



Sugar
Daddy

Keeping her will cost him.

REBEL WILD

Sugar Daddy

A Daddy Issues Romance

Rebel Wild

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2022

ISBN: (print book) 978-1-7359763-6-5

Cover Designer: R.L. Kenderson at R.L. Cover Designs

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Katherine Caron, Rose, Kevin, and Matthew, for
all that you do.

FOR MY READERS

This romance has a real-life tragic event that some may find extremely hard to read.

For full details: rebelwildbooks.com/rebelwildyououghttoknow

Use the code 1234



CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Gage

“What did you say?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“And I suppose you’re going to try and pass this baby off as mine?”

“It *is* yours. I haven’t been with anyone else. You know that.”

“I also knew you were a sweet girl. At least that’s what you led me to believe. But you and Tyra blew that shit right out of the water with your scheming and your lies. How the hell am I supposed to believe anything that comes out of your mouth at this point?”

“I don’t expect you to. I know that you hate me. I’ve given you every reason to, but I’m carrying your child, and I need help. I can’t raise this baby alone.”

“Then get rid of it.”

“I can’t do that either.”

“Oh, *now* you have morals?”

“Gage, I’m going to have our baby and you’re going to help me, whether you want to or not.”

Fuck!

Six Months Earlier

Ansford, California

“Good evening, Mr. Remington. Welcome back to the Radiance Hotel. I have your suite all set up and waiting.”

“That’s very efficient of you, Miss St. James.”

“Will you be alone for the duration of your stay?”

“I will unless you decide to join me.”

“My break is in an hour.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She hands me my room card before moving back to her desk. A mischievous smile plays on her lips as she tries to pretend she doesn’t notice my stare. She gets distracted by a coworker, and I leave her to work, going up to my suite to prepare for her visit.

I pass by the vending machines and can’t help but remember the first time I saw her there.

“Stupid machine,” she said in frustration, hitting one that was tucked away behind a corridor marked “Employees Only.”

Her voice made me curious. I’d heard it once before, so I followed where it led, rounding the corridor and venturing

into the restricted area. There she stood, just like I'd pictured her in my mind: long black hair that was pulled back in a slick, braided ponytail, and flawless brown skin. I only saw her profile as she worked the buttons on the machine, but I recognized her immediately.

A week prior, I'd agreed to make an appearance at a golf tournament at Ansford University. It happened to coincide with the library's dedication to my grandmother. While there, the chancellor offered me and my brother a tour of the campus. Being the gracious guys that we were, we accepted.

We were heading toward the library my grandmother, Alexa, funded when a girl rushed past us. Someone called her name and she turned back, ending up crashing into my chest.

"I'm so sorry. Jeez, I'm such a klutz," she said as I held on to her waist to keep her from falling back on her ass. "It's my curse in life."

She looked up at me. Her eyes were a warm shade of brown. Like the Tennessee whiskey I used to find myself at the bottom of.

"Do be careful," the chancellor scolded her. "Mr. Remington and his brother are important guests here and—"

"No harm done," I said, not liking how harshly he spoke to her on my behalf. It wasn't necessary. Grabbing onto her was the highlight of an otherwise boring tour.

"I apologize, Mr. Remington," she said my name, and fuck, it sounded good coming from her lips.

“It was my fault,” the girl that called her name came up to defend her.

“I’d like you both to meet Tyra Kerns. She’s graduating with honors this year,” the chancellor introduced us, his chest swelling with pride for one of his brightest students.

I tore my eyes away from the girl, whose name I was much more interested in, to shake her friend’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Kerns. And that’s quite an accomplishment.”

Her friend smiled with pride at my words as I shook her hand.

“And this is McKenzie St. James,” she said with a sly smile. I had to give her credit. She was smart enough to pick up on the fact that I was more interested in her friend. “She should be right next to me, but they wouldn’t allow it. I only beat her by a point.”

“Tyra,” McKenzie whispered before turning to me. “Don’t listen to her, Mr. Remington. It was only a half a point.”

Tyra laughed at her slight of correction. Surprisingly, I found them both amusing. This must have been an ongoing joke between the two of them.

“I’m sure you two have someplace to be,” the chancellor told them, not sharing in the amusement.

“The library,” McKenzie said, dragging Tyra away by the arm before they got into any more trouble. “Nice meeting you, Mr. Remington.”

I glanced up from her ass just long enough to watch her wink to me from over her shoulder.

“Well, we can skip the library,” the chancellor said, not wanting to follow behind them. “I’m sure you two are very busy men and I wouldn’t want to keep you.”

“I have all the time in the world,” I told him, continuing.

My brother, catching the hint of excitement in my voice, snickered at me. He was wise to keep his mouth shut since I noticed him eye-fucking Tyra.

It was and still is a very impressive collection of books. I immediately scanned the room for my young beauty and found her and Tyra with their heads together, giggling at whatever they were looking at on one of the computers. Her eyes caught mine for just a moment. A hint of what looked like her being busted crept on her face before she looked away, flashing me that mischievous grin.

I knew right then and there I wanted her and even chastised myself for it. She was maybe twenty-two if she was graduating. I had ten years on her already. The last thing she needed was me fucking her up. It took everything I had to walk away.

But as luck would have it, there she was, a week later at the vending machines of the hotel I was forced to stay in because my usual one was closed for renovation.

She wore the uniform of a black skirt and white blouse. She held what looked like a honey bun in one hand, and a crumpled-up dollar, which the machine was refusing to take

for something to drink, in the other. I watched as it spat her money out again, rejecting it.

“Give me a freaking break,” she said. “All I want is a damn bottle of peach tea. Is that too much to ask?”

She tried to straighten the dollar out by running it along the hard edge of the machine but it didn't work, so she hit the machine again with the palm of her hand like that would make the tea fall out.

My eyes were as fixated on her at that moment as my mind had been for the last week. The way her tits bounced when she hit that machine had me fighting to stop my hard-on. No chance in hell was I passing up another opportunity to get her in my bed. I'd been kicking myself over walking away from her the first time.

Moving toward her with the precision of a starving lion stalking its prey, I opened my wallet and grabbed a bill.

“Try this one.”

McKenzie

I've been anxious ever since Gage checked into the hotel about forty minutes ago. My body is craving him and this is the longest damn hour of my life, having him upstairs waiting for me.

“You okay?” Janine, my co-worker, asks me.

“Yeah. I just need a break.”

We work from ten at night until six in the morning and it's dull. When a sex god isn't impatiently waiting to shatter my world with an orgasm, that is.

"Why don't you go early?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, this place is dead. I can man the front desk."

"You're a lifesaver."

I leave her at the desk and pretend to go to the employee lounge before I slink off to the elevators.

Those damn vending machines back there are nothing but vessels of frustration. I've lost a small fortune inside one and nearly died of thirst because of the other. Regardless, I can't help but feel something for them. After all, I would never have run into Gage again without them. My body tingles remembering seeing him here that first time.

"Try this one." I heard a voice coming from the left.

I swung my head to stare into the most smoldering pair of charcoal-colored eyes I'd ever seen. They were attached to an equally smolderingly hot man offering me money. I lost all ability to speak for a moment, making him smirk at me. He must get that reaction from a lot of girls, but I swear it's only because I never thought I'd see him again.

"It might work a little better than the one you have," he told me.

"Thanks," I said, taking the bill. I wondered if he remembered me. "Sorry for keeping up so much noise banging

on this thing. I'm just really thirsty."

"Not a problem. I hope it works out for you," he said before walking away.

"Don't you want your change?" I noticed it was a five-dollar bill.

"Why don't you bring me a drink instead. Room 912."

I waited for the elevator doors to close with him in them before I took out my phone to call Tyra.

"I don't know if I can do it," I told her about going up to his room.

"If you don't do it, some other slut that works there will. That Janine bitch will end up with him. Is that what you want?"

"No."

"Then go get your bag."

"What if he's low-key racist?"

"Even better."

"But what if I can't do it?"

"Sure, you can. It's just like we talked about. He's all you've been talking about. All week I've had to listen to you brag about how good his ass looked in those golf pants. This is fate. You have to go for it. Use it or lose it. Or in your case, using it would be losing it."

"That's not helping, Tyra."

"Sorry."

At times like those, I hated my best friend. I threw my honey bun and peach tea in my locker before hopping into the elevator. My heart was pounding out of my chest. A dead giveaway that what I was doing was a bad idea, but I ignored it. My head was taking the lead on this.

“Pull it together. Keep it together. Be strong. Be Confident. Be sexy,” I repeated the phrases, giving my own damn self a pep talk.

Before I lost my nerve, I knocked on the door to room 912 and Mr. Pro Golfer answered.

“McKenzie.”

“You do remember me?”

“Of course.” He moves aside to let me in. My shoulder brushes his chest, sending a shockwave through my arm, but I’m sure it’s just from the cheap carpet. “It’s not every day a beautiful girl runs into me. I have to say I was surprised to see you working here.”

“It helps pay for school,” I told him, handing him his drink. My eyes drifted down to the growing bulge that was pressed against his pants. I looked up again when he took the bottle, hoping he hadn’t caught me. “I... uh... didn’t know what you liked, so I hope tea is okay.”

“Perfect. It’ll quench my thirst after.”

“After what?”

“After I fuck your brains out.”

“And what makes you think I’ll let you do that?”

“The way you were eye-fucking me.”

“You saw that, huh?”

“The same way you saw how hard I got from it.”

“Okay, for the sake of arguing, let’s say I do want you to fuck my brains out. I only want the sex. I just came out of a relationship and I don’t plan on jumping into another one. So, if you’re looking for something more—”

“I don’t do more.”

“Then we understand each other.”

“Are you on the pill? Are you clean?”

“I’ve been on the pill since I got my first period and I’m a virgin, so I can’t get any cleaner.”

“I thought you said you had a boyfriend.”

“He dumped me because I wasn’t ready to have sex with him. He’s into golf and you’re his idol.”

“So, this is a revenge fuck?”

“Can you handle that? Just a quick fuck?”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way, Miss St. James.”



CHAPTER TWO

McKenzie

It was two weeks ago almost to the day that I gave it up to Gage on what was supposed to be a quick fuck. Now here I am, right back in his suite for another repeat performance. Truth be told, it won't really be a "repeat performance" since every time we're together, he exploits me in brand-new ways. He makes my body respond like I never imagined it could.

"How long do we have?" he asks, taking me by the hand and pulling me toward the bed.

"An hour."

"Fuck. Nowhere near enough time with you."

"I know. Just don't knock me out this time. I still have a shift to get through."

"Mmm," he growls, running a hand up my skirt while the other unbuttons my blouse. They both fall at my feet, leaving me in the black lacy bra and panty set he likes so much.

He dips his hand into the front pocket of his slacks and brings out the clearest strand of diamonds I've ever seen and I've seen plenty while fantasy-shopping on the internet.

"I want you only in these when I fuck you."

I catch my breath at the sight of it before he quiets me with a kiss. He clasps the necklace around my neck and I reach up to feel the stones, running the tips of my fingers along each

one. It's a perfect match to the earrings he gave me the last time he was here. I already had those suckers appraised and I'll be able to live off them for the next six months. Add this necklace to the piles of money he likes fucking me on before giving it to me and I can pretty much quit this nowhere-fast job for something more worthy of the education I've gone into debt to get.

"Too many restrictions on time with you. I'll never get my fill of you," he says, all the while nibbling the diamonds adorning my neck. That's been his mantra ever since the first time we slept together.

That one time he made it special for me. He was slow and attentive to my needs when he took my virginity and I knew it was more for me than for him. When he asked me to return the next day, of course, I did. That time was for the both of us, each getting what we needed from the other. But then, he asked me to return for a goodbye fuck before he left for LA the day after.

Twice he's returned to handle sports engagements, and both times, he's made it a point to stay at my hotel since I can't get out of work.

This time though, it's the weekend before graduation, and *this*, he says, will be our last time together.

"You fill me to the core. Trust me on that," I say.

"Miss St. James, such a dirty mind you have."

"I have an even dirtier mouth, Mr. Remington." I sink to my knees before him.

Reaching for his pants, I unbuckle his belt, working the button and zipper to free him.

“Are you in need of some white chocolate?” he asks.

His huge erection in all its glory springs out just inches away from my mouth, dripping with pre-cum. I press my lips together to stop myself from devouring him in one swallow. He likes to be teased and tortured, so I take my time savoring him.

“Mmm,” he growls when my fingers wrap around the base of him. Being on my knees turns him on and that makes me feel powerful somehow.

My hands roam his skin, touching the parts that drive him crazy. He hisses when I flick my tongue and run it along his tip before taking him into my mouth. Looking up, I watch his reaction to me sucking him off.

“Shit, McKenzie,” he moans, taking me by the back of the head.

Never in a million years would I have thought I’d be so bold as to do this to a man. But what we’re doing—secretly meeting in hotel rooms for sex—has me feeling what Tyra calls “sexy dirty,” and Gage wanting me the way he does strips away my inhibitions. I feel no shame being on my knees with his dick in my mouth.

Just seeing him with his eyes hooded and locked on me as I work him over, his pants and underwear bunched around his ankles, and his knees shaking to keep from exploding down

my throat has me dripping wet. Turning him on turns me completely on and I'm seconds away from coming with him.

I groan in protest when he pulls me up.

"There's no way in hell I'm coming without being buried in you."

He tosses me back on the bed that's covered in hundred-dollar bills. I watch as he kicks off his pants and underwear. He makes a show of unbuttoning his white dress shirt because he sees me watching him. "Eye-fucking" is what he always calls it.

He slips off the black flats I'm still wearing and tosses them somewhere on the floor behind him. My legs are spread open and he plants his face between them. I cry out when he sucks my clit, making me come instantly.

"Mmm," he says, licking me up. "You taste so damn good." I moan his name. "What do you want, baby?" He crawls up to where I am.

"I want you to fuck me," I tell him, with my lips at the hollow of his ear. I say it just how he likes me to say it. "I need to fill you come inside me."

"Aw, fuck, McKenzie," he whispers my name in a torturous pleasure as he hammers into me hard and fast. It's *always* hard and fast. We never have the time to take things slow.

Grabbing onto the back of his head, I meet him thrust for thrust until we come together screaming out each other's names.

“McKenzie.”

I feel his lips on my bare shoulder, setting it on fire with his kisses. I wake from sleep on the now wrinkled-up money we both just came all over.

“I thought I told you not to knock me out,” I mumble, not wanting to get up, and he laughs. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Only a few minutes.”

I drag myself out of bed. Smelling like fresh sex, I go into his bathroom and attempt to clean up before I get dressed. My clothes are a wrinkled mess, so I’ll stop by my locker and change into the other uniform I always bring with me.

He lies in bed, watching me move around his room. I pick up the red box my necklace came in and my shoes before gathering up the money I left on the bedspread.

“Why do you like fucking me on piles of your money?” I ask as I hold the thick wad of bills in my hand.

“Because it’s filthy,” he says, even though he makes sure it’s uncirculated directly from the bank. “And doing filthy things with it is more fun than simply handing it to you.”

“You make me sound like a whore.”

His brow furrows at my words and I know I’ve displeased him.

“That’s the last thing I want,” he assures me, sitting up and taking the money from my hand, putting it into my bag. “I like doing things with you, to you, and for you. That includes

buying you gifts and fucking you on piles of money that you hand off to other people.”

“You are truly a sex freak, Mr. Remington.” I kiss his lips before getting up.

He gets out of bed when I head toward the door. Like always, he presses my back into it to stop me from leaving without a proper goodbye. I’ve never been any good at them. I prefer to just walk away.

“Come to LA with me,” he says.

“What?”

“You’re off the next two days for graduation, right? Spend them with me.”

“We agreed this would be the last time.”

“I know. But I need more than a quick fuck on your break time. I need to get you alone, away from here. It’s the only way to get you out of my system once and for all.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll get you back here in more than enough time. I need to be here myself for a tournament, remember?”

“I need to get back to work. Can I think about it?”

“No. I don’t want you thinking. Just meet me tomorrow, downstairs at checkout time.”

“Are you always this demanding?”

“Believe me, I’ve been easy on you. Rarely do I *ask* for what I want, but for you, I’m asking. If I don’t see you, I’ll

understand.”

“Okay.”

I try to leave, but he grabs me again and kisses me so deeply that I can't help but moan.

“Meet me,” he whispers before letting me go.

Gage

I make it down to the lobby at checkout time, trying to hide my anticipation of seeing McKenzie. Asking her to come to LA was a gamble. This thing between us was never meant to go on as long as it has. As it stands now, the more I have her, the more I can't get enough.

I've spent the last two weeks pursuing her. Between school and work, she only has a few minutes of free time. The fact that I'm flying here for a few minutes to fuck is completely out of character for me. I've never gone after a woman this way. But I wanted her the moment I saw her and I'm used to getting what I want. I've yet to have her the way I want for as long as I want and that keeps me coming back for more. I need time to fuck her into oblivion. After that, I can toss her aside like I planned the first time I fucked her.

The fact that she's so resistant is killing my ego. Being one of the highest-paid pro golfers in the world has women spreading their legs, hoping I'll get between them. But with McKenzie St. James, I have to work for it. Fuck if that doesn't turn me on. I never knew.

I look around the lobby for her, but she's nowhere in sight. She got off an hour ago. Plenty of time to go home, pack, and return. My hopes come crashing down when I realize she's blown me off. I'm pissed. I'm also more determined than ever to have her and that's a lethal combination. Never one to give up, I leave the hotel, knowing I still have one last shot on graduation day.

So consumed with winning her over, I nearly walk right past where she's waiting for me. I mentally fist-pump when I see her standing in a long red coat, a black top, and black leather pants. *Damn, she looks good.* Her bags are at her feet. I pick them up, and without a word, I take her hand and help her into the limousine.

"I thought you weren't coming," I say, settling down in the seat next to her.

"No, you didn't." She laughs.

She has absolutely no idea of how many hoops I'm jumping through just to fuck her. Don't get me wrong, it's well worth the trouble and her juices are more than enough reward. There's nothing like fucking her. I thought it was taking her virginity. Capturing that one-of-a-kind prize does appeal to me, but that's far from what has me coming back for more. Fucking her is simply an act of worship. She has the Holy Grail of pussies right between her legs, and I plan on spending the next two days at her altar.

After making the drive to the airport, we board the jet I've chartered to fly home in.

“You really are something, Gage Remington. The lengths you take to impress a girl is... impressive.”

“You’re worth impressing.”

Her smile is poetry-inspiring.

We land at Jericho Airport where Rodger, my driver, is waiting. The damn forty-minute drive to Malibu is too long. I almost fuck her in the backseat.

Finally, making it home, I take her hand and lead her through the living room. She dawdles behind me, trying to get a look around.

“You can see it all later,” I say, leading her straight to my bedroom. The need to fuck her is far outweighing my need to be hospitable until I realize she probably didn’t eat breakfast. “Are you hungry?”

“Only for my candy bar.”

I don’t know how it came about, but she’s taken to calling my dick her white chocolate Snickers. She said it’s because it’s very satisfying.

“Damn, I love that filthy mouth of yours.”

She squeals when I toss her on my bed.

“This is much better than the one at the hotel,” she says, leaning back on her elbows, feeling the bed with her hands. It’s absolutely better than that slab of stone they call a mattress at that hotel.

She holds one foot up so I can take off her boot before giving me the other. I slide her pants off, and she scoots

forward, helping me rid myself of my clothing.

“You have an amazing body,” she says, leaving a trail of red lip gloss kisses on my stomach as she moves down to my dick.

I grab her head, my fingers gripping the soft tresses while she sucks me off. I love watching her work me over, and those moans she keeps making in the back of her throat tell me just how much *she* loves it. Never has a girl gone right for it like she does. Fuck, she turns me on.

Usually, I only come inside her, but now that I have her for a few days, I can enjoy the pleasure of coming in her mouth. I know I’ll have her again in whatever way I want afterward.

“Ready for a taste of the creamy peanuts, baby?” My voice is strained with trying not to come.

“Mm-hmm.” Her throat vibrates from her laugh.

I hold her head steady as I grunt through my release. She’s sucking and swallowing me down, making it much more intense. I go limp. She slides me out with a smile.

“You liked that?”

“It was very satisfying,” she says, wiping her lips and the rest of her lip gloss off with her fingertips. I smirk all the while stripping her off her coat and shirt. “Do you want me to freshen up first?”

“No. I like you wet and raw.”

Now, it’s my turn to be on my knees. Sliding off her panties, I drape her legs over my shoulders.

“Oh, God,” she moans as I roam her pussy with my tongue. I hit all her spots, making her shudder with each flick until I know she’s teetering on the edge of her release. I focus on sucking on her clit.

She comes undone underneath me, grinding her hips and breathing through her orgasm. I lick her until she’s still and only then do I get up. Her legs are like rubber and that’s just how I like them. I spread them wide and fuck her.

Her hands are at her sides, fisting the sheets. Her head is extended back, making her tits stick out, her mouth open, letting moans of pleasure escape with each thrust until she comes again, calling my name.

I try to hold out, until her pussy clamps so tight around me, she triggers my dick, and I pump a load inside her.

“Are you tired?” I ask, lying beside her. I just dragged her bra off to play with her nipples.

That was just a quick fuck to hold me over so that I could take my time with her.

“Not too bad,” she says, looking over at me.

“I want to try something a little different with you.”

She bites her lip and her eyes widen just a bit.

“Okay,” she whispers.



CHAPTER THREE

Gage

I get out of bed and extend my hand, assisting her.

“It’s rough,” I warn her. “If it gets to be too much, tell me to stop and I will. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

I retrieve two pairs of soft handcuffs and the riding crop I keep in the closet. Relics of the days when I’d bring girls home to fuck. Upon my return, I pick her shirt up from the foot of the bed where I discarded it earlier.

“You trust me?” I ask, coming to stand before her.

“Very much.”

I pull her shirt until it is the width of a rope line and blindfold her with it. She takes a deep breath at being submerged into darkness and shudders when I lean in to kiss her bare shoulder.

“Just tell me to stop. Remember?”

“I’ll remember,” she whispers.

I turn her around. Spreading her legs apart, I run a hand between her thighs.

“Always so wet for me. I like that.”

Her moan is cut off by a sharp intake of air when I smack her on her ass with the palm of my hand. I feel a twinge of

pride claiming it.

I take the riding crop and run it along the wet folds of her pussy. She shivers when I touch her clit with the tip and cries out when I pat the hardened nub, smacking it repeatedly. A moan escapes me when I see her creamy white juices dribble onto the black leather. She whimpers through the small orgasm I just gave her. I allowed her to come just enough to weaken her.

Like I knew they would, her legs get heavy and she leans forward on the bed to support herself with her hands. Her beautifully tight ass is in the air and displayed like a delicacy to partake in. One so exquisite it's only ever been offered to me.

Removing the riding crop from her clit, I run it along my tongue. The taste of her is rarer than the finest nectar. Nothing has ever been so palatable to my tastebuds. Nothing has ever quenched my deep thirst the way she does.

She startles when I smack her ass with the wet tip of the crop. I circle the sizzling hot spot before smacking her again. I grin at the clenching of her ass in anticipation of a third hit as I lift it and hit her two times more before dropping it at our feet.

“Enough?” She shakes her head. “You want more?”

“I want you to fuck me.”

“Ask me nicely.”

“Please fuck me.”

“Fuck,” I growl. The Dom in me has been awakened. Aroused, he's ready to take what's his.

She cries out when I enter her. My dick is thick, long, and full, working its way toward emptying himself inside of her again. Her arms weaken and she falls on the bed. I pull her ass up, holding her steady while I pound into her with no care or finesse, just an all-out raw fuck. She buries her face in the comforter, muffling her moans. Not having that, I grab a fist full of her hair and yank her head up to hear her.

“Oh, God,” she moans. I use her hair as leverage, pulling at the thick mane to keep her steady.

“You like me fucking you like this?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” I smack her ass, making it hurt this time.

“Yes, sir. Please don’t stop.”

I smack her again as I fuck her.

She bucks into me, her ass bouncing off my groin, making tight little ripples in her skin. She’s sweaty and glorious. Her pussy is dripping wet and clenching tighter around me with each thrust. She hisses in pain when I fuck her deeper.

“Take it.” I push her down farther on the bed to hit her at an even deeper angle. “Tell me you like all this dick deep inside you.”

“I like it. I like it so much.”

“Beg me to come.”

“Please, sir.” Her voice is as shaky as her body. “Please, let me come.” The way she begs makes me pound harder. Her legs start to tremble. “P-please,” she stutters one last time. She

won't be able to stop herself if I deny her. She's far beyond that point.

"Come," I demand as my orgasm hits.

Her body stills while her walls clench, making me come harder. I drag her onto the bed so I can flip her over. Using the handcuffs, I tie her to the headboard. Her chest is heaving and her hair is a wild mess over her face. I sweep it away and take the blindfold off, smirking at how her eyes are rolled back in her head.

"Are you still coming?"

"Yes," she says with the breath that escapes her. She's trying to focus, but her eyes are glazed over.

"Fuck."

I lie next to her. She's flushed, sweaty, and her eyelids are heavy from being thoroughly fucked.

"You are so fucking beautiful," I say, kissing her. "I want to play with you."

She nods, licking her lips, trying to stay awake. I dip my head down to her tits, taking a moment to admire them. The little silver dollar-sized areolas are a shade darker than the rest of her skin and her plump nipples are demanding attention. I can't take my eyes off them.

"You have the most perfect pair of breasts I've ever seen."

She squirms under the compliment. She still gets shy around me, but her inhibitions are fading fast. I balk at this being our

last time together. The thought of another man reaping the benefits of her angers me to the point that I bite her nipple. Her mouth and eyes fly open as she peers down at me.

“Delectable,” I tell her to cover my slip-up, sucking the nipple a little more before moving on to its twin. Her eyes flutter close, enjoying the sensual assault. I continue licking the salty sweat that mists her body. “Open your legs.” They immediately part, and I settle between them.

The smell of her arousal is intoxicating and the taste of our orgasms mixed together nearly puts me in a stupor. She’s more animated as I bring her close to orgasm once again. Her arms move, straightening the chains of the cuffs before relaxing them again. Her body is in a deep arch, pushing her tits up toward the ceiling.

“Gage,” she moans my name. Watching her lose control is doing all kinds of shit to the Dom in me. “Fuck me with your fingers.”

My lips that were once tight around her clit break into a smile. Those words would never have left her mouth without coaxing from me the last time we fucked.

She mewls when I slide a finger inside her. Her thighs clamp around my head and her hips lift off the bed as she comes. She breathes deeply at being so satisfied.

I run my semi-hard dick through her juices, getting it wet before sliding into her. There’s nothing like this. She’s like butter, and like butter, she melts underneath me.

She pulls the cuffs, wanting to break free, but I keep her tied and under control. Lifting her legs, I wrap them around my waist, grinding my hips into her, going deeper, hitting her at just the right angle. Her head is thrashing from one side to the other before her mouth settles on my shoulder, biting it.

“Fuck,” I yell when she comes hard around me, triggering my orgasm.

I leak out of her in slow, almost painful spurts as she milks me dry.

Coming down from my high, I can finally function enough to remove the cuffs from her wrists. The sight of her already sleeping so deeply that soft snores are leaving her has me mentally beating my chest with pride.

Oblivion.

McKenzie

I awake to an empty bedroom, amazed at the time. I cannot believe I slept half the night away. I was expecting it to be sticky and smelly, but I’m clean. Gage must have wiped me up while I was asleep. I get out of bed, slip on his shirt, and go out into the living room to look for him. My ass is stinging and I can’t walk straight without putting in the effort. My pussy is sore, but I’m loving every minute of it.

He’s not in the living room, but the sound of something hitting the glass patio door gets my attention. I step out onto

the patio, barely being missed by the golf ball that went whizzing past my head.

“Shit,” he says when he sees me.

“Aren’t you supposed to yell a warning or something when you send those things flying?”

“That *is* the rule,” he says, putting his golf club down and tossing his glove before walking over to me.

He’s in nothing but gray sweatpants and the breeze from the ocean is freezing.

“You’re not cold?”

“No, but you must be,” he says, taking note of what I’m wearing. He rubs my arms for a brief second to warm them before taking me back inside.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You didn’t and I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You can’t sleep?”

“I haven’t tried. I’m not very big on sleeping. Bad dreams.”

“You’ve had one?”

“Not for a few nights, but I’m overdue.”

He warned me the first time we fucked. We were both knocked out and he was upset about it. I didn’t understand what the big deal was until he told me he served in Afghanistan. It was only a short stint before he was honorably discharged, but he still has nightmares. He won’t say what they’re about, but it’s not hard to imagine.

“And you’re still afraid you’ll hurt me?”

“The thought has crossed my mind.”

“I have a surprise for you,” I tell him, remembering it’s in my bag. I’m sure the sudden change in conversation has him puzzled, but he gets up and follows me into his bedroom anyway. He sits on the bed while I unpack it.

“What is it?” He asks, examining the medium-sized black box.

“Open it and find out, silly.”

He lifts the lid and takes out the netted web that’s embellished with blue and turquoise feathers.

“A dreamcatcher,” he says, holding it up to get a better look at it.

“Not just *any* dreamcatcher. This one is guaranteed to catch all the bad dreams and keep them away.”

“Is that right,” he says, unable to hide the amusement in his voice.

“It sure is. I have it on good authority. Chief Heinz told me himself.”

“Chief Heinz?”

“He came in for an Indigenous American convention four nights ago.”

“And his name is Heinz? I think he saw you coming, baby.”

“He’s legit.” I laugh as I hunt around the room for some tape. I find it in a small cabinet in his closet. I get on the bed

and stand on my tiptoes to reach the ceiling, taping the dreamcatcher right above his bed. “What do you think?”

“Perfect,” he says, looking up at it. “I feel it working already.”

“Good.” I sit with a bounce that makes me hiss a little in discomfort. “Come sleep with me.”

I get under the covers and pull them back so he can get in beside me. He spoons me, making me grin at the sound of him growling while his hands are all over me. Before long, he allows himself to sleep. I stay up a little while listening for any signs of a nightmare before falling asleep with him, excited about an already promising weekend.



CHAPTER FOUR

Gage

I awake to the smell of food. McKenzie is nowhere to be found so I conclude she's the one cooking. I take a quick shower before I join her for breakfast. I inwardly laugh at the newfound pep in my step. I have to catch myself from breaking out in song as I lather myself in the shower.

It's been a long time since I fucked a girl so hard and an even longer time since I slept so many uninterrupted hours. I'm usually up before the sun, but today, it's well after nine.

The nightmares that usually plague me were nowhere to be found last night and I'd like to think that good ol' Chief Heinz knew what he was talking about with that dreamcatcher. Admittedly, I haven't had a nightmare since I met McKenzie. Thoughts of her are too forefront in my mind. Never have I been so completely infatuated with a woman. I hope that shit fades.

I decided to give it this weekend. There's no place in my life for a girl so young and innocent. I don't have the time or the patience it takes to maintain a relationship. I need to fuck her enough to get her out of my system so I can be done with her. Thus far, my plan doesn't seem to be working. Just the thought of her now has my body reacting, and I finish up in the shower to look for her. I find her at the kitchen counter. She's in her bra and panties with a pair of fluffy white socks, and nothing else.

How can she be so fucking cute and so fucking hot at the same time?

“I hope you’re hungry,” she says, glancing my way.

“Starving.” I grab a bar stool and sit down.

“Good because I made way too much rice.”

I watch her move around the kitchen—*my kitchen* like she belongs here. I quickly dismiss that thought before it has time to set up residence in my head. The last thing I want is attachments. I like shit just the way it is with me living the bachelor life in my Malibu beach house being free to do what I want and *who* I want. That’s the way I plan on keeping it. The fact that I have to keep saying it to myself means nothing.

She sets my plate in front of me before taking the seat next to mine. We dig into sausage patties and the best damn rice I ever tasted.

“Milk and butter,” she says what her secret is.

“I could eat this every day,” I tell her honestly. I’ve never had rice for breakfast, but I could get used to it.

“You’d be big as a house.”

“I’m willing to take that chance.”

“Ha,” she says as best she can with rice in her mouth.

“You didn’t tell me to stop last night,” I say to her.

I want to gauge how she’s feeling. It was our second venture into kink, but I mixed in a little BDSM.

“You were worried I would?”

“I was hoping you’d enjoy it or at least tell me if you didn’t.”

I could tell she loved it, but I need to hear her say it. I can’t afford any margins for error here.

“I enjoyed it a lot.”

“Did it satisfy your curiosity?”

“Most of it. It’s one hundred percent better than that book I was reading on the subject. I can tell you that with all certainty.”

The shit they teach kids in college now. When I saw a book about the lifestyle in her bag, she told me she needed to research it for a final grade. I couldn’t believe it. If I’d known BDSM was part of the college curriculum, I would have gone. Of course, I was compelled to help her, especially when I read some of the nonsense they had in that book. She read her paper to me and it got me excited. I fucked her a little too hard and it didn’t take her long to put two and two together.

“What the hell was that all about?” she breathed, coming down from her orgasm. “That was hot.”

“That was me getting carried away,” I told her, untying her hands from the bed railing.

“That was you being a Dom, wasn’t it? Are you a Dom, Gage?”

“For the past six years now.”

“You have a sub?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be here with you.”

“You have your own dungeon or whatever?”

“No. And I’ve already told you too much.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“I’m counting on it.”

And I definitely am. She has yet to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

“Thanks for helping me with my report. I got an A, by the way,” she tells me now, taking the last bite of her sausage.

“You’re an excellent student, Miss St. James.”

“That’s what my instructors have all been known to tell me.”

“And they’re correct. You’re much too good to waste your talents in that hotel. Are you still planning to accept the marketing job they offered you there?”

“No, I don’t think that’s going to work out for me. It’s just not the experience I’m looking for, so I’m going back home to my dad in Huntsville.”

“Alabama?”

Shit, that’s far.

She kisses my cheek before getting up to clear the table.

“It’s just now coming on the map, so the sky’s the limit. Plus, there are a lot of new businesses there that need great marketing. Maybe when I save up enough money, I’ll start my

own advertising agency,” she says over her shoulder as she loads the dishwasher. “What do you think?”

“Why not do that here in LA?”

“I don’t know anyone here.”

“You know me and there are a lot of marketing opportunities I can help you with.”

“You would do that for me?” she asks, facing me once again.

“Of course.”

She bites her lip in uncertainty.

“I don’t know,” she finally says. “LA is an expensive city, and I can’t just up and move. It takes a lot of money to do that. Besides, I won’t know you after today, remember?”

“Maybe not, but I’d still be willing to help you. I don’t like the idea of you wilting away in Hicksville.”

“Huntsville.” She laughs. “Do you always take such interest in your fuck ‘em and duck ‘em girls?”

“This has nothing to do with fucking you and everything to do with business. I hate to see good talent go to waste. Especially when I have the means to tap into it.”

“And speaking of tapping.” She comes back over to me. “You have me for the day. What are you going to do with me?”

Circling her waist, I pull her to me.

“I plan to take you out, feed you, bring you back, and then fuck the shit out of you. All in that order.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Then go get dressed.” I smack her on her ass as she walks away. “Wear jeans.”

We take my Ferrari to the outskirts of the city because I knew she’d look good riding in it. She looks around suspiciously when we finally pull into a parking lot. I take her hand and lead her inside.

She now stands looking up at the climbing wall. She turns and looks at me, then back up at the wall. I’m almost convinced I made a mistake in our outing until she breaks into a smile.

“I bet I can beat you to the top,” she says.

“You’ve climbed before?”

“Nope. But it doesn’t look all that hard.”

I raise an eyebrow at her.

“And if I win?” I ask her, seizing the opportunity. I know I’m going to win.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” she says. “Same as if I win.”

“Deal.”

I help her into her harness. She watches intently as I buckle her up tight and check the ropes.

“You’re enjoying tying me up, aren’t you,” she whispers even though no one is around us.

“Always do,” I tell her, giving her a quick kiss.

“You guys ready?” The instructor comes over to ask.

“Let’s do this,” McKenzie grunts out with a fierce determination that makes me and the instructor laugh.

I let her take the lead so that I can help her with her footwork. She picks it up quickly and is already far up the wall before I even start. I work to catch up, scowling down at the instructor who’s looking up at her while holding her rope. I know that bastard is checking out her ass.

Finally, I’m level with her. I look over amazed. Gone is the clumsy girl who ran into me the first day we met. This one has the balance of the slinkiest of felines. The muscles in her arms and legs are taut and her face is determined as she figures out her next step.

I hate to leave her, but if I’m going to win this damn bet, I have to beat her to the top. She’s just a minute behind me, still excited that she made it up.

That excitement is full-force when her feet hit the floor mat.

“Yes,” she says, jumping into my arms.

Automatically, I place my hands on her ass to hold her up as she wraps her legs around my waist. She grabs my face and plants a quick kiss on my lips, but it soon turns into a make-out session right in the middle of the damn rock-climbing arena.

We've worked up an appetite, so I take her to Marco's Steak House in Beverly Hills for an early dinner. I throw the keys to the valet as I walk in with McKenzie on my arm.

Now when I called Sal, my assistant, and told him to bring over the black dress in the guest closet, I should have known he'd pick the wrong damn one. He opted for the sexier version of what I described to him.

It's a halter number with cutouts right beneath her tits. It's an inch shorter than I would have liked but it looks exquisite on her. It hugs her in all the right places and I can tell she likes it. She's wearing the white diamond bracelet and earrings I brought her and fuck if they don't look like they were made for her. They were, but she doesn't need to know that. They complement the color of her dress and her skin very well.

I place my hand possessively on the small of her back as we walk. The smell of her, the sway of her hips, and the way her hair falls around her is all woman. I'm a lucky son of a bitch walking with her by my side. She catches everyone's eye as we go past, including one couple I'm hell-bent on ignoring and I hope to hell they ignore us.

She looks around the room, impressed by the place after we take our seats.

"Mmm," she says sipping the red wine I selected. "I can see why you chose it."

"You taste better," I tell her. I'm rewarded with a shy smile. "I'd love a taste right now. How about you, baby? Are you

craving some white chocolate? Or do you just want me to fuck you senseless?”

Her eyes widen when the waiter appears. We're both sure he heard the offer of me fucking her but being the professional that he is, he doesn't let on.

“Mr. Remington.” He acknowledges me before turning to her. “Good evening, ma'am, are you ready to order?”

“Yes,” McKenzie says, trying to act normal. She's failing miserably. “I'll have an eight-inch... I mean an eight-ounce... um.”

I smirk at her as I take over ordering the steaks for both of us.

“Very good choice, ma'am,” the waiter jokes with McKenzie as he takes our menus.

She waits until he leaves before breaking into a laughing fit.

“I can't believe I said that.”

“That mind gets dirtier and dirtier. It's *nine* inches, by the way.” Her mouth falls open. “Mmm, and that beautifully dirty mouth of yours. I love when you open it.”

She quickly shuts it with a laugh.

“You've corrupted my mind and my mouth, Mr. Remington.”

I'm liking the sound of that. The zipper in my pants can barely hold me in.

“They never fail to enchant me,” I say.

“Do they now?”

“Completely.”

She grins devilishly at me when her plate is placed before her.

I instruct the waiter not to bother us again. I know she's up to something and my instincts are proven correct when she makes a show of eating. She spears a small bite of her steak. Sliding the fork into her mouth, she wraps her lips around it, slowly pulling it out before licking it clean with her bubblegum tongue, running it along the edge of the fork.

I sit with my mouth hung open for a moment, mesmerized by what she's doing to that damn fork.

“Check.” I raise my hand to get the waiter's attention.

“Gage,” she squeals, quickly grabbing my hand and putting it back down before he comes over. “You haven't even started eating yet.”

“How am I supposed to sit here eating while you're over there giving head to the eating utensils?” She covers her mouth as she laughs. “Behave yourself, Miss St. James.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, but still can't help her laugh. She hasn't let go of my hand so I lace my fingers with hers. Her other hand reaches over to touch her bracelet. Her well-manicured fingers play with the diamonds. “This is so pretty,” she says, admiring her wrist. “Is this what's known as having rocks?”

“Rocks aren't just for climbing, baby.”

“Well, you have excellent taste in jewelry.”

“Diamonds suit you. You should be covered in them.”

She looks at our joined hands and then at me. Her stare is so alluring I can't look away.

“Gage.” I hear the familiar sweet voice. I should have known they wouldn't ignore us. “I thought that was you. Your father swore it wasn't, but I knew better.”

I'm sure if he was watching the intimate exchange between us, it made him doubt it was me. McKenzie is taken by surprise. She stops playing with her bracelet and smiles up at them before looking at me. I reluctantly introduce them. I purposely failed to mention her role in my life. Not that she has one at this point.

“Well, we don't want to keep you from discussing *business*,” Mom says.

The fact that I left out who McKenzie was doesn't get past her and she refuses to let it slide. She blatantly studies McKenzie like a hawk. Being a child advocate, she prides herself on reading people, and the warm smile she's giving McKenzie lets me know right away that she likes her. That pleases me, though I don't know why I should care.

“This isn't a business meeting, Mom.” I give her a bone. “McKenzie is a friend visiting from Ansford.”

“The college?”

“That's right,” I say.

“Oh, how nice. How long are you planning to stay?”

“I'm here just for the day,” McKenzie says.

“What a shame. I was hoping maybe—”

“Come along, darling. I’m sure they don’t want to waste time talking to us,” Dad says, taking the hint of my head shaking. “Let them enjoy their meal. Nice to meet you, McKenzie.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Remington.”

“I’m never going to hear the end of this,” I tell McKenzie.

“Why? I’m sure they’re used to seeing you with girls far more beautiful than I am.”

“First of all, there are none more beautiful, and secondly, they haven’t.”

“You’ve never taken anyone out?”

“Oh, I’ve taken people out,” I tell her, summoning the waiter for the check. “To fuck.”

“Would you care for dessert?” he offers, and I look to McKenzie since she’s the one with the constant sweet tooth.

“Anything with white chocolate,” she tells me, and I wink at her.

“You heard the lady. Surprise us.”

She waves at my parents as we pass them. I escort her to the door where my credit card and McKenzie’s dessert are already waiting for us.

The Ferrari is in high gear as I haul ass back to Malibu.

I have her damn near naked as soon as she’s out of the car. We make it as far as the living room before I pull her down

and fuck her right on the floor in front of the fireplace.

“Are you ready to go to bed?” I ask, playing with her hair while her head is on my chest.

We’ve long since finished fucking, but she wanted to stay and watch the fire I started. We’re completely naked but for the throw blanket we’re wrapped in. Our clothes are strewn about the room.

“Can we sleep here? The fire is nice.”

Not being able to deny her request on our last night together, I go and get the blankets and roll out the thick foam pad to sleep on while McKenzie is rummaging around in the kitchen. She comes back with a white box, holding it up so I can see it.

“What is it?”

“Dessert,” she says, straddling me on the pad. I lean back on my hands as she opens the lid. She takes one of the pitted cherries, white with chocolate, out of the box, and feeds it to me.

“Very good,” I tell her of the sweet fruit, picking one up out of the box, feeding it to her.

“Mmm,” is all she says in response.

We feed each other until the cherries are all gone. The empty box is on the coffee table and McKenzie’s mouth is on me, sucking my tongue like she did her fork earlier.

Our fingers are intertwined at her side until I take her hands and place them around my neck. I lift her hips enough to slide my dick into her before I lie back, bringing her down on top of me. My hands are at her back pressing her into me as she rides me. Her nipples are rock hard against my chest. One of my hands is palm flat against her ass while the other finds its way into her hair, kneading her scalp. My mouth travels down her neck to kiss her shoulder. Our movements are slow and sweet. It's almost like lovemaking.

“McKenzie,” I call her name. Her whimpering in my ear is driving me crazy and pushing me toward the edge.

“Gage,” she whispers. Her juices run down my dick as she comes. I explode inside of her, pumping my hips up as I spurt my cum out to mix with hers.

Too spent and sated to move, she falls asleep on top of me, and I cradle her.

Hours later, I feel her stir on top of me. It makes me hard, but I'm too deep into a long-sought-after sleep to act on it. I feel her weight shift and she settles back down beside me. Her back is exposed to me and her head is using my arm as her pillow. I turn to spoon her, feeling nothing but contentment as I sleep.



CHAPTER FIVE

Gage

The day breaks, but I'm nowhere near ready to wake up. I feel McKenzie sit up from where she's laying beside me.

"What's the matter?" I ask when I hear her sharp intake of breath.

"A blonde," she says. "She was coming in, but she saw me and left."

"Shit," I say, opening my eyes just enough to reach for my phone and text Vera, my house manager, not to bother with breakfast yet. She usually comes to work early on Mondays, but I had no idea she came this damn early. "She won't disturb us," I tell McKenzie, pulling her back down next to me and pulling the covers up over her. "Go back to sleep, baby."

She sighs and snuggles in close before falling back to sleep.

After breakfast, McKenzie sits in my office, staring at the contract and the non-disclosure agreement I just presented to her. She's dressed in her graduation outfit.

When I woke up this morning, the peppiness I felt yesterday was gone. I finally admitted that it was because I knew that once I dropped McKenzie off at school, I was to never see her again. My mood was sour all morning and I was doing a piss-poor job at hiding it from her. When she reminded me of our

rock-climbing bet to lighten things up, that's when this idea hit me and I presented her with the contracts she's studying.

I plan to use our bet as leverage to get her to sign. Hopefully, that will be all it takes, but I'm prepared to go as far as I need to make her mine. Her leaving is not an option. I watch with a thin veneer of patience while she reads the NDA first.

"Is this all necessary?" she asks. "After today, our paths will most likely never cross again."

"It's just a way of protecting us both and making sure what happens in our private lives stays private."

"For how long does this thing last? If I see you on TV ten years from now, I can't even say to my husband that you used to bang me when I was in college?"

The thought of her with another man pisses me off, even if it's a hypothetical prick ten years in the future. I shake my head.

"Okay then. No bragging rights," she says, signing the NDA and sliding it over to me before looking at the other and dare I say more important of the two documents.

"You want me to be your submissive?"

"Yes."

"But I know nothing about it."

"You know enough. It won't be any different than what we've been doing thus far."

She looks at the contract again, mulling it over. The impatient tapping of my index finger on my desk gets her attention and she tries to hide her smile.

“So, it will be just like what we’ve been doing?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“There’s no set time.”

“But how would it work? Do you want me to fly in every weekend from Huntsville?”

“No. Too much of our time together would be spent on you traveling. I want you to take me up on my offer and move to LA.”

“I’m fresh out of college. I can’t afford to do that right now.”

“I’ll set you up in your own place. I’ll make sure you and all of your needs are taken care of.”

“Until I can find work?”

“It wouldn’t be necessary for you to do so, but yes, if you’d like. As long as you make yourself available to me when I need you.”

“‘It’s not necessary to work.’ What does that mean? You’ll pay for everything? Like a sugar daddy?”

“I prefer Dom, but if the thought of me being your sugar daddy will help you sign the damn contract, then sugar daddy it is.”

“You’re really going to bankroll me while I’m here?”

“That’s the plan, baby.”

“Do you support all of your submissives?”

“Does it matter?”

“Kinda. Yeah.”

“There’s no need to. They’re all local.”

“Is this because you haven’t gotten your fill of me? I can come back for another day after graduation.”

“I need more than that. I realized after spending time with you this weekend that it wouldn’t be enough.”

“But what if it is? What if I move here and you get sick of me sooner than you expect? What will become of me? I’m taking a big risk just for you to use me to get your rocks off.”

“I’ll put enough money in your bank account to make it worth your while. That will be in addition to your car, rent, clothes, and everyday expenses, of course.”

“In addition?”

“Yes. Trust me, you’ll be well taken care of.”

“Sir.” Roger, my driver, comes to the door.

“What is it?” I bark at him, annoyed by the interruption.

“We need to leave now if Miss St. James is to be on time for her graduation.”

I nod, and he leaves us alone.

“McKenzie.” I push her to sign.

“What if you get bored with me? Will you take back all the money?”

“Of course not. The money will be yours. Just sign and I’ll take care of everything else. I’ll take care of you.”

“I want the money part in the contract.”

She waits while I quickly add it.

“Done.” I hand her the revised copy.

She nods and gets up to leave, taking the contract with her. I call her name, grabbing her arm to pull her back to me. I don’t want to give her time to think better of my offer.

“What happened to fucking and ducking!” She laughs.

“We’re way beyond that now. I was shitting myself for even agreeing to it. The moment you came in with that damn bottle of tea, I knew I wouldn’t be able to fuck and duck you. To my credit, I tried.”

“I guess my charms were too much for you.”

I smirk at her as she bats her eyelashes dramatically at me.

“Don’t make me have to do it now,” I say, kissing her lips.

“Let me think about it and we’ll see,” she says, sliding away from me and going out the door.

With the offer on the table, we enjoy the flight back to Ansford. Roger is with us this time. He’s arranged for a car to meet us at the airfield to take us to campus.

Once we arrive, I say goodbye to McKenzie and watch as she disappears into the crowd of students and their families.

She let it slip that her parents won't be here to see her graduate. Her mom can't afford to take the time off. She doesn't give a reason for her dad not coming. She swears she's not upset by it, but how could she not be.

I fulfill my obligation by making a quick appearance at the tournament, signing a few autographs in front of the cameras, and then doing some crappy T-off before leaving. This is the shitty part about turning something I used to love into a business.

With all the money I make for what used to be a pastime, I shouldn't complain. Nothing like making the best of opportunities. Now all McKenzie has to do is seize hers and move to LA. If not, I'll have to come up with a plan B.

I marvel at my determination. There are a plethora of more experienced and true subs I can contract with. Why I'm so hell-bent on this one is beyond my comprehension. I rationalize it as being caught up in the chase. I've been chasing her tight little ass since day one and as good as she is at pretending, I know she knows I like it.

She's good at playing hard to get. She's an expert at it. All of her damn "can I think about it" drive me up the wall. One of these days, I'm going to call her bluff and tell her to forget it. But we both know that's a damn lie.

"Bring the car around," I tell Rodger and we make the short drive to Ansford.

I duck when I see the chancellor, losing him in the crowd of people. The graduation just ended and I want to congratulate McKenzie before I go back home. Tyra points me in her

general direction, letting me know that she declined to go out and celebrate with her parents. Knowing McKenzie, she probably doesn't want to intrude.

I find her in the back of the main building that leads to her dorm. She's leaning against the wall with her eyes closed and her head tilted up to the sun to warm her face and dry her newly ushered tears.

"Congratulations, McKenzie," she says, in a mocking tone that's probably meant to be from her family. "I'm *so* proud of you."

"Congratulations, McKenzie," I say for them. Her eyes fly open as I stand, holding the single, long-stemmed red rose I have for her. "I'm so proud of you."

She takes the rose with surprised laughter through her tears before wrapping her arms around me, kissing me like her life depended on it. I wrap my arms around her and deepen the kiss.

We stand catching our breath with our foreheads together. Her hands are in my hair and mine are kneading the soft material of the graduation gown that's covering her ass.

"Thank you, sir."

"Is that your way of saying yes?"

"Yes," she whispers. I pull my head back to look at her.

"Yes?"

She nods. Taking the folded envelope with the contract inside out of the pocket of her graduation gown, she hands it to

me.

“All signed.”

I pull her into me, kissing the side of her head before walking her over to the waiting car.

“Congratulations, Miss St. James,” Rodger greets her while opening her door.

“Thank you, Rodger,” she tells him, taking off her gown before sliding in.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take you out?” I ask as we sit parked in front of her dorm.

“No. I’m all right now. Besides, I have a lot of packing to do and I promised Tyra I would celebrate with her later. There’s a party at the bar we hang out at.”

“Not too much partying,” I warn her, sweeping her hair from her shoulder before kissing it.

“Darn,” she says, and I look at her in question. “I signed that thing too soon.”

“All right,” I smirk. “You can have one last night of freedom.” I reach into my wallet to give her enough money to ensure she and her friends enjoy themselves.

“Thank you, sir,” she says, taking it and rewarding me with a kiss.

“Text me when you’re home tonight. Let me know you’re safe.”

“I will.”

McKenzie

I say goodbye to Gage. He had me feeling so good, making sure I was okay about my parents not being here for me today.

I'm excited and nervous about moving to LA and I only have a day before my life changes. I was reluctant to sign on as his submissive. I didn't think he'd offer that up to me so soon. I was sure he'd want to see me again but not so permanently as to offer me a contract. That threw me off my game, but after talking it over with Tyra and having her remind me of the alternative, the choice was easy.

"Girl, are you crazy?" she said when I told her about me making him wait. "What the hell are you waiting for? Sign the damn thing. Do you want to move back with your whack-ass dad?"

My answer to that was hell no, so I signed it. Tyra was right, I shouldn't have waited to sign the contract. Everything we've been working hard for could have very easily blown up in my face. At least now I have it in writing. There's no way he can get out of supporting me. I already have enough to destroy him if he even thinks about it. I never thought this would all go so well.

I enter my cramped dorm room and instantly feel closed in. I hope he finds me a roomy place. Something like the beach house he has would be ideal, but a luxury apartment will also do.

So lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the large display of long-stemmed roses on the table next to the door. They match the one that Gage gave me earlier and I slide it into the vase to complete the dozen. I see a package waiting for me on my bed. I smile, thinking it's from Mom. I know Dad wouldn't have bothered to send me anything. I toss the stack of hundreds Gage gave me on the table along with my cap and gown before reading the card attached to the box.

It's from him. I wonder how he had time to get all this stuff in here, but I'm sure he has people who would deliver it. I lift the lid, eager to find out what's in the box. I gasp when I unfold the paper and find a Birkin bag inside. My God, this must have cost a small fortune. The thought of it makes me giddy inside. He sure knows how to treat a girl.

He has made this sad mess of a day the best graduation ever.



CHAPTER SIX

McKenzie

Tyra and I exit the yellow cab in front of the Bourbon St. Bar.

“It’s all about having fun tonight,” she reminds me.

“I’m all in,” I tell her.

“Damn, this place is packed,” she says. “Hot guys everywhere. Thank you, Lord, for my period being off in time for tonight.”

“Seven days ago, you were thanking him that it came on.”

“Oh, don’t remind me. The thought of being knocked up by that loser is depressing enough.”

“Who was it, anyway?”

“Hell if I know.” She shrugs. “Moe something.”

How could she possibly have been turned on by a guy named Moe? *The Three Stooges* come to my mind.

