

Broken

DADDY

EMMA BLAKE

BROKEN DADDY

An Off-Limits Single Dad Romance

EMMA BLAKE

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Boss's Fake Fiancée Sneak Peek](#)

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Chapter 1

Genevieve

The guy fucking me against a brick wall in the back alley looks vaguely familiar, and that thought is what keeps edging me. Every time I'm close to coming, the rough feeling of the wall on my bare ass and his hip bones digging into my thighs wrapped around his waist, the image of his eyes flash through my mind.

Who are you? I want to ask.

Instead, I let out a moan, knocking my head back against the wall. A sliver of pain rushes down my spine and I arch my back.

It's the right move; my clit rubs against his pelvic bone, and *there it is*.

"Fuck, yes."

The words come out as a groan as he keeps ramming into me, fingers digging into my ass cheeks as he rocks my hips against him. My pussy throbs around his ironhard cock and pleasure morphs into pain, then back as his grip tightens.

With a curse, he finishes, burying himself deep inside, panting against my neck.

In the dim light of the alley, his eyes are a deep forest green when he looks up. "Good?"

I nod and he carefully drops me to my feet. To most women, this guy would be deliciously tall. He's only got a few inches on me, though, as I'm close to six feet myself. Dusting off the plain T-shirt I wore under my chef's jacket tonight, I surreptitiously follow it up with yanking up my underwear and leggings.

This guy is adjusting himself. Practical, practiced—though, is that a blush on his face? I raise a brow and clear my throat and the color darkens.

Definitely a blush.

“You come here often?” I joke once we’re both relatively put together.

He stares at me, face like carved stone. It hits me all over again how handsome he is. Normally, I don’t go for older guys, but it’s been a while and...*this* guy.

Again, there’s that nagging sensation I know him from somewhere...

“No. First time.”

Okay. So he’s not a regular customer, then. I definitely would’ve noticed him before.

My grin softens into an awkward smile as I skirt around him, walking toward the front of The Black Fig. It’s late, almost one in the morning. For whatever reason, he stuck around. Shouldn’t be surprising, really, since he propositioned me first.

“Do you know that guy?” Sienna, my pastry chef, asks. She jerks her chin toward the dining room—where only one table is still occupied.

“No.”

It’s obvious who she’s talking about. The single table has two women and one man sitting at it. The two women are a couple, I think. They keep linking fingers under the table and grazing one another’s thighs. Sweet. And kind of a relief, because the man has definitely caught my eye.

He glances my way again and the table shakes suddenly as his knees bump it. Wine glasses wobble, the women exclaim quietly, and Sienna chuckles at my side.

“Looks like he has eyes only for you, Gen.”

I bite back a smile and try to focus on cleaning the kitchen with my crew. Not that it’s often a mess; The Black Fig has an open kitchen, one that customers can see into, so I run a tight ship. Stainless steel has to sparkle. Wood must be well-oiled. Knives hung straight and pots and pans all facing one direction on their hooks.

I'm so focused on scrubbing down the prep counter, I don't notice when he wanders over just after eleven. Technically, we're closed. The women have left together. The guy sits at the bar a few feet away and asks for a whiskey.

Why bother playing games? I look up and meet his gaze directly as he takes his first sip.

What I want to say is, I feel like I know you from somewhere. Instead I ask, "Do you normally hang around in restaurants after hours?"

"No." His answer is short, direct, and intriguing. I like when a man doesn't play games.

"You don't quite fit the bill of our usual clientele." My eyes run over his outfit—a flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots.

"Yeah. This isn't really my kind of place."

I should be insulted, probably, but instead, a grin curls my lips. "Those women—either of them belong to you?"

His eyes lock on mine as he finishes his drink. "No. They're clients, friends. I'm unattached."

As I run a hand through my brown hair and lead him back toward the street, I can't help wondering *why* he's unattached. He's handsome. Maybe a decade or so older than me...is dating in your forties hard?

It makes sense, since dating at *my* age feels nearly impossible. I haven't met a man yet who isn't intimidated by my job and my ambition. Except for—

I shake the thought off, not wanting to think about my ex. Not when I've just been deliciously fucked against a wall in the alley.

"Do you live around here?" I ask.

He shakes his head, hands shoved in his pockets. "No. Outside of the city. Hence..." He nods back toward the alley and I can't help grinning. His eyes linger on my lips and I wonder if he's going to kiss me—something we hadn't done in the frenzied attempts to get our pants down.

