



VALUE
Me III

DOC EXCLUSIVES

NIA ARTHURS
AND SYLBURN ARTHURS

VALUE ME: PART III

FRAGILE VOWS BOOK 3

NIA ARTHURS
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VALUE ME: PART III

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Can a cheater change his spots?

Hitting rock bottom feels like two broken legs and an empty bank account.

Everyone around me is moving on. Even Liz is finding a new beginning with Bancroft, while I'm stuck. Waiting. In limbo.

Until I meet her.

Destiny is dark eyes, bright smiles, and one devastating stipulation—she doesn't date men who've cheated.

I know I shouldn't play this game, but I've never felt like this about anyone.

I have to keep Destiny from finding out about my past and that means becoming a completely different man.

Can Doc finally turn me into the man who can earn a woman's trust? And what happens if Destiny finds out the truth before I show her that I've changed?

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ONE

PATRICK

“YOU’RE RECOVERING NICELY,” my physical therapist croons. His hairy fingers wrap around my upper arm as I clumsily grab my walking cane. “Not well enough for a fight or anything,” he teases. “But well enough that you can ditch the wheelchair.”

My smile is distracted. So are my eyes as they skid to the door.

“Remember not to rush the healing.” The PT drones on. “Putting too much weight on a recovering injury can damage the repair that’s been done.”

I seek out the clock.

It’s almost time for her to change shifts.

“Say, you don’t have a wedding coming up, do you? It feels like you’re hurrying to get better so you can walk down the aisle.”

Nerves tangle in my stomach.

Sweat makes it hard to keep a good grip on the cane.

“Patrick.”

“Huh?” My gaze fastens on the cheerful young man who comes to work every morning with a paste-on smile that lasts all day.

He flashes that strained grin at me. “Don’t try to push yourself too hard. I know it’s tough to feel immobile, but you really can’t rush the process.”

The tick of the clock rings loudly in my ears.

My heart is about to bang right out of my chest.

“If you can’t remember the exercises, just—”

I’m going to miss her shift.

If I’m late today...

“No rushing. Got it.” I slap his chest in goodbye and adjust my walking cane so it’s more firmly under my grip. Swinging the stick forward, I use the momentum to propel my body ahead.

It’s an awkward, lumbering ‘walk’, but today I don’t care.

I need speed.

Anxiety balls up inside me like a boxing glove in my stomach. The pinch of discomfort squeezes my leg. I went hard during the physical therapy session and now my body’s complaining.

Suck it up. We have to get there before she leaves.

“Excuse me,” I mumble, dodging the nurses and doctors flooding the hallways. White walls. White ceilings. Black chairs. Everything is uniform and staid.

But I know where to go.

My heart is leading me there.

I take the elevator. Punch in the right level. Lean against the rail.

As the numbers change, my neck gets tight. Discomfort shoots down my spine. A muscle in my thigh twitches, anticipating what could be the most important day of my life.

I tap my leg as if to scold it. *Don’t give out on me today.*

A glance at my reflection in the elevator makes me wince. It’s been a long time since I’ve slept comfortably. Two broken legs aren’t a skip in the park. I live in constant pain and, paired with the pills, sleep is a luxury I can’t seem to afford.

My face reflects the struggle. My eyes are puffy. Dark circles form beneath them like someone colored in my

mahogany-brown skin with a black crayon.

I've lost weight from the many months I spent sitting in a wheelchair. Trapped on two wheels, I haven't had many chances to pump iron.

The man in front of me is a shell of his former self.

I remember my glory days. Rows of abs. Glistening chocolate skin. A beard that wouldn't see the light of day unless it was lined up properly.

Now, I look at my reflection and I don't recognize the man staring back. He looks old. Weathered. Exhausted.

But he's wearing a nice shirt. The nicest he can shrug on over a sweat-stained T-shirt. His best kicks—limited edition—adorn his feet.

I might not be as fly as I used to be, but I'm giving it my best.

The elevator stops.

Doors open.

The moment I walk through them, my life is going to shift.

Yes or no.

It doesn't matter what she says, only that I'm opening myself up again to hear the answer.

I wait until everyone gets off because I know my awkward cane-waddle can hold up a line. Doctors need to get to patients. Loved ones need to visit the sick.

I'm the least urgent among them.

All I need to do is ask a question.

It can wait.

I swing down the hallway and turn left.

Almost there.

Almost...

A door bangs open and a large man with shorn hair and bull-dog eyes crashes into my path. Veins bulge in his neck.

Nostrils flare as he pulls his fingers into fists and whirls around.

His eyes are locked on something inside the hospital room, and I divert my attention there. A small, portly woman waddles out of the doorway. Her hair falls in limp strands over her cheek. She keeps her eyes on the ground.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Are you stupid?” The man roars. “You drove all the way down here to bother these people. They have more important things to deal with than you.”

My eyebrows slam together, tightening on my forehead.

“I’m sorry,” the woman croaks, her head down.

Her apology sends a purple flush over his face. He lunges for her and grabs her hand roughly. “What the hell are you apologizing for? You’re making me look like the bad guy!”

She curls into herself, flinching.

I’m moving before my brain can tell me why getting involved is a bad idea. This man is taller than me. Broader. His legs are as thick as tree trunks and working in full capacity.

I’ve got a walking cane and a temper.

Horrible odds.

But it’s not like I can stop.

Marching ahead, I snarl at him. “Buddy, let her go.”

“This is my wife, *buddy*.” His nostrils flare. “So why don’t you back the hell off?”

“It’s okay,” the woman croaks. She flicks her hand out at me as if I’m getting in the way of a common lover’s spat.

“Why the hell is it okay?” A familiar voice rings out.

Every muscle in my body goes still.

I turn and stare at the stunning woman in a nurse’s uniform. Her skin is the color of cedar, her cheekbones are as wide as her nose, which spreads across her face with pride.

Her hair is jet black and done up in long twists. Her eyes are slanted, curling up at the corners.

Her voice is usually silky and melodious, like she stepped off a plane from the West Indies. But, in this tension, her tone is a brassy threat that sends a shiver of excitement straight to my pants.

She stomps forward, her body lithe and graceful even though her expression is a fierce storm. Her eyes slice through the man before they settle on the woman.

Softening, she whispers, “I told you to stay in the room until I got back.”

“It’s okay.” The wife keeps her eyes down.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” The lumbering brute steps forward, launching his fingers like he’ll grab the nurse.

I grab his hand, twisting it away with all my might. His annoyed gaze flicks to me and he throws a punch. I drop the cane and duck, struggling to stay balanced. My feet are too weak to support me. I’m down in an instant.

The ground tastes like shoes and Clorox.

“*Security! Coming through!*” Hospital guards rush to the scene.

“I didn’t touch him!” the guy screams as the guards surround him. “I didn’t touch that punk.”

“Ow. Ow.” I play up my injuries, squeezing my eyes shut and grimacing.

His eyes widen in shock.

“Sir, you need to come with us.” The security guards yank him away. His shaken wife scrambles behind him.

At that moment, a pair of pretty knees drop into my line of sight. A white skirt rides up, revealing creamy brown thighs.

My heart slams into my chest.

A light touch on my arm sends my gaze careening up. I fall into dark eyes. Coffee with no cream. Deep and warm.

Her lips pull down in concern. “Are you okay, sir?” She leans close and the scent of lavender fills my nostrils. “Can you stand?”

“Uh...” I have game. Ask anyone who knows me, and they’ll tell you I can sweet-talk a woman into my bed in five minutes. Nah, three. But, somehow, in front of *this* woman, I get all stupid and tongue-tied.

“Oh, your walking cane.” She notices the stick on the ground and scrambles over to it.

When she returns to me, I’ve already managed to push myself to a sitting position. After spending months in a wheelchair, I’ve got wicked arm-torso coordination.

“Here, hold my shoulder. Let’s take it slow alright?”

“I’m okay.” There’s no way I’m hanging onto the girl I’ve been lightly stalking for months on the day I’m about to ask her out.

I’m no wimp.

“Don’t be stubborn.” She grabs my hand and sets it on her shoulder. Tucking herself into my side, she wraps an arm around my waist. “On the count of three, okay?”

Her hair smells like coconut oil and some kind of fruit. Mango, maybe? Something tropical.

“One.” Brown lips pucker to form the word. “Two.”

I push my palm flat on the ground to propel myself up. With her help, I manage to get to my feet though I’m still leaning heavily against her.

She’s tall. Her chin almost hits my shoulder. “Come on, let me walk you to a waiting chair.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Just pass me the cane.”

She spots the stick on the ground and supports me while I limp to the wall. Once I’m leaning against it, she darts away to retrieve my walking cane.

“You were very brave to step in.” Her eyes sparkle with admiration. “Especially since you’re injured.”

The compliment makes my chest blow up. Makes the humiliation of face-planting feel worth it. “It was nothing. I’m more worried about that woman. I hope that guy doesn’t take it out on her.”

“Ugh, I hate men like that.” She slants a sharp look down the hallway.

“Abusers?”

She nods. “There are two types of men I can’t stand—bullies and cheaters.”

Perhaps I misheard her. I blink rapidly. “Cheaters?”

“One batters your body. The other one batters your heart. Damage is damage.” She wipes her hands on the side of her sharp-white uniform. “Anyway, thanks for intervening, but I don’t think we can convince that woman to leave. Not unless she wants to.”

I clamp my lips shut, my thoughts whirring.

She sticks out a hand. “Destiny.”

I know. It was one of the first things I learned about her.

“Patrick, right?” She arches delicate eyebrows. “We met at the party you threw for those athletes.”

“Right,” I croak. It was the night I got into the accident. The night I almost died.

“Are you in any pain or discomfort? You fell pretty hard.” Her eyes rove my legs. It’s analytical. Clinical. I wish it was because she was checking me out.

I can’t stand bullies and cheaters.

I wince.

She notices and presses in. “You’re hurt.”

“No, I’m fine. Really.” I draw back.

“Destiny!” A nurse jogs toward us and waves. “They’re looking for you.”

Destiny steps back. “I’ve got to go.”

I see my chance slipping away and panic overtakes me.

“Coffee!” I blurt.

She goes still.

My mind jumbles into a confusing mess and I rub the back of my neck. “Would you like to have coffee... with me?”

Silence stretches between us.

My heart is about to gallop out of my chest. It’ll careen around the bend if I let it.

“Sure.” A slow, beautiful smile spreads on her face. “I’d like that.”

“Destiny!” the other nurse hisses. She beckons with her hands.

“My shift ends at three.”

“I’ll be here,” I promise.

She nods and runs down the hallway.

Victory washes over me. *She said yes!*

I smile like a fool.

Until I remember what Destiny said.

Bullies and cheaters.

My fingers curl into fists. My life is finally taking an upward turn. After all that’s happened, I’m not letting this chance go. If my past is going to be a problem for Destiny, then I can’t let her find out about it.

TWO

LIZETTE

I FLOP to the yoga mat in our private training room at the gym. Sweat clings to my arms and back. My lungs are burning, and my legs are jello.

“It’s rude the way you never go easy on me.”

“I’m sorry, sunshine.” Johnny smiles and sits beside me. “As your boyfriend, I’ll have a very stern talk with your trainer about his methods.”

“Throw a few punches.”

“A few? He’s not leaving until he’s on the ground.”

“The more violence the better.”

“I’ll wreck him. He should know better than to mess with the woman I love.” Johnny can’t keep the smile from stretching.

I sit up. Roll my eyes. “You think you’re funny?”

“Who’s being funny?” He offers a cold bottle of water.

I grab it and drink like a fish. When I’m done, I hand it back to Johnny who drinks from the same bottle and then calmly returns the cap.

“I want a new trainer.”

He pulls me into his arms. “I’m getting really tired of this conversation.”

“And I’m getting really tired of dying every time you go into trainer-mode. You consistently find new and creative

ways to torture me.”

“Exercise gets boring if you’re doing the same things over and over. Shaking it up every once in a while keeps things spicy.” His lips nibble down my neck.

I don’t suppress my moan. Johnny knows I’m putty in his hands when he starts nuzzling me like that.

I lay my hands over his. “I’m sweaty.”

“You’re perfect.”

Funny enough, he means that. It’s written all over his handsome face. Gleaming in those chocolate eyes.

No man has ever made me feel like I’m the center of his universe.

Until Johnny.

He eases back. “You know what I love about you?”

“What?”

“You whine like the world is ending, but you still give one hundred percent of yourself to anything you do.”

“I don’t whine.”

He arches an eyebrow in disbelief.

“I have valid concerns about my personal trainer and his sick, twisted obsession with lunges.”

“Lunges are great for workouts.”

“I’m about to resurrect whoever came up with that exercise and choke them to death.”

He laughs and holds me even tighter. His body is sweaty, stinky and perfectly hard against me. I rest my head against his chest. Hear his heartbeat. Let my heart thump in time to his.

“You’re so dramatic.” His lips are back on my neck. “It’s never a dull day.”

My fingers intertwine with Johnny’s even as my words push him away. “You said you had an important meeting after this.”

He grunts as if the thought of breaking away annoys him. “I really want to stay with you.”

“I want you to stay.”

He groans and rubs his hand over my shoulder. “Don’t say that, sunshine. You’ll make it hard to leave.”

I smirk, loving the power I have over him. It’s such a strange thing. To be the one with the power. The upper hand.

Doc says it’s to be expected.

In dating, the woman is the king.

I know the theory, but it’s different to experience it firsthand. To see it play out every day with startling consistency.

Power.

When I was married, things kept happening *to* me. STI tests. Overbearing mother-in-laws. Broken vows. And all I could do was react. I couldn’t direct the course of my life. I saw no way to control my circumstances. Keep the pain from flooding over me. Drowning me.

With Johnny...

Of course it’s different.

It’s ridiculous to compare my life before Johnny to the one I have now. With him, I get to live in a parallel universe. One where a man is doting on me, treasuring me, prioritizing me as if it’s normal. As if it’s expected. As if he *enjoys* it.

And I’m learning to accept the new normal.

Slowly.

It’s still a little wonky. The fit isn’t quite right yet.

But I’m working on learning to embrace good things. To receive them with gratitude and aloofness. To think ‘of course, I deserve to be treated like a queen’ and keep going with my day.

“What should I cook for you tonight?” Johnny’s fingers slide down my arm. Then over my stomach. Under my shirt.

I feel every ridge of his knuckles. The scrape of callouses against a paunch that exercise can't burn. That time and low metabolism have given to me.

He accepts it like it's beautiful. "Italian?" His mouth captures the lobe of my ear, tugging gently. "Caribbean? Japanese?"

My nails rake against the top of his hands as my body turns into molten silver. I bite down to keep the hiss from escaping.

"Answers, sunshine."

"Um..."

"Sunshine." He kisses me before I can remember how to speak. "The last time, you said my Alfredo was too spicy. I found a new recipe I wanted to try, but if you're not in the mood for that. I'll make whatever you want." His voice drops to a whisper. "All you have to do is ask and it's yours."

"Stop talking about food and kiss me."

He smirks and leans in. I crush my mouth against his. Dig my fingers into his neck. Sigh against his lips. My body turns languid and loose. I'm falling into a soft place where everything in the world is perfect. It's just me and Johnny. Nothing else matters.

His phone rings, forcing us to come back to earth.

"I'll have Italian tonight," I croak as he lets me go and fishes the phone out of his pocket.

He chuckles. Glances at the screen. Freezes.

I watch as Johnny's face goes still and something inside my heart gets uneasy. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I have to take this." He scrambles to his feet, leaving me on the floor. His fingers tighten around the phone.

I roll to a sitting position and slant him a confused look. *Nothing?* That's new. *Bad* new. Johnny and I talk about everything—his grandfather's take-over of the CEO position, his mother's disinterest in marrying again, his dreams for the

company. He's never brushed me off or dodged a question before.

"Sorry, sunshine." He glances at me and then his gaze crawls guiltily away.

My heart drops into a big, empty chasm.

I know that look.

The eye shift.

I've seen that expression before.

Anxiety rubs against me, easing into my skin, chasing away the buzzing that Johnny's touch had created. It creeps over my joy. Takes out the baggage I thought I'd set away and pulls clothes from it. Makes itself at home. Puts up sofas and cabinets and little side tables.

"Who is it?"

"No one." The words pushed out one after the other. They ram into each other like a giant car accident. "Just work."

I recognize that tone. Those words. Spending so much of my life married to a selfish liar gave me BS antennas. I'm a professional when it comes to sniffing out phone calls a man would rather stay private.

"Work?" My voice is husky. The hole in my chest gets bigger every second. Any more and my heart is going to disappear into the abyss, never to be seen again.

The phone keeps ringing. He slides his finger over the end button without looking down at it.

Another red flag goes up in my head.

That routine. That ugly song and dance. Why is Johnny doing it?

"I have to go." He grabs his duffel bag with his change of clothes. Then his car keys. Then a strange look at me as if he wants to kiss me goodbye but isn't sure he should approach.

I wonder about my expression. The part of it making him hesitate. Normally, Johnny doesn't think twice when it comes

to touching me. His hands would find my waist like a homing beacon. His fingers would scrape my skin, my neck, my shoulder. Somewhere. As if that connection means everything to him. As if he needs it to breathe.

“I’ll see you tonight, okay?” He ducks his head and stalks out, leaving me alone on the mat that’s damp with my sweat.

The doubts come first because it’s easier, more familiar, than trusting someone else. What is he hiding from me? Who is it? Someone prettier? Someone more in his league?

Anger is next. Aimed at myself like a flaming arrow pointed inward. Pressing right into my chest.

Hasn’t Johnny shown me he’s different than Patrick? He went willingly to Doc and parsed out the mechanic’s words for himself. He’s patient, attentive and completely devoted to me.

His commitment, even though we’re just dating, is higher than the commitment my husband had to me inside a marriage.

I have nothing to be afraid of. Johnny would never betray me.

Right?

THREE

PATRICK

I THINK about where I'll take Destiny for our date and imagine how the scene will play out. She'll be charmed by my wit. My take-charge demeanor. My smile.

I'll get to know her, chat it up. Tell her about the agency I'm running mostly by myself. Jerrison reduced his hours so he can be a devoted husband and official diaper-changer. Poor thing. He's been completely consumed by the suburban life. All that's missing is one more kid, a dog and a white picket fence. I run big decisions by him, but the rest of the show is my playing field.

It feels good.

The only piece of control I have in my life.

I'll let her know about the famous people I met in the height of my career. The cheques I signed. Anything to make her understand that the gaunt man limping along on a walking cane is not who I really am. She just caught me in an off-season. And if she's willing to stick it out, ride to the end with me, I'll show her what an empire looks like.

Maybe, a couple dates in, I'll tell her about my marriage. Keep it vague. Keep it short. But by then, she'll already be eating out of my hands. The fact that I was married once won't matter. She won't ask me why we broke up. And I won't have to lie to her.

I inhale nervously as I limp into the hospital. My cane slaps the tile in quick staccato beats. It sounds like the beginning of a fast-paced hip-hop song.

My heart is a nervous ball in my throat, stuffing my airways. I squeeze the head of my walking stick, coaching myself into a semblance of calm. *Just because I'm using a walking cane, it doesn't mean I can't still impress her.*

I round the corner and spot her immediately. Destiny stands out in the crowd of nurses. She's wearing a simple T-shirt tucked into a shiny black miniskirt. Instead of heels, she's wearing sensible black flats.

One of the nurses surveys the crowd and spots me. She points in my direction, alerting Destiny to my approach.

Destiny turns in slow motion, her slender arms moving gracefully in the air. It's almost like a pirouette and I swear she must be some kind of dancer. I was an athlete in my younger years. I spend every waking moment managing athletes now. Steeped in this world of competition, I can recognize athleticism when I see it, even if it's muted and hard to define.

She nods at me, her twists falling down her shoulders one after the other.

I lift my hand in greeting.

Destiny says something to her fellow nurse—a woman who gives me a *you're not all that* nose scrunch—and jogs over to me.

“Hey.” I lean casually against my cane, trying to play it cool. “I thought I was on time.”

“Oh, you are. I finished a little early.” Her eyes dart around. “Let's get out of here before someone sees me and pulls me back to work.”

“Aren't you off your shift?”

“Doesn't matter around here. When all hands need to pitch in, claiming you're on break isn't an excuse.” She motions me to the door.

We move briskly. Or as briskly as I can since I have to catapult my body forward with every step.

She slows her pace and matches me, showing her sensitivity and kindness. That gentleness of hers is hella sexy.

Months ago, it was Destiny's body that first drew my attention. One look at those long, long legs and her voluminous curly hair and it was like I got shot with Cupid's arrow. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

But the more digging I did into Destiny, the more I liked. She's fierce, intelligent and believes deeply in justice. What she did today—stepping in to help that woman—that's nothing new for her. She's a warrior when she wants to be, but it's all from a good place. A kind heart.

Frankly, it's hard to find women like that these days. Most of them are money-grabbing, shallow, or plain crazy. Destiny is different.

And I like that.

I stop when we get to the doors. She slows down, noticing I'm not beside her.

I gesture to a black car. "I got us a ride."

"You can drive?" Her eyes slide down to my legs and the walking stick.

Shame burns my cheeks. I hate the pity crawling into her expression. It sucks being helpless, but I'm not bedridden. As long as I've got breath, I'll find a way to avoid relying too much on people. And if I do, I might as well look cool doing it.

"Nah." I tilt my chin up, a move that worked much better when I didn't lose my balance.

She steps forward as if she'll help.

I wave her back. "I got us a chauffeur."

Her eyes widen.

I preen. *That's right. Be impressed.*

"Why'd you spend so much money?" Her nose scrunches. "I'm not getting into a car with you."

Geez.

My chest deflates like a balloon losing air.

She blinks innocently, as if she has no idea how sharp her words are. “Sorry, but I barely know you.”

Then why the hell did she agree to a date?

“There’s a coffee shop around there.” She smiles and nods to it as if my ego isn’t shattered on the sidewalk at her feet. “How about we go there instead?”

“I’m not a serial killer. And I’m not a stranger either. We’ve met before. Remember?”

“I do remember. It was the night all those athletes chose to leave rather than sign with you.”

My jaw drops.

She laughs softly. “Look, Patrick, I agreed to coffee with you because of what you did for that patient. It shows you’re not exactly the douchebag everyone says you are.”

“You’ve heard things about me?”

“A couple things.”

“Like what?”

She tilts her head. “Most of it wasn’t nice. I don’t know if it’s worth repeating.”

I swallow hard. “I’ve changed, Destiny.” Gesturing to my cane, I tell her, “You come face-to-face with death, and it leaves an impression. I’m not the guy I was anymore.”

“That’s why I’m willing to give you a chance. On *my* terms.”

“Okay.” I let out a breath, humbled.

Now that the situation is so dire, I’ll take every chance with her I can get. Screw impressing her with my accomplishments. I need to change up the game. Quick.

We cross the street, heading for the coffee shop in silence. She’s not making conversation and it’s been so long since I’ve been interested in more than a woman’s body that I’m not sure about the signals. Does silence mean she’s not having a good time?

She squints into the sun and purses her lips.

Another bad sign?

Damn. Why did I have to go and fall for an independent woman of all things?

I hold the door open for her when we arrive at the coffee shop.

“Thanks.” She smiles at me.

The knots in my chest loosen. Alright. I’ll do anything to see that grin aimed in my direction again.

We take our seats and Destiny orders a latte. I get iced coffee and she smirks. “Are you supposed to be drinking caffeine? Won’t that mess with your meds?”

“I’ll be fine.” I lean forward. Let the interest glow from my eyes. “Since you know so much about me, tell me some things about you.”

“I’ll hype myself up.” Her fingers dance over her purse as she shrugs the strap off and gets comfortable.

“Unfair.” I sling my arm over the back of my seat. Feel my old self return. Slant her a flirty smile because I can.

“I’m perfect in every way. Don’t you believe me?”

“You could try for subtlety.”

“I’m incapable of such a thing. What you see is what you get with me.”

I laugh and feel more at ease. When we’re standing, it’s clear that she’s more able-bodied than I am. But here, sitting down, no one can tell that my legs are still recovering. It’s giving me a lot more confidence.

“I want you to admit your dirt, just like whoever you were talking to, leaked mine.”

She laughs. “I don’t see why I have to do that.”

“Hey, fair is fair.”

“Alright.” The smile on her face is playful. “You’re probably wondering why you saw me there that night at your

party?”

I shrug. “It was a job.”

“Yeah. My first. I was homeless and behind on my nursing school payments. That gig dropped into my lap at the perfect time.”

“You were homeless?”

Her face tightens and her eyes go cold. “My good-for-nothing boyfriend was playing me and some other girl. I’d just moved to this city, and I was living with him at the time. When I found out, I moved out right away. No plans. No friends to rely on. Nothing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was the toughest week of my life. That’s when I promised myself that I’d never get caught up with a dirt bag like him again. I can tolerate lots of things, but I will *never* date a cheater. Ever.”

“But,” my fingers snag a napkin and squeeze the life out of it, “what if he’s changed?”

“I don’t care. The hurt I felt when I found out about that other girl...” She shakes her head. “A human being shouldn’t do that to another human being.”

I lean forward. “So it’s a hard and fast ‘no’ for cheaters?”

Her hands move up and down as her voice climbs. “It’s hard enough to think that my future boyfriend will be *capable* of betraying me. Because I’m not blind anymore. All men are capable of cheating. All of them. But now I’m expected to get with someone who’s *betrayed* someone else before me? Like he didn’t have a problem disrespecting her and spitting in her face, but I’m the chosen one who’ll magically get his commitment?” She scrunches her nose. “Nah. If he cheated on her, what’s going to stop him from doing it to me?”

“You’re going to have to trust someone eventually,” I say quietly.

“Not someone who cheated.” She sips her drink. “I draw the line there.”

Silence falls as I wrestle with her passionate words. Destiny pulls out her phone and starts tapping. I drag the napkin under the table. Shred it in two. Then in three.

Destiny's got a chip on her shoulder and a tough criteria.

One that I don't meet. By a long shot.

A frown touches my lips. This is a dangerous game to play, but I want to play it. And I want to win. No, I *need* to win. I've been intrigued by Destiny for months, and I've finally got a shot at dating her. There's no way I'm letting this chance go.

My heart thumps harder when her eyes catch mine. She smiles and I smile back. I can treat her so well that she bends her rules for me, but I'm too scared to rely on my old moves. Something tells me that being slick won't get me anywhere with her.

I need help from someone who can turn me into the kind of man she would be foolish to walk away from.

I need Doc.

FOUR

LIZETTE

I THOUGHT pregnancy made women look tired, worn out and stressed. I thought new wrinkles would form in dark skin, mapping lines of frustration.

I thought exhaustion crawled into eye bags to make themselves at home. I thought smiles would tremble and stretch only to fall flat from the terror of having a little one depend on you and only you for basic survival.

But, looking at Harriet, I wonder if motherhood is different when your husband is rich and caring and *there*.

Perhaps tears fell from my eyes every night, perhaps misery latched on to me like Amir latched onto my breast, perhaps I lost my smile and vigor because I did not have things like money or a husband or access to good healthcare.

I'm not jealous of Harriet.

Quite the opposite.

I'm thrilled.

I love to see mothers thriving. It's why I'm so passionate about the foundation. Why I believe so much in the women who walk through the doors. Mothers—whether they have a husband or not, whether they have a support system or not—deserve the world.

Harriet beams at me as she waves. She's wearing stretchy pants and a halter top that shows off her lingering pregnancy belly. Her hair falls over her shoulders, one side pinned back with a sparkly clip.

She looks pampered. Expensive. Adored.

I've seen many mothers—hell, I've been the mother—with jaded eyes. Down-turned lips. Heart turned to stone from being shattered constantly. From being stressed during a time when the body is going through the most changes.

It's beautiful to see a woman in the midst of motherhood wearing her happiness on her sleeve.

“You look amazing.” Harriet gasps, her eyes falling over me.

“I was just about to say that to you.” I pull out the chair and fall into the seat across from her.

The restaurant is new. From the vaulted ceilings and the white-clothed tables, it's fine dining to the max. I hope the food is worth the price tag. I'm buying today.

The waiter arrives. Orders are given. Drinks are presented to us, and Harriet starts chugging on a glass of lemon water.

“Are you okay with being away from the little one?”

“I miss him already.” She pouts.

“You poor thing.”

“No, don't feel sorry for me. I'm going to make a concentrated effort *not* to turn into one of those mothers who talks about her baby and nothing else.” She hoists a dark finger. “It's tempting, but I'll give it my best.”

I laugh. “I would love to hear about your baby.”

“You first.” Sunshine falls against her sharp cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. She smiles. “How are things with you and Johnny? You've been going steady for almost a year, right?”

“Nine months.”

“The length of a pregnancy.” She ducks her head. “Oh gosh. There I go.”

“It's cute.”

“I want a do-over. That was the practice run.” Her fingers tug on the straw. Lips painted a soft maroon pucker over the drink.

“He’s good to me.”

“He’s Johnny.”

I want to smile at the way she’s so confident. His name is synonymous with a man who’s sixty percent ready for marriage. It’s not a fluke. His character was proven repeatedly in his actions. He’s patient, sensitive, caring. He was there for me when I was confused about Patrick.

My shoulders relax. *Johnny isn’t cheating on me. I don’t have a reason to think like that.*

“Have you guys talked about it?” Harriet asks quietly.

I startle. “About what?”

“A future.”

I rub my ring finger. There used to be a tan line, but it faded quickly. Toward the end of my marriage, I kept taking my ring off when I went to the gym. The tan line started disappearing then.

“I don’t know if I ever want to get married again,” I murmur.

She gives me an understanding smile. The kind that makes the eyes look sad even when the lips are upturned.

“With Johnny,” I press my hands flat on the table, “I feel like we’ve already made a commitment to each other, but it’s just between us, you know? It doesn’t have to be validated by anyone else. Not by family. Not by law or the government.”

“But it’s different when a man voluntarily signs a contract to be with you every day,” Harriet points out. “When it’s just between the two of you, it’s quiet. Quieter to enter and it’ll be quieter to break. You can say things without it meaning anything because there’s no law to back it up. There’s nothing written down and acknowledged by an authority that’s higher than you.” She chuckles and leans back. “I’m not telling you to get married though. I’m just saying.”

“Patrick put our marriage on paper, and it still didn’t mean anything.”

“Patrick is a jerk.” She rolls her eyes.

My laughter is subdued.

“You’re right. Marriage doesn’t guarantee anything. But being willing to put it on paper in front of witnesses and in front of the country tells the entire world that this person is mine. Don’t you want to put your stamp on him?” She smirks teasingly. “I *know* there are ladies gunning for Johnny.”

“What do you mean?” I stiffen. “Is someone flirting with Johnny?”

The sparkle leaves her eyes. “What? I mean... I don’t know.”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip. I remember Johnny’s sneaky behavior when he rejected that call in front of me. The hunch I felt in that moment roars to prominence. *There’s something he’s not telling me.*

“Whoa, Lizette. What are you thinking?” Harriet puts her hand on top of mine.

“Nothing.” My throat tightens. “You don’t think... Johnny would ever be attracted to someone else, do you?”

“Of course he could.”

A chill runs down my spine.

“Hey.” Harriet tilts her head so I’m forced to meet her gaze. “Men don’t ever lose their ability to feel attracted to someone. It’s not a switch they can flip when they get married or enter a serious relationship. Women are attracted to other men too. But it can end there. It can stop there. It’s all a choice. A choice we make to guard our thoughts and keep our eyes on the person we love.”

I bob my head, finding it hard to breathe or speak.

“Jerrison and I have a rule about being transparent. He’s accountable to me when there’s someone giving him the heart eyes. He’ll put that person in her place if she steps out of line.

Sometimes, he asks me to be there. Sometimes, he does it alone.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that women are stepping on your husband? He’s married!”

“He’s hot. And he dotes on me. Of course other women would observe that. Of course they’d want a man who treats them the way my husband treats me.” Her voice has a teasing edge, almost like she’s trying hard to lighten the mood. “If you weren’t with Johnny, wouldn’t you want him too?”

“Not if he had a girlfriend,” I mumble.

“Obviously.” She rolls her eyes. “It was a joke, Liz.”

I’m not amused. Johnny is gorgeous, which is already catnip to other women. He also treats me like I’m his entire world. What woman wouldn’t see that and want a piece of him?

Harriet’s voice brings me back to the conversation. “My husband and I have been on a long journey. He broke my trust, and then worked hard to earn it back. Now, he treasures that trust. Protects it with everything he has. He’s proven that he’ll choose me no matter what circumstances he’s presented with. Johnny’s proven the same thing. You don’t have to worry.”

“Right.” I grab hold of Harriet’s pep talk and let it carry me throughout the rest of the day.

Johnny is a good man. He treats me like a queen. I’m safe with him. My hunch is wrong.

I meet Johnny that evening. He picks me up from the foundation and welcomes me into his arms. We hold hands in the car. His touch is warm. Light. His voice makes me want to curl against his side and fall asleep.

It’s scary how deeply he’s entrenched in my life. Doc told me to become a PI and I feel like I’ve laxed on that because my heart has taken over.

I don’t just like Johnny.

I need Johnny.

I need him to answer all my phone calls and listen when I have a problem. I need him to walk me through solutions in that calm, objective way of his. I need him to kiss me before he leaves and when he sees me again the next day. I need his laughter. His quiet murmurs in my ear.

I store things like funny videos, heart-wrenching client stories or tiny victories in my heart and explode all over him the moment we're together.

And it's terrifying.

Everything feels bigger and more dangerous the harder I fall down the rabbit hole.

I know I should be more careful, but I don't remember how. It's like I'm so lost in him that I wouldn't find the path back to a PI unless I start cutting off the connection.

"What are you thinking about?" Johnny asks, his voice deep and velvety.

"Nothing." I turn and look up at him. The setting sun paints his skin in shades of yellow and red. Strong shoulders strain against a simple button down. Full lips curve up in a tender smile.

"Nothing, huh? How was lunch with Harriet?"

"Good." I chat about my date with Harriet until Johnny parks in front of my place. We're about to walk up together when he gets a call.

His eyes turn shifty, and he glances at me over the top of the truck. "Sunshine, you go up first." He ducks into the car and closes the door. When he sees that I haven't moved from beside the truck, he turns his head away and whispers into the phone.

A parade of red flags dance in front of me.

Why is Johnny hiding his calls? Why is he being so secretive?

We don't have secrets between us.

I remain on the sidewalk, a part of me hoping there's an explanation.

When he finally climbs out of the car, he's quiet. Dark eyes fall over my face, searching for something. "You okay?"

I fold my arms over my chest. Even as my hackles rise, my voice remains even. "Who was that?"

"We should head inside." His fingers graze my back and nudge.

I remain rooted in place.

He sighs. Glances away. "Sunshine, it was nothing."

"Who was it?"

"Just... my mother." He offers me a strained smile.

My heart burns like I swallowed a bottle of acid.

Johnny clears his throat and takes a step back. "I've gotta catch up on some work at the office. You can head in without me, right?"

"Johnny."

"I'll see you tomorrow, sunshine." He turns abruptly, climbs into his car and drives off.

The wind picks up.

Storm clouds roll overhead.

Feeling off-kilter, I stumble into my apartment and kick my shoes off at the door.

It's okay. Johnny is a good man. I can trust him. I won't let what Patrick did to me ruin my relationship.

Tears prick the back of my eyes.

Deep breaths.

It's a struggle to stay calm. To pretend that alarm bells aren't going off in my head.

In the chaos, I hear a chime from my phone.

It's a call from Johnny's mother.

I muster as much enthusiasm as I can before answering.
“Hey, Mrs. Bancroft.”

“Lizette! Darling! I’m coming back to the city in a few weeks. How do you feel about us girls having a little day trip, hm? I know you have your work at the foundation. That’s why I’m making a reservation in advance.”

“I would love that.”

“Perfect. I’ll set up all the details and give you a ring when I have something more concrete.”

“Sure.” I pause. My fingers start to tremble.

Don’t be that kind of girlfriend, Liz. Don’t...

“Mrs. Bancroft, did you call Johnny a few minutes ago?”

“Johnny? No, I haven’t talked to Johnny all day.”

Dread rushes through my body. It’s thick. Pulsing. Ugly. It twists my insides until they’re scrambled into a knot.

“Did... did I say something wrong, dear? Is there something he needs to talk to me about?”

“No, it’s fine.” I mumble a goodbye and hang up.

My legs lose their strength.

My knees sink to the ground.

An icy revelation crawls out of the shadows and inches over me.

Johnny was *not* talking to his mother tonight.

He looked me right in the eyes and lied to me.

FIVE

PATRICK

THE AUTO SHOP IS LARGE. Too large. Something's different. I take in my surroundings and notice the rows of cars have gotten significantly smaller.

Doc must have hired help. Either that or he has a robot army working for him.

With the space free of broken things, there's more room to get around. My walking cane taps the cement floor. The sound jumps around the workshop, banging against the stained white walls, the long, fluorescent lights, and the shutters rolled up at the top of the doors.

The stench of car oil hangs heavy in the air. Even though it's been months since I've inhaled the scent, I breathe in like a fish jumping back into water.

Up ahead, a man is bent over a truck. Most of his face is being swallowed by the open hood.

The tapping of my cane gets louder.

Doc straightens slowly, almost as if he's taking his time for dramatic effect. I wonder what he's thinking. *The prodigal son has returned.*

I squeeze the top of my cane as sweat pops out on my forehead. A drop runs down my chin. I'm careful when I wipe it with the back of my hand.

Doc studies me with shrewd brown eyes. He looks the same. Silver-stained beard, dark skin, and dirty overalls. A moment frozen in time and stretched out for infinity.

That frown etched on his face could be disapproval. Or it could be concern about my mobility. I'm a big man. I was a college basketball legend before my injury. I was intimidating enough to work as a bouncer for many years before the agency. It's not everyday that a guy like me is seen limping along with a walking cane.

Thankfully, there's no pity in Doc's eyes.

I respect that.

"Patrick." My name coming from Doc's mouth is harsh. Months of judgements rolled into one word.

"Hey, Doc. I know it's been a while." My voice is nervous, high pitched. I can hear the guilt and hesitation rolling through it. Uneasy, I lift my chin and grasp for something else. Anything else. Self-importance. Defensiveness.

His eyes slide over me again. It cuts me to the quick. Strips me of every line of defense I have. There's something in his gaze that tells me he's kicked me out once and he'll do it again. In a heartbeat.

"I disappeared on you. I know that."

He arches an eyebrow.

"I was recovering." I gesture to the walking stick and hope it's enough of an argument. "And there was no relationship to repair because I wasn't in one. I'm barely in one now, but I came anyway."

His mouth tightens. "That's not how this works."

"I understand." I cross the room and stand beside the truck.

"Do you?"

"You're upset."

"I'm observing." His eyes darken. "This isn't the right order."

"Then what is?"

He grunts. "You don't seek me out when you're interested in someone. By then, you're already in the game and trying to

learn while you're playing on the court.”

“Sports analogies.” I keep my eyes on the grassy parking lot behind his workshop. “Nice.”

He frowns.

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry it took me this long to come back, but I’m here now.”

“For a woman.”

“Yes, for a woman.”

“Out of order.” His hand whips through the air. “You should have been using your down-time—the time before you’re interested in anyone—to prepare yourself. To develop your skills and mindset.”

I bob my head, hoping he’ll finish his rant soon.

“That’s the time to learn to become a mechanic. Before the car appears. Not when a car pops up in front of you and you have a problem.” His eyes dig into me.

“Doc, I could have done this on my own, but I came to you. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Yes, it counts for immaturity. It counts for a lack of understanding.”

Geez. He’s just as harsh as I remember. I see time and distance has done nothing to cure his frosty demeanor.

I lean more heavily on my walking stick. “Doc, why are you being so hard on me? After everything I’ve been through, I see the world in a completely new way. Look at me.” I gesture to my gaunt cheeks and bum leg. “I’ve changed a lot, haven’t I?”

“Physical appearance is not a sign of change. What you say and how you act is the only data I rely on.” He rounds the hood and fiddles with the car battery. “You went to a low place. It’s time to come back from that. It’s not time to play around. Especially if you’re thinking seriously about somebody.”

“I’m ready, Doc. Whatever I have to do.” Sincerity rings in my voice. “I really like this girl.”

He stops. Studies me like he’s trying to peer into my head and get out everything I’m hiding. Finally, Doc grunts. “If you’re ready, then hand me the wrench.”

Eagerly, I stumble to the toolbox. It’s sitting at its usual spot, rusty and old as ever. I know Doc has plenty of new toolboxes, gifts from all the grateful husbands who’ve passed through his shop. Yet, he likes the old things. The forgotten things. The ugly things.

I grab the wrench. Limping back to him, I offer it.

He takes it with oil-stained fingers and attacks the valves on the engine. “So what are we working on?”

“I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“What’s your goal with this young lady?”

I picture Destiny’s flawless brown skin, full lips and bright brown eyes. “I want her.”

“What does that mean?”

I answer slowly. “I want her. I want a serious relationship.”

“So why do you need me?” He’s working on the car and acting like he’s not listening to every word, every pause, every hesitation.

“I want to settle down and be there for one person, but it’s tough, Doc. I find myself failing constantly. I’m here in front of you because I want to know how I can change that. She makes me want to change that.”

He arches an eyebrow and shifts the subject randomly. “What are the things you look for in a woman?”

I’m used to Doc’s ability to jump subjects, and I move smoothly to the next topic. “In a woman? I like the three b’s—brains, beauty and body.” Easy. *Come on, Doc. You’ll need to try harder than that to trick me.*

“Which one would be priority?”

I grin because I don't know how much honesty Doc can take. "Her body. Definitely. If a woman doesn't have the right look, it just doesn't do it for me."

"What if multiple women have a good body?" He wrestles two wires out of the car engine. "How do you choose one?"

"Doc, come on." I smirk. "Why choose one when you can have all, right?" My laughter rings in the room, but it is not joined by Doc's. I realize who I'm talking to and clear my throat. "I'm just kidding."

His lips curl down. I stiffen in annoyance. My friends would have cracked a rib if they heard that line. I can picture Tyrell and Bucky slapping their knees and booming with laughter. Doc, unfortunately, does not have a sense of humor.

I frown. "What's the problem?"

"The fact that you can't see the problem *is* a problem."

I tilt my head to the ceiling and restrain a frustrated groan.

Doc keeps working on the truck. "Imagine you're in a race. All players have remote-control cars. But you have five vehicles with five different remotes to drive at once. Your opponent only has one vehicle to drive. Which one of you would win the race? Which of you would be the most efficient and focused?"

The one with the most focus will be the driver with only one car. But damn. I'm not going to admit I get his lesson so quickly.

"Man, I was just joking, Doc. Don't be so serious."

"It can't be a joke when it lines up perfectly with the issues that you're having." His thick eyebrows pull together.

I sigh.

Doc grabs a dirty rag and starts to clean his hands. "The fuel for a relationship is 'all'."

"What?" I tilt my head.

"What makes a relationship successful is giving your all. Anything less than that will cause you to not complete your

journey.”

“More car analogies.”

He tosses the rag aside.

I follow him and watch as he drinks his lemon water. He has yet to offer me a cup.

“Your lessons are too vague, Doc. What am I supposed to do with an instruction like ‘give it my all?’”

“It’s not an instruction. It’s a mentality shift. Once you learn to give your all, it covers a multitude of things.”

“Like what?” I huff. I’m starting to remember why I stopped attending these sessions.

“It creates boundaries.” He taps his fingers against his cup. “You have no time to wander off.” Another head bob. “It defines priority. It creates focus and the right attitude.”

“Great.” That means absolutely nothing to me.

“Are you two going out already?” Doc asks.

“We have a date next week. I want to make sure she has a good impression of me.”