We spot our friend Denise and she flags us over to come sit with her.

“Damn, McKenzie, you look good,” she says, hugging me. “What have you done to yourself? This isn’t normal for you.”

Tyra laughs and I smack her arm.

“Gee, thanks.”

“McKenzie has snagged herself a sugar daddy,” Tyra informs her. I nudge her hard with my elbow to shut her up.

“He’s not a sugar daddy,” I tell Denise. “He’s just generous.”

Flagging down the waitress, I order a large bottle of Patron, Tyra’s favorite tequila, and whatever else she and Denise want to drink. I get an extra-large platter of buffalo wings and a stack of fries to go with it. I’m going to have to run about six miles to burn this off, but I don’t care. I’m celebrating. “Let’s dig in,” I say when the waitress comes back with it all. “It’s on my generous friend tonight.”

“*Very* generous,” Denise says.

“Told you,” Tyra tells her.

“Well, in that case, let’s have a toast,” Denise says.

“To us,” Tyra says, lifting her shot glass. “Three badass chicks who kicked Ansford’s ass the last four years.”

We raise our shot glasses and drink the clear liquid down. All the gagging and heavy breathing we’re doing have us laughing as we all reach for salt and lemon.

“I love this shit,” Tyra says, taking another shot. “McKenzie, let’s dance.”

I take two more shots and we leave Denise to drink her Sex on the Beach cocktail.

Somewhere in the middle of the song, we’re pulled in opposite directions by two very hot guys. I recognize the one I’m dancing with. I had a creative writing class with him. He always had his hand stuck between the knees of some girl. I guess he’s alone tonight. He gets too close and I push him away. Leaving him on the dance floor, I walk over to the bar.

“You’re McKenzie, right?” he asks, coming after me.

“That’s right.”

I flag the bartender down and ask for bottled water. The shots of tequila are going to my head and I still want to drink more tonight. I plan to get shit-faced as Tyra likes to say. It’s not every day a girl graduates from college. Not that anyone gives a damn about it. Especially my dad. He wanted me to go to some historically black college in Georgia, but I wasn’t feeling it. He also wanted me to major in something besides marketing. Things have been icy between us since the day I left. Who am I trying to fool? He’s never been warm to me. I need to stop thinking about that before it kills my mood. I try to focus on what’s-his-name talking to me over here.

“Yeah, we had a few classes together,” he goes on to say. “I never pegged you as a party girl.”

“Stranger things. Um, what’s your name?”

“Maurice. People call me Moe.”

“Of course.” I should have known.

“So, you want to get out of here or what?”

“Listen, Moe, you already boinked my best friend.”

“Well, at least you know I’m good. So, it’s cool, right?”

“Wrong. I’m not into her leftovers.”

I huff when he slides closer to me. Evidently, he’s not taking the hint.

“I believe the lady has already said no.”

Moe and I look over his shoulder to see a very tall and very scary-looking man standing behind him. He's tatted from his neck to his wrists.

"Who the hell are you?"

"A friend of hers," he tells Moe, pointing at me.

I look behind me to see who he's talking about because I've never seen him before a day in my life. I would have remembered all that sexiness. The way that black T-shirt is stretched over his broad chest is all kinds of yummy.

"Whatever," Moe says, wisely deciding not to tangle with Mr. Hot-but-Scary Guy.

"Um," I say to Moe's retreating back because now I realize I'm at the mercy of said hot but scary guy.

"It's all right, Miss St. James. Mr. Remington asks that I make sure you have a good time tonight with your friends without being disturbed."

"I see. Uh... thank you, Mr.?"

"Just Dwayne, ma'am."

"So, you're going to be here all night?"

"Only when you need me to be."

I nod, slipping off the barstool and easing my way back over to my table.

"Who the hell is *that*?" Tyra asks, joining Denise and me, checking out my bodyguard.

“Just Dwayne,” I tell her, picking up a shot glass and filling it with Tequila.

“Bitch. You get all the good ones.”

I don't bother to tell her about Moe.

Gage

I wait until I'm back at home before opening the envelope McKenzie gave me and study the contract she signed, making note of her hard limits. I release the breath I was holding when she only lists the more hardcore elements. I would have wanted to negotiate the fisting under normal circumstances, but I can live without it this time around. Especially since she left anal play on the table. Just the thought of fucking that ass of hers gets me hard.

Speaking of the devil, she texts me.

McKenzie: Made it in safe and sound, sir.

Gage: I trust you had a good time.

McKenzie: The best. But I'm sure Dwayne already informed you.

Gage: Not in so many words.

McKenzie: Then I guess I should be the one to tell you I was on my best behavior as far as drunken party girls go.

Gage: Is that your way of saying you were out of control?

McKenzie: Terribly so. I planted my face into some guy's crotch right before throwing up on him. The bartender kicked me out right after I peed on the floor. I even spilled out of a cab onto the sidewalk. Skirt flying up and everything.

Why the hell did I agree to this night of freedom shit?

McKenzie: Goodnight, Gage.

"I'm heading home," Rodger says. "I just got the final word from Dwayne. He dropped Miss St. James and her friends off at their dorm rooms a few moments ago."

"She didn't take a cab?"

"No, sir."

"Did Dwayne mention her behavior or anything out of the ordinary?"

"Other than that small disturbance with the guy at the bar, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Typical college behavior, getting drunk and dancing. He noted her friend as the wilder of the two and Miss St. James as the more level-headed."

"Yes, she is," I tell him. *And the more devilish.* I look at my phone when it goes off again.

McKenzie: ;-)

She was teasing me with that fake confession. I believe my sexy little devilish girl has just earned her first punishment.

McKenzie

I wake up with one hell of a hangover. I didn't think I drank that much last night, but my head is killing me. I stumble over something bundled up in a blanket. It's asleep on the floor next to who I'm sure is Tyra.

I go to the bathroom in search of a pain killer. Everything is packed away in boxes, but it's just my luck that a bottle of ibuprofen was left out. I down two pills with a glass of water from the sink before going over to my bed.

"Sorry," I say to the bundle of blankets I just stepped on and he grumbles that it's okay. I move past him to Tyra. I smack what I hope is her ass to wake her up. "You're going to miss your flight."

"M'kay," she mumbles, lifting the covers off her head. "I feel like shit. What the hell were we thinking drinking so much last night?"

I shush her because she's talking way too loud for my head right now.

"All the wrong things," I say.

The bundle moves, climbing on top of Tyra and I wonder if he plans to do her with me watching.

"Shit, I'm late," he says, coming alive, throwing the covers off himself.

“Oh, jeez,” I groan, covering my eyes when I see his pasty ass.

“Where the hell are my pants?” he asks Tyra. She giggles as she goes to get them from her bed.

I hear a lot of scrambling around and I hope he’s getting dressed.

“All clear,” he says to me, and I uncover my eyes.

“Seth, this is McKenzie.”

“Nice to see you again, McKenzie.”

“You too.”

I look away while he plants a wet one on Tyra.

“I’ll call you.”

“You better,” she tells him.

“Take care, McKenzie. Bye, babe.”

I wait until he leaves before I go off on Tyra.

“Seth Remington? Really?” I tell her, and she shrugs.

“You’re not the only one that can snag one.”

“How?”

“He photo-bombed a selfie I was taking with Denise the day he came to tour the campus.”

“And I’m just now hearing about this.”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal. Anyway, I sent him the picture with our address and he showed up last night.”

“He could have killed us.”

“Funny, you didn’t think that way when you ran off to LA with his brother.”

“I don’t know about this, Tyra. Doesn’t it seem a little suspect? It’s going to send all kinds of red flags to Gage.”

“I didn’t go after him. He came up to us. Besides, I’m just having a little fun. He probably won’t even call me again.”

“If he does?”

“If he does, he does.” I roll my eyes at her shrugging it off. “Oh, come on. He may not be as good-looking, but his money is just as green as his brother’s.”

“You don’t even need his money. You’re well off, remember?”

“Correction: my *parents* are well off. Me, not so much. They’re not going to take care of me forever and it takes money to keep me happy. Besides, I deserve a rich guy and so do you.”

“Seems we’re well on our way to getting them. Brothers no less.”

“Right. But you nearly blew it with Gage, so watch it.”

“I was just playing hard to get. He likes it.”

“Hard yes, but not impossible. He’s on the hook, McKenzie. Start taking his ass for everything he has.”

“Don’t worry. I got this.”

“You go, girl.”

Gage

“Mr. Remington, Dwayne is on his way to collect Miss St. James from her dorm room,” Rodger informs me. “Vera is at her apartment doing some finishing touches and unpacking the last of the wardrobe that was delivered today.”

“Is her car there?”

“It will be delivered shortly.”

“Have Dwayne inform me the moment she arrives.”

“Understood.”

I busy myself with sending off a few emails. I’ve been invited to participate in a celebrity golf game for charity. I’m seriously considering it since it’s one that my family supports. I haven’t spent much time on the green while taking all those trips up north over the past few weeks.

Thank fuck I don’t have to bother with that shit anymore now that McKenzie will be in LA. I put her up in a condo in Pacific Palisades. It’s far enough so that we won’t run into each other, but close enough so I won’t have to wait long for her to drive over when I want to see her.

I’ve transferred enough money into her bank account that she doesn’t have to stress about work, but I know she didn’t spend four years in school for nothing. I have a marketing job lined up for her with the team I use just in case.

“My phone buzzes and I look at it, thinking it’s an update on McKenzie. I sigh when I see who it is. I can already guess

what my nosy aunt wants. I answer her call.

“Are we still on for lunch?”

Shit, I forgot.

“I won’t be able to make it today. Too much shit I need to catch up on.”

“What’s been occupying all of your time? Or shall I ask *who?*”

“Let it go, Keira.”

“Humor me, please. Tell me your mom and dad didn’t just have a mass illusion and that it was you they saw out with a black girl named McKenzie yesterday?”

“I’m sure you all have better things to do than talk about who I’m enjoying a steak dinner with.”

“Not really. So, let’s hear it.”

“It was just dinner.”

“Not the way my big sister tells it. She said you were fawning all over each other. Holding hands and playing with your cutlery.”

“She exaggerates.”

“True, but your more idealistic father is backing her up on this one. Is she nice, this McKenzie person?”

“Yes, she is and that’s all I’m saying.”

“Maybe we can double date when I get back from Milan.”

“We’ll see.”

“So, you *are* seeing her?”

“Goodbye, Keira.”

“You are such a fuddy-duddy, nephew. I didn’t rub off on you at all.”

“Mind your own business, Auntie.”

“Okay. But remember your advice the next time I meet a guy.”

“He will be vetted and interrogated like all the rest.”

“Hypocrite.” She hangs up.

McKenzie

I say goodbye to Ansford and my lame job at the hotel. Dwayne is accompanying me to LA on a private jet. I’ve never been one for flying, but private planes are definitely the way to go. This thing screams upper class.

When I told Mom I decided to move to LA instead of back with Dad, she had a million questions. Mainly why I didn’t just move in with her. I’m sure she misses me, but we would have been on top of each other in that little one-bedroom apartment she has. Growing up, I had more room and freedom living with Dad. He didn’t even notice if I was alive or dead.

Hopefully, I made the right decision taking Gage up on his offer. I already know I’m getting a car out of the deal and a nice apartment. I can’t wait to see what else. I know he’ll be very free with his money. He always is. Thank God he likes to

spread his wealth around. I thought I would have to do all kinds of despicable things for him to open his wallet, but so far so good. There really isn't much he demands from me.

I still don't know if he expects me to be kinky as his submissive, but as long as he keeps me in the life I'm quickly getting accustomed to living, I'm willing to do whatever it takes. It's worth a few orgasms. Heck, I may even let him give me a couple of those for free.

"Dwayne, have you seen the apartment I'll be staying in?" I ask him from where he sits a few seats over near the opposite window.

"Yes, ma'am. I made sure it was up to par as far as safety goes."

"Is it a nice place? Fully furnished?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure you'll be very comfortable there."

I sit anxiously in my seat, looking out at the clouds before I take out my phone to text Tyra.

***McKenzie:** In the air. Heading toward LA.*

***Tyra:** I hate you. I touched down in NYC an hour ago. Dad got me a ratty apartment in Brooklyn instead of Manhattan like I told him to. I'm so pissed. I refuse to speak to him right now.*

***McKenzie:** Is it near the river?*

***Tyra:** If it wasn't, I would have killed him and Mom both.*

McKenzie: *LOL. You're such a spoiled brat. How do your parents put up with you?*

Tyra: *They raised me this way. Let me know how you like your new digs.*

McKenzie: *Will do.*

Finally, we touch down at LAX and a car is waiting to take me to my new home. I sit in the back seat with my bags loading it down. It's mostly all the clothes and jewelry that Gage has given me. It wasn't until I packed it all up that I realized how much I accumulated over the short time I've known him. Thank God he likes to spoil me.

We park in the front of a white-brick, six-story building. I'm so excited I go right up to my top-floor apartment and look around. The place is beautiful. It's a large open space with lots of windows. The kitchen is the perfect size and it's equipped with state-of-the-art appliances. The huge double-door fridge and stacked oven alone have me swooning. The living room is decorated in creams and yellows that offset the brick of the walls. Everything looks expensive from the paintings on the wall to the throw pillows that decorate the couch and love seat. It even has a view of the ocean in the distance.

I go to my room and plop down on my queen-size bed, sighing at how comfortable it is. I'm up a second later, running to my huge closet. I jump up and down when I see it's packed to the brim with clothes, shoes, matching bags, and accessories. Reading the price tags, I nearly pass out. It's nothing but designer in here.

I all-out moan like I just came when I see the jewelry display. He's bought me every precious stone imaginable and set them in platinum necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and even broaches. *Who wears broaches in this day and age?*

"Miss St. James." I hear Dwayne and leave the walk-in closet to see him standing at my bedroom door.

"You weren't kidding. I'm going to be very happy here. Mr. Remington has gone all out."

"He was adamant about it," he says, depositing my bags on the floor. "I can have Ms. Arnold come back before she gets too far. She can unpack this for you if you'd prefer."

"Ms. Arnold?"

"Vera."

"Oh, right. I would appreciate that. Thank you."

He nods and leaves to get her. I pull out my phone and video call Tyra.

"You're not going to *believe* this place," I tell her as soon as her face pops up.

"Is it badass?"

"It is better than badass. It's a mini-mansion. I don't know what I'm going to do with so much space, and I *love* it."

"Let me see." I turn the camera around and move through the apartment so she can see for herself. "I'm raiding that closet. All that shit is mine."

"In your dreams." I laugh at her. "But wait until you see the best part." I pan over to the jewelry case that will rival the

ones in the most expensive of stores.

“I fucking *hate* you.”

I take a quick shower while Vera unpacks for me.

“It’s all put away, Miss St. James,” she says when I come out of the bedroom. “And I took the liberty of bringing you over something to eat so you wouldn’t have to cook your first day here.”

“Thank you. You’re the best.”

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll see myself out.”

“I should be good. Thanks again.”

I change into a pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt before walking to the kitchen to see what she brought for dinner. It’s some type of savory seafood dish. I don’t know what the hell it’s called, but it’s so good I clean my plate. Stuffed and feeling like a pig. I wonder if there’s a gym in the building. I grab my keys and go exploring.

Sure enough, it’s on the first floor. It’s a good size with lots of equipment. No one is in here right now so I take advantage of it. I hit the elliptical, starting light since I just ate.

“Nice ass.” I hear a familiar voice behind me.

“What the...” I say, getting off the machine and turning around. “Tyrone? What are you doing here?”

“I live here.”

“Are you serious? Tyra didn’t tell me.”

“She doesn’t know. You know I never tell her anything about me.”

“But I thought you were in New York with your parents.”

“Not with Tyra there. It’s best we stay on separate coasts.”

“How could you hate your twin that much?”

“I hate the fact that she’s a spoiled brat who treats our parents like they’re her personal ATM.”

“How long have you lived here?” I ask, changing the subject.

“I moved in last week. I was shocked to see you pull up outside with that guy. Is he your boyfriend?”

“Dwayne? No.”

“Do you even have a boyfriend?”

“I just have a friend. And speaking of friends, it’s nice to have one living here.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“And thanks for the ass compliment. I don’t work on it enough.”

“You could have fooled me. Women pay me to give them an ass like yours.”

“Pay you?”

“I’m a personal trainer. My new thing until graduate school starts.”

“Your parents are making you work?”

“No, but I don’t ask them for help. I like standing on my own two feet.”

“Maybe we can work out together sometime then. You can help me tone up. I just had a big plate of seafood and I’m sure it’s going to show up somewhere.”

“I would love to work out with you. Not that you need it. You’re hot as hell, McKenzie.”

“Thanks.” I grin like an idiot.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Gage

“Everything went smoothly?” I ask Dwayne when I take his call.

“Miss St. James is settling into her apartment. Vera helped her unpack and brought over something for her to eat. Her car was delivered and I signed for it before I left.”

“Thank you,” I say, hanging up with him before calling McKenzie.

“Sir?”

“Are you not feeling well?”

“I feel okay. Why do you ask?”

“I was just informed that you needed Ms. Arnold to help you unpack your things.”

“Oh, that. No, I was just feeling a little jet lag earlier, but I worked out a little bit and it’s gone now.”

“Perhaps it was the lingering effect of being drunk off your ass last night.”

“Um, yeah, maybe. But no, I’m not really that hungover.”

“After all that you drank last night? So much that you crotch-planted a guy and fell out of a cab with your dress up? Isn’t that how the story went?”

“You know none of that happened, don’t you? Well, I was a little miffed at being spied on. Not that he didn’t come in handy, but still. And anyway, I was just playing around with you. You’ll be pleased to know that I’m not a sloppy drunk or nasty drinker.” I smile at her attempts to sugarcoat her teasing me last night. “Why aren’t you saying anything,” she asks after a long pause.

“Because I’m enjoying the hole you’re digging for yourself. Get some rest. I want you completely over your jet lag when I see you.”

“Tonight?”

“No. I have other matters to attend to first.”

“First? What matters do you have to attend to with me second?” *Crickets are all I’m giving her.* “You’re going to punish me, aren’t you?”

“Rest, Miss St. James.”

“But—”

I end the call, letting her stew over the possibility of being punished.

Try as I might to concentrate on the proposals that are covering my desk, my mind keeps drifting to McKenzie. The fact that she’s just a stone’s throw from here isn’t making it any easier. I spend the hour trying to shake her off, but thoughts of having my way with her are still at the forefront of my mind.

Fuck it.

“Rodger, bring the car around.”

A block away from McKenzie’s condo, I take out my phone and call her.

“Sir,” she picks up, and I can’t help but smile at her guarded tone.

“What do you think of your new car?”

“It’s here?”

“I’m looking at it as we speak.”

“*You’re* here?” I look up at her window to see her peeking out. “Are you coming up?”

“I was hoping you’d come down.”

“On my way,” she says, hanging up. It takes her a good twenty minutes and I’m sure it’s because she’s changing. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” she apologizes when she finally emerges from her building.

“It was well worth it,” I say, looking her up and down. She’s in skinny jeans with a black top that looks phenomenal on her.

She looks at the car that I’m leaning on.

“Is that mine?” she asks of the Maserati.

“All yours.” I hand her the keys.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, jumping up and down a little before she throws her arms around my neck and kisses me.

“Hop in,” I tell her. She rushes around to the driver’s side while I get into the passenger seat.

We take off through the city. I give her directions and we hit some nearby tourist traps before heading back to her place.

“That car is amazing,” she says as we walk through her front door.

“It drives like a dream.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“Of course, I do. How could I not?”

“And your place?” I ask her, looking around.

“Love it.”

“I take it you’re not still... jet-lagged?”

“Not really.”

“Good. I thought I’d come check on you.”

“And punish me?”

“Why are you being punished, Miss St. James?”

“Because I fibbed a little about my bad girl behavior.”

“Make no mistake, you are a *very* bad girl.”

I take her hand and lead her to her bedroom.

“You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

Her scared plea deflates my dominant balloon.

“No, baby. I’m not going to hurt you. I’ll never push you further than you’re willing to go. I respect your limits and your safe words.”

“Okay,” she says, relaxing.

I spend the next hour bringing her to the height of orgasm only to stop her from falling over the edge. I'm in complete control of everything her body is feeling and I love every fucking minute of it.

"Please, let me come," she begs underneath me. I have her on her back, fucking her.

Her whole body is shaking. It's taut and wet with sweat. She's trying to catch her breath and her eyes are glistening from the strain of not being allowed a much-needed release. I know she can't take much more.

Now is the time I either leave her the way she is or allow her to come. As her Dom, the choice is one hundred percent mine. But as a virgin sub, I think twice about leaving her completely frustrated. It's too harsh of a punishment for such a slight infraction.

Making up my mind, I grab her, flip her over, and yank her up on her knees.

She moans loudly when my hand lands on her ass.

"Come," I demand, clutching her hips and ramming into her pussy from behind.

"Oh, God," she cries out as her orgasm claims her. She bucks and grunts like a wild horse as she comes. The bedsheets are firmly in her hands and her head is thrown back as I ride her like an untamed stallion.

"Fuck," I say, coming with her.

We collapse on her bed. The silence of the room is broken by our labored breathing.

“Have you learned your lesson?”

“Hmm, maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I may need a little more teaching, sir.”

“Jesus Christ.”

Three Months Later

McKenzie

Everything has been going well with Gage. It's been nonstop for the past few months and he wants to renegotiate the contract. He says it's the standard checking-in period to see if both parties are still willing to continue. He wants to discuss it tonight over dinner. Tyra swears up and down that he wants to continue. I think so too, but I can't be sure. I have to prepare for the worst-case scenario.

But even if he decides to be done with me and cuts me off, I'll be okay. I have a wonderful job at Bishop Advertising Agency that he got for me. My car is paid for and so is my apartment for the next year. He's still putting money in my bank account each month even though I haven't had to use any of it.

“You better get ready,” Tyra comes into my room to tell me.

She moved in with me about a month ago. When she called to tell me that she was miserable in New York, that she got

into a big fight with her parents and they cut her off, I had to help her out. So, I talked to Gage.

“But I’m so bored here by myself,” I whined to him. “You won’t even have to see Tyra.”

“Fine, let her move in, but remember our arrangement.”

“Always,” I told him. “Thank you. Thank You. Thank you.”

Tyrone was furious when I told him she was moving in. We’d been hanging out a lot, but now that Tyra’s here, he never comes to the apartment. I only see him when I go to his place or when we work out together. He couldn’t believe I let Tyra move in, but she’s my best friend so what was I supposed to do.

“Do you know what that fight was about?” he asked me. “Mom and Dad want to retire early and they told her they couldn’t support her anymore. Dad even set her up at his company. All she had to do was show up to get paid, but that was too much for her. She had a full-blown tantrum and vowed never to speak to them again.”

That’s just like Tyra to be mad about that. Hell would have to freeze over for her to work. Even now, she has Seth bankrolling her. He thinks she moved here because she was so lovesick over him. Poor guy doesn’t even know that the minute he leaves, someone else is climbing into her bed. I hate it because I’ve gotten to know him and he’s a great guy. He sure as hell doesn’t deserve to be used that way.

I shake my head at myself. Who the hell am I to judge? I’m no different than she is. I’ve been using Gage since the day I

met him. I'm hit with a big, salty wave of guilt.

"You okay?" Tyra asks.

"Sure." I shrug. "Just feeling some type of way about this meeting."

"Don't psych yourself out about it. Seth says Gage has never been so happy and his family adores you, especially his mom."

"They're okay as far as families go, I guess," I say, to downplay my feelings.

The truth is I've gotten pretty close to them. Once they found out I'd moved to LA, they hounded Gage until he caved and took me over to have dinner with them one weekend. I've pretty much been there every weekend since. It's nice spending time with a family that truly loves each other. I'm sure that's all it is I'm feeling right now.

I stuff my bad mood down while I practice being sexy. I'm wearing a long black dress with a front split up my left leg. It opens to show off the platinum and diamond thigh chain I have on underneath.

"You're going to knock him dead tonight, McKenzie. Hell, as sexy as you look right now, you should negotiate for more money."

"We'll see," I say, feeling like my old self again. "Wish me luck."

I hear the familiar knock of Dwayne coming to pick me up. Gage insists on me not driving tonight. I don't know what it's about. Tyra says it's his way of spoiling me.

“Miss St. James has arrived, sir,” Dwayne announces to Gage.

He gets up from where he’s perched in the living room.

“That will be all for now, Dwayne. Thank you.” The minute we’re alone, Gage takes my hands to check me out. “You’re breathtaking,” he says before kissing me.

“Thank you.” I feel the giddiness inside like I always do when he tells me that.

“I hope you like seafood tagine.” He checks with me, pulling out my chair so I can sit down.

“I love it.” I ate the entire plate of it that Vera brought me on my first day in LA. Of course, I didn’t know the name of it back then.

“Good,” he says, opening the bottle of Chablis. “Vera made it special for you. She said you sang its praises to her. I had to heat it since she’s off.”

“Well, I’m not worried. You’re very good at heating things up.”

We eat in compatible silence all while eye-fucking each other. When we’re done, he leads me to his office. As soon as the door closes, he pounces, pulling me into his arms until I’m flush up against him.

“You smell so damn good,” he says with his nose in my hair. “I can’t resist you right now.”

“Then don’t.”

“Mmm, this is so fucking sexy,” he says, playing with my thigh chain as he pushes me back on his desk and lifts my legs in the air. He holds my ankles while he fucks me, making me come in seconds.

Coming down from my high, I take a seat in the plush chair in front of his desk while he buttons his pants and sits down in his chair.

“How do you feel about our arrangement?” he asks.

“It’s great.”

“It works for you then?”

“It works very well. I wouldn’t mind continuing,” I say in a rush. Something in the way he’s asking has me on guard. For the first time, I feel that I may lose him. For some reason, that sends me into a panic. I don’t think it has to do with the support he gives me, but now is not the time to try and figure it out. “I’m not the best sub, but I try. I can take away some of my hard limits.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“But Gage, I—”

“McKenzie, your limits are fine. I wouldn’t mind continuing either, but there are some aspects that I’m no longer happy with.”

I sit, waiting for him to explain. I’m sure it’s about the money he spends on me. Tyra and I spent one bored Monday night when Seth was out of town, adding it all up and it was insurmountable. If it’s bugging him, then I can scale it back a little.

“I’d like for us to move forward without a contract.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I want us to have another form of commitment beyond this arrangement.” He gestures between the two of us. “A relationship that’s more... traditional.”

“Traditional like a boyfriend and girlfriend type of traditional?”

“Exactly. My family already thinks that you’re my girlfriend. Surprisingly, that idea has become pleasing to me over the last few weeks to the point that I’m no longer satisfied with the Dom/Sub arrangement. McKenzie, I’m asking you to be my girlfriend.”

“A real one? Not just the pretend thing we do around your family?”

“No, not the pretend thing. I’d like to give us a chance to at least see how far this can go, explore feelings. What do you say?”

“I’m sorry, Gage, but I don’t think I can do that.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

Gage

I've been with McKenzie for the last few months. The more time I spend with her, the more I want. I used to despise that word but now that it's attached to her, *more* is all I want. I can't get her out of my damn system. I *crave* her. She's my drug, my addiction, my cure-all tonic.

I can see how much the idea of a real commitment is freaking her out, but I keep going. I know she feels the same way that I feel about her. I can see it every time I look at her. I feel it every time I'm close to her and I won't take no for an answer.

"I know it's a big step," I say, trying to sound sympathetic.

"No, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"Please let's not do this, okay," she cries.

So floored by her tears, I don't even think to offer her a tissue. She seems torn and I can't figure out why she's so distraught about this.

"Does the idea of being my girlfriend scare you that much?"

"No, it's not that either. It's just... I don't even know where to start."

"How about the beginning because I'm at a real loss here."

"You're going to hate me."

“I could never hate you.”

She nods and wipes a stray tear.

“I’ve been playing you from the start.”

“From the start of what? Of us?”

“When it was announced that you were going to be at that stupid golf tournament, Tyra was excited, but I had no idea who you were until we looked you up. We started talking and one thing led to another...” She stops to take a deep breath.

“I’m still not following,” I say.

“We came up with this plan.”

“What type of plan?”

“A plan to get your money,” she whispers. I have to strain to hear her and I know I didn’t just hear her right. “Gage—”

“When? How?” I ask, trying to make sense of this bullshit of a bombshell she just dropped on me. “The day we met? You running into me, was it on purpose?”

It had to be. She pretended like she didn’t know who I was, but she’d already looked me up.

“Yes. We knew you were coming to tour the school, but we didn’t know when. Tyra saw you walking with Seth and the chancellor and she called me. I needed a way to meet you, so I figured I’d just run right into you.”

“It worked,” I say. My anger is barely in check. “So, what was the plan? You had no way of knowing I’d be at your hotel.”

“No.”

“What the fuck was it then, McKenzie?”

“What does it matter now?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I want to know.”

“The plan was to slip into your hotel room at the Wisteria and seduce you,” she says, and I laugh at the silliness of it. “I have a friend who works there. We knew it was your hotel of choice. I was going to get you to take my virginity.”

“Like you did that night I took it?”

“Yes. All the pictures of you were with different women—different blondes. I never saw you with anything else, but I figured I’d take my chances. Show you what a black girl had to offer. You clearly weren’t the commitment type, so I made up the whole boyfriend-revenge-fuck thing. But when the Wisteria went up for renovation, the plan was squashed. We were working on a plan B when I saw you at my hotel that night.”

“So, you carried it out. You got me to fuck you. It all went as planned?”

“No. The original plan was to blackmail you.”

“How?”

“It doesn’t matter, Gage.”

“How the fuck were you going to blackmail me, McKenzie?” I yell at her, but she stays quiet until it finally dawns on me. “Son of a bitch. You were going to say I raped you?”

“I don’t think I would have gone through with it, Gage,” she says quickly, shaking her head.

“You let me fuck you. Of course, you would have gone through with it. Why didn’t you? Was it because I asked you to return?” She nods. “So, you decided to see what all you could get that way. Less messy for you than taking a chance on the courts finding out you lied when filing charges against me.”

“I don’t think I would have gone through with it, Gage.”

“You sure think highly of yourself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re good,” I say, ignoring her half-ass apology. “You are *fucking* good. I’ll give you that.”

“I didn’t know that it would be so...”

“So what? Easy?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“So, what the hell happened tonight? You nearly hit the jackpot with the offer I just gave. Surely, you know as my girlfriend, there would’ve been no limit to what I would have given you. Why the hell didn’t you take me up on it? Was the thought of a real commitment to me that awful? Was that a step too far?”

“Yes, but not for the reason that you think. I realized that I’d gone too far, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I just... I wasn’t expecting it. I see Tyra with Seth and I don’t like it. It’s like a mirror being held up to my face.”

“That fucking bitch has her talons in my brother.” I can’t fucking believe this shit. He finally finds a girl he sees as more than an open pussy bar and this is the shit he gets. “Was this part of the plan, Tyra fucking over my brother?”

“Tyra has her own plans.” She shrugs. “I don’t want to know what they are. I like Seth.”

“Spare me that bullshit. You *like* Seth. I introduced you to my family. My parents worship you. My mother, she... son of a bitch.”

“I know. I’m *sorry*, Gage.”

“Don’t act like you’ve been hit with a fucking conscience. As far as I know, this is still some game you’re playing.”

“It’s not. I started feeling guilty at graduation. No one showed up for me, but you did. I was being honest when I hugged you and said I wanted to be your sub.”

“I should have fucking known when you asked me to add that shit in the contract. I *did* know. I just didn’t let myself believe it. I trusted your sweet and innocent act. I fucking trusted you, McKenzie.”

“But it wasn’t bullshit at that moment. I swear it wasn’t.”

“So, what happened?”

“I pushed the feelings away. I knew I was doing wrong, but I figured I was giving you something too. I talked myself into keeping it going.”

“You were whoring yourself.”

“Maybe so. But you were more than willing to buy. Like I said, I knew it was wrong, but I was desperate not to return to my dad. Being with him for any length of time would have been too much.”

“Why?” She shakes her head, refusing to answer. “So, you came clean tonight because you got what you wanted from me? Did you find another fool to use? I’m no longer needed, is that it?”

“No, I swear that’s not it. I just wasn’t expecting you to ask me to be your girlfriend. But when you said the words, I realized that you mean a lot to me. I was hoping that by being honest, maybe we could start over. Or... I don’t know...”

“You can’t be fucking serious.”

“I know I blew it. But I’m just hoping that when you calm down, maybe we could be... friends.”

“Friends? You’re lucky I don’t destroy your gold-digging ass.”

“For what? What you did, you did willingly. I never asked you.”

“You conned me. That wasn’t fucking willingly. I should have your ass arrested. But you’re not even worth that inconvenience.”

I pick up the phone to call for Dwayne.

“This shit you and Tyra had going on is over. I hope she saved her damn money. I hope *you* did, for that matter. I won’t

kick you out, but that bitch better be gone by morning. The fact that I fucked you is the only reason you get a reprieve. It's the only reason I'll honor my promise to you. But don't fucking push me, McKenzie. If you ever come my way again, you will regret it."

"You called, sir," Dwayne says, coming into my office.

"Get this piece of trash out of my sight."

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

McKenzie

I sit in the back of Dwayne's car. He glances at me through the rearview, still stunned at the venom he just saw coming from his boss toward me. Gage pulled me out of my chair and threw me out the door.

I'm stunned by it myself. I knew he'd be angry, but I never thought it would be that bad. I didn't put much thought into telling him. I certainly had no intention of confessing anything tonight. But when he asked me to be his girlfriend, I couldn't lie to him another minute. I know the kind of man he is and I know how much asking me that question cost him. I just couldn't take it that far and live with myself.

The sad part about it is that I wouldn't have been pretending. I would have gladly said yes to being his girlfriend and meant it.

I arrive back home, mentally exhausted and already feeling lonely now that I don't have Gage. Talk about burning a powerful bridge. I can only hope he doesn't make good on his threat where I'm concerned, but I still have to tell Tyra the jig is up and that she has to move out in the morning. She and Seth are waiting for me in the living room.

"I can't believe you," Seth says. "All this damn time, you've been playing my brother? Do you know how hurt he is by your shit? The first time—the first fucking time he trusts someone and this is the thanks he gets."

"I'll handle this, Seth. Just take my bags down, okay."

"After her scheming ass tried to drag you into her lies? You think I'm going to leave you alone with her?"

"What! I didn't *drag* Tyra into anything."

"Seth, please," Tyra begs him.

I watch as he throws his hands up.

"Stay the hell away from my family. And that includes Tyra."

"What the hell did you tell him?" I ask when he's gone.

"I didn't tell him anything. It was Gage. I was totally caught off guard. What the hell were you thinking, McKenzie? You blew it. Not only for you, but you nearly blew it for me."

"So, you make me out to be the bad guy in this?"

"What was I supposed to do? I'm not about to lose Seth. I worked too damn hard putting up with his ass for all of this."

She spins around to show off the fact that everything she has on, he bought her.

“What’re you going to do? Just keep using him?”

“I’m not going to tell *you*. Not after you threw me under the bus with Gage. You couldn’t have just left me out of it, could you? I thought we were friends.”

“We *are* friends, and as your friend, I’m telling you that eventually, Seth will see through you.”

“You mean like how Gage did with you? Girl, bye.” She tosses her set of house keys on the counter. “Oh, just so you know, we can’t hang out or talk anymore. I have to make it look like I’m just as mad about what you did as Seth is so he won’t suspect me. It sucks, but you made your bed, you know.” She leaves with a shrug and I roll my eyes at the door she just walked out of.

I strip out of my dress and take a long hot shower before climbing into bed. I pull the covers up over my head, letting the exhaustion take over. It’s a restless sleep that leaves me wondering what lies ahead for me.



CHAPTER NINE

Two Months Later

McKenzie

These have by far been the longest two months of my life. I spent the first going through the motions of a normal routine: wake up, shower, get dressed, eat, go to work, come home, sleep, repeat.

I didn't realize how much being Gage's sub impacted my life until it was gone—until *he* was gone. Admittedly, it's not the money I miss. Not that I've gone without. Gage stayed true to his word. He let me keep the apartment and everything in it as well as my job.

Tyra also stayed true to her word. I haven't heard a thing from her. Admittedly again, it doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would. We're still friends with some of the same people from school. I found out through their social media pages that she and Seth are engaged. I don't see how Gage let that happen, but the last time I saw Seth, he was completely fooled by Tyra. He most likely isn't listening to a word Gage says on the subject. I forced myself to disengage from the whole thing when I had the misfortune of seeing pictures of their engagement party on the internet.

I was finally enjoying my own life again when I started getting sick about a week ago. At first, it seemed like it was

just a little stomach bug. I thought I'd gotten ahold of some bad food, but I'm still feeling like crap. Some days are better than others, but most days suck. Other than going to work, I stay lying around the condo. I don't have the desire to do anything else.

Saturday morning, I wake up with what I can only describe as a migraine. My head is hurting so bad I can barely stand the sunlight peeking into my window and all my energy is zapped away. I want to pull the covers up over my head, but I know I won't be able to sleep, especially with someone pounding on my door. I look at my phone and frown at the time. It's six in the morning. It can only be one person up this early.

"The building better be on fire," I say, opening my door to stop the knocking.

"No fire, but I brought pastries," Tyrone says by way of an apology. Evidently, he can see that he woke me up.

"You're forgiven." I step aside to let him in.

He's been hanging out here since Tyra moved in with Seth. When I told him about her, he wasn't surprised by her behavior, but he was disappointed in mine. He even tried to blame her, but I had to set him straight.

"It wasn't just her," I told him. "Yeah, she's the one screwing over Seth right now, but for my part with Gage, I knew what I was doing. I'm just as much to blame as she is. Even more so since I'm the one that did it."

“I’m not letting you off the hook for that hoe shit. Don’t worry. That was messed up and I never would have pegged you as that type of girl. But I don’t care what you say, you’ll never be able to convince me that my sister wasn’t a bad influence on you.”

“I make my own decisions. What I did to Gage is on me, not her.”

“At least you owned up to it.”

“All the good it did.”

“It says something. It says that you’re not just some cold-hearted bitch who takes what she can get. And what about Gage?”

“I can’t talk about him.”

“Right. Mr. NDA. That screams victim.” He rolled his eyes, making me laugh.

“So, we can still be friends? Even now that you know I’m just like Tyra?”

“You’re nothing like Tyra, and yes, I still consider you a friend. I don’t think any less of you, McKenzie.”

He was very forgiving and thank God because I like Tyrone.

“You know,” I say, taking one of the pastries from its pretty pink box, biting into it. “You’re supposed to help me tone up, not spread out.”

“I already told you, you don’t need it. You’re hot the way you are.” I huff playfully at him. “So, what’re you doing today?”

“I have a date with my television. And it’ll probably be the same tomorrow.”

“Again? Why don’t you come out with me? You’ve been stuck in here all week.”

“I go to work.”

“And then right back here. You need to have some fun. What happened to doing that?”

“I’m not feeling very well.” I put down my half-eaten pastry because my stomach is starting to churn.

“Are you still throwing up?”

I answer his question by running to the bathroom and emptying what I’d just eaten into the toilet. It tasted good going down, but it tastes like shit coming back up.

“Damn,” he says, coming in, helping me over to the sink.

“It’s been this way every morning,” I confess to him.

“And you’re sure about the birth control, right?”

“Yes, Dr. Tyrone.”

“Have you had a period?”

“I think it came on last month.”

“You think?”

“I can’t remember exactly. I forget to write it down.”

“You need to see a doctor. This has been going on too long.”

“I know. I have an appointment later today.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“I’ll be fine. You don’t have to cluck over me so much.”

“I’ve gone from doctor to mother hen now, I see.”

“Yes, and I love you for both.” I kiss his cheek, and he dramatically wipes it off.

“Vomit lips,” he complains, making me laugh. I turn to the sink and brush my teeth.

I sit, twiddling my thumbs in the waiting room for twenty minutes before I’m finally called in to see my doctor. I’ve been actually waiting to see her all day and it takes all of ten minutes for her to finish with me. She throws in a pap smear and blood work for good measure since I’ve recently become sexually active.

The lab is backed up so it will take at least forty-eight hours to get the results. The only orders I’m given are to get lots of rest and drink plenty of fluids. It’s all the standard stuff that makes going to the doctor a colossal waste of time. I was already doing what she suggested and it hasn’t done me a damn bit of good. I finally get home and do what I wanted to do since this morning: climb into bed and pull the covers over my head.

Gage

It’s been two months since I kicked McKenzie out of my house and out of my life. Two months since I even laid eyes

on her. I'd like to say that it's the best decision I've ever made, but looking back on it, I realize I should have just kept on paying for her services.

I've contracted three subs and dismissed them after the first fuck. None so far have come close to her. None give me the release I used to get with her. For a virgin, she was fucking good at getting me off.

My family took the details of our "break-up" hard. I was hoping to spare them the knowledge of what happened, but my dick-for-brains brother had other ideas. While he was bragging about Tyra to the family, he took the same opportunity to let them know exactly what happened between me and McKenzie. This came after I warned him what that bitch he thinks he's in love with is up to.

"Look, I know you got burned by that whore, but you can't blame Tyra for what McKenzie did to you. She's nothing like that bitch."

"Wake up, Seth. Where the hell do you think McKenzie got the idea from? They're friends, for fuck's sake. Do you honestly think Tyra had no clue about all of this shit? Do you think she's not doing the same thing to you? Tyra is using you for all you've got and if you keep falling for her shit, you have no one to blame but yourself."

Before I was done talking, he stormed out, threatening to never speak to me again if I didn't lay off Tyra. I haven't said another word against her or *to* her, for that matter.

I've been avoiding going anywhere near my parents' house. To watch everyone be so happy with her while they badmouth

McKenzie is too much to swallow. Especially when I know that bitch is no better. She's worse, letting McKenzie take the heat, acting like she's innocent. She spews nothing but venom about her so-called best friend, and I know damn well it's all bullshit. She's doing it to take the attention away from herself. While everyone is busy hating McKenzie, they're blind to Tyra. She's good at playing them and it makes me sick.

Don't get me wrong, I despise McKenzie as much as they do. But she doesn't deserve this shit from Tyra. As far as I can tell, McKenzie has been a good friend to her. I curse at myself for trying to defend her. I just want to be rid of them both. I blame myself for exposing my family to the two of them.

Never again will I fall for this type of shit. I still can't understand how I let myself be suckered in this time. I still can't explain why after two months, I can't stop thinking about her. I had to stop myself from having Dwayne check in and report back on her. I still don't think I'll ever be able to get her out of my system.

McKenzie

After waking up early Monday morning to empty my already empty stomach, I make a phone call to my doctor's office to see if my test results have come in yet.

"I'm sorry, doctor, what did you say?"

This is my third time asking her to repeat herself. I know she's getting annoyed with me, but I just know I'm hearing her

wrong. I have to be hearing her wrong.

“You’re *pregnant*,” she explains, slowly this time. “This obviously comes as a shock to you, but if you plan on continuing with the pregnancy, I’ll have to transfer you over to an OB-GYN so that she can better care for you and the baby. In the meantime, your iron level is a little low, so you need to start on prenatal vitamins right away. Other than that, everything looks just about how it should. Nausea and vomiting are normal at this stage. Continue to drink plenty of fluids, but nothing too sugary right now.”

She goes on explaining the dos and don’ts to get me through until I can make an appointment to see the OB-GYN, but I barely hear a word she says after pregnant. I don’t understand how this happened. I was on birth control. I’ve been taking it forever to help with my cramps.

What the hell am I going to do now? I can’t have a baby.

My mind is in a state of shock. I don’t know how I made it through the workday. I can’t remember a thing that happened. I can’t tell you a word I said, though I was talking to people throughout the day.

I come home and spend hours researching on my computer, looking for options. How many do I have at this stage? I don’t even know how pregnant I am. From what the doctor could tell from the information I gave her, she doesn’t think I’m more than a couple of months along. I have to be at least that since it’s been two months I last had sex.

Abortion is still an option since it’s early. I quickly dismiss that. I just couldn’t live with myself if I did that. Adoption is a

better option. I quickly research it, but I don't want strangers to raise my baby. It could be an open adoption, but even then, if something were to go wrong, I wouldn't have any rights to my own baby. I can't do that.

I'll have to find a way to raise him myself. It's the only way I can make sure he's at least okay. I roll my eyes at the thought. I'm so good at fooling people, I'm doing it to myself. I know I'll mess this baby up more than anyone else ever could.

With a heavy sigh, I go back and look over adoption.

It's the only option I have right now.

"That isn't an option, McKenzie," Tyrone says when he comes over with dinner. He's my only confidant at this point. So of course, I told him about the pregnancy.

"But I can't give a baby what it needs."

"That's ridiculous."

"This baby will be messed up if he's left with me to raise."

"McKenzie, you're a beautiful person, inside and out. You'll be a wonderful mother. You may not see it now, but I do."

"No, I don't see it and I don't want to raise this baby, Tyrone, not alone. I don't even think I can."

"You shouldn't have to. The baby has a father. It's his responsibility as much as it is yours."

“I don’t think he’d see it that way. He’ll think I got knocked up on purpose.”

“Well, you can’t blame the guy,” he teases me.

“You’re supposed to be helping,” I tell him, punching his arm. “I don’t know if I can tell him. I don’t know if I *should* tell him. Maybe it’s better if he doesn’t know.”

“Okay look, just talk to him. Good or bad, in a few months, he’s going to be a father. He should at least know he has a kid in the world somewhere.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

And thinking is about all I do. I spend the entire week on autopilot: Work. Home. Lecture from Tyrone. Work. Home. Lecture from Tyrone. In between that, I manage to spend some time studying up on what to expect now that I’m expecting. Looking at all the images of the different stages of pregnancy opened my eyes to my situation. It made it a lot more real to me. I’m carrying another life inside me. One that I’m completely responsible for. A tiny little person that’s helpless and innocent.

I’m both freaked out by the idea and surprisingly at the same time excited about it. I realize I won’t be able to give my baby up, and really, I don’t want to. He’s a part of me and Gage. I know he hates me now, but at one point, when this baby was conceived, he cared about me. We cared about each other. This baby is ours and I already love him.

“Dammit,” I say, getting up from my laptop and racing to the toilet to throw up the cereal I just ate. I’m hacking up for a good three minutes and I don’t even remember eating that much of it. “Really,” I say to my flat belly. I sit back down on the couch and look at the time. “It’s not even officially morning yet and you have me throwing up. *You* are the one who wanted the cereal. You realize that? I hate that stuff.”

I laugh at the absurdity of the conversation I’m having with someone who I don’t even know for sure can hear me. But still more than once this week I found myself talking to my belly anyway.

I’ve made up my mind to tell Gage. I’m one hundred percent sure I’m not giving up my baby and I’m also certain that he has to help me raise him. This baby already has a shitty mother to deal with. At least he has a great father. And Gage is the father, whether he wants to be or not.

I spend all of Friday reaching out to him, telling him I need to talk to him and that it’s important. My emails and my text go unanswered. My calls go straight to his voicemail. I even call his assistant, but she won’t put me through.

At the end of the day, I make my mind up to see him. I go over to his office at EnGage Sports Center and wait for him in the lobby. He’s walking like he owns the world. The moment he sees me, his whole demeanor changes. He gets stiff as a board and if I didn’t know him, I’d run from the death glare he’s giving me.

He quickly excuses himself from the person he's walking with. I can feel the anger pouring out of him as he approaches me and I try not to falter under the weight of it. I've never felt the need to cower in his presence before today. I'm beginning to second-guess this whole thing.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he snaps at me under his breath, grabbing my arm to escort me outside.

"You won't answer my phone calls."

"There's a fucking reason for that. I have nothing to say to you."

"I have something to say to you and I need you to hear me out."

"Why should I listen to a word that comes out of your conniving little mouth? It's just some new shit that you've come up with. Is the money running low already? What the fuck more do you want, McKenzie?"

"I'm pregnant," I whisper it to him so low that if there had been a slight breeze, it would have carried my words away before they reached his ears.

"What did you say?"

I take a deep breath to steady myself.

"I'm pregnant," I say with more conviction this time.

"And I suppose you're going to try and pass this baby off as mine? You are un-fucking-believable."

"It *is* yours. I haven't been with anyone else. You know that."

“I also knew that you were a sweet girl, at least that’s what you led me to believe. But you and Tyra blew that shit right out of the water with your scheming and your lies. How the hell am I supposed to believe any damn thing that comes out of your mouth at this point?”

“I don’t expect you to. I know that you hate me. I’ve given you every reason to, but I’m carrying your child, and I need help. I can’t raise this baby alone.”

“Then get rid of it.”

“I can’t do that either.”

“Oh, *now* you have morals.” He fakes a laugh.

His words hurt, but I know I deserve them. I deserve his anger, but when it’s all said and done, the fact remains: I’m going to have his baby and he’s going to help me make sure he gets all that he needs to be happy.



CHAPTER TEN

Gage

I can't fucking believe she has the nerve to show up here.

That's my only thought as I grab her by the arm and force her out the door. I thought she'd take the hint when I refused to answer her many attempts to call me. I should have known she'd show up. Once again, I've thought too much of her. The girl has no shame.

Admittedly, when I first saw her, I was pleased. All those old feelings that I've been trying my damndest to suppress came crashing back. But now, my anger has taken over and I welcome it. It's better than feeling the sting of her betrayal.

Of all the fucking schemes I imagined coming out of her mouth when she asked me to hear her out, saying she's pregnant is one I didn't see coming.

She just fucks me up every single time I see her.

Not that I believe this shit. I don't believe a word that comes out of her mouth. But the more I think about it, the more I realize it could be true. I took her word that she was on birth control and not once did I bother to use a condom. It was beyond careless.

I take my hand and wipe the thin layer of sweat that has accumulated on my upper lip as her words sink in.

Shit! What if she's telling me the truth this time?

“Gage, I’m going to have our baby and you’re going to help me, whether you want to or not.”

And there is the goddamn gold-digging ultimatum.

“Fuck!” I refuse to believe this shit. No way in hell am I going to be a father. I’m pissed off at her coming over here telling me this shit in some last-ditch effort to get who the fuck knows what from me now. It’s the last thing I want to deal with. “Let’s go,” I say, dragging her over to where Dwayne is waiting with my car.

“Where are we going?”

Her legs are moving quickly to keep up with me.

“I need to know if you’re telling me the truth because I don’t believe you are. But if you’ve gone and gotten yourself knocked up, I need a paternity test done.”

“Right now?”

“Hell yes, right now. You’re not going to saddle me with a kid that isn’t mine just because you’ve been slutting around.”

“Wait a second,” she says, yanking her arm away from me. “We can’t do a paternity test this early. It might hurt the baby.”

“How convenient for you. But I’m not giving you a damn penny until I have proof that this baby you’re supposedly carrying is mine.”

“Look, I didn’t come here for your money. I came here to do the right thing.”

“By making demands on me.”

“By telling you something you needed to know. I’m just trying to think about someone besides myself.”

“You’re a piece of fucking work, you know that?”

“Fine... that’s fine,” she says. She hides it well, but I know I’ve hurt her. Like I should give a fuck. “I already told you, I don’t expect you to believe me.”

“Good. Then let’s go get the paternity test.”

“Forget it.”

She puts her hands up in surrendered frustration and starts to walk away.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“Home,” she says over her shoulder. “I’ll call you when the baby is born. You can have your paternity test then and not a minute before. I’m not risking the baby over your crap.”

I can’t fucking believe this mom-of-the-year scam she has going on right now. If she was pregnant with my kid, she’d be bending over backward, trying to prove it. She’d have just hit the gold-digger’s jackpot.

I blow my breath in frustration, getting into the back of my car, trying to process this latest bomb she just dropped on me. There are too many damn factors to consider: Is she even pregnant? Is it mine? What the fuck am I going to do if it *is* mine? If she’s even pregnant.

One thing is for damn sure. This is her problem. She needs to deal with it. I take out my phone and call my lawyer. I pay his ass enough, so now it’s time for him to prove his worth.

“Mr. Remington, to what do I owe—”

“There’s a woman I’ve been in a relationship with. She’s claiming she’s pregnant. I want nothing to do with her or that kid. Do whatever you have to do to make this shit go away. Her name is McKenzie St. James. I’ll have my assistant fax over her information.” I hang up on him.

Dwayne clearing his throat gets my attention.

“What?” I say to him.

Judging by the way he’s gripping the steering wheel and the slight push of the gas pedal, I can tell he’s not happy with me.

“It’s not my place to comment, sir.”

“I’m glad you realize that.”

As pissed off as I am, I may just fire his ass if he opens his mouth about this current fuck- up I’m in.

Goddammit. She’s determined to ruin my life.

It takes some effort to finish the dinner Vera made. I spend the rest of the evening in my office with a bottle of whiskey. I can’t even drink the shit. It reminds me too much of McKenzie’s eyes. Not only has she fucked up my life, but she’s fucked up my only way to escape it. I switch to tequila.

Just when I thought I was rid of her, she comes right back again. This time, she’s bringing a special type of baggage. At least eighteen years’ worth if she’s telling the truth. But she’s not. There’s no way in hell she is.

I go back and forth with it all night with no resolution. Finally, drunk off my ass, I go to bed. My sleep is riddled with

nightmares, but it's nothing new.

I'm on the ground in Afghanistan with the sound of artillery gunfire in the distance. Standing between my squad and the base is a woman and her four-year-old boy. She's begging for me to help him. He's been hit by God only knows what and it's torn him apart. She picks him up and cradles him, trying to absorb his pain and give him what comfort she can all while standing firmly in front of me, making sure I don't leave them there. She's too close to the base and I'm surprised a sniper hasn't picked her off. I yell behind me for the medic who stabilizes him for transport before we scoop them both up and take them with us. She kisses the back of my hand like I'm the second coming of Jesus.

I wake from the dream with the feel of her tears still on my hand. I head to the bathroom to put water on my face to calm down. I'd forgotten all about that woman and how she was willing to risk her life for her little boy. The dream has shaken me to the core. If that baby McKenzie's carrying is mine, there is no way in hell I'm leaving him to be raised by that gold-digging slut.

I've finally made up my mind.

McKenzie

“How did it go with Gage?” Tyrone asks as soon as I open my apartment door.

“About as well as I expected.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse,” I say, plopping down on my couch. “He didn’t believe a word I said and then the minute he realized it might be true, he demanded a paternity test right then and there. He was practically dragging me to see some doctor.”