“Well, it was nice meeting you.” I decide I don’t need a name. For a moment, the stranger’s brows furrow, and I see my own curiosity reflected back at me. Does he feel like we know each other, too?

“You’ll get home safe?”

The question is gruff, makes me think he’s been out of the game for a while. I sway toward him, tempted to reach out. But I stop myself.

“Yup. Live close, actually.”

Relief erases his frown and he steps away, but then pauses. My breath catches in my chest. His large hands flex open and then curl into a tight fist before he turns back to me, my heart pounding in my ears.

I should be scared; he’s a stranger, after all. *But is he?*

He reaches out and catches me by the waist, pulling me in and pressing his mouth down on mine. His lips part and his tongue swipes along my bottom lip, teasing and making me lean into him.

He pulls back too quickly, a satisfied look on his face.

“Just wanted a taste.”

And with that, he turns away, striding toward a dark car parked a few yards down the street. A very *nice* car, I realize as I stand there stunned—not the kind of car I’d guess a working-class guy would drive.

I blink in confusion as he gets in and pulls away, the car humming as it passes.

Who the hell is this mystery man?

Chapter 2

Nathan

My best friend's sister has her hands on my dick.

She doesn't realize it right away, but I see the moment she does—her eyes light up, widen, and she pulls away with a muttered, “Oh, God.”

How the hell did this happen? How did I not realize a week ago that the woman I hooked up with in an alley was Russ Walker's little sister?

This is all your fault, I want to seethe at her, so take care of it.

My charcoal trousers are stained with red wine. Gen Walker is on her knees in front of me, her dress rucked up around her thighs as she tries to clean me off. Or *get me off?* I'm not sure at this point, but I doubt Russ would be very happy to see us in this position.

“Vinegar,” she says quickly, at a high pitch and with a fake smile. “We need vinegar!”

Gen stands, riffling through the makeshift pantry the catering crew brought in. A few servers over at the prepared food are eyeing her as they load up with new trays of hors d'oeuvres and wine.

She comes back quickly and gets on her knees again, looking at me through thick lashes. “I'm really sorry about this.”

I've never had a woman apologize for touching my crotch. But then, this whole night has been...unusual.

Gen wets a white cloth with vinegar and starts dabbing.

“Great. Now I'm going to smell like vomit.”

She makes a face at me, and I can't help thinking once more, *This is the woman Russ wants me to hire as a personal chef?*

Her attitude was hot that night in the restaurant, but now I'm finding it frustrating. Or maybe I'm just overwhelmed by the string of facts I've discovered in the last hour. Part of me is mad at myself for not recognizing her, but then, the last time I saw her, she was just a kid.

When Russ asked me to hire his sister temporarily – a few weeks before I ran into Gen at The Black Fig - my initial response was hesitant. But Russ insisted Gen was well-trained and a high-ranking chef in New York with a Michelin star restaurant under her belt. The same restaurant she'd just been let go from unexpectedly.

She's not what I expected, though I have vague memories of seeing her when we were all younger. A little brunette girl running around in a dress, barely worth a glance, as Russ and I were consumed by football and dating. Gen has to be almost a decade younger than me. And now she's gorgeous.

Not that Russ is a bad looking guy, but his sister definitely inherited all the looks. Her fingers are long, delicate, and her chocolate brown hair falls perfectly to frame her face. From this angle, I have a perfect view of the swell of her breasts in the tight dress. Her height, confidence, and that saucy grin are all what attracted me to her that night in the restaurant.

My dick twitches in interest.

I reach out and grab her wrist. Maybe a little roughly...she looks up at me in surprise, her lips parted.

“Get up.”

I see the urge to question my authority flit across her features, but she only snaps her mouth shut and stands. She must *really* need this job.

“I said I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, well, that isn't going to make me *not* look like an ass at my own gala, is it?”

It wasn't my intention to be so abrupt, but the last thing I need is to get hard in her hands right now.

Brushing off my jacket, I lock eyes with Gen. Hers are a stormy gray; I can tell she wants to argue, and a sick part of me would welcome it. No one puts up much of a fight anymore. It's just me and my daughter at home, and at work, my word is final.

But this isn't the time to pick a fight, or to keep her on her knees, no matter how delicious she looks there. I physically shake the thought from my head, turning away from her and striding toward the double doors that lead to the main gallery, leaving Gen behind.

Her brother and my best friend, Russ Walker, is waiting on the other side.

"Everything good?" he asks, gaze darting down to my crotch and the spreading dark stain. I roll my eyes as he suppresses a grin.

"Great." I'm texting my driver to bring me a new pair of pants. He's resourceful and will figure it out; I'm willing to bet he keeps an extra pair somewhere in the car.

