



Bound

TO THE

BILLIONAIRE

Mogul

OPAL KNOX

Bound to the Billionaire Mogul

Opal Knox

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Epilogue

Also By

One

Avery

“I want to go back and castrate him,” I say suddenly, and the car I’m in swerves sharply. The driver looks at me like I’m crazy and I sigh heavily.

“I’m gonna end up alone. Seriously, I’ve had zero luck with relationships. My first boyfriend turned out to be a dare, and the second only dated me because I love to cook and he loved to eat.”

“The third one wasn’t even a relationship because he told me at the end ‘I thought we were just chilling.’ Seriously, what is it about me?”

The cab driver doesn’t answer, and I continue talking. “Two months ago, I was happy. About to marry the love of my life. I thought I found the best thing that had ever happened to me. Until I found out he was a lying, cheating, two-faced bastard who stole everything after I caught him cheating on me.”

I pause for a moment, sigh, and continue.

“Completely cleaned out our apartment, including my handbags, everything! Seriously, I want to go back and hurt him. Can you take me to the airport?” I ask the driver who looks at me in confusion.

I sigh again and wave my hand. “Never mind. Just keep driving.” We sit in silence for a few minutes, and I start talking again.

“Will I ever find someone? I’m in the city of angels, so there must be a real angel around who can take my prayers directly to God, right? No. Forget that. I never want to have anything to do with men again. Supernatural or not.”

After a few more minutes of silence, I open my mouth to talk but he interrupts me saying “We’re here, miss.” I look out the window and see a very tall, nice-looking building. I’m grateful to my family who pitched in so I could afford an apartment here.

I wanted a fresh start after what happened in Sienna, so, when I got a new job at a hospital in Los Angeles, I didn’t think twice before packing my bags.

I sigh again and get out of the car. The driver helps me put my bags on a trolley, so I pay and thank him.

I swear he was reluctant to take the money from me. He probably thinks I’m crazy now. Thank you, Henry. I hope you develop a skin-rotting disease and die alone.

I wheel my trolley inside and go to the reception desk. A bright, cheery lady greets me with a warm smile, and I smile

in return.

“Hi, good morning. I bought an apartment in this building online about a week ago. I’m here to move in,” I say.

“Okay. Can I see confirmation of purchase and your identification?” She asks. I give her the documents and minutes later, I’m handed the keys to my new apartment.

Thanking her, I wheel my belongings towards an elevator. When the doors open, I walk inside, and a man comes in after me. I look at the stranger when the doors close and my breath freezes. How can someone be this attractive?

I subconsciously tuck a lock of hair behind my ear and clear my throat. Seriously, a few minutes ago I swore off men. Now, my heart is a mess.

I clear my throat again and sneak a look at him. He keeps staring at the elevator doors. I’m sure he can feel my stare or at least hear my heart racing. Great, now he thinks I’m a creep.

Clearing my throat again, I wave and say “Hi. My name is Avery. I just moved here.”

He spares me a glance before continuing his stare down at the doors.

Did he not hear me?

Raising my voice a little, I repeat “Hi, my name is Avery. I’m your new neighbor. Well, not really your neighbor since I don’t know what floor you’re on. But I just moved here,” ending with a bright smile.

This time, he turns and looks down at me like I'm a piece of dirt on his shoe.

"Not interested."

"Not interested in what, exactly?"

"You."

I frown in confusion. "Why do you think...why would I want your...what are you saying? All I did was greet you and introduce myself. How does that translate into...whatever you think I'm doing?"

"Look miss, I've been approached in better, more sophisticated ways. You have to do better than introducing yourself in an elevator. You're my new neighbor? Talk about stalking," he says and moves closer to the door.

"And I assume you're someone so important that women throw themselves at you all the time?" I ask indignantly.

"Ah, the classic. Pretend you don't know me so that I notice you and start to want you. See, stuff like that only works in movies."

Is he for real?

"I don't know who you are, but I assure you, I'm not following you around. I was just trying to make a conversation. I'm new to the city and just trying to get acclimated." I say, and he starts laughing.

"You told me you just moved in, so I know you want me to come to your apartment. I'm not interested in strays, one-night

stands, or hookups, so I know I'm not interested in whatever you're proposing," he says, and a vein pops in my head.

Me? A hookup? What the actual hell?

"Look here, mister, I don't know what experiences you've had with other women that made you translate a simple greeting into an invitation for sex, but I am not that type of girl. I only wanted to make this whole ride less awkward but now, I see I should have kept my mouth shut," I say angrily.

"Okay, if you say so." He shrugs as if he did not just insult me.

"Why are you guys all jerks? My ex was a jerk. Now, I try to be friendly to you and I am tagged as a hookup and a stray in the process. Do you all share a brain or something?" I say and he rolls his eyes.

"Looking at how you're acting right now, it's clear he doesn't want you back," he says, and I blow a fuse.

"He cheated on me, so I do not want him back," I yell in his face.

"With looks like that, I don't blame him for cheating. I feel insulted that you approached me. As if I would be interested in you. I like my women beautiful."

I reel back in hurt and his words ring loudly in my ears. Images of Henry with numerous leggy blondes flash in my mind and to my mortification, I start to tear up.

"No comeback? I must have hit close to home. Tell me. Were they blondes? Tall with legs that seem to go on for days?"

You must've looked like a drab rat compared to them," he says, and I feel a knife twist in my chest.

"They were blonde and so stupid you could feel your IQ dropping with every second of conversation with them. Although you don't have anything to fear," I say and roll my eyes.

"It doesn't say much for your intelligence that he decided to cheat on you with them. He must've wanted real conversation," he says, and my eyes bulge in shock.

This is the most amount of insult I have ever received in my entire life and in one day too. Why was I even attracted to him in the first place?

Right, the sharp masculine jaw, strong pointed nose, and dark green bedroom eyes. His skin is lightly tanned, indicating he does some outdoor activity.

The thought of him working shirtless under the sun makes me squirm and I struggle to remember that I'm angry with him.

The corners of his eyes have slight crinkles that soften his face but make him more attractive. His full lips are surrounded by a light beard and his curly dark hair makes me want to run my fingers through.

I look away and breathe through my nose in an attempt to calm down but now I don't know if I'm angry or turned on.

"You are the most annoying man I've ever met in my life. I..." I start to say but he interrupts me.

“I’m not interested in whatever you’re going to say. I’m only going to say this one thing. Stop following me around or I’ll call security on you next time.”

I splutter angrily. “I’m not...I’m really...for the last time, I’m not following you.”

“Then how come you haven’t pressed the button for your floor?” He says with an arched eyebrow.

I look at the buttons in the elevator and it occurs to me that I never really pressed my floor. The car stops and he steps out when the doors open.

Before walking away, he sends a parting shot. “By the way, pretending to not know who I am is the weakest way to take a rejection.”

The doors close in my face, and I press the button for the fifth floor so hard that I almost break it. What the fuck just happened to me?

When the elevator stops, I step out and drag my stuff to my door. Opening it, I walk inside angrily. If I ever see that piece of shit again, I’m going to have a hard time not killing him.

Two

Noah

“Alright, I’ll see you at work,” I say and hang up. I drop my empty coffee cup in the sink and reach for my jacket.

The general manager for one of my hotels just called to tell me there is a problem on the second floor and they need my help sorting it out. The fact that he’s asking for my help worries me a little.

I call my driver as I walk into the elevator. “Morning, Victor. Bring the car to the front.” I say immediately after he picks up.

The doors close and I start to descend but the elevator suddenly stops. Before I can wonder why, the doors open and the woman from yesterday enters.

She freezes for a second when she sees me, then clenches her jaw and comes in, turning to face the door. She’s not talking to me today? Well, I never pass on an opportunity to annoy someone who doesn’t want to talk to me.

In my most jaunty voice, I greet “Good morning, um, Avery, was it?” She doesn’t answer but her neck stiffens a bit. I grin and continue.

“Did you sleep well last night? You know, in your new apartment. The one you were very interested in showing me yesterday?”

“Stop being such a child and leave me alone.”

I chuckle loudly. “This is a change in roles. Although, if I was following you around and looking for your attention, you wouldn’t be angry about it. You’d be begging for more.”

She finally faces me, and I am struck by how blue her eyes are. When she starts talking, my gaze moves to her lips and damn, they look so soft.

“Look here, mister...”

“It’s Noah. I at least remembered your name. Don’t you think it’s time to drop the act and address me by mine?” I interrupt and her eyes spark up.

“I don’t care what your name is, I don’t care who you are or what you have, and I don’t want to talk to you.” She says and the elevator doors open behind her.

She walks out quickly, and I follow her. Her hair sways with her waist as she walks, and her legs cover the distance to the revolving doors quickly. We make our way outside the building, and I see Victor bringing my car to me.

She stands a few paces away, searching for a cab. I walk over to her, and she stares daggers at me.

Dropping my voice to a murmur, I say, “I can give you a ride if you’d like,” putting emphasis on ‘ride’ and giving her my signature smirk.

She looks so angry that I take a step back just in case she decides to throw hands. The last thing I need is a short Latina hitting me. That shit looks painful, and I don’t want to start my day half-deaf.

“No, thank you. You should take yourself up on that offer though. Might help you fall in love with yourself more, you narcissistic prick,” she says, and I laugh loudly.

“Honey, I love myself more every day. Have fun getting a cab.”

Victor opens the door for me as I walk to my car and slide in, throwing my briefcase on the other side of the seat.

As the car starts to move, I turn to get one last look at her but she’s not there anymore. Thankfully, there is no traffic on the roads, so we quickly get to the hotel: *De Tropics*, the chain of hotels that was started by my grandfather, inherited by my father, and I’m supposed to inherit one day.

I moved here to manage our American branch five years ago. In that time, I built two more; one within the city and another in Vegas.

The car stops in front of my building and there is an increase in activity the moment I come out. I quickly make my way into the reception and a very sweaty Mr. West, the branch manager, walks up to me.

“Good morning, Mr. Galanis. I’m sorry to trouble you with this, but it was not something I could handle on my own,” he says, and my ears perk up.

Something he couldn’t handle on his own? What the hell is going on here?

“West, give me a straight answer. What is going on?” I ask, hardening my gaze. He visibly gulps before answering. “There’s an animal on the loose.”

“An animal on the loose?”

“Yes sir.”

“What kind of animal is it? And why is it on the loose?” I ask, beginning to get annoyed.

He called me to work at seven in the morning because there is an animal on the loose? If it’s a dog, I’m going to kill it.

“Well, it’s a monkey.”

“A monkey?!” I yell, my neck stiffened, and he takes a few steps back.

“First of all, since when do we allow animals in the building? People eat here! They eat, drink, and live here. Why was a wild monkey allowed to move unchecked in my hotel?”

“Well, he’s not wild. I have been assured that he is properly trained,” he says, looking away fearfully.

I smile sarcastically and he shrinks away from me.

“Well, that has solved the whole issue, hasn’t it? He’s properly trained, so I shouldn’t be worried, right?!”

“I’m sorry, sir. This won’t happen again.”

I hand him my briefcase and pull my jacket off. Giving him that too, I roll the sleeves of my shirt to my elbow and yank my tie off. He looks bewildered, watching me undress and I hand him my tie.

“If I’m going to be running after a monkey, don’t you think I should get comfortable? Now, how did this happen?” I ask, walking briskly to the elevator.

“Well, I received a call this morning from the head chef that he saw a monkey in the kitchen. When I came here to investigate, I met someone who told me he was looking for his animal,” he says. I turn to face him sharply.

“This monkey was in the *kitchen*?” I ask menacingly, and he reduces in size again.

“I’m very sorry, sir,” He responds, hunched over. I pinch my nose and take my jacket and briefcase from him.

“Send the owner of the monkey to my office immediately. Then, send the floor managers to the conference room. Lastly, get security to call animal control.”

His eyes bulge out at my last statement. “Animal control? Won’t there be trouble with the man who owns it?”

“A monkey has probably contaminated all the food in my kitchen and is somewhere spreading more diseases. I do not give a fuck,” I say harshly and march into the elevator.

Looks like someone has gotten too comfortable in his job. The doors open and I walk to my office quickly.

A few minutes later, a tall, light-skinned, well-built man hurriedly walks into my office. He holds his hand out for a handshake, and I oblige. When he opens his mouth to talk, I quickly interrupt.

“I don’t have time to waste, so I’ll go straight to the point. I have called animal control services, so if you don’t find your animal yourself, it will be taken away.”

“I will assign some workers to assist you. You better have a signal that he can respond to or else, he’s going with the authorities. Either way, that animal is leaving my hotel before evening. Now, excuse me. I have a meeting.”

Without giving him room to say anything, I walk him out of my office and go to the conference room.

A few hours later, including an evacuation order, a promise to half the cost of the stay for the guests, and a thorough sweep of the entire hotel, the monkey is finally reunited with its owner.

I walk to my car with Mr. West who insisted on seeing me out. Before I enter, I turn to him, and he shifts back a little.

“Tomorrow, we’ll discuss why I should let you remain as the general manager. Good night.” I enter without waiting for him to say anything and Victor drives off.

Half an hour later, I walk into the elevator of my apartment complex with only my bed in mind. Every work-related

activity has to wait until tomorrow. Hell, I'm so tired, I could sleep for a whole week.

The car dings and I walk out only to meet a mild commotion beside my door. What the hell is the problem now?

I make my way slowly to my house and a familiar face with a head full of tight black curls greets me.

“Hi, I'm... for heaven's sake. You again?”

Bright blue eyes glare at me angrily and I smile lazily in return.

Three

Avery

Images of my day flash through my mind and I sigh wearily. An unpleasant smell hits my nose and I groan for the fifth time this evening.

Someone puked on me as I was leaving the clinic this evening, and since I had nothing to change into, I wore my puke-soaked outfit home. My day just had to end as horribly as it started.

I bang my head on the elevator doors, and they open almost immediately. Stumbling a little, I adjust the strap of my bag on my shoulder and walk to my apartment door.

“I just want my bed,” I mutter longingly and open my door. My shoes get wet instantly and I look down in horror. “What in hell is going on here?” I mutter and walk in cautiously.

I turn the light on, and a horrible sight greets me. For some reason, my apartment has turned into a swamp.

“Did I forget to turn the tap off as I was leaving?” I mutter and walk into the bathroom, but water isn’t running from

anywhere.

“All the taps are off, so where is the water coming from?” I mutter again, dropping my bag on the bed. I go to the kitchen to check but the sink tap is also locked.

“Ugh. This is really unfair. Is this happening because I called the extremely handsome jerk a piece of shit two brain cells armadillo horse fart in my mind? He didn’t even hear me, and he absolutely deserves it, so give me a break!” I yell at my ceiling.

“Someone is going to pay for this,” I swear angrily, marching out of my flat and into the elevator. The car dings and the doors open, revealing the ground floor.

People give me a wide berth as I walk to the reception desk, and I ignore the stares. I’m not in the mood for polite conversation, so they should avoid me.

I slap my hands on the desk with force and the receptionist looks at me in alarm. “Good evening. I need to see the manager.”

“Good evening, ma’am. What can I help you with?” She asks and I reply angrily. “Unless you’re the manager, you cannot help me. Where is he?”

“Well, he’s currently unavailable. What can I do for you?”

My nostrils flare open as my annoyance grows. “I don’t care what he’s doing. My flat is flooded, so he better make himself available right now or I’m calling the complex owner.”

“Can you tell me what your apartment number is and what floor it’s on?”

“Fifth floor, 5-03.”

Her eyes widen slightly when I answer, and I narrow my eyes in suspicion. “Why did you react like that when I told you my apartment number? Did you sell me a faulty apartment?”

She smiles lightly and says “The manager will be with you shortly. Please, take a seat.”

“You’re talking about the same manager that was unavailable five seconds ago?” I scoff and roll my eyes.

Two minutes later, a tall, fidgety man walks up to me and smiles nervously. “Good evening, ma’am. My name is Clement Johnson, but you can call me John.” I eye his outstretched hand and shake it quickly.

“Avery. I’m the one with the swampy apartment.”

“Okay. Did you notice any water earlier today?” He asks and I shake my head.

“No. Everything was normal when I went to work today. I walked in this evening and there was water everywhere. I don’t even know where the water is coming from because I didn’t leave any taps on, and I can’t see any burst pipes.”

“Okay. Give me a few minutes so I can call someone to check it.” He says and moves to the reception desk.

The receptionist says something to him, and he shoots her with a reproachful glare before dragging the telephone on the

desk. I move closer to them and catch the end of what she's saying.

"I'm just saying. You knew there was a high possibility that this leak would happen again, and you demanded we should sell the flat." She says and my eyes widen in surprise.

"Excuse me?! You sold a faulty apartment to me?" I yell loudly and John jumps a little.

"You piece of rotten cheese. How dare you? You gave me a flat that has rotten pipes and here you are acting like you don't know what the problem is, asking me if I noticed anything today. I'm going to kill you, *stronzo del cazzo*."

The receptionist jumps between us, and I glare at her with death in my eyes. She flinches a little and raises her hands in a pleading gesture.

"You know what? How about I call your boss instead? I'm sure the owners of this place would love to know how well you're treating their tenants. Thank God they put their contact on their website." I say and whip my phone out.

He immediately walks in front of the receptionist and grabs my hand. "Please, let's find a way to settle this before doing anything drastic."

I yank my hand out of his hold and fire back a retort. "You could have done that a few minutes ago before you lied to me. *Tienilo per te. Non m'importa*."

I can't even remember the last time I got so angry that I switched to Italian subconsciously.

Moving away from him, I open my phone, but he takes it out of my hand and starts speaking again. “I’ll upgrade your apartment free of charge.”

“Bribery? I’m not interested.” I reply and reach for my phone, but he moves it away from me.

“I’ll put you on a higher floor. The apartment comes with an extra room and a better view. I’ll take care of the extra cost, so you don’t have to worry. It is already fully furnished, so you don’t have to bother moving the furniture set you bought in your old one.”

I stop moving and consider what he’s saying. Extra room? My family will have somewhere to sleep when they visit. “The flat will be in my name?” I ask and he nods vigorously.

“And I can keep the furniture in it?” I ask and he nods again. How much trouble will he be in if I report that he’s willing to give me so much? That’s none of my business. I just wanted to face plant onto my bed, but my evening is not going as I imagined.

“Okay. Take me to the apartment you’re offering. And give me back my phone.” He places my phone in my open palm gingerly.

An elevator ride later, I’m standing in the most beautiful apartment I’ve ever seen. Spinning excitedly, I struggle to arrange my expression into a calm one.

“Alright, I’ll take it. Let me go down and pack my stuff.” I say and he visibly relaxes. “No, don’t worry. I’ll send people

to pack it up for you. Here's the room key. I'll be up in thirty minutes with the paperwork." He says and leaves.

I run into the bedroom and fling myself on the bed. "Ahhhhhhh...this is the life." I sigh loudly and begin to drift off. My doorbell rings and I sit up sharply.

When I open the door, I see someone with a cart containing my suitcases. "That was very fast. Thank you very much." He smiles, and I wheel the first one into the living room.

I go to drag the second one inside and the handle pulls off. "Seriously? You couldn't wait?"

I yell and start to drag the suitcase by the side handle but that one also removes.

To my horror, the box bursts open and my clothes spill about. At that moment, I hear someone walking towards me. Isn't this the perfect time? My new neighbor is going to think I'm crazy.

Turning around, I start to talk but the words die on my lips immediately I see who it is. "Hi, I'm... for heaven's sake. You again?" The jerk from this morning smiles at me lazily and my brain only computes how sexy he looks.

"Every time you're around me, something bad happens. Can't you leave me alone?" I shriek in frustration.

"I have had three encounters with you, and none have been good. Why are you even here?"

"I live here," he says, pointing to the door beside mine. "Who's following who around now? How can you even afford

an apartment on this floor? And why are your clothes everywhere?" he asks, and I start to pack them into the suitcase.

Zipping it shut, I wheel it into my apartment. Now it chooses to obey me? I walk outside and see him still with that annoying smile on his face.

"You're so annoying. I'm sure you were unwanted as a child. It explains your desperate need for attention." Without waiting for a reply, I march into the elevator and go to the ground floor.

I see John standing at the reception desk and make my way to him quickly. He sees me and walks up to me. "Avery, I was just coming to you. I have the documents ready. You just need to sign."

"Forget that. I want a new apartment." I say and his face falls. "Is there a problem with this one?" He asks and I shake my head, trying to control my breathing. Just seeing one person has gotten me this angry.

"No, it's a great place. I just don't want to commit murder. My neighbor is an infuriating piece of crap and I refuse to live beside him. Isn't there another place? I'll accept a flat on my old floor. Anything is fine, seriously." I say and he looks at me like I'm mad.

"The apartment complex is full, and that's the only free place. I'm very sorry." He says, and I lean back, massaging my eyes wearily. "Okay. It's fine. I'll take it. Where do I sign?" I say and he relaxes.

After signing, I take the elevator to my apartment and would you look at this, that piece of shit is leaning beside my door.

“Jobless much?” I ask and he smirks before answering.

“No, just wanted to make sure you got this back. Nice color.”

He places a red bra in my hand, and I feel my face flush.

“Congratulations, virgin boy, you’ve seen a woman’s bra today,” I say, rolling my eyes and he laughs.

“Maybe next time you’ll teach me how to take it off?”

“I don’t know, knowledge seems to do you more harm than good,” I reply and go into my apartment without waiting for his response. I look at my new place and sigh. So much, yet so little peace.

Four

Noah

I adjust my tie as I walk hurriedly to the elevator before the door closes. My phone screen lights up and I ignore the call coming in. I know it's my father's lawyer.

He has been blasting my phone since five this morning. I assumed that by now, he would have taken the hint that I don't want to talk to him, but he keeps calling.

I fling my hand in front of me and manage to stop the doors from closing. When they open up, I see my ever-so-lovely neighbor standing inside. She sees me and rolls her eyes. I wonder, what would it be like to make her eyes roll back in pleasure?

"Howdy, neighbor," I say grinning, and enter the elevator. After pressing the ground floor button, I turn to look at her fully and she glares back at me.

"Long time no see. Are you avoiding me?"

When she doesn't answer my question, I continue. "You know it's okay to talk to me, right? I'll allow it this one time.

Not that you waited for permission before.”

She mutters something I don't hear before talking loudly. “I don't want to talk to you, I'm not avoiding you, and I don't need your permission to do anything. Shut up and stay in your corner.”

“My corner? I can't remember the last time someone said that to me. Are you a hot nanny or something?” I reply with a grin while studying her figure and I am pleasantly surprised.

Her scrubs hug her body, emphasizing her tiny waist, long legs, and nice butt that I hadn't noticed before.

Images of her dressed as a nanny fill my head and I suddenly want to gather all her hair in one hand while running my nose along her neck. Shit, this wasn't what I had in mind.

I clear my throat, trying to clear my head of all the sinful images and the elevator dings open. “Thank goodness” I mutter to myself. She walks out and I catch a whiff of spice and orange.

Damn, that makes my mouth water a little.

I walk out and catch up with her quickly.

“So, what are you? You're off to work, right? What do you do?” I ask and she eyes me before answering.

“I'm a nurse.”

I groan loudly and she looks at me. It's a good thing she can't read my mind, or she would just split my head open. My

trousers get a little tighter at the thought of her in a short, tight nursing uniform.

“Nurse, hmm? That’s sexy. Sexier than being a nanny, by the way.” I say and she rolls her eyes again.

“One day, you’re either going to see the back of your head or your eyes will get stuck,” I say, and she glares at me.

“I didn’t become a nurse because I thought it was sexy. And you’re the reason I’m rolling my eyes so much.”