“Then I would recommend you give your all... but with a limit. It needs to be balanced.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” I’d throw my hands up if I could let go of this cane without falling.

“Don’t get aggressive, stalker-ish, or pushy. Giving your all doesn’t mean making her uncomfortable.”

I shake my head. “Doc, I... you’re losing me.”

He sets his cup down gently. “Say you need to drive a great distance, so you fill the tank with gas. You have all the gas you need, but you only move at the speed that’s necessary.” His fingers tap the table. “The car being capable of running at a hundred miles an hour doesn’t mean you have to gas it all the way there. A mature approach is driving at the speed that is necessary, while keeping your fuel tank full at all times.”

“Stay focused and give her my all, but keep it on a throttle.”

“Exactly. Practice that.” He waves me away. “Now go ahead and pay the secretary. And don’t come back until next month.”

“Next month?”

“You can’t give your all in one spurt and expect that your job is done. The only way to properly give your all to a woman is to do so consistently.”

“I got this, Doc.”

His stare doesn’t hold much hope.

I don’t care. My marriage with Liz fell apart, but I’m on a new path. I’m into the beautiful nurse who hates cheaters and, even if it makes no sense, I’m pretty sure she is my destiny.

SIX

LIZETTE

MY STOMACH ROLLS as I wind the car window down. I swallow the bile that wants to surge through my throat and keep my eyes on Johnny's truck just up ahead.

He parks across the street, steps onto the sidewalk and slides his sunshades over his face. He looks like a GQ model. Like a celebrity with his own fragrance. Long, sturdy legs. Square jaw. Eyes that can rock a woman's world.

My Johnny.

A liar.

My stomach lurches again.

Calm down, Liz.

I can handle this.

Johnny enters the flower shop. Ten minutes later, he leaves with three bouquets. He glides into his car and the engine rumbles like a dream. He's been tinkering with it. He learned some things after working with Doc. Too bad he didn't learn how to keep lies out of his mouth.

The bitterness surges in me, but I push it away.

Focus.

Doc told me to be a private investigator. He told me that, in the dating stage, I have all the power. That I should use that power to observe everything about the man I'm with.

I didn't listen. Sure, at first, I held steady. Then Johnny showed me what he wanted me to see. I thought it was

enough. Time passed and the closer I got to Johnny, the less I wanted to investigate him. He gave me no reason to doubt him. No reason to restrain myself.

Well, now I have one.

Who were you talking to that night, Johnny? And why did you lie to me about it?

It's my fault for growing lax and letting love cloud my judgement. Since I stumbled as a private investigator, I'm going to make up for it now. With style.

"He's on the move," I hiss, noticing Johnny's car merging into traffic. Nodding to the taxi driver, I demand, "Don't lose sight of him."

The driver nods and takes off like an extra in the *Fast and Furious* franchise. I promised him double the fare if he helped my investigation. He was happy to oblige. Even asked if I needed a recommendation for a good PI.

I told him no.

That I *am* the PI.

And he seemed impressed.

"Looks like he's heading to that cafe up ahead, ma'am."

"Keep going. Don't get too close though." I stare out the window, my eyes stuck on Johnny's car. He flicks the indicator, and his taillight starts blinking.

The driver was right. He *is* heading to a cafe.

With three bouquets.

That are clearly not for me.

I glance at my phone. It's open to my last text message with Johnny. He told me he loved me and that he was going straight to the office.

Does this look like the office, Johnny? My teeth clench together. I'm glad I gave into my instincts and trailed him. If I hadn't met Doc, I would've never had the courage. Fear would

have held me in a chokehold. Was I a snoop? A nosy woman? Someone who can't mind her own business?

Hell. To. The. Yes.

Thanks to Doc, I will not be made to feel ashamed or hesitant about my investigation. All of Johnny's secrets will be uncovered one way or another.

And if it turns out that he *is* betraying me...

Pain strikes my heart.

I lift my chin anyway.

If Johnny is cheating, then it's over. I'm not going to stay like I did with Patrick. I'm not going through that hurt all over again.

Please, Johnny. I want this to be a giant misunderstanding.

The driver parks across the street from the cafe. I watch as Johnny climbs out and grabs all three bouquets. With a deep breath, I haul out my phone and start taking shots of my boyfriend.

"You don't use a camera?" the cab driver asks.

I spare him a quick glance. "What?"

"Most PIs use high tech cameras, right? With the giant lens?"

I want to tell him to be quiet. Can't he see that a woman's heart is on the line? Can't he tell that I can barely breathe and my fingers are clammy from the stress? Of course not. He doesn't know what Johnny means to me. What losing him will do to me.

Johnny heads toward the cafe. A group of young girls try to walk in at the same time. Like a gentleman, Johnny steps back and opens the door for them. An elderly couple waddles past him and he keeps the door open for them too. They say something and he responds. They laugh, charmed, and stare at him with starry eyes.

Is that all a front?

No, it can't be.

No one can fake being a good person for that long.

My heart begins to calm. *See?*—the side of me that's in love with Johnny pipes up—*would someone as gentle and kind as him betray you?*

Johnny finally enters the coffee shop. I lose sight of him and press my body against the door. The wind is cold as it blows into my face. *Where did he go?*

“You want me to go in?” the driver asks. “Scout the place?”

I shake my head.

He nods and turns back to the front.

Finally, Johnny pops into my line of sight again. He's visible through the windows of the cafe. He seems to be looking for someone. That person catches his eye, and he waves with one of the bouquets. A bright smile, blinding even from this distance, crosses his handsome face.

My heart thuds.

I force my eyes to the only person in his line of sight.

A woman. Blonde. Rail-thin. Pretty pink blazer. She looks like every Hollywood stereotype of a privileged princess. It wouldn't surprise me to find out she attended the same prep schools and riding academies as Johnny. It wouldn't surprise me that their families go way back. Maybe they were even arranged to be married at birth.

Really, Liz? Pro-Johnny hisses. You're concocting one giant story based on nothing? Maybe it's just a business meeting. Maybe it's...

My entire body goes cold when Johnny hands the woman all three bouquets. She puts them to her nose and inhales, looking delighted. They exchange smiles. Then Johnny reaches his hand out. The woman puts her fingers in his.

Ice seeps into my body, the bottoms of my feet, my thighs, my toes. I hear something breaking and realize it's my heart,

shattering and falling into a dark hole.

The driver glances over his shoulder, lips extended, eyes full of pity. “You gonna take the picture?”

I’m going to throw up.

“Here. You do it.” I sling an arm over my stomach. “Please.”

He snaps the photo with my phone.

I glance at Johnny again. He’s removed his hand, but he’s still staring at the woman intently, hanging on her every word.

This isn’t business. My intuition picks up another thread. There’s something more... intense between them. *How long has he been meeting her? Who is she? Why didn’t I smell her on him? Why didn’t I know?*

The driver’s eyes are on me again. He’s watching all my hope disintegrate like paper in a rain puddle. He sees the anguish crawling over my face. I can tell because his pity intensifies. He opens his mouth to say something and then shuts it.

I dig my fingers into my black skirt. “That’s enough. Let’s go.”

“Where to, ma’am?”

My voice is scratchy when I give him directions to Johnny’s place.

The moment I step into Johnny’s villa, I head straight to his bedroom. My instinct is to start shredding his pillows and setting fire to his toothbrush.

It takes effort to focus on my sleuthing. Takes even more effort to be subtle about it. To calmly pick through the trash can in his office. Open his drawers and shuffle through them in a way that nothing is disturbed. Put things back in their place like I was never there. Like a ghost tiptoed over them.

I go to his closet next. Dip my fingers into the suit pockets.

Empty.

Empty.

Until it's not.

Until I find something.

I snag the piece of plastic and an invisible knife slips between my ribs. It hurts with every breath, a pain that sharpens and sharpens until the world blurs in front of me.

It's a hotel card. The kind that only VIP members get. A hotel Johnny's never taken me to.

Did he go with that woman?

The salad I ate for lunch threatens to come back up.

I want the floor to swallow me completely. I need to fall to pieces. Shrink into a fraction of myself. I need to disappear. I put my forehead in my hands and struggle to breathe.

My phone rings.

It's Melody.

"Miss Lizette, you need to get back to the foundation. Quick. There's a woman here. She's running from someone. She's terrified."

The tears are creeping to the edge of my eyes, but I pull them back with an inhale. "Any physical wounds? Bleeding? Scars? Do we need to take her to the hospital?"

"No, she's not visibly wounded."

"Is she open to going to the police station?" Our foundation is for single mothers, not for women suffering from abuse. But so many single mothers *are* in dangerous situations, so we've had training for cases like this.

"No, she's not talking much. Except to say that he's coming for her. She doesn't want to stay at our safe houses because she's afraid to put the others in danger."

I pick myself up as best as I can. Someone needs me. I'll have to fall apart later.

"I'll be right there."

An errant tear falls as I grab my bag and hustle out of Johnny's mansion. There's a picture of us on the mantle in his living room. His arms are around me. His eyes are glued to my face. A man in love.

Lies.

All lies.

I really thought choosing myself meant choosing him. How could I have been so wrong?

SEVEN

PATRICK

MY CONFIDENCE WANES the moment I step out of Doc's shop and head back into the real world. His advice feels impractical. Especially in this day and age.

Give my all? What does that even look like? I wouldn't know where to start because I've never had to go there.

My priorities are simple. Me first. All the time. That way, nothing gets complicated.

I've survived decades without putting anyone else in the number one spot. Women have come and gone. Liz was one of those women. I put a ring on her finger, and she didn't even keep it there. Why the hell would Doc ask me to put my all into a relationship this young, this early, when my *marriage* couldn't even survive? The risk of wasting my time is astronomical.

I wrestle with Doc's advice. Push the information through my brain in cycles.

The annoyance rushes in at first. Strong. Formidable. What if I give this woman my all and come out looking like a punk?

I know how that story goes. I'm a sports agent. I've seen wide-eyed, fresh-out-of-college bucks get hammered by predatorial women like it's a skip in the park. In the world of gangly teenagers suddenly thrust into the spotlight, drowning in money and fame, sharks abound. And not just the kind with shady contracts and under-the-table slavery deals. I'm talking lady sharks. The kind with red lips, enhanced breasts and

plastic butts. I'm talking women ten years older than teenagers, preying on their naiveté and adrenaline rush.

They wipe these men clean, pick their teeth after dinner and move on to the next chump.

Why?

Because those boys are blinded by lust and what they thought was love. They give it their all, everything they have, thinking these women want them for more than their status and bank account. One blown ACL or bad financial decision and they find out how fast their girl can turn her back.

Idiots.

I've seen it happen over and over, almost like a play that's gone stale. No way am I becoming that chump.

All?

Does it have to be 'all'?

Can't I give Destiny *some* and then, when I approve of her response to what I've offered, she can get the rest?

The self-lecture creeps in next. Oddly, it sounds just like Doc's voice in my head.

Real change is when you think differently.

Think differently? How the hell do I control my thoughts? It's not like I scoop them out of a pan and throw them at my brain. They just... exist.

Real change is when you think differently, Patrick.

I fold my fingers into fists and slam my head against it. My kitchen table, where I've been sitting for the past ten minutes, rattles with the movement.

In the midst of my frustration, Destiny's face pops into mind. Smooth brown skin. Long, thick braids. Defiant brown eyes. Perfect brown lips. Everything a man could want wrapped in a tempting package.

I want her more than I've wanted anyone. And I know she won't let me into her life just because I'm desperate to be a

part of it. Especially if she finds out about my past.

It doesn't matter if Doc's advice is more than I can handle. If I want Destiny, if I want to prove I'm nothing like the kind of man she despises—uncommitted, untrustworthy, despicable, I can't do things my way. That path leads to zero chances with the woman who's been on my mind since I first spotted her in the hospital.

I have to do this Doc's way.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I shift the direction of my thoughts from *'I can't give my all'* to *'how do I show her my all?'*

It's a question with no real answer.

Until I pass by the hospital the next day and spot the coffee shop where we had our first date.

Something clicks.

I limp into the shop, my cane snapping against the tiled floor. The cashier's smile is tinged with familiarity and a hint of pity. Most people try not to look directly at my walking cane and she is no different.

Her brown eyes remain drilled in the middle of my forehead. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Are you familiar with the nurses from that hospital?" I point to the building in the distance.

"We sure are, sir."

I lean against the counter to keep my balance, snap my phone from my back pocket and slide it open. Tapping to Destiny's social media, I flash a picture. "This woman. Do you recognize her?"

Her eyes narrow and then she flicks her gaze from me to the picture. A hint of unease spreads across her face. "Exactly what are you asking, sir?"

"Nothing weird." I laugh self-consciously. Of course she'll be wary of a giant man leaning on a walking stick, asking about one of the nurses.

Sheepishly, I forge on. “I want to pay for her coffee.”

Her eyes widen. “She hasn’t stopped by today.”

“But she will.” I lean forward. “Right?”

Hesitation steals her words again but, after a beat, the server nods.

“In that case,” I reach for my wallet, “I’ll pay for two weeks of coffee for her.”

The mistrust disintegrates, replaced with a cheesy grin. “You must be her boyfriend. That’s very romantic of you.”

“Thanks.” My chest puffs out. Hell yeah. I guess I was on to something. If this chick thinks my coffee splurge is a good idea, that means Destiny will love it.

“Should I say it’s from her boyfriend when she asks?” The server’s eyes twinkle.

I start to form the word ‘yes’ before I remember Doc’s instruction to give my all... with restraint. Destiny hasn’t agreed to any labels yet. She might be uncomfortable thinking that I’m running around parading myself as her boyfriend.

Shaking my head, I step back. “Nah, don’t tell her anything.”

“Nothing?” Her eyebrows fly up.

“Tell her she won a promotion or something.” I slip the credit card back into my wallet and cram the whole thing in my baggy jeans. “We good?”

“Yes, sir.” The woman beams at me, a flush in her cheeks. “I’ll make sure she gets her coffee and I’ll keep your involvement under wraps.”

“I appreciate that.” I leave a generous tip in the jar and head out into the sunshine.

My gaze automatically swings toward the hospital. I wonder what Destiny is doing right now. Changing IV fluids? Checking on patients? Hanging out at the nurse’s desk? Just thinking about her makes my chest feel tight.

It takes me a second to realize what the feeling is.

I miss her.

Damn. I barely know this woman. I spent most of the year following her with my eyes. Then I spent one hour max in her company. That's it. How am I missing her already? Is something wrong with me?

My phone chirps, saving me from self-diagnosing what is, clearly, a mental breakdown. I limp to a bench and check my cell. My eyebrows slant together when I notice Bucky's name on the screen.

I haven't seen the boys since before my accident. Bucky went radio silent. Tyrell sent a text long after my surgeries. He claimed he'd just heard about the car crash and asked if I was okay. I responded to his text, but he never wrote back.

I know how my boys think. Anybody who rains on the parade isn't invited to the next bash. And a man in a wheelchair isn't exactly party animal material.

With a sigh, I answer the call.

"Yo, my man!" Bucky's deep voice rings through the line. It brings a rush of good memories. Riding down the streets as mischievous kids. Waiting outside a nightclub in the pouring rain as young adults. Shooting hoops and trash talking during dominos like old men twice our age.

I can't lie. I missed having my crew. "'Sup, Bucky?"

"I heard you got some money back after the divorce."

My eyes narrow. "Is that why you called?"

"Nah, I wanted to see if you were well enough to hang tonight."

"Hang?"

"I'm not about to push no wheelchair, man." He laughs loudly. "But Tyrell said he saw you getting around the other day. And I told him we should invite you out."

My eyes lift to the sky as I debate what I should say. They dumped me the moment I lost everything. Now that they've

heard I've got some money and mobility back, suddenly they want the band back together?

My lips form a 'no', until I realize that I haven't had genuine fun since before the accident. I'm okay with being alone, but I'm a little tired of staring at the television or working on my computer for hours on end.

Real change requires that you think differently.

But that doesn't apply to friends, does it?

Grinning wide, I dip my chin. "I'm down."

"Yes!" Bucky roars. "Patrick's back, baby! It's about to be wild tonight!"

I laugh.

Wild, huh? I look forward to seeing what that's like again.

EIGHT

LIZETTE

THE COPPERY TASTE of blood fills my mouth as I bite the inside of my cheek. It's sharp and calming. Brings the clarity I need to keep my voice from shaking.

"A business trip?" I croak.

"Sunshine, are you okay?" Johnny asks. It's the tone he uses on me when I'm being grumpy or especially short-tempered. A quiet, patient tone. The moment I hear it, I'd walk into his arms. Put my ear straight against his chest. Listen to his heartbeat until the world stopped feeling like a rollercoaster. And then he would put his arms around me. Massage my shoulders. Angle me into his body until I didn't know where I stopped and he began.

I'm glad he's using that tone over the phone this morning because I don't think I could walk into his arms. I'd just as soon slap him in the face than listen to his heartbeat.

"I'm fine." My voice is still. Cold. "Have a nice flight."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Why are you asking that?" The annoyance snaps out of me.

He hesitates. "It's unlike you to be so calm."

"As opposed to what? Shrieking hysteria?"

"You normally ask where I'm going. How long I'll be gone." There's a hint of teasing when he says, "Aren't you going to miss me?"

“I’m busy, Johnny.”

The teasing leaves his voice completely. “Lizette, are you... did something happen?”

“No. Have a safe flight.” I end the call and slam my phone face-down on the table in my office.

I can imagine the shock that must be spreading over his handsome face. I can see his thick brows lifting, his mouth falling open, his eyes squinting.

I’ve never hung up on Johnny before. We’re like teenagers, hanging on until the last second.

You hang up.

No, you hang up.

Obnoxious.

I want to shake those memories loose. They hurt. And I’m at work. This is not the place to fall apart because the man who stole my heart decided to toss it in the trash.

A knock at the door prompts me to look up.

Melody pokes her head in. “You said you wanted to know when the client arrived.” Her eyes slide over me. “She’s here.”

I rise wearily.

Melody sucks in a breath. “Are you okay? You look... tired. Did you get any sleep last night?”

Who would sleep well after finding a hotel card in their boyfriend’s suit jacket? After catching him knee-deep in lies? After seeing him getting cozy with a beautiful blonde who looks like she was made for him?

I swallow my anger, but it simmers in my voice when I bark, “Let’s go.”

Melody doesn’t ask any more questions. She follows me to the welcome room where we meet with clients. It’s a cozy space with a large brown sofa, a shag rug and calming green walls.

A small, portly woman sits at the very edge of the couch, as if she's ready to spring up at any moment. Her eyes shift back and forth, and her chin is tucked against her chest.

I slip on a calming smile and approach her. "Good morning, Paula. I'm Lizette. I heard you wanted to see me?"

"Yes." She clears her throat. "I wanted to say thank you."

"Oh, there's no need for that." I wave my hand.

"I..." Her eyes dart to the ground. "I also have a favor to ask."

"Of course." I lean forward, waiting.

She glances at Melody.

I keep the smile on my face and motion to my assistant. "Melody, do you mind getting us some tea?"

"Sure."

I lower my voice when I speak to Paula. "What kind of tea would you like?"

"Anything." She dots at the sweat on her brow.

I nod at Melody who ducks out of the room and closes the door tightly behind her.

"Alright, Paula. It's just you and me now. How can I help you?"

"I left some of my baby's things at the trailer." She licks her lips. Wipes her hands up and down her jeans. It's a nervous tick. I want to place my hand over hers and assure her she's safe now, but I'm not sure she'd welcome the gesture.

"Would you like us to get in contact with the police? We can arrange a restraining order so you can get your things—"

"No!" She blurts.

I blink in shock.

"No, he... he's a police officer. He'll find out."

My lips pull into my mouth. Abusers come in many shapes and forms, but it's especially disheartening to hear that

someone who's supposed to be catching the bad guys is a bad guy himself.

Paula's eyes fill with tears, but she doesn't cry. "I don't want any trouble."

Fear seeps out of her skin. It's stink. Putrid.

He did this to her.

I wish I could charge at that punk with guns blazing, but Paula's case is particularly tricky because the abuse wasn't physical. He shouted at her, threw things at her, but he didn't put his hands on her. Emotional abuse is still abuse, but it's difficult to prosecute.

"My mother's broach." Paula trembles. She's speaking quietly, eyes on the ground. "It was the only thing she gave me before we migrated here. I promised her I would give it to my daughter when she grew up. I need to sneak in and get it."

"I'm afraid it's too dangerous—"

"That's why I was hoping that your," she peeks up, "boyfriend would help."

"My boyfriend?"

"The girls at the house said he's kind. And trustworthy. He promised to help us whenever we need it. They said he's good people."

The tears ball behind my eyes. Good people? Is that what he is? I suppose men can be awful to the women they love and still contribute to society. People are complex. Even villains can have compassion for puppies.

"We can't ask him for help," I whisper.

"What?"

"We're not asking Johnny for a thing." The words rush out of me, bred from anger and coated in pain.

Paula curls into herself and I realize I might have shouted.

I frown. Reel my anger in. "I'll go myself."

Her head whips up.

“We’ll go in and get it. No cops. Just us.”

“I don’t know if that...”

“If you’re uncomfortable, you can bring someone you trust along. A friend.”

She rubs her hands faster against her jeans. “I don’t really have friends.”

I doubt it’s that she doesn’t have any. Paula seems like a quiet, sweet person. If I had to guess, I’d say her boyfriend didn’t *let* her have friends. Abusers often isolate their victims from a support system.

The bastard.

Anger bristles beneath my veins, building and building. Paula hasn’t looked up for more than three seconds. Her shoulders are hunched. Her eyes are practically drowning in anguish.

She didn’t ask for this life. The man she trusted with her heart, her body and, eventually, her child promised to be there for her. He promised to be sweet to her and love her for the rest of his life.

Paula isn’t an idiot. I’m sure she wouldn’t have gotten with her abuser if he’d shown her his true colors upfront. He probably wooed her, gave her flowers, made her think he was someone else entirely.

He lied to her.

Then he messed her up. Inflicted a pain that she’ll never recover from.

My nostrils flare.

My adrenaline spikes.

Do men think we’re a damn playground? Somewhere to run and wreak havoc until it’s time to go home? I refuse to let men who don’t know how to treasure and cherish a woman win. Paula’s going to get her mother’s broach back if I have to die in the process.

I lean forward. “If you can’t think of anyone, I’ll just—”

“Wait.” Her head bounces up. Silky hair, that she keeps tied at the nape of her neck, comes loose. “I know a nurse. She stood up to him at the hospital. She wanted to get me help, but he found me before...” Paula rummages in her purse and hefts a business card to the light. “She gave me her number and said I should call if I need help. Would she be interested?”

“Only one way to find out.”

“Do you mind...” Paula chews on her bottom lip. “Would you ask her? We didn’t really—if she says no to me, I’ll be even more embarrassed.”

I wiggle my fingers. “Hand the card to me.”

She passes it over.

The card is rough and white with a simple font.

Destiny Paige

Pretty name. I have a feeling she’s a pretty girl too. Anyone with a name like ‘Destiny Paige’ must be stunning.

The line rings for a long time. Paula rubs her hands faster and faster on her jeans. She’s breathing heavily. Her anxiety crawls into the room, thickening the air and making me dizzy.

I sigh. “Sorry, Paula. She must be busy...”

There’s a click.

“*Hello?*”

Paula’s eyes widen.

Mine do too.

I haul the phone to my ear and yell, “Hello? Is this Destiny?”

“Yes.” Her voice is firm and hurried. It seems like we’re calling at a bad time.

“I’m calling on behalf of Paula—”

Destiny’s tone changes completely. “Is she okay? Did that bastard hurt her? I’m going to do some serious damage if he put his hands on her.”

“No.” My lips curl up. I already like this woman. “We need to steal something from his house. Paula’s treasured brooch. She got it from her mother, and she wants it back but, due to some circumstances,” my eyes slide to the woman on the couch, “we have to do the taking ourselves. Paula said you might be interested in helping.”

“I’m in.”

“It might be dangerous.”

Paula’s almost levitating off the chair. Her lips are going to look like sliced hams if she keeps chomping on them.

“I have to warn you that neither of us are really thinking this through,” I add.

“That’s my kind of plan.” Destiny laughs. “I haven’t stopped thinking about how he treated her at the hospital. As long as I get to leave him a little mess when he gets home, I’m in.”

My laughter joins hers. I can already tell that Destiny and I are going to be good friends.

NINE

PATRICK

THE CLUB IS LARGER and louder than I expected. It feels like I'm crawling into a giant boom box.

I start frowning immediately. Maybe my life has been revolving around the agency and the hospital for too long—or maybe I'm just getting old—but the bass is already starting to give me a headache

Bucky and Tyrell exchange excited grins as we push into the crowded room.

“It's hype, right?” Bucky yells. “Much better than the club we got kicked out of that one time.”

Tyrell scowls. “It was Bancroft's place.”

“We saw him there with Liz!” Bucky yells to be heard over the music. He's staring at me with anticipation. Gleefully. Like he expects me to talk crap about my ex-wife and put her down the way I usually would.

A knot tightens in my stomach, but my expression remains cool. “Whatever.”

Bucky pinches his eyebrows together.

Tyrell gives me a weird look. “This way.”

Great. They dropped it. I don't want to talk about Liz. It's still a sore spot that she went skipping into the sunset with Bancroft. For now, I kind of just want to forget my ex-wife exists.

The DJ changes the song. It's more EDM mush. I shake my head and observe the room keenly. The main level holds the bar and dance floor. The walls are dark red, and it looks like blood in the dim lights.

The music gets faster and the people on the dance floor pulse to the beat. It definitely has a more... Caucasian vibe to it. What with everyone jumping up and down with their fists in the air as if it's the only dance move in their toolbox.

I'm more used to music that fills the body. Stirs the soul. Gets under the skin and pushes your hips back and forth. When that rhythm hits you, it's a must to pull someone and start grinding on them. None of this fist-thrusting nonsense.

But everyone is different.

We weave through the crowd. When we get to the bar, Bucky wraps an arm around me. "Let's get *wasted* tonight! What do you say, Patrick? Your treat?" He slaps my chest, almost causing me to lose my balance as my walking cane goes skidding.

I grunt, scrambling to keep upright.

His eyes shift to the side. "Oh, sorry, man. I forgot you're an invalid now." He laughs his head off.

I keep my mouth shut.

Tyrell nudges Bucky in the shoulder and does a subtle head bob in my direction. He's the taller of the two with a more serious disposition. Colorful strobe lights spiral over his cold expression.

Bucky sucks his laughter back in and clears his throat. "Sorry, Pat. I didn't know you were sensitive about that. You look good with that stick, man. Real old-school gangster."

I grip the bar with one hand and adjust my cane properly. It's tough not to get jostled around the crowded counter. Every time the music shifts, someone bumps into me as they sway. I'm starting to think it was a bad idea to come out tonight.

Tyrell clears his throat. "Let's get you to a seat, man."

"I'm fine."

Tyrell taps a girl on the shoulder and gestures to me. At first, she looks annoyed but, when she spies my walking cane, her brows relax and she hops off the stool.

I frown. "It's alright, ma'am. Keep your seat."

"Baby, you look like you need a stiff one." She sashays over to me, her hips swaying sensually. She's nice-looking. A little too broad for my tastes. I like my women slender and athletic, but I could picture myself holding onto those curves while I drive into her from behind...

Patrick, what the hell?

Guilt smears against my chest, leaving an oily sensation behind. It's been a while since I've felt any relief. Not many positions a man can climb into from a wheelchair. Not unless he gets creative.

I'm not above making it work, but the pills I had to take messed with my head and my body. For a long time, my equipment wasn't working the way it should. I'm just starting to feel like myself again and, with that, has come old and familiar longings.

The woman blows me a flirty kiss and trots off.

"Yo, that babe is fire." Bucky places a fist to his lips and stares at the woman's backside as she prances off. "Man, I didn't know women would screw you out of pity. Maybe I should go break my legs."

"You don't need to break your legs. Your head is already broken," I mumble.

He laughs.

I don't.

Tyrell pushes me into the bar stool. "What's with the attitude, man? You've been acting weird since we picked you up."

"Leave him alone, Ty. It's just been a long time. He'll get the hang of things eventually." A smile spreads on Bucky's face as he points to another woman in the distance. She's dancing wildly, her tits bouncing up and down like rubber

jugs. Her hair flails in front of her face and she's wearing long fake nails. "What about her, man? She seems like a nice warm-up."

"A warm-up?" My eyes shoot to his.

"You know? Someone to get you moving again." He points at my pants. "We know you're probably out of practice." Laughter bubbles under his tone. "A girl like that is like riding a tricycle. You got those spare wheels at first. Wear them out a bit." He thrusts his hips and Tyrell snorts. "And then you throw away the wheels to ride them big bicycles."

Tyrell gives him a high-five. "Pat knows what you're talking about." Still grinning brightly, he offers his hand to me. "Right, Pat?"

My hands are heavy.

I keep them at my sides.

Damn. This is funny? Am I supposed to laugh?

As the seconds pass, the smile drips from Tyrell's face and his arms slowly sink back to point at the ground.

"What's your deal, man?" Bucky's eyebrows slash low over his black eyes. "We're trying to get you to loosen up and you're acting like a punk."

"I thought we were just gonna drink tonight."

"But women and booze taste the best together." Bucky smirks. "Especially drinking shots off a naked woman. Like last week..." He hits Tyrell's chest enthusiastically. "Bro, am I right?"

Tyrell wears an equally secretive grin. "Man, that was wild. Never been to a party like that before. Freakiest crap I've ever seen, man. It was heaven."

Heaven. I try to imagine it and, yeah, it gets me excited. I feel myself stirring and my pants tightening, but it's not because I'm seeing a bunch of naked women sprawled out with shot glasses on them.

It's because I'm picturing Destiny, her eyes glowing brown and her fingers tangling in my beard as she pulls me down for a kiss.

Hell, I'm so far gone.

That's what heaven looks like to me.

"Look at him. He's already drooling." Bucky nudges me in the side. "Keep us hydrated tonight and we just might bring you along the next time we're invited."

"You're wrong."

"Wrong about what?" Tyrell motions to the bartender and orders hard whiskey. Then he leans against the bar and turns to me. "Go on. Why wouldn't you want to slurp Hennessy out of a woman's belly button?"

"Guys, I'm working on someone."

"Working on who?" Bucky accepts the glass and knocks it back. He hisses and makes a face before motioning for another.

"Tongue?" Tyrell asks. "I heard she's in love with you or something."

"No, not Tongue." I blocked her a long time ago, so I have no idea what she's been up to lately.

"Drink. Drink." Bucky urges me.

I set my cane carefully against the bar, wrap my fingers around the cup and stare at it.

"Who's the lucky chick who's going to lead you out of the desert and back to the promised land?" Tyrell asks, motioning to the bartender for another set.

"She's—"

"Ah, there she is!" Bucky jumps forward before I can tell them about Destiny. He points to a woman approaching us. She's wearing red heels and a mesh dress that exposes her black lace lingerie. Her hair falls behind her head in a long ponytail.

My eyes bug. *Tongue?*

“Hey, Patrick.” She sidles up to me and kisses my cheek. “How you been?”

My eyes fall over her body that’s on display.

There’s so much freaking skin. I can’t even focus on one thing. Her tits are glorious. I want to palm her butt and squeeze it until she squeaks.

Have mercy.

I’m not the only one having a mild heart attack.

Tyrell and Bucky are staring too.

Bucky’s mouth drops open. “Patrick, you lucky dog.”

Tongue giggles and glances around. “There aren’t any free seats.”

I reach for my walking cane. “You can have mine.”

“Thanks.” She wraps her hands around my neck and plops into my lap. “Ooh.” Her eyes slant to me. “Someone’s excited.” She bounces on top of me, sending adrenaline rocketing through my body and turning everywhere hard as a rock. With trim fingers, she grabs my whiskey. “I’ll take that.”

I stare in shock as she downs my drink and hisses. The pulse in my veins travels all the way down to my pants.

Finally, I come back to my senses and try to remove her hands from around my neck. “What are you doing here?”

“We invited her.” Tyrell smirks at me.

“*You’re welcome,*” Bucky mouths.

“You two have fun. We’ll be on the dance floor trying to find ourselves a woman like that.”

Bucky licks his lips as he stares at Tongue’s cleavage. “Damn. Girl, if you get tired of him, you can come find me later.”

“Get outta here, Bucky.” But Tongue looks pleased. She leans in and whispers in my ear, “How about you and I have some fun tonight?”

My heart tears in half.

Tongue can take the edge off. Easy. But Doc's in my head telling me to think differently.

Her lips graze my ear and the roaring in my pants drowns Doc's voice out of my head. I don't think I can be different tonight. Not when temptation tastes so sweet.

TEN

LIZETTE

A STRIKING PAIN jabs me when my phone rings en route to the meeting point. I ignore it the way I've been ignoring it since I found the hotel card. Since my eyes were opened to the truth.

The ringing is relentless. It keeps plaguing me, a sharp pinch that expands when I see Johnny's name flashing over the car's dashboard.

I don't expect the tears. They're sudden. Unwelcome. I pull them back, but I don't think it's enough. I don't have sufficient control of myself.

Flicking the indicator, I whip my car to the side of the road before I mow someone down or cause a massive accident.

The phone keeps ringing.

I stretch a finger out toward the answer button. The world gets blurry outside my window. Darkness crawls into my car with me. Everything in the world spins before righting itself.

With a deep breath, I press my thumb against the green button.

His voice fills my car. "Sunshine."

I pull myself in. Zip the fury, the pain, the love into a small bag. Shove it into the corner of my mind where it can't touch me until I'm ready for it.

Numbness takes over.

"Sunshine, you there?"

I break the silence. "I'm here."

He pauses. His voice is quiet. Controlled. Like he's trying to find the right words. Like he knows he needs to be careful.

"You haven't answered any of my texts. Are you okay? I was worried all day."

My fingers curl over the steering wheel. My breath rushes out in a tense exhale. It's normal for Johnny and I to text non-stop. Sometimes, it has a purpose. Sometimes, it's just because.

I can't fake that kind of relationship right now. I keep imagining him with that blonde. Business trip? Yeah, Patrick had a *lot* of those. And I know exactly what kind of 'business' he was taking care of.

"Sunshine, what's wrong?" This time, Johnny's voice has a warning. "Something feels off."

I bristle. "Nothing."

"Don't, Liz. Don't lie to me."

My eyes widen. I want to throw my phone into traffic.

The spite hisses in my voice. "Johnny, I don't have time to talk right now. I'll see you when you get back from your business trip."

"Liz—"

I end the call.

He calls again. I reject it and then place my phone on vibrate. Tonight's mission is important. A perfect distraction. I'll figure out how I'm going to handle Johnny's betrayal later.

There's a small car parked at our meeting point. The moment I guide my truck next to it, the door pops open and a tall, willowy woman with long legs pops out.

She's dressed in black from head-to-toe. Leather pants. Jean jacket. Even in the dark, I can see her pointed cheekbones, flared nose and sharp brown eyes. Her twists have been pulled into a high ponytail that swings with every toss of her head. She's stunning. A queen moonlighting as a ninja.

She holds out a hand to me. "Destiny."

“Lizette.” I squeeze her fingers. They’re firm. Warm.
“Nice to meet you.”

“Paula is in the car,” Destiny says.

My eyes shift to the vehicle.

“She was freaking out about doing this. I was talking her through the nerves.”

“Is she having second thoughts?”

“Only about us being involved.” Dainty brows almost touch on her forehead. “She says he’ll be angry if he finds us. She says she doesn’t want us to get hurt.”

“He’s on shift tonight. We’ll be in and out before he’s home. She won’t have to worry.”

Destiny nods.

I nod back.

We approach Destiny’s car and coax Paula out of the front seat like a frightened animal on her first trip to the vet.

Unlike Destiny, Paula isn’t wearing black. She’s still dressed in her waitressing uniform, a cream skirt and stained pink blouse. Deep bags hug the skin beneath her eyes and she’s sweating at the pits and above her upper lip.

“I don’t know about this.” Her voice is a hush.

“It’s too late to back out now. We’re already here.” Destiny gestures to the trailer.

“It’s okay. We’re right beside you.” I squeeze her shoulder. “We’ll do this together.”

Paula bobs her head, sucks in a deep breath and lets us into the trailer with the key she never returned.

The inside is as cramped and rusted as the outside would suggest. It reminds me of the apartment I had when Amir was just a baby. Cheap. Dirty. Filled with the scent of broken dreams and desperation.

Paula goes to turn on the light in the living room.

I launch over to her and grab her hand. “Hey, no. Don’t do that.”

She trembles. The whites of her eyes are apparent in the shadows.

“I brought flashlights.” Handing one over to her, I explain, “We already parked far away so no one would see our trucks. Let’s not draw attention to the fact that someone’s home.”

“Sorry,” Paula croaks.

Destiny nods at me. “Good thinking.”

“Do you need our help finding the broach?”

“No, it should be in the jewelry case in the bedroom.”

I gesture to her. “Go ahead and get it. We’ll stay here and watch the road.”

Paula scampers off.

It’s just me and Destiny.

“Can I start smashing things now?” Destiny whispers.

I laugh and turn to her. Even in the darkness, her smile is bright.

If this were a movie, she’d be the main lead. It’s more than just her pretty face which is dark and perfectly proportional. It’s her charisma. That *I’ll do what I want and screw your opinion* energy that’s almost magnetic.

I never had a chance to develop that side of me. One relationship was all it took to propel me into motherhood. Forget being wild. Forget living for myself and making crazy decisions on impulse. I had a child all of a sudden. Another human being depended on me to keep them safe in the world. Not long after, I got married to Patrick and, suddenly, I lived my life catering to him and trying to make him happy.

Destiny looks like she’d rather choke than capitulate to a man who doesn’t value her. She looks wild and determined. A part of me envies her youth. That freedom. That cockiness. If I’d had a chance to tap into that, would I have been a different

woman? Would I have made different choices in love? In marriage?

“Did you really not know Paula before?” I ask.

“Yes.” She stops pacing. Tilts her head. “Why?”

“You seem to be taking this personally.”

“As opposed to what? Being completely okay with the fact that her loser ex was abusive and has her on the run?”

Her sarcasm is innate and, if I didn't have a college-aged son who speaks in exactly that brusque, matter-of-fact manner, I'd be almost offended.

I lean against the wall and fold my arms over my chest. “Everyone is concerned. Concern is easy. It doesn't require action. You just feel bad for a second and then think about something else. What you're doing is a step further. It's difficult for strangers to move from concern to anger.”

“Anger?”

“Change doesn't happen until you get angry.” I think of my previous marriage. “Really angry. The kind of fury that makes sitting still impossible.”

Destiny shakes her head. “I don't have to know a woman personally to champion her. It's enough that she's got a womb and so do I. That makes this personal.”

“There's more though.” I pause as I study her. “Were you...”

“No.” She stops. Places a hand on the ratty couch. Leans over it. “He wasn't dumb enough to think he could lay his hands on me and live.” Her eyes shift away. “But he was stupid enough to think I wouldn't find out about his other girlfriend.”

Cheating.

Damn.

It's like a pandemic. Almost every woman I encounter has been touched by cheating, is going through it right now, or knows of someone who has. Is that a problem with the men

we're dating? Or does the fault lie with the women choosing them?

I have to ask Doc later.

"But," Destiny's expression softens, "I'm kind of seeing someone right now. He seems different."

"Kind of seeing someone?"

She smiles. "It's early."

"So how do you know he's different?" My fingernails dig into my sides and leave crescent moons on the fabric of my black T-shirt. "How do you know it's not just a front? That he's pretending to be kind and sweet, so he can take what he wants from you?"

"Take what? I don't have money. And I'm not jumping into bed with him either. Most men can take one look at me and smell that I'm not that kind of woman. If he hasn't figured it out yet, then I'll be happy to inform him so he can find someone who's interested in sex before marriage." She purses her lips. "I saw what sleeping with men before getting a ring did to my mama, to my gran, and to my aunties. It ain't for me."

"I'm glad you're so confident, but I have to warn you. Men are..." I blow out a breath. Evil. Wicked. Liars. "You have to be careful. You can't just rely on gut instincts. You can't assume you know everything about them. Because you don't." I swallow hard. "You can never really know someone."

"I know what I see. And, so far, he's been a gentleman to me. He's smart, funny, and sweet. The way he hasn't given up after all he's been through is sexy to me. Besides, he secretly paid the café near the hospital so I could get free coffee." She giggles and it reminds me that she's younger. "He told the barista not to tell me, but I hate secrets so I squeezed it out of her."

"You like coffee that much?"

She nods. "Any man who understands my obsession with caffeine can have a second date."

I want to smile, but my mind turns to Johnny and the corners of my lips tremble.

Footsteps pound in the distance. Paula's flashlight bounces to the rhythm of her feet.

I straighten and look her way. "Did you find it?"

"No." She swallows hard. "I looked everywhere. I couldn't find it at all."

"Are you sure?" Destiny pushes off the wall, her feet planted a shoulder-breath apart.

"I'm sure." Paula whimpers. "What if he tossed it? He knows how much that broach means to me. To my family."

"Okay. Describe what it looks like. Let's spread out and ___"

At that moment, wheels turn on the little dirt driveway outside.

Destiny goes stock-still. Paula covers her mouth, a panicked look in her eyes. I inch to the window and pull back the curtain. There's a pickup with the taillights piercing the darkness. A man hops out of the driver's side. His dark eyes sweep the window.

I gasp and let the curtain drop into place. Pressing my back against the wall, I shoot a frantic stare at the other women.

"Who is it?" Destiny hisses.

Before I can answer, keys rattle in the lock.

My heart flips over.

Paula's face turns white. "My boyfriend. He's home."

ELEVEN

LIZETTE

MY HEART SLAMS against my ribs when the keys jangle in the lock. Gesturing wildly with my hands, I usher Destiny and Paula down the hallway.

Our feet patter and every slight noise sends my adrenaline rushing.

“Hide! Hide!” I whisper.

We flatten ourselves against the wall just as the front door swings open. The living room light flicks on and heavy footsteps thump against the ground.

I glance at Destiny and Paula. Paula’s eyes are wider than my hand. Chest heaving violently, she pastes herself against the wall. Sweat rolls down the back of her neck and soaks into her collar.

Destiny exchanges a look with me. Her throat bobs as she swallows. Though she doesn’t seem as frightened as Paula, a wrinkle between her eyebrows betrays her fear.

The footsteps get louder and louder.

Every second ticks by in agonizing beats.

Closer.

Closer.

If he turns down the hallway, we’re dead.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try not to make a peep.

The boyfriend's footsteps stop abruptly. A murmured voice says, "There it is. I can't believe I forgot my phone. Idiot."

Tension spills through my body, coiling my fingers into tight fists. Something rattles in the living room. He must be picking up his device and storing it away.

"Should I use the bathroom?" he mumbles.

Destiny clamps onto my hand. Her fingers dig into my skin until I fear I'll have to dig my flesh from under her nails. Paula squeezes her eyes shut. A tendril of her hair falls against her forehead, sticking to the sweat on her face. I tilt my head back and try to breathe evenly, but my chest is about to explode.

"Nah." He turns away from the corridor.

I let out a breath.

He's leaving. His footsteps are getting farther and farther away. Just a couple more steps to go and we'll be...

A phone starts buzzing.

It makes a loud, vibrating sound.

Destiny's head whips toward me.

Paula shoots me a frightened look.

"What was that?" the deep voice grumbles.

I scramble into my pocket, pull out my phone and almost curse when I see Johnny's name flashing across the screen. Tapping the end button like mad, I turn the phone off completely and shove it into my pocket.

The trailer goes still, holding its breath. I can see the outline of the boyfriend standing by the front door. His head is inclined toward us as if he's deciding whether he should investigate. The night falls around him, cloaking his shoulders in dew and shadows.

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip.

My chest rises and falls as I remain frozen on the wall.