“No doctor would do a paternity test right now.”

“With his money and influence? He just might find that one.”

“Damn.”

“I know.”

“What did he say when you refused?”

“I didn’t refuse. I told him I’d call when the baby is born to have the test done then.”

“Good. That will give him a chance to let it sink in.”

“Not good. He just thinks I want money. I don’t think the idea of actually being a father ever entered his mind, and if it did, it’s not in a good way.”

“Give the guy time. It’s not every day you find out you’re going to be a daddy with a girl you want nothing more to do with.”

“Always the voice of reason.” I was about to tell him where to go when the doorbell rings. “What now?” I say, answering it.

“McKenzie St. James?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been served,” he says, handing me a legal-size manila envelope.

I take it back to the couch, open it up, and read it.

“What’s all that?” Tyrone asks.

“It’s from Gage. He’s filed a restraining order against me.”

“You can’t be serious? Why the hell would he do that?”

“I guess he didn’t like me talking to him in public. Evidently, he doesn’t want me showing up again. It says I have to go to court.”

Tyrone takes the forms from my hands and reads them.

“This is bullshit. And here I was defending the guy.”

“Maybe I should call him.”

“No, you can’t. You have to leave him alone, or risk breaking the restraining order.”

“What’s the point of it? I’m not harassing him. I told him I wouldn’t even bother him again until after the baby’s born.”

“I don’t know, but it’s a jack-ass move. You’re carrying his kid and he pulls this. I don’t know what his motivation is to go that far. I guess he just wants this all to go away.”

“A baby just can’t go away. Maybe he needs time to process it like you said.”

“Getting a restraining order doesn’t sound like he’ll be coming around to the idea anytime soon.”

“He *has* to. I don’t want to raise this baby alone, Tyrone. He deserves a great dad.”

“You won’t be alone. You’ll have me. And the baby will have us both. He’ll be just fine.”

“Yes, *she* will.”

“Another smart-mouthed beauty in my life? I like the sound of that.”

“Well, good because if she’s anything like her mother, she’s going to be a handful.”

I groan, pulling the covers from over my head. I thought I was going to get to sleep in this morning. The baby has other ideas, and for once, I’m starving. I go and raid my fridge, but come up with a lonely yogurt sitting way in the back under the light bulb. Next to it is a carton of milk. I sniff it, gagging from the rotten smell before tossing it. I hear Tyrone’s knock and rush to the door.

“Yes, my hero,” I say to him. He comes in empty-handed and I look past him thinking maybe he left the food outside. Nothing. “Where’s breakfast?”

“At the restaurant and that’s where we’re heading. Get dressed.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” I say. “I’ll drive.”

I put on a sundress since it’s warm out.

“Look at you,” he says, checking me out. I spin around to give him a better look. “Hot.”

“You lie. But keep it up.”

Gage

“Where is she?” I ask Dwayne before he can even acknowledge that he’s answered my phone call.

I sent him over to McKenzie’s place early this morning and he’s just informed me that she went out in the company of some fucker who lives in her building.

“They just sat down at Manhattan’s Grill,” he informs me.

I show up just in time to see McKenzie and the fucker enjoying themselves in the lounge area of the restaurant.

“It could be a boy, you know,” I hear him tell her.

I can’t believe this asshole knows she’s pregnant. He obviously knew before I did. The thought of her sitting with him discussing what’s supposed to be my child pisses the shit out of me. Whatever the hell my plan was on the drive over here is all shot to hell now as my temper takes over and I walk up to them. The fact that she’s sipping on a fucking cocktail pisses me off even more, but I hide it well as I confront her.

“Are you drinking *alcohol*, McKenzie?” I spit the word alcohol at her. So much for hiding it well.

She turns her head at the sound of my voice.

“Gage.” She looks at her drink on the table and then looks at me. “It’s a virgin mimosa.”

“And what business is it of yours?” The fucker comes to her defense.

“Another victim?” I gesture to him with my head, never taking my eyes off her. “Are you conning him too? Is he the one that knocked you up?”

“No, that honor goes to you,” she comes back at me.

“What are you even doing here, man?” the fucker continues to address me. “She’s been court-ordered to stay away from you, but that works both ways, you know?”

That got my attention.

“What the hell is he talking about?” I ask her.

I refuse to speak to this idiot, but I do sympathize with him. Not too long ago, I was under her spell. I don’t know how much money he has to offer her, but I’d have given her the fucking world if she would have just cared for me a little bit.

“The restraining order you filed against me,” she says. “I got the papers yesterday—”

“And now, here you are, in her face today,” the fucker interrupts her. “Who’s really stalking who?”

“McKenzie, I never told anyone to file a damn restraining order.”

“Well, someone did,” she says.

“Shit,” I say to myself out loud, remembering the conversation I had with my lawyer.

“Full of it,” the fucker says. I’ve had just about enough of him. I finally turn in his direction.

“Gage, please don’t make a scene.” McKenzie stands up to stop me.

“Then get rid of him,” I tell her.

“I’m not going anywhere and neither is she.”

“It’s okay, Tyrone. I’ll go with him. You stay and enjoy your breakfast. We’ll talk later.”

I feel like beating my chest for winning this pissing contest. Not that I want the prize.

We both watch as she walks out. I follow her. Fuck, she always has a way of making me follow her.

“Was all that necessary?” She starts in on me once we’re outside. “How did you even know where I was?” She notices Dwayne sitting in my car before I can answer her. “That’s just great,” she says, staring at him.

“I need to know if you’re pregnant.”

“Of course, I am. I had a doctor to confirm it.”

“How far along?”

“I don’t know.” She sighs. “I need to make an appointment to see the OB-GYN.”

“Let’s do it now.” I lead her to my car.

“It’s the weekend.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What about the restraining order?”

“That was a mistake done by my lawyer. I’ll take care of it. Now, come with me.”

She thinks it over for a moment while I wait impatiently.

“Fine.” She gives in. “If it’ll get you off my back.”

I smirk at her. She has no idea of how much on her back I’ll be if this baby is mine.

We sit in the exam room waiting for Dr. Carter. I picked her because Mom speaks highly of her. McKenzie already gave urine and some blood work. We’re waiting to see the baby on the sonogram.

“Who was the boy?” I ask her.

“Tyrone? He’s Tyra’s brother.”

“That’s just fucking great. Are you fucking him?”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that since I’m no longer fucking *you*.”

“McKenzie—”

“Look, can we please not start. I know that you’re pissed at me, but I’m not going to go through this experience we’re about to go through with you being like this. Can we put it aside just for a little while?”

I nod in agreement.

“You’re definitely pregnant,” Dr. Carter comes in to confirm. “Let’s take a look so we can see how far along.” McKenzie lays down while the doctor squirts gel on her belly and searches it with the sonogram probe. “There he is,” she says.

We both squint at the grainy image. We can’t see a thing until the doctor points him out.

“That’s him?” McKenzie asks. I can hear the excitement and the amusement in her voice. I smile before I can help myself.

“It sure is. It looks like you’re about ten weeks along, give or take.”

“Ten weeks,” I repeat, trying to remember when and where we were when we had sex ten weeks ago.

“Do you want to hear the heartbeat?” We both nod. She flips a switch and the room fills with a swooshing sound that makes McKenzie smile even harder. “Sounds good,” the doctor assures us. She goes on to say other things, but all I can hear is the swooshing of that tiny little heartbeat and all I can see is the little life on the screen that’s growing in McKenzie’s belly. I know in my heart he’s mine. Deep down, I’ve always known. “I’ll give you both prints of the image,” she says, cleaning McKenzie up. “Is there anything else you need?”

“When can we have a paternity test done?” McKenzie asks her. “Is it safe to do it while I’m only this far along?”

“That won’t be necessary, McKenzie,” I tell her.

She looks at me slack-jawed. My sudden one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn has her confused.

“Good,” the doctor says. “Because it wouldn’t be advisable.” I nod. “Now, your blood work is fine. Your iron is a bit low, but you stated here that you started prenatal vitamins, so that should bring it where it needs to be. I can give you a list of foods. There are things you need to avoid.”

“That won’t be necessary. I have a well-versed cook,” I tell her.

“Terrific. See my nurse on your way out. She has the prints for you.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“I need that list of foods,” McKenzie frets as we sit in the back of my car looking at the sonogram picture. I’ll have someone pick up her car later. “I need to know what to eat. I can’t remember everything my doctor told me over the phone.”

“Vera will prepare your meals.”

She sighs. I know she wants to argue, but she says no more about it.

“What made you finally believe me?”

I shift uncomfortably at the question.

“You may be a lot of things that I hate, but the one thing you aren’t is a whore.”

“Well, that’s something at least,” she says, faking a laugh. Dwayne pulls into my driveway and opens McKenzie’s door to help her out. “Why are we here?”

“You haven’t eaten,” I remind her. “I had Vera prepare you something.”

We walk in silence. The zing I still feel for her hits me full blast when we walk in, making me roll my eyes at myself. All these weeks I’ve spent trying to forget how this felt with all

the women I fucked in her place. It only takes five seconds with her in my damn house to blow it all to hell.

“You didn’t have to go through the trouble, Vera,” McKenzie tells her as she sits at the kitchen counter.

“No trouble at all, McKenzie,” Vera says and I wonder when did they get on first-name bases. I guess McKenzie spent more time here than I realized. “I’m just finishing up.”

“Oh, God,” she groans when Vera puts the plate in front of her. She covers her mouth with a frown. “Liver and onions?”

“I insisted that she make it. It’s very high in iron.”

McKenzie looks at Vera who grimaces apologetically. She warned me when I texted her that it wouldn’t be the best thing to offer McKenzie at this stage in her pregnancy, but I wouldn’t listen. The doctor said she needed iron and this is it.

“I’ll give it a try,” McKenzie tells her. “Your cooking is always amazing, but please don’t take offense if I run to the bathroom.”

“I completely understand,” Vera assures her.

I smile, pleased as McKenzie takes the last bite of her liver and then scrapes the juice from her plate. It’s good to see her eat.

For the baby, of course.

“That was good,” she says, surprised.

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“So, you’re worried about my iron levels,” she asks tentatively, trying to gauge my mood. “Does that mean you’ll be a part of the baby’s life?”

“You told me I didn’t have a choice, remember?”

“I’m sure that lawyer of yours told you that I can only get you for child support. It takes more than that to raise a baby. Can I level with you?”

“Of course.”

“In all honesty, I don’t think I’ll be much good at being a mom, Gage. I’ll try my best, I swear I will, but I just think I’m going to screw it up— screw the baby up.”

She whispers that last part and it softens me long enough to throw her a sympathy bone.

“I don’t know if I’d be any better,” I say.

“We could do it together,” she says. “Balance each other out. A baby needs both parents.”

“I think so too. But on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

I pause because what I’m about to say next is downright insane.

“You have to agree to be my wife.”

“I... your *what?*”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

McKenzie

I know I misunderstood him. He couldn't have just asked me to marry him. He hates the sight of me. So, I *know* I didn't hear him correctly.

"I want us to raise our child as husband and wife," he says again and he's serious.

"Why would we do a crazy thing like that?"

"You said it yourself. A baby needs *both* his parents."

"Right, but we don't have to be married to raise him. We can share custody. We can co-parent."

"That won't do. I won't have my child being raised in a fractured home. I won't have him being shuffled around from one place to the other."

"He won't be shuffled around. I live less than twenty minutes away."

"I won't have him exposed to you and your *boyfriends*." He throws the accusation at me.

"Is that what you think—that I'll have some revolving door of men?"

"If the shoe fits."

"And what about those size twelves you have on? How many subs have you had in the past few months?" I throw that shit right back at him. "How many will you have hanging

around here on their knees while our baby is sleeping in his crib?”

“I would never expose my child to that.”

“*Our* child, and neither would I.”

“Then we agree?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. We can have a simple ceremony tonight.”

“Wait, that’s not what I was saying yes to, Gage.”

“Is there a reason you’re refusing to marry me? If you have a better offer, you can forget it. No one is playing daddy to my child.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I overheard you and that boy talking.”

“You mean you ear hustled.”

“Whatever way you choose to word it, McKenzie. He’s not getting his hands on what’s mine.”

“Tyrone is a friend. He was just offering to help after *you* blew me off.”

“Well, I’m all in now. So, what’s the problem?”

“Oh gee, let me think. What about the fact that you can no longer stand to be in the same room with me? What about the fact that we can’t say more than four words to each other without throwing insults? What about the fact that you hate my guts?”

“I don’t mind being in the same room with you. The rest we can work on. We have time.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I asked you out of courtesy. The reality is, either you marry me or I’ll cut you out of our baby’s life the minute he’s born. You won’t so much as hear his first cry.”

“You can’t do that.”

“We both know I can. We also know I’d do everything in my power to make it happen. I would stop at nothing. I’d spend every penny I have, and I’d be forced to destroy you in the process.”

“Were you always this much of a heartless asshole?”

“You made me this way.”

“So, to hell with me and what I want? I can’t believe you.” I should never have told him I was pregnant. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Make a choice,” he has the nerve to tell me. Like the so-called choices aren’t both designed to wreck my life.

“I can still use that contract I signed against you. I will if you force me to.”

“Good luck with that.”

“You can’t deny its validity. I’m carrying the proof in my stomach.”

“McKenzie, whatever you *think* you had on me is useless to you now. The stakes are higher than just my reputation. Do

you think I wouldn't risk that at this point? I would bury you and you'd never see my baby again."

I place my hand protectively on my belly at the thought of him being taken away. I can't risk losing him.

"Does it have to be tonight?" I finally ask him. Maybe with time, he'll change his mind.

"Yes," he says, dashing my hopes.

"But there's a lot of preparation in weddings." I try to stall. "We need a license and who's going to marry us on such short notice?"

"I'll take care of that. If you need me to speak with your parents—"

"That won't be necessary, but what about your family? I'm sure they won't be happy about all of this."

"You let me worry about that. Right now, I'll have Dwayne drive you to pick out a dress and whatever else you might need."

"A dress?"

"Yes, of course, a dress. Make it a white one."

He has *got* to be kidding.

We're at some fancy restaurant that I would have gone crazy over a few months ago. Now it barely registers with me even though I'm the one that said I was hungry. The appetite I had is gone, but Gage isn't having it. Between his disapproving

scowls and the long lecture about eating for two, I clean my plate.

“I need to give you this,” he says, reaching into his pocket to take out a small black case. “Even though we’re only going to be engaged for less than an hour, you still should have an engagement ring to wear.”

He opens the lid and looks at me expectantly.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell him honestly.

“It belonged to my grandmother. My grandfather had it made for her the day she told him she was pregnant with my father. When she died, she left it to me. We were close and she loved this ring.”

“Are you sure you want me to have it? Sounds like it means a lot to you.”

“Yes,” is his only answer as he slips it on my finger. “Perfect fit.” I smile at the ring and the story behind it. I’ll be sure to take good care of it, even if its former owner is a world-class jackass. “Are you ready?”

“Sure thing,” I say too cheerfully. “I’ve had my last meal and now I’m going off to the guillotine.”

“And I’m not even French. Although, I did take it in high school.”

“Are you serious right now? You’re unbelievable.”

He laughs at my misery.

We make the drive to someplace with a name I don't care to know. I feel like I'm about to make the biggest mistake of my life and that's saying a lot. Don't get me wrong. I care about him. My feelings may have been realized too late, but they still haven't changed. Under any other circumstances, I would have been happy to marry him if I thought he cared one iota about me. After everything that's happened between us, that's almost impossible, but I'm stuck. Being railroaded into marriage is not how I pictured my wedding day.

He did care enough to not have the ceremony in some smelly justice-of-the-peace office. He found a quaint little chapel on the water. It's a beautiful place for a wedding. A girl would easily fall in love with it.

Strangers are here to help me with my hair and makeup and I slip on the dress that I picked out earlier. It's simple, knee-length, and very white like he insisted. I told him it was a stupid thing since I'm already knocked up, but he wouldn't budge.

"McKenzie, you're marrying the only man you've ever slept with in your life. Wear the damn white dress."

"Are you ready, Miss St. James?" I hear one of the strangers knock.

As I'll ever be.

Our wedding ceremony is simple. Our vows are traditional. I wish we had family and friends to wish us well, but the situation is what it is. I have to make the best of it for now.

“You look beautiful,” he says on our way back to LA.

“Save it.” I’m sitting with my arms folded, surrounded by the darkness of night. It’s very fitting for the hopelessness I’m feeling. “I don’t need your phony compliments.”

He has the nerve to smirk and I roll my eyes. I’m happy he’s finding amusement in being married to me. I feel like I’ve just sold my soul to the devil.

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Remington.”

“Why do you insist on calling me that when you know it makes me want to gouge your eyes out? You just love torturing me, don’t you?”

“I take pleasure in it, yes.”

“You’ve taken this revenge thing just a step too far, you know that. But there’s a flaw in your little plan.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re stuck with a woman you despise as your wife. Is getting back at me worth it?”

“I didn’t marry you for revenge. I married you to ensure the best possible future for my.... for *our* child. And if I have to be stuck with you for that to happen, it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

“Don’t expect me to make it easy for you. I know I was in the wrong, but you’re impossible.”

“I never expect anything where you’re concerned.”

“And here come the insults.”

“That wasn’t an insult,” he says, pulling into his driveway.
“That was a compliment.”

We walk up the stairs in awkward silence. I’m as far away from him as I can get, but I’m secretly hating myself for still feeling excited when I brush past him to go through the door he’s holding open for me. I wish that would go away. I wish all my feelings for him would just go away. They don’t serve me well at all.

“Well,” I say, once we’re in the living room. “It’s late so I guess I should go.”

“Go where?”

“Back to my place.” I go over to get my keys where they were left on the counter.

“Your lease has been bought out, so there’s nothing to go back to.”

“You got rid of my place?”

“McKenzie, *this* is your place. We’re married. The whole point was for us to start a life together.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you meant I had to move in here tonight.”

“Why wait? Your things are already put away in the closet.”

“When did you do all that? You have *got* to be kidding me.”

I rush to the bedroom—his bedroom, and look around. I’m taking up half the drawer space and the second walk-in closet that used to be empty is filled with all my things.

“He did it. I can’t believe it,” I whisper to myself, tossing the keys on the dresser.

“Believe it. I was never one for procrastinating.”

“Clearly.”

“Now that we have all that settled, are you hungry?”

“No. I’m still stuffed from the pre-wedding dinner. I don’t know how I still fit in this dress.”

“It fits amazingly well.”

“Why are you lathering it on so much? I’ve already given you what you want.”

“Will you just accept a compliment for what it is? It’s no secret how attractive I find you.”

“Yeah, but that was before.”

“Let’s not keep rehashing it. We agreed to move forward.”

“Right.”

“And speaking of moving forward, there’s one bit of business we need to handle before we call this a done deal.”

I was expecting lawyers to come out of the woodwork with papers for me to sign, preventing me from laying claim to his fortune. Not that they could. He’s already married me, but I wouldn’t put anything past him at this point.

“We need to consummate our union.”

“We need to... *what?*”

“Have relations as husband and wife.”

“I know what it means, Gage. I just can’t believe you’re saying it. We’re for damn sure not doing it. No way. Forget it. Of all the things you could have said. I can’t believe this.”

“Is it so hard to believe I want to fuck my wife?”

“Yes. Well, normally no, but... oh, my God, you drive me nuts.”

“How so?”

“You go from one end of the spectrum to the other and at breakneck speed.”

“You’re being very dramatic, McKenzie.”

“*I’m* being dramatic? You go from not believing I’m pregnant, to wanting a paternity test done, to restraining orders, to marrying me—all in the span of two days. And now... *now* you want it all consummated.”

“That sums it up nicely. Now, if you’re done with this little freak-out, let’s get to it.”

“I want you tested.”

“What the hell for?”

“For diseases. I don’t know who you’ve been with and you knocked me up, so you aren’t the most careful person.”

“I’ve learned my lesson. I don’t fuck without condoms anymore.”

“Then you won’t mind wearing one with me.”

“What the hell for? You’re already pregnant. Do you honestly think I’d risk the health of the baby by passing on

something to you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Am I not pleasing to you?”

“Of course, you are. Especially when you’re not being an ass.”

He smirks at my admission before stalking up to me.

“I still turn you on?” he asks, leaning in close to my ear.

“Yes,” I whisper, cursing myself for already getting wet.

He takes my hand and leads me back toward the bedroom next to the bed. He unburdens me of my gown and lays me on the bed. I’m surprised at how gentle he’s being. It reminds me of our first time together when he took my virginity. I try not to respond to him, to hold on to my anger at being forced into marrying him. But my treacherous body can’t help it and before long, I’m squirming underneath him as he kisses and caresses my skin, expertly driving me wild and making me desperate for him.

“Gage,” I beg for him.

“Do you want me inside of you now, Mrs. Remington?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm,” is his only response as he slips himself into me. “Fuck, it’s been so long since I’ve had you.” My legs instinctively wrap around him, pulling him in deeper. “You feel so damn good. It never feels this damn good without you. I’ll never be without you again. You’re mine. No one else will ever have you. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.” I’m so caught up in the moment that I don’t think to care what that means.

All I want is to be hurled off the cliff he’s quickly carrying me to the top of. I want to come. I *need* to come for my sanity and so does he.

“Fuck,” he moans as I come hard around him and he empties himself inside me.

He collapses on the bed next to me and I know nothing more but the oblivion I’m in.

I groan at the warm sun on my face. I turn away from it and hit something hard and hot. My eyes spring open and stare right into the darker ones of my new husband.

“Good morning, Mrs. Remington.” He annoys me with the first thing out of his mouth.

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“You’re stuck with the title. Better get used to it. We’re married now.”

“I don’t see how I can get used to it. We didn’t even have a honeymoon. Doesn’t seem like a real marriage without a honeymoon,” I tease him right back.

That should teach him. I know he’s not going to want to deal with me in that type of setting. What man wants to honeymoon with a wife he doesn’t even want?

“Hmm,” he says, getting out of bed.

He walks over to the dresser in all his naked glory to retrieve his phone. I can't help but admire him as he goes. He has the best ass I've ever seen. I catch my breath as he turns around to face me. My eyes drift down in an obvious eye-fuck but meet his again when I notice his sudden erection. I try not to lick my lips but fail. My craving for white chocolate is making me drool and I'm disgusted with myself right now.

He's talking on the phone, but I'm not paying much attention to the conversation. The view is still distracting me.

"Done," he says, tossing his phone on the bed. "Get dressed."

"Why?"

"Must you question everything?"

"Um, with you, yes," I answer, causing him to sigh.

"We're going on our honeymoon."



CHAPTER TWELVE

McKenzie

I sit next to Gage, watching all the boats go by as we drive toward the harbor.

“I don’t think this is the best plan of action right now,” I tell him. “I have work tomorrow.”

“You forget I know your boss. You can take off whenever you want. On second thought, I want you to quit.”

“What for?”

“You’re pregnant.” He says it like it’s an obvious reason for a woman to quit her job.

“It’s still too early to think about that, but I’m planning on going on maternity leave when the time comes. They have an excellent baby bonding plan.”

“Why wait? You can just stop now.”

“I’m feeling fine and I like my job.”

“There is no need for you to work, *McKenzie*.”

“I’m not going to just sit home, *Gage*. I’d be bored out of my mind.”

“You can always spend my money.”

“That’s hitting below the belt and it’s *our* money, Mr. No Prenup. Seems you overlooked that little detail while you were doing all that wedding planning.”

“And you sure as hell didn’t mention it.”

“Why would I? Man, you sure are a cock hitter.”

“Fine. I apologize for insulting you, but you still shouldn’t work. You’ll have plenty to do with a baby to take care of and a house to run.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“It’s the truth.”

“No, the truth is you’re a lame-ass chauvinist.”

“Now who’s being insulting?”

“It’s the truth,” I repeat his words before taking a moment to look around. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“I chartered a boat.”

What he calls a boat is a floating house. A family of four could live comfortably on this thing.

“It’s beautiful out here,” I say.

“I hope you don’t get seasick.”

He studies me for any signs of discomfort as the ship’s captain moves us farther out into the water.

“On this gentle thing? I doubt it.”

“There’s something for you to change in. It’s laid out on the bed in the master suite.” I go in to find a deep red bikini and I instantly fall in love with it. “Do you like it?” he asks, coming in to check on me.

“I love it, but I may just spill out of it.”

“No one around; and I, for one, would love to see that.”

“What about the captain?”

“He took a jet ski out to make arrangements for us.”

“So, it’s just us?”

“For the moment.” His eyes scan my body and I swallow hard at him eye-fucking me. “When I first saw this, I knew it would look amazing on you,” he says. His hands play with the strings at my hips. “I knew it would look even better with me fucking you in it.”

He grabs me and I’m propelled forward smack up against him. I moan as his lips press onto mine. His hands travel up my back around to the cups of the bikini, pulling them down, freeing my tits. My head is thrown back as he takes one nipple into his mouth and sucks it hard while his thumb circles the other.

“Such a horny little thing,” he says as he moves to the other nipple.

“You make me this way.”

He stops and looks at me. His eyes search mine, looking for something in them. He smiles when he recognizes whatever it is.

“You’ve missed this as much as I have,” he says.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Very much.”

I want to tell him how much I’ve missed him, but I don’t think he’d care to hear it right now with everything still so raw

between us.

“Show me,” he says, stepping back to give me room.

I drop down on my knees to pull down his shorts and boxer briefs, freeing his erection. His breath quickens as I take his dick in my hand, sliding over the smooth skin. He sucks in air as I run my tongue first along the seam of his balls, then up to his shaft.

“Fuck, McKenzie,” he moans as I take him into my mouth. My pace is fast and torturous. I suck him hard, trying to drain every ounce of cum out of him whether he wants to give it up to me or not.

I missed the taste of him, the feel of him seeping down my throat, and how powerful I felt at bringing him so much pleasure. He must have missed it too because in no time at all, he is grabbing my head, coming thickly into my mouth. I greedily swallow it all down, taking him out to lick and slurp him clean.

“Fuck, I wasn’t expecting you to do that,” he says, pulling me to my feet.

“I missed my white chocolate Snickers.”

“What else did you miss?” He’s dropped all pretense and it catches me off-guard.

“I miss... uh,” I struggle for a comeback.

“Never mind.”

He picks me up and tosses me on the bed. Instead of taking off my bikini bottoms, he pulls them to the side and enters me,

already knowing I'm wet for him.

"You." I give in to passion and say the truth. "I've missed you so much, Gage."

"Don't."

He lifts my legs to go deeper, hitting me just how he knows I like it until my body is shaking with orgasm and I'm screaming his name.

We're lying in bed, still caught up in the afterglow of sex, staring at each other. I see the old Gage in his eyes as he looks at me. The one he was before I messed everything up.

Unable to resist, I reach out and run my hands through his hair. He allows it for only a second before he yanks his head away. I watch his face as he shuts down, closing himself off from me again.

"We should get ready to go," he says, pulling away from me, getting up, and going into the bathroom.

The rejection stings, but I'm not shocked by it. I know this whole thing is a farce as much as I try to forget the real reason we're together.

"Where?" I ask him.

"It's a surprise," he calls to me from the bathroom.

"Why are you surprising me? Why would you even want to? What are you even doing all this for, Gage?"

"McKenzie," he says, now standing in the doorway of the bathroom. "I'm doing this because we're married and my wife

asked her husband for a honeymoon.”

“But why all the rest? I get the marriage part, I even get the sex part, but why your grandmother’s ring? Why the no prenup, because I know you didn’t overlook that. This is all just so...”

“Because I’m trying, okay? Just give me time. Let’s give each other time. Can we do that? Can we try and make the best of this and have some fun in the process? Otherwise, we’re both going to be fucking miserable.”

“I can try. I mean, I guess I can do that if you can.”

“Well, thank fuck.”

One week later

Gage

We’ve been at the Santa Clarita Resort on Catalina Island for a week now and things are going well between us. So well in fact that neither one of us is ready to leave, so I booked us a few more nights in our honeymoon suite.

I have to say for a quick getaway, this place fits the bill for both of us. McKenzie has taken up permanent residence in the hotel spa while I’ve been all over the golf course.

She showed up one day trying to get on the green. She’d told me she was going to hang out on the beach that day, but there she was, looking for me. She had on a cute-ass golf outfit that caught my attention at tee-off. The gray mini skirt and

tight black sports blouse made me fuck up my hit. The damn ball ended up somewhere in the middle of the pond never to be seen again. She also caught the eyes of a few fuckers who didn't bother to look beyond her tits, legs, and ass to notice the huge rock she wore on her wedding finger so I went over to show them who she belonged to, up close and personal. The clubhouse attendee beat me to her and I happen to hear the conversation.

"Excuse me, but this golf course is for members only," he told her.

"Oh, I wasn't going to play. I was just trying to surprise someone."

I could see that she was mortified at being caught and I was enjoying her embarrassment. But what that fucker said next pissed me off.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave or I'll be forced to have you escorted out."

"If my wife isn't welcomed here, then neither am I," I said, coming to her rescue.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Remington," the manager came rushing over from behind his desk. The way he'd been kissing my ass since I told him I might use his course to host a tournament, I knew he wouldn't be happy with me leaving dissatisfied. "Bartholomew is new here. Please accept my apology for the misunderstanding."

"That's entirely up to my wife."

*“Yes, of course,” he said, looking wide-eyed at McKenzie.
“I do apologize, Mrs. Remington.”*

“No harm done. Bartholomew was right. I’m not a member here.”

“Membership is extended to all family members,” he told her. “Enjoy with our compliments.”

I nod and take McKenzie by the hand, leading her away.

“Why didn’t you tell that Bart idiot who you are?”

“I suppose I’m not used to who I am.”

“Well, get used to it. I want you to start name-dropping like crazy.”

She just shook her head with a laugh and headed toward the first tee.

I spent the day teaching her about golf. She’d watch me set up my swing, laughing at the way I had to shuffle my feet and wiggle my ass to get into position. She didn’t understand how it all worked so I’d get behind her, guiding her strokes.

“Like this?” she’d ask, wiggling her ass into my pelvis, getting me so hard I’d have to readjust my pants.

It took all my self-control not to smack it. I did run my hands up her thigh when no one was looking. After the eighth time of her asking, I realized she’d already gotten the hang of it but was purposely torturing me.

“Maybe you should show me how to swing again,” she said as she took up position at the ninth hole.

“Just hit the damn ball, McKenzie,” I told her, making her laugh.

I rolled my eyes when she hit it perfectly.

The next day she was dressed and ready to play again at a doubles match. This time in a hot pink number that just about killed me. No way in hell would I survive her ass wiggling in that skirt.

“We’ll play something new today,” I told her.

“Like what?”

“Croquet.”

“But only the old couples are over there.”

“Exactly.”

I can’t help but grin at the memory.

“What’s so funny?” she asked now as we relax in our cabana.

“I was just thinking about golf. I’m going for a swim.” I give her a quick kiss before I go out into the water.

Things between us have been like they were when we first met. It’s easy for us to pretend we’re just a normal married couple among all the strangers here.

I swim for an hour before I return to shore thinking that she might be hungry. I catch her eye-fucking me as I emerge from the water. The grin on her face is a dead giveaway. Her attention is shifted when someone calls her name.

I towel myself off and watch as she goes into the water with some blonde she's befriended that literally pales in comparison to her. I would have been all over that blonde before McKenzie. Damn, just looking at her gets me hard and I curse myself for still wanting her. I've taken her on every damn surface in our hotel room and twice in the water close to the very spot she's standing and *still* I haven't had enough of her.

I take some time to check in with the family. I told them I was on a business trip, but the fact that I didn't take my usual entourage has my overly observant mother worried. She's under the impression that I've been pining away for McKenzie the last couple of months. Luckily, I was able to ease her concerns by promising I'd be over for dinner in a few days.

"If you need more sunscreen on your back, I'm happy to accommodate," McKenzie says, joining me once again. She groans when her phone goes off before I can take her up on her offer.

"Who is it?" I ask as she sits down to read the message.

"Tyrone. He's wondering why I haven't come home yet."

I watch as her thumbs move across her phone, texting him back.

"Are you telling him you're on a honeymoon with your *husband*?"

"That's not something I want to tell him in a text."

"Why the hell not? I thought you two were just friends."

“We *are*.”

“Bullshit. He wants you, McKenzie.”

“Are we really going to argue about Tyrone right now?”

“No, because I refuse to argue with you about another man. I don’t want you to be friends with him. Now, it’s settled.”

“It’s not settled.” She seethes, but as far as I’m concerned, the conversation is over. “You’re being ridiculous.”

She sits with her arms crossed over her chest silently fuming, and I’ve never wanted her more. One of these days, I’m going to fuck that attitude out of her.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gage

Without another word, she goes and sits in shallow water where the tide is low. The water is at her thighs and she leans back on the palms of her hands, staring out at the horizon. I don't like her sitting alone, so I go over and join her.

“Look, if you want to go off, then go off, but I don't plan on fighting with you on our last day in paradise.”

The fact that she thinks our impromptu honeymoon is paradise pleases me and I can't believe I still have it in me to want to please her. But I can't deny that I do.

“I don't want to fight with you either. Let's put the real world aside again and enjoy ourselves. What do you say?”

“Deal,” she says before scooting close to me. She loops her arm under mine and leans her head on my shoulder. Unable to resist, I sniff her hair. Whatever she puts in it is intoxicating. It instantly calms me. “It is so beautiful,” she says of the view.

“Stunning,” I whisper to her. She lifts her head to smile at me and I divert my eyes to the water I hadn't even noticed before. I was too busy looking at her. The little laugh she gives lets me know I'm busted. “How are you and our son doing?” I ask, watching her put her hand on her belly.

“Our *daughter* is hungry.”

I smile at the news.

Happily, McKenzie has developed quite the appetite, especially since informing me of the bout with vomiting she had. I'm glad that's subsided, but I hate I wasn't there to take care of her. For the baby's sake, of course.

"We can't have that," I say, getting up and helping her to stand.

She wants to eat at the tiki hut restaurant where they serve fried plantain. I try to push for something healthier, but she's not budging on this particular indulgence. She chalks it up to pregnancy cravings, so I give in. Besides, they have an excellent Cuban sandwich I wouldn't mind eating again.

The rest of our day is spent relaxing on the beach. McKenzie enjoys the James Baldwin hardback she picked up in the vintage book store. Since she doesn't want me to do anything work-related, I pretend to surf the web when in reality, I'm getting updates from my PR team about a late-night talk show they want to book me on. What the fuck for?

She peaks over and catches me, so I switch to some brain cell killer site about how the Dodgers are doing this season.

"Did you know they have sports groups on social media?" I ask her.

"Mm-hmm. They also have groups about books."

"Why would anyone want to create a group about a damn book?"

"Because people fall in love with the characters and they want a place to get together and talk about them. They even have fanfiction based on books."

“What the hell is fanfiction?”

“Never mind.” She laughs before continuing to read.

We stay in our cabana until the sun starts to set.

“Let’s go get ready for dinner,” I tell her, packing up.

While McKenzie is getting dressed, I get in touch with Rodger and let him know what time to meet us tomorrow. I’m tempted to extend our stay for another week, but I’d only be doing it to delay the inevitable return home. I decide to just enjoy our last night here instead.

I enter our bedroom and find McKenzie still getting dressed. She’s only in her black lace bra and panties. I can only see her profile from where I stand in the doorway, but I stop mid-stride to watch her. She reminds me of the first time I saw her at the vending machines in that crappy hotel.

She was so beautiful back then, but she’s even more beautiful now. I don’t know what it is about her. She’s stunning, no question, but I’ve had stunning women before. McKenzie just does it for me. She checks *all* my boxes.

I sit on the bed so I can get a better view. She slips on her dress and comes over for me to tie it. It is a slinky black wraparound and it clings to her perfectly.

“I figure I should wear stilettos,” she says, as she stands between my legs absentmindedly fixing the collar of my shirt.

“Well, you won’t be able to in a few months so you may as well enjoy wearing them now.”

“Don’t remind me about how fat I’m going to get.”

She goes over to look in the mirror. Turning from side to side, she inspects herself. I get up to stand behind her, circling her waist to stop her.

“You’re not getting fat. Regardless, you’re beautiful.”

“You say that now, but just wait until I’m so big I can’t even see my feet.”

“I can’t wait,” I say, kissing her shoulder.

“What am I going to do with you?” She gives me a smile that sets me on fire.

“I can think of a few things.”

She hits my arm, then heads out into the living room to grab her purse.

We ride the elevator down to the restaurant. An older couple steps in so I pull McKenzie closer to give them room. The woman, who looks to be in her late seventies, is using a walker and her husband stands at her side, helping to guide her in. I remember seeing them when we played croquet. Even with that walker, she could aim those balls. She left her husband in the dust.

“Look, Herald, it’s the newlyweds.”

“How could you tell?” McKenzie asks her, genuinely curious.

“Oh, he rarely takes his eyes off you, my dear,” she informs her.

“I used to look at my Martha that way,” the old man says to me when he sees how uncomfortable I’ve gotten. He takes it as me being embarrassed.

“He still does,” Martha whispers too loudly to McKenzie. We watch as he takes his wife’s hand and lifts it to his lips. I can almost hear McKenzie cooing at them as I clear my throat. The air is thick in here all of a sudden. “Hold on to him, dear. Any man that looks at you like he does is a keeper,” Martha says, eyeing me.

“Yes, ma’am. He sure is.” McKenzie smiles obnoxiously wide at me when I look at her. The playful shrug of her shoulders tells me she’s eating this shit up, knowing I’m unhappy being the subject of conversation. “I plan on taking *very* good care of him.”

She lifts her lips so that I’m forced to bend down and give her my cheek to kiss. I want to roll my eyes at her, but I dare not disappoint the old couple who’s looking dreamy-eyed at us like they would their child who’s found true love.

This damn elevator can’t get to the lobby fast enough to get me away from all this shit.

“They weren’t *that* bad.” McKenzie laughs as we’re being escorted to our table. “I thought they were precious. I always dreamed of growing old with someone like that.”

She’s caught the eye of several male patrons. I place my hand possessively on the small of her back before helping her into her seat. I order a bottle of sparkling grape juice since it’s the closes thing she can have to wine at this point.

“I can still drink a little wine, you know?”

“No, you can’t,” I tell her as I dismiss the waiter.

“This is going to be a *long* seven months with you at the helm,” she huffs at me.

“How so?”

“Well, since I can’t drink to tune you out, I’m going to have to find other ways to stop myself from killing you.”

“It’s just your hormones. You’ll get over it.”

Her mouth falls open, but she quickly closes it. She picks up her knife and I watch as she uses it to check the makeup she’s not even wearing.

“Threat well-received, Mrs. Remington.” She now has me wondering just how many women have stabbed their husbands under the guise of pregnancy hormones. “You dreamed of being married?” I ask, getting back to what we were talking about.

“Sure. Most girls do, I think.”

“And now? Do you still wish to grow old with someone?”

“I don’t know. I never really saw it work before.”

“I know your parents are divorced but are you saying your grandparents didn’t stay together?”

She shakes her head.

“Dad’s parents both died when I was little. I don’t remember them. As for Mom, well, let’s just say she learned how to use men from grandma.” Her eyes dart back and forth

in thought and the frown on her face makes me not like whatever it is she's thinking about. "The way I learned it from her," she whispers. "Neither of us is any good at it. She's stuck in a one-bedroom apartment in Atlanta and I'm..."

"McKenzie?"

"Forget I said that."

"Why won't you talk about your parents?"

"Because there's not much else to say. Mom did the best she could. I know she loves me."

"And your dad?"

"Dad is dad. I wish we could be closer, but he has a new life with a wife and her kids."

"So, he just decided to toss you aside for them?"

"It's hard for him to find time for me. He's a busy man."

"And a shitty father."

"Let's just order," she says, looking at the menu.

The mood of our last night here is plummeting fast and I only have myself to blame. I shouldn't have started this conversation. I want to kick my own ass for it.

"You should try the liver again," I tease her in an attempt to turn things around.

The first time I ordered it for her, she tried it thinking it would be as good as Vera's. She gagged so hard that half the restaurant came to her aid. She narrows her eyes at me, about

to respond with a smart-ass comment, but we're interrupted by the waiter.

He takes our order, repeating it several times to make sure he's got it right, and still walks away like he's confused.

"He's going to fuck that all up," I say. She dissolves into a laughing fit and I just might tip the incompetent fucker triple his worth for getting her to do that. "You might just end up with liver after all."

"Oh, God," she groans, taking a sip of her juice.

"The meal was to your liking?" I ask her.

"Very much so," she says, dabbing the edge of her mouth with her napkin and pushing away her empty plate.

"I love knowing that you're full." My confession catches her in a mid-sip and she chokes a little in surprise. "It turns me on."

"Me eating?"

"A lot."

"What else turns you on?"

"About you?" I ask, and she nods. "You just breathing."

"So, as long as I'm alive, you're turned on?"

"That's all it takes."

"So, are you turned on... right now?"

"Absolutely. But I'd be even more turned on if my face was buried between your legs."

Her eyes widen and I raise an eyebrow at her in a challenge when she starts to squirm.

“I’m not the only one turned on.”

“Completely turned on,” she whispers. “Now, what are you going to do about it?”

Her own eyebrows go up to challenge me.

“Check,” I call to the waiter.

I lead her to the elevators in the wake of the waiter’s very audible gasp at the tip I left for him.

“What did you do?” McKenzie asks, looking back at the ecstatic waiter.

I shake my head in answer, placing my arm around her waist to feel the sway of her hips as she walks. The damn elevator ride is torture. Finally, it opens and I pull her straight into our room.

“Fuck, you’re so goddamn hot,” I say, stripping her out of her clothes and throwing her on the bed.

I fuck her until we both pass out from exhaustion, only to wake a few hours later with my dick in her mouth.

“McKenzie,” I moan her name and it only makes her work harder now that she knows I’m awake. “Aw, fuck.”

I grab her head and watch as her lips slide over me, stopping only to pump me with her hands and lick the precum off my tip. My head falls back as I come hard down her throat.

“Mmm,” is the only thing she says as she swallows me down, then licks me clean.

“What brought that on?” I ask once I catch my breath, and she’s back, lying next to me.

“I just had a taste for you,” she says with a guilty grin. “Strange pregnancy craving.”

I laugh, pulling her on top of me. I slide my dick, which has just gotten hard again, inside of her.

We spend the whole morning between fucking and dozing off, only leaving the bed thirty minutes before checkout time.

I turn to look at McKenzie when I hear her coming up behind me on the deck of the boat. The wind is blowing the hair that’s come loose from her ponytail and she’s never looked more beautiful.

“You okay?” I ask when she turns to watch the hotel fade in the distance.

“Just missing our honeymoon.”

“Me too. I wasn’t ready to leave either, but...”

“We have to get back to reality.”

I nod, kissing her cheek.

“Thank you for my honeymoon.”

“Thank you for enjoying it.”

“Welcome back, Mr. and Mrs. Remington,” Rodger greets us.

As soon as we slide into the back of his car and I turn my phone on, it goes off with all the messages I've missed. I kept it off purposely for this very reason.

"Reality?" McKenzie asks, looking down at it.

"Afraid so," I tell her, putting it away again.

"Reality is not our friend. We should have stayed away forever," she says, sliding over and resting her head on my shoulder.

It's a move she's done several times on our honeymoon, twice today in fact, but something about it now is wrong. So wrong that I want to push her away. I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's the hoard of messages from people I know we're going to have to deal with once we get home. But the anger I'd been successfully keeping at bay has returned with a vengeance. I realize too late that she was right. We should have stayed away forever.

Reality is not our friend.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

One Week Later

McKenzie

We've been home for a week now and it hasn't been the homecoming I was hoping for, but I'm still holding on to the happy bubble we created.

Gage is more distant than he was before we left. He spends long hours away, leaving first thing in the morning and not coming home until well after I've gone to bed. He even left yesterday and I was hoping we'd spend our first Saturday at least under the same roof. I wouldn't mind it so much if I wasn't stuck here with no one to talk to but Vera.

He's adamant about me not working. He even threatened to get me fired if I even attempted to go back to work so I'm stuck locked up all day. He's put off seeing his family until now. His mom has pushed him into a corner and he's all out of excuses so he agreed to Sunday dinner.

"Are you sure you don't want me to be there when you tell them about us?" I ask him.

"I think it's best if I talk to them alone. After the shock wears off, I'm sure they'll want to talk with the both of us."

"Can't wait," I tell him, and he scowls at my sarcasm.

“I’ll take a change of clothes so I can just head over there once I’m done with work today,” he informs me as I sit on our bed, watching him get ready to leave for the day.

“Why are you working on a Sunday?”

“It may be Sunday here, but it’s Monday in other parts of the world and I have obligations.”

“You’ll be home late again tonight, then?” I try to phrase it so as not to sound desperate for his company, but I fail.

“It’s a strong possibility. Don’t wait up for me.”

“What if I *want* to wait up? It’s not like I have anything else to do. I mean, I don’t have to get up early for work or anything tomorrow. Why can’t I work again?”

“We’ve already discussed it.”

“No, you refused to discuss it. You just told me I couldn’t work and that was the end of it. There’s no reason for me to sit around here doing nothing. I’m bored out of my mind.”

“You working while pregnant is a non-issue. Find a hobby. Something that doesn’t have you stressed out like work would. Take up scrapbooking or something.”

“Scrapbooking? You really think I’d enjoy filling my days with scrapbooking?”

“I don’t give a damn what you’re filling them with as long as you do it here.”

“You’re such a jerk.”

“What I am is late. Don’t wait up.”

“Good luck with your parents. I hope they rip you a new ass.”

“Such language isn’t very becoming of a mother.” He narrows his eyes in judgment of me before walking out.

I grab his pillow and throw it at the door he just closed before falling back on the bed. I grab my pillow, pressing it into my face and screaming in frustration at my so-called husband.

Gage

I’ve successfully managed to keep McKenzie at arm’s length. I’m still trying to rein in this anger that’s resurfaced, but so far, it hasn’t worked as well as I’d hoped. As usual, I have zero control of my emotions when it comes to my wife.

The fact that I’m dreading this dinner with my parents isn’t helping matters. I’ve put them off for a week, but now it’s time to face the music. The song that will be playing on repeat throughout the night is an oldie called “I’m so disappointed in you, Gage.”

I spend a few hours perfecting my golf swing, but it only proves to be a nonproductive effort. Soon enough, Rodger informs me that it’s time for dinner. I look up at my parents’ door, feeling like I’m going to the gallows.

“You better wait here,” I tell him.

Normally he accompanies me inside, but with all the hell I know that is about to break loose, I need him on standby for a fast getaway.

“Gage, sweetheart, you came,” Mom feigns surprise.

“I didn’t realize I had a choice in the matter.”

“Oh, now you hurt my feelings. Is it so much of an inconvenience to see your parents now and again?”

“No,” I say, kissing her cheek in greeting before shaking Dad’s hand. I make sure to hide my left hand.

Their house manager announces dinner and we move out of the foyer into the dining room. The table is only set for the three of us.

“Everyone is out tonight, I see.”

“Your aunt is catching up with friends and your brother is away on a late business meeting. Such hours you both keep. I thought only doctors and nurses worked the weekends.”

“Well, our boys didn’t become successful by taking days off, my darling,” Dad chimes in.

“But when is it going to let up? They’re already successful. You need to have fun, Gage. Go out and date. Find a girl to settle down with. A nice sweet girl, not like that last one.”

“Let’s not start in on him. I’m sure he’ll do just that when he’s ready and not a moment before.”

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, there *is* something I need to discuss with you both.” I pause to take a breath, clearing my throat.

“What is it?” Mom frets, before turning to Dad. “I knew something was wrong the moment he disappeared on that business trip.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom. Something’s right and we’re quite serious.”

“You’ve met someone?” she asks. “Is she the reason you took that long trip?”

“She is.”

“What’s her name? When can we meet her? You should have invited her over tonight.”

“Elaine, dear, let the man speak,” Dad gently scolds her.

Mom quiets down and looks expectantly at me. The excitement is evident on her face.

“I’ve been seeing McKenzie again,” I finally get the words out and watch as Mom’s face falls.

“Why on earth would you do such a thing as that?”

“Elaine, let him finish,” Dad tells her before turning to me. “Son, you said it was serious.”

“It’s become very serious. I asked McKenzie to be my wife and she said yes.”

Mom looks like I’ve just struck her.

“Absolutely not. No.” She’s shaking her head so hard I can’t believe it’s still attached to her neck. “I’m telling you right now, this family will *never* support this engagement.”

“It’s already done, Mom,” I say, holding up my hand so that she can see my wedding band.

“You didn’t. Please tell us that you didn’t.” I only nod. “When? Why is this the first we’re hearing about it?”

“My business trip was our honeymoon. I didn’t want to tell you at the time, for obvious reasons.”

“So, you’ve been married for a few days and she’s already teaching you how to lie to us?”

“That’s not fair, Mom.”

“What’s not fair is for you to spring her on us like this. This marriage is a mistake. Gordon, talk to your son, please. Because I can’t even form the words.”

“It seems it’s too late for talking, dear.”

“Then take action. It hasn’t been that long, I’m sure you can talk to one of your lawyer friends. Pull some strings with a judge. Get this thing annulled.”

“I won’t allow that, Mom.”

“Gage, this girl has somehow weaseled her way back in with you and you’re not thinking clearly.”

“She’s pregnant. And before you ask the question, yes, the baby is mine.”

I’m met with absolute silence. I watch Dad as he watches Mom. I’ve never seen her so unnerved. She looks like she’s going to fall dead.

“How long?” She finally manages to speak. “How long have you been seeing that woman? And how long before I’m a

grandmother? If that's even what I'm about to be."

"It's only been a few weeks. The baby is due in a little under seven months."

"Seven months," she whispers. "And you're sure it's yours? Surely, there hasn't been a paternity test done yet."

"No, but I'm sure."

"This woman isn't exactly a paragon of virtue. She can easily be conning you again. I'd bet good money that she is."

"Mom, please. She's my wife."

"No, I refuse to accept that. This isn't what we planned for your life, Gage. And what do you have to say about this, Gordon? You should be up in arms."

"The deed is already done, Elaine. There's not much we can do to undo it."

"What about an annulment?"

"Our marriage has been consummated."

"Of *course*, it's been consummated. I bet she made sure of it. That's what this is all about, isn't it? She has you so hypnotized with what's between her legs you can't think of anything else. And now she's carrying a child that you may not even have blood ties to."

"For the last time, the baby is mine, Mom. I'm sure of it."

"I don't care what you're sure of. I don't trust this woman. Do you remember how much she hurt you? Because I sure do. She hasn't changed. She only wants your money. I'm sure she wasn't too thrilled to sign the prenup."

“I didn’t have her sign one.”

“What is the matter with you? I am so disappointed in you, Gage.” She says the phrase I’ve been dreading for the last week as she throws her napkin on her plate and leaves her meal unfinished.

“She’ll come around,” Dad assures me, leading me into his study so that we can talk freely.

“I’ve never seen her so upset with me before. Not even with all the trouble I got into growing up.”

“She was plenty upset then. She was just better at hiding it. Give her time to warm up to the idea. It’s not going to be easy. I warned you about this, remember?”

“I know, Dad, but it still makes me feel like shit.”

“How are things going? I know it’s still too early to tell, but are you and McKenzie getting along all right?”

He hands me a drink. I shake my head before downing it.

“The honeymoon was great, but ever since we came home... I don’t know.” I stare at the bottom of my glass. “I can’t seem to get a handle on things. My anger about what she did keeps flaring and I can’t seem to shake it.”

“Is that all your feeling toward her—anger?”

“No,” I say but don’t elaborate.

I don’t tell him how much I want her. How my possessiveness is driving me to keep her locked away at home. I sure as hell don’t tell him how much I’m starting to like the idea of her as my wife. I can’t even admit that to myself yet.

“I know it’s not easy, son, but you have to try to get along with her. It’s the only way we’re going to get that baby away from her. It’s only a few more months. Just hang in there and get it done.”

“I will. I still think we should bring Mom in on this. It’ll make it a lot easier on her.”

“Your mom acts like a tough cookie, but she wears her heart on her sleeve. She’ll take one look at McKenzie with that baby and she’ll lead the charge against us when we try to take him away from her. It’s best to keep her in the dark until the deed is done. Wait until you have full custody and McKenzie’s behind bars where she belongs.”

“I’ll have to take your word for that.”

“Good. Now go home and make nice with her. Don’t give her reasons to doubt you. Keep her so sexed-up that she can’t think straight. We need her in a constant haze.”

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t just try. Do it. Focus on those other feelings you’re experiencing. In the meantime, I’ll work on your mother.”

I nod, leaving him to his night.

McKenzie

I sit, twiddling my thumbs, bored out of my mind with nothing to do until I get a text from Tyrone asking me to come over. I

figure since Gage is telling his parents about the marriage, it's only fair that I get to tell him.

"Hey, hot momma," he says, opening his door for me to come in. "You look good."

"Thanks, but you need glasses. I look like a whale."

"You're not even showing yet." I shrug him off, placing my hands on my belly. I'm sure it's getting bigger. "What the hell is that on your finger?"

"Uh, a diamond," I tell him, hiding my hand.

"Yeah, I saw that. The damn thing is huge. What I meant was *why* is it on your finger? And let me be clear before you give me another cute answer. Why is it on your ring finger? *That* ring finger in particular."

"Gage asked me to marry him and I agreed," I say with a sigh, flopping down on his couch.

"This is some kind of joke, right? Some prank you cooked up, right?"

"Nope. He asked me and I said yes."

"Then go back and say no, McKenzie. Seriously? That guy acted like an asshole at the restaurant and you agreed to marry him?"

"I didn't just agree Tyrone—"

"Thank God."

"I already married him."

“You what? So, all that time you were MIA, it was because you were with him?”

“We were on our honeymoon.”

“Damn.”

“I know, Tyrone. I know, okay,” I tell him, rubbing my forehead as it throbs in pain.

“This is so he can help you with the baby? Or is this some money thing?”

“No, it’s not some money thing. It’s a marry-me-or-else thing.”

“He threatened you? With what?”

“The baby.”

“He can’t do that.”

“We both know he can.”

“Babies don’t just get taken away from their mothers, McKenzie.”

“With mothers like me, they do. I’m not taking any chances. Besides, it’s not the only reason I married him.”

“You love the asshole?”