“I make you roll your eyes? Honey, I haven’t even touched you yet.” I laugh loudly at her expression.

“You’re such a child. You knew that wasn’t what I meant but sadly, it’s the only thing your tiny brain can compute.”

“Babe, you know I’m a real man, so nothing about me is tiny,” I reply, and I almost hear her grinding her teeth.

“I’m tired of your bullshit. Who are you? I don’t even know your name and I am this close,” she pinches her thumb and forefinger together before continuing, “to hitting your head with a hammer.”

“Noah. Noah Galanis.”

“I don’t care.”

“You just said you don’t know my name. I think it’s weird since you’ve been stalking me for a while now, but there you go.”

“You are a sad, sad little boy if you still think I was stalking you.”

“Sure, if you say so,” I say, pretending to pick dirt off my suit jacket. Victor brings the car to me, and I start to walk to him.

“Looks like it’s time for some self-love, big boy,” she says and I laugh, looking back.

“Sparring with you is fun. Let’s do it again tomorrow. I’ll even let you win this time. See you around, Avery. Roll your eyes for me one more time?”

She starts to roll her eyes but stops halfway. I grin and enter my car.

“Good morning, sir. To the office?” Victor says when he enters the driver’s seat.

“Yes. Good morning, Victor.” He drives off and my mind goes back to the argument.

This is the most fun I’ve had in years; I can’t prevent the smile that pulls at the corners of my lips.

Minutes later, I’ve barely settled into my office when my secretary knocks. I look up and she starts talking. “Good morning, sir. You have an early visitor who insists on seeing you immediately.”

“Tell him Mr. West will handle whatever his complaint is,” I say and go back to opening my briefcase.

“I already did but he said he must see you. He says his name is Jason Samaras,” she says, and I sit up in recognition.

Why the fuck won’t he leave me alone?

“Looks like my day is about to take a lousy turn. Send him in, let me get this over with,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose.

She nods smartly and walks out. Seconds later, a short, balding, sharp-looking man walks in, and I make no move to welcome him.

“Good morning, Mr. Galanis. I’ve been trying to reach you all morning,” he says, taking a seat opposite me.

“And I have been ignoring your calls and messages. Do you not understand that I don’t want to see you or talk to you?” I reply, annoyed.

“I’m afraid, this issue isn’t one you can ignore. It’s about your father,” he states with remarkable calm.

“I don’t care what that old fart wants to say. Now, if you don’t mind, I have to work,” I say but he doesn’t move an inch, only stares at me steadily.

“Your father passed away in the early hours of today,” he finally says, and I go rigid.

“I’m sorry, what?” I blurt out, and he looks down mournfully.

“He died at 3:45 this morning. As far as we know, he had no health issues, aside from dealing with hypertension.”

“So, he just slept and didn’t wake up? The old bastard didn’t even suffer after everything he did. The evil ones always die peacefully,” I mutter, loosening my tie.

“Alright, I’ve got your message. You can leave now,” I say and gesture to the door. Jason unsurprisingly remains seated and starts talking again.

“The burial plans have been made and it is slated for next month, in Greece. You must travel home to attend.”

“Travel home for what? Not interested, thanks,” I reply, placing my laptop on my table.

“You have to be there, sir,-” he starts, but I jump into the middle of the long speech I know he has prepared.

“Look, you don’t need to explain why I have to be at his funeral or whatever. I already told him everything I wanted to when he was alive. I have no reason to go there now that he’s dead.”

“Also, you’ve been around the family a lot, so you know they don’t want me around, especially now that their champion is gone. I don’t like being in a place I’m not wanted, so no, thanks. I’m not going.”

“As the only male in the family and the heir, you have to be around to monitor the proceedings-” he starts, and I cut him off again.

“Now, you’re just lying because they already started the proceedings without me. They’ve made plans and hired event planners to manage the whole affair, so they don’t need me to monitor anything.”

“But you can’t not attend your father’s funeral. Nothing is more important than family,” he says, and I snort in derision.

“I never thought I’d ever hear that again. ‘Nothing is more important than family.’ That was his favorite saying which is very ironic to me. Look, I’ll watch whatever is going on through a Zoom call or something. But I am not traveling home.”

“I didn’t want to pull this card, but it seems I have to,” he states, and I stare at him in apprehension. “You have a debt to pay. One last wish and you have to do it. Do you remember?” he asks and I clench my jaw hard.

“You take this twisting one’s arm backward thing to a whole new level. Yes, I remember it. Why are you asking me about it?” I ask and he clears his throat before answering.

“Your father’s last wish was that you go to Greece for his burial. No excuses. Or, in his words, shove your excuses down your throat, swallow them, and get your ass home.”

I snort in dryly and reply, “That sounds exactly like something he would say. Damn, I almost miss him already. I don’t have a choice, do I?”

He doesn’t answer; he just stares at me with beady eyes.

“Fine, I’ll go. Just don’t expect me to cry or anything.”

“Okay. I’ll send you the schedule soon,” h he says and leaves immediately.

I scrub my face vigorously and sigh. That old fart doesn’t know how to stop forcing his will on others, even in death.

Five

Avery

“Good morning, you lovely ray of sunshine. Would you mind leaving your cloud outside?” I hear immediately as I walk into the nurses’ room.

I flop into my seat and my coworker, Reyna, sits beside me. “You were happy when you left last night. Who ruined your mood so early in the day?”

I throw my bag on the floor, and she chuckles. “Is it your bag? Did you carry the wrong one?”

“Ugh. I hate my neighbor!” I burst out, throwing my head back dramatically, and she raises her eyebrows.

“Why do we hate your neighbor?”

“He is the worst, most annoying man I have ever met. Ever! And I have dated a bunch of jerks.” I lean back on my chair, and she rubs my arm sympathetically.

“Okay, we definitely hate this person.” The door bursts open and three people walk in.

“Who do we hate?” Nirvana, a petite brunette, asks.

“Avery says we hate her neighbor.” Reyna answers and the only male in the room eyes me before talking.

“Isn’t it too early in the morning to hate someone?”

“Most importantly, are they hot?” The last woman, Phoebe, asks.

“That’s true. You haven’t told me if it’s a man or a woman.” Reyna pinches me and I sit upright.

“It’s a man.” I reply and get interrupted.

“And is he hot? Please let him be hot. I love a hot antagonist.”

“Yes, he is.” I mumble.

Phoebe squeals and drags her chair close to me. I look at her in confusion until Julius breaks our weird staring contest.

“Hello? We’re waiting for you to tell us why we hate your hot neighbor.”

“Really?”

A chorus of yes assaults my ears and I groan.

“I don’t want to relive any of the moments I’ve had with him.”

“Nuh-uh. You do not get to leave us hanging. Spill the beans.” Nirvana says.

Phoebe pipes up, “And don’t forget to describe his looks.”

We all look at her and she shrugs, saying “What? I’m single, okay? Let me live a little.”

“Through her hate for her annoying neighbor?” Reyna asks and Nirvana speaks up.

“Her hot annoying neighbor. You’re lucky though. I wish I had someone hot to annoy me this early in the morning.”

“Okay, we’re getting off track. Avery, the floor is yours.” Julius says, and I groan a second time.

“Fine. Remember how I said I moved here from Sienna about a month ago?” They nod and I continue.

“So, I ran into him the day I moved into my new apartment. He was really rude and insinuated I was following him around, inviting him to my place to have sex!”

“Did you invite him to your place?” Reyna asks and I shake my head.

“No. I only said I was just moving in, and he somehow took that as an invitation. What the hell?”

“Well, someone as dirty minded as Julius would take that as an invitation.” Nirvana says grinning and Julius flips her off.

“Okay, what happened next?” Phoebe asks and I lean back in my chair.

“Well, my flat had a leak, so I was given a new one right beside his. It’s a long story, but I was given that one so the manager won’t get into trouble. So now, that piece of shit fully believes I’m stalking him and won’t let me hear the last of it.”

“I’m not even gonna lie, this sounds like a love story. Like those enemies to lovers things you see in novels or movies. Your life is spicy, sis!” Reyna says laughing and I smack her arm.

“It’s not spicy, it’s frustrating. This morning, I ran into him at the elevator and he as good as propositioned me!”

“What?!”

“Uhm, what?”

“How did he go from annoying you to that?”

“Did he really do that or are you just overreacting?” Julius speaks last and I roll my eyes a little.

“Well, I told him to leave me alone and that I kept rolling my eyes because of him. He said he hadn’t even touched me yet and this ‘nothing about him is tiny’ piece of crap.” I say the last part with an attitude.

These witches burst into laughter, and I frown a little. “It’s nice to see you can be amused at my predicament.”

“I’m sorry, but he’s bold.” Reyna laughs, hanging onto the arm of her chair.

“Okay, now I have to know. What does he look like?” Phoebe asks and a picture of Noah comes to my mind.

“Well, he’s tall, has really broad shoulders, and a nice tan. Golden, actually. Or is it bronze? Whatever, he’s tanned.”

“Ooooh, he sounds delicious already.”

“His hair is quite long, very dark, and curly. I wonder if he dyes it? His eyes are green, and his lips are framed by the nicest beard ever, and...” I notice them smiling at me and I look at my fingertips.

“Well, he’s hot.” I mumble and Reyna pokes me with her elbow.

“Looks like someone has a crush on her neighbor.”

“What? I do not.”

“That was the most detailed description anyone has ever given about someone they supposedly hate.”

“Shut up. I don’t have a crush on him.”

“If you say so,” she says and wheels her chair to her desk.

Julius takes his stethoscope out of his bag before asking “Has it occurred to you that he bothers you this much because you’re attracted to him? Just a little turned on?”

“No, I’m not turned on by him. I found him attractive at first, yeah, but now I want to stab him with a scalpel.”

He shrugs and goes back to opening his bag. “Sure. Hate sex is the best though, just saying.”

“Oh, my goodness, I’m not going to sleep with him. He annoys me, period!” I exclaim and wheel my chair to face my table.

Nirvana places a finger on her chin thoughtfully. “This person you just described sounds awfully familiar. What’s his name?”

“Uhm, Noah Gala something. I didn’t catch the last part of his name.”

Everyone freezes and I stare in confusion.

“What?”

“Do you mean to say Noah Galanis?” Nirvana asks and my eyes dance nervously to the pair of scissors she’s holding.

“Yes, that’s the name. Galanis. Please put down those scissors. They look really sharp and the way you’re holding them is very scary.”

“You mean to tell me, tell us, that you’re living beside *the* Noah Galanis?” Phoebe asks and I nod.

“Bitch, you better be joking.”

“I’m serious. What’s the deal with him?”

“You live in The Plaza? Beside *the* Noah Galanis?!” She screeches and I have to rub my ears.

“First of all, ow. Secondly, calling him ‘*The* Noah Galanis’ doesn’t explain anything to me.” I say, still rubbing my ears.

“I think what our mute friends are trying to tell you is that you’re living beside Greek royalty.” Julius says, grinning widely. “That man is so hot; I question my sexuality every time I see him. That’s your annoying neighbor? Wow. That hate sex going to bang, no pun intended.”

“For the last time, we are not going to have hate sex. And how is he Greek royalty?”

“Noah Galanis is from a family of hoteliers. His grandfather started their chain of hotels in Greece and his father expanded all over Europe when he inherited it.”

“He came a few years ago and has successfully opened two others, while managing the one that was already here. He’s a billionaire and is from one of the oldest families in Greece, so yeah, he’s basically royalty.”

I look at Reyna like she’s crazy and start to laugh. “You guys are pulling my legs, right? There’s no way in hell that immature bird brained bonehead is a billionaire from an important company.”

Phoebe pinches my arm hard, and I jump out of my seat. “Ow. What was that for?”

“Here. Look at that picture and tell me if that’s the man you’ve been cursing all morning.” Nirvana hands me her open phone and I see a picture of Noah on the screen.

“Yes, that’s him.” I give her back her phone and she sinks into the chair I just vacated, holding her phone to her chest.

“You’re living my dream. Oh my God, you just wake up and run into him in an elevator. How do you do it? How are you not going crazy right now?” she says and Phoebe dramatically moves her seat beside her.

“They’ve even shared an elevator ride together. Dear God, she doesn’t even appreciate the experience.”

“Actually, it’s three elevator rides, and it’s hard to appreciate the said ride when the person is hell bent on

bringing out the worst in you.” Great, now I sound like a spoiled kid.

“It sounds like you want him to bring out a lot of your worst sides.” Julius winks at me and I hit him with my ID card holder.

“How can you afford an apartment beside him, though? That complex has 50 floors, he lives on the 45th floor, and those apartments are pricey as hell.”

I hang my stethoscope around my neck before answering him. “I actually bought an apartment on the fifth floor. It was expensive, but my family contributed so I could pay for it. A leak happened and I threatened to report to the owners, so the manager offered me this one.”

“You are so lucky. If my apartment leaked, I would be the one to pay for it, threats or not,” h he claps his hands loudly and we all jump.

“Alright dream girls, time to work. Those patients won’t take care of themselves.” He walks out immediately.

I start to follow him, but Phoebe holds me back. “Hey, can we come over one day? And I’m not asking just so I run into him, but I want to see how rich people live.”

I laugh and nod. “Sure, just don’t get disappointed when you finally meet the man of your dreams, and he shows how shitty he can be. Now, we really need to go to the ward.”

“Alright, let’s go.” We all leave the room and I start running around. A few hours later, I’m back in the room taking a

much-needed break.

“The joys of being a nurse number one: having no legs at the end of the day.” I mutter to myself, massaging my knees.

My mind goes to what they said this morning and before I can control my hands, I’m already searching “Noah Galanis” on the internet.

“Oh damn, they weren’t lying about who he is.” My eyes are drawn to a recent article, and I open it. “Billionaire Noah Galanis has recently opened a new hotel in Las Vegas. The expected income from this new place brings his net worth up to...”

That is a lot of money. I have been mouthing off against such a powerful man? Fuck. My life might be in danger.

Six

Noah

Tension rolls up my neck and between my shoulder blades as the plane lands.

I escaped this suffocating place years ago with no intention of coming back. Now, I have to be a part of a ceremony that confirms my position as the head of a family that doesn't want me.

I grab my bag and walk out of the plane. Quickly making my way outside the airport, I see Peter, our family driver, waiting for me.

“Good afternoon, Peter,” I say, entering the back of the car through the opened door.

“*Kalós írthes sto spíthi, patéras*” he replies, and I freeze. Fuck. I forgot I would inherit the title ‘*Patéras*’ now that my father is dead.

I remember my father staring down at everyone coldly until he was addressed with that title, and I shudder, feeling tainted.

“Peter, please do not address me as *Patéras*, ever. That title belonged to my father, and I would like it to die with him,” I say immediately Peter enters the driver’s seat.

“Eínai o titlos sou tóra pou o patéras sou péthane.”

“And while I perfectly understand what you’re saying, I prefer you speaking to me in English.”

With a subtle roll of his eyes, he repeats “It is your title now that your father is dead. I’m merely obeying tradition and treating you with respect.”

“Tradition be damned. My name is Noah, and you will call me that. Let everyone know that I wish to be called Noah when we get home.”

With a sarcastic smile and a nod, he replies “Of course, sir,” and he starts driving.

I watch the buildings go by as we make our way to the family estate: Kifissia, the place for the rich, and powerful, or as I like to call them, stuck ups.

I remember the first time I came here, naively being impressed by the sights and sounds. Now I know better.

The car rolls up a driveway and stops in front of the huge black gates that give way to the massive Galanis estate.

I snort as I remember my father strutting proudly about the grounds, looking like a featherless peacock.

The gates open and we pass through rows of flowers and small trees before I see the mansion.

Everything looks just the same, from the huge pine trees that surround the building to the tiny flower beds that line the walkway to the front door. Home, precious home.

Maids run to the car immediately when it stops, and I shake my head. “They still do this. That’s amusing.”

I get out and they form two lines in front of me, leaving enough walking space between themselves.

““*Kalós irthes sto spíthi, patéra.*” They chorus and I refrain with great effort, from rolling my eyes.

“Thank you, but you don’t need to do this ceremonial greeting for me.”

“You can welcome me with a smile or a wave, or don’t do anything at all, that’s fine too. Also, never call me *Patéras*. Let that formality die with my father. Lastly, talk to me in English.”

I almost sounded like my old man there, making aristocratic decrees. “Ewwwwww,” I mutter to myself and roll my shoulders.

Now they’ve started looking at me like I’m crazy. I’m definitely not helping the rumors that I know were spread about me while I was away.

I turn to go but they remain in their lines. “What? Why are you still standing here?”

“They are waiting for your permission to get back to their work, sir.” I hear Peter drawl behind me.

“Oh yeah, I forgot that. You can go back to what you were doing.” I say but they remain in their positions. “What now?”

“You haven’t gone inside, sir.” he says again, smirking.

“I think I can go inside my own house without this many people showing me the way. Now, get back to work.” Now I’m beginning to feel annoyed.

They disperse, gossiping, and Peter smiles fully. “It’s good to see you know how to deliver an order like a Galanis, sir. Please go inside. I’ll send someone to your room with your luggage.”

“You’re lucky I like you, Peter. Stop comparing me to my father.” I stuff my hands in my pocket and walk into the main house.

Multiple conversations stop immediately, and a hundred pairs of eyes settle on me. “Well, if it isn’t the one who thinks he’s better than all of us despite being an impostor.”

I turn towards the voice and come face to face with the woman who hates me more than she hates being fat. “Mother. You look healthy. Did you get your lipo done already?”

“Forgive me for not genuflecting, Patéras. I have a bad knee. You see, it won’t bend for fakes.” Alexia’s cruel, black eyes smile at me, and I struggle to reign in my temper.

“Selene, look, it’s the one with the penis.” I hear another woman say and I see Calliope, my elder sister walking towards me.

A younger version of her follows, saying “Ah yes, the only one with a brain. Welcome home, brother. Sorry, Patéras.”

“You’re all older than I am and yet, this childish. When will you outgrow these taunts? It’s a little old now.” I roll my eyes and start walking towards the stairs leading to my room.

“But I can’t outgrow anything or be mature. I’m only a woman, or didn’t you know that?” Selene says and I dash up the stairs.

I enter my room and slam the door behind me. They’ve been mad at me for years ever since my father said I would be the only one to inherit being I’m his only male child. As if it’s my fault the man was painfully narrow minded and old fashioned.

I quickly shower and change into a fresh suit. Making my way back downstairs, I meet an empty room with only Peter waiting for me.

“Everyone has gone to the cemetery, sir. I will drive you there.” I nod and follow him to the car.

We drive in silence and I’m soon walking to a group of people gathered around a freshly dug hole. “Thank you for gracing us with your presence. We didn’t wait too long.” I hear Alexia comment loudly, but I ignore her, giving everyone a wide berth.

The priest walks up to me smiling and says “Welcome, Sir Noah. May I begin?”

I nod, putting on my sunglasses. “We are gathered here this afternoon to send our father home...” I tune him out and look around mindlessly.

My gaze falls on my father who is lying peacefully in his casket. Even in death, he looks harsh.

Mr. Alexander Darius Galanis, an absolute terror who ruled over his family with an iron fist. I know I’m not the only one happy to see him gone. Sighing audibly, I look away and push my hands into my pockets.

We finish the ceremony in an hour and then move to the reception venue. I look around the hall where my mother threw the party and sink a little in my seat.

All the fake sympathy, sniveling, and subtle jabs I had to endure throughout today reminds me exactly why I left.

I look at my watch and groan when I see the time. It’s not even seven yet. I throw my head back and see my mother walking towards me.

“Fucking hell?” I mutter just as she slides into the seat beside me.

“You look very happy to be here.” When I don’t answer, she continues. “Come on, don’t pretend. You’re now a multi billionaire, owner of more than twenty hotels and an importing business. Life is great to you, don’t you think?”

“Can’t you keep pretending to be sad about losing your husband and leave me alone?” I ask irritated.

“I expect I’ll have to beg you for my monthly allowance now. Your father loved the power that came from being in charge of people’s lives, and I’m sure you do to. Don’t worry, I know how to beg a lot. I’ve done it all my life.”

“What do you want, mother?” I ask and she stiffens.

“Alexia. I’m not your mother. Call me by my name.” Her eyes are filled to the brim with hatred, and I pinch my lips together.

“Okay, Alexia. What do you want?”

“Everything you took from me and my daughters.”

“I took nothing from anyone.”

“Oh, shut up. My daughters were heirs until you came and swooped everything up for yourself and the witch who birthed you. By the way, how is she?” she asks, smirking, and I have to grip my glass tightly, so I don’t fling it at her.

“Whatever I have, I earned the hard way. It wasn’t handed to me because of my gender. Stop being such a baby about it.” I reply and take a sip out of my watery brandy. Great, all the ice melted in it.

“We all know that’s a lie. And look at you avoiding the topic of your mother. Are you ashamed of her?”

I slam the glass onto the table and glare at her furiously. “While you’re sitting there complaining about your life, have you stopped to consider the lives you and your husband have ruined?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” she says, rolling her eyes.

I scoff loudly. “Really? How about all those years that bastard abused me in the name of molding me into the perfect son while you turned your face away when I asked you for help?!”

A shadow of shame settles on her face and she looks away from me for the first time.

“It’s what you deserved for daring to reach for what you couldn’t have.”

“What I deserved? My mother was abused by your husband, and you helped him cover it up. When he found out about me, he took me away and killed her, and you helped him cover up again. When I was treated like an animal in the name of training, you looked the other way, so forgive me if I don’t care about what you and your daughters inherit. I’ll say it for the last time. Everything I have now, I earned it. Now excuse me. I don’t think I can look at you without wanting to throw up.”

I pause.

“By the way, next time you get a liposuction, make your arms match the rest of your body.” I stand up and walk out.

Peter walks up to me as I march outside the hall. “Tell someone to get my bags, Peter. I’m leaving...”

He must have heard the urgency in my voice because he doesn’t ask any questions, quickly bringing the car to me and

making phone calls as he drives to the airport.

An hour later, I climb into my plane and go straight into one of the rooms. Exhaustion crashes down on me and I fall into the bed, slipping off to sleep almost immediately.

Seven

Noah

My phone ringing jolts me out of sleep. “I believe I gave you express instructions not to bother me this weekend, West.” I bark immediately as I pick up the phone and answer it.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Galanis. I’m afraid you’re referring to the wrong person,” an annoyingly familiar voice replies.

“Samaras. Who died this time?” I ask sitting up. The comforter bunches around my waist, revealing my naked torso.

“I’m about to read the will of your late father. Since you already left, you’ll have to join via Zoom call.”

“You can’t you just send it to my office tomorrow?”

“Well, no. Everyone is going to be busy from tomorrow since it’s Monday. I decided to read it now since they’re all together.”

“And you couldn’t have read it to them today and sent the papers to me tomorrow?” I ask, irritated.

“Stop whining so much and let him do his job so we can get this over with.” I hear Alexia shout in the background.

“Whatever. Give me a few minutes.” Hanging up, I stretch a little.

I climb out of bed and walk into my closet, yawning a million times. Dressing quickly, I go to my home office and turn on my PC, opening the link Jason must have sent while I was away.

The page opens, revealing three scowling faces and a neutral one. “*Hola, mi familia*. I hope no one missed me while I was away,” I greet, grinning.

“You took all that time to wear a t-shirt?” Selene asks and I grin wider.

“You know super hot models have to take their time getting ready.”

“Okay, princess. Are you sure you don’t need to powder your nose?”

A loud throat clearing distracts us and Jason speaks. “Shall we begin?”

“Sure,” I say and reach for a snack bar in the bottom drawer. I start to eat, and Calliope rolls her eyes.