Another buzzing sound erupts, but it's not from either of us. The boyfriend drops his gaze to his jacket. Pulling it far

from his chest, he dips his hand in and pulls out his phone.

“Hello?” He places the cell to his ear and steps out of the house. We hear the door snapping in place. Keys jangle again. “Yeah.” The boyfriend’s voice is quiet but firm. “I know I’m late. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

As his footsteps fade and the door pulls shut, Paula tears herself off the wall. She stumbles to the left like she’s drunk. Clasp ing her knees, she bowls over and struggles to breathe.

Destiny chuckles nervously. “That was close.”

“I’m sorry. My boyfriend picked the worst time to call...” I swallow hard. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Let’s just find this thing and get out of here.” Destiny stomps past me.

Paula follows, giving me a weak smile.

As she goes, Destiny rubs her chest and mumbles, “I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

I silently agree.

“Paula, what did that broach look like?” Destiny asks.

She describes it and we spread out to look. Still rattled, I get more and more nervous with every second we take in the house. I’m starting to think my first impetuous decision in years was a bad call. What if that boyfriend needed something from the bathroom or the bedroom? Where would we have run? What would he have done if he’d caught us?

He’s a cop. He could easily accuse us of breaking and entering. He could justify his violence by claiming self-defense.

I tiptoe through the dark, my flashlight moving wildly. The air is smothering.

I can’t do this anymore.

Turning around, I head back to the living room just as Paula charges toward me. Her smile bounces across her face.

“I found it.” She clutches a box close to her chest.

“Great.” Destiny joins us in the middle of the living room.
“Let’s get out of here. I keep having this bad feeling.”

“Me too.”

Paula nods.

We hurry to the door.

Paula’s hands tremble as she sticks the key in to unlock it.
The key drops once, sending my heart racing.

I crouch to pick it up from the darkness and hand it back to her.

“Sorry. Sorry,” Paula whispers.

Destiny tilts her head, staring up at the ceiling. I shine my flashlight on Paula’s hand so she can see what she’s doing. The young woman gives me a grateful nod before concentrating on her task.

I glance at Destiny and notice the thoughtful look on her face.

“What?” I ask.

“Did anyone hear his vehicle leave?”

“Yes!” Paula hisses. “It’s open. Let’s go.” She hauls the door open and steps onto the rickety verandah.

At that moment, a hulking figure walks into our line of sight. He’s a giant man with a low hair cut and a sneer on his face.

The breath leaves my lungs in a sharp exhale.

My knees turn to jello.

“I knew I smelled your perfume.” The boyfriend towers over Paula.

She remains frozen, her jaw falling and her face going as white as the moon.

“Don’t you dare touch her!” Destiny charges forward and grabs Paula by the hand, pulling her to stand behind us.

I lift my chin and try to speak as roughly as I can. “Let us through. We don’t want any trouble.”

The boyfriend scowls. “I see you brought friends, Paula. What? You scared of me?”

She tucks her chin against her chest and stares at the ground. Her body trembles like a leaf in the wind. The stench of fear and panic fills the air, whipping through the windchimes above our heads.

“Paula, look at me!”

She whimpers.

“Hey! Don’t talk to her like that!” Destiny explodes.

I squeeze her shoulder to calm her. Stepping a little ahead of them both, I lift my chin. Fear wants me to cower. Fear wants me to run for my life. He’s here for Paula, not for me or Destiny. But I can’t leave these women behind to save my own skin.

I stand my ground. “Move aside.”

“Or what?” He approaches me. Stands toe-to-toe. Stares into my eyes with an anger so thick I almost choke on it.

I keep my feet planted on the verandah.

“Get out of my way!” He tosses me like a rag doll. I crash into the wooden railing. Pain ricochets up my shoulder and down to my elbow.

Paula screams.

Destiny lunges at me. “Lizette!”

“You see what you’ve done?” The boyfriend grabs Paula and shakes her. “You stupid woman! I told you not to leave but you still—”

Urgent footsteps pound up the stairs. A second later, I see a blur of white and blue. Tailored pants drop next to my head. The smell of mint, snow and something distinctly Johnny fills my nostrils. Giant hands softly touch my face.

“Liz, are you okay?” Johnny’s deep voice ricochets through me.

I’m so shocked, I can’t speak. I can only nod.

“Who the hell are you?” the boyfriend roars.

Johnny rises slowly. I’ve never seen such a cold, dangerous look on his face. He turns and flexes his hand. “I belong to this woman.” He nods my way. “And she belongs to me.”

“Take her away before things get messy.” He growls. “This is between me and my woman.”

“No, it’s not.” Johnny takes a step forward. “You put your hands on her, and that means you put your hands on me. Now, you and I are going to settle this like men.”

“Back off before you get yourself hurt.” The boyfriend faces Johnny. “That’s a warning.”

“I can be calm. I prefer to be calm.” Johnny undoes the button at his cuff. “But I become something else entirely when she’s in pain, when she’s threatened. When I see someone tossing her over verandahs.”

“Shut up!” The boyfriend swings.

Johnny ducks it and slams him in the gut. It’s a fluid motion, almost like a dance.

Paula gasps.

I cover my mouth in shock.

The boyfriend struggles to stand upright. He lifts two fists in front of his face, his eyes gleaming brightly.

“Liz,” Johnny calls.

“Y-yes?”

His eyes are so calm. So is his voice. “Call the police now. And stay back. Tell the other ladies too.”

“Johnny.” My voice is tight, drowning in concern and fear. Even though he hurt me, there’s a part of me that still cares for him. That still loves him.

“Do it, sunshine.” He gives me a soft, reassuring smile.

And then he charges at the other man like a monster on a rampage.

TWELVE

PATRICK

I TRY to keep my hands away from Tongue. To think about Destiny. To keep Doc's advice at the forefront of my mind.

But if I had noble intentions, I probably shouldn't have let Tongue sit on top of me. And I probably shouldn't have let her push her hand under my shirt. I definitely shouldn't have let her massage my throat with her tongue.

Her body is warm and soft. I know where to put my hands. Under her backside like that. A little squeeze. A little tap. Just to prove I still have it.

She groans for me.

It's hot.

But it's still... off.

The kiss is weird. Rushed. Frantic.

And not fulfilling at all.

I've had Tongue. Had her from the back, front, and upside down. Planted her on walls and on top of counters. I've driven into this woman in every way I could imagine. To the point that if someone took a swab of her insides, they'd probably see my name all over her.

I know what I'm in for. I know what she can deliver and the fact that she's eager to be feasted on, while I'm still limping and depending on a cane to get around, is a massive ego boost.

Amazing.

I want more of that.

Her.

This.

But I keep hitting a roadblock when I try to kiss her back.

Doesn't make any sense.

My pants are about to explode from the pressure. My body's into it. She's licking at my upper lip and nipping on my ear. It feels good and I want to drag her somewhere private but, in the same breath, there's this oily feeling that makes me want to push her off.

It keeps messing with my head. Tainting what would otherwise be an incredible moment with a very sexy woman.

She's all over me. In public. It's going to be incredible when there isn't so much clothes between us. When there aren't so many eyes watching us.

Focus, Patrick. How long has it been since you've enjoyed yourself? How does anyone expect a man to stay celibate for so long without having a little fun?

Tongue extracts her mouth from mine and smiles at me. One of her eyelashes is starting to sag. I guess she didn't stick it on well enough. Her lips are smeared, and I know the stain is probably all over my mouth and chin.

"Want to get out of here?" she whispers hoarsely.

Images fill my mind. Me and Tongue. Back together again. No exciting positions this time. I can barely stay upright without help. But my forearms are much stronger from pushing a wheelchair for months. And my hips aren't broken. My tongue isn't either. I can blow her mind in ways I never could when I had two functioning legs.

"Patrick?" she purrs.

Drool piles in my mouth. Being inside her would feel amazing. Why the hell am I hesitating? It should be a big fat yes. Bucky and Tyrell set this up for me. And Tongue won't

mind being used. Hell, she's practically begging me to use her as a practice run.

I open my mouth.

Still the yes won't pop out.

Annoyance surges through me. Why am I overthinking this? Doc isn't here to jam lemon water down my mouth and tell me why everything is my fault. And Destiny isn't here to see a thing.

Would it matter if she saw? It's not like we're dating. It's not like we're together. But a pang in my chest warns me that I *would* care if Destiny saw. It would tear me up. Make me regret everything.

And the thought that I wouldn't do this if Destiny was right in front of me is messing with my game.

"You need a little help to stand, Patrick?" Tongue climbs off my lap and rises to her feet. She's wearing killer heels. The kind that I wouldn't take off even if she was standing naked in front of me. I'd want them on while I devour her. While I take her to heaven and hell.

She extends her hand to me, palm up. Eyes expectant. Eager.

Easy.

Low hanging fruit.

I can blow her back out. For Destiny's sake. I'd be mortified if Destiny and I ever made it to the bedroom and I didn't know how to ride the bike with my rusty wheels.

Embarrassing.

I should use this opportunity to figure out new moves with my limited capabilities.

Yeah, if you look at it like that, I'm doing Destiny a favor. One night, when we're hot and steamy and decide to fall into bed, I'll know exactly what to do to make her scream in pleasure.

I'm not doing anything wrong.

This isn't wrong.

I'm doing this for the health of our relationship.

There's absolutely no flaws in my logic.

Smiling at Tongue, I grab my walking cane and propel myself up. "This much I can handle. Don't worry."

"Oh, I'm not worried." Her smirk is wicked.

I press the cane on the ground and drag myself forward. On the way to the door, I pass Tyrell and Bucky in the crowd. They're both grinding against scantily clad women.

Bucky gives a thumbs-up.

Tyrell nods and pumps his fist. *Respect.*

I wave them off. If they weren't so far away, I'd remind Bucky that he can barely afford the kids he has now and he shouldn't go around making any more baby mamas. I'd probably tell Tyrell that he should watch out for any STI's.

These streets are rough.

And I'm about to get back out there.

Tongue hails the cab and then pastes herself on me in the backseat. She undoes one of my shirt buttons. "I was so mad that day, you know."

"What day?" I ask, slipping my hand under her skirt and looking for any fabric I can tear off.

"That day at the hospital? When your mom went off on me."

I freeze. Back then, mom had taken a hiatus from traveling the world so she could tend to me after the accident. I was trying to fix my marriage at the time. Tongue's appearance threw off my plans in a big way and reminded Liz of all the times I cheated on her. It's not a good memory for me.

Tongue doesn't seem to care. She laughs as she undoes another button. "I almost gave up on you. But the thing is, I want what I want. And then I get what I want." Her mouth

falls on my chest as she pants. “And Patrick, baby, I want you. I want you so bad.”

It’s sexy. Everything about her makes me want to implode with lust.

But the reminder of Liz isn’t helping my cause.

A cold wave falls over my body. “Tongue—”

She laughs. “Why the hell are you calling me Tongue? Don’t you know my name?”

I stare at her, searching her dark brown eyes. Usually, I’d be quicker on the uptake. Tell her something cheesy. That Tongue is my little nickname for her. That I love what that thing in her mouth can do to me.

But I don’t have the right timing. That oily feeling is back. It makes me want to pull her hands off and take a shower.

Tongue’s eyebrow twitches. “Patrick, what the hell? I’m not a body part, you know. The least you should know is my freaking name!”

“What is it?” I ask quietly.

She stops. Stares at me as if I’ve grown horns.

“What’s your name?”

“I’ve told you a million times.”

“I’m finally listening. So what is it?”

“It’s Shaniqua.”

“Shaniqua.” Damn. It’s a memorable name. If I’d cared about more than just ramming into her naked body, I would have remembered that. If I’d cared about anyone other than myself, it would have stuck with me.

She blinks rapidly and pulls her dress back down.

I stare straight ahead, my body rigid as a board.

Shaniqua folds her hands together. Her voice shakes slightly when she says, “This is the last time I’m going to chase after you. Even people like me have a limit. I’m not going to be an idiot forever, Patrick.”

I swallow hard. Now that she's given me some space and the fog of lust is starting to clear, I realize that I don't want to be here. With Shaniqua. Not tonight. Not ever.

She sighs. "Is it your ex-wife? Do you still have feelings for her?"

I keep my mouth shut.

Shaniqua leans toward me. "Are you sure you wanna give all this up? I would have been good to you, Patrick."

"You deserve better." My voice comes out in a croak. Not because I'm sad. Because I'm realizing the truth in waves. I will never see Tongue—Shaniqua—as anything more than a warm body to ease the tension. That's it. Now and forever.

Before, I wouldn't have cared about using her feelings for me to my advantage, but I can't do it anymore.

Too much has changed in my life.

And there's too much at stake with Destiny for me to blow it this early.

"I'll take you home," I say.

"Whatever." Shaniqua scoots to the other side of the car. She presses herself into the door as if she wants to jump out of it. Through the reflection in the glass, I notice a tear run down her cheek before she silently bats it away.

THIRTEEN

LIZETTE

THE WALK from the police station to the car is silent. So is the ride to Destiny's apartment.

Destiny squirms in the back seat, her eyes darting between me and Johnny. Her anxiety is potent, and it doesn't help my jumbled thoughts. There's a disconnect between me and Johnny. Anger sinks into the cracks. It hovers in the car. Stretches out like a rubber band that's about to snap.

We're holding it.

In.

Back.

Now isn't the time for conversation.

I turn on the radio and use the music to drown out the awkwardness. Johnny adjusts his pale fingers on the wheel. They're giant hands that can wrap around it twice. His knuckles are red. Scarred. Scabbed. He didn't bother to wipe off the blood when the police arrived.

I stare at those battle-worn hands. Why did he rush to my defense tonight? Why did it make my heart waver?

I belong to this woman.

He said that tonight. With a straight face. With conviction.

It doesn't make sense. Johnny's screwing someone else. I followed him. Saw it with my own eyes. He's a liar.

But he lost his mind tonight when he saw me in danger. There was a glint in his eyes. A dark resignation.

He would die for me. And kill for me.

A man like that shouldn't be meeting other women in hotel rooms. A man like that shouldn't be lying to my face.

What is this contradiction of love and betrayal? Does he have some kind of mental problem? Is it that he loves me but he's got a weakness for women? A thrumming need for sexual variety? Is it that he loves me but he can't be committed?

My heart hurts.

I turn the music up.

Johnny glances at me. His eyes are sharp. Dark. Angry.

I glower in return.

Destiny clears her throat. "Mr. Bancroft, I—uh—I just wanted to say thanks. I didn't really get a chance to before. You were kind of busy beating that guy to a pulp and then the police..." She pauses. Shadows dance over her face. Dark cheeks. Dark eyes. Dark, quivering lips. "There's something I still don't understand."

Johnny remains silent.

Destiny does not. "How did you walk out of the station without being questioned?"

For a moment, no one talks.

Johnny stares straight ahead. His voice is gruff. "My mother is friends with the commissioner." He flicks the indicator and turns left. "Where's your place again?"

"Just up ahead." Her tone is quiet. Subdued. The stare she points at Johnny becomes a different thing. Like someone turning the dial from mild admiration to outright awe.

She sees it too. The way he glows. The way he's untouchable.

Johnny is from a different world. The kind you can't work your way into. No amount of hustling, grinding, and begging can beat someone born into money. Born into status. Born into greatness.

When it's me and Johnny, I forget that he's different. Because he doesn't act like a prince. Like someone with the kind of connections I could only dream of having access to. But when the world pokes its head inside our universe, brushes up against the fantasy he creates when he's with me, I'm forced to remember the truth.

Johnny is not from my world.

And I will never quite fit in it.

But that blonde...

She's from his world too. The stink is all over her. Fancy nails. Fancy hair. A gentleness that can only be born when life's been nothing but good to you. A naiveté. An innocence. Those who've been broken, who've had to struggle to survive, lose their innocence first. And then their dreams and their trust in humanity follow.

Is that why Johnny chose her? Is that why I'm not enough? Because I will never quite belong in the spaces that he does?

"Uh..." Destiny pops the door open when we slow down in front of her building. "Thanks for the ride. And Lizette..."

I glance up.

"... Are you sure Paula will be okay staying at the safe house? I can just as easily share my apartment with her."

I smile. Look at her. Feel a bit of the tension melt from my body. "That's kind of you, Destiny, but Paula needs to go somewhere safe for the time being. Melody is accompanying her there. She'll contact us when she's settled."

"Right." Destiny dips her chin. "Okay. Well, goodnight. And thanks again."

I nod soberly.

With one last curious glance at Johnny, Destiny clamors out of the car and heads inside.

Johnny takes off. His foot is a little too heavy on the gas pedal and I dig my fingers into my seatbelt. The first words

that want to pop out are sharp. Dangerous. The kind that will rake like claws over his face and cause him pain.

Instead of letting those weapons free, I take in a deep breath. And then another. I let my mind settle into a quiet space. A place I've visited often when Patrick returned home smelling like another woman's body.

It's so easy to dismiss a woman when she's shrieking. When her heart is bleeding and it leaks out in bitterness and hysteria, everyone can laugh at her pain because of the vessel she's chosen to deliver it in. *Emotional. She's too emotional.* But if she's calm, if her words make sense and leave no wiggle room, it's harder to call her crazy. To write off her concerns. To dismiss her.

I lift my chin and speak to the lampposts shedding silver light on the freeway. "How did you know where I was?"

"I called Melody when you didn't pick up my calls. I thought you'd be at the office. Turns out, you were sneaking into the house of a bastard who emotionally abuses his girlfriend." His voice is sharper than I expected. It hits me like a knife to the ribs. "Was this your idea?"

"Does it matter?"

"Liz."

"Johnny." I fold my arms over my chest. My grasp on rational conversation is slipping with every minute. There's a loop of images playing in my mind. The hotel card. The bouquets. The lies. The blonde.

"If it was your idea," Johnny speaks through gritted teeth, "if it was really your idea to do something this stupid and dangerous—"

"Who are you calling stupid?"

"I didn't call you stupid, Liz. I said sneaking into the house of a maniac who has no respect for women is stupid. The moment that thought jumped into your head, you should have called me." His nose flares and I finally understand a little of what Paula's boyfriend must have felt when he saw Johnny coming.

It's not the kind of fear that you want to examine because it comes from a darkness deep in the heart. The place where you stuff all your courage and thoughts about who you are in the world. The lies you tell yourself about having control, having power, and being safe. The fury inside Johnny, coiled under his pale skin and sparking in his eyes, digs beneath that control. It yanks it out by the roots and tosses it. Exposes the truth. That you're at the mercy of someone else, someone with *real* power, and there isn't anywhere you can run and hide from it.

I fold my fingers into fists. He will not cut me into pieces. I've been down that road before. Had my voice, my value, squashed to bits.

Never again.

"I had it under control," I snap.

"You did?" He arches an eyebrow and that one quirk of his facial muscles is more insulting than anything he could have said.

"Yes, Johnny. I did."

"You have no idea how scared I was."

We're going so fast that everything outside my window is a blur. Or maybe that's just me. Maybe that's just the anger pulsing in my veins.

"You've been acting strange for days now. Ignoring my texts. My calls. Now you're keeping secrets—"

"You're the one keeping secrets," I spit.

His eyes whip to me. Dark chocolate pools. Deep enough to drown in.

I sit straight up. "I saw the hotel card in your pocket, Johnny."

The fury leaves his face in a blink. It's a quick change. One second, he's wearing his annoyance with a thin layer of restraint. The next, he's vacant eyes, slackening jaw, and fluttering lashes.

My voice trembles and I hate that the tears are so quick to come. Why can't I keep my emotions out of this?

"I know you lied about talking to your mother that night."

He slaps his mouth shut. Foot easing off the gas, he breathes deeply through his nose.

I press him in a way I never thought I'd have to. I hoped I'd left this line of questioning behind when I left my marriage. I didn't think Johnny would put me through this.

"Who was she, Johnny?" My voice cracks. It's pathetic. "Who were you talking to?"

His shoulders heave.

Up and down.

He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth.

My eyes are glistening with tears. The world turns misty, like I'm staring at everything through a windowpane filled with raindrops.

Please, Johnny. Give me something I'll believe.

It's the wrong way to think. Doc said to be a detective. To keep my heart, my emotions, out of it. But I've gone and given my heart to this man. And I want to believe that I made the right choice even if all the facts are pointing to a different kind of truth.

"It's a misunderstanding," Johnny says finally, slowing in front of my place.

"What kind of misunderstanding?" I insist. "Who is she? Why were you meeting?"

He turns his face away.

My world tilts off-center. To the very end, I was hoping, praying, *believing* that Johnny would show me that I wasn't wrong to trust him. That I wasn't making the same stupid mistakes all over again.

I shouldn't be this weak. I should be planning my revenge. Deciding how much cruelty he deserves. I never gave Patrick

my ugly. I only packed my bags and left. The second go-round, I should do better. Instead, all I can do is roughly shove my door open and stomp out.

Follow me, Johnny. Wrap your arms around me. Tell me this is all a bad joke.

But there are no answering footsteps.

No six-foot billionaires who smell like mint and snow.

No relief from the pain. The anger.

Because Johnny's engine, the one Doc helped him tune and perfect, purrs in the night. And then it gets softer and softer as he drives away.

FOURTEEN

PATRICK

MY PHONE RINGS when I get home. I wearily shrug out of my jacket and ignore it.

I don't want to talk to any of the people who could be calling right now.

Definitely not Tyrell and Bucky. They'll talk a lot of crap when they find out I didn't spend the night with Ton—Shaniqua.

It could be Jerrison, but I don't want to listen to his tales of family bliss. He's already cracking dad jokes and his kid is barely one year old. A dad bod will follow soon, and I don't want any of that rubbing off on me.

The last person who'd care enough to call me is mom. And though we're in a much better place now, I don't feel like hearing her nagging. Yeah, I know it's a nagging that comes from love, but I'm already having a tough night.

I toss the cell phone on my bed and limp to the bathroom.

The phone chirps.

An incoming text.

With a sigh, I turn back and scoop it off the mattress. My eyes nearly bug out of my head when I notice the message.

DESTINY: *Are you up?*

Normally, a text like that would mean I'd stuff my pockets with protection, jump into a cab and find my way to whichever

woman issued that booty call. But I get the feeling Destiny's not texting me so we can hook up.

I maneuver to the call I missed from her and tap the screen. A moment later, her voice fills my ear.

"Sorry. I don't mean to bother you."

"It's no bother." I don't hide the eagerness. I'm happy to hear from her. It feels almost like a reward. A little gold star.

If another woman was in my bed, I'd have to tiptoe around so they didn't wake up. I'd have to sneak into another room to keep Destiny from knowing what I did.

It's not that hard to do. I've done it plenty when I was married to Liz. But I can't say it's fun. Besides, I'm trying to be different with Destiny and it feels like I passed a test.

Easing against the headboard, I throw a hand behind my head and smile. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She laughs softly. "I had a little... adventure tonight."

"What kind of adventure?"

Her voice is warm. Raspy. I love the way it softens just a bit. As if she's shy. "I don't think I should share the details. The cops said—"

"There were cops?" I scramble to a sitting position. My leg protests the sudden movement. I can imagine my physical therapist yelling at me, warning me that my broken legs haven't fully healed.

"Yeah, but—"

"Are you okay? Where are you now?" My heart is pounding.

"Patrick, I'm fine. Really. I'm safe at home. I just walked in, like, ten minutes ago."

The adrenaline spike wanes, leaving a dark emptiness in its place. What could I have done if she were really in danger? I'd have to wait for a cab. Then I'd have to limp to wherever she was. By the time I got there, she could have already been hurt. Or worse.

It's humbling. To admit that I'm not the protector. To admit I'm not the guy who saves the girl. I physically can't. My body won't cooperate with me.

I've never been that helpless. Never been forced to face the truth of my limitations. It makes me squeeze the cell phone so tight that I'm afraid it'll break. I've always been the lead of my own story. The star athlete. Then the star bouncer. Then the star agency.

I had perfection.

I had the world at my fingertips.

And even though my money's been restored and my place at the agency belongs to me again, I can't run from how much I've changed.

Inside.

And out.

My chest tightens and, it's in that moment of pain and clarity, that I see how far I've fallen for Destiny. It kills me that she was in trouble tonight and didn't call me. Kills me that I wouldn't have been able to help anyway.

It makes me want to punch a hole in the wall. It makes me want to drink a gallon of gin so I can feel like a man again. I don't want anything on this earth, *nothing*, to hurt her.

And that includes me.

"I guess I just... I didn't want to wake my friends and my parents would worry so I... I thought of you."

"I'm glad you did." I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Really glad."

She breathes deeply into the phone.

Doc is in my head again. He's louder now that someone else's tongue isn't down my throat.

Give your all, Patrick.

I lean forward. Keep my voice low. Encouraging. "What's on your mind?"

The question feels foreign on my tongue. When was the last time I asked a woman what she was thinking and how she was feeling? Why does it feel so foreign to me?

“Uh,” Destiny laughs sheepishly, “there’s a lot. Honestly.”

I pause. Try to figure out how to get her talking. “This adventure you were on tonight, did it have anything to do with the hospital?”

“Kind of.” Her voice cracks. “I’ve seen the good and the bad side of the male race tonight.” She stops. Breathes heavily. “I saw a man scream at his girlfriend. Saw her tremble in fear when she looked at him. And then I saw a different man step in and defend his girlfriend. He said that she belonged to him and he belonged to her. Totally romantic.” Her laughter is subdued. “It made me think about the kind of man I wanted. The kind of man I would choose.”

“It made you think of me?”

“Yes.”

I want to throw a line or two. Shift the topic just in case she’s decided I’m more like the jerk than the hero of the story. It takes a lot to keep my mouth shut and just listen.

“I want to believe you’re a good man, Patrick, but I can’t ignore the things I’ve heard about you.”

Words crowd my throat. They’re all excuses. Inadequate. Still, I can’t go with the alternative. If I reveal my flaws, I’ll have to acknowledge them. Apologize for them.

Did I really do anything wrong?

Liz’s painful letter floats through my mind. I remember the tears that flooded her eyes when she screamed at me. I see Doc holding out a wrench and telling me it’s my responsibility even if it isn’t my fault.

I wrestle with the words. I want to keep the ugly parts of myself hidden. It’s easier that way. Less painful. It’s better to keep going as if nothing is wrong with me. My thinking. My mistakes. The fact that I cheated on my wife.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” she says. Her voice is deflated. I’ll lose whatever ground I gained if I ignore her. If I choose the path of least resistance.

“I was a jerk.” The words tremble because they’re sincere. I’m peeling back the layers. Revealing more of myself than I ever have before. “I made bad choices.”

“I need to know why.”

I take a moment. Breathe. Close my eyes. “All my life, I resented my mother for taking us away from my dad. Turns out, she did it to protect me, but she kept the truth a secret and took all the hate I dished out. When I got married, I shifted that hate on my wife.”

Destiny is silent.

I could lose her by talking about this. I could reveal who I really am, face this horrible side of myself, and lose her.

Give your all, Patrick.

It’s worth it.

Even if I lose everything, I’m willing.

“I’m not perfect. Everything you heard about me, it’s probably true. And I’m still fighting, every single day, to not become that man. To not slide into the skin I used to wear. It’s tough. It’s work. And I fail more than I succeed. But I’ve never tried this hard for anything in my life.” There’s weariness in my voice. Resolve too. I did good tonight. I said no to free sex. I learned a woman’s name rather than just use her and throw her away. “I’m not going to lie, Destiny. A big reason I’m trying so hard is because I met you.”

More silence.

Good sign? Bad?

“But,” I’m quick to add, “I’ve been on this road for a long time. Way before I met you. And I—”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

The wheels in my head stop turning abruptly. “What?”

“I know our date is Friday, but I don’t think I’ll be able to make it. At first, I was just going to cancel on you but... if you don’t mind, I’d like to move it up. I have time for a quick coffee break.”

“I’ll take it. I can swing by the hospital when you’re free.”

“I’d like that.”

“Yeah.” I speak low in my chest. “Me too.”

FIFTEEN

LIZETTE

THE SCENT of car oil is a siren's song that pulls me deeper into the auto shop. Long, fluorescent bulbs hang from the ceiling. Oil-stained walls. Rows of broken things. So many broken things.

I'd laugh if I wasn't one of those broken toys, limping into Doc's shop, seeking repair. The rust on my frame is where the tears dried as I cried myself to sleep last night. My heart is lying in pieces like a smashed windshield.

I push back the tears when I see Doc standing next to a car. He's got a scanner in his hand. It looks like a rugged tablet with a wire snaking all the way into the engine. He's upgraded from a laptop to this fancy tool. Good for him. At least one of us exchanged the old thing for something better.

Doc's wearing navy overalls with stains all over them, turning the fabric more black than blue. His shoes are heavy duty. His gloves are too.

He glances up when he hears my tennis shoes stomping on the ground. Calm brown eyes bore into me. Drill into me. I let him see what he wants. Let him take me apart because I know he'll find a way to put me back together.

Both eyebrows arch in welcome. They're thick and black against his wrinkled brown skin. I watch the little lines etched into his forehead, carved by time. It's why he can read men and vehicle's so well. Because he's held hands with life long enough to recognize the signs.

"Hi, Doc." My words are weak. My smile is too.

He gives me an assessing look. “You’re alone today.”

“I am.”

He pulls a rag from his back pocket. It looks like the scrap of a T-shirt. Something he tore up and repurposed. I’ve learned that Doc doesn’t like to throw anything away. If it’s old, broken, forgotten, he’ll drag it into his shop and breathe new life into it. Or he’ll give it a new purpose and make it shine again.

“I remember walking in here over a year ago.” I stride forward. My fingers brush over the nearest car. It’s cherry red. A little old. Sagging at the front. I bet Doc will have it running like a dream. “I remember looking for the answers I already knew.”

He says nothing. His stare gets a little darker. A little disappointed.

I sigh. Turn to face him. Doc doesn’t care for speeches without a purpose. “Johnny is cheating on me.”

A beat of surprise passes over his face. It calms me. To see that. To watch Doc’s reaction to the truth. Validation. I wasn’t the only one who thought Johnny was different.

Doc gestures with dirty fingers. His hands are dark. Under his nails are black. He’s the color of midnight and yet, as I follow him, it feels like a new dawn.

My heart gets lighter for the first time since I left Johnny’s truck. Since I rushed up the stairs to my place, heartbroken.

Doc will figure this out.

Doc will wave his wand and untangle my frantic mind.

He pours me a mug of lemon water. Yellow liquid sweetened with honey. The recipes change based on the day. Sometimes, it’s a little sweeter. Sometimes, it’s a little sour.

I take a sip. It’s sweet today.

“When I met Johnny, I thought he was too good to be true. How could one man be that kind, gentle, considerate, and focused on me? What did I possibly have to offer him?”

“You have plenty.”

“I appreciate that, Doc, but we both know Johnny has loads of options. He can find someone other than a single mom divorcee who didn’t finish school.”

He opens his mouth.

I lift a hand to stop him. “I know you’re going to tell me not to look down on myself. And I’m not. These are facts, Doc. Just like it’s a fact that Johnny betrayed me.” It hurts to say the words. Although it hurts a little less because it’s Doc who’s hearing those words. “I haven’t even told Amir yet.” A crushing weight falls on my shoulders. I groan. “Doc, how do I tell my son? Amir loves Johnny. He talks to Amir more often than I do. It’s going to...” My breath thickens. My eyes dart back and forth. “I still can’t believe this.”

“Tell me everything that happened,” Doc says.

I start from Johnny’s secret phone call and the lies. Then I tell Doc about following him to the cafe where he met the blonde and gave her flowers. Finally, I admit to finding the hotel card.

“Patrick was never that messy. He didn’t leave so much evidence. He had two phones and alibis and lying friends who would cover his tracks. I don’t know if he had more respect for me or if Johnny just thinks I’m that stupid.” My heart burns. “All I know is that I’m not going to tolerate it, Doc.”

He says nothing. Lifting the cup to his lips, he sips his lemon water.

I wait.

Doc lets the silence ring. Expand. Until it’s pushing against me. Until it gets hot and uncomfortable.

“Doc.”

“Hm?”

“I’m breaking up with him.”

He nods. “You’re the king during dating.”

I narrow my eyes in his direction.

He sets his cup down. “Everything you’ve described to me paints a clear picture.”

“Exactly. He’s a cheating—”

“A picture that exposes how much you trust him.” He arches an eyebrow. “Or how much you don’t. We need to look into that.”

Look into that?

I’m about to ask Doc what he means, but my phone rings.

It’s Johnny.

My thumb hovers over the ‘ignore’ button.

Then I stop.

I glance at Doc.

I realize that I won’t ever feel as safe or as brave as I do right now. With Doc beside me.

Inhaling deeply, I gesture to the phone. “I’m going to take this.”

He waves me forward.

I close my eyes. Inhale the scent of fuel and car oil. Put the phone to my ear. “Hello.”

“Liz.”

I hold in the tears. It’s rude of him to call my name so tenderly. Like he actually cares. It’s rude of him to remind me of summer nights under the stars, holding his hand around restaurant tables, falling into his arms after a long day.

“Can I see you?” Johnny asks. There’s desperation in his tone. Is he going to beg me to keep on being with him? After he cheated? He knows what I’ve been through. He knows what my ex did to me. How can I offer him another chance?

I glance at Doc. Nod. “Okay.”

We hang up.

My phone pings with a text from Johnny.

It's an address. Weird. Why does he want to meet on a rooftop? Is he going to push me off the building if I break up with him?

Don't be ridiculous, Liz.

I rise slowly. "Thanks for the lemon water, Doc."

"What are you going to do?"

"Value myself more than I value a relationship." My smile is weak. Numbness spreads to my fingers and toes. I'm only being brave because it's Doc. Because he taught me so much about what I should expect. About what I'm worth. "That doesn't mean it stops hurting."

His eyes soften. "I'm sorry, Liz."

I'm too choked up to speak and the last thing I want is for Doc to see me cry. Lifting a hand, I wave my goodbye and head into the sunshine.

Blue skies. Fluffy clouds. Grassy parking lot.

The scent of car oil lingers on my skin. It's like a hug from Doc. A hug from his entire workshop.

It gives me strength.

On the drive to Johnny, I think about how our relationship began. Exhilarating and forbidden. Frightening and beautiful. Unpredictable and uncontrollable.

I'd become too comfortable in him. I thought I knew everything there was to know. I thought it was enough to relax. To close my eyes and trust that he would catch me.

Is this what hitting rock bottom feels like? It's a little softer the second time around. I've been here before. The dust, the spider webs, the shadows and darkness, they're familiar. Friends, even. They wave to me as I spiral. Laugh at me as I land at the bottom with a sickening crack, my head open. My smiles forgotten.

Beginning things are terrifying. Ending them is equally so. Why didn't anyone warn me? That there would be so many

endings in my life? So many times hurt would force me to cut off and cut away from the people I thought I loved?

Maybe it's me?

The tear falls before I can sniff it back. It's silent. Drops a trail down to the steering wheel.

It's dangerous to cry and drive. Somehow, I manage it without ramming into innocent bystanders. Into cars and babies in strollers. I make it to the hotel. The very one Johnny had a key card to. And I marvel at the irony.

The beginning and the end.

If it were anything else, any other issue, I would slog through it. Because it's Johnny. If he'd lost his money, his reputation, his family, I would have given him everything I had.

But once again, someone I love told me I wasn't enough in the most painful way possible.

At the end of the day, the only person who can choose me... is me.

I'm breaking up with you, Johnny.

I let the words run circles through my head as I trod up the stairs. Nothing he can do will change my mind.

It's over.

I'm done.

SIXTEEN

LIZETTE

I MAKE eye contact with Johnny the moment I get to the rooftop. He's wearing a grey blazer over a navy shirt. Pressed slacks hug his long legs. His hair's brushed away from his face. Square jaw. Intense brown eyes.

It's almost violent. His magnetism. If he's in a room, eyes are automatically drawn to him. Without thought. There's no chance of looking away unless dismissed.

He lifts one corner of his lips a little higher than the other. His signature lopsided smile. His expression usually softens when he sees me. This time, it doesn't. There's too much energy behind it. Too many nerves.

Does he know what I'm about to do? How I'm about to end us? Did he dress up for the occasion? Is his gorgeous appearance supposed to change my mind or show how happy he is to be free of me?

I square my shoulders and walk forward. He played with my heart, but I won't do the same. Quick and clean. I'll cut him off like a sharp sword and walk away. So he doesn't have a chance to see how he hurt me.

Something flaps in the wind. It's loud enough, out of place enough, that it draws my attention away from Johnny.

My steps slow when I notice the crystal organza set up all around the rooftop. The fabric drapes beautifully over golden arches. They shimmer in the sunlight. Translucent. Delicate.

Is someone having a wedding up here?

I sweep my gaze around. Everything is so beautiful. There's glass decorations, overflowing flowers. Exquisite. A garden straight from heaven. Candles flicker, but the flames can hardly be seen in the sharp sunshine.

Johnny's here, in the middle of a celebration.

And I'm here for a break-up. *What is going on right now?*

Johnny smiles a little harder when he sees my confused expression. The knots in my chest loosen. I smile back.

I'm in an alternate reality. In a place where nothing makes sense and yet it all feels perfectly normal. Because it's Johnny. Because he's the man who saw me in the middle of my darkest season and called me sunshine.

"You..." I can't breathe. "What? What is this?"

Johnny steps toward me. "Before I ask you, sunshine..."

Ask me? Ask me what?

"Let me explain first." He clears his throat. "I don't want this moment tainted by any doubts, so I'm going to tell you everything first, okay?"

I tilt my head back. Stare at the sky. Am I having a heatstroke? Is this what I think it is?

"First," he gestures to the rooftop, "I was sneaking around because I wanted *this*—" I'm still hyperventilating about what *this* is—"to be a surprise. But after you stumbled on what I was doing, I talked to Doc. Given the circumstances, he suggested I move up the timeline."

A trembling nod of acknowledgement is all I can offer him. I need to remind my legs their purpose is to keep me standing. Every part of my body is shaking. I'm going to find myself on the ground if I keep this up.

"I had a vision in mind. Something grander than this." Johnny points to the rooftop. "But I agree with Doc. I couldn't stand the way you looked at me last night. So I followed his advice. Decided to resolve everything in one go. That's why..." He gestures to someone.

The blonde from the café steps out.

I slap a hand over my mouth, stunned to see her.

“This is Courtney. She’s the best event planner in the city. I told her to size down our plan and get this place ready in less than twenty-four hours and she got it done.”

“It was a near impossible task, but can anyone say no to this man?” Courtney laughs. It’s a soft, gentle tone. She really looks like a pampered princess but, somehow, she doesn’t seem as malicious when she’s close-up.

Johnny stares down at me. “Whatever you saw between us was misconstrued. Every time Courtney and I talked or met, it was only regarding you.”

“Johnny’s obsessed with you. In case that wasn’t clear. And I’m happily married,” Courtney says, flashing her ring. “In fact, I showed him the ring that my husband got me,” she laughs, “and Johnny held my hand, asking if women liked diamonds that flashy. He was so eager to pick one out for you. He was eager to pick everything out for you. The man showed me... not one but *three* different kinds of flowers he wanted me to prepare for today.”

Flowers? Diamonds? Rings?

My eyes widen.

This is a proposal.

“That’s right, mom,” a familiar voice says.

I whirl around, stunned to see Amir stepping into my line of sight.

I lurch back. “Amir, what are... you have school.”

“Exactly. Which is why Johnny flew all the way out to me to get my blessing.”

I shoot a look at Johnny. “The business trip?”

He nods. “I got Doc’s blessing too.”

“Oh my gosh.” My stomach is about to burst.

Amir chuckles. “He was on the phone with me a lot. Planning this. I don’t know why he bothered to ask my blessing in person. He knows I’m all about you two being together.”

“Me too.”

“Mrs. Bancroft.” Tears float to my eyes when Johnny’s mother walks out beside my son. They link arms like two mischievous imps, eager to see their plan kick into gear.

“I didn’t know my little slip would derail the whole thing. I feel quite responsible, dear. Please forgive me.”

Stunned laughter bubbles in my throat.

“Sunshine,” Johnny calls me softly. “Liz.”

I turn and see him fall, in slow motion, to his knees.

My heart leaves my chest and jumps straight into his arms.

This is insane.

His expression. The proposal. The ring.

Holy crap.

That thing shines brighter than the sun above us and throws light all over the organza and flowers. Nestled in the velvet cushions of an elaborate ring box, it looks like a bank heist waiting to happen.

Is that ring going on my finger? Is any of this real?

“I wanted to know you from the moment I saw you,” Johnny says quietly. Earnestly. “And the more I knew of you, the more I loved you.”

My knees start to sink.

The world blurs because of the tears.

He caught my eye too. That day. The day I marched into the gym to reclaim some part of me that I hadn’t realized I’d lost. I wanted to prove that the real Liz hadn’t shriveled up and died in my marriage.

But I was still technically married when we met, so I fought as hard as I could. Tried to choke out the feelings he

stirred in me when he did those little things. A water bottle. A bag of bandages. A little note. Small, quiet actions that told me I was seen. That I was cherished.

I knew what following that path would do to me, so I ignored the truth locked in my heart. Johnny could destroy me, and I'd already had my fill of broken hearts. But I couldn't resist him. I was just as eager to dive deep into him as I was to push him away.

“You are the most precious person in the world to me, and I will forever be grateful that you came into my life because you...” He chokes up and it makes my tears fall harder. Johnny isn't one to get emotional. He glances up with a small smile, his eyes turning red from his attempt to hold back his tears. “You make me a better man. You make me believe in a world that I'd...” He uses his sleeve to wipe his nose. “In a world that I'd gone cold to.” He lifts the ring box. “This is a symbol of how committed I am to you. I want the world to know that you are mine.” He sniffs. His voice gets a little stronger. “It doesn't matter if we get married in two years, five years, or tomorrow. I will continue to prove that you can trust me, that you can lean on me, and that you can be safe with me. Because you can. I love you, Lizette. Will you marry me?”

In that moment, I look at Johnny and let the scars from my past, my fears about marriage and my hesitation to commit my life to another man fade away.

It's just me and Johnny.

I weigh him as objectively as I can. Without the scars and bruises. Without the affection and the love.

He's a man who has consistently and unfailingly put me as his number one priority. He's the man who stepped back the moment he heard I was married, even if that meant never seeing me again. He's the man who refused to yell or demean me for being confused about my heart. He's the man who's proven himself to be reliable, faithful, and kind.

I put my hand on his shoulder, partly to keep myself connected to him and partly to stay upright. “Yes.” My lips fall on top of his gently. “What was more extravagant than this?”

He sighs in relief and hugs me. “There was going to be doves.”

“Doves?”

“And fireworks.”

“Oh, Johnny.”

He laughs to the sound of our audience’s applause. Rising to his feet, he kisses me again and slips the ring on my finger.

SEVENTEEN

PATRICK

I WRACK my brain trying to figure out just what it is about Destiny that's so different. She's gorgeous. Long, long legs. Big brown eyes. Flawless dark skin like a statue dipped in black ink.

It's nothing I haven't seen or experienced before. Beautiful women come in all shapes and sizes. Stack 'em up like a police line-up and there isn't one color, body shape or race that I haven't sampled from.

So why is she the one I can't stop thinking of? Why is she burned into every moment of my day? In the morning, when I wake up. When I shower. When I spray myself with cologne. My hands. My neck. My wrists.

Not because I want to smell good but because I want her to smell like me. I want everyone in that hospital, the doctors who've been eyeing her, the patients who want to flirt with her—I want them to know she's taken. Mine.

Marking my territory?

Hell yeah.

I stop for breakfast near the hospital although it's several miles out of my way. My credit card flexes its muscles as I order breakfast for all the nurses in her department.

Giving my all with control is a lot easier now that I've been practicing. It means doing the most without being creepy. Thinking of all the ways to make her happy without going overboard.