I fight to find the answer to that question, mainly because I haven’t admitted it to myself one way or the other. I won’t even venture into that part of myself to search for the answer.

“I knew it,” he says, disappointed when I can’t respond.

“There’s a little more to it than that.”

“Sounds like it.”

“You’re not being very supportive right now.”

“How can I be supportive? I can’t pretend that I’m happy about this.”

“You don’t have to be happy. I just need you to be my friend.”

“I am your friend. And as your friend, I’m telling you I think you just made the biggest mistake of your life getting tangled up in a marriage with that guy. It just ups the complication factor by a million.”

At this point, I couldn’t disagree with him.

“Can we just focus on something else? I’m sick of my life right now.”

“Already? You’re supposed to be on some romantic high right now. All glowing and shiny with love, McKenzie. Not sick of your life.”

I throw my hands up in frustration before getting up and going back home. Tyrone may be right, but it’s the last thing I want to hear right now.

“Where the hell have you been?” Gage rounds the coffee table to confront me as I walk in. “Vera said you left without saying a word to her.”

“Since when do I run my comings and goings by Vera?”

“Since I was home waiting for you.”

“How was I to know you’d be back? You usually sneak in after I’ve gone to bed.”

“I’m not sneaking in and I expect you to be here waiting, no matter when I get back.”

“You’re going to fuck around and find out if you think being married will consist of me sitting around here waiting for you to grace me with your presence. I suppose you want me in a house dress and heels, holding a freshly baked peach pie, just waiting for you to eat so you can lay me.”

“Is that what this is about?” He wanders over to the bar, filling a whiskey tumbler before sitting on a stool to watch me.

“What?” I ask, looking down at myself, wondering what he’s staring at.

“You’re horny.”

“What!”

“That little tantrum you just threw. I’ve been neglecting my duties as your husband.”

“Is that all you heard? Because I wasn’t even talking about that. I was talking about the macho 1950s crap you keep trying to shove down my throat.”

“So, what you’re saying is you’re craving white chocolate. You want him down your throat.”

He says it with such cockiness, I contemplate how much jail time I’ll have to serve for strangling him. I have to keep reminding myself that a baby bump doesn’t go with an orange jumpsuit.

“You can’t be serious,” I say instead of killing him. “Are we even on the same planet having this conversation right now?”

“You’re sour. Let me fuck you. Maybe we’ll both feel better.”

“My sour ass wouldn’t let you fuck me now if my life depended on it.”

“Is this your way of asking me to seduce you?”

“Oh, my God. Do you practice making me this frustrated?”

“It’s a natural gift. Now, take off your clothes.”

“I’ve just entered *The Twilight Zone*. No, I’ve just entered the sex-crazed Gage Remington’s version of *The Twilight Zone*. Look, I’m tired and I’m going to bed.”

“Good idea.” He moves to get up.

“No,” I say, holding up my hand to stop him. “*I’m* going to bed. You can go do whatever it is you do that keeps you out nights. Or *whoever* you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m not doing anything, McKenzie.”

“Whatever.”

I turn to leave, but he grabs me by the arm and pulls me between his legs, placing his arms around my waist to keep me in place. I push back with my hands against the bulk of his chest in a feeble effort to get away, but I’m not fooling anyone as my panties cream from the feel of his hands creeping under my mini dress to grab my behind.

“I think this sour ass could use a good fucking.”

Ripping the delicate soft fabric of my panties, he pulls them from between my legs and brings them to his nose, moaning as he inhales the crotch. I curse my body for betraying me once again.

“Is that what you want? To go to bed alone? Because the way your body is responding tells me something different.”

“What is it telling you?”

“That you want me to take you to bed and fuck you like your life depended on it.”

Him throwing my words back at me turns me on even more.

“Well, why don’t you do it then?”

He stands up, taking me with him. I wrap myself around him as he carries me to our bedroom.

The moment my feet hit the floor, I push him back on the bed and almost tear his clothes off. It’s been a damn week since we’ve had sex. I didn’t even realize how much I wanted it. I can always blame my hormones. They’re out of control and I can’t help but devour him in all my eagerness to get a taste of him.

“Fuck, McKenzie,” he hisses at me as I nearly suck the skin off him.

I groan in protest when he pulls me on top of him and turns me over in bed, denying me the full taste of him.

“My turn,” he says, actually succeeding in tearing my dress off and throwing it in a tattered heap on the floor. “Jesus, you are so beautiful. I don’t know how I managed to stay away

from you for a whole damn week,” he says, between tongue kisses down my body to my clit.

I scream out instantly as my orgasm catches me off-guard and I come in his mouth.

“Mmm, so good. Sweet and salty.”

“Sweet and salty?” I ask him, calming down.

“Mm-hmm,” he says. He takes another lick of me, and I squirm at the feel of his tongue on my now overstimulated clit. “Like a sweet and salty peach pie, freshly baked and waiting for me to eat so I can lay you.”

I laugh at the description, wondering how my words got so twisted around in his head.

“Between my white chocolate and your peach pie, we’re going to put each other in a sugar coma.”

“It’s worth it to get another taste of you,” he says, giving me a final lick before making his way back up my body, kissing and nipping at my skin as he goes.

I feel his dick hard against me and my senses hum in anticipation.

Taking hold of my hands and lacing them with his, he enters me. I gasp at the swiftness of it.

His mouth divides its time between my neck and breast while he sinks his dick deep inside me. He pulls out to the tip only to dive deep inside me again. He pushes hard, grinding into me, but I raise my legs and hips, matching each thrust.

We coil each other up tight before unraveling ourselves. We spin gloriously out of control, screaming for one another as deep waves of orgasm take us under.

“Well,” he says, lying next to me, still sucking in air. “I guess we can agree on one thing.”

“What’s that?” I pant.

“We were made to do this with each other. I fucking love getting you off.”

Sighing in contentment, I stare up at the ceiling. All the tension that I’d been feeling for the past week has been fucked out of me, leaving me relaxed and sated.

I turn my head, smiling at Gage as his eyes dance at mine. I can almost read what he is feeling, but then his eyes go still. The carefree look he just had suddenly gets replaced by one I can only describe as anger.

“Where are you going?” I ask when he gets up.

“I still have a lot of work to do.”

“It’s in the middle of the night, Gage. Can’t it wait until the morning?”

“No,” is his only answer. “And speaking of morning, starting first thing, Dwayne will be your bodyguard.”

“What for? I don’t even leave the house.”

“So, you were here when I came home tonight? I just imagined an empty home.”

“One time in a damn week,” I yell, throwing my index finger up to bring home the point. “Since when does that

constitutes having a bodyguard?”

The tension I had just released returns full force and with a vengeance.

“Since I was home worrying about you for nearly a goddamn hour. I had no clue where you were or what the hell you were doing. And what’s worse is my child was being forced along with you. I won’t have him or his mother in danger.”

“This is *our* child, and if you were so worried, you should have called.”

“Why should I have to call? You’re *my* wife, not that boy’s that I told you to stay away from. You’re supposed to be home when I arrive. Preferably waiting to serve me my dinner.”

“Well, your mother took care of that little need for you tonight. How was dinner at the in-laws, by the way?”

“Stop with the damn sarcasm and don’t change the subject.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. This is very much the subject, and I very much would like to know how they took the news of us being married.”

“Not well, as expected.”

“Because you got married without them knowing or because you got married to me?”

“Both. I won’t lie to you. You aren’t their favorite person right now. It’s going to take some time for them to get used to the idea, McKenzie.”

“Well, how can they when you’re not even used to it.”

“What the hell does that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’ve been avoiding me since we got home. And stop telling me it’s work. I’m not an idiot. Nothing dealing with golf is that time-consuming.”

“I do more than just *golf*. I have multiple business ventures.”

“Is this how it’s going to be from now on? You avoiding me for days on end, then fucking me when I complain about it, only to avoid me again?”

“I don’t know what else you want from me.”

“I thought we were supposed to be trying?”

“It’s not easy for me. Shit just keeps resurfacing.”

“Maybe because you’re trying to avoid it instead of talking about it.”

“Talking about it will only piss me off more, like now. So, drop it.”

“Gage—”

“I said drop it, McKenzie.”

He walks out with a slamming of the door.

The happy bubble we’d created on our honeymoon finally burst, and I have a sad feeling we’re going to drown in the wake of it.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One week later

Gage

Mom has been riding my ass nonstop for the whole damn week. She's pulling out all the stops and using every guilt trip she can throw to make me "see reason" as she puts it. At this point, I'm avoiding all of her phone calls because I'm tired of hearing it. She hasn't had this much of a negative opinion of my life since I was under her roof. I didn't like it then and I sure as hell don't like it now. Especially since she's just shown up at my office with my aunt.

Keira enters first with Mom right behind her.

"Is it true?" Keira starts in on me with both barrels blazing like I knew she would. I respect her as my aunt even though she's five years younger than me, but it's days like this I want to tell her to fuck off.

"Good morning to you too. And what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"We're going out for a late breakfast, but first I thought I'd bring my sister over here to talk sense into you," Mom says. "You certainly haven't heeded my warnings since I don't see your lawyer here, trying to get you out of this mess you've created."

“You’ve really gone and done it,” Keira says, pointing at the band on my finger. “You’ve really gone and lost your damn mind.”

“If you’re referring to me getting married, yes, I’ve done it and I can assure you all of my faculties are intact.”

“Then explain to me why you’d marry a woman like that?” Mom asks. “She has to be blackmailing you. What kind of woman uses an innocent baby as a way to make her fortune?”

“Mom, please.”

“I have to agree with her on this, Gage. I don’t get both of my nephews wanting to marry a couple of whores. At least Tyra comes from a good family. McKenzie comes from the ghetto.”

“Who told you that?”

“Tyra told us, dear. McKenzie’s family is appalling,” Mom says.

“No one should have to answer for the family they’re born into. It’s not like we’re given a choice in the matter.”

“Maybe so, nephew. But you can’t deny that she’s a product of her environment. She’s a user who leeches off the rich and you’ve just given her free rein over all your money. You’re going to be living in the slums of Chicago right next to her mother when she’s done with you.”

“Dodging Bullets,” Mom says.

“Her mother lives in Atlanta.”

“Like that’s any better.”

“Listen to the two of you and this racist bullshit.”

“Racist!”

“You heard me.”

“We’re not racist,” Mom says. “You know better than that.”

“I thought I did. You didn’t raise me to be one.”

“Of course, we didn’t. We don’t see color.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard you say. Like you don’t see she’s black.”

“We don’t blame her for it.”

“Look, I’m not going to get into this with you two. The bottom line is McKenzie is my wife and you need to accept it.”

“Well, I won’t,” Keira says. “I love you, Gage, but I can’t accept this. I can’t accept *her*.”

“You haven’t even met her yet, Keira.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve always wanted a niece I could go shopping with and hang out with, but now I’m stuck with a gold-digger and her stuck-up ex-best friend who I can’t even stand to be in the same room with. It just makes me so sad.”

“It’ll be all right, Keira,” Mom comforts her, and I roll my eyes at their theatrics.

“I’m late for a meeting,” I tell them, getting up to escort them out.

“You’ll think about what we said, won’t you?” Mom asks.

“I always do,” I say, kissing her on the cheek.

“We’ll talk later,” Keira promises me.

We most certainly will not. We’ve always been close, but right now, she’s the last person I want to talk to, especially about my marriage. I wish she’d stayed in Milan for a few more months.

Once again, I’m in the solitude of my office, but peace doesn’t come easy. I lean my head back on my chair and close my eyes. My mind instantly flashes to McKenzie and a smile plays on my lips. I’ve been going home at a more reasonable hour this week. And I’m rewarded with fucking her and I do love fucking her. Nothing relieves my tension like being buried in her pussy.

But what I love more is how much she enjoys fucking *me*. The way I can get her out of control in an instant has always been the draw to her along with that mouth of hers. Not only the way she wraps it around my dick but her sarcasm, her smart-ass comebacks, and the fire in which she spits them out at me still get me going.

It’s times like these when I think I can forgive her, but like it always does, that day in my office comes crashing through my thoughts, reminding me of who she really is. She was willing to take the experience we shared that first night and turn it into something as heinous as rape.

My endorsement deals, my brand, and my business would have all gone up in smoke. Never mind the possibility of going to prison. Even if I’d been found innocent, the damage to my reputation would have ruined me. All for money.

The fucked-up part about all of this is that even after that, I still fight with myself. I'm constantly teetering between anger that keeps me away and the other emotions that lure me in. It's a dangerous game, but it's one I don't plan on losing, especially when the cost is the well-being of my child. If I'm not careful, she's going to destroy me before this plan I cooked up with Dad comes to fruition. I won't let that happen. I'll destroy her first.

Finally, after thinking it over for half the day, I'm able to push thoughts of McKenzie out of my head. I hadn't even realized the time. I should have been home over an hour ago. I'm just about to call it quits when I get a text from Dwayne and I haul ass home.

Rodger, already aware of the trouble that just turned up at my place, has his car waiting for me out front.

McKenzie

My boss, Rueben Leigh, got in touch with me via email.

He wanted my opinion on an advertisement he's working on so he sent a copy over to me. I'm familiar with the account and he apparently doesn't trust the person who was hired to temporarily fill my position. Thank God for him, because I spent most of the day lost in my work and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

I was just slipping it back into an envelope to send to him when I hear someone walk in the door behind me. I'm pretty

sure it's Vera returning from the grocery store so I continue with what I'm doing, not even bothering to turn around. It's only when my back is met with silence that I turn to see a female standing there. I don't know who she is, but I know *what* she is. The way her head is bowed tells me instantly.

Oh, hell no.

"He's not here so you don't have to do all that," I tell her.

Her demeanor changes as she looks around the room, making sure her Sir isn't in close vicinity before she speaks.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"Seeing as you've barged into *my* home unannounced, I should be the one asking you that question."

"I'm Rochelle and this is the home of my... of Gage Remington."

"Yeah, well, apparently, your Sir forgot to inform you of a few things. Like marrying me." I hold up my left hand, fluttering my fingers in her face to show her my ring. I frown at this bitch for looking me up and down, but I'm sure she can see the similarities between the two of us. If she had a little more tits and ass, she'd be my twin. Not as cute as me though.

"Is this some type of roleplay? He's only supposed to have one, and I'm the one."

"Me being here sure shoots that theory to hell, doesn't it? And as I said, I live here."

"Then, where is he?"

“Mrs. Remington, my apologies,” Dwayne rushes in. “She slipped in without me seeing her.”

“No need to apologize. She has the code to the front door, so *evidently*, she’s supposed to be here.”

I politely dismiss him and he reluctantly goes back to wherever he was hiding. I’m sure he’s informing Gage of our house guest as we speak.

“You’re married to him? In real life?”

“I’m not that happy about it either at the moment,” I say, taking note of the disdain in her voice. “Rochelle, is it?”

“Yes, Mrs. Remington.”

“Have a seat,” I say, motioning to the couch. “I’m sure whatever my husband has planned for you tonight is going to require a lot of stamina. You may as well rest up.”

“Sir is very exhausting in his efforts,” she has the nerve to say as she sits down.

She picked the right one today with this bullshit. I’m about to grind her into dust with my bare hands and then strangle Gage for putting me in this position. Speaking of the devil, he rushes in before I can hurt this bitch.

Record timing. I guess having a sub waiting gets him moving fast.

Gage

“Look who it is,” McKenzie says to Rochelle about my arrival. Her smile is like cyanide as she greets me. “I was just entertaining the stress reliever you’ve scheduled for the weekend.”

Rochelle’s eyes look like they’re about to pop out of her head before she lowers them to study her lap. The sight of her submission while my wife is present makes me want to puke.

“You need to leave. Our contract is over. Never return here. Never contact me or my wife again and I expect you to honor the non-disclosure agreement you signed or risk facing the consequences.”

“Yes, Mr. Remington. Mrs. Remington,” she says, making her escape out the front door.

“Pity,” McKenzie says, watching her go. She’s rubbing her chin to keep from biting her lip. It’s a tell that she’s hurt and trying to hide it. “She seemed like a wild one.”

“McKenzie,” I say her name in warning, but like always, she refuses to shut up.

“You didn’t have to dismiss her on my account.”

“Don’t start with me on this shit. You knew what my lifestyle was. Hell, you were a willing participant in it.”

“*Was?* Looks like to me it still is your lifestyle. By the way, is it just a coincidence that she looks so much like me? I could have sworn you preferred white chicks. Blondes, to be exact.”

“Let it go, McKenzie. I got rid of her. What else do you want from me?”

“You make it sound like I forced you. I was more than willing to get out of your way. I would have even taken the guest room for the next couple of days. Heck, I would have stayed at a hotel to give you all the privacy you needed.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Nothing was going to happen with her tonight, or any other night for that matter. Not since I married you.”

“*Really?* Well, she didn’t get that memo because she sure as hell came strutting in here, code to the front door in hand. God, at least you can change the code so I won’t get caught off-guard by your side chicks.”

“She’s *not* my fucking side chick.”

“Right, she’s your sub. Glad we’ve cleared that up.”

“I’m not going to stand here and defend myself over something I haven’t even done. I’m leaving.”

“I’ll tell you what, why don’t *I* leave. I’m sure you can still catch Rochelle and have a wonderful night.”

She gets up, putting on her jacket.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“Since we’re messing around, I may as well give Tyrone a call. See if he’s available for a quick fuck and some dinner since my *husband* will be too busy getting his rocks off with his submissive instead of satisfying his wife tonight.”

I can’t fucking believe she said that. I know she’s doing it to piss me off, but there’s still a part of me that thinks she might follow through and call that asshole. She opens the door.

Ignoring my irate demands for her to come back, she slams it shut. I don't follow her. I know Dwayne will be tailing her.

“Rodger,” I call for him and he rushes in. “Rochelle is now persona non-grata, and for fuck’s sake, change the damn code to the alarm.”

I put my hand on the back of my neck to relieve the tension that’s built up there. I text Dwayne to keep me informed of McKenzie’s every move and to intervene if she goes anywhere near that fucker she insisted on throwing in my face to make me jealous. Damn if it didn’t work.

McKenzie

Only when I’m outside do I breathe a sigh of relief until I realize I don’t have any keys. My car is now useless to me. I decide to walk, refusing to go back in and see Gage again. I don’t even bother to call Tyrone. It was an empty threat.

I head down Malibu Road toward the pier. I just walk to clear my head, still feeling the blood boiling through my veins. The nerve of her coming into *my* home to fuck *my* husband. That bitch is lucky I’m pregnant. I wanted to snatch her ass by her cheap wig. Right before I showed her who Gage belongs to. I didn’t feel secure enough in our relationship to do that. I would’ve been devastated if he’d pushed me away in front of her.

I don’t know how long I’ve been walking, but I know Dwayne is somewhere in a car behind me. I should go over to

Tyrone's and give the man something to talk about, but I refuse to play into that. My husband may be a cheater, but I'm not.

I come upon an outside market, and I stop to look around.

"McKenzie."

I sigh at him calling my name and kick myself for still getting a tingle up my spine when I get a peripheral view of him coming up beside me.

"What are you doing here, Gage?" I ask, pretending to be interested in some sea finds that's been made into jewelry. "I thought you'd be balls deep in Rochelle by now."

"Is that what you think, that I'd cheat on you?"

"I don't even know anymore. Things haven't exactly been great between us."

A necklace catches my eye. Its charm is made of a perfectly round piece of light blue sea glass that has a sandy wave painted on it. I cup the charm in my hand to get a better look at it. The huge wave describes exactly how overwhelmed I've been feeling lately. Like I'm caught in a deadly tsunami from the 10.0 earthquake that is Gage Remington.

"It brings out your eyes," he whispers to me, taking the silver chain off the hook to pay for it, having no idea what I think of it. "I'd completely forgotten about her," he says, slipping the necklace around my neck. I peek down at the sandy wave that I'm now wearing before looking up at him. I give him a sly smile as I play with the charm that represents

him. “It wasn’t until Dwayne informed me of her arrival that I remembered her. She means *nothing* to me.”

“Why does she look like me?”

“It was my way of trying to get you out of my system.”

“Did it work?”

“No.” He sighs, defeated, cupping my face. “Nothing seems to work where you’re concerned. I can’t seem to form a good enough weapon against you.”

I step out of his hands and continue to walk, trying to put distance between us so that I can think clearly. He continues to follow me. We come upon a fruit stand and I stop to look it over. The vendor sees me eyeing the green grapes and she insists I try one.

“Good?” she asks, hopeful, and I nod my head with a moan.

“Very good.”

“You try,” she tells Gage. I hold a grape to his lips before he can protest. I catch my breath at the sight of his mouth opening to take it in. I clear my throat as I eat another. “Good?” she asks Gage.

I grin at him. There’s no way this woman is going to let us get away without buying her grapes.

“Tantalizing,” he says and I know he isn’t talking about the grapes as he presses his lips into mine.

The woman is happy as she smiles at us. Kissing from her grapes pretty much guarantees she’s made her sale.

“You buy.” She says it as a statement and not a question as she packs them up. Gage tells her to throw in some peaches as well.

“For that fresh-baked pie you owe me,” he jokes, and I roll my eyes. She thanks us and we move on. He calls to me, holding on to my elbow to turn me around and stop me from walking away.

“I believe you,” I say before he can say anything. “I just wasn’t expecting her. It caught me off-guard.”

“Let me make it up to you?”

“How?”

“Come out to dinner with me tonight?”

“Why should I?”

“Do you have to be so stubborn about everything?”

“Yes, but lucky for you, we’re starving.”

He looks down at my hand as I rub my belly.

We take Dwayne’s car to a small bistro close by. It’s quaint, semi-private, and right on the water.

“This reminds me of our honeymoon,” I tell him, looking around.

“Me too.”

“I wish we were still there.”

“Well, there’s no reason for us to not pretend like we are.”

His smile matches mine as we fall back into our honeymoon pretenses.

Gage

This fuck-up with Rochelle has thrown what I've been working on for the past week for a loop and I need to get things back on track. I've come too far to let a sub screw it all up. I'm surprised at how easy I fall into conversation with McKenzie as we try to recapture our honeymoon. I can see she's desperate to make this work between us, to make some kind of real connection.

My motives may not be as clear-cut as hers, but I can't deny I enjoy her company, especially when she's unguarded the way she was on our honeymoon. I take the opportunity to do what my father suggests. I push aside my anger and focus on my other feelings. It takes some effort, but I manage enough to get the job done.

One sex-hazed McKenzie coming right up.

We barely make it past the dessert. One taste of the pie she ordered and I'm pulling her out of the bistro back home.

We lose our clothes somewhere in the foyer on the way to the living room.

“What if someone walks in on us?” she asks as she halts my attempt to take off her bra.

“They know better,” I assure her, lifting her left leg and wrapping it around my waist.

My hand ventures down between her legs.

“Are you wet for me?” I already know the answer.

“Yes,” she says, her voice husky with need as I circle her clit through the damp fabric covering it.

I growl, sitting her on the couch. I strip off my boxers before getting on my knees to feast on her. I quickly remove her bra and panties. There is no way I can go another second without being inside her. No matter what else I may feel about her, she is still my drug of choice and I face the fact that she will always be. It’s a sobering realization.

“Gage,” she moans, grabbing my neck as I spread her legs wide and slide my dick deep into her.

“Fuck,” I whisper as my skin feels like it’s being pricked with hot needles of pleasure. Every nerve ending is alive and focused on the way my dick feels sliding in and out of her.

I watch her face as she lets go of her inhibitions about being caught and allows me to do with her as I want. The light from the windows behind her cast a beautiful glow on her skin. Every inch of her turns me on as I slowly slide in and out of her.

The sea glass charm on the necklace I bought for her falls at her ear as I start to pound harder. She screams my name as a wave, as perfect as the one painted on her necklace, overtakes us both. Her pussy sucks up my cum as I empty myself. Collapsing on top of her, I rest my head where my baby is

growing. I have just enough energy to pick an already asleep McKenzie up and carry her to bed.

As I play back the recording of us fucking on the security camera, I realize the effect I was hoping for worked. I'm cast in shadow, but the image of McKenzie is unmistakable. I smile watching it play out, knowing how easy it will be to prove that it wasn't me with her.

Her wedding ring even catches the light of the camera perfectly as she fucks some guy in our living room while pregnant with my baby.

How very reckless of you, McKenzie.

I sit, watching her sleep so peacefully as another nail in her coffin has been put in place. I've never seen anything so beautiful.

I've never wanted to destroy anything so beautiful.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gage

“Good evening, Mr. Remington,” Vera greets me when I pass through the kitchen. “Would you like me to start serving dinner now?”

“Give me about an hour,” I answer her, seeing the outgoing mail on the counter. “It smells delicious.”

I pick up the large package and read that it’s being sent to Rueben Leigh. I don’t even have to open it to know what it is, but I do so anyway. I knew I should have just had her fired. This is what I get for being nice—another betrayal.

“Where is Mrs. Remington?”

“In the bedroom. She wanted to rest a little before dinner.”

“Is she ill?”

The idea of her working herself sick angers me.

“She didn’t say specifically, but she seemed in good spirits today.”

I enter our bedroom, waving the envelope at her.

“What the hell is this?”

“I’m sure you can see what it is,” she comes back at me, sitting up from where she was resting on her side of the bed.

The brief smile she had when she first saw me is gone.

“I see that it’s being couriered to Rueben Leigh. I see that it’s an advertisement proposal. What I don’t see is why he sent it to you.”

“He sends them for me to look at.”

“For what purpose?”

“Because I like to.”

“Is that right? So why does the note attached say you’ve highlighted some major revisions?” I flip through the pages and eye them as they fan past me. “Why is the damn thing filled with your little red pen markings and notes of suggestions?”

She sighs in frustration at me for picking at her, but I don’t fucking care. She’s been working behind my damn back. I can’t even trust her not to do that much.

“You know it’s illegal opening other people’s mail,” she says, taking the paperwork from me and putting it back in its envelope.

“You’re my wife.”

“I hate when you say it like that.”

“How do I say it?”

“Like you *own* me. Like whatever crap you want to do to me is okay because I’m married to you. You make me seem like your pet.”

“I hadn’t realized. You used to like being my pet. Or was that part of the act?”

“It wasn’t an act. I did like it, but back then, you didn’t despise me like you do now.”

“Never mind.”

“Can we just talk about what happened for a minute?”

“No. Forget I brought it up.”

“But it’s bothering you. It wasn’t *all* an act, Gage.”

“I don’t want to hear it, McKenzie.”

Her shoulders slump in reaction to me as I shut her down and shut her out. She mutters something under her breath, but I can’t quite make out what it is. It’s better I not know. I don’t think I could stomach it if it was more lies.

“I’m calling the agency,” I tell her, taking the envelope back. “This stops now.”

“The hell it does.” She snatches it back from me, hugging it protectively to her chest like it means the world to her. That only makes me want to rip it away from her more. “You’ve already made it so I can’t go into work, at least let me have this.”

“No work means no work. Not sneaking around lying behind my back and working yourself to exhaustion.”

“I’m not exhausted from work. It makes me happy.”

“Happy? Is that why you’re in here lying down?”

“I’m pregnant, Gage.”

“I’m glad you finally remember that fact, and if you continue to accept work from Leigh when you’re supposed to

be *not* working, his ass will be *not* working as well, permanently.”

Satisfied that my threat has hit its mark, I snatch the envelope from her arms, like I plan to do our son and storm out of the room.

“Asshole,” she yells right before I hear her fall back on the bed and sob.

I lean against the door, taking some form of sick pleasure in knowing that I can hurt her this badly. But guilt rises in me. I have to stop myself from storming back into the room, taking her into my arms, and promising to give her anything she wants to stop her from crying.

I leave the door and push those feelings back down.

Now is not the time to give in to the weakness she brings out in me. It has never been proven to work in my favor. I walk away, loathing the battle within me.

When will I be free of it?

Three Weeks Later

McKenzie

I’m in the second trimester of my pregnancy. The baby is developing as it should and my iron level is back to normal, thanks to the efforts of Vera cooking for me.

My blood pressure was a little high when Gage and I saw Dr. Carter yesterday, so she wants me to come in to get it

checked by her nurse again today. I'm just out on the patio, waiting for Gage so we can go over together. I told him he didn't have to make this appointment. All the nurse is going to do is check my pressure again, but of course, he insists.

We're barely on speaking terms. I just can't put up with his mood swings. I don't want to be bothered with trying to figure out if he's going to come home and yell at me or drag me to bed for an all-night fuck-fest. Both seem to be punishing.

While I've withdrawn deep into myself, he's drowning himself in work. I overheard him talking to Rodger about a series of tournaments in Tokyo. He said he'll be gone for at least a few weeks. The fact that he doesn't care enough to tell me he's leaving for another country doesn't help me feel any better about where we stand.

Things between us are tense at best. I didn't even bring up the trip because I didn't want to bother arguing with him about it. There's no point. He just does what he wants anyway. I've learned to pick my battles and those still leave me exhausted. After it's all over, I still end up losing.

When I make a move, he shoots me down. When I try to go beyond the locations he has deemed "safe," he stops me. Dwayne will do it by proxy and if he fails to get me to listen, which is often, Gage will show up in person to get the job done. Threaten me with how unfit of a mother it would make me look. He knows that's his only trump card and he plays it well.

A quick trip to the mini-mart has become World War III between us when I'm not allowed to go alone, especially since

I have “Vera to get me whatever I want.” Every effort I make to assert some form of normalcy in my life away from him is met with resistance at best and pure anger at worst.

It all came to a head when he arrived home last week to see Tyrone visiting me. He’d brought over root beer and the most sinfully delicious baked chicken I’d ever eaten and I was thoroughly enjoying myself. It felt like old times, hanging out with him. It’s hard to believe that old times were only a few months ago. It feels like an eternity.

Maybe I was having a little too much fun when Gage walked in to see me grinning at Tyrone from ear to ear.

“What the fuck is this?” He came in pissed to the highest point of pissstifity seeing us sitting on the couch together.

It wasn’t even the couch we had sex on. Even though I got it steamed clean, I wouldn’t let anyone but us sit on it. The fact that he was three hours early from work let me know that Dwayne had given him a heads-up about my visitor.

“I just came by to check on McKenzie,” Tyrone told him, standing up. He’s almost as tall as Gage, but not as intimidating in my opinion.

“This is between me and my wife.”

“Maybe so, but I’m not going to sit here and let you yell at her.”

“Then get the hell out.”

“This is ‘your wife’s place too the last I checked.”

“Tyrone, it’s okay. You don’t have to defend me. We’ll continue this another time.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

“I’ll be fine. I promise, okay? Please.”

Gage was getting more and more upset by the exchange, so I got up to walk Tyrone to the door.

“You’re not going anywhere with this boy.”

“Who the hell are you calling boy?”

“He didn’t mean it that way, Tyrone.” I got in between them. “Look, I’m just walking him out, Gage.”

“Don’t make it worse for yourself,” Tyrone told me before turning to Gage. “I’m calling her in fifteen minutes. If I hear a hint of anything wrong in her voice, I’m coming back over here and I’m bringing the cops with me.”

“Are you suggesting I would physically harm my wife?”

“I’m flat out saying it.”

“Tyrone,” I whispered to him. Did he really think Gage would hurt me like that?

“I’m cool,” he told me, but I could see that he wasn’t and that he truly believed it. “I just can’t get why you married this guy.”

That was the first time I’d seen my marriage through someone else’s eyes and it looked horrible. Up until that point, I could live in some kind of sick denial that everything was normal between us or at the very least that if it wasn’t, it would get better in time. I held on to the belief that Gage

would keep his word about trying. I held on to the fact that once he got over being angry with me, he'd see how much I cared about him.

I'd been a damn fool.

"You never answered my question," Gage continued to badger me after Tyrone left.

"Wasn't it obvious?" I said, gathering up the empty root beer bottles and plates, taking them to the kitchen. He was right behind me. "I'm not 'allowed' to leave the house, so Tyrone came over to check on me like he said. We were just hanging out."

"You're allowed to leave the house any damn time you want as long as Dwayne goes with you. And you know damn well I don't want him here."

"I didn't realize we get to make no visitors lists. I need to put your family on mine because they sure as hell can drop by and talk crap to me whenever they want to."

"Tyra Kerns is not my family and I already ripped Seth a new ass for bringing her over here with that shit."

"No, I'm glad they came because now I know how they feel about the baby. To hate me is one thing but to talk shit about an innocent baby is just low. Even if he wasn't yours, which he is."

"I fucking know that he's mine, McKenzie."

"Well, tell them. Because it won't change, no matter how much they try to hate it away."

“Fuck telling them. This is about Tyrone, and me coming home seeing him cozied up with my wife.”

“Will you please stop saying it like that.”

“Fine,” he said before bellowing for Rodger.

“Sir?”

“Tyrone Kerns is no longer allowed entry. Make sure everyone knows.”

Rodger stood, unsure of what to do. I knew he and Vera couldn't help but hear us argue and he knew how I'd feel about him banning my only friend, all because my husband wanted to show his ass. I was furious at Gage for putting him in that position.

He looked at Rodger, wondering why he wasn't moving to follow his orders.

“You are such a bastard,” I spat out at Gage, leaving the room to keep Rodger from getting in trouble.

I've been sleeping in the guest room every night since. I just don't have it in me to try anymore. He has finally succeeded in wearing me down. I feel like the ultimate submissive on permanent total power exchange, and knowing him, that's exactly what he wants me to feel.

“Mrs. Remington.” Dwayne's voice brings me out of my thoughts and to where he's standing at the patio door. “Mr. Remington is here.” I'm not sure which Remington it is. “Gordon Remington, ma'am.”

I nod, going inside to greet him.

“Mr. Remington,” I say to him.

“Oh, call me Gordon. We’re family now, after all.”

“Gordon,” I correct myself and he smiles like he doesn’t think I’m a gold-digging slut, to hear Tyra tell it.

“I came to see that stubborn son of mine.”

“He should be here soon. Can I get you anything?”

“You shouldn’t be waiting on anyone in your condition. How is that grandbaby of mine doing?” I frown in confusion. I could have sworn he thought I was just using being knocked up with someone else’s baby to trap Gage. “I know you’ve been made aware of some things, but I can assure you I don’t share in the rest of the families’ opinions. I’ve forbidden them from disturbing you with their nonsense. So don’t worry about them. We’ll revisit things after the baby is born.”

“Thank you. I... um...”

For the life of me, I can’t think of anything else to say, so I stay quiet. He studies me with such concern that I have to look away from the weight of his stare. Thank God Gage comes in before it turns awkward.

“Dad,” he says to him before greeting me. “We’ll be done in a minute, McKenzie.”

“Take your time,” I tell him. “It was nice seeing you again, Gordon.”

“You too, my dear. Take care of yourself. You have a little one to think about now.”

“I will,” I tell him, excusing myself to the bedroom.

I purposely go into Gage’s so his father won’t know we’re not sharing the same room. I don’t know why I’m covering at this point. I guess I still have my pride, and his family is the last people I want to know that my marriage is in trouble.

Gage

I come home to see Dad and McKenzie talking and it looks like a polite conversation, thank fuck. The last thing we need is more drama. We watch her go. The sorrow that she carries with her as she does is palpable, and judging by the look on his face as he watches her, I can tell Dad feels it too. He bombards me with questions as soon as I close my office door.

“Is she sick? Is something wrong with the baby?”

“Of course not. Why would you ask that?” I try my best to play it off.

“Because she looks awful. She’s supposed to be glowing, but she looks rundown. She used to be so full of fire when she’d come over with you for dinner. I enjoyed her company, but now she’s so docile.”

“Those dinners were a long time ago, Dad,” I say, not wanting to hear the truth about how McKenzie is doing.

“It wasn’t *that* long ago. Regardless, you were supposed to be keeping her sex-hazed. She doesn’t look sexed-up to me. If I may be blunt, she looks dead. There’s no life in her eyes or

her mouth for that matter. I was expecting her to give me a little hell for the way the family has shunned her, but I got nothing. The change in her is quite disturbing. I think she should see someone. Maybe a psychiatrist.”

“She doesn’t need a goddamn psychiatrist,” I say, afraid that I have pushed her too far and caused this.

“Gage, she’s in the midst of severe depression. I don’t know if it’s pregnancy hormones at this early stage in the game and I can’t even ask your mother without alerting her, but something is wrong.”

I know deep down he’s right to worry. He isn’t the first person to express concern for her.

Vera and Rodger have come to me on separate occasions about this very thing and no one is more concerned than Dwayne. Rodger tells me he’s reporting more of what she’s not doing than what she is. He’s even recently gone against protocol, offering to not accompany her if she goes out, but she doesn’t take him up on the offer.

Tyrone came by twice, and twice Dwayne went against his orders to let him in, but McKenzie refused to see him. She’ll occasionally talk to him on the phone to calm his worry about her, but that’s as far as it goes.

Something has gotten her mother concerned because she’s been calling her. I don’t know if Tyrone knows Mrs. St. James, but I have a feeling he’s whispered something in her ear.

“Are you two getting along?” Dad pushes me for answers.

“Things could be better between us.”

“Last I heard you were taking my advice. Is that not the case? What’s happened to change things?”

“It’s my fault she’s depressed, Dad.” I drop pretenses and tell him the truth. “I fucked up. I’ve fucked up with her.”

“What have you done?”

“I’ve been a complete ass.”

“You’ve always been a complete ass. She knows that. She’s used to that. Now tell me the real deal and don’t make me drag it out of you.”

I close my eyes, feeling like shit for what I’m about to say.

“I’ve forced her to do things. I’ve forced her to quit working. I’ve forced her to not go out without taking a bodyguard who has strict orders to report her every move to me and stop her from doing things I don’t approve of. I’ve forced her to stop hanging out with her best friend because he’s a man even though I know she has no interest in him.”

“Then why do it?”

“Because she’s mine.”

He gives me the same stern look I used to get when I would say that about why I wouldn’t let anyone play with my toys as a child. It always made me feel foolish for making such a selfish statement and now is no exception as I give him my same shameful look.

“This wasn’t part of the plan, Gage. Why not let her work if the doctor says it’s okay for her to do so? I get the need for the

guard, but why the reporting and the intervening in her life in such a way? Why not let her go out in protected privacy?"

"Because she doesn't need to go anywhere. Because I don't *want* her to go anywhere."

"Son," he says, softening up to me. "I know you're afraid of losing her again, but you're holding on too tight."

"I'm not afraid of that. I fucking hate her. After the baby is born, I want her gone. In the meantime, I want her to suffer, violently."

"Is that truly how you feel?"

"Yes. I find delight in it."

"You know what Shakespeare wrote about violent delights, son."

"What the hell does that supposed to mean?"

I know the play and I don't find it fitting. McKenzie and I are not a couple of damn star-crossed lovers.

"It means you need to figure out what you truly want before you lose it all. Because I'm not buying what you're trying to sell. You're notorious for being led by your anger, but now I'm afraid McKenzie and the baby are in your path of destruction. If you're not careful, you'll succeed in destroying them. Is that really what you want?"

I get up to pace. The emotions I've been trying hard to keep separate are bleeding into each other and I'm running out of ways to stop it.

"Of course, I don't want to destroy my baby."

“And what about his mother? What about your wife? They’re one now, you realize?”

I sit down with a heavy sigh as I admit the truth to myself and him.

“I take no *real* delight in hurting her. But I don’t want her to hurt me either.”

“The girl I just saw can’t hurt anyone. Perhaps by leaving you, maybe.” He thinks the last part out loud.

“I know,” I say, running a hand over my face. “She won’t even talk shit to me anymore. She barely says a word to me—or anyone. I think I’ve broken her.”

“You can still fix the mess you’ve made.”

“What if I can’t? What if it’s beyond repair?”

“She’s still here. She hasn’t walked out on you. She could have left and taken you for everything you’ve got. The fact that she hasn’t done that tells me she still has faith in you. Now you need to ask her if she’s willing to try again. And if all else fails, get down on your knees and beg.”

“To hell with that.” My anger flares again.

“Gage, there comes a time when you have to take a risk. As a sportsman, you know that. The risk right now is your ego. Is it worth bruising it to get what you want?”

“I’ll have what I want in a few more months without bruising it.”

I narrow my eyes as he shakes his head in judgment of me.

“You’re still as stubborn as the day you enlisted in the military without my approval. Back then, I admired it. Now, I just want to shake it out of you. I know it hasn’t been easy for you since you’ve been back from Afghanistan. I can only imagine the hell you went through and I know it’s still in you.”

“What does that have to do with McKenzie?”

“Stop beating up on her to hide from it. She’s pregnant with your child. She doesn’t need that shit.”

“I know.”

“Do you? Because she’s a shell of herself and that’s directly on you.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Then fix it.”

“I will.”

I see my father out, then go in search of McKenzie. She’s standing in our room with her back to me, lost in thought. She’s unaware of my presence and her demeanor is unguarded. I stand silently watching her. I can see how tired she looks and how troubled she seems as she stares out the window, one arm folded protectively over her stomach.

“Looks like it’s just going to be me and you for a while, kiddo,” she says, looking down at her belly. “I’m not sure how things are going to work out with me and your daddy, but I do know he loves you very much.”

The phone she has in her hand rings and she answers it before I get the chance to speak.

“I was just calling you back from earlier. I really didn’t want anything,” she says to whoever it is that’s returned her phone call. “No, it’s not cold. It’s been very nice here lately.”

She looks out the window again. I know it’s not Tyrone she’s talking to. He knows what the damn weather is like here.

“As nice as it’s been, I still can’t wait to come home.”

Come home? This conversation is making me more and more uneasy by the second. *Who the fuck is she talking to?*

“We have a lot to catch up on, Mom,” she continues with a sad little laugh.

So that’s what her Mom has been calling her for. She’s trying to get her to move in with her, and judging by McKenzie’s end of the conversation, she’s agreed.

“I have so much to tell you and it’s not like I’ll be missed much around here, anyway.”

She’s been wanting to leave and she hasn’t mentioned a word to me. She *is* leaving. I notice a small bag being packed with not only her clothes but baby clothes are included. Clothes I didn’t even know she bought.

Fuck, she’s leaving *now*. She’s not even giving me a chance to talk her out of it. She’s just going to walk right out the goddamn door. What if she doesn’t come back this time?



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gage

Seeing her bag packed sends my mind reeling. What if I've fucked it up so bad, I've lost her? It hits me full force as Dad's words ring in my ears. He was wrong, she *is* leaving me. My shit has finally pushed her away. It's hard for me to breathe and the room starts to spin. I instantly recognize what's happening. Panic attack.

Shit, I haven't had one of these in years and never this strong before. I'm right back on that road with that mother and her son. The sound of gunfire is ringing in my ears. My heart is pounding out of my chest. I'm completely caught off-guard, and I'm unable to control it. My efforts become more strained and I'm violently shaking, trying to get my heart to calm down and air into my lungs so I won't pass out.

Fuck, it's never been this bad before. I feel like I'm dying.

"Gage!" I hear McKenzie's voice. It sounds faint, like an angel speaking to me. I've gone to heaven and God has taken pity on my pathetic existence, seeing fit to give me a beautiful angel that looks like McKenzie. "Gage," she calls again and it's clearer this time.

I'm very much alive and scaring the shit out of the real McKenzie. She drops her phone and rushes to my side. The fact that she's close gives me an overwhelming sense of comfort and I hold on to it. The terrified look on her face as

she studies me gives me the strength I need to get control over the situation, so I can reassure her.

“Panic attack,” I pant, and she nods in understanding, but her eyes are still wide with worry.

“What can I do?” she asks, looking around the room for something she can use to help calm me.

Coming up empty, she turns for the door, but I grab her. She spins around to face me again. Her ponytail whips around to one shoulder.

My God, she's beautiful.

“Just stay with me,” I tell her.

I take her into my arms and press her into me. I bury my nose in her hair, filling my lungs with her essence.

The one thing I haven't destroyed.

She stiffens in my arms, feeling unsure of my embrace. I haven't held her like this in weeks. She quickly relaxes, wrapping her arms around my waist, riding the panic attack out with me.

The tenderness in her sweet words telling me I'll be okay touches parts of my soul I didn't know still existed. She lets me go once my breathing returns to normal.

“Are you okay now?” She's holding my cheek with the soft palm of one hand while wiping the dampness off my forehead with the other.

“Don't go,” I ask of her, holding on to that hand on my cheek like it was my lifeline. She looks at me in question. “To

your mom. You told her you were coming home, but *this* is your home, McKenzie. You and the baby belong here with me.”

“I was just going to visit for a few days. I didn’t think you’d miss me.”

“Of course, I’ll miss you. I don’t want you to leave. I don’t want to be here without you.”

“Is that why you had a panic attack? You thought I was leaving you?”

I only nod, feeling weak in my confession. She catches her breath. I don’t know if she’s surprised by my honesty or the fact that her leaving would cause this strong of a reaction from me.

“Me visiting my mom doesn’t mean I’m leaving you and I would never take the baby away.”

“You’re packing your clothes—the baby’s clothes.”

“It’s just a little outfit. I thought Mom would get a kick out of it. To kind of lesson the sting of me being knocked up and all,” she explains with a shrug.

“Once you’re there, you might not want to come back.”

“Well, you haven’t given me much reason to with your constant need to punish me. I wish you’d just tie me up and get it out of your system all at once.”

“That’s not what I’ve been...” I start to deny it, but I can’t even get the words out as the truth clicks into place and I

realize that's exactly what I've been doing. "I *have* been punishing you."

"For betraying you the way that I did."

"That's not why."

"What else could it be? What else is there, besides getting pregnant. Gage, you know I didn't do that on purpose. I didn't do it to trap you."

"Dammit, McKenzie," I say, taking her face in my hands to get her to listen to me. "I know you didn't. That's not the reason. None of those are the reasons, all right." I let her go to massage the back of my neck.

"Then tell me what is. Why have you been so hot and cold with me? Why do you get so angry with me? Why do you make being here so damn hard if it's not about what I did?"

I take a breath and blow it out so strongly it makes her eyes flutter. Swallowing hard, I finally speak the truth.

"Because I... Jesus... I don't even know how to say it out loud. I don't know how to explain it right."

"Try."

"I like having you around." I oversimplify it.

The confused frown that comes over her face almost makes me laugh.

"And that pisses you off?"

"Very much so."

"Why?"

“I don’t like needing people. Especially, people I can’t trust. So, I get angry. I do fucked-up shit and force people to leave. It’s easier than...”

“Letting people disappoint you,” she says it for me.

“Somehow you managed to slip between the cracks in the walls I’ve built up over the years.”

“I did?”

“I asked you to be my girlfriend. That was huge for me, McKenzie.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“I do now and I know I messed it all up.”

“It’s done. We just have to move forward.”

“How can we?”

“We can figure it out. Just stay.”

“Gage—”

“Don’t leave, McKenzie.”

“I’m miserable here with the way things have been between us, but I won’t leave you.”

“I deserve it. You have no idea how much I deserve it.”

“Yeah, you won’t get any argument from me.”

“Why have you put up with me?”

“Because I was more miserable without you. I missed you when we were apart. More than I’ve led you to believe. I just

wish that you'd still try to meet me halfway in this."

"I want to. But ever since we came back... it's not easy for me."

"At least you're talking to me about how you feel, finally," she says before a brilliant smile graces her lips. It has a hint of mischief in it that I haven't seen since we got back from our honeymoon. "Maybe the lack of oxygen went to your brain."

I shake my head at her smart mouth.

God, I've missed it.

"I hate what I know I'm doing to you, but I'm just so..."

"So what?"

"Unsure of you."

"I can help you with that if you'd just talk to me instead of keeping things all bottled up inside."

"I'm talking to you now."

"Are you sure it's not because the lack of oxygen scattered your brain cells?" she asks again, feeling my forehead with the back of her hand to check if I'm getting sick.

"No," I tell her, moving my head just beyond her reach. "And you aren't leaving me?"

"No," she whispers. I lean in to kiss her, but she pulls away. "Gage, don't do this."

"Do what?"

"Don't make me feel this way if you only plan to use it against me later. This push and pull, it's killing me. These last

few weeks... I can't take it anymore."

"I know," I say, cupping her face to wipe the tears that are now falling from her eyes. Guilt rises in me again at the sight of her crying, but this time, I welcome it. I won't fight it any longer. "I hate that I need you so fucking much. But I do need you. I need you so much it scares the shit out of me."

"But can't you see how much I need you too?"

"You do?"

"Of course, I do. You matter to me. More than anyone ever has."

"Can we try again? I won't fuck it up this time."

"Don't say it if you don't mean it."

"I do mean it. I know we still have a lot of shit to work through, but I do mean it."

I draw her closer. This time, she doesn't pull away.

"I'm trusting you," she says.

"Let me prove that you can." I kiss away her tears before my lips find hers. She whimpers, melting her body into mine, giving herself to me once again. "I've missed this," I tell her, picking her up in my arms and carrying her to our bed. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," she whispers to me, laughing at the feel of my lips teasing her neck as I make my way slowly down her body, pulling her dress off as I go.

I quickly shed my clothes and nestle myself between her legs, taking my time feasting on my favorite dessert.

“Mmm, peach pie,” I growl.

I’m rewarded with another laugh at the pet name I’ve given this delectable pussy of hers. It’s been so long since I’ve tasted her. I can’t help but indulge and lap her up like a dog in heat as she comes hard in my mouth. The taste of her goes right to my dick, making it rock hard. She sighs loudly, releasing all of her tension.

“Did that feel good?”

“It felt so good,” she whispers more to herself, coming down from her high. “God, I needed that.”

Her body relaxes as a hum of a moan escapes her throat.

“What else do you need, McKenzie?”

I need to be inside of her, but I hold off. My need to satisfy her is stronger.

“Right now?” she asks, watching me as I make my way back up to her.

“At this very moment,” I say, kissing her lips.

“I need to come again.”

“And how do you need to come?”

“I need to come with you inside me.”

Her words are my undoing.

“Come here,” I tell her, dragging her on top of me. “I need to see you come.” She straddles me, placing her opening at the tip of my dick. “Sssss,” I hiss as I watch her juices coat my tip and roll down my shaft.

I almost come watching myself disappear inside her.

Her moans and movements are getting quicker as she rides me. I buck up to meet her, making sure I hit her at that spot she loves so much.

“Oh, yes,” she moans as I play with her clit with my thumb.

I notice the tiny baby bump that was once her flat belly and I place my hand over it. She smiles down at me, placing her hand on top of mine.

“Fuck, you are so beautiful,” I say, moving my hands to grab hold of her hips as she grinds into me. I moan at the feel of her juices coating my dick. I know she is close to coming. “Let me see you come for me. Let me hear how good it feels.”

I lace her hands with my own to steady her and she holds on tight, throwing her head back and screaming my name as she comes. I’m a second behind her, pumping my load that’s been built up in my balls for weeks into her.

Her tight pussy eagerly squeezes out every drop from me.

She collapses on top of me and I flip us on our sides. One of her hands finds its way into my hair while the other is at my lower back, gripping my ass.

I spill out of her as we break our connection. Our juices ooze out of her onto the bed. I turn on my back while she’s on her stomach next to me.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who needed it,” she teases, looking over at me with her eyes dancing.

“I *really* fucking needed it,” I admit to her. I’m damn near dozing off until I feel the heat of her stare. I catch her studying me. The frown on her face tells me instantly what she’s thinking. “I’m not going to turn away from you,” I tell her, making her smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well, we better get going to this appointment you left work early for,” she says, laying her head down, and closing her eyes.

Shit, I’d forgotten all about it. She’s making no attempt to get up and the sighs that are coming from her say she has no intention of moving.

“We pay enough to have them wait,” I say, tracing her bare arm with my fingers before I scoot closer to her. “No more sleeping in the guest room?”

“No more,” she answers me right before she falls asleep.

I kiss her shoulder before falling right behind her, finding peace with her for the first time since we came back from our honeymoon.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

McKenzie

I wake up with only Gage's pillow to hold. Doubts about the strength of our new connection start to creep in as I look around the empty bedroom.

"Good, you're awake." He comes in from the bathroom all dressed and smelling good. "I let you sleep as long as I could, but we need to get going."

"Okay," I breathe, relieved.

He sits on the bed in front of me, taking note of my reaction.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I was just worried when I saw you weren't in bed. I thought maybe you'd changed your mind."

"I haven't." He slicks the hair that came out of my ponytail back before cupping my cheek. "I won't. I meant what I said, McKenzie. I'm ready to try."

"Okay. Good."

"Do you believe me?"

"I believe you. I just hate waking up alone."

"I'll try to prevent that as much as possible," he says, kissing me. "How about I make it up to you."

"Gage," I squeal when he pulls off my covers and gets between my legs.

I want to protest. To tell him that we're already two hours late to see the nurse, but the feel of his tongue on me takes over all my reasoning.

"Mmm. You taste so good," he says after I come in his mouth.

"What excuse are we going to use for being this late?" I ask, walking into the doctor's office.

"The truth. I was too busy sexing up my wife to get her here on time."

"Oh, my God," I groan at the embarrassing thought while praying she doesn't ask the reason. And thank God she doesn't as she lets us right in and straps me to the blood pressure machine.

Gage smirks at me. I know he's thinking some perverted thought of me being strapped into something, so I roll my eyes at him.

The nurse takes my blood pressure twice on my right arm before switching to my left to take it twice more. I look over at Gage and his brow is furrowed in concern.

"Is something wrong?" he asks the nurse.

"Give me one moment, please. I just need to consult with the doctor."

"About what?" Gage asks her.

"I'll only be a moment, Mr. Remington."

She excuses herself and leaves us alone in the exam room.

“Something’s wrong,” I say.

“We don’t know that yet.” He tries to calm me down, taking hold of my hand.

My head is starting to pound and it feels like I’ve caught Gage’s panic attack. I know I’m squeezing his hand a little too hard, but he doesn’t seem to mind as he brings our intertwined hands to his lips and kisses the back of mine.

“Mr. and Mrs. Remington.” Dr. Carter comes in.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

“Your blood pressure was still a little high so I just need to recheck it with a more accurate device,” she says, strapping me to a manual cuff that she brought in with her.

“Well, I’m sure it’s going to be through the roof now since your nurse just scared the hell out of us,” Gage barks.

“I apologize,” she says, pumping up the cuff. “She was told to alert me if the findings were abnormal.” I hiss as the cuff gets very tight and hurts my arm. “Almost done, Mrs. Remington.”

We all stay quiet as she places her stethoscope in her ears to listen.