“Can you stop chewing so loudly? And close your mouth when you eat. You’re an adult, behave like one for once.”

I shrug before answering. “What? Be boring like you? No thanks, I’m good like this.”

“No one in our society will accept you. You’re an outcast already, do you know that?”

“Sure, whatever. Jason, go on.” I reply in my most flippant tone and she visibly clenches her jaw.

Mr. Samaras pulls a brown envelope out of his bag, and I throw the empty wrapper of my finished bar in the trash can.

“The will and last request of Mr. Alexander Darius Galanis.” He starts, clearing his throat.

I tune him out for most of it, having no intention of listening to him read out my father’s last words. I didn’t want to hear from him when he was alive, and I still don’t care now.

I snap back to my attention when I hear my name. “...Noah Galanis, my son, I leave most of my assets.”

Most? Who is he giving the rest to?

“To my widow, I leave the Galanis estate with its attached vineyard and wine factory. The proceeds from the vineyard and wine factory shall be hers to use at her discretion.”

Alexia smiles, rubbing her chest with her hands and hugging her sisters.

“To my first daughter, Calliope, I leave one of my hotels in Kifissia, as well as my vacation home in California. These assets shall be in her name only, kept entirely separate from her husband, Mr. Apollo Papadopoulos.”

“To my second daughter, Selene, I leave the second hotel in Kifissia, and my vacation home in the Seychelles. These assets

shall be in her name only, kept entirely separate from her husband, Mr. Leander Athanasiou.”

“If they die, those properties pass to their children. If they have no children, they can give them to whomever they choose.”

It’s a good thing he made those specifications because they both somehow chose extremely greedy bastards for husbands. I thought he would leave them nothing but looks like he grew a heart before he died.

“And to my son, Noah, I leave everything else, including...” I tune him out mindlessly. I already know how much I have.

“...on the condition that he gets married before his thirtieth birthday.” I’m sorry, what the fuck?

I see my mother and sisters grinning evilly and I sit up sharply. “What was that just now?”

“He said you’ll only inherit everything else if you get married before your thirtieth birthday. Don’t you turn thirty in like, a month?” Selene titters and I want to throw something.

I take deep breaths before addressing Mr. Samaras. “If I don’t get married, what happens?”

“Well, everything goes to your cousin, Mr. Hector Galanis.”

Hector? That sweaty slime of a human being? That fool will run everything to the ground in a month.

“Understood. I’m going off now. If there’s anything else, send it to my office tomorrow.” Malicious laughter reaches my ears and I turn off my PC. Taking my phone, I call my best friend and business partner.

“What’s up, bro?” His deep voice pours into my phone when he answers.

“Meet me at the club now. I’m buying.” I say and end the call abruptly. The next time I see a certain Greek patriarch, I’m giving him a thorough beating.

I change clothes and drive to the club in record time, not seeing or paying attention to anything on the road. The lit-up sign greets me, and I park in the reserved spot.

“Daniella,” I mutter softly to myself, stepping out of my car. I opened the place about a year ago, without my father’s knowledge.

I know he would have torn it down the moment he learned about it, especially if he found out I named it after my late mother.

I walk inside, going straight to the VIP section. I see Dane already drinking and his face lights up immediately after he spots me.

“Hey, it’s the man of the hour. I ran here immediately after you said you were buying. I hope you don’t mind that I started without you,” he says, showing me his half-empty glass and the opened bottle of brandy.

“Shut up and pour me a glass, you cheap drunk. Fill it to the brim.”

“It’s that kind of night?” I nod and he whistles.

I empty the glass of amber liquid immediately he places it in my hand, and he pours some more.

“Alright, I’m very curious to know what’s making you drink this much when you know you have to go to work tomorrow.” He says and I rub my temples, groaning.

The alcohol loosens my tongue and I spill everything that happened throughout the week, from the burial to this evening.

“When I heard the urgency in your voice, I thought it was something related to the hotel or the new restaurant. I never imagined it to be something like this.” he says, staring hard at the light.

“Where the fuck am I supposed to find a wife? And in a month?” I voice my worry for the first time this evening.

“What if he had died after you turned thirty? That would’ve been interesting to see.” I eye him and smack the fool on his head. “What? I’m just saying.”

“I’m sure he had a trick up his sleeve to solve that. Maybe, force me to marry someone he chose two days before my birthday. But I’m still stuck with this problem.” I say and drink half of the contents of my glass.

“Well, I know a few women interested in getting married to you,” he says, and I scoff.

“No, thanks. You can marry one of them, though.”

“Um, never. You’re the desperate one. Do you have anyone in mind?” he asks, and an unbidden image of Avery comes to my mind.

She will make a great wife for me. She’s insanely hot and already hates me, which seems like the major requirement for anyone to be in my life.

“No. Nobody.” I shake my head and empty my glass.

“Well then, let’s drink tonight. We can start searching for your bride tomorrow.” He says and I nod, drinking straight from the bottle this time.

“Hey, I was drinking from that. Seriously, I was thinking of offering you my sister, but I can’t let her marry someone who would drink straight from the bottle.” He drags it out of my hold and pours some into his glass.

“You don’t have a sister. Now, shut up and give me the bottle.” I take it back and proceed to get wasted in the next hour.

“You’ll have to start losing some weight. Or better still, don’t drink so much that I have to carry you.” I hear someone whine beside me and open my eyes to see that I’m standing in front of the elevator in the garage.

“You’re awake? Good. Stand on your own?” Henry asks and I stand upright. The doors open and we walk in.

“Look, there was an accident at home, and I have to go. Can you get to your apartment yourself?” He asks and I nod.

“Yeah, I’m fine on my own. Go and handle your problem.” I wave and he cracks a smile.

“And if you don’t, I’ll have an embarrassing story to look forward to.”

“Fuck off,” I say, leaning against the wall of the elevator.

He leaves and I go up to my floor. I stumble towards my door, but something pulls me to Avery’s.

“Avery? Avery? Are you home?” I call loudly and when no one answers, I press the doorbell and knock repeatedly on her door.

The door opens and beautiful blue eyes stare at me sleepily. “What’s the problem...you? What do you want?”

I smile drunkenly at her. “Hi. Will you marry me?”

Eight

Avery

Thud thud thud!

I bolt upright at the loud banging on my door.

“Is there a robbery or something? I thought this building was very safe,” I mutter to myself, fumbling to turn on the bedside lamp.

I finally manage to press the switch and the bright light blinds me for a few seconds. When I can open my eyes without feeling a splitting headache, I stand up and put on my robe.

Wait a minute, the knocking has stopped. I turn to go back to bed, but my doorbell starts ringing and the person starts knocking again with more force.

“Somebody better be dying or else, someone will,” I grumble and stomp to the door.

The knocks get louder, and I yell “Hey, chill. I’m already coming to open the door. This better not be a prank.”

I open the door and a very tall man stumbles in front of me. I move back in fear that he will crash onto me but he rights himself almost immediately.

“What’s the problem...” I stop when I finally see his face. Noah fucking Galanis.

“...You. What do you want?”

“Hi. Will you marry me?”

“What?”

“Will you marry me?”

“Are you drunk?” Before I complete the question, he burps, and the smell of alcohol attacks my nose.

“Ewww. Oh my...” I choke on my last word and start to cough. He rubs my back roughly and I jump away from his touch.

“Seriously, did you drink a whole factory?” I ask when I’m finally able to talk.

He leans on the wall, barely holding himself up, and shakes his head. “No. I didn’t even drink up to one-tenth of a factory. I just had one bottle. Wait, no, it was two. Or was it three?”

“I’m not interested in listening to you count how many bottles you drank tonight. I’m very tired and I have to go to work early tomorrow, so good night.” I say and close the door.

I barely move five paces when he starts knocking again.

“What?” I ask angrily when I open the door.

“I asked you a question, Minnie.”

“What question, Mickey?”

He grins drunkenly before answering. “You always fight me back. That’s one of the things I like about you.”

“Thanks. Good night,” I reply and start to close the door, but he pushes it open. “Okay, what is your deal tonight?”

“Of course, I like your ass more, but I like your legs the most.” He finishes with a victorious grin.

“Thank you. Now, can I go back to bed?”

He pouts and he looks so adorable but I’m too tired to appreciate his looks. I think of the surgeries I’m supposed to be assisting today and eye the man preventing me from getting some sleep.

“Okay. This is me politely asking. What do you want?”

“And this is me politely asking; will you marry me?”

“Again, with this nonsense? No. I don’t want to marry you.”

“Why? I’m gorgeous.”

I close my eyes in frustration. What am I supposed to do with a drunk playboy who seems to believe I’m interested in getting married to him?

I don’t get my answer out before he starts talking again.

“Before you give me your answer...”

“I already gave it to you.” I interrupt but he shushes me.

“Shut up. You don’t know what you’re turning down, so I’ll list all my qualities for you. Then, you can make up your mind

and I'll accept your answer.”

If humoring him will make him go away, then I don't have a choice. “Fine. Go ahead.” He smiles widely and stands up from the wall.

“I'm tall and handsome so I'm already every girl's dream.”

“Not mine,” I say with a roll of my eyes. He shushes me again and continues.

“I have a nice body that I earned from a rigorous exercise and dieting routine.”

“You are a very superficial man,” I interrupt again, and he eyes me this time.

“Sorry, I won't interrupt again. I promise.” I say, laughing. He is an adorable drunk.

“Lastly, I'm rich. I have more money than you and ten of your generations can spend. The name Galanis is powerful enough to open any room for you.”

“Come on, you're getting a good deal by marrying me. And if any of those still don't appeal to you, I can make marriage worth your while. I have enough experience to make it an enjoyable affair for you.” He finishes, dropping his voice to a delicious whisper.

I catch myself tilting towards him and shake my head hard. “Can I give you my answer now?”

“Yes, please,” he says, smiling like a kid with candy.

“No,” I say and his face falls immediately.

“Why? Did you not hear what I just said? Everything I listed?”

“I did.”

“Then, why are you saying no? I don’t understand. Is there something about me that makes it so easy for all of you to reject me?”

“No, nothing is wrong with you. I just don’t want to marry you. We barely know each other,” I say, trying to make him reduce his voice.

The last thing I want is for the other people on this floor to come out and see us like this.

“I just want a wife. Please? Say yes. Come on, you have to,” he says, hugging me tightly.

“Why exactly do you want a wife? Why do you want me as a wife? I’m sure there are plenty of other women who would be happy to marry you.” I try to leave his embrace, but he just tightens his hold.

“My old man just died.” He says and I start to feel bad.

“Really? I’m so sorry.” I run my hands through his hair and God, this feels so good.

He relaxes his hold on my waist and snorts loudly.

“You don’t need to be sorry. I hated him.”

“Oh. Okay. Will you leave me alone now?” I ask, pushing him off me.

He staggers a bit before regaining his footing. “He was a bastard and I know I’m not the only one glad that he’s gone. However, he made one final act of wickedness before he died.”

“I was supposed to inherit everything once he died but now, I have to get married before I turn thirty before I can claim them as mine.”

“Why are you telling me this?” He ignores my question and continues.

“I turn thirty in a month and if I don’t get a wife before then, I’ll lose everything to an odious cousin.” He finishes and sighs heavily.

“Okay. Again, why are you telling me this?” I ask and he runs his hands through his hair.

“I don’t expect you to understand. I know you believe I’m a spoiled rich guy who doesn’t want to lose his toys to someone else, but I’ve gone through hell to get where I am. I’d rather die than see it go to that piece of shit who participated happily in putting me through that hell.”

I shuffle uncomfortably where I’m standing. I don’t think my answers are appropriate for what sounds like a very serious issue for him.

He scrubs his face with his hands and pastes a sudden smile on his face, breaking the tense moment.

“So, Avery, what do you say? Will you marry me now? Come on, I just poured my heart to you. If you say no, you’ll

just be a heartless bitch.”

I can't believe he just called me a heartless bitch and I was feeling sorry for him seconds earlier.

“I think I will be a heartless bitch. No, Noah. I don't want to marry you.” I turn to enter my apartment, but he pulls me to him.

“Okay. How much do you want?” He asks and I slap his hand off my arm.

“Nothing, you piece of rusted metal. Leave me alone.”

“I'll give you five million dollars.”

I stop moving and stare at him sharply. Did he just say five million dollars? I eye him and he smiles innocently.

“What did you just say?”

He laughs before answering. “I knew you would do it for money. You're all the same.”

“Excuse me? I'm not the one who needs to pay someone to marry him,” I screech, and he shrugs. “I'm not the one who needs to marry someone to make five million dollars.”

I scoff and throw my head back. “You know, for someone in a desperate situation, you like to make a lot of noise.”

“Are you sure you want to talk that way about your only chance to become a millionaire? Think properly, Avery,” he says in a singsong voice.

“Well, screw you and your five million dollars, Noah. I still don't want to marry you,” I say and walk inside my apartment.

He stops my hand from closing the door and whispers very close to my ear. “I can oblige your offer to screw, you know. And it will be so good. Better than you’ve ever had. You can have that and the money. Whatcha’ say?”

I eye his stupid smirk and push him out of my house. “Look at you, with all the money and great sex you’ve offered, and I still don’t want to marry you.”

He starts to say something, but I interrupt quickly.

“You can take your money and your *pene*, shove it up your *asino*, *e soffocare su di esso!* And I hope your odious cousin gets all your money. Don’t you dare knock on my door again.” I slam the door in his face and march to my room.

I fume as I take off my robe and climb into bed. Only he can be in desperate need of a wife and still insult the person he’s asking at the same time.

I tense, waiting for him to knock again but he doesn’t, so I slowly drift off.

Nine

Avery

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I silence it. Turning to the patient in front of me, I smile and continue with what I was explaining.

“You have to get tested for hepatitis B & C before we can move forward with anything. Here, take this,” I give her a piece of paper. “It shows which lab you should go to get the test done.”

“Okay, thank you. How long do I have to wait to get my results?”

“They will let you know when to come for it, but it usually takes a few days.”

She sighs heavily and I hold her hand. “Don’t be scared. The sooner we know what we’re dealing with, the earlier we can start treatment.”

“Okay. Thanks again. I’ll see you when I have the results.” she says and leaves.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and see five missed calls from my sister. Why is she calling me so much?

“I’ll call her back later,” I mutter and signal for the next person to come to me.

An hour later, I flop onto my seat in the nurse’s room. Jojo called me three more times and I started to worry while I was attending to people earlier.

I take my phone out of my pocket, and it starts ringing immediately. I quickly pick and press it to my ear.

“Jojo, what’s the matter? *Mamma e papà stanno bene?*” I ask and she answers immediately.

“Eh? *Si*. Yes, they’re fine. Are you okay?”

“I’m good.”

“Really? You don’t sound very happy. What happened?” She asks and I slouch in my seat, putting my head on the backrest.

“I’m just tired. I’ve been running around all morning, and I haven’t had something proper to eat today.”

“Are you sure? Or did something else happen that you’re not telling me? Maybe you saw someone today?” She asks and I sit up in suspicion.

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Like what?” That’s the tone she uses when she’s hiding something. I can picture the unconvincing look on her face right now.

“Jo, you can’t lie your way out of trouble. You can’t lie, period.” I say, raising an eyebrow.

She breathes in sharply before answering. “I’m not lying about anything.”

“And you can’t pretend either. What’s the matter? You left me a dozen missed calls and started asking if I’m okay the moment I picked up. Am I supposed to not be okay?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just asking if you’re fine. Is it a bad thing if I miss my sister and I just want to talk to her and make sure she’s fine?” She says and I roll my eyes.

“No, it’s not a bad thing, and I miss you too, but I also know you’re hiding something from me, so you better ‘fess up,” I say sternly and her voice breaks when she starts talking again.

“Seriously Avery, I’m not lying to you about anything. It’s not like anything happened here,” I jump out of my seat immediately.

“Oh my God, did Papa crash his scooter again? Who even allowed him to drive that thing? Or is it Nonna? Did she fall down the stairs? I’m coming home right now. God, I should have never left.” I grab my bag and dash toward the door.

“Hey, calm down. None of that happened. We are capable of taking care of ourselves without you, you know? That’s not to say we don’t love the fact that you care about us, but we are adults.

At least, some of us are. Do you know what Antonio did the other day?"

"Jo, stop. You're rambling. And you don't do that unless you're hiding something, so put us both out of our misery and spill!" I shout, interrupting her and slamming my bag back onto my table.

"Okay, chill out. That temper of yours. Damn, I don't miss that. I remember when you turned the dining table upside down. It was so..."

"Johanna!" I yell and she shuts up. "For the last freaking time, stop babbling and tell me what the problem is."

She gulps and starts talking, slowly this time. "So, you remember when you said you should have never left home?"

"When?"

"Just now, when you were running to get on a plane."

"Okay. What does that have to do anything?"

She takes a deep breath before continuing. "Well, first of all, have you heard anything about Henry recently?"

"If that's what this drama is about, then forget it. I don't need to know." I scoff and start to hang up.

"Wait, don't hang up." She shouts and I pause. "I swear, this is important."

"Jo, my lunch break is almost over, and I haven't eaten. Can't it wait?" I ask and she coughs lightly.

“No, it can’t. Now my throat is scratchy from all the shouting.”

“Okay, then hurry up.”

“I will.”

I wait for a few seconds, but she still doesn’t say anything.
“Jojo, any day now.”

“Right. Okay, whew. Um, so you haven’t seen Henry lately?” she asks and I roll my eyes.

“This again? Because I’m about to hang...”

“Henry’s in your city.”

“What did you just say?”

“Henry’s in your city, Avery,” she repeats and I drunkenly sit down.

“What do you mean he’s in my city?”

“Well, I heard from a friend that he had been asking around about you for a while. When he found out that you had left, he went out of town, too. I just found out that he is in LA too.” She finishes and I begin to breathe rapidly.

“Avery? Are you okay?” Her voice penetrates the white fog that filled my head and I blink, trying to see clearly.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Did your friend tell you why he’s here?” I ask and she stutters.

“Well, he-he-I-not really. I don’t remember. I shouldn’t have brought it up. You’re probably never going to run into each

other, and hey, it might not be true, so don't worry. I have to go."

"Wait," I shout, and I hear her pause. "Please, tell me everything you know."

She sighs before replying. "Okay. I think he went there looking for you."

I flare up a little. "What? Why would he be looking for me? If he's here to ask for a second chance, I will punch him in the face."

"Avery, he's not trying to get back together with you. He's flaunting this woman all over the place and I think he wants you to see it," she says, and I start pacing.

"He believes he can hurt me by showing off his new toy? Well, bad luck for him because I am totally over him. Who is this woman? What's her name? Where does she live and what does she do?"

"Okay, calm down, you big fiery ball of anger," she says, and I laugh sarcastically.

"He wants to show me that he has moved on? Well, I have news for him. I've moved on too. Johanna, do I know the heifer?"

"I don't - I don't know her. Umm," she mumbles, and I stop pacing.

"Jo, who is she?"

“I don’t know, honest,” she says and gives an unconvincing chuckle.

“Stop lying. Who is she?” I say, putting on my meanest voice and she squeals I’m fright.

“Fine. It’s Amy. Amy Winehouse.”

“Amy? Who’s Amy Wineho...” I trail off and fall into the seat beside me.

“Are you okay? Did you faint?” Jojo starts to blow her breath into the phone, and I move it away from my ear.

“I’m conscious, stop.” She stops and we sit in silence for a few minutes.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be the bearer of bad news.” She says and I shake my head.

“Why are you apologizing? You’re not the one flaunting the woman he cheated me with, hoping I see them in town and maybe break down.” I reply and we both sigh.

“I mean, isn’t it enough that he did what he did? Now, he has to rub salt into my wound? What did I ever see in him?” I ask rhetorically.

“Big *pene*?” she answers, chucking.

“It wasn’t even big. God, I was so stupid. Why do I have to pick the worst ones? *Sono così stupido*,” I mutter, slapping my forehead.

“Hey, chill. We will not go through this again. You are a great woman, and he was and still is a big idiot for letting you

go. What he's doing now just confirms what we already suspected."

She pauses dramatically before continuing. "He was born with dung for brains. Don't you dare cry, okay?"

"Okay. I love you. Thank you for telling me and I'm sorry for yelling earlier."

"That's okay. I love you too. And if you ever run into him, break his nose." We both laugh.

"I will. I have to get back to work now, but I will call you later."

"Okay. Love you loads. Bye," she blows me a kiss and hangs up.

I remain jumpy for the rest of the day and hurry home immediately when the next set of nurses come to relieve us.

I walk briskly to the elevator when I get to my apartment complex. Looking over my shoulder, I press the button and wait.

"This is stalking, right? I can get him arrested," I mutter to myself and walk into the elevator when it arrives.

Before the doors close, I make eye contact with someone and panic. I look back quickly and relax when I see it's not Henry.

"I am so fucking tired of his bullshit," I mutter and sag against the wall, closing my eyes wearily. I open my eyes when the elevator dings and walk towards my apartment door.

I fish my key card out of my bag and glance sideways at Noah's before I open my door. Wait, what if I use him?

He asked me to marry him a few nights ago. If Henry sees that I have a man now, especially one as powerful, he will surely back down, right?

"God, I am so pathetic," I groan and knock on his door. I hope he hasn't changed his mind or asked someone else.

A freshly showered Noah opens the door and I swallow a little.

"If it isn't my lovely neighbor," he says and gives me a slow, devastating smile.

I brush past him and into his apartment and he closes the door behind him.

"Please come in, make yourself comfortable."

"I will marry you." I blurt, interrupting him.

Ten

Noah

I am towel drying my hair when I hear a knock on my door. Who could that be at this time of the day? Dane didn't tell me he was coming and I'm not expecting anyone.

Throwing the towel on the bed, I go out of the room but return to take my wallet from the bed stand.

"When did I order food?" I mutter, opening the door and seeing a nervous-looking Avery outside.

"If it isn't my lovely neighbor," I say smiling and she walked into my apartment without waiting for me to say anything.

"Please come in, make yourself comfortable," I say sarcastically and close the door.

"I will marry you," she blurts out, and I freeze.

"What?"

"I said I will marry you," she says and I walk away from her into the living room.

“I heard you the first time, I’m just confused. Why will you marry me?” I ask, folding my arms.

“Well, you asked me to,” she says, frowning.

“When?”

“A few nights ago.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Ave.”

“Yes, you did. When the...with the...ugh, you fish-brained fur-ball,” she stutters, and I move away in precaution.

“Okay, please leave,” I say and start to walk her to the door, but she walks away from me.

“Have you forgotten when you came to bang on my door and beg me to marry you?” I shake my head and she groans loudly.

“You said there was an issue with your inheritance, and you have to get married before your thirtieth birthday which is in a month or else everything you have will go to an odious cousin.” She explains.

“And you said no. Why did you change your mind?”

“Nothing,” she says, looking away from me.

“Okay. Good night,” I say, walking to the living room.

“Are you kicking me out?”

“Yes.”

“Even though I just agreed to your proposal?”

“I don’t know why you suddenly want to marry me, and I don’t want to deal with anything illegal so yeah, I am kicking you out. Now, get out,” I say and turn on the television.

“Fine. I’m trying to avoid someone,” she says, and I face her, an alarm going off in my head.

“Why?” I ask, walking up to her. “Are you a wanted criminal?”

She rolls her eyes. “As if. There’s this man I want to leave me alone. If he sees that I am involved with you, he should back off.”

“You need a fake husband for that?” I ask skeptically and her jaw clenches.

“I panicked, okay? Besides, who am I supposed to ask to pretend to date me? Also, you offered me five million dollars,” she says, and I blink.

“I offered you what?” I ask and she shrugs.

