



Almost
PARADISE

EVELYN SOLA

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Evelyn Sola

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Blurb

Can a chance sighting lead to a happily ever after?

When Nia Nash got involved with Drake Paradise, heir to the Paradise Construction empire, she never thought that she'd end up raising their son alone.

Hurt and furious, she's spent four years trying to forget everything about him. From the way his piercing blue eyes would follow her every move, to the way he set her body on fire with only one kiss. Drake Paradise not only broke her heart, but he changed the course of her life forever.

Now he's back and demanding to be a part of their son's life, the son that he once had no interest in. Or so Nia thought. Refusing to let Drake in is not an option when he has power and money to his name.

As Drake mourns his own losses and tries to navigate his new roles in his

business and professional life, they are both forced to deal with everything they thought they knew, and the whole truth that begins to unravel.

Can Nia ever trust Drake again? Can they figure out a way to turn their lives into their own paradise?

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Chapter 1

DRAKE

While my brother holds my weeping mother, I stare at the closed casket in the hole in the ground. I wonder how a man who's lived such a life like my father can be relegated into a space that's three and a half feet wide and eight feet deep. Donald Patrick Paradise has never known anything small in his life.

Not his stature. Not his many estates. Not his company. Not his bank accounts. He'd always had it all, and in abundance. In excess. I thought he was invincible. Hell, he was. There was nothing he couldn't do or get done. He ran the country's largest construction company. He took it further than his father before him. He made it competitive, and not just in the US market, but the world. If he was Superman, pancreatic cancer would be his Kryptonite. The strongest man I've ever known withered into nothing in a matter of months, and he was taken away from his loving family before he turned sixty.

I feel a tear run down my cheek, and a soft hand wipes it away. She dabs my eyes with a handkerchief. My fiancée has been by my side since we learned about my father's fate.

“It will be okay, darling,” Scarlett whispers. “He knows you loved him. He’s at peace.”

Of course, he did. I barely left his side for the last two weeks. I was there when he took his last breath. Those last two days were some of the hardest I’ve ever experienced, but I would not leave him. Not when the nurses or doctors were around. Not when he was in agony from the pain. Not when everyone else left because they couldn’t handle the inevitable.

I had to stay because no one else could. But that’s not the only reason. I stayed because I felt like he wanted to tell me something but couldn’t. So, I sat by his bedside, holding his hand and knowing full well the days of being close to my father were numbered. I was the only one who could handle it. Mother couldn’t. My younger brother, Langley, became Mother’s comforter while I stayed with our father. My younger sister Hannah locked herself in her room and wept.

In his last hours, it was just us. It was I who held his hand and reassured him it was okay for him to go. I promised to do my best to fill his shoes, both at home and at Paradise Construction.

I was there when he finally let go and the nurse pronounced him dead. It was my job to tell the rest of the family. Even though my brother had been with my mother for the past few weeks, after Dad died, it was in my arms she sought comfort.

The details of the funeral were left to me because everyone else was too busy grieving. I’m the strong one. I’m the oldest, and the responsibility always falls on the first child. That’s what my dad’s taught me my entire life.

“You have great responsibility, Drake. You’re a Paradise, and you’ll have the world on your shoulders. Don’t see it as a burden because the world you’re carrying is yours.”

“He’s not hurting anymore. He’s in a better place now,” Scarlett whispers soothingly, pulling me out of my memories. I don’t know why people think those words bring comfort. They don’t. Sure, he’s not suffering, but he’s also not here with his family where he belongs. I’d rather have him with me. I need him. I need his guidance because I have no idea how I’m going to fill his shoes at the company. I’m not ready. I was supposed to have more time.

I don’t snap at Scarlett like I want to. She’s been my rock. When my family was falling apart, she was there with a kind word or a hug. She’s the only person who’s asked me how I’m feeling. She’s the only one who has remembered that I’m suffering too. That I was also losing my father. She made sure I rested. She told me it was okay for me to cry, but even now as she holds my hand, it’s not her comfort I seek.

Scarlett, despite her constant presence, is not who I thought about this morning when I woke up to face one of the hardest days of my life. Instead of Scarlett’s green eyes, I saw eyes so brown they’re almost black. Instead of Scarlett’s tall and willowy body, I pictured *her* small tight frame. Her smooth brown skin instead of pale. It’s her incredibly bad singing instead of Scarlett’s trained voice that I longed to hear. But I shake my head clear of that. It’s been over for four years, and I’m pretty sure Nia Nash is not thinking about me.

My mother lets out a loud wail and Langley holds her up. My sister joins them and puts an arm around my mother. The priest says a final prayer. Mother has to be taken away before Father is lowered into the ground. Everyone leaves, and I ask Scarlett to go too.

Just like when he took his last breath, it’s just the two of us at the end.

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Chapter 2

NIA

“Look at Grandma’s babies,” my mom says to the boys.

Carter, my three-year-old son, runs into her arms. She picks him up and spins him around. He throws his curly head back and laughs. When she puts him down, my nephews, eight-year-old Mason and six-year-old Kyle, hug her legs.

“How’s my birthday boy?” She picks up Kyle and kisses him.

He grins wide enough to show off his two missing front teeth.

“He’s getting pwesents,” Carter says.

I can see it now. Carter trying to get his hands on Kyle’s presents. But I know I don’t need to worry. My parents get the kids presents for everyone’s birthday. They gave me presents on my brother’s birthday until I went away to college. Shirley and Nathaniel Nash are not shy about spoiling their grandchildren.

My family has been my saving grace and my safety net. They have supported me my entire life without judgment. Not that I did anything that needed to be judged. At least not before I confessed I was pregnant at the age

of twenty-five. And since I had no boyfriend at the time, they were stunned speechless.

They didn't judge when I confessed to having a clandestine relationship with the heir of Paradise Construction. When he came to work at the company, we had an immediate connection, and despite my reluctance to get involved with him, I was unable to stop myself when he pursued me. How could I? At six feet four inches with hair the color of midnight and eyes as beautiful as the Caribbean Sea, resistance was futile.

It was the most intense and passionate year of my life, and if I allowed myself, I'd think about it every moment of every day. But I don't allow myself that. I don't give myself time to think about him much at all. He's not worthy of my time or my thoughts.

No one judged me when I told them I was carrying his baby and that he would not be a part of our lives. They didn't judge me, but they sure judged him. They offered me unconditional love and acceptance, and that was extended to the baby I was carrying.

"Let's go," my brother, Ray, says. "You riding with me, Nia?" He doesn't bother to wait for me to answer. He knows if I'm ever given the chance not to have to drive, I'm going to choose it. "We have to stop off at La Belle Bakery for the cake. The kids can ride with the old people."

"They not old," Kyle says, defending his grandparents.

"Thank you, Grandma's baby." My mom runs her hands over Kyle's head while he beams up at her.

"And I'm not too old to beat your ass," my dad says.

All the boys burst into giggles as Ray and I roll our eyes. Dad barely raised his voice while we were growing up. He'd never raise his fist.

While my parents drive the boys to the arcade for Kyle's birthday party, I

ride with my brother to the bakery for the cake, but something about today feels off. I'm not sure what it is, but it feels like things are about to change.

The clear blue March sky betrays the frigid temperatures, but there's a storm brewing and I'm sure it has nothing to do with the weather. There's a voice in my head that's yelling at me not to go today. It's telling me to say I'm sick and go back home, but I'd never miss Kyle's party. My brother and his kids have gone through enough. Ray lost his wife in a car accident when Kyle was only six months old. He has no memories of his mother, and since Carter's father chose not to be in the picture, we raise the kids together.

I want to kick myself for letting Drake Paradise enter my thoughts right now. That's how it always happens. I'll be doing something mundane like sitting in a car with my brother, and he'll pop into my head. I wish I could erase all my memories of him.

I have to keep reminding myself that he's not who I thought. He's a liar. He's a user. He's a rich, entitled man who thinks the world is his playground and his actions have no consequences. And he's right. He's never had to deal with any of the consequences.

In that year we were in each other's lives, he let me believe so many things. There were so many feelings. So much passion. Unimaginable heat that led to unimaginable pain. As much as my unplanned pregnancy shook me, it also saved me. I had someone else to worry about. I had a life inside of me that was relying solely on me, and I could not allow hurt feelings or a broken heart to have any effect on me.

And I didn't. I gave birth to a beautiful and healthy baby boy. Instead of his father, it was my mother and cousin who were by my side when he came into the world. It was *my* father who sat in the waiting room and got coffee and

donuts for the nurses in labor and delivery. When it was time to leave the hospital, it was my parents that took me home, not the father of my child.

Despite not having a father in his life, my son never lacked love and he never will.

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Chapter 3

DRAKE

I don't know why I agreed to come to this. I haven't enjoyed the arcade since I was about ten. Even then, I was bored by it. Video games have never been my thing, but when your fiancée's nephew is turning five and wants his party at a loud arcade, you show up. Even if a trip to the dentist would be preferable.

A gang of tween boys run around and bump into me, sending my phone flying out of my hand and nearly knocking me on my ass. As I reach down to pick up the iPhone, a well-manicured hand gets to it first and scoops it up. She puts it in her purse and promptly zips it.

"Really, Scarlett?" I ask.

"Really, Drake. Enough. Can you be present for a few hours?" She huffs and brushes her strawberry blonde bangs off her forehead. It's not too much to ask. After all, I did tell her I'd be here. "I promise when we get home, I'll make this little excursion worth it." She's a tall woman, but she still has to get on her tippy toes to reach me. I bend down slightly and give her a light

kiss on her thin lips. I run a hand through her blonde curls and smile down into her green eyes.

"I'm going to take you up on that," I whisper in her ear. I pull away just in time to see her eyes light up with mischief.

"Aunt Scarlett," Scott, her five-year-old nephew, says, "come on. It's time to play." He waves her to the other side of the arcade to the special room reserved for laser tag.

"You coming?" she asks, knowing full well I'm going to pass. I only promised to be here, not to play childish games.

"Maybe next time," I tell her. I hold out my hand and say, "Can I have my phone now?"

"No phone. No work today, Drake. I mean it. Sundays belong to me and the family, not to the office. Why don't you go have a beer?" She points to the sports bar on the other side of the room. There are televisions surrounding it, and there's a basketball game on I can watch while I wait. "Just relax and forget about work until the morning. Think about what I'm going to do to you when I get you all to myself tonight." She kisses my cheek and leaves.

I do my best to stifle my irritation. Life with Scarlett is mundane except for her inane rule about my phone and work. No phone at the table and absolutely no work on Sundays. I'm the one who makes the rules, but she can't seem to remember that. I expel a breath while I decide what to do. Scarlett did give me a good idea, though. A cold beer will take the edge off of this nightmare of an afternoon. I can't stand crowds, noise, or flashing lights. Add children of all ages running around and screaming, and it's like being in hell.

A drink or three will help. I cross the room and take a seat on one of the stools at the counter. After a few minutes, the bartender puts a tall glass of

foamy beer in front of me. I down half the glass without taking a breath. Despite how busy this place is, the bar is pretty quiet.

I sit back and wish I had my phone with me. Next time we do something like this, I'll have to remember to bring my secret backup phone. I take another long sip and close my eyes.

I didn't want to come here today. Not just because I hate arcades, but because this is the three-month anniversary of my father's death, and I'd rather be with my mother right now. At least she has my younger brother and sister to comfort her. Well, in theory, she has my brother. He's a bigger emotional wreck than she is right now. He spends his days drinking and sleeping. Hannah does her best, but she's in her second year of medical school and already has a lot on her plate.

"This one's on the house. You look like you can use it." The bartender puts another beer in front of me, and I thank him. After drinking about half of the second beer, I start to relax. I spin around on the barstool and face the other side of the room. I don't know what the hell I'm looking for, but I decide to people-watch since I don't have a phone to distract me.

It's not as crowded as it seemed a few minutes ago. That's probably because laser tag started again. I look around the expansive room one more time, and when nothing interesting happens, I start to turn back to the bar. That's when something catches my attention. It's not anything I would ever pay attention to, but this little boy comes running as fast as his little legs can take him, giggling the entire time. He looks to be about three years old and has cake smeared all over his little face.

He's a handsome boy with very light brown skin and a head full of dark, curly hair. I don't see anyone with him. I shake my head at the scene already judging the irresponsible parent who is likely too busy playing video games

to pay attention to their kid. He stands in the middle of the room and looks around. He rubs his hands around his mouth, making more of a mess with the cake. I've never seen this kid before, so I don't know why I care. In fact, I stay as far away from children as possible, but there's something familiar about this one. I just can't seem to put my finger on it.

Another little boy who looks to be about eight or nine comes and scoops him up. The older kid tickles the younger one's belly. The little boy laughs so hard, he snorts and chunks of cake fly off his face. For some reason, something about the scene stirs something inside of me. I don't know why it would. I only tolerate the children that I know. There's no reason for me to care about this strange and messy toddler.

"You can't run off like that, Carter. Come on. You want more cake?" the older boy asks. He's holding Carter in his arms bridal style, while he wiggles around like a fish. I wouldn't be surprised if he flails out of the older kid's arms and falls on the floor.

I don't know why I do this, but I stand, ready to act in case I need to run across the room and rescue the kid.

"Video game," Carter says, his voice loud and clear. It's only when the older boy puts him down and they run to one of the games that I let out a breath of relief. Realizing that I've given this kid enough of my time, I turn back to the bar. On my best day, I don't like kids. They are loud, messy, and demand too much time and attention. Time I'd rather devote to keeping my father's legacy alive and to expanding Paradise Construction to Canada and beyond.

"You got a menu?" I ask the bartender. "Forget the menu. I'll have an order of buffalo wings and a personal-size pepperoni pizza."

He gives me a firm nod and taps something on his computer screen. The

last thing I want is to eat at a place like this. I don't eat junk food or processed food. I have a personal chef that cooks for me every day. I have him send me lunch while I'm at the office. I'm a stickler for what goes inside my body. I work out too hard to let that go to waste by eating crap, but I need some comfort food today. One bad meal won't have much impact, if any.

The past few months have been a shit show in my private life. My father got sick and died within months. My mother is not processing his death and is acting as if he's only away on a business trip. Before he got sick, there was a weird distance between us. The day he died, I spent the entire day at his bedside. He had hospice care at home, and I sat there and held his hand.

I'm the strong one in the family. I don't know when or how I was assigned that role, but it's mine. My mother was falling apart and talking nonsense.

"He'll be better when we go for a visit to our house in Honolulu," she had said. I remember locking eyes with my sister Hannah and shaking my head in disbelief. *"You know how much he loves the beach. I love Boston, but the weather here leaves a lot to be desired. That's probably what's wrong with him. He needs sun."*

It was November in New England. Of course, the weather wasn't great. Earlier that day, it had rained, and the late autumn leaves were like a blanket on our sprawling estate. While my mom was acting irrationally, my brother was passed out drunk somewhere in the big house while my sister dealt with the hospice nurse, and I made funeral arrangements behind my mother's back.

I remember holding my dad's hand and waiting for him to say what he had been trying to say all day. I knew my dad. I knew his ways. He wasn't one for idle chitchat. Not even in his last hours. His words always meant

something, and he tended to get right to the point. He opened his mouth several times as if to speak, but the words never came.

It was after nine when I left to go home. My house is on the property and less than a quarter mile away. I was barely there an hour before my sister called saying Dad was asking for me.

“Just come in the morning, honey,” Mom said. “He’ll be back to his old self by then.” It’s as if she refused to understand that Dad was terminal and wouldn’t likely live for another week.

I remember running across the massive property and sliding in through the back door. I took the back staircase three at a time. His eyes were wide open when I got there. I grabbed his hands, which were ice cold, and waited for his words. Words I was sure would be his last to me.

“I’m sorry, Drakey,” he managed to croak out. Dad never apologized. Not once in my life had I ever heard those words coming from him. I don’t think he ever apologized to my mother. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Dad also never talked in circles. He wasn’t getting to the point, and that put me on edge. That worried me.

“It’s okay, Dad. What did you think was the right thing?”

He squeezed my hands and lifted them to his mouth, kissing the backs of them. Dad never kissed me as a kid. The only child he kissed was Hannah. It was always a kiss on the forehead for her and a firm handshake for me and my brother.

“I—” The rest of the sentence never came. He took a deep breath that turned into a wheeze. He had a coughing fit and the nurse rushed in. Ten minutes later, he was pronounced dead.

The bartender drops a steaming basket of wings and a pan pizza in front of me. Normally the sight of something like this would make me queasy, but

today, it makes my stomach growl and my mouth water in anticipation.

“I’ll have another beer,” I tell him.

He gives me a curt nod. I like this guy. There is nothing more inane and annoying on this earth than pointless small talk.

“Fuck.” I burn the roof of my mouth with the hot cheese on the first bite but it’s not enough to stop me from taking a second. The bartender hands me my third beer just in time to cool my burning mouth.

I decide I’m going to eat all this terrible food and enjoy every bite. I don’t even care about ruining my white shirt. I’m sure I have about a hundred at home just like it.

“Carter? Mason? What are you guys doing out here?” The buffalo wing stops halfway to my mouth when I hear that voice. *Her* voice. The voice I’ve been hearing in my head since she left.

Despite the comfort I’ve gotten from Scarlett since my father was diagnosed, it was *this* voice that I longed to hear.

It can’t be. I haven’t heard that voice in about four years. Not since she left me and took my heart with her.

My appetite for food disappears, and in a moment, I’m reminded of everything we once shared. I refuse to turn around. This is just my imagination. She’s not here. Thoughts of her would not leave me when my father got sick, and they haven’t stopped since he died. She’s even found her way into my dreams. This is just my mind playing an awful, sick joke on me.

“Sorry, Aunt Nia,” the older boy says, and my stomach sinks to my shoes.

Nia. That’s her name. This can’t be happening today of all days. Not on the three-month anniversary of my father’s death. I need to be around people who care about me, not her. “You know how Carter likes it when I chase him, and he got distracted by that game.”

“Carter, you can’t do that here, okay, sweetie?” Nia says. It’s definitely her. After all this time. I was fine with never seeing her again after the way she ended things, but the universe is always messing with me. “There are too many people around. We don’t want you to get lost,” she chastises. Yeah, that’s her. That’s the voice. I’ve been obsessed with it since I first laid eyes on her over four years ago. Well, first it was her face. Then her body. Then it was her voice. After that, it was everything about her.

“Sowwy, Mommy,” the little voice says. The wing falls on my plate and buffalo sauce splatters across my pristine white shirt. My mouth suddenly goes dry and the smell of the food, which was enticing seconds ago, is now nauseating. Blood pounds between my ears, and I’m a few seconds away from falling on my ass and making a fool out of myself.

Did the kid call her Mommy?

“No,” I whisper to myself. “This is not happening. This can’t be.”

“Come with Mommy.” Her voice is as intoxicating now as it was back then. “You want to watch Kyle open his presents, right?”

“Pwesents!” he yells. “I want Piderman.”

I rub my eyes with my hands, hoping that when I stop, this will have all been a mirage, and this scene will just be a figment of my wild imagination. Maybe I’m just as delusional as my mother. Maybe it’s genetic and I’m losing my shit now rather than later.

“Fuck,” I hiss at the stinging sensation of the hot sauce in my eyes. There’s no way the universe can take my dad from me with barely any warning, leave me here to deal with my mother and brother, and now drop *this* on my lap too.

There’s no way.

I’m a lot like my dad. I do what makes sense. I work with integrity, and I

get to the point. I don't waste anyone's time, least of all my own. That's my mother and brother's department. Mom lives in La La Land and is completely unpredictable. My brother is either selfish or weak.

Or maybe they are both grieving in their own way.

I channel my dad, who is the best part of me. He was strong. He was fair. He was decisive and always did the right thing. Whether it was his work ethic or his charity work, Donald Paradise could be counted on to do what was right.

With that in mind, I steel my spine and spin the stool around. Their backs are to me, but I'd know her body from ten thousand miles away. It's the same. Motherhood hasn't changed her at all. She's wearing tight black jeans, black riding boots, and a bright blue sweater. It's simple, and she's still perfection.

She's on the short side, but I'm six foot four inches tall. Almost every woman is short next to me. Her body is perfect, both in and out of clothes. She's always liked to work out. That's one of the things we have in common, but unlike me, she eats whatever she wants without thinking about it.

Even underneath her clothes, I can tell her body is as tight and lithe as it was over four years ago. Her skin is like silk and without a single blemish. I could spend hours trailing my fingertips along her spine while she was cuddled into me.

She squats down to eye level with the kid and starts to wipe his mouth with a napkin. He wiggles and fights her, but he loses. She stands, seemingly satisfied with her efforts, runs a hand over his curly hair, and taps the tip of his nose with her index finger. He grins adoringly at her.

Her hair is different now. Back then it was short, and she complained about having almost weekly hair appointments to keep it trimmed. Now, it's just

kissing her shoulders. She used to have red highlights, but now it's shiny and black. I'm transported back in time to us in my bed wrapped up in silk sheets with our lips and bodies fused together. Afterward, she told me I was worth sweating her hair out for. I remember having no idea what she meant.

The little boy runs off again, giggling along the way like it's a game they play all the time. She catches up to him in three strides and grabs his hand, preventing him from taking any more steps.

"Okay, Mama's baby. Let's go." He giggles again, and it's like music to my ears. It's pure joy and innocence. She picks him up and carries him back toward one of the party rooms.

She never notices me sitting on the stool watching. No one notices a thing, and I wonder how that can be when those few moments just upended my entire life.

Nia Nash. I've thought of her every single day since I first saw her. Not even my father's sudden sickness and quick death could stop the thoughts. Once the anger over her leaving waned, I was left with a wound that never fully healed. It didn't hurt anymore, but occasionally, when it's accidentally touched, all the pain I thought I had gotten over comes back.

I moved on. Eventually. I got over the anger. The pain ebbed. I decided to give Scarlett a chance. We get along well. So well, I put a ring on her finger a year into the relationship.

Yeah, but you still won't set a date.

My father's illness and subsequent death gave me a reprieve from talks of a wedding. I'm still mourning, so that's given me more space, but I know my time is running short. The inevitable discussion is coming. I can feel it, and it's not unreasonable. Scarlett has been beyond patient, and she deserves the wedding of her dreams. I owe her that much.

What she doesn't deserve is this sudden complication that dropped in my lap. No wonder I felt something familiar about the kid. He looks just like me and my brother. His hair is curlier, and his skin is darker, but the nose is mine. So is the mouth. Even his smile belongs to me. His eyes might not be blue like mine, but they are the same shape. There is no way in hell I can pretend that I didn't see what I just saw. That's not how I'm built. Like Donald Paradise, I always do the right thing, but what I don't understand is why Nia would keep my child from me.

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Chapter 4

NIA

I pick up my little man and squeeze him tight. I kiss his cheek and he grins so wide, I see all his teeth. “You be good, okay,” I tell him. “Mommy loves you so much.” I squeeze him again, and he starts to wiggle in my arms, so I put him down. He runs off to join his friends in his daycare classroom. “Be good for Ms. Dot,” I yell after him.

I leave the room, but I watch from the window as he helps a little girl take off her coat. My heart swells at the scene. My little Carter might be tireless and will put up a hell of a fight before he takes a nap or goes to sleep at night, but he’s the sweetest kid I’ve ever known.

He gives random kids at the park his snacks. He even offered to give a little boy in his daycare his shoes because the kid liked them. If he senses anyone close to him is sad or upset, he’ll sing and dance just to get a smile. If that doesn’t work, then he’ll get sad too. He says it’s because he doesn’t want anyone to be sad alone.

The flip side of that sweetness is that he has endless energy and likes to break things. He also loves to climb and do somersaults and cartwheels. He

thinks he's a gymnast, but he's a tornado in the shape of a three-year-old boy. He exhausts me, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

He might not have a father, but he's not lacking male role models. He's crazy about his Uncle Ray and his grandfather. They're also crazy about him and enable his mischievousness.

He looks up and waves at me. I wave back, blow him a kiss, and leave. I say hello to Ms. Dot, the owner of the neighborhood daycare, as I head toward the front door. She's run it for over thirty years. She's been here so long that me and my brother were both enrolled here.

I make the short drive to the home I grew up in less than five minutes later. This is where our parents raised me and my brother. There's nothing but good memories in this house, and when they decided to move to a townhome, they gave the house to me and my brother.

It's still early in the morning, only a little past eight. The skies are already gray, and the news is predicting snow this evening. Thankfully, my job is flexible and lets me work from wherever I want, but I do go into the office two to three times per week.

When I step out of the car, I see the same gray sedan that's been sitting across the street for the past week. At least it's been a week since I noticed it. The same bald white man is sitting in it, and I wonder what the hell he's doing. He sticks out like a sore thumb. This is an all-black neighborhood, and it's odd that he's just sitting there. I pull out my phone and take pictures of his car. I go and stand in front of it and snap a few photos of his license plate. He notices me just like I intended, but he doesn't react. He just sits there. After staring him down, I turn my back on him and go inside the house.

After brewing a strong cup of coffee, I log into my work laptop. I notice the newspaper when I sit down. My brother is the only person I know who still

gets a daily newspaper delivered. He has it turned to the business section, and my stomach drops. Why does he feel the need to keep reminding me of this shit?

I'm never going to take his advice and seek out Carter's father again. I already did that several times, and I'm no glutton for punishment. I got the message loud and clear. He doesn't want to be a father. At least not to my son. I'm sure he'll have other children when he gets married, but the idea is like acid churning in my stomach.

I look down at the newspaper, and it's an article about Donald Paradise and his legacy. There are two family pictures and I make a gagging sound. One is of the core family and the other one includes Scarlett. I rip the article in half, ball it up, and toss it toward the trash can. I miss but I don't care enough to go and pick it up. They might be worth billions, but they are still trash. They can stay on the floor where they belong. Maybe I'll step on them throughout the day.

The part of my life that included Drake Paradise is ancient history. I hate everyone with the last name Paradise, especially Drake and his daddy. Despite what they portray to the world, they have no good qualities as far as I'm concerned. The fruit does not fall far from the toxic, rotting, hypocritical tree.

But your son is part of them, and he's perfect.

My son is a part of *me*, and they get no credit. I carried him. I went through the pregnancy with only the help of *my* family, and my brother and father are the closest father figures Carter has. That boy is one hundred percent Nash. Drake Paradise is a sperm donor and a horrible one at that.

As much as I try not to think about him, his family has been everywhere this week. When your family owns the largest construction company in the

country, you tend to make the local news regularly. I remember sitting in my living room stunned speechless at the announcement of Donald Paradise's death. They never announced he was sick.

I remember feeling numb at the news. There was a time I wished death on him, but when it became a reality, I felt nothing. There was no sadness, but there was also no joy. In fact, my feelings betrayed me, and I started to worry about how *he* was feeling.

My phone dings and it's a text from Ray of an article about the three-month anniversary of Donald Paradise's death. The family donated a large sum of money for pancreatic cancer research. They also set up additional scholarships in his name for engineering, math, and architecture majors. They mention several put aside specifically for women and people of color. There are a couple of sentences about the Paradise Family's long history of hiring minorities and funding scholarships.

It sounds nice. If only it were true. Fucking phonies.

At the end of the article, there's mention of Scarlett Foley, *his* fiancée. I remember her. Drake told me she was a family friend, and he was not interested in her. He swore he never was and never would be. Another lie.

Good luck to you in that den of vipers, girl. Better you than me.

"Enough about those snakes, Nia," I say to myself. I plop down at my desk in my home office and get to work.

Work is another thing they took from me. I was working in the human resources department of Paradise Construction. That's how I met him. It was a great job with a high salary and excellent benefits. Getting a job there is like winning the employment lottery, but that didn't last long for me.

Was one benefit sucking the dick of the Paradise Heir in his office?

I clear my throat and chase that memory away. Once everything went up in

smoke, I soon found another job at a local hospital. I'm doing the same thing but on a smaller scale. The benefits are still great, but I had to take a twenty percent pay cut. That hurt when I realized I was pregnant, and that Drake Paradise wanted nothing to do with me or the child I was carrying.

His loss because my son is fantastic.

But how long until Carter realizes he's missing a father and asks you who he is?

I will never lie to my son. Even if it hurts him, I will always tell him the truth about his sperm donor when he asks. Since he's only three, I know I have several more years. If I'm lucky, it won't be until he's old enough for me to explain why it's not a good idea to go and find him.

I know that's inevitable, though. I know as soon as he's old enough, he's going to find him and ask him why. Since his father is a public figure, it will take him no time to find out a way to contact him. I only pray that he doesn't leave my son devastated and heartbroken. If he does that, I might have to find him and punch him in the teeth.

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Chapter 5

DRAKE

I stare down at the file in front of me. I've memorized every word on every document. Carter Nathaniel Nash. She had my son and never uttered a word.

I flip the page and stare at the pictures my private investigator managed to get. There are a few of them leaving the house to go to his daycare. I was shocked to see Nia behind the wheel of a car. She didn't even have a driver's license when we met. She was scared to death of driving until I taught her.

"I'm not touching that car," she whispers. "It probably cost a million dollars."

"Not quite that much. Come on. It's shameful that you can't drive. You're twenty-four years old."

"Don't talk about my age." She waves a fist in my face. I wrap my hands around it and pull her into me.

"What are you going to do about it?"

My cell phone vibrates, pulling me out of my memory, but I ignore it. Langley's name flashes across the screen, and I have no need or desire to

speak with my brother right now. He will have to wait because I can't deal with his bullshit today.

I stare at another picture. He's smiling in that one and waving at a little girl. He's always so happy in every photo. He's an angel.

He shouldn't be at that place. Ms. Dot's Daycare. What the hell is that? He should have a multilingual nanny at home who caters to his every whim. Not in this place where other children can wipe their noses on his sleeve.

There are more pictures of him outside the daycare playing. He spends most of his time in the jungle gym climbing and jumping.

Three years. I have a son, and I've lost three years of his life because his mother, a woman I once cared for, decided to keep him from me. I don't know how she could do this. The Nia Nash that I spent a year with was anything but cruel. She was sweet and funny even though she had this hint of shyness. She loved to laugh, and she loved family. She was not the type of person who would keep a father from his son. She believed in family too much to do that.

But she also ended things with me in a text message.

End what? You weren't anything. You were two people who had a physical relationship. You never told her you wanted more.

We weren't kids. I didn't have to ask her to be my girlfriend like we were thirteen years old and in the schoolyard. She should have known from the way I kissed and held her. From the way I made love to her almost every night. It should have been obvious. I spent every spare moment with her. The only time we weren't together outside of work was when I had some stupid family obligation or had to travel, which I hated because it took me away from the only person I wanted to be with.

"Mr. Paradise." Esther, my secretary and personal assistant, sticks her head

in my office. “Mr. Mangus is here to see you.” I give her the okay, and she lets him in.

I gesture to the chair across from my desk. He undoes his jacket button and sits.

“She noticed me,” he says.

“That’s the least of her problems. What else have you found out?”

“She works from home Tuesdays and Fridays. She works until about four each day and goes to pick up the kid.”

“He has a name,” I tell him. “Use it.”

“Carter, sir.” He clears his throat. I don’t know how I feel about that name. Carter. My son should have a stronger name. I would have named him after my father. “She’s a Human Resources Manager at South Shore Hospital and has been for the last—”

“I know all of this, Mr. Mangus. It’s in here.” I lift the folder and drop it on my desk. “What I want to know is, is there another man raising my son? Did she leave me so she can let another man play daddy?” If that’s the case, I’m going to ruin two lives by the end of the week. That scenario has kept me up since I found out about him. The idea that Nia is so duplicitous that she’s passed off my son to someone else to raise has caused me nothing but sleepless nights.

“Not that I’ve found yet, Mr. Paradise.” He clears his throat again, and it irritates me. I hate nervous people. It makes me think they’re hiding something. “She lives in the home she grew up in with her brother and his two sons, ages six and eight. Her parents sold the house to them for ten dollars. Her brother is a widower, and they appear to be raising the kids together.”

That takes some of the edge off, but it doesn’t come close to cooling the

inferno of anger inside of me. Her family is helping her raise *my* son, but me and my family have been iced out. Fuck that. Fuck Nia Nash and everything she stands for. Fuck her and her entire family.

“Is she at home now?” When he nods, I say, “You may leave, but stay on her. I don’t care if she sees you. Let her. I don’t give a damn.” He visibly swallows and stands before exiting my office.

I pick up my phone and call my driver. “I need a car up front in five minutes. I’m driving myself.” I slam the phone down before I get any questions. I’m the boss around here now that my father is gone. I give the orders, and it will be a cold day in hell before anyone questions me.

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Chapter 6

NIA

After a Zoom meeting with my manager, I decide to take a short break. I stretch and release some of the tension in my lower back. Since Ray is picking up Carter for me on his way home, I can run to the gym for a spin class in about an hour. It was one of the ways I dealt with ending things with Drake all those years ago. Exercise saved me until I started throwing up from morning sickness two months later.

“Ugh. Not now, girl.” I don’t know why he’s been on my mind so much for the past two weeks. I didn’t even think about him this much when I found out his father died, but lately, it’s like something’s changed. I’m not sure what it is, but I hope it will go away soon. That man is not going to take anything else from me, including time or thought.

I grab the salad I made for lunch and start picking at it when I hear a car door slam. That gets my attention. It’s close. Very close, and Ray would have called if he was coming home early. I’ve lived on this street and in this house almost all my life. I’m very aware of what goes on here. This has always been a quiet street, and the same families have lived here for as long as I can

remember. The houses on either side of me are owned by retirees whose kids only visit on the weekends or holidays.

I tiptoe to the window and almost drop my bowl. There's a sleek, black Mercedes parked in my driveway. I know who it belongs to. It might not be the same car, but it's his.

"Is that a stick shift?" I ask, eyeing the expensive car. "Don't you have a jalopy we can use?"

"Do I look like the type of guy who would drive a jalopy?" He pins me to the car and puts his arms on either side of me, boxing me in.

"I guess not. You have prep school and Harvard written all over you."

"Dartmouth, not Harvard," he says. "Then Stanford."

I get on my toes and wrap my arms around him. I nibble the side of his neck, and he sighs. He always caves when I do that, and this time is no different. My hands slide down his back and cup his ass.

"I don't think so. You're going to drive."

"How about if we fuck in the back seat instead? I know you want to." I reach for his dick, but he moves away, walks to the driver's door, opens it, and gestures for me to get in.

The loud banging on my front door pulls me out of my daydream. I clear my throat and will my nipples to return to normal. We did fuck in the back seat of that car like I wanted. It was after he made me drive it, but like always, it was glorious.

This cannot be happening. I don't make any moves to open the door. There's no way. What is he doing here right now after all these years? After all his rejections. Even though I had a feeling of foreboding since Kyle's

party, I never could have predicted this. I stand there frozen and unsure of what to do. When I decide it's best to pretend I'm not home, he pounds on the door again.

You know he won't go away. Do it now while you still have some time before anyone gets home.

“Nia, I swear to God, I'll break this door down. I know you're in there.”

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket, ready to call the police. It would be great to see him taken away in handcuffs. I'll record the entire thing and post it on social media. I'd love to see the Paradise Heir get humiliated just like he humiliated me.

In the end, I don't do that. I don't want any nosy neighbors figuring out our history. Besides, I've never been a coward, and I'm not going to start now. And I sure as hell am not going to cower to a man of such weak moral character that he would turn his back on his son. As he's pounding on the door for the fourth time, I swing it open, and our eyes collide.

I'm almost transported back in time to the day we met. Almost, but not quite. I should have known then that he was full of shit. The heir to the country's largest construction conglomerate would never see me as anything more than a convenient plaything. To him, I'm a good-time girl, and that's it.

I look away, and he barges in without an invitation. I close the door behind him. I take it a step further and close the blinds to ensure no one sees anything, but I know the old lady across the street will be asking about the Mercedes in the driveway as soon as he leaves.

I refuse to speak first. I cross my arms and wait for him to state his business. I look away, unable to look into his face without smacking him. He looks past me and walks to the wall. He's looking at a baby picture of Carter. It was taken for his first birthday and he's in a blue suit and white bow tie

that my mother got him. She also scheduled the elaborate photo shoot. He's holding a big number one and smiling for the camera. He only has four teeth in this picture. Two on the top and two on the bottom. My heart swells with love and pride for the son I carried and birthed without any support from his father.

"How could you?" he asks.

My head rolls back. I have no idea what he's talking about, but I'm not in the mood to play games. Rich people think they can waste your time with their bullshit.

"How could *you*?" I ask. I guess I am in the mood to play. I wave him off and return to my office. I close the door behind me, but he barges in before I can lock it. "I'm not in the mood for whatever this is, Paradise. Tell me why you're here or get out of my damn face."

I start to type my login, but the laptop is pulled out from in front of me. He tosses it across the room, and it shatters against the wall. Stunned, I stand and put a hand to my chest. I finally look at him, and I take a step back. He looks deranged. His hair is sticking out and his eyes dart from side to side. His breathing is shallow. Despite the frigid weather outside, he's not wearing a coat. His suit jacket and shirt are both wrinkled. The Drake Paradise I knew all those years ago was always well put together. He smiles, but it's cold and calculating and doesn't reach his eyes.

"I'm not here to play games with you, Nia. I'm here to find out when in the hell you were going to tell me that I have a son," he practically thunders.

The question shocks me so much that I lose my ability to speak. I'm usually ready with a quick or witty response. I don't take shit from anyone, billionaire or not, but today, the words get stuck in my throat.

"You don't have anything to say for yourself?" he asks, condescension

oozing out of his mouth.

I look into his eyes and blink three times. This can't be happening. After four years, this man comes slithering uninvited into my house to spout utter garbage.

"What do I have to say for myself? Who the hell do you think you are?" I decide that I don't care why he's here. "Get out of my house before I call the police." I pick up my phone from my desk, but he snatches it from me.

"I said when the hell were you going to tell me that I have a son?" When I continue to look into his eyes with utter disbelief, he says, "I know, Nia. I saw you two at the arcade two weeks ago."

"You saw us?" Drake hates video games. He hates crowds and he hates children. If I cared, I'd ask him why he was at an arcade.

"Stop asking stupid questions and answer me," he says.

I stare at him again, doing my best to determine if he's playing some kind of prank. That's got to be it. Nothing else makes sense. When all he does is stare at me, I let out a soft chuckle. That soon turns into a full-blown belly laugh. I throw my head back and laugh as if this is the funniest joke on earth. I laugh so hard that I have to hold my stomach as tears roll down my cheeks.

He pounds a fist on the wall, but not even that is enough to make me stop laughing. He moves in closer to me, crowding my space. I laugh harder at his pathetic attempts at intimidation. I lean against my desk, making sure that our bodies don't touch. If they do, I might not be able to stop my knee from hitting his groin at full impact. My laughs finally turn into guffaws until they die down.

"Thanks for that, Paradise. I needed that laugh. You can slither out the same way you slithered in." I point in the direction of the front door. "Bye."

"You think this is funny?" His voice is a mere whisper.

“I do because I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.” He takes a step closer, and I straighten up. “Don’t come any closer. You don’t intimidate me. You didn’t back then, and you don’t now.” He’s very intimidating, and I could barely look at him that first day. His eyes followed me the entire time. He’s tall and can be authoritative, but I know a side of him that few others know. I shove that aside, though.

“So, you’re going to deny having a child? *My* child?”

I manage to go around him and examine the laptop he threw across the room. It’s ruined. The screen is shattered. I toss it back on the floor and cross my arms.

“Why would I deny my son? He’s the greatest accomplishment of my life.” Once I accepted the fact that I was pregnant, I embraced it. I embraced it as much as I possibly could when I was facing the life of single motherhood. Being a single mother was never one of my life’s goals. I want a relationship like the one my parents have. And I’m still going to have that, only not with the father of my son.

“You don’t deny he’s mine?”

“Why would I? He looks just like you. He has half your DNA. Denying his existence is your area of expertise, not mine, sperm donor.”

He takes a step back at my words. He looks at me as if I’m a puzzle he’s trying to put together. Whatever he was expecting to hear, it wasn’t what I said.

“Deny him? You think I would deny my son?”

Now it’s my turn to be shocked by his words. I look around the house and wish I had something to hit him with. I can’t stand the sight of him or the sound of his voice.

“Do I think you would deny your son, Paradise? Really? Did you really just

ask me that question? I know for a fact that you would. That's exactly what you've been doing since I told you I was pregnant." I look at the mess he made on the floor and try to leave my office to get a broom. He grabs my elbow before I can reach the door. "Hands off me," I warn.

"What kind of game are you playing at?" He adds pressure to my elbow, and I slowly look into his eyes. I see something I've never seen before. I've seen him stressed. I've seen him sad. I've seen him resigned, and I've seen him passionate, but never angry. This is beyond anger. I try to pull my arm away, but he easily controls me. "What the hell are you playing at, Nia?"

"Get your damn hand off me."

"Or what?" We stare at each other. He looks down at my heaving chest and licks his lips. "Or what?" he repeats.

"Or this." I lift my other hand to slap him across his face, but he grabs my wrist. We're both immobile now.

"I don't think you want to do that," he warns.

"I think you need to get the hell out of here."

"I'm not leaving until I get access to my son." At that, I manage to pull free from his hold. Until he uttered those words, I was only irritated by his presence, but now it's like he lit a match on a pool of gasoline.

"What the hell did you just have the audacity to say to me?" I hiss.

"Are you hard of hearing? I. Want. Access. To. *My*. Son."

I can feel something start to bubble inside of me, only it's not laughter this time. It's the beginnings of something that I won't be able to control once it erupts. That's another thing about Drake Paradise. No one else on earth has ever been able to fuck with my emotions like him. Time and distance have not changed that.

An old fear creeps back up to the forefront of my mind. For months after

Carter was born, I worried that Drake and his snake of a father would try and take him from me. Not that I would ever let that happen.

“You want that, do you? More than three years later, you think you can march into *my* house and make any kind of demands about *my* son? Stop wasting my time and get the fuck out of here.”

“I always hated it when you curse.” Those words stun me and take me back to a posh hotel room.

“The only time I want to hear the F word come out of that perfect mouth is when I’m inside of you,” he whispers as he slides in.

I blink the memory away.

“I want to see my son. Today.” He speaks like a man used to giving orders. He’s been doing just that since he was born, but I don’t take orders from Drake Paradise. I never have and never will.

“Have you had a traumatic brain injury, Paradise? Maybe a lobotomy? Or is this your grief talking? Whatever it is you’re not making any sense. And you will see *my* son over my dead body. I can guarantee you that. I’m the only parent he knows and the only one he needs.”

“I—”

“You nothing!” I scream, stunning him. “You nothing! Shut up!” I yell again. “I told you I was pregnant, and you told me you wanted nothing to do with me or the kid. Remember *that*? You don’t get to walk back in years later and act like I didn’t tell you, but of course this is what you would do. This has Paradise written all over it. What was it you used to tell me? ‘A Paradise can do whatever they want.’ Well, not this time. Not with me and not with my child. Get the *fuck* out of here. I’m not going to say it again.”

“Are you living in some alternate universe where you told me you were pregnant?”

“Are *you*?” He snatches my wrist, and I know there’s no way I’m getting away from him until he’s ready to let me go.

“You want to play games, Nia? Okay, let’s play. You seem to have forgotten who I am, so let me remind you. I tried to do this the nice way—”

“By barging in here, punching walls, and breaking my work laptop? You want me to lose another job? I don’t have a trust fund to hide behind, and I have a child to raise.”

“I’m talking now, so you better listen.”

“I don’t better do a goddamn thing,” I yell, but he continues as if he didn’t hear me.

“You will let me have access to him immediately. If you don’t, I will have a team of lawyers ready to take everything from you by morning. Do you hear me? I’ll take *everything*, including him.” My blood runs cold at his threat. I let out a guttural scream and smack him as hard as I can across his face with my free hand. He doesn’t move an inch. I don’t even think he blinks from the impact.

“I’ll kill you first, Paradise. Do *you* hear *me*? I will fucking kill you before you can ever get close to my son. You abandoned him before he was born, and now you want to walk in here as if you didn’t reject the both of us?” I scream into his face.

“Why do you keep saying that to me? That never happened, and you know it. Cut the shit, Nia.”

We stare at each other, both of us breathing heavily. Neither of us ready to give an inch.

“You goddamn liar.” My words come out quiet but hostile. “You are

psychotic.” The anger in his eyes dims and is quickly replaced by what looks like pain, but it soon disappears. “Let me go.” He doesn’t. We both stand there breathing as if we just ran a marathon.

The front door of the house opens, but he still won’t release me.

“Ni!” my brother Ray yells. “I snuck out of school a little early. Why is there a hundred-thousand-dollar car in the driveway?” I don’t answer, but I hear his heavy footsteps come down the hall. “Oh,” is all he says when he sees us. He looks from Drake to me and back to Drake. Ray shakes his head and lets out a breath. “Dammit, Ni. Of all the white boys on earth,” he mutters almost to himself.

“What did you just say?” Drake asks, clearly offended, but Ray doesn’t deign to answer him.

My brother’s never met Drake. No one in my family has. The only person who knew about him before I had to admit I was pregnant is my cousin Audrey. None of my friends met him either. That’s not what we were. We were two people involved in a physical relationship. That’s it. Ray has, however, looked him up on social media, but that’s no easy feat because Drake is not on social media. He never has been. The only way Ray can stalk him is from the Paradise Construction social media.

“Let my sister go,” he orders. Ray may not be as tall as Drake, but he’s over six feet tall too. He was a wrestler in high school and college and knows how to handle himself. He’s also not the type to let any man manhandle a woman, especially a woman in his family. “Do it before I break your damn hands.”

Drake doesn’t follow Ray’s orders. Drake doesn’t follow anyone’s orders, but I manage to yank myself away from him. He holds both hands up as if he comes in peace.

“I’m only here about my son.”

“You can’t be serious,” Ray scoffs. “You’re about three and a half years too late.” Ray stands between us, but he faces Drake. “You need to go. Right now. I will have no problem beating your ass if you even look in my sister’s direction again.” Ray has a calm way about him. He’s a deep thinker and rational. He’ll also make good on his threat.

For a moment, I panic. Drake was raised to think he runs the world. He has money, power, and influence. Ray does not. I try to go around my brother to get between them, but he presses his back to me, pinning me to my desk.

Drake looks around my brother and says, “This isn’t over. Remember what I told you.”

“Don’t come to my house and threaten me. Get out.” We stare at each other for a few more seconds before he walks out of my office and out of the house. He slams the door so hard, the entire house shakes. I only exhale when I hear a car peeling out of the driveway.

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Chapter 7

DRAKE

“I want full custody, so get started on that,” I tell Wyatt. “And what about punitive damages? Isn’t that allowed for reprehensible behavior? What’s worse than keeping someone away from their son? Take her house, car, and I want one million dollars in punitive damages. Wait. Make it ten million. No, that’s not enough. One hundred million should do it.” I know she doesn’t have anything close to that, but I don’t care. I’m well past the point of being calm and rational.

Wyatt takes off his reading glasses and tosses them across his desk. He closes his laptop and puts his hands on top of it.

“You do realize I’m a corporate attorney, right? I’m not a family lawyer. I don’t handle custody cases, my friend.”

“I’m not your friend. I’m your fucking boss,” I remind him.

“Oh, get off your high horse, you rich jerk. You’re being an ass. That’s from friend Wyatt, not employee Wyatt.” I stand from my chair and tower over him. He leans back and sighs, completely unbothered. He has no wife, child, or girlfriend. He doesn’t even have a dog, so maybe he doesn’t have a

care in the world, but I do. Every second that passes without my son is like a ticking time bomb. I'm almost ready to explode.

"You don't scare me, man. I'm the same height as you. And you're a week older, so I can probably beat your old ass if I must." He can't, and we both know it. We both also know I'm not going to do anything more than fuss at him. We've been friends since we were assigned to be roommates at Dartmouth. "Sit down and let's talk about this like two rational people."

With the wind taken out of me, I sit. Lord knows I haven't done anything else. I haven't eaten. I haven't slept. All I've done is obsess about the fact that I have a son and I know nothing about him. It's been less than twenty-four hours since I left Nia's house. Since then, I've called her twelve times. She answered the first time, and when she realized it was me, she promptly hung up. She hasn't taken any of my calls since. I'm pretty sure I've been blocked.

"I'm not feeling very rational right now."

"I can tell. Listen, you're not going to sue her for custody. You're not going to sue her for anything. Under no circumstances are you to threaten to sue her."

"Too late," I mutter.

"Well, that was a dumb move. Tell her you didn't mean it. All that will do is hurt the child you say you want to get to know. She's the only parent he knows. Do you really want to take him from her?"

I clench my jaw and refuse to answer him. The last thing I want to do is hurt my child, but his mother is a whole other issue. I want to crush her, but even in my fury, I know I can't hurt her without hurting him.

"Wyatt, she—"

Wyatt holds his hand up. "I heard everything you said. I also think you can

clear this up with one conversation. From what you told me, she thinks you abandoned them, but you claim she never told you. Both of those things can't be true. There's a big piece of the story missing."

"Or she's a pathological liar," I add.

"Have you told Scarlett?" The change of subject strikes me speechless. I hang my head down and refuse to answer. "I'll take that as a no. What about your mother? Does she know she has a grandson?"

"My mother is a basket case. She hasn't even accepted that my father is dead yet. My brother, before you ask about him, drinks himself silly every day. My sister is off in her own world. And how do you tell the woman you're going to marry that she's signing up to be a stepmother?" I put my head in both hands in despair.

Scarlett wants to start a family as soon as we get married. I still haven't agreed to a wedding date despite being engaged for over a year. She's been more than patient. I can't possibly throw this at her too.

"You need to tell your fiancée that you have a child, Drake. You need to sit her down and tell her everything first. Then talk to Nia. Leave your Paradise Heir persona at home. Take it down several notches because if you approach her like you run the world, she's not going to take it well. I'll come with you as a friend and mediator, not as your lawyer."

He opens the folder and looks through the pictures. I grab one and look at the beautiful face of my son. "I'll tell you one thing, this kid is your spitting image, but you should still get a paternity test. If the worst happens and you need to go to court to get visitation, you're going to need proof of paternity anyway."

"I already got one done." His head snaps up at my admission. "He goes to a shitty daycare. My private eye figured out a way to get one. He's mine." Not

that I needed a test. I felt the connection between me and the kid. And his face is another dead giveaway.

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Chapter 8

NIA

I run my hand through Carter's curly hair. He sighs peacefully in his sleep and purses his pink, full lips. I run my thumb along his bottom lip. My heart swells whenever I look at his sleeping face. He's an angel when he's sleeping and a tornado when he's awake.

I kiss his cheek one more time, close the book, and tiptoe away from his bed. I kiss Kyle too. He's in the bed on the other side of the room. He fell asleep as soon as I started reading, but it always takes Carter longer. I leave the door cracked and make sure the nightlight is on in the hallway before I return to the living room.

"Go to bed, sweetie," I tell my nephew, Mason. He gets up from the couch and walks down the hall to his room, leaving me alone with Ray.

"Sit," he orders, and I do. "Has he called again?"

"I don't know. I blocked him, and I haven't answered any strange numbers."

Ray lets out a breath and runs his hands over his face. "First, stop doing that. You have to talk to him," he tells me.

“I tried to talk to him. Three years and eight months ago, I reached out to him. He told me he wanted nothing to do with me or the child. That’s what he said. The child. It’s as if he didn’t help create him. So, now he wants to waltz back into my life and pretend he didn’t turn his back on me? Fuck that.” Ray leaves me on the couch in the living room and goes to the kitchen when the tea kettle starts to whistle. He puts tea bags in two mugs and pours hot water over them.

He hands me my favorite mug and sits across from me.

“You need to think about what you’re doing, Nia. If he makes good on his threat and takes you to court, you can’t beat him. He has infinite money, and you don’t. Besides, he’s the father and he has rights.”

“Screw him and his rights. He and his rights can go straight to hell. I talked to Audrey, and she’s agreed to represent me if it comes to that.” The words get stuck in my throat. The idea of fighting to keep my baby is so upsetting, I haven’t slept or eaten since yesterday afternoon. I’ve always been scared of this scenario. I’ve played it in my mind a million times, but I never thought it would come true.

“Audrey has been practicing law for less than six months. I love our cousin, but she doesn’t have the experience or resources to handle what Paradise will throw your way. He’ll have an entire team. He’s probably not above blackmailing or bribing a judge. You can’t—”

“Then I’ll go back to my first plan and kill him,” I say. “There’s no death penalty in Massachusetts,” I shrug. “What do I have to lose?”

“Do that and you go to prison for life, and you lose your freedom and your son. Be serious, Ni. You need to talk to him.”

“After the way he treated me? After he let me go through a pregnancy alone? He—”

“Talk to him.” He puts his tea down and takes one of my hands. “I’ll be with you if you want, but he’s not going away. I don’t know what was going on with him when you told him, but he’s changed his mind. Maybe it’s guilt. Maybe losing his father makes him want to be closer to family. I don’t know, but he wants that boy in his life. This isn’t about you or your feelings. This is about Carter. If that jerk wants to be a father, he has rights. He didn’t sign them over, did he?”

I shake my head and say, “No. I wish he had. I wish I had thought to ask him to. There’s no way he could fake not remembering that. Carter doesn’t need him. He has you and he has our dad.”

“He will always have us, but we’re not his father. He’s going to ask about him in a few years. How do you think he’ll feel when he’s a teenager and learns that you kept his father from him? Don’t do that. Don’t be the bad guy in this because if you do that, that’s what you’ll be. It won’t matter what he did. Carter will be angry at you. Just have one conversation before you decide on fighting him in court. Promise me?”

Ray is the mediator in our family. He always makes sure everything is okay and that everyone is happy. He’s like our mother that way, and I think Carter takes after them. Ray’s rational when I’m not. He’s always been my protective big brother.

I throw my head back and cover my face with my arm. “Just the audacity of him. I can barely stand the sound of his voice. How am I supposed to be in the same room with him and not kill him?”

“Well, that’s why I’ll be there. If he says one word, I’ll beat his ass.”



It's after ten-thirty when I slip into my bed. I'm exhausted. I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours and my stomach aches from lack of food. I grab the remote in search of something to put on in the background, but my phone buzzes on the nightstand. A strange number flashes across the screen, and I just know it's Drake. Remembering my conversation with Ray, I take a deep breath and hit accept. "Hello."

The line stays quiet. I pull the phone from my face to see if the call was dropped. "Paradise?"

"It's me," he says. I can't determine his tone. He's definitely not the angry man that was here a little more than twenty-four hours ago, but he doesn't sound like I remember either. He was intense from our first meeting, but there was always a lightness and playfulness to him. Now that I think about it, most of the world never got to see that part of him. That was reserved for me. "I'm not in the mood for another fight." He sounds tired, but I shove the thought aside and will myself not to care.

"Then don't start any shit," I remind him.

"That's what you think I'm doing?" His voice has now risen, and some of the guy who barged in here yesterday makes an appearance. "I want access to my damn son," he nearly thunders.

"Your son? You are delusional. Where was this concern when I came to you three and a half years ago?"

"Stop with the lies. Do you think I'm the type of man who would not be there for my kid? What gives you the right—" I end the call, unable to listen to his revisionist history for another second. He calls back right away, but I shut my phone off.

I stare at the TV screen in front of me unable to absorb anything that's going on. When I answered the phone, the last thing I wanted to do was get

into another fight with Drake, but his entitled attitude triggers me. I didn't grow up in a house with an angry and yelling man. My dad's gentle and soft-spoken, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let Drake, or any other man, speak to me as if I'm nothing.

I decide to give up and go to sleep, but there's a knock on my door. My brother comes in holding his phone up.

"Now he's calling my phone." He waves it in the air, and I let out a groan.

"Hang up on him."

"I can hear you," Drake says.

"I put him on speaker," Ray explains. "Talk to him and then bring me back my phone." He drops it on my bed and leaves.

"Why are you bothering my brother with your nonsense? How did you even get his number?" I already know the answer. All he has to do is get one of his minions to do his bidding.

"When can we meet? I'm trying to have a civil conversation before I involve my lawyers and family court."

"Don't threaten me."

"Don't dismiss me. Tomorrow. I'll send a car and you can come to the office."

Like hell.

"Not only am I not available tomorrow, but I'm never stepping foot in your office again. Friday at my house." If we're doing this, it will be on my turf. "Ten o'clock in the morning." My mood sours at the thought of taking one of my sick days for him, but I want to do it at a place where I'm comfortable.

"Fine."

"Just so you know, my son will not be here."

"Just so *you* know, I'm going to be part of *my* son's life soon."

I end the call without another word. I wait a few minutes, and when he doesn't call back, I bring the phone to Ray.

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Chapter 9

DRAKE

“You just had to choose this car, huh?” Wyatt asks.

I ignore him and try to school my features. I need to calm down, but my heart won't stop its erratic beating. I don't understand why. It's not like Carter will be there today. My private eye sent pictures from a few hours ago of him being dropped off at daycare. I let out a deep breath when my driver turns down her street. It's not the safest neighborhood. I can only imagine the fuss Nia's going to make when I tell her she has to move, but I only want the best for my son.

“Have you told your fiancée yet?” Wyatt's annoying voice pulls me out of my own head. When I remain quiet, he says, “You can't possibly be serious.”

That's another conversation I'm not looking forward to. Carter was conceived before we began our relationship. I'm not a cheater, and she should know that, but things are going to change now that I'm a father.

“We're here, Mr. Paradise.” My driver Bertram holds the door open for me, and I slide out. It's a cold February morning with angry gray skies.

“Remember what I said. You’re not here to make demands or throw your weight around. Try being nice. Maybe smile.” I stare at him. He gives an exaggerated smile and says, “Something like this. Now you try it.” I turn away from him and ring the doorbell.

It takes her a full two minutes to open the door. I don’t know if it’s a power move or if it’s due to being fifteen minutes early. She’s colder than the March morning standing on the other side of the door. There’s no smile or warm greeting. When she doesn’t invite us in, I take it upon myself and step inside. Wyatt follows me, and Nia zeroes in on him.

“You brought a lawyer, Paradise? Of course, you would.” She crosses her arms, and the temperature dips more.

“I’m Wyatt St. James.” He offers Nia his hand, but she doesn’t shake it.

“Are you a lawyer?” she asks.

“Yes, but I’m here as a friend.”

“Sure, you are.” She eyes Wyatt up and down before she turns her back on us and gestures for us to follow. I didn’t get a chance to look around yesterday when I was here, but the house is bigger than I thought it would be. It looks like it was recently renovated and painted. She leads us to a formal dining room and tells us to sit.

The room is nice and decorated with warm earth tones, but right now, it might as well be a thousand degrees below zero. I hear a door open and high heels clicking on the hardwood floor.

“Ni, where are you?” a soft voice asks. The tiniest woman I think I’ve ever seen joins us in the living room. I doubt she’s an inch over five feet, and her round glasses appear to be bigger than she is. She comes to a complete stop when she sees us sitting there. She pushes her glasses back with her index

finger. “Ah, I assume this is him.” She gestures at me while facing Nia. Then she clears her throat and says, “And he brought a lawyer.”

She hands Nia a Starbucks tray with two drinks. She takes off her coat, and she’s wearing a navy-blue pantsuit. I notice that Wyatt sits a little straighter as he assesses her. Her hair is in one braid, and it’s wrapped like a crown on her head.

“Well, now you look like a lawyer too,” Wyatt stands and offers her his hand. Unlike Nia, she takes it and gives him a firm shake. “I guess it takes one to know one. I’m Wyatt St. James. Yale Law School graduate.”

“Hmm,” is all she says before she drops his hand and turns away from him. “I’m Audrey Nash, and I’m Ms. Nash’s legal counsel.” Audrey. She’s the only one in Nia’s family who knew about me back then.

She puts her briefcase, which probably weighs more than her, on the table and makes a show of opening it.

“Full disclosure; I’m only here as a friend,” Wyatt says. “It would have been nice if you brought coffee for everyone.”

“Friend,” Audrey says. “Of course.” I can tell she’s not convinced. “So, tell us why you’re here and what it is that you want, Mr. Paradise, so my client can go on with her day.” She clears her throat again and sits down. I’d laugh if the situation wasn’t so serious. She looks like she needs a booster seat.

Nia sits next to Audrey and looks straight ahead, not meeting my stare. She’s as beautiful as the day I first laid eyes on her. I remember wanting to kiss her then, and that hasn’t changed. Unfortunately, our circumstances are drastically different now. She’s a duplicitous little liar who is trying to gaslight me. There’s a part of me that refuses to believe that. The Nia I knew for all those months is as far from a liar and manipulator as a saint is. Her

worst flaw is that her feet were always cold. That and the fact that she's the worst singer I've ever heard.

Audrey stares at Wyatt while she waits for an answer. Nia still won't look at me. I clear my throat to try and gain control of the room.

"Mr. St. James is a Paradise Construction attorney. Family law is not his area. I'm here in good faith."

"Of course," Audrey says. "It's just that of all the, um, friends you could have brought, you chose an attorney." She coughs after she says friends.

"That's just a coincidence," Wyatt says with a wide grin.

"Bottom line," I begin, looking directly at Nia, "I have a son. You never told me about him, and I want to get to know him."

Nia's eyebrows shoot to her forehead. She stands so abruptly, her chair falls over. "This is over." She walks out without another word.

"Mr. Paradise, please address me and not my client," Audrey says. "As to your allegations, my client denies them. She informed you of her pregnancy, and you told her you were not interested in being a father to her child. After that, you refused to communicate with her, and you used a proxy to speak on your behalf."

It's my turn to stand up at those accusations. Now, I know I'm wrong about Nia. A proxy? What the hell is she playing at? "Ms. Nash, I don't know what fantasy world your client lives in, but that crock of bull never happened. I came here in good faith. I could have had two dozen lawyers on this weeks ago. I've reached the end of my patience. If your client wants a fight, I guarantee you, I'm ready. One thing I never, ever do is lose. Remind her of that. If she won't give me access to my son, I'll take it, and I promise you she will not like the results."

Wyatt puts a hand to his forehead and shakes his head at me.

“So much for good faith,” Audrey says.

I decide if Nia’s not going to engage, I’m not going to waste my time on this two-bit lawyer. I stand and grab my cashmere coat from the back of my chair.

“Mr. Paradise, someone is lying, but it’s not Ms. Nash,” Audrey says.

“Which Ms. Nash? You or your client?” I’ve never seen Wyatt grin so hard, and I fail to find just what the hell is funny in this situation. “Maybe I should just call you Audrey to clear up any confusion.”

I make a mental note to fire him once we get out of here. Audrey doesn’t return his smile though. In fact, she looks away from him and rummages through a stack of papers.

“Mr. Paradise, please sit, and I will go get my client.” Wyatt, for some reason, stands when Audrey stands. She pushes her glasses back while she eyes him up and down before walking away. He cranes his neck until she’s out of sight.

“First of all, you need to chill. You’re too intense,” he whispers.

“You’re being unprofessional,” I whisper back.

“I’m not here on a professional basis. I’m here to keep you from losing your shit and going all Paradise.” He plops himself back on his chair, and I do the same.

They don’t come back for another ten minutes. Nia still won’t look at me, but I can see that her eyes are now red. I’d think she was crying if she wasn’t made of stone.

Audrey sits back down and hands Wyatt a sheet of paper. He picks it up and scans it. He grimaces at whatever he’s reading.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It looks like a printout of text messages between yourself and Nia,” he

says.

“Please refer to my client as Ms. Nash,” Audrey says.

“What can I call you?” he asks.

“Ms. Nash,” she says.

“Let’s just be Wyatt and Audrey,” he counters. Instead of punching him like I want, I snatch the paper from him.

Nia: Why haven’t you returned my calls or emails? We need to talk.

Drake: We are over. Stop messaging me.

Nia: But I told you I’m pregnant.

Drake: That’s pathetic even for you.

Nia: You think I would make something like this up?

Drake: I think you’re looking for money. I would never want a child with you. I only wanted to fuck you. I was curious. Not so much anymore. Leave me alone or I’ll ruin your life.

Nia: Asshole.

“This is bullshit. I never said that, and I never would. I don’t even like to use the F word.” I slide the paper across the table and look at Nia. She won’t look at me. Of course, she won’t. She knows I won’t believe her lies. “Did you type this out yourself?”

“Please do not address my client,” Audrey says.

“This is ridiculous! After what we shared, you throw this at me, Nia? I would never say anything like that. I spent almost every night with you, and you think I was only trying to get in your pants? Really?”

She looks into my face. She stands again, and I expect her to storm out of the room like she did the last time, but she doesn’t. She pulls out her phone and hands it to me. It’s the exchange that was typed out.

“Here it is,” she says. “That was the last thing you ever texted to me. After

that, you sent your father.”

I abruptly stand up and say, “My father? That’s who you were talking about when you said I sent a proxy?” I ask Audrey. “I’ve never involved my father in a relationship.”

“We weren’t in a relationship. It was only sex.” I do take a step back at those stinging words. I think a punch in the gut would hurt less. “Well, your father showed up. He threatened me and sent me a cease-and-desist letter. All on your behalf because you couldn’t bother to come say the words to my face.”

Audrey slides another piece of paper across the table. This time, I snatch it before Wyatt can get to it. As if I have no control over my own body, I fall back into my chair. Right there in black and white is a letter from an attorney on my behalf demanding that she stop all attempts at contact before I am forced to seek legal action.

“That didn’t stop me,” Nia says. “I went to the court to petition a paternity test. Your father showed up, and we went to a private lab. Actually, the lab came to me. It came back that you’re the father. Your lawyer showed up next and advised that you’re willing to pay child support but that’s it. He said if I contacted you again, you’d take me to court and do everything in your power to take the baby from me. Your father was there too. He said you’d send my baby all alone to some boarding school in Europe because even though you could take him from me, you weren’t interested in raising him. Not a child with someone like me. You couldn’t even come and say those things to my face, and now you want to march in here and pretend like it never happened. The fucking audacity of you, Drake Paradise!” she practically yells into the dining room. Audrey slides three more sheets of paper across the table.

One is the paternity test results. The other is a letter agreeing to pay three

thousand dollars a month in child support. There's a drafted lawsuit for full custody of a minor child. It was never served, and I imagine it was filed to scare her.

"No way," I say. "My father would never do this. What the hell are you two playing at?" I don't give them time to answer. I reach across the table and point a finger in Nia's face. "If you think you can besmirch my father's good name with this—" I can't think of a word. All I can do is hold up one of the pieces of paper and wave it in the air.

"Did you see the name of Mr. Paradise's attorney? Howard Banks. I have already confirmed that Mr. Banks was employed by Paradise Construction and worked directly with Donald Paradise for over thirty years. The cease-and-desist letter is signed by Mr. Banks, Mr. Paradise. Do you deny that's your father's attorney?" I glance at the paper again, and there's no denying that it's from Howard.

I point to Nia and say, "I don't know what game you're playing, but—"

"Please do not address my client," Audrey admonishes again.

"You're disparaging a dead man. You want me to believe my father knew I had fathered a child and actively tried to keep me from finding out. Why would he do that?"

Nia sighs and stands. "Why do you think? Look at me, and then look at you." She gestures at me.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Mr. Paradise, come on," Audrey says. She puts her head down and shakes it. "Please don't play that role. You know exactly what Ms. Nash means."

"Excuse me?" I say to her. "I assure you, I do not."

Audrey purses her lips and turns back to Nia. "Of all the white boys on earth." She whispers the same words Nia's brother said a few days ago, and

just like then, I'm offended.

"Excuse me," I say to her. "What the hell are you getting at? Do you have a problem with me being—"

"Okay," Wyatt says, interrupting me before I can finish my thought. "Let's tone it down. Can we keep these?" He gestures at the pieces of paper.

"We have copies," Audrey says while she types something on her iPad.

"Thank you. I'll read through these this afternoon. Now, we're here because of Carter, not to discuss text messages and letters that my client knows nothing about." Hearing the name of my son immediately puts me at ease. "When can Drake meet him?"

"Don't say my son's name," Nia practically hisses at Wyatt. Audrey puts a hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

"He's your client now?" Audrey asks. "I thought you were a friend."

"When can I see my son?" I ask, getting everyone's attention.

"When hell freezes over," Nia says.

Wyatt holds up his hand, signaling for me to remain quiet. "I'm not here as a lawyer." Both women snort in disbelief. "I'm here as a friend, and I've known Drake since we were freshmen in college. He would never, ever do something like this. Please, give us some time to get to the bottom of these letters and text messages. In the meantime, he has a child, who I'm sure would love to get to know his father."

"He has two father figures. His uncle and his grandfather. He's fine," Audrey says.

"But they aren't his father," I say. "I am."

"How convenient," she mutters under her breath.

"If I did this, why would I be here now?" I ask Nia.

"I don't know, Paradise. Guilt. Grief. Maybe you're not a complete

sociopath. I'm not a therapist or a mind reader." She crosses her arms and looks away.

"After everything we shared, all you can say to me is that maybe I'm not a complete sociopath? Really, Nia?"

"I warned you about speaking directly to my client, Mr. Paradise," Audrey says.

"Ms. Nash, with all due respect, you can take your warning and shove it." I stand. "Nia, can I speak with you alone for a few minutes? Please," I add at the end.