See? I'm getting the hang of it. Doc would be proud.

Destiny texts me later that morning, while I'm at the agency. I'm in the middle of a meeting, but I stop to answer her.

DESTINY: *Thanks for breakfast.*

ME: *I can't wait to see you.*

She doesn't respond.

Is she busy? Or is something wrong?

"Patrick?" The young athlete gazes at me inquiringly.

I pack my concerns away and focus on the task at hand. My eyes dart to the clock throughout the day until it's time to catch a cab and find Destiny.

When I get to the hospital, I march straight to the nurse's station. She's not there. Must be running late. I decide to wait nearby and glance around the room to look for a seat.

In the background, I notice a nurse staring at me. She's got tan skin, long, wavy hair and eyes a little too far apart. Her fingers clutch a black pen and if she squeezes any harder, it's going to snap in two.

Weird.

I tap my phone, sending Destiny a message to let her know I'm here. When I look up, the nurse is still glowering like I'm Enemy Number One.

My eyebrows pinch together. I don't recognize her, but that doesn't mean much. Sometimes, I wasn't exactly sober when I took a woman home. She could be someone I hooked up with in college? Or more recently? Maybe when I was married?

I have no idea.

Frantic footsteps force my gaze in the other direction. Destiny rushes toward me, still dressed in her nurse's uniform. Which is sexy but not the clothes she usually wears when she leaves.

“I’m sorry, Patrick,” she says. Sweat beads on her forehead. Her eyes are narrowed. Her words are rushed. “We’ve got an emergency right now. I can’t leave.”

“It’s okay. I can wait.” I struggle to my feet. My grip on the cane is clumsy because I’m nervous.

Destiny’s eyes widen. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Shame sends a flood of heat through my face. Great. I look like an uncoordinated buffoon in front of the woman I’m trying to impress.

“It’s not going to be over right now.” Destiny’s expression is blank.

I check my watch. “I’ll stay for as long as I can. If I leave, I’ll text you.”

“Okay.” She gives me a distracted nod and walks off.

I’d have preferred a kiss on the cheek. A squeeze of the hand. Something. She’s not a touchy person and it’s a little disconcerting. In the past, I’d have girls pawing at my chest ten minutes after we meet. I’d have my hands up a girl’s skirt before we exchanged names.

But Destiny hasn’t even given me a handshake since I asked her out. Is she trying to put me in the friend zone? Why is the physical side moving at such a glacial pace? Does she think I won’t be able to handle it?

I glance up and notice the nurse from before glaring at me. Her eyes are hooded, and her lips are a firm line of disdain.

Confusion pinches my expression. *What is your problem, lady?*

Someone calls her away from her station. The angry nurse says nothing to me as she passes by, although that hard stare demands I die as slowly and painfully as possible. Maybe she didn’t like the breakfast I ordered for Destiny’s department?

She disappears down the hallway, and I’m given a brief respite from her hate-glare.

Time moves slowly.

I wait for fifteen minutes.

My phone vibrates.

DESTINY: *Sorry, Patrick. I don't think I can see you today.*

I decide to accept defeat and limp to the exits.

On the way to the agency, I text Destiny back, telling her not to over-do it and letting her know I'll be up if she wants to talk again tonight. Then I order a gourmet lunch for her. Although I'm not sure when she'll be able to eat, I bet she'll be hungry.

"Yo, he's finally here!" A voice booms when I enter my office twenty minutes later.

It's Bucky.

I stare at his feet that are kicked up on my desk and then limp past him. Falling into my chair, I gesture to his legs. "What are you doing here, Buck?"

"Been a while since I checked out your office. You did some redecorating? It looks tight."

"Thanks." It was Harriet's idea. She wanted both the international office and the one stateside to share a cohesive look.

Women.

Jerrison was happy to indulge her, though neither of us could care less about what shade of blue gets splashed on the walls.

"You haven't been answering our calls." He finally takes his dirty feet off the desk. "We thought you'd reach out with some details about what happened with Tongue."

"Her name is Shaniqua." I gather a stack of files and set them in a straight line.

Bucky snorts. "What?"

"Her name." My voice is hard. Cold. "Is Shaniqua. And not that it's any of your business, but we didn't do anything

that night.”

“You’re kidding! Did breaking your legs break your wood too? Are you sterile now?” He looks genuinely worried. “You got money, man. Is there a surgery or something? You want me to ask around?”

“Nothing’s wrong with my equipment, Bucky.” I slam a folder open. “I told you. I’m seeing someone.”

“You said it was the early stages.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I speak to the files in front of me. “I’ve decided to give it my all.”

He laughs. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“It means putting her first and thinking about her before I do anything. It means no sleeping around—”

His eyebrows form a steep V. “The hell. You’re not even married to her. Why are you being such a punk?”

My lips arch in a bitter smile.

“Get yourself together, Patrick. You didn’t even keep your pants zipped for Liz. Now some random girl gets to lock you down? Snap out of it.”

“You’re right. I treated Liz like crap. And look where that got me.”

“People drift apart. It happens.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Yeah, yeah. Who stays faithful when they get married?” Bucky shakes his head. “Women know what they sign up for. That’s why they’re so good at looking the other way. How do you think our grandparents lasted so long?”

“That doesn’t mean it’s right, Bucky.”

“This is Jerrison, isn’t it? He got you brainwashed and now he’s trying to drag you into marital hell with him too. But you’re not like that, remember?” Bucky rises and approaches my desk. He picks up a photograph of me. I’m mid-jump shot. Sweat on my face. Headband around my forehead. Perfect

form. A man all the ladies want. “You’re Patrick freaking Wilson. The lady killer. You’ve plowed through half the city, and you didn’t get caught by your wife until years later. Even then, when you thought you’d lost everything, you got some of your money back and you got your job at the agency. You don’t have to give up anything. You don’t have to change.”

As Bucky’s talking, a light bulb goes off in my head. I finally realize why Destiny is different. It’s not her looks. It’s not the conversations we have over coffee. It’s not her independence and her kindness. It’s not even that she’s willing to go out with someone who suffered a severe injury.

It’s not Destiny at all.

It’s me.

I’m the one who’s different. If I’d met Destiny at any other stage of my life, I would have pursued her, used her and moved on like I did with any other woman. Even if our connection held my attention for a little longer, it wouldn’t have been able to stop me from ruining us.

But I met Doc.

And I lost Liz.

And I crave intimacy. The kind that exists outside of groans and arching backs and messed up hotel rooms.

I’m ready to belong to someone. Completely. A bone-deep acceptance. An understanding beyond marriage certificates and weddings that don’t mean a single damn thing.

Bucky stares long and hard at me. “I don’t recognize you anymore, Patrick.”

I smile at him. “That’s a good thing.”

EIGHTEEN

LIZETTE

THREE HOURS HAVE PASSED. The engagement still doesn't feel real.

I sit around the table at the restaurant on the first floor of the hotel. Johnny's arm is hanging over the back of my chair. My son is laughing, candlelight flickering over his dark face. Mrs. Bancroft is waving her hands, enthusiastically sharing a story about her travels.

I breathe in. Just sit still. Let the moment wash over me. Taste it for what it is. Trace it into my brain. A memory I can yank out when I'm feeling down or lonely to remind myself of who I am and what I'm connected to.

I watch the overhead lights move across my ring and I smile. Diamonds mean nothing to me. Wedding rings mean even less.

My first marriage taught me that anyone can drape a piece of metal around their fingers. It doesn't have to spell commitment. It's not a symbol of faithfulness or love. It's just a fancy piece of jewelry that we romanticize. A fantasy that corporations are happy to feed us so we keep buying these precious stones and feeding their pockets.

Even I learned, later on in my marriage, to take my ring on and off. Without remorse. Without thought. A switch that I would flip to pretend, for one second, that there were no chains around my neck.

So why does it feel so precious on my finger tonight?

Lifting my hand, I watch the way the diamond sparkles against my dark skin. There's something soft and inspiring about the light it emits. It reminds me of a sunrise.

Johnny kisses my temple. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing much," I whisper back.

His thumb drops on my shoulder and makes slow, sweeping circles. My heart sings.

His smile fills me to the brim. The way he sits, angled toward me, like he can't bear to have an inch of space between us makes me smile in return. Even the most mundane things, on a night like this, feels ripe with possibilities and dreams.

"If there's one thing I've learned about you, sunshine, it's that you're always thinking, analyzing, and processing. There isn't a moment your mind is blank. So give me the condensed version."

My eyes meet his. "I was thinking that... I'm not scared."

He tilts his head.

"Fear should be eating me alive." I gesture to the ring. "Because I've been here before, and it didn't end well."

The table goes silent. Amir is looking at me. His eyes are dark and somber. The grin drips off his youthful face.

"I should be scared." My words are firm. "But I'm not scared at all. I'm relishing this moment. I feel... safe."

Johnny nods, listening intently.

"It doesn't make sense to me. A part of me should be wary of doing this again. Why do I feel at peace?"

"It's because you're different," Amir says. "And so is the person you chose."

My eyes jump to his.

"It's like that time I rode my first rollercoaster. Remember? It was a cheap ride with rust and screeching gears. Absolute nightmare. Mom didn't want me to get on, but I insisted."

“He was stubborn, even back then.”

“I believe that,” Johnny says.

Laughter filters around the table.

“Yeah, well, the safety bar snapped while we were riding it and mom had to hold the bar in place until we stopped. It was terrifying. I swore I’d never get on another rollercoaster again.”

“Did you?” Mrs. Bancroft asks, leaning forward.

“Years later. I went to another theme park with some friends. I was older by then. I’d learned that not all rollercoasters were as bad as the one from my childhood, but I wasn’t about to get on any old ride.”

“Smart kid.” Mrs. Bancroft bobs her head.

“I inspected the car before I got on. Tested the safety bar. I even stopped and asked the guy working there if they’d had any accidents before.”

Johnny smirks. “I’m sure he loved that.”

“I was holding up the line, but I took my time. I wasn’t about to jump into a death trap without making sure.”

“Since you’re still here today, I can assume that rollercoaster was sound?”

He nods at Mrs. Bancroft. “Better than that. I loved it.” A smile climbs his face. “But I could only enjoy the ride because I was old enough to do my inspection. And I only got on the ride because that rollercoaster was well-built and up to the right standard.”

“You sound like Doc,” I say proudly.

His smile is sheepish. “I learned some things when I worked with him over the holidays.”

“To learning that not all rollercoasters are bad.” Johnny lifts his beer.

“To being the kind of rollercoaster that’s up-to-standard and safe to ride.”

They clink their glasses together in a silent toast.

It surprises me to recognize just how much my son's grown up. On a level, I don't feel like I had a big part to play in it. While I was busy running after Patrick and Patrick was busy running after other women, my son was fending for himself.

Regret and gratefulness stirs inside me. He turned out amazing. I'm so humbled. So happy that he and I are forming a relationship now in this new season of my life.

Johnny observes my expression keenly, but he doesn't comment on it. Instead, he kisses my temple again and changes the topic.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Johnny takes us home. At the door, my son and my fiancé face each other.

Johnny offers his hand.

Amir does that manly, bro-hug with him.

It's cute.

"I know you'll take care of my mom," Amir says with a proud tilt of his head, "but just in case you need a reminder, I'm watching you."

"Noted." Johnny chuckles.

Amir glances at me. "Don't stay out too late."

I let out a stunned laugh. "Who's the adult here?"

"Just saying." He raises both hands and walks backward into the apartment.

I meet Johnny's gaze and shake my head. He smiles, steps forward and envelops me in his arms. The hug is warm and safe. I dip my nose into his chest. Close my eyes. Savor the moment.

"Thank you for saying yes," Johnny breathes.

“You doubted that I would? After everything we’ve been through?”

“It’s exactly because of everything we’ve been through that I wasn’t sure.” His words are muffled in my hair. “I’m sorry that my surprise caused you pain.”

“I jumped to conclusions.”

“No, you didn’t. You responded based on your instincts. I shouldn’t have put you in that position.” He eases back. Touches my face reverently. “I’ve told you that you can trust me, but I see that I have to work a little harder to earn that trust.”

“No, Johnny. It’s not you. It’s me.” I rub the back of my neck. “Honestly, there are times when you feel too good to be true.”

“Liz...”

“No, you’ve been amazing.” Frustration at myself and at the scars that still won’t heal escape in my voice. “I guess I’m still waiting for my rollercoaster to break down and every time it doesn’t, I get more and more anxious. Like I’m waiting for the worst to happen.” Emotions ball in my throat. “I hate that I’m punishing you for the hurt that someone else put on me.”

“You’re not punishing me, Liz. I love you. And I choose you.” His hands frame my face. There’s an urgent tone beneath his words. “I told you that a long time ago and it’s still true. I made a choice. That choice was you. I don’t regret it and I wouldn’t go back and change a thing. I knew what I was signing up for. Doc told me I should be...” He swallows. “I was thoughtless.”

“Johnny—”

“I don’t *ever* want you to be hurt, Liz. You are the most important person in my life, and everything I do should reflect that.”

“It does.” I dig my fingers into the collar of his jacket. Tears press the back of my eyes.

Johnny is beating himself up and it makes me sick. He wanted to surprise me with a proposal. He was working behind the scenes to make it happen. And what was I doing? Doubting him. Jumping to the worst conclusions. Now, he's taking responsibility...

My eyelashes flicker.

I breathe out in shock.

“What?” Johnny asks.

“Is this what it feels like?” My hands tremble. “When a man takes responsibility even if it's not his fault?”

“Why do you look so frightened?”

“I've never... it's my first time.” A tear slips down my cheek. “It feels kind of awful.”

“It should feel like the opposite of that, sunshine.”

“It's not right. I should have more on my shoulders. I should be doing more. It shouldn't be this easy. You shouldn't be this good to me.” My words push farther and farther apart as the tears flow.

I'm having a mental breakdown. Who in their right mind would feel so panicked by a man who treats them well? Why does it feel so foreign to me? So strange to be loved and treasured in the big ways as well as the little ways?

Johnny wraps his powerful arms around me. His lips graze over my face. His heart beats in time to mine. “I won't stop until you're used to this, sunshine.” The promise in his words makes me cry harder. “I won't stop until I show you that my love, my faithfulness, my commitment is what you deserve.”

NINETEEN

PATRICK

“YOU’RE BUSY? AGAIN?” I dig my fingers into my phone. “I don’t have a problem waiting until the end of your shift, Destiny.”

“I don’t want to do that to you.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. This is the third time she’s cancelled a date. It’s ridiculous and it’s starting to smell foul.

That’s not the only thing bothering me. Our texting has dried up to almost nothing. She doesn’t contact me unless I contact her first. And the other day, when I was going to physical therapy, I saw her laughing with some other guy in the hospital hallway.

It took everything in me not to storm over and demand he back the hell off. That she’s my woman. That we’re involved.

But I didn’t act on it.

Instead, I tried to ignore her, started missing her and texted first.

Like an idiot.

We were in a good place, weren’t we?

I don’t know what the problem is.

“Can you at least take time for coffee?”

“No.” Her answer is so sharp. So stern.

Damn.

I'm almost at the month-long mark of Doc's assignment. 'Give your all'. That's what Doc told me. That's what I've done. I've continued to send Destiny lunch, coffee, and I've shown up every time we make a date, yet she continues to ghost me.

I'm starting to get annoyed.

What the hell is going on?

"Are you seeing someone else?"

She barks out a laugh. "Really? I don't have time to even walk my dog right now and you think I'm dating around?"

"You're acting weird."

"I'm busy."

"So busy you can't even return my texts? I buy you lunch and coffee. I make myself available anytime you set up a date and I don't complain when you ghost me. Is this some kind of game to you?"

"You can keep your lunch and your coffee, Patrick, if it feels like you're wasting your money," she snaps.

I wince. "No, that's not—"

"I didn't ask for it in the first place, and if I'm not worth a cup of freaking coffee, then you can shove it."

"Destiny, that's not what I meant." My nostrils flare.

Calm down, Patrick. She's a nurse and she told you they'd be increasing her hours. Do you want to ruin this?

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Yell at me like that again and that'll be the *last* time we talk."

I blink rapidly. Destiny has always been fierce, but she's never turned that attitude on me with such intensity before.

"It won't happen again," I say quietly.

Angry silence fills her end of the line.

I run a hand over my face. “It felt like we were building something and then the momentum just—it stopped.”

“I really do have more shifts at the hospital. It’s driving me insane.” She sounds genuinely frustrated.

I wrack my brain for a peace offering. “Look, I don’t want to fight.”

Still no response.

An idea dawns. “Hey, you said you didn’t even have time to walk your dog, right? What if I walk him for you?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Toots will try to bite your walking stick and run off with it. You could get hurt.”

“I’ve been doing my exercises and strength training at home.” I used to hate doing them, but I took up those exercises with gusto on the day I saw her talking to some other guy at the hospital. If I need to throw a punch, I can’t be leaning on a stick. “My physical therapist said I’m recovering well. I’m strong enough to try walking without the cane.”

“Are you sure, Patrick?”

“Yes. Very sure.” I grin, sensing that I’m creeping back into her good graces. “I love dogs. They’re...” I cast about for an answer that a dog-lover would say, “cool.”

She laughs.

Score.

At least she’s not mad anymore.

“So how would this work? Do I get the keys to your apartment?”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

I cringe. Her bluntness really can cut a man to the quick.

“I’ll leave Toots with my next-door neighbor. You can pick him up there. I’ll send the address.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Patrick.”

“So when can I see you—”

“Destiny, what are you doing here? You’re supposed to be on your rounds...”

“I have to go,” Destiny says.

“Okay. I’ll text...” The dial tone rings. “You.”

Great. She hung up.

That night, I wrestle with what I could have done to get on Destiny’s bad side. She’s putting distance between us. Almost like she’s punishing me for being honest with her.

Maybe I shouldn’t have told her anything. If I hadn’t, if I’d kept most of the truth to myself, we could have been farther along by now. She could have spent all her free time in my bed.

Instead, she doesn’t even want to let me inside her apartment and the most I’ve done is squeeze her shoulder. Is she just not attracted to me?

The thought is a blow to my ego. I’ve spent my entire life knowing that I can get girls. They weren’t deterred by my wedding ring. In fact, some of them liked how forbidden it was to be with me.

Destiny is barely giving me the time of day anymore. We started off so strong. Do I keep chasing her when I’m not getting anything back in return? Hell, she could send some spicy pics or...

Give your all, Patrick.

I sigh heavily as Doc’s voice barges through my head. That old mechanic really is a buzzkill. He’s trying to get me to go against my own nature. What person would do this much for someone else without expecting anything in return?

Uneasy, I go to bed and then wake up early to get ready for my meeting with Toots. My schedule is packed for the day, so six in the morning is the only time I can spare.

It feels good to slip into the driver's seat again. I've been itching to grip the steering wheel for the past year.

On the way, I call Destiny.

"Hey." Her voice is scratchy as if I woke her from a deep sleep.

"Hi." I imagine her in bed, her braids spiraling over my naked chest and her fingers locked in mine. Damn. How long do I have to wait before that can happen?

"Are you picking him up already?"

"Yeah. I'm almost there."

"Remember to take the poop bag," Destiny murmurs.

She's slurring a little so I'm not sure I heard correctly. "What did you just say?"

"The poop bag." A yawn breaks her words up. "You'll have to scoop his poop."

I almost slam on the brakes.

Oh, *hell* naw.

I did not sign up to be on doo-doo duty. When Amir was a kid, I rarely changed his diaper. That kid could let out some stink bombs that had me throwing windows open just to air out the house. I didn't clean up after a baby. Why would I run around cleaning up after a dog?

"Is there a problem?" Destiny asks when I pause for too long.

"Uh, no. No problem." *Just think about how she'll reward you for this, Patrick. You can invite her over to your place. Put on some music. Get closer. She'll be so grateful she won't be able to turn you down.*

I mentally prepare myself for the task. "It'll be fine."

"Good." She hangs up.

I force myself to smile through my fear. Tiny dogs produce tiny poop, right? I can pretend it's a rock or something.

My hopes are dashed when I come face to face with Destiny's dog. Turns out, 'Toots' is not a tiny dog. At all. He's a spotted behemoth with eyes of steel and sharp teeth that flash as he barks his head off at me.

Destiny's elderly neighbor struggles to restrain him. "That's weird." She yanks on his leash. "He's normally so friendly. There must be something about you he doesn't like."

I break out into a sweat when she hands me the demon dog's leash and shoves me out of her apartment. Toots growls at me like he wants to personally stamp my ticket into the afterlife. What the hell is Destiny doing with this killing machine?

"Good doggie." I step closer, reach out slowly and try to pat his head.

He snaps at me.

I yank my hand back and yelp. "You crazy dog!"

Our walk starts and continues to be chaotic. Toots jerks me back and forth, running at trees and smelling everything. I try to hurry him through his paces, hoping to get him back before he heeds nature's call.

But it's too late.

In the middle of a grassy park, Toots drops into a crouch.

My heart balloons with panic.

I shake my head. "No! Stop! Don't you dare release that!"

A mound drops out of him, the size of which no living being should be able to produce. My eyes water from the stench and I clip my nose.

Toots wanders off, ready to smell some more after desecrating the ground with his waste.

Can I run? Will I really get in trouble if I don't pick up that thing?

"Ugh, what is that smell?" A white woman approaches me and points to the crap on the ground. "You're gonna pick that up, right?"

Damn. I'm caught.

Toots strains against his leash, trying to run across the park after some birds.

"Toots, settle down!" I snap.

He ignores me.

I wrap his leash more firmly around my hand and tug, while my other hand straps on the poop bag.

The woman taps her foot, arms over her chest.

Toots lets out a throaty bark, aimed at the birds.

"Shut up," I hiss.

He turns his evil eyes on me. I snap my lips closed.

Trying not to cry from the fumes, I lean toward the poop. Suddenly, Toots charges around me and starts barking at a bird that's landed nearby. He jerks his leash around my legs and, when I try to haul him back, I lose my balance.

In slow motion, I fall forward.

Right.

Into.

That.

Thing.

It fills my nostrils and creeps into my mouth. Every inch of my skin crawls.

Laughter explodes behind me. A crowd gathers. Phones start filming. Toots trots close to investigate and puts his nose against my face to smell his own waste.

I seize up in mortification and anger.

This is not my life. How the hell did I sink this low?

TWENTY

LIZETTE

I STEP into the room with my head held high. The hand wrapped around Johnny's arm is loose. Relaxed. The ring is blinding. Rich enough to emit its own light.

The setting is luxurious enough to be a ballroom, but it's just another room in the mansion of a wealthy family. Deep wooden tones, gold accents, leather cushions and wingback chairs. Tall bookshelves. Priceless works of art. It feels like I've stepped into a queen's parlor.

The party is more intimate than any of the soirees I've attended with Johnny. The women are pricked and prodded. Pert noses. Coiffed hair. Manicured hands gripping tumblers of gin.

I've stepped out of the safety of my modest apartment, my circle of upper-class friends, my clients from all walks of life. I've entered Johnny's world. His throne in the clouds where they have their own set of laws and expectations.

It's a skin that still doesn't quite fit.

I adjust my dress. Fluff my hair. Glance around.

Blending in doesn't come easily. I've never been one to pay attention to such extreme decorum. Sure, I had to host some parties when I was married to Patrick, but not on this level. It's nerve-wracking and I'm always afraid I'll make a mistake.

Johnny's hand closes over mine. It's warm and soft. Just like the smile he's giving me. "You look amazing."

“You’ve mentioned that.”

Several times tonight.

While running his hands all over me.

He steps close. Kisses my cheek. His lips linger on my skin. He grazes his mouth against my ear. “I mean it.”

A shudder wracks my body. He looks absolutely gorgeous in his tux, and I have a feeling he’ll attempt to steal me away before the end of the night.

We exchange smiles.

“Oh, there you are, Bonny!” Mrs. Bancroft waves her hand at a woman in the distance. “Liz, if you want the foundation to get on this year’s charity roster, you *must* have Bonny’s stamp of approval.”

I glance at Johnny. “Be right back.”

He winks. “I’ll come find you.”

I let my hand slip away from his and allow Mrs. Bancroft to drag me across the room.

Johnny’s mom is dynamite in glitters and sparkling sapphire. Couture drips from her ears and shoulders. She’s dainty, graceful and everything I want to be when I’m her age.

Whispers follow us as we dive through the room. I ignore them, almost certain that they’re discussing Mrs. Bancroft’s dress. From the moment we walked in, people have been calling her name. Not just casually. *Eagerly*. As if her acknowledgement alone can guarantee next year’s profits.

She hasn’t really stopped to talk to anyone. Her eyes are set. She’s on a mission for me. For the foundation. I see where Johnny gets his intensity. It’s almost terrifying to be the focus of a Bancroft.

“Bonny!” Mrs. Bancroft loops her arm in mine and stands before the old woman with a hooked nose and small eyes. “I’d like you to meet my future daughter-in-law.”

“Pleasure.” I accept the hand she offers.

“She runs a foundation for single mothers.”

“I’ve heard of it.” The woman’s tone is dry. Bored. Her eyes waver from mine to my ring. They light up. “Ravishing.”

“Uh, thanks.” I lift my hand self-consciously.

“When’s the wedding?” Bonny arches an eyebrow. She’s not asking me. She’s asking Mrs. Bancroft.

I don’t mind the dismissal. I’m still trying to find a polite way to answer that question. Johnny isn’t pressuring me to get married soon and I’m grateful for that because I am not in a rush.

“Oh, the kids will figure that out.”

“Hm.”

“About the foundation,” I try to interject, “it’s a cause that’s close to my heart. I was once—”

“A single mother?” Her eyes drape over me.

I squirm. “Uh, yes.”

“Well.” If she could move her lips, she’d probably be sneering at me. “The Bancroft family has a long, virtuous history in this community. Are you aware of it?”

I lift my chin. “I am. It’s an honor to be a part of their legacy.”

“Yes, a shame that legacy might be tarnished. The younger generation is to blame, I’m sure. Always so impetuous. It’s no wonder Johnny couldn’t keep his CEO position.”

Mrs. Bancroft narrows her eyes. I grit my teeth, annoyance surging inside me at the blatant insult. *Is she asking for a fight?*

I speak clearly and firmly. “Johnny is doing a great amount of good in the community with his investments. He changes lives by mentoring young entrepreneurs who are just entering the field. In my opinion, replacing him as CEO was a terrible idea. It’s the company’s loss.”

Mrs. Bancroft gives me a proud look.

Bonny doesn't seem as charmed. "I wouldn't expect someone like *you* to understand business. And, given Johnny's choice in companion, I'm beginning to doubt his taste and good sense as well."

My eyebrows crash together. I start taking off my earrings. Come at me all you want. I don't really give a damn. Go after the man I love, and it's over.

I lean forward, mouth open to put Bonny in her place.

Mrs. Bancroft touches my hand. Her lips are in a stern line. "The Bancroft family will continue to stand for all the values we hold dear. And we're very proud to have Liz join our family. Johnny made an exceptional choice."

"Has he?"

"Everything Liz has gone through shaped her to be the woman she is now. Beautiful, kind and determined. This is a perfect reflection of the legacy we wish to leave behind in this world."

Another *hm* rips from Bonny's thin lips.

Mrs. Bancroft steps toward her. "If you have any more questions about the foundation, you can forward them to Liz's office." Her tone is harsh. Firm. "I'll expect to see the foundation's name on the roster as soon as possible."

"Of course, Mrs. Bancroft. Although, if you were just going to come over here and order me to do so, you didn't have to waste your time being civil."

The women exchange polite smiles that look sharper than knives.

Bonny wanders off, probably to go and lure lost children into her house made of candy.

Mrs. Bancroft and I stay behind.

I stare at Johnny's mother in awe.

"Don't mind her, dear." Mrs. Bancroft leads me away. "Why don't we get a drink? Loosen up a bit."

I nod and follow her across the room. On the way, I notice a line of posters set on fancy golden easels. “What are these?”

“Those?” Mrs. Bancroft reaches for a champagne glass and hands it to me. “They’re the fundraising events of the season. There was a time when we each threw our own events willy-nilly. But it was so disorganized and there was so much competition. It was chaos. Now, we gather and plan out our major charitable events in advance.”

“This one’s coming up soon.” I gesture to the image of boxing gloves.

“Ah.” Her smile is wide. Mischievous almost. “This one is a favorite. We make a lot of money for charity on the boxing matches.”

“I thought betting on boxing was illegal?”

“Oh, it’s not that. People donate to come and see the fight.”

“Celebrity boxers?” I think of Harriet and how excited she’d be to see a real boxing match. She’s been cooped up with her baby since our last lunch date. I should kidnap her for another girl’s day.

“Oh no.” Mrs. Bancroft winks. “What makes it so interesting is that men and women from our social circle sign up to fight. It’s a chance for people who hold grudges to duke it out legally. In front of everyone. It’s transformed into a bigger activity than I expected.”

A pair of hands slide around my waist. I melt into the embrace, my heart recognizing him before I even turn around.

“Johnny.”

He kisses my neck. “What are you looking at?”

I point to the sign. “Are you signing up?”

“No.”

I turn and arch an eyebrow at him.

He kisses my nose. “Not even you can convince me, sunshine.”

“I’ve begged him to participate every season.” Mrs. Bancroft flutters her hands. “He just won’t listen. Stubborn. Just like his father.”

“You’re the stubborn one, mom. I get it from you.” He flashes her a loving smile.

Mrs. Bancroft rolls her eyes.

“Johnny!” A group of men call for him.

He sighs into me. “I just want to stay with you tonight. You look too beautiful. There are too many eyes on you.”

“Get used to it.” I laughingly push him away. “Your mom said this is a great networking opportunity. Don’t squander it by being my shadow. I want to make my own connections.”

He kisses my lips. “The only upside is I get to stand from a distance, point you out and call you my fiancée. It never gets old.”

“You are such a weird person.”

With another adorable lopsided grin, he turns and trots toward the group of men.

“Let’s check out the other events, dear,” Mrs. Bancroft says, pulling me along the line of easels.

Halfway down, I spot a group of ladies gathered behind the boards. They’re huddled together like a football team before a big match.

“I can’t believe Johnny’s off the market.”

“Where did he even meet that girl?”

“Does anyone else think she’s... not good enough for him?”

“Just say it plain. She’s ugly.”

“Her nose is, like, huge. And her hair... did she even comb it this morning? It needs some serious help.”

“Did you hear? She’s a single mom and she’s been divorced too. I heard she didn’t even finish school.”

Giggles ensue.

My eyes widen and I tighten my grip on my drink.

I turn slightly away. “Maybe we should...”

Before I can blink, Mrs. Bancroft’s fist launches out. She strikes the board the ladies are hiding behind and the entire thing teeters. I watch in slow motion as it crashes on top of the women. Shrieks break out from the girls and wine sloshes out of startled hands.

“Oh no.” Mrs. Bancroft blinks rapidly. “Are you okay? I don’t know what happened.”

I pull my lips in to keep the laugh from breaking out.

The girls are dripping wet, their gowns ruined.

“Looks like you spilled wine on your dresses. Although I think I did you a favor. Those gowns are last season, right?”

Blushes steal over their faces.

“Don’t bother cleaning up, dears. Just toss ‘em in the trash. You know where to find the trash, right? Since you left your class there?”

They squirm. Glance down. Hurry away.

Like quiet fairies, staff members rush in. They set the poster back up before anyone in the party sees a thing.

I smile at Mrs. Bancroft. “You are amazing.”

“Oh, nonsense.” She waves the compliment away. “I’m just annoyed that all the vultures are out in full force tonight.”

“I’m okay.”

“I know you are.” She pats my hand. “You’re smart enough not to pay those snobs any mind. They’re just jealous. All of them had their eyes on Johnny and you swept in. Stole him right from under them.”

“I didn’t do any stealing. Trust me.” I think back on how often I demanded space from Johnny.

“Oh yes, you did. And you had the audacity to make him fall so hard for you that he can’t even hide it.”

I duck my head, smiling.

“My boy is so locked on you he can’t even see straight. How do you expect these little prissies to feel seeing that?”

I laugh.

She takes my hand and squeezes. “Most of our family is too self-centered to see beyond their own bank accounts, but I’m his mother. I know what you’ve done for my son. You put that smile on his face and I will protect you—and that smile—for the rest of my life.”

My bottom lip trembles. She’s talking to me as a mother, and I feel it all the way in my heart.

“Now, we need to work on your reaction time. How can you stand up to Johnny’s grandfather if you just ignore things like that?”

“I don’t care if people dislike me.” Half-true. I’m learning not to care, but it’s still a process.

“Whether you care or not, don’t take it sitting down. Sometimes, you have to be a little crazy to get these high society snots to respect you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say.

She escorts me around the room, and I follow her advice. Chin up. Eyes forward. Shoulders back. I may not have been born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have value. Johnny didn’t make me into the diamond I am. I came ready-made.

This might not be the world I was born into.

Fine.

But I’m here now.

So I might as well make it my own.

TWENTY-ONE

PATRICK

I SCOWL as I enter the agency. Athletes stumble out of my way and so do the employees. My stride is fast. Furious. Hard enough to shake the walls.

It feels good to stomp my way around again.

My physical therapist is an evil bastard who inflicted me with unspeakable amounts of pain, but I can't argue with results.

Broken things can be set right again, but that's just the minimum. With the correct procedures and enough time, broken things can heal and become even more powerful than before.

My legs are lean, but they're slowing gaining muscle mass. I could run a marathon with these bad boys.

Thanks to Toots, it feels like I have.

I slam the door behind me when I get into my office.

"Whoa, good morning to you too," a voice says.

I jump in surprise when I see someone sitting in my couch. "Jerrison? What are you doing here?"

"Watching you act out like a teenager who just got grounded, apparently." His blue eyes follow me as I draw closer. "I heard you'd been cleared to walk so I came to see you in action for myself. Turns out, you *are* completely back to normal."

"I'm not in the mood."

His eyes regard me carefully. Since meeting Doc, Jerrison's gaze has been different. More intense. Almost like he wants to crawl into your head and sort out your thoughts.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Let's just say that I'm not a dog-person.” Yanking a bottle of water from my desk, I take a sip.

“You're upset about a dog?”

“The dog-owner, actually.”

“Wait. Go back. Are you talking about the nurse? She has a dog?”

“Yeah, she has a dog.”

And the four-legged bastard still hates me.

After ‘the incident’ in the park, I hoped our dog-human relationship would get better. Turns out, when a dog sees you covered in his crap, he takes that to mean you're his permanent doormat.

Destiny must have the same impression of me. She's been making all kinds of requests. On top of bathing her dog, walking her dog and scooping her dog's crap everyday, she's got me picking up her laundry, buying her lunch and running her errands. Hell, I took it a step further and even offered to give her rent money.

I can afford it, and it's not like I haven't done that for women before. But Destiny still hasn't put out yet. I'm basically treating her like my wife and I haven't gotten anywhere close to fourth base.

She kissed me on the cheek as thanks the other day and I was so starved for physical contact, I had to take a cold shower afterwards.

“So things are going well.” He bobs his head, pleased. “I'm glad Doc's advice is working out for you.”

“This has nothing to do with Doc,” I bite out.

His eyebrows hike.

Doc's month-long assignment is up. Actually, we've blown past that date. I haven't gone back to Doc yet because his instructions are trash and he turned me into a fool. I'm not about to waste any more of my time.

Jerrison leans forward, his expression pinched. "What do you mean? What happened?"

"Doc told me to give this girl 'my all'." Huffing, I stalk around my desk and fall into my chair. "I did that. I *am* doing that. She's got all of me. I haven't slept with another woman—hell, I haven't even watched porn—since I met her. I'm keeping my head down and my eyes to myself. And you'd think that would be enough."

Jerrison's eyes widen. "Uh..."

"But no. I'm also walking her dog, buying her lunch everyday, and texting her first when I haven't heard from her in a while. I'm such a punk I even pay her rent!"

"She asked you to do that?"

"Not the point."

We were talking on the phone that night and I wanted to get an invitation to her apartment. I brought it up, hoping she'd invite me over. It made sense in my head. Since I'm paying for her living arrangements now, I should at least get to see the inside of her bedroom.

No deal.

Destiny's more sealed up than a pair of limited edition sneakers.

"I'm out of options." Curling my fingers into a fist, I slam it on the table. "I'm bringing up the conversation."

"And say what? Sleep with me or I walk? Because women just love ultimatums."

"Well?" My eyes bulge. "You have any other options?"

"No."

"I like this girl, Jerrison. I wouldn't be doing all this crap if I didn't. But she's moving so shady, man. What if she's just

using me?”

“You think she’s like that?”

Destiny’s beautiful face pops into mind. She’s blunt. Honest. Passionate. “No, I don’t think she’s that kind of woman.” I throw my hands up. “But what else could it be?”

“Maybe she’s trying to test you.”

I swerve to look at him.

“Harriet did the same thing to me when I was trying to win her back and repair our marriage. I was being romantic and giving it one hundred percent, but she intentionally didn’t give in. She was cold because she wanted to see how I’d respond to not getting what I want. She wanted to see if I’d snap at her or if I’d be the bigger man. It’s only by being patient and continuing to pursue her, even when you don’t feel like it, that you pass the test.”

“You think Destiny’s testing me?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who’s dating her. You tell me.”

Drilling my fingers against the table, I let the thought sink in. Destiny was softening toward me. That night, when she called me to talk, I heard it in her voice. There’s a connection between us. It’s not like I imagined it. Something changed after that night, and she started being more rigid with me.

I rub my forehead. What could have happened between then and now?

“Either way, a conversation is a good idea.”

“I know. I’m going to talk to her—”

“Not with her. With Doc.” He tilts his head to the side. “According to Doc, all women are ‘a good thing’. We’re the ones who lack the training.” He nods at me. “I know how hard it was to come this far. It’s tough, man. It’s freaking excruciating to change the way you think and start over, but if you can convince someone like Destiny, who has standards that high, you can make it. Earn her trust, that’s how you show you’ve really changed.”

I let out a sharp breath.

My phone rings.

It's Destiny.

I point to the phone, and he gestures for me to take the call.

"Hey, Destiny," My tone is much warmer now than it would have been before Jerrison's pep talk. "I was just thinking about you."

"I was thinking about you too."

Damn. Simple things like that are enough to make me smile. How did I get so caught up in this woman?

"I was hoping you could help me out with something."

My smile deflates a bit. "What?"

"Do you know a Lizette Hamilton by chance? She runs a foundation for single mothers..."

"What did you say?"

"Lizette Hamilton."

The floor falls beneath me. My head starts spinning. "Yeah, I know her. Do you..." My throat tightens. "Do you know her?"

Jerrison capers to me. *What's going on?*

I can only shake my head in horror.

"Yeah, we're friends." She laughs.

Despair shreds my stomach and stretches its sharp claws toward my lungs.

"I have a package to give her. From Paula."

"Paula?"

"It's a long story. Basically, I don't have time this week, but I need to get that package to Liz. I'd send it through the mail, but it's really important that she receives it in person. Paula made me promise."

“Uh...” My heart hammers so fast against my ribs it’ll fly out in the next three seconds.

“I don’t trust anyone else with this, Patrick.”

Trust. That’s important. She’s saying she trusts me a little.

But why Liz? When did they even meet?

“I’ll leave it at the front desk for you.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks so much. I’ll call you tonight.”

“Okay.” My voice is hoarse.

The dial tone rings in my ear, and it sounds like a high-pitched scream coming from inside my head.

Jerrison rushes toward me. “Is someone dead?”

“Liz.”

“Liz is dead?” His eyes widen. “But Harriet just met with her this morning. They were squealing about engagement rings —”

“Engagement rings?” My head whips around and I stare Jerrison down.

He blinks rapidly. “Yeah.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you hear? I thought you’d know. It was all over the papers.”

“I don’t read the newspaper. I only watch sports. You know that.”

Jerrison turns pale. “Patrick...” His words are slow and even. “Johnny Bancroft proposed to Liz a while back.”

Something sharp hits my chest. It tears at my flesh and barrels into my heart like a poisoned dart.

“Proposed?”

“Yeah.” Jerrison’s eyes remain steady on me. “Patrick... she said yes.”

TWENTY-TWO

LIZETTE

JOHNNY IS PHENOMENAL. Just when I think he's run out of ways to woo me, to show me he loves me, he'll one-up himself.

I gasp when I enter the office that's been transformed with my favorite flowers—roses.

“Wow.” Melody tiptoes in behind me, her eyes widening. She glances at the arrangements. “This is...”

“A lot?”

“Romantic.”

I laugh. “That too.”

“Look, there's a note.” She points to the vase on the desk.

I approach it, my cheeks heating up when I recognize Johnny's handwriting.

The world's most beautiful flowers pale in comparison to you.

My lips inch higher.

This man.

“Aw.” Melody pushes out her bottom lip. “Isn't he running a huge company? When does he have time to think of all this?”

“When a man is prioritizing you, he'll make the time.”

“He must have done something very wrong.”

“He didn't.” I chuckle.

“So he’s doing all this just to impress you? When you already said yes?”

“A man should never stop dating his wife. Even after she says yes.”

“You’re not his wife yet.”

“But if he wants me to act like his wife, then he better act like my husband—with all the sacrifice, effort, and commitment that comes with that.”

She rolls her eyes. “Now you sound like that mechanic guy.”

“I’m glad you recognize a Doc-ism when you hear one.” I gather the roses to my nose and inhale. They smell lovely. My heart warm, I turn to Melody. “By the way, are any more women participating in the workshops? I haven’t gotten an update in a while.”

She glances away.

My instincts send a warning through my head.

I hiss out her name. “Melody...”

“I’m sorry, Miss Liz. I know you were excited about this idea but... most of us can’t afford a car, so there’s not much of a need to learn how to take care of one.”

“Have *you* gone to them, at least?”

Rubbing the back of her neck, Melody admits, “I’ve only been to the first meeting. I haven’t gone back.”

My eyes widen. “But you said you arranged a meeting every month.”

“Yes, I did. I arranged it.” She looks guiltily at the ground.

My heart flops. I was so busy investigating Johnny’s cheating and then, afterwards, I was busy attending events with Mrs. Bancroft and attaining more support for the foundation. I left some of these tasks to Melody, thinking that women would flock to Doc. Because... of course they would. Getting an opportunity to work with Doc is huge.

Or so I thought.

Apparently, I was wrong to assume.

“What’s the problem?” I frown. “It can’t just be about the cars.”

“It’s Doc.”

“Be very careful, Melody.” If anyone insults Doc, I’ll treat it as a personal attack.

“He said some weird things.”

“I know Doc’s views are unique, but I wouldn’t call them ‘weird’.”

“He thinks men are to be blamed for everything.” She tips her chin in challenge. “As if women don’t have a say.”

“It’s not about blaming men. It’s about men taking up their responsibility.”

“I have a son, Miss Lizette. And even though his dad left me high and dry, I don’t go around man-bashing because I don’t want my son around that kind of negativity. I just don’t think blaming everything on men is the way to fix things.”

“Melody, it’s not man-bashing. It’s pointing out a very real need for male mentorship. I had Amir spend a few weeks of his vacation with Doc because of that.” Stepping closer to her, I explain, “Women, as a community, equip females on how to be ladies. From the moment we’re kids, we’re told we have to look presentable. We’re told to brush our teeth. We’re told to learn to cook or no husband will want us. We learn to shave our legs, do our hair, and get an education, all because older women have a huge role in shaping us. Women are always training other women. Heck, a random lady in the subway will scold you for sitting with your legs spread. But who’s sticking around to teach men how to be good husbands? Who’s taking them aside and teaching them how to stay faithful to one woman? Who’s telling them about the challenges of maintaining a family for decades. Who’s equipping them on how to keep a marriage strong even after it stops being ‘exciting’?”

Her eyes flit away.

“I’m asking you. Who’s doing it?”