“Okay, your blood pressure is much higher than it was when my nurse took it a little while ago. Mr. Remington may be right. It could be we’ve upset you. We’ll let you rest for a little while, then take it again.”

“Is it that bad?”

“There’s no need to push any alarm buttons, but anything out of the norm is cause for concern when you’re pregnant. We want to prevent complications.”

“What’s causing it?”

“It can be several things. Fear is a very common reason like Mr. Remington said. But since it was elevated when you came in, we can rule that out as the primary cause. It could be the rise in hormones or stress. Have you been stressed lately?”

“A little,” I answer with the mother of all lies. I’ve been nothing but stressed. “But things are a lot better now.”

I glance at Gage and the look he gives me breaks my heart. His shoulders are slumped. Fear and worry fight for time on his face. He’s reeking of self-blame and self-loathing, so much so that I just want to take him in my arms and hold him, or better yet, smack him hard until he stops.

“If work is an issue—”

“It’s not,” I say.

“Things haven’t been easy for her at home, Dr. Carter,” Gage tells her. “I’m afraid I’m to blame for that.”

“Gage, don’t.”

“It’s the truth, McKenzie.”

“I see,” Dr. Carter says. “Well, it’s important to keep our mom-to-be happy and healthy, so let’s work toward that. How are you feeling right now, McKenzie?”

“My head is pounding.”

“Are you dizzy?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, I want you to lie back on the table. I’ll have my nurse bring in something that will help you. It’s completely safe for you to take, so don’t worry about that.” She lays me back and gets me comfortable on the large exam table. “Just relax,” she says, dimming the lights and closing the door behind her.

“I’m so sorry, McKenzie.”

“Don’t. This is not your fault.”

“You heard what the doctor said. I’ve done nothing but stress you out. I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me.”

“Will you stop it. I wasn’t even stressed when I came in here, far from it. I’m the happiest I’ve been in a long time. It has to be the hormones.”

He lets out a pitiful sigh and I know my words are falling on deaf ears. Worry mars my face as I study his.

“Close your eyes,” he tells me.

“Why?”

“You’re supposed to be relaxing.”

“Right,” I agree, closing them.

I hear Gage’s chair move as he rolls it over close to me. I feel him at my legs taking one of my flats off and then the other, massaging my feet.

“Mmm, that feels good,” I moan, wondering why the sensation is going right between my legs.

He takes his time massaging each foot, only interrupted once by the nurse who gives me a tiny pill and a glass of water to down it with.

Once she leaves us alone, he continues his efforts to get me to relax. I hum in pleasure at the feel of his fingers working the soreness out of my feet. The combination of the medicine and Gage's massage has me out like a light. I don't know how long I've been asleep, but I wake up to the coaxing of Gage whispering in my ear.

"Sorry," I tell them, stretching my arms.

"Don't be. That's exactly what we wanted. How's your head?"

"Much better."

"Good," she says, sitting me back up and placing the manual cuff on my arm again.

She pumps air into it again, but it's not as tight this time. I pray that's a good sign.

"Your blood pressure is back to a safer number," she says, and I instantly feel better. I look over at Gage. He tries to hide it, but I can tell he's still in the pit of self-blame. "We're on the right track, but we're not out of the woods completely. We'll have to monitor you more closely as you move farther into your pregnancy."

"I don't have to take any pills or anything, do I?"

"Not just yet. Right now, we want you to try more natural therapeutic approaches first."

“If that doesn’t work?” Gage asks her.

“There are medications that have been deemed safe, but we’re nowhere near time for that yet. We’re going to run a few tests. On your way out, I want you to see the nurse. She’ll need to get a sample of your urine. If that comes back normal, then we’re truly in good shape.”

“What can we do in the meantime?” Gage asks her.

“Eat healthily. Avoid foods high in salt and fat content. Keep your stress at a minimum. Use this as a reason to spoil yourself. A stress-free environment is key.”

She looks at Gage to be sure he understands that last part. He ignores the obvious slight and nods his head in understanding.

We take all the information the doctor gives us and she sets us up for another appointment. I’ll have to see her twice as often now and have frequent blood pressure checks with her nurse in between appointments. I’m kicking myself for letting everything get to me the way that I did.

“Gage, say something.”

He hasn’t said a word since we left the doctor’s office. He just stares straight ahead as he drives us back home.

The look on his face is full of misery. I can only guess the thoughts going through his head. The only thing I know for sure is that he’s blaming himself. We both can do our fair share of finger-pointing for the mess we created. What good would it do at this point but prevent us from moving forward as we want.

“Why do you insist on blaming yourself?” I ask as he holds the front door open.

“Because it’s my fault,” he says, leading me through the living room into our bedroom. “I’ve been stressing you out for weeks with my bullshit. I should have fucking realized what I was doing. But all I could think about was my own fucked-up agendas. Now you and the baby could be at risk. I know you won’t believe me, but that’s the last thing I wanted.”

“Gage, I *know* that. But it’s over with now. We’re starting over and we’ll get it right this time.”

I place my hands in his hair to comfort him.

“Don’t,” he says, turning away from me.

“What is it? Why are you pushing me away? You said you wouldn’t turn away from me again.”

“I’m not. I won’t, but after what I’ve done, you may turn away from me.”

“Why would you ever think that?”

“I fucked up.”

“A new fuck-up?” He nods. “One that I don’t know about?” He nods again. He turns to look at me and judging by the expression on his face, I know I’m about to hate whatever it is he has to say. “Gage,” I whisper, no longer sure I want to know, but I *have* to know. “What have you done?”

I’m at a loss as to what it could be and more importantly how bad it could be. He’s already stopped me from working

and has kept me under guard with the most no-nonsense person he could have ever hired and that's saying a lot considering Rodger. He's already shut me out of his life for weeks. What more could he have done?

“You're going to hate me. If I tell you, I'm going to lose you.”

“Just tell me because what I'm imagining is probably a hundred times worse than what it is.”

“The day I asked you to marry me—”

“Forced me.”

He only nods at my correction before continuing.

“The day I forced you to marry me, I went to my dad and asked for my grandmother's ring. He questioned the urgency. I told him you were pregnant and that I'd threatened to take the baby away from you. By forcing you to marry me, I thought I was protecting him.”

“You thought I would do something to our baby?”

“I don't know. I kept imagining all kinds of crazy shit. My mind was flashing back to when I was overseas. I was thinking about how disposable the kids were, how desperate the mothers were, and I knew you were that desperate when you came to see me.”

“I may not be the best person, but I would never do anything to hurt the baby.”

“I know, McKenzie. I don't know what I was thinking at the time. I was out of my mind. It was a lot of shit to process all at

once.”

“No shit. It was a lot to process for me too. So, what plan did you and your dad come up with to stop me from doing God knows what to our baby?” He closes his eyes as if it hurts. “Gage? I have a right to know.”

“Once he was born, I was going to take him away from you.”

“Even after I agreed to marry you already?”

“I was going to show that you were unfit. I was going to say that you were fucking around with men in exchange for drugs.”

I jerk back like he’s just slapped me. It feels like he has.

“So, instead of preventing me from hurting him, you were going to turn me into someone who would? There’s no way in hell you could have done that. I don’t do drugs,” I start to say until I think about it. “Were you going to drug me, Gage?”

“No.” He closes his eyes again like he’s trying to convince himself that wasn’t part of his plan. That he wouldn’t have gone that far.

“What about the sleeping with men part? Were you going to pay them to lie?”

“I have footage of you.”

“Doing what? I’ve never slept with anyone but you.”

“I know,” he whispers. The ball of emotion lodged in his throat makes it hard for him to speak, but I ignore it.

“Show it to me.”

“No.” He shakes his head vigorously.

He stares at me, but I won't back down. I wait while he looks through his phone. To his credit, he looks like he's about to cry as he hands it over. It's a video of him and I going at it on the couch.

“You were recording us,” I whisper to myself in disbelief as I walk away from him to watch it.

At first, I fail to see what's so incriminating about it. It's embarrassing, but I'm just screwing my husband. But then I notice I'm the only one that's clear in the video. I know it's Gage fucking me, but no one else would know just by watching it. I whirl around to look at him.

“So... you were going to say that I was fucking someone else in this video? Some stranger? All so I could get drugs while I was *pregnant*?”

The thought of it makes me sick with rage.

“McKenzie—”

“Shut up,” I yell, throwing his phone with all my might at him. It whizzes past his head and hits the wall behind him, breaking apart.

I place my hand over my eyes as hot tears spill out and burn my face. I'm so pissed. I've never wanted to kick a man's ass as much as I want to kick his right now, and if I wasn't pregnant, I would do it.

“And your dad? Was this his brilliant idea? Do you know he sat right there in that living room and told me how he didn't believe what the rest of your family was saying about me?”

“Has it all been some mind game, Gage? The push and pull? Saying you need me but hating yourself for it?”

“No.”

“Our honeymoon,” I whisper, the pain of it robbing me of my voice. “Was our honeymoon part of your plan?”

“No, McKenzie. No.”

“That was supposed to be our paradise? Our escape from reality? Our happy bubble.”

“It was. It was all those things. You asked me for it and I wanted to give it to you. I swear, it wasn’t any more planning to it than that. I loved our honeymoon just as much as you did. Please, believe me.”

“How can I believe anything you tell me?”

“I promise you; I’m being nothing but honest. I meant what I said. When I thought you were leaving me earlier, I realized how very empty my life would be without you in it. Pride and ego be damned. I am desperate to keep you, McKenzie.”

“And I can’t stand the sight of you. How ironic is that?”

“Please don’t leave.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. *You* are. I want you to leave.”

“McKenzie.”

“Just our bedroom for now. I refuse to share a bed with you after...” I stop and look at his phone in pieces on the floor.

“I understand.”

“Then go.”

“I’ll be in the guest room if you need me. Promise you’ll let me know if you need anything?”

“Just go.”

Reluctantly, he does what I ask.

I stay awake all night as the gravity of what he was planning to do hits me. We’re two peas in the same disgusting pod. I guess we deserve each other, but our baby deserves more and I’m going to make damn sure he gets it. I have to put him first. Even if that means leaving my husband.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gage

I turn toward the window, folding my pillow before lying on it. As comfortable as this bed is, it's not *our* bed. Even if it was, I don't think it would change the fact that I can't sleep. McKenzie's words from last night still ring in my ears. She's right. I am a fucked-up piece of shit. I've hurt the one person in the world who matters the most to me, all because I didn't trust her with the title. But I've realized it too late.

I may have just lost her forever.

The sun isn't even all the way up yet, but dark clouds threaten rain. It's a fitting start to what I pray isn't going to end up being a shitty day.

I manage to get in half an hour before I give the whole thing up and get out of bed at around five. More and more, I find it difficult to sleep alone. Even more so when the one I want to sleep with is in the same damn house, pissed at me. Even more so still when I'm left wondering if that same person will ever get past how I was planning to hurt her—how I've already hurt her.

I greet Mrs. Wallace; the help I hired to take over for Vera on her off days. The last thing I wanted was for McKenzie to feel like she had to cook and clean. I shake my head at myself. All these provisions to make things easier for her while making everything worse.

“Good morning, Mr. Remington. What would you like for breakfast today?” Mrs. Wallace asks in the professional manner I’ve come to expect from all of my employees.

Since I missed Vera yesterday, I go over McKenzie’s new eating restrictions with her. She makes note of them to pass along to Vera in her report for Monday morning.

I carry the breakfast tray she put together for McKenzie, hoping she’ll be well-rested and up for talking. If not, at least I hope she’ll be up for eating.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she says, turning from where she’s perched at her vanity table to watch me come in before going back to fixing herself in the mirror.

It appears she’s been up for some time. She’s already dressed.

“I wanted to,” I say, sitting the tray down on the already made bed. Unsure of how to proceed, I take a moment to study her as she sits with her forehead in her hand. “Do you have a headache?” I try to keep the worry out of my voice.

“No,” she says to my reflection in her mirror. Her response tells me she’s picked up on it. “I’m just a little tired. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“That’s my fault. The last thing I wanted to do was make things worse for you. I know my timing sucked, but I had to tell you. Seeing what I was doing to you, I couldn’t stand it.”

“I know the feeling,” she whispers so low I’m not sure it was meant for me to hear, but I nod my head just the same.

“I know you’re pissed at me. You have every right to be, but can I ask, because I need to know, where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a shrug and a shake of her head. I can’t help but hear the sadness in her voice and I can’t stand being the cause of it.

“Have I ruined things that much?”

“It’s not just you. It’s both of us together. It’s how we are together.”

“When it’s good, we’re great.”

“And when it’s not, I hurt you, then you hurt me. You get back at me, then I get back at you and round and round we go.”

“Let’s fix that.”

“I don’t think we can. Maybe we shouldn’t even try at this point. Maybe it’s better if we both just stay away from each other.”

“I don’t want that.”

“What *do* you want, Gage?” She turns to face me and I can see that she’s close to crying. Judging by the redness in her eyes, she’s been crying all night. “Because I’m tired of all this. I know I started it with my scheming and I’ve tried every way I know how to prove to you that I’m not that person anymore. When I came to you for help, I didn’t come for your money. That’s not even what I want.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know. Tell me.”

“I can’t. I don’t trust you, Gage. And you don’t trust me. I just don’t see the point in this anymore.”

“I know I fucked this all up with us.”

“We both did.”

“Okay, so why can’t we wipe the slate clean? Start all over like we wanted to.”

“How can we with all this between us? It’s just too much to fix.”

Her tears finally spill from her eyes. I want to go to her, but she turns her head toward the sound of the rain that’s pelting the window.

“McKenzie,” I get her attention again. The sadness in those beautiful brown eyes as she stares at me is my undoing.

Recognition of her internal struggle hits me in the gut. It’s an exact image of my own. I realize she’s trying to come to terms with giving up on me. I can see she doesn’t want to. Her eyes are pleading with me to say something to stop this from happening.

“I don’t believe we’re that far gone. I saw a glimpse of my life without you and I hated it. That beats everything else. Making a life with you means more to me than anything else. *You* mean more to me than anything else.”

She closes her eyes, feeling the weight of what I’m telling her.

“I want to believe you, but I can’t. You’re so angry with me. I didn’t even realize how much. How do I know you’ll get past that? How do I know you’re not planning something worse for me when the baby is born? I can’t live with that threat hanging over my head.”

“McKenzie—” I call to her, but she shakes her head for me to stop.

I can feel her heartache. It’s so palpable that the thickness of it is making my head spin as I think of the right words to say. She’s not allowed to give up on us. I rake my hands through my hair, hoping for some kind of clue as to what she’s wanting at this point.

“I want you to fight for us.” She goes ahead and tells me. “I want you to fight with me for us. I can’t do it all by myself, Gage, and I can’t fight against you.”

“McKenzie.” I bend down in front of her with my heart in my hands. “You don’t have to anymore. I need to work on my shit. That’s never been clearer to me. I know you’re ready to give up on me, but I need one more chance, just one more chance to prove that we can be good together.”

“It’s a lot to risk.”

“Fuck,” I say, pissed at myself for putting my shit in her head. I’m pissed at myself for planning it in the first place. “I’m not taking our baby away from you. I promise you. This is me, McKenzie, all of me, and I will fight for us. I will fight for *you*. Give me a chance to show you.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“What the hell is the alternative? Us being apart? That won’t do. You told me that even though I made it hard for us, you wouldn’t leave because it was worse when we were apart. I need to know if that’s still the case?”

I hold my breath as she thinks for a second, and Christ, it’s the longest second of my life.

“Yes,” she finally says with an affirmative nod, and I know she’s made up her mind to try again.

“Good.” I start to breathe again. Cupping her face, I wipe away the last of her tears. “That’s where we’ll start, then. We’ll... find a way.”

“When did you get so wise about this?” she asks with a sniff of her nose.

“I’ve been an idiot up until this point. I guess I’ve found the right motivation.”

I place my hand on her belly and she smiles a smile so warm, it takes my breath away all over again. Because all I need to know is in that smile. She’s trusting me again. She may not say it. She may not even know it, but her face tells me she is. The light has returned to her eyes and I’ll be damned if I’m the cause of it dimming ever again.

“Does this mean you’re trusting me as a mother and as an equal partner in this marriage? For real this time? I know we still have a long way to go, but I need something to hold on to until we get there.”

I have to trust her, just like she’s trusting me. I have to let go of my bullshit and believe that what we have isn’t designed to

hurt me. But how the fuck do I do that?

You can trust her. Hasn't she proven that to you already? You can trust her not to hurt you. I chant the words over and over again in my head until I start to believe them.

Fuck it. What do I have to lose at this point? I have everything to lose by not trusting her. I nod and she accepts it as my word. Her eyes widen with embarrassment as I smirk at the sound of her stomach growling. I'm happy to see her appetite has returned.

"Come on," I say, taking her by the hand. "Eat your breakfast before it gets too cold."

I lead her over to the tray and hold it while she settles down on the bed.

"You made this?" she asks, lifting the silver lid off the plate and seeing the spread of spinach egg white omelets, a strip of lean, sodium-free turkey bacon, whole-wheat toast, and a half grapefruit.

"I supervised the making of it," I tell her, and she laughs, digging in.

She stops in mid-chew of her toast to look at me. Her stare is so strong it keeps my eyes locked with hers.

"You told me everything last night, right? There isn't anything else, is there?"

I continue to look at her, taking a moment to think.

"The no pre-nup," I say, remembering it. Her face falls at the mention of it. She looks down at her plate, bracing herself for

what I have to say. I take her chin and lift it to make her look at me again. *My God, she gets more beautiful by the second.* “It wasn’t part of the plan,” I tell her the truth.

“Then why not include it? Was it to test me? To see if I would just run with your money?”

“No. I wanted you to have it. Whatever it was that you were after in the beginning, I wanted you to have it. I hated that it was all you wanted from me. I despised it, but I still wanted you to have it.”

“You hated it, but what about me?”

I sigh, running my hands over my face at the question. I hate talking about this shit, but I know she needs to.

“Are you asking if I hate you now?” She nods. “Far from it. I didn’t even hate you then. I hated myself for letting you in. I knew better but I allowed it to happen.”

“I’m so sorry I hurt you that much, Gage.”

“It’s over and done.”

“I still need you to know that you’re wrong. It was never just about the money. It was before I met you. When you were just research in my planning. You weren’t even real to me then. But that night in your hotel room, when we were together for the first time, it was special to me.”

“It was?”

“Yes, it was. I’ll always love how you made it so wonderful for me. It’s why I couldn’t go through with... everything. I couldn’t turn that into something dirty.”

A smile plays on my lips, touched that night meant something to her.

“It’s true, I liked the money,” she says. “I liked the security that it gave me. I liked that it allowed me not to need help from my dad who can barely be in the same room with me. Mainly because he sees me as a result of every mistake he’s made in his life. I would have done anything to avoid that. So yes, I liked the money and all the things you gave me. But I liked you too. I kept coming back because I liked you. So many times, I wanted to walk away, when it was supposed to be the last time between us.”

“I wouldn’t let you.”

“And I didn’t want to. I kept agreeing to one more night, one more weekend because I liked being with you. The day of my graduation, it hit home though.”

“Why then? I didn’t even take you anywhere.”

“I was feeling so alone and there you were. You made the day so special for me. I started feeling so much guilt, but I pushed it down. I told myself that we were both getting what we wanted out of the deal, so it didn’t matter. I convinced myself that it was fine because it wasn’t like we were in a real relationship. We had an arrangement. You would take care of me as your submissive until you were tired of me and that would be that.”

“But then I went and asked you to be my girlfriend.”

“I had no idea you were feeling some of the things I was. I had to tell you the truth. You will never know how sorry I am.

I truly thought I wasn't hurting anybody after I dropped the... whole... rape thing. I was so stupid."

She looks away from me, clearly upset with herself until I turn her to face me once again.

"We both were. I was stupid for asking you to be my submissive in the first place. I should never have put those types of boundaries in place when I knew that's not really what I wanted from you. I couldn't even see it from your end. You were inexperienced, and there I was, as your Dom."

"Not just my Dom."

"I was your first," I correct myself, still feeling an intense pride that I can claim that position in her life. And now that I know it was special for both of us, that's who I will always be to her.

She shakes her head and I'm at a loss as to what she means.

Who the hell am I to her, if not her first?

"My only."

Her whispered confession shoots right to my soul bringing it to life.

"Jesus, McKenzie. The things you make me feel. You have the power to condemn me or save me with every word you say."

"You have that power over me too. I don't want to condemn you, Gage."

"And I don't want to condemn you."

“Then I guess we’re stuck with option two,” she says with a laugh.

Unable to help myself, I press my lips to hers and pray she doesn’t push me away. I moan into her when I feel her tentative fingers find their way into my hair, pulling me closer until the need to breathe forces us apart. I rest my forehead on hers, still needing to touch her.

“You won’t hold what I was planning to do against me?” I dare ask.

She shakes her head, taking mine along with her, forcing me to mimic the action.

“And you’ll stop doing these crazy things to hide that you care about me?” she asks.

I swallow hard at the truth that is lodged in my throat, but it refuses to go anywhere so I may as well spit it out.

“I care so much about you, McKenzie.”

My words linger in the space between us before she takes them into herself. The look in her eyes lets me know they’ll be safe with her.

“I know,” she whispers. “I care so much about you too.”

“I have no more fight in me, except for you. I won’t give up on us and I’m not letting you give up either.” I watch as a single tear escapes down her cheek and kiss it away. My lips meet hers again until we pull away with heavy breaths. “I need to be inside you.”

“Yes, please,” she says, and I send her empty breakfast tray crashing to the floor.

I feel the anticipation in the pit of my stomach as I lay her back on the pillow. Never have I felt that excitement so strong as I do with her and I know she feels it too when she shudders slightly underneath me.

Our movements are frantic as we rush to undress each other. I slip off her dress, exposing her. Her nipples are hard and begging for me to suck is a sight that I will never tire of.

“Mmm, fuck,” I moan as her hands dip into the waistband of my sweats to fondle me.

I hiss in pleasure at the feel of her fingers running up and down the length of me, making my dick longer and more engorged every time she brushes the tip with her soft skin.

She bites her lip to hide the smile at my reaction to her touch.

“You see what you do to me, McKenzie?”

“Yes,” she answers me. Her voice is low and seductive without even trying as she hooks her thumbs around the elastic to pull them down, freeing me.

I move away from her, lying on my back to kick them off. She takes her chance to pounce on me.

Settling herself between my legs, she actually growls at my dick as she eyes it.

“Fuck,” is all I can say as she takes me in deep. She shows no mercy in working me over. Running her tongue along my

shaft and licking my balls before running it back up to the tip and taking me in deep again. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

Right before I’m about to give up the goods, I scoop her up.

She groans in protest but is soon quieted down when I ease my dick into her. Her silence is short-lived and becomes replaced with a quick succession of “Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God” as I slide in and out of her.

“Fuck, McKenzie. You are my only too,” I whisper. My voice is strained from holding off my orgasm. “No one else has ever made me feel this way and no one else ever will. It’s only you. It will only ever be you.”

“Oh, Gage, yes,” she cries out, coming apart at my words.

She claws at the headboard above her as the first wave hits. I take hold of her hands and intertwine her fingers with mine.

The feel of her nails as she grabs my hands tip me over the edge and I call her name as I empty myself into her. Her pussy is pulsating around me, drowning my dick in her warm juices. It is heaven on earth. There’s no better feeling than being inside her when she comes.

I lie still semi-hard inside her, still sheathed in her heat. Her legs are wrapped around my waist and her hands are holding my cheeks as she peppers my face with kisses.

“You’re mine,” I tell her, causing her to smile up at me.

“I’m yours.”

Her smile turns into a laugh, causing me to laugh before I roll off her. I prop my head upon the crook of my arm to look

at her.

“I’m sorry I caused you so much stress, McKenzie.”

“Well, I’m stress-free now.” She stretches her body next to mine, getting me hard all over again.

The yawn that follows lets me know another round is out of the question.

“I’ll keep you that way,” I promise her, playing with her hair that’s fanned out on her pillow.

She turns to look at me and her face becomes serious.

“Don’t. It’s over now,” I tell her, guessing at her thoughts.

“Gage,” she says, thinking I’m trying to get out of discussing it like I’ve done in the past.

“McKenzie,” I say, kissing her lips. “We can talk about it if you want, but we need to move on.”

“How?”

I take a deep breath, thinking about her question of how to go about it.

“We need to refocus. We need new priorities.”

“Like what?”

I roll my eyes at her one to two worded questions and her half-hearted attempt to stay awake.

“I think I know. But right now, we both need sleep,” I say, turning her on her side and spooning behind her. “We’ll make a new game plan when we wake up. This time it will be for us instead of against us.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

I settle down next to her, allowing myself to relax for the first time since we left Dr. Carter’s office yesterday.

“Gage,” I hear McKenzie say my name with a half-asleep mumble.

“Hmm,” is pretty much all I can get out as exhaustion from being up all last night is claiming me.

“Thank you for saying you’ll fight for me. No one else ever has.”

I kiss her bare shoulder as her words wash over me.

“I will always fight for you,” I vow to her, but I know she’s too far in a deep sleep to hear me.

It doesn’t matter. I plan on keeping the vow to her all the same. I hold her closer to me, snaking my arm around her waist, and placing the palm of my hand on her belly. I feel at peace for the first time since throwing her out of my life. I don’t fight what I’m feeling this time. I allow it in. I allow *her* in. Every inch of her is invading me. Her body is so perfectly molded into mine. Her scent is so soothing. Her skin is so soft and warm. I allow my feelings for her to overtake me.

Stripping out of my armor, I raise the white flag of surrender. My walls of arrogance, ego, and anger are all obliterated and what’s left is the cold hard truth: I don’t just care about this woman. I fucking love this woman. And there’s nothing hard or cold about her.

I’ve fought this for so long, I’m shocked at how easy it is to stop. How can something so terrifying be so damn liberating

all at the same time? I'm soaring high under the weight of it, untethered and unburdened. She's my safety net, and I'm unafraid of falling as I hold her closer.

Her soft subconscious sigh of contentment at being in my arms makes me smile while she scoots back into me, trying to get even closer. I kiss her shoulder thinking about the how part of where we go from here.

My new game plan: To make her fall in love with me and to be a man that is worthy of her love.

My new priorities: McKenzie and the baby. Nothing else matters. No one else is of more importance.

It's just the three of us from now on.



CHAPTER TWENTY

McKenzie

I awake with Gage half on top of me. His hand is splayed protectively over my belly, still holding me close even in sleep. I manage to wiggle free and run to the bathroom before my bladder explodes. Washing my hands, I look at my reflection in the mirror. The bags under my eyes from not sleeping a wink last night are going away. There's nothing like a good sleep. There's nothing like peace of mind.

I know we have a long way to go, but I think we're *finally* ready to work on it. For the first time since our honeymoon, I'm excited about the life we both want to give our baby.

Going to his side of the bed, I try to get the printout from the doctor's office off his nightstand. He catches me by surprise when he grabs me, laying me next to him on the opposite side of the bed. He smiles, kissing me before falling asleep. He keeps me wrapped in his arms for another hour.

We wake just as the sun is starting to set.

"You okay?" he asks as I sit in bed trying to get my bearings.

"I guess. I think sleeping in the daytime did something to me. I feel blah."

"You've been cooped up in here too long, thanks to me."

"I thought we agreed to move forward."

“We did. We are. But right now, I need to feed you.”

“You’re really trying to rush this whole me-gaining-weight thing,” I say, making him frown at my mood.

“Spinach pizza? Barbeque baked chicken? Stir fry?” I ask what he has a taste for as I look in the fridge.

He sits, tapping his fingers on the counter in an uninspired rhythm. I think my foul mood has rubbed off on him.

“No, no, and no,” he says. “Let’s go out to eat?”

“But there’s so much food in here.” I turn back to the fridge, bending over to get a better look. I straighten up with him smacking my panty-clad ass.

“Leave it,” he says, closing the fridge before kissing me. “Go get dressed. Something fancy.”

I pick a black thigh-high dress that hides my little belly bump well and matching heels.

“Are you feeling better?” Gage asks as we drive down Pacific Coast Highway.

The night is clear and beautiful from the recent rain, so I let my window down to take in some fresh ocean air.

“Much better. I love being outside.”

“I know.” The hint of sadness in his voice is hard to ignore.

“Moving on,” I remind him.

“Right.” He smiles at me.

Of course, he takes me back to Marco's, and of course, even though the place is so packed that people are being turned away, he gets us in.

"I didn't know you had your own table," I say as he leads me to it, escorted by the hostess.

"*We* have our own private room," he says as we enter. The table alone can sit up to twenty people easily and it even has a wall of wine for him to choose from. "I use it for business meetings and family celebrations," he explains as he helps me into my seat.

I even indulge in a glass of red wine with the most delicious, lean, cooked to perfection cut of steak I've ever eaten. Judging by the grin on his face, he's enjoying his meal as well.

"You're certainly in a good mood now."

"I'm in an excellent mood, thanks to a certain beautiful woman that allows me the pleasure of her company."

"Well, I *am* legally required."

"And speaking of which," he starts, then stops to sip his wine. "Marry me."

"But we've already done that."

"Marry me again. I want you to have a dream wedding, McKenzie."

"I loved our wedding."

"I forced you to do it."

I shake my head, stopping him.

“I *loved* it. I wouldn’t change a thing about it. Even our very short engagement.”

I look at his grandmother’s wedding ring on my finger and smile at him for giving me something that means so much. He places his hand on top of mine about to speak, but the waiter appears.

“Forgive the intrusion, but your family is requesting access to your table this evening. We’re quite full and regrettably, we’ll have to turn them away otherwise.”

“Absolutely not,” Gage says.

“I don’t mind,” I tell him.

“This is the last thing you need to deal with right now.”

“They’re your family. I’m going to have to deal with them eventually and maybe this way, it won’t be so bad.”

“See them over,” he tells the waiter before turning back to me. “The minute this gets uncomfortable for you, we’re out of here. I won’t have you upset by anyone anymore. I don’t give a damn who they are.”

So touched by his concern for me, all I can do is nod.

Gage

Even though my steak is half-eaten, I lay my knife and fork on my plate in preparation for seeing my family. I hope it’s only Mom and Dad, but I doubt it. I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes when not only my parents show up but Keira

and Seth do as well. He couldn't come to a place like this without Tyra leeching. She's on him like a two-dollar suit.

"Gage," Mom greets me. "I didn't know you were coming out tonight."

She does everything she can to ignore McKenzie sitting next to me.

"My *wife* and I were in the mood for steak," I tell her. She forces a smile McKenzie's way.

"That's terrific," Dad says, saving Mom from having to speak. "Nice to see you looking so well, McKenzie."

He winks at me in approval.

"You too, Gordon."

McKenzie smiles politely at him. Mom scowls, taking note of their familiarity. Clearly, Dad didn't tell her about his impromptu visit the other day.

After introducing Keira, they sit, waiting for their meals looking in every direction but McKenzie's.

Dad, Seth, and I order a beer. Tyra, Keira and Mom champagne. McKenzie still nurses her glass of red wine. I glare at her, silently thanking her for this brilliant idea of letting them join us. Our evening has gone straight to shit. She shrugs at me, guiltily.

"McKenzie, I love your dress," Keira tells her, finally breaking the wall of silence. "Who made it?"

"Thanks. Um, it's a new, local designer. I love her work."

Mom huffs dramatically at McKenzie's words, causing Dad to give her a look.

"Well, Keira's right, I think you look great," Tyra pipes in. "It takes a lot to pull that off. Especially with all that weight you've gained. It must be awful."

"I'm enjoying being pregnant."

"And pregnancy looks good on you. You're beautiful without even trying," I tell McKenzie and she smiles at me.

"If you say so," Tyra says, between sips of champagne and looking bored. "But after you drop that load, you're *still* going to be out of shape. I hope you don't get those nasty stretch marks. It's going to be hard trying to hide all of that."

"Not all of us have to try so hard, Tyra," I tell her. "McKenzie is blessed with *natural* beauty."

"Are you saying my beauty isn't natural?"

My words hit their mark. She's the most insecure, shallow woman I've ever had the misfortune of knowing.

"Oh, here we go," Seth says, leaning back in his chair at what he perceives is the start of an argument.

My point has already been made so I hold my tongue. I'm not in the mood to fight with anyone, but I'll be damned if I sit here and let her take jabs at McKenzie.

"Seth, are you going to let him talk about me this way?"

"He didn't say anything about you, Tyra."

I look over at him in question. Normally, he's all over me when I even hint at insulting his fiancée, but now she gets

nothing. Tyra notices the change too and sits silently fuming. She's smart enough not to piss him off. No sense in rocking the boat.

"So, how is everything going with that organization of yours, son?" Dad says in a pathetic effort to lighten the mood.

"You know what, this is just... I can't," McKenzie says, throwing up her hands in frustration.

"Right, let's go," I tell her, but she shakes her head at me before turning to everyone else.

"Look, I get that you all hate me for what you think I did to Gage." She gives Tyra a look before continuing. "I'm sure it was made out to be much worse than it was."

"So, you weren't her sugar daddy?" Keira asks me.

"No, and it's not all black and white, Keira," I say. "We had an arrangement that got complicated."

"So, you weren't dating him for his money?" she asks McKenzie this time.

"I can't deny that most of what you heard is what happened," McKenzie tells her. "But I promise you now that my intentions are true."

"I don't believe that," Mom says.

"Elaine—"

"It's Mrs. Remington to you and what I believe is that you're still conning my son. What I believe is that you're forcing him to take care of you and a baby that's not his."

"That's enough," Dad tells Mom.

“No, it’s fine. I appreciate your honesty, Mrs. Remington, and you have every right to doubt me. I would too if I were in your shoes. My child isn’t even born yet and I have the same protectiveness. It’s in that spirit I ask you not to take my mistakes out on him or her. I want this baby to experience a big family, but I won’t allow any mistreatment.”

“I would never blame an innocent child and if this baby is my son’s, I will welcome it with open arms. I just hope you understand that courtesy doesn’t extend to its mother.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Mom,” I yell at her to everyone’s surprise. I’ve never raised my voice to her, let alone curse at her.

“Do not speak to your mother like that.”

“I’m sorry, Dad, but enough is enough, and if my wife isn’t welcomed into this family, then neither am I.”

“Gage, please understand where your mom is coming from,” Keira says.

“I get where she’s coming from. I get that you’re all taking the word of Tyra, who none of you like, over mine.”

“That’s not true, sweetheart. We just don’t trust McKenzie anymore. I liked her. You know I did, but now I just don’t know. As for us believing Tyra, well, she *is* her best friend. Who else knows her better?”

“You’re right, Mrs. Remington. Tyra knows me very well, but keep in mind that I also know her.”

“When did this become about me?” Tyra asks. “Why don’t any of you like me? I haven’t done anything to anybody.”

“Bullshit,” I tell her before turning to everyone else. “The bottom line is McKenzie is my wife and if you all want to be a part of my life, I suggest you learn to accept that.”

“You can’t just kick us out of your life, Gage. We’re your family.”

“I have my own family to think about now, Mom.”

I help McKenzie out of her chair and lead her out of the room.

“That went well,” I hear Seth say.

“It would have if not for your fiancée and her big mouth,” Keira comes back at him.

“All right, stop all this bickering,” Dad tells them.

I can hear how unhappy he is with the situation by the tone of his voice.

“I’m sorry about that,” I tell McKenzie as she looks out the window while we drive home.

“It didn’t go as bad as I thought it would,” she says, turning to me.

“How bad did you think it would go?”

“Let’s just say I was preparing to dodge a few steak knives. Thank you for defending me.”

“Anytime, baby.”

“I’m baby now?”

“Yes,” I simply say, taking her hand and bringing it to my lips.

She never really stopped being my baby. I was just too stupid to admit it.

The evening didn't go anywhere near as I planned. I wanted to feed her a good meal, then come back home and fuck her into a stress-free oblivion, but my family had to fuck it up.

“I hate that our evening was ruined,” I say.

“It wasn't. And besides, we still have a lot of evening left to spend.”

She scoots down in her seat, making her dress rise up her legs. I swallow hard trying to divert my eyes, but they keep drifting back down to her thighs. My need to be in between them spikes.

Now is not the time. Now is not the time. I chastise myself.

She crosses her leg, showing me a flash of her panties. The look on her face is letting me know she's teasing me on purpose.

“What... uh... what *exactly* did you have in mind?”

Please say sex.

“Well, we didn't get to eat dessert. I had my heart set on something white chocolatey.”

I cheer silently to myself.

“I have a taste for a little peach pie myself.”

“Drive faster,” she says, and I floor it. “Seriously?” She looks at the speedometer.

“What?”

“You’re going thirty-five. That’s not driving fast.”

“It is when I have precious cargo on board.”

“Aww,” she gushes.

I hold out for as long as I can and that ends up being a second after the front door closes. I have her pressed up against the wall.

“Damn, your skin is so soft,” I tell her as my hands inch up her thighs. My lips are at her neck, nibbling at the sweetness I find there. “Even your neck tastes good.”

She laughs and it goes straight to my heart.

I spin her around, walking her backward until she’s once again pressed up against a wall. This time in our foyer. Her moaning lets me know just how turned on she is. She protests at my ringing phone. I stop kissing her to take it out of my pocket.

“One second, baby,” I tell her when I see it’s my agent.

“But what about white chocolate and peach pie?”

“One second,” I whisper, kissing her before walking away.

McKenzie

I stomp my foot like a petulant child as he leaves me hot and bothered while he takes his call. I go to our bedroom and flop down on the bed, trying to clear my mind of that disastrous dinner. The nerve of that bitch Tyra. I'd hoped she would have developed feelings for Seth like I have for Gage. I feel sorry for him. He doesn't deserve to be used by her.

Gage comes in, sitting in front of me.

“What was the big emergency?”

“A trip I have to take.”

My heart falls when I remember his trip. I hated the idea of him leaving then and even more so now.

“To Asia?” He frowns in confusion. “I heard you talking to Rodger about going.”

“No.” He kisses me. “Not Asia. I accepted another tournament.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On you coming with me. I already cleared it with Dr. Carter. She's on board with it. She thinks it's a wonderful idea, in fact.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

“St. Thomas.”

He laughs at my eyes when they just about bug out of my head.

“St. Thomas? The real live island of St. Thomas?”

He nods.

“We leave tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night!” I repeat the time, hopping up off the bed, and running to the closet. “I have to pack. What should I pack? What am I going to wear? Oh my god, we are *so* going to miss the flight.”

“Baby,” he says, taking me in his arms. “Relax. We have time. Whatever we don’t pack, we can buy when we get there.”

“You think of everything, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he says smugly, making me punch his arm before taking my phone from my bag. “Who are *you* calling now?”

“I have to make an appointment to get my hair braided.”

I laugh when he growls at me.

“I can’t wait to see this,” he says.

Gage

McKenzie sits like a kid going to Disneyland in the back seat of Dwayne’s car.

This tournament is for amateurs. I would have turned it down, but McKenzie’s bad mood when she woke up and her statement about loving being outside were the motivations to accept it. That disastrous meal with my family last night lit a

fire under my ass. I don't want to go as far as Asia, but I feel the need to get McKenzie as far away from my family drama as I can. Tyra and Mom's behavior was unacceptable and as much as McKenzie denies it, I know it bothered her.

This trip is exactly what we need to keep things on the upswing. If she thinks that tiny resort I took her to on our honeymoon is paradise, wait until she sees what I have in store for her. A whole damn tropical island at her disposal.

I asked Vera to come along because I'm not quite sure how long we'll be gone and I want her to have a woman around to help her. I know she's fond of Vera.

She looks around now as Dwayne drives us right up to the tarmac of Jericho Air. Her mouth falls open as she gets a look at the private jet that is waiting for us. I can't help but smile at her. This trip is exactly what she needed.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

McKenzie

I've been running around from room to room like a woman possessed, trying to wrap my head around the fact that we'll be staying here for at least a few days.

"How do you like the hotel room, baby?"

This "hotel room" as he calls it is not a room at all. It's a spacious townhouse type of deal, complete with floor-to-ceiling windows and patios that lead out to a view of the beach in each room. And what a view it is. Nothing but sky and a body of water so clear you want to dive right in. The whole place is open and airy, but at the same time, completely private. I feel like we're the only ones on the island.

The breeze coming off the water is warm and crisp; it makes me want to change out of my clothes and into something more island-vacation appropriate for the beach. I turn to voice my thoughts to Gage, but he's already standing behind me holding up my bikini.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask, looking at my profile in the mirror with my bikini on. "My belly isn't as flat as it used to be. Maybe a one-piece would be better. What do you think?"

"Nonsense," he says, coming out of the bathroom to check me out. Like I knew they would, his fingers play with the ends of my Box braids. The minute he first saw me with them in, he

carried me to bed and gave me three orgasms. I didn't even know it was possible to have those back-to-back. "You look sexy and adorable."

"Sexy and adorable?"

"Damn right. I want to coo at you and fuck you all at the same time. Only you could pull that off, baby."

I grin, shaking my head at him, and then all-out laugh when I turn away from the mirror to see what he has on.

"Can your shorts get any shorter?" I ask him about his white swim trunks.

"I plan on working on my tan lines," he says.

I slip on my flip-flops then grab my cover-up and beach bag before taking Gage's hand and leaving the hotel room.

"Nice shorts, sir," Rodger deadpans as we join him and Vera in the lobby. Their suites are right next to ours.

Gage gives him the finger while Vera and I try to stop laughing.

Rodger has on a pair of shorts as well. They're not as high up as Gage's, but I still try not to make it obvious I've noticed them. I've never seen him in anything other than his stuffy ol' work clothes. It's nice to see him more relaxed.

Vera looks amazing in a sundress. Her blonde hair is down and the way it catches the sun as we walk along the shoreline has Rodger staring at her.

I glance at Gage to see if he's catching it. He winks at me, letting me know he is before lacing his fingers with mine. He

kisses the side of my forehead and guides me closer to the water getting our feet wet.

The water is warm, so we go out until it's up well beyond my waist. I scream so loud I almost rupture his eardrum when he tosses me into the water. I want to get him back, but then he goes and wraps his arms around my waist, kissing me. I wrap my arms around him and enjoy being close to him instead.

We stay held up relaxing in our cabana for most of the day. Gage has ordered everything off the menu. I don't even know where he's put it all. He's had me laughing my head off at the stuff that's been coming out of his mouth. All the cocktails he's been drinking have taken away his filter.

"I'm telling you the truth, McKenzie." He calls my name in a way that says he's being completely serious. It still doesn't stop me from laughing because he hasn't been able to string a serious thought together to save his life. "They call it a cockpit because it looks like a giant dick. A big flying dick is all it is, with big wings for balls. And the pilots skid it right into pussy when they land. That's why there are no women pilots. Because women don't have cocks."

He has been trying to get me to see an airplane as a dick for the past twenty minutes.

"Okay, I can see what you're saying," I finally agree with him.

He nods, pleased with himself for making his point.

“I knew you’d get it.” He settles down and goes back to staring at my left tit. He’s been entranced by it since I laid down next to him. Why he’s focusing on just the one, I have no idea.

“But, Gage, what do dick planes have to do with me asking if you want to go out dancing later?”

He looks at me like I’ve grown two heads.

“Was *that* what you asked me?”

I nod my head with a laugh.

“Oh. It was still an important piece of information. You need to know these things, baby,” he says it all with a shrug, picking up his cocktail to sip it.

“I think you’ve had just about enough of this,” I tell him, taking it away as he groans at his empty hand.

No longer having his drink to keep his hands busy, he turns his attention on me, circling my waist, pulling me close to him as he cups that tit he’s been so fascinated with. He nudges my neck, tickling me with his lips and making me squirm as I try in vain to push him away.

Vera and I leave the men to go and check out a few shops. The fact that they’re both so willing to let us venture off alone makes me wonder if they don’t have someone else watching us. I wouldn’t put it past either of them. We run across a tour guide who tells us all about some secret spots on the island. I take him up on his offer to show us around so I can check them out before we leave. Vera is even excited about it.

Left to our own devices for the evening, Gage and I have dinner that he's arranged on a private section of the beach. We're eating in a hammock bed hanging from the branches of two large trees near the water.

"I can't believe people do this," I squeal in delight as I try to gently make it swing. Gage doesn't bother to take such care and I squeal again as we go tilting from one side to the other. "A swinging bed. Of all the things."

The servers stabilize us so we can have our dinner.

"Are you sure conch is okay for me to eat?" I ask him while spooning a mouthful of it. I truly hope it is because it's a delicious chowder.

"Yours is a healthy version, baby."

I look over at his and see that it is different than the kind I'm eating. I want to protest, but I don't want to stop eating mine. Whatever version it is, they sure made it taste good and I eat it all.

"I could get used to feeling this relaxed," I tell him, full and satisfied, sipping on my virgin cocktail while Gage drinks a wine cooler.

Staring out at the moon reflecting on the water and watching the candles flicker around us in the warm, gentle breeze makes me want to stay like this forever.

"Relaxing you is the plan, baby," he says, releasing us so we can gently swing again.

I wake in a warm bed that feels like it's made of clouds with the most amazing view in front of me.

Gage and Rodger are busy this morning with his golf tournament, so Vera and I check out the spa. I try not to moan too loudly as the masseuse works her magic fingers over muscles I didn't even know I had, let alone were aching. She has me on a pregnancy table that has a pouch where the baby is nested while I lay on my stomach.

"We need to drag Gage and Rodger over here for this. If anyone needs to loosen up, it's those two," I joke with Vera.

"Gage seemed very loose on the beach yesterday," she reminds me and we laugh at his expense.

"I seriously cannot believe he got drunk," I whisper to her. "It's so not like him. Maybe it's something in the island air that has him going against the norm."

"I get the feeling it has little to do with the location and everything to do with the company he's keeping."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not breaking any confidences by telling you that I've seen a change in him since you came back into his life. He smiles more. I even caught him laughing a day or two ago while sitting at his desk. He tried to pretend he was busy when he noticed me, but I believe he was thinking about something you'd done or said to him and he found it very funny. He doesn't even over practice his golf swing to death every morning like he used to."

I try not to show all my teeth when I grin. I know he's missing his morning practice due to keeping me up late giving me a workout in bed.

"I suspect it to change him even more once the baby is born," she whispers that last part, unable to hide her excitement. "It's going to be so much fun with a little one in the house."

"Says the lady who doesn't have to get up for a feeding at two in the morning." I laugh.

"I would love to," she says. "I plan on helping out as much as you and Mr. Remington need me. Rodger too. He's just as excited about it as I am."

"He is?"

"He's making all of the staff get first-aid certifications. I even found him researching about having the baby chipped. He was all ready to present the idea to Mr. Remington."

"Oh, God," I groan, knowing Gage will be in total agreement with chipping the baby.

"Don't worry, I talked him out of it," she tells me, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

This conversation has made my morning. It's so nice to know that someone besides Gage and I are happy about the baby. Mom is excited now that she's used to the idea, but I'd love for Gage's family to share this experience with him. He doesn't say it, but I know it hurts him not to have that support. His family means the world to him.

I brush off thoughts of them. I refuse to let them bring me down on what is shaping up to be a terrific getaway.

After being ex-foliated, waxed, relaxed, stretched out, and primed up, I return to the hotel room to meet Gage. I have just enough time to change into something sexy before he comes in.

Gage

I left McKenzie with explicit instructions to relax while I was gone. She wanted to come with me, but the last thing I want is for her to stand around in the hot sun all day watching me play. I got word that she and Vera spent a few hours at the spa from the female guard we have shadowing them.

Rodger and I ran into Vera in the hotel lobby and he's a very happy man. He practically ripped her arm off pulling her up to their hotel room. I don't suspect I'll see either of them for the remainder of the evening. This damn island has gotten everybody horny, but I never would have guessed those two would hook up.

I put a pep in my step with anticipation of seeing McKenzie. I enter the room, looking for her.

"Baby, where are you?" I say, tossing my visor and gloves on a nearby chair as I walk.

"Over here."

I turn toward the sound of her voice. She's on the lounge section of our large sofa, lying on her side with her head resting in one hand.

"Shit," I whisper at the sight of her.

"Is this relaxed enough for you?"

I absentmindedly nod as I eye-fuck her. My mouth is hanging open like a dog in heat, panting to breathe. She's in some black silk negligée number and her skin is glowing. She's like a homing beacon and I can't help but move toward her, taking off my clothes as I go.

Her eyes widen when she sees the swiftness of my intentions. Did she think I wouldn't be inside of her a second after I saw her looking the way that she does right now?

"Fuck, baby," I moan out as I lean down close, getting my first whiff of her. "You smell good."

I place my knees strategically next to hers, straddling her, preventing her from escaping me. She squirms, laughing as I nuzzle and sniff her skin.

"Like what you see?" She has the nerve to ask me.

I growl, inching my way up her legs with the palm of my hand, loving the feel of her skin. I never thought it could be smoother than it was, but shit, she's gone and made it that way. My hands are quickly replaced by my mouth and I am rewarded with a moan from her.

"Mmm, freshly waxed peach pie," I tell her, finally reaching my destination and burying my nose in her pussy. It smells just as sweet as the rest of her. Like coconut and orange blossoms.

“Gage,” she moans my name as my tongue darts out to get a taste of her.

“Mmm,” I say, sucking her clit until she creams. Her body arches high off the bed, bucking and jerking as she comes. “I like it and then some.”

“Of course, you know this means war,” she says at my sudden attack on her. She tries to wiggle from underneath me to get on top, having every intention of returning the favor. I raise an eyebrow in challenge as I make my way up her body. I place my finger inside of her, hitting her sweet spot. “Shit,” she whispers, rising off the sofa, ready to come again. I hold her orgasm at bay, forcing her to grind into my hand.

“Baby, I think you’ve just lost the first battle and you’re about to lose the war. Care to surrender?”

She quickly nods as she lets out a measured breath.

“I surrender submissively to you, sir,” she says, and fuck me, if I don’t end up waving the white flag at her words.

She knows exactly how to get to me. *Well played, baby.* I massage her spot, making her come instantly in my hand as her reward. Her head is thrown back as she rides her wave.

“I love watching you come, McKenzie. I love being the only man who’s ever seen you this way. You’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she breathes before kissing me.

I enter her, sliding in her slickness like a hot knife on warm butter.

“Fuck, baby. I’ll never get used to how good you feel. You drive me crazy.”

“Gage. Oh, God... I...” Her pussy clamps around me as her body starts to quiver.

“Mmm, no baby, not yet,” I tell her, stilling myself until she calms down. “I want to savor this.”

I smile as she whimpers in protest before I start up again. I go even slower this time, enjoying the build-up until I can’t hold out any longer. I lift her legs and pump into her deep, spilling inside of her as we come together calling for one another.

“I could get used to this,” I share in her sentiment from yesterday as she lies on top of me, dozing with her head on my chest and her arm wrapped around my waist.

“That’s the plan,” she says, causing me to smile and kiss the top of her head, pulling her in even closer to me.

One week later

“Okay, I’ve worked out our itinerary for today,” McKenzie says coming back in from the living room, bouncing on the bed, stopping me from dozing off again.

It’s seven in the morning and I’m enjoying sleeping in.

“Itinerary,” I mumble, trying to fondle her from under the covers until she swats my hand away.

The warm breeze is coming off the water, and the flowers that adorn our suite are giving off a sweet scent.

We've been here for a week and McKenzie is still like the damn energizer bunny. Relaxing is the farthest thing on her mind as she races from one end of the island to the next, enjoying all of the tourist traps St. Thomas has to offer.

She and Vera have become thick as thieves roping Rodger and me into adventures when they're not with the mother/daughter duo they've befriended. The daughter is McKenzie's age and the mother is close to Vera's.

"I have it all figured out," she says, looking at her list. "While you and Rodger are out on the green, I talked Vera into going on a kayaking tour with me."

That woke me up.

"Baby, I don't think kayaking is recommended for pregnant women."

"I already checked. It's in calm waters so I should be fine," she says. I'm about to protest, but she gives me a look that tells me I best keep quiet and let her finish. "There's this cave I found out about from a tour guide. The only way to enter is to kayak in."

"Absolutely not, McKenzie," I say, sitting up. "I'll be damned if you and Vera go off to some cave in a damn kayak with a complete stranger."

"But—"

"No," I tell her, meaning it, and watch as she pouts. I roll my eyes at myself because I know I am about to give in. "If

you want to go that bad, wait for me to go with you.”

“Yes,” she says, excited again. I’m so fucked by this woman. “I’d much rather you go with us anyway. That way you can check out some of the snorkeling areas we’ll—”

“Snorkeling? What happened to you being pampered at the spa?”

“I’ve been at the spa for two days straight and the rest of the time you have me doing things that are way more strenuous than snorkeling right here in this bed.” I can’t help the smirk on my face because no truer words were ever spoken. “We don’t have that many more days left so I have to fit a lot in.”

“There’s no time limit, baby. We can stay as long as you want,” I say, lying back down and pulling her back to bed with me.

“Really?” she shrieks. “We don’t have to rush home?”

“Of course not. We have plenty of time to do everything you want to do. Like *sleep* at seven in the morning.”

She laughs and turns over to spoon with me. The breeze from the open patio door catches the scent of whatever oil she’s put in her braids and blows it my way. I inhale deeply.

“I love this view,” she says.

“Me too,” I say, looking at her so content next to me.

No view can compete with her when she’s happy like this.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

One Week later

Gage

“Hurry up in there if you want to get a good spot for this thing,” I call to my wife from the living room. She wants to hear this band that’s playing by the beach.

Of course, I’m just teasing her. I already have a spot reserved for us. I’m just bored waiting for her to finish getting ready. I don’t know why she makes it such a production. She looks impeccably gorgeous in whatever she wears.

We’ve visited the OB-GYN Dr. Carter set us up with and McKenzie’s blood pressure is at a more acceptable level. It’s still recommended that we just monitor it for now. She’s doing great and that takes a load off both of us.

My phone vibrates and I take it out to check the message. The fact that it’s my brother is the only reason I respond.

Seth: Where the hell are you? Your place looks deserted. Vera’s not even around.

Gage: Vera is here with us in St. Thomas.

Seth: Sorry, bro. Call me when you get back in town. I need to talk to you.

I dial his number, wondering what this is all about. His ugly mug comes up on video call and I’m forced to look at his profile as he drives.

“I didn’t want to *see* you, Seth.”

“Hey, I’m driving back from your place,” he says with a grin and a middle finger.

“Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on with you and Tyra? The last time I saw you two together, you seemed off.”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just thinking about too much shit.”