"No, you may not," Audrey says. "You will not bully my client into whatever—"

"It's fine, Audrey," Nia says before she turns to me. "You have two minutes. Follow me."

"Audrey and I can get to know each other better," Wyatt says, grinning from ear to ear.

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Chapter 10

NIA

I make sure to keep him from either my bedroom or Carter's. I take him to the other side of the house to the kitchen. I don't bother to offer him a chair at the table. I lean against the wall and wait to hear what bullshit will spew from his lying mouth.

"You believe those things about me?" he asks. He almost sounds a little hurt.

"It's in black and white, not to mention the meetings I had with your father on your behalf. It's not a matter of belief. They are facts."

"You think I was only sleeping with you because I wanted to try a black woman? You really believe that?"

"That's what you said."

"Only I never said that. You're the one who broke up with me. You were working at Paradise one day and gone the next. You broke up with me with a text message and—"

"Are you insane? How could I break up with you when we weren't in a relationship? We slept together for a year and—"

“That’s bullshit. It was way more than sex, and you know it. I was never with anyone else that entire time. I was with you every night. We spent almost every weekend together. The night I got your text I was—”

“I didn’t end things. You did. You said you had grown bored and you had moved on. You went to Berlin for work, and you said you met someone you could have a future with, and I wasn’t it. I was terminated from my position a few weeks later. There was no warning. A few of us in my department were let go, but I know they were collateral damage. If you want the proof, I can show you the email ending my employment.” What I don’t tell him is that I was already looking for another job.

“You’re damn right I want it. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about or what’s going on. I didn’t break up. I didn’t want things to end, and if I had known there was going to be a baby, I would—”

“You would have what? Why are you here rewriting history?”

He holds up his hand and shakes his head. “We can discuss that later. I want to see Carter, Nia. I want to see my son. Please.”

His eyes bore into mine, and for a moment, I’m transported back in time, and all the feelings I had come flooding back. I wouldn’t admit them then. Or maybe I was scared that I wouldn’t fit into his world of privilege, so I never voiced my wants. The truth is, I wanted more. I wanted so much more. I cared about him, and I was only with him. I wanted the world to know, but being with the Paradise Heir was never one of my goals, and it came with heavy responsibility. In the end, I didn’t think I would fit or be welcome, and my instincts proved right. I wasn’t even in his world, and I was kicked out.

I turn around and give him my back to get away from his eyes. I hear his footsteps. I hold my breath while I wait for his next move. I don’t have long to wait. His hands land on my shoulders and slowly turn me to face him. He

grasps my chin and forces me to look at him, and in this moment, everything comes back. Every kiss. Every touch. Every smell. Every moment we were together. I thought those feelings had left me, but I realize now they were never far away. I only did a half-ass job of burying them. I avert my gaze, but the feelings don't abate. They've always been just under the surface, only dormant, and now they've resurfaced.

"I could never, Nia. Never." Whether he could or not doesn't matter. The fact is he did, but I know that won't matter in a court of law. Not when he has endless funds and access to the best lawyers. In the end, I'm the one who might be without her child. I could never let that happen. "Can I come by and see him tomorrow? I'd wait here all day for him, but there are some personal things I need to take care of first."

I can feel the tears starting to build up, but I refuse to let them pool into my eyes. At least not in front of him. My throat goes dry, and I swallow three times while I weigh my next words.

"Not tomorrow. I'm going to—" I take a deep breath, and my emotions betray me. I swipe away the tears, but the more I swipe the more they fall. "I'm going to need some time to tell him. Can you give me until Sunday?"

His hand lets go of my chin, and I let out a shudder. I don't know if it's from relief or disappointment. "I'll be here at ten o'clock."

Once I agree, he leaves the kitchen, and I'm grateful to have a few minutes to calm down. As if on autopilot, I plop myself on one of the chairs and let the tears fall.

I sit there until Audrey comes in and holds my hand. She doesn't say a word, but she's never had to. She's three years older than I am, and she's always been like a big sister to me. Whether it's helping me with my

homework or handling bullies for me on the playground, she's always had my back.

“Come on,” she says. “It's going to be okay. You're the best mom any kid can have. Carter's not going anywhere, and he's always going to love you. Nothing can change that.”

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Chapter 11

DRAKE

For once Wyatt stays quiet, but I can feel his eyes on me. I pretend to be engrossed by looking out the window, but the truth is, I'm barely keeping it together. Leaving her in the kitchen was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, but I know she didn't want to break down in front of me. I wanted to offer her comfort, but she'd never accept it.

I'm also waging a war within myself, and I didn't want her to see the anger brewing inside of me. I can't bear to think of what I discovered today. I need to tackle and deal with it, and I will.

"I'm sorry, Drakey." One of the last things my father ever said to me. I had no idea what he was talking about at the time, but could this be it?

My father is dead. I can't confront him, and I can't demand an explanation. Right now, I need to focus on what I can fix or at least handle. I need to speak with Scarlett. The guilt of letting this go on for weeks hits, and I know she's not going to be happy. Not about me having a child with someone else or with me keeping this from her for over two weeks. She'll stick by me,

though. I know she will. She's been my best support for the past six months, but before I speak to her, there's someone else I need to talk to first.

"Audrey was something," Wyatt says, pulling me out of my thoughts. For once, I'm grateful he's not talking about the shitstorm that my life has turned into. "Don't let her nerdy appearance fool you. She threatened to beat my sorry, baby-stealing ass while you guys were gone." He cackles and pushes his glasses back the same way Audrey did earlier. "She's what? Five foot nothing?" He throws his head back and laughs. "She called me a scuzzy lawyer under her breath." He laughs again, but my mood is much too dark for me to tease him. "I told her I've never stolen a baby before in my life. She wasn't moved."

When I don't respond, he takes the hint and shuts up. I told the driver to take me home, but my father's last words flash through my mind again.

"Bertram," I tell him, "take me to Howard Banks. Right now."



You'd never know Howard Banks is a multimillionaire from the look of his house. It's a plain two-level ranch in a working-class neighborhood. In fact, I seem to remember my dad telling me that this is the same neighborhood that he grew up in. I don't have time to look around once Bertram stops the car. I hop out before he can open my door for me, and Wyatt follows. I don't bother telling him to wait in the car. I know he won't, and he might just be the only thing that stops me from committing assault right now.

The door opens immediately after I knock, and Mary Banks greets me with a warm but questioning smile. I barge in without being invited, only to stop after seeing three young girls watching television in the living room.

“Drake,” Mary says, “what a nice surprise. Can I get you something to—”

I hold my hand up. I glance at the kids, and even in all my anger, I don’t want to cause a scene in front of them. Mary runs a nervous hand through her salt and pepper hair and gestures for me to follow her.

She takes me to the back of the house into a small office. Wyatt follows and closes the door behind us.

“Where is Howard?” I ask, getting right to the point. “I need to speak with him now.”

“He’s on his way to Alaska,” she says. “He’s going ice fishing with our sons and sons-in-law.”

“Get him on the phone. Now,” I say. She almost takes a step back at my sharp tone. Then she catches herself, stands straight, and gives a nervous laugh.

“He’s not going back to work,” she says. “He’s retired.”

“This isn’t about him coming back to work. I need to speak to him.” I bite back the threats I want to make. One thing I know for sure is that if Howard was in cahoots with my father, his wife knows nothing about it. She’s never worked a day in her life, and he treats her like she’s only capable of bearing his children and keeping his home in order.

“He’s on a plane right now,” she says.

Not fully believing her, I find Howard’s cell phone in my contacts. The phone goes directly to voicemail.

“You let your husband know I’m looking for him,” is all I say to her. I head for the door, but Mary runs past me to block it.

“What is this about, Drake? I’ve known you since you were a kid, and you come barging in here looking for Howard. Why?” She wrings her hands while she waits for me to answer.

I take a step closer to her. Wyatt approaches and puts a hand on my arm. I yank it away from him. “It’s come to my attention that your husband did something he shouldn’t have—”

“Whatever he did, it was at the direction of your father,” Mary says. “Whatever this is about, it’s not Howard’s fault—”

“Nevertheless, if he did, he’s going to pay the price.” I go around her and leave the office and her house.



The car pulls up to our palatial estate, and I tell Bertram to stop at the main house. It’s situated in a quiet Boston suburb that’s only about a fifteen-minute drive from our headquarters. I don’t wait for the driver to open the door for me. I let myself out and tell him I won’t be needing him for the rest of the day.

There’s no one around when I go inside. The place is massive, and I don’t see a single employee milling around. Maybe she gave everyone the day off. She’s done that a few times since my father passed. I think she just wants time alone.

The downstairs is darker than it usually is. The only light is what’s coming from outside, and that isn’t much since it’s gray and overcast today. Despite the lack of staff, the place is spotless.

“Mom!” I yell into the empty first floor. The house is over thirty thousand square feet. Since she’s not answering me, I go upstairs to her bedroom. It’s more the size of a large apartment. I knock but don’t hear anything. I turn the doorknob and go in. There’s a room before the actual bedroom. There’s a couch and coffee table, and the walls are bookshelves.

She's not here, so I continue into the bedroom. Unlike the rest of the pristine house, her bedroom is a bit of a mess. There are clothes on a chaise and some have fallen to the floor. I can see her stirring in the bed. I go to her, and she smells awful. There's a half-empty bottle of vodka on her nightstand and an empty glass. I take the bottle, go to the master bathroom, and dump the rest.

By the time I return, she's sitting up in the bed. Her dirty blonde hair is a mess. She tries to run her fingers through it, but they get caught in the tangles. I take her glass, return to the bathroom, rinse it, and fill it with water.

"Drink this," I say to her when I return. She takes a few sips before the glass slips from her hand and lands on her white down comforter.

"Drakey," she slurs, "come lie down with me." She pats the space next to her. "Remember how you'd fall asleep here when you were a kid? Daddy would carry you to your bed, but some nights, I'd tell him to let you stay," She smiles sadly at the memory, but I don't remember any of it. "Why did he have to leave us?" She starts to sob. I sit on the bed and pull her into my arms.

I hold her until her cries subside. I run my hand down her back as I try to soothe and comfort her. I know she feels lost, just like I do. Just like Langley and Hannah, but unlike everyone else, I don't have the luxury of checking out. I have to keep going.

"Get me another drink. I just need to do this today, Drake." She shifts and grabs me by my collar. "I promise I'll do better tomorrow, but today, I drink." Mom's never been much of a drinker outside of a glass of wine or champagne at a party. She's always been poised and well put together. The perfect wife for Donald Paradise. My entire life, they've been in sync,

whether it was through charity work, raising us, or something as simple as the family vacation; they always decided together.

At least that's how I saw it. I still can't believe this story that my father conspired to keep my child from me because of skin color. He didn't care about that. It's not only something he said, but it was in things that he did. He hired everyone regardless of race. There are high-level black executives at Paradise. He's worked with minority and women-owned contractors. What Nia is saying doesn't make sense, but on the rare chance that it's true, did my mother know?

Her sobs subside and she pulls away from me before grabbing my face. She looks into my eyes and I stare back into hers. Her eyes are just like mine, only loving and warm. They've always been.

"There's so much on you, Drakey. We've always had high expectations, but I had hoped you'd have more time. Maybe fall in love. You don't love Scarlett," she says, surprising me. "You're not happy. I wish you'd—"

"Mom," I say, cutting her off. She stops speaking but tears flood her eyes again. "Listen to me." I decide I'm going to ask. She's drunk, and drunk people tend to tell the truth. "Do you know about my son?" I wait for her to either admit or deny it. I wait for her tell, but her thumbnail doesn't go anywhere near her mouth.

She hiccups, drops my face, wipes her nose with the back of her hand, and drops herself on a mountain of pillows.

"You mean Bluey?" she says with a bit of nostalgia. Bluey was a stuffed blue whale I took with me everywhere when I was a kid. It was perfect until Langley ripped it and pulled out the stuffing.

"No, not Bluey, Mom. My son. A boy named Carter." She groans and puts a hand to her head. "Dad knew and kept me from finding out." I still don't

fully believe the words, but I have to know if they're true and if Mother knew.

“What are you going on about, Drakey? Bluey will be good as new. I have the best doctors working on him.” She sits up and cups my face again. She had someone fix Bluey for me. She made it seem like he was having surgery and would be good as new, and he was. Langley was never allowed near him again.

She drops herself back onto the bed and pulls the duvet on top of her. She rolls to her side, sighs, and closes her eyes. I sit there until her breathing evens out. I refill her glass of water and put an Advil bottle next to it. I kiss her forehead, but she doesn't stir, and moments later, she starts to snore.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, scattered across the width of the page.

Chapter 12

DRAKE

Scarlett still isn't home by the time I arrive, and I'm forced to think about the conversation I just had. The only little bit of good news out of this, other than my son, is that Mother didn't know. If my father was behind this, she wasn't a part of the deception. That little bit of knowledge gives me such relief.

I pull the papers Nia gave me out of my jacket pocket, but I can't bring myself to look at them now. I put them in my safe. One thing at a time. Right now, I need to deal with my fiancée. Then I need to get to Howard, but there's a part of me that's relieved not to have the answers. At least not yet.

I stare out the window and look at the big house just a few feet away. The house where I grew up. The house where my parents raised us all to be kind and tolerant human beings. Those weren't just words. Donald Paradise wasn't the type of man who would actively work to keep my child from me. And for what? Because Nia is black? He would never. He believed that any two consenting adults can love and marry whoever they want. He donated money to politicians who also believed that.

I eye the safe, and I'm grateful those papers are in there and away from me. They felt heavy inside my jacket pocket. My dead father can't be behind this. Not the man that I still mourn and miss every single day. Not the man whose counsel I still yearn for. There's got to be another explanation.

I stay in the office until Scarlett's voice pulls me out of my dark thoughts. I'm still standing in the same spot, more confused now than when I saw my son two weeks ago at that arcade.

"Honey," Scarlett's soft voice calls to me. "Where are you, and why are you home right now?" I remain quiet, totally unprepared for what I'm going to tell her.

She finds me two minutes later when she opens the door to my office. My back is to her while I stare out the window at my family home as if I've never seen it before.

"Oh, God, you're scaring me, honey." With rushed steps, she crosses the room and grabs both of my hands. She lifts them and puts them to her face. "You're ice cold. What is it?" She drops my hands and grabs my face. She's tall. She has a few inches on Nia, and despite being a tall man, I never felt comfortable with it. It feels unnatural to have her eyes closer to mine. It feels as if I'm not supposed to be with her, but that doesn't make sense. "Are you sick?" I can hear the panic in her voice and given what we've been through with my father, I put her at ease by shaking my head no. She exhales in relief. She takes my hands again and waits.

That's one of the things I appreciate about Scarlett. It's her ability to listen to an explanation. I take a deep breath and begin. "I don't know quite how to say this, so I'm just going to get to the point." Some of her color disappears. That's hard for her to do since she's so pale already. I brush back her strawberry blonde hair and run my finger over the freckles on her nose. She

doesn't giggle like she normally does. "I found out that I have a son." Any remaining color she had in her face is now wiped away. Her mouth hangs open and she lets out a small sound. "He's three years old, so this happened long before we got together. You know I'm not the type of man who would do that. I'm not a cheater."

She drops my hands and looks around the office. Then one of her hands flies to her hair and she pulls on it. It's a nervous habit of hers that I've noticed.

"What do you mean you have a son? With whom?" Her voice gets higher with each word.

"It's with a woman I had a relationship with a little over four years ago. She worked at Paradise. Things ended and she left the company." She waits for more, but there's nothing more I want to say about my relationship with Nia. That's something only me and her share. That year was the best time of my life. Better than anything I've experienced with Scarlett. If things had worked out differently, it would be Nia here with me. Her and our son. Together.

"And she never told you she had your child? Why did she seek you out now? For money? Is she blackmailing you? How do you even know the child is yours?" She bites her thin bottom lip. I wait for her to meet my eyes like she normally does when we're having a discussion, but she won't. In fact, she gives me her back as she runs a shaky hand through her hair.

"It's my child. There was a paternity test, but honestly, Scarlett. I didn't need it. He looks like me. I felt something when I saw him."

"When you saw him? When was that, and why do you sound so cryptic? Did you go seeking this whore out?"

I take a step closer to her, take her elbow, and spin her around. "Don't you ever call her that. She's nothing like that, do you hear me?" Her eyes widen

in shock, and I drop her arm. I don't know if her shock is from my defense of Nia or from grabbing her. From Scarlett's point of view, neither is a good choice,

"Don't ever grab me and don't you defend this greedy whore to me!" she yells.

"I said don't call her that!" Scarlett takes a step back at my rebuke. "She's neither of those things." If she wanted money, she could have gone public with this. Three thousand a month is less than nothing. It's a slap in the face, and I wonder what the hell my father was thinking when he gave her that pittance. *If* he's behind this. "No, I didn't seek her out. It was fate." She takes another step away from me. "It happened when we went to your nephew's birthday party."

"You're kidding me! The party I had to drag you to kicking and screaming?" She throws her head back and lets out a loud humorless laugh. She laughs so hard and for so long that she sounds maniacal. "If that's not the biggest fucking irony of all," she whispers almost to herself. I cringe. I hate the F-word, and she knows it. "That was over two weeks ago, Drake. You've been dealing with this for over two weeks, and you never said a word? Am I in this relationship or am I just an accessory for your arm? Do you need a wife, or do you only need me when it's time for a charity or social event? A fucking child of all things." I reach for her but she swats my hand away. She comes closer and pounds her fists on my chest. I take it until she tires herself out. "Go to hell."

She makes for the door, but I snatch her wrist and pull her to me. "This changes nothing between us," I tell her.

"Are you delusional? Everything changes. Every goddamn thing. You have a child. You'll have to have a relationship with his mother. You'll expect me

to be a stepmother.”

“Yes, that’s true. Is that too much for you? If it is—”

“I’m not going to play the role of stepmother while I’m just a live-in girlfriend. You want me to take this on?” I nod at her. Of course I do. I asked her to marry me. I want to spend my life with her. “Fine. I will, but we need to set a date. Today. I want the first Saturday of September. That gives us less than five months, but I can get it done. That’s what I want. You can’t expect me to play the role of wife when I’m not your wife. I will not be your laughingstock, Drake.”

It’s me who drops her wrist as if it burns my hand to touch her. I take two big steps back, unsure of what I’m hearing. “You’re using this as leverage to set a wedding date?”

“No. I’m asking my fiancé, the man who got on one knee and asked me to marry him, to set a wedding date. The man who is supposed to love me.” She points at herself. “You gave me this ring a year ago. I wanted to set a date then. I want to set it now. It’s not too much to ask. After all, you proposed to me, not the other way around.”

It’s *not* too much to ask. She’s been patient. Beyond understanding. She’s stood by me through everything, and now I drop this on her lap. How can I ask her to be a stepmother if I won’t marry her?

“Okay,” I capitulate. “Set whatever date you want.” I thought she would be happy and fly into my arms, but she shakes her head in disbelief. I reach for her, but she doesn’t come. “It happened before us—”

“I don’t need a timeline. You kept this from me for two and a half weeks. Now you tell me you have an illegitimate child as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. How much time have you spent with her and this child? How much shit have you done behind my back?” She says the world child

with venom, and that surprises me. Scarlett has always loved children. I'm the one who has always kept them at a distance. Until I set eyes on my son.

"I saw her twice. I saw her this morning, and she's agreed to let me meet him on Sunday. And illegitimate? What is this? A Bridgerton episode? Don't call him that again."

"Sunday? My father's birthday is on Sunday. We're supposed to go skiing in Vermont this weekend." I run a hand over my face. I had forgotten all about that, and even if I had remembered, meeting my son trumps everything. "It's fine," she says before I can answer. "I won't go. He'll understand. I'll throw a dinner party here for him next week."

I grab both her hands and she doesn't pull away. "I want you to go. I want to do this alone. At least the first meeting. He's only three, and I don't want to overwhelm him with too many people."

She yanks her hands away. "Too many people? I'm your damn fiancée. I'm not people. Go to hell." She storms out of the office and slams the door behind her. I stand there, not ready to go after her yet. She's not wrong, but I still don't want her there. I want to bond with Carter. I don't want to have to worry about Scarlett too. I also don't want her to meet Nia yet, especially not after the names she called her.

After about twenty minutes, I go to look for her. She's not on the first floor, so I go upstairs toward the master bedroom. I hear her on the phone. "I'm so glad you can come on board as my wedding planner. The date is September second. Can we meet tomorrow to discuss?" And just like that, her anger is gone. At least for the moment. I'm sure she's only putting up a brave face for the person on the phone.

I open the door and lean against the wall. She gives me her back when she sees me. When she ends the call, she says, "I'm going back to the office."

I block the door and say, “Are we okay?” I already know that we are judging from the phone call. I expected her anger, but I didn’t expect her to use this as an opportunity to get me to do what she wants.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Of course, you have a choice, Scar.”

“Really? What are my choices here?” She crosses her arms. I look away and remain quiet. “Either accept this or lose you. I don’t want to lose you. As angry as I am with you for fathering a child and keeping it from me for as long as you did, I still love you. I always have. So, no. I don’t have a choice.”

I look back into her eyes and some of the fire that I’ve gotten used to is there. There’s nothing I can say. She has always loved me, or so she says. I’ve known her all her life. We grew up together. She’s only two years younger than me, and she’s always wanted me, but I never felt the same way. At least not until a couple of years ago when she was the distraction I needed to move on from Nia. She was here, and she was familiar. She was safe, and my heart was in no danger of being broken by her.

“I never meant for this to happen,” I tell her.

“Then maybe you should have used a condom. Please move.” I step out of the way. She storms out and slams the door behind her.

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Chapter 13

DRAKE

I've barely slept since I left her house yesterday. I know I'm not going to sleep tonight. In less than ten hours, I'm going to meet my son. In a way, it was good luck that Scarlett had plans for the weekend. Things have been tense since I told her the news, so maybe the time apart will be good for us both. I need this time to focus on Carter as he's become the most important thing in my life.

I pick up my phone and stare at the pictures my private eye took of him on Friday. He's playing with a little girl and is pushing her on a swing. He's absolutely perfect, and I love him so much already.

I do worry about how he'll take the news. He already has a father figure, and I know Ray Nash is a decent man. Nia talked about him with me when we were together.

You were never together. You both were just scratching an itch.

I will go to my grave not believing that. From the moment we met, we had something.

Then

“Dad, are you for real?” I let out a belly laugh. “I’m not going to human resources. I’ve worked here before and HR should come to me.” I wave him off, but he doesn’t seem amused.

“You’re going. There are over one hundred new people starting today. You will spend the next three hours at new hire orientation.”

“That’s ridiculous, not to mention a waste of time. Time I could be working.” He shakes his head and gets a look in his eyes. I know what’s coming. He’s about to lecture me on the responsibilities of being a Paradise. His main rule is that we do not get preferential treatment because of our last name.

I tune him out while he gives the familiar speech, but now I know there is no way I’m going to get out of this. I have to go to a presentation that includes a tour of the building and its different departments. I know this company and this building like the back of my hand. I could give a tour blindfold. There’s no way anyone in HR knows this company and its history better than I do, but I’ll do as my dad says. He’s the boss. Not only that, I also respect him. Besides, he says he won’t let me log in until I come back.

I bid him farewell and go find the elevator. I’m already ten minutes late, and by the time I make it to the third floor, I must jog to the HR offices.

There’s a middle-aged Asian man sitting behind the reception desk. From the look of fear and awe in his eyes, he knows who I am. There were also several emails in the past few weeks announcing my start date. I wanted to take the summer off and start in September, but Dad gave me a start date of July fourteenth.

“I’m Dan,” he says, extending his hand to me. I give him a firm shake and a head nod. “The presentation has already started. Just go through those

double doors.” He points down the hall, and after saying goodbye, I walk away.

The room is full, and the older man talking in front of the group stalls when he sees me. Yup. He knows who I am too. I look away, hoping he’ll continue so that no one will turn to look at me. Thankfully, he does just that. Since the room is full and there are no seats available, I lean against the wall and prepare myself to be bored to death. I hope I don’t fall asleep, keel over, and make a fool of myself and my family’s company.

The first speaker is as dry as unbuttered toast, but I manage to keep my eyes open. After about twenty minutes, he announces he’s going to pass the mic to someone by the name of Nia Nash, who will go over the different benefits packages of Paradise Construction.

I know all about that too. There’s no need for me to be here, but Dad insists that employees with the last name Paradise act like every other employee. I prepare myself for another half hour of torture when I see a small figure stand and take the makeshift stage. She looks nervous as he passes her a microphone. All I can see from here is her profile, so I stand straighter and stare ahead, suddenly interested in this presentation.

She clears her throat and faces forward. I imagine this is what an out-of-body experience would be like. I’ve never seen a more beautiful creature in my life. She’s perfection. From here, I can see her clear brown skin. Her skin looks soft like rose petals. Her big brown eyes are surrounded by long and thick eyelashes. Her hair is short, a layered bob with the longest pieces barely touching her ears, and she has it parted in the middle. She looks young, but I know everyone who works in HR has at least a four-year college degree. Some even have a Master’s.

She takes a deep breath and smiles. I know in that moment, my world will

never be the same. She looks around the room, and even from more than fifty feet away, I know she sees me. Our eyes lock and the room goes deathly quiet. She has full, kissable lips. She's in a lavender pantsuit, and I find that I like it. It makes her stand out. She's in a small little package, and even with the high heels she's wearing, I know she's not very tall.

"Good morning," she says. I take one step forward before I stop myself. She's talking to the entire room, not just me. "I'm Nia Nash, and I'll be discussing the good stuff with you this morning. We're going to talk about vacation days, health plans, and the many other benefits that Paradise offers. Trust me, there are tons of them." The room claps, and so do I. "Please hold all questions until the end."

I listen to every word as if it's all brand-new information. Several times during her presentation, she puts a piece of hair behind her ear, but it's so short, it won't stay. She's a great presenter, unlike her dry predecessor. She's funny and engaging. She mispronounced a word at one point and laughed so hard at herself, she snorted. When she laughs her nose scrunches, and it's the most adorable thing I've ever seen.

She takes questions at the end, but I'm too awestruck to raise my hand. Besides, I don't want to draw attention to myself.

The next speaker does things a little differently. He eyes me from the back of the room, and from the nervous gleam in his eyes, I know he's going to out me.

"You new hires are very lucky. You have the honor of starting on the same day as Mr. Drake Paradise." He points to me in the back, and I try not to look annoyed. Nia's head whips around and our eyes lock again. I think understanding dawns and she looks away. I can hear her clear her throat

from here. “Mr. Paradise, since you missed the first few minutes, please let me introduce the HR team again.”

Now that sounds promising. As he introduces himself, I walk to the front of the room and shake his hand. She’s the last person to be introduced. I’m told she’s the HR manager. I stop breathing when I finally get to touch her. I wrap my large hand around her small one. I look down and force myself not to kiss the back of her hand, but I can feel a wave of electricity practically course through my body.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Paradise.” I don’t speak. I’m too lost in her eyes to talk. I squeeze her hand, and I swear I hear her whimper. She feels it too, but when she squeezes my hand back, I’m certain of it.

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Chapter 14

NIA

The bitter cold doesn't affect me like it normally does. An arctic blast of wind smacks me in the face, whipping my hair around and blocking my vision of the quiet street. I've been standing on the porch for the past ten minutes. Carter's been staring out the window for the past nine and a half.

I don't know if he's excited or nervous. When I told him I had a friend coming over to meet him, he shrugged and barely showed any interest. He's met my friends before, but he doesn't know this is different. At least he didn't at first. My plan was to bring it up again and explain why this friend would be different, but that's not what happened,

"Why are you saying your friend, Auntie Nia? Isn't this person Carter's father?" Mason drops the news, and the entire house goes quiet.

"I have a daddy?" Carter whispers in awe.

"Everyone has a dad, dummy," Mason says.

"Boy, hush," Ray says. "And didn't I tell you to stay out of grown folks' business? Go to your room."

"Carter's not grown. He's a baby."

“I’m not a baby.” To prove his point, Carter pushes Mason’s legs.

“Go, Mason!” Ray yells.

Mason apologized after a stern talk from Ray, but the truth is, I’m grateful to my nephew. He did something I was too much of a coward to do. I thought I’d have more time to tell my son about his father. My plan was to see a professional about how to handle it, but Drake took that away from me too.

Audrey and Ray’s advice was to just tell him. He’s young and he’ll adjust, and so far, they were right. He’s been bouncing off the wall with excitement since Mason dropped the news last night. But before I let Drake through my front door, I need to have a chat with him first. Someone taps on the window and it’s Carter and Kyle. They both wave and grin when I turn around. Normally, I’d laugh at Kyle since his two front teeth are still missing, but not today. Today, the best I can do is offer a fake smile and an unenthusiastic wave back. I hope Carter’s buying it. If he senses I’m upset, it will become his mission to make me feel better. He won’t care that today is about him. My baby is an empath.

I gesture for them to move from the window, but they don’t budge. Thankfully, Ray comes and takes them away.

A sleek black car finally rolls down the street. There’s only one person this can belong to, and it’s Drake. I can only hope that he’s come alone and didn’t bring his fiancée. Carter should only have to deal with one person today, and I pray that Drake is sensitive enough to have figured that out. He parks across the street. My heart sinks in disappointment when both front doors open, but I feel a small sense of relief when I see Wyatt and not Scarlett.

I still remember when I read the news about their engagement. I stuff that aside. Today is not about that. Besides, those two deserve each other.

He crosses the street. He looks tired, but that's not my problem. Maybe he wouldn't be tired if he didn't force his way into my life. As tired as he is, he's still the most handsome man I've ever seen. He's so incredibly tall that even in heels, I'd always have to look up at him.

“What do you think you're doing, Ms. Nash? This is a place of business,” he says while I unbutton his crisp white shirt. He pulls my hands away and goes to the other side of the office.

“I'm about to climb you like a tree.” I run into his arms. He catches me and I wrap my legs around him right as my mouth lands on his.

I bury that memory too, but even in the frigid cold, that thought is enough to set my body on fire. He gets to the front steps with his damn lawyer behind him. So much for Wyatt's lies when he was here the other day.

His footsteps become louder and louder as he climbs the stairs. With each step he takes, my heart sinks lower. Soon, he stands in front of me, and I wrap my arms around myself to stop the pull. Even after all this time and all this anger, I still want to be wrapped up in him. But he's not mine. He never was.

“Nia,” he says. “Good morning.”

I crane my neck and look into his face, but I avoid his eyes. I clear my throat and prepare to utter the words I've practiced but I don't remember them. So, I improvise.

“Listen,” I start. I block his way to the front door. His neutral expression vanishes.

“We had an agreement,” he states.

“I know. I’m not reneging. I want to say something first.” He exhales in relief and waits. “I’ve told him who you are and that you’re coming today. If you upset him, it’s done and you have to leave.”

“I would never—”

I hold my hand up. “I practice gentle parenting. I don’t yell at, berate, or belittle my kid. I praise everything he does that’s good, and I correct behaviors that need to be corrected, but always in a loving way. That’s all he knows. If you can’t do that, we’re going to have a problem.”

“I’m not an ogre, Nia,” is all he says. “Can I please go inside and meet my son?”

I want to yell that Carter is *my* son, but I don’t. I look at Wyatt. He’s dressed casually in jeans and sneakers, but I don’t buy that he’s here as a friend like he claims. “Why is he here?” I point at him.

“I didn’t ask him,” Drake says.

“Well, that hurts.”

“He’s here as my friend. That’s it,” Drake says.

I still don’t buy it, but I don’t respond. Resigned, I tell them to follow me. I push the front door open. When I step inside, I feel like my spirit has left my body and I’m looking down at myself from above.

Drake’s steps come to an abrupt stop. I don’t think he was prepared for a full house. My parents are here. So are my brother and nephews. Audrey is leaning against the wall with her arms crossed while she looks on.

“Come here, baby,” I say to Carter. The excitement he’s had since he learned the news is safely tucked away. It’s still there, but he’s put it aside until he knows it’s safe to take it back out. He walks slowly to me with his head down. I take his little hand in mine. “Remember I told you that you’d be meeting your father today?”

With his head still down, he says, “Yes, Mommy.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light-colored, stylized flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, watercolor-like style. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 15

DRAKE

I don't think I've breathed since I stepped through the front door. The crowd was a surprise, but I can't worry about them right now. If the expression on their faces is an indicator, I already know what they think of me, but they're wrong. I'd never turn my back on my child or Nia.

"Well, here he is," Nia says. I take a step closer and crouch down. I'm still too tall to be at eye level with him, but I hope this makes me more approachable. Nia lets go of his hand, and I wait to see what he does next. He takes two slow steps and stops in front of me. He looks into my eyes, and I swear I hear the heavens sing. This is akin to how I felt when I first laid eyes on his mother but also very different. Just like with his mother, my heart starts to beat erratically, but it beats to a different tune for him.

"Carter's dad is white?" I think it's the eight-year-old who asks that.

"He is?" Carter asks, looking into my eyes. "Wow. What does that mean?"

"Hi, Carter." I keep my voice low, gentle. The last thing I want is for Nia to accuse me of being rough and try to throw me out.

“Are you my daddy?” His little voice is like music. He hangs his head down after asking that question. I wonder if it’s because he’s scared of the answer.

“I am,” I tell him. If he asks me where I’ve been, I don’t know what I’ll say. He’s three. He won’t care that I didn’t know about him, or that none of this is my fault. But I needn’t worry. He runs into my arms and wraps them around me. I do the same and squeeze his little body.

I hear someone sob, and I realize it’s me, but I don’t care. I stand with him in my arms, and I swear I never want to let him go. He pulls away and looks into my face. “Hi.” He giggles and waves his little hand. “That’s my papa and my grandma.” He points at the older couple who are scowling deeply at me. “That’s Uncle Ray. That’s Mason. He’s cool, and Kyle is my best friend. That’s Audrey, and she takes us to Tarbucks,” he says, pointing at her. After he introduces me to everyone, he says, “Come see my room.” I put him down. He takes my hand and pulls me out of the room and away from everyone’s hostility.

Nia follows, but she doesn’t say a word. He pulls me into a room with a Spiderman bed and sheets. The entire room is filled with Spiderman things.

“I see you like Spiderman,” I tell him. He flicks his wrist like he’s casting a spiderweb. I pretend to get caught in it and fall on the floor. He laughs so hard, he snorts. He’s unguarded just like his mother, and I fall even more in love with my son. Then he throws himself on the floor and starts to roll around.

“Do you want to see pictures of me when I was small? Mason calls me a baby, but I told him I’m big.” He jumps up and runs out of the room before I can answer. I sit up and wait for him. I look up into the hostile eyes of Nia.

“Don’t hurt my son.” Her voice comes off like a warning, and it stings.

“He’s my son too. Stop referring to him as just yours,” I tell her.

“Go to hell.” She enters the room, and I know she’s ready for a showdown, but Carter comes running back with his cousin behind him holding a big photo album. I sit up, but I get the surprise of my life when Carter sits on my lap and Mason hands me the album.

The first page is of a very pregnant Nia with her belly exposed. She’s smiling, but there’s sadness in her eyes. The picture is captioned ‘on the way to the hospital.’ I’d give anything to go back in time and be the one to take her.

“Come, Mommy.” He holds out his hand to Nia. “You have to tell Daddy the stowies.” He gestures for her to come in. She stands there like a deer in headlights. I pat the spot next to me.

“I don’t bite,” I tell her. She looks down at me and looks into my eyes. She subconsciously licks her lips, and I know that she’s remembering that I do bite. And so does she.

She comes toward us as if I’m a bomb that might detonate. She sits close, but she makes sure our bodies don’t touch. Despite Carter wanting his mother there to tell the stories, he doesn’t give her a chance to speak. He talks nonstop, telling me a story about each picture. I glance at Nia who smiles wistfully at some of the pictures but looks away at some as if they’re too painful to look at.

“Look.” He points to what I’m sure is his first Halloween. “I was a peanut, but I wanted to be Piderman.”

“Oh, really? You remember that?” Nia giggles at him.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized, light-colored flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, rounded shapes. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 16

NIA

I finally manage to leave the room and give Carter and Drake some time alone. Carter didn't complain when I left. He seems to be quite at ease with his father. The thought almost makes me want to weep. My mom meets me in the middle of the hallway and takes me into her arms.

"It's okay, baby. It's okay. Be strong." She cups my face. She's an older version of me. "If you want, I'll go in there and kick his sorry ass all over this neighborhood. I don't give a damn what his name is or how much money he has."

"Maybe when the kids aren't around, but I appreciate you. Where's Daddy?" If I have to worry about anyone making a scene, it's my dad, but even he wouldn't do it around the boys.

"He's out there rolling his eyes at that fool. Talking all that nonsense to the boys. He's like a kid in a grownup's body." I'm not sure what fool she's talking about, but the only other non-relative in this house is Wyatt.

Wyatt is standing in the middle of the living room with the two boys looking up at him in awe. Audrey is still in her position against the wall with

her arms crossed. She's rolled her eyes twice already.

"Trust me, men. If you have the choice to be turned into a vampire or werewolf, always choose the vampire. No girl will ever choose a werewolf. I know what I'm talking about." Mason is grinning from ear to ear, and Kyle is looking at him like he just delivered an important sermon.

"Mason likes girls," Kyle says almost as if he's disgusted. "He says he wants to kiss them."

Mason blushes, but he shoves Kyle. "No, I don't," he says, but some color has crept up his neck.

"Because you read *Twilight*, you're an authority on werewolves versus vampires?" Audrey asks. She moves away from the wall while pushing her glasses back into place.

"Not just *Twilight*, though I read and saw the movies. With my little sister. Not because I wanted to. Also, *True Blood*. Don't forget about Anne Rice," he tells Audrey.

"Anne Rice? I don't remember a werewolf chasing Lestat around New Orleans. She never wrote about werewolves. You are an authority on nothing, sir."

"Alice picks her nose and eats it," Kyle says. "Girls are gross."

"And Alice is how old?" Wyatt asks. He taps his finger on his chin as if he's in deep thought.

"Five," Kyle says. "And she tried to hug me, but I pushed her."

"Well, give her about eight to ten years. She probably won't be so gross then," he tells Kyle.

"Yes, she will," he insists.

"Wrong lesson. The lesson, Kyle, is not to push girls," Audrey insists.

"Hey! She tried to hug him against his will. My man Kyle has the right to

defend himself.” He turns back to the boys. “Men, we’re in the fight for our lives against these girls. I’ve had many chase me when I was a boy too. Let me show you the best ways to avoid capture.” He stomps both feet and makes a stance like a sumo wrestler. Both boys copy him, and I turn away and go to the kitchen. I’m itching for a drink but not now. Not while he’s here. Drinking around him is dangerous.

“You’re a silly little drunk.” I run behind him and slide my hand up his T-shirt. I slide upward, enjoying the hard feel of his stomach.

“Baby, if you give it to me, I’ll give it to you.” I do my best Mariah Carey impersonation. His body shakes.

“And the worst singer I’ve ever heard,” he says. He turns to face me. I slam my body into his and splay my hand across his broad chest.

“If you think that’s bad, wait until you hear this part.” I clear my throat before I resume my singing. “I will climb a mountain high.” I sing at the top of my lungs. Even to me, it’s horrible. I don’t get a chance to say any more words before he silences me with a kiss.

“You want to sing, baby girl? I’ll make you sing.” He carries me into the bedroom, drops me on the bed, and climbs on top of me. He was right. He made me sing for hours.

“I’m gonna grab some water and wait for Carter in the kitchen.” At this rate, I don’t know how long they’ll be, but my son is not ready to see his father go. The very idea that he can barge back into my life and threaten me with lawyers to get his way infuriates me. There’s so much I will never forgive him for, and that one is toward the top of the list.

I think back to the day we met. If I had known where that would lead, would I have done anything differently? The answer is a hard no. I can't imagine a world without my child in it.

Mom follows me into the kitchen and grabs me a bottle of water. I try to suppress the memory but the day I met Drake won't leave me.

Then

We all high-five when the last of the new hires leave our floor. We have a spacious office that takes up a quarter of the third floor. As one of the managers, I have my own office.

"I'm ordering pizza for everyone," Paul, my manager says. We all cheer and he skips to his office. "Good job today, everyone," he calls behind him. While the rest of the staff straightens our conference room, I return to my office to check my emails. I grab a glazed doughnut along the way.

I was so nervous about presenting this morning, I wasn't able to eat. Now that the stress is behind me, my stomach won't stop growling. As soon as I step inside the closed confines of my office, I sink my teeth into the doughnut.

While my mouth is still full, there's a loud knock on my door. Whoever it is, opens it before I can tell them to come in.

It's him. Drake Paradise. The man who watched my every move for the past two and a half hours. Somehow, I knew he'd be back. I just didn't know it would be this soon.

"Ms. Nash," he says. His voice is as deep as I remember, and I crane my neck to look into his ocean blue eyes.

"Nia," I say with my mouth still full. I swallow the doughnut and wash it down with my water from this morning. He crosses the room and stands on the other side of my desk. He looks at me without saying a word. I stare back,

unsure of what to do or say. “You said to come find you if I had any questions.”

I didn’t say that to him specifically. I said it to the room, and I said contact me. Not find me, but I don’t correct him. You don’t correct anyone by the name of Paradise.

“Uh, do you have a question, Mr. Paradise?”

“Mr. Paradise is my dad. I’m Drake.” He stares into my eyes again, leans closer, and wipes the corner of my mouth. “Icing,” he says as if it’s the most natural thing in the world for him to put his finger so close to my mouth. He looks down at the ball of his thumb, then puts it in his mouth and sucks it. “Mmhmm.”

My mouth hangs open and his eyes lock with mine. I put a hand to my throat, and the office suddenly feels stifling. “Um, your question, Drake...” I find that I like the sound of his name.

“I was wondering if you could help me put my information in the system. I want to make sure I get it in right,” he says. He lowers his voice as he says it and walks to my side of the desk. He stands so close that I can smell his cologne. I inhale and take him in. God, he smells good.

Did he mean to say get it in or was that a slip of the tongue? I clear my throat, determined not to give that particular question any more thought.

“Of course. I’ll need two forms of identification.” He pulls out his wallet and hands me his driver’s license and social security card. He pulls out my chair for me, and when I sit, he grabs another chair and sits so close, I swear, he’ll be able to hear the beating of my heart. I let out a little giggle when I look at his license.

“You’re not laughing at my picture, are you? It rained that morning, and I had a bad hair day.” He inches closer. Now, I can smell his shampoo too.

“It’s not that.” But I do look at his hair. It’s cut short just like in the picture. “We have the same birthday. Not the year, but the day.” I clear my throat, feeling silly for saying that.

“Do we?” He drapes an arm across the back of my chair. “I bet we have a lot more in common.” He has private school and private plane written all over him.

“I doubt it. So, uh, this is the database. On second thought, you should have gotten sign-in instructions so you can set up your profile and fill out all the new hire information. It’s pretty self-explanatory once you log in.”

“You know what, Nia? I’m clueless about these kinds of things. Can you meet me in my office later and show me? I’ll give you a call when I’m ready.” Stunned speechless, all I do is nod like a dummy. He grabs a sticky note and a pen. “Write your number here.” I scrawl my office number and wonder why he can’t just look it up in the directory.

“Just dial the last four digits to get my extension.” I point at my phone. “You can also send me an email.” I write my work email address below my extension and give him the sticky note.

“How about your cell phone?”

“I don’t have a work cell, only a personal,” I tell him. He stares into my eyes and hands me back the pen and paper.

I take it and write my cell phone number down because when the future CEO of the company you work for asks you for your number, you give it to him. Once he takes the paper from me, he pulls out his own phone and types something. My phone buzzes in my top drawer. I open it and pull it out.

It’s a text, and all it says is, ‘It’s Drake. Call or text me anytime.’

“I’ll see you later.” He stands and walks out of my office, leaving me feeling flustered and unbalanced, but strangely intrigued.

Now

“Mommy!” Carter comes running into the kitchen like the house is on fire. He jumps on my lap and into my arms. “Daddy says he has presents and went to get them in the car.”

Of all the things I told Drake, I forgot to tell him not to spoil Carter. He’s already spoiled enough by other members of my family. All he has to do is ask, and he receives, but unlike Drake, my family doesn’t have unlimited amounts of money.

I wish instead of going to get presents, he’d get in his car, drive away, and never return. At least that’s my wish until I look at my son’s face and see his smile. He’s already infatuated with his father. If Drake were to leave now, it would hurt Carter, and that I can’t have.

A few seconds later, I hear the other boys talking over each other. It’s not a fight though. This is excitement. So, I carry Carter to the living room just in time to see Drake return with two big shopping bags.

“I got stuff for you boys too. Everything’s labeled with your name.” Carter kicks his legs and I put him down. I expect him to make a mad dash for the bags, but he doesn’t. He goes and wraps himself around Drake’s legs. He picks him up, and my son kisses him on the cheeks and hugs him tight.

I look away. I’ve always wanted this for my child, but I’ve been so angry toward Drake for so long, I don’t know how to process it now that it’s here. So, I don’t. At least not right now. I turn away from it all and walk toward the kitchen.

“Nia, can I speak with you for a minute?” Drake asks. I stop midstep. I don’t know when he decided to follow me, but he’s behind me. He’s so close I can feel him breathing.

Audrey, who's still leaning against the wall hears him. She's by my side in an instant.

"In private," he adds.

"I don't recommend that, Nia," Audrey says. "Remember he can't be trusted."

"Please, don't talk about me like I'm not here," I tell Audrey, annoyed by her presence and unfair characterization of me.

"This is a friendly meeting." I don't know when Wyatt got so close, but he's behind me too. I finally turn to face them.

"Friendly, my ass," Audrey says under her breath.

"Wyatt is here as a friend. I didn't even want him to come," Drake says.

"Then why is he here?" Audrey shakes her head in disbelief.

"It's okay," I tell my cousin. "Let's talk in the backyard," I say to Drake. "If I need you, Audrey, I'll yell." I grab my coat and tell Drake to follow me. I go to the back of the house, through the kitchen, and out the back door. Audrey and Wyatt follow, but they don't come outside. They both watch through the sliding glass door.

The weather hasn't gotten any warmer. If anything, the winds are even more unforgiving. I zip up my long black coat, put on my hood, and wrap my arms around myself.

"Today has been wonderful. Thank you for that," he says. He surprises me. I didn't expect a thank you, so I bite back my rebuke and don't remind him that he's only here because he threatened to take me to court. "He's a wonderful little boy. So smart and sweet. Very loving. His sweetness reminds me of how you used to be."

I take a step back at the audacity of this jerk. "First off," I begin, "I know he's smart. I know he's kind, and I know he's loving. You want to know how

I know? I know because I've been here since he came into the world." I point at myself. "Even before that. I carried him. I've loved him since I knew he was a possibility. I don't need you to condescend to me about things I already know." I turn and give him my back.

"You think I would have missed this if I had known? I've lost out on three years. Three years that I can never get back because you couldn't bother to find me and tell me you were pregnant with my baby. And don't you turn your back on me," he orders.

I turn to face him, not because he told me to, but because I want to see the audacity in his eyes.

"Liar!" I yell in his face. "You liar. You think I typed those letters on my own? It's there in black and white. You wanted nothing to do with us. Admit it. Now you've changed your mind and you're rewriting history. Own up to what you did." I look him up and down before looking away.

"You think I'm the type of man who would do that?"

"All I know is you haven't been here for the past three years other than those monthly child support payments. If there was a way for me to contact you, I could have told you that I don't need it. And you're only here, Paradise, because you threatened to take me to court. You know I don't have the resources to fight you, so you threatened me. That's the type of man you are."

"That's complete bull. Do you hear yourself? We spent almost every day together for twelve months. How did I treat you for all that time? It must not have been too bad because you kept coming back. And before you open your mouth to spew more lies, I put you on a pedestal. I cared about you. I thought of nothing but you since I laid eyes on you. There was no one else for me,

and then you pull the rug out from under *me* and disappear. You blocked me from your life.”

I clap slowly and dramatically. “And the Academy goes to....” I give him my back again, but I say, “Yeah, you put me on a pedestal,” I scoff. “You took me to a penthouse no one knew you owned. You talked about me to no one. Those dinners or parties your family seemed to have every week? I never got an invitation. Those high society charity events? I was never your plus one. I was your dirty little black secret.”

“Now, who deserves an Academy Award? My dirty little black secret? Get the hell out of here with that shit. That’s offensive. I took you everywhere. We took trips. We went to dinners where we held hands and fed each other. I taught you how to drive. We were together all the time in public where anyone could see us. You were never a secret. And what about me? Was I your dirty white secret because I sure as hell don’t remember getting any invitations to your family’s house for anything? I’d hear all about it the next day, but I was never included. Or better yet, you’d leave me at your apartment on Sundays so you could go to church and have dinner with your family. Remember those times?”

I turn just in time to see some hurt in his eyes. “Did you want to be included?”

“Yes,” he says without a moment’s hesitation.

“That’s all water under the bridge,” I say. “What did you want to talk about? Are you going to take me to court and take my son away from me?” I stand straighter, ready for a fight. Fighting with him, I can do. What I refuse to do is look back on all the mistakes we made all those years ago. What would it have changed? He still abandoned me when I was pregnant with his baby.

“You think I’m some kind of monster, don’t you?” When I remain quiet, he says, “So, I guess you don’t believe me when I tell you I never got your messages or that I didn’t send those texts? I wasn’t behind the cease-and-desist letter either. Well, I don’t believe you tried to contact me. You knew where to find me. You think being pregnant with my baby would make you put in more effort than a few text messages.” This time it’s him who scoffs.

“If rewriting history makes you feel better, go ahead. That won’t change the facts. Why did you call me out here? The sound of your voice is giving me a headache.”

He pulls an envelope out of his pocket and hands it to me. I brace myself and expect him to serve me with a custody lawsuit, but that’s not what this is. It’s a form to request a name change. Confused, I stare at him, not understanding what this means.

“He’s a Paradise, and I want him to have my last name,” he orders. I flip to the next page, and it’s a list of pre-schools. “All of those schools are a million times better than the shitty one you have him enrolled at. Pick one. I know they are a bit out of the way, so his driver will come by and pick him up for school.”

That’s a side of Drake Paradise I remember. Authoritative, decisive, and downright bossy. No one is to question him. That’s how he was raised, I guess. His word goes, but that’s never worked with me. His word doesn’t mean shit here.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“You heard me. I’m not going to repeat myself.” I’m not going to repeat myself. That’s another one of his favorite sayings. I’ve heard him say that many times to an employee.

I look at the papers again, walk closer to him, rip them in half, and throw

them in his face, but the wind blows them away. At that exact moment, Audrey and Wyatt walk out.

“I knew he couldn’t be trusted,” Audrey says. She runs off the porch to retrieve the torn papers. “I knew you were lying. You think you can just walk in here and take a little boy from his mother?”

Wyatt follows her. He’s faster and gets the papers before she can, but she snatches them from him.

While they fight over torn pieces of paper, I point my index finger in Drake’s face. “You elitist, entitled jerk.” He bristles at that. “Don’t you *ever* question how I raise my son. Who the hell are you to come here and make any kinds of demands? I wish to God you had stayed away.”

“I’m doing no such thing, and for the record, he’s my son too. I want the best for him. Did I wrongly assume that you do as well?” He has the nerve to point in my face. I knock his hand away.

“Two things. One, I’m not changing his name. He’s Carter Nathaniel Nash. If you wanted him to have your name, maybe you shouldn’t have been a deadbeat. Two, get the hell out of my face and out of my house.”

I walk past him and go back inside. The living room is now a mess with opened packages and various toys strewn about. My mom and dad are putting together a small table. I return to the kitchen in search of a trash bag when Audrey walks in.

“It’s not a lawsuit,” she says, taking a big, relieved breath. “I was dying to tell him to take his list of pre-schools and shove it where the sun don’t shine, and to take his lawyer with him.”

If I say a word, I’m going to burst into tears, so I yank a trash bag out of the box and return to the living room to pick up after the boys.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized, light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, muted tone. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 17

DRAKE

“What the hell were you thinking? If you had told me this was your plan, I would have told you to dial it back. You’re unbelievable, man.” Wyatt shakes his head at me in disbelief.

“Why does everything have to be a fight with her?” I run my hand through my hair. “She was never like that before.”

“You mean before when you were having wild sex without consequences? Well, no consequences for you. Look, you can’t just waltz in there all these years later and start calling the shots. She’s been doing it on her own for three years. This,” he says, holding up the torn paper, “is an insult. She’s doing the best she can with what she has. You can’t barge in and hand her a list of fifty-thousand-dollar schools. What world do you live in?”

“Well, I don’t expect her to pay for them. I will. These schools are better.”

“Drake, the kid is three. He colors outside the lines and takes a nap. These expensive ass schools aren’t doing anything all that different. Relax. You just got here.”

“What makes you such an expert? You don’t have any kids. You have no girlfriend. You don’t even have a goldfish.”

“I’m a kid of divorced parents, and my dad was an asshole. He was barely there. Hardly gave a shit but felt it was his right to tell the parent who was doing all the work how to do it.”

“I’m not an asshole,” I tell him. “And I don’t need you here.” He showed up at my house first thing this morning and insisted on coming with me. I tried to talk him out of it but couldn’t.

“You do, and I’m going to be your friend whether you want it or not. Forget this.” He waves the papers around. “They don’t matter. At least not yet. What matters now is that you bond with Carter.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Come on.”

I don’t move. I stand there, uncaring about the dropping temperature. “She doesn’t believe me. She thinks I blew her off and that I’m only back now because I feel guilty. That hurts.” I run my hands over my face. “How can she believe that after what we shared? It wasn’t just sex for me. It was more. It was everything.”

“Did you ever tell her that?” When I remain quiet, he asks, “Why not? Why didn’t you tell her? I see the way you look at her now, so I can’t even imagine what it was like when you were together.”

“No Paradise is ever to dip their pen in the company ink. That was Dad’s only rule.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“Yes! Don’t even bring up that my father was a racist. He wasn’t. Just look at his legacy. I refuse to believe he did what she’s accusing him of.” I shove at his chest, wishing he’d shove me back.

“You need to talk to Howard. Until you deal with that, it will always be in

the way.” I open my mouth to tell him to go to hell, but he says, “I’ll help you.”

“I don’t need your—”

The loud tapping on the window prevents me from finishing my sentence. It’s Carter and Kyle. Carter is gesturing for me to come in, but Kyle is pointing at Wyatt. I go to my son.

“Uncle Wyatt, you want to play video games?” Kyle reaches for Wyatt’s hand. I hear a loud snort.

“He’s not your uncle,” Audrey mumbles. Kyle doesn’t care. He pulls Wyatt back to the living room.

“Daddy, you want to play with my Spiderman?” He holds up the action figure, and my heart melts. He flicks his wrist and I pretend to be tied up in his imaginary spider web. He pulls me back to the living room.

Nia is running around on autopilot picking up after the mess the boys made. The hostility is still there from everyone except Wyatt and the kids, but I don’t care. I sit on the floor and play with my son.

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Chapter 18

DRAKE

“Will you come take me to school tomowwo?” His mother goes stiff from across the room. “I want my friends to see my daddy.”

I agreed without talking to Nia first. I don’t need her permission to parent my son. She can be as hostile as she wants, but I’m not going anywhere. She’s the one who kept him from me. She should be grateful that I don’t take her to court and fight for shared custody at the very least. I would win, too. But I know that would cause irreversible damage.

I’ll take Wyatt’s advice for now and go slow, but it’s not in my personality to let someone else call the shots. If she continues to fight me over everything, I will have no choice but to go through the courts and have everything documented.

I send instructions to my financial adviser and Wyatt to start the process of setting up a trust fund for Carter.

I spent hours at the Nash house. I didn’t leave until after dinner. The boys insisted that me and Wyatt stay, and I didn’t even care that the rest of them

were hostile and unwelcoming. To piss them off, I ate everything that was available.

I rub the back of my head. I can feel a headache coming on. It's going to be a long night because I finally have to tackle the mountain of work I've ignored for the past two weeks.

After changing into sweatpants and a T-shirt, I pour myself a drink and go to my office. I stare at the blank computer screen. The other thing I have to do this week is tell my family about my son. I asked Scarlett to keep quiet because I want the news to come from me.

Really? Your basket case of a mother and irresponsible brother? Hannah's the only normal one. And are you really going to bring him around Scarlett?

I ignore the voice. They will love him, and that's all I care about right now. I stare at the computer screen for what seems like hours. I don't lift a finger to do any work. I don't even log in.

All I can think about is how something that was so beautiful can turn into something so ugly. But in the middle of that ugliness is a gift. One so pure, he's unaware of the tension between the adults in his life.

I hear the alarm beep and I sigh but not in relief. Scarlett isn't due back until tomorrow, but here she is. I've barely thought of her, and I feel guilty about that, but it's never been like that with us. She's safe. There's not this obsessive need to know where she is or what she's doing all the time. The last time I had that, it went up in flames.

"Drake!" she yells. She finds me seconds later still sitting at my desk. She comes in, runs a hand through my hair, and kisses my mouth. I move away before she can deepen it. "There you are. Why are you just sitting here like that?" She eyes me and says, "Things didn't go well?" She takes my hand.

“Maybe it’s for the best. You can still take financial responsibility. You don’t have to—”

I pull my hands away. When she reaches for them again, I stand from my chair and cross the room, staying as far away from her as possible.

“Things went great with Carter.” She looks away, but not before I see some fire in her eyes. “He’s smart and sweet. It was better than I could have imagined.” She crosses her arms and gives me her back. I go to her and lay a hand on her shoulder. She pushes it away.

“I’m so happy for you.” The sarcasm doesn’t sit right with me, but I’m too mentally exhausted to deal with that right now. “I’m so happy that the man I’m going to marry is the father of someone else’s child. You get to have your outside little family, and I get to look like a fool.”

“Can we not do this right now, Scarlett? I’m exhausted. Both emotionally and physically.”

“Sure. I’ll just wait for the crumbs that you give me. Only I’ll have less, won’t I?” She turns and shoves my chest. I wrap my hands around her wrists.

“This is not the type of relationship where we get physical with each other.” I put her hands down. “I have a son. I want to be in his life. That doesn’t take anything away from you or us. It’s not about you at all, Scarlett.” I immediately regret my sharp tone, but I don’t take it back. I’m drained, and I have nothing left to give anyone today, least of all an insincere apology.

I don’t want to sound harsh, but I need to be very clear with my intentions. My son is now the most important thing in my life, and there is no compromise when it comes to him.

“It takes everything from me. Every last thing! But like always, it’s your way. It’s only about what Drake wants. I thought you loved me.”

“I asked you to marry me, didn’t I? I told you I didn’t want this to change

anything. We've set a date." The last few words get stuck in my throat.

"We've set a date?" she gasps. "You think that's some concession? You asked me to marry you. You gave me this." She holds up her left hand and the diamond catches the light. "Setting a date is not some gift. It's what comes next, but you've just dragged your feet."

"Scarlett, enough. I've been through hell these past—"

"You've been through hell?" she yells. "And what? It's been a walk in the fucking park for me? All day long, all I could think about was you and your illegitimate child. I hate this!" she snaps.

"Don't you call him that! The situation is what it is!" I yell back. "You have options." She gasps and takes a step back. "I'm not going to turn my back on my child, so if you have a problem with that—"

"I have a big problem with it!" she yells back. Scarlett is never one to yell. She's calm and level-headed, but even I realize that the situation can be upsetting to her. She didn't sign up to be with a man with a child. "Stop yelling at me! Stop telling me I have options because I don't. Not when I love you as much as I do." Tears fall, and she swipes them. I know I should pull her in my arms and console her, but I can't bring myself to do it. I don't know why I can't.

Yes, you do. The reason's face pops into my head and I shake it away. She's not mine. She's made her feelings about me abundantly clear.

Only because she thinks you dumped and abandoned her. I push that thought away too. It won't change anything. All I want is to have my son in my life.

What you want is to have them both in your life.

"I didn't mean to yell," I say to Scarlett in a much calmer voice. "But Carter is not going anywhere. I need you to understand that too."

She swallows but won't meet my eyes, yet I can see the resignation on her face. She's not going to walk away.

"What about his mother?" she asks. That question takes me by surprise. I've never given Scarlett any reason to believe I'm not in this.

Other than not setting a date, right?

I'm not the type of man who cheats on a woman. My father warned me about that. He says that will bring nothing but trouble. He told me to find someone I love, who I'm passionate about.

And you know Scarlett is not that person. I push the thought aside.

"His mother is not a concern. I'm engaged to you. I only want to be a father to Carter." Even as the words leave my mouth, my mind flashes back to the last weekend we shared. It was before I had to leave for Berlin, and we were desperate for each other. We didn't leave the penthouse all weekend. I couldn't get enough of her. I couldn't stop touching, kissing, or making love to her. I know that's when we conceived our son. It had to be because she had her period the week before.

"More," she whispers against my mouth. "Deeper." I give it to her deeper and she sinks her head into the pillow and says my name. "I want to be able to feel you until I can have you inside me again."

Scarlett rushes to me and takes both my hands, pulling me out of my thoughts of Nia. I take a small step back. I don't want her to feel or sense my arousal. Her brows are creased as if she's deep in thought, and I wait for her to speak.

"I want us to get married now. We can drive down to Providence tomorrow and get married."

Her words are like a physical blow. Married to Scarlett. That has a finality that I don't think I'm ready for. Nia's face comes back to the forefront of my

mind, and I push it away.

“Tomorrow? Providence?” I ask, too stunned by her request to put together a cohesive sentence.

“Yes. Rhode Island has no waiting period. We can go and get it done in an hour. No one needs to know, but I want to be your wife now. You owe me this, Drake.” Her last words come out forceful, and I wonder if she’s been putting together this plan all weekend. “I feel as if you’re slipping away from me. I won’t lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Scar.” I cradle her face and stroke her pale cheek with my thumb. “We’re getting married in a few more months. We’ve set a date,” I remind her.

“You owe me this. I never make any demands of you, but I’m making one now. Marry me. Tomorrow. That’s the least you can do.” She throws herself in my arms and wraps herself around me. My own arms hang by my side until I reluctantly wrap them around her.

I close my eyes and wonder why the hell my life is unraveling.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light gray, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, rounded shapes. The background is white, and the overall aesthetic is clean and elegant.

Chapter 19

NIA

This is the fifth day in a row he's come here. Like always, Carter holds both our hands until we get to his classroom. Then he drops mine and shows off his father to his friends. He's done this for the past five days, and each day, his friends act excited to meet Carter's new daddy. Throughout it all, Carter looks behind him to make sure I'm okay. When it's time to go, he wraps his little arms around my legs, and I tell him I love him.

He does the same to Drake, and each time he tells Carter he loves him, I feel something inside of me. I just don't know what it is, but the urge to bash his face hasn't gone away. So, I'm guessing whatever I'm feeling is not good.

I've decided I'm done being angry. My anger takes a lot more out of me than Drake. He's a self-absorbed narcissist who thinks the world revolves around him. He doesn't give a shit about me or my anger. Any person who can abandon their child, come back years later, and rewrite history doesn't consider other people's feelings. It's all about him all the time.

"Nia," Drake says when we get outside the preschool doors. I stop my brisk walk to my car and count to ten before turning around to face him. "I want to

take Carter for a few hours this weekend.”

The wind blows, and it’s akin to a slap in the face. There’s never any asking when it comes to him. It’s always a command. Never a request. Like the time he demanded my phone number or bulldozed his way into my apartment and my life. I should have run as fast and as far as possible. But if I had done that, I wouldn’t have Carter. That’s the one thing I don’t regret. I just wish his father wasn’t such a jackass.

“He’s not ready for that,” I tell him. “You can visit him at the house whenever you want.” I keep my voice as level and calm as possible. I don’t want him in my space, but the things I will do for my son.

“I only want to take him to get lunch. Maybe to an indoor playground. I’m not going to kidnap him and take him outside the country.”

I can feel all color drain from my face. I hadn’t even considered that, but I should have. That’s what he had his father tell me.

“Then why did you say it?” I ask. “It sounds awfully familiar to what you had your father tell me.”

His face turns red, and his head rolls back as if I just slapped him.

“I would never—”

I interrupt him before he spews more lies. “I would feel more comfortable if you visit him at the house,” I reiterate. He stares into my eyes as if he’s weighing his next words. I brace myself and wait for him to threaten me, but he doesn’t. He walks away and gets in the back seat of his fancy car without another word.



“Good night, baby. I love you.” I run my fingernails over his scalp. He’d normally giggle, but his eyes are heavy.

“I love you, Mommy.” He yawns and closes his eyes. I watch him for a few minutes and marvel at how much he looks like his father. It’s amazing how much I can love Carter but loathe Drake like I do.

But it wasn’t always that way, was it?

I kiss his forehead and tiptoe out of the room. He won’t wake up for another twelve hours. He’s exhausted. He’s been on an adrenaline rush since his father slithered into his life. He spent an hour on the phone with him tonight talking about nothing and everything. My son giggled practically the entire time.

It’s only nine-thirty, but I’m spent after a long, life-altering week. I slide into my bed and sigh in contentment. I plan on sleeping in until Carter barges in here and jumps on me. I expect sleep to overtake me, but it doesn’t. I toss and turn and ask myself how I got here. A single mother who’s in a cold bed all alone at nine-thirty on a Friday night.

Then

“Mr. Paradise?” I stick my head in his office. It’s about ten times the size of mine. There’s a brown leather couch in the corner, and I wonder why he would need a couch. Does he nap in here?

He stands, bigger than life and towering. He smooths down his shirt before he crosses the room. I crane my neck to look into his eyes.

“Just Drake,” he says. He gestures toward his big desk. “Please sit. Like I said, I’m helpless when it comes to these things.”

Drake Paradise has an engineering degree from Dartmouth and a graduate degree from Stanford. I doubt there is anything he’s not good at, especially

something as simple as this database. He pulls the chair out for me, and I'm forced to rub against him to sit. He leans down, crowding me while I stare at his computer screen.

My mind goes blank. I'm consumed by the smell of his cologne. His hand cradles the mouse and I imagine it on a specific part of my body, stroking me.

"So, if you log in, I'll be happy to add your information for you." I clear my throat and wait for him to start typing. He reaches over me, crowding me more. He has his arms on either side of me, almost as if he's going to hug me from behind. He logs into the database and hands me his information.

I hold my breath the entire time as I type. While I'm in the middle of adding his info, he puts his hand over mine, covering it completely. I freeze at the contact. His hand is warm and rougher than I thought it would be.

He puts the index finger of his free hand under my chin and turns my face to look at him. My brown eyes clash with his blue. I can feel a flush spread throughout my body. Not only that, my nipples pebble and I feel a throb between my legs.

"I have a confession to make. I didn't invite you over here to help me do that. It's not that complicated." I want to ask him why he called me here, but the words get stuck in my throat. The truth is, I know why.

I talked myself out of coming a million times since he left my office, but he's Drake Paradise. You don't say no to a Paradise.

"Why did you call me here?"

"Because I wanted to see you."

I push away and stand. "Mr. Paradise, I'm your HR rep, not a concubine." Even to my ears, I sound stupid. Who says concubine? That's what happens when you watch too many old movies with your mother.

"Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?" He blurts out, suddenly

looking shy. "If not tonight, then tomorrow?"

If this wasn't happening at work, and if his last name wasn't Paradise, I would say yes. I wouldn't think twice about it, but I can't. Not with this one. Drake Paradise can't be my first white boy.

"I'm flattered, Mr. Paradise, but that's not a good idea." I take a step away from him. He takes one forward. "Have a good day, sir." I walk out of his office before he can say anything and close the door behind me without bothering to look back. I've only worked here six months, and I love it. I'm not going to mess it up for a hook-up. And that's all it could ever be to someone like him.

The next time I see him changes the course of my life forever.

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Chapter 20

DRAKE

I lean against the wall and look at my mom. My sister Hannah hooks her arm through mine and puts her head on my shoulder. Scarlett is on the other side of the room holding a wine spritzer and giving me the cold shoulder like she's done all week.

She's still pushing for us to have a civil wedding ceremony. Every time she brings it up, which is daily, I shut her down. She's barely said ten words to me today, but not even the silent treatment will change my mind.

Put the girl out of her misery. You know she's not what you want. She never has been.

My mom looks at the set table, and I know she's seconds away from bursting into tears. Especially since she insists on making a place setting for Dad. She won't let anyone else sit there. Even when she's the only one home for dinner, she has the staff set a place for him.

I've stopped by to see her twice this week. She was sober both times, but a disheveled mess, not the put-together woman who raised us. She had no memory of my first visit. When I brought it up, she gave me a blank look,

then burst into tears. She confessed she had been drinking and promised not to get drunk like that again.

“Should we have her talk to someone?” I whisper to Hannah.

“I’ve suggested it. She stopped talking to me for five days,” she whispers back. “Leave her be for now. Maybe this is her way of grieving. It’s different for everyone.”

It doesn’t seem natural to pretend that your dead spouse never died, but I’ve never lost a wife.

