

PARADISE BAY

*The U Way
of Us*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CLAUDIA BURGOA

The Way
of Us

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Also By Claudia Burgoa

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Dear Reader,

I write highly emotional romances that include thought provoking subjects. If you would like to see a list of them, please check the link below with more information.

The Way of us is the #5 in the Paradise Bay Billionaire Brothers series.

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Happy Reading,

Claudia

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*For Machuca, thank you for teaching me to love all kinds of
arts and appreciate all the colors of the rainbow.*

She was art. The type of art that makes you feel a thousand things at the same time. The type of art that everyone wants to see. Her smile more worth than a Picasso. Eyes gorgeous like the starry night. My Mona Lisa. She was my personal gallery.

–Unknown

Chapter One



Heath

LIES ALWAYS FIND a way to expose themselves.

Always.

At least, that's what my father used to say when one of my siblings got in trouble, and I wholeheartedly believed it. Believe me when I say, you can only hide the truth for so long.

Don't believe me? Dad always caught my oldest brothers when they were skipping curfew. There wasn't a weekend when Dad wouldn't say, "The triplets are going to be grounded for the rest of their lives."

Aslan, Gatsby, and Lysander tried to get away with murder. One of them always did or said something stupid that would give them away—it was usually Gatsby. Dad didn't punish them as much as he should've, but I'm sure karma will bite them in the ass. It'll happen when they have children just like them.

I don't judge them for trying to do whatever the fuck they wanted when they were young. I just think they could've done a better job at hiding it. I believe if you're going to do something, do it right or don't bother.

Was I a troublemaker?

My father died when I was thirteen. Just a year shy of high school. The period when we all begin to make stupid decisions, push boundaries, and break all the rules. After the loss of Dad, I didn't have time to be like my brothers, but I tried my best to become like my old man.

According to my family, I'm the introvert. Sometimes they call me the grouchy doc. My best friend, Atzi, calls me grumpy sometimes. They're wrong.

I'm observant and quiet. It's because of that I learned to read people at a very young age. Almost nothing gets past me.

I'm usually the one saying, "I told you so." If only they listened to me before things got out of hand.

Which is why I'm not surprised when I read Atzi's text, telling me about her latest dating disaster. If I were a lesser man, I would screenshot the message, frame it, and hang it somewhere in my penthouse. Maybe make a copy for her house too.

Atzi: You were right.

Atzi: Drew was a liar.

Atzi: The asshole was married.

Heath: Are you okay?

I didn't tell her he was married, but that he was hiding something. He had all the red flags of an asshole who just wanted to use her.

And sadly, she had to find out the hard way.

But does she listen when I warn her about the idiots she dates? No. She ignores me. I could gloat, but instead, I head to the nurses' station to let them know I'm leaving early.

Billie, the head nurse, laughs and then glares at me. "You should've gone home hours ago. Those fourteen-hour shifts have to stop. Open your practice and start doing some good with your degree."

I try so hard not to roll my eyes. "And would you like me to hire you so you can continue bossing me around?"

Her nostrils flare. "Keep giving me that attitude, and I won't schedule any good nurses during your shifts."

I raise my hands as if giving up, but then add, "When I start my fellowship, I will return to graveyard shifts and long hours. Why try to live a normal nine-to-five life?"

She shakes her head. "If you end up back here, I'll make sure it happens."

I don't argue with her. She assumes the role of mother for all the residents and even doctors. And if there's something I've learned, it's that you never disagree with your mother. Never. They might not always be right, but all we should do is smile and nod along in agreement.

Before I arrive at my car, I pull out my phone to check if there's an update from Atzi. She hasn't responded yet, so I fire off a text to her.

Heath: Where are you?

Atzi: At the shop, about to eat my weight in chocolate. I'll probably fall into a sugar coma soon. Please don't revive me.

I roll my eyes. I adore my best friend, but she can be too dramatic at times.

Heath: I'll be there in twenty. Bring some ice cream with you, there's only vanilla in my freezer.

Atzi: I thought you were working late—like you always do.

Heath: I can't, in good conscience, leave you in a chocolate factory after you caught your boyfriend... how did you find out he's married?

Atzi: I'm at the shop, not the factory. He wasn't exactly my boyfriend.

Heath: That doesn't answer my question. :raised-eyebrow emoji:

I watch the dots dance on the screen, but she doesn't respond. She's either writing the next great American novel or trying to come up with a joke. If there's someone who can laugh at her misery, that'll be Atzi. I turn on the engine, check the phone again, and send another text.

Heath: Have you had dinner yet?

Atzi: No. As I mentioned, my date didn't go as I expected.

Heath: I'll be there soon.

Atzi: Thank you. I might even let you eat some of my ice cream.

I snort. I might have to hide all the sweets I have in my penthouse, but I also need to get ready to bring her home. Since I don't have that much time, I send a message to my brother, Lysander, asking for help. He lives in the same apartment building as I do. Unfortunately, he's still in Paradise Bay, so I try my brother, Caspian, and his wife, Rys, instead. They happen to occupy the apartment across from Lysander during the hockey off-season.

Cas: I'm at the winery too—Lysander thinks I'm his bitch. Ask my beautiful wife for help.

Heath: Rys, are you at the apartment? You're my only hope.

Rys: Yes, I'm at the apartment. Did you forget your lunch box and your lab coat, or is this something more interesting?

Heath: Ha, you're not funny.

Rys: I want to think that I am. You're just grumpy. How can I help you?

Heath: Do you have any wine you can share? Atzi would appreciate it.

Rys: Sure, I can drop off the bottles we have. It's not like I can drink any of it. I blame your brother for this. I should've remembered I couldn't drink any wine while pregnant. He should enjoy this baby since it'll be the only one we're having.

Heath: You complain now, but in a couple of years, you'll be expecting baby number two.

Rys: I don't think so.

Heath: Maia said something similar when Soleil was born, and from what I heard, Gatz and her are trying for baby number 2.

Rys: You Spearman's are too fertile and gossipy. If I didn't love Cas's manhood, I would ask you to cut it off.

Heath: And with that, I'm gone. There's going to be some food delivered to your apartment. Can you also take it to the penthouse? I'll owe you.

Rys: Hot date?

Heath: Nah, just Atzi.

Rys: Right. I forget that you're in denial and she's blind. I'd be more supportive of this insanity if you had some benefits.

Rys: Try sex with your BFFL... it might even sweeten your mood.

Heath: I'll bring you some chocolate cupcakes. Which are the only benefits I enjoy from my FRIENDSHIP with her.

Rys: Don't you dare text me with shouty caps. And I wasn't talking about those, but be sure to bring them over. I'll have dinner ready for the love of your life.

Heath: Thank you, sis.

WHEN I ARRIVE at Decadent Dreams, Atzi is outside the store, holding three white boxes. She even added a purple ribbon to each one of them. I park immediately, opening the trunk. When I get out of the car and see her, I come to a complete stop.

Atzi is beautiful, but some days, she just takes my breath away.

Today, she's wearing a tank top, a pair of barely-there shorts, and combat boots. She's jaw-droppingly gorgeous, and if we weren't just friends, I would be shoving her against the car and fucking her.

Rys isn't wrong when she says I'm in love with my best friend. I just don't act on my feelings. Atzi will never know how much she affects me. Thankfully, I'm wearing sunglasses, so she can't see I'm actually drinking her all in. From her dark, wavy hair cascading down her back to her tattooed legs.

I wish I could just lean down, kiss her lips and devour her. Instead, I say casually, "Hey."

"Hi, Doc." Her dazzling smile makes her warm beige skin glow. Those rich brown eyes crinkle, but not enough though. I can see the anger in them, maybe even sadness.

"Did you empty the entire store?" I ask as I take the packages.

She grins. "Maybe? I added a few cupcakes since Rys told me you promised her some."

Sometimes I forget Atzi is part of the family network. That explains one of the boxes, but three?

I probably misjudged how serious the relationship was with Mr. *Married-asshole*. So far, it had seemed casual, but if she has to consume that much chocolate in one night, something is wrong. Wasn't this date three or four? It's been only a month and a few days since they met. Everything was platonic, or so I thought.

Before I continue analyzing the situation, I simply say, "I didn't know you were in love with the fucker."

“Pfft, as if. I’m pissed at myself because I didn’t see the signs.”

I press my lips together, studying her. She does look angry, but seriously, is it only because she missed the obvious? Is she fucking kidding me? I told her so.

If I could, I would pull out a piece of paper and a pen to draw a graphic to explain to her those signs in greater detail so it doesn’t happen again.

“It was pretty obvious. He was a douchebag. Didn’t I say that from the beginning?” I shut the trunk and try to sound as calm as possible.

“You only said don’t swipe, block.”

I huff. “It’s the same.”

“I can’t discriminate against guys based on your poor judgment. You judge everyone, and according to you, no one is good enough for me.”

“Because they don’t deserve you.”

When I get inside the car, she begins to open and close her hand as if it’s a puppet. “This is you judging my dates, ‘Wah wah woh fuckers wah wah fuck... They’re all the fuck wah, and wah wah woh wah wah fuck fuck.’”

“I don’t sound like that.”

“That’s exactly how you sound like, a Charlie Brown adult with a copious number of fucks thrown in. Have I ever commented about the women you date?”

If I wasn’t trying to make a point, I would laugh at her insane but funny comparison. “I don’t date.”

“That’s yet another issue and a half. You’re just *Grey’s Anatomy*-ing through life.”

Her gibberish draws out a chuckle that soon becomes full-blown laughter. “Really? *Grey’s Anatomy*-ing—please enlighten me.”

“Sleeping around with nurses, doctors, and patients.”

I can't stop laughing. "Do you really think I have the time for that?"

"Do you deny that you've bedded several colleagues and nurses?"

This is exactly why she's my best friend. Even when things are crappy, she laughs and makes me laugh.

"Bedded? Is that even a word from this century?"

"De-flec-ting." She singsongs the word.

"I'm not deflecting shit."

"Listen, you can say whatever you want, but I know the stories."

If I wasn't driving, I'd be staring at her in disbelief. "Stop making up shit about me."

"Remember that time a nurse caught you fucking in the janitor's closet? Or the one when you were in an empty room, and the hospital board was making rounds and almost caught you?"

I frown. Who told her that shit? The stories are all true, but they're not mine. My other best friend, Benedict Farrow, is the one who likes to fuck around.

"That wasn't me."

"Uh-huh."

"How do you know about them and... more importantly, that was Benedict."

She snaps her fingers. "Oh, right. He thinks he's the McSteamy of New York City."

I glance at her. "Who told you about that?"

"Never mind."

"Atzi?" My voice sounds threatening. She knows I'll drag the answer from her, even if I have to tickle the fuck out of her.

"It was Rys's friend, Aubrey?" she whisper-hisses. "Yes, I remember now. It was during the last New Year's Eve party

Fern organized. She told us about his sexcapades—most of us were drunk. According to her, he taps into his McSteamy often. I don't doubt that you do too, but you're more discreet."

"Are you done comparing us with one of the most tragic and inaccurate shows in the history of television?"

"*ER* might be more inaccurate." She rubs her hands. "We should rewatch it."

Anything but that. I adore this woman, but bingeing a series that reminds me of work—and is not realistic in any way—isn't the best way to spend my free time.

Why can't she just be normal and ask for a cheesy romantic comedy?

"I'd rather schedule a root canal," I argue.

"It's either that or—"

"I'll take rom-coms for three hundred, Alex."

"Or we could watch a marathon of old *Jeopardy* episodes." All the energy drains away from her. It's like someone disconnected the plug and she's about to shut down.

And I almost smash my forehead against the wheel. I'm a fucking idiot.

When she was young, her father used to watch *Jeopardy* reruns. He always tried to guess before the contestants answered. According to Atzi's stories, he always got them wrong, and her mother laughed at him.

Why is she acting like this?

"How heartbroken are you?"

"Upset. I'm upset," she clarifies, but I can hear it in her tone and read between the lines—the unbearable hurt of missing her parents.

When I glance at her, she's rubbing the leg she broke during the accident where they died. And if I could, I would take on the pain she's trying to hide as my own. I reach out for her hand and squeeze it. It's a promise that we'll get through this day.

We always do.

Chapter Two



Atzi

I DON'T REGRET MESSAGING Heath about my pathetic dating life. Sure, he laughed at my expense and was able to gloat that he was right. Okay, he didn't exactly say the "I told you so," out loud. But knowing him, he was thinking it.

That's not important, what matters is that Heathcliff Spearman has a way of making me feel better—even during my worst days—without even trying.

He understands that some days I just need tortilla soup, tacos, and an unlimited supply of wine. He almost makes me forget I'm alone and I hate it.

Not that I'd admit that to anyone.

No one, not even Heath, would believe me if I confessed how lonely and sad I feel.

Everyone assumes that I have everything a person can desire. I have family and friends. A successful business. A career I love, and one most people can only dream of having. Plus, I have millions of people following me on social media who claim to adore me.

Although that's just what people see from the outside.

The business isn't exactly mine. My grandfather started Lavigne Chocolatier. Dad opened a branch in San Francisco and then built a factory so we could distribute our brand around the world. I'm just continuing the legacy I inherited. Being the CEO of an international brand is overwhelming and hard. Too hard.

My passion is art. I adore sculpting. Chocolate is my medium—you can say it's in my blood—so I sculpt chocolate to express myself. Well, I needed to make use of the surplus of chocolate I had around. Why not make art with it? Okay, it wasn't exactly a problem for Lavigne Chocolatier, but I like to

use the excess as an excuse as to why I focus on making chocolate sculptures more than using any other material.

My social media followers are amazing, but how can they love me when they've never met me?

They know the woman who posts videos. She's me, but not exactly me. The Atzi they think they know smiles, jokes around, and is happy all the time. Too happy. When the camera is off, things are different. Most days, I'm dealing with anxiety and depression, they just don't know it.

Then there's my family. I love them all, but since my parents died, I'm not as close to them because they live in other states and abroad. Having a relationship with them via social media and video calls isn't as fulfilling as having them nearby.

My friends have their own lives, even Heathcliff Spearman.

I'm waiting on the day for Heath to announce he was accepted for a fellowship. Soon enough, he'll be packing his things and leaving for New York or Baltimore. He's about to embark on his dream and probably fall in love.

He'll be too busy with his new life and I, Atzi, won't be a part of it. Maybe I should just move to France and start a new life too. But I can't. Even though I travel often, there is no way I can leave Lavigne Chocolatier unattended for long periods of time.

Maybe I could just move the factory to France? That's where the family business started anyway.

But that still leaves the problem of my love life. That I can't find love. Why is it so hard for me?

More so when there's a time limit. I need to find it within the next thirty days. I glance at Heath, grabbing my glass of wine and taking a sip, swallowing down the guilt I feel for keeping this from him. We've been eating in comfortable silence. The calm his presence always exudes brings me some peace and makes the sad thoughts disappear.

The only thing on my mind is the little problem I have to fix ASAP.

“What are you hiding from me, Atzi Maëlie Rivera-Lavigne?” I almost jolt when he says my full name with that husky, sexy voice of his.

See, this guy wouldn't have any trouble getting a woman. He is the whole package. Six foot four, broad chest, corded arms. Then there's his face. Angular, chiseled jawline complemented by a sexy mouth and dark eyes with a stare that penetrates so deep, at times, they seem to be looking directly into my soul. Not to mention he's also a doctor.

Women fall at his feet, hoping he'll throw them a line and make them come fast and hard. I don't believe he's not a womanizer like Ben. Heath is discreet and doesn't like long-term relationships. Plus, he hates to socialize. He's a hot-as-fuck specimen with the soul of a grumpy old man.

“Wow, you went for it, you full-named me, and I'm surprised you pronounced all of them correctly.”

He cocks an eyebrow, crossing his arms. “Are you finally going to tell me what happened with the asshole?”

I smile. He thinks he's so smart and astute. The guy prides himself on knowing everything. Heath swears he can read everyone and catch lies. I could prove him wrong, but I'd have to confess a few of my own lies if I did.

“We should've gone to my place so I could've enjoyed these chocolate cupcakes on the couch.” Hoping to distract him with my non-answer.

He snorts. “When was the last time you cleaned your studio?”

I finish my wine and pour myself another glass. “Last night.”

He releases a small laugh. “I'm not talking about the kitchen.”

“Oh, the rest?” I wave a hand as if it doesn't matter.

“Was it when I sent Trudy, my house cleaner?” He mentions his amazing housekeeper. I adore her, except when she organizes my chaos and I can’t find shit for weeks.

“Probably.”

“Can I just send her weekly?”

I begin to clear the dishes from the table. “No. I’ll do it.”

“When?”

“When I have time?” Okay, I should sound a little more confident about myself. If I don’t, he’ll send Trudy, who’ll reorganize my house again. It took me weeks to put it back the way I like it.

“Between the factory, the shop, and your sculptures, that’s never going to happen.” Heath’s challenging stare makes me feel uneasy.

“I’ll get organized.” I grab his plate, trying to avoid him.

He laughs. “That’s a good one. Why don’t you just let me do it for you?”

“Hey, I can take care of myself.” And I sound a little too defensive, but no one could blame me.

If there’s something I like, it’s my independence. Getting used to people and then losing them is jarring. It happened to me three times. Once with my parents, the second with my grandfather, and the third with my aunt. The biggest lesson I’ve learned is you can only count on yourself.

“Of course you can, but I’d feel better if you let me do it,” he offers.

And I know that’s true. He loves to take care of everyone, which is why he’s a great doctor. But I don’t want to be another burden for him.

Heath and I have been best friends for years. It happened the summer after he lost his dad, and I lost my parents. From the first moment we met, we just clicked. We get along perfectly. We agree on most things, except when it comes to how I live my life.

He wants to fix everything for me. I'm sure he'd want to put together my broken mind and my broken heart, if he only knew. He can't understand it's an impossible task.

"If you insist on doing it for me, it means you don't believe I'm capable," I almost sneer.

"Your priorities are pretty screwy. There's more to a house than just the kitchen."

I huff and open one of the boxes I brought with me. Well, two of them. We dropped off the other one at Rys and Caspian's place. I love all of his five brothers, but Caspian and Huxley might be my favorites. Fern and Cory are my friends, so I don't have favorites when it comes to his sisters.

"Please don't start. I might just move into an industrial kitchen so you'll stop nagging me. What's next?"

"You should eat less chocolate and more broccoli."

I glare at him. "If my parents were alive, they wouldn't like you."

"They would love me. More so if they knew I was watching over you."

But for how long? It'll only be until he leaves. Any day now, he's going to get an acceptance letter where he'll be swept away by some incredible hospital offering him his dream fellowship. He'll be gone for four years. Heath will find an uptight doctor like him and fall madly in love.

At first, he'll forget our video calls. Then, he'll stop texting me daily. That'll just be the beginning. In no time, we'll become strangers, and this is exactly why we should call it quits now.

Heath shakes his head. "Why are we having a bad day?"

"It was just a bad date," I growl. "We didn't even get to have a date."

He tsks. "You're a terrible liar."

I laugh because he's wrong. Or maybe I laugh because if not, I'll start to cry. Things are getting too real. Life is

beginning to suck again and I'm about to lose my best friend. I should've known, it was bound to happen.

In my experience, people leave or never stay.

What will become of us when he leaves?

Is this it? Is this the end of who we were?

Chapter Three



Heath

AFTER SEVENTEEN YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP, I can say without a doubt I know Atzi's moods—all of them.

I can even tell when she's laughing on the outside but crying on the inside. Today she's just like Eeyore. Depressed and tired. Usually, I can get her out of the funk, but so far, I haven't had any luck.

Does it have to do with the asshole she was dating? Is there something else bothering her she hasn't mentioned at all?

I can't think of anything but her failed date. Yet, I know those things don't make her sad. Atzi doesn't mope after a breakup. She doesn't care much when people leave and move away. Well, that's what she says, but deep down, I think it hurts her feelings. She just fakes it until the pain is over.

So, then, what could be happening with her?

I'm so desperate to figure out what the problem is and fix it, I'm letting her eat ice cream and cupcakes on my couch. I'm not a neat freak per se, but chocolate doesn't go well with the white fabric. I could switch my furniture for something more practical, but then she'll complain that the couches aren't comfortable.

It's a balance to keep Atzi happy, and I juggle every day to achieve it.

My next move is to hand her the TV remote. "Here, you can stream whatever your heart desires." I just pray it's not a medical drama. I swear she only watches them when I'm around.

She smiles. "Today, you might be my favorite person."

"I am your favorite person." I wink and smirk.

"Don't be cocky, Spearman. It doesn't look good on you."

"But I. Am. Your. Favorite."

“Soleil, Alyth, and Elijah are my favorites in the entire world,” she mentions my nieces and nephew, and then she pouts.

Atzi adores them. She loves babies more than she loves chocolate.

We babysit for my siblings often. When Rys has her baby, Atzi will be the first one in the hospital, claiming to be the favorite aunt. Maybe that’s it. She’s almost twenty-nine and still single. Not that there’s a problem with being single, but some men and women feel like they have to reach all their milestones. Atzi is one of them. She might be disorganized, but she likes to make plans and dreams.

Unfortunately, one of those includes a husband and children.

Why do I say unfortunately?

Because I don’t plan on marrying or having a family.

I adore Atzi. She’s probably the only woman I’ll ever love. And if we didn’t want different things, I would tell her how I feel. But I don’t fit in to her mold. I don’t plan to have children. I’m good just being the uncle.

Atzi and my feelings are part of the reason why I’m packing my things and leaving for another state to do my fellowship.

None of my siblings know I didn’t apply for any hospital on this side of the Rocky Mountains. I just need some distance between me and Atzi so I can forget she owns my heart.

Will I miss my family? Yes, but I’ll be back once I’ve fallen out of love with my best friend. While I can, I’ll enjoy our last months together. Try to cheer her up while I’m around.

“I heard Fern and Elliot are spending the weekend in Santa Cruz. We could surf while we’re there,” I offer. “In the meantime, you can tell me what happened with Le’asshole.”

Atzi closes her eyes. “He went to my shop to pick up his son’s cake—wife and child came along.”

“Tinder fucker?” I almost bark.

“Yep,” she sighs. “My store. He came inside Decadent Dreams pretending to be the best husband and father.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

She sighs. “I’m not going to tell him off in front of his child. Though, I wanted to bring up his Tinder profile so his wife could see it. When he paid, I whispered, ‘Delete my number and forget about date number seven.’”

Atzi has timelines for everything, including dating. I’m all for supporting my best friend, but I try to avoid her dating life. I’m not a masochist. Of course, there are exceptions. Like when she’s on Tinder searching for the next asshole who’ll try to break her heart. Someone has to stop her from swiping right when she matches with an idiot.

And after a breakup, I’m here for her.

Regretfully I have to ask, “Remind me what happens on number seven?”

“Anal, of course.” She grins.

I choke on my saliva. “Seriously, Atzi? I almost died—choked on my own saliva doesn’t sound heroic.”

She’s laughing uncontrollably and I’m glad I was able to get her out of her funk. When she calms, she says, “It’s your own fault.”

“How so?”

“Well, if you didn’t tune me out when I talk, you’d know that seven is the magical date when I finally tell the guy I’m dating about my sad childhood, and if they react well, we continue. Men don’t handle an ‘orphan who almost died in a car accident and lost her only sister’ story well.”

And stupidly, I have to ask, “So when do you have sex?”

“When I feel a connection.”

“Which you never do, since you don’t go past date number two.”

She bobs her head several times. “Essentially. I thought this guy was going to be the one.”

“So, you were falling in love,” I insist. There’s no other explanation.

“No.” She takes one of the pillows and throws it my way. “Why are you obsessed with the falling-in-love part?”

“Because you keep calling every guy who doesn’t work, the one.”

“The one that could’ve stopped the sex drought.”

Before I can say something, my phone rings. “Please don’t be the hospital,” I mumble. And when I see who’s calling, I wish it was the hospital paging me.

Atzi looks at me in a way that is almost heartbreaking. “Do you have to go?”

“Nah, it’s Dawn.”

“Oh. How’s your mom doing these days?”

“Do you really want to know?” Atzi and my mother don’t get along.

More like Mom has something against my best friend and they can’t be in the same room or she begins to insult my best friend.

Atzi shrugs. “I’m the only person you can talk to about her. As far as I know, no one else in your family plans to speak to her until she returns to therapy.”

I stare at her for a minute. “How do you know that?”

“Last weekend, while you were in the ER, I went to TTB to help Cory and Hux. Your sister and I got to chatting about her mommy issues.”

I roll my eyes at the abbreviation of Two Thieves at a Bar, one of the twins’ businesses. “Did she really say she has mommy issues?”

“Yep. She hasn’t talked to her since Fern announced her pregnancy. The triplets stopped speaking to your mom after

Fern's wedding. Caspian has been avoiding her since he got married—more than a year ago.”

“You're right,” I say when I realize the only two people who are on speaking terms with Mom are Huxley and me.

She points at my phone when it starts ringing again. “Are you going to answer?”

“No. I'm with you.”

“You guys are a great family, except, you're falling apart.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do they know you didn't apply to any fellowships in San Francisco?”

“I—” How does she know?

“You left the list of fellowships you were applying for next to my computer, along with the dates when you might receive your acceptance,” she says, as if responding to my silent question. “It's sad that you didn't tell me though.”

So that's where I left the list. Fuck. Working on my applications while she was in the shop's kitchen seemed like a good idea at the time. It was the night when she created the sculpture for the Spearman Gala.

“They're going to miss you,” she mumbles.

“Are you going to miss me?”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Of course. We've been best friends for years, but I'm used to it.”

“Used to what?”

“People always leave,” she whispers.

I flinch, and maybe I'm the problem. In her twenty-nine years of experience, people leave. First, her parents died and so did her sister. Then, her paternal grandfather died too.

Cécile, her father's sister, stayed to take care of her. Once Atzi turned eighteen, she moved back to France. They only talk during holidays and birthdays. Unless she goes to France to visit her. Cécile never comes to her.

Atzi's maternal family lives in Mexico, and like Cécile, they expect Atzi to jump on a plane to visit them—not the other way around.

Why didn't I think of what'll happen when I go?

"We will stay in touch," I assure her.

It'll make everything more complicated, but I won't leave her alone.

She gives me a sad smile. "Why don't you answer your mother's call?"

"I can talk to her another day."

"I wish I could have the luxury of sending mine to voicemail." She stands up, going to the counter where she left her purse. "See you around, Spearman."

"Wait, why are you leaving?"

She looks at me as if I'm a stupid man who can't understand anything. She calls the elevator.

"Atzi, stay."

"Have a good night," she mumbles, stepping into the elevator and leaving me alone with a hollow chest and a thousand questions.

Chapter Four



Atzi

IT'S ALWAYS a little chilly in the back part of the kitchen because chocolate needs a very particular environment to stay stable. I only know this through many years of experience and knowledge passed on to me from my chocolatier father, who taught me at the tender age of three the exact temperature to have the thermostat set to year-round.

I had no idea what it meant, but he always made me repeat the number. Once I was old enough to be in the kitchen making chocolates with him, I understood. Sometimes I wish I was at the old shop where Dad and Grandpa worked side by side.

The old shop of Lavigne Chocolatier closed when my parents died—I was eleven. Grandpa was too old and his arthritis too advanced to hand make chocolate, so only the factory continued. When he died, Aunt Cécile hired a CEO who did a great job until I was old enough to take over the company.

Some days I'm tempted to close the factory and just leave the small shop with hand-crafted chocolate open. But I'll never do it. This is my father's legacy—a Lavigne's institution. I take a deep breath, pushing the tears back to where they belong—hidden deep within my soul.

I hate to miss my family. Not as much as I hate wanting to create one. I stare at the chocolate melting in the pot and remind myself I'm filming. Everyone who's going to watch this video expects me to smile and radiate happiness.

I'm good at faking it. After taking another deep calming breath, I smile. It's time to be the Atzi everyone likes.

“Now, the key to getting that super glossy look perfect, is timing,” I say, looking straight at the phone camera across from me. “Don't expect to get this pour right on the first try. You have to practice doing it quickly enough so the chocolate

doesn't have time to cool down before it covers all the sides here. It helps, too, if you have someone turning the object you're covering for you, but I'm alone today, so we'll see how this goes."

I wink at the phone, which is mounted under a large ring light at the end of the kitchen bench. Then, without wasting any more time, I take the perfectly tempered chocolate and start to carefully pour it into the orb mold I'd made earlier.

There's no room for error as I pour, so I never speak for these parts of my videos. I'm pretty new to livestreaming on social media, but I think I'm getting the hang of it.

As soon as the orb is filled, I pull the hot pot away and carefully pick up the mold to rotate it slowly.

"Once you've got it all even inside, time to pop it in the freezer and wait." I do just that and wipe my hands on the front of my apron. "Thank you all for tuning in. I did put another orb in the freezer earlier, and it should be done in just about three minutes, so while we wait, I can answer some of the questions I received in my DMs." I look at the cue cards where I wrote them down last night.

"What's the biggest event you've ever created something for?" I can't help the grin that spreads across my face as I lean into the phone like I'm telling the literal thousands of people watching my livestream a secret. "Well, it actually hasn't happened yet, but next week, I'm going to be making the coolest sculpture for a premiere."

I pretend to zip my lips. "It's top secret, but stay tuned. Once it's revealed, I'll share with you all the details on how it was made."

My timer goes off, and I grab it without looking to silence it before heading over to the freezer to carefully remove the orb I'd done earlier today. It's always best to have a nearly done example of whatever you're demonstrating in a livestream so you can quickly jump to the next task instead of waiting around in real time.

“I always love this moment,” I say as I bring it back into the camera frame. “It’s so high stakes every time, no matter how experienced you are.”

I carefully crack open the mold and smile hugely as it comes apart beautifully, revealing a gorgeous milky blue, chocolate orb, exactly as promised. I’m careful as I continue to narrate and place it on the small circular stand I’d made earlier out of a different kind of chocolate. It’s part of the surreal planetary landscape that looks amazing.

“I always want to whisper when I’m assembling,” I say in a very loud stage whisper. It took me a while to get used to always narrating my every move for the camera, but now it’s almost second nature to do it as I work. “It feels like bad luck to speak too loudly, you know?”

I let go of the orb, and it settles down perfectly in its stand. I breathe an audible sigh of relief and step back from what looks like a very passable alternate universe, giant gas planet. The shiny blue I used for the orb is a mesmerizing constellation of little stars.

“This is just one small element of the overall sculpture that it’s going to be a part of, but I think that’s about it for tonight. Tomorrow, we’ll be transporting everything in pieces to the venue, one of the science museums downtown, and then assembling there. I can’t wait to show you the finished product. Until then.” I wave goodbye to my followers.

Once disconnected from the world, I shake out my shoulders and then unfasten my phone from the tripod. Next, I turn off the ring light and push it back into the corner. I always have to blink a few times to adjust back to normal lighting after staring into the ring light for so long. If it didn’t make everything look a thousand times better, I would definitely go without it.

As I’m cleaning up the mess I made of my bench and making sure everything is packed and ready for transit tomorrow, my phone chimes with a familiar notification. I wipe my hands on my apron and grab it from the table.

Abuela: I was just thinking of you. How's my favorite nieta?

I'm her only granddaughter, but there's no point in reminding her of the obvious. It'll just make her sad. She always wanted more kids, but Mom is all she had—and then she lost her too young.

Atzi: I'm good. How are you and Abuelito doing?"

Abuela: Missing you. Tu abuelo está bien. No te olvides que vamos a visitarte después de ir a Mallorca.

I try not to panic, but I'm about to have a heart attack. Of course I haven't forgotten that she'll be visiting me after she goes to Majorca. I wish I could convince them not to come.

Atzi: You shouldn't bother. I can come to see you. I'll buy the tickets right now. It'll be nice to visit Cancun soon.

I chew on my lip as I wait for a reply. This is the second time I've attempted to stall her visit. I just don't understand why she's being so stubborn. She has never set foot in San Francisco since my parents died. Never.

Why now?

Abuela: The house in Cancun is having some issues. We've been staying in Mexico City, but that's not the point. We will be there as promised. It's time we meet your fiancé.

In less than a month, I'm going to have them at my house judging my mess and disappointed in me because... well, there's no fiancé.

Abuela: Dile a tú prometido que tiene que pedirle tu mano en matrimonio a tu abuelo.

I laugh when I read that she wants me to tell my fiancé to ask for my hand in marriage. Funny story, Abuelita. I don't have a fiancé and... can you give me two more years to find

one? The small drop of panic from earlier is about to become a big anxiety attack.

This is why I shouldn't lie. The simple white lie I told back in college has become a monster of a completely fabricated relationship with a person who, in theory, doesn't exist.

What am I supposed to do now?

Chapter Five



Heath

I HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE relieved in my life to see the cardiology residents' break room is empty. I slump against the door as it shuts behind me. I close my eyes just for a few seconds of no visual stimulation. My day went from bad to what the fuck in less than two hours. Everything else has been a blur of emergencies and mishaps.

The coffee pot is empty when I finally have the energy to cross the room to the small kitchenette. I stumble through the process of throwing out the old grounds and putting in a new filter. It's tempting to make just enough for myself, but I generously take a few extra seconds to portion out enough fresh grounds to fill a pot. Maybe my karma will improve this way.

Once I fill my paper cup, I collapse into one of the worn-out armchairs and hold it to my nose. The smell alone is enough to make me feel less on the brink of death. I rub my face with my free hand and sigh. I lost a patient this morning in a high-stakes surgery, and while it's a reality of the job, it never gets easier.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to see that it's got a screenful of notifications.

Lysander: What are you doing this weekend?

Fern: We're planning a family vacation. When are you taking time off?

Aslan: Don't forget we have a board meeting next Monday.

Atzi: Sorry about the patient.

Lysander: I just heard. Sorry you lost a patient.

Fern: Call me. Love you.

Cory: Love you, Heath!

Cas: Sorry, man.

Gatsby: I'm here if you need me.

Aslan: Sorry, Heath. We're here for you.

Hux: Come by the bar, the drinks are on me.

I hadn't shared my bad morning with anyone except Atzi. I guess she texted everyone to let them know what happened. She also sent me a video of an elderly golden retriever walking around with a plushie almost as big as his head. It makes me smile instantly.

Atzi has always been great at knowing exactly how to offer comfort in a way that no one else gets. The texts from my family are appreciated in their own way because I know they mean them sincerely, but I hate dwelling too much on the bad things.

Since I'm hooked on social media, I check her channel to see if she has a new video. I'm not surprised that the event at the museum was a success. She's extremely talented. The daughter of one of the most famous sculptors in the world—Lydia Rivera—and an expert chocolatier, Valentin Lavigne. Though she still dabbles in other kinds of arts, Atzi's best work is with chocolate.

Her fans adore her. She's funny and bright. Just seeing her face is enough to make my stomach flip. One of these days, I'll stop being hopelessly in love with her.

Once I'm done pining for my best friend, I send her a link to a silly sketch I saved earlier today because I know she'll think it's hilarious.

She starts typing back almost immediately, like she's been waiting for me even though it's nearly 4 a.m. I wonder if she

just woke up or if she never went to sleep. She believes in baker's hours. It gives her enough time to get everything done by the end of the day.

Atzi: Yo, shouldn't you be at home?

Heath: I have two more hours to go, and then I'll be free for five days. Shouldn't you be asleep?

Atzi: Sleep is for the weak.

Heath: I agree. What's on the agenda for the day?

Atzi: Well, you should come by the shop this morning. I have things for you to taste test.

I smile at the text and then sigh. I lean my head back on the armchair and let my eyes drift closed for a moment before responding.

Heath: I'll probably go home and crash. I don't think I have it in me this morning, sorry. Still okay to do movie night tonight, though, if you are.

We have a standing date every Thursday to watch a movie at my place. However, it's been less consistent in the past few months as Atzi has taken on the full mantle of her chocolate business, and I've been buried in my resident duties at the hospital.

Soon though, I'll be getting word about the fellowships I applied for, which will either result in a more regular schedule or a similar shit show. Both options are far from her, and the end of our impromptu reunions and standing dates.

The fellowship will take me clear across the country to New York City or Baltimore. On any given day, I feel differently about my options. Sometimes, I can't imagine leaving my family and Atzi behind for the East Coast, but other days I think about what a fresh start could mean to me.

Maybe I could finally let go of my feelings for Atzi and date other people. But then again, would I ever want someone the way I want Atzi?

Atzi: Fine, go to sleep. I'll bring everything tonight since I want an honest opinion on those new coconut chocolates you suggested.

Heath: You might become my favorite.

Heath: But only if they're good.

Atzi: I think they're great, as is everything I do.
:wink emoji:

Her comment takes me to a place where I forbid myself to be—my bed with her naked. I think she was fourteen the first time I wanted to kiss her. A year later, when I turned sixteen, I couldn't think of anything else but making her mine.

Since then, I've been fighting the lust. Fourteen years of trying my damn best to get over her, and I can't say I've made any progress. Someone should give me a fucking medal because so far, I haven't even kissed her.

Move on, Spearman.

Because I have to start purging her out of my system, I don't continue the conversation. Instead, I like the message with a quick double tap and then put my phone back in my pocket.

I'm just getting up out of the chair to pour myself more coffee when I hear my name on the speaker. "Dr. Spearman, please come to the nurses' station. Dr. Spearman."

I put my mug down, hoping it's not an emergency. Couldn't they call someone else? I wish there was a choice. Unwilling to abandon fresh coffee, I rifle around in the cabinet until I find a travel cup someone else left behind and pour coffee into it. The hospital swallows me back up eagerly for the next two hours.

I know I made the right decision not to prolong the day when I do finally leave the hospital. I'm so exhausted that I call Owen, Gatsby's driver, to take me home. And maybe I should rethink my plans for the future. What am I going to do without my family?

As Owen takes me home, I check my phone, finding an alarming text from Benedict.

Ben: I'm fucked.

Heath: Did you sleep with a married woman, and the husband caught you?

Ben: Finally. I thought you were dead. I texted you hours ago.

Heath: One hour, but who's counting? Are you going to tell me what happened?

Ben: Something worse than finding out I slept with a married woman.

Heath: What can be worse than that?

Ben: She's pregnant.

Heath: Is it yours?

Ben: She doesn't know, and refuses to take a DNA test. On the bright side, she's due in ten weeks. I should learn my fate by then.

Heath: Explain to her that it's safe to take a DNA test while the embryo develops.

Ben: I already did. She refuses to do it. If all goes well and her husband is the father, she won't lose everything.

Ben: And I won't lose my sleep.

Heath: If it's yours?

Ben: I don't know. Babies are not part of my five-year plan—or in any plan.

Heath: Good luck. I'm here for you.

Ben: I appreciate it.

Chapter Six



Atzi

“YOU NEVER LEAVE THAT PLACE ANYMORE,” Cory complains when I answer her video call. “You might as well move in. You just need to set up a bed next to the industrial refrigerator.”

I throw her a smile from where I’m finishing off some decorations that look like delicate chocolate wings that will sit atop some truly delightful brownies I recently perfected.

“Please tell me you’ll come to Paradise Bay this weekend. You could bring my brother along.”

I glance at her, narrowing my gaze. “Why do I want to be there?”

“To meet people, of course.”

“I meet lots of people,” I say. This argument is old and well-trod between us. “The shop has dozens of people in and out every day.”

“You know what I mean,” she says. “You haven’t found the guy and your grandmother is coming soon.”

I blow a stray hair out of my face and glare at her. “I don’t need you to remind me of that. I should hire an actor. LA is not far from here.”

“Come clean,” she suggests. Cory knows, to some extent, the lie I told my abuelita—but not the whole truth. “How bad can it be?”

“Bad.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re trying to bend over and make up an entire production of *Fake Fiancé—the Musical*.”

I laugh at her crappy joke. “There won’t be any dancing or singing. I leave that to drunk karaoke.”

“We can do karaoke night at the bar. Come with?”

“Nope.”

“You haven’t explained to me why finding a fiancé is so important.”

“Abuela wants me to get married. She is the closest thing I have to a mother, and I want to make sure she’s happy with me. I don’t want to lose her too.” If things don’t work out with her, my cousins, aunts, and uncles might push me out of their lives too. A lot is on the line. My entire maternal family will disappear.

“First of all, Cécile is the closest you have to a mother. But I get your fear. I wish I could say you won’t lose her, but what do I know, I haven’t spoken to my mother in years.”

“You should—”

“Stop right there, Atzi. It’s not that my siblings and I love not talking to her, but we refuse to be around her toxicity.”

I shrug because I don’t have anything to add to the conversation. I’d give everything to be able to speak to my mother, even if sometimes she could be a cunt. Not that Mom was ever like Dawn Spearman. Maybe that’s where I’m wrong, and they have a point. Their mother is a terrible person at times.

This is probably one of those things where two people can simultaneously be right—or wrong.

“So, are you coming to spend the weekend with me?” she repeats. “If you do, convince Heath to join us. He’s always working or avoiding us. I hope he’ll be more present when he gets accepted for a fellowship.”

My heart sinks. I don’t want to think about Heath possibly leaving San Francisco or, even worse, me losing his family because I’m no longer his friend.

“Are you okay?” Cory asks.

I nod. “Yeah, I just remembered I have a project due next week, and I’m not sure if I’m going to have time to visit you this weekend.”

She probably doesn't believe me, but I can't exactly tell her that her brother didn't apply to any fellowship in the area. I love all of them, and because of that, I won't get in the middle of this mess.

"You're a terrible liar. If you're not coming because you're busy, I understand. But if I find out you went to Santa Cruz because there're babies to be held, I'm going to be upset."

I press my lips together, trying to hide the smile.

"You bitch," she says in an accusatory tone.

"They're precious toddlers. You love them too."

She narrows her gaze. "You traitor."

I smirk at her. "Instead of calling me names, you should join us."

"I have a business to run."

I roll my eyes. "That's just an excuse to party all weekend."

She laughs. "As if. I have to coordinate three bachelorette parties. Some days I regret adding the SPA to the bar. It's profitable, but it consumes my time."

"I see how this is. You want me there to work for you."

"It's about keeping me company. It's always good to have my friend around—since none of my brothers care to show up."

"Uh-huh. How about Hux?"

"It's his obligation to be here every night. This whole 'let's own a bar' thing was his idea, not mine."

"But you love the place."