“You don’t remember that?” she asks, and I make the time-out gesture.

“How am I sure you’re not making all this up?” I ask and she throws her bag on a chair.

“Why would I lie about something like this?”

“To make money off me?”

“Well, that’s not what I’m doing. You even said it’s my only chance to become a millionaire, you dip-shit,” her voice rises as she speaks.

I open my mouth to argue but stop when the image flashes in my mind.

“You remember now?” She asks and I nod. “Whatever. I’m leaving.” She picks up her bag, but I stand in front of her to stop her from leaving.

“What now?”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Why?”

“To sleep.”

“Why?” I ask and she clenches her jaw irritably.

“Because I’m tired and I’m not going to beg you to marry me when you’re no longer interested. Can I go now?” she says and tries to carry her bag again but I stop her.

“I never said I wasn’t interested,” I say, and she frowns.

“Well, you were kicking me out of your apartment a couple of minutes ago.”

“I thought you did something. I’m not interested in marrying a criminal,” I say, shrugging.

“Whatever. If you’re going to reject me even though you’re the one who proposed to me, do it fast so I can go and sleep,” she says, glaring at me.

My gaze drops to her soft lips, and I smirk. “Before I answer, I need to check something.”

“What’s that?” She asks and I walk closer to her. Her lips part and my smile grows wider.

“Just hush and let me,” I mutter, closing the distance between us.

She inhales sharply, glancing away from my face, and starts talking. “I don’t know what you’re trying to check, but you’re in my personal space.”

“Hush, Avery,” I mutter, placing my finger on her lips. Her breath brushes the tip of my finger and I lick it lightly.

Her breathing picks up as her eyes follow my movements. I stroke her cheek with a thumb, using my other hand to move her head backward, exposing her neck.

She sucks in a breath sharply and I leave open-mouthed kisses on her neck, sucking on the point where her jaw meets her neck.

She moans loudly and wraps her arms around my waist. I kiss her ear and lick the little lobe, biting the earring dangling from it.

I pull back enough to look at her and kiss her closed eyelids lightly. She gasps and I lower my lips to hers.

The first press is gentle, but I sweep my tongue across her lips the second time. She opens up to me and our tongues tangle furiously.

I groan loudly and begin to walk towards a chair. Her hands move up to grip my hair tightly and I lose my sense of being a little.

We collapse onto the sofa and her legs open to accommodate me. Our lips mesh again, and I slip my hand underneath her shirt.

The feel of her skin makes me groan again and I suck on her bottom lip. She moans loudly and I move my hand towards her bra.

Suddenly, I fall onto the floor, and she jumps up, standing over me. Annoyed and turned on as hell, I glare up at her.

“There wasn’t any need to throw me, you know,” I grumble, standing up.

“What have I done? Why did you touch me? How dare you kiss me?” She hurriedly walks away from me, adjusting her clothes.

“I didn’t take anything off, so relax. And you kissed me back, so don’t make me into the devil.”

“You kissed me first!”

“I’m guessing you were moaning because you didn’t like it?”

“Shut up, you little...ugh,” she groans and marches up to me.

“Sheesh, calm down,” I say, and she slaps my hand. “Ow. I liked you better when you were squirming under me.”

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down. You took advantage of me. How could you?” she says, slapping me again.

I grab her hands and force them behind her back, pushing her chest up against mine and her nostrils flare a little.

“I gave you plenty of time to move away before I kissed you, but you didn’t. Instead, you kissed me back, so stop yelling that I took advantage of you.”

“You still had no right to start anything,” she says, and I roll my eyes, releasing her hands.

“You do know that we are going to do a lot more once we get married, right? I was just trying to get a sample before that happens and you know you enjoyed that sample too.”

She glares at me, and I take a step back.

“What?”

“I like to know what I’m getting myself into and from that kiss, I’m excited for what’s to come,” I say, and she shakes her head a little.

“No, nothing is to come. I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“Eh? Wait, stop for a minute,” I say, raising my hands. “What are you talking about?”

She gulps and looks away from me before responding. “I want a no-sex marriage.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, but sex means a lot to me. I just, I can’t do it in a fake relationship,” she says, rubbing her wrists.

“I can make you feel really good, Avery. You’re attracted to me, and we both know it. You don’t have to deny yourself

pleasure just because of some feelings,” I say walking closer to her.

“It’s just physical attraction and it will fade. I’m still not having sex with you.” she says, walking away from me.

I throw my hands up in frustration. “I’m giving you five million dollars. Shouldn’t I get something in return?”

“You get to keep your inheritance, Noah. I’m not changing my mind on this, sorry.” She says and I walk up to her.

“I can make you change your mind,” I say, leaning down to brush my lips against her ear.

She shivers and sways against me. I grab her waist but she pulls away from me immediately.

“Maybe you should ask someone else.” she turns to leave, but I quickly hold her back.

“We are not going to be married for long anyway. It’s just to get the properties registered in your name. I’m sure you can be celibate for that long,” she says, taking her hand out of my hold.

“And if I can’t?

“You have to, or else I’m out the door and you can buy yourself a new bride.”

I groan and rub my forehead. “Fine. I’m only agreeing because I don’t have time to look for someone else.”

“So, it’s a deal?” She asks and I nod. “Okay. I’m gonna go now.”

“We need to finalize the contract soon,” I say, and she nods, carrying her bag.

“Let me know when.” I nod and she leaves, closing the door behind her.

I fall into a chair and groan. My lips are still tingling from the kiss earlier and I just agreed to no sex. I’m doomed.

Eleven

Avery

The doorbell rings and I turn sharply. That must be Noah. “I’m coming,” I shout even though he can’t hear me.

Checking my hair and makeup to make sure there are no mistakes, I pull my dress down, spray some perfume, take my purse from the bed, and go to open the door.

A fist collides with my forehead, and I jump back in surprise.

“Hello? Look before you knock,” I shout at him, rubbing my forehead.

“I was going for the door. It’s not my fault your head is that big.”

I glare at him, and he takes a step back.

“You are a very scary woman, you know that?”

“And you are rude.”

“Whatever.”

“Apologize.”

“Look, as much as I would like to stay here and argue with you all evening, we have a lot to do this evening, so let’s go,” he says, and I eye him before closing my door.

“Where are we going?” I ask and he smiles.

“You’ll see.”

I frown slightly. What is he planning? He asked me to dress up for a dinner date this evening to make our “relationship” public and has refused to let me know where he’s taking me.

We stare at each other for a few seconds, then my gaze drifts over his suit-covered body. A prickling heat of awareness sweeps through me and I quickly look away, clearing my throat.

“Like what you see?”

“Shut up,” I say, walking to the elevators.

We ride down in silence, and he leads me to a parked Mercedes car in front of the building.

“Nice car,” I say, running my fingers along the body.

“Thanks. Looks like you’re finally taking that ride I offered long ago,” he mutters close to my ear. I turn to face him in indignation, and he presses his chest flush against mine.

“Would you move back right now? What are you doing? I need space,” I say as he presses closer to me, moving his hand around my waist.

There is a click, and he moves away from me.

“I was just opening your door. What did you think I was doing?” He laughs and opens the door fully.

I grunt and get into the passenger seat. The soft leather caresses my back and I close my eyes in pleasure.

Noah gets into the driver’s seat and starts laughing at seeing my expression.

“What? They are great seats.”

“I have another seat you will enjoy even better than that one,” he says winking and I slap his arm.

He laughs louder and starts the car. My seat vibrates and I sit up a little. He notices and smiles but thankfully, he doesn’t say anything.

Forty-five minutes later, he stops in front of an expensive-looking restaurant. I open my door without waiting for him and look around in awe.

He tosses his keys to a valet and wraps his arm around my waist, walking us inside. A waitress immediately runs up to us, addressing him while ignoring me.

“Good evening, Mr. Galanis.”

I roll my eyes in irritation. I know she saw that because her smile became catty.

“Would you like me to show you to your table? You can wait there for your guest.”

I know she did not just clean off my very existence. I open my mouth to deliver a quick set down, but Noah pinches my

waist.

“Good evening...Aurora, is it?” He asks, reading her name tag.

“Yes sir.”

“Do you want to lose your job?”

“What? N-no sir,” she stammers.

“Are you blind?”

“No. I see very clearly,” she says, frowning.

“Then, I’m sure you can see my fiancée standing beside me.”

Blood drains from her face as she glances at me sharply.

“I-I’m so sorry sir. Ma’am, I didn’t...”

“See me?” I ask, lifting a properly penciled eyebrow.

“I’m very sorry. It won’t happen again. Please, let me show you both to your table,” she says, stumbling over her words.

She turns and leads us to a table in a private corner of the room.

Noah pulls a seat out for me, and I sit down, flashing the huge ring he bought and gave to me earlier today.

She blanches again and looks at the floor.

“Aurora? Send us another waitress,” Noah says after sitting down and she leaves.

Less than fifteen seconds later, a bright, petite, blond girl walks up to us.

“Good evening. My name is Celia and I will be your waitress for the evening. What can I start you off with?” She says, looking at me.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask him instead?” I reply, kicking Noah in the shin.

He glares at me from on top of his menu before turning to her.

“What do you recommend?” He asks and they discuss for a few minutes. A waiter brings a jug of water and two empty glasses.

I pour myself some water and sip quietly. A flash goes off in the corner of my eye and I turn sharply, catching someone looking away from me.

They finish talking and she leaves. I immediately grab his hand and he looks at me in alarm.

“There’s someone over there taking pictures of us.” He pulls his hand back and adjusts his cuff link.

“Do you not hear me? I said there’s someone taking pictures of us,” I repeat louder, gesturing towards the person.

“I know. I saw him immediately when we sat here,” he replies, not bothered.

I look around in confusion and he grabs both of my hands, explaining quietly.

“Look, I need news of our engagement to spread quickly. I picked this place because I knew there was bound to be one or

two photographers. That way, our picture will be in gossip magazines soon.”

“So, we’re here to provide fodder for gossip?” I ask in annoyance.

“Yes.”

“You could have said so earlier. I would have worn a better dress. Or at least, do my hair and makeup more elaborately,” I grumble.

He laughs and leans back in his chair, gazing at my face.

“You still look stunning. And that dress does wonders for your ass. It’s a shame you want no sex. The things I would have done to that posterior.”

I fling a serviette at him, and he laughs.

Our food arrives soon, and we eat in silence. Two hours later, we walk out, and someone drives the car up to us.

I get in and watch Noah walk around the car to get into his seat.

“Those bloody thighs,” I mutter quietly. I see another flash of light, but I don’t react. He gets in and drives home, with me dozing in my seat.

I keep stealing glances at him the whole elevator ride up to our floor. Once or twice, I caught him staring at my leg through the side slit in my dress.

“You know, I won’t charge you for staring at my legs. I know they’re great too,” I comment sassily as the doors open

and we walk out.

“Really? Because I will charge you for looking at me all the time.”

“You don’t need the money.”

“Even billionaires need money. Why do you think we keep working?”

“Whatever. Good night,” I say, standing in front of my door.

“Have you forgotten we need to go over the contract for the marriage tonight?” He asks and I put my key back in my purse.

“Yeah, I forgot about that. Lead the way, husband.”

He opens his door and we both walk inside. I look around carefully, noticing things I missed the last time.

I follow him inside and we end up in an office. I drop tiredly into a soft chair and kick my heels off.

“Do you need me to massage your feet?” Noah asks and I shake my head.

“I don’t trust you with them. Now give me the stupid papers so I can go home.”

He puts a bunch of papers in my open palm, and I read through them thoroughly.

I look up after thirty minutes to find him staring at me.

“What?”

“You look good while you read.”

“A compliment? Wow, I’m shocked. Are you coming down with anything?”

“Just shut up and appreciate it.”

“Well, thank you very much, sir. I’m still worried though.” We both laugh and I arrange the papers on the table.

“Before I go ahead and sign, I kind of want to ask you for a favor,” I say, pleadingly.

He smirks and steeples his fingers together.

“Stop smiling so much. I want you to help me get space at a hospital to start my specialty training.”

He eyes me thoughtfully and I cross my fingers under the table.

“Do you have any place in mind?” He asks and hope blooms in my chest.

“Well, yeah. Cedars-Sinai Medical Center or Kaiser Permanente Los Angeles Medical Center.”

“And what’s your specialty?”

“Oncology.”

“Cancer? You want to study cancer? That’s not what I expected at all,” he says shrugging.

“Why were you expecting?” I narrow my eyes in suspicion. I bet he’s going to say pediatrics or gynecology.

“Something maternal. When people say they’re nurses, I immediately think of birth nurses or pediatrics.”

“I knew it. You narrow-minded cow.” I eye him disdainfully.

“If you need my help to get in there, I suggest you watch your tone,” he says, and I scoff.

“Oh, my goodness, I’m sorry sir. Would you like me to go on my knees? How about I do that, but on your table?” I ask sarcastically.

“Don’t give me ideas,” he says, and I shut up. “Alright, I’ll do it. It will be something I can hold over your head anyway.”

I squeal loudly and he starts laughing. “Thank you. I mean it. Now, where do I sign this?”

We both sign and exchange contracts. After putting the papers in an envelope, I pick up my heels and purse, and we walk out of his apartment to my door.

“Good night, wife.” He leans against his door, smirking.

“I don’t even want to know what you just thought of when you said wife,” I mutter, opening my door.

“It’s a very vivid picture and you’re very flexible in it.” His grin widens and he walks close to me.

“You are such a dog. Whatever. Goodnight,” I say and slam the door in his face.

Twelve

Noah

I walk to the altar quickly, ignoring the murmurs and flashes of light that nearly blind me. Alexia scowls at me from the front row and I smile back sarcastically.

They were not happy when I told them I had found someone and even threatened to object during the ceremony, but I know they cannot do anything.

Apparently, their properties are also tied to whether I get married or not, which I missed because I left the Zoom call early, so they are even more anxious for me to get married than I am.

I look around the church, trying to find anyone that looks like Avery, but I don't. Maybe she didn't invite her parents, or they didn't come.

The church doors open and Avery walks in slowly. I catch a glimpse of her face through her veil and my breath catches in my chest. I will pay whoever did her makeup again.

The look is simple, yet elegant, letting her natural beauty shine through. That coupled with the simple, figure-hugging gown and ankle wrap shoes gives her this understated, yet mesmerizing look and I watch her greedily as she makes her way to me.

I notice a mini lookalike behind her. “That must be the sister,” I mutter to myself.

They get to me, and I help her up the stairs. The lookalike finds her seat and we both turn to face the priest.

“Dear beloved, we are gathered here today...” he starts but I spend the entire service looking at Avery.

How did I not notice how stunning she is? Or maybe I did and just ignored it all the time.

Less than an hour later, I am officially a married man, and my inheritance is safe.

The reception moves smoothly, and I am currently dancing with Avery’s hyperactive younger sister.

“Our parents don’t like you, just so you know. They’re still mad that they found out about the marriage through the magazines, and they believe Ave is making a big mistake.” She turns sharply and I have to turn so she doesn’t fall.

“And what about you?” I ask, smiling gently.

She eyes my face and scrunches her nose. “I don’t know. You don’t seem real, and I definitely would have argued with Avery if she had told me before, but no one can stop her once her mind is made up.”

“Besides, I suspect she’s marrying you for another reason and you won’t like it if you find out. That’s if you married my sister because you like her.”

“Why do you think I don’t like her?”

“I don’t know, you just don’t seem real to me. But it’s not my business. She can always come back home when she’s done with you,” she says and walks away.

“Done with me?” I mutter, shaking my head. Avery walks up to me smiling and I grab her by the waist, placing a soft kiss on her head.

“Don’t do that,” she says and tries to pull away from me, but I hold her firmly.

“There are cameras around. Stop squirming so much. We are supposed to be a newly wedded couple in love with each other, remember?” I mutter and kiss her ear gently.

“You’re only using that as an excuse to feel me up.”

I chuckle before saying “It’s an effective excuse.”

We dance for a few seconds before I speak up.

“Your parents didn’t come?”

“No,” she answers, downcast. “They told me I’m making a big mistake, hurrying into marriage with you because I just went through a horrible breakup.”

“You went through a horrible breakup?”

“It’s not important.”

“Is that the ex you were yelling about the first time we met?” I ask and she glares at me.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. His loss is my gain anyway. Stay here. I want to make an announcement.”

I drop a quick kiss on her lips and walk away laughing when she glares at me again. I grab a mic from the MC and the music stops.

Everyone turns to face me, and I grin. “Good afternoon. My wife and I are glad to be able to celebrate today with you all.”

I pause to clear my throat, then continue. “I don’t have much to say. I just want to thank the beautiful woman who has given me more than anyone ever has; the chance to love and be loved by her for the rest of my life.”

Everyone “awws” and Avery walks closer to me.

“I promised to make all of your dreams come true, honey, and I am going to start now with my first wedding gift to you.”

“I’ve arranged for us to go on a two-week trip to your dream vacation and we are leaving right now.”

She frowns and I grin wider.

Addressing the rest of the room, I continue. “I’m sorry for leaving this wonderful party so early, but honestly, I’d rather spend the rest of the day with this gorgeous woman. But please, enjoy. Eat, drink, and get home safe.”

I hand the microphone back to the MC and take Avery's hand. We both walk outside with people applauding and Victor immediately brings the car to us.

"I don't know what you're planning, but I need to talk to my sister first," she says, and I frown.

"Why?"

"So, I can give her my house key. She doesn't have anywhere else to stay and I also need her to take my stuff from the hotel," she says, rolling her eyes.

"Fine. I'll be in the car," I reply and enter the back seat. Five minutes later, Avery runs outside grinning and Victor opens the door for her to get in.

She enters and waves wildly at her sister. The car starts to move, and she rests back against it.

Turning to me, she asks "What am I going to change into? I didn't bring anything."

"You can change on the plane. I told someone to bring something for you to wear," I say and pull off my tie.

"So where are we going?"

"Zanzibar."

I hear a gasp and turn to see a teary-eyed Avery.

"What now?"

"I've always wanted to go there."

"I know. I mean, I just announced to an entire room that I'm taking you on your dream vacation."

“How did you find out?”

“I have my ways, missy.”

“I can’t believe you did this. Thank you,” she says, wiping her tear-stained face softly.

I shrug uncomfortably. “Don’t get too weepy. We couldn’t have gone back home immediately after the wedding. We have an audience to impress and I need to score points with my father’s lawyer so he doesn’t regard this marriage as null.”

She rears back at what I said and turns to the front. “And here I thought you were just being nice.”

“Because I like you? Please,” I say and close my eyes.

We get on the hangar soon and climb onto the plane. Avery ignores me and goes into one of the rooms to sleep. I watch the clouds move as the plane takes off and drift off minutes later.

24 hours, an extremely long flight, and an uncomfortable car ride later, we arrive at the resort and are quickly shown to our place.

I walk to the living room and draw the curtains back. Avery walks out of the room frowning.

“There’s only one bed in there,” she says, frowning.

“Ave, I’m honestly too tired to argue with you right now.”

“I’m not trying to argue. I’m only saying there’s one bed in the room. How are we going to share that?”

I pinch my nose softly before replying. “Did you see the second room? Because there’s supposed to be one.”

“There isn’t. I’ve been everywhere. I don’t see why this place is so big and has only one room,” she says and rolls her eyes.

“I’m not the one who built it, okay? And I paid for...” I trail off.

She eyes me suspiciously and asks, “What now?”

“Honeymoon lodge. They are not going to give a place with two rooms to honeymooners. Shit.” I kick a side stool angrily.

“Well, you should have made sure.”

“How?”

“For starters, you shouldn’t have said you wanted a honeymoon suite.”

“Sure,” I say, walking into the room. She follows hot on my heels.

“So how are we going to sleep?”

“With our eyes closed?”

“On the bed,” she shouts, folding her hands.

I look at the wide mattress and shrug, reaching for my bag. “That thing looks wide enough to fit five people. We shouldn’t have any problems sharing it.”

“I’m not sleeping with you or beside you.”

“Fine. Sleep on the couch.”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll take the couch.”

“But you paid for the place.”

Annoyed, I throw the bag on the floor and walk up to her.

“What do you want me to do? Because I can’t hang from the ceiling.”

“Hey, don’t yell at me,” she says, and I grip her upper arms.

“Would you just shut up?!”

“Make me,” she says, and my gaze drops to her lips.

“Fine, I will,” I mutter and claim them as mine. Her hands immediately run through my hair as our tongues clash in a battle of will.

She surrenders with a whimper and I lick through her mouth thoroughly. Pulling away, I make my way down her face, biting and sucking where her neck meets her jaw.

Her fingernails scrape my back and I pull back slightly to take my shirt off. Her eyes darken in appreciation, and I kiss her again.

I lift her off the ground and her legs wrap around my waist. Before I can make sense of anything, we fall on the bed and I land on top of her.

I grab her breast through her shirt and almost moan when I discover she’s not wearing a bra. Moving my mouth downwards, I claim the tip and she grinds hard against me.

We begin to move together, and our loud moans fill the room. I release her nipple and kiss her lips roughly. She moans my name loudly and I freeze immediately, jumping off her like someone poured scalding water down my back.

We look away from each other, breathing heavily and I run my fingers through my hair. Picking my shirt off the floor, I leave the room not caring where I'm going.

Thirteen

Avery

The sun shining through the window hits my eye and I look away in discomfort. “Ow,” I mutter, rubbing my eye.

“You know, it might help if you don’t look directly into the sun.” I hear Noah say beside me, but I ignore him.

Things have been extremely awkward and strained ever since our intense make-out. I can barely say a sentence around him and had to avoid him throughout the two weeks of our honeymoon.

It will be a lot easier to avoid him now that we’re back home and I’m grateful for that.

The car stops in front of our apartment complex, and I quickly get out of the car. Noah comes out after me and puts a hand on the small of my back.

I try to move away from him, but he quickly puts his arm around my waist.

“Relax. I won’t bite you. Besides, we’re in public and people are watching,” he mutters close to my ear.

“Don’t talk so close to my ear, jeez.” I walk inside and he follows me closely. We enter an elevator and I press the button for our floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Going home.”

“Okay. Why are you pressing our old floor?”

I wheel around to face him frowning and ask, “What do you mean our old floor?”

The elevator dings and I walk to my apartment, quickly opening the door. Everything looks the same, except for the fact that my furniture is covered. Noah walks in and I turn to face him.

“What is going on?”

“For one, we don’t live here anymore.”

“We didn’t live here before. I live here and you stay next door.”

“Not anymore. We’ve moved into the penthouse.”

“Excuse me? How did I move in with you and not know anything about it?” I shout and run into my bedroom, making straight for the closet.

I fling the door open and gasp on seeing the room empty. I walk back to the living room and Noah hasn’t moved an inch.

“Put my clothes back where they were. I’m not living with you,” I grind out.

“You are. Let’s go home.”

“No!”

“We are married. Did you forget?”

“No, but we don’t have to live together.”

He pinches his nose and sighs before answering. “And how will you explain our living arrangements to the public the minute they start to scrutinize our marriage?”

I shrug and he continues.

“It’s just for a few months. Six at most. Surely you can fight your attraction to me in that short period?”

“I am not attracted to you,” I scoff, indignant.

“Great. That’s settled. Can we go now? I want to get some sleep.”

He turns to leave, and a thought occurs to me immediately that makes me shout.

“Aha! I know what you’re up to!”

He turns to look at me in annoyance.

“What now?”

“You just want me to live with you so you can have easy access to jump me.”

“Jump you?”

“Yes. I ignored what happened on the trip, but I won’t accept any more groping from you, mister.”

He rolls his eyes and laughs sarcastically.