“We need to keep our eyes on her. Langley is no help.” I eye my brother who is already on his way to being drunk. It’s like if he drinks enough, he’ll forget our dad is gone.

A few minutes later, we’re all seated at the dining room table. I push my food around my plate and wonder what Carter is eating for dinner. I wonder if Nia’s cooking has improved or if her mother still brings her prepared meals every few days.

“So, what did you order this dinner for, big brother?” Langley says while he sips on his third drink since I got here. I’ve only been here fifteen minutes.

“Yes, what is it, honey?” Mom asks. “We can use some good news in this family.” I eye Hannah. That’s the closest she’s ever come to admitting Dad is dead.

“Yes, please enlighten everyone,” Scarlett adds. She scoffs before she sips her drink.

“Oh, sounds juicy,” Langley says. His blue eyes dart from me to Scarlett. “I think this is the first time I’ve noticed any friction between you. You two are always as exciting as steamed broccoli.” He sits up as if he’s waiting for a show to start.

“I have news.”

Scarlett snuffles and wipes her eyes with her napkin. Langley puts down his drink and leans closer.

“I’ll get right to the point. I have a son.” The room goes deathly quiet. Hannah’s fork stops halfway to her mouth. My mom’s mouth opens but no words come out.

“What did you just say?” Hannah asks.

“I have a son. He’s three. I found out about him a few weeks ago. His name is Carter.”

I look at my mother for any signs of deception, and I see none. She’s not biting her thumbnail like she does whenever she’s trying to be deceptive. Dad told me about that tell years ago over beers. Right now, she’s looking at me, and her eyes and mouth are wide with shock, but I do see something in her gaze. It’s joy.

Scarlett gets up from the table and runs out of the room, sobbing uncontrollably. She opens the front door and slams it behind her.

No one speaks. I pull out my phone and find a picture of Carter. It’s one of him waving at the camera. Langley snatches the phone from me first. His brows nearly shoot to the ceiling.

“This gets better and better.” He passes the phone to Hannah, who smiles warmly at the picture.

“He looks just like you and Lang, Drake. He’s adorable. When can we meet him?” That’s my non-judgmental sister. She always sees the glass half full.

She hands my mother the phone, and I hold my breath for her reaction. She might be easy to read, but since Dad died, she’s become erratic. She started unraveling the instant he was diagnosed.

“I’m a grandmother,” she whispers as she looks down at my phone. She puts a hand to her chest. “Your father will be so pleased.”

“Mom, Dad’s dead,” I remind her.

Her head whips around as if Dad’s death is news to her. She drops the phone on the table, jumps out of her seat, and runs out of the room. I hear her sobbing all the way up the stairs.

Langley leans back in his seat and picks up his water for once. “You really know how to clear a room, bro,” he says with a humorless laugh. When I don’t take the bait, he says, “So, the perfect son has done something imperfect. I didn’t think you had it in you.” He lifts his water glass to me in mock salute. “And a black son too.” He chuckles. “I didn’t ever see that coming.” He lets out a long whistle.

I’m out of my chair in under a second. I catch Langley off guard, grabbing him by the collar while I tilt his chair back. His water glass spills into his lap, and the glass falls to the floor and shatters.

“Drake!” Hannah yells. She’s beside me in an instant, doing her best to pull my hand away.

Langley doesn’t put up a fight. In fact, he starts to laugh. “The poster child has become unhinged.”

Disgusted with him, I shove him off the chair, but away from the broken glass. He falls on the floor like a ragdoll. Hannah helps him up, but he continues to laugh like a deranged maniac. He stands but stumbles back a couple of steps before gaining his balance.

“You’re such a fucking asshole,” I say to him.

That makes him laugh harder. “*I’m* the asshole after you assaulted me? Your fiancée ran out of here and you don’t give a fuck. You barely looked up as she ran out of here sobbing. You chased Mom away because you think your way of grieving is the only way. Who does it harm for her to still cling on to our dad?”

“Because he’s dead and she’s pretending like he’s not. That’s not normal,” I tell him.

“Who does it hurt? Leave her alone and let her grieve in a way that makes sense to her. Focus on the mess you’ve made of your life,” he taunts.

“My son is not a mess.”

“Of course, he’s not. Langley doesn’t mean that.” Hannah gestures at our brother to shut his mouth.

“Your life was a mess way before the kid came into it. The kid might just save you from a marriage you clearly aren’t interested in, but you’re too stubborn to admit it. Maybe this is why—” I shove at his chest. Again, he doesn’t fight back. He stumbles a few steps before leaning against the wall for support.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I tell him. I look at Hannah to see her reaction, but she’s looking away and not invalidating Langley’s bullshit like I want her to.

“And you think Mom’s in denial,” he says through more laughter. “I guess it’s obvious where you get it from.” I take another step toward him, but Hannah intercepts and puts a hand on my chest.

“Stop,” she says. “Langley, shut up.”

Langley straightens up and walks away. “I’m going to check on our mother,” he yells behind him.

I stare down at my sister, and she looks back at me.

“What the hell happened to this family?” I ask her. She sits at the table and covers her face with both hands.

Her shoulders sag, but then she takes a deep breath and straightens up. “Tell me about my nephew.” I pull out my phone and show her picture after picture of him. There are several of the two of us. There’s even one with his mom

because he insisted she take a picture with us. I could tell that was the last thing she wanted to do, but she did.

Her smile looks so fake. I know what one of her real smiles looks like. I remember the sound of her laugh. It was rich and throaty. Sometimes she'd laugh so hard, she'd have to hold her stomach and tears would fall down her cheeks.

All of that is gone now. Erased by years of resentment toward me, even though I don't deserve it.

"Now, tell me about his mom," she says. "I had no idea." She bumps her shoulder with mine.

"I'm not ready to talk about that now. There are a few things I need to figure out first, but she's someone I cared for deeply."

"How long were you two together?"

"About a year," I tell her.

"And you never brought her around? Why didn't you tell us about her? Is it because she's black? I hope that's not it."

"Of course not. We were having fun, and being with her was an escape from being Drake Paradise. She worked for us in HR, and the one thing that Dad always said was off limits was dating an employee. He said the power dynamics were too vast and we would just be looking for a lawsuit when things didn't work out. Truth is, I loved having her to myself. We were in our own little bubble. If I outed us, there would be so much crap to deal with."

It all sounds so stupid now. We settle six-figure or higher lawsuits all the time. He met Mom at work. Employees are allowed to date each other. Dad always said consenting adults should be with whoever the hell they please, and that it's nobody's damn business.

"Like Dad?" Hannah says. She remains quiet while she flips through more

pictures on my phone. Yeah, like our dad, who always made us his business, especially as we got older and started to date.

“I didn’t want him to scare her away with his intensity.”

“Or give one of his speeches on the responsibilities of being associated with a Paradise?”

Hannah flips back to a picture of me, Carter, and Nia. Nia’s looking at the camera, pretending to be happy. Carter has his mouth open because I caught him in a laugh.

“Hmm,” Hannah says.

“What?”

She flips to another picture. This one is just me and Nia. Carter wanted to take the picture. It’s blurry, but I’m clearly looking at Nia while she forces a fake smile.

“Things make so much sense now, Drakey,” Hannah says.

“What do you mean?” I take the phone and slide it into my pocket.

“Don’t get mad at me, okay?” I sit up straight, bracing myself for any criticism of my son or Nia. She looks into my eyes and bites her bottom lip. She always does that when she’s searching for her words. “This thing with you and Scarlett? It just came out of nowhere. I mean, we’ve known her all our lives, and you’ve never shown her any interest until you announced you were a couple. Then you give her a ring and a year later you still won’t set a wedding date, even though I know she wanted to get married right away. And last week Scarlett comes waltzing in here to tell us you finally agreed to set a date. It didn’t make sense then, but it makes sense now.”

Since I’m not sure where she’s going with this, I say, “And?”

“You never set a date because of Nia.”

“Hannah, Nia and I have been over for four years. I wasn’t ready to get

married,” I tell her.

“Then why did you propose? Why did you slip a ring on her finger if you weren’t ready to get married?”

“The answer should be obvious,” I tell Hannah.

“You’re right. It should be, but I don’t see it. Not with you and Scarlett. You and Nia are another story.”

I roll my eyes at her and let out a breath. I stand to leave, but she jumps in front of me.

“You’ve never seen me and Nia together other than a couple of pictures. You didn’t know she existed until a few minutes ago.”

“You’re right, and what I saw in those pictures, Drake?” She fans herself. “On you and Scarlett’s best day, you two are like a bowl of lukewarm soup.”

I chuckle at that. I won’t tell her, but I’ve never shared the kind of passion I shared with Nia with anyone else. Not before and not after. That kind of inferno can only happen once in a lifetime.

“Lukewarm soup? Okay, Han.” I step around her and head for the door but she runs ahead of me and leans against it.

“But you and Nia? A volcano waiting to erupt.” I put my hands on her waist and lift her out of the way. “Answer me this. Why did you finally set the wedding date?” She takes both of my hands in hers and waits. “Be honest with me.”

“When I told Scarlett about Carter, she insisted. She said it’s unfair to ask her to play the role of stepmother if we’re not married.”

Hannah nods in understanding. “Ah, yes. Leverage,” she says.

“She wants to get married now in a civil ceremony,” I confess. “But I—”

“You refuse,” she finishes for me. “What she’s asking for is not unreasonable, Drake. What you need to ask yourself is why you’re refusing

to give her what she wants. Answer another question for me,” she says.

“What is it?”

“If it was Nia who ran out of here upset the way Scarlett did, would you have gone after her?”

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Chapter 21

DRAKE

Would I have gone after Nia? That question is still mulling around in my head the next morning. I would. I have. Those first few weeks after she broke up with me, all I did was try and go after her, but she was gone. Gone on a work retreat that suddenly happened. I was ready to abandon the project I was leading in Berlin to get to her, but I had no idea where she was. No one would tell me. It was as if she had disappeared.

All I got from her were a few emails saying it was over and what we had, had run its course. I was still going to go, but Dad showed up the night before I was to leave due to an emergency on the project. Two weeks later, she resigned, but before that, she sent a text saying she was done and didn't want me to contact her again.

Hannah was right about one thing. Being with Scarlett is like being stuck in a lukewarm shower. It does what it's supposed to do, but you don't enjoy it as much. Being with Nia was too hot. Too much steam. Too much fire. It consumed us both, so maybe we were doomed to fail. No fire can burn indefinitely.

Scarlett stirs next to me. It's the wee hours of the morning, and I haven't slept at all. She started the night in the guestroom, and when she came to bed a few hours ago, I pretended to be asleep.

Hannah's thoughts weigh heavy on my mind, and I'm brought back to our first time.

Then

I've been thinking of her nonstop since she ran from my office last week. I've only gotten a glimpse once since, and I couldn't focus on her like I wanted to. She was ahead of me and running into the building. She was with a group, but her rich laughter reached my ears and stayed with me all day.

Dad insists we eat lunch in the company cafeteria. He thinks that will make him approachable. Just like one of the guys, he joked earlier that day. Of course, he makes us sit in the middle of the damn lunchroom after getting our food.

I stop mid-chew when I see her. She's on the other side of the large room using the microwave. She's with two other women I remember meeting on my first day, and they all work in HR. She's giggling at something one of the women says. She's in a pair of white tailored pants and a bright blue jacket.

"What are you looking at?" Dad asks. He cranes his neck to look behind him, but luckily her back is to us, and there's a big group of people congregating around the microwaves.

"Nothing. Just thinking of everything I need to do."

That doesn't pacify him like it normally would. He turns around and looks behind him again, but there are so many people by the microwaves, there's no way he'll know who I was looking at.

He whips his head back around and gives me a look of disapproval. I'm not used to that from my dad. He's always there with a smile, guidance, or a word of approval. "Remember our rule. The only thing I ask of you is that you don't dip your pen in the company ink. You're a Paradise. You have responsibilities here. This will be yours to run soon, so keep your shenanigans out of the office."

"Dad, I'm a grown man. I don't need you to tell me who I can and can't date. And didn't you meet Mom at work?" When he gives me the typical dad glare, the one that would make me look away in shame for talking back when I was a kid, I mollify him by saying, "I'm eating lunch and thinking about work. Chill."

That seems to please him. He gives me a firm nod of approval and starts to ramble on about things I don't care about. "Don't forget we have a charity event in two weeks. You'll need to be fitted for a hat and tails." I groan at that and make a mental note to come up with some lie to get out of it.

Nia finally turns from the microwave and our eyes collide. She misses a step and trips, but she manages to catch herself. Her friend gestures at a nearby table that would put them in my line of vision, but Nia points to a table in the corner, much too far from me. But I enjoy the bounce of her tight ass while she walks away.

That was two days ago, and I haven't seen her since. I've typed about half a dozen emails to her, but I never hit send. I think about her constantly, and I wake up each morning with her on my mind.

I'm dreading the weekend alone as I pull out of my reserved parking spot on my second Friday evening as an employee. Heavy rain beats against the windshield of my Range Rover, and I'm grateful I drove it instead of one of

my sports cars today. I hear a clap of thunder and the skies open, making it almost impossible for me to see through the windshield.

From the corner of my eye, I notice a lone figure standing under the covering at the shuttle stop. I only notice her because of the yellow blazer she's wearing. She must be waiting for the company shuttle bus to go to the train station. It's already six-thirty on a Friday, so most of the employees are gone, but there she is, standing there by herself, clutching a matching yellow umbrella.

I spin around and stop my car in front of her. I roll down the passenger side window and our eyes catch. She quickly looks away.

"Get in," I yell over the rain. I wince. I need to learn to ask, and not just give orders.

"I'm good. Have a good weekend, Mr. Paradise," she calls back. Just as the words leave her mouth, there's another big clap of thunder, followed by lightning. She startles and puts a hand to her chest. The wind picks up, and the small umbrella she was holding flies across the parking lot.

I put the car in park and get out, uncaring about the torrential rain pouring down on me. She takes a step back when she sees me, so I put both hands up. She's a small woman who is alone in an empty parking lot. It's not my intention to scare her.

"It's pouring rain, and I have a dry car. I'll take you home, and that's it. I promise. If you want, call someone and tell them you're with me. I'll even let you take a picture of me."

The downpour continues, and she stares into my eyes. I hold her stare until she finally nods. I offer her my hand, eager to touch her again, but she holds up her phone and snaps a picture of me.

"Hey! I wasn't ready for a picture. Let me see that." I take the phone from

her and gaze at the screen. It's awful. I'm standing in an awkward pose, my eyes are closed and my mouth is open.

"I'm sending it to my cousin in case I turn up dead." She snatches the phone back and types on the screen.

"Make sure you tell her I look better in person." She looks up at me, grins, and blushes.

I offer her my hand again and she takes it. I didn't think she would do it, but she does. I've been craving her touch since last week. We run to my car, and I help her in. By the time I go around and get in the driver's seat, I'm drenched.

"You can drop me off at the red line," she says.

"Is something wrong with your car? And I'm not dropping you off at the train. Put your address here." I find the map app and give her my phone.

She punches in her address, and she only lives five miles from the office. It's two train stops, so I guess she doesn't need to drive if she doesn't want to.

I can hear my own heart beating while I drive her home. Neither one of us says a word. I don't even turn on the radio. All too soon, I pull into the parking lot of her apartment building. I stop at the main door, and I run a hand through my wet hair.

"Thank you," she says.

"You're welcome. I told you I wasn't a serial killer," I say.

"Well, you still might be. Maybe this is how you make your victims feel at ease before you pounce."

"By having your DNA and fingerprints in my car? I don't think so. Maybe I'm just a nice guy."

She does a half smile and half eye roll. It transforms her face and makes

her look carefree and more beautiful.

“You want to come in and dry off? I can make you some tea,” she says, biting her bottom lip. “I’ll trust you not to kill me. Promise me you’re not a killer.”

I pull away from the entrance and find a guest parking spot. I put the car in park, and we both get out. I stand in front of her, hold up my pinky, and wait for her to wrap hers around it. I want to touch her again. Those few seconds she had her hand in mine weren’t enough. “Pinky swear.”

“You’re pinky swearing that you’re not going to kill me?” she asks. “And I’m supposed to trust that?”

“A pinky swear is binding. It’s the law, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.” I pretend to be deep in thought. “Uh, I think it was Index vs Pinky. It was way back in eighteen ninety-three.”

Her nose scrunches up and she lets out an uncontrollable giggle.

“So, the fingers sued each other? On what basis?” she asks with a grin.

“Look, I’m more of a numbers guy. I’ll have to ask my friend Wyatt about that and get back to you. He’s in his last year of law school. For now, you’ll have to trust me.” I wave my pinky around. She suddenly gets serious, stands up straight, and wraps her pinky around mine.

That’s how we walk inside her building. We stay that way as we cross the hallway to the elevator. We remain connected as we ride to her floor. Even when the elevator doors open, we walk to her door with our fingers around each other.

The building looks pretty new, and I realize it’s one of the ones we built. Not only did we build it, but we own it. It’s one of our many rental properties throughout the country.

I follow her down a long hallway, and she pulls out her key. Seconds later,

we're inside her small apartment. It's neat and smells of vanilla, but it looks about the size of the bedroom I grew up in. I decide to keep that to myself and leave my Paradise persona at the door.

When she finally pulls her finger from mine, she points to a door down the hall and says, "You can go in there and dry up if you want. There are clean towels. I'll boil water for tea." She takes off her shoes and loses a few inches in height. When I continue to stare, she clears her throat and points at the bathroom.

Inside the small room, I take off my drenched shirt and toss it in the small stackable dryer on top of the washer. My white tee is only moderately damp, so I leave it on. I use the towel on my hair and dry my pants as best as I can. When I return to the living room, it's empty, so I look around.

The place is spotless. She has a galley kitchen that's too small and narrow for a table, but the appliances and countertops, as expected, are high end. She has a small little table on the other side of her living room. Right on top is a small, framed picture of Mariah Carey.

I hear a door open, and I hear her soft footsteps against the hardwood floors. I almost fall over when I see her in a pair of short gray shorts and a hot pink crop top. Her feet are bare, and her French pedicure matches her fingernails.

She stops mid-step when she sees me standing there and gestures at me with an arched eyebrow.

"Oh my God. You took your shirt off so you won't get my blood on it when you kill me." She puts her hands on her hips in disbelief.

"Um, then wouldn't I just take everything off if that was my plan?" Her arched eyebrow rises higher at my words. I picture myself standing naked in front of her. I'd want her naked too. In my arms with her legs wrapped

around me. I clear my throat and say, “My shirt was soaked. I hope you don’t mind that I put it in your dryer.”

She says nothing, and when the kettle starts to whistle, she goes into the kitchen. She opens a cabinet and gets on her tippy toes to retrieve two mugs then opens a drawer and pulls out a variety of mixed teas. When she gestures for me to choose, I pick green tea. She picks orange spice, and I make a mental note to get some at my place for her.

“Green tea? Boring,” she says. She puts the tea bags in the mugs before she fills them both with hot water.

“And orange is what? Exciting?”

“Not orange. Orange spice because I’m spicy.” She does a little dance where she wiggles her hips. I bet she is. I’d like to find out just how spicy she is in the very near future.

“This is a nice apartment,” I tell her, quickly changing the subject before my body starts to react.

“Thanks. It’s my first time living on my own. I can barely afford it, but not having a car makes it easier.”

“Is that why you don’t have one? It was either a car or this place?” I ask.

“That and I don’t know how to drive.” She hands me my tea and blows the top of her mug.

“I’ll have to unpack that later. Seems like there’s a story there,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “There won’t be a later. This is just me saying thank you for the ride.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to be friends?”

“Friends with Drake Paradise?” She arches her eyebrow again in disbelief.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Is that all you’re after? Friendship?” She seems skeptical. She ought to be. I can be her friend too, but what I want is her. That mouth. That body. I want to pick her up and take her to her bedroom and slide inside of her and not come out until Monday morning. That’s what I want, but if I’m honest about it, I’m sure I’ll get slapped and banished from this cute little apartment.

“What are we doing about dinner?” I put my tea down and open her fridge. I expect her to tell me to get lost, but she leans against the end of the counter and just watches me. Her fridge is fully stocked, and I pull out a platter of boneless, skinless chicken breasts. She has fresh vegetables in the bottom drawer, and I pull out a bag of vegetable medley.

She says nothing while I rummage through her pantry and find white rice. On the bottom of the pantry is a rice cooker still in the box.

“What on earth are you doing?” she finally asks. She moves from the wall and sits on the kitchen countertop. I look around until I find a cutting board.

“I’m making us dinner since you only offered me tea.”

“Well, I don’t cook,” she says.

“Really? For someone who doesn’t cook, your fridge sure is stocked with food.” And it’s fresh food, not processed junk.

“My mom fills my fridge every week.” She shrugs.

“Your mom?” I ask with a laugh.

“She comes over about once a week and cooks for me. Or she’ll bring me food, but she couldn’t come this week. She’s visiting her sister in New York. My daddy says I’m spoiled.”

I bet she is, and I’d like nothing more than to have the opportunity to spoil her even more.

“Good thing I’m here to cook or all this food would go to waste. How

about a real drink?”

She eyes me up and down, probably still not trusting me or my motives, but I ignore her and focus on the food. I open the packet of chicken and start to cut the meat into cubes. I started watching cooking shows in graduate school and then started cooking for myself. I discovered I not only liked to cook, but I was also very good at it.

“White wine or I can mix whiskey sours. That’s the only drink I know how to make.”

“Whiskey sours, please.”

I make chicken stir fry, and while we’re on our second drink, she sets the little table in the corner. I plate our food and bring it over.

“I could get used to this,” she says after her second forkful. “This is delicious.” She reaches over to my plate and takes a piece of my chicken. She smiles at me when she does it, and I smile back. I take a piece and offer it to her. She opens her mouth, and I slowly pull the fork out. “Where did a rich boy like you learn to cook?”

“I’m a rich boy of many talents,” I say. I learned long ago to never lie or minimize how rich I am. It comes off as insincere. Besides, she works for my father’s company, so she knows. We live an affluent and public life.

Once we’re done, she clears the table and makes another drink. She doesn’t ask me to leave, so I follow her to the living room.

“I’m going to find a boyfriend who can cook.” She throws herself on the couch and pats her stomach. I sit at the end and put her feet on my lap. “And no more drinks for you. You can stay until you feel good enough to drive.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I tell her. I don’t know what possesses me, but I take her hand and pull her up into a sitting position. She’s little, and I lift her and put

her on my lap. She straddles me and I run my finger down her smooth cheek. Her lips pout, and I lean in. She comes closer, but she doesn't kiss me.

"You can't be my first white boy," she whispers above my lips.

"Why can't I be?" I ask.

"Because you're—" I finally get to taste those perfect pouty lips. Whatever she was going to say gets swallowed up by my kiss. I don't start off slow. I devour her, loving the taste and smell of her. She moans in my mouth. I cup the back of her head and deepen the kiss.

While my mouth ravages hers, I stroke her back, sliding my hand underneath her crop top. I stroke the soft skin at her lower back. Emboldened by her moans, I slide my hand into her shorts and cup her ass. Each cheek fits in my hand perfectly. Her ass is like a perfectly shaped small peach.

"I want you," I say against her mouth. She pulls away and looks into my eyes. Her breasts rise up and down with each deep breath. She bites her lip and looks down. I know she can see the evidence of my desire.

"But you're Drake Paradise," she says. That usually has the opposite effect and gets me any woman I want.

"And you're Nia Nash. Lovely to meet you." I bow my head. When I look back up, she's grinning.

"What happens on Monday morning when we go back to work?"

"We can figure that out on Monday. Let's live in the moment."

I wrap my arms around her and rest my head on her chest. Her breasts are soft and perky, and I can't wait until I can touch and kiss them. When she starts to pull my T-shirt up, I lift my head so she can take it off. She tosses it to the floor, and I finally get to take her crop top off. She has no bra, and her breasts bounce in front of me, making my mouth water. I attack one of her nipples, and her hand slides through my hair.

“Oh, God,” she moans.

I lick her nipple and blow on it. She grinds on me. With her in my arms, I stand and walk to the back of the apartment. Her bedroom is small. It barely has room for her full-sized bed and dresser. I drop her on the bed and pull her shorts and underwear off. She reaches for my pants, and I let her undo my belt and pull them off.

“Goddamn,” she whispers while she wraps her hand around my dick. “If you don’t hurry up and get your fine ass in this bed...” I kick the pants away, take off my underwear and practically jump in. I kiss her mouth and kiss my way down her body, sucking and biting along the way. I know she’s going to be marked, and that’s how I want it. I want her to remember me and this every time she looks in the mirror for the next few days.

When I get between her legs, I spread them apart, and her fat pussy glistens in front of me. I can smell her desire, and she smells better than I could have imagined.

“I’ve wanted this since I saw you in that purple pantsuit last week.” I run my tongue along her clit and she nearly jumps off the bed. “You taste good. I knew you would.”

“Let me taste you now,” she moans. I manage to flip us over on the small bed, ready to feel her mouth on my dick. I have beads of pre-cum oozing out. She gets on top of me but sticks her ass in my face. “Don’t stop. Eat my pussy.”

The words are barely out of her mouth before she’s sliding my dick all the way down her throat. That’s no small feat because I’m not only long but thick. She gags, and that makes me harden more. I spread her apart and eat her pussy while I do my best not to come like a fourteen-year-old boy. She tastes like sweet nectar, and I can’t get enough of her.

While she sucks me, she pumps my dick with her hand.

“Let me get inside of you,” I tell her.

“Get a condom.” I reach for my discarded pants, pull out my wallet, and grab one of the few condoms I keep. She takes it from me, opens it, and slides it down my throbbing dick. She straddles me and slowly slides down. She puts her hands on my chest and throws her head back. “Oh, fuck, yes,” she groans. “Fuck yes, this dick is huge.”

I grab her hips while she rides. I thrust deep inside of her, giving as much as I’m taking. She’s as light as a feather, so I lift her off my body. She moans in protest, but I put her on the bed and climb on top of her. I lift one of her legs up, bending it by her ear and easily slide back inside her soft, wet pussy. She’s so wet and my dick is so hard, I know I won’t last. I thrust deep inside of her, giving her as much of myself as I can. She takes it. She takes it over and over again until she’s calling out my name and coming all over my dick. I’m not far behind. I come for what seems like forever, convulsing on top of her while I bury my face in her neck.

I slowly roll off her and rest on my side. She does the same, and I run my finger down her side. We’re like magnets. I inch closer, and she does the same. We intertwine our legs together, and I run my fingertips up and down her spine. I kiss her forehead, and she rests her head on my chest.

We spent the entire weekend together. I didn’t even leave to go home and get clothes. I had someone deliver them to the front desk for me. We spent the weekend making love, eating the food I cooked, and talking about absolutely nothing. The only time we ever used a condom was our first time together. After watching her take the birth control pill that first night, I never used a condom again. It was one of the best weekends of my life.

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Chapter 22

NIA

“Mommy! Mommy!” Carter pulls on my arm, and I look down at him. “Can Daddy live here?” He points at Drake who is sitting on the floor amid a sea of Legos, stuffed animals, and action figures.

“He has his own house, honey.” I turn back to the sink full of dishes I need to wash. I’m cursing the fact that Ray took the kids to visit their maternal grandparents today because I could use him here.

“He does?” He runs out of the kitchen, and I brace myself. I know what’s coming next. “Can I go to your house?” The dish in my hand slips and crashes in the sink, breaking in half.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

“And then you can live here with us.” I turn around in time to see him jump in his father’s arms. He hugs him tight and kisses his cheek. Drake closes his eyes, and even from here, I can tell he’s fighting his emotions.

“Let me talk to Mommy first.” He takes the remote and puts on a cartoon for Carter. I give him my back when he starts walking to the kitchen, and I

curse my heart for beating so fast. After all this time and his betrayal, my body still reacts to him.

“Can we talk, Nia?” He sounds calm. “No lawyers. No family looking daggers at me. Just the two of us. Please.” I hear him pull out one of the chairs at the kitchen table. I grab a paper towel, wipe my hands, and sit. I fold my hands in front of me and wait for him to speak first. “I’m sorry,” he says.

I wait for him to tell me what he’s sorry for, but he remains quiet. “For what?” I ask.

“For threatening to take you to court. For confronting you the way that I did.”

“Okay.” I stand to leave, but he holds his hand up.

“Okay? That’s it?”

“I’m not going to apologize to you for anything. I told you I was pregnant. I didn’t end things, you did, and I have the text messages to prove it.”

“I told you I didn’t get your messages. Not only that, but I also never sent any messages saying I wanted nothing to do with you and the baby. I would never do that. You should know that about me. The plan was for you to visit me in Berlin. I was counting the days until you showed up, but you’re the one who pulled the rug out from under me.”

“Wow,” I whisper, shaking my head at his lies. “You are pathological.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, I don’t, but what the hell does it matter, anyway? You walk back into my life after four years and get to play daddy. It’s your world, Paradise. You win. Always.”

He stands and towers over me. I refuse to take a step back and walk away.

“So, this is what you think of me?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. You know what I know. I showed you the

letters. I showed you the text messages and emails. Did you look into your father?" I ask him. When he remains quiet, I say, "You can't believe us both."

"Forget that for now," he says. "I told my family about Carter, and I want to introduce him to them."

"Absolutely not," I tell him. "He's only known love and acceptance his entire life. He's too young to be around—"

I swallow the rest of the words when I hear little feet running, but that doesn't stop me from noticing the rage on Drake's face. He masks it when Carter runs to him and tries to climb him. Drake picks him up and Carter puts both hands on his face as he stares at his dad.

"Let's play Piderman." He whispers it as if it's a big secret. It would be funny and cute if his father wasn't a deceptive snake.

Drake puts him down and says, "I'll be right there. Go set up for me." He runs out of the kitchen so full of excitement he can barely contain it.

"It's unfair. My family is not like that."

"Uh-huh."

"I told you I don't want to take you to court, but you're not giving me much of a choice."

"I knew your apology was hollow," I say to him.

"I don't want to take him from you. I just want to be able to be a father without—"

"Daddy, come on!"

"I'm coming!" he yells back. Then he addresses me. "I want time with him."

"You're here, aren't you? I've had to look at your stupid face practically every day since you barged back into my life." I take a deep breath and lower

my voice. “He’s not ready to go off on his own with you. He’ll love the idea. He’ll be excited about it, but when the time comes, he’s going to get nervous. Trust me on that.”

He huffs and runs a hand through his thick hair. I know he’s close to rolling his eyes at me. “He’s comfortable with me.”

“He’s comfortable with you *here*,” I maintain. He’s fine if he knows I’m around, but I don’t tell him that. The last thing I want him to do is suggest I join them on some family outing. Maybe I’ll luck out and his fiancée will join us.

It’s at that moment that Carter comes running into the kitchen. He snatches Drake’s hand and drags him out of my sight.

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Chapter 23

DRAKE

“I missed you.” I lift her off her feet and drag her into the penthouse. My lips are on hers before she can utter a word. The only time we break the kiss is to lift her shirt over her head.

She wraps her legs around me. I love when she does that. We leave our clothes a scattered mess, and I take the stairs two at a time. I sprint to the master bedroom and finally drop her on the bed. I dive on top of her, and she spreads her legs. I grab one of her breasts and position myself at her opening.

“Oh, Drake,” she sighs right as I sink into her.

“Mr. Paradise.” Wyatt saunters into my office and closes the door. I clear my throat and push my chair closer to my desk, hiding the erection that has suddenly popped up. That’s been happening a lot lately. “You rang, milord?” He does an awkward bow and takes a seat. “I thought there would be lunch,” he says as he looks around my office.

“You get paid enough to buy your own lunch,” I mutter. I sigh and throw my head back. “I need you to go to Alaska and talk to Howard about those

allegations,” I say to him. I’d go myself but I don’t want to be away from Carter for too long.

“Okay,” he says. “Listen, you need to start preparing yourself for what I’m going to find out.”

I scoff and toss a pen across my desk. “I know what you’ll find. You’ll find that Nia is a liar, and she fabricated all this so-called evidence.” Only she never lied to me the entire time we were together. She was open and honest. But my father never lied to me either. “I know the man who raised me, Wyatt. You know him too.”

Wyatt went to Dartmouth on a full academic scholarship, but his law school tuition was paid for by my father. It wasn’t a scholarship. Paradise scholarships are reserved for engineering, architecture, or math majors, but my father took a liking to Wyatt and decided to help him. He’s spent most of his school breaks with my family. My parents treated him like another son.

“I know there are often many different sides to people but fret no more. I’m on top of it. How’s your mom and Scarlett?”

Mother showed a glimpse of normalcy after learning about Carter, but she’s since retreated to her delusional world. She spends most of her time in her room crying. Hannah assures me it’s a good sign, and that she might finally be grieving. Langley is still drunk most of the time and hasn’t been to work in months. Scarlett has perfected the silent treatment.

“My life is a shit show,” I tell him. “My son is the only good thing I have going for myself. Even though I have to share my time with his mother, who hates my guts, by the way. You should see the way she looks at me with so much disgust.”

The only thing that hurts more than the way Nia looks at me is missing out on the first three years of my son’s life. I prefer when she avoids looking at

me because the alternative hurts too much to bear.

“She’s angry at you. She doesn’t hate you,” Wyatt says.

The door to my office opens and Esther sticks her head in. “Mr. Paradise, there’s a Nathaniel Nash in the lobby who is insisting he sees you. Do you want me to have security escort him out?”

“My life gets better and better. No, Esther.” The absolute last thing I need is for Nia to find out I kicked her father out of this building. I don’t want to give her anything else to hate me for. “Please have someone bring him in.”

I stare at Wyatt and expect him to leave. All he does is take his suit jacket off and drape it across the chair. He stands on the other side of the room. I’m not sure if he’s here to watch the show or play mediator.

A few minutes later, one of the men from the front security desk walks in with Nia’s father. Unlike Nia, he’s a tall man, who despite his age, is in great physical shape.

“Mr. Nash,” I say, standing from my desk. I gesture to the round table and chairs I have in my office, but he shakes his head.

“I won’t be here long enough to sit.” I don’t reply. I wait for him to state why he’s here. He looks at Wyatt. “Is he here as your friend or lawyer?”

“How can I help you, Mr. Nash?” I ask, not taking the bait about Wyatt today.

“You have a lot of nerve, do you know that?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.” This is the last fucking thing I need right now. I’m already dealing with my basket case mother, selfish brother, tantrum-throwing fiancée, and Nia, who is angry at me for sins I didn’t commit. I don’t need her father barging into my office to recite his hateful rhetoric.

“You use my daughter, get her pregnant, and walk away because you didn’t

want a black child. Then—”

“Wait a damn minute! Not only did I not do that, but I would never do something like that. I love my son, and I would have been there—”

He takes a step closer and says, “Don’t interrupt me, boy.” He says boy with so much disdain, I take a step back. “I don’t care what your last name is or how many zeroes you have in your bank account. I want you to leave my daughter and grandson alone. Go slither back into the hole you came from. They don’t need you.”

I rub the bridge of my nose and shake my head. “Well, that’s too bad, isn’t it, Mr. Nash?” Wyatt shakes his head, and I’m positive it’s in disbelief about what I just said. “Carter is my son, and I have rights. I know you’re his grandfather, and Ray is his uncle, but he needs a father, and that’s me. I’ve already missed out on three years, so I’m not going anywhere. You can either get used to having me around or not. I really don’t give a damn.”

He takes a step closer to me, and I meet him halfway. I’m done with tiptoeing around this family when I’ve done nothing wrong. Wyatt quickly crosses the room and steps between us.

“I will have no problems beating your entitled little rich ass,” he says.

“Do your best. I’m right here.” I try to shove Wyatt aside, but he won’t move.

“People like you are all the same.”

I shrug and walk away to try and calm down. “Whatever that means. Your grandson has half my DNA, so he’s someone like me. If you’re done with your threats, I’d like for you to leave my office now.” I reclaim my seat, but Mr. Nash is not done.

He slams both hands down on my desk and glowers down at me.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” he says. He’s no longer shouting.

His voice is low now. Almost deadly. To show him how unaffected I am, I start to type out an email. “You have no idea what kind of hurt and pain you caused my daughter. All she did was cry for months. I thought it was because she was upset about being pregnant, but now I realize it was over you. You hurt my baby, and you don’t deserve to be in her life or Carter’s. She’s happy now. She’s rebuilt everything you took from her. She’s dating again, so leave her alone. Let her become a family with someone else without you lurking around in the background. You owe her that much after everything you’ve done.” My hands freeze over the keyboard. I look into his eyes, and I can see the anger and sadness there. “Don’t you dare come back after all the drama you caused.”

I put my hands down and stand from my chair. Wyatt stands next to me. “I didn’t cause any drama,” I say to him. My voice is just as low and deadly as his. “Your daughter never bothered to tell me she was pregnant with my son.” I have so much more to say. I want to ask who she’s dating. I want to ask her how she can bring another man around my son, but all those words get stuck in my throat when I get a terrible thought.

An image of Nia with another man flashes through my mind. I see her in a white wedding dress walking down the aisle to another man, and it almost becomes too much. I force the thought away and say, “I’m so damn sick and tired of you people—”

“You people?” He takes a step closer, but thankfully the desk separates us. “What people?” he taunts.

“You people with the last name Nash. Stop trying to twist my words into something ugly. The truth is you don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me, so I’m getting tired of your accusations. Did you ever stop to think that your daughter is the liar?” Even as the words leave my mouth, I don’t

believe them. Nia has never been a liar. If she says she tried to contact me, then that's what she did. If that's true, there only leaves one villain in this story, and I refuse to believe that either. At least not without proof.

“Either you're lying or your father lied. Unlike you and your father, my daughter was raised with values. She wasn't taught to deceive anyone.”

“You don't know anything about me or how I was raised. And don't talk about my father. You don't know anything about him either. Besides, he's dead and he's not here to defend himself.”

“Don't tell me what to talk about, boy. You stay the hell away from my family and we won't have any problems. And I hope your father is saving a spot for you in hell.”

“Well, Nia and Carter happen to be my family. Carter is *my* son. Nia is his mother. We're a family too.” Had I known, I never would have left her side. We would be an actual family, living under one roof right now.

“Nia is not your family. Carter is barely your family. You think—” That causes me to stand up so fast, my chair glides all the way to the other side of the room.

“Carter *is* my family. He's *my* son, and all your posturing doesn't change that. Now, I'm only going to say this one more time. Get the hell out of my office and take your hateful, spiteful words with you.” He stares into my eyes before he shoves my chest. Anyone else would have either fallen or taken a few steps back. I don't flinch. I don't so much as blink. “That's the last time you will put your hands on me. Push me again, and I'm going to push back.”

“Go to hell,” he says.

“I'm already there. I'll be happy to take you and your daughter with me,” I threaten.

“Don't threaten my daughter.”

“Or what? What can you do to me?” I let out a humorless laugh. He tries to come around the desk to get to me, and I meet him halfway. He shoves me again, and I’m ready to push back, but Wyatt intercedes and steps between us.

“Trust me, you don’t want to do that, Mr. Nash. Let’s go.” Wyatt grabs his arm and pulls him out of my office. While they’re gone, I shove all the contents on top of my desk to the floor.

“Goddamn it!” I yell. My phone buzzes and when I pick it up, it’s a text from Scarlett.

Scar: Let’s get married as soon as I get back. I’m not asking for too much. You owe me this.

I delete the text and throw the phone against the wall in my office. I throw it with so much force, it shatters just as Wyatt comes back in. I grab my suit jacket and put it on.

“I’ve had enough of this. These people won’t give me an inch, and I’ve finally been pushed too far. I warned her that if she didn’t give me access, I’d take it. It’s time.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

Chapter 24

DRAKE

Three days after the confrontation with Nia's father, I still haven't calmed down. In fact, I'm just as angry now as I was then. Not even Wyatt and his good-guy shtick could stop me from consulting a team of family attorneys.

The next morning, I fly to Utah to check on a project and for a series of endless meetings. I remain on autopilot the entire time, but my mind is on her and Carter. More so on her as I wonder if she sent her father to confront me and warn me off.

Even now as I sit in the back of my car, I scoff at that. She should know that no one intimidates me. No one. My phone buzzes, and for a moment, I'm hopeful it's her. I should have known better. She's never called or messaged me since we got back into each other's lives. She even has a new number now, and I wonder if she did that because of me. Back then, we called and texted constantly. Hardly an hour would go by without some form of communication.

I check my phone and sigh in disappointment. It's Wyatt. I hit ignore.

All his advice has been shit. I did everything he said and where did that get me? It got me begging for permission to see my child and accosted in my office by Nia's deranged father.

It's a frigid March night. It's barely eight o'clock, and I know Carter likely won't go to bed for another hour. She probably will take issue with me just showing up, but maybe she should have answered her phone. I've called three times today and she's ignored each call.

"I'll be about an hour," I say to my driver as I step out. The lights in the house are on, so I know someone's home. It takes a full three minutes for the door to swing open after I ring the bell.

My breath hitches in my throat when I see her. I've seen her made up like this before. The last time I saw her like this was a night when I went to her place to pick her up. We had plans and she was waiting for me in a skintight navy-blue dress and silver stiletto open-toe shoes. She pulled me inside her apartment, and I remember taking her hand, lifting her arm, and spinning her around. She had crisscross spaghetti straps, and all I wanted then was to take the dress off her and take her to bed. I didn't do that, though. We went out dancing, just like she wanted. We were practically glued to each other the entire night. Everyone looked at us. Or maybe they just looked at her because she's always the most beautiful woman wherever she is.

She's not in a dress tonight, but she's dressed to go out. She's in tight black leather pants and ankle boots. Her top is also black but it's shimmery and sticks to her body like a second skin. The heels are so high, they make her look tall. Her makeup is flawless, and she's sporting the same dark eyes she always wore for me, but it's her mouth that almost brings me to my knees. She's in the same pink shade of lipstick she would wear back then.

"You can't just show up here whenever you want." She blocks the entrance

with her body. Despite her sexy eye makeup, there's no warmth in them when she looks at me.

"I'm here to see my son," I say, getting right to the point.

"He's not here." I stare down at her, waiting for an explanation, but none is forthcoming.

"Where is he?" I finally ask.

"He's with my parents. They take the boys one weekend a month." She finally moves from the door, but it's not to let me in. It's so she can close it in my face, but I push my way inside. I watch her tight little body walk to the other side of the house. I follow her all the way to her bedroom. I recognize the furniture. It's the same as she had in her old apartment. We spent countless nights on that bed, and I wonder if she thinks of me each time she climbs in it. "I didn't invite you in, so you can see your way out." She picks up a makeup brush and runs it along her face. Then she grabs a pair of tweezers and plucks a few stray hairs in her brows.

"Where the hell are you going?" I don't know why I ask that. It's none of my business, and I know it, but there's an anger brewing inside of me that I don't know what to do with. It's been a clusterfuck of a week. Everything that could have gone wrong has. The only bright spot has been Carter, but despite that, I've had to deal with Nia's hostility just to be near my son. Whatever's brewing is about to explode, and I might do something I won't be able to take back.

"Don't you have a fiancée? Go home and question her. As for me, I'm a grown ass woman, and I don't answer to you. I go wherever the hell I please." The bell rings again. She picks up a long wool coat that was on her bed. She's in all black, and that's not her. She loves bright colors.

"The happier I am, the brighter my clothes get," she admitted to me once.

Whoever she's going out with is not getting the real Nia.

But before she leaves her room, she pulls out a small purse from her closet and my heart sinks. It's a hot pink clutch. Color is creeping in, and I don't like that. The purse and its color are more upsetting than the idea of her going out with a man, but maybe I don't need to be upset. For all I know, maybe she's going out with Audrey and some other women for a girls' night out.

I follow her to the front door and watch her tight ass the entire time. With each step, I realize that my heart pounds louder and the blood in my veins has turned ice cold. I'm not delusional. I know she's not going out for a girls' night. She's dressed to go out with a man, and I know he's on the other side of that door. A man who's probably as hypnotized by her body as I am, but her body is the least of it. It's her light and her energy that have haunted me all these years.

She opens the door to a tall, dark-skinned man who's holding a bouquet of daisies. Her favorite flowers. His eyes light up with an appreciative gleam when he sees her. She spins around for him, and he whistles. I physically restrain myself from punching his face when he pulls her into his body and hugs her.

He holds the flowers to her, and she blushes. I try not to snort at the cheap bouquet, and I manage to succeed. He stares down at her, and I know what he's experiencing. I've felt it too. She's like a damn witch the way she can hypnotize a man with just her eyes.

I clear my throat, and he looks up and takes notice of me. I stand at my full height, which is taller than him by several inches. He looks from me to Nia for an answer.

"That's Carter's father. He's on his way out," is all she says. She shoos me as if I'm nothing more than a minor nuisance.

“Let’s put those beauties in some water.” She reaches for the flowers, but he moves them away. He walks past her and heads to the kitchen. It’s as if he’s very familiar with this house. I follow them and get there just in time to see him open a cabinet, pull out a vase that he fills with water, and put the pathetic looking flowers in. He holds them up to her and when she inhales, she looks up and gifts him with a smile that should only ever be for me.

“I’m ready to go.” They return to the front of the house, and he helps her with her coat, all the while admiring her body. I can see the appreciative smile on his face. Fucking asshole.

“I’m Drake Paradise,” I say, interrupting the eye fucking that he was doing to Nia. I don’t miss her dismissive eye roll.

“I’m Jelani Harris.” He shakes my hand, but I notice that he looks me up and down. I do the same to him. “Carter’s a good kid,” he throws in.

That should be a compliment because Carter is a great kid, but hearing it come out of this guy’s mouth is like a punch in the gut.

“You know my son?” I ask him. Nia huffs and narrows her eyes at me.

“Yeah. I’ve known him since he was born. I grew up next door,” he says as if that would explain his familiarity with *my* family. “I’ve known the Nashes all my life.”

He gives me a friendly smile, but I don’t return it. This man not only knows my son but is familiar with the entire family. He’s comfortable enough to just walk in here as if he owns the place.

“Nia’s never mentioned you to me,” I toss out.

“Let’s go, Jelani.” Nia gives me the side eye. “I’m starving. Don’t make me go in there and cook,” she teases. My nostrils flare when he groans. I cross my arms and lean against the wall to watch them. Jelani puts both hands to

his head as if the idea of Nia cooking is unthinkable. He's right. It's a horrific thought, and how dare he know such an intimate detail.

"Please, don't. Remember that time you caused a fire inside the oven?" They both giggle at the memory as if there's anything funny about a kitchen fire.

"It didn't catch fire. Whatever I was trying to cook only exploded," Nia says as if that's some kind of defense.

"Oh, is that all it was?" I ask, interrupting their little private moment. Her smile disappears, and she frowns when she looks at me. She purses her lips as if I'm a putrid odor.

"Drake was just leaving," Nia says while looking directly into my eyes, then she turns to the clown in the room and says, "You ready?" She tucks her arm through his, and I follow them out of the house. The cold weather does nothing to cool the fire burning inside of me. If anything, the bitter winds stoke the flames.

My driver steps out and holds the door of the Maybach open for me. Jelani almost misses a step when he sees it. He looks into my eyes, and I stare back at him. I almost wish he'd say or do something so I can take some of this rage out on him.

"Call first next time," Nia says, dismissing me.

"I called," I tell her. "Three times," I add with my jaw clenched.

"And I didn't answer. That's not an invitation for you to drop by." She scoffs and cuts her eyes at me.

I move away from the car and take two slow steps toward her. Jelani whispers something in her ear, and she laughs. It's one of her carefree laughs. The one she does when she's unguarded and comfortable. I take another step closer, and she stands tall as if she's daring me to do something.

“I know some time has passed, Nia, but you seem to forget exactly who the hell I am.”

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?” she snaps. “You’re no one to me. You are of no consequence.”

“Maybe it’s time I remind you,” I whisper.

“Yeah, whatever,” she says. “Get the hell out of here.” I think I hear her whisper deadbeat under her breath.

She stares into my eyes, but I feel a sense of satisfaction when she swallows and takes a step back. Jelani moves to stand in front of her, blocking her from me as if it’s his right to protect her. Insignificant little ant. I don’t bother to say another word to either of them.

Nia pulls on his arm, and he finally looks away and leads her to a small SUV. I get in my car and close my eyes. This is the last damn time I’m going to deal with this shit. She needs to learn she’s not going to have other men around my son. Nia Nash is in for a rude awakening.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light-colored, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, rounded shapes. The background is a light, neutral tone.

Chapter 25

NIA

I send a reply to Jelani's message. We've talked every day since Friday night, and this is the first time in a long time I'm looking forward to a second date. We grew up together, even though he's two years older than I am. He recently came home after his deployment.

I was annoyed with my father when he told me he encouraged Jelani to call me. I was reluctant to accept a date with him at first, but he's handsome and smart. He's always been polite, and even though I only saw him as a friend, I realize that the circumstances have changed.

I'm lonely, and as a single mom, I need to be careful about who I bring into my son's life. Jelani knows Carter, and since I've known him my entire life, there's already an established trust there. I won't be making the same mistake I made two years ago when I was in a relationship for those few months.

Since my ex was a single father, I thought he would be a good match, but he showed his true colors after four months.

Jelani will be different.

He's met Carter before. Like he told Drake, he's known him since he was born. He knows me and my entire family. He was raised by a stepdad, so he understands how important that relationship is. I'm willing to give him a chance now. Why shouldn't I find someone when Drake's moved on with a fiancée?

I let out a deep breath and throw my head back, doing my best not to think about him. I've seen him twice this week already and it's only Tuesday. Carter loves how his father shows up every morning to see him off to school, but I can barely stand to look into his eyes. I tell myself it's because he's a lying jackass, but the truth is much worse than that. I remember everything each time our eyes lock, and when I'm being honest with myself, our time together was not all bad. Quite the opposite, which makes his betrayal sting so much worse.

He hasn't asked about taking Carter again, and part of me doesn't trust that he's left it alone. Drake Paradise always gets what he wants no matter what. He's going to revisit it again soon, and I'm going to shut it down. Carter is not ready for that, and he's lucky he gets the time I give him.

We locked eyes as I was getting into my car and his driver was holding his door open for him. Pretentious jerk. He was probably thinking that the only reason I'm driving now is because of him. He would be right, though I'll never admit it. He helped me get over my fear of driving, and I got my driver's license when I was seven months pregnant. But I didn't get it because of him. I finally did it because of my son.

"Ugh! Enough about that jerk." I shake my head and focus on the computer screen in front of me when all I want to do is crawl into bed and sleep for the next eight hours. I take a big gulp of my coffee and almost spit it out. It's now room temperature, not the hot beverage I need right now.

As I get up to go warm it up in the microwave, my doorbell rings. I'm not expecting anyone or any deliveries, so I tiptoe to the window next to the front door and peek through the blinds.

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath. "What?" I say through the door.

"Can I come in?" Drake asks. "I'd rather not yell with a door between us. It's kind of silly, don't you think? We've, uh, communicated hundreds of times with no barrier. Just you, me, and nothing between us."

"Are you trying to make me vomit this early in the morning?" I ask. He lets out a hearty chuckle. "And for your information, my standards were really low a few years ago. Not anymore."

"Uh-huh. And that loser you were with Friday night is an improvement?"

Not wanting to get into a discussion about that with him now or take any trips down memory lane, I open the door and gesture for him to come in. To show him how much I don't want him here, I slam the door behind him.

"The only loser I know is you," I tell him. "I'm working, so say what you have to say and get the hell out." He follows me into the kitchen, and I stick my coffee mug in the microwave. He looks around, then takes off his long coat. I guess whatever bullshit he's about to throw at me won't be quick.

I hate to admit it, but he not only looks good, he also smells great. Then I look down and notice the tie he's wearing. Back then, he never wore a tie with his suit. That's changed, and not only is he wearing a tie, but he's wearing the one I gave him four years ago. I look at his wrists, and he's wearing the cufflinks too. I got those for him on a whim.

I never expected him to wear them to give his speech at the headquarters of The Greater Food Bank. I bought them on sale, but he told me he loved them. He got ready at my apartment, and I was the first audience to his speech. I put

the cufflinks on him, and I made sure his tie was straight. He was only gone a few hours, and when he came back, he told me how much he missed me.

I look back up into his eyes, and in this moment, I know he's remembering that day too. I look away from him and roll my eyes as if that will push those memories out of my mind and erase them.

"Why are you rolling your eyes at me? I haven't said a word." The microwave beeps and I take out my mug before taking a sip.

"I'm mentally preparing myself for your bullshit," I tell him.

When all he does is stare, I say, "State your business, Paradise, so I can get on with my day. And what did I tell you about calling first? Don't think you can show up here whenever you want. Next time you do, I'm not opening the door." I give him my back while I indulge in my coffee. I tense when I feel him behind me. He's not close enough to touch, but close enough for me to smell his familiar cologne and to feel the heat radiating off his body.

When he doesn't speak, I turn. I make sure our bodies don't touch, and I succeed. Barely. He looks down at my face, and I curse my bare feet because he towers over me.

"I want to take Carter for a few hours and take him to meet my family." It's not a request. He's just telling me what he's going to do with my son. The son I carried for nine months with no emotional support from him. The son he abandoned for three years. The son he didn't give a shit about until it suited him to start caring.

Despite all of that, Carter loves him. He doesn't ask any questions. He's just happy to have a daddy. Maybe that's why he showed up now. Any longer, and Carter would ask questions, but three-year-olds are just full of love and acceptance. Even when the parent doesn't deserve it. I'd never deny

my son his father, but Drake doesn't know Carter as well as I do. He is not ready for that. At least not yet.

"I already told you he's not ready for that." I brush past him and go to my small home office. He follows.

"Really? I find that interesting since he was with your parents for an entire weekend." I want to slam my coffee mug down and tell him to go to hell, but I don't do that. I take a deep breath, gently put down my mug and turn to face him.

"You aren't seriously comparing my parents to you and your family, are you?" I scoff. When all he does is look down at me and blink, I say, "You know who supported me during my pregnancy? My parents. You know who's been there since the day of Carter's birth? My parents. They've provided emotional, physical, and financial support. You've been here for five minutes, and if what you're saying is true, your family has already rejected him. I will not allow his feelings to be hurt by them. Furthermore, I told you Carter is not ready to go off alone with you, so you and your demands can go to hell. Or at the very least, go back to wherever you've been since before he was born."

I log in to my computer and open my work email. He leans against my desk. I try to ignore him, but it's impossible.

"Do you remember this tie?" he asks, knowing full well that I do.

"Nope," is all I say as I sip my coffee.

"What about these?" He lifts both wrists.

"Can't say that I do," I lie.

"Well, I'm sure it will come to you." I ignore him and pretend to be engrossed in an email when the truth is, I can't concentrate on anything but him. The smell of his cologne is enough to make me combust.

“You’re wasting my time,” I mutter. “Can you get to the point or get out?”

“Today’s a special day.” He reaches for the tie and looks at it before he smooths down his suit jacket. “Aren’t you going to ask me why?”

“Are they going to bury you in that tie today? Because that’s the only reason why I would give a damn about it.”

He chuckles deeply and says, “Not likely.”

“Then I don’t care,” I scoff.

“You will.” I finally tune him out and respond to an email from my manager. From the corner of my eye, he pulls out his phone and types something on it. I want to ask him why he’s annoying me here when he has a conglomerate to run, but I don’t want him to think that I care or that his presence affects me.

No one says a word for several minutes. It’s like we’re trying to see who blinks first, and I refuse to let it be me. The bell rings again, and I leave him in my office to answer the door. I hear his footsteps once I have the door open.

“Ms. Nia Nash?” a young woman asks. When I nod, she says. “You’ve been served.” She slaps a large manila envelope in my hand and leaves before I can utter a word.

I can feel my world cracking, and I know who’s responsible. I slam the door shut and practically collide with him when I turn around. He crosses his arms and stares down at the envelope. I rip it open, and it confirms every thought I’ve had since that woman handed it to me and fucked my life up.

I flip the page and scan it before letting out a guttural sound. I toss the lawsuit in his face and run to the kitchen. I grab the big kitchen knife and take menacing steps toward him.

He easily grasps my wrist with one hand and takes the knife from me with

his other. He walks past me and puts the knife back in the wooden block. He does it with so little effort you'd hardly think I just threatened his life. I try to go around him to get another knife, but he turns and blocks me with his body.

"Let me know when you tire yourself out," he says almost as if he's bored.

"You son of a bitch," I hiss. "You think you can take my son away from me? I'll see you and your entire family in hell first." I start to pound my fists against his chest until he wraps both of his hands around them.

"I know I can," he says. "I tried, Nia. I tried to do things your way. I tried to play nicely, and what did I get? I got shitted on. I'm through being the good guy. It's—"

"You're through being the *good* guy? How delusional are you?"

"It's not in my DNA, and I'm done going against my true nature," he says as if he didn't hear my questions.

"All of this is because I won't let you take Carter off to God knows where for a few hours? You're that petty, Paradise?" I manage to pull my wrists out of his hands and smack him hard across the face. He barely flinches.

"That's the last time you will strike me." His voice is too low. Too deadly. "Do you hear me? That's the last time you will do that."

I stomp on his foot, and he lets my hand go. I'm barefoot, so that hurt me too. I manage to slap him again, but he grabs both my wrists and pulls me to him. When I continue to fight, he pushes me against the wall and raises both my hands above my head. He presses his body into mine, rendering me completely immobile while I continue to pant like a dehydrated puppy.

I can feel his rapid heartbeat against my body. Worse, he's aroused, and I can feel that too. I look up, and our eyes collide. For a few moments, I remember everything we've shared. I see it all flash before my eyes, from the

day we met until the day I received his text message ending us. My memories betray me as I remember how great it truly was that year.

I try to twist my wrists from his, but he won't let me go.

"Let go," I say. I finally break the stare, unable to bare the intensity of his eyes for another moment. "I hate you," I say, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

"That's too bad, isn't it, baby girl?" he practically whispers. I pull my head back and ram it into his chest. He pushes my back into the wall and cups my face with one of his hands. He tilts me up, and his mouth lands down on mine, kissing me with the same hunger from all those years ago.

For an instant, I kiss him back. I'm transported back to a time when the passion and heat between us was too much to bear. I could never get enough of him back then, or he of me. The kiss is punishing. My mouth is bruised, and his stubble burns my face, but I don't care. I punish him just as much with my own kiss.

I hate myself for it. For this. For this lust that I can't control for a man I loathe. I bite his bottom lip hard. He yelps, but he doesn't break the kiss. He bites me back, just as hard. I moan against his mouth and push against his chest, but he won't let me go. He grinds into me, and he's now turned to granite. He'd take me right here against the wall if I let him. Hell, he's done it before many, many times.

I bite him again so he can stop kissing me. He bites me back.

"Keep biting me. You should remember how much I love that." He nibbles at my lips. "I'll bite back and draw blood. And I'll drink it. That's how much I want to consume you."

"Get off me," I manage to say. He immediately stops the kiss, but he rests his forehead on mine and continues to pant. I manage to push away from him

and move to the other side of the room.

Disgusted with myself and my actions, I say, “I will kill you. Do you hear me, Paradise? I will fucking kill you. Gut you from chin to anus after I slice your throat,” I say much calmer than I feel.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You sound like a crazy, broken record.” He smooths his suit jacket. He sticks his hands down his pants and adjusts himself. Disgusted, I give him my back. “Nothing you haven’t seen or sucked before,” he says.

“Get the hell out of here. You make me sick.”

“Fine, but you should know that I’ve hired a team of attorneys to handle this. The best in the state. I think there are a dozen of them, and I’m paying top dollar. You have Audrey. Good luck with that. She’s been out of law school for five minutes, and she’s not capable of taking this on. I have endless funds. Endless. I’ll bury you both.” He crosses his arms as if he’s got me. I can feel tears in the back of my eyes, but there’s no way in hell I’ll let him see me cry.

“You think I won’t let you take him because I’m being petty? It’s not like that. He’s very attached to me, and he’ll be excited about going with you, but when the time comes, he won’t—”

“He will if you come too,” he finishes for me. I look away from him. The last thing on earth I want to do is start hanging out with Drake and his family. “But you can’t even give me that, can you?”

“I’ve given you as much as I’m willing to give,” I say with a dismissive wave of my hand before I give him my back.

“You think so, baby girl?” He moves quickly and puts his hands on my shoulders. “But you see? What you’re willing to give doesn’t come close to being enough.” He leans in and whispers close to my ear. “So, I’m going to

have to take everything.” The low tenor of his voice and his breath against my skin gives me goosebumps.

“I don’t owe you a thing! I know you don’t understand unconditional love, but that’s what I have for my son. I’d never deny him his father. You can see him whenever you want,” I throw in. “You do see him whenever even though you abandoned him before he was born.” I turn and point my finger in his face and yell, “You don’t get to do this. No judge is going to take him from me. I’m the only parent he’s ever known. You think you’re a father now after a few weeks?”

“I know I am. You know how I know? Because it’s the law.”

“Okay. You want a fight? I’ll give you a fight. I will tell everyone what an asshole you are. I’ll tell the entire world you walked away from your unborn child because he’s black. I’ll blast those text messages all over social media and—”

He slams his hand against the wall, jolting me so much, I jump back.

“I did no such thing!” he thunders. I put a hand to my chest and step away from him. “Don’t you ever throw that in my face again!” he yells.

“Fuck you!” I yell back. “You are trying to take my son away from me. I’ll say whatever the hell I want, you entitled, elitist asshole. You’re no better than a thug. Some schoolyard bully.”

“Oh, that honor goes to your father, who assaulted me in my office last week, by the way.” I don’t know how he can go from yelling to whispering, but he does just that.

“My father wouldn’t waste his time and energy on you,” I throw back. That’s a lie. My father would do that as his way of standing up for me, but I think Drake is lying. If my father confronted him, he would have mentioned it.

He takes his phone out of his pocket, swipes a few times, and hands it to me.

“My office has video and audio. My security knows to start recording whenever I have a guest.” My breath hitches while I remember all the things we did in his office. “Don’t worry. That’s a new thing. Those times you let me bend you over my desk or you got on your knees to blow me were never recorded. Or that time you laid on the couch and spread your legs so I could eat your pussy. What did we call it? A working lunch.” He laughs at the memory as if we’re two lovers talking about old times.

I ignore his crass words and stare at the screen. He isn’t lying for once. That’s my dad, and he shoved Drake twice and tried to go after him again. If Wyatt wasn’t there, things could have been much worse. Drake looks like he would have shoved him back if Wyatt didn’t get between them.

“Your father’s a detective, isn’t he? Homicide?” he asks. His voice is so calm that the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Burglary,” I correct.

“Now, how do you think it would look if that got out?” He points at the phone while I watch the video again. “A police officer attacking a private citizen in his place of business? This can be all over the local news in a matter of hours.” I hand him back his phone and stare into his eyes. I don’t breathe. I don’t blink. I don’t think my heart beats while I wait to hear what he says next. “Best case, he’ll be fired. Worst case, he’ll be fired, lose his pension, and get sued. By me,” he throws in with a carefree laugh.

“He’s three years from retirement. You wouldn’t—”

“I would. What did you call me? An entitled, elitist asshole. That hurts, Nia, because in all those months we were together, I only showed you the best parts of me, but maybe you could sense those things just below the surface.

Maybe you're right. Maybe I only let those parts remain dormant because why else would you think that you can tell *me* when and where I was going to see my son? I'm done being led and controlled by you."

"What do you want?" I can't stop the tears. I swipe them away so I can look at him directly in his beady little eyes.

"I want my son," he says. "I've been clear about that."

"You'll only hurt him if you take him away from me. I never tried to keep him from you. I told you about him. I wanted you in his life from the beginning. I—"

He holds his hand up, silencing me. I knock it away and stand straighter.

"Desperation doesn't look good on you," he mocks.

"Get out. Get the hell out of here." I shove at his chest over and over again. He doesn't move. "I said get out!" I scream.

"If I walk out of here, that video gets released. I'll have you in front of a judge so fast your head will spin. I'll make sure criminal charges are filed against your father. And that's not all. I'll file a civil lawsuit against him and go after—"

"Stop!" I yell. I can feel the tears pooling, but I refuse to break down in front of him. He won't get to see my weakness today. "Stop and tell me what you want. Just know that I'll see you dead before I let you take my son."

"Walk out of this house with me and marry me. Today. I'm not going to ask twice."

He didn't ask the first time. I blink and look into his eyes, certain that I misheard.

"What?"

"I said I'm not going to ask twice." He lifts his tie and admires it. "I told you today was a special day. That's why I'm wearing my favorite tie." He

looks at his watch and says, “You have five minutes to put on your shoes and get your coat.”

“You can’t be serious.” I look into his face and wait for him to laugh and tell me this is some kind of sick joke, but all he does is give me a smug stare. “I’d rather marry someone who’s on death row for killing his entire family. That’s how much I hate you,” I tell him, pointing at his chest.

“Oh, come on. You can’t find me that unappealing. A few minutes ago, you were close to letting me fuck you against the wall. I also remember a time when you’d spread your ass and—”

“Shut the hell up and get out of my house and take your proposal with you. Does your fiancée know you’re here proposing marriage to me, you creep?”

“I told you, I’m not asking twice. I will sleep fine at night knowing that I’ve ruined your father. I’ll sleep fine with Carter in the bedroom next to mine and you miles and miles away. Of course, I’m not completely heartless, so you’ll get visitation. At a time and place of my choosing. I’m a very busy man, so I don’t see that happening too often though.” He looks at his watch. “Time’s ticking.”

“I have to work.” Even to me, my excuse sounds stupid. The man is threatening to ruin my father and take my child.

“You won’t have to worry about that. The Paradise Foundation pledged one hundred million dollars to the hospital recently. I make one phone call, and you’re out.”

“When did you do that?” I ask.

“The day after your father assaulted me. Four minutes,” he says.

“Why do you want to marry me? You hate me as much as I hate you.” I see something flash in his eyes, but it’s gone before I can read into it further. He

looks away from me, and I watch as he takes a deep breath. When he looks at me again, his blue eyes have turned frosty.

“I want my son. This has nothing to do with you.”

“You want to marry me, and you think it has nothing to do with me? Are you insane?”

“When did you hear me say that I want to marry you?” He gestures at me. “What I want is my son. You’re a means to an end.”

Those are similar words he texted to me all those years ago.

“Wow,” I whisper. “You really are your father’s son. He must have been so proud.”

I shove at his chest and try to slap him again, but he grabs my wrist, spins me around, and presses me into his body. He’s still aroused. I can feel him on my behind.

“Haven’t you done enough to me, Paradise? Haven’t you taken enough from me? And you have a fiancée,” I remind him again, hoping that will bring him back to reality.

“As long as I don’t have a wife, I’m free to marry who I want. Don’t worry about Scarlett. I’ll handle her. My car’s waiting to take us to Providence. They have no waiting period, so we can do it today. I have a meeting at three, and I need to be back for it. Two minutes, Nia. I’m not playing around.” He lets me go so suddenly that I stumble, but I manage to catch my footing.

“I don’t want to marry you,” I tell him. “When I get married, I want it to be for love.”

“I want. I want. I want,” he says, mocking me. “I wanted to be in my son’s life from the beginning. See? We don’t always get what we want, do we? I don’t have all day. Let’s go, or I’m going to make one phone call and blow up your father’s life.” I stare into his eyes, and I’ve never seen them so frosty

before. I ask myself if that year with him was a figment of my imagination. Did I imagine his warmth? Right now he's as cold as an Arctic blast.

"I will make every single day of your life miserable. You're going to wish I had stuck that knife in your chest after I'm done with you. Hell, you might just stick it there yourself." I stand straighter and point at his face. "I don't want to marry you. I loathe you and everything you stand for. The only reason I don't regret ever laying eyes on you is because of my son. You are selfish and cruel. I don't know what I ever saw in you."

Something flashes in his eyes. If he was capable of feelings, I'd think it was hurt, but I know better. People like him don't hurt. All he cares about is getting what he wants and damning me to a loveless marriage means nothing to him.

"You're starting to bore me. In case I wasn't clear, let me say it again." He inches closer to me and points to my face this time. I knock his hand away, but he points right back. "Listen close because I'm not going to repeat myself. I don't give a damn what you think of me." The anger in his voice almost forces me to take a step back, but I stand tall. "Either you leave with me now and do what I say, or I come after you and your father with my arsenal of lawyers. So, go in there," he points in the direction of my room, "and get your driver's license and birth certificate so we can go." He lifts his coat and puts it on. "Right now," he snaps. Then he looks at his watch and taps it. "You might also consider running a brush through your hair."

I leave him standing there and return to my office, but he soon follows behind me. I sit in my chair and send a direct message to my manager letting her know I have a family emergency and will be out for the rest of the day. She replies right away and tells me to go take care of things.

I don't say another word to him while I put on my shoes and coat. I don't

change out of my blue jeans and faded Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. I don't even run a brush through my messy hair like he suggested. He's not worth the effort. I almost scream when I go to my room and get my wallet. After making sure I have the required identification, we leave the house.