She smiles. "True, but if I could, I would dedicate more time to Haux drinks."

My phone chimes. I smile when I see it's a text from Heath.

Heath: I'll pick you up soon.

Atzi: Why?

Heath: It's Thursday. We have a date, remember?

Atzi: It's only five o'clock.

“Who are you talking to?”

Heath: We could go to the Wharf for dinner and then come back to my place for movie night.

Atzi: Are you trying to get out of cooking, Spearman?

Heath: Or we can stay in.

“Stop ignoring me,” Cory complains. “Who are you texting? Is it Tinder? Are you finally swiping right?”

“Nah. It's Heath. He wants me to *just* work half a day.”

She laughs. “Please, you already worked too many hours. You've been awake for two days. I'm glad someone is looking after you.”

“Well, I had to finish this project. They're picking it up on Saturday.”

“I'll text my brother. Maybe he can slip in a sleeping pill so you can stay in one place for more than eight hours.”

“Heath doesn't like sleeping aids unless they're strictly necessary,” I say absently as I begin to clean my station.

“Have you...” She trails her voice, when I look at her, she sports that Spearman grin that says, I'm-up-to-something.

“Finish that sentence,” I dare her.

“Maybe you can ask him to be your fiancé.”

I almost choke at her suggestion.

Almost.

“Kidding.” She laughs. “I don’t think Mr. Truthful would do something like that. He’d be the first one to tell your grandmother you’re full of shit.”

“Probably.”

Heath: I should be there in twenty. Be ready.

“Hey, I have to go. He’ll be here in”—I look at the wall clock and then at Cory—“five minutes.”

“Did he say I’ll be there in thirty minutes?”

“Nope, twenty.”

She laughs. “Oh, he’s there already.”

I groan. “It’s like he doesn’t know how to tell time. Also, why can’t he arrive late like a regular person?”

“Because then he wouldn’t be the Heath we all love. Say hi to the grouch from me,” she says, hanging up the phone.

Right as I’m about to wash my hands, Heath appears. The tall, handsome guy leans against the frame and dares to say, “You’re not ready.”

“You said twenty minutes.”

“Or so...” The *o* lingers as he studies the table.

“That’s a beautiful ballerina. Isn’t that a sculpture?”

“Duh, I create sculptures.”

He shakes his head. “No, I mean it’s a replica of that—” He snaps his fingers.

“It’s a copy of *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans*.” I bob my head a couple of times. Happy he recognizes it.

He closes his eyes and starts counting.

“Are you okay?”

“It annoys the shit out of me when you speak Spanish or French,” he growls.

He doesn’t sound annoyed or upset, just weird. I shrug and say, “You’re a strange man, Heathcliff Spearman.”

“Ready to go?”

Pointing at the room, I say, “I have to clean the kitchen.”

He shakes his head, rolling the sleeves of his shirt. He’s ready to help. “Have you thought about hiring a personal assistant and a few apprentices?”

I pick up a rag and hand it to him. “I might in a few years.”

His jaw twitches. “A few years? Why not now?”

“I’m not busy enough. According to my plan, it should be in a few years.”

He laughs. “Which plan are we talking about?”

“The family one. By the age of thirty, I should’ve met my husband. We’ll date for a year to eighteen months before he proposes. We’ll get married by the time I’m thirty-three. A year later, I’ll have our first child—”

“Stop right there, before you tell me that number four will be popping before your fortieth birthday.”

I let out a breath and glare at him. “You’re going to ruin it, aren’t you?”

He’s always ruining my plans and adding logic to them. It’s not like I’m asking him to get on board with my schemes as he calls them.

Just leave them the fuck alone, buddy.

“I’m not trying to *ruin*”—he draws air quotes—“anything for you, but what if you meet him tomorrow, and he proposes in two months?”

Oh, but that’s exactly what I need—a miracle. Can this hypothetical guy propose two weeks later? Why wait a month? That should give me plenty of time to prepare him to meet my grandparents.

“How do I find this guy?”

He snickers. “You seem to be in a hurry to meet him.”

I laugh. “You have no idea.”

He tilts his head toward the working table. “Start cleaning so we can go home soon.”

“Thank you for helping me.”

“Always.” He smiles and gets to work.

I’m going to miss this so much—us. The way we just coexist, effortlessly. It’s like he’s an extension of me, or maybe I’m an extension of him.

What am I going to do without Heath Spearman?

For the first time, I want to ask him not to leave me.

Chapter Seven



Atzi

ONE OF MY favorite places in the world is Heath's penthouse. The upstairs loft that's converted into a television room might be my favorite area. When Aslan first mentioned he was going to move to his new house and Heath asked for it, I was thrilled.

We decorated it together. Well, most of it. I chose the couches. We agreed on the rest. It's about compromising, more so when this isn't my house. Though, it's an absolute tragedy that Heath doesn't appreciate it at all. He's barely ever home because of work, and when he is home, he's often just sleeping.

A total waste of the gorgeous bay windows that let in perfectly filtered sunshine.

"When you leave, you should rent this place to me."

He snorts, not looking up from the wok he's supervising that's full of sizzling onions and chopped peppers. It smells incredible, and he just got started.

"Thought we could try some yellow curry tonight, if that sounds good to you," he says as he adds in the neatly sliced chicken to the wok.

"For someone so busy, you sure do have a lot of time to find new recipes," I say with fake suspicion. "What's your secret?"

He winks at me. "You'll never know. Why don't you prepare a salad?"

I wrinkle my nose at him.

He snorts at me, barely looking up from the wok. "Greens are your friends. You should eat them more often."

"You sound like a doctor," I say mockingly.

"Oh, but I am a doctor and you should do as I say."

I groan. “Do you know eating strawberries is better than eating greens?”

“In your world? Probably. And knowing you, you’ll want to cover them with chocolate. But if that’s going to get you to eat salads. Add some fruit to it.”

I sigh with resignation and begin to pile ingredients for the salad. “Just remember, we’re having chocolate fondue for dessert.”

He makes a noncommittal sound.

“What are we watching tonight?” I ask.

“I sent you the list earlier. You didn’t see it?”

“Nope.”

“Let’s finish cooking, and then we can choose what we want to watch.”

“That’s one option,” I say, pulling out my phone. I pull up the trailer for the first suggestion—a bro comedy with a lot of goofs. Not today. I quickly move on to the next, which looks like a cool urban fantasy. The third is a romantic comedy. “Are we watching dragons and warlocks today?”

“Is that what that movie is about?” He sighs as he carefully picks something out of the mixing bowl where he just added coconut milk.

The man splashes sauce on the kitchen tile. He pointedly looks down at the mess and then points to the paper towels. I purse my lips at him but slide off my stool to clean up the trail of sauce.

“Look who’s the messy one,” I say with a snarky tone. Once finished with that, I stretch upward and crack my back. “I’m totally done for the day.”

“Stop stalling and do the salad,” he reminds me.

“Oh right, I was helping you with that. I forgot because I’m famished.”

“Stop complaining,” he chuckles. “Everything’s almost ready. Finish the salad so we can sit and eat.”

“You’re not going to let that go, are you?”

“I’m trying to take care of those imaginary children you plan to have at...” He cocks a brow. “Was it thirty-seven? I can only imagine how you’ll be giving them specific timelines to be born, walk, and talk.”

“I don’t think I like you.” I stick my tongue out and get to work.

AFTER WE EAT and clean the kitchen, I prepare the popcorn bowl with chocolate chips. Heath may complain about my sweet tooth, but he never says no when I offer him my creations.

When I arrive at the TV room, it already has my favorite blanket, a fuzzy lavender fleece, draped over the back of the couch, and I pet it fondly as I reach for the remote. I’ve just completed the purchase of the movie and started the download when Heath comes in behind me with the wine and glasses.

We make ourselves comfortable.

“How will we do this when you get the fellowship?” It’s not even really a question, more of a lament. I don’t want things to change. Even when I’m trying to accept that his leaving is inevitable, a part of me wants to fight it—him.

“Don’t borrow problems from the future,” Heath says around a mouthful of popcorn. “And start the movie.”

I pout at him. “You should tell your family soon.”

“Atzi, let it go for now, please. I don’t even know if they’ll accept me.”

Of course they will. He’s smart, a hard worker, and everyone in the hospital adores him. We could argue that he’s wrong. Actually, we’re due for a discussion as to why he couldn’t apply for the fellowship his mentor offered.

He was offered a position—just needed to apply. And most importantly, it’s here in San Francisco where his family lives.

It's not too late, is it? I have to intervene. "I think—"

"Atzi, please," he begs in such a way that I can't argue anymore.

He needs to shut down and enjoy the day. I comply, and he hits the light dimmer on a small white remote while I press play and settle in for the movie. I glance at Heath while the opening credits are still unfurling colorfully on the screen, and I'm a little startled when I see him looking back at me. I give him a small smile, feeling a little wobbly, then turn my eyes back to the screen.

Chapter Eight



Heath

WHEN I GET up to fetch the ice cream toward the end of the movie, I return to find Atzi curled into one corner of the couch, covered in the blanket she's claimed as her own. The glow of her phone screen illuminates her face. Even with her dark hair pulled into a bun and no makeup, she's beautiful. When she notices me hovering in the doorway, she turns away from her phone and tilts her head.

"Why are you staring at me?" She narrows her gaze at me suspiciously. Then, she wipes her chin. "Do I have something on my face?"

"No." I unfreeze myself and shrug my shoulders as casually as I can manage. I sit next to her on the couch and hand her one of the two spoons I retrieved before setting the huge tub of ice cream she brought with her between us.

"Are you feeling okay? I mean, you're letting me eat outside the kitchen." She hums in delight and shimmies her shoulders as I lift the lid off. "This is the second Thursday in a row."

Not sure why I'm breaking the rules for her. Probably because this is one of the last times we will be spending a Thursday evening together.

"You gonna press play or just eat ice cream and complain?" I ask her after she leaves the TV on the pause screen in favor of taking a huge scoop of ice cream.

"You press play," she mumbles around a mouthful.

I tsk at her. "You make me do everything around here."

"I'm the guest. If you came to my place, I would be treating you like a king." She twirls her spoon back into the thick vein of caramel running through the ice cream.

"Really? I'd get the royal treatment, huh?"

“Yep. You shouldn’t make any guests, including me, do anything. Plus, I made this ice cream especially for you. It has extra mini marshmallows like you asked.”

“Ha, like I believe that’s special and you made it *just* for me,” I grumble at her, but all while reaching for where she abandoned the remote on the coffee table.

I press play on the movie before taking up my spoon and fighting Atzi head-on for some of the caramel in my first bite. She usually mines the entire carton for the caramel and leaves me with just vanilla and the occasional crunchy bit of popped rice.

I guess having a friend who can make desserts comes in handy. Every time I suggest we should add something, she creates it and brings it home. If we love it, she makes more and sells it at the shop. If not, we grab the vanilla cartons in my freezer to wash down the bad taste.

There’s only been a couple of times she’s failed. Gummy bears, sea salt, and ice cream don’t go together. Never.

“I think the main guy is gonna die,” Atzi says as the character in question runs along the top of a skyscraper and leaps onto the back of a dragon, hanging on to some of the scales. I squint at the screen as the man improbably hauls himself closer and closer to the dragon’s head as the dragon itself continues to soar through the city. “He’s gonna sacrifice himself or something.”

“Eh, bet they don’t have the guts to actually kill him. Remember Maverick? I still can’t believe they didn’t kill Tom Cruise. They should’ve done it,” I try not to sound upset, but I’m still mad at that movie.

Some filmmakers should learn that killing their darlings is okay in the name of art.

“I bet they’ll make you think he died, and then he’ll make a miraculous, unexplained recovery for the final scene,” I add. “We should watch something else.”

Atzi chuckles. “You’re just bitter. Remember Jon Snow? He was dead. If *Game of Thrones* brought someone to life,

every other show and movie can.”

“It shouldn’t happen,” I argue.

She huffs, probably because she knows I’ll never let that go. Then slashes at my spoon so she can reach the ice cream before me. I let her knock my hand to the side with an eye roll. The movie unfolds exactly as I predicted it would, and Atzi is making a face by the end of it that tells me she didn’t like it.

“So, you hated it?”

“I just think they could have done a lot more with the literal fucking dragons than, like... kill them indiscriminately.”

I nod along. “Dragon adoption is always an option, I agree.”

She makes a show of carefully moving the ice cream to the coffee table before grabbing a throw pillow and smacking me with it. I grab it from her and throw it back at her face. It isn’t long before it’s an all-out war with Atzi lobbing all sorts of projectiles at me.

I duck to dodge a particularly solid sphere pillow and then tackle her around the waist, bringing us both back to the couch, and I must be losing my mind because two seconds later, I realize my mistake when I find myself sprawled on top of Atzi, looking down at her flushed face and twinkling eyes.

I’m frozen in the moment while my brain tries to come back online. She’s still smiling by the time I manage to scramble off of her with an awkward laugh of my own. Of course, the moment must have barely registered as strange for her—I know she’s never looked at me romantically.

As if to reinforce that, she stays laid out on the couch with her arms thrown dramatically above her head. Her chest is heaving. It’s incredible and also absolutely not something I should be committing to memory, but I absolutely am with only the tiniest twinge of guilt.

“Heeeeah,” she groans, dragging out my name in a completely unhelpful way. I swallow, close my eyes, and turn away to make myself busy with tidying up a few dishes that

hadn't made it to the rolling cart yet. "I'm tired, can I stay over?"

"You know the guest room is always yours," I say.

"What if I ask you not to leave me?"

She could ask for anything and everything, and I would do it in a heartbeat. But I'm trying to learn to stop myself from wanting to please her and loving her. That's exactly why I have to go. Nothing will change my mind.

Nothing.

"Please never ask me that, okay? I need to leave."

"Okay," she whispers, and I feel like shit, knowing I'm hurting her. But this is how it has to be.

Chapter Nine



Heath

Atzi: Good luck!

“I don’t need luck, I need patience,” I mumble as I climb down from my car.

Heath: I wish you could join us.

Atzi: So she can add cyanide to my food? No, thank you.

Heath: She’s not capable of harming a fly.

Atzi: I have my doubts.

Heath: What are you up to today?

Atzi: I’ll be working on the piece for the premiere. I have to drive it to LA next Monday.

Heath: Are you coming with me to Santa Cruz tomorrow?

Atzi: Of course. I made some special candy for the twins.

Heath: Stop bribing them with sweets.

Atzi: I won’t rest until I’m their favorite person—aside from their parents. It worked with Soleil.

When I walk inside the restaurant where I agreed to meet my mother, I send one last text.

Heath: TTYS

Mom is already seated at the table when I duck into the small upscale grill. She's wearing a crisp linen blouse with a lavender scarf tied loosely around her neck. Her dark, graying hair is neatly tucked into a ponytail that sits low on the nape of her neck. When did she stop dyeing her hair? I remember when she used to dye it platinum blonde.

She half-stands from the chair when she sees me, and I dutifully kiss her cheek before unbuttoning my sports jacket and sitting down across from her.

"Heathcliff," she says warmly, her voice crisp, despite the evidence she's already had a good portion of the pitcher of mimosas on the table. She gestures for the waitress, who comes quickly. "He wants his usual."

The waitress looks a little like a deer in headlights as her eyes flick back and forth between the two of us, as if asking silently, "and that is?"

Mom will never understand that just because we come here often, it doesn't mean the employees know who we are. This is San Francisco, not Paradise Bay. Our small town has less than three thousand habitants and everyone knows everything. Even what we like to have for breakfast.

"Eggs sunny side up with a side of Belgian waffles," I tell her quietly. "For me, it's going to be an omelet with broccoli, mushrooms, and Swiss. A side of Nutella crêpes."

"That'll be all, sweetie," Mom tells her in dismissal.

Brunch with Mom has become a thing since our weekly family Tuesday dinners in Paradise Bay ended abruptly. She visits once a week during one of my off days. We chat about her health, her traveling plans, and my future.

"How are you feeling, Mom?" I open the conversation.

It's a familiar script, but she lights up, pleased as always to be asked.

"Dreadful," she chirps. "I think I might have a vitamin deficiency. Did I tell you? I googled it, and everything matches."

I hum noncommittally. My mother is a strange creature full of mysterious ailments and constantly wounded feelings. It's better to just let her bask in her own reality than try to contradict her newest self-diagnosis or personal grievance.

It does especially pain me as a doctor to let her get too deep into the weeds of an illness she definitely doesn't have, but she still treats me as though I'm a kid she can order around. If possible, she'll be asking me to write her prescriptions to cure all her illnesses. I'm better off trying to gently push her toward the family physician.

"What kind of vitamin?" I ask, playing along.

She squints as she tries to remember.

"I don't recall," she says. "But it was very similar to how I feel. I'm sure that's it."

Listen, vitamin deficiency is real and something no doctor should take lightly, but knowing my mother, there's nothing physically wrong with her. She'd be better off going to a therapist.

"You should go visit Dr. Strauss before you add any supplements." This is also a trusted script for these situations. More often than not, I have to repeat this sentiment multiple times during any meal I have with Mom. I know she won't go, but the next time we meet she'll bring some mysterious illness to discuss.

"Well, I'm sure he wouldn't be opposed to a probiotic, would he?"

I want to sigh but very wisely hold my tongue to keep the peace. I know it probably won't do much good to try to explain that there is a huge difference between a vitamin and a probiotic, and chances are, she'll choose the one with the most expensive price tag. I've learned to pick my battles.

"You should tell him anyway," I say instead. "Maybe he can recommend an even better one."

"Maybe so," she says, beginning to raise her voice in frustration. "Although, I've been thinking about finding a new doctor. I really feel Bill doesn't listen to me. He never

prescribes anything but rest. How much can one person rest? Maybe he's too old to continue practicing medicine."

William Strauss has been my family's on-call doctor since I was a child, and any threat to leave him is entirely empty and oft-repeated by Mom.

"We could find someone new, Mom." I try to sound firm but also compassionate. How often have I listened to complaints about patients who end up in the ER because their doctors weren't paying attention to the signs? Mom might be a little bit of a hypochondriac, but I want to make sure she's healthy and comfortable with her physician. "I know a few people in SanFran who can give you a second opinion."

She huffs. "I'll consider that, but maybe you should open a medical practice and treat me."

I could remind her that I'm a cardiologist, not a family practitioner. Also, I shouldn't be treating family. It's unethical. I don't bother, she refuses to understand. I don't know if she's always been like that and I never noticed, or if it happened after Dad died and she went into a catatonic state. It doesn't matter though. She's my mother and I love her.

The server mercifully brings our plates by and successfully derails the conversation into banal patter about how good everything looks and tastes. I dutifully follow my mother's lead throughout the brunch until finally, I'm walking her out to her car. She kisses me briskly on the cheek.

"I'll see you next week, Heathcliff. Let me know when it's your day off, and you should tell your brothers to join us," she says as she opens her door.

She doesn't mention my sisters. Maybe Atzi is right, and this family is falling apart.

Chapter Ten



Atzi

“HOW’S YOUR MOM?” I ask as I climb into Heath’s Jeep. “Any new cancerous masses? Mysterious flu-like symptoms? Suspicious freckles?”

He sighs. “You couldn’t start with a lighter subject like the weather, your crazy customers, or... just not my mother?”

I shrug. What can I say, other than I know something went wrong. He had brunch with her yesterday. Normally he calls me right after, but this time he went radio silent most of the day. I only got one text after midnight, reminding me he was picking me up today around nine.

Usually during his days off, he drops by the shop or texts me constantly. Not yesterday, which means he was either trying to solve a problem or dealing with Helicopter Dawn all day.

“So, what happened during brunch? Did you have to spend the day with her?”

“Nah. Mom’s fine, but I’m concerned about her. What’s going to happen after I’m gone? No one is going to check on her.” He pulls out of the parking spot. “So, I went to Paradise Bay and spent my day with Lysander. I tried to discuss Mom with him, but he just shut me down.”

He grips the wheel. “Can you believe it? I spent an entire day helping him with the vineyard for nothing. Nothing.”

The worry and anger in his voice pinch my heart. I wish Cory would tell me why she’s not speaking to Dawn. Or any of Heath’s brothers would give him a clue about what’s happening. If he had all the information, he’d understand and stop worrying so much.

At this point all I can say is, “You’re a good son. Is she okay?”

“Yeah. Mom mentioned she has a vitamin deficiency,” Heath says dryly. “What vitamin she’s deficient in, only God knows because she refuses to go to the doctor. She wasn’t happy when I refused to give her any medical advice—she’s my mother.”

I nod, pinching my face into a thoughtful expression. “Makes sense, but you should suggest she find a new doctor.”

“I already did.” He sounds so frustrated I want to give him a hug. Maybe later when he’s not driving.

“And? What did she say?”

“She’ll probably ignore me.”

Dawn Spearman has never been kind to me, but I wish someone would pay a little more attention to her. Heath’s concern is valid, and after he’s gone, there might not be anything he can do—and no one will look after her.

My advice would be to find a fellowship in San Francisco—or accept the one he was offered—but he’s ready to leave. If anyone tries to stop him, he’ll resent them. I’m getting used to the idea of losing him. Nothing will be the same after he leaves, but that’s okay as long as he’s happy.

He’s going to ghost me, and I bet he’ll do the same with his family. What did we do to him that he has the need to run away from us?

The silence in the car begins to suffocate me, and when his phone rings, I sigh with relief. When I look at the dashboard, I announce, “It’s Ben.”

Heath sighs, as if he just can’t take another problem into his hands.

“What’s wrong with him? Did someone at the hospital catch him screwing a nurse?”

“Oh no, it’s worse.”

“What can be worse than that?”

“He knocked up a married woman,” he mumbles as he connects the call. “What’s up, Ben?”

“It’s a girl.”

I squeak. “What?”

“My possible child is going to be a girl,” he groans. “What am I supposed to do with her? I don’t know anything about raising children.”

“Love her?” I ask. “And what do you mean by *my possible child*?”

“Is that you, Atzi?”

“Hi, Ben.”

“Ugh. I’m not ready to tell anyone this, so keep it on the DL, please.”

I scoff. “People might notice if you have a child calling you Daddy. You should—”

“As I suggested,” Heath interrupts me. “Create a trust for the child and wave goodbye to the mother. You’re not cut out to be a father.”

“I’m not,” Ben agrees. “And whatever I do to fix this has to be soon. The mother had the due date wrong. The baby will be here in six weeks.”

“How can she have the date wrong by four weeks? It’s simple math. Maybe you’re not the father. If I were you, I’d find a good doctor, the best lawyer, and you should handle the paternity test.” Heath is frustrated. Anyone would think he’s the one who got the bad news and knocked up some woman.

“On it. I need the name of your brother-in-law’s lawyer. If I remember right, he has offices here in New York?”

“We’re on our way to Santa Cruz to see him, Fern, and the twins. I’ll ask for the information when I see him.”

“Thank you. Pray I’m not the father.” Ben’s voice is almost heartbreaking.

“Can someone explain what’s going on?” I ask instead of saying he should keep his dick in his pants and, if he can’t, to use condoms.

“Ask Heath. I have to go back to work,” he answers, finishing the call.

I rotate slightly to face Heath and ask, “What happened?”

Heath tells me about the baby mama and how she’s not sure if the child is Ben’s or her husband’s. Also, the possible solutions to his problem.

“A baby isn’t a problem. It’s a miracle.”

“I love my nieces and nephew. Babies are adorable, but if I knock someone up, that kid becomes a problem.”

I scrunch my nose. “Ouch. So, what would you do?”

“Offer her money. A trust so the kid grows up with everything, but also, I’ll rescind my parental rights and make sure they won’t have access to my family’s money.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Listen, I don’t plan on having children. If it happens by accident, I have to be prepared.”

I cross my arms, upset on behalf of the poor kid who didn’t ask to be born. “So, you told Benedict to do the same.”

“It’s the best solution. Like me, he’s not a family man.”

“You are. What if you regret not being part of your child’s life?”

“I. Don’t. Want. Children.”

It’s none of my business and his decision, but why is he so adamant about not having a family?

“Why not?”

“So many reasons. What if the kid is born with the same cardiac defect Dad had? He could die at a young age. What if I’m the one who dies when he’s just a child? You know how it is to grow up without your parents.”

He’s not wrong, but he’s not right, either. “You can’t stop living because people die. Yes, my parents and my sister left too soon, but I have amazing memories of them and I’m glad I got to spend eleven unforgettable years with my family.”

“You miss them. Ever since they died, you’ve wanted to have a family—or create one.”

And somehow, I feel like we’re not talking about me but him. He’ll never admit it, but Heath is still mourning his father, remembering when he found him dead on the ground and how his mother responded by disconnecting herself from reality. She spent six years wasting herself away.

“Do me a favor,” I mumble. “If you ever knock someone up and neither one of you wants the baby, give her or him to me. I’ll make sure to give the kid everything they need.”

“But I wouldn’t want anything to do with the kid.”

That doesn’t make any sense, until I realize what he means. “And if I have the child, you wouldn’t want to hang out with me?”

“I—” He clamps his lips, and after a long pause, he asks, “Why do you always create a problem where there aren’t any?”

“Not sure. I like to solve problems. This seems like something we have to figure out before you pull a Benedict.”

“I would never do that. I use condoms.”

“They’re only ninety-seven percent effective. And what is it that you always say?” I tap my chin. “Oh, yeah. Never say never.”

“Well, it’ll never happen to me.”

He groans, and I laugh. If he ever knocks someone up, I’ll remind him of this conversation and make him squirm.

Chapter Eleven



Atzi

SOMEONE ONCE SAID that you meet so many people in your life, but only a few connect with your heart. I believe it. I met Heath at a grief camp. He was thirteen, and I was almost twelve. He was always alone by one of the giant redwood trees, hiding from the counselors. I followed him like a duckling because I also wanted to avoid everyone. The first two days, we didn't speak to each other. I would be sketching, and he'd be reading.

By the third day, he brought me some cookies. His sister, Fern, had sent them. I shared some of my chocolates. There wasn't much communication between us, but the silence we shared brought some peace to my soul.

I didn't feel as alone as I had been since I lost my parents.

Back then, I thought we had outsmarted the counselors. Now, I think they let it happen—our friendship. During week two, we were participating in some of the activities, and after that, we became almost inseparable.

After spending a month together, we became best friends. His family would let him come to San Francisco to visit me. We transformed my sister's nursery into the guest room. It had been one of the first steps to say goodbye to my family's belongings. I was allowed to visit him in Paradise Bay. When I stayed at the vineyard during the weekends, I'd stay in Cory's room. We organized fun slumber parties with her brothers. That's sort of how I became friends with everyone and part of the Spearman family.

I guess his siblings welcomed me for the same reason Aunt Cécile opened the doors of our house to him. We had finally connected with someone after the loss we suffered. To this day, I just show up with Heath at most of the Spearman's events. Also, when he just drops by his siblings' places during the weekends.

These days, I love visiting Fern and Elliot. Well, more like I adore spending time with Alyth and Elijah, their twins. They're just learning to walk and talk, and they're a blast.

"At-zi," I say my name slowly as I give a spoonful of carrots to Alyth. "See, it's pretty easy. Atzi."

"Stop trying to get her to say your name before she says mine," Heath warns me, but I see the smile on his lips as he hands Elijah a sippy cup with water.

"You should help us teach them to speak French and Spanish," Fern says while cleaning the gadget she used to prepare the baby food.

It seems like having a baby is more work than I imagined. Preparing their food—all organic—is almost like a science. As complicated as trying to create a replica of the Taj Mahal with chocolate. The time I tried, it took me four days.

Elliot, who is washing dishes, looks over his shoulder, staring at me. "You speak both? How?"

I shrug. "Dad was French American. Mom was Mexican. They never spoke English when we were at home. My father's family only spoke to me in French, and Mom's family did the same, but in Spanish."

Elliot frowns. "Mom was Mexican American, and we never became fluent. And how did your parents understand each other?"

"Mom spoke French, Italian, and Spanish. I guess they used one of them. Though both spoke perfect English too." I shrug because I never thought much about it.

I don't tell them they bent the rules with my sister though. I guess since she was really young, they didn't put as much pressure on her.

"Phew, that sounds exhausting," Fern sighs. "How did you manage?"

"There was nothing to manage. Kids are sponges. They absorb everything. After my parents died, Aunt Cécile

continued speaking to me in French, and so did Mom's family in Spanish. I'm used to it."

"Will you be doing that with your children?"

"I haven't thought about it."

Heath gives me a skeptical look. "Please, I bet you have a timeline for them too. Don't lie."

I laugh and Alyth tosses her head, laughing too. She spits all the food, smearing some on my cheek. Grabbing a napkin, I clean her first and then myself. Then look over at Heath and say, "I don't."

"I won't even argue with you. Those poor children are going to be tormented with art, chocolate, and multiple languages." Heath shakes his head as if saying, "poor children, they're going to suffer so much."

"Probably. I'll try first with these little ones." I poke Alyth's nose, and she smiles widely. "Maybe I'll add Soleil and Ben's child to the mix."

Fern's smile vanishes and she stares at Heath. "Ben has a child?"

Heath rubs his face with one hand, letting out a loud exhale. "We're not sure."

"Is Benedict okay?" Fern asks like the mama hen she is.

"He will be, as soon as we find a solution to his problem—if he has a problem." Heath slumps his shoulders.

"A baby isn't a problem," I snap at Heath.

This man better not knock anyone up because I swear I'll be on his case until he accepts them.

"You think so because you want them," he argues.

"It's sad." I look at him with pity.

He crosses his arms. "What's sad?"

"You'd be a great father, but not with that attitude."

Fern claps her hands. "Children, stop fighting about nonsense."

I could stop arguing, but raising my voice, I say, “You might change your mind when the time comes.”

He snorts. “Doubtful.”

“Can we focus on Ben?” Fern insists.

Heath looks up at the ceiling and swallows hard before he looks at his sister. “He doesn’t want this to get out yet.”

“I don’t care. We’re his family, too. If he needs help, we need to know now,” Fern sounds like a mama bear who’s ready to defend her cubs.

This is exactly why I love this family. They welcome you in and treat you just like they do their siblings. After a big silence, Heath finally shares what he knows about Benedict’s paternity situation. It’s not until then that my heart clenches. Cory.

Cory is going to be devastated by the news. She would never admit it, but she’s in love with Ben.

How am I going to break the news to her? I’ll let her siblings do it.

“Let him know that we’re here for him,” Fern repeats.

Heath glances at Elliot. “He’d like your lawyer’s information.”

“I’ll call Ben,” Elliot offers. “Having a child is scary, but he might want to listen to the opinion of someone who’s less jaded.”

“I’m not jaded,” Heath says defensively. “You can’t force love, children, or a family.”

“True, but the moment you meet your kid, you’ll understand the meaning of unconditional love. It’s powerful.”

“Listen, I’m giving him options. Plus, I’m not planning on having children.” Heath’s face is red, and the vein on his temple is about to explode. The grump is about to show up and ruin the party.

“Why don’t we change these little ones and go for a walk by the beach?” I suggest and look at Fern and Elliot. “You two

could use a little break from the noise—or you can take advantage of us and go out to dinner.”

“I like how she thinks.” Elliot winks at Fern. “Let’s make it a night, babe.”

Fern smirks at her husband, who takes her into his arms and gives her a kiss that leaves steam in the room. Well, that’s not really what happens, but it’s hot.

“You two are disgusting,” Heath complains, helping Elijah out of his chair.

“THIS IS PERFECT.” I point toward the ocean as the sun is beginning to set. We’re on our way back to the house. We tired the twins out so much, they’re ready to go to bed.

Heath looks at the horizon and frowns. “The sunset, the ocean... what is it?”

“Everything. I want this moment to be part of my future.” I’m almost nostalgic. My parents used to own a house in Plage de Passable. When we stayed there, we would do this every evening. Walk after supper and just enjoy each other’s company.

This is the first time I have thought about that house or the things we did as a family. I should ask Aunt Cécile about it.

“What do you mean?”

“Once I meet Mr. Right, I’ll buy a house by the beach so when we have children, we can walk in the evening by the sea, watching the sunset.”

“That’s too specific.”

“It’s a wish, a dream, something to manifest for my future. Tinder and all those apps might be failing me, but it’ll happen.”

“Lately, you sound as if your clock is ticking. You’re just twenty-nine.”

“You’re thirty-one, and you still behave like a bachelor.”

“I am a bachelor, and I plan to stay like that forever.”

“That’s impossible. What if you fall in love? Will you let her go because you don’t want to get married?”

“Yes. Because I love her, I’ll let her find happiness with someone who’ll give her what she needs.”

We’re talking about a hypothetical scenario, but why is it that he sounds so sad, as if he already did it? He already let the woman of his dreams go, breaking her heart and his along the way.

But if it happened... how is it that I don’t know?

Who was she, and how did I miss it? I can’t even think of any woman he could’ve dated long enough to be in love with her.

In fact, he never dates. I give him a suspicious look.

“Let it go, okay?” he mumbles.

That’s all I need to confirm it did happen. He was in love and the very stupid man let her go.

“Okay,” I answer, but I don’t like the fact he has a secret. I should be upset at him but I can’t when I’m hiding something from him too.

Chapter Twelve



Heath

IT'S BEEN two weeks since Atzi and I had some sort of fallout.

We didn't get into a fight, but we haven't spoken much since we visited Fern and Elliot in Santa Cruz. I can pinpoint the moment it happened, just not the why. It was during our walk by the beach with my niece and my nephew.

Was it something I said, did, or... I just don't know. Is it her? Is it me?

Are we beginning to part ways, knowing this is the end of the road and our friendship is over? Not that I want that for us. She is after all, my person. Also, the woman I love. A therapist would have a field day listening to the reasons why I can't be with my best friend. But they're founded fears.

Discovering my father dead on a burnt to a crisp vineyard did a lot of things to me. My mother going into catatonia because she lost the love of her life was life-changing for all of us. And some days I believe it was my fault. I disobeyed her when she asked me to go and get Dad from the field.

Once she fell sick, I couldn't help her. She wouldn't speak. She barely moved or ate. At night, I would go ask for her forgiveness. I would plead for her to come back to us, to love me again. Some days I believed she blamed me, others I felt like she was punishing us for my disobedience.

Because if I had checked on Dad earlier as she had asked, I could've found him alive.

No matter what I did afterward, how much I cried and how much I begged, she didn't react.

Love destroys. I don't want anyone to end up like my mother or like us when we were children. Not because of me. That's why when Atzi asked, "Will you let her go because you don't want to get married?"

Without hesitation, I responded, "Yes. Because I love her."

We were speaking of a hypothetical, imaginary woman. But that's not the truth. I was referring to Atzi. Maybe I should've said, "Yes, I'm letting you go because I love you."

And so, our connection broke and it might be for the best not to fix it.

When she texted me last week to cancel our Thursday date because of work, I responded with okay. Usually, I would cook for us and bring the food to the shop or just order takeout for us. Not this time. Instead, I went to Paradise Bay to help the twins with the bar.

I wasn't sure what to expect today until Atzi texted me an invite to a gallery opening with the question, "Do you want to go?"

Of course I did.

I do.

We might not be the same, but I still miss her.

I still love her.

I still need to see her at least one more time.

I doubt I'll ever stop loving or needing her. And this is exactly why today will be the last time we spend time together.

I have to quit her cold turkey.

In two weeks, I'm leaving for New York. I haven't told anyone yet, but my acceptance letter arrived yesterday morning. When I applied, Benedict offered me his guest room. I'll take it while I find an apartment. God knows what's going to happen with him if he finds out the kid is his.

He can't handle a child, but if he's a father, I might be the one helping him with the creature.

Maybe I should have a vasectomy, so this doesn't happen to me. Atzi and my family will judge me, but I don't care. It's my decision.

Okay, now I'm thinking about too many stupid things. Way too many. Maybe it's the silence in the car. Usually, Atzi would be talking about her latest project, the shop, or looking

for just the right song on the radio. Not tonight. Tonight, the drive is uncomfortable, even painful.

When I glance at Atzi, she looks gorgeous in the shimmery halter top that shows the tattoos along her arms. I try not to look at the miniskirt that's barely covering her long, tanned legs. How I wish this were a real date and not... what is this?

Today is completely different from our usual Thursday nights. She's dressed like she's ready for a cocktail party. I'm wearing a suit—as she requested. This is one of her most important clients. Atzi might offer to bring some of her non-chocolate pieces to exhibit in the gallery.

If she allowed me, I would reach out to my cousin, Sterling Ahern. He's almost as famous as her mother was and has many galleries where he could exhibit her work. Atzi doesn't want me to do it. She wants to succeed on her own. There's nothing wrong with introducing her art to someone who can help her. I wouldn't be doing more than just sending pictures to my cousin. However, I respect her wishes.

This is when I know leaving her will be hard. Just as much as trying to stop caring about her. Ever since she began to follow me around at camp, I wanted to save her. I wasn't sure from what or who, but I wanted to slay dragons for the little girl who looked alone and broken.

Or maybe I was mirroring myself. I was just as lonely and shattered as she was. It's her friendship that brought me back and glued my heart back together. Will I be able to survive without her when I leave?

I have to, which is why tonight, instead of eating at my place, I suggested a restaurant. It was a terrible idea though. This outing feels fake. A dreadful way to end what has been one of the best relationships I've had in my entire life.

When we arrive at The 9th Door at the Wharf, I dare to say, "You're silent today, is everything okay?"

She nods, almost jumping out of the car. When I join her, I notice she's jittery. Something is bothering her, but what?

"Are you sure?"

She taps her temple. “Yeah, I’m thinking.”

I arch a brow, offering my arm. “About?”

“A problem I have to solve,” she answers, sounding more casual than she looks. She hooks her arm with mine and we walk toward the restaurant.

The doorman opens one of the heavy glass doors. When we reach the hostess station, a chirpy teenager greets us. “Welcome to The 9th. Do you have a reservation?”

“Spearman, for two,” I say, hoping Lulu, Aslan’s assistant, came through with my request.

The girl offers her brightest smile as she grabs a couple of menus. “The table is ready for you, Mr. and Mrs. Spearman.”

Atzi frowns, but doesn’t say a word. When we reach the table, I pull out the chair for her and, after she sits, push it in. Then I take my seat right next to her. The hostess hands us our menus and says our server will be out shortly.

Atzi points at the red roses on the table. “Mr. and Mrs. Spearman?”

“They probably thought Aslan was coming. Lulu made the reservations for me.”

She cackles and shakes her head. “The irony.”

I cock a brow. “What am I missing?”

She shakes her head as she pulls out her phone and sets it on the table. I hate that habit, but I understand it. Sometimes her family calls her around this time, and she doesn’t want to miss them. “Nothing. I have an issue, don’t mind me.”

“Why don’t you try me, I could help.”

She releases a nervous laugh. “Nah, it’s something simple. Probably a trip to France will help.”

I’m more confused by the second. “Is Cécile okay?”

“Oh, yeah. She’s totally fine.” She straightens her posture, perking up slightly. “But you know what would help? If she broke an arm or a leg.”

My jaw almost drops. This doesn't make sense. I reach out and hold her chin between my thumb and my index finger. I study her closely. "Your pupils look fine, but did you hit your head?"

She scrunches her nose and moves away from me. "Yes. No, I didn't hit anything. I made a mess and I'm trying to figure out how to get out of it."

"And how does Cécile breaking a bone fit into this?"

"Mis abuelos are coming to SanFran and I'm trying to avoid the visit."

This woman confuses the fuck out of me. "Sweetheart, you're not making any sense."

She winks at me. "You don't want to know. It's for the best."

I stare at the ceiling for a moment. This shouldn't be my problem, but I hate when she's stressed out. If she won't tell me, I'll try to guess. "Is this so you can go and visit them in Cancun?"

"Good evening." Our server arrives. "I'm Axel, and I'll be your server for tonight. Would you like to start with some wine, appetizers, or just order *taapas*." The way he drags the *a* makes Atzi chuckle.

"Wine and tapas sound like a good idea," she says, looking at me expectantly. I guess she doesn't have headspace to decide what she wants to eat tonight.

I browse the menu and order a bottle of rosé and tapas to share. When Axel leaves, I turn back to Atzi. "So, you're trying to score a trip to Cancun?"

"I tried that, but the house is under renovations. I offered to take them to France with me, but they refused. At this point, I would go to the end of the world, but they still want to come to San Francisco."

"Why are you trying to keep them away?"

She waves a hand. "It's not important. Let's talk about you. Why did you choose such a fancy restaurant, Mr. Spearman?"

The suggestive tone makes my entire body react and my dick hardens. I don't need her husky voice and sassy tone. I take several breaths, trying to compose myself. Once I'm in control, I say, "You're hiding something from me."

"You, of all people, don't want to be involved. You're welcome."

"What the fuck, Atzi?" She dares to say, "you're welcome." Now I'm concerned. "Tell me what's happening. Is the company in trouble?"

"Hey, I need to run to the ladies' room, but can you order me some water too, please?"

I glare at her. "Don't think I'm going to forget this conversation."

Axel arrives with a bottle of rosé but leaves because he forgot the glasses. I don't have the energy to deal with Atzi's nonsense and this guy who might be either new or tending too many tables.

At that moment, Atzi's phone rings. I glance to see if it's important, and when I read *Abuelita*, I answer immediately. Atzi would hate missing her call.

"Hello?"

"Finally, someone answered. Wait, who is this? Is Atzi okay?" she responds.

"Heathcliff Spearman. You must be Mrs. Rivera."

"*Chaparro, es su prometido.*" I don't understand who is the short one, if she's calling me short or what a *prometido* is, so I don't say a word. "It's nice to finally meet you, Heath. We've heard so much about you."

It's nice to know that Atzi has been talking about me. "Same here. I heard you're coming soon. That's exciting."

"Can you keep a secret?" she whispers.

"Always."

"She thinks we're going to be there in two weeks, but we arrive on Sunday." She sounds so excited that the earlier

conversation with Atzi makes less sense than before.

“Well, Mrs. Rivera, I’ll be happy to help with the surprise,” I offer. “Would you like me to make some hotel reservations? If you give me the information, I’ll pick you up at the airport. It’s my day off.”

“Hotel? No.” She sounds so offended, I want to apologize, but she continues, “We’re almost family, Heath. We want to get to know you better before the wedding, so we’re staying with you.”

“Wedding?”