“Like what shit?”

McKenzie

Vera and Rodger just excused themselves for the evening. Gage and I gave each other looks because we knew exactly what they were going to do. Rodger can’t keep his hands off her. I don’t know what it is about this place that has us all acting so romantic. It has to be something they’re putting in the water.

“You okay?” I ask Gage after the band plays their last set and we finish up eating dinner.

He’s been a little off since we left the suite. I can tell something is on his mind.

“I was just thinking about Seth. I was on the phone with him while you were getting ready and he said some things about Tyra that pissed me off. I’m just trying to shake it.”

“What did he say?”

“Baby, let’s not talk about this on our vacation.”

“I want to know.”

He looks at me as I wait for him to tell me. He sighs, giving in.

“Tyra is blowing through his money trying to keep up with you.”

“With me?”

“The beach house, the status, all of it.”

“That all belongs to you.”

He frowns at my words.

“It belongs to *us*. McKenzie, she wants a baby too. Seth is scared she might try to poke holes in his condoms.”

“She has lost her ever-loving mind. What about all she was saying about me losing you because I’m fat?”

“Jealousy. She was just trying to hurt you.”

“I can’t believe her. I never knew she had so much animosity toward me. Tyrone was right about her. She’s a horrible human being.”

“No doubt about that. Seth seems to think that the dinner set her off about having a baby. The fact that we were so close. It’s clear she doesn’t have that with him.”

“Because she doesn’t care about Seth like I care about you.”

“No, she doesn’t,” he says with a smile.

“I think maybe we should do a postnup.”

“Where the hell did that come from?”

“I want to prove to you that I’m not after your money like Tyra is after Seth’s, and I think that’s the best way to do it. Plus, it may go a long way in helping your family come to terms with me again.”

“Baby, I *know* you’re not after my money. This is a non-issue for us. And fuck whoever tries to make it one, including my family. This is *our* marriage, not theirs.”

“I just want you to know that I want our marriage, but most of all, I want you.”

“I want you too. I never want to hurt you again, McKenzie. Believe that,” he says, cupping my face.

“I do,” I whisper.

He takes me by the hands and helps me up. Without a word, we make our way back to our suite.

“Mmm, you have magic hands,” I tell him, sitting on the bed as he massages my shoulders with some of the oil I picked up down in the spa.

He grins at me, holding the bottle up and letting the oil drip on my chest. I moan again as he massages my breasts, rubbing the oil in my skin before capturing one of my nipples in his mouth. I nuzzle his head before kissing it. He looks up at me I’m guessing surprised by the gentle gesture.

“The things you make me feel, McKenzie,” he says. “Just by the little things you do to me.”

“No one’s ever made you feel this way before?” He shakes his head. “So, I’m the first?” He shakes his head again.

“You’re the only.”

I love this man. I love him. I love him. I love him.

Last Day in Paradise

Gage

“Are you ready for the best day of your life?” McKenzie’s voice wakes me up.

“I already had that day when I married you,” I say, pulling her down next to me.

“Aww, you get the cheesy prize,” she says, kissing me.

She’s happy with excitement and I love it.

We did the kayaking-through-caves thing the other day and picked out a great spot for snorkeling, so we’re doing that this morning, being it’s our last day on the island. She’s finally ready to go home.

I enjoyed the kayaking. The water was calm and the caves were beautiful. The second McKenzie got out in deep water on that little slip of wood, it freaked her out. We almost had to turn back until we all promised her that nothing was lurking underneath waiting to swallow her up. Once she calmed down and got used to it, she enjoyed herself.

This tour guide asshole that has become a little too friendly with my wife swears that she'll love snorkeling so she's eager to give it a try. I nail her down long enough to get a light breakfast in her before we head to the boat.

"Selfie," she says as we wait to board.

She holds her phone up and I get close to her and smile while she takes the picture. I've never taken so many damn selfies. I may just frame one and place it on my desk next to the picture of our wedding day McKenzie still doesn't know I have there.

We take the boat out to our perfect spot. The water is so clear and shallow you can see straight down to the bottom of it.

"Gage," McKenzie screams to stop me from going into the water.

I look over to where she's pointing and I see a medium-sized fin barreling right for the boat. I'm sure to her it looks like something right out of *Jaws*, but I know what it is and so does she once it gets closer to us.

Looks like the guide knows this particular dolphin as one that comes to snorkel with the guest and that's exactly what it does. It even lets McKenzie hold on to its fin as he slowly pulls her.

I watch as she swims along with him. Her tiny baby-bumped belly sways from side to side as she kicks her legs. She's so fucking cute. It's a damn good thing this water is a tad bit cold because my dick would be huge right now looking

at her. And that's the last thing I want. Some damn overzealous fish might come along and snip it off.

The dolphin gets bored with us and swims away, but we have other exotic fish that are so close we can touch them. McKenzie gets the asshole tour guide to take an underwater photo of us and I'm for sure framing that one. *Mine*. I say to myself as I get up close to her for the picture he's taking.

We swim for another hour before boarding the boat.

"That was amazing," she says, drying off and I have to agree.

She's all smiles as we take the yacht around the island. We hang out there for most of the day swimming and soaking up the sun until it starts to sink lower in the sky so we head back to the docks.

"Gage, look," McKenzie says, looking out at the sun setting. Just when I'm about to comment on the view, our friendly dolphin jumps out of the water and I realize that's what she meant.

We watch as it jumps a few more times. With each one, it's farther away from us than the last.

"It's saying goodbye," she says with a hint of sadness in her voice.

We go to our suite and get changed to meet up with Rodger and Vera at Margaritaville. Once there, Rodger buys a *Drinking margaritas with my senioritas* T-shirt and I roll my eyes when he actually puts the damn thing on.

We order nearly every damn margarita on the menu from pomegranate to kiwi lime and McKenzie has every virgin variation. Even the food is margarita themed from the donuts to the pizza we eat. Rodger's favorite drink is the Corona beer margarita while Vera is throwing down shot after shot of the cotton candy. McKenzie likes the pineapple jalapeno which shocks the shit out of me. She never liked anything spicy in her drinks before. It must be some type of pregnancy craving. I order a few more of the blood orange. By the time we're done, everyone but McKenzie is drunk off our asses.

Rodger is in Vera's ear, running his mouth a mile a minute. I didn't know the man could form so many words all at once. Whatever he's saying, Vera is eating it up because she inches so close to him, she's nearly in his lap. I pay them no mind because I'm too busy trying to sex up a completely sober McKenzie who's finding my slurred words hilarious and not panty-wetting at all.

I don't know how we made it back to the hotel. McKenzie must have gotten us all back because the next thing I know, the sun is in my face and my phone is going off.

"Fuck," I say, trying to get up.

My head is feeling like it was just bashed in by a sledgehammer and I lie right back down. McKenzie hands me my phone before getting out of bed.

McKenzie

I hand Gage his phone and go into the kitchen to find him some painkillers and orange juice.

“What’s wrong?” I say to him, handing him the two pills and the juice.

“I’m supposed to be interviewed on *The Morning Show*. I forgot all about it,” he says, downing the pills and the juice.

“So, we’re not leaving today?”

“We are,” he says, getting up to shower. “Just a little later than planned.”

He groans, mumbling profanities into the bathroom, and I grimace, feeling bad for him having to socialize with a hangover. I’m sure he planned to sleep it off during our flight home.

I go into the closet and pull him out something to wear so he doesn’t have to think about it.

“Thanks, baby,” he says, eyeing me as I help him get ready by buttoning his shirt.

Has he forgotten that not too long ago, I was his submissive?

“You’re welcome.”

“Why don’t you and Vera go shopping? You haven’t bought anything since we’ve been here.”

“I have more than enough stuff.”

“Baby, don’t start this again,” he says, taking hold of my chin and making me look at him. “Please.”

I close my eyes at his plea. I could never resist it.

“Okay.”

“Good girl.”

“I suppose I can’t convince you to eat before you go?”

The disgusted frown on his face is answer enough.

“I’m still belching up pizza margherita,” he says, but still making me promise to eat.

Before he goes, he introduces Vera and me to Sandy Gately. Evidently, she’s been guarding us the whole time and now she’s to drive us around to the places we want to go. I roll my eyes. I knew all this freedom was too good to be true.

We choose to go to a few off-the-beaten-path places. We find cute little things to decorate the beach house with and a few things we know Rodger and Gage will find funny. But my favorite is this purse store that promises one-of-a-kind bags.

There’s only one that catches my eye. It’s made to look like a set of beautifully designed classic books on a bookshelf. I debate on if I should get it, but then I grab it before the other woman that’s looking at it gets close enough to take it.

I see Vera looking at one in the shape of a strawberry dipped in chocolate and I insist she get it as she’s just as fickle about spending money as I am, but unlike me, she has no reason to be.

We practically drool over the bags as we head back to the hotel.

“So, what’s with the strawberry?” I break down and ask her.

“There... uh... They’ve been Rodger’s favorite thing to eat... off... me,” she says with a naughty grin.

“Oh, my God.” I laugh and she joins me. I never would have guessed the two of them were so kinky. “Okay,” I say. “Since we’ve broken into the ranks of being friends. You won’t be so formal around me anymore, right?”

“Right,” she says. I shake my head at her agreeing all too quickly. It’s a sure sign that she doesn’t intend on doing it. She’s almost as bad as Rodger with being so serious when at work.

“Do you have everything, baby?” Gage asks me as he zips up our last bag.

“I made sure,” I tell him, going over and looking at the view one last time.

“We can always come back,” he says, coming behind me and circling my waist. “Or are you worried about going home?” I shrug an answer. “It won’t be like it was before. You know that, right?”

“I know, but that’s not enough,” I say, turning around to face him. “I’ve been thinking about it. And if we’re going to work, things need to change when we get back.”

“What things?”

“Everything.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gage

My mind is racing as to what she means.

“Everything like what?”

“Starting with me not wanting you or Dwayne dictating where and when I come and go. I certainly don’t want him reporting my every move to you. I only have one friend right now. And Tyrone is *just* a friend, Gage. I know you don’t care for him and I respect that, but I’d still like to maintain our friendship.”

I let out the breath I was holding.

“I get it. I know I was wrong for how I handled all of that. My only defense is I let my demons get the better of me.”

“What demons?”

“I thought if I gave you too much freedom, you’d realize you’re better off without me. You being close to Tyrone and having fun with him; I wanted that to be me.”

I confess to her the shit that was going around in my head I wouldn’t dare admit just a few weeks ago, let alone voice it to her. She lets out a sympathetic sigh as she smiles at me.

“I wanted it to be you too. I hated the distance between us. I missed you so much I was sick about it. I just didn’t know how to reach you.”

“Come here, baby.” I take her in my arms and hold her.

She sighs more contently this time with her face snuggled into the crook of my neck.

“I want to go back to work,” I hear her softly say. I’m ready to argue until she lifts her head to look at me. “I love my work.”

Images of me ripping that envelope out of her hand and making her cry come forcing their way into my mind.

I’m such a fucking bastard. I don’t know how she stands me.

“I’m sorry I made you cry about working.”

“Water under the bridge. We’re moving forward now, remember?”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, as in you won’t give me grief about working?”

“As long as you promise you won’t work too hard.”

“I promise,” she agrees before I can even finish the sentence.

“Good. Now that that’s all settled, let’s go home.”

“Be it ever so humble.”

“You think it’s too humble?” I’ve been thinking about getting a bigger place.

“I love it there. I was only joking.”

“You sure? We could move if you want.”

“Where would we go?”

“Someplace with a big backyard like I had when I was growing up.”

“You want to buy land?”

“It’s something we can consider.”

McKenzie

“What are you smiling about?” Gage asks as we walk up our front steps. His hand is firmly kneading the curve of my ass.

“I’m just happy to be home. I feel like it’s the first time we’re really going to be living here as husband and wife.”

“Careful what you wish for, baby. That title alone keeps me with a constant hard-on. I love the idea of being inside my wife and *actually* being in her is even better.”

He pulls me close to him and I laugh at the feel of his breath tickling my neck. I do my best to squirm away from him. I’m whisked into the foyer smack up against the far wall.

“Well, you won’t hear me complaining,” I say. Successfully managing to squirm away from him this time, I walk into the kitchen with him right behind me.

“Good. Because I plan on introducing this sweet little ass of yours to every flat surface in this house.”

“Gage,” I shriek his name when he lifts me up and sits me down on the breakfast bar. The look in his eye lets me know exactly what he plans to do with me. “What if someone sees us?”

“No one here but us, baby,” he says, reminding me of him giving Rodger and Vera time off.

Leaning back on my elbows, I watch him as he lifts my dress over my hips and slides my panties off.

“Mmm, nice,” he says, still admiring the treatment I got at the spa. “I want a taste.”

“What? Here? Now?” I moan as he runs the tip of his tongue over my clit.

“Right here. Right now,” he says, refusing to stop licking me until I come in his mouth, giving him his taste of me. “Mmm,” he says again, licking me clean. “We can count this as the first surface. What do you think?”

“Umm,” I sing, trying to answer. I’m still feeling my high. “I don’t think it counts unless you come too.”

“You’re right,” he says and I laugh at him fumbling with the crotch of his pants. But it soon turns into a gasp when he slides them off and frees himself.

His dick springs out thick and hard.

I bite my bottom lip watching a pearl of his precum ooze from his tip and run down his shaft like the dew droplets off a tall cold glass of water. Suddenly I’m parched as I swallow hard, wanting him to quench my thirst.

“You want a taste, baby?” he asks me, and I quickly nod.

He walks around the counter, bringing his dick close to my mouth, and I scoot my head over until my lips are touching him.

He hisses as my tongue darts out to lick another drop of precum slipping out his tip.

“Oh shit, McKenzie,” he moans deeply when I take him in. His hand tangles in my hair, holding my head steady as he pumps his hips into my mouth. I suck hard. He is transfixed on watching me as he slides himself in and out. “Fuck, baby, this feels so damn good. I fucking love your mouth.”

I slurp on him when he becomes wet with my saliva and his arousal.

His free hand makes its way past my baby bump to my pussy and I grind my hips into his hand while he fingers me.

He smirks at me when I come, feeling cocky that he got me to do it so quickly.

“Oh, shit,” he says when I wipe the smirk off his face by popping him out of my mouth to suck his balls. I stroke him with my hand, jacking him off. His balls are cool in my mouth. “Shit. Shit. Shit, McKenzie. I’m coming.”

“Hey,” I groan out in protest as he comes on my face. “I wanted to taste that.”

“Sorry, baby.” He laughs, tapping his dick on my lips. “I couldn’t hold it with the job you were doing on my nut sack.”

I laugh as I try to wipe his come off my face, but it's a lot of it. I don't get how he has so much when we just had sex on the jet a few hours ago.

"You look good with my jizz on you," he says with no remorse whatsoever for the mess he's made of me.

"I would roll my eyes at you if I didn't think they wouldn't get full of sperm," I tell him, continuing to wipe. "Aw, man, it's in my braids, isn't it?"

"It's not in your braids." He laughs, helping me up.

Taking off my dress and bra, he leads me to our shower. I stand under the warm water with my back to him as he washes it for me. He's already taken extra care in washing the rest of me, grinning at my reaction when he lingers at my chest.

"I can get used to all this pampering," I say as he dries me off and lotions me down.

"That's the plan," he says when we get into bed.

"So, what else is in this plan?"

Gage

McKenzie is lying with her back pressed into my chest and my head is in the palm of my hand looking down at her. My free arm is wrapped around her and like it always is when we sleep, my hand is splayed out protectively over her growing belly.

“Making our family the number one priority,” I tell her half the plan, leaving out the *making her fall in love with me* part. “Nothing is more important than what we’re building right now.”

“Do you really think we can make it work this time?”

“I know we can. For the first time since this started, we’re on the same page with no hidden agendas and no secrets between us. We just have to keep it that way.”

“Okay,” she says. I can’t help but notice the beautiful smile on her face and I wonder the reason. “What are you thinking?”

“Just that I’m happy we’re talking like this. I was scared the moment we got back, it would all change like it did before when you pulled away from me.”

“It won’t, baby. I won’t shut you out again. I can’t promise you’ll always like what I have to say, though. I’m still the same asshole control freak that I was.”

“Well, that’s one of the many things I lo... like about you.”

“Many things?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Well,” I say, waiting for her to continue. “What else do you like about me?”

“Are you seriously fishing for compliments?”

“Unashamedly so.”

“Hmm,” she pretends to think. “Besides your obvious God-like good looks, I like how you take care of the people that matter to you. I like your idea of joking which is... so like

you. I like how you make things okay for me without even realizing you're doing it. I like how passionate you are about things. And most of all, I like the asshole control freak better known as Dominant Gage."

"You like the Dom in me?"

"As long as you use him for good, yes. And keeping in the spirit of using him for good, I want to go back to work tomorrow since you're going."

"Aw, for fuck's sake, McKenzie. We just got back."

I can't believe she wants to start work already.

"I think we need to add compromise to our plan," she suggests.

"Compromise?"

"That's right."

"Why does that sound like a euphemism for me letting you have your way?" She shrugs all too innocently, making me shake my head at her. "I want to have lunch with you. I don't want to go the whole day without seeing you."

"Okay, but not in the office. It might look like I'm spending time in the enemy camp on my first day back."

"Why am I the enemy?"

"You're the big cheese. Nobody wants to be around the girl who is sucking up to a major account, especially when said account shows up to have lunch with said girl."

"But you're my wife." I all but whine at being banned from her office tomorrow. I planned to pop in and check on her.

“My point exactly.”

I lie back with a frustrated thud on my pillow. McKenzie turns over to look at me. This whole compromise thing is foreign to me and she’s loving watching me struggle to do it.

“Have Dwayne drive you over to my office.”

How do you like that compromise, baby?

“Really?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just never been up there.”

“Tomorrow is as good a time as any.”

“Are you sure? I mean, people will know that I’m your wife and that I’m pregnant. I didn’t think that’s what you wanted...” She trails off.

It takes me a minute to figure out why, but then it clicks and I feel like shit.

“McKenzie, baby, I wasn’t trying to keep you a secret. When I made it hard for you to go out, it was because of my own selfish need to keep you. I’m proud to have you as my wife and the mother of my children. I’d shout that shit from every rooftop in this damn city if I could.”

She laughs at that last part, but then looks at me with widened eyes.

“Children,” she says. “How many children are we talking about having?”

“Good night, baby,” is my only answer as I settle in bed.

I can feel her stare at me while I pretend to be asleep. I even go so far as to fake snore. With a huff, she rolls back over to her original position.

“Jesus, McKenzie,” I say when she purposely puts her cold feet on me to warm them up. She does this nearly every night, so I should be used to it by now. And like every time she does it, I give in and turn over, wrapping her in my arms to keep the rest of her warm. “Sweet dreams, baby.”

I kiss her shoulder. She sighs contently and places her hand where mine rests on her stomach.

I awake to an empty bed. I shake my head, hoping McKenzie didn't go into the office this damn early, but the smell of what I think is turkey bacon frying tells me exactly where she is.

Our bedroom door opens and she comes in wearing the white button-down I had on last night and nothing else. Her red bra is dangling in her hand. The one I took off her last night and tossed somewhere in the kitchen.

Shit, she looks good. Just watching her walk toward me gets my juices flowing and like clockwork at the sight of her, they all pool right at my dick.

“Damn, I wish I looked that good in my shirt.”

“Oh, believe me, Mr. Remington, you look damn good in this shirt.”

“I wish I looked as good as you do *stripping* out of my shirt.”

“There’s a lot I can say about that.”

“Do tell, Mrs. Remington.”

“I can show you better than I can tell you?”

Hell yeah, now she’s talking.

I’m geared up for this little striptease I’m about to get. She makes it as far as the third button and the smoke detector goes off in the kitchen.

“Dammit,” she says, remembering the bacon she left frying. She goes running to take it off the burner.

I get up to follow her.

Cock blocked by burning turkey bacon.

McKenzie

“I’ll see you at lunch, baby,” Gage reminds me, walking me to the front door where Dwayne is waiting to escort me to work.

Dwayne will no longer be required to report a thing to him about my day-to-day activities. Now I’m looking forward to telling him all about my day myself.

“Okay,” I tell him, giving him a quick kiss as he hands me my bag. “Don’t work too hard.”

He laughs at me for being the one to tell *him* that. I blow him a kiss goodbye before closing the door.

“I’m so excited about going to work,” I tell Dwayne who gives me a look like I’m crazy before his tough expression

fades into his version of a small grin.

He's been a little more relaxed with me. He even went against protocol and offered to let me go out alone against Gage's orders a few weeks ago.

Vera told me in confidence during our time together in St. Thomas that she, Rodger, and especially Dwayne was concerned about how withdrawn I'd become. He started getting on Rodger's ass about being forced to stop me from doing things that were not a security risk. He went so far as threatening to quit, and in turn, Rodger kept on questioning Gage about it. I was surprised and touched. I had no idea they were that worried about me.

"I'm glad you didn't quit," I say.

"Me too, Mrs. Remington."

"No chance in you calling me McKenzie, huh?"

"No chance at all, ma'am," he says, still grinning.

"That's what I thought."

I walk down the stairs and right into Seth.

"McKenzie, hi," he says surprised to see me.

"Hey, Seth."

"Do you have a minute? There's something I want to tell you."



CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

McKenzie

Great. Could his timing be any worse?

“Actually, I was on my way to work so...”

“It’ll only take a second.”

“Look, I don’t need to hear any more about how awful you and Tyra think I am. I get it, okay. I’m terrible for Gage.”

“McKenzie, let me apologize for the things I’ve said.” He moves us away from Dwayne so that he can speak more freely. “You have every right not to want to talk to me after the way I treated you. My only defense is I believed Tyra and I was only trying to look after my big brother. He’s a bonehead, but I love the guy. I can’t stand to see him hurt.”

“Believed Tyra, as in past tense? You don’t believe her anymore?”

“Let’s just say I’ve come to my own conclusions about things.”

“That includes Tyra?”

“Yeah, Tyra too. We just argued and it made me see her in a new light. Not that I wasn’t already. I don’t know, McKenzie. I love the girl, but I just don’t know.”

“I liked you from the first moment I met you. You wear your heart on your sleeve. Even though you hide it with lame jokes and silly behaviors.”

“It’s that obvious, huh?”

“You’re a lot like your brother that way, except he hides his heart with anger and revenge.”

“That’s your guy to a T.”

“Yeah, he is my guy. But Seth, I don’t think Tyra is your girl. I know Gage has tried to warn you about her. You should listen to him. I didn’t want to get in the middle of anything because it wasn’t a good place for me to be. I considered her a friend, even though she didn’t give me that same courtesy. But trust me when I say she isn’t the person she pretends to be.”

“Is that your way of telling me she’s after my money?”

“I think maybe you already know the answer to that since you’re asking the question. I’m really sorry, Seth. But you deserve so much better.”

“Thanks, McKenzie. I don’t want to keep you here listening to my problems. I just hope one day you can accept my apology and that we can at least be friends.”

“You’re my brother-in-law, my husband’s best friend, and the uncle of this little one,” I say, rubbing my belly. “We’re much more than friends. We’re family. Of course, I accept your apology. And I get why you felt that way.”

“Thank you,” he says, visibly touched by my words. “Just so you know, I plan on being a very hands-on uncle.

Somebody has to teach the little dude how to be chill. His dad sure sucks at it.”

I laugh.

“Looking forward to it.”

Gage

“That wife of yours is something else,” Seth says, coming into my office.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing bad,” he says, putting up his hands. “I had the pleasure of talking to her.”

“When?”

“Just now. I ran into her outside.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me. It’s her first day back at work. The last thing she needs is your bullshit.”

“It was a good conversation. I apologized for being an ass and she forgave me. I even told her what a great uncle I plan on being.”

“Is that right?” I’m amused now and glad he tried to fix things with McKenzie.

“Damn right. Someone has to remove the stick I’m sure you’re gonna try to shove up his ass.” I put my forehead in my hand at his choice of words. “What?” he says, then thinks about it. “Aw, hell, you know what I mean.”

“I do and it doesn’t make it any better. Why are you even here this early?”

“Things have been tense at home. I cut Tyra off. She’s been trying to butter me up and when it doesn’t work, she gets pissed. She came at me real hard last night. I kicked her ass out to the guest room and left this morning without a word to her.”

“Maybe you should think about kicking her out permanently. I had one of my guys run a little check on her.”

“Aw, c’mon, Gage. Is that shit really needed?”

“I believe it is and so will you when you take a look at what he found out.”

“I don’t want to know that shit. What Tyra did in her past is none of my damn business.”

“Seth, don’t be naïve. You’re not the first man she’s done this to. It’s how she is. She robbed her father blind. When he found out, he cut her off but not before the damage was done. He had to put off retiring to fix the mess she made.”

“Shit,” Seth says, not believing she would screw over her father.

“He’s not the only sucker. One of her professors lost his job, his tenure, and his wife. Not to mention all of his life’s savings. Then there was a guy before you moved her here from New York.”

“All right, that’s enough.”

He looks defeated and I know he knows I'm telling him the truth finally.

"She's not worth it. I know I shouldn't be telling you how to live your life after giving you hell for butting into mine, but I'm telling you for your own damn good. Get rid of her."

"Her family has turned their backs on her."

"With good fucking reason."

"I can't just kick her out on the street."

I refrain from rolling my eyes at this bleeding-heart bullshit.

"I still have that loft downtown. She can live there until I put it on the market in a few months. That will give her plenty of time to get her shit together if she wants to."

"Or to find another sucker to fall in love with her."

"You're not a sucker. You trusted the wrong girl. It happens."

"This coming from a guy who hit the jackpot with his girl."

He won't hear any arguing from me.

"You'll hit your jackpot. But first, you have to get rid of the loser that's holding you back and bleeding you dry. Where is she now?"

"Looking at houses in Laguna Niguel. Keira let it slip that you have a horse ranch in Chino Hills, so she wants a big house now too."

Unfuckingbelievable.

“I’ll have her shit moved out of your place and into hers in less than an hour.”

He sits thinking before he finally nods, but I’m unconvinced he’ll go through with it.

“Seth?”

“Yeah... Yeah, okay.”

McKenzie

“McKenzie Remington,” I answer my phone. I’ve been here nearly half the day and the time has flown by.

Rueben and I’ve been working with a client that’s loving our ideas. It’s so exciting being a part of the process. I easily get lost in it and lose all track of time.

“Well, hello to the working girl.”

“Tyrone. You got my message?”

“Sure did. It was great hearing from you.”

“I know I’ve been MIA a lot lately. My life was a mess the last time I saw you, but it’s much better now.”

“You sound better. So, your husband finally got his head out of his ass, I take it.”

“He’s been amazing. I’m really happy.”

“I was about ready to do a *Mission Impossible* and kidnap you.”

“Darn. I hate I missed that.”

“Well, I miss you. How about I take you to lunch?”

“I would love to but I’m having lunch with my husband today.”

“It starts.”

“What?”

“As soon as the ring goes on, the friends take a back seat.”

“That is not true.”

“Sure, it is. Happens all the time.”

“You’re crazy.”

“It really does. Guys lose the best bromances that way. Some chick comes along and bam! Bro-blocked.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about our... whatever ‘mance we have. You’re still my go-to person and my BFF. Once I get used to this schedule, I’ll drop by your place. I’ll make you the chicken and dumplings you like so much.”

“Deal. Looking forward to it.”

“McKenzie, are you about ready to have lunch?” Rueben pokes his head out of his office to ask me.

“Leaving now,” I tell him. “Do you want me to bring you back anything?”

“Already got it covered. Have a good one.”

I grab my purse and walk through the office to meet up with Dwayne.

“Going to lunch,” I tell the receptionist so that she’ll redirect my calls.

“No problem, McKenzie.”

Dwayne makes the ten-minute drive to Gage’s training center. I really could have driven myself, but I don’t make a big deal about it.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Remington.” Three men in business suits greet me as they walk past me in the lobby.

I get the same response from the two women at the receptionist desk that we walk right past without stopping to check in. I feel like the First Lady, the way everyone is turning to look at me.

“How do they know who I am?” I whisper to Dwayne as we ride the elevator and he gives me a you-can’t-be-serious look.

“Mr. Remington made sure they would. Heads would have been rolling if anyone had questioned you about being here.”

I don’t know why that makes me smile, but it does.

“This place is very impressive,” I tell him. I’ve only seen it once and didn’t make it past the lobby before Gage pulled me out. But I know it not only has a full-sized golf course, but an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool, basketball courts, and baseball field. I also know he has a sports program for at-risk kids that practice here.

“Yes, ma’am,” Dwayne agrees with me.

“Mrs. Remington,” a beautiful brunette greets me with a bright smile when we step off the elevator on Gage’s floor. “I’m Jenna, Mr. Remington’s assistant. It’s very nice to meet you. Can I get you anything? Some water, or tea maybe?”

“No thank you, Jenna. It’s nice to finally meet you. Gage speaks very highly of you.”

That bright smile gets even brighter at learning how well he thinks of her.

Gage sits behind his large desk lost in the stack of whatever paperwork he’s signing. His office is so him: larger than life and tastefully expensive.

“Sir,” Dwayne gets his attention and leaves quickly thereafter.

“There’s my girl,” he says, flashing me a smile that makes my heart race. He takes me in his arms and kisses me until my knees go weak. “I missed you today.”

“I missed you too.”

“Did you make it up here okay? No one stop you, did they?” He eyes me, readying himself to give his staff hell if my answer is not to his liking.

“No, no problem at all. I was able to come right up.”

“Good,” he says more relaxed as he leads me over to his seating area.

“So, this is where the magic happens?”

“Magic? No. This is where all the tedious work happens that I have to toil away at until I’m free to come home to the *real*

magic.” I try not to laugh at what must be his cheesiest line yet. And it’s all crap. I know he loves what he does and how well he does it. “Now, about that lunch,” he continues.

“What are we having?”

“Well, *I’m* having something... sweet.”

“What?” I ask before I catch him eye-fucking me.

“I want her laid out right on my desk.”

“Gage,” I squeal. “You cannot be serious. What if Jenna hears us?” He raises a naughty eyebrow and I know I have done little to dissuade him. I should have known there would be a catch to this whole thing. A very tempting, very delicious catch, but still a catch. “Well, let’s do the thing, then,” I tell him, unwrapping my navy-blue wrap-around dress.

He laughs at my one-eighty but catches his breath when I drop my dress, revealing my blue lacy panties.

“Fuck, baby. I can’t believe you got past me this morning wearing these,” he says, running a finger in the waistband. I gasp when he rips them off me.

“Gage! How am I going to work without panties?” I say to him in disbelief as he sniffs them before stuffing them in his pants pocket.

“Work is over for today, baby. Your question should be, how the hell are you going to be able to walk straight when I’m done with you.”

I huff out a breath, upset at him as he gets down on his knees in front of me. How am I going to explain going out to

lunch and never returning? It's my first day back, for crying out loud.

“Oh, my God,” I moan at the feel of his tongue between my legs.

I forget all about work.

Two Months Later

McKenzie

“I'm sorry to spring this on you on such short notice, baby,” Gage says as I drive him home from work. I was in the neighborhood getting my braids taken out, so I surprised him by picking him up. “I completely forgot about the damn thing. I can understand if you don't want to go.”

He checks his Rolex, noting that we won't be too late. He told me about the charity event last month and it was on his calendar. How it skipped his mind is beyond me at this point. I think he has more of a baby brain than I do.

It's a hospital charity that deals with children's cancer research and no-cost treatments, so I know it's important to him. When he didn't bring it up, I just assumed he would make an appearance without me.

“No, I do want to go. Are you sure you want me to come, though?”

“Why wouldn't I?”

“It’s a big event. The press will be there. Your parents. Do you really want your whale of a wife to be waddling behind you while you’re trying to talk to people?”

I look at him when he turns to face me.

“I hate when you talk like that.”

“But I’m huge.”

“You’re *pregnant*. And you’re beautiful. Let’s get a few things straight right now. Never will you waddle behind me. Your place is at my side, McKenzie. And if you don’t want to be there tonight because you’re not feeling well, then fine. But if it’s because you’re worried about what people will say, fuck them. Anyone who doesn’t see how beautiful you are carrying your husband’s child is either envious or fucking idiots. Neither of which are of any importance to us.”

“Well, when you put it like that, I’ll be more than honored to accompany you.”

“That’s my girl.”

After being primped and made up by the team of stylists that Gage had waiting, I stand in my closet looking at the large selection of gowns, trying to find the perfect one. I settle for a beautiful black design that’s very intricate in its detail. It’s exquisite.

“You’re doing a number on your mother’s figure, little one,” I say to my belly as I stand looking myself over in the mirror.

Tyra's jabs about me getting so fat that my husband wouldn't want me are still in my head no matter how many times Gage reassures me, and I hate myself for it. I hate her even more because she's the only one who knows about the issues I had with my dad making fun of my weight when I was younger. I know she purposely put that in my head to mess with me.

Don't give her the satisfaction, McKenzie. Don't let her steal your joy.

"Jesus, baby, you look amazing," Gage says, coming into the room.

I turn to look at him and the way he's looking at me takes away all my doubt.

"Right back atcha." I compliment him. The way he looks in his classic black tux is doing all kinds of things to me.

"I have something for you." He hands me a flat black box and waits in anticipation as I open it. I gasp at the deep red ruby and diamond bracelet, earrings, and necklace set. "Do you like them?"

"I love them, but you shouldn't have."

"They were made for you. Perfection. Everything about you is simply perfection."

Oh, how I love this man.

"Whoa," I say when we pull up to the event.

Rodger is driving and Dwayne is riding shotgun.

“Don’t worry about it, baby. A few pictures and a few quick hellos and we’ll make our excuses to leave. My wife needs her rest.”

“One of the joys of being pregnant,” I joke at being the made-up excuse and he smirks.

Rodger opens the door for Gage. I take his offered hand and he helps me out.

We walk in a sea of blinding lights as cameras flash at us. People are calling me, trying to get my attention. So much so that Gage puts his hands out to present me before I pull him back close to my side. He was enjoying the media attention until someone shouted about getting pictures of my belly and that was the end of that.

We left them all behind and walked inside to find our table.

We’re seated with his family. Gage was about to request another place, but I asked him not to. I didn’t want to make it obvious there was a problem. Besides, it was about charity, not our petty family drama.

Keira gives me a warm smile while Elaine coldly nods in my general direction. She isn’t happy with me being here and at her family table no less. Being the proper lady, there isn’t much she can say without it being in the earshot of people at the neighboring tables. So, she sits quietly fuming. She’s made no effort to fix the situation we’re all in. She avoids us like the plague. I feel sad about it because I know what a wonderful person she is. I hope when the baby is born and she sees I’m not lying, she’ll come around, but I won’t be holding my breath on that.

“I love your dress, McKenzie,” Keira says. “How you look so good is awe-inspiring.”

I laugh before complimenting her.

She and I have gotten closer since she’s been stopping by with Seth to visit Gage at the beach house. She even ran into Tyrone when he came by to see me once. They hit it off but once she found out he was Tyra’s brother, she wanted nothing else to do with him. He’s still bugging me constantly to put in a good word for him.

“McKenzie,” Gordon says, coming up to kiss my cheek before sitting down next to Elaine.

“Nice to see you again,” I tell him.

I say no more because I’m still not comfortable with his role in Gage’s plan to take the baby away from me.

“Hey, bro.” I smile when I hear Seth’s voice coming up behind us. We’ve become very close in the past two months and broken into the ranks of being good friends. “Kenzie. Looking hot. I swear if you weren’t with my loser brother— “

“Get bent, Seth,” Gage says, cutting him off from flirting with me. “And don’t call her Kenzie.”

“Boys,” Elaine says to them while shooting daggers at me. I inwardly cringe. I hope she doesn’t think Seth was being serious. She’s looking at me like I’m hiding some affair with him. Does she really think I’m that much of a slut?

“You all know Erin, right?” Seth says of the beautiful redhead on his arm.

I've spoken to her a few times. She and Seth dated in college and now that she's recently moved to LA from Florida, they've picked up where they left off.

Gage seems to like her. But I think after Tyra, he'd like pretty much anyone.

She's a big deal designer who just finished with some movie star's twin's new nursery, so I'm thinking about having her help with ours like Gage suggested. One thing is for sure; she's really into Seth and he's eating it up.

Ending things with Tyra was hard for him. He spent a lot of time hanging out with us just trying to get through it. She didn't go without a fight. She played on all his insecurities and his feelings for her. When that got her nowhere, she tried to tell him she was pregnant. It almost worked until I caught her in the store buying a box of tampons and confronted her about it. She learned that day.

Just thinking about her gets me pissed. I'm glad she's out of our lives and I don't have to deal with her. Seth told me she still calls him from time to time. But now that things are serious with Erin, I have a feeling she's not one Tyra should cross.

"We can leave whenever you're ready, baby," Gage says to me as he gently moves me around the dance floor to a song I've never heard before. Gage seems to know it. He pulls me close to him and rests his cheek on mine. I catch my breath when I hear him sing. It's so low that I have to strain to hear him. I

don't react for fear he may stop. Just as quickly as he started, he catches himself and stops.

"Um, no, I'm having a really good time," I tell him, trying to play it off like I didn't just get the gift of a lifetime from him. "Anyway, we haven't eaten yet."

He smirks at me and my never-ending appetite. Those plates were a thousand dollars a pop. No way am I going to *not* eat it after he paid that much for it.

"Bathroom?" he asks when I groan on the way back to our seats.

"This kid of ours is making mincemeat out of my bladder," I tell him.

He moves to go with me, but I stop him when I see Elaine sitting by herself. I suggest he go over and talk to her instead.

I rush to the designated women's bathroom and get the shock of my life when I see Seth and Erin screwing on the sink.

"Shit," he says, trying to pull up his pants before I can see him, but it's too late. His pasty ass is seared into my brain once again.

"Sorry," I say, closing my eyes and the door like I can unsee it. "Don't mind me. I'll go to the next one."

I race to the men's bathroom and thank God, it's empty. I lock the door before I go into one of the stalls and relieve myself.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” I say when only a little bit of pee comes out. It felt like I was about to explode. “Ease up on Mommy’s bladder, baby.”

I return just in time to see the dinner being served. The baby kicks letting me know that he agrees with me being hungry. I put my hand over the spot where his little foot is pressing into my belly. I will never get tired of feeling him do that.

His dad loves it more than I do. He puts his hand on my belly and like clockwork, the baby kicks at that very spot his hand rests. Even when he moves it, the baby finds it and kicks it for him. He isn’t a very emotional man by any stretch of the imagination unless the emotion is anger. But the first time he felt our baby kick, it brought him to tears.

“Did you talk to your mom?” I ask him, rejoining him at our table. I see her sitting with Gordon, looking upset. “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he says, and by the tone of his voice, it’s not going to be good. “What took you so long in the bathroom?”

“It was, um... occupied.” By the way I say it, he knows something is up.

“By who?”

“Erin and Seth.”

“Both of them?”

Speaking of the devilish pair, they appear with matching grins plastered on their faces and Gage quickly figures it out.

“Sorry about that, McKenzie,” Erin apologizes to me.

“When you gotta go, you gotta go. Right, Pooches,” Seth says to her.

“Pooches?” Gage whispers to me.

“Right,” Erin answers him, on cloud nine as he kisses her.

I laugh at Gage rolling his eyes at him because secretly I know how happy he is that Seth is going to be okay.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gage

“I’m stuffed,” McKenzie announces, leaning on me to take off her shoes in the foyer.

I carry them into our bedroom while she works on the side zipper of her gown.

“Better?” I ask as I slip it off and drape it over the arm of the chair that sits tucked away in the corner.

“Much,” she says, breathing easier. I watch with hooded eyes as she slides her panties off. She removes her jewelry and walks into the bathroom to grab a quick shower. “Are you going to tell me what happened with your mom?” She’s talking over the running water, but I can still hear her from where I’m undressing in our room.

I slip in behind her, taking the sponge to wash her back, careful not to wet the loose strands of hair that’s escaped her shower cap. I’m trying to think of the best way to tell her about the conversation. I’m still furious at my mother’s behavior.

“Mom, are you enjoying yourself this evening?” I asked, sitting down in the seat Dad left vacant when he got up to dance with Keira.

“The event itself is wonderful. I’m not very happy with the company I’m being forced to keep.”

“I can see that. I wish you could learn to let things go. I know how important these events are to you.”

She looked around for people listening before she spoke again.

“The only way I’ll let this go is when the paternity test results come back and prove that is your baby she’s carrying.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

“I know for a fact it is because I’m the only man that McKenzie has ever known,” I told her, matching her tone.

“That’s according to her. You have more than enough reasons to doubt her, but you refuse to see them. Or you purposely forgot them. But don’t make me out to be the bad guy for pointing them out to you.”

“I don’t see you as the bad guy, Mom.”

“Well, I feel that way sometimes. You know I liked McKenzie from the very beginning. I thought she was good for you, but then she hurt you. She betrayed you, and as far as I’m concerned, she still is.”

“How?”

“You cannot be this gullible. For her to just come back out of the blue, with nothing but good intentions. People don’t change that quickly.”

“You’re right. They don’t and she didn’t. There was always something between us. You were the first to see it. But we let a lot of things get in the way of our feelings. We’re working on us right now. We’re committed to each other and to this baby

we're having. And make no mistake, Mom, we're having my baby—our baby."

"I can see that you're working hard on this marriage, Gage. I just don't think that your wife has motives that are as pure as yours."

"I'm no saint. I've hurt McKenzie tremendously and done unforgivable things to her. By some miracle, she's managed to forgive me. I know that you have your reservations about her. She understands that. She'd be more than willing to put your mind at ease if you'd have a conversation with her, but since you won't, can you at least try to be civil?"

"I've been nothing if not civil. I haven't said a word against her. Did she tell you I have? Is she that determined to turn you against me?"

"You're doing a bang-up job of that yourself, Mom."

"Why? Because I haven't drunk the Kool-Aid that is McKenzie St. James?"

"She is McKenzie Remington."

"Hopefully that will change after the baby is proven not to be yours."

"You almost seem happy about that possibility."

"I know you'll be devastated, so I would never be happy about it. Maybe relieved when she's out of our lives."

"She's not going anywhere. We're in this marriage for better or worse."

"For richer but not poorer, I'm sure."

I sighed in frustration.

“I hate this is coming between us. Can’t you see how happy she makes me?”

Before she could answer, McKenzie appeared in her line of vision.

“This is not going to end well for you, Gage,” she said, looking at McKenzie as she stood with her hand on her belly, eyeing the food that was being served.

She shook her head at McKenzie in disgust, thoroughly pissing me off.

“The only thing that seems to be not ending well, Mom, is my relationship with you.”

“Gage.” My name was laced with pain as I abandoned her side for McKenzie.

“It was just more of the same, baby,” I say, rinsing the suds off us. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“She’s never going to come around, is she?”

“It’s her loss. But I know her and one day she’ll realize the mistake she’s making. I just hope it doesn’t come too late.”

“I would never hold this against her. I know better than anyone how one mistake can ruin lives. I wouldn’t do that to her.”

“I know. It’s one of the reasons why I... I appreciate you. You’re a very forgiving person to those who don’t deserve it. But I won’t let your forgiving nature cause you to be hurt by anyone anymore.”

I turn the water off and kiss her shoulder before wrapping a towel around her.

I love this woman and her big heart so much.

One week later

McKenzie

“Gage,” I whisper his name, jabbing his chest with my elbow to wake him up.

“What’s the matter?” He opens his eyes to study me. They’re still heavy from sleep and his hair is in every direction. My bedside lamp light is in his eyes so he can’t see me hiding a smile at his expense.

“I can’t sleep. I’m worried about tomorrow. What if something’s wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong. This is just a routine checkup. Remember what the doctor said. Every woman gets one at this stage.”

“But they’re going to be measuring him. Counting his little limbs, his little fingers, and toes. What if he’s too big or too small? What if he’s missing something? What if he has too much of something else? What are we going to do then?”

“I’ll tell you *exactly* what we’re going to do.” He places his hand on my belly where our baby is kicking. “We’re going to love him or her, no matter what. Stop making yourself crazy thinking about this. You’re worried for nothing right now.”

“You’re right.” I place my hand on his.

“Damn right, I am.” He turns me over on my side and cuddles up next to me. I slide more securely into him. “Now, you two get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow.”

I love it when he talks to both of us like this.

“Baby, stop fidgeting,” Gage tells me as we wait for Dr. Carter to come into the exam room to give me my ultrasound. I apologize to him for doing it, but I find it hard to sit still.

She finally comes in, putting me out of my anxiety-based misery.

“Gage, hello. McKenzie, how have you been doing?”

“Okay, as far as I know, except for the constant food cravings.”

“That sounds about right. Any headaches since I saw you last? Any dizziness?” I shake my head. “Very good. Your blood pressure is still on the higher side of normal, but it’s stable which is a good thing. Just keep eating right and keep stress to a minimum. Now, are you ready to take a good look at your baby?”

“Since late last night.” Gage makes fun of me for waking him up and I stick my tongue out at him.

I lean back on the table, lift my shirt, and tuck it under my boobs.

“Let’s see here,” she says, moving the cold, gel-covered probe around, turning on the sound so that we can hear the

baby's heartbeat.

I never get tired of that sound and looking at the expression on Gage's face, neither does he. She takes her time, carefully checking the baby's heart for any sign of abnormality. She measures his arms, his legs, his fingers, and his toes.

"Your baby has *very* long legs and fingers." She laughs.

"Is that bad?" I ask. I'm picturing a baby with alien-like limbs.

"Not at all. Everything is perfectly normal. He's not a very big baby. Maybe he'll slide right out during labor."

"That's what I'm hoping for," I say. The thought of pushing a big baby out of my coochie is terrifying. I don't know how I'm going to do it.

Gage laughs and I roll my eyes at him. I know he's thinking about how tight he always says I am. I smirk at how he's going to feel when the baby stretches me out. But then inwardly groan at the thought of a baby coming out of me once again. There has to be an easier way to do this whole labor thing.

"Okay," Dr. Carter says. "Do we want to know the sex of the baby?"

Gage and I stare at each other.

"We're undecided," he tells her.

He's dying to know, but I'm still on the fence about it. I want it to be a surprise, even though I know waiting will drive us both nuts.

“How about I write it down for you, put it in a sealed envelope, and you can open it when you’re ready?”

“Please,” I say.

We ride home with the sealed envelope and new sonogram photos of the baby resting on what’s left of my lap. Gage keeps eyeing the one that has the sex of the baby inside it.

“Let me take a peek,” he says.

“No way,” I shriek at him, holding the secret tighter on my lap.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because you’ll know.”

“But I *want* to know.”

“But I don’t want you to know and I *not* know. I want us to not know or know together.”

“Then let’s open the envelope so we’ll both know.”

“No.”

“You’re a stubborn woman. I have a feeling it has nothing to do with being pregnant.”

“Well, get used to it, pal.”

“Pal?”

“Would you prefer pooches?”

“Don’t start with that shit.”

I laugh at the name I’ve been teasing him with since we heard it from Seth.

I've been in heaven since we got back from the doctor. Vera and I fawned all over the sonogram pictures and made baby plans until Rodger and Gage got sick of us and disappeared somewhere in the beach house.

“What color do you prefer to paint the walls of the nursery, yellow or green?” I ask Gage when he comes back.

I'm sitting at the kitchen counter eating apple slices. Even though Vera is just about done with dinner, I still have to answer my craving call.

“White,” he answers, taking one of the slices from my plate, eating it.

“I don't think the baby would appreciate something as plain as white.”

“Why not blue?”

“Because blue is for boys.”

“So?”

“So, what if it's a girl?”

“Well, there's only one way to find out.”

“Let it go, Gage.”

I smile when he sulks at being denied.

“Dinner's ready,” Vera announces.

“Thank God. I'm starving,” I tell her.

“Shall I plate it up now then?”

Gage gives her a look that most likely means she'd better hurry up and plate it before I eat straight from the serving dishes. She nods knowingly at him before going back into the kitchen.

"Fuck, I get hard watching you eat," Gage says, but I'm too busy finishing the food on my plate.

"I swear she needs to write a cookbook," I tell him, scraping the last of my modified version of pesto chicken fettuccine. "It would be a bestseller."

"Then she'd be too busy to cook for us."

"You're right. We better keep quiet about this. No need to blow a good thing."

"Now you're talking sense."

"Who needs all that money, recognition, and fame when they can stay here cooking for us?"

"I wouldn't know, baby."

We're saying all of this deadpanned, but then I ruin it by laughing.

"We're awful," I say.

"*We?* You're the one who dragged me into this."

I roll my eyes as I gather our empty plates and watch as he gives me a puppy dog look or his version of one.

"You're not going to let it go. Are you?"

"It's not like I can help it. Everything we want to know is in that little envelope."

“Okay, let’s open it.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’m dying to know just as bad as you are.”

I abandon the plates on the table to go retrieve the envelope with our most precious secret inside.

“Wait.” Gage stops me just before I tear it open. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to. There’s no way I can wait until the baby is born.”

He nods. I look at him for a few seconds before I tear the envelope open. I move closer to him as I pull the contents out.

We both read the words carefully.

“Baby Boy Remington.”

The words are typed next to a picture of the baby with a circle around what is clearly his penis.

“Yes,” Gage yells at the top of his lungs as the words finally sink in.

Rodger and Vera come running.

“Sir,” Rodger says, looking around for any trouble.

“It’s a boy! We’re having a boy!” he tells them and whoever else can hear him yelling through our open patio door. He picks me up and kisses me. “A boy,” he whispers, sitting me down and wiping away the tears that are on my face.

After a round of excited congratulations from Vera and Rodger, Gage is finally able to calm down enough to resume

his place at the dinner table, but he's still looking at the sonogram of the baby with the words and the penis circled.

"Look at the size of that thing," he boasts about our son's endowment. "He's his father's son, that's for sure."

"Really," I say, shaking my head at him. "Of all the things to say about your son. *That* is what you come up with?"

"It's the truth. He takes after his old man," he says, unapologetically and very proud.

I pretend to be put out, but secretly hope it's true. I can already picture a tiny version of Gage running around here wild and unruly. I finish gathering up our plates to take to the kitchen.

"What are you up to?" I call back to him.

"What makes you think I'm up to something?" He looks over at me with a toothy grin that spells trouble.

"That look on your face is a dead giveaway, Gage Remington."

"I was thinking."

"I can see that. Go on."

"I think I have the perfect answer to your question from earlier."

I shake my head playfully at him. It was a very simple question, but of course, my husband has to make it complicated. He's smugly pleased with whatever he's come up with as I come close to where he still sits looking at the baby's picture.

“You’re going to make me guess, aren’t you?”

“No.” He chuckles his answer completely out of character as he pulls me into his lap. I’ve never seen him so happy and I’m loving every minute of it. “I was in my office earlier looking at properties.”

“What kind of properties? Houses?”

“Since you and Vera were planning, I thought it was a good idea we get the ball rolling.”

I nod in agreement.

We’re already getting in lots of stuff from Gage’s sponsors. His golf buddies from all over the world are sending gifts. Packages from random people keep showing up with the hopes the baby will wear them to help promote their businesses. I thought it was kind of strange, but Gage says it’s to be expected.

Keira and Seth are no better. They’ve already single-handedly filled up what was to be his nursery here and Erin is already bugging Gage about knocking a wall down to make more, much-needed room.

I hadn’t realized that one baby needed so much space and I have a feeling that now that we know it’s a boy, it’s going to get a million times worse. That is if his dad has anything to say about it and judging by the looks of him right now, he has plenty to say about it.

“Did you see any worth looking at?” I ask, already liking the idea of moving to a house with a yard for our little man to run around in.

The beach house is great, but so much has been going through my mind about living here. What if there's an earthquake and it causes a tsunami. What if the ground gives way on PCH? We could be caught in a mudslide or a rockslide? What if the baby sneaks out and gets carried away by a huge wave?

I never would have thought about any of this before, but becoming a mom has me thinking of all kinds of stuff. Gage says we have a horse ranch in Chino Hills and as great as that sounds, I'm not a fan of living with horses. What if the baby gets kicked in the head by one?

"There's one that I think you might like," he says. "I've asked our realtor to make arrangements for us to tour it."

"Tour it? How big is this place?" His silence says it all. "It's big, isn't it?" He only smirks, and I want to kill him for keeping it a secret from me. "You just love torturing me."

"Oh, turnabout is fair play, Miss Let's Wait Until the Baby's Born."

"That's Mrs.," I say, flashing my wedding ring.

"Fuck yeah, it's Mrs. *My* Mrs. All mine."

I laugh as he nuzzles my neck.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Gage

“McKenzie, what do you think about the placement of the crib?” Erin asks her while they inspect the nursery.

Seth and I look at each other because we know this conversation isn't going anywhere good. Especially when we'll be the ones moving the furniture. We still have to set up all the gifts from the baby shower last week.

We've been in our new home for a month now. It's a huge property in Hidden Hills. McKenzie took one look at the place and fell in love.

It's a Mediterranean-style three-story with windows opening to sweet smelling-flowers that remind us of St. Thomas. McKenzie has deemed them all her favorite. We added fruit trees and a big noble fir that's strategically placed for Christmas decorating.

The perk for me is that I can take all of my cars out of storage. Although, McKenzie is dead set against having them all out on the property. She equates it to someone having a large RV parked on the front lawn. I'm looking into buying one since she mentioned it. I see a road trip in our future. The three of us taking the scenic routes, stopping wherever we want, grilling up a couple of steaks. McKenzie says that what I'm feeling is the male version of nesting. And while she's in a

nesting mood, it'll be hard to get her to leave here for long periods of time.

“Hmm,” McKenzie says, looking around the room intently. “Maybe the crib is too far away from the door.”

She goes over and walks the distance from the door to the crib as if she was coming in to take care of the baby.

“Maybe we can put it in the middle of the room. That way everything else can surround it,” Erin suggests.

Seth and I roll our eyes as we move the heavy crib, custom-made of solid rosewood, into the center of the room. McKenzie makes a production of walking the distance from the door to the crib again.

“Now, it's too close to the door. Let's try this wall.” She points to the space to the right of the crib.

Without a word, Seth and I lift the crib and carry it over to the middle of the new wall and watch as McKenzie shakes her head displeased about the new location.

After moving the crib four more damn times, she finally settles on it being back in the center of the room again.

“You know what,” she says, looking guiltily over at the first wall the crib was on before Erin asked the question. “I think maybe I liked it better where it was.”