When we step outside, the driver is there holding the door of his car open. I slide in and stare out the window, refusing to look at or speak to him. He ignores me too and spends the entire fifty-minute drive on the phone. He talks business as if our entire world is not about to change.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light gray, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, elongated shapes. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 26

DRAKE

I didn't think she'd do it. I didn't think she'd give in, and if I didn't have the video on her father, I doubt she would have. No, I know she wouldn't have. She would have fought me over Carter, and if she had taken it public, my image would have taken a severe beating. I would have been seen as a rich bully, but I still would have won because I could afford to keep the fight going indefinitely. What she doesn't know is that I never would have taken her to court for full custody. I never would have gone after her father either. The entire thing was a bluff. A bluff I rehearsed in my head since I left her on Friday. I don't know what I would have done if she refused and told me to go to hell.

Her father was my key, and he played right into my hands. I just didn't realize it on that day. After these weeks, there's only one thing that I want, and that's my family. I've missed out on enough time, and I refuse to miss out on any more. Being a part-time father who gets every other weekend is not enough for me. I'm used to having it all, and this will not be an exception.

The car rolls down her street. She's been staring out the window the entire ride back, just like she did on our way to Providence. She hasn't spoken to me at all. The only time she spoke was when she repeated the vows. A few times the words got stuck in her throat, and her tears were not tears of joy. That hurt me. I don't want her to cry. Despite how things ended up today, I don't want her to be upset, but there was no other way.

The driver pulls up to her house, and she opens the door and jumps out before he can get the door for her.

"I'll be right out, Bertram," I tell my driver. I follow Nia inside and manage to catch the door before it slams in my face. "Like I said, I have a meeting. I'll be back to pick you two up tomorrow night. I'll give you a night to tell your family."

"How big of you," she says.

I ignore her sarcasm and say, "Pack whatever you need. We can send for the rest."

Her head whips around as if my words shock her. I don't bother repeating myself. I lean down to kiss her cheek, but she practically leaps across the room. She barely let me kiss her after we said our vows. The best I got was a brush of my lips against the side of her mouth because she turned her face before my lips touched hers.

"I am not going to the home you shared with your fiancée, and I'm not going to your family compound or whatever the hell it is." She crosses her arms. I guess she was right about trying to make my life hell.

"I wasn't planning on taking you to either of those places." I still have to end things with Scarlett, and my mother is still a ticking time bomb. I want Carter to be far away from my family home until Scarlett leaves.

"I hate you," she says.

“So you’ve said, and I still don’t care.” I push down the hurt her words cause. There was a time when she didn’t hate me. There was a time when all she wanted was me, and I wonder how that all could have gone so wrong, so fast. “I’ll call Carter tonight, and I’ll see you both tomorrow.”



Scarlett has not returned any of my texts or taken my calls for the past five days. Not since she went to a work conference in Charlotte, North Carolina. After my business trip to Salt Lake City, I flew there Friday morning to try and talk to her, but they were doing a team-building exercise, and Scarlett was unavailable. It was pure bullshit. She was ignoring me to get me to do what she wants. It didn’t work. There’s only one woman who can get me to do what she wants, and her name is not Scarlett.

As much as I wanted to see Carter Friday night, I realized I wanted to see his mother just as much. But what did I get instead? Her all dressed up for another man while our son was spending the weekend with his grandparents. That was bad enough, but seeing the face of the man she was willingly spending time with was like a bullet in the gut. Her father’s words about her dating hit me, and I made up my mind then and there.

I didn’t want to do it this way. I wanted to end things with Scarlett first and ask Nia for another chance. The truth is, Scarlett and I were over the minute I spotted Nia in the arcade. Even if there was no Carter, there would be no more me and Scarlett. But I quickly realized on Friday that time was not on my side when it comes to Nia.

Despite that, I don’t want to hurt her.

Really? You run off and marry another woman and you say you don't want to hurt the one woman who has been waiting years to marry you?

She's in the house. Her phone is tracking there, and the lights are on. I even see her silhouette in the living room window. She has the phone to her ear and a hand on her hip. I take a deep breath and prepare myself for another unpleasant conversation. I bid good night to Bertram and walk to my front door. Before I go inside, I look at the platinum wedding band on my left ring finger. I have no intention of taking it off, but there is a part of me that feels like scum for what I'm about to do to Scarlett.

I decided on Friday night I was going to make Nia my wife. Not only that, but I had the jeweler bring me a selection of rings to choose from, and I have no regrets about that. I never should have let it get this far. I never should have been with Scarlett, never mind given her a ring. She used Carter as leverage to set a date, but I never should have let that happen either. I should have ended it then.

Hannah is right. You don't give an engagement ring to someone when you're not ready to set a date. I take a deep breath and step inside, eager to have this confrontation and leave it behind me.

"Saturday afternoon is perfect," I hear Scarlett say. "Don't worry about that. There's no budget for this wedding." She stops talking for a few seconds then says, "Yes, he'll be here, and we can go over the details with him then. I'm so excited about these caterers." I look at the ceiling. No one says no to doing a Paradise event. No one. Catering my wedding is a dream job. Unfortunately, there will be no wedding. At least not with Scarlett.

I close the door behind me and walk into the house. Yeah, there's no way I can bring Nia here. I'd have to knock it down and rebuild it first, and that's if she doesn't stab me in my sleep the first night.

“Okay. Talk to you soon,” Scarlett says. She ends the call just as I reach the living room. It’s all done in various shades of white. It’s as boring as our relationship, and I’ve never noticed how depressing these muted colors are.

She turns and our eyes catch. Her green ones assess me, and I hold her stare. She runs across the room and leans in to kiss me. I grab her shoulders and keep her away. “I guess you’re still angry with me.” She bites her lip and plays coy.

“I’m not,” is all I say. There’s nothing left to be mad about. In truth, there was never anything for me to get angry at. She’s the one who has the right to her anger.

She lets out a big breath. “Good. I just needed some time. This is all so upsetting, but I’m getting used to the possibility of being a stepmother.” I’m not sure what she means by possibility since my son is already a reality, but it doesn’t matter. I never would have let her near him. “I mean, I’m sure he won’t spend that much time here, and we’ll have our own kids. You know. A real and legitimate family, not some shameful secret.” She tries to run her hands through my hair, but I step back. “I’m not trying to be insensitive, but really, Drake, that was irresponsible, especially with someone like her.”

“What do you mean by someone like her?” I ask. “I’m the one who went after her, not the other way around.” If I hadn’t pursued her, we never would have had anything. We wouldn’t have a son, and I wouldn’t have had the best year of my life.

“Some random girl that you probably knocked up in the backseat of one of your cars. I’m mortified.” She waves her hand around as if that will erase the existence of my son and his mother. Who is now my wife. “Anyway, that was the wedding planner Lyssa. We have big plans on Saturday afternoon, so don’t schedule anything. She managed to get three different caterers, and

they'll be here to give us samples." She sighs and takes a deep breath as if making a single phone call to the wedding planner is some great feat. "You have no idea how much work this is. I called your mom to see if she would be willing to help. It's my way of getting her out of her funk, but she says she's not up to it. She sounded kind of drunk, but Hannah says she'll be here on Saturday. I should also mention—"

"Scarlett, listen," I say, stopping her. She freezes and looks into my eyes. They narrow. "We need to talk." Her eyes widen and she visibly swallows. She takes a step back and shakes her head as if she's afraid of what I'm going to say.

"Somehow my mother's talked me into making all six of my female cousins bridesmaids. Of course, Heather is my maid of honor, but I'd really rather have Emily." She pulls her hair and lets out a strained laugh. "You know me and my sister are always fighting. Lord knows I love her, but—"

"Scarlett," I say a bit louder.

She jumps at my tone and takes another step back. She shakes her head harder than before. "No," she says. She holds both hands up as if to stop me. "Whatever you're going to say, I don't want to hear it. We're getting married in a few months, an—"

"No, Scarlett, we're not." I shake my head. "We're not getting married."

She stumbles and I quickly grab her to keep her from falling, but she yanks away from me and gives me her back.

"I could not have possibly heard you right." Her voice is too low and calm for the news I just delivered. "I couldn't have," she whispers. "Because I know that I haven't been waiting all this time for you to marry me only for you to tell me that you're not." She spins around and runs toward me. She

slaps me across the face before I can grab her wrist. It stings, and I think Scarlett surprises even herself with that hit. She stands there, immobile.

When she tries to slap me again, I wrap my hand around her wrist. I've had my fill of women hitting me. I slowly put it down. She looks down at my hand and lets out a guttural sound. "What is that?" She points at my left ring finger, and I lift it up, showing off the platinum ring. "Is this some sick joke, Drake?" The tears start to fall, and I look away from her. Not in shame. I could never be ashamed of my wife, but I hate having Scarlett as collateral damage.

"I didn't mean for you to find out like this. I flew to Charlotte to end things, but you wouldn't see me."

"When did you do this?" She's lost all her coloring now. Her pale face is ashen.

"Today. This morning," I say to her. "In Providence," I add when she still doesn't speak. "I'm sorry, but—"

"In Providence? You went to Providence and married someone else when I've all but begged you to go with me?" Her voice is low and full of disbelief. I open my mouth to answer, but she speaks over me. "Shut the fuck up," she hisses. "Just shut the fuck up." She swipes at her eyes. Her normally pale cheeks are now flushed red.

"You deserve someone who will love you unconditionally. You deserve more than I can give—"

"Don't tell me what I deserve!" she screams so loud her body shakes. "Why did you give me this if you never had any intentions of marrying me?" She holds up her left hand, and the diamond on her finger catches the light. "You've made such a fool of me."

"I'm sorry," I repeat. "When I gave you that ring, I thought this was what I

wanted.”

She shoves my chest and asks, “Then why did you refuse to set a date?” When all I do is stare, she yells, “Liar! You goddamn, fucking liar. I lost you the moment that whore came back into your life. I lost you that day at the arcade.” She lets out a deep breath and starts to laugh like a maniac. “The biggest irony is that I’m the one who guilt-tripped you into going to that stupid party. The joke’s on me, isn’t it?”

I take a step closer to her. She stills and glares into my eyes. “I know you’re upset, Scarlett, but you’re upset with me. Do not call my wife a whore again.” Her head rolls back as if I struck a physical blow.

“Your *wife*? You have the audacity to call her your wife to my face? Fuck you and your whore wife, Drake! And fuck that little bastard she bore. I wish she had aborted him when she—”

I grab her wrist and spin her around to face me. She opens her mouth to say more, but the look I give her promptly shuts her up.

“Don’t you *ever* utter those words again. Do you hear me?”

I don’t let her go. I stare into her eyes until she looks away in shame. Her head whips right back, and the anger and defiance return. I drop her wrist, unable to stomach touching her for another second.

“Or what? What else can you do to me?” she taunts. “I should have seen this coming.” She swipes more tears. “Do you realize you haven’t touched me since we went to the arcade? It’s always because of her. I lost you the first time because you met her, then I lost you the second time because she came back. Who am I kidding? I never had you. God, I hate that bitch.”

“I’m sorry it happened like this, Scarlett, but we never would have worked. I’m not going to say it again. Do not call my wife names.”

“Oh, to hell with you both,” she hisses while she stabs her index finger into

my chest. “Actually, fuck all three of you. You never loved me, did you?” I look away, refusing to confirm her question. She’s right, but I won’t utter the words. “But you love her?”

I don’t answer that either. My feelings for Nia are between me and Nia. Besides, she’s made it clear how she feels about me. “I’m doing this to be near my son.”

“Fuck you and your son,” she says again. “I hate you! I hate everything you stand for. You, your whore, and your little bastard son can all burn in hell.” She attacks me, raining punches on my chest. I let her exert her energy until she tires herself out then she rests her head on my chest and weeps. I don’t put my arms around her to offer her comfort. I step away, still fuming from the angry words she just spewed.

“You can stay here for a few days until you figure out where you want to go.” I planned to let her stay here for as long as she wanted. She doesn’t need it, but I was going to offer to buy her a home. Not anymore. Some of the guilt I’ve been carrying has abated.

“So, that’s it? We’re over? Just like that?”

“I never should have proposed. You’re right. My heart was never in it, and I don’t know why I did it. I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a selfish asshole, and I hope your little whore ends up hurting you like you’ve hurt me. I don’t accept your apology. I’m leaving. I’ll send for my things in a few days.” She tries to brush past me, but I grab her forearm and hold her in place. She tries to pull away, but she can’t. I hold her in place until she realizes she’s no match for me.

“I warned you about calling my wife names,” I whisper. Her breath hitches in her throat and she looks up at me. There’s anger in her green eyes, but now there’s fear too. “Don’t you ever utter those words, do you hear me? If you

do, and I hear about it, you won't like the consequences. Your issues are with me, not her. You will not disrespect her or my son." I stare down at her. She gasps, but she doesn't say a word. I let her go, and she stumbles back two steps. She rushes past me, bumping into me in her haste to get away.

I assume she's going to run out the front door, but I'm wrong. She grabs a small statue. It's a hideous piece of art she insisted on when we went to a charity event. She hurls it across the room and it hits a mirror, shattering it.

She gets a frantic look in her eyes. She lifts the coffee table and tosses it. She goes for the flats screen television on the wall, doing her best to pull it off. She manages to dislodge it, but I get to her before she can toss it to the floor.

I pull her back into my chest, but she moves away and goes to the front door. I hear her loud weeping all the way out. I have no desire to go after her. The only thing I feel now that she's gone is relief.

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Chapter 27

NIA

That bastard. The no-good bastard. I should have stuck that knife in his cold, black heart and twisted it. I haven't packed a thing, and I don't intend to. Blackmailing me into a marriage I don't want isn't enough for him. Not even close. He had the nerve to call Carter last night and tell him we would all be living together like we're this happy little family. Of course, that's all my son's been talking about all day because he has no idea what that means.

"I'm going to put a bullet in his head the minute he steps through those doors," my dad says. "Ray, go dig a trench for that miserable A-hole."

I broke down and told my entire family everything last night. It was after the kids had eaten their dinner and had gone off to play. My parents and brother all stared at me with their mouths hanging open. At least they did until my dad started cursing and vowing vengeance on Drake and his entire family for the next one hundred years.

"You will do no such thing," my mom says. "It's because of your macho attitude that he was able to blackmail Nia."

My dad paces around in the living room with both hands on his hips. He's a tall man. He might be sixty-two, but he works out five days per week. If he had gotten into a real fight with Drake, both would have ended up hurt. Dad is incredibly strong, but Drake is also fit and almost thirty years younger.

"Mom, maybe you and Dad should go home," I suggest. Dad whips his head around and the angry look in his eyes makes me take a small step back.

"Like hell we will," Mom says, now just as angry as my father. "I'm going to smack the shit out of him when he gets here," she whispers. She looks around to make sure that the kids don't hear. Mom would never hit anyone. She doesn't even like the idea of her grandkids hearing her talk about committing assault. That's just not how our family is.

I hear a door in the back of the house open and little feet come running into the kitchen.

"Is he here yet?" Carter runs into his grandfather's arms, and Kyle comes running behind him.

"Not yet, baby," my mother says. She takes him from my dad and holds him tight.

"Can I go too?" Kyle asks. The front door opens before I can answer Kyle, and I hear the telltale sounds of Audrey's stilettos against the hardwood.

"I have a plan," she shouts while holding a baseball bat. She comes to a stop when she sees the kids.

"Yes!" Mason says when he sees the bat. "Thanks for getting it for me, Audrey." He takes it from her and starts to swing it.

"Why don't you boys go play in Mason's room?" I suggest.

"I want to wait for my daddy," Carter says.

"I'll let you know when he gets here," I tell him. My mom puts him down and he scampers away with Kyle and Mason, leaving the adults alone.

“We are fighting this, don’t worry,” Audrey says. “And when we’re done, you’re going to have half of his billion-dollar empire. You don’t have to pay me a penny. Not until you get your settlement. If that doesn’t work, let’s just say I have another plan. I’m positive I can plan a perfect murder.”

Ray shakes his head at our cousin.

“Let’s start with that option,” my mom throws in.

“Audrey, you need to stop watching ID,” Ray adds.

We start talking at once until the doorbell rings. We freeze and stare at each other, knowing full well who it is. Carter comes running through the house with both boys behind him. They know they’re not supposed to open the door without an adult, but the charge in the air must be too much for them.

I hear the front door open, and I look around at my family, unsure of what I’m supposed to do now. I planned on telling Drake to go to hell alone or with only Ray as my backup, not with everyone. Ray would simply make him leave whereas my dad will threaten violence. Drake is not the type who would let my brother and father thwart his plans, so I can only imagine the chaos his presence is about to cause.

“He’s here,” I hear Carter say. “Hi, Daddy! Hi, Uncle Wyatt.”

“His lawyer again?” Audrey whispers under her breath.

They find us seconds later. Carter is in Drake’s arms, and Kyle is on Wyatt’s back. Mason walks beside Wyatt, looking up at him in awe. Wyatt is dressed casually in jeans and a pullover. I’m not sure if that’s so he can try and convince us he’s only here as a friend or not.

Drake is in a navy blue suit and white shirt with no tie. Despite how cold it is outside, neither one of them is wearing a coat.

“Mason, can you go get me the bat?” Audrey asks. Mason obeys and comes back moments later. He hands the bat to Audrey. No one else says a word.

“It’s the bully and the fool,” my mom says.

“Which one am I?” Wyatt asks. Everyone ignores him. Drake looks around the room. I’m not sure what he’s looking for, but his brows furrow in disappointment when they land on me.

“Uncle Wyatt, what do you think of zombies versus aliens?” Mason asks.

“He’s not your uncle, baby,” my mom says.

“Well, men,” Wyatt begins, “if you’re ever presented with a choice between zombies and anything, you never, ever choose the zombie. They’re basically braindead dummies walking around.”

“Takes one to know one,” Audrey mutters before giggling to herself.

Wyatt ignores her and continues spewing his nonsense. “Aliens are much cooler. Think about it. They’ve traveled through space and time, probably for millennia, before finding this fine planet. They build cool spaceships. Do you know how hard it is to build a spaceship? Even I, with my genius-level IQ, haven’t been able to do it yet.” He looks at Audrey when he says it.

“Genius my ass,” Audrey whispers, and the boys giggle.

“I’d beat up the zombies,” Kyle says.

“No, Kyle. You don’t ever want to do that. If they bite or scratch you, you’ll turn into one of them. What you want to do is stick a knife in their brain, bringing them down for good. Or you can bash their brains in with something,” Wyatt says. “Show me your room, and I’ll tell you more.”

Mason takes his hand and practically pulls him away. Carter kicks his legs, and Drake puts him down. He runs behind them, giggling along the way.

Once the room is free of kids, I look at him up and down, give him my back and turn to load the dishwasher.

“Where’s your stuff?” I hear him say. “I have two cars outside. We can send for the rest of your things later.”

“You have some nerve,” my dad says.

“Not some. I have a lot, Mr. Nash,” Drake says back to him.

“Don’t get smart with my dad,” I warn him. “Get out.” I hear his footsteps on the hardwood. He gets to the sink and leans on the counter. I eye the knives.

“Get your stuff, and let’s go.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’m not going,” I say without turning to look his way. “This is Carter’s home, and it’s staying that way. You leave and take your lawyer slash friend with you.”

I bend down to put the dish in the dishwasher, but it’s snatched from me. He tosses it back in the sink, and it breaks in half.

“I’ve had all I’m going to take of this. He’s only three. He’ll adjust. And we’ll only be a few zip codes away, not in Siberia. He can see your family any time he wants. Besides, I already told him, and I’m not going back on my word when it comes to my son.”

My head finally whips around to look at him. I glare into his face. “Your son? You’ve been here five minutes. If you knew anything about being a parent, you’d know that you can’t fill his head with nonsense and lies.” I look away from him in disgust. He filled Carter’s head about us living together, now my son thinks we’re going to be this happy family. “But I guess that’s all you know how to do.”

“I would have been here the entire time if I knew—”

“Oh, shut up, you liar,” I hiss.

“I’ll be right back, and then I’ll tell you all the reasons why Mario is better than Sonic,” I hear Wyatt say before he joins us in the kitchen. “So, uh, do you need me to help you with your bags?” he asks me.

I give everyone my back, pick up the broken dish from the sink and throw

the pieces in the trash.

“She’s not going anywhere,” I hear Audrey say. “The only people who are leaving are you two. You can either walk or limp out. The choice is yours.” I turn in time to see her swing the bat in their direction. Wyatt easily grabs it from her and holds it high above his head.

“You’re a feisty little thing, aren’t you?” he asks with a lowered voice. “Let me hold onto this so you don’t hurt yourself,” he says.

“No, let her have it,” Drake says. “Hit me with it, please, so you can be charged with assault. I’m here for my wife and son. This has nothing to do with you.” he utters. “Stay out of it.”

“You think you can threaten me with the police?” Audrey asks. “You haven’t seen—”

“She doesn’t want to be your wife,” my dad says, interrupting Audrey.

“Nevertheless, she said I do. Are we done? Here are your options, Nia. You can either pack a bag or not, but we’re leaving in ten minutes.” He taps something on his phone. “Starting now.”

“Go home to your fiancée and leave me and Carter alone.”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, Carter runs into the kitchen like a possessed toddler. “Can we go now?” He practically stomps his feet. “Daddy says I get my own room.” He wraps himself around one of Drake’s long legs.

“I’m just waiting for Mommy.” He plops himself at the kitchen table and puts Carter on his lap.

“Does Kyle get a room?” Carter asks, and the entire kitchen goes silent. Here it is. He’s never known a world without Kyle and Mason. Of course, he assumes we’re all going.

“Sure,” Drake says. “Right next to yours. He can come visit and spend the

night whenever he wants. Mason too.”

“Really?” Mason asks. “Can we go, Dad? Uncle Wyatt says he’ll come watch movies and play video games with us. Please.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized, light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, watercolor-like style. The flowers are scattered across the top, with some larger and more prominent than others, creating a delicate and elegant frame for the chapter title.

Chapter 28

DRAKE

She doesn't say a single word during the entire thirty-minute drive into the city. She doesn't bother to ask where we're going. She packed a small bag for Carter as if they're only going to be gone overnight. I don't know if she threw anything for herself in that bag or not.

She has her arms crossed as if that can keep me away. Carter talks though. He talks the entire time without taking a breath. I'm relieved that Wyatt drove himself, and I don't have to suffer through his inane chatter, but I'm also grateful he came with me today.

I knew she'd have her entire family there. I was sure she told them everything I did. I'm also shocked that her father didn't hit me or pull out his gun. I guess that was due to the kids being there. All her parents did was glare at me, which was easy to ignore. I've been stared at my entire life. I couldn't give a fuck about that if I tried.

None of that matters now. She's married to me. She's the mother of my son, and she's not going anywhere. I made sure of it. How soon she decides to accept that is up to her.

“We’re here,” I announce. “Someone will bring your bag up.” Bertram opens the door for us, and I open the door to the building. Carter is practically bouncing with excitement. I pick him up, put him on my hip, and step into the elevator, which opens to the penthouse.

All color has practically left Nia’s face. It started when she saw the building and got progressively worse on the elevator ride up.

The apartment is still the same. I never changed a thing on the first level. Before today, she’s the only person, other than the housekeeper, who has ever been in here.

“Can I see my room?” Carter asks. I leave Nia in the middle of the entryway and go up the stairs. I put Carter down, and he dashes in front of me. He does a cartwheel and runs right past his room.

“Over here, buddy.” He runs back and his mouth opens wide when he sees it. I’m seeing it for the first time myself, and I realize the interior designer might have gone overboard with the Spiderman decorations. There’s a Spiderman bed, sheets, and right above the bed, is a painting of the superhero. It looks like he’s crawling upside down on the ceiling. Carter throws off his shoes, climbs onto the bed, and starts jumping.

“When is Kyle coming?” he asks. “I want him to sleep here.”

Just as the words leave his mouth, Nia leans against the door. She crosses her arms as if she’s waiting to hear my answer, but Carter gets distracted when he notices the toy box in the corner. He hops off the bed, opens the big wooden box, and pulls out the Spiderman action heroes I had it filled with.

Feeling proud of myself, I turn to Nia. I expect her to be happy, but all she does is turn her back and walk away from me. I leave Carter playing in his room and follow her. She walks past the master bedroom’s signature double doors. She doesn’t even look at it. There are three other bedrooms up here,

and she looks inside all of them. She must find something she approves of in the last one because she goes inside and finally takes off her coat. She opens her large purse and pulls out two laptops and puts them on the bed.

“I will need a ride back to the house to get my car in the morning,” is all she says to me. “Can you let me know when your minion brings up the bag? I need to give Carter a bath and start getting him ready for bed.” She rubs both hands over her face. “Which will take twice as long tonight,” she whispers. “But as long as Drake Paradise gets what he wants, I guess the earth can continue spinning.”

She drops herself on the bed and removes her shoes. She lies on top of the down comforter on the bed and opens her personal laptop.

“I need your WIFI password,” she says without bothering to look up at me.

“It’s the same password you set all those years ago.” Her head snaps up and she stares into my eyes. She knows the password. I’m sure of it. She looks away, types something on her computer, and continues to ignore me.

“What are you doing?” I ask her. I sit on the edge of the bed next to her. She tenses before moving as far away from me as possible while remaining on the bed. “You know where our bedroom is. You’ve spent lots of time there.”

“I’m not sharing a bed with you. This marriage is a sham as far as I’m concerned.”

I dig around in my pants pocket and pull out her wedding rings. “You discarded these by the kitchen sink earlier tonight.” I take her left hand and slide them back on. “Perfect fit. And you’re wrong. This marriage is very real. You’re my wife, and I’m your husband. Those are the facts.”

I think I hear her mumble, “Fuck you and the facts.”

I take off my suit jacket and hang it in the empty closet. I remove my shoes

and get in the bed next to her. She elbows me in the ribs before she tries to shove me off the bed.

“Are you trying to tickle me? You know I’m not ticklish.” I take her wrists and hold her in place. “If you prefer this room, fine. We can stay in this one even though the master is much bigger.”

“You think this is all a big joke, don’t you? You have no idea how miserable I’m about to make your life. I’m not sharing a room or a bed with you. You will never lay a hand on me again. Go home to your fiancée.”

Before I can answer her, Carter barges into the room carrying a bunch of toys. He drops them on the floor and climbs on the bed with us. Nia pulls him on top of her and he rests his head on her boobs. I used to do that.

“When is Kyle coming?” he asks again. “I miss him.” He sticks out his bottom lip and rubs his eyes.

“Baby, Kyle doesn’t live here. How about we FaceTime him? After I pick you up tomorrow, I’ll take you to the house for a visit, okay? You can call Kyle, Mason, and Uncle Ray whenever you want.” She kisses the top of his head, and that seems to calm him. I put my hand on his back, and he puts his little hand on my chest. I pick it up and kiss it.

Minutes later, I watch as she gives Carter a bath in the bathroom connected to his room. I help him put on his pajamas, and while she gets him warm milk, Carter picks out a book from the bookshelf in his room. I thought he’d pick one about Spiderman, but he grabs *Pinocchio*.

As much as he fusses about not being tired, he falls asleep before Nia gets to the third page. She kisses his forehead, and I do the same before we both tiptoe out of there. She goes into the bedroom she’s picked for herself and slams the door in my face. I had all the locks removed from the bedrooms,

but I don't let myself in right away. I get a few things from the master bedroom first.

She's in the middle of the bed under the down comforter. She has the blanket all the way up to her neck while she types something on her phone. She doesn't react to my presence. I toss my pajamas on the bed and start to undress.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asks. "Leave your clothes on."

"Why? You're afraid you won't be able to stop yourself?" I ask, grinning for the first time in hours.

"Stop myself from laughing or vomiting? Probably not," she retorts. She looks straight ahead, but I can practically see steam coming out of her ears.

"I don't remember you doing either of those things at the sight of my naked body. You want to know what I do remember?"

"I don't want to hear your delusions or your revisionist history," she says before she purses her lips shut.

"Anyway," I say, deciding to stop us from having another argument, "I'm going to bed. I hope you don't mind, but I have some emails to read. I'd normally do it in my office, but it's been a long few days and—"

"Get out of this room, Paradise. I'm not playing with you. I don't want to be anywhere near you. You're disgusting."

My only response is to drop my pants and take them off. She gasps as if she hasn't seen every inch of my naked body before. Not only has she seen it, but she's touched, kissed, and licked every patch of skin.

"Disgusting? When did I become that? You weren't too worried about it back then. I don't think there's anywhere on this body that you haven't kissed, licked, or sucked."

“I wouldn’t touch you with rubber gloves.”

“Really? Because there was no rubber involved when you let me put it in your—”

She crosses her arms and interrupts me before I can finish. “Why are you doing this?” she asks after I put on my lounge pants.

“Why am I getting in bed with my wife? That should be self-explanatory.”

“You’re never touching me again.”

“I don’t ever remember any complaints before. In fact, you could never get enough.”

“I will stomp your balls if you even think of getting in this bed.”

“If you want to touch my balls, all you need to do is ask, but no stomping. I’m freaky, but not that freaky. You can do whatever—” She jumps out of the bed and storms out of the room. She’s still fully dressed in the jeans and sweater she had on earlier.

She goes into Carter’s room, and I follow her inside. I reach her before she can get into bed with him. Now, I’m kicking myself for getting Carter that big bed. I wrap my arm around her waist and lift her off her feet. I don’t take her back to the guestroom but back to our room. The room and bed that I’ve only ever shared with her.

I toss her on the California king, and she bounces like a ragdoll. “You’re my wife, and we’re going to share a room and a bed like we should. We are not going to raise our son in some dysfunctional household. If you leave this room, I’ll only bring you back.”

She gets off the bed and takes menacing steps at me. She has her fists clenched at her sides.

“You blackmail me into a marriage I don’t want, and now you want to talk about dysfunctional households? What world do you live in?”

“The world where husbands and wives share a damn bed,” I hiss at her. The last thing I want to do is yell or get into another fight, but she’s slowly pushing me.

“I don’t feel like your wife,” she hisses back. “Not only that, but I don’t want to be,” she yells.

“I don’t give a damn how you feel or what you want! You *are* my goddamn wife!”

She takes a step back when I yell at her. I don’t want to make her more upset than she is right now, but she’s leaving me no choice.

“Well, obviously you don’t give a shit about me,” she yells back. “You’ve made that abundantly clear.”

I raise both hands in surrender and immediately regret my words. They’re not true. I do care about how she feels and what she wants.

“That’s not true, I—”

“Enough with the lies,” she says, interrupting me. “You want to share a bed? Fine, we’ll share a bed. I’ll wait until you fall asleep, and I’ll stick a knife in your cold, black heart like I should have done the other day.” She gestures toward me. “God, I can’t stand the look of you. You think this is some joke? I had a life. A life that I worked really hard for after you and your daddy blew up the other one. It didn’t include any of your bullshit, but because you had a crisis of conscience, I must pay the price.” She turns her back to me and angrily stomps away, but she turns back. She points at me and says, “You know what you are? You’re a spoiled nepo baby who’s had everything handed to him all his life. I bet I’m the first person who has ever told you to go to hell, and you can’t handle that, so you—”

Not willing to hear any more of what she thinks of me, I cut her off and turn the tables. “Everything handed to *me*?” I ask, pointing at myself. “You

can't possibly be serious. You're going to throw stones from your glass house, Nia? What about the house your parents paid off and then handed to you and your brother? How about the car your parents bought for you? Remember that apartment you had? The one where I paid your rent and all the bills?"

She takes a step back at my rebuttal. She flares her little nostrils and looks at me in disgust. "I never asked you to pay for a thing. And do you think only rich parents can help their kids? My parents show up for me and my brother because they care. They bought me that car so I can take better care of their grandson, which is a lot more than your parents have ever done. Too bad you don't know what unconditional love looks like. When your family shows up it's to cause—"

"If I were you, I'd shut up now before you say something you can't take back," I warn.

"It's to cause nothing but destruction, but I guess the fruit doesn't fall far from the rotted tree. You've condemned me to a loveless marriage to a man I hate."

The slap she gave me yesterday stung less than this. She looks away from me, turns, and walks toward the bathroom, but I speak before she can go inside. "Well, that's too damn bad, isn't it? Whether you hate me or not, that doesn't change the fact that you're my *wife*. You can be as happy or as miserable as you choose. And let's not talk about parents, sweetheart," I taunt. "Last time I checked, my father never assaulted anyone."

"Yeah, he did much worse than that. At least my father is direct, and what he did was to protect me. He did it out of love. What about the great Donald Paradise, huh? He was a two-faced snake just like his son."

She slams the door hard behind her before I can refute her words. Seconds

later, I hear her cries from inside the bathroom. I walk to the door and put my hand on the knob. I rest my forehead against it and wait for her to come out, but the only thing that happens is that her cries turn into gut-wrenching sobs. As awful as things are between us and as cruel as her words have been, I don't want her to cry. I hate the sound of it, and I wish we were in a place where I could take her in my arms and console her.

“Nia, it doesn't have to be this way. Please, come out and talk to me.” I regret not removing the locks from the bathrooms too, but I've upset her enough for one night, so I don't try and break the door down. It takes her another ten minutes to come out. I think she's surprised when she almost collides with me. Her eyes and the tip of her nose are red. Her cheeks are puffy and swollen, and I know I'm responsible.

She goes around me and says, “It's your world, Paradise. You want me to sleep here? Fine, because I know if I don't you'll go after my dad or take my son away from me.” She pulls the covers back on the bed, climbs in, and gives me her back. “Remember what I told you. I'm going to make your life miserable.

She doesn't speak again after that. I imagine she's slammed her eyes shut. Even from where I'm standing, her shoulders look tense. I do what I've been missing for the past four years and climb into the bed with her. It was never like this in the past. The biggest difference now is that we have clothes on. The second is that she's not wrapped in my arms, but at least she's here.

“I don't want you to be unhappy, Nia.” I put a hand on her shoulder. She tenses before she shrugs it off. “We were happy before. We made a beautiful, perfect boy together. It doesn't have to be this way.”

Really? You blackmail a woman into marrying you and you expect her to fall into your arms? Do you want her to give you a complimentary blow job

too?

She doesn't answer, but I don't hear her cries anymore.

"Do you want me to get you some pajamas? You can't be comfortable in jeans and a sweater." She doesn't answer. I know she's not sleeping because she snores. For months, her snoring was my lullaby, and I yearn for that again.

I leave the bed and retrieve the pajamas from the top dresser drawer. I walk to her side of the bed. Her eyes are open, but they're vacant as she stares at a spot on the carpet. "You left these here the last time we were together." I hand her the shorts and matching T-shirt, but she doesn't take them. She doesn't even look at me. "I'll leave them here if you change your mind." I put them on the chaise in the corner and get back in bed. She doesn't say a word. She doesn't get up. She doesn't sleep. She doesn't move. She lies there in silence.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light-colored, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, rounded shapes. The background is a light, neutral tone.

Chapter 29

NIA

Unbeknownst to anyone else, I've taken the rest of the week off. I haven't uttered a single word to Drake since last night. After dressing Carter, feeding him breakfast, and taking him to daycare, his driver drops me off at home.

This morning was more unsettling than last night. When I woke up and went into the bathroom, it was still hot and steamy from Drake's shower. It took me a few moments to notice the things on the sink. All my favorite moisturizers, body butters, and body sprays were there, and I know they weren't there the night before. I was so shocked, I couldn't bring myself to touch any of it. He not only got my preferred brand but the scents I like. How could he possibly have remembered?

That was only the first surprise. The closet was filled with clothes for me. All designer labels with expensive price tags still attached. All the right size and things I would pick out myself if I had unlimited funds. The dresser drawers were full too with underwear and cashmere socks.

I don't know when he would have had the time to get these things, but the guy is loaded. It's not like he has to go shopping himself. Either way, I don't

care. He's lucky I was too tired to throw all those things in the trash where they belong.

I thought I had purged myself of this man and everything from him. In the year we were involved he bought me purses, jewelry, and designer clothes and shoes. He even chartered a yacht one weekend when he surprised me with a trip to San Juan.

After we were over, and I found out I was pregnant, I sold everything he gave me, but I was never able to erase the memories. I'd bury them but never for long. I barely went a day without him infiltrating my mind in some way. Something would always trigger a memory, and as much as I tried, I could never rid him from my thoughts.

It was with relief to finally leave Drake behind this morning. When Bertram stopped the car in front of my house, I jumped out before he could get the door for me. Drake followed me out, but I was able to get in and lock myself inside before he made it to the top step. I know he stood outside for about five minutes, but he didn't knock or demand to come in.

I finally take my clothes off and take a hot shower in my old bathroom. After putting on an old and faded pair of flannel pajamas, I climb into my bed.

I barely slept an hour last night. I kept smelling him. I felt every breath he took, and being in the same bed as him, even though we were a million miles apart emotionally, brought me back to where we were four years ago. I remember everything. We never wore clothes to bed. We'd often leave a trail of our discarded clothes leading to his bedroom.

He's right about one thing. There's not an inch of his body that I haven't touched, kissed, sucked, or licked. For a split second, I wanted to stop hating him, crawl into his arms and return to that time when nothing separated us.

Then I remembered how he denied my son. Then changed his mind and lied about it. He threatened to mess with my dad's career, and he blackmailed me into a marriage I don't want. He's not the same man from all those years ago. He hasn't been the same since he told me he was only experimenting.

When he finally turned off the light and closed his laptop last night, I held my breath. It wasn't the first time that he worked while we were in bed together, but it was the first time he didn't pull me into his arms once he was done. Even when he was working, I'd be cuddled to his side, saying or doing something stupid to distract him or make him laugh.

I'll never admit it to anyone, but I've missed him every single day we've been apart. I wouldn't even admit it to myself for years. I was so angry that I shoved down all the good memories. Now with him not only back in my life, but married to me, there's no way I can forget again.

Even now, the wedding rings are a reminder. I slip them off and put them underneath my pillow. The last thing I think about as sleep overtakes me is that I don't plan on wearing them ever again.



The kitchen is pure pandemonium as Carter chases Mason and Kyle. He wraps himself around Mason's legs. Kyle does the same, and the two of them manage to take him down. Once the younger boys are on top of him, they start to tickle him until he slides from under them and runs away. They follow him.

I shake my head, loving the noise and the craziness of the house. Ray points at the cutting board, and I start slicing cucumbers for a salad.

“You okay?” he asks. “Is he still alive or should I expect the police to come knocking any minute?”

“Ha ha. I guess I’m as okay as anyone who was blackmailed into marriage by their deadbeat baby daddy can be.” I shrug. “He’s still alive.” I pick up the knife and slam the blade into the cucumber and pretend it’s a certain part of Drake’s anatomy.

“Of all the white boys on earth,” he says, shaking his head.

“Ugh. Don’t remind me,” I tell him. “He’s the worst.”

“Why are you here right now?” he asks. “Not that I’m not happy to have you. Kyle was really upset last night. Now he has it in his head he’s spending the weekend at Carter’s new house.”

Of course, he does. That’s all Carter’s talked about since he got home. He told them every detail. He even promised them pizza at his new house.

“We’re staying here tonight,” I tell my brother.

“Does your husband know that?” I take a slice of cucumber and throw it at him.

“I sent him a text.” After I did that, I shut off my phone, so I have no idea if he’s tried to reach me, but since he hasn’t called Ray’s phone, I’m hoping he’ll leave me alone. I can’t imagine spending another night like I did last night. I was so exhausted that I slept for seven hours straight after I got here this morning.

While Ray checks on the baked ziti he has in the oven, he asks, “Have you ever considered that he might be telling the truth?” He removes the dish, closes the oven, and puts it on the table.

“No,” is all I say, but I’m not surprised by his question. Ray always wants to see the best in others.

“It’s not out of the realm of possibilities that his daddy did this. It makes

sense if you think about it. You never talked to Drake directly. Only in text or email. Then later, through his father and lawyers.”

“Well, it’s certainly easy to blame the dead guy, right? Look, Donald Paradise was no saint. I hope he’s roasting over a spit in hell right now, but he knew details that only Drake could have told him.”

Ray yells at the boys to go wash their hands for dinner. While he pours water for everyone, he says, “Ni, the dude was a gazillionaire. If he wanted information, he could figure out a way to get it. All I’m saying is—”

“Well, his dead daddy didn’t make him blackmail me into marriage, did he? Did Daddy Paradise tell him to threaten to get our dad fired? He also threatened to get me fired, by the way. He told me that he was never serious about me, and that he was only experimenting. Now that he has an attack of conscience, he comes back and ruins my life. He can go to hell just like his father as far as I care.” I open my mouth to say more, but the boys come running into the kitchen, so I shut up.

Ray raises both hands in surrender, but I know from the determined gleam in his eyes, he’s not done. “All I’m saying is,” he whispers, “I’m lied to every single day. Comes with the territory when you’re a teacher. I know when someone is being dishonest. I don’t get that vibe from him.” Then he puts a finger to his lips and points at Carter, who is waiting patiently for his food.

Ray serves the boys, but the doorbell rings before I can take my seat. Expecting Audrey, I open the door without asking who it is, only to lose my breath at the sight of Drake. He’s dressed just like he was this morning. I wouldn’t look at his face then, but he looks exhausted. He looks like he got about as much sleep as I did last night.

He walks in without being invited.

“Daddy,” I hear Carter say. I hear his little footsteps as he runs right into

Drake's arms and sticks his head in the crook of his neck.

"I missed you," Drake says, hugging him tighter.

"Let's eat," Carter says. He kicks his legs, and Drake puts him down. He takes his father's hand and drags him to the kitchen. By the time I get there, Drake's already taken off his coat and is seated at the table.

"Hi, Uncle Drake," Mason says. Kyle offers him a high five.

"Hello, boys. This looks and smells great." He reaches for the salad and puts some in a bowl. Then he puts a big helping of pasta on his plate.

"Carter said we can come over on Friday and spend the night. He said we can have pizza and popcorn," Kyle says. I look at Ray and he rolls his eyes. "And cake," he throws in. I don't remember Carter offering cake, but I guess Kyle is going all in.

Carter looks at Drake, and I know he's holding his breath while he waits for his answer. He's made a lot of promises to his cousins, and all without permission. Now, I bet he's worried his father will contradict him. For my son's sake, I hope that doesn't happen.

"You boys can come over whenever you want. Pizza sounds great. Your auntie will get your favorite kind." This time, it's me who rolls my eyes. Since when does Drake want to be around children? He's never liked them before, and he's not one to eat pizza either. He's always been a stickler about his diet and exercise regimen.

Carter giggles and smugly looks around the table. "I told you he was nice," he tells his cousins. "He got me a million Pidermans."

I let out a snort. "Yeah," I say. "Nice." I take the seat next to my son, and thankfully away from Drake, and eat my dinner. The boys ask Drake all kinds of questions, so I'm glad all the attention is on him and not on me.

"Can Uncle Wyatt come over on Friday," Kyle asks Drake.

“I’ll invite him. He has no life, so I’m sure he’ll come.” The boys all high-five each other, pleased with their plans.

“Call him,” Kyle insists.

“Boy, eat your food,” Ray says.

“I’ll call him after dinner,” Drake tells him.

The boys and Drake talk nonstop. I tune them out and eat my pasta since this is the first full meal I’ve eaten all day. Once the boys eat, Drake calls Wyatt on FaceTime. They take his phone and run out of the kitchen with it.

“When will you be ready to go?” Drake asks me once the kids are out of sight.

Ray raises his eyebrows, but he doesn’t say a word. He stands and starts to clear the table.

“Didn’t you get my text?”

“That ridiculous text about you staying here? Not happening. We’re a family and we live together.”

“You can go to hell,” I whisper.

“I’ve already been there. I’m not going back.”

“Okay, well how about you kiss my ass then?” I stand from the chair and pick up the dirty dishes.

“Can I? It’s not like I haven’t done it before. I’ll be happy to revisit that,” he says. Ray groans and shakes his head. “Do you need me to help you pack?” He cuts me off on my way to the sink.

“What I need you to do is get out of my face,” I warn.

“Or what?” he asks, lowering his voice. He takes a step closer and the scent of his cologne almost overtakes me. I stare into his eyes, refusing to cower. “Or what?” he asks again, stroking the side of my cheek with the back of his hand. I step back and go the other way to the sink.

“I’ve got it,” Ray says, taking the salad bowl from me. “Go figure out what you’re going to do. Yell if you need me to beat his ass.” He says the last part loud enough for Drake to hear, but Drake doesn’t react.

I walk past him to go to my room, and Drake follows me. He’s on my heels, and I have no time to slam the door in his face. He barges his way in before looking around and opening the closet.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

“I’m helping you pack since you refused last night. You don’t live here anymore.” He finds a suitcase in the back of the closet and throws it on the bed. It pushes the pillow away, revealing the rings I took off earlier. He freezes when he sees them, then he grabs them and reaches for my left hand, but I push him away. He doesn’t move. He grabs my hand and forces the rings back on.

“Next time I’ll flush them down the toilet where they belong.”

“I’ll get you another set,” he says as if it’s no big deal. He opens my top drawer, grabs all the contents, and drops them in the suitcase. He does the same with another drawer, but I kick the suitcase off the bed and across the room. “I’ll carry you out of here over my shoulder. I don’t care, but you’re coming home.”

“That prison is not my home. This is.”

“Wrong.” To prove his point, he drops more of my clothes in the suitcase. “A penthouse is hardly a prison.”

“Just so you know, Paradise, I’m taking half of your fortune when this is over. You should have had one of your shady lawyers draft a prenup. And you can forget about a post-nuptial agreement. I’ll never sign it. For all your fancy pants education, I thought you’d be smarter. Guess not, dumb ass.”

His smile is almost predatory. If I thought losing half his money would

have given him pause, I was wrong.

“Is that your ace card? If you take half my billions, you know what I’ll be? A billionaire, baby girl. Do your worst. You want a fight? I’ll give you one. All we’re going to do is make our lawyers rich.” My smug smile drops, but I take a step forward and throw a punch at his midsection. His hand wraps around my wrist before I can make contact.

“Don’t call me that,” I warn. “Let me go.”

“I’m never going to do that, *baby girl*,” he whispers right before he drops my wrist.

“You won’t have a choice. There’s such a thing as no-fault divorce. Audrey’s told me all about it.”

“Audrey?” he asks with a dismissive snort. “I bet she got her law degree out of a Cracker Jack box.”

I rub my wrist, hoping to erase his touch, but I can’t. “Asshole,” I mutter under my breath. “And stop going through my drawers.” I try to push him out of the way, and when that doesn’t work, I close the drawer he has opened.

He yanks it open and grabs a handful of my underwear. I block his path to the suitcase and slap his hands. Some of the contents fall to the floor. “Don’t touch my underwear, you pervert,” I hiss.

He ignores me and bends down. Just as I’m going to kick his hands as hard as I can, I hear little feet running to the room, so I put my foot down and take a step back.

“Mommy, I want to go sleep on my ‘Piderman bed. I want to send pictures of it to Kyle.” He had Kyle on FaceTime this morning and showed him his room. Kyle stands in the middle of the room, grinning wide and showcasing his missing two front teeth. I straighten up and run a finger over Kyle’s thick eyebrows. I lean down and kiss his head.

“Carter says I can sleep in it with him.”

“Let’s go, buddy,” Drake says. Carter jumps into Drake’s arms. “I’ll let you use my phone to take those pictures for your cousin. I’m just helping Mommy pack some of her things.”

I smile at my son, but my smile is so fake, I feel my face might crack.

“I want a bath in the big tub,” Carter announces. The big tub is the one in the master bedroom.

With Carter still in his arms, he manages to close my suitcase, pick it up with one hand and walk out of the room.

“Come on, Mommy,” Carter shouts.

It doesn’t take us long to put on our coats. The boys hug and make plans for their sleepover on Friday night.

“Try not to kill him,” Ray whispers in my ear while he hugs me goodbye. “Maybe have an open mind and open dialogue,” he suggests. I groan in protest, but before he can say more, the doorbell rings, and Ray leaves me to go open it.

Expecting Audrey, I almost drop my purse when Jelani walks through the front door. He’s holding a small, white paper bag. He’s smiling, but the smile soon drops when he looks into Drake’s scowling face.

“Hey,” Jelani says to me. I pray the floor will open and swallow Drake whole and drag him into hell where he belongs. He sidesteps him and approaches me. Drake moves closer to me. “I got you some of those falafels you like.”

I clear my throat. From the corner of my eye, Ray leans against the wall and crosses his arms. Jelani hands me the paper bag, and despite my full belly, my mouth waters at the aroma.

“Falafels?” Drake snatches the bag from me. “I’m the one who introduced

her to those,” he says to Jelani. Then he turns to me and says, “Remember how you would eat them off my naked body?”

I gasp at his crassness.

“Jesus, man,” Ray says. “Some things I don’t need to know.”

“Liar. That never happened.” I feel some color creep up my neck, but the only liar here tonight is me. I placed a trail of falafels from his chest all the way down to his navel. I remember that every time I see or hear about a falafel. I snatch the bag back from him.

Jelani’s face has lost all coloring while standing there, probably unsure if he even heard Drake right.

“Please don’t bring my wife anything else,” Drake says. If Carter wasn’t standing right here, I’d hit him right in the jaw. Jelani almost takes a step back, and I’m not sure if it’s from Drake’s words or his harsh tone. It’s probably both.

“Your what?” he asks.

“Well,” I begin, needlessly clearing my throat, “I was going to call you and explain that—”

“Let me save you a phone call, baby girl,” Drake says, interrupting me. “We got married on Tuesday. This is my wife and son. They’re *my* family, and I don’t share them with anyone.” Drake takes a step closer to Jelani and practically blocks my view of him with his tall body.

“Let’s go, Mommy,” Carter says.

Jelani looks around, then walks out of the house without another word and slams the door behind him. I feel about two inches tall. Instead of sleeping all damn day, I should have called him, but the truth is, I haven’t thought about him much at all since Tuesday.

Drake gestures for me to go ahead of him, but I don’t move. I lock eyes

with him and hope he understands how much I hate him at this moment.

“Mommy, let’s go,” Carter says, elongating the word go. As sweet as my son is, he’s impatient, a trait he did not inherit from me.

“Let’s go, baby girl,” Drake says, gesturing for me to leave again. Unwilling to have a confrontation with him here and now, I walk out the front door without a word.

He must have driven himself because no driver is holding the door open, but his fancy SUV is parked in the driveway as if it belongs there. He puts my suitcase in the back and straps Carter into his car seat.

As I’m getting in the car, he snatches the paper bag from me and puts it in the trash can that was put out on the sidewalk earlier. “You will not eat anything from that idiot,” he practically growls.

I turn to look at my son, who is kicking his legs happily in the car, and swallow my sharp rebuke.

A few minutes after getting to the penthouse, one of the security guards from the building drops off a brown paper bag. Drake hands it to me without a word. When I peek inside, it’s an order of falafels. I toss them in the trash, give him the middle finger, and walk past him to go upstairs.

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Chapter 30

NIA

After leaving Drake downstairs to stew, and hopefully choke in his own toxic misery, I go upstairs into Carter's room. He's happily playing on the floor with his action figures, totally oblivious of the tension between his parents. I run my fingers through his hair. He looks up at me, and my heart melts at his smile.

"Mommy will be right back," I say to my son. He turns his attention to his toys while I head for the door.

I peek down the hall, and when I don't see any signs of Drake, I tiptoe to the guestroom and pull my phone out of my back pocket. I click on Jelani's name and hold my breath. The phone rings five times and goes to voicemail. My calls to him have never gone to voicemail in the week that we've been communicating. He always answers my calls, even if it's only to tell me he'll call me back.

After listening to his message, I decide to leave my own. "Jelani. It's me, Nia." Idiot. He already knows it's you. I clear my throat and continue. "I really hate that you had to find out the way you did, especially after what we

talked about on Friday. I had every intention of telling you myself. I'm so sorry that—" The rest of the words die in my throat. The door is pushed open, and Drake storms in. His blue eyes are pure fire when he sees me. I look away from him, determined to leave a complete message. "Like I was saying, I apologize for the way Drake—" The phone gets snatched from me before I could say another word. I try to take it back but he moves away and puts the phone to his ear.

"First off, my *wife* never has to apologize to you on my behalf. Second, if you call her again, I'm going to come find you, and you won't like what I do. Do you hear me?" It's like I'm paralyzed. I'm unable to move and snatch the phone from him and offer Jelani yet another apology. At this moment, I wish the floor would open and the Devil would come up and snatch Drake Paradise into hell.

He pulls the phone away from his face. Something changes, and I think that's when he realizes I was only leaving a message. "This is your last warning. Nia Paradise is *my* wife. Whatever bullshit you two had going on is over." He ends the call and turns his back on me. I can see him scrolling through my contacts before he presses something on the screen. When he finally turns to face me, he throws the phone on the bed. "I deleted his contact from your phone."

It's that last statement that brings me back to reality. I grab my phone. Jelani's contact is gone, just like he said. "I blocked him too," he taunts.

I turn and look at him. He's leaning against the door with his arms crossed. He even has his lips pursed as if he's the wronged party. This man has barged back into my life after abandoning me and the child I was carrying. He's threatened me with lawyers. He's filed a lawsuit for full custody, threatened

my dad and forced me into a marriage I don't want. Now, he's standing here acting as if he's the injured party.

I take my phone and throw it across the room as hard as I can at his head. He catches it, which makes me angrier. He holds the phone up, shakes it and smirks. "Don't quit your day job, baby girl. You're clearly no pitcher," he says.

"You goddamn son of a bitch," I scream while I sprint across the room. I try to punch him in the jaw, but he wraps his hand around my wrist. "You ruin everything. Me and Jelani talked about being in a relationship, you asshole. This is another thing you've taken from me." I try to pull away so I can scratch his face but can't.

"So violent," he says before he laughs in my face. "Well, you can't be in a relationship with him because you're married to *me*. The vows were pretty clear, baby girl. Remember the part about forsaking all others?" I kick him hard in the shin.

"Dammit, Nia," he says. I manage to twist my wrist away and try to punch him, but he moves out of the way. I follow him and hit any part of his body that I can.

"You arrogant, smug son of a bitch," I snarl between hits. He's unphased. He stands there and takes it, all the while laughing at me. I hit him until he has enough and grabs both my wrists. He raises them above my head and pushes me against the wall. He presses his body into mine which prevents me from kicking him.

Just like before, he's aroused. I can feel it. My nipples harden, and I hope he can't feel them through my thick sweater.

"I've never hated a human being as much as I hate you," I spit out. "You've ruined my life."

“Aww,” he taunts. “I suggest you get over that little problem.” Sarcasm oozes out of him. “Just know that my wife will not be calling another man. Under no circumstances are you to apologize for me. Ever. I’m Drake Paradise, and I make no apologies for anything. I go after what I want, and I take it. Just like I took you.”

“I’m not a possession,” I tell him. “I’m a person with wants and needs.” He presses his body into mine and rubs his erection on me. “I don’t want or need you,” I say.

“Liar,” he whispers. He kisses the side of my neck, and I almost become undone. “Your mouth tells lies, but your body tells the truth.” He runs his tongue along the base of my neck and my body involuntarily shivers.

“Let me go.”

“Make me,” is all he says. I lean into him to push him away. Big mistake. He grinds on me.

“You’re so disgusting,” I manage to say, but my body is suddenly more alive than it’s been in years. Damn Drake Paradise to the deepest depths of hell. Only he’s been able to do this to me. I’ve been with men before him and one man after, and no one has come close to making me feel the way he does. Just one kiss from him is better than anything I’ve had with anyone else. I hate him for it.

“The lies you tell, baby girl. I don’t ever remember it being disgusting. I think the word you’re looking for is nasty.” he whispers in my ear. He licks the shell, and I almost groan. “It was so nasty. The way you’d call out my name when I made you come. How did it go again? I think something like this. Drake.” He lowers his voice and elongates his name. His warm breath hits my skin, and my body immediately covers in goosebumps. “And the things you’d let me do to you. Those nasty, filthy things,” he whispers. “I’ve

been in all your holes. You let me come in your pussy. In your mouth where you'd greedily swallow every drop. In your ass. On your tits after I fucked them. I even got some on your face and in your hair a few times. You'd swipe my cum with your fingers and suck it into your mouth like pudding. And what about that other time I fucked your tits? That time was because you were on your period. A little blood never stopped us before, but you had cramps that day. You had cum dribbling down your chin because I came so hard. *That's what I remember.*"

He's right. Every single thing he said is true. I wanted every part of him. I let him have me in countless ways. Nothing was off limits. We'd spend an entire weekend in bed, and it wouldn't be enough.

"You'd let me do those things to you on Saturday, and you'd go to church with your family on Sunday like a good girl. I always wondered what you prayed about," he says.

"I don't remember any of that," I lie. He presses himself further into me. Then, he drops my wrists and takes a step back. As I try to get my heartrate down to normal, he surprises me and rips my sweater in half. He does the same with the tank top underneath. Before I can blink, he lifts my bra and covers my breasts with both hands.

"These pebbly nipples tell the truth, baby girl. I bet your pussy is already trembling. Just like it used to. It's a trembling, wet, greedy mess right now, isn't it?" He lifts me and throws me on the bed. I try to get up, but he dives on top of me, covering my body with his. His mouth lands on mine and he gives me a punishing kiss. He bites my mouth, and I bite him back. I return the kiss and try to punish him as much as he's punishing me. It's too much. It's nowhere near enough.

My fingers slide in his hair, and I pull it as hard as I can. All he does is

groan and grind into me. He takes my free hand and puts it over his erection. I move my hand away as if burned. He groans again. He unzips my pants and slides his hand in my panties.

“This doesn’t lie either. I can practically hear it begging for my dick.” He’s right. It is, but there’s no way I’ll ever admit it. He slides a finger inside of me. I can’t help it. I mewl like a bitch in heat. He resumes the punishing kiss, and because I don’t know which one of us I hate more at this moment, I kiss him back just as hard.

Without breaking the kiss or removing his finger from inside me, he rolls down my pants with his free hand.

“Open your legs,” he orders. He ends the kiss and removes his hand and starts to unbuckle his belt. The sound of the buckle takes me out of my lust-filled haze, and I remember all the ways I loathe this man.

“No,” I tell him. He pushes his pants and underwear down. His hard dick springs free, and I notice a bead of pre-cum oozing out at its head. My greedy mouth waters and my wet pussy is practically begging for it. “No,” I find the strength to repeat.

“No?” he asks almost as if he didn’t hear me.

“I said no. Get out of this room.” He bends down to kiss me again, but I move my head. “No,” I state firmly and emphatically. “You can put your dick away. You won’t be using it on me. Ever. I suggest your dick get acquainted with your right hand since we are forsaking all others.” I roll over too fast and fall off the bed with a loud thud. I land on my ass. I stay on the floor while I wait for my body to return to normal. The only sound in the room is the sound of our heavy breathing.

After a few minutes, I hear him get up. I hold my breath. If he comes on this side of the bed and touches me, there’s no way I’ll be able to resist him

again. I'll spread my legs for him and let him defile my body any way he wants.

I hear his retreating footsteps, and then the door opens. Seconds later, it slams so hard I let out a gasp of surprise.

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Chapter 31

DRAKE

A few days later, Wyatt barges into my office late in the afternoon. He looks a mess in wrinkled blue jeans and a crumpled sweater. He has his laptop with him, and I gesture for him to take a seat at the table I keep in the corner.

“Greetings from Anchorage,” he says.

It took my security team a few days to find out where in Alaska Howard Banks was, and when they did, Wyatt went to question him.

“What’d you find out?” I ask, getting to the point.

“So, how’s married life?” he asks with a grin.

I rub my face with both hands and groan.

“It’s bliss,” I tell him. “Let’s see. My wife hates me. She’s threatened to kill me. Threatened to take half my fortune when she inevitably divorces my dumb ass. Her words. She thinks I’m a liar who denied my son. She doesn’t want to live under the same roof as me and says it will be a cold day in hell before she lets me touch her.” My body still hasn’t calmed down from a few nights ago. “Her brother is the only adult in her family who doesn’t hate me.”

“I told you not to do this,” he warns. “What did you think would happen when you blackmail a woman into marriage?”

“My marriage is the good news,” I add. “Scarlett has left me about a dozen messages calling me every name in the book. She’s either raving or crying. I prefer the former. Her father called to give me a piece of his mind. When did my life become such a train wreck?”

Wyatt shakes his head sadly at me. The only bright spot in my life is my son, who continues to be a source of happiness. He loves without expectations or conditions. He’s always happy and laughing. He’s perfect. He’s exactly how his mother used to be.

I lean back in my chair and exhale. “Whatever I do is wrong,” I tell him.

“You served her with a lawsuit for full custody of the child she thought you had abandoned. You threatened her father, whom she loves. You blackmailed her into marriage. You’re damn right everything you do is wrong,” he tells me. “What the hell did you think was going to happen? I swear. No one ever listens to me.” I eye his laptop and the manila envelope he dropped on the table. “I’m afraid the news is not about to get any better.”

I trust Wyatt more than I trust anyone else in my life. That’s why I asked him to look into the accusations Nia and Audrey made about my father. I could have gone to Alaska, but I didn’t trust myself to look at all the angles. Not about my father. The man who raised me and whom I adored.

“Just give it to me straight,” I tell him. I pull out a bottle of bourbon I keep in my drawer and pour myself a drink. I don’t bother to offer Wyatt one. He never drinks on the job.

“Once I finally got to Howard, I couldn’t get him to shut up. I confirmed everything Nia claimed,” Wyatt says. Howard held his job for thirty years

working directly with my father. Once Dad was diagnosed with cancer, Howard retired at the age of sixty-two.

“Go ahead,” I order, already bracing myself.

“Your dad had no idea until you forgot your phone in his office one afternoon. Nia sent you a text, and he was on to you since. He had you guys followed.”

None of this makes sense. This does not sound like the father I grew up with every single day of my life. He taught us independence and how to think for ourselves. He was accepting of everyone and of every lifestyle. That’s not just something he preached. That was something he did.

“My dad wouldn’t do something like that,” I say in his defense.

“I’m reporting the facts, Drake. Stop being so defensive and listen.”

“How did he do it?”

“Think back. Howard said you left the phone in the car on your way to Berlin. Your father had it, and while you were in the air with no means of contact, he went to work and sent the first text to Nia telling her you were done. He then went to her and said he was there on your behalf, and you wanted nothing to do with her. She had a conference in a few days, and shortly after that, she was let go. He let a few people go as well so it wouldn’t look suspicious.”

She was supposed to join me in Berlin for a few days after her conference. She was so excited about seeing Germany for the first time. We stayed up practically all night the week before talking about all the things we were going to do for the four days she’d be with me.

“He blackmailed her too. Told her he’d get her dad fired. The Paradise Foundation had just donated money to the Boston PD.”

“Are you shitting me?” I lean back and cover my face with my hands as the

words I spoke to Nia come back. “No wonder she hates me.” I did the same thing to her my father did. Now, her words make sense. I’m just like my father. At least in her eyes, I am.

“Fast forward three months. She contacts you to tell you she’s pregnant. Your father intercepts. He still had your phone. I don’t know how he did it, but he was getting her messages instead of you. He probably cloned it. Maybe when he ordered you that new phone, he somehow blocked her number from your new one. Howard says he didn’t believe her about being pregnant, so he went to see her himself. Howard went too. He told her you asked him to speak to her on your behalf and you wanted nothing to do with her and the child. His advice to her was that she terminate the pregnancy.” I sit up at that, suddenly sickened at the thought of my son not being here.

“Please tell me he didn’t tell her that was my idea.”

“I asked Howard that. He didn’t.” I expel a breath, not that this will make any of this news better. “After that, Nia walked away and left the meeting, stating she would never contact you again. Only, she tried to reach you again a week later. She came to the office, but security was made aware to kick her out. She didn’t know it, but you were still in Berlin. That’s another thing your father did. He told her you were back in town and didn’t want to see her. She called, texted, and even emailed you. Your father intervened each time until he sent the cease-and-desist letter. After that, he went to her and said if she tried to contact you again, you’d sue her for full custody. He told her he’d make sure you’d win, then you’d send the kid off to Europe to go live with nannies until he was old enough for boarding school. He made it clear that if she left you alone, she’d get child support. She told him to take his money and shove it, but once the child was born, he set up the child support payments. All from you. He went so far as to set up a college and trust fund.”

Wyatt didn't say anything I didn't already suspect but hearing him confirm Nia and Audrey's accusations in such a factual manner makes me want to vomit. I didn't want it to be true, but after my initial reaction, I knew Nia wouldn't lie about that. As far as I know, she never lied to me. Back then, I trusted her with my life.

Really? Then how did a few lies from Daddy Dearest manage to destroy something that you valued so much?

"Why? Why would he do this? He loved his children, and he couldn't wait for grandchildren." Wyatt stares at me and crosses his arms as if I'm some kind of idiot. "He wasn't like that!" I yell.

"Then why? Let's take the same scenario and instead of Nia, we'll insert Scarlett. Let's say she even worked here and had no connection to your family. Do you think your dad would have done this had it been her?"

He holds my stare, and I hold my breath before looking away. I already know the answer to his question. He knows it too, so I'm glad when he doesn't push.

"It doesn't make sense. This is not how he and Mom raised us."

"Maybe he did believe in all those things he taught you in theory, just not for his family, and especially not for his heir. I knew your father well. I spent a lot of time with him, and one thing that always stood out to me was that he put you on a pedestal. He loved all his children, but you were special. He saw you as an extension of himself." He stands and leans over my desk. "I'm not going to sugarcoat it, Drake. Your father did this. He successfully conspired to keep you from your son and Nia, and the only reason I can assume he did that is because of the color of their skin." He walks around my desk and puts a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, but you need to hear it and accept that he did this."

I don't push his hand away. He's right. I did need to hear it. I've been dragging my feet about looking into this, and the only reason I asked Wyatt is because I know he would give me a straight answer without trying to spare my feelings.

"What have I done?" I stand and stare out the window. My office faces the back of the building. There's a man-made pond and water fountain in the middle of it. It's frozen and dead now, just like I feel inside. "I threatened to ruin her father. I blackmailed her into marrying me." I turn and face my friend. "I never would have done it, you know. I never would have had her father fired, but I still used it against her because I knew she would do anything for her family. I felt like I had no choice." He tilts his head to the side in disbelief, but I continue before he can say I'm full of shit. "There was another man. She was going on a date, and I was running out of time."

"Drake, you had a live-in fiancée, and you got jealous over a date? Come on, man," he says, throwing both hands up.

I ignore his comment about my jealousy. He's right again. I have no defense. I don't tell Wyatt this, but while I regret threatening her father, I don't regret that it got me what I wanted. "She told me she hates me, and that I'm no better than my father." I hang my head in defeat. "She's not wrong."

"I told you not to do it," he says again.

"Stop saying I told you so," I warn him.

"Well, I did."

"What the hell else could I have done?" I yell. Especially after witnessing her getting all dressed up to go on that date. Was I supposed to walk away and let another man have my family? I did what I had to do. I did what any man would have done, and I made sure to do it before Wyatt could confirm the news.

“Anything else but what you did. But listen, prior to that, you didn’t do anything wrong either. You both are victims.”

“I don’t see it that way, Wyatt, but thanks for that.” When he remains quiet, I turn back to the window and stare outside.

I could have taken my father’s office, which is twice the size of this one, but there are too many memories here. Memories of us doing things two people have no business doing in the middle of a workday. Sometimes, I’d watch her from this window. Unbeknownst to her, of course. She’d sit on the bench with one of her co-workers. Even after we were together, she’d come out here on her breaks, and I’d watch her. Always so beautiful and content. She was so optimistic about her future. She loved this job and the independence that it brought her until my father took it away from her, and I let him do it.

Four years ago, I let my pride get in the way. That’s on me. I didn’t have to go through a pregnancy thinking that the father wanted nothing to do with me and the child. I didn’t have to deal with my father’s hateful rhetoric. I didn’t have to be a single mother for three years, thinking the father had abandoned me. I went on about my life. I’m the CEO of the biggest construction company in the United States. I got engaged to another woman. The same woman I told her I had no interest in, while she had responsibilities that I can’t imagine.

“I loved her then,” I admit. Saying the words out loud is bittersweet. I should have said them to her years ago. “I loved her so much. She was coming to join me in Berlin a couple of weeks after I got there, and I was planning on telling her. I wanted it to be special, and I wanted Berlin to be our place. The last stop of our private little bubble before going public, and then it all went to hell.”

“Do you think she loved you?” he asks.

“I know she did,” I say without a moment’s hesitation. “I felt it. It was in everything she did. It was in every touch. Every kiss. I’ve never experienced anything like it before or since.” I know he’s long suspected that I wasn’t in love with Scarlett. He accused me of being with her because she was safe. He was right even though I denied it. I was never in any danger of being hurt by Scarlett. While I feel guilty about how things ended between us, I don’t miss her. I haven’t thought about her at all.

“Well, then, try to remind her of that,” Wyatt says, taking me out of my thoughts. “Stop being an asshole. Show her you can be a good father. Try and be that guy she fell for all those years ago.”

He makes it sound so easy, but I’ve made so many mistakes. She’ll never forgive me for serving her with the lawsuit for full custody and for threatening her father. In her eyes, I’m no better than Donald Paradise.