“Yes, I know, I know. You two haven’t set up a date yet, but maybe we can talk about it when we’re there. I’m not getting any younger. I want great-grandchildren soon.”

“A date? Great-grandchildren... Okay.” What the fuck is she talking about?

“I hope I can meet your family too,” she says with so much excitement that I’m afraid to break the illusion, because this lady isn’t making any sense. “Atzi talks so much about them. I’m glad she’s going to marry a man with such a loving family.”

“I—” *Marrying Atzi?*

Atzi arrives at the table and gives me a suspicious look. “Hey, why are you on my phone?”

I glare at her. “It’s your grandmother,” I say with a warning voice.

“Call me Abuelita,” Mrs. Rivera corrects me.

“It’s Abuelita, darling.”

Atzi goes pale.

If I didn’t know better, I would think she’s having a stroke. Her breathing is becoming shallow, and her lips are almost white like the tablecloth.

“What?” she mumbles.

“Yeah, she’s so happy you’re marrying me—a man with a loving family.”

Atzi snatches the phone. “*Te hablo luego, Tita. Si, te quiero much.*”

I rise from my seat and pull out two hundred-dollar bills and set them on the table. “It’s time to go. Seems like we have a lot to discuss, Pinocchio.” I whisper the last word and tap her nose.

Chapter Thirteen



Heath

IF THE EARLIER DRIVE WAS DREADFUL, this one is a hundred times worse. Neither one of us speaks. I don't know what's going through Atzi's head, but I hope she knows how angry I am.

I am too fucking mad at her.

She knows I hate lies. Hate them. Why would she tell her family we're going to get married?

Once inside my place, I lock the elevator, ensuring that none of my nosy brothers will barge in.

I begin with the easy one. "What's chaparro or why would she call me short?"

She narrows her gaze. "Oh, that's the endearing term she uses for my grandfather, who, by the way, is almost six feet."

"And what does prometido mean?" I ask, wondering if that'll help me piece everything together.

Atzi barely glances at me. She heaves a breath, and her gaze drops. "Fiancé."

Okay, I was almost right. I should start taking French and Spanish classes if I... no, there's no if. *Our friendship is over, and way to fuck it up, Atzi.* But I can't just leave things like that. I have to at least figure out why she did it.

"I'm guessing part of the issue you're currently troubleshooting has to do with the conversation I just had with your abuela."

She holds her midriff while staring at the floor. "I..."

"What the fuck, Atzi?"

I walk toward the floor-to-ceiling window and stare at the Golden Gate Bridge. This can't be more fucked up even if she

tried. “She wants to set up the wedding date. Why did your grandmother call me your fiancé?”

She’s quiet for a bit. I don’t care what’s in her mind. There has to be a reason why her grandmother thinks we’re getting married. “Atzi, I’m waiting.”

“It all started with a little white lie.” She drags the words out.

“Little would be if she thinks we’re casually dating.” I don’t turn to look at her. I need to control my anger before I face her.

“That’s exactly what it was when this began,” she assures me.

I snicker. Little white lie, my ass. When I turn around, I find her on the couch, covered with the fuzzy blanket. Almost terrified of me. “That’s how it started,” she insists.

She’s melting my determination, but I won’t let her. I cross my arms, staring at her. “I’m listening.”

She sighs. “It happened during my sophomore year of college. The semester I spent in México City, she invited me to parties and events where I could meet eligible young men. It was dreadful. One day, she saw a picture of us on the nightstand and... well, I told her we were dating.” She shrugs. “It was an easy solution. You often called, so she believed it right away. It was a harmless lie.”

I blink twice. “That was nine years ago.”

She gives me a weak smile. “Ten.”

“You could’ve broken up”—I draw air quotes—“with me years ago.”

“Oh, we have done that a few times.” She scratches her neck as if she has hives. I should check her skin. When she’s too anxious, she tends to scrape her arms and neck raw. “But when she threatens to introduce me to someone, we’re back together. After six years of dating, we moved in together and two years ago—”

“Let me guess, I proposed?”

She bobs her head a couple of times. “It made sense at the time.”

“So, what’s our current status, darling?”

“Living together and happily engaged.”

I groan. “She thinks we’re going to get married and wants us to set up a date while they’re here. This is why you’ve been in a funk, isn’t it? She’s coming to visit, and she’ll learn you’ve been lying for years.”

“Partially.”

“How... I don’t even know what to ask. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You hate lies, and I was working on fixing it.”

“This is pretty simple. You tell her the truth.” I dust my hands as if I have restored the order of the universe.

“It’s not that simple. If I do, she might get upset. You don’t understand her. She has a plan for me, just like she did for Mom.” She clamps her lips. “Mom died. I’m her last hope. I don’t want to disappoint her.”

Her eyes are filled with moisture, and I can sense the devastation.

“And what are you going to do when she visits?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to meet someone, but—”

The married asshole now makes a lot of sense. “You were looking for the one you could replace me with, weren’t you?”

She twists her lips. “Yeah.”

I can’t believe I’m going to ask this, but... “What’s the plan?”

“I have a couple of weeks to fix it.”

But she doesn’t, and even though I promised to keep the surprise from her, I have to break it. “Your grandparents arrive on Sunday.”

“What?!” she shrieks. “I’m not ready. Why did you answer the phone?”

“I didn’t want you to miss her call. However, not answering wouldn’t stop them from arriving in just a few days. You should tell her the truth.”

“Nope. This is too complicated. I don’t want to lose the only connection I have to Mom!”

“You wouldn’t lose it,” I assure her.

She covers her face with the blanket. “Abuelita stops talking to people if they disappoint her.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Atzi shakes her head. “She did it with Mom.”

“What do you mean?”

Atzi comes out from hiding. “She met Dad during one of her trips to Paris. He was there just for the summer. They stayed in touch, and met several times here in SanFran. Then she registered to take classes at the Art Institute of San Francisco, so she could be close to Dad—and moved in with him. When he proposed, my grandmother was livid. She disowned her and didn’t go to her wedding. It wasn’t until I was born they started talking again. It took her four years to forgive my mother.

“I didn’t want that to happen to me, which is why I had to use an excuse. You. I couldn’t tell her I wasn’t ready to date or marry—I was just nineteen. That would upset her, so I continued the lie. I’m just trying to keep the few people who still love me close. Aunt Cécile left me when I was old enough, and... you know the story. If I piss them off, they’ll just stop answering my calls and I’ll be broken and all alone.”

I’ve known her for years, and this is the first time I understand why she always bends over backward for her family. Every Christmas, she buys presents for every family member—even when they don’t send anything in return. She also sends presents on their birthdays and anniversaries. If anyone needs money, she only asks where to send it.

When she’s sick, the only person by her side is me. My family is the one that celebrates her birthdays, not them.

My heart breaks for the poor kid who lost her parents at eleven and still can't find anyone who'll love her unconditionally. I sit next to her, wrapping my arms around her and drawing her back into my chest.

I kiss the top of her head. Trying to absorb all the pain. I wish I could convince her that she's not alone—nor broken. Maybe I could do one last thing for her before I leave. "Okay," I say.

"What?" she whispers.

"We'll do this. We'll pretend we're together. However, a week after they leave, you'll tell her we broke up due to my fellowship. We decided not to have a long-distance relationship."

Her breathing is shaky, but the first thing she asks, "Any word on that front?"

This is probably the worst time to give her the news, but I might as well rip off the bandage fast. "I'm leaving in two weeks."

"You are?" Her sigh sounds almost like a sob.

"Yeah."

She hugs me tight. "When were you going to tell me?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. We have to figure out a plan to convince your family we're together."

She snorts. "You don't have to do this, but thank you for offering."

"We'll do it," I insist.

"I know how much you hate to lie."

"I'd hate myself more if you lost your grandparents."

"Thank you." She rests her head on my chest. "Sorry for getting you involved in this mess."

"We'll probably have to bring some of your stuff to my house."

“Or, we can make excuses, so they don’t have to visit either one of us. I’ll set them up at the Four Seasons.”

“Oh, they won’t go to a hotel, because they’re family.”

She growls. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I assure her.

“Are we okay?”

“Of course.” My voice is losing energy because I hate to lie.

“Why does it feel like I’m losing you?”

“It’s only for a few years.” I say the second or maybe third lie of the night.

“You’ll visit me often, right?”

“Why don’t I order some food?”

She nods in response.

When I pull out my phone, I notice the string of texts from my brothers.

Aslan: We need access to the man cave, asshole.

Lysander: Unlock the elevator or at least the door to the stairs. Promise not to interrupt your coital activities.

Hux: Dude, are you okay?

Gatsby: That’s it. I’m calling the SWAT team. Unless you’re finally getting together with the chocolate fairy.

Lysander: Why do you call her the chocolate fairy?

Gatsby: She always brings chocolate when she visits Soleil.

Caspian: Heath, these assholes are at my apartment. Let us know when we can access the roof. My woman is about to claw our eyes out because they're noisy.

“Hey, I ordered the usual. My brothers need access to the roof. I’ll be back, okay?”

She nods, and I realize she’s crying.

“What’s happening?”

“Nothing. I’m just overwhelmed.” I know that voice. It’s the one she uses when she’s trying to hide something from me.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m going to miss this.”

“You’ll be fine,” I assure her instead of confessing I’ll miss it too.

This is for the best, though. We need boundaries, a wall, states between us, so I can stop loving her and move on.

Chapter Fourteen



Heath

IT BREAKS me to see her cry and be unable to help her. It's even more jarring when I know this is the end of our friendship. I let her cry until she calms down. When she falls asleep, I gently move around and set her on the couch so she can sleep while I go to check on my brothers. When I arrive at Caspian's, their food is getting delivered.

When Cas sees me, he says, "Thank fuck he's here. My woman was about to kick us out of the apartment and probably divorce me."

"That's a lie," I hear Rys calling from the other room. "I just need a few minutes of quiet, and you, Spearman, are being too noisy."

"McPhee was being noisy as fuck, too," Lysander says. Elliot glares at him.

"Why did you change the access code?" Aslan, who owns the building, asks.

I grin as all seven of us step into the elevator, and I punch the access code. "To avoid intruders."

Aslan scoffs. "The building is pretty safe. I need you to give me the new codes."

"When I say intruders, I mean you fuckers. You think you can barge into my place and the roof whenever the fuck you want."

Gatsby nods as if understanding. "Though the doc has a point." He pauses and glares at me. "We're going to need access to the roof. You always ignore us. The least you could do is let us in the man cave whenever we need it."

Lysander narrows his gaze as we get out of the elevator. "What's bothering you?"

I shake my head.

“Something happened with the pixie. We saw the footage of you two coming into the building, and neither of you looked happy. She’s always bouncing on her tiptoes and laughing. Not today.”

They watched the footage? And this is exactly why I have to change the codes and lock my doors every single time they get their hands on it. “You’re so fucking intrusive.”

“We wanted to make sure you were home,” he says defensively.

“And what if I wasn’t?”

“We would’ve hacked the system to get access to the roof,” Aslan says. “I understand you live in the penthouse, but the roof isn’t yours. That’s the condition I gave you when I let you move into the building.”

Lysander waves a hand. “We’ll discuss that later. I need to know what’s happening to our doc.”

Ever since Dad died and my mother went catatonic, the triplets have been like fathers to us. Even at my age, they continue worrying about me.

I rub the back of my neck. “Atzi’s grandparents are coming to town.”

Lysander crosses his arms. “How does that affect you?”

Lysander, Gatsby, Aslan, Caspian, Hux, and even Elliot, watch me intently. I don’t understand their concern though. It’s as if they think I’m going to do something stupid—which is partially true.

“Her grandparents think we’re engaged,” I mumble.

Gatsby blinks a couple of times. “Engaged?”

“Yep.” And I tell them how that happened and add what I just did to fix it for her.

“You’re going to do what?” Gatsby asks with utter disbelief.

“He’s going to pretend to be engaged to the love of his life.” Lysander glares at Aslan, then hits him on the back of

the head. “You’re a bad example. After your stunt with Keaton, our little brothers think it’s okay to pretend to date for the fuck of it. This is why I should’ve had full custody of all the children when our parents died.”

“Only Dad died,” I correct him.

Aslan looks at me, ignoring Ly’s nonsense. “I pretended to be with Keaton to keep Dawn happy. What’s your excuse?”

I tell him about Atzi’s grandmother. They already know how she’s mostly on her own. Which is why she spends more time with us during holidays than she does with her family.

Gatsby shakes his head. “I understand why you want to do it, but you’re a terrible liar.”

“More like he can’t bend the rules and refuses to bend the truth,” Hux corrects him. “You won’t be able to make it believable. If you want, I can take your place.”

“I agree with them,” Elliot says. “It’s a bad idea. They’re going to catch you immediately.”

“You can’t lie to save your life,” Aslan adds.

He’s wrong though. I hate lying and don’t see the point in doing it unless it’s extremely necessary. I have been pretending for years I don’t love Atzi, and as far as I know, she still believes I just see her as a friend.

“Don’t do it,” Hux says.

“I have to.”

“Because Atzi needs you to do it, and you love her so much you’d do anything for her.” It’s not a question. Lysander is just confirming what everyone knows. Well, everyone but Atzi.

“I explained to you why I’m going to do it.”

“I don’t agree with you. Why did you accept?” Gatsby is trying to find the logic to this problem.

“Actually, I offered.”

Gatsby hits his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Have we mentioned that this is a terrible idea?”

“Five times, maybe?” Lysander groans. “For how long are you pretending to be madly in love with the love of your life?” My brother gloats as he makes this sound like this is the most moronic thing anyone has done in the history of life.

“I don’t know. Her grandparents arrive on Sunday.”

“Where are they staying?”

They’re throwing so many questions, I don’t even know who’s talking anymore, but I answer immediately. “In my guest room. Can we stop with the interrogation?”

“You have to alert the entire family and keep them away from Mom,” Lysander warns me.

“What if they expect you to marry her?” Caspian throws the question to the mix. Then tosses his hands up in the air. “I need a drink. Of all the stupid things we’ve done in our lives, this one is the worst.”

“And he’s done very, very stupid things,” Gatsby confirms. “We’ll never forget his wedding in Vegas.”

“This is different. We’ll break up in a couple of weeks,” I assure them.

“You should just marry her,” Aslan says, as if that fixes everything in life.

“Things between us are not like that.” My voice is loud and defensive. They’re starting to irritate the fuck out of me.

“You’re in love with her.” Gatsby pats my shoulder and hands me a tumbler with whiskey. “I just don’t understand why you don’t act on your feelings. One of these days, a guy will swoop in, and you’ll be crying in a corner.”

I refuse to explain to them why it wouldn’t work out for Atzi and me. I doubt they’d understand, sometimes it’s hard for me to see the logic.

“Please, enlighten us. Why can’t you just act on your feelings?” Aslan insists.

They don't understand my explanation might open wounds I'm not willing to tend to anymore. The past is where it belongs. "Atzi and I want different things. Besides, I'm leaving for New York in a couple of weeks."

Aslan's eyes land on me. His nostrils flare. "What do you mean?"

I scrub my face. This isn't how I want to tell them, but I guess it's out.

"They accepted you at Columbia?" Gatsby mumbles. "What about the others? Didn't you apply for San Francisco General?"

I shrug a shoulder and don't correct him or tell him I didn't apply for anything around the area.

"When were you going to tell us?" Lysander chimes.

"I just found out yesterday." I shrug as if it's not a big deal.

"What happened to the other applications?" Gatsby asks, not letting this go.

"I think New York City is the best option," I say, knowing they might digress if I say anything to the effect of living in SanFran isn't an option. Not until I'm over Atzi.

"How long will you be there?" Gatsby asks.

"You should try family medicine and open a practice in SanFran," Aslan suggests.

I glare at him and almost bare my teeth like an angry feline when I say, "I'm a cardiologist."

"You should set up a practice for that here. Why do you need this fellowship?" Aslan insists.

"I want to make sure people get treated before they die." I know it's a stupid answer, but I'm not going to explain to them why I do what I do.

"As a cardiologist or a—"

"Leave him alone." Lysander puts himself between Aslan and me. "He's an excellent doctor, and we can wait for him to

come back in a few years.”

But that’s not the plan, and since I can see their worry, I refuse to say anything else.

“You’re coming back, aren’t you?” Lysander questions.

I shrug a shoulder slightly. “I don’t know. I might meet someone there and start a new life. What if they offer me a job at a big hospital?”

He puts both hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eyes. “And Atzi?”

“We’re not compatible.”

He snickers. “I call bullshit.”

“That’s the most stupid thing I’ve heard in my life. You’ve been in love with her since you met her. You’re perfect for each other,” Aslan argues.

“She wants a family. I don’t.”

Gatsby is about to speak when Lysander puts a hand in front of him. “Leave him alone. He’s free to live his life however he sees fit.”

“We’re losing him. You understand that, don’t you?” Gatsby argues.

Lysander shakes his head. “Caspian lives in Oregon during the season. You travel to New York and San Diego often.”

“But my roots are here,” Gatsby barks.

Huxley claps his hands. “Stop this before it becomes a fight.” He pats my shoulder. “I’m going to miss you, but putting all that BS aside, I think you should tell our sisters your plan and get everyone on board before you fuck this for Atzi.”

Lysander nods. “The kid is right.”

“Don’t call me kid. I’m old enough to drink—and run a bar.” Hux glares at him.

“We should meet in Santa Cruz this Saturday,” Elliot suggests. “Actually, if you can, we can arrive there tomorrow

evening. We'll talk to the wives and then make sure these two lovebirds get it right. There's an art to pretending to have a different life."

I swallow. "It can't be that hard."

Elliot smirks. "If that's what you think, then you're screwed."

I feel as if I'm about to take the MCAT and all my knowledge has been ripped out of my brain. This is worse than the dream where the principal of my high school tells me I never graduated, and I have to go back to school.

"What does that mean?" I ask, almost afraid of the answer.

"You and Atzi have to be comfortable with each other. Make sure you're not jumping out of the chair each time she touches you." He gives me a knowing look. "Which you do often."

"I don't."

"Oh, yes you do. Since she affects you so much, you try to avoid touching her. You can't do that in front of her grandparents."

I press the heels of my palms against my eyes, shaking my head. "Why didn't I think about that?"

"So, we're crashing at your house, huh?" one of my brothers mentions, almost mockingly. "He might need to stay there for years to learn how to lie."

When I open my eyes, everyone is laughing at me. Yep, I'm fucked and they know it. And Fern might not like it or support us, and so I say, "But you'll give my sister the 4-1-1, won't you? Maybe work some of your magic to convince her to help us?"

Elliot scoffs. "Sure, that's exactly what I'm here for. Work some magic and make my brothers-in-laws' lives easy."

"This is why he's my favorite brother-in-law." Gatsby pours more whiskey into his glass.

"He's the only one," I correct him.

Instead of going downstairs with Atzi, I decide to stay a few more minutes so I can drink enough alcohol to be numb when I see her again.

How are we going to pull off this stunt?

Chapter Fifteen



Atzi

LAST NIGHT, I left Heath's penthouse while he was with his brothers. I just scribbled a note that I needed to be alone, but I would meet him on Saturday.

This morning I woke up with a headache and a text from Heath saying we're going to Fern's house for the weekend. I hope he remembers my grandparents are here on Sunday and we're... doomed.

Heath doesn't like to lie. I can see him confessing the truth to Abuelita by Monday morning, right before I can drink my first cup of coffee. With that thought, I leave my bed, take a quick shower, and start my daily routine. Hopefully, I have enough time to prepare breakfast before he arrives.

I'm not that lucky. Right before I step into the kitchen, I hear the lock opening. As usual, Heath doesn't knock, he lets himself in. He just enters my studio as if he belongs here. At least, mi abuelita won't notice we're not familiar with each other. Sometimes we even use the same toothbrush.

"Morning," he growls. "Is there any coffee?"

"Good morning, grumpy. I was just about to start it," I say, then turn to look at him. "Are you upset?"

His face flickers and then he shakes his head. "Of course not. I'm just tired."

I narrow my gaze. Like I'm going to believe him that he's just tired. "We don't have to do this. You're a terrible liar."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?"

I tilt my head. "Who's this everyone you speak of?"

He sighs. "My brothers think this is a terrible idea and I can't lie."

I scrunch my nose. "You told them?"

“Yeah, last night while I was opening the roof for them. We got to talking and—”

I snap my fingers. “You’re hungover.”

“Ugh.” He holds his head.

I grin because that’s a lot better than being pissed at me. “Did Heath drink a little too much last night?”

“Please don’t shriek.” He flinches.

“I’ll make you my famous anti-hangover concoction, and in the meantime, tell me why you decided to share this with them.”

“They asked what was bothering me. Plus, it seemed like a good idea to tell them. What if they drop by unannounced while your grandparents are at my place? They’ll screw the entire operation.”

I twist my lips a few times as I think about his reasoning and search for the Tabasco sauce. “Huh, I didn’t think about that, but just remember this isn’t an operation.”

“See, I can lie.”

I hum thoughtfully. Even after years of knowing him, Heath can sometimes be hard to read. He’s a master of hiding his emotions beneath a perfectly agreeable face. That’s not lying, more like suppressing his feelings all the time. Most of the time, he’s willing to let me into his private thoughts, but right now it feels like there’s a wall up between us again.

If he’s regretting his offer, I’m okay with that, but if not... what is happening with him?

“So, what are we doing at Fern’s?” I ask, handing him the glass with the concoction I just prepared. “Make sure to plug your nose before you drink it.”

He does as I say and gulps the thing in less than twenty seconds. “This tastes like feet.”

“Do you eat feet often?”

He glares at me. “Not the point.”

“Are you going to answer my question?”

He sighs. “Elliot thinks we should prepare for your grandparents’ visit.”

“I am ready for them. I stopped my special orders for the next couple of weeks and I made sure the store is covered. I might go to work for a couple of hours because the truffles don’t make themselves, but everything else should be good. How about you?”

“I’m on shift Monday night at six until Wednesday. After that, I’ll ask for a few days off so we can spend time with your grandparents. I don’t want them to think I’m rude. But that’s not what they mean by that. We have to be familiar with each other and make sure they believe the lie.” He smiles at me softly. I am caught up for a moment in his eyes. My smile back feels wobbly.

“I’m excited to meet your grandparents. Are they like Cécile?” He breaks eye contact and walks toward the coffee maker.

“Nope. They’re the absolute opposite. Loud, happy, and loving.”

“Cécile loves you.”

“Yes, but she’s also cold. My Mexican family is the opposite. Warm, friendly, and noisy. They like to hug and show affection.” I tap my chin. “You might want to get ready for that, since you don’t like PDA that much.”

He clears his throat. “What do you mean?”

“Abuelita might hug you and you’ll have to hug her back and not act like someone is trying to attack you or kill you with kindness.”

He does that with me often. I don’t take it personally. He’s just not a hugger, which I hate because, like my family, I’m pretty affectionate.

Heath makes some sort of frustrated noise as he pours coffee into the mugs.

“What now?”

“Atzi,” he says and then pauses for way too long for my newfound anxiety. “Now that you mention it, we didn’t really talk about uh... how?”

“How what?”

“How you want me to... act, I guess?” he says, sounding more unsure with each word.

His face is flushed with embarrassment, a rare sight, and I can feel my own sympathetic blush starting.

“Just... be you, but don’t react badly if she hugs you,” I warn him.

“No.” He shakes his head, and my stomach drops further before he holds up a hand to stop me. He’s clearly marshaling his words, so I wait. My bottom lip is nearly torn to shreds after the couple of days I’ve had, but I’ll worry about it later.

“This is why we have to go to Fern’s. Not only so we can all be on the same page, but to get comfortable as a couple.”

A couple, I mouth.

My face feels like it’s on fire. I press my hands to my skin to try to cool it down and focus on a long exhale.

“Um, what do you mean?” My voice is back to a squeak.

I can’t believe I squeaked like the plastic unicorn Soleil has.

“You haven’t thought this through,” he says. “The fact that we have to hold hands, hug, and maybe even kiss. We’ll have to sleep in the same bed.”

We have shared a bed a million times, but not kissed, or hugged—he doesn’t even like to hug.

“No.” I wave my hands frantically. “She’s going to know. You’re the one who offered. I told you last night you shouldn’t be involved in this.”

“You’re almost shaking. Are you afraid of your grandma?”

Yes, but I’m not focused on what my grandmother might see, but on *the kiss*.

I don't know why kissing Heath in front of my abuela had never once occurred to me, but now that I am thinking about it, my mind is shorting out on the image. A kiss, from him.

My heart is beating fast.

My hands are sweating.

Worse, my mouth is watering.

What the hell, Atzi? Get it together. He's your best friend.

"Ummm—" I chew on my lip even more.

"Are you okay?" Heath stares at me, and my small studio has never felt so tiny in my entire life. I feel claustrophobic, I need some air.

"Atzi," he sighs. "Are you okay?"

I swallow around the boulder in my throat and pick up the mug he poured for me, so I have something to do with my hands. I don't know why the question has caught me so off guard. I should have thought this through when he offered to help me, and now...

"Well," I say finally. "Abuelita is very warm, so she'll expect us to be cozy with each other. She would think it was weird if we weren't at least a little touchy. Abuelo always has his arm around her when they're together."

He nods, but waits for me to continue. I take a sip of my coffee, hopefully to chase away the bone-dry feeling in my mouth. It doesn't help. It's hot like my body. I have another flash of an image of Heath leaning down to kiss me, and I have to press the hot mug on my face to hide the intense blush. I wish it was iced water, to cool me down.

When I've got what might seem like lust under control, I try talking again, but my eyes are fixed on his lips.

Those delicious lips that suddenly I want to kiss—need to kiss.

"We probably need to... hug?" I wince as I say it and force myself to look up after a few seconds of silence pass between us. Heath's face is guarded again, but he doesn't look like he's

about to jump from a twenty-story window yet, which is good. “If that’s okay. I know that’s... a lot.”

He’s quiet for another moment before he shifts his weight from one leg to the other. I watch him pop his neck and then reach up with one hand to rub at the knot of muscle there.

I don’t know why I’ve never really noticed his lovely neck, all muscular lines and graceful curves. I make myself stop looking and glue my eyes to a spot just beyond his shoulder.

The wall is safe.

The wall will not cause me to have sudden, inappropriate thoughts about my best friend.

The wall needs a coat of paint.

Yes, paint. I should focus on a list of things I need to do around my house instead of Heath’s broad shoulders, six-pack, and incredible body. Forget about his mouth.

“We should probably do a test run.” Heath finally breaks his silence.

If I had been drinking water, I would have 100% spit it out. I look at him with wide eyes, but he’s as calm and unbothered as usual.

“T-test run?” I’m back to squeaking.

Since when do I squeak? Apparently, I started today, and I can’t stop it.

“So it doesn’t look awkward in front of your abuelos or even my family.” He clears his throat. “That’s why we’re going to Elliot and Fern’s, so they can tell us what we need to do to look like a couple.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can say. I smooth down the front of my shirt as if I had spilled coffee, but I didn’t. I just don’t want to look at him.

“Um, I need to... pack or... do we have to...” I’m at a loss for words. I believe my brain broke at the mention of a kiss, and I can’t reset it like a computer. Maybe if someone unplugs it?

He laughs.

He literally laughs and shakes his head as he walks toward me, like a mountain lion does while hunting his prey.

He wraps his arms around my back, tugs me to his chest, and plants his lips on mine.

He plants his lips on mine.

I want to jump out of his arms and stay between them forever. This is the second time he's willingly hugging me on a day that's not my birthday or Christmas. Instead of running, I snake my arms around his neck, and kiss him.

I'm kissing my best friend.

Heath. The guy who knows me better than anyone in the world and is *just* a friend. If he's just a friend, why am I enjoying his full, soft, commanding lips?

Instead of pushing him away, I tilt my head and let him deepen the kiss. Our mouths move together, our tongues become familiar with each other. They touch. They taste. They dance with each other.

It's the beginning of a song. A slow waltz I know exists, but I've never dared to play before. His hands rake down my body, pulling me closer to him. A groan tears from the back of his throat when I push my hips, pressing on his hardening cock.

The kiss becomes desperate. We need more, and it scares me. I end it abruptly. We're both breathing harshly. I want to run from his embrace, but I'm thankful he's holding me, or my weak knees would give up.

"That was..." I press the tips of my fingers to my lips.

He rests his forehead on mine. "I'll try to control myself," I promise.

"You don't have to, okay?" He kisses my nose and moves away. "Get ready. We have to leave soon."

I have so many questions, but I'm so afraid of the answers that I just do as he says.

Chapter Sixteen



Atzi

THINGS BETWEEN HEATH and I are getting weirder by the day—maybe the second. Two weeks ago, something happened at his sister's house. I don't know if I was upset because he's been in love and never told me or because he's leaving, and he doesn't care who's staying behind—missing him.

And now he's suddenly a totally different Heathcliff Spearman. He must've hit his head, had a lobotomy, or... I can't find any other reason why his behavior changed so much.

This Heath hugs me when I need him—or he kisses me as if I'm the last drink of water. His salvation. The reason why he exists.

He doesn't do PDA. And suddenly he's Don Juan, flashing smiles, lowering his voice to almost a bedroom tone, and kissing.

He fucking kissed me.

How dare he kisses me like that?

Okay, I might never get over it.

It doesn't surprise me neither of us speaks on our way to Santa Cruz, nor that the atmosphere inside the car is so thick I'm having trouble breathing.

When we arrive at Fern's place, I jump out of the car and run toward the house without looking at Heath. Cory is waiting for us. She leans against the main door, arms crossed, and shaking her head.

I sigh. "You know, don't you?"

She nods. "You could've said it was Caspian or Huxley. Why Heath?" She rolls her eyes. "Big fail."

"What are you doing, Coriander?" Heath walks toward us, carrying our luggage.

“Gatsby invited me to judge you,” she answers, giving him a peck on the cheek. She’s not even addressing the fact that he called her Coriander, not Cordelia.

Cory is having fun with this and she’s going to tease him until he’s begging for mercy. “This is going to be so much fun,” she says. “You’re not the best match for our Atzi. I vote to change the players and make Hux the runner-up for the fiancé title.”

“What do you mean judge us?” I glare at her, ignoring the comment about the fiancé.

“You can’t sell that you two are together. He’s a terrible liar, and you respect his boundaries way too much.”

I roll my eyes. “That sounds silly.”

“Listen, I’m here to help. I can tell you how to avoid getting caught.”

That’s music to my ears. “You can? How?”

“Yes, by giving you pointers. Like right now, he should be kissing you on the lips and saying something like, ‘Babe, I’m taking this to the room. Wanna join me?’ And wink. Then, you two stay in the room for an hour, shower, and change. That way, your grandparents will think you were fucking.”

“Why do you have to be so annoying?” Heath complains.

“I’m not. That’s what a happy engaged man would say and do.” She grabs my left hand and studies it before sighing. “So, where’s the ring?”

I gasp.

“See, you two aren’t ready,” she says before going into the house, almost bouncing with joy.

Heath tilts his head toward the entrance. “Let’s get moving. I might have a solution for you.”

When we arrive at the guest room, Fern is fixing the sheets.

“Let me do that,” I say.

She turns to glare at me. “You and I have to have a long conversation, young lady.”

“I’m sorry.” I pout.

“I understand sometimes we want to do what we think is right, but this lie went a little too far.” She places her fists on her waist. “I don’t like it. Someone is going to get hurt.”

“I know, but I’ll do my best not to screw this up.”

“We’ll help you because there’s a lot on the line. Next time, try talking with her before you make things up, okay?” Fern assures me.

I nod. “Thank you.”

She opens her arms. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

She grips my arms, looking me in the eyes. “Never say that. Everyone deserves a loving family, and that’s what we are to you, okay?”

She looks at Heath and smiles. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do.”

She twists her lips and shakes her head. “When were you going to tell me about New York?”

“Today?”

She walks to him and hugs her little brother as if he weren’t six foot four and thirty-one. “We’re going to miss you.”

“It’s going to be okay,” he says, and I’m not sure what he means by that, but I don’t ask.

Once Fern leaves the room, Heath pulls out a red box from his backpack. When he opens it, I gasp. It’s a solitaire ring. “How?”

“I made a few calls. It’s not exactly what you’d want in a ring, but I thought it’d be good for now.”

It's an emerald-cut diamond on top of an infinity setting. It's not too flashy, and it's beautiful. Not sure why my heart twitches, like something is bothering it. Maybe it's my stupid clock reminding me I'm not getting any younger and the man of my dreams is nowhere in sight.

But right now, I need to focus on what I have, the chance to convince Abuelita I'm with someone who loves me and I'm happy. "I love it."

He slides it onto my finger and there's butterflies in my stomach. How I wish this was real. Well, not him proposing. We know his plan is to be a bachelor for the rest of his life, but someone like him. A man who knows me well and perhaps loves me in a way no one ever will.

And this wouldn't be just a friend doing me a favor but a proposal. He'd tell me all the reasons why he wants to spend the rest of his life with me, and I'd cry because I have never seen someone look at me with so much love.

This is not that though. We're just two friends doing what we always do, helping each other out.

"Good." He smiles, staring at the ring as if he did something great, but still, he looks conflicted.

"We don't have to do this."

"It's okay," he says, as if his mother just served him brussels sprouts and he has to eat them.

"But you'll hate every moment of it," I push, because I don't like that he's forcing himself. "I love that you want to help me, but I don't want you to be uncomfortable. This isn't you. You can barely stand when I touch you."

He scoffs. "That's not exactly true."

"What does that mean?"

He leans closer to me, kissing me lightly on the lips. "It's complicated."

"You could explain it to me."

Heath shakes his head. “I could, but I won’t. Let’s go to the kitchen. We didn’t have anything for breakfast, and we know what happens when you don’t eat.”

“Me? Pfft. You’re the one who gets cranky. That’s one of the reasons why I call you the grump-doc.” I look around the room. “Where are you staying tonight?”

He grins, as if he has yet another surprise for me. “We’re sharing a room.”

I frown. After that kiss, he wants us to occupy the same bed? Is he crazy?

My lips still tingle from the way his mouth possessed mine. Heathcliff Spearman knows how to kiss. For a man who hates PDA and avoids affection, he knows how to handle himself really well.

“Why?”

He throws me a playful wink. “Because we have to look like a normal couple.” With that, he leaves the room like he just won some kind of challenge.

What just happened?

Chapter Seventeen



Heath

THEY SAY the amount of success depends on the effort we make.

The only way her grandparents will believe that we're together will depend on how convincingly we look like a loving couple.

To many it'd be difficult, but not to me. My brothers are concerned about how I'll act if I have to touch Atzi. The key is to stop doing what I've been practicing all my life, avoidance. The reason I dodge her touch and affection is because if I don't, I'd be pinning her against a wall and fucking her.

I not only love her, but I lust after her.

Atzi has no idea, because I've been working so fucking hard not to show how I feel that I just seem like a cold asshole. All my effort paid off. I succeeded. Now it's time to stop trying too fucking hard to keep my feelings inside and just let them flow.

Isn't that ironic? But I definitely got this.

"You seem quite pleased with yourself," Gatsby says as I walk into the kitchen.

I take a step back and glare at him. "What are you doing here? I thought we were meeting tonight."

He nods. "That was the plan, but then Fern called Maia, Keaton, and Rys. One thing led to another, and we all had to be here at eight in the fucking morning."

I check my watch. "That's a couple of hours ago. Why wasn't I told that we changed plans?"

He shrugs. "Because it didn't pertain to you. And not to be an asshole, but why the fuck are you here so early? We're not ready for you."

“I wanted to pick the best bedroom. Not that it happened. When I arrived, I saw Elliot texted me. He assigned me a bedroom—and I’m sharing it with Atzi.” I have to speak to him. Usually, we get separate rooms. Changing the way I behave with her is going to be easy, but sharing a bed...

How can I stop myself from wanting to touch her?

Gatsby grins. “It’s part of the plan.”

I raise my eyebrows and cross my arms. “Is it ‘giving a fucking hard time to your younger brother’ day? What are you talking about?”

“That’s a mouthful, and we can implement the day. I think February twenty-eight should be a good day to fuck with you guys.” He laughs at his terrible joke.

“Gatz?” I warn him. “What’s going on?”

He rubs his hands and grins. “We decided to make this a game show.”

I rub my chin, reminding myself he has a child who needs him, and murder is prohibited in all fifty states. “Explain yourself,” I order.

“You guys are here so we can give you pointers. And now, we’re making it into a game with levels, different challenges, and quizzes.”

I toss up my hands and walk back and forth from the kitchen to the living room, cursing under my breath. When I’m done, I say, “Did you lose your ever-fucking mind?”

“No, but watching you cringe every time you have to touch her will be worth the trouble.”

I roll my eyes and open the fridge. He doesn’t need to know that during the drive from SanFran to Santa Cruz, I figured out how to make this work for us. No one will ever doubt that we’re madly in love.

I just have to do everything I’ve avoided since I realized I was in love with Atzi, and I’ll be golden. It’s just about hugging her, holding her, and kissing her whenever the fuck I want. If I begin today, by the time her grandparents arrive,

everyone will think we're madly in love. It's so fucking simple.

"Why are you looking so confident?" Gatsby narrows his gaze.

I look around, hoping his wife, Maia, is here to control him. She's not. I use the one person who can distract him, "Where's Soleil?"

"Everyone is by the beach, including my baby."

I shrug. "Then, why are you here?"

He shows me a tote bag. "I was preparing the snacks for the kids. Now, will you tell me why you look so smug?"

It occurs to me they can't be here just to see me squirm. Knowing my brothers, I can tell there's a lot more riding on this. "Do you have a bet going?"

He nods. "Yeah. Do you want in?"

"Is anyone betting we don't get caught?"

Gatsby laughs. "Nope. I'm afraid to tell you that no one has faith in you."

"Ooh, I'll get in on that bet. Sign me up for day four," Atzi says.

"Not even the chocolate fairy has faith in you." He glances at her and tsks. "You're a bad influence on my little brother."

She rolls her eyes, laughing in a good-natured way. "What can I say? I was born a rebel."

"Did you bring any chocolate with you?" Gatsby looks at her, hopeful.

"No, sorry. It's only when I visit Maia. I didn't know you'd be here."

"Everyone is here," he corrects her.

She looks around. "Where are they?"

"By the beach," he responds.

Atzi looks at me. “We should join them after breakfast. What are you making us?”

Gatsby waves. “I’ll see you soon, lovebirds.”

Atzi gives him a sideways glance before her attention is on me. “It’s like he’s having a blast at your expense.”

I groan. “The joy of having so many fucking siblings. The triplets and the twins like to torture me.”

“You’re just jealous because you don’t have a twin or a trio.” She throws me a wink and walks to the fridge.

“I’m definitely not,” I argue. “Pancakes?”

She nods and adds, “I want to have twins. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a partner in crime?”

“Not really. You were an only child for years.”

“Nine, and though I had fun with my parents, it was lonely at times.” She sighs, looking at her ring. “When I marry for realz, I plan on having more than one child—three at least.”

“Three replicas of you?” I pretend to shiver. “That’s scary, and it’s pronounced real, not realz.”

She hits me playfully on the arm. “You’re supposed to be excited about having multiple copies of me—remember, we’re engaged.” She even shows me her ring.

“We’ll have an entire football team of copies of you. Better?”

“Not really, but I’ll let it slide for today.”

I lift up her chin. “Hey, I swear you’ll meet the guy, and you’ll have plenty of children who’ll look just like you.”

She scratches her arm, and I stop her. When I look at it, there are angry red lines along it. I kiss them. I hate when she’s like that. “Anxious?”

She nods once.

“Have you taken your medicine?”

“I did. If not, I would be having constant panic attacks.”

Usually, I would avoid her and just offer a fidget toy. This time I take her into my arms and hold her, trying to calm her. “It’s going to be okay. Can you tell me what’s happening?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Too much to process?”

“Yeah,” she whispers.

“Do you trust me?”

She mumbles something I can’t understand and nods.

“We’ll be fine, okay? If you feel like your anxiety is getting out of hand, let me know. I’m here for you.”

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“Being my friend and my person.”

I wish I could say always. But that’d be a lie. This is the last time I’ll be who she needs. I just hope I don’t get so hooked on her that I won’t be able to move on, even when I live so many miles away from her.

Chapter Eighteen



Atzi

TWO WORDS.

Twilight Zone.

I'm about to call 9-1-1 or have Heath committed to a mental institution. Maybe he was kidnapped by aliens, and they gave him the wrong brain during the teleportation back to earth. Okay, that's pretty far-fetched, but something strange is happening with him.

While preparing breakfast, he finds a way to touch me. My hands, my face... he even kisses me and flirts.

He actually flirts with me.

Grumpy, cold, and at times ruthless Heath Spearman seeks personal touch. I try to avoid him, but he makes it impossible. Then, he reminds me about my grandparents.

I understand we have to practice, but he's going overboard. What does he want from me? Sex?

Okay, that's my body trying to override logic. I have to keep reminding it that Heath is a friend, and as hot as he is and as great as sex could be between us, it's a hard no.

No sex.

No.

Sex.

No—

“Are you okay?” he asks, kissing the corner of my mouth. His citrusy sandalwood aroma hits just the right spot.

His sexy voice dragged me out of my head and made me forget what I was thinking. All I want to say is, “I want you. At least kiss me.”

Shut up, Atzi!

And why do I care about his scent? I'm immune to it—to him. Aren't I?

“Babe, you're very distracted. Can you hand me a plate, please?”

“Babe?”

“No? Do you think we should go with something different? How about *love*?”

I frown. “Why are we trying nicknames?”

“We've been dating for ten years and we're about to get married. Don't you think we should have pet names for each other?”

“That's...” I frown. “I guess it'll be helpful.”

“We could try something like *mon trésor* or go for something in Spanish like *mi corazón*,” he says, with an almost flawless pronunciation. “If not, we could go with *ma belle*. What did your parents use for each other?”

I hand him the plate because I can't think straight when he's looking at me like I'm breakfast and he's ready to feast on me.

“Atzi?”

“It never occurred to me that nicknames would be necessary. I guess love is fine. We don't speak in French or Spanish enough to justify using them.” I scrunch my nose. “That's tacky.”

He leans closer to me, whispering, “Fair enough, *love*.”

I jump away from him, shivering.