Seth makes a show of grabbing his back before we move the crib again.

“Hmm,” she says thinking once we put it down.

“Baby, have mercy on us.”

“Okay, Okay. It’s fine where it is for now,” she says with a laugh.

“Thank fuck for that,” I tell her, grabbing my own aching back.

“You guys are the best. Why don’t I make us all lunch?”

“Now you’re talking,” Seth says, never being one to pass on food.

“I’ll help,” Erin says.

“Hot damn, Gage, we’re in for a treat,” Seth says, taking hold of Erin. “Both of our ladies cooking. Now, all we need is Aunt Keira to make the dessert.”

“Well, call her over,” McKenzie tells him.

Gage

I sit next to McKenzie on the back deck while she rubs her belly. We’re on the home stretch now and things are getting uncomfortable for her. She rarely complains about her swelling feet, aching back, and tightening of her skin, but I know it’s all bothersome to her.

“That was delicious,” Dad says, rubbing his stomach much like McKenzie is but for very different reasons. He had thirds of the stuffed peppers and barbeque baked chicken that Erin and McKenzie made plus the kiwi tarts that Keira whipped up for dessert. It started with the three of them making a light

lunch, but after that was over, everyone just hung out here until it was dinnertime, so they cooked that for us too.

“That lemonade you made should just about be chilled, right, babe?” Seth says, taking a moment to stop loving up on Erin to ask her.

“I’ll get it,” McKenzie offers.

She insists on doing everything herself. She read somewhere that staying active will help labor go faster.

“I’ll help you,” I tell her, getting up and following her into the house. “You okay?”

I can tell something’s not quite right with her.

“It feels kinda strange having lunch and dinner with the man who helped you plan against me.”

“He didn’t. It was all on me,” I tell her, mad at what an idiot I am.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m just feeling antsy. I’m nervous about labor.”

“Is it that, or do you still think I want to take him from you?”

“I promise I don’t think that. I’m just ready for him to be here.”

“Me too, baby. Me too.” I take her in my arms and kiss her while our son kicks so hard that I can feel it. “Hey, easy there, son,” I tell him. “Your mom’s not a football.”

“With that kick, I think he just made a field goal.”

“Come on.” I kiss her again before picking up the picture of lemonade. “Getting a taste of this will chill him out.”

“You say the cheesiest things, Mr. Remington.”

“You make me cheesy, Mrs. Remington.”

“I thought I made you hard.”

“Painfully so,” I tell her, placing her hand on my growing erection, making her groan. “Are you in need of some white chocolate, baby?”

“Mm-hmm—”

“Hey, what’s taking so long?” Seth’s voice is like a cold shower to my libido. “Behave, you two. I bet that kid’s going to have a dick imprinted on his head.

“Seth!” We hear Dad, Keira, and Erin call his name. It was quickly followed by a smack that I’m sure was someone hitting him upside the head.

I smirk at McKenzie’s snicker when she hears him yelp in pain.

McKenzie

“Come on, Gordon. I need to get ready for my date with Tyrone,” Keira groans as Gordon takes his sweet time getting ready to leave. That’s what she gets for riding with him.

Gage shakes his head at the mention of Tyrone’s name.

I finally talked Keira into giving him a chance and she can't stop thanking me for it. He certainly is head over heels for her and Gage couldn't be sourer about it if he tried. At least he's learned to tolerate him a little better.

"Keep your shirt on, Keira," Gordon says to her. "And I mean that, young lady. I don't want to have to hunt this Tyrone fella down to defend your honor."

"Seriously," she yells at him for embarrassing her, but he couldn't care less.

"McKenzie, I just wanted you to have this little something for the baby," he tells me, handing me the medium package that's elaborately wrapped in baby blue paper.

"You didn't have to."

"Nonsense. I meant to drop it off with Keira for your baby shower, but she ran out of the house so fast, I missed her. I thought I'd save it for another time and this seems perfect."

Gage watches as I open the box and lift Gordon's present to show it to him.

It is a navy-blue onesie made to look like a dress suit with the words Grandpa's Little Lawyer in white on the front of a black briefcase. It comes complete with a little knit cap, baby shoes made to look like men's dress shoes, and hand mittens that look like he has a little notepad in one hand and a cellphone in the other.

"This is the most adorable thing I've ever seen," I tell him. "I can't wait to see him in it. Thank you."

“My pleasure, my darling. And get used to me spoiling him. He’s my only grandchild, after all.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I’m so touched that I hug him, much to his surprise. I’m really happy that he’s excited about the baby. Finally reaching her peak of impatience, Keira pulls him from the living room and out the front door.

“Golfing,” he says as she continues to pull him. “I’m going to have him a little golf set made. That’s what I did for his dad and now look at him.”

Keira closes the door with a wave as Gage and I laugh at the two of them.

“That was fun,” Gage says.

“I thought so too.”

I start to clean up until he stops me.

“Leave it for Vera. Right now, I want you in bed.”

“Okay, just let me check on one thing for work.”

“Baby...”

“It will only take me a minute. I swear.”

“Fine,” he relents, knowing it’s useless to fight me on it. I’ll just end up thinking about it all night.

I rush to my office, or I do my pregnant version of rushing, to check my computer. I spend a lot of time here. It’s one of

my favorite rooms in our house. I smile inwardly at this being *our* house. We have a family home and I'm welcomed here like I never thought I would be.

“Baby?”

Hearing Gage's voice, I look up at him standing in front of my desk. I didn't even hear him come in.

“What time is it?” I ask, looking at the clock on the screen that's an hour and a half past the few minutes I promised. “Sorry. I just got so caught up that I—” He's looking at me with the most terrified expression I've ever seen. It reminds me of the panic attack he had back when he thought I was leaving him. “What is it?”

I'm about to go to him when I feel something wet draining from my nose. I wipe it and watch as a drop of whatever it is hits the H key on my keyboard with a splatter, turning it bright red. I take my hand away from my nose to see that it's covered with fresh warm blood.

“No, baby,” Gage says when I'm about to stand up.

He rushes to my side, yelling for Rodger. He and Vera come running. Both take one look at me and their horrified expressions match my husband's. They all start moving around so fast that I have trouble focusing on them.

Vera disappears, only to return with a cool towel. She places it on my nose making me hold my head down. Gage lifts me and carries me out the front door to the car. All the while,

Rodger is on the phone with who I think is emergency services.

Dwayne has the car running with the back door wide open for Gage to put me in. I don't know how or when he was called, but he drives all of us to the hospital.

"How are you feeling, baby?" Gage asks me. "Dr. Carter wants to know."

I can hear the fear in his voice. I hate to make it worse, but I have to tell them the truth.

"My head is killing me," I pant. "I'm dizzy and I can't focus very well. My heart is beating fast and I can't catch my breath."

I hear Rodger relaying the message. Gage takes the towel away from my nose to check if it's still bleeding. A look passes between him and Vera before she tells Rodger what Gage falters at saying.

"The bleeding is worse," I hear her say it as low as she can for my benefit, but I still hear the urgency in her voice.

I get scared thinking about what all could be going wrong.

It's my blood pressure. We all know that. I've been working from home because it keeps spiking. We've been monitoring it very closely. The doctor sends a nurse to check it daily at Gage's insistence, but today it was fine. I don't understand why this is happening. But I do know that this is way more than a spike. I can feel how wrong this is. I pray the baby is okay.

He has to be okay. He just has to be.



CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

McKenzie

Dwayne gets us across town to the emergency room in less than fifteen minutes and two minutes after that I'm on a gurney surrounded by a sea of nurses. Gage's voice is somewhere in the background demanding to be at my side before Rodger begs him to give them space to help me. He must have listened because I don't hear either of them anymore.

Dr. Carter rushes in. Her being here calms me down a little. I feel better seeing a familiar face who knows everything that's going on with me. A nurse takes the towel I have on my nose away. I put my hands up to catch the blood, but it just rolls right past my fingers.

"It's okay, McKenzie. We'll take care of it," Dr. Carter assures me of the bloody mess I'm making.

I feel the prick of an IV being inserted into my arm and probes being attached to my index finger and my chest. A blood pressure cuff is cutting off the circulation on my other arm as it beeps while working. It's so tight I can feel my heartbeat in my fingers. My head pounds in rhythm with it.

"One eighty over one ten," one nurse tells her. "And rising."

The blood pressure cuff finally releases the pressure from my arm, but the nurse doesn't remove it.

“Respiration is thirty. Pulse Ox. is eighty-nine,” another nurse calls out right behind the first one as she wipes the blood away from my face and places an oxygen mask over my nose and mouth. The blast of air cools the blood on my lips and they instantly feel dry.

“Pulse is one ten,” yet another nurse quickly says.

Dr. Carter notices me frantically trying to listen to them all.

“Relax, McKenzie,” she says. “We’ll take good care of you and the baby. Your job is just to relax.”

She nods to the nurse that put my IV in just a moment ago. I feel the sting of something going into my veins and then nothing.

I wake to the familiar feel of the baby kicking me. I try to smile, but my lips hurt, and for a moment, I’m confused as to why until I remember the oxygen mask. I try to move, but my body feels like it’s been dragged through hell. A hand is in mine so I squeeze it.

“McKenzie,” I hear Gage. He leans over me with his free hand now in my hair. I lick my lips, trying to talk. “Hold on, baby.”

I do as he asks waiting for him to get something from the bedside drawer. He opens up a little brown packet and rubs whatever’s in it on my lips, making them feel better.

I’m no longer in the ER, but I’m still hooked up to all kinds of machines. One is circling my waist and I know that it’s for monitoring the baby.

“What happened?” I ask him, feeling groggy from being out of it.

“Your blood pressure was out of control. They needed to get it back down.”

“Is it okay now? Is the baby okay?”

Before he can answer, Dr. Carter comes in.

“Good, you’re awake,” she says, smiling at me. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than before, I guess. But how’s the baby?”

“Doing very well considering what Mom has been through these last few hours.”

“It felt like my head was being split open.”

“I’m sure it did.”

“Is that why my nose was bleeding so much?”

“Nose bleeding, believe it or not, is common with pregnancy. But it’s a good thing it happened when it did. It made Gage get you in here all the faster. What about your eyes? How are they?”

“Not as blurry as they were. I can focus a little better now.”

“Good.”

“Have I been admitted?” I ask, looking around the large room. “When can I go home?”

“Not for a while. We have to run a few tests.”

“What kind of tests, doctor?” Gage speaks up now that his concern is piqued. It must be the first he’s heard of me needing

tests.

“We just need some urine and blood samples,” she tells him before turning to me. “We need to check how your kidneys are functioning. That will tell us a lot about how severe your condition is. We also need to check your liver and other vital organs that may have been affected, including your eyes.”

“It got *that* bad?”

“I’m afraid so. We’re giving you magnesium sulfate through your drip, but we need to wean you off and monitor your pressure as we do. If it doesn’t stabilize once the drug is out of your system, you may need to stay here until the baby is born.”

“But that’s over two months from now. I would have to stay here for that long?”

“Afraid so,” she says again. “How we proceed will be determined by your test results. Right now, let’s just take it one day at a time. For today, you’re not allowed to get out of bed.”

“What if I need to use the bathroom?”

“The nurse will give you a bedpan. We need to catch your urine anyway.”

“But what if I have to... go number two?” I ask her and Gage raises an eyebrow at my choice of words.

“The nurse will give you a bedpan,” she says again, unmoved and unfazed. “You and that baby need to stay on those monitors until we know the severity of what we’re dealing with.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Gage says, finalizing her orders, and I know with him in agreement with her, I don’t have a leg to stand on, literally.

“Gage, I can’t take a shit in a bedpan,” I tell him once we’re alone.

“What happened to go number two?”

“Oh, shut up.”

“So that dirty mouth of yours is only reserved for me? I like that, Mrs. Remington.”

“Stop trying to make me feel better.”

“Is it working?” he says gently, taking my hand and bringing it to his lips.

“Yes. But I’m still scared. What if my kidneys are shot? Or my liver or my eyes? What if the baby suffered the same things because he’s unlucky enough to be stuck inside me?”

“Don’t say that and don’t even think it.”

He takes me in his arms as best he can with all this tubing I’m hooked up to. I try to take comfort in him, but I can’t shake the feeling that whatever they find in all those tests is not going to be good and Gage feels it too. I can tell. Even though he’ll never admit it out loud to me.

We’re both hanging on to each other waiting for the other shoe to drop. And it’s not going to be a soft shoe either. It’s going to be heavy and hard.

It will rip our happy world apart.



CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

McKenzie

I've been in his bed for what seems like an eternity. I can't even walk to the damn bathroom. And just my luck, my baby boy is putting all his weight on my bladder. I'm peeing like a camel whose hump has a hole in it. I just look at liquids and I have to call the nurse for that awful bedpan.

On top of that, I have two big fat needles stuck in my hand and arm. Plus, the monitors strapped around my forearm and belly make me very uncomfortable. I'm downright miserable.

"Uh." I sigh, knowing I'm being dramatic but not caring.

"Baby..." Gage says, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Baby my butt," I tell him, crossing my arms above my tits since I can't cross them over my sensitive nipples. I give that up and put the cherry-tinted lip gloss he brought me from the gift shop downstairs on instead. The smell of it makes me feel better.

"Mrs. Remington," he says, leaning closer to me in his chair. Just the way he's looking at me makes my skin tingle. I can read his dirty mind so well. "I would *love* to baby that sweet little butt of yours."

"Shut up," I squeal, throwing the napkin from the dinner tray I just finished eating from.

“Well, you seem to be in better spirits,” Dr. Carter comes in and catches me laughing.

I eye Gage as he clears his throat, motioning to her that I’m still moody. I swear if either one of them mentions pregnancy hormones, I can’t be held responsible for my actions.

“Did any of the test results come back in?” I ask, noticing paperwork in her hands.

“They have and there are a few things we need to discuss.”

Gage abandons his seat across from me and joins me on my bed, taking hold of my hand. I’m not sure if the gesture is for his benefit or mine. He’s been hiding it well, but I know he’s out of his mind with worry. The way he checked his watch and the door every few minutes before she came in was a dead giveaway. It took everything he had not to storm down to that lab and demand they hurry up with the tests.

“There was a significant amount of protein in your urine and your liver isn’t functioning quite as well as I hoped it would be—”

“What the hell does that mean?” Gage interrupts her.

“Overall, it means that your condition is at a higher stage of severity—”

“A higher stage of severity. What the hell does that mean?”

“Gage, please,” I beg him to stop interrupting so she can finish.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“It means McKenzie will have to remain with us for a few more days until we get things back up to a more satisfying level.”

“Is that possible? What if the damage is permanent?” I ask her.

“It’s not permanent, McKenzie. All of these symptoms are secondary due to the rise in your blood pressure and the stress on your body this pregnancy has caused. Once that’s under control, you should be fine.”

“Should be,” Gage repeats, latching on to every word that’s not a guarantee. My control-freak husband can’t stand all these what-ifs. Not that I’m far behind him right now.

“I wish I could give you one hundred percent yes or no answers,” Dr. Carter says to us. “The truth is, we just have to wait and see.”

I nod.

“Can I at least use the bathroom now?”

“Yes, you can. Just call the nurse so she can unhook you from the monitors. I ordered a new medication for you that will be inserted into your IV, and in a few days, we’ll run some more tests and hope for better news. In the meantime, get some rest. That’s the most important thing you can do right now. I’ll check in with you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Gage says to her as she leaves, running his hands in his hair. He looks haggard.

“You should go home and get some rest,” I tell him.

“Not a chance in hell,” he says, and I laugh. I already knew that would be his answer. “I’m not going anywhere without you coming with me.”

“Okay,” I whisper to him. “I hope that I’ll be able to.”

“You will.”

“I’m scared.”

“I know,” he says, bringing the palm of my hand to his lips. “I’m scared too.”

“It helps to know that you’re here and that I’m not alone. I couldn’t imagine going through this all by myself.”

“That was never going to happen,” he assures me. “Baby, do you want me to call your mom or... anyone?” He won’t say my dad.

“No,” is my only answer to that question.

One week later

“You smell good.” I nuzzle Gage’s neck as he lies with me on the bed. He just got out of the shower and I want to eat him alive.

“Mmm,” is his only response to me as his hands dip under the covers, inching down between my legs. “So fucking wet.”

“What are you going to do about it?” I ask, then groan at the door swinging open and Dr. Carter walking in.

“I hope this interruption brings good news,” Gage says to her.

“If you call getting out of here good news, then absolutely.”

“I get to go home? As in right now, today?”

“You certainly do. Your labs are great and your blood pressure is down. You responded to the new medication beautifully. So we’re sending you home, with a few stipulations, of course.”

“Stipulations?” Gage asks her. I can hear the relief in his voice, along with deep concern.

“McKenzie will be sent home with oral medications to aid in the control of her blood pressure. Unfortunately, she’ll continue to be on bed rest for the duration of her pregnancy,” she answers him before turning to speak to me. “That means ninety percent of your day has to be in bed to keep the stress to a minimum. You’re allowed out of bed when needed for bathroom and bathing. You’re also allowed thirty minutes twice a day to have your lunch and dinner. Breakfast always in bed.”

“Can I still work from home?”

“No,” she says and the look Gage shoots me lets me know he wouldn’t have gone for it anyway. Scrapbooking, here I come. “Your diet restrictions have also been tightened. I want you to eat only what’s on the list I’m giving you.”

My God, I’m going to freaking starve to death before the baby is even born.

I look over at my husband who's taking the information in, eagerly ready to place me under all these restrictions. I'm sure it's his dream come true. Having me bed-bound with him in control of my care. I roll my eyes at him, but of course, he has no idea what has me so irritated with him.

"And the baby?" I ask. "Is he being harmed by all of this that's happening to me?"

"He's doing well. His heartbeat is steady, but any issues with you will most likely affect him," she says, looking between the two of us, noting our now worried expressions. "We have two goals. One is to keep your blood pressure controlled to lessen the stress on your kidneys. The other is to allow as much time as we safely can for the baby to continue to develop. Right now, his lungs aren't mature enough to work on their own, so we want to give him the best chance possible without it being a risk to you."

"Forget about me."

"McKenzie," Gage calls.

"No," I tell him. "There's only *one* goal and that's to take care of our son. I don't care what happens to me, just please don't let anything happen to him," I tell Gage before turning to Dr. Carter. "Having a healthy baby is our *only* goal. It's the only thing that matters."

"I understand and I can assure you, we'll do everything possible," she tells me. "Gage, do you mind accompanying me to the nurse's station so that we can get the discharge paperwork started."

“Of course,” he says, kissing me before getting up. “I’ll send Tyrone in. He’s been visiting every day since you got here.”

“He’s not the only one here,” Dr. Carter informs us. “I was stopped by all of your in-laws right before I came in, wanting to know when they’d be allowed to see you.”

“I’d like to see them all if I can.”

“Of course.” Dr. Carter permits visitors, then leaves with Gage.

“Hey, peanut,” Tyrone says, entering the room first with Keira, Seth, Erin, and Gordon right behind him.

“Peanut? Do I look that round?”

“You look beautiful,” Erin says.

“Flawless,” Keira agrees, blowing a hard breath Tyrone’s way like he should know better than to say anything remotely disparaging to a pregnant woman.

“Hot,” Seth chimes in. Even he’s learned better. “If it wasn’t some kind of weird fetish or kind of a sister-in-law incest type of thing, I’d do you as a pregnant woman.” He looks around as we all stare at him. “I took it too far, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” we all say in unison, before breaking out in laughter.

“You just went a little bit nasty with it, baby, but I knew what you meant,” Erin says, always coming to his rescue.

“Seth has never been known for his tact,” Gordon says, kissing my cheek. “How are you, sweetheart? You had us

beside ourselves with worry.”

“I know. It was really scary for a minute, but I’m much better.” It’s a lie. I’m still uneasy about this whole thing. “I just have to be in bed until the baby is born.”

“Aw damn. That sucks ass—” Seth starts.

“Well,” Erin pipes in, shutting him up. “I, for one, am digging it. Looks like it’s going to be party central in McKenzie’s bedroom. I’m thinking of watching movies till our eyes bleed and eating some type of healthy junk food until it comes out of our noses.”

“I’m in,” Keira says.

“Me too,” Tyrone says, and Seth breaks out laughing at him.

“Fat chance of that happening Ty, my man,” he says. “You’ll hang out with McKenzie laid up in bed in her nightclothes around about the 31st of February. The year after hell freezes over.”

“Even then, his chances are iffy,” Erin adds.

“You said it, Pooch,” Seth tells her in the most annoying display of male baby talk I’ve ever heard. It’s met by frowns and eye rolls all around.

“Are they always this...,” Gordon starts, studying them, trying to find the right word to describe them.

“Vomit worthy?” Keira asks him. “Yes. And in public.”

Upon hearing her badmouth him, Seth wraps his arm around Keira’s neck and brings her down into his chest, giving her a

noogie. She responds with an elbow that misses its mark and hits him square in his groin, sending him to his knees.

My mouth falls open and I slap a hand over it to hide my laugh. I can't help it with their antics.

Gage

I have a feeling whatever Dr. Carter called me out here for has little to do with McKenzie being discharged. My suspicions are validated when she leads me to a private office beyond the nurse's station.

“What's this all about?” I ask her once we are seated. “Is there something more you neglected to tell McKenzie?”

“About her current condition? Not at all. But there is one thing I'm hesitant to bring up to her at this delicate stage of her recovery. I started to broach it a moment ago but had to stop when I noticed a spike in her blood pressure. McKenzie has stated our goal should be to focus on the baby. If that's her wish—”

“She was upset. She didn't mean that.”

“It's important we know what to do beforehand. The best way is to have what's known as an Advance Directive.”

She slides me the form.

“You want me to fill it out?”

“McKenzie has to do it herself. Maybe being home will help to think about it without it upsetting her so much. And she

needs to know your thoughts as well. It involves you too. But just know that legally, whatever is on that form is what we have to follow.”

“Do you think it will come to this?”

“McKenzie’s condition is serious and calls for us to take certain precautions, that’s all. We’re not expecting to ever have to use this. It’s just to help us have a greater understanding of the approach we should take if something unexpected were to happen. I can try talking to her again if—”

“No, you were right to stop. I’ll talk to her when she’s feeling better about everything.”

“My nurse will follow up in a day or so and she’ll file the form for McKenzie.”

“Understood.”

“Please don’t hesitate to call if you have any questions.”

I nod as I study the form, already knowing what McKenzie will decide to do. She’ll make it about our son and forget all about herself. The possibility of it coming to that breaks a part of my heart I didn’t even know I had. I suppose it’s been on hold. Reserved for my little boy.

Walking back to McKenzie’s room in a fog of worst-case scenarios playing on repeat in my head, I enter to see her laughing hysterically at the hijinks of my brother and aunt. The sound instantly lightens my mood and clears my head of the unimaginable thoughts, that just a moment ago, plagued it.

I take my place at McKenzie’s side while she desperately tries to catch her breath. I roll my eyes at my brother. It looks

like Keira belted him one good time if the way he's crossing his legs is any indication. It wouldn't be the first time. She always pretends it's unintentional but she knows damn well where she's aiming.

The nurse comes in to drop off McKenzie's paperwork, and Dad, knowing they've all overstayed their welcome, shoos everyone out. He kisses McKenzie on her cheek with the promise of stopping by when she gets settled in at home.

"You okay?" she asks once everyone's gone. "You looked upset when you first walked in."

"I'm fine. I didn't want everyone to overwhelm you," I lie to her.

"What's that?" she says of the form in my hand.

"This? Oh, this is your new diet restriction," I lie again.

"Sounds like fun," she says with a pout that makes me smirk at her and her love for food that kicked into overdrive when she got pregnant.

"Baby, you know Vera will make it all delicious for you," I say, folding the advance directive up and stuffing it into my pocket.

"I know," she says with a wide grin. I can see her salivating from here. I shake my head at myself for getting hard.

Her eyes dart down to my erection and then back up to me. She licks those fucking cherry-tinted lips and I swallow hard at where her mind has gone. Just when I'm about to find out, the door swings open again.

You have to be fucking kidding me.

This time it's the nurse with a wheelchair.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Yes," McKenzie says to her, purposely throwing the covers over my boner as she moves toward the edge of the bed. I discreetly adjust myself.

The nurse disconnects her from the monitors and takes out her IVs before helping her get dressed. She puts her in the wheelchair and finally, we're out of here.

She sits in the back of Dwayne's car next to me as he drives like a snail back home. He glances back in the rearview mirror with every little bump in the road to make sure she doesn't feel it. I'm guessing he must have been worried about her too.

After much protesting with Rodger, Dwayne, and me insisting that one of us carry her, she does her cute little waddle walk inside all by herself right into the arms of a waiting Vera, who fusses over her just as bad.

"I have everything all set up for you in your room," Vera tells her as they walk. "Your walk-in tub is installed. I'll run you a hot bath once you're in."

"Oh, God, thank you, Vera. You're a lifesaver."

Dwayne, Rodger, and I eye each other. We're a little put out that our efforts were not taken so wonderfully as Vera's until it dawns on me that the two of them are in our bedroom for no

damn reason because McKenzie only had one bag and I carried it in here for her.

“Get the hell out,” I tell them and they hurry away.

While McKenzie sits safely soaking in her new tub, I go over her diet restrictions with Vera. She assures me she has some very flavorful dishes in mind. The assurance isn't needed. I know whatever she comes up with will be to McKenzie's liking.

I excuse myself and go to my office. I pull out the advance directive to look at it again. I have every intention of discussing it with McKenzie. At least that's what I tell myself when I lock it away and go to check on her. I'm happy to see she's enjoying a relaxing soak.

When I first brought up installing a walk-in tub for her, she balked at the idea, thinking it was for old people. Of course, I had it put in anyway. I won't say I told her so, but the temptation of saying it is enough to get me smirking.

“I can see that smug look on your face with my eyes closed,” she says. “And tough luck getting me to admit that you were right about this tub.”

I laugh at her inadvertently admitting it.

“I wouldn't dream of it, baby. How are you feeling?”

“Mmm, so much better,” she says.

I pick up the brush from her sink and go over to her, carefully brushing her hair back before sweeping it all up and putting on her blue silk bonnet. I smile remembering the first time she was comfortable enough around me to wear it.

She sighs contently now and it's heaven to my ears. As long as she can still feel that good, my world is okay.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Two Weeks Later

McKenzie

I just texted Gage to come up to our bedroom. He appeared before I even put my phone down.

“You rang?” He strolls in with his bulge outlined in gray sweatpants oblivious to how hot and bothered he’s making me.

He’s been spending most of his days home with me, only giving a few interviews and appearances on the major sports networks.

“It’s official. I’m over it,” I say. I’ve been in this damn bed for two straight weeks and I’m just about to go crazy with cabin fever. “I’m breaking out of here. Me and this bed are parting ways.”

It’s late afternoon. We had dinner over an hour ago which means I’m stuck in bed until tomorrow. I even ate the damn dinner in bed since the nurse from the agency Gage hired took my blood pressure and saw that it was elevated.

Normally, I’d take this time to sleep since the baby isn’t kicking and is most likely napping right now. He has a habit of being up at all hours of the night and sleeping during the day. So, I sleep whenever he does.

Gloom has set in over the city and it isn't helping my mood. It's been threatening rain all day, but nothing has come of it but a blanket of thick dark clouds. The setting sun only makes it look even more ominous.

Gage studies me as I lay sprawled in the middle of our bed in his T-shirt and a pair of undies, supported by a mountain of pillows behind my back. The magazines Keira brought over earlier have all been read but are still in a messy pile next to me along with a large scrapbook and photos I've been pasting into it. They go flying from the bed when I throw the covers off me.

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs. I can at least be on the couch and keep you company."

"Get right back in that bed, Mrs. Remington."

"C'mon, Gage. What difference does it make where I lie down as long as I'm lying down?"

"You heard what Dr. Carter said when she dropped by. You're to stay in bed. Couches were not included in her orders."

"She also said no stress," I tell him, pissed off and irritated.

The words come out before I realize what they meant to him and I instantly regret them when I see the hurt look on his face.

"I'm stressing you out?"

“No. I didn’t mean that. I don’t know why I said it. I’m just... ugh. I don’t know why I’m being such a bitch.”

He smirks at me.

“Because you’re pregnant.”

“I better enjoy it while it lasts then.”

“*I’m* enjoying it.” He gets in bed with me and pulls the cover over us.

“You are?”

“Absolutely. I get to have a beautiful woman in my bed all day. How can I not enjoy that?”

“Even when she’s being a bitch to you?”

“Especially when she’s being a bitch to me. My bitchy wife is quite sexy. Especially when she’s wearing these.” He snaps the waistband of my underwear and I giggle at him.

God, I love him for making me feel better.

“There’s my girl,” he says, pulling me into his arms, and kissing me. The baby starts to squirm. I think my laughing woke him up. He kicks my side like it’s aimed at Gage. “Is he cock blocking me?”

“Yup.”

Gage slides the cover down to my legs and raises my T-shirt.

“Are you trying to kick daddy out of bed?” he asks, and I laugh when the baby kicks the hand Gage just placed on my belly to talk to him.

“I think that was your answer,” I say and he shakes his head.

He reaches over and grabs the headphones he bought because he read somewhere that babies like to listen to music and puts them across my belly. He turns on a classical piece that is mostly piano-based. Even with the headphones, it’s still loud enough for us to hear it.

He swears up and down that this kid is going to play at Carnegie Hall one day. I almost half believe it because every time he plays this particular piece, it calms all activity. It’s almost like our son is stopping to listen. I lean back, getting comfortable. I live for times like these. All of us here in bed together in our little bubble of happiness. But like after our honeymoon, there’s a thin layer of danger around it, waiting for a weak moment to burst it. I contend with the fact that my own body is what’s threatening it this time.

“What are you thinking about?” Gage asks me, seeing how I just checked out.

“Just about how far we’ve come in such a few short months,” I make up something to tell him so he won’t fret over me so much. “It wasn’t that long ago when I thought you were done with me for good, and now here we are, beginning a family.”

“I was an idiot back then.”

“We both were, but I only bring it up because back then, I never dreamed I would be this happy. I never thought I *deserved* to be this happy. That someone would find out and take it all away from me.”

“Did your dad make you feel that way?” He’s absentmindedly running a gentle hand along my leg and back up again. It’s exciting me. I’m so horny and we haven’t been allowed to have sex since I’ve been back from the hospital.

“I don’t think he did it on purpose,” I say. He treads very lightly when he asks about Dad. He knows how sensitive I am about the topic.

“Was it bad for you growing up?”

“From the outside, I had everything I needed. I was clean and well-fed, fat even. Dad would make fun of my weight all the time. He hated having a fat kid. He’d call me moo-moo because I’d probably end up having to wear one if I didn’t lose weight.”

“What an asshole.”

“It wasn’t just my weight. He hated everything about the way I looked. My hair was never straight enough, and every summer he’d complain about how dark the sun made me.”

“Are you telling me he hated that you were black?”

“He would never admit it, but I think so.”

“But he married your mom.”

“And he hates her too.”

“Damn.”

“Believe it or not, all that was better than him ignoring me. He never even celebrated my birthday. One Christmas he got me a gift, but I think it was his girlfriend at the time who put his name on it. It only got worse when he remarried and he

finally got the daughter he wanted—all blonde and thin. Going back to him after college was... I just couldn't do it. One thing I can say is he never hit me. His words hurt more than if he would have, though."

"Baby, why didn't you stay with your mom?"

"I love Mom. She wouldn't have minded me living with her. But the divorce was hard on her. She's better now. She's happy. At the time, I guess I didn't want to burden her."

"I can understand that."

"I'm sorry you got caught up in my problems though."

"That seems like a lifetime ago," he says, kissing me.

I turn my attention to the now squirming belly bulge that is our son. The song has ended and he's at it again, kicking at his daddy's hand.

"He is not even born yet and he demands all the attention," Gage says. He forgot to put the song on repeat, so he starts it again to settle him down. We lie quietly while he listens to it.

"Maybe you're right. We may just have a little rock star on our hands."

"Rock star," Gage says with a frown. That's not what he sees when he envisions sold-out concert halls.

The soothing sounds of the piano are having the same effect on me as it does on the baby.

"Sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll," I mumble, drifting off to sleep. I may have thrown up some devil horns, but I can't be sure at the moment.

“No way in hell,” I hear him say to our son.

I stir when I feel the bed move next to me.

“Gage?”

“Go back to sleep, baby,” he whispers. I feel his lips on my forehead and hear the bedroom door closing behind him.

“I thought Helga was coming to give you a spa treatment today,” Gage asks after I give him a rundown of my plans for the day while we eat breakfast in bed.

They include bed, then taking that late morning pee which is always exhilarating, then a bath, then bed, then lunch, then bed. Oh, and brushing my teeth, that’s exciting. I’m just jammed packed with fun.

“If Helga puts those hands anywhere near me today, I’ll break them off and beat her with them,” I tell him, biting whatever the hell this is that’s a substitute for bacon. The dramatic effect is lost on it because it doesn’t have the same crunch. I think it’s strips of carrot made to taste like bacon. It’s good, but I would kill for a strip of pig. Maybe some pickled pig feet. *God, I sound like a cannibal.* I’m dying from unhealthy food withdrawal.

Gage doesn’t know what to make of my threat to do bodily harm to my masseuse, so he wisely changes topics.

“Why don’t you call Tyrone?”

My mouth falls open at him willingly allowing Tyrone to be in here with me. He has come over plenty of times before, but

only with me promising to be in real clothes which sucks when I'm in bed. Why I can't be in pajamas around him is something even Gage can't explain. He knows Tyrone is into Keira, but still, his possessiveness is forefront.

“Do I make it sound *that* bad?”

He grins.

“I just hate you're so miserable. I know you'd prefer being at work or out walking around the grounds.”

“I would, but being stuck in bed is for a good cause, right?”

“The best.”

“Thank you for putting up with me.”

“My pleasure. Remember that, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

He helps me with my morning routine and makes sure I'm tucked back in bed before he goes downstairs to work. He's just about to kiss me goodbye but there's a knock on the door. It opens before we can answer it. Gage is pissed, already knowing who it is. Seth stands in the doorway grinning at us.

He already got ripped a new ass for barging in the first time he did it, but he came back saying if we didn't want him coming in, we should lock the door.

Gage beat his head against the wall trying to get him to understand how we shouldn't have to lock our bedroom door in our own house to stop people from entering it. Of course,

Seth knew this. He only pretended not to understand to rile Gage up.

“Well, there’s my little ray of sunshine,” Seth says to me, barging in once again with Erin and Keira right behind him.

“Oh, shut up,” I yell at him to Gage’s delight. Sometimes my foul mood works in my husband’s favor.

“Uh-oh. Hormonal pregnant lady alert.” Seth makes a cross with his hands to ward me off. “We need holy water.”

“You’re an asshole, Seth,” Keira says, pushing him out of the way so she and Erin can walk by.

Gage is edged out of his place next to me while Erin and Keira set up camp. We look over which movies we want to watch today.

“My cue to get to work,” he says to me.

“Have a good one,” Keira answers him and I roll my eyes at her for it.

“Yeah, I think I’ll join you, bro,” Seth tells him, taking a look at what we selected to watch first.

“Do you want us to wait to start the movie?” Erin asks him.

“No, Pooches, go on ahead.”

Keira and I snicker like school girls as he kisses her while Gage is behind them pretending to gag on his finger. I don’t know what it is that makes our maturity levels drop about ten notches when we’re all together.

He blows me a kiss before leaving me in good hands.

Gage

“You don’t want to watch the movie?” I ask Seth, taking a seat behind my desk.

“*Thelma and Louise*? I’m cool on the man hate today,” he says, and I smirk at him. “You don’t know what it’s like in there. I have to hear the phrase ‘I hate men’ every time McKenzie complains about some pregnancy discomfort. Then they look over at me and I feel the need to run for my life.”

“Erin can outrun you.” I’m trying to keep it light like I do with McKenzie, but he’s not buying it for a minute.

“What’s the deal?” he asks, turning serious much too quickly to be anything like Seth.

“Her blood pressure is up,” I tell him the truth. “We’re doing everything we can, but it’s not enough. We have zero control over it and I fucking hate that shit, Seth. McKenzie is scared out of her mind. She hides it by pretending to be miserable and by bitching and complaining. I don’t know how to make it better for her.”

“Mom keeps asking about you guys. Maybe she could—”

“The last thing McKenzie needs is Mom’s shit. You know, she won’t even name him. She refuses to even look at the baby naming book Keira got for us. It’s like she’s just waiting for...”

I stop and run my hands through my hair, unable to voice what McKenzie is waiting for out loud.

“Your girl is strong, and so are you. I know this is a fucked-up situation, but it’s making you two stronger together, and when it’s all said and done, you’ll have a little rock star running around here spoiled as hell, getting into trouble and driving everybody crazy.”

I smile at the image.

I can’t wait.



CHAPTER THIRTY

McKenzie

“Mmm.” I sigh, lying back on the bed. “That was the best non-sex orgasm I ever had.”

“Is that a fact,” Gage says, lying next to me, running his middle finger over the nipple he just sucked.

“Total fact. You’re a very skilled non-lover.”

“Mmm.” He sighs, abandoning playing with my nipple to lie on his pillow. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Really,” I say, looking over at him. His face and body are more relaxed now that he’s had a release. He closes his eyes.

“Absolutely. My dick is very pleased at the moment.”

“He nearly choked me, you know?”

“He was backed up.” He chuckles. “He missed you.”

“I miss him too. I can’t wait for him to be inside me.”

“Me either, baby.”

He starts to doze off. I settle down to join him for an evening nap, but the activity in my belly keeps me awake.

“Gage, I think Blue is hungry.”

His eyes spring open to look at me.

“We’re not naming our son Blue, McKenzie. I don’t give a damn what my aunt says. I don’t see what’s ‘sooo hot’ about it.”

I can't help but laugh at the voice he uses to mock Keira.

I finally looked at the baby naming book she brought over to us a few days ago. Gage was excited that I was finally willing to pick out a name for our son. I had put it off because I was afraid I'd jinx things. Nothing like planning something. It's a sure way of it not happening.

But I knew I was being selfish in denying Gage the experience of picking out baby names. I'm glad I gave in. It passes the time much better than lying around doing nothing.

"Just say it out loud a couple of times to get used to it," I say. "It's trending right now. All the celebrities are naming their kids after colors and other crazy stuff."

"How the hell is he going to pull that introduction off? Can you imagine the explanation he'll have to give as a follow-up to it? 'Hi, my name is Blue. No, not Indigo. My name is actually Blue. No, not Cerulean. I'm not telling you the *color* of my name. My name is *literally* Blue. All right, here, let me show you my driver's license so you'll see what I mean.' Our son will be scarred for life. It's not going to happen."

"Okay, you have a point," I admit, laughing at his scenario. "But whatever we call him, right now he's making me hungry."

"What do you have a taste for?"

"Can I have a bowl of that ice cream with a bag of those potato chips?"

"You got it," he says, kissing me before getting up to get it for me.

While he's gone, I grab my phone to text Keira.

McKenzie: Blue is out.

Keira: But naming kids after colors is so hot right now.

McKenzie: IKR.

Keira: Did you tell him everyone is doing it?

McKenzie: I told him. It was still a no-go. He's leaning toward something more traditional.

Keira: Just don't make it old fogey. Ask him to tell you about his grandmother on his dad's side. Gage loved her.

McKenzie: Okay I'm on it.

Gage

I leave McKenzie to rethink this whole Blue Remington thing and go downstairs to the kitchen.

"Chips and ice cream," I tell Vera who is busying herself making dinner. "I'll get it."

"Shall I hold off on dinner for an hour or so?"

"Normally I would say yes, but this is a very pregnant McKenzie we're talking about," I say. She pretends to think.

"I better put a rush on it."

I laugh at her.

"I want to thank you for all you do to make things easy for her." I know McKenzie smothers her with praise, but I feel the

need to mention it. “And please don’t tell me it’s your job. Making healthy meals is one thing, but perfecting no-salt baked sweet potato chip recipes because she’s craving them is completely another.”

“I truly enjoy doing it,” she says. “I’m happy she likes it.”

“She loves it.”

Grabbing the bowl of the Planet Oat ice cream, along with a bag of sweet potato chips, I go back to bed.

I’ve given up working in my office. Anything I need to get done I just do it on my laptop next to McKenzie. I love being in bed with her. It’s like we’re on a tiny vessel in the middle of the ocean, just the two of us. But of course, I get to go to shore whenever a food craving hits her.

I shake my head at some of the things we’ve done to keep each other entertained. My favorite is the long talks we have. I’ve never easily shared so much with anyone. I’ve never felt so close to anyone. I love being with her.

“Yes,” she exclaims, scooting up in the bed to take her chips and ice cream from me. She quickly takes a spoonful of vanilla and eats it, before putting the chips on top.

“Vera is putting a rush on dinner,” I tell her.

“Good. I’m hungry,” she mumbles around the spoon in her mouth.

“I guessed as much,” I tell her, stealing one of her chips. The damn things are good.

I watch as she takes more ice cream into her mouth and damn if it's not making me horny. I shake it off, reaching for my laptop to distract myself with work while she finishes eating. But of course, she has to start moaning about how good it was when she scrapes the last of it out of the bowl.

"Gage," she shrieks when I pounce on her. The bowl goes tumbling to the floor along with my laptop as my lips crash into hers to get a taste.

"Mmm, so good," I say.

"Not as good as my white chocolate."

"I'll be more than happy to give you a load right now, baby."

"Oh, really?"

"Damn right."

"Have you forgotten the doctor's orders about sex, Mr. Rule Stickler?"

I roll my eyes in frustration at this once-a-day orgasm bullshit we've been put on. Even with that, I'm not allowed to penetrate her. She snickers at me.

"What so funny?" I grumble at her.

"I think my foul mood is rubbing off on you. Nothing like being horny to make you grumpy."

"Ha. Ha," I say, before moving down to talk to her belly. "The minute after you're born, you're off to your uncle Seth's house so Mommy and Daddy can have some alone time."

He kicks hard at me, making his mom laugh.

“I ate too much,” she says, rubbing her stomach while she relaxes in her walk-in tub. I just came in to check on her. “I’m going to be feeling it later, but it was well worth it. Vera made a wonderful dinner.”

“That she did. And you deserve to indulge. Your blood pressure has been perfect all day.”

“Mm-hmm,” she says to the feel of me in her hair, brushing it. “I’m proud of me.”

“You should be. We just might pull this thing off, baby.”

She smiles.

“You hear that, Milo?” she says to her belly. “Mommy is doing good.”

“Milo Remington is also out,” I tell her.

“Silo?” she asks as I lotion her down and slip on one of my T-shirts she loves wearing.

“No.”

“I figured,” she says, getting back into bed. I crawl in next to her. “It looked good on paper.”

“And here I thought your eyes were back to normal.”

“Oh, you hush,” she says, grabbing the baby book to look at new names. “Hey, will you tell me about your grandmother?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you feel comfortable telling me,” she says, snuggling up to me.

I turn on my side and spoon into her.

“She was a tiny thing. Not even five feet, but she sure didn’t take any of my shit. Dad said she was quite the badass when he was little. I had nothing on him.” We both laugh. “As tough as she was, it was only matched by her need to nurture. She was so gentle with me whenever I needed her. She always knew how to make me feel better. Love just poured out of her.”

“Sounds like she was a great lady.”

“She was. I knew I was safe with her. You remind me of her.”

“What was her name?”

“Alexandria Remington.”

“Alexandria,” she whispers it as she drifts off to sleep.

The television coming on wakes me up. The soap opera that McKenzie’s become addicted to was programmed to come on at nine this morning. I can’t believe I slept so late. This staying in bed all day thing has my internal clock all out of whack because I’m still sleepy.

“Baby,” I mumble. I’m trying to sleep over the dramatic rant some redhead is in the middle of. I’m surprised it hasn’t woken McKenzie yet since she’s usually up when the TV pops on. She’s been talking about this particular episode all week.

Some big reveal is supposed to be happening. I can't bring myself to get that deep into it. Even though I do catch myself watching right along with her. "Baby, you're missing it," I mumble again, nudging her a little with my forearm. But still, she's not waking up.

Fuck it. She can just rewind the damn thing and watch it later.

I settle back down next to her. She's still in the same position she first fell asleep in so I throw an arm over to hold her. I quickly recoil it when I feel wetness there.

Is she sweating? It's not that warm in here, is it? It's hard to tell with her. She's so sensitive about the temperature. I throw the covers off to cool her down and my legs are hit with cold air. I realize not only is she wet, but so am I. My pajama pants and the whole lower half of the bed are soaked.

"Jesus, baby, what is this?" I say in confused horror.

My eyes adjust to the light, only to see she's not sleeping but unconscious. What I thought was sweat is fluid coming from McKenzie. Only it's not just fluid, it's blood. So much blood.

"McKenzie!" Grabbing my phone, I start pushing buttons while I take her gently in my arms. "Baby, wake up... McKenzie." There's a bright red pool of fresh blood between her legs.

I must be yelling louder than I thought because both Vera and Rodger are in the room along with the nurse that just came on duty. She rushes to McKenzie while Rodger comes for me.

“Let the nurse see her,” he says, but I’m rooted to her side. All the blood is draining out of her. She’s so cold. “Gage, you need to move.”

He manages to pull me away, while Vera takes the phone from me to talk into it. She assists the nurse, repeating what she’s saying to who I’m sure is emergency services as that’s who I believed I called.

It all becomes a muddled blur. It’s like I’m stuck in a thick fog that’s making everything appear dreamlike. But I know this isn’t a dream. This is a fucking nightmare and I won’t be able to wake up from this one. McKenzie’s life is draining out of her and I’m helpless to save her.

The paramedics get her in the ambulance and I sit holding her ice-cold hand as we race to the hospital. They’re in a measured frenzy. Most of what’s being communicated go over my head. What I can understand is that she’s hemorrhaging uncontrollably.

Uncontrollably. No, baby. Don’t do this.

The blaring of the siren above us stops. The ambulance doors fly open and I’m pulled out as a team of nurses rush to McKenzie, headed by Dr. Carter. I hear car doors slamming behind me, but I never turn to see who it is. The team rushes through the emergency room doors with McKenzie on a gurney. I run behind them, but I’m stopped by a nurse who tells me I can’t go beyond the double doors. I’m just about to push her aside when I feel Rodger’s hand on my arm.

“Get the fuck off me,” I yell at him as the doors close and lock me out.

“Sir,” he calls to me, but I’m too busy banging on the door demanding to be let in. “Sir, don’t do this. Let them help her. You’ll only be in the way in there.”

I know he’s right. Of course, he’s fucking right, but my wife is lying in a pool of her blood and I want to be with her. I *need* to be with her.

“Son,” Dad comes rushing up behind us.

“Dad. I... McKenzie, she’s...” I break down.

“I know, son,” he says, taking me in his arms. “I know.”

“I can’t lose them, Dad. I can’t.”

Keira, Seth, and Erin arrive a second after him. Keira stops in her tracks when she sees me crying and bursts into tears because of it. I don’t think she’s ever seen me cry before. Seth takes her in his arms to comfort her.

“It’s okay, auntie,” he says holding her, but I can tell by the way he’s looking at me that he fears the worst.

The double doors to the emergency room open and Dr. Carter rushes out.

“Gage,” she says, pulling me away from the traffic of the door and I’m sure what was supposed to be my family, but they follow us. “We’re unable to stop McKenzie from hemorrhaging. She’s being prepped for emergency surgery.”

“She and the baby, they’re going to be all right?”

“They’re both in severe distress. The advance directive isn’t on file. We need to know what to do.”

“What the hell do you mean? Don’t you all know what to fucking do?”

She glances at my family. Seth and Dad come to stand on either side of me. Dad takes me by the arm as if bracing me for something.

“We’ll do everything we can to try and get the baby out in time through C-section and stop McKenzie’s bleeding, but there may not be time to do both. Gage, we may only be able to save one. We need to know which one?”

“You... you want me to choose?”



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gage

The worst moment of my life keeps replaying over and over in my head as I sit holding my son's tiny hand in mine. I never knew a human being could be so small. I never knew one so small could evoke so much love.

My heart is heavy because McKenzie isn't here to share this moment with me. The Fates have played a cruel joke on me by showing me a glimpse of happiness. They allowed me to feel the purest form of love in my life with McKenzie, only to rip it all away from me when I needed it most. Now I'm a shell of who I once was. The man who McKenzie showed me I could be.

I didn't have a soul worth saving, but she saved it. Only to tear it out of me in the end. I was a man who didn't have a heart, but she gave me one. Only to break it in two. Keeping one half for herself and giving the other to our son.

Not even the most talented of playwrights could have penned a more fitting punishment for the man that I was before. The man who planned on taking her son away from her. But that was before she changed me.

Now all that's left is this tiny hand I'm holding. A hand that looks just like hers. He's so small and helpless. So perfect. All but just an hour old. Nothing has had a chance to taint him and

nothing ever will. He'll always be pure and innocent. He will always be loved.

Dad comes quietly into the private room to check on me.

"I'm still saying goodbye to him, Dad."

"Take your time," he says. The emotion in his voice is still as strong as it was when he held me up after getting the news that my son didn't survive his birth. "He's a beautiful boy."

I nod, wiping away a tear as I cradle his body in my arms.

"He looks like McKenzie," I tell him.

"He sure does. I can see a lot of you in him too."

"McKenzie should be here. She should be able to hold him. She should be able to say goodbye."

"I know, son. I know."

"I'm going to lose her too. She's not going to make it."

"No, that's not true, Gage."

"You heard what her doctors said."

McKenzie has lost too much blood. Her chances of surviving are small even with the blood transfusions.

"I heard them say she had a fifty/fifty chance," he reminds me. "Now, you know better than I do that's more than enough for McKenzie. Look at what she survived already. She's strong and she's a fighter."

"What is she fighting for? He's gone."

"She has you. She has people who love her."

“But she doesn’t have him. He’s all she wanted and I can’t give him to her. I have nothing to give her anymore. If she dies, I have nothing to live for anymore.”

“Gage, I’ve been where you are, son. I know your pain. God knows I know how hard it is for you right now. I’m here to tell you that there’s still life left in you. There has to be. You have to live for McKenzie. You have to fight with her through this because you will get through this. Go to McKenzie. Let her feel you. Let her draw strength from you.”

“I need to take care of him. I need to arrange for his...” I stop before I say it. The words just won’t come out.

“I’ll stay with him.”

I nod, planting a gentle kiss on my son’s head before I slowly place him back in his bassinet. I take one last look at him, taking his little hand. I wish with all that I am he would hold on to mine.

“Dad, do you think that Grandma’s taking care of him now?”

The thread that was keeping his emotions in check breaks. He holds his face in his hands as he sobs.

“I’d like to see anyone try and stop her,” he finally says, wiping at his eyes.

I take some comfort in that.

Three Days Later

McKenzie has been unconscious, but she's out of ICU and in her private room. She has a revolving door of visitors stopping by to check on her.

Her mom came from Atlanta. She took the news of the baby hard and seeing McKenzie so small and lifeless in her hospital bed even worse. She comes by and checks on her often, but she can only handle seeing her in small doses.

I, on the other hand, find it impossible to leave her side, even though it's just as hard for me to see her so still day after day. She never could sit still. The only way she stayed in bed for so long was because I was with her, practically nailing her down.

"Gage, your mom is waiting to take you down for a bite to eat," Dad says, entering McKenzie's room where I sit holding her hand.

"What if she wakes up and I'm not here?"

"I'll stay with her. I'll call you if she wakes up."

"No. I don't want to leave her."

"You need to clear your head," he insists. "Get some fresh air. Mom and Keira are worried sick about you. Go down and eat with them."

I nod, caving in. I'm too exhausted to argue with him. I haven't been getting much sleep. Images of our baby boy keep me going, at the same time, it also tears me up inside.

"Call me the minute anything changes."

"You have my word. I won't leave her side for an instant."

I get up, leaning close to McKenzie.

“I’ll be right back, baby,” I whisper to her before kissing her lips. “Dad is here with you so you’re not alone.”

“We’ll be fine until you get back,” he assures me. “I’ll just tell her a few of my funny golfing stories.”

“Yeah, hate to be the one to tell you, but they aren’t funny.” Seth stands in the doorway giving Dad hell about his golf games. “We want McKenzie to wake up, not stay asleep from boredom.”

I laugh for the first time in three damn days.

“Reinforcements?” I ask Seth why he came in.

“I was told to drag you out,” he says. “Something about you going stir crazy and taking it out on the nurses.”

“They need to do their damn jobs,” I bark at him, and he raises a cocky eyebrow at me now that I’ve proven his point. “Whatever.”

I kiss McKenzie goodbye again.

McKenzie

I know I just mumbled something out loud because I woke myself up. I know that I’m in the hospital because I can hear the beeping of the monitors. I know that someone’s here with me. It’s not Gage, but the smell of his cologne tells me he’s been here. I take comfort in the scent as I will my eyes open. They land on Gordon who’s on his phone talking to someone.

“What happened?” I grimace, placing my hand on my dry throat. He gives me a tiny sip of water through a straw to make it feel better.

“You’re in the hospital, but the doctors say you’re going to be fine.”

“Was it my blood pressure?”

“No, sweetheart. Gage is on his way up to talk to you—”

“The baby.” I press my hand on my stomach that’s now flatter than it’s been in months and painful. “Where’s the baby?” *Oh my God, he’s not here. I can’t feel him.* “Where is he?”

“McKenzie—”

“Gordon, where is my baby!”

“Let me call the nurse.”

“I don’t want the nurse. I want you to tell me where my baby is. I gave birth to him. How are his lungs? I... I need to see him.”

“McKenzie—”

“Is he in the nursery?”

“McKenzie, there were some serious complications.”

“Want kind of complications?”

“You were hemorrhaging. They had to take the baby through C-section.”

Okay. Good, they were able to take him, so he must be okay.
I breathe a little easier, but I’m still anxious to see him.

“Where is he?” I ask again, wondering why he’s not answering me.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

The answer is in his face. The quivering of his bottom lip and the glistening of the threat of tears in his eyes. I see the truth, but I refuse to believe it.

“No. No, that’s not true,” I scream, shaking my head.

“McKenzie, I’m so very sorry. I wish... I wish I knew how...”

“You’re lying.”

“I wish I were. I’m not, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

“Yes, you are. You *are* lying. Where’s Gage? You’re in on this with him, aren’t you? Was this the plan all along? To make me think my baby was dead so he could take him from me?”