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Chapter 32

NIA

I don't bother staying for dinner at home tonight. After picking Carter up from daycare, he said he wanted to see his daddy. I tried not to roll my eyes, and I succeeded.

Drake was there when we arrived. Carter runs to him the instant we get through the front door. Drake picks him up and hugs him tight before Carter pulls away and kisses his cheek. I turn my back, pick up my bag, and walk up the stairs without a word to Drake.

Tonight, I plan on going back to the guest room, but I stop at the master bedroom first to pick up the clothes I intentionally left on the bathroom floor. I felt bad about that all day. I don't want to make more work for the housekeeper, but when I get to the bathroom, the clothes aren't there. The bathroom is back to being immaculate. I stomp out and go to my closet to find something comfortable to change into and come to a complete stop when I see the short navy blue dress I wore all those years ago. We went dancing that night, and he could barely keep his hands off me. The silver stilettos I wore are also there. I bend down and pick them up. He bought these for me,

and they were obscenely expensive. I run my hands over the rhinestones and put them down almost as if it burns to touch.

Why would he have left everything here like some kind of shrine? Unwilling to think about the reason, I grab my duffel bag and almost bump into him at the door. He eyes my bag, but I step around him, go to the guestroom, and slam the door shut. I know he's right behind me. I'm barely in there five seconds before he knocks on the door.

"What?" I don't yell in case Carter's nearby.

"Can I please come in?"

I'm immediately on alert. His voice is lacking the usual hostility. And he's never asked permission to come into a room in this house before.

"It's your world, Paradise, not to mention your house," is all I say.

I expect him to barge through the door, but he doesn't. It takes another few seconds for him to open it and step inside. I don't say a word. I refuse to look at him. I open my bag and pour the contents on the bed before plopping myself beside them and yanking my shoes off.

"Where's your ring?" he asks. I stare down at my bare left hand.

"I took it off," is all I say. "You can't leave Carter alone." I try to walk around him to go to my son, but he grabs my elbow. I roughly pull out of his grasp.

"He's not alone. He's with Delores. She was our cook when I was a kid. She retired, but I convinced her to work for us part-time," he says.

"To work for *you*," I correct him.

"Will you come downstairs and meet her, please? And can we call a truce until Carter goes to bed? Scratch that," he says, shaking his head. "Can we call an indefinite truce? I don't want to keep fighting with you, Nia. I really don't. It wasn't always like this between us. Can we go back to—"

I cut him off before he can go any further with this nonsense. “You never threatened my father before, and you never sued me for full custody of the child you didn’t want.” He looks away as if he’s ashamed, but I know better. “But sure. Truce. Like I said, it’s your world.” I walk past him, bumping him along the way. He follows me down the long hallway and down the stairs.

When I get to the kitchen, Carter is sitting on the counter, talking nonstop to an older black woman. She looks to be about my mother’s age, in her late fifties. She’s looking down at him affectionately and puts a cucumber slice to his lips. He takes it, and she runs her hand through his curly hair. When she looks up and sees me, she crosses the room to pull me into a tight hug.

“I’m Delores,” she says when she pulls away. “You must be Nia, the mother of that adorable little boy. He reminds me of his father at that age,” she says fondly. She lets me go and returns to the stove.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask her. I go to my son and take him into my arms. He wraps his legs around me and rests his head on my shoulder. Delores tells me to relax while Drake sets the table.

He’d always do that back then. He’d cook and set the table. I’d be in charge of clearing it and washing the dishes. Even then, he’d stand next to me and dry. We could never be far from each other back then.

I barely speak during dinner. Drake and Carter talk the entire time, mostly about nonsense and Spiderman. When Drake promises to wear matching Spiderman Halloween costumes, Carter jumps out of his chair and into his father’s arms. It would be sweet if I didn’t hate Drake so much.

When I was pregnant with Carter, especially when I found out I was having a son, I pictured moments like these. I dreamed of the three of us eating dinner together, going for walks or to the playground, and taking vacations as a family. Despite not liking kids, I always knew he’d make a great father to

his own. He was always so caring with me and always doting on me, but I guess I was wrong. He abandoned us, and now he's back, and while I'm happy that my son finally has his father's love, I feel nothing but anger, hurt, and resentment.

"Mommy can be Piderman too," Carter says.

"I'm more of a Wonder Woman," I tell my son. I grin at him, and he grins back.

"Or Cat Woman," Drake says. He winks at me, and I lose my breath.

For a brief moment, I'm transported to that first Halloween when I was a sexy Cat Woman, and he was Batman. I wore a black skintight leather jumpsuit and black stiletto boots. We were supposed to go to a bar in my neighborhood, but the moment we locked eyes, we ripped each other's clothes off and climbed into bed instead. We didn't leave it until the next afternoon.

I look away and stare at my empty plate, angry at myself for remembering.

"I'll clean up and then I'll come give you a bath," I say to Carter.

"I want Daddy to do it." He lifts his hands, and Drake leaves his chair to pick him up.

I promise to come read him a story after I clear the table. It only takes me twenty minutes to bring the kitchen back to its pristine order. When I get upstairs, I'm met with Carter's uncontrollable laughter. He runs down the hall without a stitch of clothes on and Drake runs after him. He catches him and lifts him off his feet. I find myself laughing at the scene. Drake brings him to his room, and I lean against the opened door to watch as he puts his pajamas on.

"Look, Mommy!" Carter picks up a Spiderman coloring book and a brand-new box of crayons. He goes to his little table in the corner of his room and

starts to color.

“You’ll spoil him,” I warn Drake. “You already bought him a bunch of toys. I don’t want him to think this is normal.” I gesture around the room and all its opulence.

“It makes him happy, and I’ve missed out on so much.” For once, his tone isn’t accusatory. I almost wish it was so that I can tell him off. Instead, I’m lost in the ocean-blue intensity of his stare. When he takes a step closer, I take one back. “Can I talk to you for a few minutes?” He cranes his neck to look at Carter, who now has his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth while he colors. “In private.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized, light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, muted tone. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 33

DRAKE

She looks at Carter one more time. She doesn't give me an answer, but she walks outside of the room, and I follow her. She goes into the guest room that she tried to claim last night. She leaves the door cracked open, leans against the wall, and crosses her arms. I hate this. I hate this wall of resistance that she's put up. This was never our energy. After that afternoon when I took her home, everything between us was always so easy.

Tell her everything.

I open my mouth to do just that, but when I look into her eyes again, they seem hollow and distant, not warm and full of mischief like before.

"Actually, can you follow me, please?" I don't wait for her to respond. I walk out of the room, and I expel a breath of relief when she follows me downstairs and toward the back of the house. I open the door and gesture for her to go inside. "I had this set up for you as a home office. I hope you like it, but if you don't, you can furnish and decorate it any way you like. It's right next to my home office." She doesn't so much as crack a smile, but she does look around the room. There's an oak desk that is similar to mine, and I got

her a lime green chair because she loves bright colors. I even put a framed photo of Carter on her desk.

“Thank you,” she says, clearing her throat, “but this isn’t necessary. I prefer to work from my home.”

“This is your home,” I insist.

“Under duress. Like a prison,” she whispers. I don’t think I was meant to hear it, but I do.

“This isn’t a prison, Nia,” I say louder than I intend. I take a deep breath and decide not to take the bait. “Anyway, these are for you.” I open the drawer in the desk and hand her a small box. She eyes it and slowly reaches for it. She puts it on the desk, opens it, and takes out a small envelope. Her eyebrows shoot to her forehead when she sees the American Express with her name on it. She puts it down and holds up the checkbook that has both our names.

“I don’t understand,” is all she says.

“Well, if you want to decorate this house or need to buy anything for yourself and Carter, you can—”

“I can take care of myself, but I will use these for Carter,” she says. “As for the house, it’s yours, not mine. It’s not my place to change anything.”

I do everything I can to rein in my temper. I remind myself that she’s only here because I blackmailed her. She’s angry, and she has every right to be. I also remember that for four years, she thought I had turned my back on her when she became pregnant with my baby.

I didn’t think it would go like this, though. Especially after the comment she made about taking half my billions once she divorces me. I thought she’d be ready to spend as much money as possible. Scarlett did from the moment she agreed to be my wife. Hell, she did it before then too.

“I thought you’d be happy so you could start putting me into the poorhouse,” I remind her.

“I know I can never do that. I still plan on taking half, though, only because I know despite whatever you say, it will piss you off.” She drops the checkbook on the desk and starts to walk out. I grab her elbow. She doesn’t pull away, but she doesn’t turn around to face me.

“What can I do to get in your good graces, Nia? I hate this, and if I’m being honest, I’m not used to it. We never fought,” I remind her.

She finally pulls her elbow out of my hand and turns to face me. “That’s not true,” she says with a soft voice. Much too soft. “What about that day Scarlett visited the office, and she had her hands all over you? They were more like tentacles. We fought then. Remember what you said?” I know exactly what she’s getting at, but I remain quiet and wait for her to speak. “You reassured me that she was only a friend. You promised you weren’t interested in her, and that there would never be anything other than friendship between you. Then just a little while later, you slip a ring on her finger. I guess that was just another one of your lies.”

She looks up at me, arms crossed, while she waits. I put my hands on my hips, then I look down at her. “It was more than two years after us. I thought —”

She interrupts me before I can say anymore. “Did you get hard for her, Drake? Did you fuck her?” I feel my face flush and look away. “Did you come inside of her? Did she ever get on her knees and blow you? Did she wrap her lips around your dick? Did you go crazy when she did? You could never say no to a blow job. Did you—”

“Enough,” I say, choking on the word almost as if it hurts. “Please stop.”

“I have a question for you. What was it like going from bad to basic?” She

arches an eyebrow. “I mean, you really went slumming. I would think a guy like you would have better options, but—”

“I thought you didn’t want me. I thought—”

“Oh my God. Is anything ever your fault? You’re not seriously going to tell me that you were with Scarlett because of me. What about you? Is anything ever a result of your choices? It’s not, is it? I guess that’s how the Paradise Heir was raised. Is there anything else?” she asks, her voice annoyed and dismissive.

“Do we have to fight about every little thing?”

“Little?” she says with a chuckle. “Who’s fighting?” she asks, feigning innocence. She opens her eyes wide and raises both hands. “I’m playing catch up. It’s been over four years, after all. But if you think this is fighting, you’re in for a rude awakening.”

When she stares into my eyes, I look away, not taking the bait. The last thing I want to do is talk about Scarlett or my time with her. “I want to introduce Carter to my family on Saturday. I’ve already arranged it. Feel free to be mad about that too. Add it to your growing list.” I walk out of the office and slam the door behind me.

I don’t make it two steps before I hear her. “No,” is all she says.

“No, what?” I slowly turn and close the distance between us in one step.

“I don’t want him to meet your family.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because he’s only known love and acceptance with me and *my* family. I will not have him hurt because you come from a family of—”

“You better watch what you say, Nia. My family is not like that.”

“Well, I have the paperwork and text messages that show otherwise. And since you claim you didn’t know, I can’t exactly trust your judgment, can I?”

From her tone, I know she still doesn't believe me. I'm glad I didn't tell her what Wyatt told me this afternoon. She's not ready to hear it, and I'm not up for another round of being called a liar.

"Do you think I would let anyone hurt my son?" She opens her mouth to argue, but I hold my hand up. "Yeah, you probably think I would. I know what you're going to say." I hold up my hand again to silence her before she can spew any more hate. "You're going to say I was the first person to hurt him, but I swear on everything, I didn't know. I didn't send those messages. Either way, his grandmother, aunt, and uncle want to meet him. He has a whole other side of the family, so you're going to have to share him. You can either come along and meet your in-laws or not. That's your only option, but Carter will be coming with me."

I didn't mean to say all of that. I didn't mean to use that tone, but I can't be a half-time father who must ask permission to take my son for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon.

"You and your entire family can go straight to hell." She walks past me, not saying another word. She runs up the stairs and disappears out of my sight.

I storm to my office and pour myself a shot of the bourbon I keep at my desk. The sense of calm the alcohol gives me only lasts as long as it takes for my phone to vibrate.

"What Kurt?" I say after seeing Scarlett's father's name flash across my screen. "I'm not in the mood for whatever this is. Things are over between me and Scarlett, and I'm married to someone else. Stop calling me!" I yell.

"You pompous little asshole," he says, his voice cold as ice. "Do you know how much you've hurt my daughter? She's a mess."

"And this pointless phone call won't change that. It's over between me and Scarlett. And since you're on your third marriage, you should understand the

concept of ending a relationship.”

“I should come find you and kick your disrespectful ass.”

“Only you can’t. Not with your fists, and you don’t have any power to beat me at anything. Call me again, and Foley Construction will be in the past tense.” I end the call, resolved never to speak to another member of that family. Foley Construction is one of our primary subcontractors, and Kurt is hopefully smart enough to know not to bite the hand that feeds him.

After another drink, I slam the glass down and return upstairs. I find them in Carter’s room. She’s in bed with him, reading him a book while he cuddles to her side.

I lean back and watch. I know she knows I’m here. She always knows when I’m nearby. I listen to her sweet voice as she reads about green eggs and ham. Even from where I am, I can see Carter’s eyes getting heavy. He falls asleep just as she finishes the story.

She slides out of the bed, kisses his forehead, and covers him with the blanket. After making sure the nightlight is on, she walks out of the room and past me as if I’m not there.

I sit on the edge of Carter’s bed and take his little hand in mine. He’s out cold, and I brush the hair off his forehead. I kiss his hand and put it down before I tiptoe out of the room.

It’s still early. Much too early for me to go to bed, and I’m too wired to sleep. Last night with her in the bed was sweet and torturous at the same time. I was so turned on that I had to go to the bathroom to relieve myself. It didn’t help much. At the very least, I wanted to pull her into my arms and be lulled to sleep by the beating of her heart. At most, I wanted to slide inside of her and stay there until morning.

She’s right, though. I did tell her there was nothing between me and

Scarlett, and at that time, it was true. We were lifelong friends. Her family was close to mine. There was never any attraction on my part, but I knew she felt differently toward me. I've known it for a long time. Before Nia, I was not interested. After meeting Nia, there was no one else on this earth that I would choose over her.

The joke's on me because four years later, that's still true. I kept Scarlett hanging for years only to turn around and marry Nia within weeks of getting her back into my life. But that was inevitable. There's no way I'm letting her go again.

Well, good for you. Enjoy having a wife who hates you until death do you part.

After changing into lounge pants and a T-shirt, I return to her room. I knock on the door, and when nothing happens, I let myself in. The door to the adjoining bathroom is closed, and I can hear the shower. She still has a bunch of clothes on the bed, so I carry them to the master bedroom and put them on one of the shelves in her closet.

Not wanting another fight right now, I snatch my laptop and return to the guestroom. She's still in the shower. I'm not surprised because she took long showers then too. I slide onto the bed and open the spreadsheets I was looking at before I left work. It takes her another fifteen minutes to come out. She's in a black onesie and even has the hood on her head. She misses a step when she sees me in bed.

"What are you doing in here?" she asks.

"I'm going to do some work before I go to sleep," I tell her without looking up.

"In here?"

"Unless you want to come back to our room," I tell her. Her eyes narrow

and she gives me her back. She opens the closet door and sticks her head in. When she doesn't find what she's looking for, she pulls the drawers open and slams them shut.

"Where's my stuff?" she asks.

"I put them in your closet in our bedroom," I say without looking up at her.

"Asshole," she says under her breath. She doesn't say anymore. She climbs into bed, and just like last night, she gives me her back. She falls asleep within a few minutes, and I don't know if it's because she barely slept the night before or because she's as physically and emotionally exhausted as I am, but she starts to snore.

I'd always make fun of her about that. I even recorded her one night. Unable to stop myself, I put my hand on her shoulder. When she doesn't stir, I put my laptop on the end table, turn my front to her back and put an arm around her. I inhale the back of her head just like I used to and pull her back into my chest. She contours her body to fit into mine. Just like then, she fits perfectly.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of light gray, stylized flowers and leaves. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, oval shapes. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 34

NIA

I'm exhausted. Not physically, but emotionally. I don't know how people remain in toxic relationships because one week in, I'm ready to wave the white flag. I didn't grow up like this. I lived in a house with my brother and two loving parents. My father is Audrey's father's younger brother. They lived one street away. We were always together. One could say that I've had the ideal childhood. Other than Drake and the path that led me to single motherhood, my life has been drama free.

So, how did I ever end up here? I don't want to stay here, and I'm not referring to this beautiful penthouse. I mean this emotional place. The last thing I want is for my son to absorb some of what I'm feeling. I don't even know what that is anymore.

A few days ago when I woke up wrapped in Drake's arms, I had closed my eyes and gone back in time. Back then, we'd wake up facing each other. Our limbs would be intertwined. Most nights, I'd sleep so deeply and soundly that I'd drool on his chest. He never minded. He'd joke and say it was good luck. We'd make love again before showering together. Most of that was done in

this house. In that bedroom upstairs. That's why I got no sleep my first night here. There are too many memories in that bedroom.

"When is he getting here?" I hear Mason ask someone.

"He's on his way," Drake says, and I guess they are talking about Wyatt.

"Whatever," Audrey says. She's leaning against the wall across from me, watching me like a hawk. I had no idea she was coming, but she showed up with Ray, who is in the kitchen drinking a beer.

There's a loud knock on the door and I go to get it, but the boys come running out like a herd of elephants. Mason opens the door, and they practically jump on Wyatt, who dramatically falls on the floor. The kids jump on him until he manages to get up. He picks up Carter, and Kyle wraps himself around one of his legs.

"Uncle Wyatt has arrived," he says, throwing a punch in the air.

"You're not their uncle," Audrey says.

"Yes, he is," Kyle says in Wyatt's defense.

"Let me guess. You knew I'd be here, so you had to show up." He wiggles his brows, and she looks away. "Where's the pizza, men? I hope someone got me one with anchovies."

As if on cue, there's another knock on the door and four boxes of pizza are delivered. Drake takes them into the kitchen. The boys, including Wyatt, all run after him.

"Let's eat," I tell Audrey, suddenly hungry.

"Dad, is Carter's dad rich?" Mason asks when we get to the kitchen. My brother playfully whacks him upside the head.

"Mason, he's beyond rich. He makes some rich people look poor."

"Wow," Kyle says. "Can you buy me a dragon?"

"I want more Piderman," Carter adds. He's never one to be left out if there

are going to be presents.

“I want a dragon, like in House of the Dragon,” Mason says.

“Boy, didn’t I tell you not to watch that?” Ray says, giving him a look of disapproval.

“He likes the girls,” Kyle snitches. “He says he wants to kiss one like this.” Kyle puts his tongue where his two missing front teeth would be. He closes his eyes and slowly moves his head around.

“Shut up, Kyle,” Mason says, but he doesn’t deny his brother’s words.

“That’s isgusting,” Carter says between giggles.



Today seems like a million miles away from the lighthearted Friday and Saturday night I had with the boys. Having them there was a gift I didn’t know I needed. The house was loud and messy, but I wouldn’t have changed a thing. I also saw another side of Drake. For someone who said he didn’t like kids before, he has infinite patience with the boys. They built a fort with blankets in the living room, they asked him all kinds of questions about Paradise Construction, and he answered all of them. Mason declares he wants to work there as an engineer so he can build bridges, and Drake promises to hire him.

Now, I’m in the back of his car with Drake and Carter while Bertram drives us to his family home. It’s the last place on earth I want to be today, but there’s also no way in hell I would let my son do this without me.

When Drake told him about today’s plans, he was eager to go. I bet he thinks everyone will love him like my family does. I didn’t tell him otherwise, but I’ll be here to distract him if any bad vibes come his way. I’m

also ready to leave if this shit goes left, and Drake will just have to deal with it. I don't care how much money he has or how many lawyers he can hire. No one is hurting my son. And as of now, I can afford just as many lawyers as him.

The car turns onto a long, winding street. It's the type of street where the rich people in horror movies always live. There are no sidewalks, and the street looks cold and deserted. The car stops in front of an even colder dark gray house. I'm surprised I don't see crows squawking around outside or gargoyles on the roof. Carter's hand tightens around mine, and I try my best to give him a reassuring smile, but I don't think I succeed.

"Daddy used to live here?" he asks while he looks out the window.

"I did," Drake says.

"Is it scary?"

"Of course not. You have a grandma, aunt, and uncle waiting to meet you." I try not to snort or roll my eyes at that. The driver opens the door, and after I unbuckle Carter from his car seat, Drake takes his hand.

"Like my papa, Grandma, and Uncle Ray?" Carter asks.

"Just like that," Drake replies.

"Hardly," I whisper. He whips his head around to look at me, and I scoff and look away in disgust.

It's with my heart in my throat that I follow them inside. Drake stops walking, and I almost bump into his back. He picks up Carter and faces me.

"I don't want to fight today," he says. He never wants to fight. I guess when you always get what you want through bullying, you don't need to fight.

"As long as no one starts anything, I'm cool. If they do, a fight will be the least of your problems." I tilt my head toward Carter so he knows my

meaning. He looks into my eyes and opens his mouth to say something, but he blinks and the moment is lost.

The front door opens, and a young woman comes running out. I know it's Hannah Paradise. I've seen pictures of her online, and Drake had tons of family pictures on his phone. She has dark hair and blue eyes just like him. She hugs him and pulls away. Carter reaches for me, and when I take him, he wraps his legs around me.

"It's okay, Carter. This is my sister and your Auntie Hannah." He lifts his head and looks at her. She smiles warmly at him.

"It's nice to meet you." She touches his back. He relaxes in my arms, but he doesn't engage. "Drake says you like Spiderman." That gets him to finally smile. "I have a surprise for you inside."

He looks at me, then at her. "Really? Is it a Spiderman?" His mouth hangs open while he waits.

"Come and see." He kicks his legs and I put him down. He takes my hand and starts to pull me inside. Drake opens the door, and when I step over the threshold, it's like I'm transported to a world of opulence. Drake's penthouse is big and fancy, but it's contemporary. This house has old bones and is designed differently than Drake's.

"Wow," Carter says as he looks around. In the entryway there's a double staircase, and right above us is a chandelier.

"Are they here?" I hear another woman's voice. Drake follows it, and an older woman with dirty-blond hair flies into his arms. He kisses both her cheeks. She smiles at him, but her smile seems sad. In fact, everything about her seems sad, despite her designer clothing and impeccable makeup.

She sees me and Carter standing there, and her hands fly to her mouth. "Is that my grandson? Why did it take you so long to bring him?" She leaves

Drake's side and comes to stand in front of Carter. She crouches down to his eye level and he stares at her. Drake might have his father's height, but he has his mother's bone structure and eyes. He looks a lot like her, and so does Carter. She runs a shaking hand through his hair. He stands there, frozen. She smiles at him, but her eyes fill with tears and they slide down her cheeks.

"Don't cry," I hear my son say. I move closer to him to let him know I'm here if he needs me, and that I'll walk out the door with him. Drake's reaction be damned.

"Oh, I'm just so happy to meet you, sweetheart," Mrs. Paradise says. "They are happy tears. Can you give your grandma a hug?" Carter turns back to look at his father. Drake nods at him, and that's all he needs. She opens her arms to him, and like the loving child he is, he walks in. She wraps her arms around him and holds him close. She closes her eyes and softly cries.

"You are just about the handsomest little boy I've ever seen," she says when she pulls away. "You remind me so much of your daddy." She cradles his face and kisses his cheek. She stands and lifts him, spinning around with him in her arms and kissing his face.

Another man walks in from the back of the house. I know it's Langley Paradise, Drake's younger brother. He's just as tall and has the same dirty blonde hair. He looks more like their dad, but he has his mom's blue eyes.

He leans against the wall and watches his mother. There's an expression on his face that I can't read. Hannah stands next to him, wraps her arm through his, and rests her head on his shoulder.

I look away from them to look at my son, who appears to be comfortable for now.

"I'm so rude," his mother says. She puts Carter on her hip and smiles at me. "I'm Maggie Paradise." She extends her free hand to me. "You must be Nia."

I shake her hand and nod yes. She continues to smile, even though I've yet to return it.

"Yes, this is my wife," Drake says. I don't react to that. Not in front of his family. I don't even consider myself his wife, so there's no point in arguing with him about it in front of these people. "Nia, this is my brother Langley." Langley finally pulls himself away and shakes my hand. I don't smile back at him, but his hand is warm and his smile genuine.

"Carter, this is your Uncle Langley," Drake says.

"Like Uncle Ray?" he asks.

"Like him but much cooler." Carter just stares at him, probably not sure of how to respond.

"Uncle Ray is nice," he finally says.

"Does he let you have dessert before dinner?" Langley asks.

Carter shakes his head no. "And he doesn't like it when I jump on his bed." I'd laugh if I wasn't in a den full of lions. Ray's always fussing with Carter and Kyle about jumping on his bed.

"You can jump on mine whenever you want," Langley says.

"Really?" Carter asks, awed.

"And me, your grandma, and Aunt Hannah got you some presents. Come on." Langley extends his hands, and Carter nearly jumps into his arms. We follow them through a formal living room and then down a long hallway. We're led into an informal living room that seems to also be a family room. I roll my eyes. How many living rooms does one family need? Drake catches me, but I look away.

There's a pile of presents in the corner, but before Carter can get to them, Langley points to the sliding glass door.

"Wow!" Carter runs to the door and stares at a Spiderman car that's sitting

on the deck with a big red bow on it. I look to the ceiling and ask myself why these people would get this child a car like this when it's still cold out.

A server comes out carrying a tray of drinks. He's a black man likely in his late twenties or early thirties. His steps almost falter when he sees me. He looks away and looks right back. It's as if he's trying to make sure he saw what he thought he saw. He offers me a tentative smile, which I return. He looks at Carter and then back at me as if he's waiting for me to confirm he's why I'm here. I shrug and he tilts his head knowingly.

Drake must notice because he looks from me to him, not at all pleased. He takes two drinks from the tray and offers me one.

"For you, wife," he says loud enough for the server to hear.

The server's eyes land on mine and he raises his eyebrows. I nod.

"Girl," he says, elongating the word. He doesn't even try to be quiet. "Now I've seen it all," he says to me on his way out of the room.

"I'm not thirsty," is all I say to Drake when he offers me the drink for the second time. I walk away and go to my son who is opening packages like it's Christmas morning.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized flowers and leaves in a light, muted color. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, rounded shapes. The pattern is centered horizontally and spans the width of the page.

Chapter 35

DRAKE

“Who is that?” I whisper to my mother and discreetly point at the server who had the nerve to smile at and talk to my wife.

“That’s Solomon,” she says. That’s all she says. Carter jumps up and waves a Spiderman action figure. Then he hugs Langley and Hannah. Nia watches. There’s no expression on her face. She’s just blank, and I hate that more than her anger. “He’s just perfect, Drake.” Mom wraps her arm around mine. “Your father would have been so happy to—”

“Not now, Mom,” I tell her. The last thing I want is for Nia to hear my mother talking about how much my father would have loved his grandson. She’s already looking for an excuse to take Carter and bolt. Mom opens her mouth to say something else, but I speak first. “No Dad talk right now. Please.” I stare into her eyes, imploring her.

“I’m going to get to know my grandson.” She kisses my cheek and walks to Carter and his pile of gifts.

He jumps in Hannah’s arms and she spins him around. When he gets down, Langley hands him a cookie. Nia huffs at that, but she doesn’t say a word.

“Cool kid,” Langley says minutes later. I’m leaning on the wall on the other side of the room watching my son and his mother. “You sure he’s yours?” If I wasn’t holding a flute of champagne, I would have punched him in the face. He senses my mood because his smile dips. “Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean he’s cool and you’re not.” I inch closer to him and sniff. I sent him a text last night asking him to stay away if he gets drunk before lunchtime. He didn’t reply. When I don’t smell alcohol, I step back. “Fuck off,” he whispers.

“There he is,” I say. “Asshole.”

“You’re sniffing me and I’m the asshole? I’m not an alcoholic, Drake. Get off your high horse. You think I’d be drunk meeting my nephew for the first time? Great kid, even though his mother hates you and us by extension.”

I look past his shoulder and stare at Nia. She’s still as stoic as ever. Hannah tries to engage her in conversation. She answers. She’s not rude, but she’s cold. She’s not the happy woman from years ago, and I’m responsible for that.

“By the way, congratulations on your marriage. Thought I’d be saying that to you about Scarlett.” I expect to see smugness or judgment from him, but there’s none. “Your blushing bride looks like she’d rather face an execution squad.” Langley is not wrong. He’s an annoying pain in the ass but has always been astute.

“She can’t seem to stand you, which begs the following question. How on earth did you convince her to marry you?” Another server comes in with a tray of drinks. He offers one to Nia, and she shakes her head no. When he reaches me and Langley, I put my glass down on the tray. Langley takes a glass of water.

“That’s our business, but what are you getting at, Langley?”

“You can’t stop looking at her, but she’s going out of her way to avoid looking at you. I’m no genius, but the vibe I’m getting from her is that she’s looking for an excuse to take the kid and run out of here.”

“Well, she can’t run.” She can, but I know she won’t go any further than her old house. Even if she did try to go somewhere else, I’d find her in a matter of minutes.

“You made sure of it, huh? Has anyone ever told you that you’re just like Dad? And that’s not the compliment you think it is.”

We lock eyes, and I can tell he wants to say more, but Carter runs over to us and pulls on Langley’s pant leg.

“Uncle Ray never lets me use his phone.” He looks up at his uncle and waits. Langley pulls his phone out of his pocket. Carter practically bounces on his heels.

“Let’s go download your favorite games.”



“I can get you whatever you want to eat and drink,” I whisper to Nia a few minutes later. She hasn’t eaten any appetizers yet either.

“I’m not hungry or thirsty,” she says.

“But you haven’t eaten all day.”

“I’m not a child,” she whispers. “When I get hungry or thirsty, I’ll do something about it.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice Langley watching us, but Carter starts to talk to him, so he looks away. Minutes later, we’re called for lunch. Nia tries to take Carter’s hand, but my mother gets him first.

Meals at home have always been formal affairs. The chef cooks and servers bring it to us. Today's no different, and I regret not asking my mother to make this more casual, but she probably has no idea what that means. To her, this is a small lunch with the family.

Carter eats everything and talks nonstop to my mother and siblings. They laugh at everything he says, and every few moments, Mom's eyes will fill with tears. Nia just pushes her food around on her plate. She doesn't take one single bite. I'm sure Hannah and Mom don't notice, but Langley does. His eyes dart to her every few minutes. To his credit, he tries to talk with her and ask her questions, but Nia will only give him one or two-word answers.

After lunch, he offers to take Carter for a walk on the property. Nia offers to go too, but I know it's not because she's interested in my family estate. A home that is partly hers now. I'm sure she just wants to keep her eyes on Carter to protect him from my family's immediate threat.

"I want to swim in the pool," I hear Carter say.

"Honey, you don't know how to swim yet," Nia reminds him.

"Yes, I do," Carter insists.

"I'll teach you this summer," Langley volunteers.

"Oh, yes. I'll get you an instructor," Mom says. She wraps her arm through mine. "I'm looking forward to summer barbeques and pool parties."

Nia doesn't say a word, but I can tell she's not happy about that by the way her nostrils flare with irritation. As much as I don't want to fight anymore, I guess we'll have to fight tonight about her behavior.

After our walk, Langley and Hannah let Carter drive his new car in the driveway. The temperature has dropped so they are not out there for long. Nia stands out with them and watches the entire time. After loading his new

presents in the car, it's time for us to leave. Nia is stiff when my family hugs her goodbye.

We don't speak on the way home. She looks out the window. Carter's exhausted and falls asleep in his car seat almost immediately. When we get to the building, I carry him. He's wide awake by the time we take the elevator to the penthouse. After promising to get his new presents from the car later, he says he's going to color in his room.

Nia still hasn't said a word to me. She's already in the kitchen, pulling out contents from the fridge to make a sandwich.

"Hungry?" I ask. I get a bottle of water and hand it to her. For the first time today, she looks at me, but it's over much too quickly. She takes the water bottle, opens it, and drinks half in a few gulps. "You know, the chef is pretty good. Maybe you should have eaten instead of pushing the food around on your plate."

She ignores me and cuts a baguette. She puts cheese and turkey in it, closes it, and takes a huge bite. She stares at me as she chews, uncaring about the crumbs falling from her mouth. After she swallows, she says, "I thought you said you didn't want to fight."

"I don't." I hold both hands up. Actually, I do. For now, an argument will be the only way for me to know what she's thinking or feeling.

"I don't either," she says right before she takes another big bite. I wait for her to chew and say more. "Unlike you, I'm not toxic, Paradise."

Hearing her call me toxic shouldn't bother me. She's angry at me, and she's lashing out. My head knows this, but my heart breaks a little each time she says it. "I'm toxic?" I snort as if the idea is absurd. "What about you?" I ask before I can think better of it. "You've called me every name in the book. You've hit me. You've pulled a knife out on me, and you stand there in all

your hypocrisy and call *me* toxic?” Her head rolls back as if I just struck a physical blow. “Pot, meet kettle.”

“None of those things have ruined your life like you’ve ruined mine,” she says while pointing at herself. “Am I just supposed to sit back and take it? Fuck that,” she says. “Me calling you a few names and slapping you across the face like you deserve doesn’t come close to what you’ve done.”

“Ruined your life?” I give her a fake laugh. “Look around you, baby girl. Your life is hardly ruined, but I find it telling how you left out the part where you tried to kill me.”

“If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead,” she says dismissively.

This time, my laugh is genuine. This is the same woman who cried for an entire weekend about her neighbor’s dog being put down four years ago.

“Okay, tough guy,” is all I say.

“As I was saying,” she says. “I don’t like chaos. I don’t want Carter to know how I’m feeling. I don’t enjoy fighting either, believe it or not.”

She gives me her back. She puts the sandwich down and goes to the pantry. She comes back with a bag of chips.

“Then why didn’t you eat? And why were you so cold to everyone? They were a lot nicer and a lot more gracious and welcoming than your family has been to me.” She slams the chips down on the counter and faces me. I guess she’s ready to give me that fight now. That didn’t take long.

“You think my family should be gracious to you? After you abandoned—”

“I warned you about accusing me of that. I did no such thing.” I do my best to keep my voice low so Carter doesn’t hear, but I don’t think I succeed. She puts her finger to her lips, signaling for me to be quiet.

“I don’t care about your warning,” she whisper shouts. “Fine. If you want to rewrite history and say you didn’t abandon us, fine. What about all your

other dirty deeds? And I didn't eat or drink at your dysfunctional family's stick-up-the-ass little lunch because I don't trust them not to poison me."

Of all the things she's said, the last one is the most surprising, not to mention the most absurd thing I've ever heard.

"Out of the two of us, you're the only one who's ever had anything up their ass." That statement shocks her so much, she takes a step back.

"Thanks for continuing to remind me of all my life's mistakes," she says.

"Really? Which time was it a mistake? I seem to remember you're the one who asked for it. Again and again," I add, pushing down the twinge of pain her words cause me. When she purses her lips and refuses to answer, I say, "And poison you? Have you gone mad? You know damn well no one was going to poison you. You did that to be petty and to get back at me."

"To get back at you for what?" She finishes her sandwich and waits. "Which one of the many awful things have you done to me that I'd want to get back at you for? And yes, I don't put anything past anyone with the name Paradise. Oh, God. The irony of your last name. Paradise," she scoffs with a heavy dose of disdain. "It should be purgatory, do you know that? You poison me, take my son, and blame it on Solomon."

I let out a snort at the absurdity that just came out of her mouth. "You watch way too many true crime documentaries. You sound deranged, baby girl. I'd hate to commit you to a mental institution. However you might feel about my father or me, my mother and siblings had nothing to do with it. All they want is to get to know Carter. Believe it or not, they want to get to know you too. You're part of the family now." I eye her left hand and she's not wearing her ring. She hasn't worn it in days. I have no idea where it is, and I wonder if she made good on her threat and flushed it down the toilet.

"Well, I don't believe it, and I never will. You walk around with blinders

on about your father, and I'm supposed to trust your judgment about the rest of them? To be clear, I don't want to be a part of your family. I'm done with yet another pointless conversation with you. I have a headache, and I'm going upstairs to get the hell away from you." She walks past me and disappears from my sight, not bothering to clean up the mess she left on the counter first.

After making sure the kitchen is back in order, I find her in Carter's room. She's in his bed while he plays in the corner. She has that same vacant look in her eyes like she had her first night here. When she sees me, she turns and gives me her back. I sit on the edge of the bed and put my hand on her waist. She doesn't move away, but I might as well be touching an iceberg.

"Just so you know, I love having you and Carter here. We had something good once. It was better than good for me if I'm being honest. I want us to get back to that. I never had anything close to what we shared before you or since. I hate that you're unhappy. I hate this hostility. I hate this tension and this wall between us. I've missed you, Nia. I think you've missed me too."

She doesn't say anything, and I don't expect her to. I reluctantly move my hand and stand up.

"Why don't we let Mommy nap?" I say to Carter. "Come watch cartoons with me." He's up and out of the room in no time.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, scattered across the width of the page.

Chapter 36

DRAKE

If the circumstances were different, I'd be annoyed at my mother showing up at my home without calling first, but not tonight. I'm mildly relieved. As far as I know, this is the first time she's left the property since Dad's funeral. She's been holed up at home for months with Langley, her grief, and unlimited alcohol.

I might not be irritated, but I'm worried about why she's here. I saw her two days ago for that strained lunch. We talked briefly on the phone yesterday, but she did not mention coming over. I don't even know how she knows where I live. I certainly never told her about this place, but it would only take a moment to talk to my security team to know where I am at any given moment. Another perk of being a Paradise.

Nia's right. Sometimes it's like being in purgatory. I'll never admit that to her though.

The elevator dings and my mother steps into the penthouse. She's impeccably dressed in a tailored pantsuit, but I can see the sadness in her eyes. She looks like she's aged ten years in the past nine months. She has

crow's feet at the corners of her eyes and mouth, and she has gray hair at her temples.

I walk to her, and she kisses my cheeks. After helping her with her coat, I gesture for us to sit on the couch, but she takes her time walking around the first floor of the penthouse.

"This is nice," she says once she gets to the kitchen. Her fingertips trail along the marble island and she finally takes a seat. I pour us each a glass of red wine. She pats the stool next to hers, and I sit. "I'm sorry," she says as she sips her wine.

My heart sinks at her words. I put my own glass down and wait for her to say more. I stare into her eyes, wondering if I read things wrong all those weeks ago when I went to see her and found her drunk.

"I've been checked out, and it started way before your father—" she lets the word hang, "—left us," she concedes. "I've been out of it since his diagnosis. Maybe even longer because he was sick for a while before he went to see the doctor." She blows her breath upward.

"You're grieving. You don't have to apologize for that." I put a hand on hers. As always, her skin is warm.

"I haven't been able to be your mother, Drake. You need a mom regardless of how old you are." She finishes her wine, puts down the glass, and grabs both my hands. "Even when you're married," she says looking right in my eyes. "Where is your family, by the way? I was hoping to see my grandson." She exhales and smiles at the mention of Carter. Her eyes light up, and in this moment, I'm positive my mother did not conspire with my father.

"They're at her family's. They'll be home soon," I tell her.

"Why aren't you with them? Her family is your family too now." We stare at each other, but no words come out of my mouth. I can't tell my mother that

my in-laws hate me, and I'm giving my wife a gift by not barging into their house. "Let me say something," she says.

"Please," I tell her.

"I never thought Scarlett was right for you." That takes me by surprise. She's never voiced any objections about me and Scarlett, but now that I think about it, there was no excitement either. At least not from Mom. Dad was happy about us though. "I believe she cared about you and wanted you, but it was not mutual. You were not happy with her, and it showed. There was no chemistry. No zing. After you got engaged, I was coming to talk to you about it, but your father got sick, and everything went to hell."

"Mom, I'd rather not talk about Scarlett." The last thing I need is for Nia to come home and overhear talk about my ex.

"Fair enough. I didn't come here to talk about her, but I just had to say it. I do want to talk about Nia." She whispers her name. She looks around the kitchen as if we're not the only two people here.

"What about her?"

"You care about her. It's plain to see. You couldn't keep your eyes off her on Sunday, but she wouldn't look at you. She didn't eat or drink a single thing, and she barely interacted with us. I don't understand that. It's as if she's angry at us, but from where I'm sitting, she's the one who never told you or us about Carter. We lost out on three years because of her, so why is she acting like we did her some grave injustice?"

"Mom, she didn't do that," I say in Nia's defense. "She did everything in her power to let me know she was pregnant with my baby."

That shocks her. She lets out a little gasp of surprise. "Really?" she asks.

"Yes, really," I tell her, but I don't say more. She's still too fragile and I don't want her to return to the darkness that's held her for so long.

“Then why am I just now finding out about him? I’ve missed all this time, Drake. His birthdays and Christmases. We’re his family too, and we love him. We could have loved him all this time. He’s all Langley and Hannah’s talked about. Your father would have loved—”

I don’t mean to, but I slam my hand down on the counter, shocking her. “Don’t talk about him,” I whisper. I turn away from her, the hurt and confusion more intense now than ever before. I stand and pour her another glass of wine.

“I’m not going to avoid talking about your father. What’s gotten into you? You shut me down about him on Sunday too.”

“Mom, enough,” I tell her. She gets up and stands next to me. She puts a hand on my back like she used to when I was upset as a little kid.

“Okay,” she says. I know that tone. She’s not going to leave it alone. She’s going to come at it from a different angle. “Why does Nia seem to have an ax to grind with us? And by us, I mean you too.”

I step away from her, and she drops her hand. “Mom, I said enough. Drop it. Do you want to see pictures of Carter I took this morning.” I pull out my phone from my pocket and open the camera. That gets her attention. She looks through the pictures with tears welling in her eyes. She even traces her finger along his face. She takes my phone, texts them to herself, and hands the device back to me.

“I want to talk, Drake,” she says. “I know I haven’t been present, but I’m here now. I’m not retreating again. I’m the only parent you have left, and I want to be here for you. I know you’ve always been closer to your dad, but I’m your mom. You need me now.” She takes my hands again. “We’ve put a lot on you. We can all fall apart because we know you’ll be there, so let me be here for you now.”

I try to pull my hands from hers, but she tightens her hold on me. “Tell me why my daughter-in-law hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” I say in her defense. If she hates anyone, it’s me and my father, but I won’t say that to my mother.

“You said she didn’t keep Carter away from us. Does that mean you did? Did you think I or your father would be upset about it? You know that’s not the case—”

“Mom, stop! Do you think I’d ever be ashamed of that little boy? Never. And stop speaking for Dad. Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He was my husband. We talked about everything. I knew him better than he knew himself,” she says.

“Oh, really? The reason why no one, including me, knew about Carter is because of him!”

I stun her into silence. When I see the color creep up her neck, I immediately regret my words, but there’s no taking them back. They’re out in the world now, spreading like a virus.

“What the hell did you just say?” That’s the tone she used when I was a teenager sneaking into the house past curfew on a Saturday night. “Tell me what you’re talking about.” She puts her hands on her hips and looks into my eyes. “Right now, because there’s no possible way I heard that right.”

I squeeze the bridge of my nose. I’d rather be fighting with Nia right now instead of dealing with this. I don’t know how I’ll ever forgive myself if Mother goes back to that dark place again, but this is something she needs to know. I would have told her eventually.

“Fine,” I concede. “Come into my office.” In case Nia and Carter come home, I don’t want them to walk in on this. I’ve noticed that Carter is very

sensitive, and if someone is upset, he too becomes upset.

She follows me to the other side of the first floor and into my home office. If I'm going to tell her, I'm going to tell her everything. For the next twenty minutes, I detail it all. I tell her about my relationship with Nia all the way until the day I saw her and Carter at the arcade. I tell her about confronting Nia and her allegations. I tell her about Wyatt's investigation. I even pull out the lawsuit my father had drafted in my name, the text message exchanges between him and Nia, the cease-and-desist letter, and the monthly child support payments. We were able to trace it back to an account he opened a few weeks before Carter's birth.

She doesn't say a word the entire time. I watch her face, but it is expressionless. She reads every piece of paper in front of her, but she doesn't react. I don't know what to make of that, so I sit back and wait for her to finish. When she's done, she pushes the papers away as if they're contaminated.

"I refuse to believe this. Your father would never—"

"He did," I say, cutting her off. "I've been where you're at. I couldn't bring myself to accept it for weeks, but it's right here." I gesture at the papers. "Howard has confirmed it and filled in some blanks. My father did this."

She opens her mouth to argue, but promptly closes it. She reads the cease-and-desist letter again.

"He told her if she kept trying to contact me, I'd get custody of the kid, ship him to Europe to be raised by nannies, and send him to boarding school. He basically threatened to make sure my son would never know that I loved him —" The words get stuck in my throat.

"My God," is all she says. "I just don't understand why. He loved you. He loved all of us. He wanted grandchildren and—"

“Mom, please. I don’t want to hear about his love right now. All of this says otherwise. If he loved me, he wouldn’t have done this. He took three years of my son’s life from me, and over four years of a life with Nia. That’s not love, and you can’t convince me otherwise.” There’s a hard edge to my voice, and she doesn’t argue with it. She’s lost all color to her face now. She picks up one of the pieces of paper and reads it as tears begin to stream down her pale cheeks. As if it’s too much to bear, she puts the paper on the desk and pushes it all away.

“You love her,” she says, and I nod. “You were happy all those years ago?” She swipes a lone tear. When I tell her that I was, she asks, “And Nia was happy too?”

“We both were until we were ripped apart,” I admit.

“Oh, Drake,” she cries. “My poor baby.” She wipes more tears. “I’m so sorry. I understand now.” She shakes her head sadly. “She’s angry at you. At us for things we knew nothing about.”

“She doesn’t believe I didn’t know. She thinks I only came back out of a sense of guilt,” I admit.

“Son…” she begins but stops when we hear the door and footsteps.

“Daddy!” I hear my son’s loud voice, and in it, his excitement of seeing me. “Daddy!” he yells again.

He bursts through the office door and runs to me. Nia is right behind him, but she stops short when she sees my mother. Mom hangs her head as if she’s too ashamed to look at her.

“Hey,” I say to Carter. I tickle his belly. “Your grandma’s here.” Mom quickly wipes her eyes and reaches for Carter. He goes to her, and she hugs him.

“I’m so happy to see you,” she says. “I have some gifts for you.” He

bounces in her arms. “It’s nice to see you too, Nia,” Mom says. She smiles at Nia. Nia smiles back, but it’s fake. I know she’s only doing it for Carter’s sake.

“Mrs. Paradise,” is all Nia says.

“Carter, why don’t you show me your room? We can look at your presents in there.” She puts him down. He takes her hand and practically pulls her out, leaving me alone with Nia.

She has her arms crossed, but she doesn’t say a word. She walks further into the room, and that takes me by surprise. She never voluntarily goes into a room with me. She looks down at the papers and back at me. She purses her lips, and I wait for her to go on a tirade about how awful my father was.

“You told her?” she asks waving at the mountain of evidence against my father.

“I did.”

“And what? She pretended she had no clue just like you did?”

“She didn’t pretend anything and neither did I.” She stares into my eyes, and I don’t look away. I’d give anything to open my arms and hold her to me right now, but we’re light years away from that.

“Are you okay?” That question shocks me. She’s never asked about me, and now she is. It lights some hope inside of me.

“Not really. No.” How can you be okay when you find out your father is not who you thought he was? How do I deal with my father’s deception when I can’t confront him about it? How can I be okay when she’s so close and still so far away?

I wait for her to call me a liar. Call my mother a liar, but she doesn’t. She eyes me up and down and inches slightly closer. I hold my breath while I

wait to see what she does next. In the meantime, I will myself not to open my arms to her. I can't take another rejection right now.

"Well, you'll be—" She never finishes.

Carter bursts through the door holding a stuffed blue whale and another Spiderman action figure. This one is almost as tall as he is.

"Look!" He drops Spiderman and holds the stuffed animal in the air. My mom comes in behind him, happier than I've seen her in almost a year.

"I found Bluey," she announces. "I don't know why, but I woke up with him on my mind a few weeks ago. He was in a box in the attic," she says. Carter hugs it.

"I love him," he says. "Grandma says he was Daddy's." He waves it in front of Nia's face. "Now it's mine." He hugs it again, picks up Spiderman, and runs out of the office.

"I hope it's okay that I got him a few things," Mom says to Nia.

"Of course," Nia says.

"He's so wonderful and sweet. He—"

"Grandma, come on!" Carter yells. Whatever Mom was going to say is forgotten and she rushes out of the office.

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Chapter 37

NIA

I don't care. I've played that mantra in my head for the past two days. I do not care. What exactly are my obligations here? Is it my job to make him feel better about his father? If he's telling the truth, that is. That can't possibly fall on me, but he's been walking around like a wounded puppy since his mother left. She spent the night. She stayed and gave Carter a bath and read to him until he fell asleep. When I went to check on them, she was also fast asleep in the bed next to him. Drake threw a blanket over them and left.

Those *few things* she said she bought Carter was a complete lie. She got him everything from toys to clothes to board games. She's called every night since and promises to come back tomorrow.

Now, it's time to wake up my son. He's usually awake by now, running around the apartment giggling. He's a happy kid. He always has been, but having Drake in his life has made him the happiest I've ever seen.

"Mama's baby," I say as I open his door. He's in the middle of the bed, and the sheets have been thrown off. He's stirring, but even from here I can tell something is not right.

He groans and I put my hand to his forehead. He's warm.

"Hi, Mommy," he says, but he grimaces.

"Does your throat hurt, baby?" He nods at me and sits up. I pull him into me and he rests his head on my chest. We sit like this while I rub his back like I always do when he's sick.

"Hey, how about some breakfast?" Drake comes in, and he stops short when he sees us. I do too. He's in a pair of shorts, and that's it. His bare, sweaty chest glistens, and I lick my lips. He would do pushups with me on his back in this home gym. Then we'd fuck on the floor like two wild animals. It was the perfect way to start the day.

"He's sick," I say to Drake, reluctantly looking away from his body. "Why don't you go use the bathroom, and then I'll take your temperature," I tell Carter.

Drake takes him from me and feels his forehead. When he feels his glands, Carter giggles uncontrollably. While Drake helps him in the bathroom, I go to the guestroom and get my first aid kit.



It's never a big deal for me to take a sick day. My manager is a mom of three, and she understands better than anyone that kids get sick. I sent her a text that Carter has a hundred-degree temperature, and she replied back to take care of him.

He's a healthy kid, but he does tend to get sick about twice a year, usually around this time. I expect Drake to go to work and leave my sick son to me, but that doesn't happen.

After taking his temperature, he picks Carter up and takes him to the kitchen where he tries to feed him breakfast, but our son tends to lose his appetite when he's not feeling well.

"I'm taking a sick day today," I tell Drake. I take a grumpy Carter from him, and he wraps his legs around me. "You can go get ready for work. How about some yogurt for Mama's baby," I say to Carter.

"I'll work from home," Drake says. "He's my son too." His voice sounds terse, and because I'm not in the mood to fight with him, I ignore Drake and feed Carter yogurt and strawberries. When he's done eating, Drake scoops him up and takes him upstairs without a word to me.

After cleaning the kitchen and making myself a cappuccino I go upstairs to tend to my son. I take a long sip of my drink and exhale in satisfaction, but I know my joy will be short-lived when I see Drake walking out of the master bedroom. His face looks hard as granite, and his lips are pursed shut. I'm not sure what I could have done to merit the anger radiating off his body this early in the day.

"I don't appreciate what you did downstairs," he whispers. Not in the mood for a confrontation or a fight, I try to go around him, but he blocks me.

"What? Feed my son breakfast?" I roll my eyes at him.

"*Our* son," he corrects.

"What the hell is your problem?" I ask, frustrated.

"You dismissed me and my concern."

"How on earth did I do that?"

"By assuming I'd be going to work. He's my son too. I love him. I'm worried about him, but you don't give a damn about that. All you care about is yourself."

"Really, Drake? All I care about is myself because I assumed you'd be

going to work so you can run your conglomerate? Yeah, I'm awful." I dismiss him with a wave of my hand and try to go around him. Again, he blocks me, and if this cappuccino was not hitting the spot, I'd throw it in his face. "Can you please move so I can go check on my sick son?"

"He's not just your son," he hisses.

"It's funny how you remember that now," I taunt.

He takes a step closer, trying to crowd me, but I don't budge. I hate that I have to crane my neck up to meet his eyes.

"I would have never—" he begins, but I cut him off, unwilling to hear his bullshit right now.

"I never denied he was yours. Never. Not once. And trust me, if I only thought about myself, I wouldn't be here right now." He opens his mouth to respond, but I talk first. "I'm not in the mood for another one of these conversations that lead to nowhere. I'm really not. It's not in my nature to be this toxic and combative. You're probably in your element, but it's draining to me. I wasn't trying to dismiss you downstairs, but I'm also not used to you being around. I'm used to running the show where he's concerned. It wasn't a dig. It's not a big deal for me to take a day off work, but you're the head of Paradise Construction. I know you think I'm selfish, but I was thinking of you and your company." I manage to squeeze past him, but he quickly catches up to me and grabs my elbow.

"I'm sorry," he concedes. "I'm sensitive when it comes to him, and I hate that I missed so much time. I should know how he is when he's sick, but I know nothing about my own child."

For a moment, I feel sorry for him. If his father did do this and he had no idea, I understand how he would feel betrayed and insecure as a parent. I've been here since day one. I've been here since before Carter was born. There

isn't a thing about him that I don't know or can't anticipate. Drake is still learning.

"You're doing the best you can. You're learning and you're in his life. That's all I've ever wanted for him. I wanted him to not only have a father but to have one who loves him and wants to spend time with him. And he doesn't care that you don't know things. He loves you."

"I love him too," he says. Something catches in his throat and he looks away. Carter calls for me, and I find him in the middle of the bed in the master bedroom clutching Bluey to his chest.

"Daddy says I can watch cartoons in here." I put my cappuccino on the nightstand and climb into bed with my son. Drake gets on the other side, and Carter climbs on top of him.

"Mommy," he says while I hand him Bluey.

"Yes, Carter."

"I love having a daddy," he whispers.

"I know you do, baby." I run my fingers through his curly hair. Drake turns his head to look at me, and our eyes catch. I can see so much emotion in his eyes, but right in this moment, I don't know if it's because of what Carter said or if it's because of me.



Three days later, Carter bounced back and returned to his healthy self, but I caught whatever he had. He complained to his daddy that he missed his friends, so Drake took him to daycare. Feeling run down, I stay home. Drake looked me up and down before leaving with Carter. He didn't say anything, but I know I look awful, and I'm relieved to have a moment to myself.

Today is the first day he left the house since Carter has been sick. He worked, though. He had countless meetings and conference calls, all from home. Delores and the rest of the staff were here as usual, but he took care of Carter. He let Carter play in his home office while he worked.

I worked from home yesterday, and he had Carter sit on his lap through one of his meetings. He had the door cracked open, and I watched as he sat there quietly while looking from the monitor to his father in awe.

Other than the housekeeper, no one is here today. I return to my bedroom and look at my reflection in the mirror. I'm exhausted. My eyes are sunken and have dark circles around them. I was up most of the night, unable to sleep due to congestion. I go to the bathroom and take my temperature. The tip of my nose has now turned red, and the edges hurt to the touch.

"Ugh," I say to myself when I see my temperature is over one hundred degrees. After putting on a pink onesie, I head downstairs to my home office. Today will only be the second day I'm using it, but I reluctantly agree that it's comfortable. I don't know how he remembered, but he got my favorite pens.

I nearly crash into him when I get to the bottom of the stairs. I go around him, but he follows me. I decide I'm going to ignore him and not ask why he's here. I thought he'd be eager to get out of the house after three days, but I guess not.

"What are you doing?" he asks when I sit at my desk and start to log in.

"Working." I try to sound sassy, but I start coughing.

"You're sick." His hand suddenly covers my forehead, and I freeze. A few weeks ago, if he had touched me, I would have pushed him away. Hell, I might have even hit him, but now I sit there like a statue. "You're warm. You're not working today."

With his last statement, I get my wits back. I shove his hand off my forehead and turn toward my screen.

“I already called your manager and told her you’re sick,” he says. I whip around to look at him, but I get dizzy from the sudden movement and have to blink three times before my vision returns to normal.

“Get lost,” I tell him. “I need to work.” He snatches the wireless keyboard away from me.

“Why? Why do you *need* to work?” he challenges.

“Why does anyone work?” I ask him. I roll my eyes at him and reach for my keyboard, but he moves it away. “And how dare you call my manager on my behalf? I don’t stick my nose in your business.”

“You do not need to work,” he says, and I decide I’m not going to dignify that with a response. “And I dare because I’m your husband. For the record, feel free to stick your nose in my business whenever you want.” I spin in the chair and stand. I do it too quickly and stumble back a step. He reaches for me and steadies me.

“Will you stop with the husband stuff? It doesn’t count if you do it under duress.”

“I don’t do anything I don’t want to do,” he tells me.

“Well, isn’t that great for you? You do what you want, and you force your will on everyone else. You know what you—” Another coughing fit hits, and the rest of my words get cut off.

He puts the keyboard back on the desk and picks me up bridal style all in a matter of seconds. I cough all the way upstairs into the master bedroom where he puts me down.

“I’m going to call a doctor, and then I’m going to make you some tea.” I put my head on a pillow and suddenly remember all the hours we spent in

this bed. This very comfortable bed.

“I can take care of myself,” I tell him while I try to get up. He puts a hand on my shoulder and gently pushes me down.

“You can, baby girl, but you don’t have to. In sickness and in health, remember?” he says. I look up at him, fully intending to refute his words, but the intensity of his gaze stops me. “I meant my vows,” he says while looking directly into my eyes.

I look away, but I say, “You told me you didn’t want to marry me. You said I was a means to an end, remember? All you wanted out of this marriage was Carter. You can’t say you didn’t want to marry me and turn around and say you meant your vows. Both of those things can’t be true.”

“You’re right. They both can’t be true. Listen to me closely. I meant my vows,” he repeats before leaving the room.

He returns about ten minutes later with a steaming cup of orange spice tea and says, “The doctor will be here soon.” I open my mouth to tell him it’s not necessary but he speaks first. “She’s already on her way.”

He stomps to the closet and comes back in jeans and a plain black tee. I look away and try to forget how good he looks. How tall and strong he is. Memories of us from back then creep up, and as much as I try to stuff them down, I can’t.

Lazy Sundays of the two of us in this very bed. Naked and wrapped around each other. Slow, deep kisses. His big, strong hands on my skin. Moments of us in the kitchen while he would cook, and I’d watch as I drank wine spritzers or mimosas.

Him telling me how much he’d miss me because I’d have to leave for a few hours to join my family for church. It was on the tip of my tongue to invite him about a million times, but I never did.

He drops himself on the loveseat in the corner of the room and turns on his laptop.

About an hour later, Dr. Larsen, a blonde woman in her fifties examines me. She declares it's not the flu, just a cold. I'm told to stay in bed, rest, and drink plenty of fluids.

Once she leaves, Drake brings me a bowl of chicken noodle soup, another cup of tea, water, and cold medicine. My stomach growls, and I devour the soup and the tea. Once I take the medicine, he takes the tray from me.

"Thank you," I mumble.

"You're welcome," he says.

"Where are you going?" he asks once I get out of bed. "Dr. Larsen says to rest."

"To the bathroom," I tell him. "Is that alright with you?"

He's still there when I return, typing on his laptop. He looks up and watches me climb back into bed. My body suddenly aches, and I'll never tell him this, but I'm grateful I don't have to work today. I'm also grateful to have him take care of me. I put my head on the pillow, close my eyes, and promptly fall asleep.

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Chapter 38

NIA

I knew I should have stayed in bed, but today's the first day I've felt like myself since I got sick. After bouncing out of bed, feeling good, I decide to get on the stationary bike. Assuming Drake and Carter were already in the kitchen eating breakfast, I am unprepared for the sight I walk in on when I enter the gym. Drake is on the floor doing pushups with Carter on his back. They're both grunting, and Carter is gritting his teeth as if he's the one exerting all the effort. I have to put my hand to my mouth to stop myself from laughing at Carter's facial expressions. I fail because they hear my giggles.

"Mommy!" Carter yells and waves at me. "We doing pushups."

"I see," I say to my son. I refuse to look at Drake's shirtless back. "I'll let you two continue with your workout." The words are barely out of my mouth when Drake stands with Carter still on his back.

"We're done," he says, breathless. "I'm going to wash him up and start breakfast." He moves fast. He puts his palm to my forehead to check my temperature. Then he checks my glands. I move away from him and get on the bike without saying another word.



They're in the kitchen forty-five minutes later when I go downstairs. Carter is still on Drake's back, and Drake is still shirtless. I don't think they see me. The blender is mixing a green concoction.

"Good morning, baby girl," he says after turning off the blender and looking up at me. He pours the hideous green mess into two cups but leaves them on the counter.

"That's not baby girl," Carter says. "That's Mommy."

"Well, she was my baby girl way before she became your mommy." Drake looks at me when he says that, but I look away and ignore him. I walk to my son and kiss his cheek. He giggles and kisses me back.

"Kiss Daddy now," he says.

"Um, your daddy doesn't like kisses," I tell him. I think my words come out even, but my rapid heartbeat betrays my calm exterior.

"Yes, he does," Carter says right before he kisses Drake's cheek. "See?" Drake kisses him back.

"Well, Daddy doesn't like kisses from Mommy," I clarify for my son. That's a lie. Drake lived in my body at one time, and that included my mouth. There isn't a part of me he hasn't tasted. And he loved every single moment of it. I shake my head clear of those thoughts and walk toward the fridge for a water bottle, but I feel a hand wrap around my wrist.

"Kisses from Mommy are my all-time favorite things." And before I can respond or move away, his soft lips land on mine. It's a soft tender kiss, and unlike the deep passionate ones we've shared, this makes me feel everything I don't want to feel. I feel goosebumps spread throughout my body as his lips

press into mine. He puts his hand on the back of my head and kneads my lips with his. I open my mouth to inhale, but he takes that as a sign to deepen the kiss.

For a brief moment, I let him. I bask in the feel of his tongue and his familiar scent and taste. I'm transported back to a time when I was so consumed by this man that he was all I thought about. I remember everything. Not just the kisses and his touch, but how they made me feel. How alive I would become just being close to him. I've never had that before or since.

I push at his chest and break the kiss before stepping away. He grasps my chin and forces my eyes on his. My brown eyes lock on his blue, and the only sound in the room is the sound of the blood pounding in my veins. The anger that was inside of him weeks ago when he came back into my life is gone. In its place is the man I remember. The sweet man who would send me a text in the middle of the day just to tell me he was thinking about me. The generous man who would fulfill my every desire. The sexy one who could never keep his hands off me.

I break the stare, clear my throat, and walk away.

"That was disgusting," Carter says between giggles. His laughter breaks the tension, and I give them my back while I drink from my water bottle. "Look, Mommy." He waves his glass with the green smoothie. "Daddy says it's for our muscles."



"So," Audrey whispers, pulling me out of my thoughts of this morning's events. "I think I finally have a foolproof plan. The way people get tripped up

these days is either by DNA or cell phone records. What we need to do—” I tune Audrey out while she drones on about her plan to commit the perfect murder.

I was sick for three days, and he took care of me the entire time. No staff came to the house for those days. He cooked my meals, brought me my medicine, and took care of Carter when he got home from daycare. I even woke up from my nap to find him massaging my feet. I pretended to sleep, and when he was done, he softly kissed my forehead and caressed my cheek.

It was hard for me to be angry at him when he was doing everything for me and our child. All without a single complaint. What I don't understand is why he decided to do everything himself when he could have had his employees do it. For a few moments, I let myself wonder what it would be like if our marriage was really like this. If our vows were real and we took care of each other, but it's not.

He told me to my face he didn't want to marry me. I told him the same thing. As far as he's concerned, this arrangement is only about Carter.

But he told you he meant his vows. I've thought about that statement since it came out of his mouth. As much as I try to shove that thought aside, I can't. I keep reliving those words, and I keep wondering if he means them.

Now, on this moderately warm Sunday, the boys are playing in the yard while the three of us talk in the kitchen.

“You watch enough ID to know that won't work. You'll be caught and arrested in a day,” Ray replies to Audrey. “And you know you won't do well in jail. There's no Starbucks or Sephora in there.”

“Whatever, Ray,” Audrey says. “I've worked it all out.” She pushes her big glasses back.

I've decided I'm done fighting and being angry. That's not who I am, and

it's been eating me up inside. I refuse to remain bitter. I've always wanted Carter to have the love of both his parents, and he has it now, and I'm not going to be mad about that.

"I hate being this angry person all the time," I tell them.

"We'll take care of him, and there will be nothing to feel angry about. Why don't you people ever listen to me?" she asks.

"Okay, officer of the court," Ray says to our cousin. "I ain't going to prison."

"I'm serious," I say, ignoring Audrey and her plan. "I don't like that version of me. I've been angry all the time. I've never argued with someone as much as I've argued with him, and I'm exhausted by it. I don't want to be like that. Not for my son and not for me. It's not healthy."

I meant my vows. I can practically hear his voice in my head.

"Good. I'm happy to hear that," Ray says. Audrey isn't. She crosses her arms and frowns. "Have you talked to him about things?" he whispers.

"Don't have any serious conversations with him without your lawyer there," Audrey says. "I don't trust that man at all, and you know he'll have his friend slash lawyer with him. Be careful," she warns me.

"So, she can't have a conversation with her husband without you there, Audrey?" Ray asks.

"I haven't talked to him beyond telling him he's full of shit, and that I hate him," I tell them. "But he took care of us this week while we were sick," I admit. "I mean, he really took care of us. Like a real husband. Like Dad does when Mom is sick," I tell Ray. "I just don't want to be angry anymore."

"Well, it's the least he can do," Audrey says. "I hope he got sick too."

Ray shakes his head at our cousin. "Does this mean you're going to start communicating with him?" he asks.

“I don’t know,” I tell him.

“So, you’re going to spend the rest of your life with the man, and what? Grunt at him?” Ray asks.

“He should consider himself lucky to get that,” Audrey adds. “But don’t worry. We’re going to get you out of that marriage sooner rather than later. By any means necessary,” she whispers.

Audrey’s phone rings before she can say any more, and she excuses herself to go outside.

“I don’t know what to do, Ray,” I whisper to him now that Audrey is gone. “He told me he meant his vows. It would be easier if he was indifferent, but he’s acting like we’re a real family. That doesn’t make sense because he told me the marriage is all about Carter, and I’m a means to an end.” I don’t tell Ray how much that hurt. I’ve always dreamed of a relationship like the one my parents have, or the one Ray had with his wife before she passed away. I never thought I’d be blackmailed into my own marriage.

“I never believed the marriage was about Carter. If the man wanted access to Carter, he could have it without being in a marriage he doesn’t want. Come on, Nia. Think.”

I shake my head, unwilling to allow Ray’s words to take root in my brain. He stands and grabs a beer from the fridge for himself and pours me another glass of wine. “Obviously, you two had something four years ago, right?” He sits and raises his hands. “I don’t need details, but it couldn’t have been bad. Before things went to hell, what was it like? No details about the nasty stuff. Be honest about how you felt about him. You know you can be honest with me.”

I look outside, and Audrey is still talking on the phone. She throws her head back and laughs at something. Audrey is the only one I told about Drake

while we were together. She had warned me to be careful. When things went to hell, she let me cry on her shoulder while she cussed him out, but she never said I told you so.

“It was great,” I admit. “I was crazy about him, and I thought it was mutual. I thought about him day and night. We were together almost every day, and it wasn’t just physical. No man has ever treated me as well as he did. He was funny, sweet, and so damn romantic.” He makes a face, but I continue. “It was really special and beautiful. The man I remembered didn’t have a mean bone in his body. At least when it came to me, but there was always this nagging feeling in the back of my head. Like it could all be gone in an instant, and it was. Maybe that’s why I kept him all to myself. Maybe deep down I knew it wouldn’t last, and I didn’t want to share our time together with anyone else.”

The only person I talked about the breakup with was Audrey, but Ray was the first person I told about being pregnant. I confessed everything to him that day, and even though he was still grieving his wife’s death and was the single parent of two young kids, he held me while I cried on his shoulder.

“He still cares about you,” Ray says just as Audrey walks in. She snorts. “He does. He’s always making eyes at you.”

“Making eyes at me? That sounds like something Mom would say,” I tell him.

“I know when a man cares about a woman. All I’m saying is, if you cared about him once, you can care about him again. Maybe the man from all those years ago is still there. You don’t have to sentence yourself to a life of loneliness because you’re mad. In other words, talk to your husband. Really talk and maybe listen too.”

“How long was I outside?” Audrey asks. “Care about him again? Are you

crazy, Ray? After all he's done? Listen, my plan will work if yo—”

“Audrey, remember when that family of raccoons got into Grandma’s basement?” I giggle, and Audrey crosses her arms and looks away. “You cried and begged the adults not to kill them. You did a whole report on how raccoons benefit the ecosystem.”

“And? What is your point?” she asks Ray.

“My point is you are no killer. Take several seats. Now, I don’t want Nia to be filled with resentment, hate, and anger, do you?”