“And if I were your grandmother, I would be suspicious about your relationship status,” someone says, and I jump away from Heath, almost falling down. Fortunately, Heath is close enough to catch me.

“Are you okay?” He kisses my cheek as he helps me stand on my two feet.

“Of course she’s not. She’s skittish and ready to run away from you.” I tilt my head and find Lysander standing next to the kitchen island. “You two have to try harder. He’s your fiancé. You probably can’t get enough of him. Why would you react as if he’s a wasp or a yellowjacket?”

I shrug. “It’s weird, okay?”

“Well, try to work on that. And I agree with her, don’t start throwing Spanish or French words because you feel like going international will give you more points.”

“Is this why you are here? To annoy the fuck out of me?”

“Yes. It’s going to be so much fun.” Lysander turns around and leaves.

Heath looks at me, tilting his head. “Am I coming on too strong?”

“You’re going from zero to a hundred in less than a second. It’s hard to get used to it.” His lips pass over mine with a slight brush that makes every cell in my body tremble.

“Heath.” I breathe his name, my lips parting.

He teases me once more before lowering his mouth to mine. This kiss is different from the one he gave me at home. It’s slow but deep. This is an exploration. The discovery of a new world. Probably the beginning of something, I just don’t know what. I let him lead, matching his movements and his pace. Tasting his mouth and probably his soul.

I don’t want this moment to end. Never in my life have I ever desired something like I do now.

This kiss, him, his arms.

When we pull apart, his eyes are on fire.

He presses his forehead to mine. “Atzi.” His voice almost cracks.

“What’s happening?” I whisper with a trembling voice. It’s hard, too hard, to speak.

His hands frame my face as he pulls back. Those eyes are full of mischief and desire. I want to know what he’s thinking,

what he wants.

“Nothing, everything,” he answers my question with a low voice. “Just trust me, okay? I’ll get you through this.” It’s a promise, but I’m not sure what he’s assuring me of. That my grandparents won’t catch us, or he won’t destroy my heart before this is over.

My throat is closed. I can’t make a sound or say a word, and so I nod. I trust him. I just pray I don’t fall in love with my best friend. More so when he’ll never reciprocate.

Chapter Nineteen



Atzi

AFTER BREAKFAST, we go to the beach. I spend most of the time watching Elliot teach Alyth and Elijah how to stand on a board, it's entertaining. The little ones can barely stand on the sand. I doubt either of them understands what their father is saying, but watching them copy him is adorable. More so when they fall down more often than they can stand up. I think their butts have hit the surfboard so many times that their diapers will disintegrate.

“Why do you look like you're trying to solve a puzzle?” Heath kisses my shoulder, and I move forward, glaring at him.

“You okay?”

I brush my shoulder and nod. “Just keep your lips to yourself.”

He rolls his eyes acting annoyed, but I see the smile almost dancing on his lips. “You have to get used to me touching and kissing you.”

This part of Heath is unknown to me, maybe even to his family. Or maybe they're just watching us to make sure we're doing what couples normally do. I just can't get used to that.

“I'm trying,” I almost pout.

“Try harder. We only have a couple of days to look convincing.”

“Fine. And to answer your question, I was staring at the ocean and looking at your niece and nephew. I mean, that thing is massive, and they're so tiny. I can't see them ready to hit the waves in the next thirty years.”

He chuckles. “Well, they're practicing on the sand.”

“Yes, but one day they'll be in the ocean.”

“You surf and do well. Why wouldn't they?” He snorts. “Will you let your kids in the kitchen when they're that

young? I mean, it's hot molten chocolate and dangerous tools."

I almost roll my eyes because that's not how things work. Not at all. When Dad introduced me to the kitchen, it was pretty much empty. He only had the mix of the truffles and the cocoa dust. That was my first experience helping him. It was almost like being at Mom's studio playing with clay or finger paint.

Do I plan on teaching my children everything I know? Of course.

"Yes, I will, just like Dad did when I could barely stand on a chair. According to my parents, I was rolling my first truffles by the age of one." I shrug a shoulder. "I guess some hobbies are worth passing on to the next generation."

He nods. "Exactly."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask what he'll be passing to his children, but I immediately recall he doesn't want any. My heart clenches when I look around and see the happy families enjoying the beach.

How can it be possible he doesn't want this? The wife, the children, or the daily adventures. I stare at the ring on my hand and feel a pang. As if I'm the one losing all that because he doesn't allow himself to love or be loved.

"Are you okay?" He kisses my cheek so close to my lips I almost jump out of my skin.

"You need to stop touching and kissing me," I growl.

"Stop being weird. We're supposed to be happily engaged," Heath reminds me, showing me seven fingers. "This is the seventh time you're about to punch me for getting too close to you."

"I wouldn't hit you. And sure, we're going to pretend to be together. Just remember this isn't real, and it feels strange to do it in front of your family."

He lifts my chin with his index finger, his eyes staring at me, licking his lips. I can't help but stare at his mouth. "This is how we're going to play this. From this moment until your

grandparents are boarding the plane back to Mexico, we'll act like a couple madly in love that's about to get married."

"But we're not. This feels strange, and my brain is having trouble processing it. What if I get confused?"

"Everything will clear out the moment they're gone. We'll return to normal, and I'll be in New York soon." He leans closer and gives me a peck on the lips. "You promised to trust me."

"I did, but this might go too far." My voice is breaking.

He winks at me. "We can take it as far as you want, love."

The longing and ache in my chest increases. Why is it that I'm reacting to his voice and his body? I don't know, but the fear? It's like the juggling act of keeping everyone happy, and everything together might fail.

My heart is cracking open, and the memories of getting the news that all my family had died, leaving me alone, hit me right in the core of my soul.

Heath's arms wrap around me, drawing me into his hard chest. "It's okay," he whispers. "I got you. I always do."

But I have a bad feeling. That same feeling I had the day my parents and my sister died.

I cling to him, praying I'm just being pessimistic.

"Please, don't cry. I swear it'll be okay."

This is the second time in less than twenty-four hours that I cry for an unfounded fear. I act like it doesn't matter when people leave me, but I hate being alone. He might promise me everything will work out, but we know at the end of this very stupid and dangerous charade, he's leaving me.

And if I fall in love with him, how will I survive?

Chapter Twenty



Atzi

AFTER THE WEIRD nervous breakdown I had at the beach, I work harder to pretend I'm engaged to Heath. Hard isn't the exact word. It's easy to be myself but strange to deal with his mood. I doubt I'll ever get over this. I might be a little in love with his alter ego, Not-grumpy-affectionate-Heathcliff.

We spend the rest of the day with his family. It's not until the little ones have gone to bed that they suddenly let loose the crazy. Crazy might not be the proper term, but no one could deny they're insane.

Who creates an entire game show with tequila as a prize and lemon drops as punishment just to tease their brother? At least, that's what I think they're doing—and I'm going along for the ride.

The first part is walking blindfolded through the house. I lose the coin toss and get to walk through a path Hux and Lysander created. Since I don't fall, hit myself, or give up, I get a shot of tequila.

"This is not going to work," Heath says, taking the blindfold off.

"It's your turn."

"What if I forfeit?"

"You get to drink two Bloody Marys—prepared by Cory," Hux responds.

"If we lose, we drink lemon drops," Heath protests. "Coriander thinks she's preparing a salsa, not a drink. My stomach isn't ready for her poison."

"The name is Cordelia, and you're being too dramatic." Cory glares at him.

"Dramatic?" His voice booms throughout the house. "My choices are to let you perforate my stomach or let Miss I-can't-

remember-the-names-of-objects give me directions.”

“Again, you’re exaggerating,” Cory says.

Gatsby tsks. “Shouldn’t you be trusting your future wife?”

Heath squeezes his eyes for a second before bending and kissing my nose. “I must love you a lot to go through this.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. What does he mean? But I can’t think much since Caspian blows the horn, and I have to start giving Heath directions.

“Thirty seconds to get him through this,” Cas says, pretending he clicks an imaginary clock.

“Take four steps to your left,” I say, but obviously, I miscalculated his long steps, and before he takes the third one, he bumps his leg against the coffee table.

“Fuck, Atzi.”

I flinch. “Oops, sorry.”

“She’s going to get me killed,” Heath complains, and everyone laughs.

“Look, the doc can be funny. I guess he just needed to get laid.”

I’m so mortified that of course, I say the wrong thing. “Three steps straight, and then take a right.”

He does as I say, and before I can say careful, he hits the couch, takes a step back, and trips on Mia, Rys and Caspian’s little puppy. He falls close to Ralph, who begins to lick his face.

“Your mutt is going to kill me.” Heath tries to take off the blindfold while keeping Ralph away from his face.

“Ralph, sit,” Cas says. The big brown dog immediately obeys him.

Heath finally takes off his blindfold, pushes himself into a sitting position, and glares at me. “This is exactly why you’re not allowed to drive.”

I get close to him to check if he's hurt and say, "I'm not a bad driver."

"Someone hand me a drink. This is going to be a long game." He sighs, pulling me to him, and once my ass hits his lap, he puts his hand on the back of my neck and kisses me hard. This time I don't fight him. I melt into him.

"I DON'T GET why we're doing this." I glare at Fern.

Things are going from silly to ridiculous.

"It's a trust game," she says, as if that explains the nonsense.

Heath is standing in front of me, giving me his back. "I understand that, but can you comprehend what's going to happen when he falls? I'm not strong enough to catch him, and he's the only doctor in the house."

She grins. "He trusts you enough that you will catch him."

"I trust her judgment more than yours." Heath stares at Fern. "If Atzi doesn't think she can do it, I'm not participating."

"Bloody Mary time!" Cory claps.

"No," Heath says with a panicked voice. "This shouldn't count as forfeiting. Neither one of us is willing to do something borderline stupid."

"Judges?" Cory looks around.

"I'd say let them go with a shot of whiskey."

"I can't believe we didn't bring enough vodka for the lemon drops," Hux complains.

"I thank my lucky stars." I grin, then turn to Fern. "What's next on your trust game?"

"Buddy walk?" Cory chimes.

“What is that?” Heath looks at her, terrified. I can’t help but laugh.

“We tie you by the legs, and you’re supposed to walk a certain distance,” she explains.

“That’s something we do at the annual Spearman trip,” Caspian says. “It’s too easy.”

“It’s not annual,” Aslan corrects.

“Buddy, we’ve done it two times, and we’re organizing number three. The fact that it’s not during the same month doesn’t mean it’s not an annual event,” Lysander chimes in.

“Where are they doing it this year? Hawaii?” Cas is grinning. “I hope this time is during the off-season. I want to be there for more than a couple of days.”

“Colorado. Jackson and June are organizing it.” One of them responds, I’m not sure who. I think I’ve drunk too many shots to keep their voices straight.

Fern looks at me. “You’re coming this year, aren’t you?”

I glance at Heath, who says, “We’re allergic to camping.”

“Which is ironic since you two met at camp.” Gatsby claps Heath’s back.

Since we’re digressing, I say, “Can we be done with this nonsense?”

Fern nods. “Since these trust games aren’t working, let’s try the questions.”

I stare at Heath, whose eyes are filled with panic. “What’s wrong with your family?”

“And you think having siblings is the best thing that can happen to a person.”

I laugh. “Honestly, I’m having a blast, even though I don’t understand what’s happening to them.”

Caspian is the one who whistles, dragging everyone’s attention. “Let’s start the round of questions. My lady, would you like to start?”

Rys has a bunch of colorful cue cards. She takes a seat on the couch and looks at Heath. “What’s Atzi’s favorite food?”

“Fruits because they’re sweet—except watermelon. She’s allergic to it.”

“Correct,” Hux hands him a tequila shot.

Rys turns to me. “Same question for you, Atzi.”

“He doesn’t have a preference.”

“Buzz.” Caspian almost screams. “Wrong.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” I say as he pours a shot of whiskey. “That’s what he says, but he secretly loves pancakes.”

Hux hands me a shot of tequila. Do they understand I’ll be drunk before midnight if they give me a shot for every question they ask?

“What food does Atzi hate?” Rys continues.

“We need better questions. Those are too easy,” I protest.

“It’s necessary.” Rys shrugs as if she didn’t invent the made-up rules—but she did.

“Anything green,” Heath responds almost immediately.

“Now to you, Atzi.”

“Salmon. He hates the consistency.”

I glare at Hux, who’s pouring more tequila into my glass.

“Is Atzi a dog or cat person?”

“Dog, but she can’t own any because her career is too demanding, and she can’t bring pets to work.”

Rys stares at me. “But how about cats?”

“She’s allergic,” Heath says.

“You could—”

“Rys, stop trying to give the woman a pet,” Caspian stops his wife.

Rys almost pouts. “I was just saying that—”

“Babe, not everyone needs a pet.”

“That’s a lie.” She crosses her arms indignant and glances at me again. “Favorite smell?”

“Are we not asking about Heath’s pets?”

“Nope. He’ll give us an entire lecture about the reason why he can’t have nice things. Work.” Rys sighs, almost disappointed.

“I was going to give you the whole explanation.”

“We’re saving you the energy so you can keep answering the questions.” She grins. “What household chores does Atzi hate the most?”

Heath laughs. I glare at him and mouth, *asshole*.

“All of them—she cleans the kitchen because she has to work in it.”

“And he’s a neat freak who swears everything must be impeccable.”

Suddenly Elliot takes a few steps and says, “I think our work here is almost done.”

“What do you mean?” Heath looks at him.

“You’re comfortable with each other, and you’re almost finishing each other’s sentences.”

Heath and I look at each other and frown. Is he right?

“How do you know we won’t fail?” I ask him because he sounds like an expert. “Are you an actor?”

Elliot shakes his head. “Let’s just say I had to do it when I was younger.”

Heath snakes his arm around my waist and pulls me closer to him. “We’ll be fine, promise.”

He keeps saying that, but something doesn’t feel right. What is it?

Chapter Twenty-One



Atzi

GNOMES ARE tap-dancing inside my head. Well, it's either that or the combination of whiskey, tequila, and having to share a bed with Heath. It's after midnight and I haven't slept at all. This is a thousand times worse than last night when I was just dealing with the anxiety.

Close your eyes and just sleep, I order, but like everything else, it's not working.

God knows I've tried everything. Counting sheep, thinking about the next sculpture I have to create, and even telling those stupid gnomes to stop the nonsense because my head is killing me.

Nothing is working.

I can't manage to do more than just think about what we could be doing in bed. Once, I heard that sex helps with headaches. I don't know how, but the good doctor should test it with me. I might forget about everything if I see him completely naked—and fucking me. It's been so long.

Too long since the last time I had sex.

Okay, I'm pretty sure that's the alcohol speaking. I'm not drunk, but I'm not sober enough to keep my body from wanting to bare myself and get under him—and also on top. I bet riding him like a cowgirl would be fun.

“Are you having trouble sleeping?” Heath asks, breathing close to my ear.

I close my eyes, doing my best not to moan. It's so hard when his arm hugs my waist and he pulls me closer to him. What is he trying to do? Torture me?

“We've done this a thousand times,” he says.

What is he talking about? I'd remember if we had had sex before. He's probably thinking about the alcohol or the crazy

day we experienced. So, I whisper, “Make fools of ourselves while drinking ourselves stupid? I don’t think I’ve done this since college.”

“It was silly to humor my family. Next time, I’ll stop them.”

Next time? There shouldn’t be any next time. “Why did you let them go that far?”

“You were relaxed and having fun.” He kisses the back of my neck.

I groan when he runs his fingers across my bare stomach. I should’ve worn long johns or a chastity belt, not a silk cami and my tiny shorts.

Ugh, I’m not even wearing underwear—I never do when I sleep. It’ll be so easy if he just slides his hand lower and touches me between the legs, where I’m beginning to ache.

“Stop,” I whisper-shout. Not sure if it’s to him or myself.

Did we lose our common sense?

“Why? You seem to be enjoying it.” He nibbles my ear.

A throaty moan escapes me. *Yes, please keep going*, I want to beg. Instead, I use the voice of reason. “I have a headache. Also, we have to consider what this could do to our friendship.”

His lips glide along my shoulder. “Do you want me to find something for the pain? Or I can always find other ways. Oxytocin helps with headaches.”

“Is that something that comes in ibuprofen?”

He chuckles. “No. It’s released when you’re having an orgasm.”

Yes, please. My body wants him badly, but I know this isn’t right. Something might break, and why risk one of the most important relationships in my life?

Actually, I’m curious as to why he’s behaving like this. Like he’s attracted to me, as if I’m the most important person

in his world. The love of his life. “Why did you kiss me like that?”

He presses his hot mouth against my skin, searing it. I should push him away, but I can’t. I like how they make me shiver. If anything, I want him to do more with those lips—and his tongue.

“Like this?” He kisses my back one more time.

“No, the other kiss. The one at my studio.”

“It’s been more than twelve hours, and you’re bringing that up?”

“No one has ever kissed me like...” My voice trails off. I can’t find a way to describe it or the feelings he evoked.

“Did you like it?”

Like it? Loved it! But I won’t tell him that. This can’t continue, even when I’m dying for more.

“I can’t say it was bad,” I answer casually. “You’re a good kisser.”

“You’re not that bad yourself, Lavigne.”

Should I take that as a compliment? Is that what he tells the women he dates? No, it’s not, because Heath doesn’t date. Then, what are we doing? Maybe he thinks that’s how he should behave with his significant other. Although I may love the attention and enjoy his touch, we don’t have to continue behaving like two crazed teenagers in heat.

“I don’t think we’ll have to do it often. Do you?”

“You sound afraid.”

“Of course I’m scared. I don’t understand why you’re not affected. The kiss was different.”

“Different, how?”

“Scary different.”

“Maybe if we try again...”

“That sounds like an excuse,” I claim, trying to fight him and fight the urge.

“You sound like a scaredy-cat.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



Heath

I BLAME ALL the alcohol I ingested. Normally, I wouldn't challenge Atzi to do anything, knowing she'll make it happen just to prove me wrong. She rolls to the side. Her face is close to mine. So close.

"Heath," she says in a way like she's praying, like she's telling me a secret.

A secret I want to know. I'm fighting the need, but she moves farther, and her lips touch mine. They burn my mouth and I lose it.

I lose all control and kiss her, pushing my tongue inside, capturing her lips, and hoping I can devour her with this kiss.

A searing kiss.

A burning-your-soul, stealing-your-heart kind of kiss.

The sound she makes when I deepen it sends a colossal amount of endorphins to my brain. I want her. It might be impossible to stop the urge to have her. I press my cock between her legs. Her sweet gasps make me harder.

"Atzi," I whisper before taking her lip between my teeth.

She's right. This is too fucking scary. I'm afraid of what can happen afterward. There's an expiration date between us. This is why I never crossed the lines, but they became blurry the first time I kissed her. I can't see them anymore. The need to possess her obliterated them.

The voice of reason screams to stop, to move away, and take a plane to New York. But my body doesn't agree, and my heart is saying, "Shut the fuck up."

I slide my fingers under the elastic of her tiny silky shorts. Atzi surprises me by copying my movements and taking my girth.

“Love,” I whisper with a trembling voice. “Do you want this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we stop,” I say before finding her clit.

“You’re still leaving, aren’t you?”

This is the worst time to ask me for anything. If she does, I might just stay and fuck up her future. That’s not me. I don’t plan on ruining her life.

“Please don’t ask me to stay,” I mumble against her lips, recognizing I’m not planning to give her much in return.

She lets out a shaky breath before saying, “I wouldn’t. I want you to be happy. Also, I want this for as long as you’re here. When you leave, we’ll go back to just being friends.”

I like her plan, friends with some benefits. The pleasure and honor to be inside her. To possess the most precious creature in this world.

“Okay.” My voice is so ragged, anyone would think someone is hurting me.

On the contrary, this, touching her and kissing her, is bliss. Ecstasy. Paradise.

Heaven.

Atzi is everything I want and can’t have. If I can do it just for one day, that’s all I need to die a happy man.

I bury my face in her neck. “Thank you,” I say before I sprinkle kisses on every inch of her exposed skin.

My hands push her shorts down while I continue worshiping her with my mouth. Just the thought of what I’m about to do to her, with her, makes my cock swollen and it leaks. Atzi is a vision. The most beautiful woman in the world.

In my eyes, she’s the only woman, and she’s about to be mine.

She’s probably the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and now, she’s here in my bed allowing me to love her.

I finish undressing her. If I only have her once, I want to taste all of her.

“What are you doing?” she asks with a trembling voice.

“Worshiping you.”

“You don’t need to use foreplay to convince me.”

“No, I need it to enjoy you, taste you”—I lower myself—“devour you.”

“Like the big bad wolf?”

“No, like a starving man who’s been waiting his entire life for this.” I lower myself, kissing her.

My hands touch her hardening nipples. She whimpers as I interrupt our kiss and moans when my mouth trails down her jaw and her neck, and eventually, I bite on her hardened nipples.

Fuck, her tits are perfect. Full. Round. Mine. They taste like chocolate and Atzi. Her back arches and I move her hands away from her pussy as she tries to touch herself.

“This is mine to touch, to lick, to enjoy, my love. Tonight, I’m the one who makes you come.”

Slowly, I go down on her, kissing every inch of her body until I arrive at her core. The scent of her arousal hits my nostrils, making every cell of my body vibrate with need.

All I want is to taste her warm, tender, beautiful pussy. I slide my tongue through her folds, and thrust one finger inside her.

“You taste delicious,” I mumble against her sweet pearl, blowing on it.

She gasps, thrusting her hips into my mouth. Atzi grabs my hair when I push a second finger inside and nip her rosy bud.

“Harder,” she orders. “Please, fuck me harder!”

“You’re also bossy in bed, aren’t you?” I look up at her. She chews her lip, her eyes lock on mine. “But not tonight.”

“Heath,” she pleads.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Be patient. I’m going to take it really slow. We’ll glide, soar, and then fall together.”

She wails as I lap at her pussy. I eat her thoroughly. She squirms and gasps as I devour her with the hunger of a man who’s about to face death row. The last meal. My first taste of heaven. I’m starving for her. She’s moving so much, I pin her with my free hand while I continue fucking her tight canal.

I savor her while crooking my finger and pressing it against her G-spot. Atzi’s pulling my hair, pushing her hips, moaning when the orgasmic wave hits her. She screams my name with euphoria. I press my tongue against her tender bud as her spasms increase and her legs tremble. My cock is about to explode. It needs to be inside of her. I can’t think of anything else but her and the hunger that’s eating my insides.

After drinking her orgasm, I stand up, pushing her back onto the bed, kissing her hard and teasing her entrance with my dick. “You want this?”

“Please,” she whimpers when I thrust a finger between her sweet labia.

“Taste yourself.” I place my finger on her lips.

She wraps her lips around it, swallowing it deep.

Sucking it.

Her dark eyes fill with craving—with need. The fire within melts her brown-eyed gaze, and I can’t wait to be inside her. I kiss her one more time.

“Your scent is addictive. Intoxicating. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough,” I pant as her fingers touch my shaft. “Not yet. If you touch me one more time, I’ll come all over your hand.”

“Please,” she begs. “Fuck me!”

“Are you sure about this?” I whisper, watching her eyes burn with desire.

There's no going back, but I already knew that. We part ways in two weeks. We might as well enjoy these last moments. I can do what I forbade myself to do since I fell in love with her. She's mine for now.

"I want you," she says desperately. "All of you."

Carefully, I climb back in between her legs, picking up the condom on the nightstand. Whoever stocked this bedroom is a genius. I roll the rubber on my dick.

I place the head of my cock at her entrance before sliding into her. Her eyes meet mine. She holds her breath as I push myself slowly until I am deep inside her. She's tight and warm, and fuck if I don't want to lose myself inside her forever.

I don't want to let her go—never.

Mine.

Mine.

But I love her so much I refuse to keep her with me.

She's so perfect.

We fit. It's as if she had been made for me—just me.

And I'm hers.

I lean forward, slamming my mouth against hers, and kiss her deeply as I thrust in and out of her.

I surrender myself to her.

She owns me.

She has since the moment we met.

Pleasure, craving, and lust drip from every pore of my body as I claim her. Our tongues move against each other the same way our bodies do.

It is a perfect symphony. The edge of the tempo increases as the friction between us ignites a fire as hot as a deep inferno.

Too soon, we reach the edge.

We're on top of Everest.

We're touching the surface of the sun, burning.

We're part of the universe—a star about to be reborn.

A shock of electricity zings from the base of my spine all the way to my groin, exploding into a billion notes playing inside my head. She milks me dry with her pussy. All too soon, it's over, but we're new. We're us.

The way we have never been before. I wish I could confess to her I love her. That leaving San Francisco and her is going to be hard, but I'm doing it because she deserves better.

"Heath," she whispers, her arms wrapping around my back. Moisture wets my cheeks. I lift my head, and she's crying.

My heart stops for a moment. "Did I hurt you?"

"Don't mind me. This was just too overwhelming. I've never felt anything like this in my entire life."

I understand what she means, and I wish I could say more, but there are no words that can describe what I feel without breaking the illusion. I'm unsure about the future and won't regret the past. I'm only certain of one thing. I love her.

I love her with the depth many won't understand.

I swallow hard, drinking all the words I wish to say and all the feelings I wish to erase.

And so, I fuse her mouth with mine.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Heath

WE SPEND most of the night making love. Around six in the morning, I wake up Atzi and urge her to get dressed. Once she's ready, we leave immediately.

I'm done with my family and their crazy games. Did they help during their illogical intervention? I'm not even going to acknowledge yesterday. It's one of those days that'll go unrecognized. I already erased it from my mind.

Not surprisingly, Atzi sleeps during the drive to San Francisco. I kept her up all night—no one could blame me. I finally had her.

Atzi Lavigne was finally mine.

She. Is. Mine.

It's only temporary. An illusion, but who the fuck cares when I can fuck her whenever and however I want.

I dreamt of having her, her body, her mouth. When I heard her scream my name, it was better than I had ever imagined.

Picturing her fucking mouth wrapping around my cock didn't do justice to the real thing.

She was a goddess.

She's my queen.

She's my everything and more.

Fuck, I sound like a lovesick man. A man who finally got his chance and doesn't know what to do now, how not to lose the most precious thing in the world.

As we enter the penthouse, all I can do is picture her on the couch with her legs spread wide, her pussy glistening, waiting for my mouth. I'm dying to have her again. I'd give anything to bury my face and eat her.

There's always the option of having her on my kitchen counter—naked and covered with chocolate. I would feast on her, licking her perfect tits.

Atzi yawns as she makes her way inside my place. I adjust my throbbing cock, taking several deep breaths before following her. I continue to the kitchen, searching for food. When was the last time I ordered groceries?

Before I open the refrigerator, I say, "We might need to order breakfast."

"There's pancake mix in the pantry," she says with her bedroom voice. "You must have at least two eggs and oil, don't you?"

She's either about to fall asleep or wants the same as me, sex. I glance toward the living room. This is why I like this place. Even though it's big, you can see what's happening in almost every corner. Well, except in the bedrooms. The main bedroom is on the top floor, isolated from the rest of the penthouse. The other two are close to it, but they're not soundproofed.

"Feed me," Atzi says, not looking at me.

She's on the couch, hugging a pillow and looking relaxed. If anything, all the sex tired her out, and she might be able to sleep for another hour or so before we have to stage the house.

Against my better judgment, I'm about to suggest eating donuts and coffee. She's going to love it since it has her favorite food groups: chocolate, bread, and caffeine.

"You know what we can eat?" I say, using my most enticing voice.

"I'm sore, Spearman." Her voice echoes in the entire penthouse.

I chuckle, shaking my head. At least I'm not the only one thinking about sex. "Huh. So, you're complaining about last night?"

"Not necessarily. I'm just not used to that much..."

"Fucking?"

She snorts, rolling her eyes. “Don’t be crude.”

“What do you want me to be?”

“Just be yourself.” Then she unfolds herself, kneeling on top of the couch. “Though, if you can keep some drunk Heathcliff around, I’d appreciate it.”

“What’s that?” I ask, confused.

“You know, warm and affectionate. The way you *never* are.” She shrugs, slumping back onto the couch.

“If you want me to do that all the time, it’s going to cost you,” I say, opening the negotiations.

“What are we talking about here? Chocolate, ice cream, American currency...”

I laugh, pulling out my phone. “Why don’t I order some coffee and donuts? While we wait, we can discuss my price.”

“You’re going to charge me for... what services are you offering?” She uses a sultry voice. This woman likes to play with fire, and though she enjoyed burning with me, I’m not sure she’ll want to do it again so soon.

Still, I humor her and don’t flirt back. “It’s an all-inclusive, love. You get all of me, including the kisses you can’t get enough of.” I wink.

She scoffs. “Says who, smooth talker?”

“So, you hate them?”

“I didn’t say that at all,” she huffs. “And how much are you going to ask for what might not be worth more than a truffle—from the factory.”

“Ouch.” I flinch. “Not even a hand-crafted chocolate, huh?”

She tilts her head, cocking her eyebrow. “What were you expecting?”

I smirk. “Sexual favors, of course.”

Her eyes and mouth open wide. She uses her index finger to close her mouth. “Who are you, and what have you done

with my best friend?”

“You sound a little dramatic.”

Her smile fades. “This is going to end up in tragedy.”

“Are you regretting last night?”

She narrows her gaze, twisting her lips from one side to the other several times.

“You wound me, Lavigne.” I touch my chest, feigning hurt.

She waves her hand. “No. I told you yesterday that I have a bad feeling.”

“You did, and I thought we ironed things out overnight.”

The corner of her lip tugs slightly. “Having sex all night doesn’t equal ironing things out.”

“We said we would keep this as friends with lots of benefits,” I remind her. “Unless you regret it.”

“It’s daylight, the effect of the alcohol is gone, and my grandparents will be here tomorrow. Of course things are different, but I don’t regret it.”

“What do you need from me?”

She pouts, and it’s adorable. I walk toward her, planting a kiss on those delicious lips. “Why the meltdown, baby?”

“You’re confusing me,” she whispers.

“I just want to give you what you need”—at least for now, I don’t add—“let’s get moving. We need to exchange all your kitchen gadgets and some of your clothes.”

“We’re blurring the lines of our friendship. You can’t exist outside the lines, Spearman. Can you survive the next few days?” She’s loud but not angry.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I think we destroyed them last night. Can I live without them? It’s easier than I thought, so don’t worry about me, okay?”

She nods. “Fine, order some yummy donuts. Afterward, I’ll get the groceries for the week.”

“Use my credit card.”

“Hey, I’m freeloading for the next few days. The least I could do is pay for the food.”

“You don’t need to.”

She points at me with her cute index finger. “Don’t go all caveman on me, Spearman. It doesn’t look good on you.”

“But I like to do it,” I tease her.

“You do, huh?”

“Of course, you’re just too bossy to allow me to do it on a regular day.” I shrug one shoulder, tilting my head. “At least let me have a little fun.”

“So it’s my fault that you can’t be yourself? Next thing I know, you’ll tell me a wife and kids might be part of your five-year plan.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“How far would you go?” she challenges me.

“With you, baby, to the end of the world.”

She claps. “You know what? If the medical thing doesn’t work, you should try acting.”

I bow. “Thank you, I’ll be here all week.”

“Let’s get moving. We might find something to cook.”

“What about the donuts?”

She looks at her wrist, pretending to look at the time. “It’s getting late, and everyone is trying to get their food delivered. We can try again another day.”

“You’re missing delicious fried dough with a layer of sugary goodness.”

She smiles. “Just the way I like them, but really, I’m fine. Today I’ll cook, since you’ll have to be the one showing his impressive fake fiancé skills when mis abuelitos arrive.”

“I’m ready for the challenge.”

Not sure if that's true, but if there's something I learned from her, it's to fake it until we make it.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Heath

ATZI FINDS a bag of rolled oats in the pantry that she left last Christmas. It was part of the cookie party she organized with the family. The fresh fruit is courtesy of Rys, who had some berries and mangoes in her fridge. I guess it's a blessing to have family close by. Not sure what I'm going to do when I'm in New York. I guess the same thing I do during hockey season, fend for myself.

While Atzi prepares the oatmeal, I return to Cas and Rys's place to use their fancy coffeemaker. It has almost as many options as the Starbucks app. They even have syrups next to the travel mugs. Why didn't I come to prepare my coffee more often?

I make my way back to my apartment, where I find Atzi scrolling her phone quietly at the breakfast bar.

"Large latte with two pumps of vanilla, extra foam for Jatzee." I try to sound like a clueless barista at a busy coffee shop on a Saturday morning. They never give a shit about writing down the right name or pronouncing it correctly. Sometimes I'm Ethan, Ethereal, E...

Atzi hates it more than anyone else. I'm not surprised when she looks up, narrowing her gaze.

"What?" I ask innocently while setting the travel mug in front of her. "That's usually what they call you when we go to Starbucks."

"Not true. It's been Lacy, Assy, Matzy." She rubs her chin. "There was Liz, and let's not forget the day someone called me Mazeltov. No one ever called me Jatzee."

"I remember that, you almost murdered the guy."

"I mean, there's a difference between I changed a letter and let's just fuck your name." She glances at the bowl. "Breakfast is ready."

I sit down next to her and proceed to eat the oatmeal I wasn't expecting and am surprised it doesn't taste like cardboard and chalk.

After I'm done with the fourth spoonful of oatmeal, I say, "You're a good cook."

"Not as good as you, but I try my best."

I don't add that maybe it's because she only likes to work with recipes that include sugar. The only time she gives salt a chance is when she creates salted caramel chocolates.

I look at the time, trying to figure out how we will organize the day. "Did you get groceries?"

"Mm-hmm," she says, turning her attention to her phone.

"Did you use my card at least?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Nope," she says cheerfully. It's good to see the playful smile on her face, though. It's a glimmer of the normal Atzi underneath whatever mood she's in this morning. I have yet to figure out how she's feeling.

I sigh but don't hassle her. I accepted a long time ago there were some battles I'll never win, even when it comes to letting me take care of her. She only allows me to do so much. Speaking of which, we have to discuss the logistics.

Sure, we agreed on how much I'm allowed to touch her while her grandparents are here, but there are more important things.

"How do you want to do this?" I ask.

She glances at me with a confused look and then takes a spoonful of her oatmeal.

"You remember that I promised your grandparents I'd keep the surprise from you."

She swirls the spoon around her bowl before saying, "We'll tell them I ruined it when you asked for their phone number to confirm their flight."

That's a great option, but there's a second one. "Or..."

The corner of her lip lifts, and she looks at me expectantly. “There’s an or? This is so unlike you, Mr. Spearman. Are we trying to live dangerously?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “No, but we could send Owen to pick them up.”

“It’s the weekend. I don’t want to impose.”

“It would be better. It’ll make things less awkward.”

She tosses her arms around my neck. “You’re right. You’re the best fake fiancé in the world.”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “You should show me how grateful you are.”

“So all this is in exchange for sexual favors, huh?”

“Exactly, and maybe after breakfast, I’ll set you on the kitchen counter and eat you.”

She gives me a conspiratorial smile. “I might have some ice cream stored in your freezer.”

I kiss her nose. “You might be my favorite person.”

“I wish I could say the same, but if this FF operation doesn’t work, you’ll be on top of my most wanted.”

I shiver. “No one wants to be there. You’re a cold woman when you’re upset.”

“And don’t forget that.”

IT TAKES four trips to move Atzi’s kitchenware from her place to mine. It barely fits but she finds places to stuff them in. The closet is a different story. Her leggings fit perfectly in one of my drawers. All her silky tank tops hang next to my shirts. She only owns two pairs of jeans—the fabric is too uncomfortable for her. Her tiny shorts find places to hide in my credenza.

She sets all her toiletries in my bathroom. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my place so colorful and full. It’s like she filled

the emptiness in just a few hours.

“We have to get a new comforter,” she says, staring at my bed.

I arch an eyebrow, and suddenly, I wonder if she’s about to set up a flowery pink comforter in my room. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s blah.”

I stare at the bedding. Yeah, she wants to change it. “Black. It’s black,” I correct her, playing along. “The K isn’t silent. I’ll never understand why in romance languages they delete letters so arbitrarily.”

“That’s insulting.” She glares at me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. You’re just complaining about my bedding. I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

She looks from side to side and then lowers her voice. “It’s ugly.”

“I think I’ve allowed one too many concessions for today.” I wrap one arm around her waist and the other around her shoulders.

“What are you doing?”

I stare down at her, grinning. She sighs dramatically, sliding her arms around my neck. I lean down, taking her lips. This is a slow, sensual kiss.

The one you give to your lover as you’re about to leave or after a long trip. I push past the elastic of her shorts, patting my way between her legs. She doesn’t push me. No. She opens them wider. Atzi holds on to my neck as I begin to play with her pussy.

“Heath.” Her voice is tenuous, almost trembling. “We just —”

“You want it,” I say, my heart thumping fast. I want her to fall apart before I fuck her against the wall. I’ll probably have her on top of my bed, her hair spread on my pillow.

The slow pace transforms into an urgent race. I push her shorts and panties down with my other hand as my fingers continue teasing her. She's getting hot and wet.

I take her lips again, tasting the chocolate she ate while we were at her place. Savoring her desire. I push two fingers inside her. I curl them, hitting her spot. I want to make it good for her—really good. She grinds me as I thrust my fingers in and out. Faster. Harder.

She's so fucking wet for me.

“Good girl,” I praise her, running my lips along her jaw. “You're ready for me, baby.”

“Please, fuck me,” she begs.

I don't think twice. I push her against the credenza, unbuttoning my jeans. I pull out my hard cock, about to explode.

Atzi watches as I press my length, inching my way in. My finger rubbing her clit. She groans, shattering me. I can't get enough of her. I doubt I ever will. I push hard, pull out, and dive back in. After the night we've had, this should last longer, but my balls are pulsing, and my stomach tightening.

I continue circling her clit with one hand. The other grips her hip firmly. There are so many perfect moments in life. This is the one that might change my entire trajectory. I just don't know how.

A growl comes out of my throat as I finally explode inside her. I seek her mouth, kissing the most exquisite wildflower. My chaos and my home.

My Atzi.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Atzi

I'M ON FIRE.

Just looking at Heath makes my cheeks heat and my heart rate spike. It's Sunday morning, the day when my grandparents arrive. We're waking up from a two-hour nap after another long sex-athon.

Not once in my life did I think I would be addicted to a person. I am. I can't get enough of Heath Spearman. The shy man who's barely affectionate seems to have a dark side to him. He likes dirty talk—and also dirty sex.

I'm getting used to this—him—but sometimes, I still blush like a virgin bride.

“Like what you see?” He sits up on the bed, his eyes raking over me.

My hand touches his delicious muscles—all cut like diamonds and chiseled to perfection. He's better looking than any Greek statue.

“You're okay,” I say casually.

He chuckles, tugging me like a rag doll. I'm sitting on his lap, feeling his throbbing cock growing against my body as I wiggle against it. Heath's lips descend, crushing into mine. He kisses me hard. I like my independence and to boss him around, but I like him to dominate me when we're in bed.

“Just okay?” he whispers in my ear. Chills erupt across my skin. I blame his voice and the tip of his cock for being so close to my entrance. I push my ass to the right, hoping it'll just slide in, but Heath stops me. His fingers press against my clit.

I moan, closing my eyes. I arch my back, wanting more. Everything. “What are you doing to me?” I whimper.

“If I have to explain it to you, baby, maybe I’m doing something wrong.”

There’s no time to answer. Heath dips his fingers inside me.

“N-nothing wrong,” I stutter.

He moves me around. I’m back on the bed, legs spread with his mouth between my legs, nibbling me as his fingers fuck me harder. His thumb pushes inside the sensitive back entrance. I squirm with pleasure.

“One day, I’ll fuck you in here too,” he promises, and I want to beg him to do it now.

I’ve never had anal sex, but he makes me want to do it—to beg for it. Just like I did last night, when I begged him to let me suck his cock. I lick my lips, remembering his thick length fucking my mouth. It was during our shower, right after we had licked chocolate from each other’s bodies.

“You like it dirty, Doctor.” I squeal when he spanks my ass.

“And you love it, my good girl,” he says with a low voice and continues flicking his tongue, sucking, nibbling.

“Such a fucking good girl.”

He’s building my orgasm again. Pumping his fingers in and out. Everything is too much.

Too much.

I close my eyes as my entire body shatters. “Heath,” I scream between shallow breaths.

He turns me around, pressing his hand on my belly as he guides his cock inside my pussy. His finger is back on my clit, moving fast, just as fast as he’s fucking me.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he whispers as he pumps into me, hard, so fucking hard I think we’re becoming one.

“Atzi,” his ragged voice says my name. “Love, you’re so fucking perfect.”

The orgasm hits me again, and it's almost at the same time as his. He freezes one moment, and the next, he's trembling on top of me. His mouth sucks hard on my bare shoulder, so hard, I'm trapped between pleasure and pain. Loving it.

This man. This perfect strange man has me tied into knots.

I just have to be careful because I know the score. If I fall for him, he'll leave me heartbroken. Instead of being in the middle of a sexy song, I'll be stuck in the chapter of another love story gone wrong.

UNSURPRISINGLY, we fall back asleep after having sex. My alarm beeps at eleven. It's time to go to the airport. I find myself alone in the bedroom. Instead of searching for Heath, I take a quick shower. Hopefully, he won't find me first. It's not like I don't want the guy but we don't have time for another round of sex—and sleep.

After I dress, I track down Heath. He's in his office, dozing on his favorite leather armchair, a book sliding off of his lap. His hair is still soft and floppy. He looks several years younger when he's asleep.

I want to just climb onto the armchair and take a nap with him, but my abuelos are landing in about an hour, and we have to fight traffic to get to the airport. The exact opposite of a peaceful mid-morning nap. I should just leave without Heath to pick them up, but it'll look better if we're together.

It's such a shame Owen canceled at the last minute. It would have been better if he had picked up my abuelos.

I kiss him on top of his head. "Hey, sleepyhead."

He doesn't say a word or open his eyes, but his arms wrap around my waist and he pulls me to him.

"I'm not a doll."

"You're my doll."

"Really? Aren't you a little old to be playing with dolls?"

“Sorry, I meant to call you an action figure. A collectible. You’re all mine.”

I laugh, pushing myself off his lap. “Why don’t you get ready? I’ll make us some coffee so we can go to pick up my grandparents.”

“But I wanted a quickie before we leave.”

“Are you always this horny?”