“McKenzie, no. Never would I allow that. Gage is on his way back here to you, sweetheart.”

“Back from where? Where is he? I know he was just here. Is he taking the baby from me right now?”

“No, McKenzie—”

“He’s taking him from the nursery, isn’t he? He can’t. I won’t let him.”

I yell from the pain of the stitches in my stomach as I pull the cover off me to get out of bed. I rip out the IV line from my arm and race out of the room, pushing past the pain. I barely feel it. I’m too focused on finding my son. I rush down the hall, following the signs that direct me to the nursery.

“Where is he?” I say to the nurse who comes out from caring for the newborns when she sees me. I’m trying to get into the coded door. “Baby Remington? Where is he?”

She looks open-mouthed at Gordon who comes up fast behind me.

“McKenzie,” I hear Gage, and I turn to him.

“What did you do with him? Give him back to me. Please. Please, give him back to me. Don’t take him away from me. I’m his mother. He needs me.”

I’m vaguely aware that Keira and Elaine are with him, both looking confused and devastated at my pathetic pleas.

I go for the locked nursery door again, but I slip in the blood pouring from my IV line, yelling out in pain when I hit the floor. Everyone pounces on me. A nurse comes up and shoots something in my arm while another one slaps a pressure bandage on to stop the bleeding as I try to fight them all off. I’m desperate to find my baby.

He can't be gone. He can't be.

Gage yells at them to get back as he picks me up and holds me in his arms. I cling to him as he gently cradles me, taking me away from everyone.

“Give him back to me, Gage.”

“I wish I could, baby,” he whispers, pressing his lips to my head. I can tell by his voice that he’s crying. “I wish I could.”

He lays me back in bed and climbs in next to me, pulling me into his arms. I still cling to him as we cry. Whatever the

nurse shot me with is starting to take effect. I don't want to sleep, but I can't help myself from succumbing to it.

“Don't fight it,” Gage tells me. “Sleep. I can't bear to see you in so much pain.”

“I'm sorry,” I say.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

One week later

Gage

McKenzie has been under various forms of sedation for several days now with her pain killers, along with a round of antibiotics to treat the infection from tearing her stitches. But I believe her mental state has little to do with those damn pain pills.

In the moments that she's lucid, the hospital offers her grief counseling, but she refuses to speak to anyone. She refuses to see anyone. I think she wants to avoid the pitiful looks that she knows people will give her. She's always been proud. Not to mention stubborn as hell. I've always loved that about her.

Barely does she tolerate me being with her at this point. She'd rather be alone with her grief than share it with anyone. Maybe it's a form of denial. If she doesn't have to talk about it, then it didn't happen. She can pretend that our son is tucked away safe in the nursery. At least for the few seconds her mind will allow it.

Three days later

Yesterday I gave McKenzie the picture of our son I took for her. I hated that she didn't get the chance to hold him and say goodbye to him like I was able to. As difficult as it was, it gives me some sense of peace to know what it felt like to hold him. Her only response was that she wouldn't have wanted to hold him like that anyway.

She just sounds so defeated. She didn't even cry when she first saw the picture of him like I thought she would. She just seems numb, like nothing matters to her anymore.

"What color were his eyes?" she asked me earlier today out of nowhere. We were supposed to be watching TV. I guessed, like me, she wasn't paying attention to what was on the screen.

"Brown," I told her. "They were brown like yours."

She nodded her head and stared at the picture of him. She still hasn't let it go.

"A funeral," she said a moment later. "Do you still want one? Because we have to pick out what we want to put him in and where we want to place him and... everything. Gage, what are we going to put him in? Does it have to be a casket? I don't know if I can take seeing him in one."

"Baby," I called to her before she started to cry. "Seth and Erin want to design something for him."

"They do?" she asked and I nodded.

"But if you don't want them to, they'll understand."

"No, please. I... I trust them to do it."

“Okay.”

“And can we dress him in that little outfit Gordon gave him? The little lawyer tuxedo.”

“Of course, baby. I know how much you loved it. Whatever you want. You know, we still need to name him for his... we still need to name him.”

“Alexander,” she whispered.

“What is it, baby?”

“I want to name him after your grandmother. Alexander Remington. Do you mind?”

My heart just about ripped out of my chest. I had no idea she even liked the name.

“I don’t mind in the least. It’s perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

She nodded, looking at his picture, gently fingering the outline of his little face. He looked so peaceful, just like he was sleeping.

“Mommy loves you, Alexander,” she whispered to him.

We both gave up trying to come up with an obituary. What the fuck can we say? He didn’t have a moment, not a fucking moment of life on this earth. He never took one single breath. What the fuck are we supposed to say about that?

The funeral home director suggested a nice program covered with angels and inspirational quotes. As sensitive and helpful as he was trying his best to be about it, damn if I didn’t let him have it.

“Fuck that shit. There’s nothing inspirational about it. There’s nothing angelic about it. Our son died. It’s ugly and it’s fucked up, so fuck all that pretty packaged shit you’re trying to dress it up in.”

McKenzie reached for my hand and I took hold of it, apologizing to her for losing control.

“It’s okay,” she whispered.

I don’t think it was said to excuse my behavior but more to comfort me for the cause of it.

One week later

McKenzie was finally allowed to come home two days ago.

The large house is eerily quiet. Funny how that is. The same amount of people still live in it. But the life that filled it only a few weeks ago is gone.

I’m taken aback at how much it’s affecting my staff. Rodger and Dwayne especially. Somehow, they feel they failed in their duty. Here they are, our guards hired to protect us, and they couldn’t keep this from happening. I guess we all feel we’re all-powerful in our own way. No one understands them better than I do. With all my money, I could have an army to protect us. None of them would do a damn bit of good. They would be useless.

I find McKenzie in Alex's nursery, as she's taken to calling him. She goes in there often during the day. She finds comfort in being with his things. I was unsure if I should remove everything before she got home. I didn't want it to be a reminder to her. I didn't want her to feel burdened with the task of doing it if she didn't want to see the room again. Vera convinced me to let it be. That McKenzie would want to see it the way she left it for him. I thank God I listened to her.

The staff walks a delicate line with McKenzie, trying to stay out of her way, but also making sure she has everything she needs. I find myself walking that same line with her and so do our family and friends. They keep a respectable amount of distance like McKenzie wants, but are always making sure she knows they're available whenever she needs them.

Dwayne has been in a deep protective mode. Tyra had gotten past the nurse's station and was on her way to McKenzie's room on our final day at the hospital when Dwayne laid into her.

It was only when McKenzie heard the voices outside being raised that she allowed her to come in. I didn't think it was a good idea. The last thing we needed at that moment was her shit. But McKenzie wanted to see her so I let her in. Dwayne was right behind her, ready to haul her ass out of the room if she said the wrong thing.

“Hey,” she said with flowers in hand and a wet and blotchy face from where she'd been crying. “I heard about your baby. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am. I never wanted anything like this to happen. I know I have a funny way of

showing it, but I do care about you. I just wanted you to know. I am so sorry, McKenzie.”

“Thank you, Tyra,” McKenzie told her.

She left without causing a scene, escorted out by Dwayne. I have it on good authority that he made damn sure she wouldn't bother McKenzie again, just in case she wasn't being sincere. McKenzie believes she was. But I want her to stay away all the same.

“How is she?” Dad asks, coming into the living room where I sit doing absolutely nothing. I don't know what's wrong with me today. I never do nothing.

I just shake my head.

“Not the same.”

“Give her time.”

“Dr. Carter thinks she's suffering from postpartum depression. I don't know how she can tell that. Doesn't she have a right to be depressed?”

“Of course, she does. Has she spoken to the grief counselor at all?”

“She doesn't speak to anyone. I want to give her time, but I don't know if that's the right thing to do.”

“It took your mother months to work through the grieving process. And truth be told, son, I think a large part of her is still working through it. I couldn't imagine having a life growing inside me and then losing it so horribly. But it was

tremendously hard on me as well. I felt the loss every bit as deeply as your mother and I know you do for Alexander.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Just to take care of your wife. But don’t lose yourself in McKenzie’s grief, Gage. You need to deal with your own. If you don’t, it will sneak up on you. Trust me, I know. I spent many years looking down an empty bottle of scotch before you finally came along.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“I plan on seeing that it doesn’t.”

“I want this day to be over with,” I tell him. “Is Mom okay with not coming to the funeral?”

“She already paid her respects earlier,” he assures me. “Don’t worry about your mother. This is yours and McKenzie’s time to say goodbye to your son.”

“I better check on her.”

“I’ll meet you over at the cemetery. I want to make sure everything is as you both want it to be for little Alex.”

“Thanks, Dad. I don’t know how I would have done this without you.”

“It never would have happened that way. You’re my son and I love you. I’ll always be here for you whenever you need me to be. Now, go take care of that beautiful wife of yours.”

McKenzie is no longer in the nursery. I enter our room to see her struggling to zip up her dress.

“You were supposed to call me to help you get ready,” I tell her. I can see she’s still in pain from the surgery. “You don’t have to do this. No one is expecting you today if you don’t feel up to it.”

“I want to. I need to be there. I need to say goodbye to him. Just help me a little, okay?”

“Okay, baby,” I tell her, zipping her up. I help her put on the pearls that match the white polka dots of her navy-blue dress that her mom helped her pick out.

No one is allowed to wear black.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You look beautiful,” I whisper to her, pressing my lips to the back of her head.

She rests her cheek on the hand that I placed on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Gage.”

“Don’t, baby,” I tell her. I can’t stand to hear her apologize again.

I don’t know how long we stay standing that way until Rodger comes in ready to escort us.

The graveside service we chose to have is only for close friends and family. They’re all gathered at the cluster of maple trees that is Alex’s gravesite.

Tyrone is here with Keira, supporting her as best he can. He hadn’t seen McKenzie since before she went into the hospital.

He holds her close. I don't know what he whispers in her ear, but she smiles so I'm glad she finds comfort in his words.

Seth stands next to Erin, wiping at his eyes constantly. Never have I seen him so serious about anything before. Not even at Grandma Alexandria's funeral. He's always used jokes to cope. He found a way to make us laugh even on that day, but today he has nothing by way of humor.

McKenzie's co-workers and the associates I've been in business with, as well as those I've gotten to know on golfing tours, sent condolences in the form of flowers, cards, plush stuffed animals, and childlike banners. They cover the gravesite and made McKenzie smile for a brief moment when she first saw them.

Jenna is in attendance as well as McKenzie's boss, Rueben Leigh, who she's gotten close to since working with him. All hug her at the end of the ceremony before leaving us alone to say our goodbyes.

Dad stays by my side, like he has since this started, while I stay next to McKenzie's. Her mom is also here to support her and she's staying close to her during the service. I'm relieved to see McKenzie cry through most of it. She's fought against her feelings for so long that I'm grateful that she's able to let them out.

I watch as she places a hand on the head of the coffin that Seth and Erin made for Alex. It was a labor of love. It's ocean blue with a little sailboat riding a perfect wave on top of it. I'm touched by how detailed it is. I hadn't even realized it would be so small. In the back of my mind, I wonder if they make

caskets that small. Who would think to do such a thing? And then to have them sitting out on display just waiting to be bought?

Thank God Alex's looks like a little toy chest that he simply curled up in and fell asleep. Not like a casket at all. More like the seven seas adventures Seth and I both loved so much as kids. It's perfect for Alex.

McKenzie's goodbye to him shatters what little strength I'm holding on to for her. Her words are those of love and hope, of sorrow and pain. The reality that we'll never know what could have been overwhelms her and she is lost in her grief. It's only matched by my own when that reality strikes me as I'm holding on to her.

I stand behind her, enveloping her in my arms, lying my head on the back of hers as we both cry. I feel her hands reach up for me, grabbing onto my forearms where they're wrapped strongly around her chest.

I thought I was the one holding her up before I realize she's doing the same for me.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

One Month Later

Gage

“Baby,” I call to McKenzie as I enter our bedroom. She’s lying with her back to me, looking out of the window at the start of a new day. She’s more like staring out into nothing. “Vera made you something to eat. Do you want me to bring it up for you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Maybe you can come down and sit with me in the kitchen for a little while. After, we can take a walk in the garden. The roses you planted are starting to open.”

“I don’t want to see them and I’m not hungry, Gage.”

I sigh heavily at her refusing food as I go in and sit next to her. She barely eats anything anymore and I can’t stand it. The moment I reach out to her, she turns in the opposite direction. The rejection stings, but I don’t show it.

“I hate seeing you in bed like this all day and all night.”

“It’s the last place I was happy with him. He was here in this room with us. Just let me have this, Gage. Please. Just leave me alone and let me have this.”

Her shoulders tremble as she silently cries. I place my hand on her arm, but she stiffens up so much that I take it away. I long to hold her, to comfort her, to show her how much I love her even though she doesn't want me to. It's killing me, but I do as she asks and leave her alone.

I disappear inside my home office. Escaping by perfecting my putt with the indoor golf set she ordered before everything went to shit. It's the only thing that keeps me going these days now that she's completely shut me out. I lose myself in it for hours. I can forget everything I'm feeling and focus on the one thing I can control.

If I could, I would hide in here forever, but it's impossible. I know my wife needs me. Her depression is getting worse by the day. It's taking over and she doesn't have the strength to fight it, or perhaps she doesn't want to. I forced her hand last week. Putting my foot down, I made her see a grief counselor. Physically, I forced her to go, but mentally she checked out. She just sat there, not saying a word during the whole hour.

She was prescribed antidepressants, but she's not taking them anymore. She said they make her feel numb. To her, feeling numb means she's betraying Alex. Feeling anything but sadness for him makes her think she's betraying him. So, she stays in her grief to be close to him.

"Remington," I answer my phone without looking at who's calling.

"Gage, how are you?" Mom asks. She calls and checks on me every day.

“I’m fine,” I tell her the same thing every day, lying my ass off. I’m nowhere near fucking fine.

“And how is everything?”

“She’s fine too. You can say her name, you know.”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t want to say the wrong thing.”

“I know. I’m sorry for snapping at you.”

“You don’t need to be. I just wish there was something more I could do. I hate feeling so useless when you’re hurting so much.”

“I know,” I tell her, closing my eyes and remembering how I blew up at her a few days after Alex’s funeral. She had caught me at a terrible moment and I let her have it.

“Gage, I’m so sorry,” she said, kissing my cheek the way she always had to comfort me. “What can I do?”

“Nothing, Mom. He’s dead,” I told her. “My son is dead and there’s nothing you can do. He was mine, Mom. Did Dad tell you? He had my hair and my feet. That fine little patch of freckles that ran across my nose when I was younger. I didn’t need a paternity test to tell me what I already knew. He was mine and McKenzie’s.”

“Gage, I’m so sorry.”

“You missed out. He was your grandson and you missed out on him. You never got to feel him when he was alive. The way he would kick my hand when he felt me press on McKenzie’s belly. He knew my voice. He knew my touch and he would kick for me.”

“Oh, Gage,” she cried.

“I never got to share any of that with you because of your damn paternity test. You refusing to believe my wife wasn’t after my money. Now he’s dead, and none of that matters. It was all for nothing. I hope it was worth it for you.”

I reduced her to tears. She says she understands that it was grief talking, but I still have trouble forgiving myself for it.

“Don’t worry so much,” I tell her now. “I’ll be fine. I’m hanging in there. We’re taking it day by day.”

She only hangs up after promising to call me again tomorrow. I so want to avoid that call and the lying to her, but I know it will only make her worry more. That’s the last thing I want to do.

“Vera, I have to go into the office for a few hours. Will you look in on McKenzie and call me if she needs anything. No matter what it is.”

“Of course, I will. I’ll take good care of her until you return.”

The poor woman has less and less to do. Even though this place is twice as big as the beach house, her work is all done in an hour or so if she doesn’t stretch it out. Most of the rooms are unused. McKenzie and I planned to fill them all. I don’t know if we ever will. I doubt that dream will ever come true.

One Month Later

McKenzie

I pull the cardigan sweater over my arms and button it up to hide how much weight I've lost. I look tired, even though all I do is sleep all day. I decide to leave my hair down. It still looks pretty decent and it hides some of my face.

Closing the door to Alex's room and walking past the stack of letters sent by strangers still giving their condolences, I make my way downstairs.

Gage has just gone into the office. He only spends a few hours there each day. The rest of the time he spends trying to take care of me. I wish he would focus more on himself and his work. I can only guess how his golf game has suffered because he feels the need to fuss over me. It's just one more thing I'm made to feel guilty about.

Well, that ends today.

I waited until he was gone before I got dressed because I didn't want him to talk me out of doing what I know is right.

"Mrs. Remington," Dwayne pops out of nowhere as I grab my car keys. I ignore him and keep walking to the front door. I stop when I feel him following behind me.

"I can drive myself today," I say, turning around to face him. The look on his face lets me know that isn't going to fly.

"It's no trouble at all, ma'am," he says. That's his way of saying *let me drive you or I'm calling in reinforcements, namely your husband.*

I don't even bother standing my ground. I don't have much energy for it these days, anyway. No use wasting what little I've managed to muster up today on fighting with him.

"Fine," I tell him, handing him the keys.

"Where to?" he asks, after closing my door and hopping into the driver's seat.

"The Remington's. I have an appointment with Gordon."

"Very good, ma'am," he says.

I can hear the uncertainty in his voice about taking me. He wasn't expecting me to go there. I haven't exactly been feeling very social these last few months.

I sit looking out the window as he drives. It's a warm day so everyone is out. We pass a park and I take notice of all the fun. People are exercising, bike riding, and having cookouts. Kids are running wild all over the playground and at the swings. It all seems so foreign to me, so odd. I just want to rush out of the car and shake them. I want to yell at them all.

How dare you go on enjoying your lives as if nothing horrible has happened. This world lost something precious. How dare you not feel it too?

"We're here, Mrs. Remington," Dwayne tells me. I think he may have said it more than once. The concern on his face has grown as he comes around to open my door and help me out.

"I'll only be a minute or so."

I take a deep breath, collecting my thoughts as I walk up the driveway to the front door of the house.

The last time I came here was on some long-ago Sunday. We were all having dinner. I was dressed to the nines. It was a designer dress that Gage had shipped in specially from I can't even remember where. It's a far cry from the jeans and sneakers I have on today.

"McKenzie, what a wonderful surprise your phone call was," Gordon greets me after his house manager walked me over to his study.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I hope it wasn't too much trouble rearranging your schedule."

"Nonsense. I always have time for my family," he says, kissing and hugging me. So much for hiding my weight loss. "Let me get you something."

"No, I'm fine. I just want to get this over with if that's okay."

"Of course," he says, directing me to sit down in one of the chairs that face his desk. "I admit I'm curious as to what you need my help with. You were rather vague over the phone."

"I didn't want you telling Gage, and thank you for not doing so," I tell him and then stop, trying to think of the best way to say what it is I need. "Gage and I, well, I don't know how it would all work, but I want to divorce him. The sooner, the better."

"McKenzie," he says, floored. It takes him a moment to recover. "I know my son isn't the easiest person to live with, especially in times like this. If he's neglected you—"

“No, he hasn’t. He’s been wonderful. Nothing but attentive.”

“I know he spends time working.”

“He’s grieving. It helps him. He’s there when I need him to be. It’s nothing like what you’re thinking. I’m not doing this because I’m unhappy with him.”

“Then why?”

I take a deep breath and pause, trying to think of the best way to explain.

“Gage only married me because I was pregnant. It was the epitome of a shotgun wedding.”

“I remember well,” he says, smiling at what seems to be a memory.

“It was all done with the promise of raising a family,” I continue. Absentmindedly, I press my hand to my stomach. “That’s gone now. Our baby is gone and Gage shouldn’t be held to that promise.”

“McKenzie, he made vows and he meant them.”

“You must see how unfair it is to hold him to those vows. I think he’s done more than enough for me. I need to do this for him. It’s bad enough we lost Alex. Now he has to put up with a wife who is making him miserable. I can’t help but grieve this loss for the rest of my life. But Gage shouldn’t have to. He should be able to move on and find happiness. He can’t do that with me.”

“McKenzie, that’s simply not true.”

“I didn’t sign a prenup, but I’m sure there’s a postnup or some type of thing I can sign to say I don’t want anything from him,” I say, pulling out the things I brought with me from my bag. I place them on his desk.

“What is all of this, sweetheart?”

“These are checkbooks, bank cards, and credit cards from our joint account. And there’s one for a personal account he put money in when we were dating. It’s all there, I never spent it, except for what I sent to help out my mom. He’s always been so generous with his money.”

“McKenzie, you’re breaking my heart, my dear.”

“Dwayne insisted on driving me here so I’ll have him return the car when I leave,” I go on, doing my best to get it all out so I can be done with it.

“Where are you going? Have you spoken to Gage at all about this?”

“He would only try and talk me out of it like you are right now.”

“As well he should.”

“He’s a man of his word and he would die in this marriage right along with me if I let him, but how fair is that to him? He deserves so much more than I’ve given him.”

“The one thing I know with absolute certainty is that my son enjoys being your husband. He adores you.”

I smile at him.

“I’ve been nothing but trouble from the start and you know it.” I laugh a little. “He told me how you tricked him, making him think you’d help him with his plan. That took guts.”

“I remember fondly the day he came to me saying he was going to marry you. I wanted to throttle him for that ridiculous plan he came up with until he went and done the one redeeming thing that proved where his true heart lies.”

“What was that?”

“He asked for his grandmother’s wedding ring. I realized he cared for you, but he was just scared to admit it. So, I became his co-conspirator. All the while pushing him to get closer to you. I wanted you in a happy bubble of love like all newlyweds get to experience. Of course, it was all part of the plan to keep you unaware. At least as far as my son was concerned. I knew eventually he’d stop fighting his feelings for you. I hope you can forgive me for secretly giving him a little nudge in the right direction.”

I nod.

“I’m sorry I accused you of helping him take Alex.”

“Don’t give it another thought.”

I smile at him before doing the hardest part.

With trembling fingers, I take my wedding ring and slide it off. My hand feels so bare without it already, so exposed and unprotected.

“I’m sure you want to have this back.”

“Gage gave that to you. I can’t take it from you,” he says. I place it on the paperwork I gave him.

“I don’t have a lawyer. I figured since I’m not asking for anything, I won’t need one. I’m sure you’ll be able to help Gage out with the process. If you need me for anything, you can call me. Whatever makes things move quickly, you can do it. Even if it means making me look bad. I don’t mind, really. Whatever’s easiest for Gage.”

“Being your husband is easiest for him. If you go through with this, it will devastate him.”

I shake my head, getting up and grabbing my bag. I know he’ll be fine. This is for the best for him. He can have his family and his happiness once I’m gone.

“I want to thank you for always being so kind to me,” I tell him, rushing out of his office before I change my mind.

I run right into Keira and Elaine.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

McKenzie

I acknowledge Keira before doing the same to Elaine. I don't bother to explain why I'm here; I just rush right out the door. The last thing I want is Elaine to see me upset. I refuse to show any emotions over losing the child she probably still doesn't think is Gage's and consequently giving up my marriage because of it in front of her.

Keira calls my name, following behind me.

"I'm divorcing Gage," I spin around to tell her.

"What?" she says, stopping short of running into me. "Why? What did he do?"

"Nothing," I blurt out. "He's been wonderful. I just don't feel right staying with him like this anymore."

"Oh, McKenzie," she says, holding me.

"I have to go," I tell her, pulling away. "I need to pack. I want to be out of the way before he gets home. And I need to look for a place to stay in the meantime."

"This is all too much right now," she says, stopping me from rattling on. "Let's just slow down for a minute, okay."

"I already told your dad I'm divorcing him," I sniff. "I know this is the right thing to do."

"Okay," she says. I know she's patronizing me. I must seem like a hot mess to her. "Whatever you want. I'm coming home

with you. You shouldn't be alone right now."

I shake my head.

"I can't go back home," I tell her, even though I know a moment ago, I told her I needed to go there and pack. My thoughts are going a mile a minute and I can't slow them down enough to get a handle on them. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"Okay. That's okay," she says, in a high-pitched voice meant for comfort. "Let's just go to Tyrone's. He's been asking to see you. Let's just go there and take a minute out to visit, okay? Then we'll figure it all out together."

I nod, getting into the car.

She sits next to me silently communicating with Dwayne, glancing at him through the rearview mirror as he drives. They both think I'm certifiable at this point.

"You don't still have to do this for me, you know," I tell Dwayne as he opens the door for me to get out.

"I don't mind. It's my job."

"Not anymore. Soon, I won't be Mrs. Remington."

"Mrs. Remington or not, I'm still here to look after you."

"Thanks, Dwayne."

"Anytime, ma'am," he says, making me smile.

"McKenzie, hey," Tyrone greets me, opening his door, and giving me a quick hug. He looks around at Keira and Dwayne curiously before inviting us all in.

The way they're all staring at each other would be laughable under any other circumstance.

Gage

"Mr. Remington, your father is here to see you," Jenna announces his visit over the intercom. I'm surprised he's here. Usually, he's knee-deep in work right about now.

"Send him in."

"Son," he says, sitting down. He has the same look on his face he had when he told me my grandmother was sick.

"What is it?"

"I just came from a meeting with McKenzie."

"What for?" She never mentioned wanting to talk to Dad.

"There's no easy way to say it, but she asked me to start the ball rolling for a divorce."

"Divorce," I whisper the word, trying hard to swallow it back down. "Jesus. I thought I was giving her what she needed. I thought I was being a good husband. I tried to be supportive. Clearly, I failed her."

"That's not true."

"It is true. I've failed her again."

"You're not the reason she wants a divorce. At least not for the one you think."

“I spend too many hours away. I should have been there for her more. I should have tried harder to comfort her.”

“McKenzie understands your need to keep busy and knows you’re there for her. She gets you better than you realize, Gage, so stop this way of thinking, right now.”

“Then why would she want to divorce me?”

“She’s trying to right what she sees as a wrong—getting pregnant and you marrying her as a consequence. She’s tied it together in her mind and right now she’s not able to separate the two. Quite simply, she wants to save you from having to spend your life with her.”

“She’s doing this for me?”

“She’s trying to free you of your obligation.”

“She’s not a goddamn obligation. She’s my wife.”

“I tried to explain that to her, but she has her mind made up.” He places a manila envelope on my desk.

“What the hell is that?” It better not be the damn divorce papers.

“Bank accounts she’s handed over. She didn’t take a dime.”

“Take where?”

“She didn’t say, but her driver was with her. He won’t let anything happen to her.”

“She’s gone,” I say, on the verge of a panic attack. “I’ve lost her, Dad. I’ve lost her and I’ve lost Alex. How am I supposed to live without them? I’ve been holding it all together for McKenzie, but now...”

“Listen to me, Gage,” he says after going over to get a shot of whiskey and making me drink it. “You haven’t lost her. She’s just in a world of hurt right now. She isn’t thinking clearly and neither are you, for that matter.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, if you were, you’d already be out the door to find her.”

I stare at him as his words sink in. He’s right. Why the fuck am I sitting around here when my wife is out there somewhere?

I race out the door, leaving him in my wake and going to the one place I think she’d run.

“Tyrone, where is she?”

“In the spare room,” he says, blocking his front door. I look past him at Keira talking to Dwayne who looks put out about this whole situation.

“I need to see her,” I say, turning my attention back to Tyrone.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea right now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tyrone. Please let my nephew in,” Keira tells him. He takes a deep breath, debating if he should go against his girlfriend. Of course, he listens to her and lets me in.

“Sir,” Dwayne says with a nod.

“How is she?” I ask him and Keira.

“Terrible,” Keira answers. “We convinced her to rest.”

“She didn’t want me to call you or Rodger, sir,” Dwayne adds. “I didn’t want to upset her further so I did as she asked.”

“Thank you for looking out for her,” I tell him before turning to Keira. “I’m going to go see her.”

“She doesn’t want to see you,” Tyrone says to me while Keira gives him a look.

“She doesn’t know *what* she wants right now,” she tells him.

“Look, she’s my best friend, okay,” he says to the both of us. “I hate seeing her like this.”

“She’s my wife, Tyrone, and he was my son. You couldn’t *possibly* hate this more than I do.”

“Down the hall,” he says. “Second door on the right.”

I go in that direction while Keira hugs him.

I enter the dimly lit room where McKenzie is sleeping, curled up on the bed. It’s the sort of rest that comes from sheer exhaustion. My heart aches for her and my body longs to feel her close. I toe out of my shoes and climb in. She stirs when she feels me behind her.

“Gage,” she whispers.

“Sleep, baby,” I tell her, wrapping my arm around her.

She never truly sleeps anymore and I know she needs to; we both do. She holds my forearm as best she can, grabbing on to me tightly as if she doesn’t want to let me go. Her grip soothes my soul and eases my mind, telling me how much she needs me. The feel of her body nestled in mine calms me. I kiss her

shoulder, reveling in the feel of her skin and the smell of her hair.

Her breathing evens and her grip on my arm loosen a bit as she falls into a deeper sleep. I lie awake, silently promising her things will get better before my mind and body both give out and succumb to sleep.

I wake up just an hour later to her sitting on the edge of the bed watching me. She still looks exhausted. I whisper her name. My voice is still raspy from sleep.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she says. “I didn’t want to see you.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you changing my mind about what I need to do.”

“Divorcing me?”

“Setting you free.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“You should.”

“Why?” She shakes her head. “Why, McKenzie? Why should I want something like that?”

“Because I wasn’t strong enough for him.”

“Baby, that’s not true,” I pull her into my arms. “Somewhere inside of you, you have to know that’s not true. Jesus, you’re tearing me apart.”

McKenzie

The sun setting low in the window wakes me. Instinctively, I place my hand on my stomach. Reality comes crashing down on me when I feel how flat it is.

Gage isn't here with me. I half convince myself that I dreamed him, but I know better. I leave the room in search of Tyrone, but find Gage in the kitchen instead. Surprisingly, he's at the stove. I have to blink twice at the fact that he appears to be cooking.

"I'm reheating," he says of the dinner he had delivered with a laugh and a shrug as he orders me to sit down.

"I thought you left," I say before looking around. "Where's everyone?"

"Keira wanted to go out," he says. I know it's code for him asking them to leave us alone.

I feel terrible for displacing Tyrone from his apartment. I don't want to be a burden to him. The sooner I find a place, the better.

"Eat," he says, sliding a plate of pasta in front of me. He watches with satisfaction that I'm doing what he says. "I've been thinking about what you said earlier."

"I won't change my mind. This is what needs to happen."

"That's not the part I'm talking about. Baby, you're drowning in your grief."

“And I don’t want you to drown with me. There’s no point in both of us going through this.”

“But both of us should. We both suffered a loss.”

“You can have other kids.”

“So can you.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I loved him too.”

“I know. God, Gage, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make it sound like you didn’t. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“But now you know something is?”

“I can’t seem to snap out of it.”

“I want you to talk to someone. I want you to *talk* this time, McKenzie.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it. But you shouldn’t worry about it. I’m no longer your responsibility, Gage.”

“You’re my wife.”

“Hopefully, your dad will be able to put a rush on fixing that for you.”

“I don’t want him to *fix* it. For fuck’s sake, our marriage isn’t something to fix.”

“I won’t argue with you and I won’t stay in this marriage with you. Alex is gone. The whole thing is over. We just need to let it be over.”

“Baby, I get that you’re running scared. I wrote the book on that shit, starting with me running to Afghanistan when I

couldn't deal with my grandmother dying. Believe me, I get it."

"I'm not running scared. I'm finally doing the right thing for once. I'm thinking of someone besides myself. I'm thinking of you."

"Divorce isn't what I want."

"Yes, it is. You just don't realize it yet. I set this whole thing in motion when I decided to lie to you when we first met, and now I'm paying for it."

"Baby, what happened to Alex isn't because of that. None of that shit matters anymore."

"Maybe not, but one of us is going to gain some happiness out of this whole thing. It's too late for me, but it's not for you. I can save you. I can save you from me—from this life you never really wanted in the first place."

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true. Whatever we had is over. It was over the day he died. I want a divorce, Gage."



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Gage

At McKenzie's insistence, I leave her with Tyrone. Her only compromise was to let Dwayne stay close by. I enter the house that used to be a home to find it so lonely without my wife. As big as it is, the walls close in on me. I pour myself a glass of bourbon and down it, hoping the sting will ease my ache for her.

"Mr. Remington." I hear Vera's voice behind me, but I don't turn to acknowledge her. "Would you like me to make you something to eat?"

"No thank you, Vera. I've already had dinner. Why don't you and Rodger call it a night," I tell her, my voice croaking with the last word. I'm still not looking at her. One look at the pity I know she feels for me and I'll lose it. "I'll see you in the morning."

She hesitates. I'm guessing she wants to say more. Instead, she walks away. No longer hearing her footsteps, I pour another glass full of whiskey. Smiling briefly at the warm brown color that still reminds me of my wife's eyes, I down it.

I used to relish being alone. It's hard to believe how much I've changed in only a few short months and it's all because of McKenzie. My life is empty without her. Abandoning the glass, I reach for the bottle and retreat to one of the guest

rooms. There's no way I can sleep in our bed without her being in my arms.

Everything that makes this house a home is because of her. Every piece of furniture, every picture on the wall, every swipe of paint is her. The excitement I get coming through the front door is because of her. Now it's just a shell, cold and hollow.

I collapse on the bed passed out, unsure if it's from exhaustion or whiskey, and no longer giving a fuck either way.

One week later

McKenzie

"I don't see the point in talking about any of this," I tell my grief counselor, Dr. Shaw. "Talking about it won't change anything."

I say it for the second time in the two minutes we've been standing outside her door. This is to be the first of six mandatory group meetings I'm to attend as part of the divorce agreement Gage made Gordon draw up. I'm pissed about having to sit in a room full of strangers bleeding my heart out. I instantly regret coming here.

"You're right, McKenzie. Sadly, it won't change what happened, but it can help to know that other people are going through similar situations. You don't have to say a word if you don't want to. You can just listen. Agreed?"

“Fine,” I tell her. “Let’s just get it over with.”

We enter the lilac-colored room with the large, plush chairs all around. I sit in the only vacant one left. Once I’m settled, Dr. Shaw speaks to the group that’s discreetly eyeing me.

“Hello, everyone,” she greets the men and women sitting in a circle. There are eleven of us in all. “This is McKenzie. She’ll be joining our group as of today.”

“Hello, McKenzie,” they all say in unison.

“Let’s go around the room and introduce ourselves, catch McKenzie up on why we’re here,” Dr. Shaw suggests. I want to roll my eyes at feeling like I’m the new student in grade school all over again. “Christina, why don’t you start.”

“Sure,” a woman of about forty speaks up. “I’m Christina, and this is my husband, Tom.” She smiles at the man sitting to her right. He catches her eye and smiles right back at her. “We lost our son Daniel a little over a year ago to a drunk driver.”

She stops and dries her tears with the tissue her husband gives her.

“I’m sorry,” she says to us, wiping her palms on her jeans before taking her husband’s hand, drawing strength from him as she continues. “Daniel would have turned eighteen today. It’s just so... hard. We always went all out for his birthday and him turning eighteen would have been big. He was such a great kid, you know. And I’m not just saying that because I’m his mom. Although, I am biased.” She laughs and I can’t help but smile at her. “His friends still stop by to visit. They’re all excited about graduation and going off to college. I think that’s

the worst part about it. Seeing them all growing up, so eager to start life. It just makes me wonder who he'd be today.”

She lays her head on her husband's shoulders and silently cries. I wipe at my own tears.

“Tom,” Dr. Shaw calls for her husband to speak next.

One by one, they tell their stories. I never say a word. I just listen. Men, women, husbands, and wives all bonded together through the loss of a child. Each story is different but they all just break my heart. In all that sadness, we laugh. Someone shares a tale about a mischievous toddler who wreaked havoc on his walls with a red crayon or a rebellious teen that frustrated his parents, and we all laugh.

Somewhere in the middle of it, I remember Alex. How he would kick at his dad's hand. How he seemed to purposely moon us during sonograms. How he would only settle down when Gage played his favorite song.

I remember our son, not just him dying but him living. I know he would have been a holy terror and we would have loved every minute of it. For the first time in a long time, I smile inside when I think of him.

I feel just a little bit lighter.

One Month Later

Gage

“Dad, what the hell am I going to do? She refuses to speak to me,” I’m all but pulling my hair out, pacing around the home that’s still too big and quiet for me.

McKenzie refuses to come back. I offered to move out so she could live here, but stubbornly, she wouldn’t hear of it. I did manage to convince her to move to the beach house and out of Tyrone’s place. I was hoping that at least living there would remind her of how good we are together.

Vera has been shipped off to take care of her and Dwayne has yet to leave her side, needing no orders from me not to do so. Rodger takes pity on me and stays at his post, so he’s separated from Vera. I think that’s more Vera’s doing than Rodger’s. She doesn’t want me to be alone. Even though a member of my family stops by every day, it doesn’t stop me from feeling alone.

“You’ve done all you could,” Dad says.

“I can’t believe she fucking hired that bitch of a lawyer.”

“Well, I stalled McKenzie long enough to force her hand. Priscilla Davis is a pit bull, that’s for damn sure. She demands the best for her clients. In any other circumstance, it would be commendable. But right now, it’s not in our favor. She’s tired of playing the waiting game.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“There’s only one thing left to do, son. Give McKenzie what she’s asking for.”

“Are you kidding me?”

He turns from the window he was just staring out of to regard me. The look he gives leaves no room to doubt how serious he is.

“Our hands are tied,” he says. “McKenzie has done all that you asked of her. She’s in counseling and she’s on the right combination of antidepressants. It’s all done wonders for her.”

I sigh deeply at that fact.

“I thought that once she got better, she’d see that we belong together. I thought divorcing me was just her grief talking.”

“No, son, wanting to divorce you has nothing to do with her grief and everything to do with her love for you.”

“Dad, you’re wrong. She doesn’t love me. How could she?”

“She loves you just as much as you love her. She loves you enough to let you go.”

“How the hell is that love? I don’t get that. You don’t let the people you love go. You fight like hell to hold on to them.”

He raises an eyebrow at my words. I’m sure it’s for all the times I tried to push McKenzie away.

“I’ll talk to Priscilla,” he says. “I’m sure she’ll agree to an arbitration meeting.”

“I’m not divorcing McKenzie, Dad.”

“Of course not. This is just to get you two talking.”

“She won’t talk to me.”

“Then make her listen.”

“How?”

“I asked you once if you were willing to put it all on the line to get what you want. Now, I’m giving you your chance at this meeting. Tell her what’s in your heart. It’s the only thing you have left to fight with. I believe it’s the only thing she’ll listen to.”

I nod, grabbing the back of my neck to ease the strain I feel there.

“What are your plans for this evening?” he asks.

“Seth’s coming by for a guy’s night.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Why don’t you join us?”

“I think I will. I best go give your mother some attention so she’ll leave me in peace while I’m out tonight.” I frown at the thought of that. I don’t even want to know what attention she’ll require. “Did you pack up Alex’s room yet?” He turns around before he walks out.

“Not yet.”

“Good. You and McKenzie need to do it together. It’s important.”

I nod as he leaves me alone.

Arbitration Day

Gage

McKenzie sits anxiously across the table from me. Her lawyer is to her left and Dad is to mine. Paperwork is put in front of her saying that whatever the arbitrator decides today will be agreed upon by both parties. She signs before sliding it over to me. Her eyes catch mine as she hands me her pen and our fingers touch.

She's beautiful in a dress that brings out her eyes. They're bright and alive again. Her weight has picked back up some, her face isn't tear-stained anymore, and her hair is full and bouncy, framing her face. This is the McKenzie I've longed for.

I tear my eyes away from her to speak to the arbitrator.

"Before I sign anything, I'd like a moment alone with my wife."

McKenzie sucks in a winded breath. Her eyes look at me with curiosity. Did she think I'd make this shit easy for her?

"I don't see the point of that," Priscilla speaks on her behalf. "We've been nothing but fair in giving in to the demands of Mr. Remington. Mrs. Remington is ready to get on with the business at hand."

"Priscilla, we have every intention of preceding today," Dad tells her. "What harm would it do to take a moment?"

She looks to McKenzie who nods her consent.

"Since Mrs. Remington agrees, we can spare ten minutes," the arbitrator says, getting up and leaving the room.

Priscilla follows suit after whispering to McKenzie. Dad gives me a nod of encouragement before following everyone

out the door and closing it firmly behind him.

“McKenzie,” I call to her now that we’re alone.

“There isn’t anything left for us to say,” she says, getting up from the table, putting distance between us.

“We’re about to end our marriage. There’s a lot of things left to say.” I stalk toward her.

“What things?”

“Like the divorce itself. I don’t want it and I know you don’t either.”

“Gage, please—”

“Baby, we’ve been here so many times before, haven’t we? I’ve lost count as to how many times we should have thrown in the towel and walked away, especially you, but we didn’t. We couldn’t. There’s a reason for that.”

“Yes, there was a reason. We did it for Alex. We did it so that he could have a family he deserved, but now he’s gone.”

“It wasn’t all about Alex. What about how good we were before we got pregnant?”

“That was just sex, Gage. It was kinky, earth-shattering sex, but it was still just sex.”

“What about St. Thomas? What about all the fun we had just being together? What about our bed island, huh? Watching your soap operas and eating everything and anything you were craving? What about staying up late, holding on to each other, and sharing our secrets?”

“Gage, stop. Please,” she says, shaking her head of the memories. “That’s all over with now.”

“Don’t you miss us, baby? Because I miss us. I miss *you*, McKenzie. I miss my wife. I miss our life. Don’t you miss me?”

“Of course, I miss you. I’m miserable without you.”

“Then stop this.”

She shakes her head.

“It wouldn’t be fair to you. All the promises you made were because of Alex. You shouldn’t have to be tied down to me. You should be free to do what truly makes you happy. Your vows to me shouldn’t matter now without him.”

“Baby, I didn’t make those vows because of Alex.”

“Why else would you? He’s the reason we got married in the first place. Why else would you have possibly vowed to spend the rest of your life with me back then?”

“I made those promises to you because...” I stop, taking a deep breath to steady my hands as they cup her face.

She closes her eyes so as not to look at me. She doesn’t want to see the truth. I know it’s written all over my face, but she doesn’t want to see it. Or perhaps she doesn’t trust it.

I have no choice but to speak it. I hope my words are somehow enough. They have always fallen so short of how I truly feel.

“I love you, McKenzie.” The words I’ve been terrified of speaking for so long comes out in a whisper. I fear they may

have been carried away by the space between us until her eyes spring open. They dart around, trying to grasp what I've just said. I say it to her again. "I love you, baby."

I watch as her big warm brown eyes overflow and the contents spill down her cheeks. I brush the tears away with my thumbs. Her head shakes slightly in disbelief, so I keep going. I refuse to stop until she believes what I'm saying is true.

"I can't tell you for how long. I think it's always been there. I was just running from it because I was so afraid of losing you. No, that's not true. I was afraid of giving you the power to hurt me. But I've loved you since the day I married you. It's the *reason* I married you. It's the reason I kept pulling and pushing you when we returned from our honeymoon. It's the reason for that unforgivable plot against you. It's the reason for all of it, baby. I love you. I love you so much, and every day, it only gets stronger. It consumes me. You consume me and I'm too weak to fight it. I don't want to fight it. It's too good. Loving you feels too good, too right, too vital to who I am because I'm nothing without you. I love you and I need you."

"Gage," she sniffs my name.

"I don't expect you to love me back, McKenzie." I let go of her face. "I know I fucked up. I'm fucked up—"

"Don't say that. Don't even think that." She grabs hold of my shoulders, ready to shake me. "How could I not love you? You're everything I've ever wanted. You're everything I could *ever* want."

"I am?"

“Of course you are. You’re my passion and my strength. You’re my joy and my anger. You’re my dream come true and... I love you. I love you so much, Gage.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” she blurts out with a laugh at my two-worded responses. “I do. I was just scared that you didn’t. I didn’t want you to regret me. It would have killed me all over again if you did.”

“Jesus, baby.” I take her in my arms. “Never. I love you.”

“I love you.”

I close my eyes and allow the truth of her words to wash over me.

“No divorce,” I tell her. I’m downright demanding it because there’s no way in hell I’ll ever sign a damn thing now.

“I don’t know. I...” My lips press to hers, making her moan into me. Her arms wrap around my waist, pulling me closer until we’re smack up against the window for all of LA to see. “No divorce,” she pants when the need for air pulls us apart.

On its own accord, my face breaks into a lip-splitting grin only to be matched by hers.

Thank fuck. Thank fuck. Thank fuck.

She moans my name as I nibble her neck. It’s been so long since I’ve held her this close. My every pore is craving for her to fill it.

“I need to taste my peach pie. It’s been way too long since I’ve had it, baby. I’m starving for it.”

“I’ve missed my white chocolate too,” she says, squirming into me.

“I’m going to drown you in so much backed-up white chocolate,” I warn her. She laughs before she feels my hand inching up her leg.

“Gage,” she says, swatting it away. “We’re in a law office. Feeling each other up can’t be legal.”

“Then come home with me,” I groan like a denied child.

The door opens before she can answer and the arbitrator walks in with Priscilla and Dad close behind. I look to McKenzie, but she says nothing as she takes her seat.

“Are we ready to proceed?” the arbitrator asks McKenzie who in turn whispers to her lawyer.

I wait with bated breath as they converse.

“Are you certain about this?” Priscilla asks.

“Completely,” McKenzie tells her.

“Well, I’m happy to report that Mrs. Remington has changed her mind about continuing with the divorce,” Priscilla says for the record. Between me and Dad, I don’t know who breathes a sigh of relief the loudest. “However, she does have one stipulation for continuing with the marriage.”

“And what might that be?” Dad asks exactly what I’m thinking. I raise an eyebrow at McKenzie who bites her lip guiltily at me.

The innocent gesture shoots straight to my dick and I want to agree to whatever it is already so I can get her out of here

and into bed.

Priscilla grimaces like what she is about to say will feel like pulling out her eyelashes one by one. She pauses, looking at McKenzie in disbelief before continuing.

“Mrs. Remington will remain in the marriage on the basis that a postnuptial agreement is signed.”

“Never going to happen,” I say to her before turning to my wife. “No way in hell am I agreeing to that, McKenzie. No fucking way.”

“Gage,” she starts to argue.

“No,” I tell her and she crosses her arms in defiance. That little pout always works on me, but not this time. This is too important to me. “It’s never going to happen, baby.”

“Let’s just leave that on the table for now, all right, Priscilla. I’m sure we’ll be able to come up with something that will satisfy all parties,” Dad says to the arbitrator once he’s done laughing. “For now, I think we’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“I wish all my hearings ended like this,” he says. “Good luck to you all.”

“Thank you,” I tell him as he leaves.

“McKenzie,” Dad gushes as he rounds the table to go to her.

“I guess I’m back in the family again,” she says, shrugging guiltily at him.

He holds her at arm’s length, looking at her with the love he’d only reserved for Keira until McKenzie came along.

“Oh, no, my dear. You never left. You’re my daughter. Your place is in my heart and this family is absolute.”

I smile as he takes her in his arms.

“Well, I think this is a reason to celebrate,” Priscilla says to him. “Why don’t I treat you to lunch, Gordon. We can go over that pesky ol’ postnup.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let that slide,” Dad tells her.

“Not on your life,” she says.

“I’ll tell the family not to expect to see you two for a good long while yet,” he says to me and McKenzie with a chuckle before following Priscilla out the door. I shake my head at him, even though truer words have never been spoken. If I were to have my way, McKenzie and I won’t be taking any visitors for a very good long while yet.

“Let’s go home, wife.”

“I like the sound of that,” she whispers.

Dwayne is still at his post in the hallway as we approach.

He looks from me to McKenzie and then down at our interlaced hands. It only takes him a moment to put it all together. He cracks a grin that is very out of character for him. It even makes McKenzie laugh.

I sit in the back seat with her nestled perfectly in my arms. I shoot a text to Rodger telling him to take a few days off to reconnect with Vera, offering up the beach house for the both

of them. Of course, he jumps at the chance. I'm sure his ass is flying out the door while reading the damn text.

"Can we have chocolate-covered strawberries delivered to them?" McKenzie asks.

"Absolutely," I tell her. "But why strawberries?"

"Oh, no reason." She shrugs with a giggle, making me eye her.

She sits up straight as we pull up to the house. It's been over a month since she's been here.

"Wait," I stop her at the front door.

I take her rings out of my pocket. I've been carrying them since the day Dad gave them to me. I open my palm, revealing them to her before taking her hand and slowly slipping them back on her finger.

"I felt naked without them," she says, curling a finger around the precious stone of her engagement ring, caressing it.

"I felt naked without you," I tell her, lifting her to carry her over the threshold of our home. I take her straight to our bedroom, laying her down on the bed and sliding in next to her. "We can just lie here," I tell her. As much as I want her, I don't want her to feel pressured.

"I want you," she admits, tangling her hand in the hairs on the nape of my neck and bringing me down to kiss her.

"Is it okay for us to...?" I ask and she nods.

"We'll have to use a condom. I'm not on birth control," she says.

“Right.”

I get up and haul ass to my closet, hoping I have at least one damn stray condom tucked away in there so I won't have to go to the damn drugstore.

Luckily, I find a box full, and thank fuck they're not expired.

I try to get my dick's head right as I walk back to McKenzie. He's sticking out of my pants too damn impatiently and I know his ass won't last but a few strokes the way he's acting right now.

Keep your fucking shirt on. Let's savor this. I try to tell him. Not that he ever listens.

I reenter the bedroom that I haven't slept in since the day McKenzie left. I could never bring myself to be in that bed without her. Now here she is, the love of my life, my wife, right where I've been dreaming she'd be.

I just stand and stare at her.

My God, she's beautiful.

“Gage Remington, if you don't come over here and take what's yours, I'm coming over there and getting what's mine.”

I growl at her threat because either way, it's a damn win-win for me.

“You're still mine, baby?” I ask, lying beside her once again.

“Only yours. You're my one and only. My husband.”

“Mmm,” I moan at her words.

“I love you,” she says before her lips find me again.

Clothes and shoes go flying in our desperate need for each other. There’s no elegance in our movements. They’re quick and purposeful, but frenzied. Hurriedly, I sheathe myself with a condom before I slide into her.

Her wet arousal makes it almost effortless.

“Jesus, baby,” I moan from the feel of her. It takes everything in me to keep still inside as I kiss her lips, making my way down her neck and then slowly suckling each perfect nipple, getting them hard.

“Gage,” she moans in desperation as she brings her legs up, wrapping them around my ass, pushing her hips up into me, sliding me in deeper.

I meet her thrusts, letting her set the pace. Her hands are in my hair painfully grabbing it as she takes us higher. Feeling her under me is almost my undoing. Her skin is so soft, so warm. She feels so good—too fucking good.

“Never leave me again,” I say, with my lips at her ear. I know I won’t survive it a second time.

“Never,” she promises. “I’ll never leave you. Never ever again. I love you.”

“I love you. I love you so much, baby.”

“Gage,” she calls for me, tumbling over the edge, gripping my dick as she comes.

I damn near cry as I join her.

I collapse on the bed, studying her as she stares grinning up at the ceiling, trying to catch her breath.

“Fuck,” I yell out.

“What?” she says, turning her head to look at me, wondering what the matter is.

“I didn’t get to taste you.”

She laughs.

“Well, we have plenty of time,” she says, turning over on her side to face me.

“All night.”

“All night,” she agrees. “And all morning and the day after that and forty years from now and forty years after that.”

She pauses to think.

“Will you still even want to taste me when I’m almost a hundred?”

“Hell yes,” I say. “One thing about a peach, it gets better with age.” She laughs, doubting that. “Welcome home, baby.” I pull her into my arms.

“This is home,” she whispers, snuggling into me. I grin, knowing she doesn’t mean the house.

Being in each other’s arms will always be home.

I kiss the top of her head and hold her tighter.

She is home.

The End



Their story isn't over.

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<https://storyoriginapp.com/giveaways/e88d4792-ba57-11ec-9719-136a7df88a41>

Have you read the Dare to Love Again Trilogy?

Excerpt:

“Professor Jericho.”

“Jax,” I correct her.

“Jax,” she says my name and I get hard from the sound of it coming from her mouth. Those sexy, plump lips need to be wrapped around my cock. “I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for...” She pauses to swallow and I imagine her doing that with my cock down her throat.

“For what? For distracting me because you’re so damn sexy? For making me want you? What is it exactly that you’re sorry for?”

“I... don’t...”

“You’re such a fucking tease.”

I walk up to her, take her in my arms and press my lips into hers so hard it hurts. She moans into my mouth, opening hers slightly. I slip my tongue in and nearly come from the taste of her. She’s so sweet. I try to savor it, but she pulls away.

“Tell me you want me?”

“I want you,” she says with no hesitation, so I kiss her again. “Jax,” she moans. “Fuck me.”

I lay her naked on the bed, not even caring where our clothes went. Her smooth legs rub together like silk and I waste no time prying them open. My cock slams into her and

she gasps, biting my shoulder as I rip into her. Her tight pussy pulsates around me. I slip out and slide back in again. My cock is slick with her warm juices.

“Tell me you like the way I fuck you. Say it.”

Her nails are raking my back and her lips are pressed against my ear. The dirtiest shit’s coming from that sweet mouth of hers while I dip down to capture her plump nipple in my mouth. Her tits alone are going to make me come.

“Daddy?”

“Mmm, that’s right, baby. I’m your daddy.”

Wait... what?

“Good morning, Daddy,” Summer’s voice penetrates my dream.

Fuck!

My eyes spring open, looking around.

“Can we have pumpkin pancakes for breakfast?” she asks, looking down at me with her icy blue and white princess pajamas on.

“Of course, we can,” I tell her, rubbing my eyes. “Give Daddy a minute and I’ll be right out, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Can we go watch cartoons?” Connor asks with his Mine Craft pajamas on.

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll call you when breakfast is ready,” I say to their backs as they leave the room.

I get out of bed and head to the shower, making sure to adjust the water until it's tepid. Normally, I like it hot, but this boner I'm having is painful and it's begging for release. I let the water run over me, trying to shake the dream I was just awakened from. I want to jack off like the horny teenager I feel like I am, but no way in hell can I do that when my twins are hungry and waiting for Daddy's pumpkin pancakes. I will myself back under control, finish up my shower, and head for the kitchen.

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