“I don’t know? The church?”

I snort out a laugh.

“Fine. No one is teaching men. You happy?”

“No, I’m not happy. Because even though men are the ones who are less equipped, women sure as hell get the brunt of the blame when a marriage falls apart. Everyone has a lot to say about her. She didn’t dress sexy enough.” My fingers curl into fists as I remember my past and the lies I told myself. “She wasn’t soft enough. Feminine enough. She nagged too much or didn’t give him enough space. We’re so hard on women, but when men act out of order, we shrug and say ‘that’s just how men are’.”

She bobs her head. “You’re right.”

“I don’t want to stuff Doc’s thoughts down anyone’s throat. I just want the women who are interested to see that it’s not their fault. That they don’t have to shoulder everything. That they weren’t *meant* to.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip. “I’ll consider going back if it’s that’s important.”

“I’m not saying you *have* to go, Melody.” I rub my forehead, frustrated with myself that my thoughts are coming out so harshly. “It’s my fault. I’ve been out of it lately. I have to fix this.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“No, it has to be me. I had to beg Doc to take on this class in the first place. It’s a miracle he even agreed to do this.”

“I thought he wanted to help people?”

“He does, but he believes the man is the foundation, so he only works with men. He doesn’t meet with women. Not usually. I kind of... tricked him into doing this training.”

“Really?”

“He thinks all he’s teaching is auto repair. What he doesn’t know is that he talks about relationships naturally. I was hoping, as the classes went on, that he’d be more open to doing seminars and talks in the future, but if this class isn’t even going well...”

“I’ll do better.” Melody wrings her hands together. “I promise.”

“I told you. It’s fine. This is my fault. I’ll take responsibility.”

At that moment, my phone rings.

I nod to the door. “You have work to do.”

“I’ll be outside,” Melody says quietly.

As she scrambles out, I glance at my screen.

Destiny.

I pick up.

“Hi, is this Lizette?”

“Yeah. Destiny. Hey.” My words flow out in a tired but happy gush. “It’s good to hear from you.”

“You too.” There’s a smile in her tone. “I wanted you to know that Paula contacted me recently. She said she was safe. She wanted me to tell you thanks. I’m sending someone to deliver her gift to you. It should be there soon.”

“I’m glad she’s doing well.” I glance out the window, noticing a car driving into the lot.

“Yeah.”

“And you? Are you doing well?”

“Close enough. I’m extremely busy right now. My internship at the hospital is getting more intense, and I also have exams too. But my boyfriend has been incredibly supportive. In fact, he’s the one who’s bringing Paula’s gift.”

“Oh. That’s...” My words trail when I see Patrick stomping out of the vehicle. An instinctual annoyance clamors through my chest.

What is he doing here?

“That’s what?” Destiny chuckles.

“Huh?”

“You were saying something, but you blanked out on me.”

Patrick glances up. Sunlight drowns his face in gold. He looks exactly like the man I fell in love with all those years ago. Same dark face. Same gold chains around his neck. Same angry swagger.

His cheeks are gaunt now—evidence of his trauma and recovery after the accident—but he’s just as darkly charismatic as he was back then. It irritates me to see him here. To see him looking so well.

“Destiny, I’ll have to call you back, alright?”

“Is something wrong?”

“I spotted a rat. It just came into my building.”

“You should call the exterminator. Those little things are dangerous.”

“No,” I say coldly. “I’ll handle this rat myself.”

I storm downstairs and meet Patrick in the lobby. He’s leaning over the front desk, asking for me.

“What are you doing here?” My voice echoes in the room.

He spins and gives me a head-to-toe scan. The slight flare of attraction in his eyes infuriates me even further.

“I told you I never wanted to see you again,” I hiss, drawing closer to him.

“Relax. I’m not here ‘cause I want to be.” He shoves something at me. “It’s a delivery.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“From Destiny.”

My blood runs cold.

I stare up at him, my jaw slackening. “What?”

His eyes drop to my engagement ring and stay there.

I blink rapidly, trying to make sense of his presence. “If Destiny sent you then...”

“Yes.” Patrick slides his dark eyes back to me. “She’s my girlfriend.”

TWENTY-THREE

PATRICK

LIZ DOESN'T TAKE me to her office. I get shoved into a storage closet like I'm a freaking dirty secret.

It's a sizable closet. I'll give her that. Enough room for Liz to pace back and forth like a general on the cusps of a great battle.

The silence is tense.

I watch Liz intently. She's so damn attractive that it messes with my head. Supple, dark skin that glows even in the darkness. A fancy dress. White. Long-sleeved. A woven belt tied at her waist. High heels that she never wore before she divorced me.

Even her hairstyle is different. The curls are big and voluminous, framing her oval-shaped face in attractive coils.

When we were married, she didn't take this much care of herself. It makes me wonder if we'd still be together if she'd put in a little effort. Made it a little easier to come home.

She's your mirror, Patrick. What were you showing her that she reflected back to you?

I wave Doc's voice away. I don't need him butting in with his principles about wives and mirrors. I'm not in his garage. I'm in reality. And, in reality, the Liz in front of me looks both fierce and gorgeous. This woman would have kept my attention.

Liz tucks one of her curls out of her face. A bright light almost blinds me when she lifts her hand. It's the giant

diamond stuck to her finger. Bancroft must want everyone to know he put a ring on it—even the people up in space.

My eyes snap to hers. “Nice ring.”

Her gaze lowers to it and she stiffens.

“A little gaudy but...”

“Gaudy?”

“Didn’t you prefer simple, classy jewelry?”

She stops in her tracks and gives me a blistering stare. “It’s bigger and better than what you gave me, so that makes it gaudy?”

I bristle. “Don’t pick a fight, Liz. I’m not here for that.”

“You’re the one making underhanded comments, Patrick.”

I scoff. Hard. This isn’t how I wanted our reunion to go, but seeing that ring is ticking me off. If Bancroft hadn’t swooped in and stolen my wife away from me, maybe Liz and I would have been able to work things out. The what if’s are playing on a track in my mind. It’s frustrating because I’m over her. Or I thought I was. But now that she’s standing right in front of me...

She’s sexy. She’s a hustler. And she used to be mine. Now she’s going to marry some other guy. I don’t know why that bothers me so much.

“I’m surprised Bancroft actually proposed. I thought a rich clown like that would want to keep you hidden.”

“You don’t know a *thing* about Johnny, so keep his name out of your dirty mouth.” Her nostrils flare.

That furious expression reminds me of the fights we used to have when we were married. Sometimes, those shouting matches would end with me storming out of the house. Other times, they’d end with me hauling off her clothes and drilling her into the kitchen counter as she gasped my name.

Her voice snaps me out of the fantasy. “When did you meet Destiny?”

“Huh?”

“When. Did. You. Meet?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “How is that any of your business?”

“Destiny is a sweet girl, Patrick.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I scowl at her. “Destiny is incredible.” Before I knew what had happened, my heart went and got stuck on that woman. I’m acting totally out of character, running after her every whim and playing a fool just to make her happy. If anyone knows how amazing Destiny is, it’s me.

“What are your intentions toward her?”

“Look, Liz, all I came to do was drop this off. I’m not here for a freaking interrogation.”

“Answer me, Patrick.” Her voice is heated.

I glance down pointedly at her fancy engagement ring. “It seems like you’ve forgotten. The days of you yelling out questions and demanding answers are over. You gave up the right to nag me when you signed the divorce papers.”

“I’m not going to drop this, so you might as well answer now.”

Great. Liz found a damn backbone and now she’s even more insistent.

I shake my head and turn away.

She charges in front of me, her chest heaving and her eyes sparking with flames. “I don’t know what you did to convince her you were worth her time, but I’m going to strongly encourage you to break it off. Immediately. Before you do something that breaks her heart.”

“That’s not your place, Liz.”

“Patrick.”

“What? Why is this so important?”

“I told you already. She’s a nice girl.”

“So? What’s it to you, huh?” I lean down. Close enough that I can see the light brown flecks in her eyes. “Why does it bother you so much that I’m dating again? That I’m serious about her?”

“Destiny and I are friends.” She maintains eye contact.

“Is that all? Think good and hard, Liz.”

She scowls at me.

I smirk in return. She’s still attracted to me. Why else would she get this upset? The realization is an ego boost. It gives me the courage to step closer to her even though she’s steaming from the ears.

“Sorry, Liz, but I’m committed to Destiny. She’s my girlfriend and I’m going to keep on dating her for as long as I please. Nothing you can say will change that.”

She grits her teeth.

I give her one more once-over and reach for the door. A sigh rattles out of me. Not gonna lie. I was nervous the entire way here, wondering how I’d handle seeing Liz again after so much time. Her last words to me were to not contact her again and, when I got her money, I was too ashamed to see her.

This reunion isn’t exactly an amicable one, but at least I’m in a much better place. The last time Liz saw me, I was broke, in a wheelchair, and struggling to keep my sanity. Today, I’m stronger than ever, building my empire, and I have a wonderful woman by my side.

Destiny’s face comes to mind.

Beautiful eyes. Soft smile. Sharp tongue.

I don’t want to give her up. After meeting Liz again, I’m even more certain of where my heart lies.

Destiny is the one I want.

Sure, my pants are a little tight. I’m still attracted to Liz. And I’d like to get her naked as much as I’d want any nice-looking woman to satisfy me right about now. It’s been a hot-

damn minute since I've felt a woman's touch. But the way I feel for my ex-wife is different than the way I feel for Destiny.

Liz is my past.

She's my biggest regret.

But she's not my future.

It's like the dust is settling in my soul. Like the world suddenly became sharper in my focus. I'd thank Liz for bringing clarity, but I don't think she'd appreciate my gratitude.

"Don't worry. The next time Destiny wants to send something over, I'll make up an excuse so I don't have to see you again. Goodbye, Liz." My hands are reaching for the door. My body's already leaning toward the exits when Liz spits her venom.

"I wish her luck."

I freeze, my fingers wrapped around the knob. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Does she know that you're a backstabbing liar?"

The insult pummels into my gut. I whirl around.

"Does she know that, when it comes to relationships, you're a lightweight who can't handle the responsibilities of a wife and a family?"

I narrow my eyes. "The only lightweight is Bancroft."

"Johnny's twice the man you'll ever be."

My temper ignites. "Even when I had to use a walking cane, I could take him in a ring. He's a crybaby who grew up with three nannies and a gourmet chef. He's never been on the streets. He's never had to fight for anything. He's a punk. And you know it." I stick a finger out at her. "That's why you're defending him. Because he can't defend himself."

Liz curls her fingers into fists. "You're despicable."

"And you're a sell-out. You ran and got engaged to the big billionaire you were messing around with when we were

married, yet you act like you didn't do anything wrong back then."

"I can't believe this."

"Don't play innocent, Liz. It's beneath you."

Her hair slaps her cheek as she shakes her head. "Does Destiny know?"

"Know what?"

"What you did to me?"

My voice gets tight. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm not going to let you ruin that girl."

"Liz!"

"You think you're capable of changing? You're wrong. You're the same scumbag who cheated on me and lied to countless women. Someone capable of so much destruction can't dedicate himself to one woman. Sooner or later, you're going back to your old ways. Destiny will be the one to suffer for it."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I told you. You can have the idiots who think you're something special, but Destiny is like a sister to me. You do *not* get to hurt her."

My laughter is bitter. "You really think you can still control me, don't you?"

Her lips slide into a thin line.

"I'm going to do whatever the hell I like." I throw my hands wide, annoyed beyond belief. Liz is way out of pocket, and I'm done tiptoeing around her fragile ego. My voice carries the strength of my promise. "Destiny is amazing, intelligent and beautiful. She's everything I could want in a woman. I want a future with her. Hell, I might even marry her."

Liz steps back, her eyes so wide that someone would think I just confessed to murder.

“Yeah, Liz. I’m that serious.” My voice drops to a low threat. “So stay out of my way.” I whirl around and open the door. “And congratulations. I hope you and Bancroft have a long, happy life together.”

She releases a pained breath.

I storm out of the room, my mind crashing as my ex-wife’s predictions follow me like a dark cloud.

TWENTY-FOUR

LIZETTE

I PACE the lobby and dial Destiny's number over and over. It keeps going to voicemail. She told me she was busy, but I *need* her to pick up. I can't let her make the biggest mistake of her life. She has no idea the world of hurt that she's in for.

You sweet girl. How did you get caught up in a man like that?

I squeeze my eyes shut, recalling all our past conversations where she casually mentioned her boyfriend. I had no idea she was talking about Patrick. Why would anyone as sensible as Destiny sign herself up for that kind of pain?

Memory after memory crashes into me. Holding the cell phone after hearing my STI test was negative. Calling Patrick's friends to find out why he still hadn't come home 'from the office'. Smelling perfume on his clothes. The hint of lust on his breath.

If I'd known, if I had even the slightest clue that she was dating Patrick, I'd have warned her. I would have talked her out of it.

But it's not too late.

I can still save her.

Johnny texts me, asking if I got the flowers. I respond to him. Something quick and distracted.

Yes, I loved them.

I keep calling Destiny.

He texts me again, asking if I want to eat out tonight or if I'd prefer for him to cook.

I'm not really hungry.

There are no new texts for a while.

I'm grateful for that.

"Come on, Destiny," I chew on my nail. "Come on, come on." The call goes to voicemail again and I curse under my breath. When the recorded message prompts me to leave a note at the end of the beep, I oblige. "Hey, Destiny. It's Liz. Call me when you get this, please. It's urgent."

Johnny calls me.

I pick up. "Hey."

"Hey." He's whispering. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Why are you whispering?"

"I'm in the middle of a meeting, but I crept away to call you. Something about your texts... I don't know. It doesn't feel right."

I love this man. I love that he can tell whether I'm distressed or not by the content of my text messages. I love that, even in the midst of his busy schedule arranging million-dollar deals, he'd leave it behind to check on me.

This is the man I love.

This man is ten times better than Patrick.

A hundred times.

Destiny deserves that. And Patrick deserves *no one*.

"There's something going on right now."

"Do you need me to head over there?" His voice rises in volume. He means it. Johnny would ditch whatever he's doing and come find me in a second.

But I don't need his help this time.

"I've got it. Thanks, though."

"Are you sure?"

I swallow hard. “You’re in a meeting.”

“Sunshine.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Patrick came to see me just now.”

Johnny’s silence is louder than a thousand bullhorns.

“He was dropping something off for Destiny... his new girlfriend.”

“Whoa.”

“She probably has no idea what kind of person he is.”

“Maybe she does.”

“No. There’s no way. If she did, she wouldn’t be with him.”

“Either way, it’s between them, right? You know how smart Destiny is. She’s not the type who’ll put up with anybody who mistreats her.”

“Love can make people do crazy things. They miss the signs and accept terrible behavior thinking they can fix it.”

“Does Destiny seem like that kind of person to you?”

“But—”

“Sunshine, you and Patrick are over. That means he doesn’t have a right to meddle in your life and you don’t have a right to meddle in his.”

“This isn’t about meddling. This is about Destiny.”

“Even if it is about her, it’ll *look* like you still care about him if you try to break him and his girlfriend up.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m completely over him.”

“Then let it go.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Very few people can hide who they really are. It’ll come out eventually. You don’t have to worry. Destiny will be fine.”

Voices call for Johnny in the background.

I hurry to get him off the phone. “You’re right. I shouldn’t get involved.”

“You good?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll pick you up later. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

After we hang up, I get a text from Destiny. She only has a couple minutes to meet, but she can spare me the time. I don’t hesitate to set up a meeting with her.

Johnny is a man. He doesn’t understand how devastating it is for a woman to invest her time and emotional resources in a relationship that goes south. It would be better to know in advance and avoid the pain. I’m doing a good thing.

Twenty minutes later, I rush into a crowded coffee shop and find Destiny already there. She’s wearing a nurse’s uniform and comfortable shoes. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her braids look like they’re in desperate need of some moisture.

I slide into the seat across from her. “Thanks for meeting with me.”

“It sounded urgent.” Her tone is flat but polite. As if she doesn’t really want to be here right now.

I know it’s not personal, but I wish she’d show a little more enthusiasm. I’m here to help her. To save her. She should show a little more appreciation.

“What is this about?” Destiny pulls her cup of coffee closer. She sips it like it’s supplying blood to her veins.

“It’s about your boyfriend.”

“Patrick?” Her eyes light up. She seems genuinely happy to discuss him.

“Yes, Patrick. How did you two meet?”

“In the hospital.” Her eyes lift to the ceiling. She seems to choose her words carefully. “I’m going really, *really* slow with

him. I wanted to see if he'd turn into the man that everybody said he was." She lifts one shoulder. "So far, I've been dragging him through the mud, but he hasn't caved once. He's been extremely supportive." She lets out a sigh. "Honestly, I'm starting to rely on him more and more. Genuinely."

Well then. This is going to break her heart. "I'm sorry, Destiny."

"For what?" She blinks up at me. So young. So trusting. She has no idea.

"Patrick is not who you think he is." I let the sentence linger in the air between us. Let her prepare herself for the shock that's to come. It's going to be unpleasant. Frustrating. Maybe even heartbreaking—depending on how much she'd started to fall for him. "Patrick is," I slide my fingers together and push them across the table, "he's my ex-husband."

Her eyes widen. "What?"

"Yes." I dip my chin. My fingers tremble from the bitterness that's finding new ground inside me. "He was a terror. He tore my life apart with his cheating and his lies."

Her eyelashes flutter. "He cheated?"

"Yes."

Destiny inhales sharply.

I stare into her eyes so she knows I mean every word. "I'm telling you this for your own good. He's not a nice person. He only brings pain and destruction to the people in his life."

"Thank you for telling me." Destiny seems withdrawn, but it's not the devastation I expected. I'm also not hearing anything about her breaking up with him.

"Did you hear what I said? We divorced because he cheated."

She nods. "I heard you."

"He can't be trusted."

"Okay, Lizette." There's a hint of frustration in her tone.

Why? Why is she annoyed with *me*?

I give a nervous laugh to break the tension. “Look, I know I might seem nosy and that’s not my intention at all. I just feel we’re a lot alike. And I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I won’t. I’ll handle it.” She rises regally.

I take a deep breath. “Are you going to break up with him?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

Think about it? What is there to think about? She needs to drop him like a hot potato. She needs to rake his eyes out and then kick him to the curb. I didn’t have the guts to choose violence, but Destiny isn’t like me. She’s bolder. Way more in control of her own life than I was at that age.

“What do you mean ‘think about it’?” I know I’m pushing my luck. I know I’m being unreasonable and annoying, but I can’t let her be passive about this.

“It means I’ll discuss it with Patrick and ask him why he didn’t tell me.”

“Of course he’s going to make an excuse!” I shriek. “He’s spent his entire life learning how to sweet-talk women. He knows how to tell you what you need to hear. He knows how to make a woman stay and ignore her better judgement. You can’t fall for it.”

“Lizette, I appreciate you telling me this, but I’ll handle it my way, okay?”

The air suspends in my lungs. My fingers dig into my thighs, leaving small indent marks from my nails.

Her throat bobs. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

I blink rapidly, watching as she tears out of the coffee shop. It still feels like she’s mad at me. Like she *blames* me for telling her.

Shocked, I drive back to the office. I step into the room filled with Johnny’s roses. I take a deep breath. The world spins crazily around me, so I grip the desk for balance.

Destiny's a smart girl. She won't fall for Patrick's tricks. He won't get to tear someone like her down.

My phone chirps.

I turn to pick it up and see a new message.

DESTINY: *I wanted to apologize for the way I acted when you told me about Patrick.*

ME: *It's okay. I understand. I know it's hard, but I had to tell you the truth.*

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from typing anything more.

DESTINY: *Liz, I'm going to give him a chance to explain. I hope you and I can still be friends even if you don't agree.*

"A... chance?" A maniacal laugh gets trapped in my throat. I squeeze my cell phone to stifle the sound as the roses blur in my vision. *Is she serious? She's giving him a chance? A chance to what? Break her down the way he broke me?*

Frazzled, I step back and into the desk. One of the vases wobbles. I whirl around and try to grab it before it hits the ground.

I'm too slow. It shatters and Johnny's roses spill on the floor. Numbness falls over me. I stare at those broken petals and pieces of glass for a long, long time before I move to clean up my mess.

TWENTY-FIVE

PATRICK

WE NEED TO TALK.

The four most damning words in the history of relationships.

I stare at my phone screen. At Destiny's message.

It's so innocent when it's there on the screen. What damage can 'talking' do?

A lot.

It can destroy everything.

Earlier today, Liz threatened to expose me to Destiny, and I knew she was good for the threat. The wounds I inflicted on her are too deep. They're oozing now. Ugly and bitter. They're creeping into my future and tainting what I have with Destiny.

A part of me wants to lash out at Liz. Can't she mind well enough alone? Can't she just butt out of my life for good?

But I know I can't blame it all on her. The truth was bound to come out anyway. I danced around it for too long. Admitted to 'making mistakes', but not clarifying what those mistakes were. It was a desperate attempt to keep Destiny's heart without exposing too much of mine.

And now the jig is up.

We need to talk.

I want to tell Destiny I'm busy. That I can't meet. That I'm in a coma.

If she breaks up with me...

It would kill me.

I've invested so much time and effort in our relationship. For the first time in my life, I've given one woman my all. All my attention. All my commitment. All my efforts.

I had to be broken—physically and emotionally—to arrive at a place where I could do that. Now that I'm here, I don't want to lose the only woman who could make months of celibacy tolerable.

Avoiding her is the only strategy I can think of, but it won't last forever. I'll need to speak to her and, somehow, make a last-ditch appeal for our relationship. If I can't convince her that I've changed, that my past is behind me, I'll lose her for good. I'm sure of it.

These thoughts drive me back to the mechanic shop. I'm a yo-yo on a string. Every time I think I've successfully bounced away from Doc, my life goes to crap and he pulls me back in.

The scent of engine oil and car fuel is a cloud that hovers over the shop. Broken cars stare at me, their eyes dull from waiting their turn to be healed. Grimy white walls. High ceilings. Fluorescent lights.

Home.

This place used to feel like a prison cell but, right now, it almost feels like a refuge.

My steps are softer now. There's no walking cane thudding on the ground, alerting Doc to my approach. I can turn and run. Change my mind. Leave Doc and his harsh principles behind to do things my own way.

But Destiny wouldn't have given the old Patrick the time of day.

If I want her, I have to kill what's left of him.

I have to become something new.

Doc glances up when I'm near to him. He's covered in engine oil. It smears over his cheeks, a shade darker than the

color of his skin. His silver-threaded beard is a little fuller now. His eyes bore into me, calm and serene.

“Doc,” I croak out his name like a prayer.

“Patrick.” He arches an eyebrow.

“I know I’m late.”

He regards me intently.

“I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t even blink.

“I need your help.” My breath escapes sharply. “I did what you said. I gave this woman my all. It was hard and I wanted to stop every time I didn’t get my way, but I kept going. Do you know why?”

Doc grabs a rag and starts cleaning his hands.

“Because I love her. There’s no other explanation. Any other woman and I would have given up. But it’s her. She’s the one I want, Doc.”

“What’s the problem?” He gestures to the mug of lemon water.

A beat of shock passes through me. Is Doc finally inviting me to drink with him?

I gallop over to the table and take a seat. “It’s my past.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“Not everything.” I watch as he pours the liquid into the cup. “Doc, I’m in over my head. Destiny is dead-set against dating cheaters.”

“That’s an understandable criteria.”

“Not if it disqualifies me.” I shake my head. “You know my history. And now, thanks to Liz, Destiny does too.”

“Hm.”

“I don’t want to lose her. What do I do?”

Doc slides the glass of lemon water over to me. “A car’s instrument gauge is very important. It keeps the driver aware

of what's happening inside. It gives him information on the things he can't readily see. This information allows him to drive safely."

My eyebrows smash together. Why is Doc suddenly talking about instrument gauges?

He eases back in his chair. His words are as calm as his expression. "What are the two greatest commandments of a relationship?"

"Commitment and communication," I mumble, recalling that particular lesson with clarity.

He nods. "We already worked on commitment—which required you give her your all, but there's a second part."

"Communication."

He nods. Takes a sip. Leans back. "That instrument gauge *communicates* if something is wrong in the vehicle."

"What's your point, Doc?"

"Allowing your meters to be seen is a good thing."

"A good thing? No, if she knows about my past, she might..." I gulp. "She might not want to see me anymore."

"Revealing your gauges may cause you to feel exposed, but it will help with being faithful. Transparency requires submitting yourself to the other person. This shows humility."

"You can't be right about this one, Doc. Every advice I've ever gotten said transparency is dangerous. That's how you start fights and get misunderstood. Some things are better held close to the chest. You can keep the peace if she doesn't know."

"Keep the peace? How fragile is a peace that's built on lies?" He wraps his fingers around the glass. "Tell me this. If you block out the instrument gauge of a car, will that end well for the driver? Will it benefit the vehicle in the long run?"

I shrug, unwilling to admit I see his point.

"Transparency. Accountability. That is how trust is developed. A relationship with trust is a relationship that will

be impenetrable. It might shake, but it won't bend."

"What if it didn't start out with transparency? What if it breaks because she finds out...?"

"The root of the problem is that this young lady doesn't deal with cheaters. Who does?" He shakes his head. "In this case, your first job is to fix you. Fix the cheater."

"I'm fixed. I haven't looked—"

"Have you, Patrick? Have you not looked at all?"

I think about the way I was eyeing Liz today. My gaze skitters away from him.

"There's only one way to deal with the temptation of cheating, but it requires something."

"What?" I lean forward.

"The opposite of being macho."

I scrunch my nose in confusion.

"To resist the temptation of cheating, you must learn to run. Avoid. Go the other way as fast as you can."

"Doc."

"If you see a hole in the road, you steer away from it. You don't run through it to show you're bigger than the hole. That's stupid. If you're overtaking on a hill, you don't swerve out for the fun of it because a truck might be coming on the other side. If it starts raining, you slow down."

"I get it."

He gestures to me. "This is the only time you are allowed and *encouraged* to be a coward. Whenever temptation comes or whenever you feel that drive, that desire for another woman, you develop your running skills."

"That's it? There's no other way?"

"Has any other way worked for you?"

I clear my throat.

Doc taps the mug in thought. “What is the purpose of a vehicle?”

I narrow my eyes at him, wondering if this is a trick question. “To... take you from one point to the next.”

“Right. Movement.” He presses his hands flat on the table. “Even though the purpose of a car is to move, the manufacturer installed brakes. The brakes are there so you can stop.”

I nod.

“If there’s a threat up ahead, you don’t run to it and pretend to be brave. You apply the brakes. It’s why that pedal is there. To stop you although everything wants to go forward.”

“I get it, Doc.” I let out a breath. “It’s embarrassing but, if it’s effective, I can run.” I frown at him. “How does this keep Destiny from breaking up with me?”

“It doesn’t. I’m addressing the root problem, so you can function with any woman. The only person you can control is you. Whether Destiny wants to give you a chance is her choice. No one can force her.”

My phone rings.

I glance down and then back up at Doc. “It’s Destiny.”

“Go on.” He gestures with his chin.

“I’ll pay the secretary first.” I dig for my wallet.

“Patrick.”

I turn around, distracted and worried.

“Remember, when you explain your past mistakes, do not blame your wife. Make it clear she had nothing to do with your behavior and it was all your own twisted choices.”

His words cut through me. “She’ll hate me even more, Doc. That’s the opposite of what I should say to convince her.”

“Throw your wife under the bus, blame her, and it means you’ve learned nothing.”

I hang my head. Take a breath. Accept the principle I've been fighting so hard to ignore. "It's not always my fault, but..."

"But?" Doc arches an eyebrow.

"But it's my responsibility." The words taste bitter on my tongue.

Doc juts his chin at the door. "Go."

I leave the money at the little office window and hustle out of the workshop, my stomach in knots. Tonight might be the last time I see Destiny.

But I really hope she gives me a chance.

TWENTY-SIX

LIZETTE

“SUNSHINE, HOW DID YOU GET HURT?” Johnny grabs my wrist and turns my hand over. His eyes fix on the haphazard gauze that’s wrapped around my fingers.

“I broke a glass vase today,” I say casually. Johnny doesn’t need to know that I was filled with frustration when I bumped into the desk. That I was so annoyed I just grabbed a plastic bag and picked up the pieces. That my stupid plan resulted in me getting sliced and bleeding out into the floor.

“I’m sorry. I told them not to put any in your way.” He frowns. I wonder if heads will roll at the florist shop tomorrow.

I squeeze his hand. “I’m fine. Really. It was a clumsy mistake.”

“You’re not usually clumsy.” His eyebrows tighten.

“We all have our days, right?” I keep my tone light.

Johnny gestures to the sofa. “Sit down. I’ll fix that.”

“It’s fine.”

He gives me a sharp look.

I shut my mouth and sit in the sofa.

Johnny leaves and returns with the first aid kit. He sets the kit on the sofa, clicks it open and rummages inside for a fresh gauze, antiseptic and a cotton swab.

I watch the top of his head as he works. His shoulders are broad. His neck is thick. The smell of antibacterial cream

overpowers the scent of his cologne, but I can still pick up traces of it. Such big hands and yet they're so gentle. I like the way he blows on my cut as if that'll rush the healing.

He glances up. "What?"

"Nothing." I smile. "It's just been a really long day. I'm glad to see you."

His lips quirk up. One side is higher than the other.

I press a finger to his cheek. Johnny. My kind and patient Johnny. The moment he entered my life, it felt like a puzzle piece that just... fit. I didn't know I was missing anything. I didn't *want* to feel that connection with a man again. But he rode in like a hurricane, tore everything by the roots and, by the time I realized it, sunflowers were growing where concrete and ash used to be.

We're best friends. Lovers. Teammates. His joy is mine and his victories are mine. I don't have to think with him. Like magnets, we fit exactly where we're supposed to. His flaws are perfectly balanced against my strengths. His strengths are balanced against my weaknesses.

Seeing Patrick today reminded me of that. Not that I needed a physical reminder to prove that Johnny is the man for me.

"I was worried you'd be upset," Johnny murmurs.

"Upset?"

"About seeing Patrick again." His voice is carefully casual.

Mine is too. "We didn't talk long."

"I thought he'd goad you into an argument." Johnny sets the gauze around my fingers. His hand seems especially pale against my dark skin. "I figured he'd taunt you about his relationship with Destiny."

"Yes, well, Patrick has always been immature."

Johnny bobs his head. "I know you wanted to intervene, and I can see why you'd feel the need to bring it up first, but they didn't ask for your opinion about their relationship."

“Sometimes, people don’t know what they need.”

“You could be wrong too.” He carefully applies the ointment. “What Patrick did to you might be different than what he does to Destiny.”

I bite down on my bottom lip. “You’re right. No one knows.”

“Are you okay with not telling her anything? I know it bothered you.”

I swallow hard.

Thankfully, Johnny’s phone rings, saving me from having to lie to him. While he’s on the phone, I mouth to him that I’ll be in the bathroom. He nods and focuses on his call.

I hurry into the bathroom, cup my palm beneath the sink and throw water on my face. The droplets slide over my broad nose and thick lips. The woman in front of me is shaking and nervous.

“Relax, Liz. You did the right thing. Johnny doesn’t understand, but he will. We’ll find the right time to tell him.”

Not tonight. Obviously.

Maybe in the future, when he’s forgotten about all this, I’ll casually mention that I met with Destiny. By then, it won’t seem like a big deal.

Straightening my shoulders, I head back to the office. The room is quiet. Johnny must have ended his call already.

A smile stretching on my face, I push the door. “You did great work with the bandage. Thanks for that by the way. I’m horrible at using my left hand for...” My words trail when I see his cold expression. “Johnny?” I glance down and notice that my phone is in his hands. “Why are you holding that?”

“I was moving it so I could start packing the flowers in the car.” His voice is tight. I’ve only heard it get that dark a few times, but it was always with other people. I never wanted to hear it drop to that decibel with me. “I happened to see a message. From Destiny.”

My eyelashes flutter. “Johnny, I can explain.”

“Don’t. Do not lie to me, Liz.” His voice is barely above a whisper. Johnny isn’t the type of man who has to shout at someone to demand their attention or their respect.

I stay in my position at the door. The tone of his voice, the way his expression is completely shuttered, it makes me want to hide from him. My face. My body. My guilt.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Johnny asks.

“Yes. Eventually.”

His eyes shoot up to mine.

“Maybe.” I shake my head. Swallow past the lump in my throat. Try to hold back my tears.

“Destiny’s text said she’d be talking to Patrick. She’s meeting him tonight to discuss what you told her.”

I want to step back. Step out of the room. Have a re-do. Do this entire day over.

“You went to her,” Johnny says. He’s not asking.

“I... I couldn’t let it go.”

“I’m guessing she wasn’t as angry as you thought she’d be.”

“No.” My voice breaks. “She was acting like she’d still give him a chance if he said the right things.”

“Is that why you broke the vase?”

My eyes widen. “What? No.”

“Were you so mad, so devastated that your ex-husband was in love with another woman that you threw it intentionally?”

“No, Johnny. You have to believe me.” I stalk closer to him. My fingers wrap around his arm.

“I love you, Liz.” He slides his hand away from my grip.

My heart leaves my body at that moment.

“Nothing you can do or say will make me love you any less.” He reaches up. His knuckles caress my face. Hope

bubbles in me again.

“I love you too.”

“I want you to be my wife. I want you to be my everything. That won’t ever change. Never. To the day I die. But I can’t do this with you right now.”

My eyes search his. Desperation is a cork in my throat. It makes every word painful. It makes every breath heavy. “W-what are you talking about?”

“I need some time.” His words aren’t directed at me. They’re pointed at the floor. They bounce back up and spear my chest. Blood gushes out, but he can’t see. He’s not looking at me. He wouldn’t care if he noticed. “I need to think without seeing you.”

The tears are coming. They’re pushing against the back of my throat. The back of my eyes.

“Johnny, no. You misunderstood.”

“I knew, last year, you were just getting out of a divorce. You came to me fresh from a marriage that tore you down. I could have given you more time to move on, but I didn’t. I wanted you and I was willing to go at your pace if it meant I could be with you.”

“Johnny...”

“I understand that he’s your ex-husband. And I understand that Destiny is your friend, but can you look me in the eyes and tell me this has nothing to do with your feelings for him?”

A tear courses down my cheek. I can’t speak. Can’t think.

“When he was in the hospital, I bit my tongue, and I gave you the space you needed to sort out your heart. I knew I had to be patient. I knew you would come to me if I just gave you time. If I just... didn’t press too hard. If I offered all the things, gave you all the time, gave you all of me, I knew you’d move on from him. I believed that, even if you couldn’t, you’d be honest so we could work through it together. I could learn how to be there for you and give you what you needed. Even the things you couldn’t say. I want to do that, Liz.”

“I don’t have feelings for Patrick. I don’t.”

“Are you sure, Liz? Because right now, it feels like you’re not.”

His face is blurry. I want to drag him close. Kiss him. Promise him that I would be a fool to run away from a love as pure and overwhelming as his.

But Johnny doesn’t give me a chance.

He plods past me as if each step is putting his heart through the wringer.

“I love you,” I call at his back. “I love you so much, Johnny.”

“I love you too, Liz. I love you too much to be satisfied with only half of your heart. I need everything. I need all of you because you’ve taken all of me.” He lets out a heavy breath. “So I think, in this time apart, you need to consider—once and for all—who you want. Because I can’t share you with him. Not anymore.”

The door closes softly when he leaves. And my sobs are just as soft when I weep.

TWENTY-SEVEN

PATRICK

CREEPING on the freeway isn't illegal, right? I want to stretch out the time before I see Destiny. If there was a way I could get this moment to stop, I would.

What do I say to her? How do I show her that I'm changing? How do I keep her by my side?

The thoughts are new. The analyzing. The longing.

It's all foreign.

Destiny's crawled into my soul and pulled out a yearning I didn't know I had in me.

My fingers tap the steering wheel.

Sweat beads on the back of my neck.

Back in the day, I didn't think this much. Why would I? I was good at so many things and I was loved by so many people.

My love life. My school work. My friends.

They didn't require effort.

If something was too demanding, I dropped it.

Life was tidy for me.

Uncomplicated.

My sports career was different on the surface. I had to practice to stay on the basketball team. Early morning workouts. Lean diet. Good grades. But the rewards were worth

it. Chicks clamoring to sleep with me. Crowds screaming my name. Attention. Adoration.

Even then I was still lazy about it. My basketball abilities were innate. I was tall. I was good at ball. It was a bonus that I enjoyed it. And hell, if it got me out of the hood, I didn't see any downsides.

After I got hurt, I got lost again. I didn't fight to keep playing ball. I didn't fight to stay in school either. My first job came to me. I didn't go out looking for gigs. Some guy saw me on the streets and asked if I wanted to work as a bouncer.

I said yes.

Easy.

With the agency, Jerrison came to me with an idea. I knew it would be a success. I quit my job and jumped in, certain he would think through the hard parts while I focused on what I did best—sweet-talking people, entertaining starry-eyed high schoolers, selling dreams.

Easy.

I called it a hustle, but if it was all struggle, all sacrifice and all misery with nothing to show for it? I wouldn't have lasted more than a couple years.

My teeth graze my bottom lip.

I wipe the sweat on my neck with a tissue.

Hell, it's like I'm looking into a mirror. My flaws are there with clarity. Frightening detail.

Doc.

He did this to me.

That man always points my thoughts in crazy directions. Drives me down paths I don't want to take. He's got me caught in his trap and I have to wrestle with myself if I want to be free.

Was I really the problem this whole time?

I think of how I started pursuing Liz. Back then, she was the sexy single mom who wore her desperation on her sleeve.

Easy.

I married her because I knew she would stay. It was all over her face. There in the way she fell in love with me so quickly. There in the way she hung on my every word. There in her gratefulness—she was so damn grateful—that I paid her the time of day.

I knew I wouldn't ever have to worry about her cheating.

Easy.

My marriage fell apart long before Liz walked out, but I didn't care to fix it. It was simpler to keep pretending that everything was fine than put in the work to mend what was broken.

And Liz, she didn't demand anything of me. She'd huff and puff, but I knew she wouldn't go. That's why I kept coming back to her.

Easy.

She was the home base I could return to and know that, no matter what I did, she'd always take me back. Brush me off. Reset me so I could get back to life.

I slap the radio on.

My jaw clenches.

I don't want to think anymore.

None of this is helpful.

Destiny's at the cafe across from the hospital. She knows about my past. Liz must have made me out to be a monster. I have to come up with a plan. Think of the right words. I can't go there without a speech.

Come on, Patrick.

But I'm stuck on that loop.

Some truths you can't unsee.

Especially the truth about yourself.

You're lazy, Patrick.

I think of mom. All the hate I gave her growing up. The resentment. The bitterness. She worked two jobs to clothe me, feed me and shelter me, but I lashed out at her in any way I could.

Easy.

Slapping a target on her back and taking aim was simpler than sorting out the anger at my father. He wasn't there to take my frustration. He wasn't there to hear my accusations. Why didn't he come for me? Why did he abandon us? Why did he put us through so much pain?

Dad was a ghost, but mom was real, so I pointed the gun at her and let it rip.

Damn it.

What have I done?

My thoughts roar louder as the engine purrs in the night. I try to stop them. Calm them. Instead, they move and expand. Turn and break apart.

It gets louder.

Insistent.

Infuriating.

What do I do with these revelations? How do I live my life now that I've come face-to-face with who I really am?

You change.

Doc's voice is in my head.

Irritating old bastard.

Change.

As easy and as difficult as that.

The hospital lights are bright against the backdrop of the sky. The cafe is right around the corner.

Two minutes.

I'm there.

I cut the engine, but I don't climb out of the car.

My shoulders hunch over the steering wheel.

I struggle to breathe.

My phone rings.

It's Destiny.

I reach for it and put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Are you here yet? I have to get back to the hospital." She sounds annoyed. Not a good sign.

"I'm here." I force myself to climb out of the car. Bells jangle when I open the door to the cafe.

Destiny's sitting at our usual table. In profile, she looks even more stunning. The smoothness of her dark skin. The slope of her nose. The roundness of her cheeks.

I can't lose her, but what if I already have?

The coffee in front of her is almost empty. I smile nervously. "Should I get you another cup?" Lifting my hand, I motion to a waitress. "Hey—"

"No." Her voice is firm. Her lips are tight.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. I'll try it Doc's way. I'll show her my instrument gauge and hope it's enough.

"I know what you want to talk about," I say quietly.

Her eyes narrow. She tilts her head, waiting.

"First, I want to apologize for not telling you everything." Another pause. Another breath. "The truth is... I got divorced because my wife had enough of me cheating on her."

Destiny winces. I wonder if a part of her had hoped I'd said something else. I wonder if she would have forced herself to believe me. Should I have fed her a story like I originally planned?

And how much longer would your lies have held up, Patrick?

“I don’t know exactly what Liz said, but everything she told you about me is probably true. Our marriage was miserable and that was... that was my fault. I was selfish, demeaning and destructive.” My voice trembles. Admitting it out loud is ten times harder than acknowledging it to myself. “I was terrible to her, and I wasn’t interested in being better. In treating her with care or love. I was only interested in myself and what I wanted. I had no desire to repair things. To repair myself.”

She glances away. Bites down on her bottom lip. Flares her nostrils.

“Destiny?”

“You knew. You knew what I’d been through and how much I don’t respect cheaters.”

“I’m sorry.”

“How did I end up like this?” Her head sinks into her open hands. Her eyes bulge. “This is exactly what I was trying to avoid.” The words are muttered. Almost like she’s thinking out loud. “Is something wrong with me? Why do I keep attracting guys like this?”

Her hand is right there. Slender fingers. Black skin. Perfect nails. I keep my touch of comfort to myself. “I know that, after hearing this, I stand a chance of losing you, but I want to begin on the right foot. I want to show you how different I am.”

“People don’t just *change*, Patrick.”

“No, not normally, but I’ve been seeing this mechanic—Doc. And he’s teaching me all the things I didn’t know before. He’s equipping me with what I need to be a better man and have better relationships. He has these unusual ideas and sometimes I fight them, but he always has a point. And I’ve been learning a lot.”

She stares past me, her jaw clenching and her eyes glistening. The tears don’t fall, but I can see them creeping behind her hard stare. Silence stretches between us, amping up the tension.

I rub my hands against my thighs. Look down. Wait on pins and needles.

“One of my friends saw you at a club a while ago,” Destiny whispers.

My head launches up.

“She saw you with some girl in your lap. You were kissing her.”

Denial springs to my lips. Until I remember that night, a long time ago, when my friends set me up with Shaniqua. A few days later, I went to pick up Destiny and saw one of the nurses glaring at me. Right after that, Destiny became more distant.

It all clicks into place.

“I’d already heard rumors about you, and I was going to cut you off right there, but I decided to punish you instead.”

“Punish me?”

“That’s why I had you walk my dog and pick up my laundry and all that.” She laughs sadly. “I wanted to teach you a lesson.”

My jaw drops.

Destiny folds her hands together. “The thing is, Patrick, I expected you to get enough of me and go find some other girl. But you didn’t. You stayed. You took care of me, and you did all those things without complaining once. I wondered if those rumors about you were lies. You were showing me a different person and I was starting to believe in him.”

Hope perks up in my heart.

“What you said tonight... about going to see someone? That’s good. Most men wouldn’t agree to counseling. The fact that you’re willing to humble yourself and work on your issues tells me where you are.”

“So... we’re... cool?” I ask eagerly.

“No, we’re not.”

Something heavy drops in my stomach.

Destiny licks her lips. "I need some time to think."

"Time?" I repeat the word like it's foreign.

"I want to be cautious because of what I've been through. I don't want to make the same mistake again."

I nod. What else can I do?