His eyes finally open and he smiles lazily. “No. Only when I’m with a very hot vixen.”

I stare at him, trying to understand the meaning of the last sentence. He’s hard to read and doesn’t date much. If only he was more open about his love life, I would figure out who keeps up with him.

“You want it too, don’t you, love?” He winks at me.

I laugh. “You’re a lost cause, Spearman.”

“Is that a no?”

“It’s a maybe we can do it tonight.”

He groans something I can’t understand, but I ignore him. Knowing Heath, he’s trying to figure out a way to get away with something. Probably having sex one more time.

As much as I would love to do it, we don’t have time. We should stop this insanity all at once. My grandparents will be here, and he’s leaving for New York soon.

Can we keep doing this “friends with benefits” after he’s gone?

Chapter Twenty-Six



Atzi

HEATH SIPES A TRAVEL mug of fresh coffee while he weaves expertly through traffic. When we get to a stoplight, he glances at me, asking, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I croak. We’re about to get onto the highway. I usually don’t mind it, unless we’re going to the airport.

“It’s okay,” he whispers. “I got this.”

“I trust you.” My voice is a murmur. I’m not sure he can hear me.

Driving toward the airport is not my favorite activity. My anxiety spikes one thousand percent on a good day. It’s been this way since my parents and my sister died. It took a long time to be able to get into a car after the accident.

Aunt Cécile bought me a cute convertible when I turned sixteen. I refused to drive it. Later that year, she purchased an Audi Q7, hoping I’d change my mind. According to her, it was one of the safest SUVs on the market. It took a lot of convincing from Heath and my therapist to agree to driving lessons.

I still have both cars, but I try to walk and use public transportation as often as possible. It’s safer for the drivers around me and, well, me. Heath insists I’m a shitty driver because I don’t practice.

He doesn’t understand why I can face everything with courage except for one thing. Driving and going to the airport. It brings terrible memories. I recall the last moment when Mom screamed, and the other car was coming at ours from the opposite direction.

Dad said we’d be fine, but we weren’t. We were on our way to France to celebrate Mom’s birthday. That was the last time I saw my parents. I still can hear the panic in their voices. The sound of the emergency vehicles and my sister crying.

I rub my leg as the pain begins to cripple along with the anxiety.

“Count with me, love. One, two... I can’t hear you.”

“One,” I murmur.

“Deep breaths, everything is okay. Let’s count: one, two, three.”

I join him, counting until my breathing normalizes.

“This is why I wanted Owen to pick them up,” he says. “You’re already dealing with a lot.”

I lean my head against the seat and close my eyes. “Will it ever get better?”

“Are you still in therapy?”

I almost growl because it’s been a hot minute since I last saw a therapist.

“You need professional help,” he points out.

“Don’t use logic on me, Spearman.”

“This is just a suggestion, but you do you.” There’s some humor in his voice.

I blow some air out. “Fine, I’ll search for someone new.”

“When did you stop going?”

“If I say I don’t remember?”

He laughs. “That long, huh?”

“The last one wanted me to stop working so much and find a real hobby.”

Heath gasps. “The horror.”

“Listen, kettle. You’re always at the hospital.”

“Not true. I’m either there or with you. Mostly with you.”

“Hmm,” I say, almost lost in thought. I had never thought about his whereabouts. Is that true?

“And here we are,” he says as he enters the parking garage. “Ready for them?”

“No. We’re going to fail.”

He chuckles, shaking his head as he slides into a spot. “It’s you and me, baby. Everything is going to be all right.”

PICKING anyone up from the airport—any airport—is a nightmare. When it’s two elderly people who like to stop at every shop, it somehow takes even longer.

We do eventually find my abuelitos. Abuela’s bright red hair is a beacon even in the huge crowds.

“There they are.” I point toward the bookstore, where they’re probably buying gum or water.

“I don’t remember her being a redhead,” Heath studies them from where we stand.

“That’s been her new look for the past couple of years. I’m sure I showed you the pictures of our last vacation.”

“She was wearing a big straw hat,” he reminds me.

“Right. She only took it off when we were eating at restaurants... and I hope inside of her room too.”

Once Abuelito is done paying, and they turn around, I wave wildly. It feels like I haven’t seen them in years. “Tita, Abuelito!” I run to them and hug them both at the same time.

“*My chiquita, que gusto verte.*” She takes my chin in her hand and looks me over.

“It’s good seeing you too.” I can’t help but smile back goofily. The pool of dread that had been in my stomach all month dissipates now that she’s actually here.

“Tita, Abuelito, let me introduce you to Heath,” I say when she finally lets me go.

Heath extends his hand, but my grandmother wastes no time pulling him into a hug as well, even though he’s well over a foot taller than her. He leans down to accommodate her, then exchanges handshakes and nods with my abuelo.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, Heath. Welcome to the family,” Abuelita says with so much enthusiasm my heart shrinks.

I hope she doesn’t get too attached because this will be over in less than a week.

Heath smiles at her. “It’s nice meeting you too, Mrs. Rivera.”

“Abuela or Tita,” she corrects him. “We’re family.”

“They’re not married yet, Adelaida,” Abuelito protests, glaring at Heath.

“We’ll discuss my intentions with your granddaughter later, Mr. Rivera.”

Grandpa nods. If Heath’s stressed about meeting my grandparents, it doesn’t show on his face. He’s doing great at playing the part of the fiancé meeting the grandparents for the first time.

I dry my hands with my shirt. I’m probably the nervous one. My eyes darting from my abuelita to Heath and back again as I try to take in her every reaction to him. Luckily, she seems to immediately fall in love—like most women when they meet Heath.

“Why don’t we head home so you can rest? You must be exhausted.”

“Poquito.” Grandma shows him a pinch with her thumb and index finger. “We spent last week in New York visiting bridal boutiques.”

“Why don’t we go?” I insist instead of staring at her.

Did she dare go to bridal shops without me? Not that I care. I’m not getting married. I am not.

PICKING up the luggage takes longer than expected. I’m scared when I see they have five bags with them. Five.

Heath and I drag them all the way to the parking lot. I'm grateful he brought the Range Rover to pick them up or the bags wouldn't have fit.

We finally corral both my abuelos into the car, with Abuela taking the front seat and me moving to the back with Abuelo. He grins at me as I duck into the back after closing her door for her. "How are you doing?"

"I'm well, Abuelito. Happy to see you."

He tilts his head. "We've been wanting to visit, but it's been hard between my business and the family. It's been hard. Your great-grandmother is getting old and sicker."

Grandpa owns a big construction company in Mexico. They work primarily with commercial buildings, but as an architect, he's designed several houses, including the one where Mom grew up.

I reach over to squeeze his hand. "Sorry about Nani, but I'm glad you could visit."

This time is his turn to pat my hand. "You look so much like Lydia."

It's weird to hear that coming from him. Every time I look at myself in the mirror, I wonder why I have so much of my father and so little of my mother. I miss both, but these days, I wish I had her with me, giving me advice and telling me things will be okay.

Heath pulls smoothly into traffic, completely unruffled, when someone blares their horn behind us. I gasp and cover my head.

"It's okay, love," Heath says from the front seat. "I got it. Just breathe, okay?"

Abuelo draws circles on my back, as I try to fight the panic attack.

"Nothing is going to happen, *chiquita*," Abuelita mumbles, her hand reaching out to me. "I thought you were okay with cars."

“It’s just the drive to and from the airport,” Heath clarifies. “She’s usually okay.”

“Come to live with us. I already said you’d be better with us, but the law is the law,” she still sounds bitter about the ordeal.

When my parents died, they left Aunt Cécile as my guardian. My grandparents tried to fight it and take me to Mexico, but they lost the two trials. They were lucky they got visitation rights.

“What does that mean?” Heath asks.

I don’t think he’s ever heard about the little legal battle my grandparents and aunt had right after my parents died. The second time they tried to file for custody, they were willing to move to San Francisco, but the state kept me with my aunt.

Abuelita tells him about the ordeal from beginning to end. She’s almost crying when she says, “Atzi was the last thing I had from my only child, and they wouldn’t give her to me.”

“It’s in the past, Adelaida,” Abuelito says, irritated.

Thankfully, we arrive at the penthouse. This isn’t something I wanted to discuss. I don’t know why Heath had to ask. He’s usually observing but never asking. I breathe a sigh of relief as soon as Heath cuts the engine in the underground parking lot.

“Why don’t you guys go up first?” Heath asks, opening the passenger door and helping me down. “I’ll follow with the luggage so you won’t be crowded in the elevator.”

“You okay?” I ask him.

He lifts my chin and gives me a quick peck on the lips. “I should be asking that. You scared me back there.”

“I promise to get a therapist.”

“Do, please. I don’t want to—” He exhales but doesn’t end the sentence. He lifts his gaze. “They’re already going toward the elevator. I’ll meet you in five.”

“Okay,” I say, jogging to meet my grandparents.

“Atzi, I like him,” Abuela says. She loops her arm through mine and squeezes.

“He’s great.” I smile as I stare at Heath, who’s managing the bags.

We enter the elevator, and I sigh with relief. They haven’t caught the lie. Maybe we can pull this off. I hate to deceive them, but it’s for the best.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Heath

THEY SAY it takes a lifetime to get to know a person. I'm beginning to think it's true.

Up until a few hours ago, I thought I knew everything about Atzi Maëlie Rivera-Lavigne, but I've been proven wrong. No one had ever told me embarrassing stories about her childhood until today.

According to Tita—that's what Atzi calls her grandma—she's always worn crazy colorful leggings, baggy sweaters, and had curly hair. Unless it was too hot. Then she wanted to wear swimsuits. One funny fact is Atzi used to wear socks to the beach. She didn't like the feel of the sand between her toes.

I'm not surprised to hear she was a quirky little girl who liked to color on the walls while her mother worked in her studio. Lydia Rivera was a wise woman who had a wall designated for her daughter's doodles. When Atzi ran out of space, her husband painted it so their daughter would have a clean canvas.

Her baby sister wasn't born until she was nine, and Atzi was the best big sister in the world. She even got a CPR certification at ten, so her parents would let her babysit.

This is the first time I've learned how old her little sister was. It also explains why she's never part of the stories she tells about her parents. Learning about Atzi is making me fall more in love with her. Leaving her is going to be ten thousand times harder than I thought.

How do you walk away from someone so extraordinary?

Right now, she's in my office with her grandfather, playing chess. Her grandmother is cooking dinner for us. I'm in my favorite chair pretending to read while I watch a different version of Atzi. I had no idea she knew how to play chess. She's never shown any interest before.

Her grandparents are sweet people, and I'm beginning to understand where she got her bubbly personality. Well, she's happy unless the dark cloud traps her. If only the accident where she lost her parents and her sister hadn't happened. Maybe I wouldn't have met her.

As I watch her think about her next move, I'm transported to another time. The time when we first met.

I was thirteen years old the summer I met Atzi.

Thirteen and angry.

My father had died earlier in the year, and the triplets had descended upon the family, all three of them leaving college to return home to become the parents of five lost children. My relationship with almost everyone in my family had been contentious for years after Dad died. Maybe contentious is not the right word. It's just strange. I tried to be a part of them, but at the time, I felt like an outsider who didn't deserve them.

I'd been the one to find him and the one unable to save him.

The summer I met Atzi was a bad one, and then unexpectedly, against all odds, a bright spot appeared in the form of a skinny girl with glossy dark hair and a scowling face that matched my own.

It was a grief camp, of course we were all broken in a way, but Atzi and I carried more than the sadness. We carried guilt. I couldn't save my father. Everyone died during the car accident but her. She still lives with survivor's guilt, even though she denies it.

Almost from day one, she followed me around like a silent duckling, hiding from everyone else. She carried a sketchbook and a pencil with her. We didn't speak at the beginning, but later, we began to exchange food. That's all we would do, share the silence while we let the feelings eat at us.

Though, there was one night when we truly bonded. I noticed her sitting apart from the main group at one of the abandoned fire circles that was a little farther out than the ones the other kids tended to congregate at.

I watched her from a distance at first. I'd been walking the perimeter of the camp, not on any sort of patrol but because I found that walking endlessly at night tired me out enough that I could sometimes sleep instead of staring at the wooden beams of my cabin.

Atzi was trying to light a fire and was looking more miserable by the second that she couldn't get the flame to take.

Finally, as I saw her kick the logs and hunker down in a sweater two sizes too large for her, I took pity on her and approached the circle.

"Do you want me to help you get it started?" I asked.

Her scowl was pretty intimidating when directed at me, but I met it with one of my own. Wounded animal to wounded animal. She blinked at me, the fierceness flickering into something a little softer.

"Would you?" she asked. "Actually, show me and not just do it, please."

I nodded. In normal circumstances, I would smile at her to reassure her, but honestly, I hadn't managed a smile in months. Instead, I just pushed up the sleeves of my own camp sweatshirt and kneeled next to the circle to start collecting the logs she'd kicked back into a neat pile.

"You had it mostly right," I said. It was easy to fall into teaching mode with this, at least.

I had two younger siblings around her age. The twins were always following me around and asking a gazillion questions. Also, I had camped with Dad many times, and he taught us survival skills. One of them was how to build fires. Atzi was sharp and willing enough to learn so we had a fire crackling merrily in front of us within minutes.

She sat down on one of the log benches with a sigh when it was clear this fire would actually burn and not just sputter out. I hovered awkwardly, wondering if she wanted me to leave.

"You can sit," she said.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted company.”

She squinted at me.

“I don’t. I never do,” she said shortly. The confusion must have shown on my face because hers softened again and she gestured to the empty log beside her. “But you keep everyone away, so we can probably safely co-exist alone together for a little while. Your feet must be tired from all the loops you’ve been doing.”

I blushed, grateful for the dark. I hadn’t realized anyone outside of my cabin counselor had noticed my excessive walking at night. I took a seat on the log and the cue to not continue the conversation that night. Eventually, we did get around to talking. Then we’d just never stopped.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Heath

ATZI CONCENTRATES on the board when her abuelita calls out, “*La comida esta lista. Vengan pronto o se va a enfriar.*”

I’m guessing she’s calling us to have supper, but I’m not sure if that’s right.

Atzi turns to look at me. “Dinner is ready.”

“There was more than supertime. What else did she say?”

“Food is ready. Come downstairs before it gets cold.”

I have my doubts, and as I put the book I’ve been holding down, I say, “You’re trying to confuse me.”

That was a bad move on my part because her grandfather scoffs. “Maybe you should start learning more Spanish, Mr. Heathcliff.”

“And French,” Atzi adds all cutesy.

“I plan on doing so, but you can call me Heath, sir.” I use my most polite voice. This man is about to kick my ass and maybe have me arrested for dating his granddaughter.

“I don’t think we’re that familiar yet.”

Atzi rises from her seat and hugs the man. “*Tranquilo*, Abuelito. He’s a nice guy.”

Mr. Rivera glares at me as he stands up. Then, he kisses his granddaughter on top of her head and leaves.

“Your grandfather hates me.”

She chuckles. “Not really. He’s just not thrilled about your existence.”

I shrug innocently. “What the fuck did I do?”

She winks at me. “If you recall, you’re the guy who’s doing his only granddaughter.”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “And I plan on doing *her* tonight too. If I were you, I’d save some energy because I plan to keep you up all night.”

She giggles and jets out of the office. I follow behind. When we arrive at the dining table, Atzi gasps. There are at least seven bridal magazines and a white binder. I pull out her chair so she can sit before she has a nervous breakdown.

I should be concerned about the wedding hints, but I’m laughing. Her grandmother is on a mission. If we aren’t careful, she might call a minister and marry us now.

“It’s not funny, Heathcliff,” Atzi growls.

“Oh, but it is.” I kiss her cheek before sitting next to her.

But all is fun and games until I’m staring at a meatball soup. Now, this is when things begin to take a turn for the worst. Next to it, there’s a plate with rice, salad, and broccoli. I’m all about trying new food, but Atzi is going to hate the food.

“This is different. I usually eat meatballs with spaghetti.” I point at my bowl, hoping not to sound petulant or ungrateful.

“Those are albondigas in a chipotle broth.” Atzi frowns and picks up her spoon. “They have either olives or boiled eggs inside. Did you use my chipotle? I was saving it to make truffles.”

“Chiles are not for candy. Also, you might want to stock your pantry. I couldn’t find tortillas in this house,” Mrs. Rivera complains. “How do you eat without them?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to explain to her that if it doesn’t contain chocolate or sugar, or I cooked it, her granddaughter doesn’t eat it.

“You make it sound like we eat tortillas with every meal, Adelaida.” Mr. Rivera glances at us and shakes his head as if saying, don’t listen to her rants.

“We ran out of tortillas yesterday when we made quesadillas for lunch,” Atzi answers promptly.

I tap the tip of her nose, which is beginning to grow. How she can manage to come up with lies so fast is surprising. Her ability to weave them comes to her as easily as molding chocolate.

“This penthouse is beautiful. I like the view, but where is your studio?” Her grandma carefully cuts the meatball with the spoon and takes a spoonful of the broth before eating it. Mr. Rivera follows suit.

“I don’t have it here. It’s at the shop,” Atzi mentions and starts to eat.

I decide to do the same and begin with some of the albondiga’s broth. I’m expecting it to burn my tongue. It doesn’t. The tangy, spicy mix is delicious without the heat. I guess spaghetti isn’t a requirement for meatballs then.

“But sometimes you say you’re working at home, in your studio,” her grandmother points out.

And we’re going to get caught by a technicality.

The irony!

Atzi tilts her head toward the kitchen. “Yes, that is my studio.”

Her grandmother bobs her head. “That explains all the weird tools I found.”

I almost sigh with relief. Atzi chuckles and continues eating her food.

“So, are you two moving to your parents’ house when you get married?” Mr. Rivera asks. “Or is he buying you a house?”

I stop mid-bite and ask, “My parents’ house?”

Mr. Rivera points at Atzi. “No, hers. You still have the house, don’t you?”

“Sí, Abuelito, but I’m renting it. And no, we wouldn’t move there. I don’t think I can live in that place. It’s too painful.”

“Such a shame. It’s perfect for children. Maybe you’ll be lucky and have more than one.” Her grandmother looks at me.

“The women in my family have trouble getting pregnant. That’s why we only had Lydia and why she only had Atzi.”

“Well, and Atzi’s sister,” I correct her.

Her grandmother leans forward. “She was adopted,” she whispers conspiratorially.

Atzi groans. “Can we not talk about this, please?”

“He’s family.”

“I am too, but discussing the past makes me anxious.”

Grandma waves a hand. “Fine, let’s talk about the wedding. I found several dresses that might be to your liking.”

I can’t help but laugh. This conversation is like walking through a minefield. No matter where we go, something is going to explode.

“We’re not ready to get married,” Atzi states.

“Why not?” Her inquisitive grandmother is not going to let this go.

Mr. Rivera taps the table. “Are you just using my granddaughter for the sex?”

“It’s *sex*, not *the sex*,” Atzi corrects him. “And it’s a perfectly normal thing to do when you’re in love. I don’t know why you’re trying to make it sound like a sin. We like *sex* and have it as often as we can.”

Can she stop saying the word *sex*? It’s like she’s having fun making him squirm. Her grandfather looks at me as if he’s about to shoot me. I search for the nearest exit, but they seem too far away from where I sit.

Why aren’t Lysander or Caspian barging in like they always do?

“The least you could do is—”

“Stop,” Atzi interrupts her grandmother. “This is a different century, and marriage isn’t everything.”

“You’re going to end up like Cécile,” Mrs. Rivera warns her.

“Happy and single?” Atzi touches her sternum. “Oh no, how terrible.”

“No. She was with a wine man who played with her for years and then left her pregnant and alone.”

Atzi blinks a couple of times before asking, “What?”

“We promised we would never say anything, Adelaida,” Mr. Rivera says with a low voice.

His wife waves a hand as if saying it doesn’t matter. “It’s been long. Esme has been dead for years.”

Atzi frowns. “My Esme? She wasn’t Aunt Cécile’s daughter. My parents adopted her from—” She presses her lips together, staring at the ceiling. “Oh.”

She’s slightly pale, and knowing her, I have to put a stop to this nonsense. “Though it seems like your family has a rich past, you shouldn’t compare someone else’s life with ours. We will marry when we’re ready.”

“And when will that be?” Mr. Rivera chimes in as if he needs the answer now. “Life is short. You can’t wait for the right time, because let me tell you, it never comes. You have to make it happen.”

I stare at him, wanting to say that there’s never going to be a right time between Atzi and me. If they knew more about me, they’d agree and convince their granddaughter to leave me immediately.

“Heath is waiting to hear about his fellowship,” Atzi prompts. “Once he knows, we’ll start making some decisions.”

“Fellowship?” Mr. Rivera asks. The quiet man seems to have found all the necessary words to roast me.

“Pediatric cardiac surgery,” I answer.

“I thought you were already a cardiologist,” Mrs. Rivera answers.

“I am,” I respond instead of saying, *I’m a surgeon specializing in cardiology*. “I work at North Bay Medical Center, but I’m not done with my studies.”

“See, that’s the problem with—”

“Adelaida, don’t start.”

“She’s going to be thirty, and then she’ll have trouble having children. How many kids do you want, Heath?” Mrs. Rivera questions.

“Me, I don’t want children.”

Atzi kicks and pushes my leg with hers. That’s when I realized we forgot to discuss her grandparents’ expectations. Apparently, they include a picket fence and one point nine children. The Heath they want should be willing to have at least two children, have a practice where I only work three hours a day, and convince Atzi to move to her old house—which I had no idea she still owned.

In fact, other than acknowledging she runs a chocolate empire, I don’t know her bottom line. She might be richer than me.

Mrs. Rivera gasps. “Oh, but children are—”

“Abuelita, please stop with the inquisition. I thought you came to see me, not to judge us.”

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“And I appreciate the sentiment. I hope that just because I’m not following your blueprint, you won’t stop talking to me.”

Mrs. Rivera’s eyebrows shoot up. “What do you mean?”

“After she moved to San Francisco, you stopped talking to her.”

“Lydia lied to me about what she wanted to study.” Mrs. Rivera’s voice is shaking with frustration. “She said she was going to France because she wanted to be a translator. Those earn good money. Next thing I know, she’s still with her art and moving in with a man twice her age, and without our blessing.”

“Dad was only fifteen years older than her, and he adored her.”

“That he did. He loved his girls so much. I wish we hadn’t been so hard on her.” Mr. Rivera’s mournful tone is heartbreaking.

I understand what it is to live with regrets, guilt, and grief. Also, why Atzi is lying to them. They’re sweet but harsh when it comes to life decisions. It’s their way or the highway.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Atzi

FORTUNATELY, once dinner is over and I offer to wash the dishes, Abuelo announces he's taking Abuelita shopping. He even calls a car to drive them but promises to text me when it's time to pick them up at the mall.

"That was intense," Heath says as he sets the dishes I'm rinsing in the dishwasher. We're almost done cleaning the kitchen.

"Yeah, they can go from sweet grandparents to Spanish Inquisition in less than two seconds." I hand him the last plate.

Heath turns on the dishwasher and hugs me from behind, kissing my neck. "Are you okay, love?"

I lean my head on his chest. "No. I have plenty of questions about Cécile and Esme."

"How come you didn't know?"

That's a great question. I've been trying to think about those days. All I can remember is the excitement of visiting my grandfather and picking up my baby sister. It was one of the most exciting days of my entire life—at least, my nine-year-old self saw it that way.

"No one told me where she came from. One day my parents said they were going to France to pick up the new member of our family. They had been trying to have children for years. It seemed normal to learn that they decided to adopt."

"You didn't go to the adoption agency?"

This is the first time I have wondered where Esme came from. "I stayed with Pépé at his château."

"Who is Pépé?"

I grin. If this guy and I were a real couple and had children, I would teach them to speak other languages to tease

their father. It's so much fun. Unfortunately, we're never going to go beyond friends.

Before I digress, I say, "You really need to learn more French and Spanish, Spearman. Le p p  is grandpa in French. Sometimes I called him that, other times just P p ."

"Okay, so you were with your grandfather, and they brought a baby to you without saying 'here, this is your cousin, but we'll adopt her.'"

"That's exactly what they did. I guess it would've been awkward and hard for me to understand. I was nine. But now, I don't comprehend why Aunt C cile gave her up for adoption though."

I tap my lips, trying to come up with a reason why this happened. Maybe she didn't want to have children? I didn't see Aunt C cile for a couple of years. Not until my parents and my sister died.

"Not everyone wants the picket fence and the little tykes," Heath says as if that explains everything. He'd know. I bet he'll be signing over the parental rights of his children if that were to happen.

"I guess," I say absently.

Heath exhales loudly. "You're thinking."

He has no idea. My brain is traveling a thousand miles per second trying to figure out what happened so long ago. "I want to know about the wine guy. Who was he, and why is C cile still single? Is she with him?"

"What did she do before she became your guardian?"

"The same thing she does now. She worked at the winery in France."

"At Ch teau Lavigne? Your grandfather's winery?"

I nod, wondering if that's where she met this mysterious man.

"He was probably a client or a colleague," he says.

That sounds logical. Maybe they met during a wine tasting or he owns a restaurant in Paris. “But what happened to him?”

Heath taps my nose, then kisses it. “You’re being nosy.”

“Only concerned. I mean, she never came to visit Esme. Until now, I never thought much of it, but I recall not seeing my aunt for two years until I woke up in the hospital. Did she give up her life for me?”

There’s a twinge in my heart. Did I destroy her future and all her plans?

“What does that mean?”

I glance at Heath and erase that theory because maybe what happened is that the love of her life didn’t want the kid. “Maybe the wine guy didn’t want kids. She gave the child up and ran off with him.”

“Would you do that?”

“Never,” I growl. “I’d choose my kid over any man—even their father.”

Cécile chose me over her life. Why would she do that? I rush to Heath’s office where my phone is charging, and dial Cécile’s number immediately.

“Hello?” she answers all groggy.

“Esme was your daughter?”

“It’s almost three in the morning, Atzi. Are you okay?”

I flinch, oops. How did I forget the time difference? “No. I’m not and I’m sorry to call this late. We can try to talk about it later.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll call later,” I insist.

“You felt this was too important to even consider the time difference. We should discuss it now. Remember that once you wake me up, it’s impossible for me to fall back asleep.”

That’s true. I might as well get this over with, or the questions will continue popping into my head until she

clarifies everything. “Esme. She was your child.”

“Oh boy, it was twenty years ago. Why are we discussing her now?”

“She was your baby. I want to know what happened. Why did you give her up?”

“It’s a complicated subject. It’s better if we leave it in the past.”

“Try me,” I insist.

“I’d rather not.”

Okay, so if she won’t answer that question, I can try another one. Something has to come out of this conversation. “Is it so you could be with her father?”

“Not at all. Leave everything in peace, okay? It’s best for everyone.”

Who is everyone? My parents are dead and so is my sister. “But I can’t.”

“How did you find out?”

In French, I tell her my grandparents are here and the ordeal we’re dealing with because of my big fat lie.

She groans. “I thought I told you to tell them the truth years ago. Why did you continue with this idiotic fabrication?” She sounds like an upset mother who’s about to send me to time-out.

“Because what if they stop speaking to me? I don’t have many people left.”

“Then it’s their loss. You have me, and all the Lavignes adore you.”

“Only when I visit them.” I sound bitter, but it’s true. They don’t seem to care much about me.

“Do you need me there?”

“No. I’m fine.”

She scoffs. “You’re a terrible liar. I’m not sure how you’re getting away with this farce.”

I shrug. “Me neither, but I hope it flies under their radar.”

“When are they leaving?”

“This Saturday.”

“I’ll be there Sunday once they’re gone. Can you call the service to get the house ready? I wish you’d move there.”

“It’s too big for me.”

“There’s plenty of space for you and your studio. The lease on your parents’ house is almost up, are you going to renew it?”

“Yes, I don’t want the place, but I’m not ready to sell it. If you’re coming, maybe you should be here sooner than next Sunday.”

“Your grandmother and I don’t see eye to eye.”

“Why can’t you get along with them?” I’m just spitting all the questions I’ve had for years.

“I did my best while you were growing up. Now, I don’t need to deal with them.”

“They’re still my family, and I don’t want them to stop speaking to me.”

Aunt Cécile groans. “Listen, I adored your mother. Lydia was an amazing woman, a wonderful artist, and the best thing to happen to my grumpy brother. The best. She also gave us you. However, she had a big problem—just like you do.”

“What was it?”

“You want everyone to love you, and sometimes you have to accept that not everyone is chocolate or wine.”

“Chocolate or wine?” I ask confused. What is she talking about?

“Everyone loves one or the other. Sometimes both. People can’t ever be those items. You have to learn that if people don’t accept you for who you are, they’re not worth your time.”

“She’s my grandmother,” I argue.

“Then she should love you with flaws, bad taste in food, and weird addictions.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It shouldn’t be hard,” she states. “Family should be supportive, loving, and unconditional.”

“Why did you leave me when I turned eighteen?”

“I didn’t know you wanted me to stay.”

“You were my only family. I was left alone,” I say reproachfully.

“Honestly, I didn’t think of it that way. You had plans, and it felt like you were ready to spread your wings. I tried not to hover around you. In my head, it made sense to leave and take charge of the winery.”

“It felt like you abandoned me,” I confess, and suddenly, I feel Heath’s arms around me.

“That was never my intention. You’re the most important person in my world.”

“Not the wine guy?”

“Who?”

“Esme’s dad.”

“Leave that one alone, okay?” she says firmly.

“Are you still with him?”

“No. We broke up long ago.”

“You can look for him and maybe find happiness,” I suggest.

“I’m happy. Plus, I looked for him after Esme died to let him know and found out he had died.”

“Sorry.”

“Let’s never talk about it, okay? It’s for the best,” she asks with a soft nostalgic voice.

“I love you, and I’m sorry for bringing up sad memories.”

“Love you more, sweetie. I’ll buy the tickets for next week.”

“Sorry for waking you up.”

“I’m glad you called. I’ve missed you. Please try to talk to your grandmother about your fake engagement. It’s better to confess before things get out of hand.”

“I’ll try,” I say before hanging up.

Heath places his hands on my shoulders, looking at me. “Did we have a breakthrough?”

“I think so.”

“I’m glad,” he says before taking my lips and kissing me hard. It’s a way to make me feel less lonely—cherished. I take it. I love the way he makes me feel—whole, safe, and me.

And I’m beginning to worry about how my heart is starting to respond to him. But I can’t help myself. I’m addicted to the peace I feel when I’m like this, melting into a kiss and letting him take charge of me.

Chapter Thirty



Atzi

DURING COLLEGE, I worked at a bakery close to campus. The owner was a classically trained pastry chef who worked a lot with chocolate. We had a deal. She trained me while I gave her discounted chocolate.

It was because of her that I learned to have baker's hours. I still follow them most of the time, which means I wake up extremely early in the morning. It also means that these short few days my abuelos are visiting are a weird vacation.

My body is trained to wake up at four in the morning during weekdays. It never fails. These five days, my brain has gone into panic mode since it feels like I'm running late. Today is the fifth day without fail. I sit up so violently in bed that Heath groans and rolls over, shoving his face into the pillow.

"Sorry," I whisper.

He doesn't answer, just goes back to sleep. I lie back down carefully and turn on my side to look at him. Not in a creepy way, but just... to look.

I feel like I haven't been doing enough looking lately, and now I'm spoiled for time. My grandparents leave in a couple of days, and I don't know what'll happen between us after that.

Heath is my best friend, but what we've been sharing these last few days is entirely different. I'd be lying if I say I don't care about it, in truth, I love what we have now.

The way we were before my grandparents was great, but now... He's so caring and affectionate. The best part is how sexy he is. The guy is a bit dirty and I enjoy it so much.

Sex at night is the best. Well, we have sex whenever we can find the time and the place. We might not be engaged, but

we behave like two crazy people, madly in love, who can't get enough of each other.

If he didn't look so peaceful sleeping, I would be waking him up to have another go with him. His breath's deepening into a soft thrum. I lie in bed for a long time before I finally have to concede I am not going back to sleep.

My body is awake and it craves coffee. I slip out of bed and look for some clothes. This is the sixth, maybe seventh, night I've slept wholly naked under him. It's strange, but I'm getting used to it—and him. There are three things I'll miss the most when this is over:

Sex with Heath.

Multiple orgasms.

His arms holding me tight.

Once I'm presentable, I smile at Heath's sleeping form. He looks so peaceful and adorable resting. We have one last day to enjoy whatever we've created. Today, we're heading to the vineyard so my grandparents get a tour and introduce them to his siblings.

He made sure his mother is not in Paradise Bay while we're there. It's a precaution, to avoid any altercations. The woman doesn't like me at all. I appreciate him. It's amazing all of the quiet ways he finds to take care of me sometimes, even when I claim to be independent. It's always been that way too.

While preparing my coffee, I grab the ingredients to bake cream horns. Grandma likes them, and I want her to be happy while she's staying with me. So far, things have been going well. More so after the dinner we shared on the first day they arrived. Well, the meal wasn't a problem but the serious conversations they tried to have with us—marriage, Esme, even children.

Should I tell them I'm not engaged to Heath?

Aunt Cécile sent me a text yesterday with the details of her flight. Of course, she didn't fail to remind me that the truth shall set me free.

Maybe she's right, and I work hard to please everyone in exchange for love, but I'm lonely, awkward, and in urgent need of love. She can't blame me for trying my best to charm all the people in the world. Someone has to like me.

Abuela finds me halfway through decorating my dainty cream horns with a crust of pearlescent candies on the chocolate rim. I pause what I'm doing, quickly prepare a mug of coffee for her, and slide her a plate with one of the already finished cream horns.

I might not be an enthusiastic cook, but I'm a damn good baker. She watches me assemble the rest of the horns with a gentle smile.

"You've grown so much in your art," she says. She always calls my chocolate work "my art" even though it used to make me squirm. "Your parents would be proud. You got so much of both of them."

"Why did you stop talking to Mom for years?" I almost gasped after I let out such a controversial question, but I only have a day left, and I need to know.

"She lied to me, and at the time, it felt like she was ruining her life by moving in with an older man in a foreign country. Lydia was smart, and could do so many things, but she decided to be an artist."

"Mom's still considered one of the best and most influential Latinas in the world. Her sculptures sell for a lot."

"You're selling her art?"

I shake my head. "Not the ones I own, but the pieces she sold while she was alive. She was a talented woman."

"But she was my only child, I wanted a different life for her. If she hadn't disobeyed me, she would be alive—maybe married to a businessman with many children."

And I wouldn't exist, I want to tell her, but I don't. She doesn't understand how changing the past would alter my present.

“If things don’t work out with Heath—” I don’t know how to finish the sentence.

“They will,” she assures me. “He loves you very much and he’s a doctor. If your art doesn’t pay off, he’ll support you.”

I’m offended by her statement. Heath doesn’t love me, but he’s a great actor. It’s probably all the endorphins from lust keeping him so high that it looks like I hung the moon and the stars. I don’t need anyone to support me. My art sells well. People pay a lot of money for my chocolate sculptures. And if I wasn’t selling them, I have a chocolate empire that thrives.

I understand that she’s in her seventies and comes from a generation that thinks men are the only ones who can succeed, but it’s annoying. My main concern is my future with my family.

“But what if we break up... what would happen?” I insist, and maybe this could’ve been a great moment to say, by the way, this is all a lie.

“Why? Are you two having any problems?”

I shrug a shoulder. “As you know, he’s waiting for his fellowship acceptance. That’s another three years of working ungodly hours. Things can change in a blink of an eye.”

She shakes her head and is about to speak when the sound of the elevator doors opening makes us turn toward the foyer.

“Did he go out for a run again?” Grandma perks up, ready to greet him.

Before I can answer, I notice Dawn Spearman walking toward us, fists close, face red, and eyes bulging.

“Why are you telling people you’re engaged to my son, whore? He’ll never be with you and I’ll make sure of that.”

Chapter Thirty-One



Atzi

SLACK-JAWED, I stare at Dawn Spearman in surprise. Why is she here? Who told her about the engagement?

None of that matters. I have to think on my feet before she ruins everything. I square up my shoulders and plant the best fake smile I can. “Good morning, Dawn. It’s nice to see you.”

“Where is Heathcliff?” she yells, then looks at me again. “I’m not going to allow you to ruin his life. I thought I got rid of your kind years ago, but you’re still hanging around, aren’t you?” Her voice can be heard all the way to San Diego or probably Seattle. The veins in her forehead are popping.

“Heathcliff!”

“You need to leave,” I say as calmly as I can.

She steps closer, looking down at me. “Listen, whore, I won’t be leaving the house that belongs to my son. You are nothing to him. Nothing. If I were you, I would leave while it’s safe.”

Is she losing her shit? I don’t know what to say or how to act. I’m not afraid of Dawn, but I don’t do well during confrontations. Also, what if she has another breakdown and gets lost in her mind for another six years? Her children won’t be able to handle it.

“What the fuck is going on? It’s just seven in the morning,” Heath says as he makes his way down the stairs.

“How can you still be friends with this woman?” she asks with an accusatory tone. “After everything her family did... how could you, Heathcliff?”

I want her to say more about my family. What did we do to her? Unless she’s talking about me and she believes I’m more than one person. She’s definitely losing her mind.

“Mom, calm down.”

“I’m calm.” She lifts her arm, showing her shaky hand. “See, steady hand. I’m in control of the situation.”

“You have to leave, Mom.”

She lifts her hand. The movement is so fast that I don’t realize she’s slapped me until my face begins to throb.

“That’s enough,” Heath says.

Dawn touches her chest and begins to breathe rapidly. “If you think I’ll allow you to be with this woman, you’re mistaken. Her aunt stole my husband, but I won’t allow her to steal my son.”

Heath blinks a couple of times. “What?”

“You didn’t know? Your father had a mistress,” she says. “Everyone thought he was a good man, but he was just like every asshole in the world—a cheater.”

Dawn slaps me again.

She slaps me.

Heath puts himself between his mother and me. “Mom, you have to leave.”

“I won’t. I’m here to protect you. If this bitch thinks she can have you, she’s mistaken. Lying that you two are together... what’s next? Getting knocked up so you can trap him? That’ll never happen, not on my watch.”

The elevator sounds again. Lysander and Caspian are walking toward us. “What’s the commotion?”

“This woman is trying to steal your brother from me.” Dawn is screaming so loud my ears are about to burst. “She’s spewing lies about an engagement. They’re just lies.”

“You’ve done enough damage, Mother. Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Lysander says, grabbing his mother by the elbow.

One moment she’s walking, the next, she’s fainting on the floor.

“Give her space and call 9-1-1,” Heath orders.

His brothers are moving around. Cas carries her to the couch. I remain in the corner watching, horrified at the scene. The ambulance arrives within minutes. Heath leaves with her, and Lysander looks at me, shaking his head.

“Sorry, I apologize,” I mumble.

He looks at my face. “Did my mother hit you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I wave a hand.

“But it does. Are you okay?”

I smile cheerfully, because that’s what I do all the time. Pretend nothing affects me. Not even the psycho who might’ve ruined my life. “I’ll be fine.”

He turns to my grandparents and extends his hand, and shakes them. “Lysander Spearman. I’m sorry we have to meet under these circumstances.”

“Pablo Rivera. This is Adelaida, my wife. Is your mother going to be okay?”

Lysander shrugs. “Sure. That was probably one of her best acts. Pretending she’s tragically dying, so we let her get away with shit. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“She seemed sick.” Abuela looks at the closed doors, almost horrified.

“Nothing a promise from her favorite son won’t cure,” he states and salutes us. “If you don’t mind, I must join my family at the hospital. Hopefully, I can reason with Heath before he surrenders his soul to Satan.”

Once he’s gone, my abuela asks, “Is that true?”

“She’s pretending to be sick to drag her sons’ attention?” I nod. “Most likely.”

“No. That you’re faking being engaged to him.”

I could say no, but maybe confessing the truth is for the best. If I hadn’t lied for so many years, my face wouldn’t be throbbing, and Heath wouldn’t be worried sick about his mom because she’s disturbed by the fake news.

“Did you lie?” Abuelita insists.

Both my grandparents are already looking at me with disappointment. I won't be surprised if they leave without saying goodbye. The nightmare that's been haunting me for years is about to become a reality.

I lift my chin, trying to be courageous. “Yes, but only because—”

“You lied to us,” Abuelo interrupts me angrily.

“I didn't—”

He shows me a hand. “Stop. You're just like your mother.”

“I hope I am just like her. She was a loving person, smart, and compassionate.”

“*Vamonos, no tenemos nada que hacer aqui. Esta niña es igual de ingrata que Lydia.*” Abuela does the sign of the cross.

I want to tell her I'm not ungrateful, and my mother wasn't either. That if they want to leave, the door is wide open. I don't need them, but the last part would be a lie. I need their love.

“We're leaving. Send our things to Mexico. We don't want to see you again,” Abuelo says.

“But I did it—”

“We don't care why you lied,” Abuela says, adding, “Was Heath your boyfriend?”

“No.”

“You're nothing to us,” she says. They turn around and walk toward the elevator.

As they leave, Rys enters the penthouse. “I take it they didn't like Dawn's performance.”

I shake my head.

“Let's put some ice on those cheeks.”

“Why are you here?”

“Cas texted me. He wanted me to make sure you were okay.”

Am I okay? Doubtful, but they don't need to know that. No one has to learn that I'm ready to cry. “How's Dawn?”

“She's better, but the doctor wants to keep her overnight. Heath's staying with her.”

I check my phone, but there's no message from him.

“Do you get along with Dawn?” I dare to ask, since she doesn't seem concerned.

“We haven't met yet.”

“How's that possible?”

“Lysander told Cas to keep me away from her.” She shrugs as if saying, I don't get it, but we follow his wise advice. “It's sad, though. I want the little one to be close to her grandparents—the three of them. However, the more I see how she behaves, the more I think this distance between her and me is for the best.”

For the sake of her little one, I hope she stays away from Dawn's toxicity. Since I don't want to discuss her vicious mother-in-law, I ask, “How are you feeling?”

“We're doing well. Sixteen weeks and going strong. My last visit to the doctor is next week.”

I frown, not liking the sound of it. “Last visit. Why?”

“Since we have to go back to Portland full-time, I'm switching doctors. The hockey preseason begins soon.”