“Really? Jump you? If I remember correctly, you were an active participant in the kiss. I was the one who pulled away; if not, it would have gone somewhere else, and I would still be blamed for that.”

My cheeks burn and I look away in shame. I still feel embarrassed at the way I responded and at the fact that he was the one who had enough sense to walk away. If he didn't, I would have let him nail me into the mattress.

“Besides, we've been alone in this apartment for minutes and I haven't jumped you yet. Oh, my goodness, I must be broken.”

“Shut up. I know you're attracted to me.” I shout and he rolls his eyes.

“Sure. Look at me, I can hardly control myself.”

I grit my teeth and look away from him.

“I've seen you at your prettiest so I'm good. Worry about yourself. Now, let's go or I will carry you up,” he says and walks out of the apartment.

I give him the finger and stomp my feet when he's out of sight. “Annoying, controlling, arrogant, ugh!” I groan and walk after him.

We ride the elevator in silence, and I tap my foot, irritated. When the doors open, I forget my annoyance and walk out in awe.

The elevator leads directly into the hallway leading to the living room and I walk down, admiring the portraits on the

wall.

“This place is amazing,” I say excitedly and catch Noah smiling at my reaction.

Clearing my throat, I look at the rest of the room quietly.

“You’re very excited for someone who didn’t want to move here a few minutes ago,” he says, and I frown.

“Can you go back to being quiet? I was having fun until you spoke,” I say and open the nearest door.

The door reveals the most beautiful kitchen I’ve ever seen. Running my hands on the counter, I squeal inwardly at how smooth the surface is and go to open the fridge which is fully stocked.

Taking note of the contents, I close the door and go back into the living room. I meet Noah shrugging his jacket off and look away.

The last thing I need is to get caught admiring his mouth-watering biceps.

“I’ll see you when I wake up,” he says and walks down a separate hallway.

“Ehm, Noah?”

“For the love of God, Avery, we’ve only been married two weeks and I can already see exactly why your relationships always fail. What do you want to fight about now?” He says and I rear in shock.

“I was just going to ask where I’m going to sleep, but now I’m annoyed with what you just said.” I fold my arms and frown.

“I haven’t had this many arguments in my entire life. Do you just cook up scenarios in your head and attack me with them?”

“You don’t know anything about me and my past relationships, so who are you to say I’m the problem?”

“If the past two weeks are any indication, I have enough evidence.” He turns to walk away but I jump in front of him.

“Listen here...”

“Excuse me.” He pushes past me and walks into a room. I walk after him and enter the most exquisite room I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Whoa,” I mutter, spinning around.

“I’m about to take my clothes off, so please leave. I don’t want you to accuse me of jumping you with my nakedness,” Noah says behind me.

I turn to face him still fully clothed, thank God, and raise my hands.

“Before you take anything off, where am I going to sleep?”

“Here. The bed is big enough for us and a third person, so don’t worry about me cuddling you at night,” he says, raising his eyebrow.

My cheeks color crimson as I remember the multiple mornings we woke up with me wrapped around him on his side of the bed. I didn't realize I moved so much in my sleep.

"I don't want to share a room with you," I say, and he rolls his eyes.

"Okay then. The place has three extra bedrooms. Pick one. Can I undress now?"

"What about the bathroom? What will we do if one person wants to use the toilet and the other..."

He interrupts my rambling. "Each room has an en-suite bathroom and closet. I don't think there will be a problem with the toilet and bathing."

I blink twice and look away foolishly. Being this close to him is driving me crazy already.

"I'm undressing now and if you don't leave, you're going to get an eyeful of ass," he says, and I frown in confusion.

He starts to unbutton his shirt and I turn around, panicking.

"Stop taking your clothes off for a minute. We need to lay some ground rules," I shout, pressing my hand to my eyes.

"No. I warned you," he says, and I turn around to say something but lose the my train of thought immediately after I see his chest.

Damn, those muscles are tight. I stare at him long enough to be inappropriate and jump when he clears his throat.

Looking up, I see his eyes dancing with laughter.

“Ground rules, Ave.” I almost taste the amusement in his words and my cheeks burn again.

“Right. Uh, well uhm, plates. If one person cooks, the other has to clean up after.”

“I have someone who cooks and cleans for me.”

“Okay. If one person is already watching something on the TV in the living room, the other can’t change it just because they want to watch something else.”

“There is a television in every room, Ave,” he says, smirking.

“Okay, um, we do not invade each other’s privacy.”

“Seeing as you’re standing in my room right now, you’re already breaking your rule.”

“Why do you get the master bedroom?”

“I moved here first.”

“I wasn’t aware we were moving, so that’s cheating.”

“What the actual fuck is wrong with you?” he says, rubbing his forehead.

I open my mouth to argue but my phone starts ringing.

“Hello? Yeah, this is she...I’ve been invited to what? Yes, I’ll be there. Thank you. Goodbye.” I squeal and jump around immediately when I put my phone down.

“Hey trampoline, can you get out now?” I hear an annoying voice behind me.

“Can you stop raining on my parade?” I say irritably. “I just got invited for an interview at one of the hospitals I want to do my specialty training!” I squeal at the end of my sentence.

“Congratulations. Now, get out, or you’re getting a show,” he says, pointing at the door.

“Maybe I want a show,” I say, crossing my arms. He shrugs and drops his trousers. I get a view of his extremely tight boxer briefs showcasing a nice bulge in front. I immediately turn crimson and move my hands up to my eyes.

I turn around screaming, “Oh my god, how could you? Pervert!” Without waiting for him to reply, I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

Fourteen

Avery

My cab stops in front of an imposing building, and I come out with my mouth open. “Wow, this place is huge,” I mutter in awe.

The car zooms off and I smooth my hands over my skirt, brushing off nonexistent lint. I walk inside and enter a large, air-conditioned reception area.

Looking around, I see a large reception desk in a corner and walk over to the man standing behind it.

“Good afternoon. My name is Avery Lombardo and I’m a nurse. I was called yesterday to come in for the specialty training interview.”

“Welcome. Go to the second floor, first door to your right. Wait there and someone will attend to you,” he says, and I smile in appreciation.

“Thank you.” He nods and goes back to what he was doing. I locate the stairs and climb up, entering the room he described.

There are three people seated there already and I sit beside what seems like the last one on the line.

“Hi, I’m Avery,” I say to the lady beside me.

“Hello, I’m Monica.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“What? You mean the interview?”

“Yes.”

“Well, not very long. They don’t take more than thirty minutes with each candidate,” she says, tilting her head.

“Wait, I know you. You’re that lady who just got married to that Greek billionaire guy.”

I widen my eyes and look around, making sure nobody heard her. “Please, quiet down. I don’t want people to know me.”

“Girl, they already know you. Y’all’s faces were splashed all over them magazines and all that. Congratulations. What are you doing here? Aren’t y’all supposed to be honeymooning or something?”

“Well, not really. Something came up, so we had to cut it short.” Why did he have to splash my face everywhere? That darned man.

“Okay. But why are you even working? You’re like, *rich rich*,” she says, giggling.

“I just like working. I didn’t get this degree for nothing.” I laugh nervously and dab the beads of sweat on my forehead.

“Could never be me though...” she starts but a woman comes in, calling her name.

“Monica Kaleb,” we both look at her and she beckons at Monica.

“Please, follow me,” she says and walks through a door on the other side of the room.

“This is me. Good luck, girl. Although I’m sure you don’t need it. The openings were probably created because of you. Anyways, bye,” she says and walks after the other woman.

I slump in my chair and sigh heavily. They won’t accept me because of my last name, right? I mean, Noah got me the interview, but they won’t take me just because of him.

I hear my name and sit up sharply.

“Avery Lombardo.”

“Yes, that’s me,” I say, raising my hand.

“Come this way,” she says and goes through another door. I follow her and enter a wide room containing an examination bed with a dummy on it.

A man and woman sit on the opposite of the bed and look up when I enter. Oh God, what are they whispering now?

“Good afternoon,” I say, fidgeting with the hand of my bag. The woman speaks up first.

“Afternoon, Nurse Avery. Don’t be nervous, have a seat.”

I pull a chair close to me and sit down. I hope she doesn’t notice my hand vibrating.

“So, you applied here to start your specialty training in oncology?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. What can you tell me about the hallmarks of cancer?”

I relax immediately when I hear the question. Oh, thank God, I can do this. I take a deep breath before answering.

I am asked a couple more questions, before demonstrating a few procedures on the dummy. After a grueling forty minutes, they signal me to sit down.

“Your procedures were very neat. It says here in your file that you went to Sapienza University of Rome, correct?”

“Yes.”

“You won a couple of scholarships and graduated with a good GPA.”

“Yes, that is correct,” I reply, nodding.

“Why do you want to work in oncology?” The man asks, leaning forward.

I breathe deeply as unpleasant memories flood through me and look at their faces before answering.

“My youngest sister was diagnosed with cancer when she was five years old. She was in and out of the hospital until she turned seven when she died. During that time, I was the one with her in the hospital the most.”

I pause, breathing through my mouth to stop the tears threatening to fall. When they recede, I continue.

“I saw how much pain she was in, and it broke my heart that I wasn’t able to do more for her. That’s why I got into the nursing program. Maybe I can help other people with whatever knowledge I have.”

They stare at me for a while after I’ve finished talking before discussing with themselves. I steeple my fingers and watch them, praying.

The woman starts talking and I sit up in anticipation.

“It’s good that you want to help people. You have the passion and a large pool of inner strength, which you will need studying here,”

Wait, does she mean what I think she does? My heart starts beating loudly and I lean forward in my seat.

“You answered all your questions correctly and performed your practicals perfectly. I don’t see why we should waste any time, telling you to wait for a callback.”

I move to the edge of my seat, waiting.

“It is my pleasure to invite you to start your specialty training here. You will receive an email before midnight explaining your employment details.”

A grin splits my face and I whoop loudly, jumping out of my seat. They look at me weirdly and I sit down muttering a sheepish “Sorry.”

She continues. “You are expected to submit your employment letter along with a list of documents you will see in the email. Congratulations, Avery. This facility is happy to have you.”

I smile and get up to shake their hands. “Thank you very much. You won’t regret this, I promise. Thank you.

“Not regretting would be nice, Mrs. Galanis,” the man says, and I freeze for a second.

“Congratulations on your wedding, by the way. You aren’t expected to start until one month after submitting those documents, so enjoy your honeymoon properly. Have a nice day,” he says and waves me out.

“Thank you again.” I pick up my bag and walk out of the room, grinning. Making a mental list of all the people I have to call, I walk out of the hospital, light on my feet.

I’m very sure everyone who saw me thought I was crazy because I couldn’t stop grinning the whole way home. I even waved at a flock of pigeons.

I start shouting immediately after the elevator doors open at the penthouse.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! I did it! I got it!” I kick my shoes off and throw my bag in a corner.

“Yes,” I squeal, running through the hallway into the living room. An amused Noah looks up at me.

“I thought something bad happened but look at you, twisting your hips.”

I look down and see that in fact, I had been dancing. I stay still for five seconds and start shouting again.

“I got the job! *Ho ottenuto il lavoro! Inizierò la mia formazione specialistica!*” I throw my hands in the air and dance around in my spot.

“Okay, English or you’re just rapping,” he says, holding me in a spot.

“Non crederai a quello che è successo. Hanno detto che ho risposto a tutte le domande e ho fatto le procedure perfettamente. Ho ottenuto il lavoro sul posto. Oh mio Dio! Non ci posso credere!”

“I still don’t understand a word you’re saying, Avery,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

“They said I answered all the questions and did the procedures perfectly. I got the job on the spot. Oh my God! I can’t believe it!” I repeat, jumping around.

“Congratulations. That’s great,” he says, and I wrap my hands around him.

“Thank you so much. This wouldn’t have been possible without you,” I mumble into his chest and his hand rubs my head gently.

“You’re welcome, tiny,” he says smiling and I look up at him.

“Thank you. I’ve been trying to get in for a while and you made the whole process easier. Thank you,” I say emotionally and link my fingers behind his neck.

What am I doing? His hands grip my waist and pull me closer. We stare at each other for a few seconds before I close the distance between our lips.

The kiss tastes just how I remember, and I groan loudly. I tug his bottom lip and he moans in response. So, he loves biting.

Standing on my toes, I lick a spot on his neck, and he pulls my head back using my hair.

“That mouth...that fucking mouth,” he groans and attacks me using teeth, tongue, and lips.

We fall softly to the floor, and I climb on top, grinding hard on him. We moan and he pinches my nipple through the layers I’m wearing.

The friction heightens the sensations and I find myself fast approaching my peak. Am I going to come from grinding alone?

Quickly, my body answers that question for me. I jerk quickly and liquid pools in my underwear. After a few seconds, I stop twitching and fall on him.

He bites the worried nipple and I jerk again, falling off his body immediately.

“What a great way to celebrate your new job, Avery. I’m glad I could help both times,” he says, and my cheeks burn in embarrassment.

“Shut up,” I mutter and sit up, pulling my shirt into place. He sits up beside me and starts kissing my neck.

“Do you want to take this to the bedroom?” He mutters, biting gently. I push him off and jump up.

“Don’t touch me ever again,” I shout and run to my room, my heart beating loudly as I shut my door. What have I done?

Fifteen

Noah

The smell of sizzling bacon fills the air and I hear a door close. Footsteps shuffle into the kitchen, stopping beside the fridge.

“Good morning,” I hear Avery mumble and turn to look at her. She looks gorgeous with her hair tied up and all I can think of is kissing her neck until the bright blue of her eyes dim in pleasure.

Clearing my throat, I turn back to the pan. “You’re talking to me again. Nice.”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?”

I turn off the stove and face her. “No, not okay. I’m really tired of all the mixed signals you keep throwing my way. That has to stop. One minute you’re grinding against me and the next, you ignore me for a whole week because you came against my trousers.”

“You don’t have to throw it in my face. I know what I did and I’m sorry.”

“All I’m saying is you’re the one who demanded a no-sex marriage. I’d be happy to go down and dirty, but you have to agree with yourself that you want me first.” I plate the bacon and set it on the kitchen table.

“Pffft. I don’t want you.”

“Still in denial?”

“I might find you a little attractive physically, but I still don’t want to have sex with you.”

I put my fingers on my temple, pretending like I’m thinking. “There’s this memory I have that begs otherwise.”

“Shut up,” she says and smacks my hand.

“Ow. One day I’ll have you charged for assault.” I massage my hand and take a jug of juice out of the fridge. “Breakfast?” I say and drop the jug on the table.

“You cooked?” she asks eyeing me and I look away sheepishly.

“Yes. Well, I...wanted to do something nice on your first day at your new job.” I scratch the back of my head and grab the thing closest to me which is...a paper towel?

Rolling my eyes internally, I trash that and give her a plate. “Eat. There’s no need to hug me this time. I know I’m irresistible but blaming me every time you have a lapse in judgement is tiring.”

“I was going to thank you, but I don’t think I want to eat something marinated in hubris,” she says and drops the plate.

I laugh and give it back to her. “Okay. I won’t mention it anymore. Now eat or I’ll charge you for wasting my food.”

“Not like I asked you to cook for me, but whatever.”

She starts to fill the plate up but pauses when I walk towards the door.

“Aren’t you eating too? There’s no way I can finish all this food.”

“Just eat as much as you can. I’ll finish up whatever is left.”

I turn to leave but her voice stops me again. “You don’t want to eat with me? Are you scared I’ll jump your tiny bones?”

“No, my bones aren’t tiny. And I have to wash up.”

“You always bathe very early Noah,” she says, deadpan.

“Are you watching me, Avery?”

“No, I’m not. Don’t say stupid shit like that.”

“Hey, relax,” I say laughing. “If it means that much to you, I’ll eat with you.”

“It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Sure. Won’t you sit? Or do you plan to eat standing? It won’t help you grow taller.”

She groans and sits on one of the chairs around the table. Still laughing, I fill my plate and sit opposite her.

A moan reaches my ear and I choke on my first bite. Looking up, I see Avery chewing slowly with her eyes closed

and again, my eyes trace a path from her ear to her collarbones.

She moans again and I cough into my fist. “Keep moaning and we’ll soon be doing more than eating.”

She opens her eyes and swallows quickly. “I did that out loud?”

“Yes. Are you that loud normally?”

“I assume you’re talking about food.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t ruin my appetite, Noah.”

“Fine. Go back to having sex with your food,” I shrug and continue eating.

“I’m sorry about the noise earlier. It just tasted really good. How did you learn to cook?” She asks, and I shrug again, ignoring the question.

She keeps looking at me expectantly and I focus on my plate. A kick to my leg makes me look up and Avery repeats her question.

“How did you learn to cook? Come on, tell me. I’m curious.”

“Why?”

“Well, I never pegged you for someone who would know how to do anything remotely useful, so it’s very interesting.”

“Fine. You are very annoying,” I sigh and continue. “I watched cooking shows and just followed the recipes.”

“That’s it? Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Shocker.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be honest with each other in a marriage?”

“In a real one, perhaps.” I take a bite of bacon and chew slowly. She rolls her eyes and sits back, folding her arms.

“I’m just saying, these pancakes taste too good to be made from just watching a cooking show. I’ll bet anything you got the recipe from a family member.”

I don’t say anything and continue eating.

“I’ll keep annoying you until you tell me.”

“I can hit you on the head with a plate,” I say, watching her drizzle syrup on her second pancake. She licks a stray drop off her fingertip and I cough, adjusting my trousers.

“Is the syrup homemade too?” She asks and I nod.

“I’m impressed. You have to teach me how to make it. Seriously who taught you? I’ll keep moaning until you tell me, and I mean it.”

“Fine. It was my mother’s. I’m talking about syrup and pancakes. Are you happy now?”

She grins and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, I’m happy. What about the eggs? They’re really nice, like, one of the best-scrambled eggs I’ve ever had,” she says, and I grin lazily.

“Really?”

“Yeah. In my rankings, you come third behind my Nonna and my mom.”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise and comment. “You don’t cook?”

“I do. I just can’t do eggs.”

“Well, I’d be glad to do your eggs,” I smirk, and she hits my hand with a ladle.

“You have to stop hitting me.”

“You have to stop making those dirty jokes.”

“I was talking about regular breakfast eggs. It’s not my fault you have a dirty mind.”

She raises the ladle threateningly and I pull it out of her hand and throw it in the sink.

“Fine. Tell me, who taught you how to make eggs?” She says and I groan, dropping my fork.

“Give it a rest, Ave.”

“No.”

“If I tell you, you won’t believe me, so stop.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Why is this so important to you?” I ask and she shrugs.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just enjoying the conversation. Annoying you is a bonus.” I eye her and she grins.

“I learned how to make eggs myself. Now leave me alone,” I say and drop my plate in the sink.

“Why?” She asks and puts a forkful of eggs in her mouth. She chews slowly and I sigh, taking my seat.

I empty my glass of juice before answering. “I was left alone most of the time when I was younger, so I had to cook for myself. I learned during that time. Eggs are fast to make, so it was the first thing I learned.”

She narrows her eyes slightly and swallows before talking. “There was no one to cook for you?”

I run my hands through my hair and sit up. “There was someone to cook. I just wasn’t allowed to eat.”

“I’m very confused.” I look at the door uncomfortably as memories I buried a long time ago start to resurface.

“My father was a very...strict man. No, he was a living terror. At the time, I didn’t fit his image of the perfect son and heir, so I got punished regularly.”

“One of his favorite punishments was whipping, along with starvation. He would flog me and then order them not to give me anything to eat. Whatever was left over after meals would be thrown out for dogs to eat and I would be forced to watch.”

Avery gasps and puts her hands on her mouth. “What about your mom? She didn’t intervene?”

I snort as I remember Alexia purposely putting me in trouble. “Nah. She was happy to watch me get punished.”

“How can a mother do that?”

I drum my fingers on the table and shrug. “That’s her. Anyways, I decided to take the loophole. He didn’t say anything about me cooking for myself, so I started making stuff to eat.”

“Of course, he would have killed me if I got caught, so I learned to make fast dishes. Like I said earlier, eggs are very fast to make, so it was the first thing I learned.”

“Whenever he was out of the house for long, I would make something more substantial. I got caught eventually,” I pause as I remember Alexia reporting me to her husband. That malicious smile disturbed my sleep for years.

“I was beaten to nearly an inch of my life. The dogs were licking my wounds,” I shrug and look at the wall unseeingly.

A touch on my hand makes me jump and I see Avery looking at me with teary eyes.

“I am so sorry that happened to you,” she says, and I recoil.

“Have a great first day, Ave.” I kick my chair back and stand up. She walks up to me and hugs me, but I push her away.

“Excuse me.” I move to the side, and she follows me. Annoyed, I press my eyelids and chuckle, mirthless.

“Move, Ave.”

“No, don’t leave like this. You can talk to me.”

“Why? Because we’re a couple? Stop pretending to care about me and get out of my sight!” My voice raises at the end, and she flinches.

I push past her and walk out of the kitchen, ignoring the stricken look on her face.

Sixteen

Noah

I walk past Avery's room for the fifth time, thinking of how to approach her. She hasn't talked to me since I yelled at her a few days ago.

She came home a few minutes ago and here I am, tiptoeing around her like a criminal. I just have to do it.

Squaring my shoulder, I walk up to her door, fist poised to knock, but I turn back at the last second. It suddenly opens and a scowling Avery glaring at me.

“What?”

“What's what?” I shrug, biting my fingernails. Why am I so nervous?

“It's a Thursday evening and you're pacing outside my room. What do you want?” she asks, folding her arms.

“I've been meaning to talk to you.”

“What have I done now?”

“What? You didn't do anything. Why would you ask that?”

“Well, it’s either I’m jumping your bones, or I’m pretending to care about you. What? Have I not stayed out of your sight well enough?”

I scratch my neck and look away, embarrassed. “I um... wanted to apologize about my attitude on Monday. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“An apology. Wow, I didn’t think you were capable of giving one.”

“Avery.”

“I’m just saying. You had all week to talk to me and you’re coming now? You must want something else.”

“Ave!” I shout and we engage in a stare-down for a few seconds. She sighs and looks away first.

“Fine. Apology accepted. Can I go now? It’s a little late and I need to sleep.”

I look at my wristwatch and up at her. “It’s not late, it’s just five past seven.”

“What’s your point?”

“Avery,” I take a deep breath before continuing. “Can you stop fighting me for just one minute?”

She folds her hand, leaning against the wall and I take that as my cue to continue talking.

“I need you to get dressed in thirty minutes. We’re going out.”

“Why?”

I scratch my neck again, more embarrassed this time.

“Well, it’s our anniversary.”

“So?”

“So, we’re going out to celebrate.”

“We are not a real couple, so what are we celebrating?” She asks and I groan loudly.

“Do you have to argue with me all the time?”

“I’m just pointing out the truth.”

“I bought a dress earlier and put it in your closet. Put it on and come out. I made reservations for eight, so we need to leave soon.”

I turn to go to my room, but her voice stops me. “Is this one of your publicity stunt things again?”

“What?”

“You know, for people to see that we have a great marriage, we are a power couple and stuff.” She says and I grind my teeth slowly.

“That’s not what this is about, Ave. I’m trying to...”

“I knew there was a reason you apologized. It’s always something with you.”

“I’m not the bad guy you’re painting me to be here,” I say, and she laughs sarcastically.

“So, we’re going out because you want to spend time with me? You said it yourself, we’re not a couple and we don’t care

about each other.”

I run my hands through my hair uncomfortably. Before I can say anything, she starts talking again.

“Sure, I’ll get dressed. It’s what you paid me for anyways. I’ll be down in twenty.” She enters her room and closes the door in my face.