She gets up woodenly, pulls her purse closer to her side and shuffles past the booth.

"Destiny."

She stops. Glances over her shoulder.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll be waiting until you're ready to contact me."

Her eyelashes flutter.

I turn fully around and look right into her eyes. "I don't have to see you to walk the dog. Toots and I have a standing appointment. I will convince that mutt to give me a chance. And I'll have your laundry returned to you on time. As usual." My smile is tentative. Weary. "Nothing changes on my end."

I watch Destiny walk away from me without a word and then I sink into the booth, defeated.

TWENTY-EIGHT

PATRICK

REJECTION IS a different beast entirely when love is involved. I didn't know that. I didn't want to know. I keep learning lessons I didn't ask for.

Destiny said she needed time.

It sounded like she meant to be neutral, but I felt the scale tipping towards a 'no'.

She thinks I'm a mistake.

Us.

What we are together.

It cut me right in the ribs. Made me want to tear through a club and find a woman who would say yes. Yes to anything. My fingers. My tongue. Getting thrown around in bed. Filthy, decrepit things. However long it took to sweat it out and forget.

No effort.

Easy.

My old skin is calling to me.

But Doc told me to run from that desire.

Not just walk or skip.

Run.

So I'm taking myself home and locking myself in the house. I'm going to put on a basketball game and avoid beer, since it clashes with my medication. I'm going to work on a

project for the agency. Or exercise. Or do a hundred pushups until my lungs burn and my brain takes a freaking break.

I turn the radio up on the drive home.

It's blasting rap. Money and drugs. Side women. Baby mamas.

Good.

I'm a man. Men don't cry. We don't feel anguish over relationships.

But my brain won't listen.

It keeps running back to Destiny.

I force myself to keep making plans for the night. Since I can't bury my pain in sex and booze, I'll find another outlet.

I need time, Patrick.

Damn.

Destiny is there, big brown eyes holding back tears. So much hurt. I didn't mean to make her cry.

Self-loathing makes me want to take everything inside me and dump it out. Kick it to the streets. It's an emotion that's too big for me to contain. I don't have anywhere to store it. I've never hated myself before. I've never felt this sorry before.

I turn into the parking lot of my condo. There's a man leaning against his car. Moonlight strikes his dark hair and pale face. His vehicle is vintage. The price tag for a model that rare is something close to priceless. I'd respect his taste if I didn't hate him so much.

I turn off my lights. Cut the engine. The smile that grows on my face is cold. Almost villainous. If I can't have booze, I might as well have a fight. It's not quite the same, but it'll get the blood rushing.

I slam the door loudly when I get out of the car.

The man turns and looks at me.

“Bancroft.” I swagger across the lot. Keep my shoulders straight. Keep my fingers loose. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you. Obviously.”

My eyes narrow. His tone is condescending. I don’t know if that’s a race thing or a class thing. In both senses, Johnny’s different than me. In a higher place of privilege. He grew up in a world that looked at him and expected great things. I grew up getting followed in stores. Getting stopped by police for walking down the street. Hearing my mom cry and tell me not to wear hoodies anymore.

“You must have heard that I saw Liz.”

His eyes flicker. There’s a hint of unease. Frustration. He and Liz must have fought about it. If they’d talked it out, had a happy little bonding session, he wouldn’t be outside my condo looking as eager for trouble as I am.

“I’m not here to talk about Liz.”

“No?” I fold my arms over my chest.

He’s distraught. I can see it clearly because I’m in the same hellhole.

It’s almost funny.

He’s a wealthy, entitled white man.

I’m a rags-to-riches entrepreneur.

With all that we have, two beautiful black women brought us to our knees.

My snort is quiet. Understated.

Johnny looks at me like I’m crazy.

I can’t help my amusement. Doc said women are the kings during dating and it’s plain as freaking day right now. Destiny has me tied up in knots and Liz? She put the man in front of me through the ringer. He can’t hide it. His skin is too pale. It shows everything.

I want him to bleed a little more. It’s the least he can do for stealing Liz.

My voice drops. A taunting. “You’re not worried that I might be interested in getting my wife back?”

There’s that flicker again. The hesitation. He hides it quickly though. I’ll give him that. Must be a skill he picked up from all those fancy billionaire club meetings.

“I’ve given Liz my all. It’ll take a lot for her to choose misery when she has a better option.”

He’s insulting me. It’s underhanded. Sly. Exactly why I don’t like him.

I should introduce my fist to his face, but I can’t because there’s that term again. *Give my all*. It’s clear that he’s been listening to Doc. People who’ve been brainwashed by the mechanic all sound alike.

The fact that he’s one of Doc’s makes me hesitate to swing first. I keep my fists at my side, ready but not in motion. Yet.

“So what are you doing here?”

Johnny tips his chin up. “I came to talk about Destiny.”

My patience slips away.

“Tell me—man to man—are you dating her? Or are you just messing with her?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Liz made it my business.”

My laugh is humorless. Bancroft has never been told he doesn’t belong. His privilege is showing.

“Liz cares about her.” He steps closer to me. “And I care about whoever Liz cares about. I protect whoever Liz protects. You understand?”

“This little intimidation tactic...” I gesture to him. Smirk. Shrug indifferently. “Does it usually work?”

Bancroft’s ears get red, but his words are still calm. “I’ve shown a lot of restraint, Patrick. That was a choice I made for Liz’s sake. Although lately,” he licks his lips, “I’m starting to wonder if it was the right one.”

“Is that a threat?” My shoulders hike.

“After all the things you’ve done to hurt Liz, after the way you grounded her to bits until she had to pick herself up and fight just to believe she deserved to love again, I shouldn’t be this civil.”

“Then why bother?” I walk right up to him. Show him I’m not afraid. “Let’s go right now.”

“You talk big, Patrick, but can you back it up?”

“Bring it on.”

“There’s a fundraising event. A boxing match for charity.”

“Why would I sign up to go to your white folks cage match? You think I’m stupid?”

“It’s legal. And it’s fair. You can get out all your frustration in the ring with some gloves on *or* I can pummel you into the dirt tonight and we both get charged for assault.”

He’s asking for a beatdown. My temperature spiking, I shove Bancroft. Hard. He stumbles back. I raise my fist but, before I can swing at him, I hear a voice cry ‘ey!’ Footsteps pound the concrete. Bucky and Tyrell rush in, beers in their hands and eyes glassy.

“He messing with you, Pat?” Tyrell asks, stumbling to the side.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bucky grabs Johnny and whirls him around. “Hey, you’re that Bancroft guy. Liz’s new man.”

I roll my eyes. “Impeccable timing, guys.”

Johnny shrugs off Bucky’s hand. “Don’t touch me.”

“Nah, you were all up in my brother’s face. I saw you.” Tyrell wiggles a long finger at Johnny.

“I suggest you both move aside,” Johnny says calmly.

“Or what?” Bucky mumbles.

“Yo, Pat! You’re just gonna let him talk to you like that?” Tyrell stumbles, unable to walk a straight line.

“Ugh!” Bucky swings. His fist makes a wild arc. He misses Bancroft completely.

Tyrell, eyes at half mast, growls at Bancroft. “You messed with the wrong guy, man!” He rushes forward, probably intending to drive Bancroft down. Bancroft simply side-steps the advance and Tyrell crashes into the ground himself.

I tilt my head at the sky and cringe.

Bucky starts cursing up a storm. “You’re going down!”

Tyrell picks himself up.

Both men run toward Bancroft at the same time. Without blinking, Bancroft grabs them by the back of the neck and slams their heads together.

My jaw drops.

I watch my friends cry out in pain and sink to the ground.

Bancroft meets my eyes when I flash an angry stare at him. He shrugs. “Let them ice it.”

Annoyance charges through me. Bucky and Tyrell get up, holding their heads and grunting expletives. They look like they’re about to rush Bancroft again, but I step forward and yell at them.

“Stop!”

Everyone freezes.

Tyrell and Bucky look back at me.

I snarl, my eyes on Bancroft. It won’t look good to the cops if it’s three against one. Even if Bucky and Tyrell are drunk out of their minds, we’ll come out looking like the bad guys.

“This fight is between me and him,” I hiss. “I don’t need you two buffoons to fight it for me.”

Bucky pouts and rubs his head.

Tyrell’s gaze is steady on the ground.

I dip my chin, my voice a warning and a promise. “Sign me up for the match. I’ll do it.”

Without acknowledging me, Bancroft turns and trots back to his car.

“You’re just gonna let him go?” Tyrell bawls.

I stare at Bancroft’s truck until it becomes a blip in the distance. Liz’s fiancé needs to be taught a lesson. And I don’t have a problem getting in the ring with him if it means he learns to show a little respect.

TWENTY-NINE

LIZETTE

I SIT in the car outside the gym and coach myself on how to breathe. When that fails, I lean my forehead on the steering wheel, close my eyes and remind myself that I'm whole without Johnny.

I don't need him to function. I survived before he came along and I'll adapt now that he's stopped talking to me. It's not forever, right? It's not... we're not over. He asked for time and I'll give him that because he's given me so much. It's the least I can do.

The gym is crowded. As usual.

Delia at the front desk calls my name cheerfully.

Jeff, Johnny's stand-in trainer, asks if I want his help.

I brush him off. I'm too spoiled to Johnny's form of torture. It won't be the same.

Instead of going to the private training room that Johnny closed off just for me, I head to the elliptical machine.

I go through my texts as I run. I pretend that I'm not looking for a message from Johnny. I pretend that I'm not disappointed when all I see are memes from Amir, baby photos from Harriet and wedding dress magazines from Mrs. Bancroft.

Twelve hours.

I'm already tired of space.

I want to go to him.

Instead, I go to Doc.

Everything smells the same. How does he do that? It's always that perfectly heavy blend of car oil and engine fluid. Of machines bleeding out and being filled to the brim. Raw, heavy, industrial. It isn't the kind of smell I should enjoy. It shouldn't flood me with peace and make every step feel like a loosening of the burdens.

Doc is at the end of the long line of cars. As usual, he's repairing what's broken. The wrench in his hand is heavy—or so Harriet told me. I've never had to hold the wrench.

Doc sees me coming. He nods but doesn't stop working on the car. He's wearing a pair of dirty-overalls and construction boots. His eyes are narrowed in concentration.

I feel bad for bothering him. Does he ever get a break? Someone must wander into his shop, looking for answers, direction, repair—every day. I wonder if he ever gets tired of it. If he's ever overwhelmed.

My eyes search through the rows of cars. Each time I visit Doc, there's always a new vehicle. They're pressing through the doors, rushing to get to him. To have their problems brought to the light. New parts and old things. Engines that only needed a little attention to go on running.

"I'm here," I say as if he can't see me. As if he's suddenly gone blind.

He stops. Looks fully at me. "Lizette."

There's welcome in his tone. Acceptance in his eyes. No judgement.

I swear I don't come to Doc's shop just to cry.

He gestures to the mug. "Would you like to sit?"

"No. Not really. I... you can go on working. I didn't come to bother you."

He doesn't argue. He has no time to. He'll challenge thoughts. Present a different point of view. And then he'll leave it there, to let his words rot or breathe new life as he works on a different car that needs his attention.

I lean against a nearby truck. Ignore the way dirt gets on my yoga pants and exercise shirt. For a while, the only sound in the shop is the clammer of the wrench as it wrestles with a valve.

“We argued.” I whisper. “About Patrick.”

Doc keeps working.

“And his new girlfriend.”

The wrench goes still.

“I went to her. Told her to stay away from him.”

Doc sighs and goes back to fixing the car. “Are you here for answers you already know?”

“I’m here because Johnny thinks I still have feelings for Patrick.”

“Do you?”

“No.” I pause. I can’t lie to Doc. “*Feelings* isn’t the word I’d use. I was upset when I found out because Destiny is a friend. I don’t want to see her go through what I did. I don’t want him to waste her time.”

“Did you explain that to him?”

“Johnny didn’t believe me.”

“And does he have a reason to be uncertain?”

“I’m not going back to Patrick.”

“Because he doesn’t want you or because you’ve moved on?” His questions are pointed. Harsh.

I want to snap at him. Instead, I try to see where he’s coming from. “I can’t say that I won’t always resent Patrick. I gave half of my life to him. I cooked and washed and cleaned for him. I don’t think anyone who lived like that can just forget the bitterness.”

“Hm.” Doc sets the wrench aside and attacks the valve with his hands.

“But what I have with Johnny is so much sweeter, so much better for my health and peace of mind. I would never give up

Johnny to go back to Patrick. I would be a fool.”

Doc successfully retrieves the valve. He inspects it carefully. “We gather information from a car based on its symptoms. How the car behaves lets us know there’s an issue.”

“There’s not an issue.” I shake my head rapidly.

“A lady who is continuously upset about her ex is a lady who hasn’t gotten over her ex. Most men—no, most humans, would think this way.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Whether I’m wrong or right, you have to keep in mind what you’re saying with your actions. If it’s the case that you would never trade Johnny for anyone, then this problem has a simple solution. You just need to line up your actions with your words.” He tackles the wires sticking out of the engine.

I flash my finger. “I accepted his ring. He should trust where my heart lies.”

“But he doesn’t.” Doc steps away from the car and grabs a dirty rag. “This is simply saying you need to be aware of what message is being sent. Once you’re aware of that, change your message.”

“What message am I sending?” I throw my hands high.

“Not getting over your ex, screaming about your ex, *meddling* in your ex’s life, represents lingering interest—”

“No.”

“Or lingering hurt.” He arches an eyebrow and keeps wiping his hands. “A man who loves you will not force you to love him back. He would prefer to give you your space to sort out your thoughts. He’ll want you to have what you want. Even if that’s not him.”

Doc gestures for me to follow him and I do.

He grips the mug of lemon water with his dirty fingers and pours some into a glass cup. “From what you’re telling me,

you're genuinely concerned for the young lady who's dating Patrick, but that's not the message being sent."

I suck in a breath. Let it out through my mouth. Accept the glass.

Doc takes the other seat.

I stare into the lemon water. "Maybe I'm too much. Maybe I..." My voice cracks. "I'm too broken. Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve him. Why couldn't I have met him when I was whole?"

Doc stares thoughtfully at the sunshine pouring into the workshop. "The beauty of dealing with something that's 'not whole' is that you can cultivate it. Shape it into what you like. It's the equivalent of a memory foam seat. It's malleable, so it adjusts to the owner."

"I thought being incomplete is dangerous."

"It is dangerous... when it's the man who's incomplete."

My lips quirk up in amusement. "It always leads back to the man and his responsibility, doesn't it?"

Doc's eyes twinkle. "There are times when a man can also be cultivated."

I take a sip of the lemon water. It's good. "I thought he had to be equipped before he even started dating?"

"You're right. He has to be..."

"Sixty percent ready for marriage before dating," I recite.

Doc's lips twitch. "A woman cannot cultivate an unequipped man. She can try, but he will continue in his ways because, inside a marriage, he's the king. And kings can listen to advice, but they don't have to follow it."

"So what kind of cultivation can a woman do?"

"A man who is whole, complete and equipped to take care of a family has the necessary levers available for a woman to tweak him. I'm talking specifically about small attitudes, outward appearance, and dress code. She's not cultivating him to become a man. What she's doing is cosmetic cultivation,

determining how he dresses, how he does his hair, even what he eats. The man will submit himself to that.”

I bob my head. “Johnny lets me dress him for parties now. He’ll even call me asking what he should wear for business meetings.”

Doc takes a sip of his drink. Nods. Leans back.

“What about the woman? Does she have these levers?”

“Whether she comes with levers or not, she—according to the manual—is a good thing. She’s ready for whatever the husband needs her to cover. All he has to do is equip her with the necessary resources to get there and she’ll fly.”

I drain the rest of my lemon water. “Okay. I’m not a failure because I don’t come with all the levers. Now that we’ve established that, how much of this is my responsibility, Doc?”

“You are king before marriage.”

“Fine. Let me be clearer. I mean,” I stare at the ground in frustration, “how do I fix this?”

“You’re scared. You can’t fix anything from a place of fear.”

I frown at Doc, almost offended.

“As the king during dating, you decide what you want. Only you can control your mind. So think long and hard about what you want from the relationship and what you’re ready for.” He picks up my empty cup and sets it aside. “Then you’ll have your answer.”

THIRTY

PATRICK

I'VE NEVER GONE this long without sex.

It's killing me inside.

Abstinence.

Torture.

A necessary hurdle, at least for me.

I thought I could handle it. I thought loving one woman meant I could magically keep my pants zipped and my fingers out of someone's skirt. Turns out, it's much harder than I thought.

I know it's something I have to work on. One of the reasons I couldn't stay faithful in my marriage is that I like screwing around. I like it so much that I'd bang my wife and then bang someone else a few hours later. No remorse. No fear.

I like everything about getting freaky in the sheets. Tasting something different. Hearing a throatier moan one night and a higher pitched one the week after. Touching a woman's body. Worshiping the curves.

I'm good at it. I can talk women into my bed. Talk them out of their clothes. Talk them into a state of bliss. And then talk them right through the door with instructions to never contact me again.

Hell yeah. All day, all night.

I'm a beast.

But I don't need those skills right now.

I choose Destiny.

I'm *proving* to Destiny that I'm different now.

I'm someone she can trust.

Trust.

Damn.

I don't even trust myself.

I get why Doc said to run.

Sure.

Fine.

But there are temptations *everywhere*. Women are freaking beautiful. All of them. As a whole. I love everything about them. Their curves. Their scent. Their softness. Their warmth.

Just driving down the road, I can spot three different woman I'd take home tonight.

Damn.

I feel like I'm starving, but nothing is quenching the hunger.

The hunter.

The animal on the prowl.

It's a fight every time an attractive woman flashes her eyes at me. Gives me signs that she's interested. That she finds me handsome or accomplished or intelligent.

My body gets harder than granite.

The whispers start in my head.

A struggle.

A war.

A little voice says Destiny isn't worth all this. That even if she is, she doesn't have to know. And the things she doesn't know? Well, they can't harm her.

It's happening right now.

I jerk my eyes away from the woman with the backside that video vixens wish they were born with.

Look away, Patrick.

I keep driving.

The car slows in front of a billboard. A perfume commercial. Some blonde with her tits hanging out of a jeans jacket, her mouth open in a sultry gasp, her fingernails blood red.

Desire drips over me.

I need it. My face in someone's chest. My thighs burning as I thrust my hips. My tongue licking at their sweat.

I'm bursting at the seams.

Destiny.

Sweet, sweet Destiny.

I want her. I do.

But maybe I should take a sip of another woman? Just to take the edge off. It doesn't have to mean anything. Basic biology. Sex doesn't always have to be some grand romantic sign of love. Hell, I've banged women when I didn't know their names, their age, nothing.

My phone rings.

I clear my throat to ease the dryness. "Hello?"

"Thanks for walking Toots again this morning." Destiny's voice is low. Sheepish almost. "I didn't think you were serious about doing that."

"I keep my word, Des."

"I know, but... we're still technically taking a break. I don't know if this is alright, Patrick."

"It's fine. I can do it." My tone is testy.

She picks up on it. "Are you okay?"

No, I'm not. Would you come to my apartment—naked—and let me ride you like a bull? “Yeah, I’m great.” The words are a little looser. Meant to push her off the scent. “By the way, I’m in this charity event tonight. I, uh, left you a ticket. At the hospital desk.”

“I’m sorry, Patrick. I still need time.”

I pull my lips in. Force myself not to let the frustration show. “Right. Of course. I was just wondering.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll, uh, I’ll let you go.”

“Okay.”

I hang up and slam my fist into the steering wheel. Idiot. Why did I push her? If I keep on being insistent, she’s just going to end it.

Frustration wells up in me. I press harder on the gas, not realizing there’s a red light. The vehicle in front of me suddenly stops. I gasp and slam the brakes. The tires screech. My car lurches an inch away from the other truck’s bumper, narrowly avoiding a collision.

I squeeze the steering wheel and lower my head, taking in frantic breaths. As my adrenaline goes down, I see someone on the sidewalk flagging down my car. At first, I think I’m in trouble and I don’t look. Then I realize I didn’t do anything wrong and point my gaze in that direction.

My eyes widen. It’s one of my old friends from college.

I pull over at the nearest spot and wind the window down. “Cecile! Hey, girl.”

“Patrick.” Her voice is low and sultry. “I thought that was you. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I laugh nervously.

Her eyes sparkle at me. “Hey, my car broke down and I have to get home. Do you think you could give me a ride?”

“Sure. Of course. Hop in.”

She climbs into the car and smiles at me. Her lips are shiny with gloss. Her hair is long and black. Light brown skin. Big hoop earrings.

I wonder if she'd smash?

I shake my head.

Cecile grins broadly at me. "So how have you been, Patrick? Last I heard, you were some hot-shot executive at a sports agency."

"Oh, you know. Just keeping it pushing."

"Someone's being humble." She nudges me with her finger.

I jump. Adjust my fingers on the wheel. Sweat from every part of my body. "What do you mean?"

"I heard your business went international. That boxer kid is running it? Fuentes, right?"

"Yeah." He's Jerrison's golden child, but he's also incredible as the face of our company. I glance at her. "How do you know so much? Have you been reading up about me?"

"Maybe," she sings.

I let out a practiced chuckle. "What about you? What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I just got divorced." She waves a manicured hand. "It was time. We lost that spark you know? As two people grow and change, they slowly drift apart."

It was your husband's responsibility to keep that from happening.

"It was an amicable parting," she adds. "Honestly, I feel like I'm a better person when I'm not with him."

Because you're his mirror. You were just reflecting what he was giving you.

"But I'm free now and ready to party." She flashes me a big smile, all her teeth and gum showing.

I smile back, much more reserved.

She leans over and starts massaging my muscles. “Have you been working out? You look bigger than you did when you were playing ball back in the day.”

“Yeah.” I slide my arm away from her.

Since sex was out of the picture, I decided my stress reliever of choice would be training for the match. It worked out perfectly. Johnny showed a surprising amount of agility and speed the night he tackled my friends. I want to be ready for him.

“Wow.” Her tone is light. Playful. Flirty. “Did you know I used to have a crush on you in college?” She laughs, a hand to her face. Despite her casual tone, her eyes are studying me intently. “All these girls were after you. I didn’t bother trying to get your attention.” She points to the left. “My apartment is just up there. Do you want to come in? Catch up?”

My eyes leave the road and land on her body. She’s a woman. She’s willing. She’s disposable. I can work her up for an hour, get my satisfaction and leave her behind. No one would know. And she’s just coming out of a divorce. It’s not like she’ll cling to me and try to start a relationship.

“Come on, Patrick. Let’s go back in time. Pretend we’re the same people we used to be.”

Do I want to be the man I used to be?

She slides her hand over mine. “We can pretend we’re in college again. But this time, I’d tell you that I liked you.”

All of Doc’s principles start floating to the top of my head like neon buoys. I blink and look at Cecile—her eyes this time, not just her body. There’s a hint of desperation in her gaze. A burning need to feel loved again, to be reminded that she’s still valuable and attractive.

I can give her what she wants. It would be sweet to undress her. It really would. But do I want to unravel all the progress I’ve made for one moment? Is it worth it?

She laughs nervously when the silence gets too long. “Sorry, did that sound too forward? I didn’t mean it like that.

Well, actually I did. But you can just come up. Have a drink. If you're not too busy."

See, Patrick? It doesn't have to lead to anything. It's just catching up with a friend.

I pull over in front of her apartment complex. Glance away. Wrestle that voice under control.

I choose Destiny.

"The thing is Cecile..."

"What? You scared?" She teases me.

Don't try to be macho. Run.

I wrap my fingers around the steering wheel and squeeze. "Cecile, it was nice catching up with you, but I'll have to pass. I'm heading to a meeting right now."

What are you doing you idiot? The brain in my pants berates me. She's fresh meat. She's throwing signals. Open her up like a Christmas present.

"How about later then?" Her words are dripping in hope.

I'm going to shrivel up and die if I don't get any action. Do you hear me? I'm going to turn blue and fall right off.

"Sorry." I grit my teeth. Dig my fingers even tighter into the steering wheel. "But that's not going to happen. I have someone I'm interested in."

"A girlfriend?"

"Not exactly."

"Your ex-wife?"

"No." I check my watch. Let out a breath. "I need to run."
Literally.

With a pout, Cecile bounces out of my vehicle, taking her sweet, curvy body with her. I don't spare her a glance. I slam my foot on the gas, tearing out of her parking lot like the bats of hell are on my tail.

When I'm far enough away, when I've put enough distance between me and Cecile, I start to laugh.

I did it.

Rather than a man who can control others, I've finally become a man who can control himself.

THIRTY-ONE

LIZETTE

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF? Doc's question runs circles through my mind. It's a haunting melody that plays in the background as I try to get used to a life without Johnny.

Torture, that's what it is.

Time slows to a crawl.

Every day feels longer and longer.

I wait for it to get easier, but it doesn't. Instead, it gets worse. I walk into rooms and I touch the things Johnny gave me. The things that remind me of him. The things that make him seem closer.

There are mornings I wake up and check my phone. When there's no message from him, I get uneasy. Walking to my car after work makes me pause. It feels like I'm forgetting something important—my wallet, my keys, my IDs.

What are you afraid of?

The night I left Doc's shop, I wasn't happy with him. He rudely probed into my fear. That secret place I keep chained. What bothered me more than his question was the insinuation that I'm not as strong, as impenetrable, as I thought I was.

I broke up with my cheating husband.

I'm engaged to a wonderful man.

I'm running my own foundation for single mothers.

One look at me and everyone should know I'm happy.

I've moved on.

I've... evolved.

Can't he tell that I'm bigger now? Less consumed by public opinion? There's too much evidence. I hold my head up in the company of Johnny's fancy friends. I don't run when I hear the whispers about me, my past and my intentions toward the Bancrofts. Even my appearance is looser, more confident. I wear makeup if and when I want to. I let my hair grow out with natural coils.

What are you afraid of?

I have no fear.

The sunset tries to blind me as if pointing out how wrong I am. I crack open a bottle of beer and sip it. The wind batters my curls and tosses them into my face. The ocean roars, taking a chomp out of the jagged rocks beneath my feet.

Footsteps approach me and I stick out my hand to Melody without looking. She forks over the files and a pen.

I skim the document, sign and hand it back to her. "Thanks for bringing it all the way here."

"Of course." The folder crumples as she grips it close to her.

"Everything okay at the foundation?" I've been working at home these days. I had to get out of the office. It still smells like roses in there.

"Yes. No major emergencies to report."

"That's good." I take another swig.

Melody clears her throat. "Do you mind if I sit?"

I gesture to the space.

She sits on the edge of the wall.

I offer her a beer.

She shakes her head. Smiles. "I'm still on the job."

"I'm the boss. I can give you a break."

“It’s okay.”

I shrug. “Suit yourself.”

We sit in silence for a bit.

After a while, I squint at the horizon and ask, “What are you afraid of?”

“Me?” She swivels to face me.

I nod. Take a drink.

“I’m afraid of spiders.”

“I meant,” I make a downward gesture, “deeper than that. What are you afraid of?”

She turns her eyes on the horizon. “I’m afraid I won’t be a good mother to my son.”

My gaze lands on her face.

She glances down. Lets out a shuddering breath. “I’m afraid my... boyfriend will get out of jail and try to see me again.”

“You’ve never told me your boyfriend was in jail.”

“It’s not exactly something to be proud of, is it?” Her voice is tight. I can tell she doesn’t want to say more.

Letting it go, I face the water again. “I’m afraid of love.”

Melody looks startled.

“I’ve been denying it for a long time but, after a talk with Doc, I’ve had a couple days to sit and think about it.” I glance at her. Smile sadly. “I’m scared that a pure, unconditional love exists. Because if it *does* exist, then I’ll always hope that I can experience it.”

“What’s wrong with hope?”

“It causes you to have expectations.” I grip the beer tight. “In my experience, it’s not possible for someone to really love me. Not the way Johnny loves me. It’s scary because it’s new.” I bring the beer to my lips. Sip. Keep on confessing to my assistant who probably doesn’t want to hear about my crap. “Johnny is everything I could want, but I keep waiting for him

to change. I'm holding my breath until the day it falls apart. What if I start expecting to be treated well, to be loved and cherished and then I'm let down? Isn't it better not to experience those things in the first place?"

"Not to me."

I glance at Melody.

She purses her lips. "I've never been loved the way Johnny loves you, but you know what's scary? Finding out you're pregnant while you're still a teenager. It's convincing your boyfriend he's the father and then almost losing the baby when he gets arrested." Her face is expressionless. Her voice is bland. "Having someone who's committed to you, who's there when you need him, and who keeps his promises isn't frightening. No offense, Miss Liz, but that's just stupid. If you don't know how to appreciate good things, then you shouldn't have them."

Ouch.

I let her words ring in the air.

Melody faces the dying sun and chews nervously on the corner of her lip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"You weren't rude." I put my hand over hers.

She looks down.

"I mean it." Pulling my hand back, I sigh. "You're right. I'm a professional at self-sabotage."

"I didn't say that," she argues.

I smile at her. "You didn't have to."

At that moment, my phone rings.

It's Mrs. Bancroft.

"Hello?"

"Liz, what on earth is going on? Have you talked to Johnny today?"

My heart starts thumping fast. "What's wrong? What happened to Johnny?"

“My son is participating in the charity boxing event tonight.”

“What?”

“He’s fighting your ex-husband.”

My eyes bulge.

“Didn’t he tell you?”

“Melody!” Gesturing wildly with my hands, I urge her to follow me to my car. While on the move, I yell into the phone, “I have no idea why he and Patrick are fighting.” Hauling the door open, I jump in and start the truck. “I’ll talk to Johnny.”

“Okay, dear. I’ll see what I can find out on my end.”

We hang up and I tear out of the grassy lot.

Melody grips the top of her seatbelt as I drive wildly. “Miss Liz, you want to slow down?”

I whip my head around. “Melody, I’m going to drop you off at that bus stop, okay? I’m really sorry that I can’t take you all the way home.”

Her teeth chatter. “Don’t worry. I prefer taking the bus.”

I drop her off in front of the bus stop.

When she gets out, I poke my head toward the passenger side. “Hey.”

She stops. Turns around. Looks at me.

“Thanks again.”

She nods.

Slamming my foot on the gas pedal, I merge into traffic and fix my eyes on the road. Twenty minutes later, I park in front of Johnny’s house. His car isn’t in the driveway, but it could be in the garage. I dial his phone number, but he doesn’t pick up. I call Patrick next, but his number goes straight to voicemail.

“Are they really doing something this stupid?” I mutter.

Out of options, I call Destiny.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Destiny. I’m so sorry to bother you but have you heard from Patrick?”

“Not since this afternoon.”

“Okay.” I let out a troubled breath. “Sorry to bother you.”

“What happened, Liz?”

“He and Johnny entered this charity boxing event and I’m trying to get in touch with them.”

“Patrick’s in a boxing event? He barely started walking without a cane! What is he doing signing up for a fight?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m going to the ring now to see if they’re already there.”

“I can’t leave my shift...”

“It’s okay.” I hustle to my car and speed through the streets. “I’ll talk to Johnny.”

“Keep me updated.”

“I will.”

I hang up, toss the phone and drive like a madwoman. My mind whirs with chaos but, in the center of the turmoil, is a desperate need to see Johnny. I have to let him know that he has absolutely no reason to get into that ring. He doesn’t have to fight for me.

Because I’m already his.

And I don’t want anyone else.

THIRTY-TWO

LIZETTE

THE WAREHOUSE IS MUCH ROUGHER than I expected. The crowd in the stands is rowdier too. The air smells like Dior and disaster. Like greed and Givanchy.

Two fighters are in the ring. I can smell the blood from here. The sweat. They're sporting matching bruises. A little clumsy. A little unsure. But the anger between them makes the fight feel personal. Forbidden.

The wealthy are packing the stands. Excitement threatens to blow the roof off. *We are gathered here to watch our own punch each other in the face.*

So much eagerness for anarchy. It's a harsh reminder that, underneath all their money and pedigrees, the wealthy are human too. Prone to giving into their base instincts. Just as broken. Just as messed up. All they do is hide it better.

The woman who takes me to Johnny's room is wearing a vibrant purple jacket and a pair of stretchy pants that might as well be her panties. She didn't allow me backstage until I told her I was Johnny Bancroft's fiancée. I rarely use the Bancroft name to get what I want, preferring instead to use my own skills and connections, but this time I didn't have a choice.

Her heels click against the tiles. There's a strange scent in the air, like burning plastic. A glance up reveals black stains on the wall.

I nod at the stains. "What are those?"

"Not sure," she answers, blinking up at the marks. "Maybe it's oil from something that's leaking?"

I pin my lips together. I've seen dirty walls stained by leaking machinery and this isn't it. She has no idea what she's talking about.

The girl points a delicate finger at the room and nods politely.

"Thanks," I say.

As she walks away in her fishnet and heels, I hesitate outside the door. Loud metal music is playing outside, but it sounds muted in the hallway. My heartbeat is roaring louder than the bass's thump.

I press the door and it opens with a creak. The room is dimly lit with only an orange lamp in the corner and a couple tables. The walls are exposed brick. Stripped to the rawest form. On one of the tables, there's a mirror with bulbs all around it.

Johnny's eyes meet mine in the glass surface. They suck me in like whirlpools.

His eyebrows rise. He says nothing.

I close the door softly behind me and walk toward him.

Johnny.

My Johnny.

The smile on my face is as natural and as real as the joy spreading through my body. I feel like I'm diving headfirst into water after dying of thirst for days. It's the purest side of longing. The kind that's stripped of all pretense and hesitation.

He watches me. His expression softens too.

I'm sure he wanted to be mad. To look as intimidating as possible.

I wish I could be scared.

"How did you find out?"

I stop a distance away from him. His hair is lying messily on his forehead. The robe is black and shiny. It's the most garish thing I've ever seen him wear. "Your mom called."

“I told them to wait until the last minute to announce my match. And yet she still heard about it faster than I expected.”

“She’s amazing.”

“She’s dangerous. I’m almost scared.”

I watch him. “You said you don’t do these things.”

“I don’t.”

There’s more to it. Do I have to pry it out of him?

I clutch my purse. Hold it tight.

The silence yawns.

I want to be over there, hugging him. Kissing his face. Telling him I love him.

Instead, I keep my distance.

“Do you need help?” I gesture to the tape he’s trying to wrap around his hands.

He doesn’t respond. At first, I think he won’t speak at all. Finally, he points to a roll of tape on the table. “It’s a little tricky using my non-dominant hand.”

I slip my purse off my shoulder and approach him. The robe is tied at his waist, but I can see glistening pecs peeking at me. His forearms bulge with muscles.

“Are you worried?” Johnny asks.

My eyes shoot up.

His gaze is not on me. It’s on the side of the table. “Is that why you’re here?”

“No.”

He lets out a breath.

“I went to Doc.” I place my fingers gently over his wrist and turn his hand over. “We talked about my fears.”

“Your fears?”

“After my marriage, I thought all men were destructive, wicked beings. I thought every relationship would hurt me.

Deep down, I never let go of that belief. Even when I raised my standards, even after I learned to value myself, I still couldn't accept that love existed."

His eyes slide over my face as if he wants to inscribe my features to memory.

I start to apply the tape. "That fear led me to hover around Patrick after the accident. And it led me to lie to you about Destiny." I shake my head. "You're right. I should have been honest with you, but I wasn't thinking about you. All I could see was my own hurt. I didn't consider your feelings at all."

"Liz."

"I'm almost done."

He closes his mouth.

"I just assumed that you would always be there and if you weren't, then didn't it prove my point? That all relationships are doomed to fail?"

I'm done with the tape.

Not with the speech.

"Johnny," I inhale deeply, "I'm ready to give you my all. I'm ready to push aside all the fear that was getting in the way. You have my full commitment." Another breath. "Okay. Now I'm done."

When I pull my hand back, Johnny's fingers close over mine. I glance up. Fall into his intense eyes. The air clogs in my throat. I forget what words are. And why breathing is important. There's only Johnny, those eyes and that sexy, lopsided smile that makes me want to throw myself into his arms and never let go.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know."

"I wasn't the one who needed time. I just said that..."

"I know." I'm not going to cry. "I know why you said it." If he hadn't, if he'd told me that *I* needed time, I would have

told him that I didn't. I would have convinced him in every language I could to stay with me.

But when he told me he was the one who needed time, I promised myself that I wouldn't infringe on his space. I'd tie myself to a chair before I took something from him after all he'd given me.

"I'm sorry I took so long," I say.

"I was willing to wait forever."

"You're making it hard to keep my hands off you."

He chuckles. "What else did Doc say?"

"To take my time. Not to rush and fix anything. He said I was dealing with a heart condition, so I should find a way to walk out my change of thinking, not just talk about it." I gesture to the room. "But you kind of forced my hand."

"Should I apologize?"

"It depends on why you're fighting Patrick."

"Then I should definitely apologize." He sighs. "I missed you." I can hear the pain in his voice. The yearning. The blend of resolve and gentleness. I see the promise in his face. That he would fight the same battles over and over, as long as I promise to come back to him.

It's dangerous. I don't want to crush him. I don't want to hurt him. I want to build him up like he's done for me.

"Are you really going to fight him?" I ask hesitantly.

He shakes his head. Laughs. "Is that all you want to ask me, sunshine?"

"Yes." I sit on the heels of my feet because looking down at him is making my neck cramp.

He follows me. Bends right over so our noses touch. "Aren't you going to ask me to go easy on him?"

"No."

He arches an eyebrow.

I glance down. "All I want is for you both to be okay."

He goes silent.

I wince. Glance up. “Are you angry?”

“Is there anything you want that I wouldn’t give you?”

My cheeks warm. My hand on his is steady. “You aren’t here to damage anybody. This is not a million-dollar fight.” I trace my name into his skin. “And you’re not a bully.”

“I can pull back.”

“In the ring?”

“I won’t hurt him.”

I smile. “You decided that before I came, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” He touches my nose. “But now I’m considering whether I want to do this at all.”

“Everyone is already out there, waiting for a fight.”

“There are plenty more matches to enjoy.”

“Your reputation.”

“Patrick’s recovering from an injury.” Johnny’s eyes drop. “It was immature of me to suggest we fight at this point. Calling it off is the only way to ensure we all walk out of here safely.”

The door slams open without warning. It’s the same girl from earlier. “Mr. Bancroft, you’re up in five.”

He looks down at me. Reaches out a hand. “Get up, sunshine.”

I take his hand and rise to my feet. I think he’s going to lead me out the door. Instead, Johnny swoops down and plants a long, hard kiss on my lips. It’s a kiss that swallows me whole. That reminds me exactly what I mean to him. What our relationship means to him.

His tongue pries my mouth open as his hand falls over my waist and down the dip of my spine. Big hands. Warm, rough fingers. They skate over fabric and brown, trembling skin.

My heart beats like crazy. My eyes drift closed, but the weight of his gaze is heavy on me. I grip the back of his neck,

digging my nails through his scalp until he hisses. Until I feel him give in to me the way I want. Until I know his eyes can't help but fall shut.

His body shudders with mine and the noise roaring through the door from the crowd outside fades to nothing. I can't think. I can't hear anything except my own pulse racing and skittering for more.

The kiss is longer than it should be. A voice in the back of my head is telling me now is not the time. There's an audience waiting for a show. An empty ring. There's my ex-husband in a room somewhere down the hallway, priming himself up only to be let down.

We have things. Responsibilities. Words to say. Instead, Johnny gathers me to him and kisses me like a hero returning from war. And I give him my kisses, my love, in return.

The organizers, the crowd, and Patrick can wait.

THIRTY-THREE

PATRICK

I PULL ON THE WORN, red boxing gloves and let in a deep breath. What's supposed to be a pure dreg of oxygen makes me cough. The air stinks of mildew and a strange chemical scent that irritates me. *What the hell is that?*

I shake my head and try not to let the surroundings screw up my focus. Who knows? That scent could be an intimidation tactic from Bancroft and his team. In fact, the weird burning smell might be just the *start* of their terror.

Sitting here alone, before my first athletic competition since college, I get the frightening thought that I might be walking into a trap.

Bancroft set up this match. His people are running the show, and he has all the opportunities he can think of to fight dirty. Why wouldn't he? Who's going to tell him to follow the rules when he's the one making them?

The best thing for me would be to leave. Walk out. Flip the middle finger to Bancroft and his flashy world.

But I can't do that.

Even if the odds are stacked against me...

Even if Liz is going to be in his corner tonight...

Even if no one will be in mine, I have to do this.

I'm an athlete.

I'm not punking out.

I glance at the mirror once more. The organizers gave me a white robe. The woman who handed the garment to me made a comment about how white would set off my complexion.

The shy, stuttering way she approached me said she'd never been with a black man before. I didn't encourage her interest. Ushering her out of my room was easier than breathing. *Guess the more I do this 'control myself' thing, the easier it gets.*

"You can do this." I coach my reflection. "Put Bancroft in his place. Get it done."

What if you can't? The doubts cling to me like magnets. I flick them away with finesse. Even if I wanted to bail, I already got the instruction to get on stage.

It's go time.

I push out of the chair and take a step toward the door when it blows open. A woman with dark brown skin, a giant afro and angry brown eyes storms in. She's still wearing her scrubs and the Crocs that eases her feet during those long hospital hours.

"Destiny?" I draw back. "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't going to make it."

"I asked to switch shifts. I'll have to work back-to-back tomorrow, but I couldn't just..." Her eyebrows tighten in exasperation. "Why didn't you tell me the charity event you were participating in was a *boxing* event? What the hell are you thinking, Patrick?"

"Bancroft put a challenge down. I couldn't just walk away from him."

"Yes, you can."

"No, I can't," I insist.

"Why?" She slams her hands against her hips. "Because you want to punish him for getting engaged to Liz?"

My eyes dart away. "Bancroft has been asking for a beating since we met. He acts like he's better than everyone else. Like we're all supposed to bow down because he's got

money. He needs to be dragged down to the real world where the rest of us live.”

“And you’re the one to teach him, right?” Her nostrils flare. She takes a step toward me, her lips set in a firm line. “You. The man who was in a terrible car accident just one year ago. The man who’s been in a wheelchair for over six months. The man who had to use a walking cane until just a few weeks ago.”

“I can fight.”

“I know you can, Patrick. From the moment you were rushed into the emergency room, everyone knew you were a fighter. The fact that you’re still here, still alive and walking, means you’re a fighter. It’s not your ability to fight that’s the problem. It’s the battles you choose.”

Her words hit me hard in the chest. I blink rapidly.

“You’re going to go out there and what? Throw some punches around? Take a few hits from Johnny? *He* wasn’t in an accident that almost cost him his life. He’s not the one who can break old injuries and cripple himself.”

“I won’t lose.”

“Win or lose, what do you walk away with?” Destiny hisses. Her eyes glimmer with passion. “What do you gain from this, Patrick?”

“Respect.”

“From whom? Johnny? From his friends? From Liz?”

I frown at her. “This isn’t about Liz.”

“Is it? Don’t you want her to feel just a little twinge of regret for letting you go? For choosing a billionaire over you?”

I glance away.

Destiny touches my shoulder. “If it’s Liz, this fight won’t bring her back to you.”

I open my mouth.

She lifts a hand. “If it’s respect, you can go out there and make a fool of yourself fighting for something Bancroft and those people can never give you.” Her eyes dart between mine. “You know what’s *really* worthy of respect? It’s admitting your flaws and being transparent even if it means you could lose the person you want more than anything. It means choosing to do the right thing at all costs. It’s fighting to change from the selfish person you used to be into someone a woman can put her trust in. *That’s* worthy of respect. What can Bancroft—what can this stupid fight—offer you, Patrick?”

It’s a lecture. The old me would never have allowed her to talk to me like that. I’m not that man anymore—at least I’m trying not to be—but humility doesn’t sit well on me. It irritates my skin. Makes me want to beat my chest and yell at Destiny. Tell her she has no idea what she’s talking about.