Now I want to pout because she's one of my closest friends. “I'm going to miss you.”

“You'll come and visit me, won't you?”

“Of course, and when the baby is born, I'll be there to spoil her rotten.”

“We don't know if it's a boy or a girl yet.”

“But picture this, a big hockey player with a little girl skating by the pond.”

She sighs and chews her bottom lip. “I know. If Cas looks adorable with our pups, can you imagine him with a baby?”

Usually, I don’t get jealous, but right now, I wish I could have a family with Heath. That’s never going to happen. Knowing he needs me, I text him.

Atzi: How is she?

Heath: Better.

Atzi: Do you need me there?

Heath: No, it’s best if you don’t show. Maybe leave the penthouse today. I’m bringing her home tomorrow. Someone has to look after her. If you want, I can set up your grandparents in a hotel room.

Atzi: No need. They already left, pretty upset at me.

Heath: I’m not surprised. Lies tend to always find a way to...

Atzi: Your mother was vicious.

Heath: She’s hurting. I understand now why she doesn’t like you.

Atzi: I’m not my aunt.

Heath: Take care, Atzi. I’ll have someone pack all your stuff and send it to your studio soon.

Atzi: Are you kicking me out of your place?

Heath: Mom is coming over. I need you to leave immediately.

Atzi: Am I going to see you before New York?

Heath: Probably not. I wish you the best.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Atzi

AFTER THE TEXT exchange with Heath, I make an excuse to leave the penthouse. Rys doesn't have to know my heart is shattering or that my person is gone.

Rys and I hug, promising to call each other soon, and I leave.

I run out of the building fast.

I'm escaping from the pain, from an explosion, from my life.

I run so fast my muscles burn.

I welcome the pain, hoping it'll erase the agony eating my insides.

Nothing works.

Nothing.

The ache is there, branded in my soul.

I arrive at my studio drenched in sweat and tears—endless tears.

How am I supposed to continue?

My grandparents don't want to see me again. Heath said goodbye forever. And with losing him, I've lost his entire family.

What am I supposed to do now?

I allow myself to cry for a few minutes, or maybe hours. I don't know since I lose track of time. After that, I go to the studio. Not the kitchen, but the one next to it. The one I barely use that has the material to create different kinds of art.

I'm sad, angry, and just terrified I will end up alone. Life is unfair. I'd give up my fortune and my talent to have a family and love. But that's not how this works, is it? We don't get what we want.

I put on my gear and pick up a piece of steel and the torch. Welding is mind-numbing. I have to put all my focus and energy into it. It's also incredible but time-consuming, which is why I ignore it. I can melt metal and beat the shit out of it a million times until I mold it the way I want it to be. That's why I love creating things. I pour my feelings into it while making something I can control.

My mind runs through the different scenarios of how I could've prevented what happened to Dawn. It was my fault, and Heath will never forgive me. One white lie. That's all it was at the beginning. One harmless little white lie.

But isn't that what I've done since my parents died? I lie about everything. Mostly my feelings. I play the part of the happy orphan. Everyone prefers to deal with cheerful people. I pretend life is perfect, and I've got my shit together. Most times, while everyone swears I'm filled with joy, I'm crumbling inside, missing my parents and wondering why I'm still around.

When I delve into my dark places, I wish and hope that something happens to me, so I can go back to them. Life was so much better when Mom and Dad were around. I try to keep going. God knows I do because everyone who knows me has always told me they'd want me to do it.

I keep hammering, torching, and twisting metal for hours. It's not until my leg begins to hurt so much that I'm almost falling, I stop. Going to my studio isn't an option, and the other place where I usually like to hide is now forbidden.

After taking off my helmet, gloves, and suit, I sit on the floor, staring at the tree trunk and wondering how long it'll take me to create the branches. If I keep going, I might be able to finish over the weekend. The leaves will take me a few more days.

There's a knock on the door, the handle wiggles, and whoever is behind pushes it open.

"You're a hard person to find," Aunt Cécile says.

"It's Friday. What are you doing here?"

She frowns. “It’s Sunday, mon petit chou.”

“That’s not possible.”

“I’m afraid it is. I got on an earlier flight. I arrived last night, and I’ve been looking for you ever since. I called Heath, who said that if you weren’t at home, you’d be here.”

“Oh.”

She squats in front of me, her blue eyes staring with disbelief. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

I shake my head. “Nothing really. Everything is fine.”

“I heard what happened. I just want to hear your side of the story,” she says, sitting next to me.

I close my eyes, leaning my head on her shoulder. “From whom?”

“Your grandmother called to yell at me for raising you poorly,” she answers. “It seems like you almost destroyed poor, delicate Dawn Spearman.”

I open my eyes. “She went crazy.”

“She likes to be dramatic,” she says. “Do you want to tell me more about it?”

I give her the SparkNotes from the entire week. “The things Dawn said were weird. They confused me. She blames me for something—she always has. I don’t think I did anything to her. Did I?”

“Nothing.” She presses her lips together. “It’s about who you represent.”

“Who is that?”

“Me.”

“Why?”

“Long ago, I met this tall, handsome man. He was an older man. I was just thirty when we met. He was visiting Château Lavigne, wanting to buy grapes from us. I’ve never met anyone as charming as him. One thing led to another, and we became friends. We traveled to different vineyards, and I fell

madly in love with him. He was perfect—or at least I believed he was perfect.”

“Esme’s dad?”

She nods. “Yes, but during those two years, he forgot to mention a few important details about his life—his wife and eight children.”

How could I forget that Dawn was yelling about her husband’s mistress? “I take it you fell for Joel Spearman?”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “Things spiraled out of control after that.”

I squeeze her hand. Seeing how Dawn reacted two days ago, I can only imagine what happened between her and my aunt. “Sorry about all that.”

“It’s in the past. I loved him, you know? But I would have never crossed the line if I had known about Dawn or their children.”

Then I recall something I haven’t thought about in years. “Is that why you were hesitant about my friendship with Heath?”

She nods. “I didn’t want you mixed up with Dawn, but she wasn’t in the picture. Also, as Lysander pointed out, you two seemed to be the best thing to come out of your grief.”

“Lysander knew?”

“Not about my relationship with his father. At least, I don’t think so. When he asked me why I didn’t want you two to be friends, I gave other excuses. Honestly, I don’t even remember what I said. He and Heath’s therapist came to the house to reason with me.”

I can see that. Lysander has always looked after Heath. As if out of everyone, he’s his favorite brother, or maybe the one who needs him the most.

“I’m surprised Heath is not here with you.”

I cry as I tell her about Heath and the end of our friendship.

“He’s not worthy of your friendship or love,” she says. “I wish I could say I’m surprised, but that’s what Spearman’s do. They are spineless.”

I wish I could tell her she’s wrong, but Heath showed me she’s right. Maybe there’s more to her story with Joel, but I don’t want to ask about it. Why open old wounds and bring the pain back into her life.

“How long are you staying?”

“I don’t plan on leaving unless you need space.”

I cuddle closer to her. “I never needed space.”

“Sorry for leaving,” she whispers, giving me a side hug.

“Why did you give up Esme?”

“So many reasons, but the most important was because I believed your parents would do a better job than me.”

“Do you regret giving her up?”

She shakes her head. “No. I was too depressed to take care of her or myself.”

“Does this get any better?”

“What?”

“Life,” I mumble.

“I think so,” she says without hesitation.

“Are you happy without anyone in your life?”

“I have you, mon petit chou. You’re plenty and everything I need in my life.” She sighs. “What’s with the tree in the middle of the studio?”

“My body needed to burn some energy.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Since Friday?”

“Let’s go home. You’re due for a nap and some TLC.”

And maybe Mom isn’t here, but she left me with the best person in the world.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Heath

MY LIFE for the past four weeks has been hell.

Hell.

First, my mother made a scene at my house. She had a panic attack that landed her in the hospital. Her mental health took a turn for the worst. I'm thankful she didn't go catatonic on us. I don't think any of us can take another six years of her silence. Well, I think I would be the only one willing to look after her, and I can't do it.

Needless to say, I spent my last week in San Francisco taking care of her.

That's not the worst of it though. She made me choose between her and Atzi. That's the hardest choice I've ever made in my life. I lost my best friend forever.

It shouldn't matter. It's not like I planned to see Atzi again. Still, I wanted to say a real goodbye to her, and when I went to see her, she wasn't there. I tried calling her, but she didn't pick up the phone.

I don't blame her. I wouldn't speak to me again either after what Mother and I did to her.

The only thing I have going for myself is the fellowship. I practically live in the hospital. Ben and I have barely seen each other during these past few weeks. We talked more when I lived in San Francisco than now that we're roommates in New York.

Today is my first full day off. The head of pediatrics made it mandatory. I can't go back to work for five days. Five fucking days staring at walls and missing Atzi. That's going to make me miserable and tired.

To pass the time, I cleaned the apartment. Ben lives in a pigsty. Then, I went grocery shopping and I'm making my first homemade meal since I moved.

“My roommate is real,” I hear Ben’s voice. “What’s happening, asshole?”

He whistles. “Look at this. I can see my couch. Did you toss away my one-week-old pizza?”

When I turn around, I can’t help but say, “You look like shit. And maybe you should stop thinking you’re still in college.”

He chuckles. “It’s called a thirty-seven-hour shift and I don’t have time to clean shit.”

“Aren’t those illegal?” I arch an eyebrow.

“Says the guy who lives in the hospital.”

I grin. “That’s me avoiding life. What’s your excuse?”

He links his hands behind his neck, stretching. He presses his lips together for a moment before saying, “Right, you don’t know we have a roommate arriving soon.”

“Roommate?” I look around the living room area and the kitchen. “Where are you going to put him? On the couch?”

“It’s a she,” he corrects me. “She’s a twenty inches, six-pound little bundle of joy. She’s moving temporarily into my room, but I’m having some fancy concierge lady come next week to set up a nursery in the loft.”

I take a step back. “Wait, what?”

“She’s mine. The baby.” And the asshole grins, as if the entire world is now pink and he’s the happiest man alive. “Bernadette Farrow was born yesterday and she’s a beauty.”

I take a second to think about my new problem. A baby. Is he out of his fucking mind? “So, you’re the father and she’s moving in with us? What about her mother? She needs her mother.” My voice comes out desperate.

He shrugs. “Petra has two options. She can either keep the baby and her husband will leave her—penniless. Or she has to get rid of the baby.”

“If the mother can give her up, why don’t you do the same?”

“She’s my child, dude. Mine. I’m not just tossing her away like some piece of clothing that doesn’t fit.”

He has a point, but the kid deserves better. Ben can’t even pick up his socks to save his life. A baby takes more commitment than the five-month-old carton of milk I threw away earlier today.

“What does your family think about it?”

“Derek, my oldest brother, is supportive of my choice—but let’s not forget he’s the black sheep of the family.” He tilts his head and gives me a look that says, *who-the-fuck-cares-about-the-rest*.

“You don’t care if they disown you?”

“No. I have my brother, my trust fund, and I’m a fucking doctor. We don’t need them.” Then, he crosses his arms. “I have your support too, don’t I?”

Of course he does, but as much as I want to be team Ben-Bernadette there’s a huge issue. “How are you going to care for a child when you have a shitty schedule?”

“I have twelve weeks of paternity leave, hence I worked a thirty-seven-hour shift. After that, I’ll figure out what’s next for me.” He shrugs. “Maybe Atzi can come and help me so you two can kiss and make up.”

I scoff. “Unlikely to happen.”

“Are you going to tell me what transpired between you two?”

“Honestly, I’m still trying to wrap my head around it. Mom lost her shit.” I shrug because I haven’t told anyone about Joel’s indiscretion—not even my siblings. Dad... he was my hero. But he hurt Mom so much and she still loved him.

“Who’s watching your mother while you’re here?”

“I hired her a nurse. None of my siblings give two shits about her and I can’t check on her as often.”

“Welp, I think it’ll be best if you go back to SanFran, tell Atzi how you feel, and fix your shit.”

He's wrong, if I go back, I won't be able to see her. It's her or my mother, and as much as I love Atzi, someone has to put Mom first.

"I have the fellowship, and I can't possibly be with her. You weren't there to see how Mom lost her entire shit just because I was pretending to be with Atzi." I tap my head. "Can you imagine what'll happen to my mother if it was real?"

Ben shakes his head. "I wouldn't give two shits about my family's feelings. Think about your future. You can get a fellowship in SanFran and be next to your woman. Your mother should get over herself. Therapy might be the best solution for all of you. I used to want to be a Spearman, but lately, I feel like you guys are falling apart."

Is he right? Atzi mentioned exactly the same thing a few months ago. I haven't spoken to my family in a while, though. I've been too busy and also upset with them. How hard is it to check on their mother? She gave us life. The least they can do is to make sure she's taking her medication and try to push her to go to therapy.

Thinking about Atzi makes me want to talk to her. I dial her number but the call goes to voicemail. I text her, hoping she'll get them. I used to be able to get the timestamp of when she read my messages. Now, I'm lucky if I get a notification that they were delivered.

Heath: Are you okay?

Heath: I just need proof of life.

Heath: Listen, I'm getting worried.

There's no answer. Not even a middle-finger emoji or a *fuck off, asshole* note. Nothing. They say the opposite of love is hate. Those people don't understand the opposite of love is indifference.

Indifference is what's killing me slowly. This is all my fault. The lines were crossed and now we cut them. These days

all I can do is worship her ghost. The person I loved and who was always by my side.

It's probably better this way.

Atzi on one side of the country, and me thousands of miles away from her.

We are over, even though we never started.

Chapter Thirty-Four



Atzi

THE IDEA of change is terrifying.

My life shifted in just a few days. It's been even more difficult to process everything that's transpired in the past five weeks. The changes, my past, and the present.

There's no straight and narrow path to healing. The word easy has been deleted from my dictionary, but I'm taking more steps to get better. I've done more in these past weeks than I had since my parents died.

I haven't healed completely, but I've made more progress than I did almost eighteen years ago when the accident happened. This time, I'm not telling my therapist what she wants to hear but what's in my mind, soul, and heart.

Admitting the sadness I harbor has been more difficult than accepting I'm a total mess to my aunt.

Not surprisingly, my life has changed in the past few weeks. Instead of making chocolate sculptures, I've been welding obsessively. My aunt has to drag me out of the studio around 6:00 p.m. each day. She's had people delivering food three times a day. The only breaks I take are when I have to videoconference with my therapist.

I've been working so much and so hard that by week three, I've produced enough pieces for an exhibition.

Cécile finds me a guy who knows a lot about art, is a lawyer, and sometimes acts as an agent. She swears he's legit. I let her handle everything with him. I'm not as interested in being part of the spotlight as I used to be when I was creating chocolate sculptures.

I have to confess my new agent is good. He finds me a spot at a gallery in New York City. Aunt Cécile and I spend two days packing every piece. I don't want to sell the big tree I created the first day I had my nervous breakdown. However,

the gallery owner wants it as the centerpiece—he'll ship it back once the exhibition is over.

I begrudgingly agree and even create a copy of the tree made out of chocolate.

Usually, I would offer to travel to the gallery and rent a kitchen where I can make the sculpture. However, I don't want to go to New York City. It might be a big city, but with my luck, I might come face-to-face with Heath. If I never see him again, it'll be too soon.

I'm not only upset but completely mad at him. How dare he toss away our relationship? I'm staring at the taillights of the truck that's taking my hard work away to the other side of the country when I hear a screechy voice, "How are you, bitch?"

I turn around and find Cory glaring at me.

"How are you, Cordelia?" Aunt Cécile asks. "It's nice to see you."

"Hi, Ms. Lavigne. I'm well"—her eyes take on an accusatory stare—"if you don't count that my friend has been ignoring me for weeks."

I lift my hand and wave innocently. "Hey."

"You changed your number." The tone of her voice carries more sadness than anger.

"I changed a lot of things," I confess. Old me would've cracked a joke and made her feel good about herself.

I can't be that person anymore. Did I switch my number? I had to. Heath texted me several times during the weekend. Five days of ongoing messages asking if I'm okay.

I was tempted to text back something like, I'm not fucking okay and we're not friends. I didn't.

"No offense, but why are you here?"

"I need my friend." Her shoulders slump. "But apparently, I lost her when my fucking brother left for New York."

Aunt Cécile kisses my cheek. “I’m heading to the front of the store so the girls can take their lunch break. Don’t forget you have therapy in a couple of hours. Also, you promised not to return to the studio until you unpack your room.” Then, she turns to look at Cory. “It was nice seeing you.”

I salute my aunt. “Got it.”

Cory watches my aunt go before she says, “What boxes?”

“Listen, I love you, and you were one of my closest friends, but I can’t be around your family. Not when I’m trying to get over the codependency and your brother.”

She crosses her arms and huffs. “Codependency? That’s not what I expected to hear.”

Though she seems like she wants to be angry at me, she’s just not pulling it off. There’s something wrong with her. “What’s happening to you?”

Cory shrugs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“But it does.”

“We’re not friends anymore. I might as well leave.”

“Cory, don’t make me beg. Something is bothering you. I’m guessing you can’t talk to anyone else and I’m your last resort.”

She frowns. “You’d be wrong. I know you were friends with Heath first, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. His issues aren’t mine. If he can’t cut the fucking umbilical cord and live his life, it’s not my problem.”

“Have you spoken to him?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. I’m still angry at him. He let you go.”

“But that’s not what’s hurting you, is it?”

“It upsets me, but no. Do you know that Ben has a daughter?”

I walk to her and hug her. “I’m sorry.”

“At least it wasn’t that woman, Audrey, Aubrey, Au—”

“Avery Aldridge,” I correct her.

“Who the fuck cares?”

“You do, because you’ve been madly in love with him forever.”

“I am, but it’s not like I’m ever going to be more than just fucking Cory. His friend’s little sister.”

“How can I help?”

“No one can help me. Have you ever been in love? I mean the kind of love where you’ll surrender everything to that person. He becomes your entire existence—your air, your heartbeat, and the only person you want to spend your days with?”

Cory begins to cry, and I understand why she can’t talk to anyone else but me. I’m the only one privy to her feelings for Ben. I hug her, but as much as I want to focus on her pain, her words are bouncing in my head. Air, heartbeat, and existence. I’d lie if I said I have never felt like that. I did once. It lasted a week. A week of intense love and soul-deep moments.

Fucking Heathcliff Spearman, he made me fall in love with him and I’m just realizing that, on top of everything else, I’m dealing with a broken heart. I love him and he’ll never love me back. How am I supposed to deal with that truth?

It wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Why are men so stupid?” Cory interrupts my thoughts.

“I wish I had an answer.”

She wiggles her way out of my embrace and looks at me with red blotchy eyes. “So what happened between you and my brother? You two were inseparable for years. I hoped one day you’d finally see how much he loves you and marry him.”

But he doesn’t love me, and we’re never going to be together. He just pretended to be in love with me. And because I don’t want to dwell on my feelings and discuss them with her, I focus on Dawn. I tell her what her mother did. Every single thing.

“Mom’s a bitch, and... Dad cheated? That’s new.” She shrugs.

“You didn’t know?”

She shakes her head. “Other than Mom had a breakdown and she slapped you, we knew nothing.”

“Now you see why we can’t be friends.” I shrug as if saying I totally get it, and I’m okay with not being part of her life or the Spearmans’.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Why?”

“My family hurt your mother,” I explain to her clearly.

“Ha, like I give a shit about that woman. You’re my friend. My mother is Fern. Dawn is just a piece of work who likes to manipulate her children. They swear she was a doting mother when we were growing up, but she wasn’t. Mom was always out while the nanny looked after us.” Her tone is almost as angry as the one Dawn used.

“I had no idea.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m surprised Heath doesn’t remember that. He’s the one who helped us with homework. Other times it was Fern. The nanny ensured we had our meals and didn’t die.”

“It seems like there are a lot of layers to your family.”

She nods. “A lot, but that doesn’t matter. I don’t like that you disappeared on me for more than a month.”

“Sorry, but I need time to get over losing my best friend. Plus, I have no idea if you guys hated me too.”

She scoffs. “I can’t believe he stopped talking to you. That’s surreal. He should’ve defended you when Dawn insulted you.”

“He loves your mom more than anything in the world.”

Cory shakes her head. “It’s more like he thinks he owes her Dad’s life. Heath sacrifices everything for her, including his life. He needs therapy, just like our mother.”

I can't help but smile. "That's kind of ironic."

"You know what's more ironic? He doesn't want children, and he's been taking care of Ben's kid. Imagine if he knocks up someone." She's laughing as if wishing for him to fuck up so she can have a front-row seat to the shit show.

"Though it'd be funny, I doubt it'll happen. He's too careful." I think. I mean mostly. He's careful but missed wearing condoms several times when we were...

"Why are you frowning?" she asks.

"I..." I'm stumped because with everything that's happening, I just realized we failed to use condoms when we took showers together or at night, after the third or fourth time we were fucking. Also, the most critical part is I just remembered that I haven't had my period in several weeks.

Several.

Weeks.

"Atzi? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just worried I forgot to add a piece of art to the truck."

She turns toward the street. "The one where you shoved in a gazillion boxes? What was that all about? Are you moving to another country? Because I went to your studio and they're remodeling it. I have so many questions."

"I moved back in with Aunt Cécile. The truck is heading to New York City for an exhibit."

"Chocolate sculptures?"

"No, steel sculptures. I've been welding."

She nods. "That explains why you haven't posted anything online."

"Listen, I need to unpack and prepare for my therapy session. If you need me again, you know where to find me."

"How about giving me your number?"

I shake my head. “I love you and am here for you, but no. You’ll give it to your brother, and I prefer not to speak to him.” I tap my chest a couple of times. “It’s too painful.”

She nods. “I understand. Good luck with everything.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



Atzi

HOW MANY TESTS does it take to confirm a pregnancy?

Maybe the question is: how many tests does it take to accept the inevitable?

I don't know, but I buy several boxes at the pharmacy and run to the house. This can't be happening to me. Not now. I'm not ready to be a mother and less when the child is from a man who doesn't want any kids—or loves me.

I open the boxes—all of them—and read the instructions. Most suggest I pee in a cup and then submerge the test. What happened to those movies where you see the heroine pee on a stick? I go to the kitchen and drink a liter of water.

This isn't stalling, just making sure I get it right. Once I think I'm ready, I take the first one but decide not to look at it until I have tried a second one. By the sixth test, I wash my hands and call Aunt Cécile. She arrives when I'm on test number ten.

“What's the emergency?” she asks when she shuts the main door of the house.

“I'm in the bathroom,” I call out.

“Should I call the doctor?” She's almost out of breath when she reaches me.

“What's with all those boxes?”

The bathroom counter looks like Christmas Day. Wrappings and containers are all over the place. “I might or might not be pregnant.”

“Have you tried peeing on the stick?” She picks up a box. “Opening them doesn't give you much information.”

I chuckle. “I did for a couple of them. I submerged the others in the cup.”

“What’s the result?”

I shrug. “Who knows? I’m not brave enough to take a look.”

“It’s simple, either you are or you’re not. The result doesn’t matter. I’m here for you.” She crosses her arms, giving me a look that says, stop fooling yourself.

I take a seat on the edge of the bathtub and shake my head. “It’s not *that simple*. This is life-changing—and I’m already doing a lot of that. I don’t know if I can take this new thing.”

“So you don’t want the baby?”

“See, that’s the problem. I don’t know if I want it to be positive or not.”

“You need to give me a little more than that.”

“If it’s positive, what should I do with the child?” I cradle my head between my hands. “What. Am. I. Supposed. To. Do. With. A. Baby?”

I take several cleansing breaths before I lift my gaze. My aunt looks at me with such tenderness I know that no matter what happens, I won’t be alone. Still, I continue with the cons. “I have to explain to the kid that his father doesn’t want him. Even when I’ll try to do my best, I might fail at being a mother because I’m a mess. If I’m not pregnant, I’m going to cry because this might be the only piece of Heath I have left—and funny enough, it’s the best of him.”

“You’re not making any sense, sweetheart. Why do you think you’re pregnant? Any symptoms?”

I shake my head. “Other than that I haven’t had my period in a while, no.”

“Don’t you have an insert birth control?”

“The doctor took it out...” I count with my fingers and look up at her. “Probably ten months ago. I was supposed to get an IUD, but between trips and other commitments, I forgot to go back.”

She nods, as if understanding. I'm glad one of us does because I'm confused about what's happening and what I will do with my future.

"Can you see if..." I can't even say it. I clear my throat and try again. "Can you look at them and tell me if I'm pregnant?"

"I'm here for you, but I think you should be the one finding out." She gives me a hopeful smile. "Maybe it's something else and there's no baby, and that's totally fine. Can you imagine what it would be like to care for someone else? If you're not pregnant, you'll skip late-night feedings, tantrums, and all the nasty things that come with having an infant."

But I can't think of the bad things. I recall Soleil, Alyth, and Elijah. Holding them when they were newborns. They were so tiny and precious. I touch my stomach, wondering if I can make this little one smile like I did with them. I didn't have to pretend to be anyone else with them. I was just myself.

With newfound strength, I stand up and walk to the counter where all the tests are lined up. There are two lines, plus signs, and the word pregnant.

"I'm pregnant," I whisper so softly I can barely hear myself.

"What do you want to do?" Aunt Cécile asks.

"Confirm with a doctor, maybe get a sonogram."

My aunt places her hand on my shoulder. "You're being too calm. Do you need to call the therapist?"

"I don't know how to be," I answer. "But it's definitely not freaking me out. I guess I'm trying to absorb what's happening. Just a few hours ago, I realized I fell in love with Heath... or maybe I've been a little in love all along but tried to contain it because I knew it wasn't safe. Once we crossed the line, I gave everything to him."

Every little piece of myself.

Everything.

What do I have left?

I touch my flat belly. This is what I have left. A family. The beginning of something extraordinary.

In a way, this is a weird way to close our chapter. We're finishing the story with a baby—my baby.

How could I have let myself open up to him and give myself in ways I never thought was possible? Why did I do it?

There's a flicker of hope inside my heart that waits for him. But in my head, I know he'll never come back, I just know it. That's not how real life works. He never cared for me. If I had been the love of his life, he would've chosen me. He would be here, and maybe he would be happy about the baby. That's what his brothers did when they learned about the pregnancies of their wives.

Me... I might need to hide it from him because he might want me to get rid of the baby.

"You want to keep the baby?"

"Yes. It might be hard to become a mom, but I'll learn along the way."

She side-hugs me. "You'll be an excellent mom. We'll figure everything out, okay?"

"Thank you for being here with me."

"Always."

Chapter Thirty-Six



Heath

THE SCREAMS of a baby wake me up. I place my arm on top of my face, hoping it goes away, but it becomes louder.

And they say babies are the best part of the world. Whoever said that hasn't been dealing with a cranky infant who only likes to wake up at night.

"I'm too fucking tired," I mumble as I push myself out of bed. Bernadette is wailing, and Ben is either preparing her bottle or unable to wake up because he's too tired to function.

When I arrive at his bedroom, I find Bernadette in her bassinet, thrusting her legs and screaming bloody murder.

"What's going on, sweetheart? Did your ungrateful father forget he has a beautiful princess to tend to?" She sniffs as if she's trying to control herself, but goes back to crying.

"It'd be nice if you change her diaper instead of criticizing me in front of my daughter, fucker," Ben calls from the kitchen.

Bernadette stops crying as I pick her up from her crib. I head to the nursery and start my duty. When I signed up for the fellowship, I was willing to live at the hospital if necessary. I never entertained the idea of shortening it. Who would have thought I would do it to dedicate the time to this little one?

"How long until she sleeps through the night?" Ben asks, taking a seat on the rocking chair. He has the bottle ready and he's just waiting for me to finish.

"I heard somewhere around six months to eighteen years," I joke as I fix Bernie's onesie.

"Fucker," he grumbles, picking up the pillow he uses to help him support her while he's feeding her.

"You should watch your vocabulary, or that'll be her first word if you continue talking like that around her," I warn him,

then I recall that we haven't talked about his future. "Have you made any decisions about the hospital? Are you going to tender your resignation?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. I have eight weeks left to make a decision. I don't want to lose my seniority."

"We can figure out a schedule," I say, handing him the baby so he can feed her.

"You're a good friend, Heathcliff Spearman." Then, with a small voice, he says, "The best uncle ever."

"I just do it because she's cute. Also, you helped with Fern's twins when they were born. It's a little *pay it forward*."

"That's what family is all about," he says. "And since I like you a lot, I'm going to give you some advice."

"If it involves Atzi, please don't do it." He's been pushing me to go back to SanFran and get her back.

There's nothing to get back. Things between Atzi and I never started, but they're definitely over.

"It's been what, like, two months since you left her? I don't get why you did it. Not when I know how much you love her."

No one will ever understand why I refuse to return to her. It's not only because Mom can't stand her but also because Atzi wants a family. I stare at Ben cradling his baby as he feeds her and I wonder if I will ever be able to get past my guilt.

Every night as I help him with Bernadette, I think about Atzi and me and the possibility of having more with her. A house, a family, and happiness.

But then, I'm reminded of what can happen to the children or me. What if they are born with a congenital defect? My father's heart condition, my mother's mental issues, or... there are so many reasons why I shouldn't have children.

But if everyone thought the same way I do, the entire human race would be in danger of disappearing. "Do you worry about her future?"

“I’m concerned of course. Seven books, two classes, and Fern on speed dial haven’t given me enough confidence to believe we can do it. I just plan on winging it like all parents do.”

I chuckle. This sounds so much like Ben. In every class we took, he did what he called his best with the minimum effort. He’s a good doctor, one of the best. He’ll probably become one of the best parents too.

“You should try to get in touch with Atzi.”

I shake my head. “I made a promise to my mother. She’s doing a lot better. Next week she’s going on a cruise. It’s the first trip since the incident.”

He shrugs. “Listen, you’re a good son, but instead of being good to your mother, you should start by being good to yourself.”

“She needs me. I still can’t wrap my head around Dad’s infidelity. No wonder she was a mess after he died.”

Ben is rocking back and forth slowly while feeding his daughter, and I’m almost sure he’s about to fall asleep. “Do you want me to help you?”

“No, I’m just resting my eyes and wondering if your mom isn’t just using you.”

“Why are you saying that?”

He shrugs. “She’s blamed you for not finding your dad in time. The guilt has taken you all the way to New York to figure out how to prevent his heart condition from birth. But, what’s that heart condition again?”

“What do you mean?”

“What was it? High cholesterol, atrial septal defect, single ventricle defect... You’ve never named it.”

This... I’ve never thought about it. I’m a fucking doctor, and for the first time in my life, I’m faced with a question I have never asked before. What the fuck happened to my father? A heart attack, sure, but what caused it? I’m a man of

science. A doctor. I should've asked more questions. I'm old enough to do it, and I never did it.

The fuck, Heath?

It's painful to respond, "I don't know." I sound like a dumbass.

He scoffs. "Isn't that convenient?"

"What are you talking about?"

"For all you know, you'll have to keep applying for fellowships and specializing until you forgive yourself for something that wasn't your fault."

That's where he's wrong. "I could've saved him."

"Please, tell me how a thirteen-year-old could've saved a man having a heart attack." He shakes his head. "Actually, you found him dead. Dead. It was over."

"If I had gotten there earlier, I could have called an ambulance."

"What was the TOD?"

"Excuse me?" How am I supposed to know the time of death?

"See, maybe I don't love my parents as much as you do, and that's why I'm trying to figure out the loophole to get you out of the guilt-chain that keeps you attached to your mother. If I were you, I would get my hand on a copy of the autopsy to figure out everything. Time of death, reason, and more. You should try that, along with therapy."

"I don't need therapy." And fuck if I don't sound like my mother who still refuses to get help.

"You're in denial," Ben says. "You lost the woman you love because you're blind with guilt. If I didn't love you, I would let this go, but you're like a brother to me. If it wasn't for you, my life would be a clusterfuck—and I'm talking about our college years."

Those were hard for him. I'm glad we were roommates and became close. "It was nothing. I'm here for you."

“Same, which is why I’m going to tell you to get off your ass and do something for yourself. Atzi won’t be waiting for long.”

“So what do I do, call her? She’s just going to tell me to fuck off.”

“No. First, you fix yourself, and then you grovel.”

Can I do it? Is it that simple?

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Atzi

TODAY HAS BEEN A BUSY, tiresome day. Earlier I had a long conversation with my lawyer. Since I haven't been able to get in touch with Heath, she's serving him with the papers. Hopefully, he'll sign them and rescind his parental rights ASAP.

We want to have them ready before I leave. I'm moving to France with my aunt, and I'd rather have everything squared up.

The doctor just gave me the green light to fly. My window to travel is short, only two weeks. Aunt Cécile scheduled our trip for next Monday, hoping Heath will sign the paperwork and we can be on our merry way.

This is what's best for my little family and me. It wasn't an easy decision, but I have to think about the future and not myself. Instead of nesting for the past twenty-some weeks, I've been trying to figure out the next step while continuing to heal. It's safe to say that I'm not ready to be a mother, but I'll try my best.

We're not closing Lavigne, but I'm dedicating my time to what matters the most. My family and the little ones.

I hired two pastry chefs for Decadent Dreams. We're in the process of hiring a CEO and a COO for Lavigne Chocolatier. Everything seems to be working as planned. This time, I'm not making up some scheme without a good foundation, the way old Atzi used to do it.

As I leave the doctor's office, I call my grandparents, knowing they'll send me to voicemail. "Hi, it's me again. I just wanted to let you know I'm moving to France next week. Again, I apologize for deceiving you, but I only wanted to keep you happy. During these past few months, I've learned that by doing so I was actually dishonest with myself. Trying

to please others so they'd love me was wrong. I just feared what would happen if I lost the only connection with Mom.

"I didn't understand that the most direct link to her is my heart and all the memories we shared. It's a shame you two won't be a part of my life and my new little family, but if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me. I love you both."

I hang up and step into the elevator, not even looking at who's inside. I call Heath right after. "Hey, it's me again. By now, you must think I'm some obsessed crazy ex trying something weird. I'm not. We just need to talk. Please reach out to me when you have time. It's important. If you don't, I have a lawyer that'll contact you. Just sign the papers and this will be over, okay? I hope life is treating you well."

When I step out of the elevator, I text Aunt Cécile to let her know I'm on my way home.

"Atzi?" I hear a voice calling me. When I look up, it's Elliot.

I wave at him. "Hi."

He smiles and hugs me from the side. "It's good to see you."

"Same. How are Fern and the babies?" This conversation is so painful, I want to run in the opposite direction.

It's been so long since the last time I spoke to any of the Spearmans. Well, that's not true. Cory and I are still close. She has become Switzerland and hasn't told anyone about my pregnancy. She's encouraged me to start anew in France and promised to visit us often.

Rys and I talk often, and I just told her about the babies when I announced I'd be moving.

"Missing you. I'm sure she'd be happy to see you."

I sigh because I miss them too. So many times, I've been tempted to reach out to them, but I decided that phones work both ways. I'm done being the one reaching out to people.

"Say hi to them when you get home."

“Why don’t you visit us?” he suggests.

Rubbing my swollen belly, I shake my head. “I really wish I had time, but I’m moving to France in just a few days.”

He looks at the bump. “Can you travel?”

“Yes. The doctor just cleared it.”

“Does *he* know?”

I arch an eyebrow, as if saying, what are you talking about?

“Heath, have you told him about the baby?”

I shrug. “I’ve been trying to reach him for the past couple of months. He’s not picking up the calls. My lawyer will serve him with the paperwork, don’t worry about it. They’re not his responsibility.”

“But you can’t just give him that option.”

“He doesn’t want anything to do with children,” I whisper, trying to keep myself calm.

My decision has been months in the making. I’ve discussed it with the therapist. The best for me and the babies is to live with family. All the Lavignes are waiting for me. My anxiety has diminished, and I’m not even taking medication.

“Fern would want to be a part of their life,” he says. “Same with the rest of the Spearman’s.”

I shrug and begin to walk outside of the building. “Sorry. I think this is the best for us.”

“Atzi, think about it,” he calls out. “We’re your family.”

I shrug and find the car I ordered earlier. “My ride is here. Send my best to everyone. Maybe when they’re old enough and I’m ready, I’ll call so you can visit them.”

I don’t like that the car is across the street. I wait for the light to turn green so I can cross over, and Elliot’s worried face is the last thing I see.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Heath

EVERY TIME I start surgery I think about Atzi. She always teased me about creating a catchphrase. Something like Patrick Dempsey did during the show. I can't even remember what he used to say. I haven't come up with anything. I think it's silly, and I doubt any doctors have something to say when they're about to cut someone open.

So far, all I do when I step into an OR is hope to save the life of the child I'm operating on and think about Atzi. I'm still trying to figure out my shit. Therapy is helping, but I haven't tackled the major issues. Which means I'm not ready for her.

I've been ignoring her calls. It pains me, but I can't talk to her until I'm ready to offer her everything. When will that happen? I don't know. This is a work in progress. I dedicate my time to my surgeries, Bernie, and therapy. Ben is temporarily working at a private practice three times a week. He sends his daughter to daycare one day a week, and I take care of her during my two days off.

So far, he's been able to handle fatherhood, but he wants to move closer to family. My family. He's waiting for me, hoping I'll transfer to SanFran. I doubt it'll happen soon. There's a lot I have to work out before I'm ready for Atzi and our life together.

But now it's not the time to think about my life or future. It's time to work. I signal I'm ready. The nurse turns on Mozart. It's what I like to listen to while I'm doing surgery. My eyes focus on the tiny chest I'm about to open.

It breaks my heart to see a toddler with tetralogy of Fallot. He should've been diagnosed at birth, maybe even before birth. It shows in a sonogram after the sixteenth week of gestation. Parents need to be more informed.

But it's okay. I can operate on this little one and send him home, ready to have a normal life. I'm almost done with the

surgery when we receive a call. I hate when the phone rings. Someone, somewhere, thinks there are more important things than my job.

“The call is for you, Dr. Spearman,” a nurse announces.

After a long deep breath to control my anger, I say, “Tell them I’m in the middle of something important.”

“I did, but they say—”

“Spearman.” Ben makes his way through the OR wearing scrubs. “How long until you’re done? Your presence is requested in San Francisco.”

I glare at him. He’s got to be fucking kidding me. What can be more important? Did my mother lose her shit, and my brothers got her committed to a mental institution? Doubtful. They don’t care enough to do something like that.

“Listen, I’m closing the patient. Can this wait?”

He shakes his head. “Have someone take over. We need to go, now.”

I swallow hard. It’s my mother. “Mom? What happened to her?”

He shakes his head. “It’s Atzi. She was in an accident. The plane is ready to take you to SanFran.”

“Atzi,” I whisper her name like a forbidden word, a prayer, a melody I haven’t sung in a long time. “What do you mean an accident?”

“Very serious car accident that might take her life,” he says slowly.

Take her life.

Take her life.

Take her life.

Those three words are on repeat.

“No,” is all I can say.

I’m frozen.

Completely frozen and numbed.

“Dr. Spearman, I’ll finish closing. You need to move,” someone says.

“Dude, we’re leaving,” Ben says, pushing me. My legs are moving along, but I can’t seem to react. It’s like I’m floating.

He slaps me and says, “Dude, I need you to keep your shit together. You can’t afford to lose it right now. She needs you. Do you understand?”

I shake my head, trying to take my next breath, but it’s almost impossible. “How is she?”

“Fern didn’t tell me much. She said you should get home ASAP.”

I take off my scrubs and begin to pace. We have to leave, but how do we get to SanFran? I need to book a flight. That’ll take hours, plus the six-hour trip. What if I don’t get to her in time?

We need to pack. That’s when I realize we’re missing the little one. “Where’s Bernie?”

“At the nurses’ station, waiting for her favorite uncle. I already emptied your locker. Let’s get moving.”

I scrub my face. “Do you have your phone? I need a plane. Maybe Cas can get me something.”

“That’s done. Lucky for us, Derek is in town, and he’s giving us a ride. We have people waiting on the helipad. We’ll fly to the landing strip, where the private jet awaits. Move now.”

“How bad is it?” I ask.

He puts a hand on my shoulder. “They might not make it, man.”

“No.” My eyes fill with moisture in my eyes. “I can’t lose her. Not after...”

“We’ll make calls to the right people, okay? They have great doctors in the hospital.”

They do, but I could be in the operating room, saving her,
if I were there.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Heath

THE WORST SIX hours of my life.

I just spent six fucking hours inside a plane feeling powerless. I'm a doctor, I save lives and the love of my life is miles away from me. I'm unable to help her, and what if the asshole operating doesn't know what the fuck he's doing?

No matter what Ben says during the trip, I can't settle down. The stupid jet's Wi-Fi isn't working, and I don't have a way to communicate with my family. When we land in SanFran, there's another helicopter waiting for us. We arrive at the hospital's helipad and I make my way down to the ER's waiting room. No one is there.

I head toward the receptionist.

"Atzi Lavigne," I say.

"The family is in the private waiting room, sir."

"How is she?"

"You need to head there and a doctor will be with you when they have any news."

I rush through the waiting room, expecting... well, I don't know what to expect but the place is full.

Aslan, Gatsby, Hux, and Cas are here. It doesn't surprise me that Maia and Rys aren't though. They have their little ones to look after. I guess Fern is also at home with the twins. But when I move my gaze toward the doors that lead to personnel only, I spot my sister Fern on the bench, holding Cécile who's crying and holding a rosary. Then, I spot Uncle James, Aunt Ari, and most of my cousins from Colorado.

Alex, their youngest son and probably my favorite cousin, approaches me and hugs me. "Have faith, okay? Remember I almost died and I'm here."

He did, he was in a horrible car accident and the doctors thought he'd never walk again. And yet, here he is standing on his own two feet and during the winter season, he's always snowboarding with his wife and kids.

I nod, trying not to lose my shit, like Ben said. He went to my penthouse to settle in with Bernie. Derek is staying with her while he joins me in the hospital.

“How is she?” I ask.

Cécile looks at me and shakes her head. “Still in surgery.”

I check the time. “It's been more than six fucking hours. What's taking so long?” My lungs deflate, something bad. They might be reconstructing bones, organs or... I run a hand through my hair.

“I should be inside,” I say with a shaky breath.

“They had to do a C-section first, to save the babies,” Fern mumbles.