“Fuck,” I mutter and rub my face with my hands. In less than twenty minutes, I shower and throw my clothes on, then I go to the living room to wait for Avery.

Minutes later, she comes out wearing the dress I picked out for her, and I must say, I chose it perfectly. I watch her movements greedily, not taking my eyes off her exposed legs.

She stops in front of me, and I have to clear my throat multiple times just so I can talk.

“You look...beautiful,” I say sincerely but she rolls her eyes.

“Stop the drama and let’s go.” She starts to walk away but I hold her hand, pulling her back.

Blue eyes look at me quizzically and I clear my throat again.

“Just to be clear, we’re not going out because I want to put on a show. I wanted to apologize properly and maybe spend time with you. It is our anniversary, after all, fake marriage or not.”

I release her hand and walk to the elevator. Her stare burns my back the whole ride down, but I ignore it.

I sneak a look at her as we walk through the garage to my car in silence and a knot forms in my throat. Why is she suddenly the most beautiful thing I've ever seen?

It must be because of the whole no-sex rule. Immediately after this ends, I'm burying myself so deep in someone that they'll need to pull me out.

The car beeps as I press the key and I go to open the passenger's door for her, but she stops me, putting her hand on mine.

I roll my eyes and step back. "If you're about to complain about me opening the door for you, just stop. I won't do it again, get in so we can get this evening over with."

"No, that's not what I'm doing. I didn't know you were trying to do something nice and I'm sorry for being a brat about it," she says, grabbing my hand.

My heart leaps when I look at our joined hands and I pull away immediately.

"Okay. Get in."

Ignoring her stare, I enter the driver's seat and start the car. A heavy silence fills the car as I drive us to the restaurant.

"Noah," she calls but I ignore her. Poking my hand, she calls again.

"Noah."

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“So why are you still mad at me?”

“I’m not.”

“Really? Could’ve fooled me with the way you’re ignoring me.”

I turn to look at her and my gaze is drawn to her cleavage. This time, my slacks tighten, and I quickly turn to face the road.

“I’m not mad at you. I promise.” How can I tell her I’m annoyed because she looks very beautiful and all my cells are calling for me to take her right here, right now?

We arrive at the restaurant, and I park, handing the car key to a valet. We get shown to our table and place our order almost immediately.

I sip on water quietly and choke when Avery suddenly bursts out. “I’m sorry, okay? I was a bitch this evening and I’m sorry.”

Wiping the water that spilled on my trousers, I chuckle and set the glass on the table.

“I’m not angry.”

“Well, you’re not saying anything.”

“Honestly Ave, if you knew what was going through my head, you would shut me up for life.”

“What’s that?”

I lean in my chair and eye her slowly. “Well, it involves you not wearing that dress.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes immediately. “I should have known it was something dirty.”

We sit in silence, smiling this time.

“I’m sorry though, for assuming the worst about you,” she says, and I nod.

“So, what did you get me?”

“What did you get me?” I ask and she starts to stutter.

“Well, I...it’s not...”

I gasp dramatically and say, “Don’t tell me you forgot about our anniversary?”

“I didn’t...” she starts but suddenly stops.

“Ave? Avery? What’s wrong?” I tap her hand repeatedly, but she doesn’t answer, looking at something behind me.

A man with an oily smile on his face walks up to our table and she blanches. “*Ciao Piccola. Ti sono mancato?*”

I clear my throat and they both look at me. He grins widely and points at me. “*Avery, hai un uomo nuovo? Bello.*”

He stretches a hand for me to shake and I eye it, irritated. “*Ciao. Sono l’uomo di Avery.*”

Avery jerks and looks at me in panic. “He’s not my... he’s...”

I place my hand on hers and shit, it's vibrating. His eyes follow our hands, and he frowns.

“Avery, who is this man? Why is he touching you? And in public too.”

I glower at him, and he cowers slightly. “My wife and I are on a date. Excuse us or I will have you thrown out.”

“Wife? Avery's not your wife. She's just my ex, and she wasn't even a good girlfriend.” He sneers and Avery grips my hand tightly, tears pooling in her eyes.

I massage her hand softly and her grip loosens.

Turning to the intruder, I start “Look...”

“Henry,” he says, and I roll my eyes.

“Fool, I'll give you thirty seconds to leave or else, I'll have you hunted down.”

“How dare you talk to me like that? Who the fuck are you?” He sneers loudly and I stand up, adjusting my cuff links.

“Galanis. Noah Galanis. And this is my wife, Avery Galanis.”

His face pales in recognition and he takes a step back. I lean forward and lower my voice, making sure he's the only one that can hear me.

“If you ever come close to her again, I will bury you alive. And you know it won't be traced to me.”

Leaning back, I say loudly, “Now, do you want to walk out on your own, or should I ask someone to carry you out?”

He turns and walks away quickly, and I sit down, taking Avery's shaky hands.

"Hey," I whisper, and she lifts her gaze to meet mine.

"Take me home. Please," she whispers back, and I nod.

I quickly cancel our order and we go outside. She remains quiet on the drive home, and I keep thinking. What the heck did he do to her?

Seventeen

Avery

I can feel Noah's stare on me, and I look out the window, watching stores and people go by. I had assumed that Henry had gone back home since we hadn't heard anything about him since.

But the bastard tracked me down to the restaurant. Seeing his annoying face brought back a lot of memories, and none were good.

"Get up, Avery. You're so lazy..." "I've told you to stop following me around. For God's sake, you're crazy. I'm not cheating on you."

The worst was when I walked in on him with someone else. He was wearing the same stupid smile on his face this evening.

"Well Avery, you've finally met Amy. It was about time too," he said, putting on a shirt. "You will have to learn to co-exist or else, we're done."

I shudder and close my eyes, blocking the tears. A hand connects with mine and I grip it like a lifeline.

After some time, the car stops, and I open my eyes to see that we're in the garage already.

"Hey," Noah says, massaging my hand. "Let's go up. I'll run you a bath."

I nod and open my door. Somehow, he gets out before me and hurried to my side to help me out.

He holds me tight to his side which is good because I suddenly have no balance. We go to the elevator, and I lean against him the whole ride up.

Didn't I come to LA to get away from men? Now look at me, leaning against another one. I can't even hold myself up.

When the doors open, I detach myself and stagger into the house. Noah runs after me in concern.

"Hey, don't walk on your own. You'll fall."

"I'm fine," I snap, and he eyes me.

"You're not. You're not even stable on your feet. Let me help you..."

"I said I'm fine! I don't need you" I shout this time and he shrugs.

"Okay. I'll get you some water..."

"I don't need anything. Leave me alone," I interrupt and start to walk away.

He pulls me back, makes sure I can see his face, and says, “Stop interrupting. Go to the living room and sit. I’ll get you something to drink and run you that bath.”

He walks away and I roll my eyes. Nobody tells me what to do, much less a man. I’m not going to the stupid living room.

My feet, however, don’t agree with my head and take me straight there. I sigh heavily and collapse into the sofa.

Fifteen minutes later, Noah walks up to me with a glass of water in his hand. Giving me the glass, he sits beside me and says “Drink.”

I eye him but I am thirsty, so I empty half of the glass. He takes it and sets it on the floor.

“I give great hugs, you know,” he says, breaking the silence. I look at him and he shrugs like, what can I say? It’s true.

I roll my eyes and he smile, taking my hand. I look at our joined hands and sigh. I’m not supposed to be getting attached to this man, but my heart is fluttering because we’re holding hands.

I’m so lost in thought that I don’t notice his arms going around me until I am leaning against his broad chest. I hum in pleasure and close my eyes.

“Ave.”

“Hmm?”

“Who is he?”

I open my eyes and sigh. I guess he deserves to know, after all, he made Henry go away and he has been good to me all evening.

“He’s my ex.”

“Your ex-boyfriend?”

“Ex-fiancé, actually.”

“You were going to marry that oily toe rag?”

“It was a long time ago and I was in love with him,” I say and melt when he starts massaging my head.

“So, what happened?”

“Are you being nice just so you can get information out of me?”

“Is it working?” He asks and kisses my temple.

“A little.”

“Good. Now tell me what he did so I can pound him to a pulp.”

“I met Henry when I was nineteen. I had just gotten out of a horrible relationship. I found out that I wasn’t in a relationship. I was just cooking and cleaning for this guy and thought we were together.”

“He told me to my face that he was never dating me and was there because of the food. My first boyfriend only dated me because he was dared to do so and broke up with me when I wouldn’t put out.”

He pulls me against him, nuzzling my neck, and whispers
“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I just have horrible taste in men. Anyways, I met Henry after my breakup with the eating guy and he was this sweet, charming...”

“Oily?” He interrupts and I laugh.

“No. He was charming at the beginning,” I say, and he scoffs.

“I just met him today and I wasn’t charmed.”

“Shut up and let me talk.”

“Okay, sorry.” He kisses my ear and relaxes.

“At the beginning, it was all fun and roses. However, everyone around me warned me against going out with him. I didn’t listen, of course. They didn’t know him like I did, and they were judgmental.”

“I didn’t see his refusal to get a good job as anything because I was just a student at the time, and I also had no money. As soon as I graduated, he said we should move in together.”

“I thought it was too soon, but he gave me an ultimatum; we live together, or we’re done. That should have been the first red flag, but I ignored it and we moved to this expensive place.”

“For the first two months or so, it was fine. We split the bills and did everything together and shit. One day, he came home

and told me I would have to start paying the bills myself.”

“I complained and he gave me that ultimatum again. Foolishly, I agreed to his terms again. After I finished my house job, he said we should buy a house and move there.”

“I had just started earning more money and I complained that I wanted to support my parents back home. He gave me his ultimatum and I refused this time.”

“Hell started for me. He would show up at my work, follow me home, drop funny messages for me, just stalking me until I finally broke down and we bought the house. Foolishly, I put it in his name.”

“Then, he started staying out late. Mind you, I was still the one footing the bills. The only thing he paid for was food because, in his words, I couldn’t get his food right.”

“My sister told me she had seen him with different women. I refused to believe it and confronted him. Would you believe he didn’t even deny it?”

“He said it was my fault because I refused to go beyond third base with him, and he had to seek his pleasure somewhere else. Scared, I agreed to have sex with him.”

“But he didn’t stop. This time, he started cheating so blatantly. When I confronted him again, he said it was my fault. I’m a bad lay and I just stay there like a dead fish, letting him do all the work.”

“I tried to up my game. I even started yoga just to improve my flexibility, but he wouldn’t change. My only mercy was

that he didn't bring his women into the house.”

“By this time, I wasn't talking to my family, and I had no friends. He made me stop talking to everyone.”

“After some time, he stopped sleeping around and I thought he had changed. I was so happy. I threw it back so often, my waist hurt.”

“One day, I walked into the house, the house I bought, the house I was paying all the bills in, and saw him having sex with this blonde. They saw me but didn't stop until they both came.”

“Then, he dared to tell me that if I wanted him to still keep me around, I would have to co-exist with her. Something snapped in me, and I threw him out.”

“One day, I went to work and came back to see the place empty. No furniture, clothes, not even my stuff. He stole everything and ran. A few days later, I was told that he had listed the house for sale and took the down payment I made months ago just because I put the place in his name.”

“I left Sienna and came here for a fresh start. Then, Jojo called me a few days after you asked me to marry you and told me he was here, looking for me.”

“So that's why you agreed to marry me so suddenly,” he says, and I nod.

“And that's what happened. My life is a mess, isn't it?”

“No, and you're not stupid either. You're a brave woman and I am going to kill that scumbag the next time I see him.”

“You don’t have to do anything. He won’t bother me again, you made sure of it.”

He sits up and turns me to face him and I am shocked by the concern on his face.

“Avery, you’re my wife. He did all that to you.”

“I wasn’t your wife when he did all that.”

“And he had the effrontery to confront you tonight after all he did. Heaven can’t stop what’s coming to him.”

My eyes water and I look away from him. He turns my face back to his and coos.

“Don’t cry, honey. You’re too beautiful for that. Spread your lips, come on, show me your teeth.”

I laugh and he grins. I wrap my hands around his neck, and he hugs me, stroking my back. We pull apart but our faces remain close together.

“I meant it when I said you were beautiful tonight, Ave,” he mutters and against my better judgment, I kiss him.

His hand splays against my back, pushing me against him, and we fall backward, me on top of him.

His tongue sweeps mine twice and I moan in response. I arch my back and his hand grips my ass tightly.

“Damn, I knew this thing was fat,” he mutters, and I laugh. We kiss again and his hand starts to crawl up my lap. His forefinger brushes my sensitive area and I jump.

Wait, what am I doing? Do I just jump into bed with whoever comforts me about a past relationship? When did I even start liking him?

Overwhelmed, I pull back and sit away from him. He sits up and sighs, running his hands through his hair.

“This again?” When I don’t answer, he reaches for me and I jump up, running to my room.

I slide down the door in a puddle. Fuck, I have feelings for my fake husband.

Eighteen

Noah

Avery has been ignoring me for the last week and I'm not going to lie, I feel like shit. I thought we were moving forward when she opened up to me, but she kisses me and ignores me again.

Should I be feeling this way when I'm the injured party? All I did was comfort her and she's the one ignoring me when she kissed me.

I guess all is fair in love and war. Wait, love? I don't love Avery. Shaking my head, I go to her room.

I knock on her door, and call out softly, "Avery," before opening it. It is empty, so I go to the living room.

I find her there, curled up on the sofa where we kissed last week. Clearing my throat loudly, she turns to look at me and my breath slams in my chest.

Her hair is curlier today, and there are a few freckles scattered across her nose. Her bright blue eyes glare at me and I grunt.

“Hey. What are you doing?” I ask and she points to the book lying face down beside her.

I sit beside her, and she sits up, moving away from me.

“Why are you mad at me now?”

“Nothing.”

“Really? Because you’ve not said a word to me since last week.”

She takes her book and uses it to cover her face. Now I’m beginning to feel annoyed. I pluck the book from her fingers, and she glares at me.

“Ave, I’m running out of patience here.”

“Then stop following me around,” she snaps, and I raise an eyebrow.

“You finally said something to me.”

“Leave me alone, Noah,” she says and stands up.

I pull her back down and her hand feels warm in mine.

“There’s something. You can’t even look me in the eye. Why?” I say, grabbing her chin and turning her face to mine.

“Nothing. Just leave me alone,” she says, avoiding my eyes.

“Wait, are you embarrassed?” I chuckle and her cheeks color.

“No, I’m not. You’re annoying. Let go.”

“Not until you talk to me. And you are embarrassed. You’re blushing so much.”

She slaps my hand away from her face and rolls her eyes.

“Fine. I am embarrassed. Happy?”

I grin and lean back in the chair. “Why would you be embarrassed?”

“Well, you saw my ex and then, I told you my horrible past. Then I kissed you after I’d been complaining about you jumping me. So yeah, I am embarrassed.”

I laugh loudly until she begrudgingly smiles.

“I mean, I am kind of irresistible. Jump me anytime you’d like.”

She hits my arm and I laugh again.

“Why don’t we go out? It might help with all this back and forth,” I say, and she looks at me in suspicion.

“I’m not making another contract. I’m just saying, I’m tired of the whole kiss-and-ignore thing. Why don’t we go out today and get to know each other?”

She keeps eyeing me and I laugh.

“Even if this isn’t a real marriage, we can still try to be friends,” I say, nudging her hand and she finally nods.

“Fine, I’ll go. Let me change into something appropriate.” She stands up and walks to her room.

Forty-five minutes later, I drive through a set of rusted gates and stop at the foot of a small hill.

Avery comes down from the car first, smiling.

“Where are we? Did you bring me here to murder me?”

I take the hastily packed picnic basket and lock the car doors, signaling for her to come to my side.

She rolls her eyes but walks beside me and we climb to the top of the hill. Once there, we set up in silence and fall on the blanket when we're done.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she sits up and opens a bag of chips and a bottle of water.

I lean up on my elbows and watch her chew for a few seconds before sitting up completely.

Grabbing the bag from her hands, I say “How about we agree to a truce?”

“A truce?”

“Yes. You're obviously attracted to me...”

“I'm not.”

“...and I think you're beautiful...”

“I already know that.”

“...so, stop interrupting me and let me finish.”

She takes the chips back and says “Fine, I won't.”

“So, why don't we agree that we like each other and stop trying to wound ourselves with silence or words?” I finish and she stares at me for so long, I'm afraid she froze.

“Okay, you go first,” she finally unfreezes, and I grin.

“Why? Are you shy?” I ask and she blushes.

“No, you brought the suggestion, so go first.”

“Fine. I like you, Avery. Let’s be friends,” I say, looking straight at her. She rolls her eyes before talking.

“I like you too, Noah. Even though this feels very childish.”

“Truce?” I stretch my hand and she eye it for a few seconds before shaking it.

We eat in silence for a few seconds before Avery breaks it.

“You know, I can’t figure you out.” I turn to face her, and she continues.

“The first time we met, you were this angry, rude bird and now, you’re nice. It’s a little spooky, to be honest.”

I drink deeply from my bottle before talking. “Yeah, well, when you grow up like I did, you have to address the world with coldness.”

“The starving you part?” She asks and I scoff.

“That’s not even the worst. Since you told me a little about your past already, I can trust you with some of mine.”

She sits up and draws closer to me and I start.

“First of all, Alexia isn’t my mother,” I laugh at her expression before continuing.

“My father was this wild, rough stud who didn’t appreciate being told no. He saw my birth mom at a hotel he stayed at one time and asked her for sex.”

“She said no, and he raped her. Repeatedly. She got pregnant with me and went to him but was threatened into

keeping quiet.”

“After many years, he realized Alexia couldn’t have more children and they only had girls, so he came for me. My mom refused to let me go and he killed her.”

She gasps and holds my hand, eyes shining. I shudder before continuing.

“I was five when he took me from my mom. Alexia and her girls were not happy about my arrival when they found out that he planned to leave everything to me.”

“Selene and Calliope were hoping to be chosen as heirs which makes no sense because he would have rather run his empire to the ground than see it go to girls. Old fashioned bastard.”

“I found myself suddenly alone, and then, the training from hell started. Alexia and her daughters did whatever they could to increase my punishment.”

“One time, Selene lied that I’d touched her without her consent. Do you know what he said to me?” I pause and look at Avery who shakes her head, curls bouncing around her face.

“He said he wasn’t surprised, seeing how I was conceived. Apparently, my mother was a whore who got what she deserved for daring to tell him no.”

“That makes zero sense,” Avery says angrily, and I scoff.

“It wasn’t said to make sense. He just wanted to break my spirit and for a while, he succeeded. He also flogged me so hard that I dislocated a wrist. Fun times.”

“Anyways, I became the person he wanted his heir to be. Hard, cold, unfeeling, nasty, basically a piece of shit human being. In other words, a copy of him.”

“Some years back, I started digging into my mother’s death and I found out what happened to her. I just went mad. I confronted him and...” I trail off, remembering split knuckles and my father’s bleeding face underneath me.

“Well, it wasn’t a pretty sight. I left and came here. The story that spread was that I came here to manage our hotel, but really, I never planned to go back home.”

“But I had no money of my own. Everything was tied to him, and I would have died of hunger if I turned my back on him completely.”

“So, I managed the hotel and expanded. The two new places were originally in my name, but he seized them as a way to show that I can never escape him.”

“A friend of mine helped me open a club hidden well away from him. Now he’s dead and managed to force me into marriage.”

“Another show of power thing?” She asks and I nod.

“At least you’re pretty. Annoying, but I can manage,” I joke, and she hits my arm.

I hear a snuffle and turn to face her sharply. There are tears on her cheeks, and I frown.

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m sorry, it’s just, you went through so much and I’ve been calling you a stuck-up playboy without knowing your story,” she says and I laugh.

“Yeah, it’s just, I was hoping you would kiss me when you hear my sob story and now, you’re just crying,” I say and she laughs, slapping my arm.

“Ouch. Not fair.”

We sit in silence, and I feel lips on my cheek. When I turn to face her, she pecks my lips lightly and I smile.

I pull her close to me and we lie down, my arms around her waist. My heart beats loudly in my chest and I feel raw, but this is the most content I’ve been in forever, so I’d be damned if I ruined the moment.

Nineteen

Noah

An alarm blares and I look up from the papers I was examining. “It’s 5 o’clock already? Fuck. Where’s the afternoon going?”

I massage my eyes and lean back on my chair, yawning. After a minute or two, I arrange my desk before going out of the office and into to the kitchen.

“What should I make this evening?” I mutter, surveying the contents of the fridge. The housekeeping staff already stocked it, so there are a lot of options.

Deciding on spanakopita stuffed shells, I go to the wine cellar to take a bottle of red.

“This should go well with dinner,” I mutter and go back to the kitchen to put it in the fridge. Then, I start taking ingredients out of the fridge and onto the kitchen table.

As I turn on the oven, the doorbell rings and I pause. Why is she home so early? I turn it off and go to the door.

I start to smile but a thought occurs to me. Why is she ringing the doorbell when she has a key?

Frowning slightly, I open the door and come face to face with a strangely familiar face. We stare at each other until he says, "Long time no see, son."

Immediately, I recognize him. "Mr. Theo Diamandis," I say, eyeing him.

"You don't mind if I come in, do you?" He says and walks in without waiting for an invitation. I slam the door shut and walk after him into the living room.

"You have a nice place here. It took me a while to find you, what with your unreasonable need for privacy." He sits, crosses his legs, and smiles at me.

"I wasn't private enough. Pardon my manners, sir. Good evening and welcome. Can I offer you anything?" I ask and he frowns.

"You serve? You don't have someone to do that here?"

"I already sent my staff home. You know, some of us are capable of doing stuff for ourselves."

"That's not befitting of your station, *Patéras Galanis*."

I scowl and he shrugs.

"What? No matter how you try to deny it, that's your title now."

"Why are you here?" I ask not too politely.

“Before that, since you’re serving, I’d like a glass of wine. Or brandy, if you have,” he says and I nod, going to bring the bottle of wine I kept in the fridge earlier.

My hands shake as I pour glasses for us. Memories of him laughing with my father burn into my eyes and I have to loosen my grip on the glass.

If my father was the devil, he was the devil’s advocate. They were thick as thieves and he always supported my father’s decisions, especially the bad ones.

He was the one who suggested starving me as a means to bring me to heel. Fucking bastard. He couldn’t have followed his best friend to the grave.

I take a steadying breath and take the glasses to the living room, handing him one and I take a seat opposite him.

“Look, Mr. Diamandis, I appreciate you tracking me down...” I start and he laughs.

“That Galanis dry wit. Makes me almost miss your father.”

“Almost?”

“You know, when it’s time to go, it’s time. I can’t argue with nature.”

I nod and take a sip of my wine slowly. He chuckles again and drops his wine glass on the side table.

“So, how have you been coping with his death? How do you youngsters say it? ‘What’s up with you?’” He asks and I raise an eyebrow in surprise.

“Why are you asking?”

“Well, I’m sure you miss him. He was your father after all, and he changed your life.”

I laugh humorlessly before emptying my glass and I put it on the coffee table in front of me.

“What do you want, Theo?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to use that command. Anyways, I heard about the will, and seeing as you managed to retain everything you have, I’m guessing you got married.”

I keep quiet, leaning back on my chair and surveying him with mounting dread. This man doesn’t gossip for no reason, and I doubt I would like what he has to say.

“How’s the marriage going?”

I shrug noncommittally and a tic jumps in his jaw. Good, he’s getting annoyed. He’s easier to manage when angry.

“Who is the girl? What does she do? What family does she come from? Do we know her? What’s her history like?”

I narrow my eyes at him before answering. “She is none of your business. I had no idea you had started gossiping. Is this a new thing? Because you’ll be very disappointed. I’m not my father, so I won’t entertain you.”