Instead, I look past my own ego to the truth in her words. “You’re right.”

The tension in her shoulders loosen. “I honestly didn’t expect you to say that.”

“Neither did I.”

She laughs.

I smile at her, marveling at her beauty. “Thank you for coming.”

She dips her head. “Of course.”

I take a step toward her. “I should go find Bancroft or one of the organizers and let them know that I—”

Suddenly, screams erupt in the distance. Destiny’s head whips around. I shoot my gaze to the empty hallway, uneasy.

“What was that?” Destiny shirks back.

Screams break out again, louder and longer this time. The frantic wailing is followed by a crackling sound. The strange, burning plastic smell that had been filling the room for a while gets thicker now. Smoke billows toward us, but there’s no visible fire.

Destiny shuffles toward the wall bearing large black stains. “Where is the smoke coming from? This room doesn’t have any windows.”

My eyes widen when I realize what’s going on. I launch forward. “Destiny, get away from there!”

She looks at me like I’m crazy. I grab her hand and pull her into the hallway just as flames burst out of the walls of my changing room. Her eyes bulge and she stumbles behind me.

My breath escapes hard and fast. I can’t think clearly because I’m moving on pure instinct. We have to get out of here. Get to safety.

I’m not the only one thinking like that. The scene in the hallway is pure pandemonium. People race back and forth, searching for the exits. Others are trying to gather their things, hoping to save a few bucks while putting their priceless lives in danger.

“How did you know?” Destiny huffs behind me. She places a hand in front of her nose to stop from inhaling too much smoke. “Back in the room?”

“I didn’t at first.” My gaze scans the long hallways, wondering which path to follow. Smoke burns my eyes and forces me to squint. How did the fumes get so thick, so fast? “I wasn’t sure what I was smelling when I first arrived but, when I saw the smoke coming from the walls, the stench of burning plastic made sense.” I stop and look at her. “It’s an electrical fire. And if it gets to the roof...”

A long creak echoes through the room. The floor beneath us shakes, but it doesn’t feel like an earthquake. Screams erupt from the bleachers outside.

Destiny covers her mouth. “Patrick.”

A stream of people run toward us from one of the hallways. Their faces are twisted in fear. Footsteps drum like a war song. It feels like I’m an extra in a horror movie. Except this darkness, this chaos, is real life.

“The exits that way must be blocked.” I squeeze her hand tightly. “We need to get out of here.”

“Destiny! Patrick!” A familiar voice cries.

I turn around and notice Bancroft and Liz coming from one of the dressing rooms. They’re carrying a man between them. He’s limp and his face is turning ashen.

“What happened?” Destiny runs to them.

“I don’t know,” Johnny says. “We were heading to your dressing room to talk to you when we heard the screams. On the way to investigate, we passed his room and found him unconscious.”

Destiny inspects the man and presses her fingers to his chest. Her expression remains steady, but I can see the slight tremble in her lips. “He’s still breathing, but it’s shallow. I think he might be suffering from the smoke inhalation. If we don’t get him to help soon, he might die.”

I shudder at her pronouncement. I’ve seen gang violence and gun violence. Spraying handguns and expletives is home for me. I know I can survive a speeding bullet because I have before. But disasters like this are completely beyond my realm of control.

Lizette chews on her bottom lip. “I heard the main exits were blocked. People are trying to find another escape route.”

“*Help!*” Someone bursts into the hallway. She’s dressed like a ring girl. She’s wearing tiny spandex and a sparkly bra. Her face is creased with soot. Tears form a muddy track down her pale cheeks. “We need help! Someone’s trapped under a beam outside.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Liz place a restraining hand on Bancroft’s arm. He glances at her with a look that’s pure determination. She gives him a slight shake of her head and his look turns conflicted.

It’s weird watching their unspoken conversation. They’re not talking, but they’re on the same page. Sharing the same brain cell.

Liz makes a slight gesture, just the barest shift of her chin and Bancroft responds by firming his lips. “I have to.”

Liz shakes her head at him and says in resignation, “Be careful.”

Bancroft nods. Then he glances at me. “Let’s get the ladies and this man out first and then come back to help.”

I nod.

Liz and Johnny rise together.

I glance at Destiny. She looks slightly panicked, and I wish I could calm her without words. “We need to take him outside where the ambulances can get to him faster. They’re going to need you out there. Will you be okay?”

“I can handle it.”

She certainly can.

A roar erupts from the roof. Flames lick at the ceiling like it’s ice cream. My bones quiver in fear, but I pretend to be strong as I grab Destiny’s hand and run to the exits with her. More than anything, I have to make sure that this woman gets out of here alive.

THIRTY-FOUR

PATRICK

“BE CAREFUL,” Destiny says, grabbing my hand and holding on. We’re standing on the grassy lawn outside the warehouse. A crowd is gathering to stare at the building and the giant plumes of smoke filling the night sky.

“You too.” I squeeze back and take a second to look at her. She takes my breath away. Billowing, black hair tipped in grey from smoke and dust. Dark skin. Flared nose. Dirty scrubs.

She’s magnificent.

She’s safe.

“*We need help over here!*” A pair of dirty hands wave from the curb. A woman’s hand. She’s looking, not at Destiny’s dark hair, dark face and big afro, but at her scrubs. She’s kneeling next to a man laid out on the ground and bleeding.

Destiny’s focus shifts in an instant. I see the moment she transforms from a worried woman to a nurse. To a hero.

Destiny’s hand slips away from mine. I don’t watch her go. I turn. I run. I rush into a burning building because even villains can be heroes in a crisis.

The fire crackles. I didn’t know something so destructive could be so loud. Or so beautiful. It dances gently. With a class and sophistication that shouldn’t be possible. Its fingers arch over the ceiling. Yellow at the base and tips but pure white in the center. Almost heavenly. But that’s pure deceit. It leaves behind soot and smoke. Such heavy smoke that I can barely see.

“Patrick.” Bancroft’s a little ahead of me. He reaches down and rips the edge of his robe. “Cover your face. It’ll be easier to breathe.”

I tear off the silky end of my robe and fix the cloth over my face. Tying it up quickly, I hurry to the group of men who are trying to lift a giant cement beam and failing. The rock won’t budge, but none of them give up.

Hard cement digs into my fingers when I edge my hand under the giant slab. Together, we rise. Together, the slab doubles in weight and resists us.

The resistance sparks an ember in my heart. Man against nature. A competition with gravity. We don’t stop trying. Even if it shouldn’t be possible. Even if it’s insane.

Someone counts and we lift on three. Our grunts mingle and rise louder than the fire. For one, strange moment, I’m connected to these privileged, rich men. Strangers. Maybe even enemies that wouldn’t think twice about kicking me to the dirt if we met on the street. I’m risking my life with them and fighting for the same thing. One vision. One breath.

It’s overwhelming to put my all into this moment. To care so much about a person who’s trapped in this simulation of hell. Someone I don’t know. Someone who can’t help me. Who has nothing to offer me. But I’m not leaving—none of us are leaving—until we’ve accomplished this.

Veins pop out on my neck. Sweat beads on my forehead—partly because of the exertion and partly because of fear. Noble intentions don’t lessen the challenges. They don’t make our choices less dangerous.

The fire seems to be concentrated in the far corners of the room, but it’s creeping closer. Closer. Edging over to us like a snake flirting with its prey.

I bare my teeth in an inhumane grunt, putting my all into moving the concrete beam. At last, we inch it away from the man who’s pinned beneath the rubble. Bancroft grabs the man by the shoulders and drags him away from the beam just as we all drop it.

The crackling fire is louder now. No longer satisfied to flirt, it's a raging maniac. Mouth open and roaring. Orange fangs bared. Breath like sulfur. A punishment for tearing away its victim.

The heat is beyond dangerous now. Before, it was like stepping into a scorching summer day after being in an air-conditioned office. Or a trip to the sauna in a five-star resort. *This* is nature in all its evil glory. The stench of melting rubber is close.

What does skin smell like when it's burned?

I don't want to find out.

We make a mad dash to the exits just as another beam careens from the roof. A gust of wind rushes past my face as the missile makes a loud landing. I see the flames respond, getting bigger. Greedier. Eager to feed.

The exit is just up ahead.

The door to salvation.

I burst through and immediately bowl over. Hand to my knees. Other hand to my chest where my heart is beating rapidly. The tiny voice in my brain, the part made up of self-preservation, is howling at me, calling me an idiot for taking a risk like that. The other guys had it. Why did I have to get involved?

I shake the thoughts loose. We're free now. Everyone got outside in time. The crowd is loud and panicked. Women and men covered in diamonds and ash. Trembling hands. An utter state of despair and relief.

More professional help has arrived. The ambulance is parked haphazardly in the grass, like the driver threw the vehicle into a resting position without bothering to straighten up. Blue and red police lights flash on the wounded.

I've lost track of Destiny, but I know she's with the paramedics, helping the people who need her most. I notice Liz in the distance, touching the shoulders of a woman who's crying. Moving over to another, elderly woman, and dipping her head close. Her expression is soothing. She's offering

something different. Comfort. She's always been like that. Invested. Interested. Except I saw it as nagging.

"I can't find her!" A ring girl sprints around the clusters of people plopping to the ground and catching their breaths. *"She's not here!"*

"Hey." I stop her because she looks frantic, and no one is paying her any attention. "What's wrong?"

"My friend. Connie. She's..." Her cell phone rings. The woman's eyes widen, and she shows me the screen.

Connie.

She picks up. "Connie, where the hell..." Suddenly, her words stop, and she shifts her eyes to the building.

I feel a presence. A glance over my shoulder tells me that Bancroft is close by. I should have known he'd be paying attention, even if he didn't say anything.

"Connie! Connie!" The woman yells into the phone. Then she gives me a desperate look. "Her phone disconnected."

"Where is she?" Bancroft asks, putting his makeshift mask back over his nose.

I grab his arm and wrench him back. "Are you crazy? Do you see that?" I point at the building. Flames lunge from the windows like a giant octopus with eight, fiery tentacles. It's King Kong beating its chest on the Empire State building. It's a warning. A declaration of power.

Bancroft's words are muffled behind his mask. "The fire department isn't here yet. There's a huge traffic accident on the freeway. It's a mess. And it'll take a while. We're her only chance."

We? Why is he saying we? Why do I—

What if it was Destiny in there?

The thought stops my innate, selfish thoughts in their tracks. Some random girl can wait for the authorities. Some random girl means nothing to me. But if Destiny was in her

place, I'd run to the fire in an instant. If I wasn't there to do it, I'd hope a stranger would do the same.

I can't sit this one out.

Bancroft isn't waiting for me to come to my senses. He's already lunging toward the fire like a crazy man. I charge behind him. The police officers take note of us. I can hear them calling for us to come back. To stop. To wait for the fire department.

I hear Liz's voice too. It's faint and it's one word—*Johnny*.

But we're inside before any of those voices can haul us back to safety. We're in another world. One where nature hates everything. One where everything it touches shrivels up and dies.

We hurry past the beams littering the floor. Johnny runs confidently in the direction of the changing rooms.

"You sure she's in there?" I yell to be heard over the sound of crackling flames, burning rubber, and charring wood.

"Her friend said that's where she'd be." The last of his words is carried away by the roar of the fire. The flames have changed from yellow to red. Cheerful to furious. The way the heat presses on my skin is uncomfortable. Each breath brings more smoke into my lungs.

Bancroft stops in front of a door with a pile of broken cement in front of it. For a moment, I wonder how he magically knows that *this* is where the girl is but, a second later, I notice the doorknob rattling.

She's in there.

It doesn't take long to push the beams away, but the doorknob has stopped rattling and we both know that can't be good. Bancroft's eyes meet mine. His skin is no longer pale. It's pure black. Soot and smoke and fire turned him into a brother. At least on the surface.

We both nod and launch our shoulders at the door. Bancroft cries out in pain. I jump in my skin, shocked to hear

it. He cradles his arm, but he doesn't stop flinging himself at the door.

It takes me a second to realize he screamed from getting burned on the doorknob. The knob was pure metal and he's the one who took that side. I don't know if the choice was intentional. I don't want to think about it.

The door crashes in and we rush inside. A young girl is passed out on the ground in her sparkly bra and tights. Her hair cascades around her, speckled with dust. The smoke rolls thick on the floor like an angry fog. Like a panther daring us to take what belongs to him.

Bancroft doesn't hesitate. He scoops the girl over his shoulder and yells at me, "Come on!"

I follow him down the hallway and to the only corridor that, thankfully, isn't blocked. The entire auditorium is burning with flames. I stumble over fallen cement blocks, broken beams and steel sticking out of upended columns.

A cracking sound thunders through the air. It sends a cold bucket of ice shivering over my skin. I glance up and notice a beam hurtling straight for us.

"Bancroft, watch out!" I jump to the side, springing light on my feet. Bancroft isn't that lucky. His steps are sloppy because of the girl he's carrying on his back.

The beam misses his head but catches his shoulder. I hear him grunt and, somehow, the sound of muted pain is more alarming than the surprised cry he gave when he crashed into the door.

"Bancroft?" I glance behind me. In the smoke, in the darkness, I don't see anyone standing. "Bancroft!" Urgency propels me forward. Back into the flames.

Bancroft is lying on the ground. The girl is slightly on top of him, unharmed. He protected her when he dodged the falling beam. Pain glints from his eyes as he shoves the girl toward me. He's only using one hand. The side that was dinged by the beam is still.

"Take her," he croaks.

“Bancroft, Liz will kill me if...”

“She’s not breathing, Patrick.”

“But—”

The ceiling shift again.

The flames are warning us to get out of its territory.

“Take her and *go!*” Bancroft yells. “I’ll be right behind you.”

With no second to lose, I scoop the girl into my arms and run to the door covered in flames, hoping like mad that Bancroft keeps his promise.

THIRTY-FIVE

LIZETTE

I THOUGHT I KNEW FEAR. I thought I knew the burning sensation beneath the skin. The pounding of a heart that wondered, always wondered, if tonight would be the night she lost everything.

I knew tingling fingertips that were numb and feet that pressed into the floor after waiting by the window. Waiting for a truck to still in the driveway. Waiting for a man to come home.

I thought there was nothing wrong with the fear. With the dread that poured through tightening veins and whispered that my husband might return with divorce papers instead of lips that dripped with lies.

Fear made me value the ashes of my marriage. If I stopped caring, if my heart stopped pounding and all was well when my husband disappeared with another woman, it meant I'd pushed out all the love from my heart. And didn't love and fear work so well together?

For years, fear told me that Patrick still mattered to me. That all would be forgiven. Would be well. As long as he came home. As long as he came back.

Fear was a friend.

Now it's a beast.

I've never felt a fear like this. A horror. A dread. It's crippling. It makes my knees weak and makes it impossible to cry. To think. To breathe until I see him again. *Johnny*.

The way he tore into that burning building, I knew he would not return empty-handed. Never. I knew he would push through his own limits to bring whoever was in there to safety.

And it scares me so badly I can't stop shaking.

The flames are bigger, and the fire truck still isn't here. It's only been a couple minutes since Patrick and Johnny went in, but it feels like hours. Like a century has gone by.

I clutch my fingers together and stare at the door lit with flames, at the patch of grass just outside of it, at the ash falling in the air like snow, until it all blurs into an orange mess.

Finally, out of that mess, a man darts through the door. He's wearing a white robe that's singed. Dirty. Torn at the bottom. He's carrying a woman in his arms and the police officers are there to take her. Paramedics are there to attend to him.

He bats their hands away and turns. Looks imploringly at the fiery door.

I look there too.

Wait.

Wait.

Two men went in. Why did only one come out?

Heart in my hands, I lean forward. Press forward. Stumble.

Then I'm running.

"Where is he?" The voice that tears from my throat isn't mine. It belongs to someone else. The words claw from my lips and rake blood from my mouth. "Where is Johnny?" I'm flying at the flames. At the beast that took the man I love from me. "Where is he? Where is he?"

Patrick is there, arms closed around me. He smells like ash and destruction. He smells like a past I'd gladly burn to the ground if it meant I could have Johnny in its place.

I slam my fist against his chest. "Where is he?"

“He said he was right behind me.” The words are frantic. His eyes dart to the door as if he’s willing Johnny to show up.

Another explosion rocks the building.

“No!” I scream. Then I lunge. Then I’m air borne.

My legs scramble, but Patrick doesn’t put me down.

“Stop, Liz,” he says in a low, firm voice. “Stop!”

“I can’t. He’s still in there. I can’t—”

“I’ll go.” Patrick stares me right in the eyes. I settle down because I hear the resolution in his words. Because I see the same expression on his face that I saw on Johnny’s when he rushed in to save that stranger.

No plan.

No idea of what he’ll face.

Just purpose. Just pure determination to tame the beast and win.

Patrick sets me away. And then he’s gone. His legs hit the ground. His hands are straight and flat, like blades cutting through the wind.

The police officers can’t catch him. The robe flaps and waves goodbye to me before he disappears inside the building.

The officers curse. They complain about nosy civilians. They form a perimeter in case others want to ‘play hero’. They call the fire truck that says it’s finally out of traffic and on its way.

Seconds tick by.

Too long.

A hand closes around mine. Destiny. She glances at me with concern. Someone must have told her about Patrick. About Johnny.

I see a different kind of fear on her face. Or maybe it’s a different response to the fear. As if she’s not familiar with it and is uncomfortable with it. With the loss of control. It drains the color from her dark face and from her red lips. It makes

her eyes big and loosens her jaw until her mouth opens silently.

If I had any comfort to give, I would share with her. Instead, I squeeze her hands tightly and let hope crowd out the fear. Let it squeeze in between the sorrow.

Johnny will be fine. There's no other option.

I can't live without him. There's no other option.

The firetrucks arrive. The men who climb out have grim faces. Their silent nods and urgent footsteps tell me no one can survive a blaze like that. No one can...

A shout goes up from the firefighters.

There.

One set of footsteps. Slow. Lumbered.

It's Patrick. Johnny's on his back.

Is he alive?

It's the only answer that matters.

I rush ahead, but I'm not faster than the firefighters. Than the police officers. Than the paramedics. They swarm Johnny, and I push my way through. I fight to be by his side, lifting my ring as a weapon, as evidence of why I have a right to be there. To be in the way. To be beside him.

He's lying on a stretcher. His shoulder is bleeding. His eyes are closed. He stormed into a fire wearing nothing but a silky black robe and boxing shorts. *Bravery or foolishness?* Even the professionals know better than that. They know to wear hardhats and oxygen tanks and fire-resistant suits. Johnny wore nothing but his stubbornness.

My fingers touch his face. Smooth-shaven cheek. Square jaw. Upper lip.

A soft breath hits my flesh when I curve my finger under his nose.

I fight gravity, but I can't stop it. My knees buckle and the grass rushes up to me. Tears shouldn't be this salty. It should

be sweet. Like the relief flooding my veins. I shouldn't shake this violently. My shoulders shouldn't cave in like this.

He's alive.

He's okay.

Destiny has to pull me away because I'm not allowing the paramedics to do their job. She leads me to the side. I don't allow her to drag me far.

"Liz." Patrick meets my eyes. He's pacing the grass beside the ambulance. He wrings dark hands. Paces again. "Is he..."

"He's okay." The words are a blubber but, somehow, he understands.

Patrick nods.

"Thank you." More tears well in my eyes. I wish there were better words in the English language. Just those two aren't enough.

He nods again.

A hiss rings in the air. The firefighters pour water on the building where Patrick and Johnny were supposed to fight. The fire roars but eventually gives way to smoke and ashes.

I leave the dying fire behind. I climb into the ambulance next to Johnny and ride with him to the hospital. The entire way, I hold his hand and stare at him. Just stare and stare and let the fear pulse out of my system.

Mrs. Bancroft arrives soon and, the moment she shows up, a tornado of activity descends. A doctor is called. A private room is arranged. Nurses swirl and stomp around us. It happens in such fast succession that I can't even register it all.

I'm caught up in the flurry of movement. In the lingering relief when the hand I'm holding eventually holds mine back.

"I want to go home," Johnny says, right after the doctor puts his shoulder in a sling and pumps him full of medicine.

"Home?" I whisper.

Mrs. Bancroft shakes her head. “Don’t listen to him, Liz. The doctor said—”

“Liz,” Johnny smiles sadly at me, “I hate hospitals.”

I turn to Mrs. Bancroft. “We need a car.”

“You’re just like him,” she mumbles as she stomps away.

An hour later, I get Johnny settled into bed and cover his body with the blanket. He groans and fights to keep his eyes open. The doctor warned that the meds would knock him out, but he’s fighting it. He gestures me closer and tries to speak.

“Do you need something?” I whisper when I see his lips moving.

He pats the side of the bed with his uninjured arm. I climb under the covers with him. His body is warm and hard. Even though Mrs. Bancroft and I wiped him down with a wet cloth and helped him into a loose shirt and pajama pants, he still smells like the horrors of the night.

“I love you,” Johnny says sleepily, nuzzling his face into my hair.

“I love you,” I croak. “You scared me. I thought I’d never be able to say that to you again.”

Johnny doesn’t answer. His deepening breath tells me he’s already fallen asleep.

THIRTY-SIX

LIZETTE

I WAKE up to sounds of a muffled grunt. My eyes burst open, and I immediately seek Johnny out. He's seated upright on the edge of the bed.

“What are you doing?” My words are sharper than I intend them to be. It's fueled by the vestiges of fear. The horror that billowed inside me during the fire will take a while to die out. It will take a while to forget.

If Johnny were someone else—anyone like the man I was once married to—I would have been scolded for that tone. I would have been told to ‘never talk like that again’. And then a fight would have broken out as I defended my intentions, and they defended the way it was received.

But I'm not with my ex.

I'm not with any other man.

I'm with Johnny.

And he twists his neck and gives me a patient look. A look so understanding and tender that I'm the one who feels silly for snapping.

“Liz.”

“What are you doing?” My voice is softer. More genuine. “You shouldn't be moving around.”

“I didn't want to wake you.”

“Does it look like I'm the one with a crushed shoulder right now?” I push myself up. My feet slam to the ground.

“What did you need?”

His lips twitch. “Bathroom.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll handle it myself.” He offers a shadow of a smile.

“Now is not the time to get shy.”

“It’s not shyness. I really wanted you to sleep. You’ve been through a lot tonight.”

“I didn’t run into any burning buildings.”

His grin continues to grow.

I narrow my eyes. “Don’t smile at me right now, Johnathan Bancroft.”

“Johnathan? Am I in trouble?”

I pull my lips in because he’s a stubborn man who’s too used to getting his way. If I don’t lay the law down now, he’s going to be doing all kinds of crap in the future that could further injure his shoulder.

Fixing my expression into a firm one, I wrap one arm around his waist and help him up. He winces but doesn’t make a sound. A glance at the clock tells me he’s almost due for his next pain pills. No wonder he looks so uncomfortable.

I help him to the bathroom, wait right outside until he’s finished and then burst in to help him wash his hands.

Johnny scowls at me. “You were listening while I used the bathroom?”

“Privacy is over-rated. At least between us.” Pulling his hand gently, I massage the soap into his palm. He closes his eyes and lets out a deep breath.

I watch him, watch us, in the mirror. The way my brown skin presses against his pale shoulder—right under a burn the size of a doorknob. The way his towering figure makes mine look small and fragile. And yet he’s still leaning on me. Relying on me. Needing me.

I almost lost him tonight. The thought sinks in with unbearable clarity. I try to keep it together. I help Johnny back to the bed, hiding my face so he doesn't see the tears sparkling on my eyelashes. I turn away quickly.

"You need to take your pills now," I say as calmly as I can. "I'll get water."

Johnny lets me leave and even takes his medication without complaint. But when I try to walk around to the other side of the bed, he grabs my hand and hauls me down to him.

I gasp. "Johnny, your shoulder."

"You won't hurt me, Liz." The words press against my skin. Warm. Gentle. Loving. "You never have."

I don't look into his eyes. I know he'll see the evidence of my crying.

He kisses my forehead and doesn't seem put off by my silence. "I almost died tonight."

The words send a shudder down my spine. It's enough for me to grapple with. I don't need him cementing my thoughts in the air.

Johnny doesn't back down. "When I realized I couldn't go on and I was probably going to lose to those flames, all I could think about was you." He touches my hair and gently runs his finger down my chin. "And how much I love you."

My tears can't be stopped.

He wipes as many as he can. "I love you, Liz."

"I can't." The sobs are pathetic, but there's no stopping them. "I never imagined a future without you in it, Johnny. But you forced me to consider what that was like. I hated every second of it."

"I'm sorry."

I wipe the tears he can't capture because his other hand is slung up and pinned to his chest. I rub my face on his shirt and remind myself that he's real and the fire tonight was the nightmare.

“Did you have to risk your life like that?” I croak. “You didn’t even know that girl.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“We could have waited for the authorities—”

“No, we couldn’t have, Liz. You know that.”

I do know that but, sometimes, feelings don’t care about facts.

“And I didn’t risk my life for her.” He tilts my chin up. “I risked my life for you.”

“What?”

“I was scared. Same as any man would be. People with common sense know you don’t run into a burning building with an equally untrained guy as your only backup. But I couldn’t stop thinking about you. What would I want to happen if you were in that situation? Wouldn’t I want someone to risk their life to save you? Not because they knew you but because it would be the right thing to do? Because you were precious to someone out there? Because your life has value?”

I stop crying then. It’s hard to be emotional when you’re grappling with words that carry so much weight. The truth has no time for tears. Only acceptance. Only awe.

I blink slowly. The way I watch him is different because I’m seeing a different side of him. A love that’s been tested by flames. It’s something close to obsession. Without all the negative connotations. It’s knowing that he really would die for me without expecting anything in return.

I stare into his eyes. I smile. I accept him, everything about him and the intense way he loves and takes care of me. I’m no longer confused by his adoration. No longer guilty about whether I deserve it. Whether it belongs to me or to someone better—whatever that classification of ‘better’ looks and acts like.

I no longer hate myself for accepting a love like Johnny’s. To prove it, I take a deep breath and press my lips to his. It’s

gratitude and relief. It's a promise to love him just as intensely, just as much, as he's loving me.

Johnny tries to roll on top of me so he can deepen the kiss, but he retreats abruptly. His face crumples in pain and I jump.

"Are you okay?"

He nods although the sweat beading on his temple and the sharp crease in his forehead tells a different story.

I adjust the covers over him. "Sleep."

"I can't. I'm wide awake, sunshine."

Laughter feels inappropriate, but it still pours from my mouth. "Then talk."

"About what?"

"Why you hate hospitals."

I knew that would sober him. Or at least scare him away from me. Instead, his gaze softens. "You know."

"I know the bullet points. I know bits and pieces. I've inferred the rest from what you haven't said, but I don't know everything."

He tilts his head and the pillow rustles under his chin. "Why didn't you ask before now?"

"Because the man you are to me isn't the man she knew. And I'm aware of that. It doesn't make me love you less."

He glances at the ceiling. "I was a coward for most of my life."

I want to disagree. After everything he did tonight, how can he say that?

"From the moment I was born, my path was laid out for me, and I didn't have the strength to deviate."

"What did you want to do?" I whisper.

"My uncle was a boxer. I wanted to get into the ring because of him, but my grandfather didn't think that was a respectable career. I always did what he wanted, so I turned

away from boxing as a career and only trained with my uncle for exercise.”

I stroke his arm, listening quietly.

“My grandfather wanted me to go to college, so I did. I got my MBA. Followed in his footsteps. And then I married the girl I knew would please him. She had all the right things—family background, good education, same social circle. It was the kind of wedding, the kind of marriage, he’d approve of.”

I slide my hands under my chin. “Did you love her?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t have to think about it and I’m glad for that. Glad that his first wife got to experience what Johnny’s love felt like. “But loving someone doesn’t mean you know how to treat them well. Or that you know how to function in a marriage.”

“Doc would say you weren’t equipped for marriage.”

He blows out a breath. “I wasn’t. I wasn’t even twenty percent ready for marriage. I thought the job was done after the wedding. I’d given her a ring. Given her my last name. Given her money. I didn’t notice that wasn’t enough. I didn’t know I was killing her slowly. That I was suffocating her in a world where the man she thought would be on her side was always chasing his grandfather’s approval.”

I close my hands over his.

He squeezes it, but the guilt is still growing on his face and trembling in his voice. “I was immature, but I didn’t realize how much until she got sick. I was so selfish...” His eyes dart from side to side. I hear the pain. The disappointment in himself. In his actions. “I thought that, if she couldn’t be of use to me, then I didn’t have to invest myself in her.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I shoved her off on a nurse and threw myself into work, into building the company. There were many times she cried, not from the pain of her sickness but because of me. I didn’t care. It was all about me and getting more money, more possessions, more prestige. In the time it would take to be there for her, I could be trying to get my grandfather’s

attention.” He shakes his head. “The nurse was great. The hospital was top-notch. I thought I’d given her everything but, instead, I gave her a lonely life. I cut her off when she wasn’t directly benefitting me. I was a stupid kid who thought relationships should have a good return on investment. If I wasn’t getting a benefit, why bother with too much effort?”

It’s hard to hear about this side of Johnny because it’s not what I experienced, but it’s the truth. He did that to the woman whose only mistake was to fall in love with him without doing proper investigation.

“She asked to see me before she died. She told me that she loved me. That she hoped I’d be alright. That I’d be able to shake my grandfather’s influence and find freedom. Even in her dying moments, she was thinking of me. I was shaken.” He sighs loudly. “After she died, life became meaningless. I had a big house and all this money in the bank, but I didn’t have anyone to share it with. She was gone and my grandfather still didn’t approve of me. I’d done everything I could—I’d rejected my wife in her darkest moments—and I still wasn’t enough.”

“Johnny.”

“I wondered what I was working so hard for. What exactly was I trying to prove that I was a jerk to my wife? I wanted to change, and I started in the only ways I knew how. With business. I made investments in people and ventures that really mattered to me. I picked those over the ones that would only buffer the bottom line.”

I blink in surprise. “That’s when you bought the gym?”

He nods. “It wasn’t enough. I still felt like there was more I had to learn. I spent many years searching for penance. I knew I didn’t truly understand what love was, but I knew what it shouldn’t be. I promised myself that if my heart ever beat for someone again, I would give it my all. I would make sure everything I did with her was the opposite of what I did with my first wife. I promised myself I wouldn’t be selfish. That I would start and end with putting that person before myself.”

My heart shifts toward him. “Then you found me.”

He smiles. "Then I found you."

I push myself up on my elbow and look down at him.
"Johnny."

"Mm."

"When you were in the fire, and I thought that I lost you, I realized that I can't live without you." I meet his eyes.
"Johnny, I'm ready." The words are determined. Clear. Resolute. "Let's get married."

Johnny's eyes widen and he grabs me in for a tight hug.

THIRTY-SEVEN

PATRICK

I'M sore and aching when I wake up the next day, but just because *I* don't want to get out of bed doesn't mean Toots will want to slack off today. I made a commitment to Destiny, and I intend to keep it, aching back or no.

I check my phone when I swing out of bed. There aren't any messages from Destiny. Not that I expected anything. She went straight to the hospital to help the victims of the fire. I imagine she'll have to start her shift early today and work late into the night to make up for coming to see me yesterday.

To my surprise, I have hundreds of messages and missed calls. News outlets. Magazines. Even a text from Fuentes asking if I'm alright.

My eyebrows shoot straight up. "What the hell?"

The phone vibrates in my hand.

Jerrison's number lights up on screen.

I answer. "Hey, J."

"You rush into a burning building to save Johnny Bancroft and I have to find out from the morning news?"

"What?"

"You're all over the papers, man. They're calling you and Bancroft heroes."

"Don't they have anything better to report today?"

"Guess a fire and brave civilians make better TV."

I shuffle gingerly to the closet and pick out a shirt, pants and sneakers I don't mind getting destroyed by dog excrement. "Did they find out what caused the fire?"

"Something was wrong with the electrical."

"Thought so." I flinch when I raise my arms to slip the shirt off my head. I'm forgoing the bath until I've finished with Toots. No reason to get sweet-smelling for a dog who never bothers to listen to my commands.

"According to the news, the owner of the building knew about it, but he'd already booked the boxing match, so he didn't want to risk losing the deposit. He set an appointment with an electrician for the day *after* the event."

"Bastard."

"Well, greed is blinding. Now, he's going to be sued within an inch of his life."

"By the city?"

"The city? Nah, not the city. The organizers. That wasn't just any old match, you know. Old money was in those stands. That kind of clientele, they have an army of lawyers. You don't want to mess around with that."

"I'm just glad no one got hurt." I pull on a fresh pair of jogging pants, swipe my keys from the dresser and head outside.

"Don't be humble, Pat." Jerrison chuckles.

"I'm not. I'm just speaking the truth."

"That's unlike you."

"Honesty?"

"Humility." He pauses. The amusement leaves his voice. "What got you to rush into a burning building and help those guys?"

"What? I should have let them die because they're entitled and rich?"

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m just... surprised. Pleasantly so. You weren’t this philanthropical before.”

“Maybe I’m changing,” I shoot back.

“Oh, you definitely are. I’m asking what clicked for you.” He clears his throat. “We all have that moment. When it makes sense. When you decide to be better. To *do* better.”

I head downstairs and climb into my car. Jerrison’s making it sound like I turned into a completely different person because of one thing, but I can’t point to just one moment and say it happened then.

“It kind of snowballed, I guess. From everything Doc said to the way Destiny makes me feel.” I place one hand on the wheel and watch the road ahead of me. “I don’t want to lose her the way I lost Liz.”

He whistles through the phone. “So when do I get to meet my new sister-in-law?”

“Not sure.” I rub the back of my neck. “We’re... kind of on a break.”

“A break? Why?”

The last thing I want to do is rehash the whole Lizette-exposing-our-past drama. At least not today, when my head is aching as much as my body is.

“Another time. I gotta go, J.”

“Alright. Stay safe and tell us if you do any TV interviews. Harriet says you’re welcome to meet reporters at the bakery. It’ll make for free advertising.”

I shake my head. “Thanks.”

We hang up and I drive to Destiny’s apartment in silence. I’m feeling a little better when I approach her neighbor’s door fifteen minutes later. Hopefully, Toots can sense my exhaustion and goes easy on me. My arm can’t handle tugging on the leash today.

I pass Destiny’s apartment and, without warning, her door bursts open. I jump a little, not enough to be embarrassing but

enough that she starts to laugh. I recognize that laughter and go still.

“Destiny?” I blink at where she’s standing in the doorway. She’s wearing athletic pants, a tank top and sneakers. Toots is beside her, breathing hard and wagging his tail in welcome.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come.” Her smile is the sunlight. I can’t stare directly at it. “After the night you’ve had, you deserve to sleep in.”

“I told you I’d walk him every day. I meant it.”

Her eyes soften with affection. “I guess you did.” She glances down and clicks her tongue at the dog. They come trotting toward me and stop in the middle of the hallway. “We were just about to go for a walk. Would you like to join us?”

“Like a date?” I want to clarify. Need it. If we’re moving forward, I’m going to jump so far away from the friendzone that it never appears in my rearview mirror again.

“No.” She shakes her head.

The little hope that had been trying to rise in my heart drops to the ground.

“But,” she pulls her lips into her mouth, “I could use the company.”

I take the offering, even if it’s not exactly what I want to hear.

Toots is a much better behaved dog with Destiny and I’m sure that’s out of spite. The mutt knows what he’s doing. But I have to admit, Destiny knows what she’s doing too. She handles him with firmness and certainty. I make a few notes for the future.

“How did you get the day off?” I ask as we stroll the park. Sunshine bounces against her hair that’s contained in a puff. Her eyes sparkle. “My supervisors heard that I was part of the fire victims’ medical team. I got today off and a letter of recommendation for my school.”

“Destiny, that’s fantastic.”

“Thanks.” She smiles harder.

I take Toots from her because I want her to relax and also because I want to show her I can walk him too. “What you did out there was amazing.”

“Me? You’re the one who risked your life to help others.”

“It was nothing.”

“It was everything. You didn’t have to intervene, but you did. You could have just thought about it and waited for someone else to step up, but you acted.” She bobs her head. “Not only did you help in a dangerous situation, but you saved your ex-wife’s new fiancé. I respect that.”

My cheeks hurt from all the smiling I’m doing. “I never thought of it that deeply.”

“I did.” She arches an eyebrow. “You went there to have a one-on-one with Johnny Bancroft and you walked out of there with him on your back, a hero. That tells me a lot about you. I’m sure it told Liz a lot about you too.”

I blow out a breath and remember the moment my ex-wife’s eyes connected with mine. When Bancroft didn’t run out of the building behind me, Liz looked like she’d fall apart. Like her world would stop turning.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen that kind of look on her face. Not even with Amir. Going back for Bancroft felt like a tiny way to make up for the past.

I was relieved when I could make a path to him. Even more relieved when I could get him out. Liz breathed for the first time when she saw him. I don’t think she realized, but I saw it. She’s absolutely crazy about Bancroft.

The soundtrack of early morning cyclists, exercise groups and dog barking fills my ears. I wonder what kind of person I would have turned into if Liz had never divorced me. If I’d never met Doc. If I’d never gotten my legs broken.

It makes me a little queasy in the stomach to think that I would have remained on the same path. Indifferent. Callous.

The kind of man who wouldn't earn anyone's respect, much less someone like Destiny.

Toots lurches at a squirrel, jarring me from my thoughts. My entire body goes flying because that dog is a giant menace. Destiny laughs and jogs beside me. She tugs on Toots' leash, does the click-tongue-thing and he heels.

I bowl over. "How did you do that?"

"Training." She pats her dog's head. "It takes time but, if you're patient and consistent, he'll listen to you too."

"I doubt that."

"He just needs time, Patrick," she stresses again. "Deep down..." Destiny chews on her bottom lip. "I think he likes you."

"Yeah?" I stare intently at her, hearing the words she isn't saying.

"He just needs more time to trust you."

"He can get all the time he needs," I promise softly. If there's hope, if there's a chance I can have her, then I'll wait for the rest of my life.

THIRTY-EIGHT

LIZETTE

I TRY to tiptoe out of bed without Johnny waking, but I fail so hard that I'm promptly hauled back to the mattress. His arm is heavy around me, and his breathing deepens. It takes me a few minutes until I can pry his hand off and escape to the kitchen.

Breakfast is toast, eggs and bacon. Simple. Though bacon is his favorite food, it's the smell of coffee that finally lures Johnny out of bed.

He walks toward me, his hair deliciously disheveled. There are bruises all over his chest and deepening around his shoulder. The beam that nearly killed him left a deep impression on his skin, a constant reminder of what could have happened if he hadn't jumped away.

Johnny's good arm wraps around me and he kisses my neck. "Morning."

"Morning." I slide my hand over his and try not to melt into him.

"Music and breakfast?" He juts his chin at the hidden speakers that are playing a cheerful jazz. It sounds like spring and bubbling champagne. It's as light as the sunshine in the room.

"You almost died yesterday. Let me celebrate."

"My near death?" he rumbles.

"Your miraculous survival." I kiss his jaw. "Don't play dumb with me."

He laughs and rocks me to the jazz playing over the speakers. It's a simple, quiet moment, but it's special because it's Johnny. Because he knows me and loves me anyway. All the flaws, the pain, the parts of me I'd rather hide. He embraces it and calls it beautiful.

There's a smile on my face that promptly flees when I smell something burning. "The bacon."

I try to push his arm away.

He holds me fast.

"Johnny."

"Woman, I'm not letting you out of my sight until I'm ready."

"I'll still be in your sight if I go to the stove."

"I'm not letting you out of my arms then," he says stubbornly.

"The bacon..."

"Here. Hold on to me." Johnny picks me up with one arm like I'm a five-pound weight at the gym. Unprompted, I lock my legs around him and wind my hands around his neck, careful not to touch the injured shoulder.

He takes the spatula from me and flips the bacon on the stove. I rest my temple against his and inhale his scent. It's mint and salt and Johnny. I close my eyes, enjoying the quiet of the kitchen, the warmth of the sunrise and the crackle of the bacon.

"I'm thinking about seeing Destiny today."

He doesn't stop flipping the bacon, but I can feel the tension winding off him. "Are you worried about Patrick?"

"No. I only want to see Destiny. We need to talk."

"Mm." His shoulders relax. "It would be okay if you were."

"If I were what?"

"Worried."

“About Patrick?”

“He saved my life.”

“Should we invite him over for dinner?”

He blows on a stick of bacon until it cools. “I don’t know if you’re being sarcastic or serious.”

I open my mouth to accept the bacon. The flavors burst on my tongue. I moan so hard that Johnny kisses me so he can experience it too.

He licks his lips and then licks the corner of mine. “It’s good.”

My toes curl. “You are so evil.”

He laughs. “We were talking about your ex-husband.”

“Why would we do that?” I ask distractedly.

He kisses my forehead, and I smile dreamily at him.

Is this man even real?

He’s too beautiful.

His face is regal. High cheekbones. Thick hair. A deep, healthy tan.

“Liz.”

“Mm?”

“Sunshine.”

I blink. “Yes.”

He laughs again. It’s soft and deep. Intimate. Like he’s so in awe of me that he can’t laugh too loudly or I might shatter. Might reveal myself to be a fantasy.

I touch his cheek. “You got the wrong messaging about my feelings when I intervened in Patrick’s life. There’s a chance Destiny might have misunderstood too. I want to clear things up. I value her as a friend. I want the best for her. That hasn’t changed.”

He nods because he’s Johnny. Because he understands.

He drives me there even though I insist that he should stay home and rest. He kisses my hand and tells me to call him when I'm done.

I wave him away and tell him I'll catch a cab. He asks me if I'm trying to make him angry. I'm left with strict instructions to text him or he won't take his meds. Sometimes, he's more stubborn than Amir.

Destiny rises when I approach the table in the cafe. There's something so formal about it. So hesitant. The man she cares about is the man who broke my heart. Of course there would be awkwardness.

It's why I came.

I wave to her. Offer a friendly smile to assure her, before I've said a word, that I've come in peace.

She sits. A slow, hesitant smile spreads on her face too. She's not in scrubs today. Instead, she's wearing a stylish blouse and mini-skirt. Her hair is big around her face, a loud and proud afro.

I'd forgotten how regal she is, especially when she's in plain clothes. I love her fashion sense. It's young and powerful. Just like her.

"You just got off a shift?" I ask.

"No, I was with Patrick." Her eyes avoid mine.

"I'm glad he's okay. And I'm thankful for what he did for Johnny."

"Yeah." Her smile is a little more relaxed now. "It was incredible, wasn't it?"

We talk about the fire and the details we've heard about it from the news. I wait until our drinks are served before I change the topic. "Destiny."

She stirs the straw in her drink.

"I know the other day I warned you about Patrick."

She glances up, cautious.

“There’s something else you should know.” I lean forward.
“He’s training with a man named Doc.”

“The mechanic, right? He told me.”

I nod. “What you saw yesterday was a man who was brave enough to save another. That courage doesn’t necessarily mean he’s sixty percent ready for marriage, but it does tell me that he’s changed. A lot. And if he’s working with Doc, those changes can really open the door for a different way of thinking.”

“Did you say sixty percent... ready for marriage? We’re not at marriage yet.”

“It’s a Doc thing. A principle. The point is not to jump into relationships with men who aren’t equipped to handle a family, much less a committed relationship.” I smile. “Doc has a different way of thinking about marriage and if Patrick is finally accepting that, it’s a good sign. Doc can work miracles. As long as he’s in Patrick’s corner and Patrick’s listening to him, learning from him, you have a chance.” I close my eyes and struggle with the right tone for this last part. “Just... be patient. Please. There are some things only time can prove.”