“Of course, I don’t.” Audrey softens and reaches for my hand. I meet her halfway, and she squeezes it.

Ray turns to me and says, “Just talk to him.”

I stick my finger in my mouth and pretend to gag.

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Chapter 39

DRAKE

I track her location every few minutes, but I don't need to. She's at her old house and was driven there by one of the drivers. I'm pleasantly surprised that she did that. I would have sworn she would have called a ride-sharing service just to avoid using anything of mine. She's never called for her driver before even though I gave her his information the night she moved in. She's only ever ridden with me in the mornings to drop Carter off.

It was with great reluctance that I left the house today. I made up my mind that when Nia and Carter moved in, I would not work on the weekends, but with both being sick this week, I need to play catch up today. I left because I wouldn't be able to focus with Carter following me around. I figure I can give them my undivided attention tonight.

My loving son and his mother who hates me. I have felt a slight change from Nia for the past few days. She only put up a small fight, but she let me take care of her. Since the first day, she's been a lot less hostile, and I wonder if I'm being foolish to hope that one day we can get past all this and return to how we were before.

While I pull out a spreadsheet with last quarter's numbers, my office door swings open and Langley walks in. I do my best to mask my surprise, but I don't remember the last time he stepped foot in this building, never mind my office. I think he checked out when he learned our dad only had months to live. Of course, it was left up to me to delegate to his team. He never once thought that I might need comfort or my own time to grapple with Dad's illness.

No one in my family other than Hannah considered me or my feelings. Mom stuck her head in the sand and is only now starting to emerge. Langley just threw his hands up in the air and dumped everything on me, yet he acts as if I'm the one who hurt him.

I don't say a word. I don't look at him at all. I don't know why he's sought me out, but I doubt it's for any positive reason. There's no need to ask him how he knew I'd be here on a Sunday.

We were close as kids. We were close as adults too, but things changed between us a few years ago. I can't think of anything I did, but he became resentful of me and pushed me away. Whatever bullshit he's on right now, I'm too busy for it.

He walks to my desk and sets something on it. It's a large coffee from a local coffee shop.

"To what do I owe this honor? Did you poison this?" I think of Nia accusing my family of poisoning her, and my stomach sinks at the memory.

"Fair question, but no." He walks around the office and looks out the window that shows the back of the building. "Can't a brother come and say hi to another brother?" he asks.

"Not if those brothers are us. Let's not pretend we're anything more than we are."

“I guess that’s my fault,” he says.

I don’t answer. I just stare at my phone and hope Nia will call or text, but just like always, there’s nothing.

“What, Langley?” I ask. “I’m busy.”

“How come you never introduced us to Nia when you two were together?”

I wasn’t expecting that. He hasn’t asked me a question about my personal life in about five years. He didn’t even question me about Scarlett. The only one who did was Hannah.

“I’d rather not talk about that with you.” I minimize the spreadsheets and pick up the coffee.

“That’s fair too,” he says. “But I’m asking anyway.” I answer a few emails, fully expecting him to barge out of my office, but all he does is lean against the wall and sip his coffee. After several minutes, he says, “I’m not going anywhere until you talk.”

I look up at him. Just like the other night at dinner, he looks sober. I don’t think he’s been sober since we got Dad’s diagnosis.

“Why do you care?” I ask, shrugging at him. “Since when do you give a shit about me or what goes on in my life?”

“I’ve always cared,” he says.

“Yeah, sure.” I stare at my screen, but I can’t think of a single thing to do. The truth is, I just want to be home with my son. I want to be home with my wife too, but I’m sure I’m the last person she wants to see.

“You can tell me all the ways I’ve failed you as a brother later. Right now, I’m wondering about you. Why didn’t you introduce her to us?”

“Why do you think?” I snap. When all he does is stare at me, I say, “The only rule Dad had about us working here is that we don’t dip our pen in the company ink, so I kept quiet about it. We met on my first day here. She

worked in HR. I pursued her. I loved being with her, and I didn't want to taint that with Paradise obligations and responsibilities. She was a part of my life that no one else knew about. Not because she was a sordid secret, but because I wanted our time together to be just ours."

"It's not because she's black?"

"Of course not. You think I give a shit about something like that, Langley? Get the hell out of here. I don't need this." I'm so sick of everyone throwing that in my face. Nia's entire family hates me because they think I'm a bigot who turned his back on his son when that can't be further from the truth.

"No, I don't think you'd care. I'm wondering if you thought Dad would care."

I look away. "No," I finally reply. "At least not back then."

"What's changed?"

"Since when do you give a damn about me? You've barely said a nice word to me in years and now you want to bond over my personal life?"

"Deflecting, huh?" He sits down across from my desk. "Look, I can understand things no one else can, and believe it or not, I know things about our dad that you don't. You've always idolized him."

"And you didn't?" I counter.

"I did, but unlike you, I didn't believe he was perfect."

This time, it's me who stands and looks out the window at the back of the building and the manmade lake. God, I loved watching her here. Those memories is the reason I refuse to give up this office. Everyone thinks it's because I'm not ready to take my father's place, but that's not it. It's because there are so many memories of her here. That's always been the reason.

"I didn't think he'd care, but he did. I didn't know that about him until recently. Not until I found out about Carter's existence." He remains quiet,

and I know he's waiting for me to say more. Feeling the need to unburden myself, I tell my brother everything that's transpired since I saw Nia and Carter at the arcade all those weeks ago.

For once, he listens and doesn't judge or condemn me. I even tell him how I blackmailed Nia into marrying me.

"Wow," he says once I'm done. "I certainly was not expecting to hear that. Sorry Dad did that to you. I'm sorry you had to learn that about him at all." He stands from the chair and stands next to me. He puts a hand on my shoulder. "He really fucked you over."

"Did you know that about him? It doesn't make sense, Langley. He didn't raise us that way."

"I suspected," he says. "He caught me flirting with a journalist who came to the house to interview him one day and gave me a lecture."

"Was she black?" I ask him.

"Yeah. All he said was that it's fine for everyone else but not a Paradise. We never talked about it again, but I never forgot it. After that, I never considered bringing anyone home to meet him. So, while I'm disgusted by what he did to you, I'm not shocked. Though I never thought he would go so far as to keep your son from you. That's low."

I wish I had known that four years ago. "I wish you had told me this back then, Lang."

"But you blackmailed her? Classic Donald Paradise. Total control freak move."

"Not exactly a compliment."

"It wasn't meant to be. What the hell were you thinking doing that?"

"I wanted my family with me," I say in my defense. And I needed to do it before things about Dad were confirmed. Seeing her with Jelani that night

was the final push I needed to make my move.

“I can tell you care about her.”

“Of course, I do, but that’s something I need to discuss with her before anyone else.” That’s putting it mildly. The feelings I had all those years ago never went away. I stuffed them down, and now they’ve resurfaced. I chose to be with a woman who could never compare to Nia, not even on her best day. I had condemned myself to a life of melancholy and adequacy. I had given up on passion. The nights with her just sleeping beside me are more fulfilling than anything I’ve had with anyone else.

“I’d like to spend time with Carter. He’s all mom’s talked about.”

“You can see him whenever you want. He’d love that.”

Nia was right when she told me Carter is full of love. He’s like that because that’s all he’s received, and that’s not thanks to me. He got that from her and her family. My father, my so-called family did everything to keep him from me. That thought is like acid churning in my stomach.

“Why did you ever get involved with Scarlett? You were never interested in her, and then out of nowhere, you two became a couple. Then you give her a ring but never set a date. What the fuck was that all about?”

I look away, ashamed and guilty at how I treated her, but I remember all the awful things she said about Nia and Carter, and most of that guilt disappears.

“She was safe. After things ended with Nia, I was so hurt. I was angry. I didn’t want to feel those things again, and I knew that I was not in danger of getting hurt by Scarlett. I shouldn’t have done it. Part of me feels like shit for doing that to her.”

“I’ll be honest, watching you two together was so uncomfortable. Every time she put her arm around you, it felt unnatural. But only part of you felt guilty?”

“What are you? Some investigative reporter? I’d appreciate it if this conversation stays between us, by the way.” I eye him up and down. He’s obviously sober and not holding any malice toward me. At least while he waits for me to answer. “She said some horrible things about Nia and Carter. I’m not going to repeat them, but they were ugly. So, yeah, I’m not going to wallow in guilt over her.”

He nods in understanding. “I bet,” he says. “She came to the house and cried on Mom’s shoulder. She told her it was up to her to convince you to take her back. I don’t know what she was thinking since you’re married, but it made Mom uncomfortable.”

I can picture it now. Scarlett crying hysterically because she thinks it will get her what she wants. I noticed that’s how she operates with her family. She cries to her father, and he does whatever she wants. She assumes that will work on everyone else.

“I guess it makes sense why Nia was so closed off toward everyone. She didn’t eat or drink, and she wouldn’t let Carter out of her sight. She assumes we’re all like Dad, doesn’t she?”

I nod in silence and run my hand over my face. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. She has every right to be angry and wary of us, and I have no idea how to change that. She still doesn’t believe that I didn’t know. She thinks I’m only in his life now because of some sense of guilt.” Truth is, I’m fucked. I went about everything the wrong way, but I don’t regret us getting married when we did. I regret how I went about it, but I’m fine with the result. Besides, I didn’t have the luxury of time once Jelani entered the picture.

“Well, you look at her like you want to have her for dinner,” Langley says. My head snaps up, and I look into his face. “She avoids looking at you at all

costs. It's really quite funny."

"Not from over here, it's not."

"Try being nice. Maybe apologize for your actions and come clean about our father. Have you told her you believe her about Dad? I bet when she first made the accusation, you didn't take it well."

"I didn't. Our father wasn't perfect, but I never thought he was that." I can barely say the word. "I thought he loved us. I thought he loved me, but how can a loving father do this to his son? The worst part is, he's dead so I can't even walk away from this and cut him out of my life. I don't know how to reconcile any of it. And what the hell kind of apology can I offer that would erase his actions?"

I sit back down in my chair and lean back. I exhale and cover my face with both hands.

"Just tell her you're sorry she had to deal with him and go through a pregnancy alone. I don't know, Drake. Go to therapy. Have a mediator help you communicate. Tell her how you feel. Start small by asking her out on a date. Hell, ask her for an hour of her time. Just do something."

She'll probably pull another knife out on me if I do all that, but I don't say that to my brother.

"Why are you here? And why are you being nice to me?"

"I don't want to be an asshole like you and Dad," he says.

"I'm not an asshole. At least never to you. Get your facts straight. You've had it out for me for the past five years, and I have no idea why. We were close once," I tell him. "I miss that."

"Look, I was just sick of you being the golden boy. Dad always preferred you. He put you on a pedestal. Hannah was his little girl, and I was an

afterthought. It was always you who would run the business. Everything was Drake, Drake, Drake, and I got sick of it. Maybe I want to be CEO,” he says.

“You want to be CEO? Take the job then. You think I want all this responsibility this soon? I thought I had another ten years. Dad dies. I’m left with keeping everyone and everything together. You get to drink yourself silly every day, and you think I have it good? You get to walk away from your job. From all your responsibilities. I’m the one who had to juggle everything while you sat around, drank, and moped, and you have the nerve to be jealous of me? Yeah, I was such the golden boy that he took the only woman I’ve ever loved from me. He kept my *son* from me. You think he did that out of love? Fuck him and fuck you too.” Instead of looking at the spreadsheets, I decide to shut off my desktop and go home and wait for my wife and son. “The most pathetic thing of all is that I still miss our father. Despite the anger and resentment I have inside of me, I still love and miss him. That’s some fucked up shit.”

That’s the first time I’ve uttered those words out loud since I found out about my father’s duplicity. Langley puts a hand on my shoulder in quiet understanding.

“I know how you feel,” he says.

“He didn’t raise us this way, Lang. He didn’t run his business this way. I don’t understand. How could he do this to me? I’m his damn son, and because of him, I lost out on three years of my son’s life. All I have of that time are pictures that his mother reluctantly shares with me. Years I can never get back. And years I lost out on with Nia.”

We don’t speak for several minutes. For the first time in years, I’m grateful for my brother’s company. There are things I don’t have to explain to him like I would with Wyatt or anyone else.

“Here’s what I know,” he says. He plops himself down on my desk. “Fair warning, I don’t know much.” He chuckles and so do I. “Yes, you lost three years, but you have the rest of your life. Yes, Nia is angry at you, but let’s be real here. She had your baby when she didn’t have to. I’m sure she cares about you too. Tell her what you found out and apologize on Dad’s behalf. You might not think it will matter, but it will—and you have to be patient with her. Be patient with yourself too.”

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Chapter 40

DRAKE

Be patient. Be patient. Langley's words play in my head for the next couple of hours. After getting a text from Nia's driver that they were on their way home, I decide to leave the office for the night. The place is eerily quiet when I get there. I know she's home, but I don't hear the television, Carter's constant chatter, or the sound of his little feet as he runs around the house.

"Carter! Nia," I yell, suddenly eager to see them both.

"Up here." Nia's voice lacks the usual hostility, but I'm immediately on alert. Carter is not home. If he was, he'd be here and climbing on top of me by now.

Resigned, I take off my coat and shoes ready to go upstairs for another confrontation, which is the last thing I want or need right now. I'm drained. I'm physically, emotionally, and mentally drained. I have nothing left to give in an argument, and if Carter is not home, there's no one here to keep things from escalating. Before I can get to the steps, she comes down.

"Carter wanted to spend the night with Mason and Kyle, so I let him. Ray will drop him off at daycare tomorrow."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her that she should have called me first before making that decision, but I swallow those words. Carter misses his cousins. I know it because he talks about them nonstop.

“Okay. I'll call him later. Do you want to go somewhere and have dinner?” That question takes her by surprise. Her head snaps up and her mouth forms an O. “I want to talk to you.”

“I've already eaten, but I want to talk to you too.” Now that takes me by surprise. She's not wanted anything to do with me since I barged my way back into her life.

She follows me into the kitchen where I open a bottle of white wine. I don't want this on an empty stomach, but I need it to prepare myself for whatever she has to say, which I'm positive won't be anything I want to hear. The only thing I won't give her is a divorce. If she wants one, she'll have to fight for one. She already knows I fight dirty.

She turns down my offer of a drink and says, “It's been hard on me being angry with you all this time. I'm not like that. I don't enjoy fighting with you. I hate feeling this way, so I'm done.”

I wait for her to call me toxic or some other name. I watch her, ready to grab her wrist if she tries to hit me, but she doesn't say or do anything else.

“You're done? Done what? Done being my wife?” I put the wine glass down, fully prepared to give her the fight of her life if that's what she means.

“I'm done fighting with you. I don't want it to affect Carter. That's all. Look, I know this marriage is only because you want to be close to our son. I'll never keep him from you, so you don't have to worry about that. If you want out of it—”

I hold my hand up, and she stops talking. This marriage was never about Carter. Yes, I want access to my son, but there are ways to get that without

marriage. She's asking for a cease-fire. It sounds good, but does this mean I'm going to have a version of the Nia that showed up at my mother's house for lunch? I'd rather she fight with me than walk around with a vacant look in her eyes.

So take the vacant look away, idiot.

"Okay. I appreciate that. I don't want to fight anymore either." I surprise her when I reach for her hands. This is the first time I've touched her like this in years, and she feels just like I remember. She's warm and soft. As if I'm on autopilot, I lift her hands to my face like I used to and sniff them. She smells the same. Light and safe. She pulls her hands away before I can kiss them like I used to. "I don't want you to be unhappy. I hate seeing you this way, and I hate knowing that I'm the cause. Can you please take down this wall? I hate it."

"What wall?" she asks just before she gives me her back. I stand behind her and put my hands on her shoulders. I slowly turn her around and look into her eyes. She looks away almost immediately.

"This wall. This distance. This tension." I grasp her chin and force her eyes back on me. "Once upon a time, there was nothing between us."

"That's not true and you know it. There were billions of things between us. There was family and obligations between us. There were people conspiring to keep us apart. There was class and wealth and race between us and neither one of us thought to address any of that. We were fooling ourselves back then. We were stupid."

She's not wrong. Even though we didn't know about some of those things, they were all there. I should have known. I should have done more to protect what we had, but I was a fool. All I cared about then was that I had her in my

corner. She made my responsibilities and obligations tolerable. Knowing that she was waiting for me was everything, but I failed to protect her.

“Do you remember how you were supposed to meet me in Berlin?” When she nods, I continue. “It was going to be our city. I was going to make it special and tell you how I feel about you. That was supposed to be the end of us being a secret. I wanted the world to know, but that was taken from us.” She searches my eyes as if she’s trying to decipher if I’m telling her the truth. “I believe you. My father did this, and I’m so damn sorry.” I rest my forehead on hers. She doesn’t move. She’s stopped breathing. “I know you don’t believe that I never got your messages or that I didn’t send those texts to you ending us.”

She remains quiet, but I feel encouraged that she hasn’t called me a liar yet.

“Drake—”

I pull away and put a finger to her lips. “I’m sorry you went through your pregnancy without me. I won’t say you went through it alone because you had a lot of support, and I’m so grateful for that, but that should have come from me. I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

She pulls away. She swipes a stray tear and nods. She doesn’t speak at first, then she takes a deep breath.

“Why didn’t you come find me? Your father made it impossible for me to get to you, but you could have come to me. You say you didn’t know, but what about everything we shared? How could you believe some stupid text messages? I didn’t believe them at first. Not until your father showed up in person.” She doesn’t yell, and I wish she would. I look away in shame.

“Because I was stupid. Because I let my pride get in the way. And I did try to get to you. I was ready to come back to the States, but my father showed up the day I was supposed to leave. Looking back now, he knew my plans

and ruined them. I got more messages from you, and I let my pride, hurt, and anger get in the way. He also kept me there for almost a year instead of just three months.” I don’t tell her that Scarlett visited three times when I was here. Nothing happened, but now I wonder if that was my father too. He was the only member of my family who was happy about me and Scarlett. No one else was.

“Then you ask Scarlett to marry you? You told me she meant nothing. How do you go from nothing to wanting to spend your life with her?” She shoves at my chest, and the movement is so sudden, I take a step back.

“I’m married to you. I never married her.” I know she’s at war with herself. She doesn’t want to fight, but she’s angry still.

“You fucked her, though, didn’t you, asshole?” She shoves me again, but I anticipate it this time. “You’re disgusting.”

“Scarlett is gone. Getting involved with her was a mistake. She was safe. I was so hurt when we ended, and I never wanted to go through that again. If I knew the truth, I never would have been with her.” I start to close the space between us. I stop just a few inches from her. “I’m asking you for a chance.”

“A chance for what? We don’t work—”

I cut her off before she says anymore. “Give me one weekend. Carter is spending next weekend with your parents, right?” When she nods, I continue. “I’m asking you to give me that weekend. No wall. No ghosts of mistakes past standing between us. Just Drake and Nia like we used to be. Let me remind you of what we had.” I clasp her chin again and force her to look at me. “You remember how good it was, right? Please, give me just one weekend.”

“Why? Because you want to fuck me?” She tries to pull away, but I don’t let her.

“Do I want to make love to my wife? Yes, I do. I’ve missed you so much. It will be just like the weekend we had all those years ago. It was right before our birthday, remember?”

I can tell that she does. For the first time since she’s been back in my life, her smile isn’t fake. “So, you want anal again?” She rolls her eyes.

“I mean, I wouldn’t turn it down,” I tell her. “Even though you couldn’t sit down for days.”

She gasps in surprise, and I see a slight blush on her cheeks. She looks away and giggles. “Perv,” she says.

“Just one weekend, but you must promise not to put up the invisible wall. I want my girl back. The one who loves glazed donuts, wears bright colors, and laughs at the dumbest things. The one who despite her crazy sock collection has ice-cold feet. The one who thinks she sings like Mariah Carey.”

“Thinks? Do you need a reminder?” she teases.

“You sound like a dozen cats being strangled at once. My ears still bleed sometimes.” I deadpan.

She giggles like she used to, and her little nose scrunches.

“What happens after I give you one weekend?” she asks.

Maybe you’ll remember how good we were together and give me a lifetime.
“You can give me a week. Or a month,” I tell her. Or forever. “Think about it, okay? If you agree, our weekend will start on Friday when we get home from work.”

I pick up her hands and bring them to my lips.

“I don’t need to think about it,” she says. I brace myself for her rejection and my disappointment. I thought she would have taken more time to think before telling me no, but I know I can persuade her. “I agree,” she says,

stunning me. “Like I said, I don’t want to feel this way until Carter turns eighteen.” As if I would let her go so easily after he turns eighteen. “But Friday is good. I’ll have time to process and prepare.”

I pull her into my arms and hug her. She feels exactly the same. Despite the height difference, no woman has felt better in my arms than her. No one else could ever take her place.

“Thank you.” I pull away and bring my mouth to hers. I want to taste her sweet, full lips. She kisses me back. It’s just like the first kiss we ever shared and the hundreds after that. She molds her body into mine and opens her mouth for me. She tastes like peppermints just like she used to back then. Before I can deepen the kiss, she ends it.

“Friday,” she reminds me. She takes a giant step back, putting too much space between us. “I’m going to take a shower and go to bed.” She leaves me standing in the kitchen, fighting a war with my body and wondering how I’m going to survive until Friday.

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Chapter 41

NIA

It felt like a million years away on Sunday when we agreed to this. Despite the anticipation that's been between us all week, it still managed to fly by. Things have changed already. Our schedules are still the same. We have breakfast together before we both drop Carter off. Then I either get dropped off at work or at my old house on the days that I work remotely.

We eat dinner together as a family at night. Ray invited us over on Wednesday. Drake ignored Audrey who looked daggers at him all evening. Other than that, it went well. The boys harassed Drake until he got Wyatt on FaceTime for them. Audrey huffed while they discussed the difference between alligators and crocodiles.

All week I've been nervously anticipating tonight. All week, Drake's been a great father to Carter. He plays with him. Reads to him and bathes him. He's never tired of Carter's nonstop chatter or ridiculous questions. He doesn't even get annoyed when Carter FaceTimes with Kyle and Mason and gives him the phone to say hi to his cousins. Every day he brings home a toy or new book for Carter.

Now, it's Friday. Not only that, but it's also Friday evening. Carter is away until Sunday night, leaving me alone with Drake for the first time in years. If we didn't have this truce, I would pack a bag and check into a five-star hotel for the weekend, all on his dime, of course. I'd turn off my phone and order room service and expensive champagne.

Now, he's on his way home and I don't know how to deal or how to act. The penthouse is eerily quiet. Delores was given the day off, so I walk around the empty kitchen and run my hand along the island. I decide to pour myself a glass of white wine, and just as I pull out the bottle, the elevator door opens.

It can only be him. No one else other than my family and his mother have been here. His heavy footsteps hit the hardwood floor. It's as if he knows where I am. Our eyes lock when he steps into the kitchen. I look away, pour a second glass of wine and hand it to him.

"I thought we could go out to dinner," he says. He holds up his glass, and I clink mine with his. I thought he'd want to go right to bed. I know I do. That's all I thought about all week. It's been a while since I've been with a man, and I've never been with a man who is a better lover than Drake. Not before we met or after we ended. There might have only been one guy since we broke up, but he didn't come close.

"Dinner sounds good." I haven't eaten since lunch, and I barely ate that. "How dressed up do I need to get?"

"You are perfect just as you are." I'm in blue jeans and a blue and white striped button-up shirt. It's as far from perfection as possible.

"I have room for improvement."

"You're flawless."



Forty-five minutes later, I'm sitting beside him in one of his sports cars. He said there would be no staff this weekend. I was relieved. It's a big adjustment getting used to all the hired help that comes and goes. He never had anyone in the penthouse back then. At least not while I was there. Now, they treat me like the lady of the house, and I don't always know how to react to that.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Your favorite place," he says.

"Legal's Seafood." I clap my hands in excitement. "But you hate it there. I know it's not fancy enough for you."

"I don't hate it," he says. He puts a hand on my lap. I decided to wear a short skirt, black knee-high boots, and I have a tight red top underneath my black leather jacket. He caresses my knee, and I'm transported back in time four years. We never stopped touching each other back then. I'm dying to put my hand on top of his, but I don't dare go there. "And even if I did, you like it, and I always have a good time with you."

"You think the last few weeks have been *good* with me? You did get a lobotomy." He lets out a hearty laugh, and I do the same. I laugh so hard, I snort, which makes us laugh harder.

"You did promise to make my life miserable," he reminds me. "It was still better than all those years without you."

My smile drops, and I look out the window, unsure of how to answer. I'm not sure I'm ready to reply to something like that.

“No wall,” he says. “You promised.” He squeezes my thigh. I close my eyes and exhale. I’ve missed his hands so much. I rest mine on top of his.

“Yeah, but I didn’t pinky promise.” The tension disappears. “God, we were so corny, weren’t we?”

“Hardly.” We arrive at the mall, and he finds a spot close to the restaurant entrance.



“I’m so full,” I tell him the instant we step back inside the penthouse. Drake ordered several decadent entrees for us to share. We shared a bottle of wine too. It was like going back to four years ago. Just two people having dinner and enjoying each other’s company. There was never any limit to what we could buy. All I had to do was utter a want or a desire, and he’d fulfill it.

He follows me to the living room and pulls me into his arms. This is the first time since Sunday that he’s gotten so close. At least while we’re both awake. I’ve woken up several times this week with his arms wrapped around me.

“I had fun tonight,” he whispers close to my ear. I feel a shiver go through my body. “It always amazes me how much bread and butter you can eat.”

I giggle at that. “It always amazes me how impeccable your table manners are.” I pretend to drink from an imaginary mug and hold up my pinky finger. Then I bow dramatically.

“A gentleman in the streets, but a beast in the sheets,” he says in my ear. His hands glide down my side and rest on my hips. I can feel the heat oozing off him. His hands feel like a thousand degrees.

“Come upstairs in ten minutes. Bring me a glass of bubbly.” He presses his lips to mine and moans, but before he deepens the kiss, I push at his chest and step away. “On second thought, bring an entire bottle.”

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Chapter 42

DRAKE

It takes me fifteen minutes to finally go upstairs. I've been thinking about this all week. Hell, I've been wanting her for the past four years. I've never had anything close to what we've shared with anyone else. Not before or after her. It was difficult to be with Scarlett in the beginning because I felt like I was cheating on Nia.

I don't know if she's in the master bedroom or the guestroom she's claimed as hers. That's the one we've shared for the past few weeks, but in this house, we've only ever been intimate in the master bedroom. Or on the couch in the living room. I had her in the master bathroom a few times too. Or the floor in the home gym.

The door to the master bedroom is cracked open, so I push it in. The lights are dimmed, and there is soft music playing overhead. Of course, it's Mariah Carey, but even that's not enough to make me not want this. The room is empty, but I see the light is on in the adjoining bathroom.

Unsure of what to do, I put the champagne bottle and flutes on the dresser. If this was then, I'd barge into the bathroom, bend her over the sink and take

her that way. Or I'd lift her off her feet, carry her to the bed and make slow, sweet love to her. The kind that would leave us both sweaty and breathless. Then she'd push her body into mine, I'd kiss her shoulder and fall asleep with her in my arms.

I shrug out of my jacket and toss it to some dark corner. Getting undressed and getting in bed to wait for her doesn't seem right, so I pour each of us a glass of champagne and sip mine.

She opens the door of the bathroom, and I lose my breath at the sight of her. She's in a hot pink, lace teddy. She spins, revealing the crisscross straps in the back. Her feet are bare, and her toenails are the same color as her lingerie. My mind flashes back to one Sunday morning in this bed when I put one of her feet in my mouth. She laughed so hard, she fell off the bed and pulled me down with her.

Nia slowly walks to me. She makes her hips swing from side to side. My heart pounds. She takes the glass from me, sips it, and gives it back. Her hands glide up my shirt and I feel like I'm breathing for the first time in four years. I put my glass down and lift her off her feet. Her legs wrap around my waist and her mouth lands on mine.

The kiss on Sunday was a prelude to this. This was inevitable the moment I laid eyes on her again. There was no other path for us but this one. The road to this might have been bumpy, but that's behind us now. There's no way I'm losing her again. She breaks the kiss long enough to unbutton my shirt. She loses her patience and pulls the shirt from my body, sending buttons scattering.

"Get naked, Paradise. Right now." I walk to the bed and drop her on it. She bounces before she reaches for my belt. It's off in seconds. While I take off

my white tee and toe off my shoes, she unzips my pants and pulls them down along with my underwear.

“Oh, shit,” I hiss when her hand wraps around my hard dick. “Yeah, baby. Stroke that dick. Put it in your mouth like you used to. All the way down your greedy little throat.” If she does, I’m going to come in under a minute like an inexperienced boy.

She doesn’t. She drops it and gets on her back. She’s still in the teddy, but not for long. I don’t bother trying to figure out how to take it off her. I grab the front of it and rip it apart.

“You animal,” she pants. I capture her mouth in a kiss while I manage to get the torn lingerie off her. She spreads her legs and I stroke her clit. “Oh,” she moans. I rub it again, and she nearly jumps off the bed. I pull her knees apart.

“Stay open for me. Just like you used to. Remember what else you used to do? We used to do?” I ask.

“You’re not spanking me tonight, Paradise,” she says. I switch our positions and put her on top of me.

“I’ll spank my wife’s tight little ass whenever I want.” To show her I mean business, I slap her cheek hard. She bites her bottom lip and moans. She closes her eyes and throws her head back. “You know what to do, wife. Don’t make me spank you again.” I spank her anyway. Twice. All on the same cheek. I’m not gentle, so I know her ass must be stinging.

She does what she’s told. She flips over and puts her ass in my face. She shakes it before I run my hand through her pussy. She’s drenched, and my mouth waters. She has a landing strip in the middle, but the rest of her is bare. The last time I ate a woman’s pussy was four years ago when we were still

together. I could never get enough of her back then. I'd feast on her for what seemed like hours, and she'd do the same to me.

I spread her apart and eat her like she's an entrée at a five-star restaurant. She moans loudly, and to drive her crazier, I suck on her clit. She teases me back. She licks the head of my dick, and I let go of her pussy so I can enjoy the feel of her hot, wet mouth on me.

"Hey," she says, "you stop, I stop," she warns. She doesn't pop my dick out of her mouth, but she stops licking the crown. I slide a finger inside of her. I pull it out slowly and put the finger in my mouth.

"God, you taste good," I tell her. I return my mouth to her pussy, adding pressure to her clit with my tongue. She takes me all the way to the back of her throat, just the way I like it.

"Yeah, just like that," I groan. "Take it all." And that's no feat because I'm long and thick, but I think my dick was made just for her mouth. And her pussy.

We stay like that, me feasting on her and her nearly bringing me to orgasm.

"Baby girl, I don't want to come from your mouth our first time back together," I manage to whisper. I pull my mouth from her pussy, and she pops me out of hers. She turns and straddles me. "Ride me but not reverse cowgirl. I want to see your face." She slides down before the words are fully out of my mouth. She's so wet, I just slip right in. She closes her eyes and throws her head back when I'm fully ensconced.

"Fuck, Paradise," she moans. "God, yes." She takes my hands and places them on her hips. "Things are about to get bumpy. I hope you can handle it." She grinds on top of me.

"Mmhmm," I moan. I have my eyes closed and my head thrown back. "I've handled this pussy before. Tired you out many, many times. Put your ass to

sleep for hours.” I slap her thigh and grasp her hips. I grip them tight, digging my fingers into her skin just like she likes.

She puts her hands on my sweaty chest and grinds, then starts bouncing up and down. She’s slow moving at first, then she picks up the pace and damn near makes me go blind with lust.

“Let’s see who tires who out,” she challenges. She leans down and kisses me hard. Her hair falls forward and caresses my face. I grab her ass, pushing myself further into her. We kiss, and I know she tastes herself on my tongue. I put it in her mouth and she sucks on it. She kisses the side of my neck, biting and sucking on that skin before she returns to my mouth.

My hands roam her naked back, marveling at the softness of her skin. Her body is different now. It’s a minute difference, but I know every inch of her. Her breasts are bigger. Her hips and ass are thicker but only slightly. She’s still perfect. She’s more perfect now because her body carried our son.

“I’m coming, baby,” I moan in her mouth. “I can’t hold off any longer.” I start to tell her that I’ll make her come with my mouth, but she goes stiff for a fraction of a second. That’s something else about her that hasn’t changed. She has a tell when she’s about to come. She goes still and then she starts to shake.

Her orgasm brings forth mine, which was already on the brink. I explode inside of her. I close my eyes and call out her name. My mind goes blank while wave after wave of euphoria washes over me. If I could talk, I’d ask her about birth control, but I don’t really care about that. I’d love for her to get pregnant with another baby. This time, I’d never let her out of my sight.

“Goddamn,” I manage to whisper.



“We can do rock, paper, scissors,” she suggests about two hours later. She’s in my arms, naked and cuddled to my side. She has a leg thrown over me, and my fingertips glide up and down her spine.

“No. You cheat at that,” I remind her.

“How does one cheat at rock, paper, scissors?”

“You find a way.” She never makes her move at the same time as me. She always waits just a fraction of a second after I go before she does. “You could have gone and been back ten minutes ago,” I tell her. “I’m thirsty.”

“Fine,” she huffs. She tries to get up, but I pull her back and kiss her first. She puts on the white tee I had discarded and leaves the bedroom.

We’ve made love three times in two hours. The last time, we bet that whoever came first would have to go to the kitchen to get water and the cheese and fruit plate from the fridge. She lost just like I knew she would.

I quickly use the bathroom while she’s gone. By the time I return to the room, I hear my phone vibrating in my pants pocket. Scarlett’s name flashes on the screen, and I hit ignore. She calls right back, and I ignore it again. This is about the fifth time she’s called this week. I’ve ignored her each time.

“Who is that?” Nia asks as she comes back into the bedroom. I put the phone down and take the tray from her.

“Scarlett,” I tell her. I’m never going to lie to my wife. We’ve had enough lies between us.

She huffs and rolls her eyes. She puts a bottle of water on my lamp table and climbs on the bed. She sits in the middle, crosses her arms, and flares her nostrils. “What does she want?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t answer. I ended things. There’s nothing left for us to say, but she’s been calling all week,” I tell her. “I don’t want any lies between

us. That's why I'm telling you."

"Well, whatever," she says. She opens her water bottle and drinks it. When I get back in the bed, she's stiff and won't let me pull her back into my arms. It's like trying to cuddle with a statue.

"We agreed there would be no wall. Come on." I pull her into me. She lies next to me, but she remains stiff.

"Did you ever bring her here? If you did, I swear, I will set this bed on fire after I punch you in the teeth."

"No. She's never been here. She doesn't know about this place. This has always been only ours. I could never bring anyone here. I couldn't even bring myself to sell it."

"Of all the people on earth, I can't believe you would ask her to marry you. I should—"

I shut her up by turning around and capturing her in a kiss. She capitulates and finally kisses me back. I kiss her slowly and tenderly, hopefully telling her how much she means to me.

"She's gone," I remind her. "I never should have gotten involved with her, but I'm married to you. I don't want to talk about her, especially during our weekend."

"Did you get down on one knee?" she asks as if she didn't hear what I just said. "How did that big proposal go? I bet it was stupid." She goes stiff again while she waits. There's no way I'm going to answer that. I did get on one knee. It was awkward, and I was embarrassed when she screamed her answer. I proposed because the person I wanted was gone, and Scarlett was there.

"She's not someone you should ever think or worry about."

"You think I worry about her? Oh, please. I'd like to punch her in the face though. After I kick you in the nuts for getting—"

I take her hand and put it on my balls. “I’ll let you touch them, but no kicking. Come on.” I turn to my side so we can face each other. “She’s irrelevant. I’m married to you, and we’re a family.” She finally relaxes and throws her leg over me again. She cuddles into me and rests her head on my chest. “That’s more like it,” I tell her. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” she admits.

“I’ve even missed your horrible singing.”

“Not horrible at all. Do you need a reminder?” She clears her throat, and I know she’s about to butcher a Mariah Carey song. I wince and brace myself, but the sound of her ringing phone saves me.

She takes it from her lamp table.

“Hey, Dad,” she says. She puts the phone on speaker. I don’t pull away, but some of my good mood dissipates. I know her father will probably always resent me. He’ll never believe I didn’t know about Carter, and after threatening his career to get his daughter to marry me, I doubt he’ll ever forgive me. “Does Carter want to talk to me?”

Her dad clears his throat before he says, “He’s asking for his father.” I can hear the disapproval in his tone.

“Hi, Mommy,” I hear Carter say. They talk for a bit, and Carter tells her all about his time with his papa, grandma, and cousins before he asks for me.

“Hi, Daddy. Papa made us asghetti,” he says. “With meatballs. Grandma gave us cake for dessert.”

“Sounds like you’re having fun,” I tell my son.

“Kyle tried to take Bluey, but Papa made him give him back,” Carter snitches. After talking for a few more minutes, Carter tells us he’s going to bed.

I grab my wife, pull her on top of me, and slide my hand up the white tee

she's wearing. "What's with this shirt? No barriers. Take it off." I help her lift it over her head. "I missed these breasts," I say when she presses them against my chest. "And this tight, little ass." I slap her before I grab one of her cheeks and squeeze it. "And those perfect, perfect lips."

"Oh, God. Please don't. Don't say it." She starts to giggle uncontrollably.

"Smooch me." I start to blow loud kisses in the room. She buries her face in my chest and laughs.

"You're so lame, Paradise," she says. When I don't stop blowing kisses, she finally puts her lips to mine. We kiss slow and deep.

I flip us over so she's on her back.

"Oh, Paradise," she says as I slide inside her wet pussy.

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Chapter 43

DRAKE

If we don't go to sleep, the weekend will last longer. I'm exhausted, but I love having her this carefree and unguarded that I'm not willing to lose a second of it to something as meaningless as sleep.

I have her on top of me. We're both spent from our lovemaking. I glide my fingertips up and down her spine, and she sighs in contentment.

"I've missed this," she says. She bites right below my collarbone.

"Me too. Kiss me." She gives me a soft but chaste kiss. She's probably worried that anything more will reawaken my body, but she needn't worry. I'm spent. I'll need a few more hours before I can make love to her again.

"I guess that attraction is still there," she says.

"You guess? I've been wanting you since I saw you in the arcade all those weeks ago. This thing that we share, baby girl, is only for us. We can't have it with anyone else." She looks up into my eyes, and I stroke her cheek with the back of my hand.

"Turn over. Let me give you a massage," she says. I quickly oblige. She sits her tight ass on my tailbone and starts kneading the spot between my

shoulder blades.

“Can I ask you something? I know we agreed to not discuss our past together, but I want to know what you’ve been up to. I know you’ve been a great mom to Carter, but is there anything else?” The kneading stops and she goes still on top of me. We’ve always been in sync, so I know she knows what I’m asking.

“What are you getting at?”

“How serious were things with you and that guy?” I refuse to say his name. The image of how his eyes lit up at the sight of her still upsets me.

“It was our first date. Like he told you, we’ve known each other forever, but he was in the military and lived abroad for a few years.”

“You liked that clown?” I ask with a snort.

“Really? You want to do this?” I know there’s no way I can win this argument with my history with Scarlett, but I can’t let it go yet. “He’s not a clown.”

“Did you do anything with him?” Her hands drop to my side, and the room goes ice cold. I hold my breath and wait, uncaring about my hypocrisy.

“Like what? Get down on one knee and propose?” She starts to slide off my body, but I quickly turn over and grab her hips, keeping her in place. “Are you really asking me this? You want to know if I’ve fucked anyone else in the past four years, but you won’t answer any questions about Scarlett?”

“This isn’t about her. I want to know about you.”

“No, I never fucked Jelani. I had every intention of fucking him, but you ruined the night and the mood. Since you’re so interested, I had a boyfriend two years ago.” The relief I felt about knowing I ruined her night with Jelani evaporates before my eyes. “We were together only four months. He was a

single dad, so I thought he'd be a good fit, but he wasn't. That's my entire dating history since we ended," she says. "Happy now?"

"He was your boyfriend?" She stares but does not answer. I should shut up and not take this any further, but I can't. "You fucked him then?"

"Did you fuck Scarlett?" she asks. When I remain quiet, she says, "You are unbelievable." She pushes down on me and hops off the bed before I can grab her. I catch up with her before she locks the bathroom door. "Why do you have to ruin a good night?" she asks. "And you have no right to be jealous. None."

"It took me two years to be able to be with another woman, and I was only with her because she was safe. She wasn't you. I couldn't get hurt again." She rolls her eyes at me and scoffs. I take a few steps and put my hands on her naked waist. "For months after that, I felt like I was cheating on you." I rest my forehead on hers. "I only feel whole now because I'm with you again."

We stay like that for a few minutes. She finally wraps her arms around me and rests her head on my chest.

"I felt the same, despite how angry I was. Then I felt like a shitty mom because I was away from my son to be with a man who wasn't his father. Then it ended. I wasn't that upset to see him go, but I felt so guilty about it because of Carter. Like how could I have gotten it so wrong? I thought a single dad would be a great fit for us, but he wasn't. It was a very hard time in my life, Drake. I don't know what I would have done without my family's support."

"I'm glad you had that, baby girl." I kiss her forehead. "But I want you to know that you have me now too. You should have had me from the very

beginning. I never wanted to let you go. You were the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“I know, Paradise. I know,” she mutters.

“I don’t want to ruin our night. And yes, I hate the thought of you with anyone else, but I’m not angry at you. You were just trying to make a life for yourself. I get that.” It takes a lot for me to say that. I want to find out who this guy is and kill him. It wouldn’t take much effort to find him. I have an entire security team that could either do it themselves or find someone who can, but that would be betraying her trust, and that’s the last thing I want to do.

That’s the past. I’m her future. Besides, I have no right to do anything.

“Okay,” she says. “I won’t bring up your past mistake if you don’t bring up mine.”

“Deal.” I hold up my pinky, and she wraps hers around it.

“Let’s go back to bed. You wore this girl out.” I lift her off her feet and carry her back to bed. After kissing her good night, we both turn on our sides and I spoon her. She sighs and starts to snore almost immediately.

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Chapter 44

NIA

I'm not going to think of the consequences until Monday. Hell, I won't even think of them then. This is just one weekend that we agreed to. It's a ceasefire. The other way we were going was exhausting, and if I continued as we were, it would drain me. I have a small child to care for, and I need all my energy for him.

I reach for his side of the bed, and the sheets are cold. He would always get up hours before I do. He'd workout, check his work emails, and start breakfast. He'd lure me out of bed with the smell of bacon. Sometimes he'd bring it to me on a tray and feed me.

I groan as I roll out of the bed. I'm sore all over. From my shoulders to my back and between my thighs. He was everywhere. Whether it was his hands, mouth, or dick. He didn't leave a single part of me unscathed. He couldn't touch, kiss, or fuck me enough, and it wasn't one-sided. I couldn't get enough of him either.

After stumbling my naked body into the bathroom and indulging in a hot shower, I put on a pair of jeans and a yellow sweater. The bed is a mess. Our

clothes from last night are still on the floor, and I know he'll just have the housekeeper clean up after us on Monday, but I can't do that. I pick up the clothes and make the bed. It was so disheveled, the sheets had come off the mattress, leaving it exposed.

I find him downstairs in the kitchen. He's in sweatpants, but his chest is bare and covered in a coat of sweat. His body looks better than it did then. He was always in great shape, but now he looks as if he's added muscle. I felt it last night but seeing it in the light of day is something else.

"I was just coming to wake you." He pours coffee into a mug and brings it to me. He tilts my chin up and plants a kiss on my lips. I feel a blush creep up my neck at the sudden display of affection.

"I don't smell anything cooking, Paradise. What the hell? I'm starving."

He pulls me into his arms, bends down, and runs his nose along the base of my neck. "I wore you out, didn't I?"

"I admit nothing."

"I already know. Turns out, you wore me out too. A guy can only eat so much pussy before he tires himself out."

"I guess you'll be taking a break tonight then, right? Don't want you to pass out from exhaustion." I spank his butt, taking him by surprise, then walk away from him.

"Oh, like hell I'll be taking a break."

"Yeah, you could never stay away from this pussy," I tease while I gyrate my hips.

He snatches my wrist and pulls me back. "I'll take you to breakfast at our old place." He pulls me into his arms again. "We can walk there."

"Our old place, huh?" Our old place is not a neighborhood diner or café. It's a fancy restaurant at a five-star hotel. "Okay. Go shower. You remember

how I am when I get hungry.”



We're seated in a secluded booth toward the back of the restaurant almost an hour later. We walked here just like we used to. Like two lovers without a care in the world holding hands and laughing.

“Remember those egg sandwiches you'd make for me? The ones with the avocado slices? Those were the best,” I tell him.

“I spoiled you back then, didn't I?” He did. He absolutely did. Whatever I wanted, he'd do. “You spoiled me too.”

“I did not,” I tell him. “How could I? You had everything.”

“You did. You gave me you. You'd listen to me complain about work. I'd complain about my parents too, and you'd never dismiss me because I'm rich. Most people think that because you're rich, you have no business complaining, but we have the same issues as everyone else.”

I reach across the table, and he puts his hands in mine. Back then, he'd tell me about the pressure that was on him to take over for his father. While he always wanted to work for the company, he wasn't sure about running it. As confident as he was, there was a vulnerable side he'd let me see. He wasn't sure he could ever run the company as efficiently as his father.

“How has it been since he passed? Work wise, I mean.” The last thing I want to do is talk about Donald Paradise, but I guess if we keep it about work, it will be okay.

“It's been a lot, but I don't want to talk about that right now. This is our weekend.”

Relieved to leave his father out of it, I squeeze his hands. “I want bottomless mimosas,” I tell him. “And,” I whisper, “I want something that’s not on the menu, and you’re going to make it happen.”

He grins at me. The first time we went to a very upscale restaurant, he requested something not on the menu and they made it for him. No questions asked.

“You’re Mrs. Paradise now. *You* make it happen, baby girl.”

“I think I will,” I say with a satisfied grin.

Our server arrives and I order our drinks. They’re delivered minutes later. I requested pineapple even though it wasn’t listed. All the waiter did was nod and come back with my request, but instead of asking the chef to make me something not on the menu, he requests to cook us a special brunch, and we accept.

“I can’t believe we have no idea what we’re eating.” We clink our champagne flutes, and I drink mine in one swallow.

“That throat and mouth does wondrous things,” he says, and I almost choke. I start to laugh uncontrollably, even getting the attention of the people in the next booth.

“You know how slutty I get after I have a few drinks,” I remind him.

He picks up the pitcher and refills my glass to the brim. “Bottom’s up,” he says. Then he flags the waiter down and asks for a second pitcher. “I remember that level of sluttiness well.” He wiggles his brows. “Let me not think about it now, but remember that time we were driving from dinner, and I had to pull over because you managed to get your hand down my pants. I swore we were going to get arrested.”

The champagne on an empty stomach must be getting to me. I move over in the circular booth and slide my hand onto his lap. When I reach for his

waistband, he wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls it away.

“Oh, you’re turning me down? Since when?” I start to giggle and reach for him again, but he grabs both my wrists and pulls me to him.

“You can do whatever you want to it when we get home,” he promises. I lean in and bite his cheek just like I used to back then. While I’m gently biting him, I hear a loud throat clearing. With his cheek still between my teeth, I look up at a frowning woman. She has her arms crossed and her brows are creased. She looks familiar with her strawberry-blonde hair and pale cheeks, but I have no idea who she is. Nor do I care.

“Heather,” Drake says. I let go of his cheek and wipe his face with my sleeve.

“Is this what you’ve become?” this Heather asks.

I straighten up, ready to defend Drake, but he speaks first. “This is Nia. My wife. Ni, this is Scarlett’s sister, Heather.”

Of course. They look very similar. Heather doesn’t respond to the introduction. She doesn’t even look my way. All her ire is reserved for Drake.

“You string my sister along for years, and you dump her to marry that?” She waves her hand in my direction. “Actually, you married that *then* dumped her. Everyone in our family knew you didn’t love her. I’m relieved it’s over, but she didn’t deserve that type of treatment. She’s devastated, not to mention humiliated, and you dare show your face in public with—”

“With my wife,” he says, suddenly standing up and towering over Heather, who has enough brains to back up. “You’re damn right I’m out in public with *my wife*, and that’s nobody’s business but ours,” he says. “You have a problem with me? Fine. Address me, but you will not disrespect Nia. She had absolutely nothing to do with me and Scarlett. You also have the option of

keeping your mouth shut and staying the hell away from us because your opinion changes nothing.”

“Yes. Please use that option,” I mumble, but she ignores me.

Drake takes another step closer to Heather. I stand too, ready to punch her for insulting me, but Drake steps back and boxes me into the booth.

“She has everything to do with it.” She gestures at me, but still won’t look my way. “When she and that kid of hers showed up, you broke my sister’s heart. She’s loved you all her life and—”

“Well, he doesn’t feel the same,” I say to her, interrupting her tirade. “And didn’t you just say you’re relieved?”

“I’m not talking to you,” Heather says without looking in my direction.

“Well, I’m talking to you. And for the record, don’t talk to my husband.”

She finally looks at me and arches a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Your husband?” she sneers.

“Yes. My. Husband.” I hold up my left hand and point at my ring. “Back off.”

“Or what?” she challenges.

“Why don’t you come over here and find out, princess.” I try to go around Drake to get to her, but he pushes his back into me, not giving me any space to get free. I’m ready to jump on the table and get to her, and I start to do just that, but he snakes an arm around my waist, keeping me in place.

A tall, heavy-set man approaches our table and quickly assesses the situation. He puts an arm around Heather’s waist.

“Come on, Heather,” he says.

“I’m not done talking yet,” she says, pulling away from this man.

“Yeah, you are,” he says before he lifts her off her feet and carries her away. He looks back and mouths sorry.

“Fucking bitch,” I hiss under my breath. I sit back down, and Drake slides into the booth next to me. The bubble we were in has burst, and the playfulness from earlier is gone. I blow a breath upward and move away from Drake.

“I’m sorry about that,” he says. “Their anger should be at me and no one else.”

“Well, there would be no anger if you never got involved with that Scarlett.” I say her name with as much disdain as possible. “Of all the people on this earth, you chose her. That entire family seems like a trainwreck. You’re so gross.”

He puts his hand on my lap, but I push it away. He throws an arm across my shoulders and pulls me closer. “I’m sorry, Ni. Not fighting harder for you and getting involved with Scarlett was the biggest mistake of my life. I’ll apologize every day, but I really don’t want this to ruin our weekend. Please, don’t put the wall back up. You promised.”

I toss my hair aside and pick up my drink. “Fine. I hate the thought of you and her.”

He puts his arm around me, and I let him pull me close. He kisses my temple just like he used to back then. “You’re my wife,” he reminds me.

I don’t tell him, but being called his wife has become a lot more tolerable than when we first married.

“Let’s go. I’ve lost my appetite,” I tell him. Just as the words leave my mouth, the server returns with a cheese and deli tray. He sets it down and tells us what’s on it and that the chef created it specially for Mr. and Mrs. Paradise. When he leaves, Drake wraps a piece of prosciutto around a wedge of goat cheese and puts it to my lips.

“No. We’re here, and we are going to eat. No one is going to chase us out

of here or anywhere else. Besides, I want everyone to see me with my beautiful wife.”

I open my mouth, take a bite, and sigh with satisfaction. “Fine but keep the cheese coming.”

“And the drinks,” he says as he refills my glass. “I’m really looking forward to that slutty side.”

I laugh so hard, I almost choke on my food. He rubs my back, but he laughs too, and that evaporates the tension.

The chef sends out a spinach and cheese quiche which is one of the best things I’ve ever eaten. That is followed by something sweet. French toast with powdered sugar and fresh strawberries. Drake made that for me several times. We’d have lazy Sundays where he would make an elaborate breakfast, and we’d eat it in his California king bed.

I decide to forget that ugly scene and focus on this moment with this man who is now my husband.

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Chapter 45

DRAKE

“Come here.” She straddles me, and the blanket bunches around us. She wraps her bare legs around my naked body. Her breasts, which are now slightly larger, press against my chest. I run my hands down her sweaty back, and she trembles in my arms.

We stumbled back into the apartment, both drunk from the endless mimosas. After Heather’s scene, things went back to normal, and I was grateful to be able to coax the anger out of her. I realize it’s not hard to do since she’s always been a happy person, but I make a mental note to have words with Heather and Scarlett later.

When we got home, we found our way upstairs and fell onto the bed. We were both too full and drunk to do anything else. She let me hold her, and after about an hour, we took off our clothes and set the bed and the sheets on fire with our passion.

Now, hours later, we’re pressed against each other just like we used to do back then. I want to talk about things. I want to talk about what the last four years were like for her. I want to talk about our future.

“You know what I want to do for our birthday?”

She puts a finger to my lips. “Just a weekend,” she says, deflating me just a little bit. “I don’t want to think about anything beyond that.”

“So, does this penthouse turn into a pumpkin on Monday morning? Does the wall go back up, and you go back to either ignoring me or telling me off?” I try to sound calm, but I know she senses my irritation. I take a deep breath and tamp it down. I’m the one who asked for one weekend, and she’s still learning to trust me again. “We’ve talked about the past,” I remind her.

“Yeah, the good things like those egg sandwiches you used to make for me,” she says. “I like this. I like this weekend and the truce. If we talk too much about things, it will change the mood.”

I rest my forehead on hers and pull her closer. Her exposed pussy rubs against me, and even though I made love to her less than thirty minutes ago, I’m well on my way to wanting her again.

“Okay. I’ll table it for now.”

I reach toward my lamp table and grab her champagne flute. We sti up, clink and sip, but there’s so much I want to say. So much I want to ask her about the past four years, but this weekend is not the time. For now, we’ll be a happily married couple who’s enjoying a child-free weekend.

“You should be talking about what you’re making me for dinner tonight,” she says.

“Whatever you want,” I whisper. “All you have to do is tell me, and it’s yours.” Her head snaps up. She knows I’m not talking about dinner. She swallows but quickly looks away while she sips her champagne.

“How about you give me some more of that dick?” She finishes her drink and plants her full lips on mine. I put my glass away, wrap my arms around her, and put her on her back.

“I thought you’d never ask.” I toss the sheet aside, lift her leg and slide inside of her.



After plating spaghetti Bolognese and grating parmesan cheese on top, I go to the bottom of the stairs and call for Nia. When she doesn’t come down or respond, I take the stairs two at a time to find her.

This weekend has been the best weekend of my life since we separated. This is how I remember her. This is how we spent our time together. Talking, loving, or being carefree. Well, she was carefree. I had obligations weighing down on me, but she made it bearable.

I check the master bedroom first when I get upstairs, but she’s not there. The light in the guestroom is on, so I walk inside. I don’t see her, but I hear her moving around in the walk-in closet.

“Hey,” I say to her. I must surprise her because she drops something, and it lands on the carpet with a thud. I bend to pick it up for her, and it’s a photo album. I open it, and it’s a picture of Nia. I know it’s from around the time we were together from the haircut.

She tries to take the album from me, but I give her my back and look. She’s smiling at the camera, but her eyes are sad and vacant. The smile is forced. She has her shirt up. At the top of the page is written ‘twelve weeks pregnant.’ I flip the page and it’s the same pose, but at thirteen weeks. Each picture is of her in the same outfit, showing her every week of the pregnancy.

She looks more beautiful in each one, especially the ones where her cheeks are fuller and her belly rounder. But despite the smiles, she looks unhappy.

She doesn't try and take the album from me anymore. She stands there while I look through every picture and try to memorize every moment. This is the closest I'll ever get to being there while she carried our son, and that's thanks to my father. I stuff that thought aside for now. If I think about it, I might break something.

She's huge in the last picture. She still has the same sad smile. I trace my hand over the picture as if I can touch her in real time. I slam the album shut and put it on the shelf in the closet, knowing full well I'm coming back here tonight after she falls asleep to look at it again. I'm going to take pictures with my phone so I can look at them whenever I want.

I face her and open my arms. I'm relieved when she walks in, and I wrap them around her. I hold her for several minutes with neither one of us saying a word. I rub her back and hold her close.

I can apologize again, but I don't think that's what she needs to hear right now, and that's only to make me feel better. Sure, I was hurt by the breakup, but she's the one who had to bear all the consequences. She went through a pregnancy thinking I had only used her. She had to go through labor without me by her side cheering her on. Despite all the help she had from her family, she was a single mother, something I'm positive she never aspired to be. I got to live my life. I got to pretend that I was the victim when all the while, I had no idea.

"When you're ready, I want to hear about those months leading up to Carter's birth. I want to know every detail, but only when you're ready to share them with me." I look down at her. When she looks up, I cup her cheeks and stare into her eyes. There's so much I want to say to her, but I agreed to a weekend free of the past, so I'm not going back on my word.

"I was looking for a shirt. I forgot I had stuffed that album in there," she

says, seemingly embarrassed. I don't say anything while I wait to see if she will say more. "The pictures were my mom's idea. She said I'd thank her later. She did the same thing when she was pregnant with me and Ray."

When she doesn't offer any more explanation, I say, "You look so sad, baby girl. That's not like you."

"I was sad," she confesses. "Finding out I was pregnant rocked my world. It was the last thing I expected or wanted. I'll be honest, I didn't think I was ready to be a mom, and then having to do it all without you really hurt. I was so mad at myself for misjudging you and for thinking you cared about me. Then you walked away, and I was left to deal with the consequences while you got to live your life. I started to feel bitter and resentful."

I close my eyes and let the words sink in. As hurt and angry as I was, that was nothing compared to her. "Baby girl, please believe me when I tell you that had I known, nothing would have stopped me from being with you, and we would have been a family from the beginning. You weren't wrong about me. Everything I said and did was real."

She doesn't answer, and I take that as a win. A few weeks ago, she would have called me a liar and told me to go to hell.

"I have more albums if you want to see them. My mom insisted on documenting everything. There's video too," she says.

"Nothing would make me happier," I tell her. She moves out of my arms and pulls out a tote bag she had stashed in the back of the closet. She grabs another album, and I take her hand and lead her back downstairs to dinner. Instead of sitting at the table, we sit at the island and put the photo album between us. This one has candid shots of her. There's less sadness in her eyes. In a few, she looks happy.

"You were the most beautiful pregnant woman," I tell her.

She playfully punches my arm. “No, I was not. I waddled like a duck,” she says. When I look at her confused, she jumps off her seat and goes to the living room. She returns with a pillow and stuffs it under her sweater. “My center of gravity was off. I looked like this.” She thrusts forward. “And I walked like this.” She walks around the kitchen as if she has something between her legs. “I’d get cramps in my legs at night and low back pain. That’s nothing compared to the night sweats. I’d have to lay out three or four T-shirts to change into throughout the night. By the time I was in the last month, I could barely walk a city block without getting tired.” She punches me again, harder this time. “I put a hex on you and your entire family for the next ten generations. I cursed you daily. My mom says that’s why Carter looks so much like you.”

I pretend to rub my arm. “So, you put a hex on yourself and Carter?” She tries to pinch me, but I pull her onto my lap while we pour over the album. There are shots of her baby shower. It looks like she had it at her old house.

There are pictures of her at the hospital and several taken right after Carter was born. Nia is crying in several of them. She looks exhausted, but so damn beautiful.

“What was the birth like?” I ask. I’d give everything I own to be able to go back in time and be there for her. To cheer and offer encouragement when she needed it.

“It was hard. I was on partial bedrest the last two weeks because my blood pressure was high. My water broke in the middle of the night, and my parents drove me to the hospital. Audrey showed up a few hours later, and she and my mom were there when Carter came out. I was in labor for about sixteen hours. Carter weighed eight pounds, five ounces, and pushing him out hurt like a bitch.”

I rub her shoulders and ask, “And afterward? Where did you go?” We would have come here, or I would have gotten us another house. We would have hired a designer to do the nursery.

“Me and Carter lived with my parents until he turned one. They were so amazing with him and me. They made sure I got enough rest and ate well. My mom taught me everything about newborns. I would have been lost without them. Then Ray asked me to move back to our childhood home, and even though I wasn’t under my parents’ roof anymore, they were my support system.”

“I’m glad you had them. Your family is remarkable,” I tell her. No wonder her parents hate me. They did everything I should have done. The fact that time was taken from me by my own father is not something I will ever get over.

“Yeah, they are,” she says. “Now, what’s for dessert?” And just like that, the somber mood is lifted.

“Your favorite. Strawberries and whipped cream.” She rubs her hands together in anticipation. I kiss her temple, and when she stands from my lap and takes her seat, I serve my wife her dessert.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized, light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, watercolor-like style. The flowers are scattered across the width of the page, with some larger and more prominent than others.

Chapter 46

NIA

I slam my eyes shut the instant I hear the shower go off. Monday morning has reared its ugly head. My parents kept the boys last night and dropped them off at school and daycare this morning. This gave me and Drake another night into our weekend.

It was amazing, and just like every other weekend we've ever spent together back then. I didn't even mind talking about my pregnancy and delivery. It didn't bring forth the anger that I thought it would. But now, Monday morning is upon us, and our little bubble of alternate reality has burst.

He comes out of the bathroom, humming as if he has no care in the world. He'd do that back then too. He'd hum while he cooked, or when I was sitting close to him while he replied to work emails. There was always something Donald Paradise needed him to do. Whether it was to show up at a charity function or take a work trip, Drake always had a lot of responsibility.

His hum turns to whistling, and even with my eyes closed, I know he's standing over me and looking down.

“No one sleeps with their eyes shut that tight. Time to get ready for work, baby girl.” He runs his finger along my cheek and my eyes pop open. He lifts the covers, revealing my still naked body. Despite it being Sunday night last night, we stayed up until after midnight making love and cuddling. I wanted time to stand still, but time waits for no one.

Resigned, I get out of bed and close the bathroom door behind me. He’s fully dressed thirty minutes later when I come out. He even has a cappuccino waiting for me on the dresser.

“Thank you,” I manage to say while I take a lingering sip. He watches me while I lotion my body and put on a pair of navy-blue pants and a yellow button-up shirt. I don’t know why, but I think he smiles when he sees my outfit. I look away from him, unsure of what to do or say. We agreed to one weekend, and we had it. I’m not sure what to do now.

But I do know I don’t want to return to that angry person that I was before. That was not only exhausting, but it made me extremely unhappy.

“Delores is here making breakfast. I thought we could go by the daycare to see our son before going to work. I’ve missed him,” he says. He comes over and kisses my cheek. I nearly jump to the other side of the room, but instead, I look away. “Oh, no,” he says.

“What?” I ask, unsure of what he’s talking about.

“The wall is back.”

The wall is not only back, but taller and thicker.

“I want to see Carter too,” I say instead of addressing his last statement. I turn to the door, eager to make my exit. If Delores is there, he won’t talk about anything personal, but he grabs my elbow before I can leave. I pause but don’t turn around. He lets go of my elbow, puts both hands on my

shoulders, and slowly turns me around. When I won't look up, he grabs my chin and forces me to look at him.

“I know I said one weekend, but you had to have known I'd want more.” I open my mouth to speak, but he puts his index finger to my lips. “Let me say something, please. And I don't want you to respond now. I want you to take the day and think about it, okay?” When I nod in agreement, he continues. “I want to say this now because there's been enough lies between us to last one hundred lifetimes. I don't want one weekend. It was never about a single weekend for me. I asked for it because I wanted you to remember, but what I want is a lifetime. If there's anything in the afterlife, I want that too. I loved you back then, Nia, but what you need to understand is that I love you now. I love you so much. I'll never stop loving you. When I saw you at the arcade months ago, that was a turning point. I knew then that I was not going to let you get away again. Even if there was no Carter, I would still have figured out a way to get you here with me. I want you. I want our family. I'm sorry for how I got you to marry me, but I'll never be sorry for making you my wife. That's all I've ever wanted, even back then. I have never and will never feel about anyone the way I feel about you. Even if I wanted to. I can't give to someone else what rightfully belongs to you and only you. Think about it. Promise me you will. That's all I'm asking.”



His words play in my head on a loop. They're all I'm able to think about. I think about them while we eat the breakfast Delores made. It's a somber affair compared to how our weekend went, but Drake looks at his iPad and goes back and forth with his personal assistant. If things were different

between us, I'd tell him no business talk at the table. It's on the tip of my tongue the entire time, but I swallow the words. It's not my place to say.

Why isn't it? He's your husband, and this is your home. It's your table.

I think about what he said on the ride to the daycare. Even Bertram must sense something. He must have looked at us through the rearview mirror a dozen times. Drake talks on the phone the entire ride there, but when we arrive he puts it away, and we focus on Carter. Even then, I think about it.

His words stay with me while I work and during a staff meeting. Even the lunch that is brought in doesn't have the same appeal because I have too much on my mind.

He texts in the middle of the day to let me know he won't be home until seven. After picking up Carter from daycare, I have the driver take me home so I can talk to Ray. While the boys watch TV in Ray's room, he sits in the kitchen with me. He drinks a beer while I sip on a bottle of water.

"So, I have a problem," I tell him. He leans back on the chair across from me but doesn't say a word. That's not Ray's way. He listens, then says what he thinks. "I had a weekend with Drake." He creases his brows as if he's confused. "He asked for a weekend like we had back then."

He nods in understanding. "No details, please," he reminds me.

"As if," I tell him. "But it was amazing. We talked even though I refused to discuss anything about our past or our future, but I did tell him a little about my pregnancy. Anyway, I think you might be right."

"Of course, I'm right, but about what though?" Ray grins at me.

"His dad did this, and he had no idea about Carter."

"You know I'm a human lie detector. What finally convinced you?"

"He never lied to me before, and he loves Carter so much. You should see how he looks at him and how he takes care of him. I can see how pained he is

about missing out on three years. I've been so angry for all this time that I wouldn't let myself remember how caring and sweet he can be. His story has never changed, and I just know it." He remains quiet. My brother knows me. He knows there's more I want to say. "It's all I've ever wanted. I want Carter to have a family and a father who loves him."

"I'll come back to him and Carter later, but I want to ask you something. You said he asked for a weekend?" I nod my head. "What in the world did you think was going to happen after the weekend was over? That he would be content to go back to you either ignoring him or being angry at him?"

That's the question I refused to ask myself when Drake first asked for the weekend. I knew things would change after that, but I only allowed myself to live in the moment.

"I didn't let myself think about that," I admit. "Like I said, I want Carter to have his father in his life. I've always wanted that."

"Yes, that's important, but what about *you*? You deserve someone who loves you too, and who you love in return." He gets a distant look in his eyes. He lost his wife so suddenly when Kyle was just an infant. He had to battle grief with being a single father to two young kids. He's barely dated in the past six years. "I'd give anything to have my wife back," he sighs. "I know the circumstances are different, but you can have Paradise back. Don't squander it."

"Yeah, but there's so much water under the bridge."

"So? If you believe him, you know none of it was his doing, just like none of it was yours, what does it matter? If you want a second chance, it's right there for you to take. I know he won't be happy with a weekend, and his ratchet-ass daddy is dead. Let that hateful asshole roll over in his grave."

"He said he wants a lifetime. He said he loved me then, and he loves me

now. He wants us to be a family.”

“What do *you* want?” he asks again. “And don’t even think of lying to me,” he warns.

I know better than that. Ray can always read me.

“I want that too, but I’m scared, Ray. What about the blackmail and the custody suit? He did a lot of dirty stuff, and even if I forgive him, which I think I can, Dad never will. I don’t want our family to—”

Ray holds his hand up, and I stop talking. “First, our family is team Nia, especially our dad. Mom will see that he falls in line if this is what you want. Audrey will threaten to kill everyone, but she’s all talk.” Mom and Ray have the same temperament. Mom is forgiving and thoughtful, whereas I’m more like our dad. I react, and it takes me longer to let old slights go. My brother is right again. Dad will listen to Mom even if he complains the entire time. “Don’t worry about anyone else. What does Nia want? You’ve been through a lot. You’ve been living for Carter for the last three years, and you deserve happiness too. If you can have that with his father, everyone wins.”

I let out a deep breath, reach across the table and hug my brother. He hugs me back before he pulls away.

“You deserve that too,” I remind him. The one time he dated, Mason did not react well because Ray’s former in-laws told Mason the woman was going to steal Ray away.

“We’re not talking about me right now. We’ll come back to me another time. What else? I know there’s more,” he says. I look at him and he says, “Human lie detector.”

“Okay, so let’s say in a perfect world, we manage to make our relationship work. He’s still grieving, and things are complicated now with his father’s deception.”

“Okay,” Ray says. “Where are you going with this?”

I look around the room to make sure it’s clear of kids before I continue. “What exactly are my obligations when it comes to his father? I hate him. Drake might be angry, but he loved and admired his dad. What am I supposed to do when he’s hit by a bout of grief?” I shrug at my brother. In a perfect world, I’d never hear the name Donald Paradise again, but that will be impossible when I’m married to a Paradise Heir.

“Are you asking me how you should treat your husband as he mourns the loss of his father, Nia? I think you of all people know what it’s like to have a father you love.”

“Well, when you put it that way.” I roll my eyes at him. “But our dad would never do anything as awful as this.”