He scowls and cracks his knuckles before continuing.

“She must be a good lay if you’re jumping to her defense like this.”

Heat rises to my face, but I don't bite the bait, taking deep breaths before replying.

"I would advise you not to talk about my wife like that. I don't want any unnecessary drama between our families, but I won't take your comments against my wife lightly."

I emphasize *my wife* and a nasty smile starts playing around his lips when I'm done.

"Okay. I won't say anything. Although, I suppose you must've had your fill of her by now because that thing needs to end."

I sit up a little. "What needs to end?"

An unconvincing look of surprise crosses his face, and he says "You haven't heard? Well, I suppose I can give you two more months, but that's it."

"What are you talking about?" I ground out, annoyed.

"You have to get divorced soon, son. I won't have my daughter be in a polygamous marriage," he says, smiling fully now.

"Explain yourself fully or get out."

"With pleasure. It seems your father didn't inform you, but before he died, we made a pact to join our families and business in marriage. You would wed my daughter and only child."

"What?!"

“I didn’t think we would be rushing things, but since he’s dead, I might follow him soon and I’d like to put my affairs in order before that happens.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” I say, frowning. “What’s my business with you dying soon?”

“As you very well know, I can’t pass my properties to a mere woman.”

“Why? They have one head, just like men,” I interrupt, and he scowls.

“You want me to leave my businesses to a woman? Bah! As if they know anything other than how to look pretty and fuck.”

“There’s a lot women can do, and you would see that if you weren’t such a stuck-up, medieval-minded son of a bitch.”

He looks at me in shock and I shrug.

“It seems America has messed with your mind, boy, but that’s the order of things. I won’t leave all I’ve worked hard for in the hands of a woman.”

“Well then, take it with you to the other world.”

He glared at me fiercely and I bite back a smile.

“You might think it’s funny until it’s your turn and you have only girls,” he says, and laughter explodes from me.

“As if that would matter to me,” I say, still laughing.

“It is tradition to pass all the properties to a male child,” he says, and I scoff.

“Tradition? Or just the whims of selfish old men who have refused to grow?”

He glares at and breathes deeply, trying to calm down. I cross my arms and wait for him to start talking.

“Back to the marriage deal...” he starts but I interrupt him.

“Was it a signed deal?”

He frowns and I repeat the question.

“This...pact between you and him, did you write it down and sign it?”

“No. We don’t need to sign a contract just to marry our children,” he says, and I smile.

“As long as that bullshit is not legally binding, I don’t have to do anything. Now, leave. My wife will be home soon,” I say and gesture towards the door.

He eyes me for some time, before sighing. “I thought you might say that. Well, if you don’t agree to my proposal, I will pull out all the investments and shares I have in your companies.”

I sit up like someone just electrocuted me and he laughs at seeing my expression.

“I see I finally have your attention. It looks like business is the only thing you understand too, so why don’t we strike a good deal?” he says, smirking.

I don’t answer, so he continues.

“Let me tell you what you stand to gain from this marriage. My entire fortune, properties, and businesses included, and my beautiful daughter. If you refuse, you’ve made an enemy of me, and believe me, you don’t want that.”

Vibrating with anger, I point a shaky hand toward the door. “Get out of my house now.”

He grins when he sees my hand and reaches for his jacket.

“I will not only pull out, but I will persuade the other investors to leave too. Choose wisely, son.” With that, he stands up and shrugs his jacket on.

“The way I see it, it’s an easy choice. You say yes, more money and a stunning wife. You say no, and well, heavy loss.”

I stand up, glowering at him. “I think you’re mistaken. You believe I’m my father who would choose money over everything else. You can take your offer and shove it up your ass.”

He shrugs and walks to the door. Before leaving, he sends a parting shot.

“I’ll give you a month to say yes, or else you lose me as a business partner.”

“Out!”

He smirks and leaves. I sink into the chair and bury my face in my hands. It’s a good thing you’re dead, Alexander, or else, I would have killed you myself.

Twenty

Avery

I look up from my bowl of cereal when I hear footsteps. Seconds later, my grumpy husband walks into the dining room.

I eye him, trying to gauge his mood and see if he will look at me, but he barely spares me a glance, picking an apple from the fruit bowl and leaves.

He has been this way for a while now, not saying anything to me. Rolling my eyes, I slam my spoon on the table and walk after him. I refuse to deal with this attitude any longer.

“Noah? Noah!” I call out but all I get is a door slamming. What could have happened?

Throwback to three nights ago when I came home and met him sitting in a daze in the living room.

“Seriously, you have to stop littering the hallway with your shoes,” I said when I entered, bending to pick up the offending footwear after closing the door.

I carried it into the living room, prepared to deliver a speech on the dangers of throwing stuff around but his facial expression stopped me.

He looked like a man who didn't know what to do with himself. I dropped my bag and the shoes and immediately went to sit beside him.

He didn't rouse until I put my arm around his shoulder. Startled, he jumped away and eyed me furtively.

“You're home. When did you get home?”

“A couple of minutes ago. Didn't you hear the front door open? Or me complaining about you throwing your shoes about?” I said, pointing at the door.

“I'm not in the mood for your nagging tonight, Avery,” he said and stood up, walking away from me.

“What is up with you? You were sitting here looking like you just saw a ghost. Is there a problem?”

“Do I have to tell you everything now? What are we? Friends? Give me a break,” he snapped, and I raised an eyebrow.

“What happened while I was away? Was there bad news from home?”

Big mistake. He immediately got in my face, shouting.

“There was no news from home. In fact, there is nothing at home for me.”

I raised my hands, backing away. “Okay, sorry I asked.”

When he had calmed down, I put a hand on his shoulder, stroking softly.

“So, what is the problem?”

“There’s no problem. I’m fine.”

Weighing my options, I decided to head to my room and wait until he has calmed down.

Picking my bag, I started to climb the staircase when a thought occurred to me.

“Hey, did you still make dinner? You promised you would do so when I left and...” I stopped at the look he sent my way.

“What? Do I exist to cook for you? My only purpose in your life is to make you dinner. There’s food in the kitchen. Make something for yourself.”

Annoyed, I blew my hair out of my eye before replying.

“I’ve had a very difficult day, so I don’t appreciate this attitude. If something happened to you, you can either talk to me about it or you keep that shit to yourself. Stop taking your shitty mood out on me.”

He looked at me with scorn and chuckled with no humor. “The queen doesn’t appreciate my attitude. You’re the only one allowed to have bad days and that’s fine. I’ll remove my annoying self from your sight.”

With that, he stomped past me to his room and has been giving me the cold shoulder ever since.

As if that wasn't bad enough, I had to clean up the melted cheese I found on the kitchen table that night.

I am forcing that information out of him one way or the other tonight. With that thought, I grab my bag and go to work.

However, I am kept very busy at work that I come home very tired and don't remember to ask him until the following evening when I get back from the hospital.

I walk in and almost fall when my foot hits a big shoe. "That's it," I mutter, picking the pair when I locate the other one and march through the house calling Noah.

He doesn't answer, so I go up to his room. Without knocking, I push the door open and see a very surprised and half-naked man.

The surprise soon turns to anger, and he points to the door.

"Get out."

I shut the door firmly behind me and walk further into the room.

"No. What's your problem?"

"What's my problem? What's your problem? Why are you barging into my room like it's nothing?"

"First of all," I throw his shoe on the floor and point at it, saying "How much do I have to talk about you always kicking your shoes off so close to the door? Someone might trip on them."

He picks them up, walks to his closet, and throws them inside. Then he comes back to face me.

“Is that all? Can you leave now?” He says and I roll my eyes in irritation.

“No. I want to talk to you, but before that happens, can you put a shirt on?” I gesture to his exposed chest, trying not to make it obvious that I was checking him out earlier.

This man has serious muscles and I’m holding on to my last bit of concentration, so I don’t start to drool.

“Whatever you want to talk about, I’m not interested. Also, you barged into my room, so deal with the nakedness,” he says and attempts to walk past me.

I block him and he moves back, running his hands through his hair, exasperated.

“What is your problem, Avery?” He asks and I flare up.

“My problem is you, Noah. You don’t talk to me; you don’t answer when I talk to you. I’m tired of being treated like furniture.”

“Behave like you don’t know me too. That will solve your incurable need for attention.”

“My incurable need for attention? What happened to what you said a month ago? The truce? The whole “I like you and you like me too’ thing?”

“You have to be the world’s most gullible idiot to believe that I like you. As if I could. I’m a billionaire and you’re just

you. Now, get out of my room.”

He walks past me and opens the door, but I close it.

Looking him dead in the eye, I say “You’ve changed, and I know it’s only news from Greece that can cause a change as big as this. What happened? We were doing so well.”

Looking uncomfortable, he turns away from me and walks to the far end of the room.

“Nothing happened, okay? Maybe I got tired of pretending to be nice,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck and I know he’s lying.

“You weren’t pretending. You and I know that. For a minute, I believed you liked me, and I...” I rub my face with my hand and sigh.

Walking closer to him, I soften my voice, asking “What’s the problem? Noah, you can talk to me. We promised to be friends. Come on.”

He scoffs and looks at me with ridicule. “Friends? This is my problem with poor people. You tell them one thing and they believe you were serious.”

“Maybe I was just trying to get you into my bed which, now looking at you, I’ve changed my mind. You’re not worth all the stress.”

I shake my head in disbelief. Is he going to keep playing this script?

“Not worth the stress? Noah, you made the move towards reconciliation every time.”

“Exactly, my bed. Although, now that you’re here, we might just...”

I hold a hand out in front of me to halt his movement and he smirks.

“Come on. You know I’ll make it good for you. Don’t be shy now,” he says, and I eye him in annoyance.

“Drop the act, Noah. Something is bothering you and I’m going to get to the root of it.”

He suddenly starts shouting and I walk back quickly.

“For the last fucking time, Avery, nothing is bothering me. Do you just love staying in situations where you’re unwanted?”

Voice dripping with disdain, he continues.

“Do I have to serve you divorce papers just so you can get out of my bedroom? Or do I have to fuck another woman in front of you just so you can get the message and stay out of my life?!”

The silence that follows weighs on my chest heavily and I struggle to breathe. After a few seconds, he points at the door.

“Get out,” he says, and I turn to it. Hand on the doorknob, I turn back to face him and look him straight in the eye before talking.

“You know what? Fuck you, Noah. Whatever’s eating you up inside, I hope you choke on it. I tried but if this is how you want to be, fine. Good night, and don’t talk to me ever again.”

I open the door and walk out, slamming it so hard, the windows rattle.

Annoying little shit. I’ll show him silence since that’s what he wants.

The next morning, I purposely wait for him to enter the dining room before I reach for the last apple that I know he wanted and take a big bite out of it.

Looking away, I wait for him to say something, but all he does is huff and leave the room.

How am I supposed to affect him when he’s ignoring me too? I refuse to lose this battle.

I throw the rest out through the door and his footsteps stop. Point one to me, piece of shit.

Twenty-One

Noah

I look up from my phone when the scent of berries hit my nose. Avery has been trying new scents every week and it has been driving me crazy.

Last week, it was cinnamon, and the week before that, gardenias. To have her this close and not even talk to her has been killing me.

Just like we do every morning, she walks into the dining room, takes fruit from the fruit bowl, and leaves while I watch quietly.

I sigh, take a sip of my coffee, and recoil at how cold it is, just like my life has been for the past month.

Groaning, I take my jacket and go to work. Just like every other day, my mind wanders to Theo and his demands.

How do I boycott him? I looked into his percentage in the hotels, and it is quite a lot. Can I absorb a loss like that?

“Gain a penny, lose a dollar,” I mutter, and ten heads look at me. Shit, I forgot I was in a meeting.

“Is there a problem with the report sir?” A balding man sitting at the end of the table asks and I shake my head.

“No. However, let’s wrap this up now and continue next week. Have a great weekend and I’ll see you on Monday,” I say and leave the conference room, stunned gazes following me.

I fall into my seat once I enter my office and loosen my tie. Why is it so hard to make up my mind?

On one hand, I retain a business partner and merge my business with his. On the other hand, Avery.

Sweet, beautiful Avery who has been the reason I enjoyed making breakfast for in a long time and made me want to go home early.

Her smile, eyes, laughter, hair, her presence, I have to lose all of that for money. Suddenly, the answer comes to me, and I sit up straight.

I refuse to give up the woman I’m in love with just because of a business deal.

“Whoa, love? I can’t be in love with Avery,” I mutter but for the first time in weeks, my heart feels lighter and my thoughts clearer.

I have to make things right. With that, I quickly put on my jacket and dash for the elevator, dialing Victor to bring my car out.

I get home in no time and run to Avery’s room but she’s not inside.

“Ave? Are you home?” I call out but there’s no response. Wait, today is Friday, which means she’s on call.

I guess my apology will have to wait until tomorrow.

The night passes quickly and I pace in the living room, waiting for Avery to come home. The door opens and I pause.

After a few seconds, she comes into the living room and my chest constricts. How could I think I could give her up? How did I even survive not talking to her for a whole month?

“Ave?” I call. She twitches but ignores me and goes to her room. I follow and quietly knock on her door.

“Ave? Can we talk? Please? I need to talk to you. Please, open up. I’m sorry about everything and I can explain, please.”

I stop knocking and put my ear against the door, but I don’t hear anything. Maybe she went into the bathroom.

“I’ll make you some breakfast,” I say and go to the kitchen. Every five seconds, I look at the door, but she doesn’t show up.

Half an hour later, I carry a heavy tray to her room and put it on the floor so I can knock. However, she keeps ignoring me.

“Ave, I have your food. At least take it,” I say and raise my hand to knock again, but the door opens violently and blue eyes glare at me in anger.

“You have a lot of nerve, telling me to just take something after you’ve ignored me for weeks.”

I sigh and put my hands forward, pleading. “Please, if you’ll just let me explain.”

“Don’t you dare touch me? I was going to ignore you but I’m really tired and need to sleep and you knocking on my door is preventing that from happening. Go away,” she says and slams the door in my face.

“Okay. Your breakfast tray is here. Don’t go hungry just because you’re angry with me,” I call out but all I get is a loud thud of a book being thrown against the door.

I put the tray directly in front of the door and go to my room.

After three torturous hours, I walk out and meet the untouched tray of food still in front of Avery’s room, so I knock again.

“Avery, seriously, you have to eat something. I know you’re mad at me, but you don’t have to starve yourself because of that.”

I get no response, so I push the door open and meet an empty room. Did she leave while I was in my room?

Panicked, I run down to the living room but stop when I hear someone munching. Following the sound, I enter the kitchen and see Avery eating a bowl of cereal.

I sag against the door in relief, but she just rolls her eyes at me.

“I made you breakfast. Didn’t you see it?”

She keeps quiet, slowly emptying her bowl, and drops it in the sink when she's done.

"I saw. I ignored it," she says and tries to walk past me, but I block her.

"Avery, can we please talk?"

"No. Excuse me."

"I'm very sorry about these past few weeks, but I have a reason for going mute."

"I said no, but you're still talking to me."

"I just...something happened from home, and I panicked and..."

"And took it out on me? Is that fair?"

"It isn't, but you have to understand, I..." I say but she interrupts.

"I don't have to understand anything. I came to you when I noticed your mood was shit and you blew me off. You started ignoring me, but I tried to talk to you again and you just..."

She pauses to look at me and scoffs.

"You were right. We're not friends. You're a billionaire and I'm just me. We are worlds apart. I'm sorry for bothering you then and I'll keep ignoring you now."

She moves towards the door, but I block her again.

"What the fuck do you want from me? One month, you want me around and the next, you don't. I'm not your plaything!"

She glares at me, but I don't move an inch. After a few seconds, I start to talk.

“About a month ago, I got some news from home that I didn't like, and I didn't know how to react to it...” I start and she interrupts me again, louder this time.

“You suddenly want to talk to me about it? Well, I don't care anymore. This has nothing to do with me, so...”

“But it has everything to do with you, Ave. The news, my decision, has everything to do with you. I didn't realize it at first, but now I do, and God, what an idiot I have been for taking so long.”

She eyes me but doesn't say anything, so I continue.

“If you let me, I will explain everything over lunch,” I say, and she rolls her eyes.

“You have a lot of nerve, asking me to lunch when I've still not forgiven you.”

“I know, and I'm sorry. If you want me to get on my knees, I will, but I am very sorry for everything I did and said.”

She doesn't say anything, so I quickly throw in “Besides, you need to eat something reasonable. Cereal doesn't do anything for you and we both know it. You don't have to do anything. Let me cook and explain, you listen and fill your stomach, and then forgive me.”

She frowns and I hastily correct myself. “Sorry, consider my apology.”

She nods and takes a seat at the kitchen table.

I quickly boil pasta and heat some sauce on the stove. In a few minutes, the food is done, and I make plates for us.

She starts eating slowly but wolfs it down at the end. I chuckle quietly and quickly shut up when she eyes me.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just, you were this hungry, yet refusing to eat the food I made earlier.”

I laugh again and she growls.

“And your problem is?”

I sit up straight and take her empty plate. “Nothing. Do you want more?”

Without waiting, I dish a second helping and give it to her. Then, I take a bottle of wine out of the fridge, pour it for both of us and sit beside her.

“What now?” she says, rolling her eyes and I grin.

“Nothing. I missed you, that’s all.”

“If you think you can sway me by using sweet talk...”

“I’m not sweet talking you, I swear. I missed you. It was hell, seeing you and not talking to you, and smelling those maddening perfumes you changed every week. God, I missed you so much.”

She smiles mischievously and says, “I knew the perfumes would bother you.”

I smile and look at her only to see a drop of sauce on her face. Using my thumb, I wipe it off and lick it.

Her eyes follow my movements, and she blurts out, “I missed you too.”

We stare at each other for a second before I close the distance and cover her lips with mine.

Our tongues tangle and I can taste the sauce on her. She breaks away long enough to say, “This doesn’t mean I forgive you.”

“I’ll take it,” I say and kiss her again. I lift her onto the table and loosen her curls when I hear a knock on the door.

“Fuck,” I groan, and she giggles.

“Saved by the door,” she says, and I groan a second time. The person knocks again, and I pull away from her.

“I’ll be back. Finish your food, though.”

I open the door and see a pretty woman standing outside.

“Hi, how can I help you?” I ask gruffly and she lifts one perfectly drawn eyebrow.

“Hi. I’m Calypso Diamandis. Your betrothed,” she says, and I freeze.

Why the hell is she here now?

Twenty-Two

Avery

“Hi, how can I help you?” Noah’s voice booms to the kitchen and I smile. Wait, I’m supposed to be angry with him.

Although, the way I was clawing his shirt earlier didn’t say anger. I snort into the silence and pick up my fork.

Wait, silence? Why can’t I hear anything? The hallway practically leads to the kitchen.

I go out to check what is going on and see Noah staring at a tall, green-eyed goddess.

Nobody notices my approach until I’m standing beside Noah. Panic spreads across his face when he sees me, and I frown a little.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, I stretch my hand toward the lady, saying “Hi, I’m Avery. It’s nice to meet you.”

She looks at my outstretched hand like it’s diseased, so I put it back at my side. She walks inside the house, glaring as if everything offends her.

I turn to look at a rigid Noah who still doesn't say a word, so I walk after her quickly.

“Uhm, hi. I don't know who you are and...” I say, but she interrupts me with a knowing smirk.

“You don't know me? Noah hasn't told you anything?”

I look at him and he shakes his head slightly, so I turn back to her, and she continues.

“Well, I'll be happy to break the good news to you. Noah and I are...”

Noah coughs loudly, blocking whatever she was about to say, and glares at her before turning me to face him.

“Ave, can you excuse us? I need to talk to Calypso in private. I won't take long, I promise, and I'll explain everything after,” he says, fidgety.

I look between the two of them before nodding and passing through the living room, heading for the staircase.

This pillar is big enough to hide behind,” I mutter and quickly throw myself behind it when they enter the living room.

Their voices are loud, so I stop straining to hear what they are saying.

“Why the fuck would you come to my house?!” he shouts, but she keeps looking around with a sneer on her face.

“This place is so shabby. When we marry, we're definitely moving.”

He grabs her arms and turns her to face him, shouting.

“I won’t ask again. Why are you here?”

“Does your wife know we’re engaged?”

“We’re not getting married.”

“It is pretty much a done deal.”

“It was a stupid agreement between friends, and I haven’t even given him my answer yet.”

She scoffs and places a delicate hand on his arm, rubbing it.

“Surely, you’re not so delusional to believe you have a choice. We’re getting married soon. I’ll be a good wife, I promise. I’ll even let you keep her around as long as it’s not in my face.”

Keep me around? Arranged marriage? Deciding I’ve heard enough, I creep out of my hiding place and walk down the hall quietly, into a guest room.

So, this is why he ignored me for a whole month. Is he getting married soon? He could have just told me, and I would’ve left.

My heart clenches at the thought of leaving and I sit on the bed. How can I leave him behind?

I mean, I knew this day would come, but I’m not ready for it. I already lost one month with him and now, I have to leave?

How dare this bitch come in and demand that I give my man up? And for what? An arranged marriage?

“Not like ours was real,” I snort, thinking about our contract. Theirs would be more real than ours ever was.

I foolishly thought we were heading somewhere after this afternoon. My fingers touch my lips and I sigh, remembering the kiss.

Wait a minute, he kissed me knowing he was getting married to someone else soon?

My eyes snap open and I shoot out of the bed. Wow, he was keeping me on the side.

I don't realize I'm making noise with my pacing until the door opens and Noah pokes his head in.

“Thank goodness you're here. I couldn't find you anywhere and started to get worried, and then I heard movement here and decided to check. Are you okay? I'm sorry about earlier,” he says, cradling my face in his hands.

I move back and glare at him.

“I'm fine. Is your wife gone?”

“Yeah, she...” his eyes dart to mine in surprise and I scoff.

“What? Are you surprised I know?”

“How did you find out?”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I was, just after I had tidied everything up.”

I move away from him and cross my arms, glaring more furiously.

“You know, you could have said something since. I wasted a whole month pining for you when you were making marriage plans with some Greek bitch who won’t even acknowledge my handshake!”

I lift one shaky hand, pointing at him and he takes a step back.

“When you said you received some unpleasant news from home, was it your marriage to your green-eyed siren?” I ask and he nods.

Stunned, I look away from him and blink the sudden tears from my eyes. Why am I crying over someone I never even had?

“You made me waste one month, looking for you, wanting you, and you were planning a wedding with someone else? Let me guess, she’s a rich heiress and you inherit everything her father owns when you marry her.”

He nods again and I laugh sarcastically. The sound fills the room and I recoil from how empty it sounds.

“Life is made for you, huh?” I eye him before making for the door, but he stands in front of me.

“At least let me explain,” he says, and I hold up my hand in a stop gesture.

“No. You don’t need to. I don’t want to listen to anything you have to say.”

“Ave, let me talk! You’re always making assumptions, never letting me explain anything.” He shouts and I frown.

“Why are you yelling at me?”

“Because I’m tired of you always assuming the worst about me. Give me a chance to explain.”

“Explain what now?”

“The situation.”

“Right, the situation,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Fine. Some weeks ago, her dad told me about this stupid arranged marriage he and my father agreed on. He said I will lose him as a business partner if I don’t agree and I’ve just been torn over it for a while.”

“Looks like you’ve made up your mind to me,” I interrupt, and he scoffs.

“Really? How?”

“You’re going to marry your princess and enjoy her daddy’s money. Congratulations,” I say, smiling sarcastically and he rolls his eyes.

“Stop. I’m not done.”

“What else is there to say?”

“What I decided to do?”