A knot roots in my throat. I can barely speak when I ask, “Babies?”

She nods. “Lysander, Cory, and Rys are with them. You should go. The doctor said the baby girl is too fragile and she might not make it.”

Cécile breaks down and cries. Fern hugs her. I don't ask more questions. I make my way to the NICU. All I can think of is the word babies.

Babies.

Not one, more than one. The girl is not going to make it.

The girl. There's a baby girl inside the room—Atzi's baby.

Well, she's not going to die.

Billie is outside the NICU. “Why are you here?”

“Do you have the charts for the Lavigne babies?” I say, disassociating. I'm putting my feelings in a box and storing it for later. I'm saving the children.

She nods. Handing me one. “This is baby girl Lavigne. She’s so tiny, unlike her brothers.”

“Brothers?” I repeat. “How many?”

“Two,” she says.

I read over the baby girl’s chart. Thirty-week gestation, two pounds six ounces and fifteen point two inches. She’s tiny. Too fucking tiny.

I grab some scrubs and a mask from the shelves and step inside. Lysander is in front of an incubator, wearing scrubs and pumping a small valve. That has to be her.

“Is she having trouble breathing?” I ask.

“Her oxygen levels are low, just like her heartbeat,” Billie says. “Your brother doesn’t want to give up. He’s a stubborn Spearman.”

“We don’t give up,” I agree. I take a second glance at the chart.

There’s no doubt in my mind that these babies are mine. Mine. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure they stay alive.

“She might have a heart problem, her organs might not be fully developed,” I say out loud, ordering all the tests she needs.

“We should concentrate on the boys. They have a better chance,” Billie suggests.

I glare at her. “Get the machines, now. Get the OR ready. You took an oath to save lives, and even if there’s little hope, we’ll make this happen. She’s not dying.”

Billie scrambles and begins to throw orders around. I step close to the tiny little baby and squat. I put my hand through the hole in the incubator and touch her tiny hand. “You’re going to be okay, sweetheart. I’m here to take care of you.”

I feel an arm on my shoulder. “Sorry.”

“She’s going to be okay,” I mumble. “Keep pumping that, please. Don’t stop.”

I beg him as if my own life depends on what he's doing. We can't lose this little ray of sunshine. We won't lose her.

When I turn around, I see Cory next to a crib talking with one of the boys. Rys is with my other son.

"Why didn't she tell me?" I mumble, trying to understand how I'm just finding out I was going to be a father.

Rys looks down at one of the boys, avoiding my gaze. So she definitely knew about it. Cory is the one who answers, "She tried calling you several times."

"You knew?" I glare at her. "You two knew and didn't tell me. What the fuck?"

I turn to look at Lysander, who shrugs and shakes his head. "This is the first time I'm learning about my niece and nephews, but I don't condemn Atzi's or our sister's actions. You've had your head shoved inside your ass for months—if not years."

"Don't come and act like we offended you. If you recall, you took off and abandoned everyone. You didn't give a shit about any of us." Cory mumbles the last words.

"But she could've told me," I insist.

"Did you ever answer her calls?" she asks with defiance in her gaze.

"No, because I wasn't ready."

Lysander tsks. "If you keep waiting to be ready for life, you're screwed, little brother."

"If I had been—"

"Shut up, and don't start thinking about things you could've done to fix your past. It's over, move on and stop making so many fucking mistakes," he says.

He's right. I've had this conversation with my therapist for months. Learn from my fuckups and move forward.

Since I need to keep my head straight, I focus on the boys' charts. One is bigger than the other by a few ounces and a third of an inch. We need their prenatal history. I ask Cory if

she knows about her doctor. She leaves the NICU to ask Cécile for the doctor's number.

I held each of my boys for a few minutes, promising they'll be fine—and so will their mom and sister. I know how to keep that promise, but I have no idea how to create a future for all of us. I broke everything.

Can I make that happen?

Chapter Forty



Heath

NOT SURPRISINGLY, my little girl has tetralogy of Fallot. My guess is that Atzi's womb was too small, and the technician didn't take the time to look into her organs to make sure all of them were working properly. I'm relieved that just last week, I operated on a pregnant woman to correct the congenital defect of her son. He'll be able to grow up without any issues.

Operating on someone so small is hard, but I want to believe I have the experience. So far, I haven't breathed a word that this is my child. Technically and ethically, I'm not allowed near the OR. However, the only people I would trust with this surgery are six hours away.

"Their mom is out of surgery," Billie says as they're getting the OR ready for my little girl.

"Do you know how she's doing?"

"She's in the ICU in critical condition."

"That can mean anything," I growl.

"I feel like you're too close to this case, Dr. Spearman. Are you sure you should be operating on the baby?"

No, and I'll probably lose my license after this, but I don't see any other option.

"Is there anyone else in the hospital or the Bay Area who'll do it?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"There's your answer."

"But their mother is your friend," she states.

She's much more than my friend, but I won't be telling her that. I'm thankful no one paid attention to my earlier conversation with Cory and Lysander, or Billie would have me suspended.

At that moment, Ben enters the room.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. He’s showered, changed, and even looks ready to start a shift.

“I’d like to ask the same question. Cory mentioned something somewhat disturbing. Would you like to explain what the fuck you’re thinking?”

Billie frowns. I move him away from her and quietly I explain to him what’s happening. He shakes his head, giving me a disapproving glare.

“I have to do it.”

“No. You won’t lose your license because you’re a stubborn ass. I’ll do it,” he says.

“You’ve never performed a surgery of this magnitude.”

“I agree, but even though you can’t operate, you’re allowed to supervise the procedure,” he says. “You’re a great teacher.”

“You’re not learning on my baby.”

“You could lose your license if you do it.”

“But I have to save her.”

“And we will. Do you trust me?”

He’s a great doctor. The only reason he’s slowing down his career and changing gears is because of Bernie. Bernie who’s been able to spend the last six months with her father. The little girl who coos when I read to her and loves to go out for walks.

If I want to do the same with my baby, I have to trust him and myself. We’re a great team and we can make this happen.

“Okay,” I sigh.

“Good, then check on Atzi while I scrub in. Once you’re done with her, come over so you can guide me.”

Everything sounds perfect, until I remember a huge inconvenience. “You don’t have permission to operate in this hospital.”

He grins. “That’s the beauty about knowing Derek. He got it for us—you didn’t have it either, asshole.”

I sigh with relief, but then I have to ask. “What does your brother do again?”

Ben shrugs. “It’s a ‘don’t ask, just go with the flow’ kind of situation.”

Don’t I know that. For years, I’ve been patching people he brings to the ER. I can’t ask questions, and even if I do, Derek Farrow doesn’t breathe a word about it.

Ben squeezes my shoulder. “Let me hurry so I can see Atzi before the surgery.”

When I get to the ICU, I spot Dr. Schneider and sigh with relief. He’s one of the best trauma surgeons in the city and one of my mentors.

“How is she?” I dare to ask.

“If I had known you were around, I would’ve asked you to scrub in with me.”

I shrug and ask again, “How is she?”

“She’s in critical condition but she’ll pull through. I repaired her spleen. Orthopedics reconstructed her left arm. She has two broken ribs and, thankfully, no punctured lungs. Neurology is keeping her sedated for a few days.”

“Is there brain function?”

He bobs his head. “They can’t tell until the swelling goes down. I heard two of the babies will pull through, but the girl —”

“We’re operating on her,” I cut him off before he jinxes me.

“You scrubbing?”

“Just assisting, since she’s my daughter,” I admit.

He sighs. “Oh. I had no idea.”

Me neither, but I won’t tell him that part.

Dr. Schneider pats me on the back. “Spend a few minutes with your wife before you head to the OR. I’ll make a few notes on the chart and alert the hospital that the patients are some of ours.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“Are you coming back?”

I don’t know what I will do tomorrow or the day after. I will probably spend the next few months in the hospital caring for my family. I scrub my face with both hands. Only a few minutes ago, I was willing to give up my entire career to save my daughter. I would give anything up for her.

“Spearman, you have to trust us. We’ll make sure they pull through, okay?”

“Thank you,” I say in a monotone voice.

When I enter the room, my heart sinks. Atzi is surrounded by machines, tubes, and everything she’s hated since her parents died and she woke up alone in a hospital room.

Gently, I kiss the top of her head. “Hey, love,” I whisper. “I’m sorry for everything I’ve done these past few months. I was an idiot and a coward. There’s no excuse for how I acted, but ironically, I’ve been trying to fix myself so I could come back to you.”

If she was conscious, she’d probably give me shit about it. I’ll have to grovel for days before she tells me I’m her person and she can’t be angry at me.

But things have changed since then. I’m probably the last human on the face of the earth she wants to see, and she’s sedated, fighting for her life. Sure, Dr. Schneider said she’s critical but she’ll pull through. We know what critical means.

It means that the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours will define her future. She’ll either live or die.

She has to live.

“Talk to me, love,” I beg.

There's no response. The only sound in the room is the beeping of the machines. The assurance that she has a pulse. She's still with me.

"I met them. Our babies. They're tiny, and... our little girl needs surgery. Ben will perform the procedure, but I'll guide him through every step, okay? I promise everything will be fine."

But the promise feels empty. I begin to cry, feeling helpless. The dread is stronger than the one I faced when Dad died.

I feel an arm on my shoulder. "You should be heading to the OR," Lysander says.

"Where's my girl?"

"They already rolled her over," he explains to me. "I'll stay with Atzi."

I glance at her, praying that she's okay. The world can't lose her. We can't lose her.

"This isn't your fault either," he says.

I snort.

"Dad wasn't your fault," he utters.

"Why does it feel like it was?" I touch my temple. "Even when I'm going to therapy to understand it, it's too fucking hard to erase what happened that day."

"You believe it because before our mother went into a catatonic state, she blamed you. I should've stopped her or talked to you. However, I was too busy dealing with other issues."

"What exactly happened to him? You guys said his heart gave out, but I need more."

He shakes his head. "You don't."

"What if any of us share the congenital defect?"

He scoffs. "I'd be more concerned about inheriting our mother's fucked-up genes."

“What does that mean?”

“Dr. Spearman, report to the pediatric OR.”

“This isn’t over,” I warn him.

“Save your little girl, okay?” He presses his lips together.
“When we have this conversation, you must be ready to hear the truth.”

“Does it have anything to do with Dad’s infidelity?”

“It has to do with infidelity, but there’s more that you might not be able to handle,” he warns me.

I place that in a box and save it for later. All I need now is the knowledge I’ve gathered throughout these years that will help me save my little girl.

Chapter Forty-One



Heath

KEEPING my mind straight has been almost impossible. I'm thankful for Benedict. So far, he's done an excellent job. We're on the last step of the surgery. He's closing her tiny chest when her pulse begins to decrease.

"Sweetie." I take her tiny little hand with my fingers. "You're almost there, baby. Please, don't leave us. Please don't."

The sound of the flatline shatters what's left of my heart. I push very lightly on her chest. "Let's do it together, princess. You can do it. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three."

I pray to God, I beg my father to watch over her, and because I'm desperate, I ask Atzi's parents to forgive me for failing their daughter but beg them to return my little girl to us. She's not ready to leave. I'm not prepared to let her go. This would destroy Atzi.

There's so much more for us.

The monitor begins to beep again. "Pulse is normal," Ben says.

"I love you, little one. I love you more than you'll ever understand," I whisper before I move away so that Ben can finish and the nurses can take her back to the NICU.

"You did well," Ben says on our way out.

"Thank you for saving her."

"It was an honor to do it and to learn from you. What's next?"

"Wait." It's a one-word answer, but I definitely don't have more to say.

All I can do for the next few days is wait next to my family and hope for the best. Now I understand the husbands, parents, and children of my patients. Their agony. The pain. The fear in

their eyes. Everything we say is just gibberish which means they'll either live or die.

“D’s staying around so he can keep an eye on Bernie. If you need anything from us, let us know.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Let’s go and update Cécile and the rest of the family.”

Everyone is still in the waiting room.

“How are they?”

Ben is the one who answers. My brain is no longer connecting with my mouth. This feels surreal. I’m outside my body, watching everyone’s reactions, including mine. I’m listening to my best friend word for word, but his words don’t mean a thing to me.

“The police might come back tomorrow morning,” Elliot says, snapping me out of my trance.

“Why?” I ask. “Wasn’t this an accident?”

“I want to believe that it was, but”—Elliot pinches the bridge of his nose—“the car was waiting on the other side of the street. I saw that car when I entered the building, and a man was talking to him, handing him money. The next thing I know, Atzi is crossing the street, and another vehicle comes out of nowhere at high speed. I was able to take down the plates, but the police are hoping they can talk to Atzi.”

“You think someone did this on purpose?”

“Who knows? It just looked choreographed,” he answers.

“Did the person who ran over her stop to help?”

“No. That’s another reason why they have to come back. It was a hit-and-run.”

“How are they going to find them?”

Ben raises his hand. “I’ll tell D as soon as we get home.”

“Your brother?”

“He has connections,” he says. “If you guys need me, I’ll be at home.”

“Thank you, everyone, for being here,” I say, unsure if I should send them home or have them stay.

Aunt Ari is the one who squeezes my hand. “We’re staying with Alex, but we’ll be here tomorrow morning to take turns with the babies.”

“Thank you.”

“Is your mom coming over?”

I shake my head. “No, and I’d appreciate it if you don’t tell her about it.”

“Where do you want me?” my cousin Jack asks. “Babies, making sure your mother stays the fuck away, or making calls to figure out who attacked Atzi?”

“I don’t know where to start.”

Aslan approaches us. “We’ll make a schedule so neither the babies nor Atzi are ever alone.”

“That sounds good,” I say. “I really appreciate each and every one of you.”

Cécile remains on a chair, sitting next to Fern. I squat in front of her and take her hands. “We’ll make sure she pulls through.”

“She’s the only thing left I have in my life,” she whispers. “We were ready to start something new, the next chapter. Now...”

“I swear she’ll be fine and you’ll have plenty of time to enjoy your grandchildren,” I assure her.

“That’s the same thing they told me while my brother was in the hospital. I waited days, praying at least he and Atzi would survive.” She cries again. “I had already lost Lydia and Esme. Within a week of the accident, he was gone too.”

“This time is different,” I say, as I am sure that no one is going to die.

“*Donde esta Atzi?!*” I hear the commotion before I turn and see Mr. and Mrs. Rivera.

“She’s in the ICU,” I answer.

“The babies?” Mrs. Rivera asks. “Are they okay?”

“Like their mother, they’re in critical condition, but they’ll pull through.”

Mrs. Rivera sits next to Cécile. They hug each other and begin to cry. I want to stay and make sure Cécile is all right, but I trust that she’s staying with people who’ll look after her. I need to check on the babies and, later, see how Atzi is doing.

IT’S hard to name babies when their mother is in an induced coma. I decide to call them Princess, Jellybean, and Cupcake. Cupcake is the firstborn. He has a healthier weight and height than Jellybean.

Cécile stays the night with Atzi. I stay with the babies in the NICU with Lysander. Cory leaves but promises to come first thing in the morning, so I can shower and stay with Atzi.

I ask for the nurse’s help, take off my shirt, and she helps me set Cupcake and Jellybean on my chest.

“What are you doing?”

“Kangaroo care,” I respond.

“Aren’t they too little for that?”

“No, and before you ask, I’ve done this before. It’s a good way to reduce stress and help the little ones regulate their temperature and heartbeat.”

“Look at you. Anyone would think you’re a doctor.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“More times than I care to admit.” Lysander gives me a sad smile. “You fucked up.”

“In so many ways.”

“Was it worth it?”

“How’s Mom doing?”

“Same as usual. She’s well until one of you is close enough to see her, and then she pretends to be losing her shit.”

“You make her sound like a conniving bitch.”

“She is.”

“What the fuck, Lysander? She’s our mother.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Maybe she lost her mind because our father was unfaithful. Have you ever thought about that?”

“They were getting a divorce,” he whispers.

“When he died?”

“No, before he met Cécile.”

“How do you know?”

“I dug for some information after Dad died, but before Dawn went into a catatonic state.”

“What does that mean?”

“There are two sides to the story, and just as I was about to get to the bottom of it, our mother suffered a severe mental breakdown.”

“You’re telling me she faked it?”

“No. She was so terrified of what could happen if I figured out the truth, that her mind got trapped within itself.”

“What do you know?”

“I didn’t finish my research, but tomorrow I’m picking up from where I left off.”

“You make it sound like a crime scene.”

He looks at me with a severe face. “Unfortunately, it might be.”

Chapter Forty-Two



Heath

“AREN’T WE A LITTLE COMPETITIVE, PRINCESS?” I say as I hold my girl tightly to my chest. It’s been eight days since my kids came into this world.

The three of them are doing a lot better than expected. Though, the boys are gaining weight faster.

My little ray of sunshine is a late bloomer and that’s totally fine. We see progress in her every day. Aslan, Gatsby, and Lysander pulled a lot of strings and had the hospital create a private NICU from one of the new ICU floors they were planning to open next month. Atzi is just next door from us. It makes it easier to be with them at all times.

If my family continues donating this much money to the hospital, they might end up calling it Spearman Memorial. I wouldn’t mind. Zuckerberg also has his name on one of the medical institutions in San Francisco.

Princess moves a little. “What’s happening? Do we want to change positions? Are you hungry? You’re probably missing Mama, aren’t you?”

I sigh. “I miss her too—so much. But soon, she’ll be up and about.”

Not sure when soon is. It can be a week or... who the fuck knows? I’m trying to be patient and just have faith that her body will heal at its own pace.

“How’s my favorite patient doing?” Dr. Perez steps into the NICU. “Is it me, or every day I visit, there are at least two more toys on the bookcase?”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “What can I say? Their family doesn’t have any restraint.”

She scoffs. “Sure, because I didn’t see you shop at the store earlier for that purple triceratops.”

“My princess is going to love it,” I say between yawns.

“Have you slept?”

“Here and there,” I answer.

“You have to build your strength. When they go home, they won’t let you rest,” she warns me.

“I’ve heard that’s how it goes when they’re little, but I’m ready for it.”

She has no idea how ready I am to become a part of their lives. I just pray to God that Atzi forgives me—not that I deserve it.

“How’s their mom?”

“The swelling is gone. The doctor plans on lowering the sedatives today,” I answer, trying not to sound so hopeful. And, of course, I fail. I’m anxious to see her big brown eyes open wide and to hear her voice. “Dr. Russell-Aldridge is in charge of her case.”

“He’s one of the best.”

“We’re lucky to have him,” I say, thankful he came when we called him, and he’s been watching the case closely.

Atzi’s recovery is coming along. Maybe I’ll get lucky, and we’ll be able to go home in just a few weeks. But the reality is, she has a long way to go. The babies might have to stay here for a couple of months. It doesn’t matter where we are, as long as we’re together and they’re recovering.

“Baby time!” Huxley arrives, putting on the scrubs.

“You’d think he’s never seen one of those in his life,” Lysander mocks him. “How are they today?”

“They’re doing well,” Dr. Perez answers, a little too fast.

If I didn’t know better, I would think she has a crush on my brother.

“So this is the part where you go to bed, and we watch over the little ones,” Lysander explains very slowly. He’s such an asshole.

“There’s only two of you,” I remind him.

“Alex is outside finishing his coffee. He forgot that this is like the airport. No liquids, no electronics, and no bad jokes allowed.”

I shake my head, rolling my eyes. “Thank you for doing this.”

Before leaving, I say goodbye to my three little ones. As Lysander said, Alex is outside with a cup of coffee and his phone. He’s on a video call. I wave at Hannah, his wife, and hear their children say, “Hi, Uncle Heath.”

“Hi!”

“When can we meet our new cousins?”

“Hopefully soon,” I promise.

I pat Alex’s shoulder before saying goodbye. If I hurry up, I’ll be able to go to my penthouse, shower, and come back before Atzi wakes up. I have to remind myself it won’t happen that fast—Dr. Russell-Aldridge reminded me of that when he explained it to me yesterday. Sometimes I put aside my medical knowledge and try to believe that maybe things can work out differently.

WHEN I ARRIVE at my house, it’s upside down. Toys everywhere, Bernie on the floor playing with Eris, Rys and Caspian’s daughter. Mia, their little puppy, is right next to her. I’m guessing Ralph isn’t around, or the mammoth of a dog would be trying to have playtime with the girls too. He’s gentle for a Newfoundland mix, but it still scares me to see him too close to the kids.

“So, we’re having a party,” I say, kissing the heads of both little girls.

“It’s my turn to babysit them,” Benedict says. That’s when I notice he’s sitting in the dining room area with Derek.

“We having a meeting?” I ask when I see a bunch of folders on the table.

Derek taps the papers. “We’re looking into your woman’s case.”

“She has a case?” I have been out of the loop. My entire focus has been on the health of Atzi and the babies.

“The police can’t find anything. The plates were fake, which makes me think there’s much more to this so-called accident.”

“What does that mean?”

“We’re looking into that, but it’ll take us longer than I thought to find who did it. If I were you, I’d hire a bodyguard to keep her safe.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Humor us,” he says. “I know a good company, and I’ll even pay for it.”

“Who would want to do anything to her?”

He shrugs. “We might get some answers when she wakes up.”

“I don’t want to stress her out.”

“We’ll wait, but only if you let us have someone shadowing her twenty-four seven.”

“Even at the hospital?”

He nods. “Especially then. What if it was someone trying to steal a child? There are many cases of abducted pregnant women who we’ve found dead and childless.”

“What do you do again?”

“It’s best if we keep this on a need-to-know basis, okay?”

I nod. “Fine, but I can pay for the security.”

He grabs his phone, taps it several times, and then says, “Done. You can go take a shower and go back to your family.”

“But what if—”

“I’ll take care of this, just as you took care of my brother while I couldn’t, okay?”

I can’t argue with him. This is outside my area of expertise, and if Ben trusts him, I do too. I hope he’s wrong and this was a freak accident.

Chapter Forty-Three



Atzi

MY EYELIDS ARE HEAVY.

Did I go to a party and drink heavily?

I don't recall doing that since college. Okay, that's a lie. I remember when I turned twenty-one and Cory and I visited Heath and Benedict during their first year of med school. But I never felt this sick and achy. My head's throbbing, and my throat is as dry as the Sahara Desert.

Opening my lids takes more effort than carrying a steel beam from the garage to my studio. When I finally make it happen, the first person I see is Heath.

Heathcliff Spearman.

The grumpy man who's been invading my dreams and telling me to keep fighting, looks like shit. Don't get me wrong, the whole unshaven and long hair is great. However, it's not as appealing when there are dark circles under his eyes, and he looks thinner than the last time we saw each other. His eyes fill with worry.

"Hi, love," he greets me.

I try to speak, but I can't. The intensity and sequence of the beeping noise that woke me up increases.

"Take a deep breath," Heath says. "Calm down, please. You're okay."

How can he say that when I'm unable to talk? A throaty, almost desperate sound echoes through the room. It takes me a long second to realize it's me.

"Yes, I know you want to ask questions. You have a tube going down your throat to help you breathe."

I sigh and move my hands toward my belly. The babies, but I can barely move one arm and the other is wrapped with tubes, cords, and needles. This is a bad dream. I'm eleven

again, after the car accident feeling powerless and waiting to die.

“The doctor and the nurses will be here soon to check your vitals and take the tube out,” he continues explaining with that calm voice he uses when I’m too agitated.

“Blink once if you know who I am.”

I humor him by doing so, and he smiles. “There’s my girl,” he says. “Well, one of them. Our little girl is currently in the NICU, growing healthy and stronger.”

My pulse shoots up when he mentions her. Where are the boys? Did something happen to them?

“Love, I need you to take a deep breath. Stress isn’t your friend. Do this for our little ones. The three of them are expecting to see their mama soon.”

I stare at him expectantly, waiting for more. They can’t be out. They still have weeks to go. “Six,” the doctor said.

Six weeks if I’m lucky, but eight would be ideal.

He pulls out his phone. “Here. This is our princess. She’s the tiny one, but our little girl is a fighter like you. Jellybean is beginning to breathe on his own, and Cupcake is getting there too. They have strong lungs.”

I glare at him. Cupcake, Jellybean, and Princess? What is wrong with him? And why does he sound like a proud father showing off pictures of his children? He didn’t want them. He didn’t want us.

“You don’t like the nicknames, do you?”

“Sorry for the delay,” a female voice says. “Dr. Russell-Aldridge will be here soon.”

“I’m going to be by the door,” he says, and I want to beg him not to leave me and to bring my little ones to me.

“Heath,” a male voice greets him. “I hear our patient is up.”

“She is, and she recognized me. She even got upset at the nicknames I gave our children.”

“It’s none of my business, but *the cupcake* is a shitty name. I wouldn’t be happy if my husband did something similar.”

Dr. Russell-Aldridge, my neurosurgeon, looks like Patrick Dempsey, and though I can now talk, I’m definitely not opening my mouth. It’d be terrible to say something stupid like, “How’s Meredith doing? Didn’t they kill you on season...” What season did they kill this poor man? I don’t think my mind was affected by the accident since I’m thinking nonsense and not freaking out.

Why am I not freaking out?

I smile when I remember the dream I had. Mom, Dad, and Esme were there. I even got to chat with Joel Spearman. I wanted to stay. The place was warm and inviting, and I was with my favorite people. Mom’s the one who reminded me about the three little ones who were waiting for me. Joel also asked me to be gentle with his son. He had it rougher than he liked to admit.

But his son hurt me. Suddenly, the anger I gathered all these past months is back. How dare he pretend to give a shit about me when he abandoned me.

My chest is flooded with rage. It’s hard to breathe as the fury overtakes my mind and body.

“Her pulse is spiking,” someone announces.

Heath appears by my side, and I feel his hand holding my fingers. “Love, I need you to take a deep breath. I don’t want them to sedate you again. Is anything hurting?”

My heart, but I doubt he gives a shit about that.

“Leave,” I finally manage to say.

“But I’m here to take care of you.”

“I don’t need you.”

He presses his lips together and nods. “I understand. I would hate me too for the way I acted, but I was trying to fix my shit before I came for you. That’s probably my biggest regret.”

“Leave,” I say again. “Now.”

“If that’s what you want. I’ll be next door with our babies,” he says.

The doctor examines me. They’re going to run some tests. It’s been two weeks since the accident. It took five days for me to regain consciousness after they took me out of the induced coma. I have a broken arm, but they don’t think it’ll affect my art—Aunt Cécile asked that question from day one.

The three doctors who operated on me updated me about my health. The cast will stay on for another four weeks. Then I’ll be in occupational and physical therapy. I have to keep a light diet for the next few weeks.

When I’m finally alone in my room, I wonder if I can ask the nurses to take me to see the babies. At that same moment, Cory walks in.

“I heard you woke up.”

“Hi.”

“You look like shit.”

“As always, you make me feel like gold.”

“You scared me.”

“Why is your brother here?”

Cory brushes the hair away from my face. “We had no idea if you’d make it. He saved her.”

“What?”

“The little princess almost died. Something about a congenital heart defect... I really couldn’t understand. Heath was willing to lose his medical license to save her.”

All I hear is that I almost lost my baby. “She almost died?”

Cory nods. “Yeah. I know you’re mad at him, and he doesn’t deserve a second chance, but the man adores you—and the babies.”

“That’s just the fear of losing a patient.”

She pulls out her phone and holds it in front of me, playing videos of Heath talking to our babies and holding them. He sings lullabies and tells them about me. He's bare-chested in most of them, holding them against his torso as if trying to protect them, and loving them. I see the love he has for them—all three of our babies.

“Okay, I can't keep holding this any longer, my arms hurt, and I don't have any more videos.”

He's dreamy and seems like the best father in the world, but it's all an illusion. It's the same farce we lived when my grandparents came. He looked at me like I was the best thing that had happened to him, but he left me without a goodbye.

“You can't expect me to forgive him.”

“I hope that you make him grovel, but in the end you'll accept him because neither one of you can be happy without the other. It was never codependency, Atzi. It is love. It's being soulmates and belonging to each other.”

She kisses the top of my head.

“Where are you going?”

“To Heath's place. I'm babysitting Bernie.”

“Who is Bernie?”

“Ben's daughter.”

“How are you dealing with that?”

“I'm probably in denial, but hoping to move on soon. He seems happy with his life, and maybe I should find one of my own.”

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“Being my rock during these months and looking after the little ones while I couldn't do it.”

“It was my pleasure. The entire family has been caring for them—and Heath has spent most of the time by their sides, unless he was with you.”

“Stop making him sound like some kind of hero.”

“He’s not a hero. He’s a man with flaws who is too broken to think he deserves love. But he’s also a man who’s been madly in love with you ever since he met you.”

“I...”

“Don’t say anything. Just remember that time is precious, and life changes rapidly. You don’t want to miss the best thing because you’re filled with anger.”

She’s right. My brain knows she’s right.

But my heart is too scared to let him in again—too scared to open up to the possibilities of love.

Chapter Forty-Four



Atzi

I DON'T DO MUCH during my recovery.

Aunt Cécile comes for a few hours.

My grandparents also visit me daily.

We speak about what happened before and how they are loving, but they can also be too cold. They want to be a part of my children's and my life. We agree to start family therapy—with a Mexican therapist so they can understand perfectly.

Like they don't speak English fluently. I concede because I understand how hard it is for them to admit they need help coping with the loss of their daughter. Also, to do something that back in the day was considered taboo. Therapy was for crazy people, and only bad people have mental health issues.

Every night, everyone leaves, and every morning I wake up with Heath by my side. He doesn't say a word. He just smiles and walks out of the room before I say a thing.

Tonight, I see when he enters. When he realizes I'm awake, he turns around, but I finally speak, "Who is with them?" I clear my throat. "Who's with our babies?"

"Lysander, Huxley, and Alex," he says.

"How are the babies?"

He pivots, facing me. "Gaining weight. The boys are breathing on their own. The princess needs a little more time. If we're lucky, they might let us take them home in a couple of weeks."

"Cory told me we almost lost her, but you saved her."

"Ben did. I only told him how to operate on her."

"Thank you."

He shakes his head, shoving his hands in his jeans. "It's the least I could do for her. She's my baby." He presses his lips

together. “So, your lawyer finally caught up to me. She served me with some interesting papers.”

“I’m leaving for France.”

He swallows hard, bobbing his head. “Listen, I have to check on the requirements to get a visa or a temporary residence in France. If you don’t mind waiting until I can square things up so I can go too.”

“You have your family and your career here,” I remind him.

“No. My family is in the next room. Those three little ones are who matter the most to me. Well, you too, but I understand why you won’t forgive me. Clearly, I fucked up royally. I just beg you not to take them away from me.”

“The last time I checked, you didn’t want children.”

“I was a very stupid man. Didn’t you see all the shit I did?” Why is he asking me? I lived every single one of them.

He takes a seat and shows me a finger. “I lived in denial for years. More like I lied to you about my feelings and pretended I wasn’t in love with you.”

He shakes his head, exhaling with frustration. “Who the fuck does that? Someone very stupid.”

Heath points at himself. “Stupid,” he says.

“But that’s not all,” he continues. “I carried the guilt of my father’s death for years and used it to keep the most important person in my world away from me. I denied myself the gift of love because of that. I refused to want happiness with you—or a family. Worst of all, I let my mother manipulate me.”

He scrubs his face, the way he always does when he’s highly frustrated. “I forgave myself for being so stupid. She caught me at a very young and impressionable age. After blaming me for not saving my father, she went into a catatonic state. Obviously, I thought it had been my fault. That I destroyed my family.”

“But you didn’t,” I remind him.

“It’s taken me a long time to understand that. I lost the love of my life and I might lose my children too because of that.”

We stare at each other. I’m not sure if there’s more and if he’s talking about me. “Am I the woman that you let go because you love her?”

“Of course you are. I adore you, Atzi. Maybe from the moment I met you or somewhere between teaching you how to start a fire and sharing cookies, but I fell madly in love with you.”

“But you’re always so cold with me. If I touched you, you’d get mad.”

“It was a coping mechanism. I love when you speak Spanish or French, but it turns me on. It made me want to kiss you and more. Same with your touch.”

I scoff. “That’s ridiculous.”

He nods. “See how many stupid things I’ve done for eighteen years? And because I was blinded by guilt, I lost you. I understand if you won’t forgive me, but let me go with you to France.”

“But if you move with us, you might not be able to practice medicine.”

“Cécile offered me a job at the winery. I know all about the business,” he offers.

It seems like he’s been doing more than just cuddling babies, singing to them, and making sure we’re all taken care of.

“I love saving lives, but I love you and our family more than anything else. If you allow me, I’ll follow you anywhere—even to the end of the world.”

“So you just want me to forgive you and pretend everything is okay.”

“No. I want you to give me a chance to be a father to our children. I’m hoping you can see past all my stupidities and let me show you how much I love you. I want you to let me back into your world and be a part of you. I want to show you how

sorry I am for my behavior. I could live without you, but it'll be like keeping me on life support for the rest of my life."

We haven't seen each other for months, but I know this man well enough to know he's sincere. I don't know if I have it in me to allow that many concessions, but I want to believe we can find a middle ground so he can be a part of his children's lives.

"Take me to see my babies, and I might consider some of those requests."

He crosses his arms, tilting his head. "Are we negotiating, Lavigne?"

"Of course we are. You have something I want, and it appears I have something you need."

The corner of his lips stretches. "I missed you."

He can't say that after the way he behaved.

"Then, why did you ignore my calls?"

"Oh, that's yet another stupid thing I did."

"Why did you do it?"

He tells me about Bernie, Ben's daughter, and the night he realized he'd been a complete idiot. Almost immediately, he found a therapist and began to fix himself. "It was all about learning to love myself, so I could love everyone else."

That sounds like what my therapist suggested when I began my healing path.

"I take it you're still finding yourself," I say.

"It's a work in progress, but when I almost lost you, I learned a different lesson."

"What is that?"

"Life happens while you're planning it. If I had answered all those calls, a lot could've been different. I'm not looking at how I can fix our past, but hoping we can learn from it and make a better future. If not for us, for our little ones."

Heath sounds like a different person. A more mature man who is ready to fight for what he wants.

“Give me time,” I ask, because I’m still recovering from everything that happened.

“No pressure, but if you can at least consider letting me in on the name picking.” He shrugs.

“Fine,” I agree. “We definitely need to find something fast because Cupcake and Jellybean are terrible nicknames.”

“I love you,” he says.

“Too soon.”

“It’s never too soon to tell you something that’s overdue.” He stands up. “I’m going to get you out of here so you can meet them. Be right back.”

Chapter Forty-Five



Atzi

IT TAKES us an entire week to come up with names for our little ones. Our oldest boy is Ryker, which means strong. The middle—who's pretty quiet and observant like his father—is Hasen, which means soul. Our girl is named Itzel—rainbow lady.

I'm no longer a patient in the hospital, but we've been staying with the babies. Caring for them is a little tricky when I only have one functional arm. It doesn't matter though. Heath is with me all the time and our families drop by to aid us during the day.

“And the frog jumped high.” Heath's reading their nighttime story. I love how he changes his voice as he narrates.

When these three little ones get older, I'm sure they'll enjoy bedtime a lot more. I can only imagine them sitting on the bed staring at their dad expectantly. My favorite part of the bedtime routine is when he's singing and cradling them. Watching him love these babies like they're the best part of himself is fulfilling and heart-stopping. Secretly, it makes me want to have more babies—later, not right at this moment.

“You're staring again,” he mumbles.

“What?”

“Every time I'm with Itzel, there's this crinkle in your eyes.”

He's wrong. I do it when he's with any of them. “You look kind of cute with her. I can't help myself.”

“Good. For a moment, I thought you were making plans. You know, like those schemes where you try to create a future out of nothing.”

“I haven't done that in a long time,” I say defensively.

“Pfft, like I’m going to believe you. You live for them.”

“I haven’t,” I insist.

“What is it this time? Already thinking about how you’re going to get another three Spearman’s out of me within the next two years?”

I laugh. “Listen, buddy, if you think carrying three children is easy, you should try it.”

“So you don’t want more.” He sounds very disappointed.

“Probably not now. I want to enjoy them. If they’re anything like all the triplets in your family, I want to keep an eye on them for at least four years before I consider another one.”

He smiles.

“What?”

“I hope you include me as part of that five-year plan, and I’m willing to give you as many babies as we want.”

And I love the way he says we. Heath is wearing me down with all his small gestures—and the big ones too. Every morning he sneaks in a tea latte. He’s brought me a few chocolates too. He gifts me flowers every day and stays with me at night.

He’s helped me convert one of the guest rooms in Aunt Cécile’s house into a nursery. Well, he hired a concierge company who did that within two days. Next week, we’re taking these little ones back home. Unfortunately, the babies aren’t ready to travel yet. My plans to move to France have to wait. Plus, there’s some paperwork I have to file at the embassy before we can move there permanently. This is why it was better to give birth to them there instead of here.

I curse the person who ran me over. The police are still looking for him, but the trail is cold. Ben’s brother offered to help with the case. He seems like a nice guy but he’s paranoid. I have a bodyguard because Derek Farrow believes someone is trying to kill me.

“Do you think your aunt will allow me to stay on your couch?” Heath asks, pulling me out of my head.

“We have two more guest rooms,” I remind him. “You can stay there.”

“Why is the house so big?”

I shrug. “Grandfather bought it when he and Grandma planned on opening a winery in San Francisco. But as you know, they decided to start a chocolatier.”

“Maybe he was a visionary and knew his granddaughter would have a big family someday.”

I sigh, slightly overwhelmed about the prospect of taking these little ones home. “I doubt that’s the case. The château is also big. They might’ve bought it because they liked big spaces and lots of room.”

“Why do you seem worried?”

“It’s going to be hard to handle them without nurses around the clock,” I confess my new fear.

“Fern is getting a schedule set up so they can pitch in during the first couple of months, if that’s okay with you.”

“She mentioned it, but I didn’t want to impose.”

“You won’t. Everyone adores our babies. I’m hiring a nurse, too,” he adds as an afterthought.

“Who?”

“Billie.”

“Doesn’t she have to work here?”

He gives me a conspiratorial smile. “Ben and I are opening a practice. She’s going to look after these three little ones while we set it up.”

That’s a new plan. “Really?”

He nods. “Yeah. Benedict has been thinking about it for months. His brother is helping us with the permits. It’ll have a family practice but also a few specialties like pediatrics, cardiology, and orthopedics.”

“So you’re planning on staying?”

“No, I’m planning on opening a practice with my best friend. We’ll run it together, and when I’m in town, I’ll receive patients. I’ll keep up with the admin stuff when I’m in France with my family. I’ll just do the admin stuff. We know Ben is a fucking mess and he’s going to need me.”

“You’re really okay with leaving the country and your family?”

“Why don’t you believe me?”

“Medicine is everything to you.”

“No. You are everything to me, but I had to focus my energy on other things like my career because I believed we shouldn’t be together—that I didn’t deserve you.”

“I feel like this is too easy.”

“What? Us?” He tsks. “You’re insane if you think getting to this point was easy.”

“It isn’t?”

“Nope. Look at it from my perspective. We lost our parents and lived broken for years. We held each other’s pieces together, but it wasn’t until we realized we had to put ourselves together on our own first that we could finally allow ourselves to be happy. I believe we’re finally due for a break.”

I remember my dream. The one I had while I was in a coma. Joel Spearman asked me to be gentle with his son—he had suffered a lot.

“Mind if I ask you about your mom?”

“What about her?”

“Is she okay with you being here?”

He shrugs. “Mom and I haven’t spoken in months. I finally understood why my siblings avoid her. The way she treated you was unforgivable. Not only when she went to my place, but also when we were in college.”

“I feel bad for her.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you. She’s a manipulative person who’s only looking after herself. Plus, there’s something weird that happened when Dad died. Lysander doesn’t want to tell me, but once I have time, I’m digging deep.”

“Sounds like a mystery.”

He grins. “Do you want to Nancy Drew with me?”

I nod. “You’ll have to be a Hardy Boy, but sure, let’s do it.”

Chapter Forty-Six



Heath

I'M NOT comfortable being on the roof with my brothers while Atzi is in the hospital with the little ones. I get it, she's with Cécile and her grandparents, but I don't like to be away from my little family.

“What's so urgent?” I ask.

“Benedict here told us Atzi's accident seems to have been a murder attempt,” Lysander says.

I shrug. “Listen, I'm a medicine man and not a detective or a forensic doctor,” I add in case one of these assholes wants to tease me with that. “Derek suggested we put a bodyguard on her, and that's what I'm doing.”

Aslan nods. “We understand and also get why you haven't told us about this yet. There's a lot happening in your life, but we need to talk. She's leaving the hospital next week with the babies. I want to make sure you have security at all times for her.”

“Derek is making sure that she does,” I answer, unsure why we are here. “Do you think we are also being targeted? Because I doubt it.”

Lysander shrugs. “We don't know.”

I point at him. “There you go, being all cagey again. We're old enough to be involved in grown-up matters—as you used to call them.”

Gatsby nods as if giving Lysander permission to speak.

“A lot happened around the time Dad died. These past few days, we've been wondering if the accident where Atzi lost her family is related.” Lysander shrugs. “It's a very old case, and we're certain it's going to take long... too long, to get to the bottom of this case. They might not be related, but we don't want to take chances.”

Aslan exhales loudly. “We’re setting up security for everyone in the family, even our mother.”

“You think she’s in danger?”

“We’re not sure, but even though she’s a manipulative shrew, we can’t just forget about her,” Gatsby answers.

I nod as if understanding, but all this information has my mind spinning out of control. Atzi and I agreed to look into the messy situation when Dad died, but this is deeper and more disturbing.

“So, how long do you think this will take?” I dare to ask. “Should I take my family to France as soon as they are able to fly?”

Lysander nods. “Probably. We can’t be sure of anything.”

Aslan pats my shoulder. “Doc, you need to live your life and not obsess about what’s happening. It might take years before we figure out what happened. Don’t go back to the old Heath who couldn’t live because he was afraid of the past.”

“This might affect the future of my family too,” I remind him.

“Which is why we’re going to take precautions, okay?”

I nod.

“On your way out, you’ll meet your new security detail.”

“Mine? Why? I don’t need them.”

Aslan shrugs. “But you do. It’s going to be a thing from now on, until we figure out what happened. Okay?”

I nod.