“You don’t have to wax poetic about the man. You don’t have to say anything about him at all. Just be there for Drake. You don’t even have to say a word. Hold his hand or rub his back. Hug him. Tell him everything will be okay. That’s all.”

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized flowers and leaves in a light, muted green color. The flowers have five petals, and the leaves are simple, rounded shapes. The pattern is set against a white background.

Chapter 47

DRAKE

I manage to get home a little before seven o'clock. Nia hasn't been here long according to her driver. All the lights are on downstairs, but she and Carter are nowhere to be found. The dinner table is set, though.

I take the stairs two at a time and barge into the master bedroom. Carter is on the floor coloring in his Spiderman coloring book. He jumps to his feet and hugs my legs when he sees me. I lift him up and hug him tight. He giggles and kicks his legs, so I put him down.

"Where's Mommy?" I ask him.

"In here," Nia says from the walk-in closet. She pokes her head out and says, "Come on. We need to talk." She gestures for me to come, and my heart drops. We need to talk is never a good sign.

I've been thinking about this since I left the house this morning. I've put it all out there. The next step is up to her. The only thing I know for sure is that I'm not letting her go. Even having her here angry at me is better than not having her at all.

The closet is a disaster of clothes and shoes when I get there. It takes me a few seconds to realize she's putting her things into the closet. I stand still, unsure if I have it right, but when she pulls a blazer out of a suitcase and hangs it up, I'm certain that I do.

"I'll finish this later." She walks around me and closes the closet door, but not all the way. She takes both my hands in hers. "I'll get right to the point," she says before taking a deep breath. "I've thought about what you said this morning. That's all I've been doing all day, and then I talked to Ray." Everything she says is encouraging. I'm glad she talked to Ray and not her father or Audrey. "I want us to be a family too. To be honest, that's all I've wanted since I found out I was pregnant. Despite being so hurt by you, I had hoped." She bites her bottom lip, and I can see she needs a moment to get control of herself. "This weekend brought back so many memories with you, and they were all good." She shakes her head and says, "Great memories. We were so stupid not to tell each other how we felt back then, so I'm not going to repeat the same mistake twice." She squeezes my hands, and I squeeze hers back. My heart is beating so fast, I'm afraid it will fly out of my chest. I hold my breath while I wait to hear what she says next. "I loved you then too. I loved you so much, and I'm sorry for not telling you, but I was so scared you didn't feel the same way. I guess that made your father's deception easy for me to believe because of my own insecurity, but I don't want to talk about your father." She shakes her head as if she's chasing any memories of Donald Paradise away. "What I want to tell you is that I love you now. I never stopped loving you. I'll never stop." A lone tear rolls down her cheek. She drops one of my hands long enough to swipe it away. "And I believe you. I believe you didn't know, and I believe if you did, we would have been a family from the very beginning."

Stunned speechless, I can do nothing but pull her into my arms and wrap her in them. She rests her head in the middle of my chest just like she used to.

“I would have chosen you, Nia. I would have chosen you and our child. Tell me you believe that.”

Her eyes brimming with tears, she nods. “I do,” she says, her voice hoarse with emotion.

“Do I really have my baby girl back?” I can barely get the words out with the lump in my throat.

She doesn’t answer. At least not with words. She pulls away, holds up her hand, and lifts her pinky. I quickly wrap mine around it. That’s when I notice she’s wearing her wedding ring again.

“You have me back,” she whispers. She jumps on me and wraps her legs around me. If Carter wasn’t on the other side of that door, I’d take her in this closet. “I’ve missed you so much. Please know that you have my heart.” She presses her body into mine and kisses my forehead.

“I know it, and you have mine too. I’m so sorry.” She slides down my body and looks up. I cup her cheeks. “I’m so sorry for what my father did, and I’m so sorry for letting my pride get in the way. I was just so hurt. I’m sorry about Scarlett. I’m sorry for everything. I know you did everything in your power to tell me you were pregnant. I’m so sorry you went through that without me.”

“Let’s promise we’ll never let pride get in our way again.”

“Never. And here.” I let her go and pull out a new iPhone from my jacket pocket. “I got you a new phone. I have one too, and they are only to be used between us. And if it’s anything important, we call each other. We have to hear it from each other before we believe it.” I call her with my new phone so she has my number.

“Let’s take it one step further and make a secret password that only we’ll know.” She giggles and her whole face transforms. More tears fall, and I wipe them this time. I cup her cheeks again, tilt her face up and kiss her lips. “Mariah Carey,” she says.

“What about her? Please don’t start singing now.”

“That’s our secret code,” she whispers as if we’re not the only two in the closet.

“Oh. Done. As long as you don’t sing.” She huffs as if she’s offended, but she giggles.

The closet door bursts open, and our son runs in. I let his mother go long enough to lift him up.

“I’m hungry,” he says.

I run my hand through his curly hair.

“Let’s go eat.” I throw an arm across Nia’s shoulders. With my son in my arms and my wife at my side, we go downstairs and have dinner together as a family.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, scattered across the width of the page.

Chapter 48

NIA

While Drake reads to Carter, I run my fingers through my husband's hair. Things have changed quickly between us. We couldn't stop touching each other during dinner. Whether it was as simple as me resting my hand on his lap or giving each other a chaste peck between bites.

"I'm going to wait for you in the bedroom," I whisper in his ear. "I love you," I whisper again. "I'm going to say that so much you'll get sick of hearing it." I nip his earlobe. He manages to swat my ass as I walk out. I know he won't be long. Carter had already closed his eyes when I left his room.

I run into the bathroom and change. I look down at my legs, thankful that I never need to shave above the knee. Drake never minded anyway. After running a brush through my hair, I add lipstick.

He comes in holding two glasses of champagne and I see the appreciative gleam in his eyes as he looks at my short red lace nightie. It has a slit on each side, making it even sexier. I spin around, intent on giving him a show.

I take the champagne flute from him and sip.

“You like?” I ask, spinning around again.

“I love,” he whispers, but something changes in his expression. It darkens.

“Where did you get that?”

“The store,” I say, doing my best to be coy.

He puts his champagne flute down, grabs the hem of my nightie, and starts to pull. He manages to rip half of it off before I move away.

“What the hell, Paradise?” I ask him.

“When did you get that? Tell me you aren’t wearing something for me that you bought for another man.” In another instant, he manages to rip the gown completely off my body. I shove at his chest, but he doesn’t move.

“Are you kidding me? You’re jealous again?”

“Yes,” he readily admits.

I stand straight and let him admire my naked body. “So what if I did? We were separated for a long time. You know your girl has needs.” I step closer to him and press my breasts against his chest.

“If my wife has needs, they are for *me* to fill. No one else.” He pulls me into him and grabs my naked butt cheeks. He squeezes them so hard, I get goosebumps. I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him.

“Then shut up and fill me.” I crash my mouth on his and sigh in happiness. I start to unbutton his shirt while we kiss, but he roughly grabs my hands and puts them down.

“I don’t think you deserve to touch me,” he growls. He breaks the kiss, leaving me panting and wanting more. He wants more too. I see the evidence of it in his pants. I reach for him but he steps back and waves his index finger in my face. “Uh-uh. Not so fast.”

He snatches me, spins me around, and bends me over the sink. I stick my ass out and shake it for him.

“Drake!” I yell and he slaps me hard. I hear the sounds of his belt, followed by his zipper. When I turn around to watch, he turns my head and covers my mouth with one of his hands. He aligns himself at my slit. I can feel the beads of pre-cum on his tip. He rubs himself at my entrance, and I moan like a greedy slut. I bite his hand, and he slides into me.

He lets go of my mouth and grabs my hips. He fucks me hard, squeezing his big hands around my soft flesh. I expected him to take me to bed and make slow love to me, but I guess not. This is good too.

“Tell me who your husband is,” he orders. All I can do is throw my head back and moan because I’m too far gone in ecstasy. “Tell me or I stop.” And he does just that.

“You, jerk. Fuck me.” I stick my ass out and start to move. “Drake,” I say. “You’re my husband.” He grabs my hips again and thrusts deep. He slows down, and instead of slamming into me, he works his hips and gives me the deep strokes that I love.

He wraps an arm around my neck and holds me. He squeezes but only slightly, which is just how I like it.

“Hurry up and come, baby girl. I don’t know how much longer I can last.” He picks up his pace, and I know he’s close. He starts to come before me, but his moaning and grunting forces me into an orgasm so strong, I see stars.

He stays inside of me until he softens and slides out. He grabs my hips again, but it’s to help me stand up straight.

He turns me around and gives me a slow gentle kiss. I get on my toes and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I love you,” I whisper against his mouth. I feel myself blush.

He cups my face and says, “I feel like I’ve waited a lifetime for this. I love you too.” He rests his forehead against mine.

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Chapter 49

DRAKE

I move the hand away, but I hear a giggle before she starts tapping my nose with her fingertip. “Wake up,” she says.

“My God, you’re insatiable,” I moan. I pull her on top of me. “You can have more, but you’ll have to ride it this time.” I start to nibble the side of her neck, but she swats me away and rolls off of me.

After fucking her in the bathroom, I took her to bed and made love to her two more times, but just like back then, she really is insatiable.

“Oh, please. I wore you out. You can’t handle any more of this pussy.” She grabs my hand, puts it between her legs, and grinds. “But I have a question.” I roll over to my side and she does the same. It’s almost midnight, and I’m exhausted, but now my curiosity is piqued. “This being Mrs. Paradise thing is kind of intimidating. It was one thing when I planned on making you miserable, but now that’s changed, so I don’t know what to do. I had so many diabolical ideas, so you better stay on my good side.”

“Really? What were you going to do?” The girl I fell in love with all those years ago doesn’t have a mean bone in her body. Even when she tried to

make me miserable, it wasn't all that bad. "Go on a hunger strike whenever you're around my family?"

"That was meant to piss you off," she says.

"It worked."

"Good. My other plan was to walk around naked and give you nothing," she says,

"What if I did the same to you? You act as if you can keep your hands off me," I counter. "Even though I still haven't gotten over you sending me away with blue balls a few weeks ago.

"And I was going to have numerous affairs," she says,

"I'd kill them all and lock you in a room. And did you wake me up to torture me, baby girl?"

"So, what am I in for?" she asks. I close my eyes and groan, having no idea what she's talking about. "What does being married to a Paradise entail?"

I snake an arm around her waist and pull her closer. "You ride this dick whenever I need you to." I bite her collarbone, and she yelps.

"Well, obviously, but how many masquerade balls do I have to attend each year? Do I have to run charities and stuff like that? Will I ever meet Mariah Carey?"

"Baby girl, all you have to do as my wife is be yourself, but I would love for you to do some charity work. You can sit on the Paradise Foundation with Mother and Hannah. Whatever you want. Hannah will guide you." I don't mention my mother now. She's still in a dark place, and I don't want her to turn Nia off. "But can we talk about this tomorrow? I'm exhausted."

"I don't need Hannah's help. I can figure it out myself, but I really have my heart set on a masquerade ball."

"How are you going to figure it out yourself?" I ask, too tired to talk about

our family dynamics right now. But things can't stand as they are with her resenting my family, and her family resenting me.

"Google," she says. She turns and I spoon her, pulling her naked back into my chest. I kiss her bare shoulder, and I think I hear her sigh.

"We are going to figure things out between our families. I promise." She doesn't say anymore after that. She falls asleep moments later, and I do the same.



Days later, I attempt to make good on my promise to my wife. It took an entire day for me to get her father on the phone. Talking to her mother was easy but her husband was another thing completely. When I finally tracked him down at work, he would only grunt at me. I took it as a good sign when he agreed to see me today. Of course, he made it in the middle of the damn afternoon on a Friday when I have so much work to get done. Especially since I no longer plan to work on the weekends.

I didn't bother with the driver today. I drove myself to their townhouse. I guess they moved out of the family home when they signed it over to Ray and Nia. Their unit is gray brick and sits at the end of their quiet street. I wonder if they are aware that their townhouse was built by Paradise Construction.

Just as I open the gate, the front door swings open, and Nathaniel Nash looms big and unwelcoming at the front door. His wife stands next to him. She's also unsmiling but seems much warmer. Something about her reminds me of Ray, who is the least hostile adult in this family.

I stand in front of the door and wait while Mr. Nash stares me down before his wife finally invites me in. Their living room doesn't have anything out of place. There are pictures of Nia, Ray, and the boys everywhere. There's one on the coffee table of the entire family. Mr. Nash is holding a baby Carter, who appears to be about one. They're at Disney World, and Nia is standing next to her dad and son, smiling happily. My heart breaks all over again about all that I've missed. Had my father not deceived everyone, I would have been there with them on a family vacation.

Mr. Nash takes the picture from me and puts it face down on the coffee table. I guess I know how this meeting is about to go.

"I'll get right to the point," I start.

"Please, sit," Mrs. Nash says. She gestures to her red couch. "I'll get you something to drink." By the time I take off my coat and sit down, she returns with a glass of whiskey and a bottle of water. She puts both on the coffee table.

I pick up the whiskey and down it. I clear my throat and say, "As you already know, Nia's forgiven me for the events leading up to our impromptu marriage. Like I've said, I had no idea about Carter. It was my father who did this. He set all of it up, but I love your daughter. I loved her four years ago when we were together, and I love her now. She loves me too, and we're a family. I hope that in time, you can forgive me and accept me as a member of your family. It probably doesn't mean much, but I was never going to take Carter from her, and I wasn't going to get you fired or sue you."

When no one speaks, I pick up the bottle of water and drink it. I look up, and her father has only gotten angrier. His brows are furrowed, and his eyes are now narrow slits.

"You think I give a shit about myself?" he whispers. "I don't. Have you

ever heard of the police union?” he scoffs. “I would have taken whatever you threw my way, and I would have beaten you at your own game.”

“Nathanial, stop cursing,” Shirley Nash says.

“Pardon me, Shirl, but this boy abandons our pregnant daughter, shows back up years later like the entitled little rich brat that he is, threatens her, threatens me, and blackmails her into a marriage she doesn’t want. Now, he wants to be part of our family. I don’t know how they do things in your family, but we don’t use blackmail in ours.”

“She wants it now,” I say, correcting him. “She loves me. And I did those things because I want my family with me.”

“Yeah, she was here yesterday spouting that same nonsense,” he says. I look at Mrs. Nash, and she eyes her husband. She purses her lips at him, but she doesn’t contradict him.

“It’s not nonsense.”

“It’s our fault.” He points to him and his wife. “We coddled her. She’s been sheltered, spoiled, and shielded from the evil of the world. That’s how she was able to fall for a shyster like you, not once but twice.”

Affronted, I stand. He meets me head-on, but Mrs. Nash rushes over and stands next to her husband.

“I’m not a shyster. I’m a man who’s made mistakes. Look,” I say after taking a breath, “I might have—”

“Might?” he says.

“I went about it wrong, but I don’t regret marrying Nia. I love her. I came here to apologize to you,” I tell him.

“I don’t accept your apology. I want you to leave my daughter and grandson alone. Let them go,” he orders.

“Nathanial! You will stop this right now,” his wife admonishes. “This is not

what we talked about,” she whispers. “She’s happy with him, and Carter loves him. Let them be.”

“I will not let my wife and son go, Mr. Nash. I love them more than anything, and if you can’t accept that, that’s your problem, not mine.” I’ve said all I’m going to say to him for today, so I turn to his wife. “Mrs. Nash, thank you for your hospitality. I hope in time, you and I can become friends. I really would like to get to know you, and I hope you’ll give me a chance. I apologize for any stress I’ve caused your family, but please know that had I known Nia was pregnant with my baby, I would have been by her side. We would have been a family years ago.”

She inches closer to me. She’s about Nia’s height with eyes just as intense. She stares at me, and right now, she reminds me so much of her son.

“I hope we can too,” she says with a smile.

“You can’t be serious, Shirley?” Nathaniel grumbles.

“And my husband looks forward to it as well.” She glares at him. He opens his mouth to argue, but the look she gives him must change his mind. He promptly shuts it. “Because we love our daughter and grandson. We want the best for them.”

“And how do we know the rest of his family isn’t like his father? We can’t exactly trust his judgment if he’s telling the truth,” he says. He doesn’t bother to look at me when he says that. “And that’s a very big if.”

“I promise you, Mr. Nash, my family is eager to get to know my wife and son. I would die before hurting them.”

He glares but doesn’t speak and then looks away from me.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Nash. I hope to see you again soon.” I pick up my coat and walk to the door.

Mr. Nash doesn’t say another word, but Mrs. Nash follows me. She puts a

hand on my arm after I get the front door open. “My husband is very protective of our kids and grandkids. He’s especially protective of Nia. He’s going to need some time, but if you can show that you love them, he’ll come around.” She squeezes my arm for support.

“And what about you?” I ask. Her husband will probably always hate me, but maybe I can have a relationship with her and Ray.

“As long as Nia and Carter are happy, safe, and loved, you and I will get along fine.” She looks behind her, and I look over her shoulder. Her husband is standing there with his arms crossed, looking just as stern as when I first got here. “When she was here the other night, I saw a side of her I hadn’t seen in a long time. She’s always been happy, but the last few years dimmed some of her shine, but she has it back again.” She takes a step closer to me. “I don’t approve of what you did, but if Nia can forgive you, I guess I can too. In time.”

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Chapter 50

NIA

I kiss the top of Carter's head and leave him in the kitchen with Delores to finish his breakfast. She makes him whatever he wants, and he loves the attention she pays him.

The bedroom is empty when I get inside. I left Drake sleeping soundly this morning. He worked late last night, coming home at almost eleven o'clock. He slid into bed next to me and spooned me, promptly falling asleep. He was still out cold when I got up to get Carter ready. I hear whistling in the bathroom, and I let myself in. We've turned a new corner. There's no wall between us. There are no doors, no secrets, and no toxic family either. I doubt that I'll ever be close to his, but I'll be civil until they give me a reason not to be.

He's standing in front of the sink with a towel wrapped around his waist. He puts down his electric razor when he sees me and grins. I get on my tippy toes and kiss his cheek before hopping onto the sink to sit. He eyes me, and I give him my most innocent smile. He doesn't buy it.

"Good morning," I practically sing.

I glide my hand across his taut torso. He splashes aftershave on his cheeks.

“I was coming downstairs to join you for breakfast,” he says.

“I thought you might be hungry.” His eyes land on my mouth, and he licks his lips. “I thought I’d bring breakfast to you.”

I put my legs on the counter. My short nightgown rides up my thighs. I spread my legs apart, revealing my bare pussy. His nostrils flare and he arches an eyebrow. “All you can eat buffet,” I whisper.

“You are a tempting little thing, aren’t you?” he asks. He stands between my legs, tilts my face up, and takes me in a savage kiss. I pull the towel off him, and his dick springs free. He lifts the flimsy nightgown over my head and tosses it aside. “I’m sorry I was so late last night,” he says before he takes a nipple in his mouth. “I’m trying to figure out a way not to work so much.”

I put a finger to his lips. “I’m not here to talk about work. I’m here to get some dick from my husband so I can go on with the rest of my day.” The words are barely out of my mouth before I feel his hand between my legs.

“So wet already,” he says against my mouth. He takes me in a deep kiss before he tosses the contents on the counter to the floor. He lies me down, throws one of my legs over his shoulders, and finally puts his mouth to my pussy.

“Yeah, just like that, Paradise. Just like you used to.” He works my pussy with his mouth and tongue while his big hands caress my breasts. I run my fingers through his hair and moan his name. “Fuck me now, baby. I want to feel you inside of me.”

His mouth stops, and he scoops me up bridal style into the bedroom. He drops me on the bed and climbs on top of me.

“I don’t know how I existed these last few years without you,” he whispers

as he sinks into me.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a repeating pattern of stylized, light-colored flowers and leaves, possibly hydrangeas, in a soft, watercolor-like style. The flowers are scattered across the top, with some larger and more prominent than others, creating a delicate and elegant frame for the chapter title.

Chapter 51

DRAKE

“What the hell is he doing?” I whisper to Nia.

Carter just jumped from the couch to the floor. He does a series of somersaults and flicks his wrist at us. He does a maniacal laugh that takes me off guard. “What kind of laugh was that? Isn’t Spiderman a good guy?” I whisper again.

We’re in the family room upstairs. Nia is on top of me on the couch. There’s a silly cartoon about a pack of firefighter dogs on, and every few minutes, Carter will forget he’s supposed to be Spiderman and will sing and dance along with the characters on the screen. Right now, he’s in his Spiderman pajamas and singing as offkey as his mother.

“Sometimes he’ll say Spiderman does bad things. Like when he takes one of Kyle’s toys. He’ll say it was bad Spiderman,” she says to me.

The song on the television ends and Carter sits on the floor, totally engrossed.

“I was thinking for our birthday, we can throw a party here. Nothing too big. Just your family and mine.” I can feel her tense on top of me. “Maybe in

a few weeks we can go to the Bahamas for Spring Break. I haven't had a vacation in a while, and it can be our little honeymoon."

"Um, yes to spring break, but our family here together? I don't know about that."

"I want my family to meet yours," I tell her. Maybe if they see with their own eyes that my mother and siblings love Carter, some of the tension will die down. I don't expect an overnight miracle but baby steps. One thing I know for sure is how much Nia's family loves her and Carter. They would never do anything to upset either one of them.

"Um, Okay," she says, not sounding the least bit convinced. "I'll be sure to have another chat with my dad and Audrey," she says.

"Well, Audrey doesn't need to come if she has such a problem with me."

"Yes, she does. We're very close, and she—"

"I'm not the one who has a problem with her. Fine, she can come. I just won't speak to her."

"I don't want that either. Can we promise to at least try? I'm willing to try with your family. Can you try with mine?" I don't remind her that I have. I've apologized to her father, but he won't give me an inch. I have made progress with her mother and brother though, so I'll take that as a win.

"Of course, I can. Anything for you."

"For us, not just me."

"I like the sound of that. How about you come back to work at Paradise Construction for us? You can have your job back." She turns over and ends up looking into my eyes. "Or you don't have to work at all if you don't want to."

She raises both eyebrows. "Oh, and what would I do?"

"There's the Paradise Foundation or various charities. You can be a full-

time wife and mother. We haven't talked about it, but I want more kids." Just as I say that, our son does another somersault.

"A full-time wife and mother? But I didn't major in that in college. Or graduate school for that matter, Paradise." She grins down at me.

"Yeah, I know, but it's an option."

"I want to work," she insists. "I like what I do."

"Come back to work at Paradise. I like the idea of having you nearby, and you never should have been let go." I glide my hand down her back and caress her butt.

"I'll think about it, but my memories at Paradise are bittersweet. I don't know if—"

"Let me undo every wrong that was done to you. Let me—"

She puts a hand up, silencing me. "We're together and happy. You don't have to undo anything."

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Chapter 52

DRAKE

I flip through the pictures my mom has been sending to my phone all morning. It's ridiculous and over the top, and Carter will love it. Without telling me first, Mother had a room made for him in my childhood home. It's everything Spiderman, and I worry he'll get sick of that superhero soon enough. But who am I kidding? Even if that happens, Mother will just redo the room to his liking.

She hasn't asked, but I think she's expecting Carter to have sleepovers there like he does with Nia's parents. He's not ready for that, so, we'd all have to stay there as a family, and I doubt Nia would be willing. She'll do anything for our son, but I'm not going to ask that of her. At least not yet.

We've turned a corner, but it's still new, and I rather enjoy this side of her and our relationship. We're like any young family with two working parents. The only thing that would be better would be if she comes back to work here, but I've asked, and the decision is hers.

I text Mom a thumbs up. She texts back that she's stopping by tonight, and that Langley is coming with her.

Just as I put my phone down, my other one buzzes. This is the one only Nia and I know about.

“Hey, baby girl,” I say into the phone. “If you worked here, you could just come to my office to talk to me.”

She doesn’t say anything, then a few seconds later, the chorus of Mariah Carey’s We Belong Together comes on. I cringe when she sings along too.

“Thanks for that. You know, I do value my hearing,” I say to her, grinning from ear to ear.

“You know that’s our song,” she says.

“Um, I didn’t know that,” I tell her. “Do I get a vote?”

“Nope. What are you doing? Are you busy?” She already knows my schedule, and she knows I am.

“If you worked here, you could come to my office and find out for yourself. Just come in whenever you want.”

“I said I’d think about it, and you’re damn right I’d come to your office whenever I want,” she says. “Because you’re my husband. Mine.”

“That almost sounds like a threat,” I say with a laugh. “I’m kind of scared.”

“You should be. Uh, your meeting is in ten minutes, right?” I check my watch and note that it is. She’s up to something. When I tell her that it is, she says, “I’ll let you go get ready. I just wanted to use our secret phone to make sure it works.”

“I always have it with me, and it’s always charged,” I promise.



Ten minutes into the quarterly meeting with the department heads, my secret phone buzzes. I look around before I pull it out. It’s not ringing, but it’s a text

message. I eye Langley who's been back to work at his CFO position. He's not paying attention to me, so I pull the phone out.

Nia: For your eyes only. You're welcome.

She adds a wink emoji. Of course, she'd do this. I had completely forgotten what a pain in the ass Nia could be. A pain in the ass in the best possible way. I look around, and no one is watching me. Another text comes through, and this one is a picture.

I force myself not to groan. It's a close-up of her cleavage. She has her breasts shoved together, and I can see patches of her purple lacy bra. She used to torture me like this back then. If history is anything to go by, the pictures are going to get more risqué until she drives me insane. The next one is of her with a red lollipop between her lips. She's looking at the camera with her big, brown eyes. Her lips are pouty and plump, and all I want to do is suck her bottom lip into my mouth. This time, I do moan. Langley must hear because he looks at me and down at my phone. I ignore him. He can pay attention to one of these boring ass meetings for once. The next picture is of her bare thigh. I should have known she was up to something when she put on that skirt this morning. She's in her office and has the skirt pulled up, showing a smooth thigh.

Me: You're killing me, baby girl

I barely hit send before she sends me another picture. This one is the apex of her thighs. The lacy purple panties covering her make this picture more tempting. She sends the final shot next. She has the panties pulled to the side, and she has her legs spread just enough for me to see her pussy.

Nia: Enjoy your meeting.

She sends a final picture of her blowing me a kiss.

Me: When I got us these phones, driving me crazy isn't what I had in mind.

Nia: All I did was send my husband some pictures.

I put the phone away and try to focus on this meeting, but all I can do is hope and pray no one notices my erection. I pull myself closer to the desk and make sure my lower half is under it. I should be paying attention, but all I can think about are ways I'm going to make her pay.

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Chapter 53

NIA

I keep checking my phone, but I haven't heard from Drake for an hour and a half. I can picture his face and his body's reaction to my pictures. I'd always tease him back then. One time after a meeting, he ordered me into his office. He didn't say a word when I got there. He put me on top of his desk and fucked me so hard, I was worried his assistant would hear, but he informed me his office is soundproof.

I check my watch and it's just about three o'clock. I'm ready to go pick up my son and go home, but there are several offer letters I need to send out by the close of business today. Before I do that, I need a cup of cold water.

I wave at a few of my co-workers in their cubicles. The floor is quiet until I hear the door open and heavy footsteps on the carpet. We're in a secluded section of the hospital. No one comes here unless they need to, and it's the end of the day. There are no meetings scheduled. I look up and nearly drop my mug when I see my husband walking through our department. He sees me standing by the water cooler, and even from here, I can see the lust in his eyes.

My co-workers stand and watch. My eyes get wider with each step he takes. When I thought of this plan this morning, I could have never predicted he'd find me here at work. Everyone knows who he is and that I'm married to him. I stand immobilized, holding onto my mug like an idiot.

He gives me a smug look when he sees me. Randi, my manager, comes out of her office. She's a large, round woman with hair so red, it looks unnatural.

"Mr. Paradise," she says, giving Drake her hand. Drake takes it, but his eyes are only for me. "We're so happy to have you. The conference room is yours." She grins from him to me.

"Drake is fine," he says to her. "Thank you, Randi. Come with me, Nia." My eyes widen at his audacity to come to *my* job and give me orders, but he takes my elbow and steers me to the small conference room on the other side of the office. I can feel everyone's eyes on us until we turn the corner, and he drags me into the conference room and closes the door.

He turns and faces me. The congenial look that was on his face is now gone. He takes slow steps toward me, and I back away until I hit the conference room table and have nowhere else to go.

He stands in front of me, close but not touching. Our eyes lock, and I bite my bottom lip. My panties moisten. He takes the mug from me and puts it on the floor. Without a word, he places his hands on my hips, lifts me, and puts me on the table. He stands between my legs and pulls me until my body collides with his.

"You thought you could play with me?" he whispers above my lips.

"Maybe I just wanted to get you here," I say back. I look into his face and run my hand through his hair. "Maybe I just know how to work you."

"Oh, you're going to work me, baby girl." He takes my hand and puts it on his hard dick. "Feel that?" I nod at him. "It's been like that since the first

picture. In a room full of executives talking about last quarter's numbers and that wasn't boring enough to keep this down."

"Mmhmm. That's a pretty big problem."

"What are you going to do about it?" He starts to nibble the side of my neck while he slowly takes off my panties and slides them into his pocket.

"Nothing." I try to push him away. "We are not about to do anything at my job. If you're a good boy, I'll take care of this tonight." I squeeze his dick, which only makes it harder.

"You think I came all the way over here to be turned away with a hard dick? Oh, baby girl. Remember what happened the last time I showed you just who the fuck I am?"

I point my index finger in his face and say, "I don't think we're at a place where we can joke about that yet. If you know what's good for—"

He cuts off my protest with a kiss, and with his lips on mine and his tongue in my mouth, I don't care that the last time he said those words were a few days before I was blackmailed into marriage. That got us here, and I don't regret marrying him.

I start to moan in his mouth while he undoes his belt and pulls his pants down.

"Drake," I moan, "you did not just pull out your dick in this conference room."

"I did," he says. "That's what happens when you think you can play with me."

"We can't do this here. You know I can't be quiet. Are you—"

He spreads my legs apart and slides inside of me. He cuts off my loud moan with his hand over my mouth. "Shh," he warns. "I don't care who hears, but

you do.” He pushes himself all the way in. I bite his palm and run my tongue along it.

I open my legs wider, and he drops his hand from my mouth. He fucks me on top of the table, driving me so wild with pleasure that my eyes roll to the back of my head.

He abruptly pulls out of me. My eyes fly open, and just as I’m about to protest, he lifts me off the table, spins me around, and bends me over. He slides right back in where he belongs, but this time, he caresses my ass while he fucks me. He wraps his hand around my hair and pulls my head back.

We both come at the same time, and he covers my mouth again to keep my moans quiet. I feel him shaking behind me, pumping every last drop of his release inside of me. He pulls out, and my legs are so wobbly that I drop myself on one of the chairs while I try to catch my breath.

He puts himself back together, lifts me to my feet, and kisses me gently. This kiss is different than the possessive one he gave me just a few minutes ago. This one is slow and tender just like the ones we shared years ago.

“Oh, wow,” is all I can say once he ends the kiss. “Do you know how hard it was not to hit a Mariah Carey level high note?” I fan my face with my hand. “How the hell am I supposed to show my face out there.” I put both hands to my cheeks. “Everyone will know. Look.” I point to my legs that won’t stop trembling.

“We’re married. They know we fuck. Go to your office and get your stuff. We’re picking up our son and we’re going home, but because you’re such a temptress, I’ll have to work at home for a couple of hours tonight.”

“As long as I get my cuddles,” I tell him. “And how the hell do you just come in here, commandeer a room, and then decide you’re going to take me home?”

“Because I’m Drake Paradise, and I do whatever the hell I want. And what I want is my wife home with me and our son.”

I grab his collar and pull him closer. “Oh, God. The power,” I say right before I kiss him.

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Chapter 54

DRAKE

I snap the lid shut of the little black box holding the diamond necklace I got Nia for her birthday. Nia, who happens to be in the building on this Friday afternoon. She took today off and brought Carter over for a visit. She's introducing our son to her former co-workers. The last birthday we had, we had to celebrate the day separately, but the next weekend, we flew down to the Bahamas for three amazing days. We're going back there in a couple of weeks for spring break, but this time we're staying at a home I had built there three years ago. I don't know why I did it back then, but I just had the urge. Thankfully, I never took Scarlett there. I didn't even tell her about it.

Just as I'm putting the box inside my jacket pocket to keep my nosy wife from finding it, Esther sticks her head inside my office.

"Drake," she says. She looks around, nervously. "Sir, you have a visitor."

The last time I had an unannounced visitor, it was Nia's father.

"Is it Mr. Nash?"

Before Esther can answer, my door is pushed open and Scarlett walks in.

I take a deep breath and look to the ceiling. I would have preferred Mr. Nash. With his daughter and grandson in the building, I'm guaranteed he'd be civil. I can't say the same about Scarlett. She's called a few times, but I haven't answered. I have sent one text telling her to stop calling me.

"I'm so sorry," Esther says. "Ms. Foley, I asked you to wait."

"It's okay." Esther nods but purses her lips in disapproval as she walks out, leaving me alone with Scarlett for the first time in months. There's a part of me that feels guilty for leading her on, but the happily married family man is annoyed that she's here to taint my day and the upcoming weekend.

I'm not going to keep this visit secret from Nia, and I hope this doesn't upset her or ruin our plans. I need to get a handle on this. I look down as I gather my thoughts and notice she's still wearing the engagement ring I got her.

"Scarlett, what is this about?" I ask. "I have a meeting, and then I'm leaving for the weekend." Not to mention I don't want my wife to come in here and see this. Even though I won't keep it from her, I'd rather tell her about it after the fact.

"Home to your wife?" I can hear the derision in her voice. She walks to my desk and picks up the framed photograph I have of the three of us. Nia took it on her phone a few days ago and surprised me by framing it. It's of us sitting on a bench at the park grinning at the camera.

"Put that down," I tell her. She does, but she puts it face down. I cross the room and put it back in the right position.

"I thought this would have blown over by now. I'm willing to forgive you, but you have to get a quickie divorce. If you want to be a parent to the boy, I won't stop you, but I expect our kids to take precedence."

I stare into her face, unsure that I've heard her correctly. "Scarlett, I'm not

even going to dignify that nonsense you just spewed with a response. Have you had a break with reality? You're delusional if you think any of that is going to happen."

Her pale cheeks turn pink and her lips form a straight line. "Do you love her?" she asks.

"More than anything," I admit. Her cheeks go from pink to red. All I can think about is how I don't have time for this shit. I broke up with her. People end engagements every day, and what I don't need is her in my space right now, but since she's here, I can use this time to set her straight. "I love my son too."

"Did you ever love me?" she asks, her eyes brimming with tears.

"No," I state bluntly. She gasps and her head rolls back as if struck. "I don't mean to hurt you, but no. I could never love any woman other than my wife. I want you to move on and find someone who will—"

"Do not condescend to me. You've made a fool out of me, and I curse the day I ever laid eyes on you."

I eye her left hand again. She sees me this time and holds her hand up. I expect her to pull the ring off and throw it at me, but she doesn't. She leaves it on.

"Give me back the ring," I calmly tell her. I don't want the damn thing. In fact, I'll give it to Esther, and she can pawn it for all I care. What I don't want is Scarlett walking around with an engagement ring that I gave her when we're no longer engaged. And I don't need my wife to see it either. Of all the damn days Scarlett could have barged her way in here she had to choose this one.

"No," she says. "I will not. Just because you broke your promise doesn't mean I'm taking this off. This meant something to me. I still love you." I sigh

and open my mouth to tell her to shut up, but my office door flies open and Bertram and another member of my security team walk in.

Bertram crosses the room like a man with a mission. “Mrs. Paradise is down the hall,” he whispers. He’s a big man and when he gets nervous or excited, his face turns so red it clashes with his orange hair.

“Scarlett, please don’t—” My words are cut off, and I don’t get to tell her to stop making a fool of herself because my wife walks into my office. Even Esther follows behind her as if she’s worried that things will escalate.

“No! Just shut up. You can’t do this.” Scarlett yells as she looks around the room. She tries to grab my arms, but I move out of her way. That doesn’t deter her. She moves quickly and grabs the collar of my suit jacket.

“Get your damn hands off my husband,” Nia says right before she pushes Scarlett away. She shoves her so hard, Scarlett stumbles and collides with Bertram.

“Bertram, escort that whore out of the building,” Scarlett commands. In the time we were together, she’s never ordered my staff around. Bertram doesn’t make a single move. He looks at me and waits for my command, but Nia speaks first.

“Bertram, it’s okay,” she says. She even smiles warmly at Bertram and the other security guard, but I don’t buy it. Her eyes narrow at me but only a fraction. “I’ll allow Ms. Foley to stay for a few minutes because I want to hear what she has to say, but after today, please make sure she’s not allowed back in this building.”

Nia’s eyes never leave mine when she speaks. I know she’s probably daring me to contradict her, but I never would. Not about this.

“Of course, Mrs. Paradise,” Bertram says.

“I should be Mrs. Paradise!” Scarlett screams.

No one so much as bats an eyelash at her tantrum.

“Please give us some privacy,” Nia tells Bertram.

He looks my way and I subtly shake my head at him.

“I’ll ask Rob to leave,” Bertram says, pointing at the other security guard.

“But I’ll stay as I’m Mr. Paradise’s personal security.” The other man leaves the room, but I know he’s only going as far as the other side of the door. Esther follows him out, but not before she gives Scarlett a dirty look.

“You fucking bitch,” Scarlett hisses. She tries to break free from Bertram to come after Nia, but Bertram is almost seven feet tall and big. Scarlett is not going anywhere. “You and your brat stole my life.”

Nia rolls her eyes but ignores Scarlett for now. She comes to me, gets on her tippy toes, and kisses me.

“Where’s Carter?” I ask her.

“With Langley and your mom,” she says. “Your brother wanted to show him his office. And my old department had a lot of questions,” she says with a grin. “I gave the abridged version.” She stands next to me, and I wrap my arm around her waist. “What can we do for you, Scarlett?” Nia asks. She blows her breath upward as if she’s already exasperated by this scene.

“I didn’t come here to see you.” Scarlett tosses her reddish hair in dismissal.

“Then leave,” I tell her. “There’s nothing left to say.”

“Yes, goodbye. Don’t try to talk to my husband again.” I notice Nia eyeing Scarlett up and down. Scarlett holds up her left hand and shows off the ring as if it’s supposed to mean something. “Oh my God,” Nia says. “Is that what I think it is?”

Scarlett stands straighter and juts out her chin. “He put this on my finger,” she says.

“He dumped you, though, sweetie. That’s kind of pathetic. From one woman to another, it’s time to take off that ring and move on,” Nia says.

“Why don’t you go to hell?” Scarlett hisses. “You and that little bastard son of yours.”

“Say what you want about me, but don’t you ever speak about our son.” Nia pushes away from me, and before I can catch her, she grabs Scarlett’s left hand and pulls the ring off. Bertram is holding Scarlett, who is unable to pull her hand from Nia’s. “Let her go, Bertram,” Nia taunts while she slides the ring into her pocket. “Since this is the last time she’ll ever step foot in here, let’s make it worth it.”

I step between them quickly and say, “Bertram, please escort Ms. Foley out of here.”

“After everything we’ve been through, this is how you treat me?” Scarlett screams. “Over her? She’s nothing.” She tries to pull out of Bertram’s grasp but can’t. “She’s a whore who trapped you.”

Nia opens her mouth, but her ringing phone stops her. She pulls it out of her pocket. “Hold on, Daddy,” she says. She puts the phone down and turns to me. “I have to take this.” She points at the phone. “Handle that before I come back in here, or I’ll be forced to take out the trash myself.” She gestures at Scarlett. She gives me a deep kiss before starting toward the door. On her way out, she stops in front of Scarlett, holds up her left hand, and taps her wedding ring.

Scarlett tries to pull away from Bertram but has no luck. Nia walks out without another word.

“Trash? She has the audacity to call me trash. Just who the hell does she think she is? She’s—”

“She’s my wife,” I tell her, rendering her silent. “My. Wife.” I enunciate.

“Bertram will see you out, and after today, you are never to step foot in this building. You are never to contact or speak to me or my *wife* again.”

“So, that’s it? She assaults me and takes the ring you put on my finger, and now you kick me out of your life as if I meant nothing to you. As if we never shared anything. All because that whore tricked you with a pregnancy. I should have done the same, I guess.” The idea of having a child with Scarlett makes my skin crawl. I will spend the rest of my life thanking a higher power that never happened. “Your father would be ashamed of you,” she throws in.

“My father’s approval does not have the appeal that it once had, Scarlett,” I say with disinterest. “Get the hell out of my office and out of my sight.”

Her eyes dart around like a maniac, and she blurts, “You weren’t ever supposed to find out about him. Your father and I—” She promptly shuts up and some of her color goes away.

“My father and you what?” I ask, taking a step closer to her. “What does my father have to do with you?” She turns her face away from me. Refusing to touch her, I look at Bertram, who gets my meaning. He turns her face to me. She’s now gone ashen.

“Nothing. Your father would be ashamed of you,” she says again. “That’s all.”

“My father’s approval no longer matters,” I remind her. I point at her and say, “What do you mean I never should have found out?” My voice is low. She looks around the room, and I snatch her elbow to force her to look at me. I promptly drop my hand, disgusted at having touched her at all. “Found out what?”

“Tell this barbarian to let me go,” she orders. She does a good job of pretending to be brave, but I know she’s anything but. She bites her bottom lip, and I can practically see the wheels spinning in her head.

“Don’t lie to me, Scarlett,” I warn. She visibly swallows, and her eyes widen in fear. “Because I promise you, I’m going to find out what you’re hiding, and when I do, you’re going to wish you had never been in cahoots with him.”

“Don’t threaten me, Drake. I’m not scared of you.” She tries to move away but all she does is tire herself out.

I think back to the year in Berlin and how she visited three times on the Paradise jet. She monopolized my time, and because I thought she was a friend, I obliged.

“Tell me what you mean.”

When she remains quiet, I wrap my hand around her throat.

“Drake,” Bertram warns, but I ignore him and add just a little bit of pressure.

“Talk or I swear...” I don’t finish my thoughts, but something in her eyes changes. She opens her mouth and lets out a moan. I drop my hand like I just touched something hot. She licks her lips and moans again. Disgusted, I turn from her.

“Get her out of here,” I tell Bertram.

“You will not dismiss me, Drake Paradise!” she screams. She manages to get away from Bertram, runs to my desk, picks up the family photo, and throws it against the wall. It shatters. “That’s just a preview of what’s going to happen to your little family.”

I take her elbow again and push her against the wall, but Bertram comes between us and shoves me away.

“I promise you, you don’t want to go there. I promise you that.” I lower my voice. “And this is no threat. Don’t mistake it for one. I’ll destroy you and everyone you love if you even think of hurting my wife and son.”

She refuses to meet my eyes while she stands there frozen.

“You are a selfish, hateful bastard,” she whispers. “I hate you and everything you stand for.”

“Good. Now, get out of my office and don’t come back. If you know what’s good for you, you won’t think of my wife and son again.” I move as far away from her as possible. She stumbles, but Bertram grabs her elbow and starts to drag her out, even as she fights him. “I said get the hell out.”

“This is how you treat me?” Right on cue, her tears start, and if the circumstances were different, I might feel bad for the treatment of her. After all, I’m the one who proposed. I chose to get involved with her and marry another woman before ending things, but the circumstances are what they are. She threatened my family. Not only that, but she also had a slip of the tongue and mentioned my father, which made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “I gave you everything,” she says.

“What did you give me, Scarlett? If I remember correctly, I’m the one who gave you everything. Who do you think paid for your shopping habit?”

My office door opens, and Wyatt walks in with Nia behind him. His steps falter when he sees Scarlett, and he quickly reads the room.

“You marry another woman while engaged to me and then cut me off financially? Why? It’s not like you don’t have enough.”

“Well, my husband won’t be taking care of another woman. What the hell is wrong with her? Is she dumb?” Nia asks me.

“I’m done here,” I tell her. “Bertram, if you need to carry her out, please do so.”

“I can walk with you and Bertram, Scarlett,” Wyatt says.

“Don’t bother. You’ll live to regret this when you realize that whore is nothing—”

“Call my wife another name. I dare you,” I say with my voice low. I take a few predatory steps toward her, but Wyatt quickly stands between us.

“Let her go, Bertram, so she can say that to my face.” Nia tries to get to Scarlett, but I wrap my hand around her wrist. Bertram lifts Scarlett off her feet. She swings her arms and legs in failed attempts to be set free. Wyatt follows behind them.

“This isn’t over!” Scarlett yells while doing her best to wiggle out of Bertram’s arms. Wyatt slams the door behind him.

I have half a mind to go after her and show her a thing or two about threats, but my wife is here, and I don’t want to make any more of a scene.

“Here,” she says, tossing the ring on my desk. “That thing nearly burned a hole in my pocket, it’s so gross and tacky,” she says of the five-carat solitaire. “I really question your taste sometimes.”

“I’m going to see if Esther wants it,” I tell her. I reach for her, and she comes into my arms.

“You’re so disgusting, Paradise,” she says right before she shoves my chest and moves away.

“Will you stop with that disgusting shit?” I rub the bridge of my nose, suddenly feeling a headache coming on.

“She’s tainted this office.” She looks around and waves at the couch. “Did she ever sit on that?”

“Yes, baby girl,” I sigh.

“Did you two ever—”

“No, baby. Never in here. Come on. We agreed to let the past go. I really need to feel you against me right now. Please.” She comes into my open arms, and I wrap them around her. I pull her close and close my eyes. “I love you.”

I really need to hear the words back from her right now because if my instincts are correct, this day is only going to get worse.

“I love you too.” She looks up and puckers her lips. I lean down and kiss my wife. “But you’re sleeping in the living room tonight. You’re also getting rid of that couch and disinfecting anything else she’s touched in here.”

I close my eyes and rest my chin on top of her head. “The only place I’m sleeping tonight is next to my wife. I’ll sleep on the couch if you sleep there with me. Now, I’m going to have your driver take you and Carter home.”

“I thought we were going home together,” she says against my lips. “I’ll leave you alone to work in the home office.”

“I’ll be home as soon as I can.” She looks into my eyes as if she’s expecting me to say more. I never turn down an opportunity for us to go home together, so I know she knows something is wrong. “Do you trust me?” She nods. “Then know that there’s something I need to do. Something I need to figure out, but I’ll tell you about it as soon as I get home.”

“Okay,” she says. “But don’t be home too late. I’ll prepare the couch for you.”

“I’d rather you take off all your clothes, get in our bed, and spread your legs for me. I’ll settle for you spreading your ass cheeks too, but don’t waste any energy on the couch.”

“Being disgusting has consequences,” she taunts.



“Esther, see if you can reschedule my meeting. I’m taking off for the day. And this is yours if you want it.” I hand her the diamond ring.

She gasps and quickly snatches it from me. “Are you proposing? I’m older than your mother, but—”

I grin when I see the playfulness in her eyes. She already has the ring on her middle finger and she’s holding it up to the light.

“Don’t let my wife hear that,” I tease. “And please arrange a deep cleaning for my office and have the couch replaced immediately.”

When I return to my office, Wyatt is waiting for me. He’s leaning against the wall now, watching me. He knows me as well as my closest family member. He knows something is brewing.

Instead of addressing Wyatt, I pick up my office phone. “Bertram, I need you to find out where Howard Banks is, and I need you to take me to him now. Have the car outside in fifteen minutes.” I end the call.

“Are you going to tell me what is going on? Esther called me and told me to get in here pronto. What the hell did I walk in on?”

While I scan my email, my phone buzzes, and it’s Scarlett. I hit decline.

“She threatened Nia and Carter,” I tell him. He sighs and rubs his hand over his face. “But before that, she said something about my father.”

That gets him to stand straighter. “Like what?”

“She said a couple of things. The first is that I wasn’t supposed to find out. Then she said something about her and my father, but she shut up before she could finish her thought.”

“Oh, shit,” is all Wyatt says.

“I swear to God, Wyatt, Howard better have some answers for me. I will have no issues putting my hands on him.”

“What questions?” Wyatt asks. “What are you thinking?”

“The night that I told Scarlett that it was over and that I married Nia, she said something then too, but I was too focused on ending it for it to register.

She said that she lost me the first time because of Nia. How would she have known anything about her?” Wyatt’s eyebrows practically shoot to his hairline. “No one other than my father knew. But he kept me in Berlin for almost a year, and in that time, Scarlett visited three times. Each time on the family jet.”

“You don’t think—”

“I do, and I’m going to get some goddamn answers. I swear, if Scarlett played a part in this, I’m going to destroy her and her entire family.”

“I’ll come with you.” I don’t bother to tell him no. He’ll come whether I want him to or not. If the answers aren’t what I want to hear, not even Wyatt can get me to calm down.

“Fuck,” I say when my phone buzzes again, but when I realize it’s my second phone, my agitation disappears. “Hey, baby girl,” I answer.

“Hey, husband,” she says back. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“I put the blanket and pillow on the couch for you.”

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Chapter 55

DRAKE

“Drake,” Mary Banks says.

Like the last time I was here, I barge inside her house without an invitation. Unlike last time, Howard is standing in the middle of the hallway looking down at his phone. He freezes when he sees me. I don’t offer any pleasantries or explain why I’m there. From the wide-eyed look Howard is giving me, I’m certain Scarlett has already warned him. With Wyatt on my heels, I walk to him, slam him against the wall and pin him there.

“Drake!” Mary yells. “He has a heart condition.” She tries to pull my arm off but can’t.

“It’s okay, Mary,” Howard chokes out. “Give us a minute.”

“I will not—”

“Mary! Give us a minute,” he grinds out.

She looks at me one more time but finally leaves.

“Speak, Howard,” I order. “Because it seems like you left out a very important detail when Wyatt tracked you down weeks ago.”

“Come to my office,” he says. Wyatt pulls me off Howard, who stumbles back a few steps. He sighs heavily and gestures for us to follow him to the back of the house. We go through the kitchen and down a flight of stairs to his basement. He finally gestures us into a spacious office. When he closes the door, he holds both hands up and says, “I didn’t approve of any of it. I tried to talk him out of it a million times. I pleaded with him, but—”

“But you went on with the deception. You helped my father keep my son away from me. You let the pregnant mother of my child, a woman I was in love with, think I used and abandoned her. Now, you stand here and say you didn’t approve of it.”

“I was his attorney. Everything was confidential. I couldn’t break the privilege.”

“He lied, and you knew he was lying. You faked a letter on my behalf. I don’t want to hear about your ethics now.” He opens his mouth, but I speak first. “Did Scarlett know? Yes or no.”

“Yes.” The word is barely out of Howard’s mouth when I shove him against the wall again. Not even the look of fear in his eyes or Mary’s warning about his heart condition gets me to back off.

“Drake,” Wyatt warns, but I ignore him and push into Howard.

“He wanted her to go to Berlin and help you get out of your funk. He knew you were hurting, but he was in too deep.”

“Why did he do this?” I ask. I already know the answer, but I need to hear it.

“He had such high hopes for you. He said if this happened to Langley, he could accept it, but not you. He wanted you with someone more—” I put my hand around his throat, and he shuts up. I drop my hand and step away from him, too disgusted to hear anymore.

“Shut the fuck up,” I whisper. “I’m going to make sure you get disbarred,” I warn. He might be retired, but he’s only sixty-two. He might go into business for himself, but I’m going to make sure he never practices law again. “You could have done the right thing at any time, but you didn’t. You continued the deception.”

“Look, you had already ended things with Scarlett and you and Nia found your way back to each other. I’m happy for you. I didn’t want to destroy Scarlett’s life too.”

“Where was this concern for me? Or when you were threatening a pregnant woman who didn’t have the resources to fight you?”

“He was riddled with guilt. He was going to tell you. Then he got sick, and he didn’t want to die with you hating him. He left a video and a letter for you. He didn’t want you to have it until the first anniversary of his death. I have it in my safety deposit box at the bank. I’ll have it sent.”

“A year after his death? Why a year?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Those were his orders.”

“Just so you know Howard, I’m coming for you and Scarlett. When I’m done with you, I’m going to go after your children. And then—”

“My children had nothing to do with this. Please—”

“My son had nothing to do with this either, but you didn’t give a shit about that. Now my dad’s dead and you’re left to deal with my wrath.”



“Daddy,” Carter says as soon as I step into the penthouse. His little bare feet tap against the hardwood floors as he runs to me. I pick him up and hug him against me.

I want to scream at the fact that my father was behind me missing out on three years of his life. I close my eyes and feel his little body pressed to mine. When I open them, Nia is studying me. I open my arm, and she joins us in a hug. I kiss her temple.

“I love you, baby girl,” I whisper. I can see the questions in her eyes when she pulls her head back to look at me.

“I love you too. I fed Carter, but I thought you and I could eat together.” She takes Carter from me and sets him up in the living room. She turns on his favorite channel and gestures for me to follow her.

“Delores made this incredible salad and lemon chicken. Sit down, and I’ll get it for you,” she tells me.

“Remember that time you cooked chicken for me?” I ask her. “I still don’t know how it was burnt on the outside but raw on the inside.” I chuckle at the memory. I remember how she stood by my chair, biting her bottom lip and anxiously waiting for my reaction. When I cut into the meat, it was pink and raw on the inside. Without a word, I dumped the food in the trash, took her hand, and drove us to a nearby restaurant.

“Well, now I don’t need to cook ever again. Let’s eat and then you can tell me what’s wrong.” And that’s what we do. We don’t talk, but every few seconds she looks at me. I try to smile, but I just can’t bring myself to fake it today.

“I’m afraid the news is not good, but I promised you that I’d never lie or keep things from you, and I meant it. Come sit here,” I tell her once dinner is over. I tap my lap, and she sits. “Scarlett let something slip today when you stepped out to talk to your dad.” She tenses but doesn’t say anything. I don’t know if that’s a good sign or not. “She said something about her and my father. She caught herself before she could finish, but that got my attention. It

triggered a memory of the night I ended things with her. She said she lost me the first time because of you.”

“How could she have known that?” Nia asks. “How could she have known anything about me?”

“Exactly, so I went to see Howard Banks.”

“Your father’s lawyer? The guy with the beady eyes?” she shivers. “He gives me the creeps. What did he say?”

“I asked Wyatt to investigate your claims about my father. He went straight to Howard, and he confirmed everything you told me.” I tell her everything Wyatt reported to me weeks ago. From how my father found out about her to the steps he took to keep us apart.

“But you’ve known this for weeks. What can be worse than that?” she asks. She looks at me with her big brown eyes. The same eyes I fell in love with on my first day at work, only I was too stupid to realize it.

“Scarlett knew about your pregnancy.” She lets out a rush of breath. Her big eyes widen and her mouth falls open. “She knew I had a son and never said a word. My father got to her once I was in Berlin and told her everything. She visited three times while I was there.” I rest my forehead on her shoulder and wait for her to say something, only she doesn’t. “Nothing happened between me and her in Berlin,” I say quickly. “I wasn’t even thinking about that.” I tell her everything else I learned from Howard today.

She doesn’t say a word, but she wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight. She runs her delicate hands along my back. She even runs her hands up the back of my neck and through my hair.

“Paradise, I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m sorry people you cared about did that to you.”

I close my eyes and just feel her in my arms and absorb her touch.

“I have no business letting you comfort me about this, Nia. That’s not why I told you, but I’m too selfish not to take it. I really need you right now, baby girl.”

“I’m your wife. If you’re upset, it’s my job to comfort you.” She pulls away and cups my face. “I know how much you loved and admired your father. Probably as much as I love and admire mine. I can’t even begin to imagine how I would feel if my father did something like this. As for Scarlett, I wonder if she ever truly loved you or only the idea of you. I love you, Paradise, and I could never imagine doing that. If I found out tomorrow you had another child out there, I’d welcome him or her into our family. That’s what you do when you love someone.”

She hugs me again, and I close my eyes and sigh in relief.

“Your dad’s dead. You and Scarlett are over. Let’s live our lives together and be happy. I know you lost some time with Carter, but you have the future.” She pulls away and cups my face again. “Soon, we’ll have another baby, and you’ll be there for everything. I’ll be selfless enough to let you get up at night so I can get my beauty sleep since you missed out on that with Carter. Maybe by then science will advance enough so you can breastfeed,” she teases.

“Hey, now. I don’t have breasts.”

She giggles and says, “My point is we should focus on all the good stuff ahead.”

“You’re right except I’m going to make Scarlett and Howard wish they were never born, but I’m putting that away for now. We have our party tomorrow. What are the odds your dad punches me in the face?” I ask. She laughs and that takes some of the tension out of the air.

“Zero. My dad would never, and I gave him a stern talking to. It’s going to

be a great night, I promise.” She rests her forehead on mine, and I forget about the crappy day I’ve had. We only move away when we hear little feet running through the house and into the kitchen.

“Can I have ice cream?” Carter asks. He comes to a stop when he sees us. He watches and slowly comes closer. “Why is Daddy sad?” he asks his mother while pointing at me.

“Adults get sad sometimes, baby. Daddy will be okay. I’ll take care of him.” Carter turns to me, and I open my arms to him. He jumps in and the three of us do a group hug.



A few hours later, I check on my sleeping son. After dinner, I worked in my office for a few hours, and Nia got him ready for bed without me. I run my hand along his smooth cheek before bending down to kiss it. I leave his door cracked open on my way out, and after getting a bottle of champagne and two flutes, I go in search of my wife.

The light in the master bedroom is on when I step in, but Nia is not there. I hear water running in the bathroom, and I quickly strip down to my boxers. She comes out minutes later, visibly unsurprised to see me standing in the middle of the room.

She’s in nothing but a sheer white nightgown. Our eyes lock, and I feel the heat in the room. She smirks at me, and I give her my back to pop the champagne and fill the flutes.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” she says once I give her the glass of champagne.

“You’re not the least bit surprised,” I challenge. “Interesting choice of sleep attire after kicking your husband out of the room.”

“This old thing?” She spins around in it. It’s obscenely short, and I wonder if she’s wearing any panties. She bends down and pretends to rub her legs. The gown rides up, revealing her bare ass. She straightens, faces me, and grins. “But why are you in here wearing that?” she gestures at my nearly naked body. “I left everything you’ll need on the couch.”

I put the flute down and take slow steps to her. She backs away until she hits the dresser. I crowd her and put both hands on either side, boxing her in. “But *you’re* not on the couch,” I whisper close to her ear. I feel her shiver.

“You’re not having this tonight,” she says.

I take the champagne from her, finish it, and put the flute on the dresser. “I am.” I run my nose along the base of her neck. “Do you know how much I want you and look forward to our nights together?” I grasp her chin and lock eyes with her. “You have no idea how much I want to sink into you. Or do you? I know you want it just as much. I bet if I touch you right now, you’d be soaked.” My hand slides underneath her nightgown. I feel the heat from her pussy before my fingers open her folds. “I was wrong. You’re not soaked. You’re drenched, Mrs. Paradise.” I nip her earlobe and watch goosebumps erupt along her skin.

She shoves my chest and manages to get away from me. “You’ll have to shake it off,” she teases.

“Is that what we’re doing?” She giggles, and I fall in love with her all over again. This is my girl. The fun, light, and silly one.

“I want you to touch my body,” I tell her. "Or I'm gonna break down."

“You’re obsessed with me,” she replies.

“That’s because you’ll always be my baby girl.”

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” she challenges.

"But I can't sleep if sleeping is without you," I whisper.

"I still believe you'll be okay."

“Oh, baby girl. You know we belong together. And this love will take no time at all.” I don’t give her time for an answer. I close the space between us and take her in a deep kiss. I lift her off her feet, and she wraps her legs around me. I can feel her hot, wet pussy on my bare stomach.

“I’ll give my all to feel you inside of me right now,” she says against my mouth. I carry her to the bed and put her down. I take off my boxers and rest between her thighs.

“Thank God I found you,” I whisper right as I sink into her.

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Chapter 56

NIA

I should have been downstairs ten minutes ago. It's not my intention to leave Drake downstairs with my family without me. I'm not worried about a scene. My family would never do anything like this in front of the kids, and they would never embarrass me. But I need to be down there to play mediator between my relatives and everyone else.

After checking my makeup, I take off my hoodie and put on the burgundy peplum shirt. It tapers at the waist and has a plunging neckline. I reach for my jeans, but I hear the door to the bedroom open and Drake walks in.

"Sorry, baby. I'll be done in two minutes. I've had so much to do today." The party planners and caterers handled everything per my instructions. I spent the day at the hair and nail salon, and both had me running late.

He comes up behind me and puts both hands on my waist and kisses the side of my neck. "You look beautiful," he says. "Absolute perfection."

"Thank you. I wanted my makeup to be perfect. By the way, I spent hundreds at Sephora today. Thousands at Lululemon and La Perla. You will be one happy boy tonight."

“Spend whatever you want. You don’t have to give me a rundown.” I pull off my yoga pants and decide on black leggings instead of jeans. “One thing is missing, though. Close your eyes.” I do as he says, and moments later, I feel something cold being placed around my neck. “Open.”

I lose my breath when I see the diamond necklace. I run my hand over it and some of the diamonds catch the light. It’s an eternity necklace with diamonds across the length of it.

“Drake,” I whisper, “it’s beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you.” He spins me around to face him. “Happy birthday, Mrs. Paradise.”

I fan my face to keep the tears at bay. “Happy birthday, Mr. Paradise. Let me give you your present now.” I take both of his hands in mine. “I’m going to give my notice at work and come back to Paradise Construction if they have a spot for me in HR.”

“Trust me, there will be a job for you. And I love my present. Thank you.” He leans down and gives me a peck. “But you did buy me something right because that’s kind of a cheap gift.” I swat his chest and he pretends to be hurt.

“Yes, you big baby, but it’s downstairs. Let’s go.”

“Yeah, let’s go. Things are, um, interesting downstairs,” he tells me.

“What happened?”

“You’ll see. Come on.” After I put on my new stilettos, and he takes my hand, he leads me downstairs.

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” I whisper to Drake when we get to the bottom of the steps, and I see the scene before me. My family is on one side of the room, and Drake’s is on the opposite side. My dad is holding Carter in his

arms while holding Kyle's hand. I know that's to keep them from running to the other side of the room to Drake's family.

Audrey is standing in front with her arms crossed. Each time Carter turns his head to talk to someone on the other side of the room, my father turns his head away from them.

Ray shrugs when he sees me, but he's firmly on the side of the room with our family. Mom stands next to Dad and holds Mason's hand.

Kyle waves at Wyatt and Langley. Langley waves back and says, "I like your bow tie."

"Grandma made me wear it. She says it makes me look handsome," Kyle says, grinning from ear to ear.

"Uncle Wyatt, what do you think of Batman versus Superman?" Mason asks.

"I like Piderman," Carter interjects.

"Mason, be quiet," my dad says.

"Why can't we have fun?" Mason asks, clearly agitated with my father. "I thought this was a party. "Dad, can we go—" My father cuts him off before Ray can answer.

"Your dad's not in charge. I am," Dad says.

"Dad, these are my kids," Ray responds.

"You can be quiet too, Ray," Dad says, totally dismissing my brother.

"Oh, boy," I whisper. Dad will pull the grandpa card often, but it's usually to keep the boys from a punishment from me or Ray. "Let me handle this."

I let go of Drake's hand and approach my family. I reach for Carter, but Dad moves him away from me.

"Daddy," I begin, "I want my birthday hug." It's our tradition each year. "And tradition dictates that the birthday hug is between me, you, and Mom.

Not Carter.” I manage to grab Carter from him and put him down. He runs across the room. Kyle and Mason also manage to break free and follow. Carter goes right to Langley, and Kyle and Mason start chatting with Wyatt. Drake’s mom takes Carter from Langley and hugs him, but only for a moment because Hannah takes him from her.

To distract my dad, I open my arms, and my parents and I do a group hug like we do every year on my birthday. They both kiss my cheeks.

“Happy birthday, my baby,” my dad says. “You get more beautiful every year. Your mother and I wish you nothing but happiness, love, and success.” We hug again, and even though my dad says the same thing each year, my eyes still fill with unshed tears.

We break the hug, and Drake snakes an arm around my waist. The four of us stand there while my parents look from him to me.

“You look good, Nia,” my dad says. “I’ve been so worried about you and Carter.” He looks directly at Drake when he says that. I look up at my husband, and to his credit, he doesn’t flinch under my dad’s intense gaze.

“We’ve all been worried,” Audrey throws in.

“Dad, I just saw you two days ago, and we talked on the phone yesterday and this morning on FaceTime.” I look into his eyes and raise my eyebrows, urging him to remember the conversations I’ve had with him all week. If my father thought for a second that Carter and I were in any type of danger, he would have come charging over here weeks ago. “And Audrey, you were with me today at the spa,” I remind her.

Audrey shrugs and flips her hair.

“Drake, we want to wish you a happy birthday too,” my mother says to my husband. My dad grunts and Audrey purses her lips. “We got you both a little

something. Did Nia tell you about the tradition she has with Ray and Audrey?”

“She did,” Drake says. “And thank you. I’m looking forward to it.” Audrey groans, but she doesn’t say a word.

Each year, my parents give me, Audrey, and Ray one hundred dollars each for our birthdays, which are all within a month of each other. The tradition is that we take that money and the three of us splurge on dinner and drinks. I haven’t had the opportunity to tell Audrey that Drake will be joining us from now on.

“Oh, yes,” Wyatt says as he joins our little group. “Drake told me about the birthday tradition. My birthday’s next week, so can I join?” He grins when he asks.

“Sure—” I begin but Audrey cuts me off.

“It’s for family only.”

“Audrey, I’m flattered,” Drake says. “Or should I say cousin?”

“I think it’s Ms. Nash,” Wyatt says.

“It is,” Audrey responds.

“Drake’s like a brother to me,” Wyatt says. “So, that makes Nia my sister, which makes me family.”

“Yeah, but you need a hundred dollars,” Audrey says as if that’s a hardship for anyone here.

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Wyatt responds.

“The hundred dollars has to be a gift. It can’t be your own money,” Audrey says to Wyatt.

“Done. I’ll give it to him,” Drake says.

“I’ll see you at our birthday dinner,” Wyatt throws in. Audrey huffs but doesn’t offer any more excuses.

“How about a drink?” Drake says. He flags the servers, and they bring trays of champagne. He gestures for his family to join the rest of the adults while the kids run to the corner to go through a stack of presents that Drake’s family brought over for Carter.

“I’d like to say something,” Drake says, and the room quiets down. “I want to wish my beautiful wife a happy birthday.” I feel a blush start from my neck up into my face. “And I’m so grateful that not only is she my wife, but she’s the mother of our son. So, to Nia on our first shared birthday as husband and wife. I want you to know how much I love you. How much I’ve always loved you and will always love you. And I want to take this moment to introduce our families.”

The staff offers champagne to the adults and ginger ale to the kids.

“To Drake and Nia,” Maggie says. Her voice trembles, and I know she’s fighting back tears. “I didn’t say it before, but I want to officially welcome Nia into the family. We’ve had a lot of sadness lately.” She looks from me to her son, and I pray she does not bring up Donald Paradise right now. “But Carter and Nia have been a source of joy. Finding out that I have a grandson and daughter-in-law was the gift our family didn’t know it needed.” She turns to Drake and takes his hand in hers. “I’m glad for you, Son. I’ve never seen you so happy, and that makes this mother happy too because that’s what I’ve always wanted for you.” Her tears don’t stay at bay. She angrily swipes them away and says, “Happy birthday to you both.”

We all clink our glasses together.

“This is a party, so let’s have some fun,” I announce.



An hour later, we take the party to the rooftop deck. It's a big space with couches and a long table that's been set. The place is set up with four mock food trucks, including tacos, burgers and fries, barbeque, and a pizza truck. There's an open bar, so I get a margarita for me and Drake.

My father is still distant, but when Maggie starts a conversation with him, he suddenly becomes charming and friendly. I don't buy it. It's his good cop persona that he uses when he's trying to get information.

The boys monopolize Wyatt and Langley, and Ray and Hannah talk in the corner. Audrey finally comes to the rooftop, holding hands with a man.

She walks over to me and Drake and says, "This is Justin. Justin, this is my cousin Nia and her husband Drake Paradise." She still manages to give him the side eye, but he doesn't react. In fact, he smiles at her.

"Welcome to the party, Justin," Drake says.

After wishing us a happy birthday, Justin and Audrey go to the bar. Drake pulls me into his arms and whispers, "Best birthday ever."

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Chapter 57

DRAKE

“This is the fourth Mariah Carey song in a row,” Langley whispers to me.

While everyone mills about, I stand in the middle of the rooftop deck. Nia’s back is to my front, and I have my arms around her shoulders, practically hugging her from behind.

“Isn’t it great?” Nia says to Langley. “One good thing about Mariah is that she has so many songs, we probably won’t have to hear the same one twice tonight.”

Langley laughs, but he soon sobers up when he realizes he’s laughing alone. “You can’t possibly be serious?” he whispers.

“Why would I joke about Mariah?” Nia asks.

“She’s serious. I’m surprised she hasn’t started stalking her yet.” I lean down and kiss her temple. “But it’s my birthday too, and it’s my turn to pick the music.”

“But your taste in music sucks,” she says. “I don’t want to hear rock music.” She makes a face.