“Isn’t it obvious? You’ve said yes. That’s why she came here and treated me like trash. I must have looked so stupid, stretching my hand, and introducing myself.”

“Ave, you didn’t look stupid,” he says, pinching his nose, but I ignore him and continue talking.

“Introducing myself as the mistress of the house to the real mistress of the house. What an idiot.”

“Why are you so sure I said yes?” He asks and I stop moving, looking straight at him.

“Because you’re you. That’s what you would do. Money means more to you than people do.”

He scoffs loudly and eyes me before grinning widely.

“Fine, you’re right, money does mean more to me. Why are you so bothered though?” He asks and I slam my fist on the nearest surface, a shelf.

“Because you led me on. All that talk of us being friends, liking each other, you apologizing this afternoon, shoving your tongue down my throat like you’re not engaged, you man whore.”

He clenches his jaw slightly, before answering.

“I didn’t lead you on. And you reciprocated everything I did. Besides, we’re nothing to each other.”

“We are married, Noah. That’s something.”

“No, I paid you to pose as my wife for a while and the time is up. Why are you bothered about it?”

Hurt, I move back, grasping at anything to formulate an answer.

“Because I...you could have at least told me we were done before now. You were all over me today, apologizing and cooking. Did that mean nothing?”

“I don’t know, you tell me. After all, I’m a lying man whore.”

“Fuck you, Noah,” I say, turning away from him.

“Why would you have me do it? Turn her down? She’s a lot more valuable to me than you are because I’ll lose a business partner if I say no to this arranged marriage.”

He steps closer to me and continues talking.

“On the other hand, if I say yes, I gain more power, money, and an entire empire. After all, money means more to me than people, especially you.”

I quickly turn, brush past him, and go to the door. Not looking at him, I whisper, “Fuck you, Noah” and run to my room before allowing my tears to fall.

Twenty-Three

Noah

I hear the hurt in Avery's voice when she whispers, "Fuck you, Noah" and dash towards her but she runs out of the room.

Shit. What have I done? I run my fingers through my hair and pull it, but the pain does nothing to lessen the tightness in my chest.

"Fuck!" I shout, kicking the door repeatedly but nothing happens, except for the pain now shooting in my leg.

"I'm going to kill you, Theo," I mutter and wrench the door open. I go to my room to take my coat and car keys, then dash out.

Sobs and a flurry of movement reaches my ears from Avery's room when I walk past and I stop, reaching for the doorknob.

No, I can't fix anything yet until I talk to the bastard interested in controlling my life.

I put one painful foot in front of the other and walk out of the house, into the elevator.

Driving at a speed that can cause an accident, I arrive at Theo's lodging. I park and throw the keys at a valet, dashing madly for the elevator.

I press the button for the thirteenth floor and tap my foot impatiently, waiting for it to stop. Finally, the door opens, and I go to his room.

I bang on the door for some time before Calypso opens it. She leans against the door, eyeing me.

She says something that I don't listen to, entering the room and shouting. "Theo? Theo? Where the fuck are you?"

The man in question comes out of the en-suite room wearing a bathrobe and gives me a once-over.

"I don't know if it's the shock from losing your father that made you lose your manners, but I won't tolerate it," he says and turns to go back into his room.

"You will remain where you are," I growl, and he turns back to face me.

"This is how you address an elder?"

"One I don't respect."

He cocks his head to the side, then smirks and gestures to a chair, saying "Why don't you have a seat, and we can talk about what have you riled up."

"I don't want to discuss anything calmly."

"Suit yourself," he shrugs and sits down, looking at me expectantly.

“First of all, you’re not welcome at my house, ever. I never want to see you or Calypso there again.”

“Really? That’s not something you should say to your father-in-law,” he shrugs, and I have to hold my fist tightly to my side so I don’t fling something at his face.

“Why the fuck did you send Calypso to my house? What did you think would happen?”

“Well, I thought you needed a reminder, that’s all. And you are here, in front of me.”

“Never in your sorry life, give my house address to anyone. Ever again! Are we clear?”

He raises an eyebrow, eyeing me in amusement.

“Wow? Throwing orders around? Can you afford to do that?”

Schooling my features into a mask of dead calm, I talk calmly.

“You seem to think you are the big fish in this situation, Theo, which is funny to me because you never were. In the sea, I am the apex predator, and you are my prey. Always have and always will be.”

“Interesting. You think you’re big enough to take a swipe at me with your tiny kitty claws?” He asks and I laugh humorlessly.

“No. I’m just stating facts, Theo. And you’re acting like you’re doing me a favor, throwing your daughter and wealth at

me, but I know you need this marriage to happen more than I do. I don't even need it."

He bristles at my comment and sneers, saying "And what have you decided? I assume that's what you came here to tell me."

"Of course, I refuse. Honestly, did you think you could threaten me into an alliance like that? Me, a Galanis? My mother and sisters are ahead of you on the ladder, and you dared to threaten me?"

He stands up and walks up to me, getting in my face.

"I don't think you understand what's at stake, boy. You don't know what you're losing."

"I'm losing nothing, just an egotistical old cat who doesn't know his place. I don't need your money, neither do I need a new wife. I love the one I have now."

I hear a gasp behind me, but I don't react to it, my mind spinning at what I just said. Did I just say I love Avery?

That's right, I do, my mind seems to say to me. From her head full of tight, black curls, to her toes always painted bright red.

I've been in love with her for ages and I just refused to acknowledge it. Instead, I pushed her away countless times. I have to go home and apologize as my life depends on it.

"Did I hear you right? Love?" His voice breaks through my reverie and I glance at him, smirking.

“That’s right. I love my wife and your money means nothing to me if I have to lose her to get it. And before you mention your daughter, she nothing compared to Avery.”

“Excuse me,” a voice splutters behind me and I turn to face a red-faced Calypso.

“Are you talking about that dumpy-looking woman I saw earlier? That’s what you’re comparing me to?”

I grip her arm tightly, swearing. “If you say one more fucking word against her, I swear I will destroy your very essence.”

“Unhand my daughter this minute,” Theo shouts behind me and I release her, pushing her back a few steps.

Looking at him, I say, “I’m done here,” and head for the door but he starts talking again, stopping me.

“After all the years your father spent trying to mold you into something perfect, this is how you turn out? You would insult his memory by staying bound to that woman because of love?”

I turn to look at him, glaring a warning, but he continues heedlessly.

“Let me tell you a thing or two about love. It is a futile endeavor made only for fools.”

“That’s a speech I’ve heard a million times and the only thing I got from it is the fact that you people are scared of being happy. That’s not going to be me.”

I turn to leave again but his next words stop me in my spot.

“What about your business? Don’t you love that?”

I face him, grinding my teeth. He smiles and continues.

“I wonder how many of your hotels will be left standing when I pull out all my investments and shares.”

I chuckle a little and eye him, disdain on my face.

“You have an over-inflated sense of your importance. I have bigger investors lining up to do business with me, so I won’t even feel your loss.”

“I’ll speak to the community in Greece. I wonder how you would survive when they withdraw their support for you. Such a shame; you could have been something,” he smirks but it immediately disappears when I walk up to him, putting my hand on his arms.

“You won’t even get reception from anyone back home. Did you think I hadn’t tidied up that end already? Besides, let’s face it, nobody will go against me and my family just because you tell them to.”

I brush off a speck of non-existent dust from his robe and move back.

“You over-reached, and I know it’s not your first time doing this. You failed with my father and thought you could win against me? As you said, he molded me. I am Galanis.”

He glares at me but doesn’t say anything in response.

“Let this be the last time you pull shit like this or else, I will destroy you. I won’t warn you again. Enjoy your vacation

quietly and go home.”

With that, I brush past Calypso but stop when I remember something.

“By the way, I put your shares up for sale. If you’re going to be attempting a takeover every year, I don’t want you around.”

Shock and anger turn his face purple and he walks towards me, finger-pointing.

“Now look here, boy. You cannot do that...”

I interrupt him with a sneer on my face. “You have a problem with that?”

He eyes me for a long time before looking away, glaring. “No.”

“No...?”

“No, *Patéras*.”

I grin and wave at Calypso before leaving. Once outside the room, I shake and gag.

“I really hate that title. Blech,” I mutter and run to the elevator. Please, Avery, be at home when I get there.

With that thought in mind, I drive home quickly and dash for the door when I come out of the elevator.

The house is eerily quiet when I enter, and I get a prickling sense of doom. I don’t see Avery in the kitchen, dining, living room, or downstairs guest room, so I run upstairs to her room.

Heart beating loudly, I knock on her door, but I don’t get an answer, so I push the door open and meet an empty room.

“Avery? Ave?!” I run into the closet, empty. The bathroom is empty too.

Where has she gone? Then it dawns on me that all her stuff is gone.

“Fuck!” I shout and run out of the house, taking the elevator to my former floor.

I get to her apartment and bang on the door loudly, but nobody answers. A man comes out of the other apartment on the floor and looks at me quizzically.

“Good evening. Did anyone come here this evening?” I ask and he shakes his head.

“No. That place has been empty since the woman there moved out.”

My heart falls and I go to the elevator in shock. She left me.

Bringing my phone out, I call her number, but it doesn't go through. Did she block me?

I try again but it's the same thing. I walk into my house slowly and fall into a chair in the living room.

Opening my phone again, I shoot a text to my private investigator to find Avery and throw it to the side.

I scrub my face with my hands and look around my empty apartment. God, it's so cold without her.

I'll find you, Ave, and when I do, I'm never letting go, ever.

Twenty-Four

Avery

The noise from the moving cars makes me lose concentration and I toss the book I'm supposed to be reading aside.

"Ugh. Can you all just shut up?" I yell at the ceiling and drape my arm across my face.

Why did I even move out of the apartment complex? Right, I didn't want to live in the same complex as Noah.

I wonder why he's doing right now. Probably choosing his wedding theme or drawing up divorce papers.

Whatever it is, I'm out of the picture. Nope, I won't think about him anymore.

However, my mind overrides my resolve, and it drifts to the day we had the picnic and made a truce.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," I mutter and reach for my book, but a loud bang makes me fall off the chair.

"What exploded?" I spit my hair out of my mouth and scramble up to find Noah glaring at me.

I take in his wind-blown hair and wild eyes and my knees melt a little, but I quickly pull myself up, also glaring.

“Why are you here?” I ask. His nostrils flare as he takes a menacing step forward.

“Do you know how worried I have been? I nearly lost my mind when I couldn’t find you at home.”

I toss my hair back and cross my arms, assuming a protective stance.

“How did you find me?”

“Did you believe you could hide from me? I would have followed you to the end of the earth if that’s where you went.”

I glare at him, and his expression turns remorseful but before he can talk again, I point to my door.

“Get out.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Get out of my house! Now! I don’t want you here.”

“Wait, let me explain,” he says, coming close to me but I move around him to the door, pushing it wide open.

“Leave,” I say, pointing to the free hallway.

“No. I came to say something, and you will hear me out,” he says and closes the door, trapping me with his body.

“What... with...what are you doing?” I ask breathlessly and he raises his hands.

“I’m not going to touch you. I just want you to listen and you won’t do that if you’re allowed to roam.”

I frown and push him, but he doesn’t budge.

“Allowed to roam? Am I an animal now? You are being very rude for someone who should be groveling.”

“If you promise not to kick me out, I will grovel.”

“You’re still making demands?”

“I just want you to listen to me.”

I glare at him for a few seconds before nodding.

“Fine. I won’t shout. But I won’t waste any more time with you, so say your shit and get out.”

I push him and he moves this time, so I go to the chair I was in before and sit on it.

He follows me, fidgeting with his jacket, and points to a chair opposite me, asking “Can I?”

“If it’ll make you say your piece and leave faster, sure. Be comfortable.”

He sits and fingers his jacket for a few seconds, before talking.

“Look, I know I have no right to come here and ask you for anything. I have been the world’s biggest asshole to you...”

“Yes, you have no right, and you are an asshole. Are you done now?”

He shakes his head and I sigh, rolling my eyes.

“I just wanted to apologize properly. I’m very sorry about everything that happened, what I did and said. I was an idiot and I’m sorry.”

“Sure. Can you leave now?”

“I’m not done. You said you would listen to everything I have to say.”

“Does it have to be so much?”

“Ave! I’m trying here. I’ve never had to apologize to anyone before, so cut me some slack.”

I clap loudly and he narrows his eyes at me.

“Wow, I feel honored to receive your first-ever apology. Seriously, get out,” I point at the door, but he ignores me, crossing his legs.

“Do you not hear me?”

“I do. Are you done? Can I continue?”

“Your idea of an apology needs a lot of work,” I grumble and look away from him.

“May I continue?” I nod and he breathes deeply, taking off his jacket. My eyes zero in on his biceps and my mouth waters.

“Keep the jacket on. You won’t be staying long so there’s no need to get comfortable,” I say.

He ignores me and throws it aside anyways. Just as I expected.

“Okay, uhm,” he starts, rubbing his palms together. “You know about the whole arranged marriage thing already, but I need to explain a lot more.”

“When Theo came to the house, he told me about the arrangement between him and my father and also threatened to pull his investment out of the business. I didn’t want to lose his support, but I also didn’t want to lose you...”

I scoff but he continues, ignoring me.

“Also, his threats scared me a little because,” a dark shadow passes across his face, and he pauses, fighting with a thought.

He clears up after a few seconds and continues.

“He was one of the people who ‘trained’ me. I forgot about him when I moved but seeing him again and hearing his threats took me back to when he was an active influence in my life.”

Concern floods through me as I look at him, taking in his shaking hands and tight eyes. He doesn’t look at me and continues.

“Anyways, I pushed you away and I’m sorry, but you have to understand, it wasn’t easy for me to see him. So, I retreated and thought about it for a while.”

“That one month of not talking to you was the hardest thing I’d had to do in a while and I swear, I missed you like crazy, but I was in over my head.”

“You started talking to me again out of the blue. Why?” I ask and he smiles a little.

“I had just made my choice. It was either you or the money he was offering me, and it wasn’t that difficult to choose which one I wanted the most.”

My heart sinks as I take in his words, and I hug myself. Struggling to keep the pain out of my voice, I talk.

“Okay. I’ve heard your apology. Can you leave now?”

He looks at me, surprised and confused and I roll my eyes, getting up from the chair.

“I forgive you. Can you leave now?”

He stands up, towering over me, grabs my arms, shaking me.

“Did you not understand what I was trying to say? My life without you is empty, Ave. I want you back. I need you with me.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper, covering my mouth. “You cheating bastard. Are you here because your fiancée told you she will allow you to keep me on the side? Is that how you see me?”

“No. Jesus, how...”

“Get out!” I roar, pointing a shaky hand at the door.

“How dare you? Me? A side piece? I can’t believe I listened to your load of crap. Get out of my house!”

“No, wait, listen to me...”

“No! No more pity, no more concern, I don’t care anymore. Get out of my sight. Go ahead and marry your Greek heiress.

Get all the wealth in the world, just leave me alone!” I yell, tears spilling down my cheeks.

He grabs my arms, shaking me harder this time.

“I turned him down. Christ, will you listen to me before leaping to conclusions?”

“What?” I hiccup and he cleans my face gently.

“I turned him down. I said no. I’m not getting married to anyone else. I only want you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m head over heels in love with you.”

Blood rushes to my ears and I stand still, shocked.

“Eh?”

“When I said it was easy to choose between you and what he was offering, I meant that I chose you. I would choose you over anything. I love you so much.”

“Really?” I ask and he chuckles before answering.

“Yes. I know you might not feel the same way, but please, just give me one more chance with you. I love you more than anything in the world and I don’t want to lose you.”

“I love you too!” I blurt out, taking shuddering breaths. His shocked eyes find mine and he rubs my arms slowly.

“Really? You’re not pulling my leg or anything?”

“Yes, I love you too. Why do you think I was so mad about the marriage thing?”

“I don’t know; you love getting mad at me.”

I laugh and he grips my chin anxiously.

“You’re serious?”

Looking straight into his eyes, I nod.

“Yes, I love you.”

“Good, because I love you too,” he says before kissing me feverishly.

For a couple of minutes, we’re the only two people in the world and I revel in his presence. By the time we pull apart, we’re both breathing heavily, and he rests his forehead on mine.

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

“That’s a little too late, seeing as we’re already married,” I say, and he laughs quietly.

“Seriously, let’s start over again, for real this time. You and I, a real relationship,” he says, staring deep into my eyes.

I nod and he breathes a sigh of relief, hugging me tightly. We stay this way for a few seconds before he breaks the silence.

“I know we just agreed to be together, and I know this might be too fast, but will you move in with me again? The house is empty without you and this place is shit.”

I laugh and he kisses my temple.

“Fine, I’ll move in with you.

“Good. I’ll make a few calls.”

We separate and he goes to his jacket, taking his phone out of it.

One phone call, many moving guys, and a car ride later, I’m back in the penthouse and Noah carries me into the master’s bedroom, bride style.

He dumps me on the bed, grinning wolfishly.

“Welcome home. Don’t ever leave again.”

I nod and he grins wider, bending to take off my shoes.

“You know that rule you made at the beginning?” He asks and I frown.

“Your no sex rule.”

“Ah, that.”

“Yes. That’s out the window, right?”

I grin down at him and nod.

“Good.” He says and kisses me ferociously, obliterating all of my thoughts. And I allow him.

Epilogue

“Stop running, Noah. The floor is still wet and you’re going to fall,” I shout after my son who only stops to blow raspberries at me before continuing his race.

I’ll be very surprised if he doesn’t become a professional athlete when he gets older.

I spin in a circle, searching for the rest of the kids when a pair of familiar hands settle on my hips.

“Looking for me?” My husband’s delicious voice curls up to my ear and I smile impishly.

“No,” I say and he turns me to face him.

“Really? There’s no need to lie, you know,” he says, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“I don’t need to look for you.”

“Really? Why?”

“Because I already have you. Besides, you’ll come to me, ruining the search.”

He pushes me away slightly and I burst into laughter.

“I was going to kiss you, but you’ve ruined the moment, so there’s nothing for you now,” he says and I smirk.

“Sure. You’ll beg me later.”

“Whatever. What’s going on and why aren’t you getting dressed?” He asks and I gasp, moving away from him.

“What? What?”

“You’re not supposed to see the bride before the wedding. It’s bad luck,” I say and he raises an eyebrow.

“Honey, I’ve seen you plenty of times before today. Naked, even, and in many positions. How is me seeing you this morning supposed to bring bad luck?” He asks and I slap his arm.

“Ouch. Seriously, stop hitting me. Sometimes, I wonder why I love you so much.”

“You know, we have some time before the ceremony starts,” he says, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“And the children are not inside at the moment. Why don’t we take this opportunity and...”

I immediately push away from him, exclaiming loudly.

“The children! Where are they? I shout, looking around wildly until he taps my shoulder.

“The nanny has them. Look.”

I look past his pointing finger and see our nanny holding our three children by their hands and dragging them inside.

We had our first child, Noah Jr., a year after we got back together. I would have preferred to wait but this man can't stay away from me, which is why we had our twin girls approximately a year and a half later.

Now the twins are three and we decided to have a proper wedding ceremony with both of our families.

More like, my father finally approves of him and he can now love me lavishly. His words, not mine.

We moved here after the twins were born. According to him, the penthouse wasn't large enough for five of us.

I turn from the sight of my nanny pulling my children and face my husband. His face lights up and he holds me again.

"So, about that advantage. There's a room with a well-laid bed somewhere," he mutters, head dipping to kiss me.

I allow him to tease me for a few seconds before opening my mouth for him to explore. The kiss rapidly escalated and I moan when his hand pulls my bra cup down.

"Wait, wait," I mutter, but he kisses me again and pinches me softly.

"No. stop talking and let me work," and he goes straight for the sensitive spot on my shoulder.

Quickly, I step out of his hold and his face falls. Shaking my head, I take steadying breaths while he eyes me grumpily.

"I haven't touched you for like a month. You have to let me do something," he grumbles and I giggle.

“It’s to make our first time as a properly married couple more special. Come on, it’s only a few hours left.”

“Baby, every time with you is special. I don’t need any of this traditional bullshit. Hell, you want special? I’ll give it to you right now,” he says, heading towards me and I run away from him, laughing.

“Seriously, Noah, there’s only a few hours left. Besides, after the wedding, we’ll go on our child-free honeymoon. What’s better? A quickie in the living room, or taking your time later when there’s no one to disturb you?”

“I don’t care, whichever gets me inside you quicker,” he grumbles, and I laugh louder.

“Just a couple more hours and I’m all yours. There’s Jojo, I’d better go. I love you,” I say, hugging him quickly and I walk to my sister who leads me to the room she commandeered, as the bride station.

Two hours later, my mother sets my veil on my head and stands back to admire her work.

“Bellissimo,” she says and dabs moisture away from her eyes. Jojo hugs her and she turns her face away, sobbing quietly into her shoulder.

“Mamma, non piangere. Farai piangere anche me,” I say and go to hug her, tears already pooling in my eyes.

“Don’t you dare cry, Ave. I worked too hard on that makeup for it to not see the light of day,” Jojo warns and I laugh.

“Fine, I won’t.”

The wedding planner tells us they're about to start, so I am handed my bouquet and everybody leaves.

Alone, I admire my reflection in the mirror until a knock on the door startles me.

"They're ready for you now, Mrs Galanis." I hear and take a deep, shuddering breath.

Why am I this shaky? I've done this before. Steeling myself, I walk out of the room and meet my father waiting for me.

I tap his shoulder and he looks at me, tears filling his eyes instantly.

"Oh no, papa. Joanna already commanded me not to cry, so please don't make me," I say and he grins, the first tear falling from his eyes.

"Non posso farci niente. Sembri così prezioso. Ti amo, Ave, e sono molto felice per te," he says and I hug him tightly.

"I love you too, Dad," I mutter and pull away.

"Spero che sappia che sei il suo più grande tesoro. È meglio che ti tratti bene."

"Lo fa, papà."

"Buono. Let's go."

With that, he takes my hand, and we walk out of the house to the yard where they set up the wedding ceremony.

The place is beautiful, but all my focus is on the man standing at the altar, waiting for me. He looks finger-licking

good in his suit and my spine melts a little at the smile he gives me.

“Voglio lamentarmi del sorriso che ti sta dando, ma avete già tre figli, quindi non ce n'è bisogno,” my father mutters and I laugh.

Noah looks at me in question when I get to him but I shake my head, still grinning.

“Dearly beloved,” the priest starts but my eyes focus on the man standing in front of me, effectively blocking any sound out.

Funny how this relationship started with a fake marriage and now, here we are, getting married for real with God and our loved ones as our witnesses.

This time, it's for real and there are no contracts or inheritances involved, just both of our pure hearts.

Something in my gaze must have alerted him because he mouths “What's wrong?”

I shake my head smiling and mouth back “I love you, so much.”

He grins and ignoring the priest who is still talking, grabs and kisses me deeply in front of everyone.

I respond enthusiastically until I hear my father grumbling from the front row and I pull away immediately.

“I love you more,” he mutters and I shake my head.

“Not possible, big boy.”

“Big boy? I’ll show you what’s big...”

“Ahem. If you’re finished, let’s return to the ceremony,” an annoyed priest interrupts us and we laugh, returning to our positions.

I feel nothing but joy when he pushes the ring on my finger. When we’re pronounced husband and wife, Noah looks at the priest pointedly before kissing me, this time raunchier.

“There’s more where that came from,” he whispers against my skin and I grin.

“Good. Because I want more. I love you,” I reply and he pulls back so he can stare into my eyes.

“And I live for you, Ave,” he says and I hug him tightly, refusing to let go because really, I’ll never let him go.

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