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Aslan says. “Keaton and I cleared our schedule to spend time with the little ones. Hopefully, you can use that time to rest.”

I laugh. “Try to get Atzi out of the hospital.”

“Then just stay in the bedroom sleeping. You need a break, Doc. When was the last time you slept for more than two hours?”

I shrug because honestly, I don't remember, but also, I'm not tired. Focusing my energy on the little ones and Atzi makes me happy. I smile like a fool thinking about them. Hoping she gives me another chance. I almost destroyed the most beautiful part of us. If the universe is good to me, maybe Atzi will forgive me and will let me love her again.

"Thank you for all your help," I say.

"There's nothing to thank. We're family. From now on, you guys come to us, and we'll come to you when needed. I hated that we were beginning to fall apart. Your kids kind of pulled us back together," Aslan says.

And I believe he's right. They're a miracle not only to their mom and me but also to our entire family.

Chapter Forty-Seven



Atzi

WHEN IT'S time to go home, I'm too nervous. Are we ready to be back in the real world?

Even though Heath and I are not together, we've created a safe place for our babies. Outside... well, I don't know how we'll function. We have security details because someone might want to kill me—I don't think that's true but I don't argue about our safety. Our little ones come first.

Our plans to move to France are pending. My grandparents rented an apartment in Aslan's building so they could be around. Aunt Cécile helped them furnish it. It seems like they resolved their differences and are willing to work together for the sake of our family. I wish they had done the same when I was little.

Heath and I haven't solved our relationship problems. Maybe we'll do it soon, or when the babies are older. They are our biggest priority at the moment.

Speaking of which, he buys a big electric SUV with two bench seats so we can fit the three car seats and so we can transport the babies in the safest way possible. It's comfortable and has too many gadgets for just being a car.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks, holding my hand.

We're going to his penthouse to pick up some of his stuff so he can move in with us. Aunt Cécile prepared the guest room for him, but I would have him in my room if I had it my way.

“How messy is the house?”

“It's Wednesday... the place is a minefield,” he answers. “The housekeeper won't be here until Friday.”

“Is Aslan okay with Ben living in his penthouse?”

“He's like a brother. Of course Aslan is okay with that.”

When we enter the foyer, I'm welcomed by a steel tree hanging on the wall right in front of the elevator. Not just any tree, but one of the pieces I created during my lowest point. It's one of my favorites. I painted it to give it some depth. The bronze and rose colors give it the feel of the sunset. The promise of a new beginning. It was one of the last pieces I made for the exhibit.

I stare at it and then at Heath. "How?"

"Oh, this incredible masterpiece?" He shrugs as if it's nothing. "While I was in New York, my cousin June invited me to an exhibition at her husband's gallery."

I frown. "Ahern Gallery is..."

"Sterling Ahern's place," he says out loud. "In any case, when I stepped in, I was taken aback by the huge tree in the middle—which was not for sale—and looked at the rest of the pieces. I wanted to buy them all, but this one was my favorite one. It called to me. It was like seeing you finally smiling without the mask you always wear."

"You knew?" I'm unsure what I'm asking when I say those two words.

"That you had a fucking breakdown because I was an idiot? Yes. If there's something I learned from the beginning of our friendship, it's to read your moods. I can even feel them through your art. Also, it's not hard to know since it appears that you welded all that in about a month, maybe less."

"I hated you," I breathe the three words as I'm letting the last of my anger go.

"I hated myself."

"It hurt that you left me like I wasn't important."

He takes me into his arms. "Sorry. I'm so sorry." He looks at me for a long moment before saying, "I wasn't thinking. All I wanted was to get away from how much I was feeling and how much I wanted you in my life. I didn't want my mother to hurt you or for her to be in pain. It wasn't the lack of communication between us but the fear and lack of self-

esteem. I didn't think I was worthy of loving someone as special as you."

He's looking at me expectantly. As if waiting for a sign. The way he looks at me and makes me feel whole, fills me with joy. "So, what am I supposed to do now?"

He shrugs. "What do you want to do? I just want to be with you, Atzi. I love you so much, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

There are many things I can say. This time, I give permission to my heart to speak and walk back to the place where I've always felt the safest. And so, I say with all honesty, "Right now, I want to kiss you, hug you, and probably ask you not to let me go again."

"Love," he whispers, taking me into his arms and kissing me with the longing of two souls who've missed each other for a lifetime.

Epilogue



Heath

FIVE MONTHS LATER...

I stare out the window looking at our garden as I hold Hasen. He's sound asleep on my shoulder.

"Put the baby down, Spearman," I hear Atzi.

When I turn around, the most beautiful woman in the world stands right by the bay window, smiling. The moon glows above her, making her look like an angel. My angel.

"Did we wake you up?"

"I heard one of the babies complaining, when I checked on them, one was missing—and so were you." She places her hands on her waist, but smiles. "You're weak, Spearman."

Giving her my best innocent smile, I say, "This little one was fussing. I couldn't just leave him in bed."

"They have you wrapped around their pinky fingers." She draws circles around her pinky with her index finger while laughing.

"Can you blame me?" I ask, snuggling Hasen closer to me.

She walks toward me, kissing my jaw. "No, and you look very hot when you hold them."

I wiggle my eyebrows. "Already planning a fourth one?"

Atzi laughs. "Nope. Maybe when these three are old enough, I'll consider having another. We should head to bed. We have to wake up early. Farmer's hours, remember?"

"Baker's hours, farmer's hours..." I sigh dramatically. "What's next? Doctor's hours?"

It doesn't bother me to wake up early. Honestly, even with three babies I get more rest than I used to while working at the hospital.

“I don’t think we’re moving back to Paradise Bay soon, are we?”

We haven’t decided what’s next for us. A month ago, we moved to Saint-Émilion. We want the babies to interact with the Lavignes. While I’m here, I’m helping with the vineyard and Atzi is creating a few pieces for an exhibit.

Our next stop will be Cancun and then Mexico City where we’ll be living with the Rivera side of the family. The medical practice is up and running. I do phone consultations when Ben or any of our colleagues need me.

“You should come to bed, Mr. Spearman,” she whispers, kissing the top of Hasen’s head.

“How about we put this little one in bed, and you come with me?” I suggest.

“Where are we going?”

“The garden.”

She gives me a suspicious look but humors me. We take our baby to his crib and ensure that the three of them are sleeping. I rush to the bedroom to grab the box I’ve been carrying around for months, and find her in the middle of the garden, next to the tree sculpture she created more than a year ago. This piece has a lot of meaning for both of us. The reason why it’s here is because this is where her parents’ ashes were buried after they died.

It’s a symbol of everything she lost, she’s gained, and our future.

I couldn’t have chosen a better spot to do this. I grab her hands and kiss them. Then, I go on one knee.

“I’m not sure of anything. Everything in our lives changes, sometimes within seconds, but there’s one thing I know with certainty. I love you,” I say, reaching for the box, opening it. The ring sparkles just like her beautiful eyes.

“I love you with a depth no one can understand. I you love as far as the galaxies reach and beyond this world. I want to

spend the rest of my life with you, and grow older with my best friend.

“Atzi Maëlie Rivera-Lavigne, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“Yes, a thousand times yes. I love you so much.”

“I love you more.”

I kiss this incredible woman with everything I have.

She’s not perfect, and I know I’m far from perfect. Despite our imperfections, we understand and wholly accept the other—flaws and all.

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WHAT’S next in the Paradise Bay Series?

Huxley Spearman

[Meant for Me](#)



I never thought I’d be the proud owner of a quaint small-town bookstore, but life has a funny way of surprising us.

With my virtual BFF’s encouragement to seize the day and follow my heart.

I say goodbye to my corporate job and say hello to my new adventure.

Until I meet the town’s grumpy billionaire, Huxley Spearman.

He's every woman's dream.

Tall, devastatingly handsome...

But annoyingly arrogant.

And if making a new enemy isn't enough, there's more:

1 My long-lost Mother might be alive.

2 This bookstore is *the money pit*.

3 My checking account is in shambles.

4 My online friend wants to be more than my virtual crush.

5 And, somehow, I'm falling for two different men.

Can love truly grow from a virtual connection? Or will a rough-around-the-edges man steal my heart?

This is a heartwarming tale of love, second chances, and a twist of the unexpected. In this spiritual successor to "You Got Mail" and "Pillow Talk."

Faking the Game



Aslan

It's past three o'clock in the morning, and I'm standing at my living room window.

Some would say I have insomnia. That's not the case. I operate on very little sleep, just like my father did.

Nights like this, I enjoy staring at the city lights, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the dark sky. If I were in my childhood home, I'd be gazing at the blanket of diamonds illuminating the blackness above us. That's the beauty of Paradise Bay. The sky is always clear. There's no light pollution dimming the stars.

If it wasn't so late, I'd drive forty-five minutes to my old house and see if that would bring me some answers to all the problems I'm dealing with lately—including my mother.

While growing up, I watched my father doing the same thing almost every night. He'd be staring at the big picture window that looked toward the vineyard. I guess I got my restlessness from him. Some nights, he'd wiggle his fingers, calling me to approach him. We would both stare at the still sky for a long time.

I was an active kid, but those nights when he invited me to be next to him, I didn't fidget or say a word.

"I'll let you in on a secret," he said one time, whispering. "When in doubt, always ask the stars. They'll listen to your problems and will guide you until you find the right way to solve them."

And here I am, as I do almost every night for the past fourteen years since he left us. I stand in front of the window, hoping to find a star that can guide me. Joel Spearman was an extraordinary father, a wise man, and a kind soul. I can't understand why he left us so soon.

It's been too many years without him. Anyone would think that I would be over his death, but I'm not.

He was too young, too full of life and plans.

I rub my chest as if trying to calm the ache of my soul—it's impossible.

The searing pain of losing my father will never disappear, and on days like today, it becomes unbearable. I needed him then and I need him now.

We barely survived his loss and everything that happened during those dark days.

It all started with the vineyard. One night, my family was woken up by the angry flames burning the vines and the guesthouse. According to the fire marshal, it was arson.

Two days later, Dad died of a heart attack. He was found in the field. According to Mom, he had gone out to assess the damage. It wasn't until supper time that she sent my brother, Heathcliff, to look for him. Heath is the one who found him lying lifeless next to the burnt vines.

If that wasn't enough, I found Margie, my fiancée, fucking my cousin Troy during Dad's funeral.

She taught me a valuable lesson. Women only want me for my money—that's exactly what she told Troy as he fucked her. Since then, I haven't dated or taken anyone seriously. My sister Fern says it's just an excuse to be an asshole like the rest of the men in her family.

Is she right?

That's debatable.

It shouldn't matter if I'm dating or not.

But it matters to my mother.

That's why a year ago, I lied and told her that I had a girlfriend. It's the best way to keep her happy. Mom lives in this enchanting world where true love exists, and soulmates are paired before they're even born. According to her, it

happened to all the Spearman families and it's bound to happen to her children too.

Someone should remind her that her soulmate died fourteen years ago. I can't understand how she still believes in that nonsense. She hopes my current girlfriend is *the one*.

My brothers and sisters hate that I've been lying to her for the past year, but it's worked like a charm. Unless I count those days when she wants me to bring my mysterious girlfriend to our family dinners—or for family celebrations. Like the Spearman family reunion happening in less than two weeks.

Yep, I'm fucked.

Hey, I never said the plan was bulletproof.

Should I have had a contingency plan when I learned about this event?

Nine months ago, when we learned about the possibility of a Spearman reunion in Hawaii, I laughed with my brothers, Gatsby and Lysander, my triplets. They've been my partners in crime since the day we were conceived. Our logic laid on the fact that the Spearman family is huge. Dad was one of seven children. Each one of them had five to eight children. Some of them are parents too. It's impossible to get that many people into one place.

We were wrong.

Three months later, I received an invitation to the first annual reunion. They had invitations and we had to RSVP.

The event is well organized. I found out that my cousin June, who used to own a PR company, is one of the masterminds behind the entire operation. Her twin Jeannette and her sister-in-law, Emmeline, are helping her. Those women could take over the world on a weekend and fix it if they had more time.

Since then, Mom has been reminding us that we need to RSVP and our presence at the event is *mandatory*.

With less than two weeks to go, I have to figure out a way to skip this trip. Am I afraid that my mother will drag me against my will? Yes. I think she's capable of that and much more.

Do I want to go?

Maybe.

It's Hawaii. My cousin Jackson and his wife Emmeline will be renewing their vows. Jack is the oldest of our generation. His brothers and sisters are my favorite cousins from the Spearman side, but Mom wants me to bring my girlfriend—after all, we've been together for more than a year. Plus, I'm in the middle of an acquisition, a merger, and... there's a lot of work to do. I can't just pack up and take a vacation.

There's also the fact that a week after this trip is over, we'll be celebrating the fifteen-year anniversary of Dad's departure.

I should borrow a page from Gatsby's life and disappear for a few weeks. Good luck finding me while you're celebrating nonsense or remembering that we lost the most important man in our lives.

"Fuck, I need drink."

As I'm about to head to the kitchen for a glass of scotch, my phone rings. I groan as I realize it's Lysander's tone. So much for having a peaceful night without dealing with family. I take one last look at the Golden Gate Bridge and turn toward the kitchen. If I'm going to deal with him, at least I'll do it with a finger of scotch on the rocks.

I pull out a tumbler, the bottle of alcohol, and answer the phone, setting it up on speaker. "What's up, asshole?"

"Some of us would like to get some sleep," he growls.

If I wasn't pouring my drink, I'd be staring at the phone. Why the fuck is he calling me then? "Good night? Go to sleep? Do you need a nighttime story? Did you try closing your eyes?"

“I can’t sleep because you’re thinking too fucking loud.”

I burst into laughter, almost dropping the glass. “Really? You’re complaining about my loud thoughts?”

“Yep, plus, you make too much fucking noise. I heard you when you left the bed and went to the kitchen. Why are you back there? Do you need another drink? We should soundproof your apartment so I can sleep.”

I look down and give him the finger. Letting him and Gatsby live in my building was one of the worst decisions I’ve made in the past couple of years. They don’t pay rent, they come to my apartment at all hours of the day to take my food, and I don’t have any privacy. “Or, hear me out...you can move out of my building. It’d make more sense to live close to the vineyard.”

He laughs but doesn’t confirm what we know. Lysander doesn’t want to live near Mom. He doesn’t need to live in the guesthouse. Why can’t he just buy a property or rent a place in Paradise Bay?

I guess because he’d be so close to our mother, she’d be barging into his place every five fucking minutes. *Mom needs a hobby* I think as the amber liquid goes down my throat.

“What’s upsetting you?” he asks.

People think he’s the most relaxed of the triplets, but that’s Gatsby. Though, in all honesty, none of us are chill or calm. The moment Dad died, the burden of the family fell onto us. Suddenly, we became parents to our younger siblings. Life came to be complicated as we tried to parent five teenagers and our mother, who had situational depression—losing Dad hit her pretty hard.

That’s the part of her situation I don’t understand. She suffered so much when she lost Dad. Why would she want that for her children? I wouldn’t want anyone to go through what she went through just because they thought they were in love with me.

“Listen, if you’re just calling to harass me—”

“It’s a courtesy call to check up on you,” he interrupts me.

“I’m fine.”

“I call bullshit. Something is either frustrating you or causing you major anxiety. I just want to help you chill the fuck out. Have you tried hooking up? Releasing endorphins is a healthy way to relax.”

“So now you want to dictate how I feel?”

“No, I want you out of my head and heart. It’s so fucking hard to deal with your feelings, Gatsby’s feelings, and my life.”

I snort. “Because you don’t have feelings.”

“Ha, don’t start playing ‘let’s annoy the fuck out of Lysander because’...I hate being a triplet.”

Is it wrong to enjoy his frustration? Probably, but I swear it’s so fucking funny when he’s annoyed.

“Can you just tell me what’s wrong with you?” he growls.

I know when to push, but I also know when I have to back off. Since the game is over, I confess what’s fucking with my head. “Hawaii, our mother, the merger...why can’t things be simple?”

“Tell Mom, ‘Fuck off. I don’t need a wife. The only girlfriend I have is the inflatable doll Caspian gave me for Christmas.’ See, it’s pretty easy.”

Fucking Caspian and his gag gifts. He’s such an idiot.

“I don’t understand why she’s always on my case and not yours. She has seven children *other* than me to nag, and I only hear her say, ‘Aslan, dear, when are you going to get married?’ Why?”

“Margie,” he answers.

I close my eyes, exhaling harshly. “It’s been over for fourteen years. Again, she has seven other children to harass.”

“None of us have ever been close to having a family. You were engaged.”

“You—”

“I don’t count,” he interrupts before I say something else. “Listen, your only options are to confront her or keep going with your fabricated girlfriend.”

He doesn’t understand that I’m at a crossroads. This is it. The fable has to come to an end. Unless he has a solution. “How can I continue with the lie?”

“Take *that* girlfriend to Hawaii, you can break up with her during or after the trip.”

“She’s not real,” I reminded him, annoyed.

“It’s not a matter of having her but finding someone to play the part. Hire someone for the week.”

“Sure, let’s bring a whore to the family event. Classy.”

“I meant—”

“You’re an idiot,” I interrupt him before he says something more stupid.

“Hire an actress.”

I’m about to pull out my hair. Is he serious? I snap my fingers. “Why didn’t I think of that? I could just post it on Craigslist. Actress needed to play the part of my girlfriend. Must be available to travel. No passport needed. Non-smoker, not clingy, nothing serious. I’ll have my assistant run it before noon.”

“The hot VP of Operations could do it.”

“Keep Keaton out of this conversation,” I growl.

“Aww, you don’t want us to mention your favorite, shiny, unwrapped toy?”

I’ve no idea what he means by that, but I’m about to go downstairs and rearrange his face.

“You’ve always had a soft spot for her. On the plus side, she knows how to deal with your...lovely personality.”

He’s not wrong. I consider his idea for one hot second. Can I fake being with Keaton? She’s smart, fun, and beautiful. Not that I’m gawking at her every time we’re in the same room.

Okay, I might glance at her from time to time because, well, she's gorgeous.

"Do you think that's going to keep Mom away?"

"At least for a few months. It's perfect." He snaps his fingers, almost as if he just had a brilliant idea. "She's leaving San Francisco in a couple of months, isn't she? You can claim that *she* didn't want to have a long-distance relationship."

The thought of her leaving makes my stomach drop. Soon, she'll move to Arizona—if the merger with Monti Media goes as planned. Another good reason why I have to skip the reunion. This is her dream, I have to make it happen—for her. I can't go on vacation.

But what if I bring her along? We could work in the hotel room, pretend we're together, and enjoy a week in Hawaii. She needs a vacation. I hate to admit that this plan might work, but am I that desperate?

No. I don't mix business with pleasure or family.

Including Keaton in this insane plan isn't the solution. "There has to be another way?"

"Yes, but you don't like to confront Mom. Hence the big lie, Pinocchio."

"I'll tell her I'm too busy to go to Hawaii."

He chuckles. "The last time you tried to wiggle your way out of a family event using work as an excuse, she threatened to fire you. She might not hold any shares for the company, but she's my mother, and if she asks, I'll vote in her favor. Everyone would agree with me."

The board is a joke. My brothers and sisters only make decisions that are convenient for Mom, and I have to deal with the rest. "I love our mother, but she makes our life too fucking complicated."

"I couldn't agree more. Now can you settle down? I have to be at the vineyard in less than two hours."

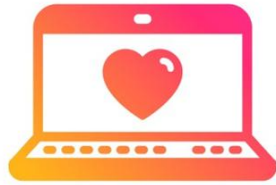
"You need to move back to Paradise Bay."

“I will, as soon as you tell Mom to fuck off.”

That’s probably going to be never.

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Can't Help Love



Maia

Fourteen years ago...

“Your plane ticket for May is ready,” Dad says.

I stare at the screen, trying to concentrate on the conversation. It’s impossible.

I’ve always been a rational person.

At least I think I am. My parents raised me to keep my feet firmly planted on the ground. I follow all their social rules. *All* of them.

Well, at least I did up until I started my junior year of college and finally moved out of the house—and the state.

Dad is a very conservative man who believes women shouldn’t leave home until they get married. According to him, I’m not allowed to have a boyfriend before the age of twenty-five.

Ha, good luck with that, *Papi*.

“Maia, are you listening?” Dad growls.

Oh, I’m listening. I just can’t build a coherent sentence.

My secret boyfriend is hiding under the table—as I requested. However, he’s doing very naughty things while waiting for this call to end.

I swallow a whimper as Gatsby licks my left thigh as he skates his hands down the center of my body. He’s so close to my core I can’t breathe. I’m desperate and needy for him.

My story is simple. I’m a naïve good girl who went off to college and discovered she liked sex—a lot. It doesn’t help that my boyfriend can’t keep his hands to himself. He’s always touching me, and I’m always wanting it.

I blame him.

Damn it, Gatsby Spearman and his delicious mouth and wicked fingers.

I told him to hide and stay quiet while I'm speaking to my parents. What is he doing?

He's quiet, but also being his usual wicked-horny self.

"You said your last test is May fifteenth, the ticket is for the twentieth. You're staying in San Diego for the summer, right?"

I bite my lip and nod a couple of times as Gatsby slides his finger between the elastic of my panties and touches my already soaking slit. I jolt but contain my expression. Every evening, this man does something forbidden while I have my daily video call with my parents. By now, I can keep my face stoic and my voice almost steady.

If computer science doesn't work, I might have a career as an actress.

I try to kick Gatz, but he holds my legs in place while pushing two fingers inside me.

Deep.

So, so deep, I can't help but open my legs for him and hold on to the table so I don't fall.

My breath becomes shallow, and then, I sober up when my father speaks. "Maia, are you paying attention to us?"

"Of course, I'm paying attention, *Papi*. You have my ticket for M-May."

"Are you okay, *mija*?" Mom asks.

I nod. It's almost impossible to talk when my boyfriend's thumb circles my clit in a torturously slow motion while two of his fingers thrust in and out—fucking me.

"Of course, I'm okay." I swallow hard.

Mom nods, satisfied. "How are your midterms coming along?"

I hold the table tighter, gulping down a breath as Gatsby keeps tormenting me with his fingers, his mouth. He's about to send me to the edge, make me come so hard that my screams will be heard all the way to Europe. I'm trying to hold still, but it's almost impossible.

My traditionalist parents would be very disappointed in me if they realize what's happening under the table. They'll be dragging me back home if they learn that I lost my virginity last September—it was my boyfriend's twentieth birthday. We spent a romantic weekend on Tybee Island.

They'll hate knowing that we have sex several times a day. We sleep in the same bed almost every night. They wouldn't approve of our relationship at all.

Dad will buy a chastity belt, throw me in my room, and ground me until I'm thirty. Since I'm not planning on dealing with the consequences of Gatsby's actions, I look under the table and mouth, *Stop it*.

Gatsby gives me a wicked smile. Not only that, he dares to pull down my panties while giving me a challenging glare.

“Stop,” I whisper.

“End that call.” The commanding low voice sends a wave of heat through my entire body.

I'm getting close.

So close.

“Are you okay?” Mom's voice makes me hit my head on the table.

“I hate you,” I whisper.

Gatsby winks at me. “It's okay. I have enough love for both of us.”

And I melt.

Getting under the table and riding him would be ideal, but I restrain myself and go back to my conversation. The one I plan to end soon so I can go back to my boyfriend.

“Are you okay?” Dad asks, giving me a suspicious glare.

“I thought I saw a cockroach under the table, but it was a wrapper,” I lie.

Mom touches the bridge of her nose. “Where are your glasses?”

“In the nightstand.”

“You should wear them all the time. That’s why you think that your trash is an animal. Clean the studio.”

My studio is clean, Mom. My boyfriend is a neat freak.

I almost roll my eyes, but I don’t. “*Si, Mami.* I’ll do that this weekend.”

“If you have a pest problem, call the management company. They’ll take care of it,” Dad reminds me.

“I can squash bugs, *Papi*, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

And just because he can, Gatsby pushes my legs wide, dipping down. I feel his breath against my wet center. When he swipes his tongue against my clit, I shiver. Pleasure rising like a tide of euphoria. His mouth is so good, my breathing is becoming ragged. If I don’t end this video call now, they’re going to hear me come.

“I don’t want to cut this short, but it’s time for me to go back to studying. Say hi to Tiggy and Cee-Cee for me.”

Dad glares at me. “We barely spoke. Your sisters plan on saying hello after they finish their homework.”

“Maybe you should give me one of those things called... cellphones. I could text even if I’m in class.” My parents are thrifty. They don’t like to spend on superfluous items. Someone should tell them that landlines are becoming obsolete. It’s been almost a decade since the last century ended.

“We’ll see,” Dad answers. That’s his polite way to say, *no*.

“I’m sending you a care package tomorrow. We made *polvorones*.”

“Thank you, Mami.” I wave, ending the call and closing my laptop.

Pushing my chair away from the table, I spring out of the chair. “What is wrong with you, Spearman?”

He’s still on the floor, grinning. “Have I ever told you that you taste delicious?” The dirty boy licks his lips and sucks on the fingers he had inside me a couple of seconds ago.

“You’re a wicked man. If my father knew about this”—I point from me to him a couple of times—“he’d kill you and ground me forever.”

“Your parents love me.”

“No. They liked you when we met you because you helped us carry the boxes and furniture while moving. You were also charming.”

“I’m still charming.”

“They’d stop liking you the moment they learn we’re dating, and once they learn we’re...doing it, well, they’ll hate you.”

He gets out from under the table, and I notice the silhouette of his hard length pushing against his shorts. “I hope you know we’re not having sex tonight.”

“But I just got started, and you’re so wet... I think you’re ready to ride me.” He gives me a sweet, pleading look. “It’s our lucky charm. We have sex, and we pass tests with flying colors.”

I can’t remember when he decided that he’d fail if we didn’t have sex the night before an exam.

Like he needs an excuse. We’re humping each other every chance we get. I’m not complaining, but he should at least own that.

Crossing my arms, I give him an unamused look. “We have a presentation tomorrow, not a test.”

“It’s sixty percent of our grade,” he reminds me, and suddenly his smirk appears. “You know what we should do? Move this party to my apartment. Your studio is cute but small.”

I give him a defeated glance. I'd agree if my parents were different, but they're overbearing, and I can't disobey them. This might be the day they call me or... I don't want to tempt my luck.

Gatz automatically takes me into his arms. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the beat of his heart. It's soothing. Though I want him to finish what he started during our call, I can just stay here, in his protective embrace.

"Can we go to my place?" he insists.

"Nope. If they call and I don't answer, I'm doomed. If they catch me out of my studio after eight, my parents will drag me back to San Diego—immediately."

"I think you're exaggerating."

"You don't know Mom and Dad."

"I've met them. They're lovely. They'd know me better if you didn't hide me every single evening. It's a pain to keep quiet when this place is so small."

"Sorry? There's not much I can do to fix it. You knew what you were getting into from the beginning."

He sets his chin on top of my head and sways me as if we're dancing. "Let me get you a cellphone so they can reach you at any time—in my big-ass, comfortable apartment."

"No, thank you."

"Every time I offer to buy you something, you decline it."

"Why would you buy me stuff? You're lucky I let you pay for my meals. May I remind you I'm an independent woman?"

"I don't know. Margie never says no to Aslan. Actually, she's always demanding something new."

Every time he talks about his brother's girlfriend, I get the feeling that she's a gold digger. Maybe I'm wrong. After all, I don't know her. Aslan, Gatsby, and Lysander might be triplets, but they sound like totally different people. I wish I could

meet them. Maybe one of these days I'll accept his invitation to visit his family.

"Well, I'm not Margie, and you're not Aslan. I'll get a job over the summer and buy myself a phone."

He releases me and puts his hands on my shoulders, staring at me with worry. "Hey, don't stress out. We'll keep sleeping here and I'll hide. All I want is for you to be happy. I love you, Little Blue."

Every time he calls me that, my heart flails wildly in my chest.

Is it normal to feel this way about a man?

I don't know. I was homeschooled all my life. I took several classes at the community college, and it wasn't until I turned eighteen that my parents agreed to let me leave the house. I moved to Atlanta, where I now study at Georgia Tech.

If my parents had a choice, I would've gone to Stanford or Caltech. Unfortunately for them, they didn't offer me any scholarships. I look at Gatsby and smile because he is one of the best things about my college experience—if not *the* best.

He's not only the best boyfriend in the world. He's my rock. From the moment I arrived on campus, he held on to my hand and helped me adjust.

And best of all, he loves me as much as I love him.

He kisses my nose, brushes my lips with his. "What are you thinking?"

"That I'm lucky to have you, and maybe we should practice tomorrow's presentation."

"We already did that thrice. It's time to take a break."

"I just want it to be perfect. As you mentioned, the majority of our grade is riding on it. What if we fail?"

"Last semester you said the same about the app we created, *Rencontrer*, and we aced it."

I smile. “You know we could start our own matching company. I mean, not right now, but if we set up the website, tighten the algorithm, and come up with a good marketing campaign... My graphics for the branding are pretty awesome.”

“You’re brilliant and a kick-ass artist, but there are more colors than purple, pink, and blue...” He pauses, kissing my nose again. “We’ll talk about that when we’re ready to set up our company. I’m sure Dad will back us up, and if not, I’ll use my trust.”

“First of all, we’re not taking money from anyone, I want it to succeed on its own merit. Also, we need romantic colors for the application.” We might be years from starting it, but I want to get things started.

“That’s because you’re a romantic and believe in all that stuff.”

“You don’t?”

“I believe in you and that I’ll never stop loving you.”

The insecure girl inside me asks, “Is that a bad thing?”

He hugs me again, tightening his grip. Then, he pulls us forward. We fall on the fluffy queen-size bed.

The one he bought—against my wishes—last September, after the first night he stayed with me. He claimed the single bed my parents got me was too small. Okay, he was right about that. The guy is six-three and has the body of a swimmer. He’s a combination between Johnathan Rhys Meyers’s face and Michael Phelps’s body—including the washboard abs.

“No, loving you is never a bad thing. I’m hoping that after we graduate, we’ll set up *Rencontrer* and everything else we come up with together. They’ll be the best applications in the world.”

“Sounds like you plan on keeping me around a long time.”

He brushes some strands of hair away from my face. “Forever if you allow it, but let’s not get sidetracked. I think

you owe me something.”

He lowers his head and kisses me. As always, his mouth burns my lips, and the heat combusts my entire body. I sway on the edge between fantasy and love.

>>>> Continue Reading [Can't Help Love](#), Gatsby's Story

<https://claudiayburgoa.com/wp/cant-help-love/>

Along Came You

Elliot



We all think there's a defining moment that shapes a person's future.

There's not *one moment*.

It's a series of events that occur throughout our lives.

The person I was yesterday isn't the same as I will be twenty years from now.

Not many guys think about the happily ever after when they're young, but I'm pretty sure that I happened to meet the love of my life at the tender age of two. I don't think I can say that I fell madly in love with her. We just loved each other. I believed she was my future and my everything until not one, but several events changed our lives.

At eighteen, I thought my life would be different. I planned on marrying the girl next door, living by the ocean, and having a few children.

I did marry the girl, but then destiny screwed with my life, and I lost her.

It's been twenty-three years since I said I do. Less than twenty since the divorce and it feels like a lifetime since I let her go. She found happiness with another man. I'm no longer that teenager with dreams and an open heart.

All those moments I lived were so impactful they became a wound.

A wound so deep that I avoid certain things.

If I ever write a biography, I'd call it *The Art of Avoidance*.

I avoid relationships of any kind, settling down, and commitments.

I'm a drifter.

A ship that lost its anchor so long ago it keeps floating along the ocean. Well, more like flying around the world, but the result is the same. I visit my family, so they know I care about them, but I mostly keep my distance, so they don't suffocate me.

I just arrived from Zambia. It was an almost eighteen-month trip where I helped build a hospital. The moment I arrived in San Francisco, I texted the family group chat to let them know I'm back on US soil.

For how long? I don't know. It could be just a few days or maybe a few weeks.

No one bothers to respond immediately, but I'm not surprised that my phone rings while eating lunch. It's Kyle, my best friend and brother-in-law.

"Hi," I answer, setting my spoon on the napkin.

"Where are you? There's a lot of noise in the background." There's no hello, how are you, or... he's never been one to have a normal conversation.

"A coffee shop."

"City? What city? I couldn't find you with the fucking app. Did you change phones again?"

I sigh. If he could, he'd put a tracker on my ankle. My little sister gets anxious when she doesn't know where I am. She should focus on raising her five children and dealing with her husband. Kyle is too fucking needy.

"I'm in San Francisco."

"Huh, interesting."

"Is it? You know the place well, I'm sure there's nothing *interesting* here for you."

Kyle and I met in Santa Cruz, a town just an hour south of the Bay area. That's where I was born and raised. His family owned a vacation home, but he's part of the Maxwell family. The Maxwells are one of the wealthiest families in the state, maybe the country. I think his worst memories are buried somewhere downtown. He's better living in Evergreen, Colorado, far away from here.

"Don't play dumb," he snaps. "Why are you there and not here?"

"I'll visit you soon, honey. You know you're my one and only," I joke.

"Fuck you. My wife wants to know how long you're staying. She misses you—" He pauses long enough to make me want to hang up, but I don't. "We all miss you, Elliot."

Kyle used to be the clown of our friend group. He didn't care what happened around him, but now, he sounds more mature than I do. It's not like I haven't matured.

My sister, Cassandra, swears I have Peter Pan Syndrome, but I don't. There's a huge difference between not wanting to grow up and avoiding my past.

"How's Cassy? How are the kids?"

"You should come and visit us."

"I'll do it soon," I promise, though soon can mean six months or a year, or maybe even two.

I adore my brother and sisters, and sometimes I miss my best friends. However, they'll expect me to stay longer, and I don't like to stay in one place for too long.

"What are you up to?"

If I knew, I wouldn't be here, but I just say, "I'm still deciding."

It's not like a project is going to fall into my lap. Next week, I might make a few calls. "For now, I'm planning on taking it easy." I don't lie. I'm gently letting him know to fuck off.

“You can come and work for me.”

I laugh. “No, but thank you for the offer.” I’m tempted to tell him that we co-own his company, and we agreed I’d be a silent partner. Meaning, he runs it and makes monthly deposits into my account.

That’s how I’ve been running my business affairs for the past six years—since Mom, my sister, Dahlia, and two of her daughters died in a car accident. I close my eyes, sending a silent prayer for their souls.

“Your sister would appreciate having you around for more than a weekend.”

“Why don’t I call you when I decide where I’m going next. Say hi to everyone for me.”

“Elliot you—”

I cut off the conversation before it gets too heavy. I love my friend, but I’m not in the mood to discuss my future, my choices, or his nonsense. I go back to eating when I notice a woman holding a tray walking around the dining room as she looks for a place to sit and eat her food.

There’s something about her that calls to me. Maybe it’s her posture, those eyes, or the frustration etched on her forehead. She’s beautiful but young. Too young. She could be my niece. Not many believe I have nephews and nieces who are in their early thirties.

If my niece Teagan were distraught, I’d love for someone to aid her. I rise from my seat and approach the frazzled-looking woman. “Would you like to share the table with me?”

She smiles, almost knocking me down to my knees. She’s even more gorgeous than I thought a second ago. Her gray-blue eyes are big and bright. It’s like staring at the ocean. I bet they’re bluer when she’s happy and look like a storm when she’s angry.

This kid is too young, just walk away.

“I don’t want to interrupt your meal,” she says with a sweet, gravelly voice that hits me in the groin.

Okay, maybe I need to look for a woman who can take the edge off. It's been a long time since the last time I fucked someone. She's not the one though.

"Don't worry about me," I assure her, planning on just picking up my tray and leaving the place immediately.

"Okay, but it'll only take a few minutes. I'm a fast eater." She sets up the tray on my table, and I pull out the chair so she can sit. She glances at me, gifting me another smile. "Thank you. You're making me believe in humanity."

"Because you lost hope?" I ask, taking a seat. "Please, don't eat fast on my behalf. Take your time."

"I always eat fast."

"Why?"

"I grew up with six brothers. They'd scarf everything down. If I didn't match their pace, they'd leave me without dessert."

I can't help but laugh. "Six brothers, huh?"

"Yes, and a baby sister. We're a big family." She fixes the paper napkin on her lap, squeezes some hand sanitizer, and then grabs a spoon.

While she's eating, I study her. Brown hair with some auburn highlights, fine facial features, and her heart-shaped lips are tempting. She's pretty and probably too young. She might be just fresh out of college.

"You don't have to stop eating on my account," she says.

I shake my head, wondering what it is about her that hypnotizes me. Since we're sharing a meal, I extend my hand. "Elliot McPhee."

She smiles, meeting it. "Sorry, where are my manners? I'm Fern. My mind is all over the place today. People are just... not very nice."

I can't help but chuckle at her politeness. "Anything I can do to help?"

After a long yet soft exhale, she says, “If you can find a construction company that can take on my project, maybe?”

“There are plenty in this area. I doubt any of them will turn down a job.”

“You’d think. I just finished a meeting with North Bay Construction company, and they shut me down when I said this is for a foundation, and I was hoping they’d donate—”

“Wait, you went to one of the biggest construction companies in the Bay area asking for a donation, and they rejected you?”

“Try biggest in the state,” she corrects me with a smirk on her plumped lips. “And yes, I dared to ask them to work for me. Not that they let me say much.”

“Biggest company on the West Coast, but that’s not the point,” I argue with humor in my voice. “What in the world did you ask for that they shut you down?”

She sighs. “I made the mistake of mentioning the words charity and donation. Even before I could pitch my project to them, they ushered me toward the exit. Which is weird because aren’t construction companies supposed to woo their future clients?”

“Usually. Why did you flip the roles?”

“Who said it was my doing?”

“You.” I grab a chip from the bag and munch on it as I consider offering my services. I know a lot about construction and spend most of my time doing volunteer work. We could help each other. “Why don’t you tell me more about this project they rejected?”

She takes a bite of her sandwich. After chewing and swallowing, she explains, “I want a community with affordable housing close to the city. We have the lots, but before I can even tell the board what we’re doing, I need to have an architect willing to design them, and a crew—”

Fern sighs in frustration.

“Take a deep breath. It seems like you have a big project on your hands, but you just haven’t found the right person to manage it.”

She grabs a napkin and wipes the corner of her lips and nods. “That’s why I went to North Bay Construction. However, Jonathan Smith shut me down and invited me to get the eff out of the company.”

Fern straightens her shoulders and tilts her head toward the door. “The CEO is an asshole. I swear he just agreed to see me because...”

She clamps her lips without finishing the sentence.

My jaw tenses. “Did he insult you?”

“He kicked me out of the building. He has quite a colloquial vocabulary. I bet if I had been there representing one of my brothers, he would’ve been trying to kiss my ass.”

Some people are just entitled assholes. But maybe I should be thankful, because I could take on that project and give myself some time to think about where I’ll be going next. It shouldn’t take me long to draw up some blueprints and plan a community. I’ve done it a few times before.

“Why don’t we finish our lunch, and I can follow you to your office. Then, you can tell me more, and I might be able to find the right person.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “Just like that.”

I shrug. “Why not?”

She laughs. “Sorry, who are you?”

“I thought I already introduced myself. The name is Elliot.”

Fern can’t stop the laughter. “Well, that should be plenty to trust you with this project. What are your qualifications?”

“Well, for starters, I know the right people for that kind of job.” I wink at her.

She gives me a suspicious glance. “What do you know about construction?”

I show her my calloused hands. “Dad taught me from a young age so I could help him.”

“Though that’s helpful, I need more than a handyman.”

This woman might want my résumé before I can even learn more about the community. I sigh. “I’ve worked in construction for more than twenty years. I also have a degree in architecture and have a few engineer friends who might be able to give you a hand—for free. As long as your foundation is legit.”

She’s still not buying what I’m saying. I can see it in that doubtful gaze. “Are you pricey?”

“No, and if your cause is worthy, I might even donate my time.”

“You don’t have to. We can pay you, but—”

I point at her food, interrupting what might be her pitch. “Why don’t we enjoy our lunch, and then you can proposition me. Maybe I’ll even do a lap dance for free.”

I wink at her, and her cheeks heat up.

Continue Reading [Along Came You](#) >>>> Fern and Elliot’s Story

<https://claudiayburgoa.com/wp/along-came-you/>

Dear Reader



Thank you so much for reading THE WAY OF US.

I can't believe this is book 5 on the Paradise Bay series. It feels like it was just late 2020 when I first thought about writing more about the Spearman family. I knew Jackson, Jason, Alex, and June's kids were too young for that, but I remembered their cousins.

The Spearman's from Paradise Bay are just as fun, but there's so much to unload, isn't it?

Heath and Atzi's story took me by surprise. I didn't think it would be so emotional until I was crying like a baby. I should add somewhere in my blurbs something like: make sure you have tissues handy.

Heath and Atzi's book was going to be light, I swear... and I know what you're thinking, Claudia you always think you'll

write something funny and end up making yourself cry ... maybe?

But sometimes, before starting the first draft of a book I'm not aware of how deep are their wounds and... well, we end up with a pretty angsty book, don't we?

Heath was maybe one of the most emotionally abused children from the eight children. The hell he lived through after her mother went catatonic and the guild he carried made him do very stupid things, but I'm glad he was able to seek help and write her rights.

And I know there are some questions, but I promise everything will be answer.

For those wondering who is next?

I just finished Huxley's book and it was light. Yep, I can confirm it was light, and a bit witty. I guess it's a break before you guys get the last two books which will be pretty angsty. ((Rubs hands))

Sending all my love,

Claudia xoxo



Claudia is an award-winning, *USA Today* bestselling author.

She writes alluring, thrilling stories about complicated women and the men who take their breaths away. Her books are the perfect blend of steamy and heartfelt, filled with emotional characters and explosive chemistry. Her writing takes readers to new heights, providing a variety of tears, laughs, and shocking moments that leave fans on the edge of their seats.

She lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband, her youngest two children, and three fluffy dogs.

When Claudia is not writing, you can find her reading, knitting, or just hanging out with her family. At nights, she likes to binge watches shows or movies with her equally geeky husband.

To find more about Claudia:

[website](#)

Be sure to sign up for [my newsletter](#) where you'll receive news about upcoming releases, sneak previous, and also FREE books from other bestselling authors.



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