“At least I like more than one artist,” I say back. “Nobody wants to listen to Mariah Carey all night.”

“That’s the first time I ever agreed with the boy,” her dad says from behind us.

“Fine, but *I’ll* change it,” she says. She pulls her phone out of her pocket, and The Weeknd starts to sing.

“I wanted to ask you two if it’s okay if I get Carter his own phone,” Langley says. I look at Nia and she furrows her brows.

“He’s only three,” she tells him.

“Yeah, but he’s a mature three,” he says. “He likes to play with my phone, so why not get him his own?” He grins like he’s come to a fabulous conclusion.

“Because he’s three,” I remind him. “There’s no such thing as a mature three, idiot.”

“So, I can’t get my nephew a phone?” he asks, incredulous. “Fine. This is the last time I ask you two.” He waves us off in dismissal.

“Aunt Nia,” Mason says. The three boys come up to us in a frenzy. “Carter says you’re going to the beach.”

“The Ahamas,” Carter says. “On a airplane.”

“The Bahamas, baby,” Nia says. “Yes, Mason, we are.” Nia runs her hand over Mason’s head.

“Can we go?” Mason asks his aunt, but before she can answer, he turns to his father. “Dad, can we go to the Bahamas too?”

“You boys and your dad are more than welcome to come,” I say. Mason and Kyle high-five each other, and Carter jumps in excitement.

Ray walks over to us and says, “Boys, we don’t want to intrude on their—” Mason cuts Ray off and says, “But Uncle Drake says we can come.

Please?” Kyle wraps himself around one of Ray’s legs, and Carter attaches to the other.

“Please,” Kyle and Carter say in unison.

“Ray, I’d feel better if you and the boys went,” Nia’s dad says. “You can look after your sister and Carter.” Nia tenses in my arms. Even Langley creases his brows in confusion.

“Why would Ray need to—” Langley begins, but I cut him off.

“Like I said,” I say, my voice a lot colder than it was. “The boys and Ray are welcome, but not because they need to look after my wife and son. That’s my job.” I look directly at my father-in-law.

The air becomes frosty, and everyone stands still.

“That means we can go,” Mason declares. The boys all run off to Wyatt.

“You know what?” Nia says, ending the tense exchange. “We should have gotten a pasta food truck, but it probably wouldn’t be as good as your pasta.”

“Drake’s pasta? Is that some freaky sex stuff?” Langley asks. Nia spits out her drink, and I roll my eyes at my brother.

“What the hell?” Nia’s dad says.

“No,” Nia says after a few coughs. “Drake is just a really good cook.”

“Nia, Drake can’t cook,” Langley says. “He probably ordered the food from some fancy restaurant and lied to you.”

“No, he didn’t. I’ve watched him cook dozens of times. He cooks for me and Carter every weekend when Delores isn’t here.”

Langley looks around in complete disbelief. “Everyone, come here,” he announces. Everyone, including Nia’s family, comes over. “Nia is under the impression that Drake can cook.”

They chuckle in disbelief. Even my mother waves Langley off. Nia’s dad lets out a loud belly laugh.

“Boy, please,” he says.

“Carter, can Daddy cook?” I ask my son.

“Better than Mommy. He made me chicken and pasta with the white sauce,” his little voice says.

“That boy and Nia would live off Chef Boyardee or tuna straight from the can,” Nia’s dad says. “And this one,” he gestures at me, “can’t cook. I’m certain of it. Look at him.”

“Drake, I’ve never even seen you make a sandwich,” Hannah says.

“That’s because I’ve only ever cooked for my wife and son,” I tell them.

“Wyatt, do you know anything about this?” Maggie asks.

“Never seen him so much as spread peanut butter on toast,” Wyatt says.

“A very observant lawyer,” Audrey mumbles.

Wyatt hears her and raises his glass to her. She huffs and looks away.

“Prove it. Make something,” Hannah says.

“Well, I’m not cooking now. There’s a bunch of food here,” I tell her.

“I think that’s best,” Langley says.

“Make them that champagne shrimp and pasta,” Nia says. “With the shaved parmesan on top. That’s delicious.”

“Champagne pasta?” Ray says. “For real?”

“Fine, but everyone is only getting a sample, not a full meal. Follow me.”



“If I didn’t see this with my own eyes,” Nia’s father says about an hour later over a small plate of my champagne pasta. He even takes some from his wife’s plate before she manages to shove him away.

“He makes all kinds of stuff,” Nia says. “A few times he made us lobster omelets.”

“Make that now,” Langley says.

“Once he made a Tomahawk steak with this amazing red wine reduction sauce,” Nia says, practically licking her lips at the thought.

“No way,” Langley says. “When did you learn to cook?”

“When I was in grad school, I watched a lot of cooking shows and started cooking for myself,” I tell him.

“Make me one of those lobster omelets,” he orders.

“Langley, I’m not your personal chef. Have Cook make you a lobster omelet,” I tell him.

“I’m hurt,” Wyatt says. “You’ve never once cooked a thing for me.”

“Are you my wife or son? They’re the only ones I cook for,” I reply.

“I would have married you if I knew you could cook like this,” he jokes. Everyone laughs.

“That’s going to give me nightmares,” I say.

“Next Sunday, we’ll host a brunch. Drake will cook,” Nia announces. “I’ll help.”

“I’ll come and help if you need it,” Ray says. “You stay out of the kitchen.” He points a finger at his sister, and Mr. and Mrs. Nash laugh. Even Audrey nods in agreement.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a variety of light-colored flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

Chapter 58

NIA

It was after midnight that our families finally left. As far as first meetings go, this went better than I could have predicted. Everyone was relaxed and friendly after Drake's pasta, and once everyone was relaxed enough, they even danced. Afterward, we sang happy birthday, ate cake, and opened presents.

Maggie Paradise got me and Drake a honeymoon trip to anywhere in the world. All we have to do is tell her where we want to go. Drake teared up when he opened my present to him. It was a portrait of the three of us. I used a picture of us and commissioned an artist. He's already hung it up in the living room.

Now with everyone gone and Carter out cold until probably mid-morning, my husband is on the other side of that door waiting for me. I look at my reflection in the mirror, satisfied with what I see.

When I went shopping with Audrey earlier, I wanted something in a bold color, but she helped me pick out this black baby doll. It's sheer on the

bottom, but the top is lace. The outfit is complete with a black pair of thong underwear.

I finally open the door to the bedroom expecting to find him on the bed, but it's empty.

“Looking for me?” he whispers in my ear. His sudden appearance makes me jump. He traps me against the door by pressing his body into mine and kisses the side of my neck. “Happy birthday, Mrs. Paradise.” He pulls a box out of his pajama pants and puts it in my hand. “Are you going to open it?” he asks when I continue to stare at it.

“You gave me this.” I stroke the diamond necklace.

“And now I'm giving you this.” He points at the box, and I quickly open it.

“A key? To what? Your heart?”

“You already have that. You'll find out what it's for when we go to the Bahamas,” he promises.

“Tell me,” I urge.

He taps my nose before he kisses it. “Fuck me,” he whispers.

“Sir,” I say in an exaggerated southern drawl. “I'm a married woman. Mind your manners.”

“You're right. Pardon me.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket, and an instant later, the lights dim, and Mariah Carey starts to sing. “Can I have this dance first, Mrs. Paradise?”

He pulls me into his arms and we start to sway to We Belong Together. “This song is perfect for us,” I tell him. I feel a sudden bout of emotion hit and a stray tear rolls down my cheek. He wipes it. “I feel like I need to sing along with Mariah,” I warn.

“Baby girl, let Mariah handle this. Please.”

“Nope. Here I go.”



He cringes the entire time I sing. His cringes are so exaggerated that I forget the words and burst out in laughter. Once the song ends, he turns off the music and tosses his phone onto the carpeted floor.

“Your ears might not like my singing, but something else does.” I grind against the hard bulge in his lounge pants. I pull away and spin for him. “You like?” I ask about my nightie.

“Love,” he says. He reaches for the hem and lifts it over my head before tossing it into a dark corner. My panties come off next. Now I’m naked in front of my husband, and even though we’ve made love hundreds of times, he’s looking at my body as if this is our first time.

I follow his lead and pull his pants and boxers down. His dick springs free, and I wrap my hand around it. He tosses his head back and moans. I drop it and jump into his arms, wrapping my legs around him.

He spins us around until I become dizzy. I’m not sure if it’s from the movement or from him. He looks up and I lean down to kiss his lips. He tastes of the champagne we had earlier tonight. He kisses me until my head spins and I forget my name and where I am.

“Drake,” I murmur against his mouth. “I need you right now.”

I can already feel how wet I am. He finally sets me down in the middle of the California king bed and rests between my thighs. I stroke his nape while he stares into my eyes.

“What?” I ask him. It’s like he’s studying me for the first time.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, and I feel myself blush. “You are,” he insists. “Your outer beauty was the first thing I noticed about you. I was mesmerized

by that at first. Then your inner beauty grabbed onto me and wouldn't let go. I want you to know how much I love you," he whispers. "More than anyone and anything."

I open my mouth to answer him, but he puts a finger to my lips. "Just let me love you tonight. I already know you love me, but I want to make sure you know that there will never be anyone but you. I'm so sorry about—"

This time, it's me who puts a finger to his lips. "Let's not apologize about the past, and I know, baby." I caress his nape and he shudders from my touch. "I know because I feel the exact same way." He seems to sigh in relief. "Now, slide that big dick inside of me before I start to sing again."

"Oh, baby girl, you're about to hit all the high notes." And he slides his way home.

A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, scattered across the width of the page.

Chapter 59

DRAKE

I'm being pulled under, and I gladly surrender. I close my eyes and shut out the moonlight streaming through the blinds. She scoots her naked body closer. I feel her breasts crushed to my back, and we both sigh in unison. Content and satiated after two rounds of lovemaking, I surrender to the fatigue that's finally hit me. I don't know when I fell asleep, but a persistent tapping on the bridge of my nose awakens me.

I swat the offending hand away, but it returns.

"Drake," a soft voice croons. "Husband," she says, softer this time.

"Baby girl," I moan without bothering to open my eyes. "You'll have to wait until morning if you want more dick. It needs to recharge. You sucked and fucked the life out of it."

She makes a little gasp, but I inch away from her, so desperate for sleep. She moves closer and the damn tapping on the tip of my nose returns.

"What?" I practically whine.

"I'm hungry," she says.

“Hungry again? Go eat something then. There’s a bunch of leftovers from the party in the fridge.” I swat her hand away, but it soon returns.

“And warm it up by myself?” She sounds almost aghast at the thought.

“Yes. Or order from Uber Eats or something if pressing buttons on a microwave is too much for you. Just let me sleep,” I groan.

“It’s almost three o’clock in the morning. The least you can do is go downstairs with me. I’m hungry because you made me burn so many calories, so it’s your fault my stomach won’t stop growling.” I snort and pull the covers over my head, but she taps my nose over the blanket. She climbs on top of me and pulls the covers from over my head.

“I’m not going to leave you alone,” she warns. “If you love me, you’ll go with me. You must be hungry too.” She finally gets up, and just when I think she’s going to let me sleep, she yanks the covers off and throws something at me. Whatever it is hits me in the face. “Put that on and let’s go.”

I groan, but I know she’ll just keep harassing me until she gets what she wants. I get off the bed and angrily put on the pair of sweatpants she threw at me.

“You know, I completely forgot what a giant pain in the ass you can be.”



“You are the president of the spoiled wife’s club,” I say to Nia about fifteen minutes later. She’s sitting on the kitchen island with me standing between her legs. She has them wrapped around me keeping me in place.

“President, chairman of the board, CEO, founder, and—” I shut her up by putting a taco to her mouth. She takes a huge bite, and I finish it off. I rub my

hands on her bare legs. She's in one of my T-shirts, and I stroke her upper thigh.

"You're an annoying pain in the balls, do you know that?" I feed her some more, and she nods in agreement with me.

"But you love me anyway," she says.

I kiss the side of her neck. "I do, and since I'm the one who spoils you, I guess I only have myself to blame."

"Drumstick," she orders. I pick up a drumstick and put it to her mouth. She takes a big bite, and when she's done, I eat the rest. That's how the next fifteen minutes go. She calls out the food she wants, I feed it to her, and I finish it off.

"Water," she says while she rubs her eyes. I put a bottle to her lips, and I drink the rest. I don't bother cleaning the kitchen. I leave the food on the island, pick up my wife and carry her upstairs. She grumbles when I tell her she needs to brush her teeth, but once she does it, we climb into bed. I spoon her from behind, and we both fall asleep almost immediately.

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Chapter 60

DRAKE

The next month is busy and the best month of my life. Our four-day trip to the Bahamas has been a whirlwind. Between entertaining three young boys, teaching Carter and Kyle to swim, and keeping ourselves sane, the few days away weren't enough. Our days are either spent at the pool, the beach, or touring the island. It was my first time seeing the house in person, and everyone, including me, was awed by it. It's a mansion, located in Lyford Cay, the island's most exclusive, gated community. The house is situated on the beach, and it has a dock for our boat.

“Remember that key I gave you for your birthday, baby girl?” I whisper in her ear our first morning there. Everyone's still in bed and we're outside sipping coffee.

“Yes,” she says.

“Come with me.” I take her hand and we walk around the massive property to the dock. “It's for that.” I gesture to the boat. “Nia's Paradise,” I say pointing at the name on the back. She covers her mouth with both hands and turns to stare at me.

“You can’t be serious,” she whispers. “You got me a boat? Do you even need a key to start a boat?”

“The key is symbolic, baby. Come on.”

The six of us spend the entire day at sea, and when we return to the house, we share the meal the cook made. The boys are tired and grumpy after being in the sun all day, but Ray says he’ll get them settled and tells me and Nia to go have a night out.

It’s the first time since our weekend that we’ve had anything close to a date night. We go to a bar, have drinks, and dance to the live band. Afterward, we go home and make love until we fall asleep.

The only blemish on the short trip is a conversation I overhear between Ray and his father. He’s in the kitchen with his back turned while pouring himself coffee. It’s barely seven o’clock in the morning, and everyone else is still sleeping. My plan is to get my laptop and do a couple of hours of work while my wife sleeps.

“Hey, Dad,” I hear him say. I reach for my laptop on the table but his next words stop me. “It’s fine,” he says. “You don’t have to worry about him.”

Knowing the ‘him’ he’s referring to is me, I stay to eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation. “Dad, Nia is fine. He makes her happy, and he’s a good father to Carter. He’s a good uncle to Kyle and Mason too. You can stop worrying.”

Whatever his father says causes him to sigh and look to the ceiling. He turns and his eyes collide with mine. He mouths sorry while he listens to his father.

“Nia doesn’t need me to look after her.” He sighs some more and says, “You should drop it, and no I don’t believe he lied. I never did.” After a few moments, Ray says, “Saying I’m like my mother does not offend me, Dad. As for Audrey, Nia did ask her to come.” That’s news to me, but it wouldn’t have mattered since I don’t care what she thinks of me. “She’s going to Paris next week and couldn’t take any more time off. Drake didn’t go out of his way to exclude her. Honestly, I don’t think he cares how she feels about him.”

At that, I snort. Ignoring her is not a problem for me. I have no problem pretending she does not exist.

“Well, you’re the only one who’s still mad about it.” Another pause and then, “Jelani still? Dad, Nia’s married so Jelani will need to find someone else. Can you—” Ray pulls the phone away from his ear and cusses.

“He hung up on you, huh?” I ask him.

“Sure did.” He runs a hand over his face before taking a sip of his coffee.

“I guess he’ll never forgive me let alone like me. I hope we can be cordial for Nia and Carter’s sake, but if he tries to fix my wife up with Jelani or anyone, I won’t be polite about it.” In other words, tell your father I’m not going any damn where.

“Don’t worry about my dad. He’s extremely protective of Nia. When she was little, one of the kids in the neighborhood pushed her on the playground, and Dad nearly lost his mind. He confronted the parents and threatened to sue them. In his mind, no one messes with his daughter.”

“I get it. I’d do anything to protect my son too, but I never abandoned them. I’d never do that.” When Ray starts to talk, I hold up my hand to silence him. “Believe it or not, I would never have taken Carter from his mother. Never. And I never would have done anything to your father. It was all a bluff. I wanted my family and that’s how I went about it. I don’t regret

marrying her. I never will, but I realize I should have gone about it differently.”

“Look, just give it time. Dad will come around.” While he pours himself another cup of coffee, I hear footsteps on the back staircase. Nia appears, rubbing sleep from her eyes. I put down my laptop and open my arms to my wife.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” I ask before kissing the top of her head.

“I need cuddles,” she says. “Come back to bed. I’ll even let you bring your laptop.”

“Let me?” I ask.

“Yeah. Let you. Come on.” She steps out of my arms and takes my hand to pull me upstairs. She climbs in next to me and falls asleep in my arms almost immediately.



“Hi, Daddy,” Nia says a few hours later. She’s in a one-piece red swimsuit with a giant straw hat on her head. Since this is our last day, we’re in a cabana on a private stretch of beach on Pearl Island. The boys are building a sandcastle with Ray while my wife and I sip cocktails.

Nia calls the boys over and says, “They’re right here, Dad. We’re just having fun at the beach.” It’s a FaceTime call, and I can see him from where I’m standing.

“Well, you look good,” he says.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Nia asks. I’m sure she knows her father is insinuating something about me.

“What time are you getting in tomorrow?” he asks her.

“What time, baby?” Nia asks me.

When I tell her we should land by noon, her father says, “It’s going to be a nice day. Come by after you land. I’m grilling. You can bring that no good husband of yours,” he throws in.

“Can you not call him that, though?” Nia asks.

“I’ll try. Now put my grandsons on the phone. Have fun,” he says.

Nia hands Mason the phone, and the three boys run off to show him their sandcastle.

“Now, if anyone’s going to get poisoned, it’s going to be me,” I whisper in Nia’s ear.

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Chapter 61

DRAKE

Surprisingly, spending time at Nia's parents' house isn't as uncomfortable as I thought it would be. The weather is warm, and we have spent the afternoon in the yard, which looks like a garden from a magazine.

The boys play, while Nia's dad works the grill and Ray and Shirley talk in the kitchen. Nia cuddles next to me on the loveseat, and I put my arm around her, pulling her close.

"I had so much fun," she says right before she kisses my cheek. "But I'm exhausted. Let's go home after we eat."

"Why don't you go inside and take a nap?"

"And leave my husband's arms? Never." She turns to face me and grins. I can't help but grin back before I kiss her forehead and her lips. "Besides, I had a thought. You know the gift your mom gave us for our birthday?"

"I do," I tell her.

"I know where we should go." She turns to face me and takes both of my hands while I wait to hear what she says next. "Berlin," she whispers.

"I love that idea," I tell her.

“We go as husband and wife with our son,” she says. “It can still be our city, Paradise.”

“I love you,” I say against her mouth. “Are you by any chance leaving your birth control at home?” I’ve not been shy about wanting more kids, and she’s agreed to have more. The only disagreement we have on that topic is when.

“You’d better because I love you too.” I hear a deep sigh and look up to see her father staring down at us. He doesn’t scowl at me like he normally does, but he does plop down two bottles of cold water on the table.

“One for you, Nia, and one for your sorry ass husband. Maybe the cold water will cool you both down,” he grumbles as he walks away. “When you two are done kissing like a couple of teenagers, get the boys washed up so we can eat.”

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Chapter 62

NIA

About a month after our short getaway to The Bahamas, Carter and I officially change our name to Paradise. I also returned to my old job at Paradise Construction a few weeks later. I had no idea when I stepped into the building on that rainy Monday that Drake had arranged a celebration. He catered lunch for the entire company and announced my return at an impromptu town hall meeting. I remember blushing from my toes all the way to the top of my head.

After lunch, when I went to his office, it was to find that he had replaced the couch like I asked him to. He locked his door, and we christened the new couch like the newlyweds that we are.

Every day we drop our son off at daycare and go to work together. Sometimes he works late, but most days we pick him up together. We have dinner as a family every night, and afterward, we bathe our son and get him ready for bed. Every day I have more love for my husband than I ever could have imagined. Every day, I'm happier than the day before.

Even my dad stopped with the scowls. Drake goes to church with the family once a month now. My mom confessed to me that Dad believes me and Drake love each other, but he's still keeping his eyes on my sorry ass, no good husband.

Drake's family has us over for dinner too, and we even spent the night once. Drake's mom is doing her best to make Carter comfortable enough to stay there without me or his father, but I think my son is still intimidated by the grandeur of the Paradise home. He still loves to go there for barbeques and to swim in the pool. Ray even let me take Mason and Kyle a couple of times.

The only blip with Drake's family occurred when Hannah found out about her father's actions. Like Drake, she refused to believe it at first, but when she was presented with the evidence and Howard Bank's confirmation, she left the room sobbing only to return later to apologize on his behalf. Drake's mother took me aside to let me know she does not agree with her late husband's actions. She said if she had known, there's no way she would not have been a part of Carter's life from the beginning. I believe her. Maybe that's why her husband kept this secret from her too. Maybe he knew that she would not agree with him and would run to Drake. I can't say I'm close with his family, but I'm open to a relationship.

My private phone buzzes in my pocket, and there's only one person who knows about this phone, so I answer with a big smile on my face. "I can't come to your office every day for some afternoon delight, husband," I tell Drake.

"Why the hell not? I've already turned off the cameras," he says.

"You do realize your security knows why those cameras are turned off almost every afternoon, right?"

“So? And they know to shut up about it,” he replies. “But that’s not why I called. I have to leave for an offsite meeting in half an hour. Have you looked at those schools? We need to pick one, baby girl.”

I groan, but he’s right. Ms. Dot is retiring and moving to North Carolina to be closer to her daughter, so we have to enroll Carter in a new school. As a thank you, Drake wrote her a six-figure check. Her jaw almost hit the floor when she saw it.

“I was thinking of Carrington and Friends. It’s close to the office and the students and teachers are pretty diverse. Do you think he’ll get in?” I ask.

He huffs as if the idea of him not getting accepted is ridiculous. “I guarantee it.”

“There’s one more thing I want to ask you,” I tell him. He stays quiet while I take a breath and blurt, “Can I set up college funds for Mason and Kyle?” I hold my breath and wait.

“Baby girl, you don’t need to ask me. I’ll have one of our account managers contact you about setting it up. Set up trust funds too.”

“Really? It’s that easy?”

“It’s that easy. You’re a Paradise, and Kyle and Mason are our nephews. Talk to your brother and see if he wants them to go to Carrington. If so, we can make it happen, and they can start in September. Aunt Nia and Uncle Drake will take care of the tuition and costs.”

I hadn’t thought of that, and I don’t know if Ray will agree, but I will try.

“I’ll ask him,” I tell my husband.

“Okay, then. I’ll have everything handled. Let me know what Ray says, and I might be a little late today, so you’ll have to get Carter without me.”

I pout into the phone, but I know my husband is a busy man. I’m spoiled with all the time I get with him.

“Okay, and don’t forget next Friday is my mom’s banquet. She wants all of us there.” The Boston Public Library is honoring my mother for twenty-five years of service with a dinner and an award. She wants the entire family there, and that includes my husband.

“I have it marked down. We’ll make a donation in her honor as well. We’re good, baby girl. Come to my office so you can tell me you love me in person. I’ll keep my pants on. I promise.”

I don’t fully trust him to do that. When I had lunch with Audrey a few days ago, he asked me to bring him something back. When I got to his office to deliver it, he put me on his desk, lifted my skirt, and ate me until I orgasmed in his mouth. Then he lifted me off the desk, turned me around, bent me over, and slid into me.

The only blight on our bliss has been Scarlett, who still manages to call him at least a few times per week. Drake has cut all ties with her family’s company as well.

I check my makeup in my office, the same one I had when I worked here previously. Drake wanted me to have an office next to his, which makes no sense since that’s not even on the same floor as my department. I insisted on taking the same job and my old office. He agreed, but he reminds me weekly that I don’t need to work.

I find him with his back turned. He has his phone pressed to his ear. “Well, that’s what happens when your daughter messes with my life. I mess with yours, so suffer the consequences. Don’t call me again.” He slams the phone down and his eyes clash with mine.

He opens his arms, and I go in, wrapping mine around him and resting my head on his chest. “What happened?” I ask.

“I blocked a deal Foley was trying to get, but I don’t want to talk about that.

I want to kiss my wife before leaving the building.” So I let my husband kiss me. I tilt my face up and his warm soft lips land on mine. I slide my hand through his soft hair and moan when his tongue meets mine. He tastes like he always does, like my husband. Like the only man I will ever love.

“I made a decision. I was thinking,” I say when we both reluctantly pull away, “that when we go to Berlin, I might not pack my birth control pills.” I bite my bottom lip while I look into his eyes and wait for his reaction.

He lifts me off my feet and spins me around. “That would make me the happiest man on earth.” Then he puts a large palm on my stomach. “I want a girl this time.”

“You’ll get what you get, and you’ll be happy about it,” I tell him. “Now, go so you can hurry up and get home.”

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Chapter 63

NIA

It's the third time a strange number has called my cell phone. I don't answer unknown numbers, so I hit ignore. Moments later, my office phone rings, and it's the same number. If it was anyone I know, they would send a text, but curiosity gets the better of me, so I answer.

"This is Nia Paradise." I almost giggle after saying my new last name. The other line stays quiet, and I say, "Hello? This is Nia Paradise."

"You whore," the voice says. It's a woman's voice that sounds familiar.

"Excuse me?"

"Whore. Watch your back."

"Scarlett? Are you serious?" When she remains quiet, I say, "Yeah, I am a whore. A whore for my husband," I cackle. "What's your point? I'm not scared of you. Do something, bitch."

"After you steal my life, you tell me that?"

"I didn't steal a damn thing. Get a life." She starts to talk, but I slam the phone down.



“She said what?” Drake yells hours later. It’s late and we just finished making love. “She called you a whore?”

“Look, I don’t care. I know I’m not a whore. I’m telling you because we promised not to keep secrets.”

“I’m getting my attorney to file a restraining order. I’m sorry, baby girl.” He kisses my sweaty forehead. “This is all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault that she’s batshit fucking crazy.” I inch closer to him. “I still don’t know what you ever saw in her in the first place.”

“I’ll take care of her. Don’t worry about it, but for the time being, you can’t go anywhere without security with you.”

“I’m not scared of that bitch,” I tell him.

“It’s not about that, and I know you’re not. This is for my peace of mind. Did you decide on a nanny yet? I’m relieved that Carter won’t have to go to the daycare anymore.” I look up and stare into his eyes.

“What?” he asks.

“That sounds snobbish.”

“It’s not. The Carrington school has security and it’s top-notch.” I lie back down and sigh. He’s right. Carter has outgrown Ms. Dot’s Daycare. In fact, his last day is Friday. It will be everyone’s last day, and I arranged a party for the entire daycare, the students, and their families.

I sigh in contentment and rest my head in the crook of his arm. I feel my eyes getting heavy, and it’s moments like these when I’m surrounded by darkness and in the safety of my husband’s arms that I am the most content.

Just a few months ago, I never could have predicted that I'd be here. That *we'd* be here, but in this moment, everything in my life is perfect. My son is perfect. Things between me and my husband are perfect. Our families are still a work in progress, but it's a lot closer to perfect than it was weeks ago. There's no way I would give this up. And there's no way in hell I will allow anyone to try and come between us. Scarlett will just have to get over it and move the hell on.

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Chapter 64

DRAKE

I look around my office and can't find my phone. I check the inside of my breast pocket, and my secret phone is still there.

"Esther," I say into my office phone. "Do you have my cell charging somewhere?" I'm known for leaving my phone lying around and when I do Esther will put it on the charger by her desk for me. When she tells me she hasn't seen it, I sigh in defeat.

I had the damn thing all morning, then I had a breakfast meeting with Langley and the COO offsite. Now I can't find it. I must have left it at the restaurant.

I grab my other phone and call my wife, who is out of the office today. "Baby girl," I say when all I get is her voicemail. "I've lost my other phone again, and don't kill me but I'm going to be a little late for the party. I'll be there though, and don't get any ideas about me sleeping on the couch. Love you." I end the call and step outside my office and into Esther's.

"Esther, call the restaurant where I had my breakfast meeting this morning and see if they have my phone. Have it delivered to me at home if you can

find it.”

“You got it, sir,” she says. I look down at her hand and she’s wearing Scarlett’s old ring.

“I thought you would have given that to your son. Didn’t you tell me he’s getting married soon?”

She holds her hand up and looks at the large diamond. “He can buy that raggedy heifer her own ring. This one is mine. You’re all set for the teleconference in fifteen minutes,” she says, pointing to the large conference room across the hall. “After that, you need to go meet the missus.”

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Chapter 65

NIA

“Paradise, I’m going to kill you if you are not out of the office in the next five minutes,” I say into the phone. His regular phone is either dead or off, and he’s not picking up the private one.

After making sure everything for the party at the daycare was taken care of, I had to run home for a Zoom meeting with my department head. By home, I mean the house I grew up in which is just a few streets away. While there, I spilled coffee all over myself. Luckily, I found some decent clothes and was able to change.

Now, I’m in the back of one of our cars while my driver takes me back to the daycare. I call Drake’s office one more time.

“Esther,” I say after she picks up, “has my husband left the office yet?”

“Ten minutes ago,” she says. “And he lost his phone.”

“Of course, he did. Thanks, Esther I hope he’s on his way to the daycare and not going to an offsite meeting first. Carter’s been looking forward to having his father there so they can get matching Spiderman face paint.

I sigh and put my phone back in my purse, but when I hear it vibrating, I quickly snatch it. My disappointment is instant. It's from an unknown caller. I normally don't answer those, but whenever Carter is not with me, I do.

"Hello?" When I get no answer, I repeat myself. "Hello?" I hang up when all I get is silence.

"What's happening, Jerry?" I ask my driver, who also acts as a security guard. The traffic in our direction has come to a standstill, even though we are on a quiet, tree-lined residential street. A few seconds after that question leaves my mouth, I hear the faint sound of sirens.

"Sounds like a fire truck, ma'am," he says. I clear my throat, and he says, "Nia." He looks through the rear-view mirror and grins sheepishly. Immediate color creeps his pale cheeks.

A car speeds by going in the opposite direction of ours. I wouldn't have noticed it if it wasn't going so fast. My head whips around to look at the car, but it's a black luxury SUV with tinted windows. Besides, it goes by so fast, I can't see the driver. I'm instantly angry because not only is there a daycare on this street, but there are also plenty of elementary school-aged children who are now out of school for the summer.

With each passing moment, the sounds of the sirens get closer and closer, and an uneasy feeling creeps up the back of my neck. When Jerry pulls to the curb to allow the fire truck room to pass, the feeling of unease intensifies. Another fire truck soon follows, and I feel my stomach drop. Slowly I turn around, hoping that whatever I'm thinking isn't true.

Several police cars whizz by, all going in the direction of the daycare, which is on the main road, just off this quiet street. The traffic eases and Jerry starts to drive, but it's still slow.

My heart drops several minutes later when we get to the end of the street. I

look to my left, and the firetrucks are in front of Ms. Dot's Daycare. There's smoke coming from the house. A police car flies by and blocks part of the street. Jerry is unable to make a left turn. I don't give myself time to think. I unbuckle my seatbelt and open the door without uttering a word to Jerry.

Jerry leaves the car in the middle of the intersection, and he's beside me in two steps. I run faster than I've ever run in my life. All my fears flood to the surface. After having Carter and falling in love with my son at the first sound of his cries, I had an intense fear of losing him. Back then, I'd worry that Drake and his father would make good on their threat and take him from me. I had nightmares about turning away from him for a moment in the playground and someone would steal him. I never thought I'd lose him in a fire. Now, I know it's not only me who would fall apart if something happened to him. His father would too.

It's pandemonium the closer I get to the daycare. An officer stops me, blocking my path.

"My son's in there!" I yell at him. I try to go around him but he steps in front of me. "Jerry, do something!" I plead. He takes the officer aside, and they speak in hushed tones. The cop eyes me, and something in his expression changes.

"Let me see what I can find out," he says. He touches my shoulder and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

"Nia!" I hear Drake's voice from behind me. I turn and run into my husband's arms. "Where's Carter?" He runs a hand through his hair. His eyes are frantic as he looks around.

"Look," Jerry says. We turn to see a group of kids being escorted onto the sidewalk. EMTs rush to them. I scan the area and see no signs of Carter anywhere.

“Where the hell is our son?” I nearly yell. I try to run to the EMTs but Bertram holds me back. Drake approaches one of the officers. More kids come out, but still no Carter.

I see Ms. Dot coming out of the house, and with Herculean strength, I pull out of Bertram’s hold and sprint to her. “Ms. Dot, where’s my baby? Where’s Carter?” I ask, my words rushed and desperate.

She gives me a look that nearly makes my knees buckle, but then she takes a deep breath as if she’s relieved. “I’m so glad he left just as the fire alarm went off.”

“What do you mean he left?” Drake must hear how loud I am. He leaves the officer and jogs over to me and Ms. Dot.

“Your nanny came and got him. Drake texted earlier about his doctor’s appointment. She promised it wouldn’t take more than an hour. I was surprised you didn’t tell me, but just as I was going to call you, the fire alarm went off.”

Despite the smoke coming out of the daycare, the kids crying and the noise of the cops, EMTs, and firemen, the place suddenly goes deathly quiet.

“Ms. Dot, Carter doesn’t have a Nanny,” I tell her, my voice much too quiet and low for this revelation. We finally agreed on who to hire, but no offer has been made yet.

“But I got your husband’s texts.” She pulls out her phone, and sure enough, there are texts back and forth from Drake to Ms. Dot. “Look. He sent me her name, and I checked her ID.”

“I didn’t send those,” Drake says. “I didn’t have this phone when those texts were sent. I lost the damn thing.”

“So, who the fuck sent these? What’s her name? What did she look like, Ms. Dot?”

Her eyes dart around. She's a dark-skinned woman, and despite that, I can see some of the color leave her face at this turn of events. "Tall, thin with reddish hair. Lots of freckles. Green eyes, I think," she says. "Something Foley."

All the outside noise ceases again at the realization of who it must have been. I whip my head around, and my eyes collide with Drake's. "Did this bitch kidnap my son?" I whisper.

"Is this the person?" Bertram hands his phone to Ms. Dot, who nods that it is.

Drake pulls me into his arms, and I bury my face in his chest.

"Don't worry," Bertram says. "After she showed up at the office, I put tracking devices on her car and the cars of her close family members." He looks down at his phone screen and frowns. "Her car is parked at her parents' house, which is where she's been staying."

"Wait," I say, speaking quickly. "There was a black SUV that sped by several minutes ago. It looked out of place here, but maybe—"

"This one," he confirms. He shoves his phone in Drake's face. "It's on Blue Hill Ave, a few miles from here. It's moving, though I have no idea where she could be going."

Bertram shouts orders at Jerry, who then contacts the security office. He also speaks with the officer, who calls dispatch after he's given the direction of the car and the license plate.

"Let's go," I tell Drake when Bertram and Jerry head to their cars.

"Baby girl—" he begins, but I cut him off.

"If you think I'm staying here while you go off to find him, you're crazy. He's *my baby*," I nearly sob. "And if that crazy bitch so much as touches a

hair on his head, I'm going to kill her. The best-case scenario for her is that I beat her within an inch of her life before the cops drag her away."

My husband looks like he wants to argue with me. He looks from me to the waiting car. I don't give him time to try and talk me out of it. I briskly walk to the car and get in. "Let's go," I order Bertram once Drake gets in.

"Don't worry," Bertram says a few minutes later as he slowly maneuvers out of the bottleneck of traffic. "The entire security team is tracking them now. The police are headed in her direction."

Those words should calm me, but my heart remains in my throat. Drake puts his hand on top of mine, and it's cold and clammy. Not even when he first came back into my life and we were constantly fighting, did his hands ever feel like this.

I know he's scared for Carter, but I also know it's more than that. He's scared about my reaction. I put my hand on top of his, and he visibly exhales. He lifts my hand and brings them to his lips.

"I would never blame you for this," I whisper to him.

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Chapter 66

DRAKE

I only exhale when Nia puts her hand on top of mine. My heart only beats again when she assures me that she doesn't blame me.

But I blame myself.

I can't even say that Scarlett won't hurt a child. This is my child. Nia's child, who she blames for taking me away from her. The truth is this is all my fault. I chose to get involved with Scarlett when my heart was never in it. All I knew was that I could never give it to another woman, and Scarlett was no threat.

I could have ended it after a few months, but I didn't. I kept it going and proposed. After dragging my feet about setting a date, my world changed and Nia and Carter came into my life. I was always in love with Nia, but I fell in love with my son too.

"He'll be fine," I hear Nia say. I have no right to seek comfort from her. This is all on me. I put my son in danger from this psychopath. "That's the car I saw speeding away." I hear tires screeching before the black SUV

comes to a stop. I know that car. It's not one of Scarlett's. This is one of her father's.

"It looks like she's driving home, sir," Bertram says. "I suggest we follow her there. Makes things less public." I nod in agreement, and for the next thirty minutes, we follow her. I'm positive she knows she's surrounded. She drives below the speed limit until she pulls into the long driveway of her family estate.

My security team pulls up behind her car. Several police cars arrive and park along the deserted street. I don't know if it's from the direction of my security, but their sirens are off. The Paradise Foundation donates annually to the Boston Police Department, so I'm not surprised that they are letting my security dictate the rules.

I step out the moment Bertram comes to a stop. I don't tell Nia to stay in the car. I know she won't listen, and she has every right to handle this her way.

"Stop," Bertram orders her. She doesn't listen, but he runs ahead of her, his hand already reaching for the gun he keeps in his holster. Several officers follow him on foot and surround the SUV. Bertram opens the back door. An officer sticks his head inside, and a few seconds later, he pulls Carter out of the car. He puts him down, and Nia runs to him.

"Mommy!" he says. He's happy and giggles while she plants countless kisses on his face. "Mommy, stop," he whines between laughs. "I want to go see Daddy."

She puts him down, and he runs to me. I nearly crush his body to mine. I close my eyes before I plant my own kisses on him. He laughs and wiggles like a fish. "Are you okay?" I ask, my words coming out choked and hoarse.

"Yeah. Can I go back to Ms. Dot's? That lady is weird," he says.

I hand him to Bertram, who takes him to the safety of our SUV. Jerry slides

in with him and I exhale with relief at the sound of my son's endless chatter.

The front door to the house opens, and Dan Foley rushes out. His steps come to a quick stop when he sees the cars and people in his driveway. He holds both hands up and says, "Lemme handle this." He walks slowly to me, but one of my security guys steps between us and shakes his head at him. "Drake, she didn't mean to—" he begins but shuts up when Bertram opens the door, and Scarlett comes out with both hands in the air. Tears stream down her face as she looks around until she sees her father.

"Daddy," she chokes out.

"Scarlett, don't say a word," he warns as he tries to get around my security but can't.

"I wasn't going to hurt him," she blurts out before she bursts into tears. An officer walks to her and she starts to sob. "No! Please, don't. I didn't mean to—" The rest of the words never leave her mouth. Nia runs to Scarlett and slaps her hard across the face. Stunned, Scarlett stands there, holding her cheek. Nia shoves her, and she stumbles back two steps.

"Get your hands off my daughter," Dan yells. "Are you guys going to just stand there? Stop this! Scarlett, stop talking."

"Are you going to do something?" Scarlett yells at the officers. "She assaulted me. Arrest her." They look at Bertram who shakes his head at them. "Are you kidding me?" The words are barely out of her mouth when Nia smacks her again. She does it with the back of her left hand this time, and her ring cuts into Scarlett's face. She screams in agony.

"Hit me back," Nia taunts right before she pushes her to the ground. Scarlett falls like a ragdoll, and Nia jumps on top of her and straddles her. She slaps her again and Scarlett starts to sob uncontrollably.

"Get off!" Scarlett screams. She manages to land a hit to Nia's ribcage. Nia

lands one final smack to Scarlett's face, and blood pools at the side of her mouth.

"Stop this now," Dan says.

I reach Nia and pull her off Scarlett. "Let me go," she hisses. "You can't fight her, but I can. Let's go, bitch." She lunges at Scarlett who has finally gotten up. I lift her off her feet and carry her away.

"I would never hurt a child!" Scarlett yells. Her words come out muffled while she holds her hand over her face. Blood drips from between her fingers. I don't respond. I do everything I can to hold onto Nia who's doing her best to jump out of my arms and go after Scarlett again. "Don't let them take me away," she screams between her sobs. "Daddy, tell them I was never going to hurt him." She turns to me and says, "I only wanted you to see—"

"Scarlett, shut your goddamn mouth," her father warns. "Now!"

Bertram opens the door for me, and Jerry steps out.

"Let's take our son home," I whisper to Nia, who immediately calms. I put her down, but I make sure to block her with my body to prevent her from going after Scarlett again.

She gets in without hesitation, but I needn't have worried. Nia always puts Carter first. Besides, Scarlett has problems other than Nia now. She's being handcuffed while the officer speaks to her. He's likely telling her her rights. She shakes her head as if the words pain her. As my car pulls away, I watch as tears continue to stream down her face.

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Chapter 67

NIA

Hours later, Carter is unaware of the danger he was in. He's unaware of any drama at all while he plays in the corner with his cousins. The three of them chase after the new puppy that Uncle Langley brought for Carter. The puppy he brought over here and handed to my three-year-old son without talking to me or Drake about it first. Carter and the boys have been chasing that poor poodle around for hours, but she doesn't seem to mind.

Both our families are here. They got here soon after we did, and they haven't left. There's no tension because I think everyone has only been concerned about Carter. He's gotten kissed and hugged by everyone, and he loves it, of course. Now, he's so happy and distracted by Pixie, who is currently licking his face while he giggles.

"I'm the best uncle," Langley says, clearly satisfied with himself. Ray overhears and tilts his head our way. I catch his eye and he mouths 'like hell.'

"You can't just give a three-year-old a dog without talking to his parents first," I tell him. I expect Drake to say something, but he doesn't say a word.

He's been quiet since we got home. After he held Carter to him for what felt like forever, he got up and locked himself in the bathroom for over an hour.

"Well, you wouldn't let him have a phone, so I figured I was done asking for permission. What did Dad always say?" The air leaves the room, but Langley is oblivious. "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission." He cackles but quickly sobers up, probably realizing his faux pas. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," I reassure him. "He was your father."

Carter and the boys come running into us. Carter crashes into Langley's legs, and Pixie barks and puts his paws on Drake, who rubs behind her ears.

"Auntie, can you convince our dad to get us a dog?" Mason asks me. I look at Ray, who is shaking his head at me. Mason has been asking for a dog for a long time, and now that Carter has one, I don't know how much longer he can put him off. "I wish I had a cool uncle like Uncle Langley," he moans. "Our uncle is so boring."

"Me too. Can you get us a dog?" Kyle asks Langley.

"Don't even think about it," Ray warns.

"Come on, boys," Langley says, and they all chase after him.

"Look," I tell Drake, "my parents and Audrey are talking to your mother and sister, and there's no bloodshed." He looks and smiles, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. He looks tired. He looks like he's only going through the motions. I take his hand in mine and squeeze it. He squeezes back, but it's missing something.

An hour later, everyone leaves, including Mason and Kyle, who complained about leaving Pixie behind. I offered to have them spend the night, but they are spending the weekend with their maternal grandparents.

Drake picks Carter up and takes him upstairs. After giving him a bath, he

puts him in our bed and tells him he can watch television. Pixie lies at the foot of our bed.

This time, when Drake goes into the bathroom, I follow him. He's at the sink with his head hanging down. I wrap my arms around his waist and put my face in the middle of his back. I plant several kisses there, but I get nothing back.

"He's okay, baby," I reassure him.

He turns around and looks down at me. I look into his eyes, and they seem pained.

"It's my fault," he finally says. He looks away as if he can't look at me.

"It's not—"

"It is. Maybe you don't see it yet, but it is. And I'm so afraid that tomorrow or the next day, you'll realize this is my fault and you'll take him and leave. I don't know what I'll do if I lose you again."

I almost take a step back at that admission. I reach for his face and hold his cheeks until he looks into my eyes.

"I got involved with Scarlett. I brought her into my life. I proposed marriage and never set a date. Then I marry you before breaking things off with her. I did all those things. I pushed her into kidnapping Carter. Me." He points at himself. "I'm supposed to protect my family, and I've failed in every single way, Nia. In every way. The first time I failed you and Carter was when I allowed my father to tear us apart."

I walk into him and wrap my arms around him. He does the same to me, but he's still distant.

"I dropped him," I admit. "When he was five months old. I was home alone with him, and he had a major diaper explosion. I'm talking about the kind that went all the way up his back."

“Um, does that mean what I think it means?” he asks. I look up into his eyes, and for the first time since we got home, I see some playfulness in them.

“Yup. It was the green kind and it got as far as the nape of his neck. I was horrified. I think the explosion scared him because he was screaming his little ass off. By the time I got him to the changing table, I was frazzled. I put him down, but there were no wipes nearby. I was so out of it, I left him on the table to go to the bathroom to get the wipes. Before I could get back, I heard a loud thud, followed by more screaming. I thought for sure he had broken something or given himself a concussion. By the time, I got to him, I was crying too. And instead of calling nine-one-one or his pediatrician, you want to know what I did?”

“What?” he asks.

“I called my mother,” I say with a chuckle. “While I’m holding a screaming baby who was oozing green poop and probably had an injury, I called my mommy.”

“What did she say?” He put his chin on my forehead.

“She told me to calm down, and by the time she talked me down, Carter was smiling.”

Drake laughs at the story, and so do I. “I appreciate what you’re doing, baby girl, but it’s not the same thing. You were a first-time mother who panicked. I brought Scarlett into—”

“Remember I told you I had a boyfriend a couple of years ago?”

His jawline ticks, but he doesn’t say a word. He just nods.

“He was a single dad to a little boy, and I thought he and I would be a good fit. His son was a little older than Carter, but he was a great kid.” I feel him tense in my arms. “One night he suggested I let my parents or Ray raise

Carter so I could devote all my time to him and *his* son. I ended it on the spot. He acted like he was kidding, but I left and never spoke to him again.”

“What’s his name, baby girl?” he asks much too quietly.

“That doesn’t matter. My point is, I almost brought someone into Carter’s life who didn’t have his best interests at heart either. You’re not responsible for Scarlett’s actions just like I wasn’t responsible for my ex’s. You ended a relationship. That’s something people do every day. You’re allowed to end an engagement. You’re allowed to change your mind and walk away. That does not give her license to kidnap our son as revenge. She’s an adult. The only person responsible for Scarlett’s actions is Scarlett.”

“But—”

“You are not responsible for what she did,” I repeat a little louder. “All we can do is make sure she pays for her crimes.”

“I will make sure of it,” he says. “I was so worried you’d blame me,” he whispers, his words choked.

“Drake, I know firsthand how much you love Carter. You’d die before hurting him. I don’t blame you. I love you, and you are never losing me again. Never.” I tilt my face up and he smiles down at me. This smile is real, and I feel him exhale with relief. “Now kiss your wife.”

And he does just that. He wraps his arms around me and gives me a kiss that sets my body ablaze. I press my body into his and immediately feel how much he wants me. I rub against him, and he groans in my mouth.

“I’m going to put Carter in his bed, and then my husband is going to make love to me,” I say against his mouth. I kiss the corner of his lips and run my hands down until they land on his ass.

“I told him he could sleep with us,” he reminds me.

“I’ll put him back in our bed after I have my way with you.” I put my hand

over his hardened bulge. "I need to take care of this."

He wraps me in his arms and kisses the top of my head. "Thank you, baby girl." He squeezes me. "I had no idea how much I needed to hear that." He cups my face and rubs his nose on mine. "Then later, you're going to give me that guy's name, and I'm going to ruin his life."

"Let it go, Paradise."

I leave him there and carry Carter to his room. Carter doesn't move while I tuck him in. Pixie lies at the foot of the bed and closes her eyes, and I hope that this puppy does not go to the bathroom on the floor. If she does, I'll have Drake kill his brother.

When I get back to the bedroom, he's waiting for me. He pulls me to him and lifts my shirt over my head. I take off my bra while he pulls my jeans and underwear down. Once I kick them off, I help him undress. He lifts me bridal style and brings me to the bed.

He's on top of me, and that's just the way I want him tonight. Him on top taking control of my body. I open my legs, and he rests between my thighs.

"Make love to your wife, Drake," I say against the crook of his neck. He kisses me. It's a rough and savage kiss. It's possessive, and it's like he's sucking my soul into his body. I let him. I'll let him take it all because he's mine, and I'm his.

That's all the foreplay I get tonight. He's hungry and desperate. He slides into me with one hard thrust and no warning.

"Oh, Drake," I moan once he fills me.

"I love you," he whispers back. "You're my first and last love."

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Chapter 68

DRAKE

“Ooh,” I moan at the feel of her hands between my shoulder blades. Her hot little pussy is sitting on my ass while she massages the tension away. I don’t think it will work after the events of today, but for now, I’ll put those thoughts away and focus on my wife’s hands.

For a moment today, I thought I had lost her. I knew we’d get Carter back, and I knew I would unleash hell onto Scarlett, but I thought Nia would blame me and pull away. I should have known better. She loves me, and that means everything to her.

“I was thinking,” she begins. It’s after one o’clock in the morning. After making love, she went to the kitchen and brought up a tray of cheese, crackers, and meats. She took care of me by feeding me, and I let her. “You know all the things that Paradise Construction stands for?”

“Uh-huh,” I say as I wait to hear more. Despite coming back to work there, she never discusses business at home.

“I’m not just talking about the spreadsheets and profit margins. I’m talking about diversity, scholarships, and empowering women. All the good stuff.”

“Profit margins are good too, but yes, I know all those things.”

“And you believe in them, right? You’re not just paying lip service.” Lip service like my father.

“Of course, I do.”

“And you’re the leader of Paradise Construction now.”

“I am,” I say, still unsure of where she’s going with it.

“So, be the leader. Continue the legacy but expand on it. Grow the company. I’m sure there are things you want to change or things you want to do that your father didn’t or wouldn’t do.”

“All true,” I tell her.

“Then do them. This is your time. Take the big office and lead Paradise Construction into the future.” She leans down and nips my ear. “Maybe Carter can work there when he’s older. If he wants to, that is. It’s our children’s legacy.”

I turn onto my back, but I grab her hips to keep her on top of me. “I like what I’m hearing,” I tell her, smiling from ear to ear. “But what’s brought this on? You never talk about business at home.”

“I want to support my husband. You have so much responsibility on your shoulders. I want to be there for you.”

“For a while after my father got sick, I thought about giving it all up and walking away. My mother became unrecognizable. Langley gave up. He walked away from all his responsibilities. The only person in my family who didn’t fall apart was Hannah.”

“Why didn’t you walk away?”

“In the end, I didn’t want to let anyone down, especially my mother. There are people who have worked at Paradise for decades, and I wanted to do right

by them. I want this as a legacy for Carter and our future kids. And I really believe in everything that I thought we stood for.”

“So are you going to listen to your smart wife?” she asks.

“I always do. And I always will,” I promise.

“And we at HR have some ideas to improve the benefits Paradise offers. Do you think we can get a meeting with the CEO?”

“You’ll have to get past Esther to get to the CEO,” I tease. She drops herself on top of me, and I glide my hands down her body to cup her ass. “But all you have to do to get to your husband is kiss him.” I kiss her, and when she starts to deepen it, I reluctantly leave her mouth. She pouts. “I need something from you,” I tell her.

“Oh, you’re about to get it, husband.” She wiggles her brows and inches closer.

“You’re right, but I’m not talking about that.” She stills and waits for me to say more. “You’re my wife. I need you to do more than work a job in the HR department of our company.” I move my hand from her luscious ass and take both of hers in mine.

“But I love what I do,” she says.

“And you can still do it. You can be a bridge between HR and the C-suite, but I need you at the Paradise Foundation. Right now, my mother and sister are the face of it, but Hannah won’t have much time. Mom will need someone, and she can teach you everything you need to know. You’re the Foundation’s future.” I hold my breath while she mulls over my request. I’ve wanted her to do this since the day we got married, but now is the perfect time to ask.

“Nia Nash as the head of the Paradise Foundation? OMG. Whoever would have thought?” She blushes and averts her gaze.

“Nia Paradise, baby girl,” I remind her. “Is that a yes?”

“I’m your wife, and if being on the Foundation is a part of that, of course, I’ll do it. I want to support you,” she says. “This is my family now.” I expel my breath and inch closer, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Do you think I’ll be any good at it?” she asks with a hint of shyness. “I have no idea what to —”

“You’ll be terrific,” I tell her. “Thank you. I know this is asking a lot because of what my father did, but—”

She puts a finger to my lips. “This is about what we’re going to do in the future, not the past. We’re going to do so many good things.”



I don’t know when Scarlett will go in front of a judge, but since it’s only Saturday, she’ll be in jail at least until Monday. According to Bertram, who used to be a Boston police officer, they made sure the magistrate denied releasing her until the court can open on Monday. She’s been booked, fingerprinted, and photographed. When I get there, she’s still in the clothes she had on yesterday. She has a bruise on her cheek where Nia smacked her and it’s starting to turn a purplish-blue.

Her eyes widen in shock when she sees me standing in the small office they are letting me use. She doesn’t say a word when she sees me. In fact, after her eyes darted away when she saw me she can’t even look at me. She’s not handcuffed and stands as far away from me as the small office will allow.

After several minutes, she says, “I’m pressing charges against your whore. She assaulted me in front of witnesses.”

That was the wrong thing to say to me, especially from the woman who took my son. “You’ve never been smart, have you, Scarlett?” I ask. “If you had at least one working brain cell you would have walked away quietly.”

“Quietly? After you married her and dumped me? After you humiliated me?”

“What I did was end a relationship I never should have been in. What you should have done was walk away and go on with your life. Now you’re facing up to twenty years for kidnapping, and believe me, I’m going to make sure you serve every single day.”

At first, she shrinks away as if she’s hearing about the possibility of going to jail for the first time, but then her expression changes and with a bout of bravery she scoffs.

“Scoff all you want. Don’t think you’re going to cry and get away with this like everything else. Your daddy won’t be able to keep you out of jail.” As disgusted as I am with her, I walk to her. Her back is now plastered against the wall. “If you had come after me, I might have shown mercy, but you went after my *son*. You went after an innocent child, and what you should never, ever do is go after my *wife* or my *son*.”

“I was never going to hurt him,” she says, tears now streaming down her face.

Disgusted by her, I look away. “Then why?”

“I don’t know,” she finally sobs after several moments. “Maybe I wanted to punish you both, but I was never going to hurt him. I gave him candy and told him I was going to take him to the park, but he said he wanted his mommy.”

“You wanted to punish me?” I ask, my voice low. “After you and my father worked your little scheme, you thought I needed to be punished?”

“He made sure the kid was taken care of. He was getting child support. He had a college and trust fund. But you see them once, and you throw me aside like a used tissue and went on with your life like I never mattered. You proposed to me!” She jabs a finger at her chest. “You said you wanted to spend your life with me and then you dump me like I’m nothing! All the while you start an idyllic life with your wife and son. When I’ve wanted to be with you my entire life. I’ve loved you—”

“Shut up!” I thunder and she closes her mouth. “Shut your mouth. You don’t know a thing about love because if you did, you would have never colluded with my father to keep my son away from me. Don’t you ever open your mouth to tell me that you loved me again!”

“I did love you,” she insists. “And you’re damn right I didn’t tell you. If I had told you, you would have gone back to her, and it was my time. I wasn’t going to lose you to some little nobody who just happened to get hired by your company.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Some little nobody? As opposed to you?” I gesture at her. “She’s everything. Always has been and always will be. As long as she exists on this earth, that’s who I’m going to be with. And if by some cruel twist of fate, I outlive her, I’ll never be with anyone else again. *That’s* love, and she never had to do anything other than exist for me to love her.” Her sobs get louder at my declaration. “This is the last time we will ever speak.” I look at her again. She’s a shell of a human being. It’s like she’s aged ten years overnight. “Don’t think your father or your family’s connections can get you out of this. They can’t. I’m going to make sure of it. You went after my son, which means you went after my wife. There will be no mercy, and for once in your life, Scarlett, there will be consequences.”

All color has left her face now, but the sobs have tapered off. She’s

standing stock still and as pale as a ghost. I leave her there, too disgusted to be in the same room with her for another second. I didn't want to come see her, but I had to let her know that for once she would have to deal with the consequences of her actions.

Her father called my mother, begging us to talk to the district attorney and say it was a misunderstanding. He promised to send her to the west coast for treatment, but my mother knew better than to make promises on my behalf. Besides, unlike my father, my mother loves her grandson.



“Daddy, look!” Carter pulls on my pant leg the moment I step inside the penthouse. I pick him up and hug him. He points to Pixie, who is looking out the window and jumping. I guess rain makes this dog jump, and I remind myself to punch Langley in the throat next time I see him. The dog pissed in Carter's room and chewed his favorite Spiderman Crocs. “Uncle Yanglely says he has toys for Pixie.”

“Hey,” Nia says from the kitchen. “I made lunch.” That instantly puts me on notice. The woman can't boil water. “I know what you're thinking. What I mean is, I warmed up the lasagna that my mom dropped off a few hours ago.” She takes Carter from me and puts him down. He runs away, probably to avoid eating any food his mother touched. Pixie follows him.

I pull Nia into my arms and wrap them around her. “I missed you,” I say into her ear. “Let's not leave this house again until Monday morning.”

“Well, I'm working from here until Carter's comfortable with the nanny.” The nanny starts in one week, and we've decided Carter will remain at home until he starts preschool in the fall.

“Let’s climb into bed until then at least.”

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Chapter 69

NIA

“You warmed this up all by yourself without burning the house down?” Drake asks. He’s standing at the kitchen counter looking at the perfect lasagna I pulled out of the oven. “And why is your mom still cooking for you? That’s my job now.”

“Oh hush,” she says. “Mom made one for Ray and his boys, so she made one for us too.” I pour us each a glass of wine. “And for your information, I can cook three things now. My mom taught me when I was pregnant with Carter.”

“And what are those three things?”

“I can actually make lasagna. I can also make pancakes and brownies, both from a box.” I smile, proud of myself for my efforts.

He puts a hand to his chest and sighs dramatically. “There’s no way on earth you can make lasagna. No way. Remember that salmonella on a plate you served me?” he reminds me.

“Oh, get over it.” I swat his chest. “Carter already had lunch, so it’s just you and me. I hope that’s okay.”

He grabs my chin and kisses my lips. “You do not know how to make brownies either,” he teases.

I leave him standing there and grab a Tupperware bowl on the other side of the kitchen. I open it to reveal the brownies I made for Carter while he was gone. He takes one and bites it.

“It’s good. You mean to tell me that you measured oil and cracked an entire egg yourself?” I pretend to take the brownie from him, but he shoves the entire thing in his mouth.

After setting the table, Drake dims the lights, and we sit for lunch.

“Wow,” he says after taking two bites. “This is good. You are so spoiled.”

I roll my eyes at him. “That’s never going to change, but how did it go?” I finally ask him. When he told me this morning about his plans to see Scarlett, I didn’t try to talk him out of it. I encouraged him to go and get things off his chest.

“As you’d expect.” I listen while he tells me about his conversation with her and shake my head in disbelief at her reasons for starting a fire and taking our son. I’m satisfied though, that for now, she’s where she belongs. “Enough about that. We’ll have to deal with that soon enough, but I was thinking about something else.” He puts his hand in the middle of the table and I put mine in his. “How about we get married?”

“Paradise, we’re already married, remember?”

“By a judge in a courthouse. I was thinking of a big church wedding. The kind where I wait for you at the altar while your father walks you down the aisle. The kind with fanfare, family, friends, and the most handsome best man slash ring bearer.” My heart stops at his words. I look into his clear blue eyes, and he holds my stare.

“I want to wear something strapless,” I say, and he grins. “But does that

mean you want to wait to get pregnant?”

“Why would I want to wait?”

“I don’t want to be a pregnant bride,” I admit. “And you want a big wedding, so that will take time to plan.”

“We set a date for next fall. That’s about fifteen months away. We’re going to Berlin next month. I put a baby in you then, and he or she will be born months before our wedding.”

“What if it takes time for me to get pregnant?”

“Baby girl, we made the most perfect boy without even trying. I’m positive we can get the job done. I’m going to put a girl in you this time.” He puts a hand on my stomach and taps it.

I get up from my seat and sit on his lap. He wraps his arms around me. “Yes to a baby and yes to a wedding. Yes to everything.”

“You know what this feels like?” he asks with his forehead on my temple.

“What?”

“Almost paradise.”

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Epilogue

DRAKE

Two years later

I pretend to be asleep when I hear the door to the bedroom open. I hear rapid footsteps until someone jumps on the bed and yanks the covers off me. Carter hugs me while giggling.

“Happy Father’s Day!” he yells. He jumps off and grabs the balloons from his mom. He lets them go and they float to the ceiling. He jumps on me again and kisses my cheek.

“Aaaah,” Priya, our one-year-old daughter says as she bounces in Nia’s arms. She reaches for me, and Nia puts her on the bed. She crawls on top of me and gives me a wet kiss on my chin.

“Good morning, my favorite baby doll,” I say to my daughter.

“Happy Father’s Day to the best daddy there ever was. You and my dad are tied so you know this is huge,” my wife says.

“High praise indeed. How about you come over here and give the father of your children a kiss.” She climbs on the bed too, puts both hands to my face, and plants a kiss on me.

“Yuck,” Carter says before a fit of giggles.

Priya laughs too right before she slaps me in the forehead.

“Come on,” Nia says. “There’s brunch downstairs. You’ve been sleeping the day away.”

“Because this baby doll kept me up all night.” I lift Priya and wave her around while Carter makes a noise like an airplane. She laughs, and a big glob of drool dribbles down onto my chest.

“Come on, Daddy.” Carter jumps off the bed and holds his hand out for me. I hand Priya to her mother and put on a T-shirt. I take Carter’s hand, and we follow Nia down the stairs in our new home. We had it designed and built to our exact specifications and moved in only two months ago. We still have the penthouse. There’s no way I will ever be able to sell it.

Life with my wife and children is as close to perfect as possible. Nia got pregnant right away, and she gave birth to a beautiful, healthy baby girl practically nine months to the day after returning from Berlin.

That trip didn’t go as we expected but for the best reason. Of course, Mason and Kyle heard about it and begged to come with us. Ray offered to watch Carter so Nia and I could have a proper, kid-free honeymoon. We compromised. Ray and the boys joined us in Germany a week into our honeymoon, and we made the second half a family vacation. Hannah and Langley joined us for a few days, but Mother said she wasn’t up to traveling just yet.

When the doctor confirmed Nia’s pregnancy, I spent every spare moment with my wife. I experienced as much of the pregnancy as I could. I couldn’t keep my hands off her changing body, and I never missed a single doctor’s appointment. I made sure she ate well and got enough rest. Every day, I spoiled her and showed her how much I love her. Every day, I was reminded

of what I missed out on when she was pregnant with Carter, and as much as I loved our life together, resentment about what I missed continued to fester.

After expressing my feelings to Wyatt, he told me to focus on the present. He reminded me that I got back everything that was taken from me and not to let resentment take the life I've built.

"Look, Daddy," Carter says when we get to the kitchen.

"Happy Father's Day!" my mom, brother, and sister yell out. Even Pixie barks from the other side of the room. There are colorful gift bags on the kitchen table and a buffet spread on the island.

My mom takes Priya from Nia and kisses her cheek, but Hannah takes her from my mom seconds later. Carter goes to Langley, and they rush out of the room while speaking in hushed tones.

I look at Nia, but she just shrugs. "Sit down, and I'll take care of you," she says. She gets on her toes and kisses my cheek.

"I think you should sit and let me take care of you. I'm only a father today because of you, baby girl. Have I told you I love you yet today?"

"You did, and I love you too. It's your day. Come on. Eat because we have to go see my dad and Ray in a few hours."

My relationship with my in-laws has gotten better. It took Nia's father over a year to stop scowling at me, but once he held Priya in his arms for the first time, things between us finally changed. He stopped scowling and started treating me like a member of his family. Mrs. Nash told me that her husband sees how dedicated I am to my wife and family. She says he believes me about not knowing Nia was pregnant, and that he has forgiven me. Of course, he's never told me any of that himself.

Nia's relationship with my family has improved too. She's one of us and is accepted by everyone. Her relationship with my family went from hostile to

tentative to friendly. Ironically, she's closest to Langley because she's the connection between HR and the C-suite.

"Daddy," Carter says, running into the kitchen with Langley behind him. I eye my brother, who is holding something under a big blanket. "I got you a present," he says, practically bouncing on his heels. My eyes narrow at my brother. If this is what I think it is, I'm going to kill him.

Langley pulls out a carrier case from under the blanket. The moment he puts it down, I hear a soft meow.

"Tell me he didn't," Nia says.

"His name is Daddy Cat," Carter says, proudly puffing out his chest. "I picked him out and Uncle Langley got it for me."

My son jumps into my arms and hugs me. My eyes lock with Langley over his shoulder, and I give him the middle finger.

"Um, thanks, Son," I say to Carter. Langley pulls out a Siamese kitten. I rub its head and reluctantly admit that it's cute. "Thanks, Langley," I say before I mouth 'fuck you' to him.

Langley and Carter's latest obsession is watching cat videos together on Langley's phone. I should have known my brother would do this. Of course, giving it to me as a gift for Father's Day was a brilliant move on his part.

"I'm gonna go play with him." Carter picks up Daddy Cat and sits on the floor with him.

"Langley, you are so dead," Nia whispers. "Do you know how long it took us to train Pixie? Now you bring in a cat?"

"Threaten me again, and I'll give you a pair of birds for your next birthday," he threatens. "Or what about this? What do you think of the name Mommy Cat?" Nia's nostrils flare, but she stops talking, knowing full well Langley means it.

“Okay,” I tell him. “We’ll get you back for this. Your day will come.”

“And Daddy Cat is a girl,” he tells me.

“Oh, please. He can’t even get a date,” Hannah jokes.

Langley pretends to be hurt by putting a hand to his heart.

Everyone serves themselves brunch, but Nia makes a plate for me. The kitchen is alive with chatter, and as happy as I am today, and as happy as I am in my marriage and family life, the mistakes that I’ve made with Scarlett continue to creep in.

It doesn’t help that she was sentenced recently. After sitting in a jail cell for months waiting for trial, the district attorney presented her with a deal of ten years, which included seven years for the kidnapping and three for the arson. Nia and I didn’t offer any pushback. We wanted the entire thing behind us, and we didn’t want to have to testify in court, but Scarlett would not take the deal. She felt she did nothing wrong and wanted her day in court. She went to trial and was found guilty.

The courtroom was packed with both our families, each taking a side in the small room. When the verdict was read, her side started to cry. Her father called me a son of a bitch and was escorted out of the room as per the judge’s orders. Scarlett turned white as a sheet and started to weep. There was no joy in our side of the courtroom. My mother teared up, and she later told me that she blames my father’s deception for all of this. If not for that, none of this would have happened. I didn’t offer a response. I held her in my arms and let her cry on my shoulder.

Scarlett was sentenced to a total of thirteen years with credit for time served.

“It’s your day, baby,” Nia says before she kisses my temple. “Nothing but happiness today.”

“Nothing but happiness every day with you,” I whisper.

From the corner of my eye, I see my mom smiling wistfully at us. Her eyes fill with tears, but I know she won’t let them fall. Not right now.

My father is the other source of unhappiness in our marriage. I still haven’t read the letter he left with Howard or looked at the video recording. Nia says to take my time, and that this is something I should handle when and how I want. My mom and siblings still talk about the good times, but I never engage. They went to visit his gravesite on his birthday, but I didn’t go.

A few months back, there was an award given in his honor, and Langley accepted it on his behalf because I refused.

“Da,” I hear Priya say. I look up, and she’s reaching for me. I take her from Hannah and put her on my lap before I feed her some of my eggs.

“Daddy’s baby doll,” I say to my daughter.

Nia runs her hand through my hair, and looking up into her smiling eyes, I’m reminded of everything I have. I have her back, and I’m never letting her go again. We have our family. We have trust and love. We have everything.

“Almost paradise,” she whispers in my ear.

THE END

Can't get enough of Drake and Nia? Sign up for my newsletter and receive a bonus epilogue.

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Acknowledgements

Would you believe that a version of this story has been floating around in my head for the past two years? I knew I wanted to tell this story, but there were so many other stories inside my head, that Nia and Drake had to take a back seat.

I'm so happy I got to write their story and their journey back to each other. It was a long and bumpy road to their HEA, but they finally made it.

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Until the next book,

Evelyn

About Evelyn

A Boston native, wife, mother, and wine enthusiast. If she's not writing, thinking about writing, you will find Evelyn with a book in her hands. While a new publisher, she's been writing for years, and she will continue to write for many years to come.

Evelyn is obsessed with assertive and confident men who will stop at nothing to get their woman. Her stories are filled with love, passion and humor.

She currently lives in Chicago, IL with her husband and two daughters.

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