“I meant what I said that day, Liz. I’m moving slow. Not rushing anything. But I’m going to give him a chance.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you for meeting me. For caring so much. I really didn’t want to lose you as a friend.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I nod. My heart is at ease. Destiny is free to live her life and make the best decisions she can. Plus, Patrick *is* going to Doc. Maybe he’ll settle down and treat Destiny the way she deserves.

Only time will tell.

AS THE DAYS GO ON, I realize how much more of my life I get to live—how much room I get to make in my heart—

after leaving my hatred for my ex-husband behind.

I've finally dealt with the bitterness left over from my previous marriage. Now, there's only hope. Possibilities. Adventure in front of me.

Johnny and I make plans for our future together, but it only takes up a small part of our lives. There's too much of me, too much of the Liz that's independent and firm, that has a foundation to run and a life to live, to care about the details of a wedding.

It's a struggle in my heart. I know I *should* be excited about the wedding. Johnny gave me his black card a long time ago. I have free reign to plan the grandest wedding this city has ever seen.

Even so, I don't feel any eagerness to get the ball rolling. There are bridal gown books piled up on my coffee table at home, unopened. There are messages from Harriet, my matron of honor, asking what kind of bachelorette party I'd want. There are questions from Amir, asking if he can bring his friends to the wedding and when exactly will it be again?

I wonder if it bothers Johnny that I don't know the answers. I wonder if my disinterest in planning the wedding, the dragging of my feet—much to Mrs. Bancroft's everlasting annoyance—makes him ill at ease. There were so many obstacles between us. Will this wedding be another one?

Because it's Johnny, I don't keep those thoughts to myself.

Time taught me things.

My worries are safe with him.

My fears are at ease.

I spread them out before him, and we dismantle them together.

"Why would it bother me?" Johnny says, tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. We're sitting in his office because he's been working more often lately. His grandfather was admitted to the hospital and it seems as if Johnny will have to take the

helm of the Bancroft companies again. “Why would any of that upset me?”

I smile at him and see the sincerity in his eyes.

He rubs his hand over my thighs. The doctor allowed him to ditch the sling last week and that hand has been making up for lost time. “I was prepared to wait for years, Liz. You agreeing to marry me so soon is all I need.”

“We also need a wedding license.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

“And a cake, flowers, a wedding venue.”

“Do you want me to take care of that too?”

I look at him and I see forever. My smile widens. “I want to be involved.”

“But you find it hard to make decisions?”

“I don’t want to get carried away.” The smile loses its grip as I sigh. “I’ve been in this position before. Back then, I had a baby and Patrick was a bouncer. We didn’t have money for a dream wedding, but that made me more invested. I worked as hard as I could. I personally sewed all the tablecloths, blew up the balloons, fashioned the centerpieces for the table and made sure everything was perfect. I had a big, extravagant wedding ceremony on a low-cost budget. We invited everyone to celebrate a marriage that neither of us was ready for. And now...”

“And now,” he sets his work aside and takes my hands, “you don’t see the point.”

“Before you say let’s head down to the courthouse and get it over with, that’s not what I want. I do want a dream wedding, Johnny. I do want to celebrate our love in a big way. I think we’ve been through a lot, and I’d love to walk down the aisle to you.”

“Tell me what you don’t love,” he whispers.

“I don’t love pretense. And I don’t love prioritizing everything that such a grand party will entail. Your family is a

big deal. All kinds of people will be there.”

“They don’t have to be,” he says.

“No, I don’t mind them. It’s not them, Johnny. It’s me. I have more important things to do. And I know that sounds awful, but it’s how I feel. If having a big wedding meant a marriage was sound and would last forever, then every celebrity or billionaire would be happy and together right now.”

He nods because he understands even if I don’t fully understand myself. Pulling my hands to his lips, he kisses each of them and then he fixes it. “I’m going to hire a wedding planner.”

My eyebrows shoot up.

“I’m going to pay her enough that she gets into your head, finds your heart, and produces the wedding you envision. The wedding you deserve. She’s going to run around, paying attention to all the details. She’s going to deal with the pretense. She’s going to free up your time so all you have to say is yes or no. Every problem will be handled before you can get wind of it.” His eyes soften. “You want a fancy wedding, and you want a marriage that’ll last. I’ll give you both, sunshine. You don’t have to choose.”

My heart skips a beat.

Johnny caresses my hand. “When the ceremony’s over and everyone else goes home, it’s just going to be me and my commitment to you. No family. No flowers. No—”

“Wedding dress?”

“Definitely not.” Johnny’s voice is low and smooth. As smooth as the hand dragging me on top of him. “This wedding is not important to me. You are. I don’t care how often you need me to remind you. I’ll make that abundantly clear every time.”

I shudder when his lips caress my ear.

“I don’t want you to be stressed. The minute you’re stressed out is the minute I’m stressed too.”

I can't think when he talks like that. When he touches me like that.

“If you can't make the decision, you come to me. I'll help you make the decision. If you want a second opinion, you can drag me to cake tasting, flower picking, whatever you need. I'll make time. You're not in this alone.”

His lips meet mine in a possessive kiss.

I can't breathe.

“Anything you want is yours.” His voice is steel wrapped in velvet. “All of me and all that I have, it belongs to you.”

I put my fingers on his chest before he can dive in and make it impossible to keep my wits about me. “I've been thinking. What about keeping our hands to ourselves until the wedding night?”

He pushes out his lips.

I laugh at his expression.

“You're going to test me to the end, aren't you, sunshine?”

I bat my eyelashes.

He reroutes his kiss to my temple and squeezes me tight. “Whatever you want.” He gently pushes me out of his lap and puts space between us. “As long as you're aware that I'm stealing you away before the reception.”

I laugh and nod. “That sounds like a plan.”

THIRTY-NINE

PATRICK

THE LAST PERSON I expected to walk through my office doors just did.

I stare at Bancroft like he's an apparition. A projection from my exhausted mind. Although why I would conjure my ex-wife's fiancé and not Destiny is a mystery to me.

It takes me a second to realize that he's real. Which leaves me with more questions than before.

I haven't seen Bancroft since the fire, although I know I was on his mind beyond that night. Rather than simply call and thank me for saving his life, Bancroft connected my agency with one of the most prominent law firms in the city.

The firm is the kind of place where you have to know someone to get in. Since Jerrison and I both come from new money, we didn't have a leg to stand on. It took me a few days to realize the connection was Bancroft's doing. Took a few days more to accept the lavish favor.

I'm still not a fan of Bancroft, but sometimes doing business means using whatever's at your disposal. I wasn't about to turn away the opportunity of a lifetime because of the source.

"Bancroft." My words are firm, not quite welcoming but not as disgusted either.

"Wilson."

"Your shoulder looks better." I point to it.

“Yeah.” He rotates his shoulder. “I’ve been out of the sling for a couple months now. Feels good.”

I look him over. He’s wearing a suit tailored to his tall frame and he’s holding something in his hand. My eyes drop there. To the delicate envelope and elegant stamp that looks out of place in his giant paws.

“That isn’t what I think it is, right?” I nod to the envelope.

He sets the invitation on my desk. I know what I’ll find inside. Lizette’s name. Bancroft’s name. Probably a picture of wedding bells or a heart. Whatever frivolous design Liz came up with.

“You saved my life that night.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Not a big deal.”

“And you want to support Liz.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you didn’t run back into that fire for me.”

I glance away. “Does Liz even want me there? This is her new beginning and I’m her past.”

“We’ve seen you grow, and we’d want you to be a part of this.” He taps the invitation. “If you and Destiny ever get married, we’d want to be invited too.”

I swallow hard as I catch the names scrawled on the envelope. It says ‘To Patrick and Destiny’.

As a unit.

They don’t know.

My stomach drops, but I paste a smile on my face. “Thank you.” I pull the invitation close and nod. “We’ll be there.”

I don’t let my panic show until Bancroft leaves my office. Only then do I toss the invitation across the desk and groan aloud.

Destiny and I are on a break right now. Not because of anything I’ve done. We got closer after the fire and it felt like

we were moving in the right direction, but her schoolwork intensified and so did her hours at the hospital.

She felt like she was taking from me. Like my efforts of walking Toots, being there for her, and sending her lunch was unfair to me. No matter how much I tried to tell her that it was fine, that I would wait until she was fully ready, she didn't allow me to.

We've exchanged a few texts since then. Thankfully, it's not a full break up and I'm choosing to buy her excuse about being overwhelmed with life right now. Maybe it's not the right time for a romantic relationship, but it will be. And I'll be here for her.

I hold my breath when I dial her number and only let it out when she picks up.

"Hey, Patrick."

"Hey, Des." I can't hide the smile in my voice. "It's been a while."

"How are you?"

We exchange small talk for a bit until I can't stall anymore. Finally, I clear my throat. "So, Liz is getting married."

"She is." Destiny pauses. "Does it... bother you?"

"Why would it bother me?"

"Well, you called. I thought you wanted to talk about that."

"No, not about that. I'm happy for Liz." I mean that, even if it doesn't make sense. Even if Bancroft isn't my favorite person. Having a kid at such a young age, and then meeting a jerk like me, she's been through enough. If Bancroft can make her happy, I want that for her.

"I knew about it, but I'm still waiting for my invitation," Destiny says.

"I don't think yours is coming."

"Why?"

I glance at the envelope teetering on the edge of my desk. “Because I have it.”

“What?”

“They gave me an invitation with both our names on it.” I hold my breath, waiting for her to say something. When she doesn’t, I add, “I know we’re on a break right now, but I really don’t want to show up alone or... separately.” It would be humiliating. Especially since Liz and Bancroft already assume that Destiny and I are together. “I don’t want to field any questions and I figured you wouldn’t either.”

“Okay.”

I blink rapidly. “Yeah?”

“Of course. I’ll come to the wedding with you.”

“As a date?”

“No.” Her words aren’t sharp. They’re quiet but firm. “I’m sorry, Patrick.”

I hate when she apologizes to me. I don’t want her regret. I want her back.

“Destiny, if you don’t want to be with me, you can come out and say that,” I respond in a tight voice. It’ll kill me to hear those words, but it’s killing me even more to be on a go-slow for months with her.

“It’s not because of you,” she insists. “It’s really not. I’ve seen how much you’ve changed, Patrick. The fact that you’d even consider going to this wedding, that you can be happy for Liz and want someone for her who can treat her the way she deserves—that’s maturity.” She sighs. “I do care about you, but I refuse to string you along when my life is as chaotic as it is right now. You deserve to have someone who can be there for you fully and that’s not me.”

It sounds like she’s edging against a real break-up conversation, and I don’t want to entertain that. Not right now.

“It’s fine.” I cut her off before she can continue. “I’ll pick you up for the wedding.”

“Okay,” she says quietly.

LIZ’S WEDDING is as extravagant as I expected it to be. The room is packed. Politicians. Businessmen. International dignitaries. On the other side of the aisle are all the single mothers she’s helped through the years. Everyone shows up to celebrate her getting hitched to Bancroft.

A live quartet plays. Harriet holds Liz’s bouquet after Amir walks her down the aisle. I swear, I smiled at Amir when he was passing by with Liz and he scowled at me. I don’t know. Maybe that look was aimed at someone else.

The priest says a few words and then Liz turns to Johnny. There must be a microphone somewhere around her because, somehow, I’m hearing her words from all the way at the back.

“Johnny Bancroft, I never knew what love was before I met you.”

I cringe and glance away.

“I was battered and bruised by love, and I was so sure that lies, betrayal and abuse were the only forms of love that existed.”

Destiny pulls her hand out of mine.

I glance over, but she’s not looking at me.

“Then I stumbled on a miracle. Johnny, you are the most incredible man I’ve ever met. You’re kind.” Liz’s voice breaks. *“You’re gentle. And you’re so, so patient with me.”*

Bancroft wipes Liz’s tear.

“I will spend the rest of my life being grateful for you and for the way you’ve proven me wrong. Real love does exist, but it’s not a feeling or a fairytale or even a whirlwind romance.” She turns the page of her vows. *“It’s a man who’ll back away silently when he finds out the woman he’s pursuing is legally unavailable.”*

Nervous laughter breaks out.

The eyes of those who know Liz and our story glance my way. The stares are freezing. I pretend not to see.

“It’s moving at a glacial pace until that woman realizes she’s ready for a new relationship. It’s being patient as that woman deals with the baggage of bitterness, obligation, and pain from the scars of her past. It’s knowing when to give her space and when to assure her that you’ll always be there. Be considerate. Be committed.”

Tissues start fluttering in the crowd. Women dot at their eyes. Some glance at their husbands with fond smiles. Others look at their husbands with a scowl.

“You, Johnathan Bancroft, are the love of my life. It is an honor to marry you. I will say yes to you for the rest of my life.”

The priest turns it over to Bancroft. His vows are short. Thankfully. Not that he has to say much. Even I can admit that his entire relationship with Liz has been one, big love letter to her.

I’m grateful when the marriage ceremony’s over and even more so when the reception is held close by. If I had to drive somewhere, I’d probably just drive home.

Both Destiny and I clamor for the champagne the moment we arrive in the reception hall.

“You okay?” I ask, stepping close to her. I haven’t forgotten the way she pulled her hand out of mine during the ceremony.

“Yeah.” Her smile is tight-lipped. “I’m going to go find Liz. She asked beforehand to take some wedding photos with her.”

Liz didn’t ask *me* to take photos. Understandable. But it doesn’t make this entire wedding less awkward. I have no idea what possessed me to come here and, now that Destiny’s gone, I feel even less tethered to these events.

After a couple minutes looking for a friendly face, I finally spot two. Jerrison and Doc are at a table. They're surrounded by a group of men that I don't recognize. Until my eyes land on one in the middle of the table.

I squint. *Is that... Dean Reece?*

Jerrison notices me and motions me toward the table.

"There he is." Jerrison slaps me on the back.

Doc welcomes me with a nod. I didn't think he owned anything other than dirty overalls but, clearly, I was wrong. He's in a pressed tux and shiny shoes. His greying beard is well-groomed, and his hair is shorn and neat.

One glance at his hands, however, and they can't hide the truth. I'm sure Doc tried his best to scrub his fingers clean, but there's still a little oil beneath the nails.

Jerrison squeezes my shoulder. "Everyone, this is my best friend and business partner, Patrick. Pat, these are the Love Repair men." He points them out by name, and I get lost somewhere between Lee Huang and Calvin Fox—who are both huge in the entertainment and business sectors.

The men nod at me. One of them draws out a chair.

I shake my head. "I'm waiting for Destiny. She went to take pictures with Liz."

"Our wives too." A man with tattoos all over his arms and knuckles says. "They'll be a while. Trust me. When those women are in front of a camera, it's game over."

The other men chuckle in agreement. The way they interact with each other is easy. Familiar. It suggests that they've met as a group quite often.

Doc meets my eyes. As usual, that knowing gaze bores right through me, but it doesn't burn. I've got nothing to hide, and he knows that.

"Are you okay, Patrick?" Doc's words are low. Intense.

I force a smile. "Fine."

At that moment, I see Amir walking past. Excusing myself from the table, I hurry toward the boy. Well, he's not a boy anymore. He's taller and broader than I remember. His chestnut-colored skin and gleaming black eyes are full of intelligence and vigor. I bet he's popular with the ladies.

"Amir." I wave to him.

He ignores me and keeps walking.

Weird.

I follow him and grab his arm. "Hey, Amir." There's a smile on my face. It drops like a rock when he shakes my hand off and whirls on me.

"What do you want?"

My eyes widen. I notice people looking at us and withdraw my hand. "Hey, bud. I just haven't seen you in a while." My throat bobs. "You know, just because your mom and I aren't together, it doesn't mean you can't come to me if you need anything."

"I don't need anything from you." He scowls.

"Amir."

"Why are you here?" He speaks with so much venom that it hits me right in the chest. "You don't belong in my mom's life."

I raise my hands, palms out. "I know I messed up. I hurt your mom. I'm really sorry about that."

"Saying sorry doesn't mean anything." His nostrils flare. His eyes burn with hatred for me. A hatred I had no idea was brewing in the little boy who once called me 'dad'. "I watched mom cry. Every. Day. She'd sob in the bathroom. These sounds... they didn't even sound human. They made me wonder if I'd find her alive the next day."

My eyes widen in horror.

"You think I'll forget something like that? I'll never forget what you did to her."

My mouth goes dry. I try to lick my lips so I can speak calmly. “I know you don’t want to hear my apology, Amir. But I owe—”

“I already told you. Saying sorry to mom won’t fix anything.”

“I wasn’t talking about your mom. I’m talking about you.” I notice the way his eyebrows jump. “We haven’t had time to talk, but I want to apologize for not being there for you.”

He shakes his head. “Save it. I grew up without a father, and it’s too late to act like one now.”

“For what it’s worth...” I call after him when he tries to storm away. He stops to listen. “I’ve been where you are. Holding onto grudges and bitterness, at least for me, made me into the person you can’t stand. The fact that I can now stand here and be happy for your mom without any ulterior motives, that’s the type of person that you want to become.”

“I won’t ever be anything like you. I won’t ever do to a woman what you did to mom.”

My heart throbs. “I believe you. I do. But there’s more to it than just how you treat women. There’s also the hate you build up in yourself. The way it consumes you...” I shake my head. “Just be careful. Sometimes, the thing you hate, the thing you say you’ll never be, is what you eventually turn into.” I step closer to him. “Bitterness isn’t good for you, your mom, or the person you’ll be interested in later on. If you learn nothing else from a dad who messed up, I hope you learn that.”

Amir scoffs and marches away, disappearing into another room.

I rub my forehead, a headache emerging, when a flash of gold catches my eye. My gaze locks on Destiny, and my heart stops in my chest.

Her troubled expression tells me that this night is about to get much worse.

FORTY

LIZETTE

TONIGHT HAS BEEN the best night of my life. No, this entire day has been the best.

It started with brunch. I ate with the Love Repair ladies, whom Harriet introduced me to at my spa-themed bachelorette party. We clicked so well that I invited them all to my wedding and they promised to show up and help in any way they could.

It was surreal to be surrounded by such professional and accomplished women. Cut-throat lawyers like Hazel and Jaz, business owners like Nataya, Chloe, and Pax, and a high bank official like Alayna.

They're all alpha woman. A girl-boss gang, really. And they're all fully supported and loved by their husbands. Anyone can see it. There's a certain way that a woman behaves when she's pampered. When the world is at her feet because she knows that any part of it she wants to conquer is hers for the taking.

There's support at home. There's a husband who would die for her. There's the option to work or stay home and take care of the kids. Or do both. There's priority. There's love. There are endless possibilities. Why wouldn't she fly? Or feel at ease in her own skin? Or support other women by throwing herself into the deep end and swimming them to shore?

"Did you really meet Bancroft when you were married?" Nataya had asked while passing the mimosas.

I'd laughed and told her yes. "He backed away slowly but surely after that."

The words knocked a little inspiration free. I had to grab my vows and write a new line of my speech.

After brunch, Harriet and I went to the hotel to get ready. I enjoyed the Love Repair ladies so much that I was pleased when they accepted the invitation to join me for the wedding prep.

Jaz made drinks that I couldn't name but tasted like joy in my mouth. Mrs. Bancroft joined her at the bar to learn her secrets.

Courtney, the event planner who'd organized Johnny's proposal and our wedding, had everything happening in lightning-fast motions. Almost like a dance.

The makeup artists came and cleared the table, set up lighting and brought flowers from Johnny with a sweet note about how much he couldn't wait to get married to me.

Without me having to ask, Courtney had hired more makeup artists on the fly to accommodate my new friends. They gathered around, taking up space in a room that was slowly becoming too small.

The chatter, laughter and happiness almost made me forget that I was at my own wedding. Until I slipped into the wedding dress.

The outfit was white. Off-the-shoulder. Sparkly.

Me.

It was me and it was beautiful.

Hand-beaded floral appliques. Semi-sheer bodice. Front plunge. It felt exquisite on my skin and made me wonder if I was dreaming or awake.

"You're beautiful," Harriet had whispered. Right before she burst into tears, making me wonder if she was pregnant and holding back her announcement until after my wedding day.

We calmed Harriet down and chatted through the rest of the makeup and hair prep. Johnny sent over his groomsman—a cousin who owned a thriving nightclub—to check on me.

The young man almost tripped over his shoes when he saw all the beautiful women who were crowding my room. After drooling a little, he was promptly escorted out.

Amir came to walk me down the aisle. He looked dapper and grown up. I almost burst into tears myself.

“Let’s get you married,” my son said. “You deserve this, mom.”

I really did shed a tear then and Courtney had to hussle a makeup artist into the hallway to fix it.

When the doors opened, I was reminded of just what money could do. Courtney and the decorators had outdone themselves, turning an indoor venue into a garden of flowers, vines, and a startling rose path. The room was a vision, and I would have been in awe if I hadn’t locked eyes with Johnny.

Apart from him, I saw no one else. His eyes had turned a little watery and I knew that he felt this moment. The gravity of it. The weight of our worlds colliding.

He’d made a commitment to me and treated me like his wife, like his most precious person, from the beginning. But now he was declaring it to everyone. Joining our lives in the most public way possible. One that needed lawyers and the government to untangle it.

It was intense.

Amir squeezed my hand before putting it in Johnny’s grip. I heard nothing the priest said because I was so caught up in how handsome Johnny looked. I doubt Johnny heard anything either. His kiss was a little early and a little too enthusiastic for the clergy who cleared his throat and got red.

We danced down the aisle and I saw Doc clapping with everyone. I dragged Johnny along with me and we went straight to Doc.

I gave him a hug and Johnny embraced him too. Everyone stared and applauded in confusion. They had no idea what this amazing mechanic had done for me. The part he played in my journey to wholeness. To a place where I can value myself highly and expect men to do the same.

The wedding photos were another blur. Johnny and I kissed, held hands and exchanged hot looks. Those looks warned me he'd keep his promise. We really wouldn't make it through the reception.

"Ready?" Johnny says, slipping an arm around my waist. I turn to him, not realizing how hard I'm smiling until I see his lopsided grin too.

I wrap my fingers around Harriet's hand and turn it over. After checking the time, I look up at Johnny. "You lasted one hour."

"Two if you count the pictures."

"I don't."

"I do." His voice is thick and heavy. "I've shared you enough."

"So impatient."

Harriet just gives us a knowing grin.

It takes another half-hour to wave goodbye to everyone. People have a lot to say. Especially when you're trying to get out in a hurry.

At last, Johnny gets enough of it and tugs me through the back exit.

"I told you we should have snuck away," he growls as he drags me into the elevator. "People don't know when to get enough."

"It's our wedding." I wrap my arms around his neck. "What did you expect?"

"Sunshine, whatever expectations I had, you blew them out of the water." He looks down at my dress.

My heart starts beating fast.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Heat barrels through my body. "You don't look so bad yourself."

Understatement of the *century*.

Johnny looks like fine wine and cigars and old James Bond movies. If James Bond was monogamous and committed to one woman for the rest of his life. I want him so badly my hands are shaking.

He notices because his lopsided smile comes out to play and that wicked, teasing side of him takes full control.

I have to remind myself that I'm a beautiful, intelligent woman. And beautiful, intelligent women don't start their honeymoons in elevators.

The doors open and Johnny leads me inside. He pushes the button for the top floor, squeezes my hand and brings it to his mouth to kiss.

"I've waited so long for you, sunshine," he rasps.

My stomach tightens. It's the first time in my life that I really don't care what society expects of beautiful, intelligent women.

The doors slide closed without a sound. I'm not sure if my hands find his neck first or if it's his hands that grab my waist. All I know is that my feet are no longer pressed fully on the ground.

I'm on the tips of my toes, one hand cupping the underside of his jaw, while the other scrapes at the fabric of his tux like I'm raking through skin. His lips are on mine and I forget where we are, what my name is and why breathing is important.

"I love you," I whisper between kisses, when I should have been asking if there were cameras or if all this energy in my veins was dangerous. Or maybe I should be reacquainting myself with oxygen.

Johnny dives in and kisses me again. It's a greedy and obsessive touch. Almost as if he wants to punish me for taking over his life the way he's planted himself in mine.

I'm all his. All gasps. All curling toes and open hands and satin sliding down my thighs as smoothly as whiskey.

The way I bawl out when he touches me is louder than the fire alarms. I don't know how to do anything but hold on. But scramble my fingers over his back. In his hair. I sigh into his mouth and swallow his air because I can't find any of my own.

We leave the elevator and I realize that I'm connected to him in ways that can get us arrested. But no one sees and I don't think we could stop if they saw us anyway.

The bedroom is dark. Decorated with rose petals. Someone put in so much effort and Johnny messes it up without remorse when he throws me on the bed. Impatient hands shove my dress to my waist, not bothering to take it off at all.

And then he's there.

Oh have mercy.

He's *there*.

He knows how to caress my body. It shouldn't catch me by surprise, but it does. He knows me and so he knows what makes me groan and gasp and plead for mercy. I don't want to sound as desperate, as needy as I do when I call his name. When I garble out words that should make sense but don't because I'm too busy riding a wave of pleasure that destroys me.

The sounds make him smile. Make him wicked. Make him plaster me to the bed with a kiss that's designed to pluck my soul from my body and send it skittering into the heavens.

One of his hands grips my back and arches me toward him. It's then I realize how big his hands are. How much of me he can gather in his palm. I whimper when he reaches for me. When he tells me to move.

"Johnny..."

"Turn. Over." It's a firm command.

I roll slowly so my elbow is in the pillow and I'm on my side. I can't see him, but I can feel every inch of him. He's staring down, his brown eyes fierce. As I gaze at the city that's full of twinkling lights outside the balcony, I see it then. The way he has full control. The way he's determined to take his

time with me even though I feel like I'll explode if I can't have him now.

He's a torture artist. Just like he is at the gym.

"You asked me to keep my hands to myself." He slides his finger down my shoulder. "And I obeyed. Now it's my turn to make the demands. Is that okay?"

I nod because I know I'm going to enjoy this more than anything.

He places his fingers at my dress zipper and tugs down. It makes a loud, metallic sound. "I wasn't looking for a relationship. For years, I was satisfied alone. I'd had flings, but nothing that would take me out of my restlessness. Nothing that felt like the right direction." The zipper is at midback now. He's moving slowly. Because he hates me as much as he loves me. "Nothing made me come alive. Until I saw you. One look at you and I knew I'd never have enough." He pushes me to my back. Tugs the lace off my shoulder. "I'd never seen a woman wear her burdens and her determination like that. I'd never seen anyone so beautiful. You were too loud in my head. I couldn't get you off my mind. I kept coming back so I could survive. So I could focus on work and money. But even when I had a taste of you, it wasn't enough. I needed more."

"Johnny..." His fingers are hard when they scrape against my chest.

"The more I got to know you, the more I wanted to protect you. Hide you away in here." He touches my chest. Traces a circle. Watches as I shudder out a breath. "But I also wanted to set you free. See the way you'd build and tear down whatever you got your hands on. See the way you'd make something beautiful out of a mess."

I reach for his pants and he swats my hands. Then he grabs my wrists and pins them on either side of my head. "Patience, sunshine."

"You're killing me."

“Imagine the way I felt when I couldn’t touch you?” He arches an eyebrow.

I tremble.

“There were so many times I should have been angry with you.” He tugs my dress down a little. “So many times.” Tugs it again. Reveals the bra underneath. His eyes light up and he lowers his head to breathe over my skin. “But I couldn’t. Even when I wasn’t around you, I thought about you. A single thought of you made me light up inside.” He throws my ten-thousand-dollar dress on the floor and stares at me like he wants to paint me and hang it up in a world museum. “You’re a part of me, sunshine. I love you. I adore you. I belong to you. I will for the rest of my life.”

I kiss him until the room spins. Until somehow, his clothes are off and mine are too.

Then I press our bodies together and whisper, “That was way longer than your wedding vows.”

“Some things are better just between a husband and his wife,” he rasps, looking into my eyes.

And then he falls into me. Fills me until the world is too big for me to contain myself.

Then he does it again.

And again.

Until the sky turns golden with the dawn.

FORTY-ONE

PATRICK

ONE YEAR LATER

“WRENCH.” Doc stretches out an oil-stained hand. He pins me with those dark, knowing eyes and arches an eyebrow.

Shakily, I grab the tool and hand it to him.

Doc returns his focus on the engine but, somehow, I can *feel* that he’s observing me.

“What has you so distracted today?” Doc asks.

I clear my throat and try to play it off. “Nothing.”

Of course, pretending is a foolish strategy. At least when Doc’s involved.

“You don’t have to tell me.” His eyes sharpen. “But I’d appreciate if you wouldn’t lie.” He rotates the wrench.

“Is there anything else I can help with?”

He bares his teeth as he throws his all into loosening the bolt. “I’ve told you already that you don’t need to keep coming here. You’re ready. You’ve shown that you’ve grown and matured.”

“There’s always more to learn.”

“That very mentality is proof that you’re more equipped than you were when we first started.”

I chuckle. When we first started, I wanted to run Doc over with one of his trucks. Now, I respect him more than my own father.

“I’d be here every day if I could, but the agency is expanding like crazy, and I barely have time to sleep.”

Doc shakes his head. “Don’t try to change the subject. You still haven’t told me what the problem is.”

There’s no problem. Not any new ones at least.

My mind flashes to that night almost a year ago. The night my heart broke for the first time in my life.

“Destiny, why aren’t you saying anything? Did you feel weird about going to Liz’s wedding with me? Did someone...”

“They called me an idiot.”

“What?” My eyes swerve to her.

“I overheard some old ladies talking. They said you had some nerve showing up to Liz’s wedding after what you’d done to her. They called you a fiend. Said your new girl better watch out. That it was only a matter of time before you did to me what you did to Liz.”

“D-Destiny, they’re just talking. They don’t know that I’ve changed.”

“Yeah, you did, Patrick. But what if you change back?”

“What?”

“What if you decide that this life of commitment and monogamy is not what you want anymore?”

“That’s not going to happen, Des.” I hear the frantic note in my voice. “You’re upset by what you heard. By the reminder of who I used to be. I get that. But—”

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to be involved with a guy who cheated. For this very reason. Now, the thing I avoided is exactly what I’m caught up in.”

“Des.”

“I want to break up.” Her voice cracks a little. “I know that you’ve changed, Patrick. I can see that you’ve grown a lot. But you can never outlive your past. And I will always have a shadow over me because of you.”

I cried for the first time that night. It wasn't a pathetic weeping, but a tear rolled down my cheek after I dropped Destiny home. It cut me to the quick to lose her.

"It's about Destiny, isn't it?" Doc says, as if he can read my mind.

I straighten up. "No."

"I asked you not to lie, Patrick."

My shoulders slump.

Doc wipes his dirty hands on an old cloth and gestures to me. I follow him to the mug of lemon water.

He pours me a glass. "Do you remember what I told you that day when you came to see me?"

I nod. The day after Destiny broke up with me, I drove to Doc. Not to rage at him for his teachings. Not to express regret for giving Destiny my all. Just to ask if there was a chance, if there was hope that I could ever get her back.

"Doc, I did everything right this time. I gave her my all. I had commitment and communication. And I'd do it again. That part doesn't bother me. What bothers me is I don't want anybody else."

"You have the correct approach. Just give it time."

"What if she never comes back?"

"Then it's time to move on."

"I can't."

"You can't control another person's will, but you can control your own."

"I'd rather take my chances with time."

"Time proves all things. If, after a period of time, she's okay without you and doesn't want a relationship with you, then time has proven her rejection."

I shake my head to clear it. "You told me that time would prove it."

"And what have you learned in this time?"

“That I still love her.” I wrap my fingers around the mug. “I’ve gone on a few first dates. The women are beautiful, but they don’t... I mean... they’re not her.”

“Has she made contact?”

“No.”

“Then?”

I glance into his dark eyes. “Then I need to give it time?”

“You can’t control other people, Patrick. Only yourself.”

I glance at the cars in Doc’s shop. There are plenty to choose from, but I don’t want any of them. Because my heart already belongs to the vehicle that got away.

AFTER HELPING Doc out at the shop, I head to the café by the hospital. It’s close by and I haven’t been there in a while. Mostly because I didn’t want to run into Destiny by chance.

Today, I head inside and walk toward a free table. My stomach is grumbling. Doc acts as if he doesn’t need my help, but he sure does appreciate when I lend a hand with his repairs. I think he secretly appreciates the company.

“Patrick?” a familiar voice calls.

I know it’s her just by the way she says my name. Soft. Sweet. Hesitant.

“Destiny?” I turn and drink her in. Dark skin. Dark eyes. Big, afro hair. She’s wearing a blouse and a mini-skirt. Comfortable sandals adorn her feet.

She smiles at me, and the sun starts shining a little brighter. “I can’t believe it’s you.”

“Yeah. I was...” I stick a thumb at the counter. “Dropping by for something to eat.”

“I was just leaving.”

Disappointment hits me hard and fast, but I play it off. “Oh. You’re still at the hospital?”

It’s a silly question. I know she is. I’ve been keeping up with her on social media. She and Liz appear to still be good friends. Just recently, there was a post with Liz, Destiny and Bancroft at some kind of concert. Bancroft had his arms around Liz and both of the women were smiling brightly at the camera.

I can’t lie. I felt a little anger at Bancroft for being the one in that picture. Not because he was with Liz but because he got to spend time with Destiny.

She clears her throat. “How have you been?”

“Good. Good.” I lick my lips because this conversation feels awkward as hell, and I don’t know what to say to make her smile. To make her stay. “Jerrison’s got another kid, so he passed over the international side of the business to me. I’ll be much busier now, flying back and forth.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

The silence stretches.

“And you?” I gesture toward her. Laugh nervously. Shuffle my feet.

“I graduated with honors. I’m working at the hospital now.”

“That’s great. And Toots?”

Her smile stretches across her face and it’s stunning. “He’s great too.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

We fall silent again.

Before I can find another topic, Destiny backs away. “I should get going.”

“Yeah. It was great seeing you.” I reach out a hand for her to shake. She goes in for a hug. I drop my hand and raise it to hug her just as she eases back and offers her hand for a shake.

We both laugh.

I step back and lift my hand in a wave. “Goodbye, Destiny.”

“Goodbye, Patrick.”

Her shoes thump against the ground as she leaves. I don’t watch her. I don’t think I can handle watching her walk away from me again. The bells over the door jangle, punctuating her exit.

My stomach feels empty, and yet I’m not hungry anymore.

With a sigh, I lower my head. Even if I don’t feel like eating, I might be hungry later. It’s better to get something than go home empty-handed.

I turn to the counter to make an order when the door crashes open. The bells jangle loudly again. Everyone turns and watches who made such a racket.

My eyes widen when I see Destiny.

She looks sheepishly back at me before lowering her head, folding her hands together and walking over.

“Um...” She pulls her plump bottom lip into her mouth. “I’d like to get coffee with you. Sometime.”

I blink rapidly. Happiness springs to life in my heart and I can’t stop it even if I swing at it with a two-by-four.

My chest billows. “Coffee?”

“Yes.”

“Like a date?” I stare at her.

A slow smile lifts her cheeks. “Yeah, like a date.”

My world gets brighter.

The room gets smaller.

I take a step toward Destiny. “I would love to.”

ENJOYED *VALUE ME III*? Then you'll also enjoy the other Love Repair stories. Check out *Earn Me* [here](#).

Want an exclusive alternate ending to see what would have happened if Johnny and Patrick *did* get in the ring? You can read that by signing up to my mailing list [here](#).

DOC'S NOTE

Is it okay to hide something from someone because you think it'll make the relationship worse? Then my question is 'so when do you tell the truth? And what is the person getting if they are getting a lie?'

Though it may be difficult, being upfront in a relationship introduces trust and lays a strong foundation for the relationship to be built on.

It took some time, but Patrick is finally making all the right steps. Hanging close to Doc, desiring for change, and walking out the disciplines required for a healthy relationship are signs of maturity. And maturity is one of the basic ingredients required for a healthy relationship.

- DOC

NIA'S NOTE

If you'd like to find out more about the principles Doc shared in this book, you can check out my dad's non-fiction book called '[The Marriage Key](#)'.

It discusses unique principles on marriage strengthening and repair. (And if you *do* pick it up, please feel free to reach out. My dad would love to hear your thoughts or answer any questions).

Want to get in touch with Doc and learn directly from the source? Join Doc's FB group [here](#).

To get sneak peeks, cover reveals and book deals from me, sign up to my newsletter [here](#).

Until the next whirlwind BWWM Romance.

~ Nia

EARN ME

EXCERPT

SNEAK PEEK! EARN ME CHAPTER ONE

STONE

MY KEYS CLATTER against the table.

The house is silent.

Holding its breath.

I get uneasy the moment I drag my suitcases in. Past the living room decorated in earthen tones—brown, beige, cream. All different colors according to Nat. They just look like sand to me.

Past the paintings on the wall. Each one custom and commissioned by a famous artist. Swirls of color. Blues bleeding into reds and greens. Universes we can't see trapped in a canvas.

As a fellow artist, I appreciate how the painter trapped chaos on the canvas.

Nat gets it too.

She always does.

My shoes thump against the marble floor. They echo too loud. Sound too invasive.

I leave them behind at the counter. Pass the leather couch filled with decorative pillows. The fridge with our pictures arranged neatly in rows. The staircase made of gleaming mahogany.

My stained fingers grip the railings. The ends of my frayed jeans slip against the solid wooden steps.

Why isn't Nat out yet? She would have heard me by now.

“Nat?” My voice sounds hollow in the silence. Every move I make echoes, but her name skitters to the ends of the house and doesn’t return to me.

The silence gets sharper. Becomes a weapon.

It slashes at my ears and my ribs.

I let out a breath. Try to relax.

Maybe she’s not home yet.

I take another weary step up the stairs and lug my suitcase behind me. While I move, I reach into my back pocket and pull out my phone.

The screen brightens. Nat’s gorgeous face looks up at me. Thick black hair to her shoulders. Sultry, almond-shaped eyes. Plump red lips. Skin so gloriously brown it draws and emits sunlight whenever she moves.

This is my favorite picture of her. Of us.

It was last year. Our seventh wedding anniversary. My tattoo shop was just starting to take off, so I sprung for a trip to one of those fancy vineyards.

Swiping away from the home screen, I tap my message icon.

Emails from my assistant. Work. Work. More work.

Nothing from my wife.

With a sigh, I return the phone to my pocket and heft my suitcase to the second floor. Setting it on the ground, I drag it to the master bedroom.

Reach out.

Push.

Open the door.

It’s dark. Quiet.

Immediately, I feel the emptiness.

Every time I’ve come back from a trip, Nat’s been here. She’d either greet me at the door with a kiss or wait in bed

wearing the kind of lingerie meant to punish me for leaving.

Why isn't she here yet?

I shake off my concern and grab a clean set of clothes from my suitcase. Might as well shower before she gets here. My trip took longer than expected, but I rushed home the moment I could get away.

I toss my bag on the foot of the bed—right on top of that trunk Nat inherited from her great grandmother—and tug my shirt over my head.

As I enter the bathroom, a dark feeling pulls me back.

Empty.

Something's empty.

I whirl around and face the sink. A large mirror takes up the entire wall.

His and her sinks.

My side has three bottles—shaving cream, body lotion, cologne.

Nat's side has...

Nothing.

No makeup scattered everywhere. No cocoa butter. No oils, serums, and hair products smelling of life and growth and earth after rain.

It's all... gone.

Wiped clean.

Like it never existed.

My eyebrows pinch together. I make a sharp turn and stride urgently into the bedroom again. The walk-in closet catches my eye. Storming over, I throw the door wide open and step in.

The light from the bathroom casts a dim shadow, but I don't bother reaching for the light switch. On a good day, my clothes take up one row of this closet. Nat's outfits fill every hanger and squeeze into every available space.

Except for tonight.

Except for right now.

I stumble forward. Extend a hand. Catch air where Nat's clothes should be.

The scent of her still lingers. It hasn't been long since she packed up.

Since she—

Damn.

No.

This isn't happening. There's got to be some other explanation.

I return to the bathroom and check under the sink. Nat's a messy person, but she'll have these cleaning bouts that hit her like lightening. She'll gather all her stuff and put them away neatly. Set them in lines. Organize. Pack. Throw away.

That's what happened.

I check under the sink.

Nothing.

Heading back into the room, I look for garbage bags filled with her clothes. We've talked about going minimalist. Maybe she jumped on it. Maybe she gave all her clothes to charity.

There's got to be an explanation.

My wife didn't leave me.

That didn't happen.

Pattering around to the other side of the bed, I check the outlet for Nat's charger.

Gone.

It's all freaking gone.

I sink to the edge of the bed. Something crackles beneath me.

A thick, square envelope. Handwritten scribbles. Nat's familiar penmanship.

My name's there, in plain letters.

To Stone.

My stomach drops.

My throat gets tight.

The air thickens until I'm sweating. Suffocating.

This isn't freaking happening.

There's no way my wife of eight years just packed up her things and left a note.

I dig under the flap. Open it.

I deserve more than this, Stone. I've had enough and I'm moving on.

Don't come looking for me.

Something else slips out of the envelope. It flutters in the air before it falls into my lap.

A curse tumbles from my lips and I stumble back.

It's really over.

FOR THREE HOURS, I sit at the bar and stare at the amber liquid the bartender keeps filled in my glass.

I lift the cup. Focus on the way it catches the light. Like the color of Nat's eyes in patches of sunlight. Honey brown. As warm and sweet and syrupy as her laughter. The perfect song to a perfect day.

What the hell am I thinking?

I'm not drunk yet but I'm getting there.

I shake my head and take another sip. A scrawny man falls into the seat next to me. He's wearing a wrinkled suit. The

wedding ring on his finger flashes as he orders a beer and sets his briefcase on the floor.

Liquor makes my tongue loose. I turn to him. “You married?”

“Ah...” He lifts the hand. Spins the ring around. “No.”

“No?”

He nods when the bartender brings his drink. “You?”

“Not for much longer.” I stare at my gold band. It’s simple. The cheapest in the shop. Nat’s first ring was the matching pair. It was all the twenty-year old me could afford from the pawn shop.

A few months ago, I bought Nat a huge diamond. The kind of ring she deserved. The kind of ring I should have gotten her from the start.

I wonder if she’s still wearing it.

My heart punches a hole through my chest.

My fingers tighten on the glass.

I’m trying to summon the anger. Trying to dig deep to find the indifference.

Maybe if I tell myself it doesn’t matter, it won’t.

Who cares if my wife moved out? I don’t.

I don’t.

The stranger coughs. “She asked for a divorce?”

“Not yet.” I take a swig of my liquor.

“You want to save it?”

I arch an eyebrow at him.

“I’ve been there.” He lifts the glass and ice clinks against the center. “Marriage on the rocks. No idea how to fix it.” He sets the cup down, grabs a napkin and writes an address on it. Sliding the note over to me, he says, “This guy helped me understand where things went wrong. I was already too far

gone, but if I'd gotten his help earlier, I might have been able to save my marriage."

"I'm good." I slide the note back to him. "I'm not into fortunetellers."

The guy laughs. "Trust me. There's no magic to this guy's system. Just a lot of hard work." He pushes the napkin back. "Hold on to that."

I stuff it into my pocket with the intention of throwing it out. Giving him a nod, I push away from the counter and head into the night.

My phone rings when I'm about to throw the note away in a nearby trash can. Switching gears, I tug the cell out and check the notification.

It's work.

Disappointment cuts me.

Inhaling a deep breath, I stuff my hands into my pockets and head to my empty house. I walk inside. Past the paintings. Past the beige walls.

I don't go to our room. My room.

Instead, I pull my laptop close, check the numbers for the store and try to replace the ache in my chest with money.

Half-drunk and miserable, I fall asleep on the couch. Alone.

Earn Me is BOOK 1 in the Love Repair Series. These books feature Doc and the husbands who encounter his principles.

Read **EARN ME** [here](#).

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