"I swear she's not normally like this. She's just nervous."

She's nervous because a week ago I was making her come, and now she's probably as thrown off as I am, I'm tempted to blurt out. But the last thing I need is to ruin one of my very few friendships.

With a sigh, I fight the urge to run a hand through my hair. Normally I'm not quite this stylish, which is why I'm so irritated this suit is ruined. Especially on a night like tonight, when I need to look like the owner of Ironside—not some booze-drunk wino traipsing the streets of New York City.

"What exactly is her deal again?" I ask tightly.

Before Russ can answer, Gen herself steps out of the kitchen. Her lips are tight, but her face reveals nothing as she glances our way before walking out into the gallery, head held high.

"It's weird you two have lived in the city for years and never heard of each other. She was the head chef at The Black

Fig.” I nod vaguely, as if the name is unfamiliar to me. “She recently had a...revolt occur.”

I cock an eyebrow. “A revolt?” That’s not exactly a ringing endorsement.

Russ grimaces. “I don’t really know the details. But trust me, Nate, helping her out for a few months will be worth it. A win-win, really. She gets job security while she figures things out and you get...”

“Canapés?” I ask, snatching one off a tray moving past us.

I’m not particularly concerned with cuisine. Despite the insanely large amount of money my construction company pulls in every year, I live a modest life. Partly because I don’t want my daughter to grow up to be a spoiled brat. Russ rolls his eyes.

“No. Steady meals. Home-cooked meals. I don’t know, I was thinking Eva might want something other than Dino Bites at some point.”

Giving him a sneer, I pop the canapé in my mouth and consider the offer. It’s not like I don’t have the money, and Russ is right—Eva’s nanny used to cook for her (us, when I was home) but she graduated from college and moved abroad somewhere.

A personal chef and regular meals would add some sense of stability to her life. Recently, her teacher has noted she’s been acting up a bit at school. Nothing crazy but...they’re concerned.

It might also be because I missed picking her up two days last week.

“I’ll think about it.”

Russ doesn’t look thrilled, but nods, accepting the answer. Then it’s back to work. The gallery he works at, Fog, partnered with my company to host the annual gala. It’s a sort of thank-you to our clients and a night off for the rest of the guys, letting them schmooze and drink high-end alcohol.

I scan the room, taking in the night's theme. Architecture, appropriately. All forms of it—massive oil paintings, collections of photography, hand-drawn maps of the city. All gorgeous. All uninteresting to me.

A text from my driver comes through, letting me know he'll meet me at the side door. I skirt the room and prop the door open, reaching out to accept the bundle. "Thanks, Steve."

And just like that, he disappears into the night.

Now I only need to figure out where the hell to change. The bathrooms are tempting, but they're on the other side of the gallery. I'd have to walk through the entirety of the crowd, soaked in wine and smelling like vinegar.

A quick glance around reveals a short hallway lined with small, dark offices. I dip into the nearest one and move into a corner, belt jangling as I undo it.

My pants are around my knees when I hear the gasp. And that already familiar voice. "Shit. Sorry."

I stare in surprise at the woman in the shadows.

Gen sits on a desk, legs crossed at the ankles, navy blue dress blending in perfectly with the darkness. When I squint, I see she has a hand over her eyes.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're waiting for an opportunity to catch me with my pants down."

It comes out as a dry joke, one that gets Gen's attention as she parts her fingers, brows knit.

"I—definitely not—"

She winces, seeming to realize it's partly an insult, and a slow smirk creeps across my lips. She doused me with wine earlier, by accident, of course. But it would be interesting to see her squirm.

Since we're past embarrassment now, I move closer to flick on the desk light and shuck my pants easily. Gen's eyes drop to my boxer briefs, widening before her gaze darts away.

“Usually, I make a woman work for it more than this,” I say in a low voice.

She raises a brow. “You didn’t make me work very hard that night in the alley.”

“Watch it,” I warn. “Wouldn’t want your brother to come in and catch you eyeing the goods.” The tension breaks as I chuckle darkly, Gen realizing this has been a bit of a twisted joke. “Don’t worry, he’s making the rounds again. Trying to sell that atrocity called a sculpture.”

Her lips quirk up at the corners. So she agrees; a giant steel gingerbread house is absolutely ridiculous.

“You think he’d be upset?” I ask, curious. “If he found out you and I...”

I’m not sure where the question comes from. Uncharacteristically, it tumbles from my lips as I carefully unfold the new pair of pants, eyes noting the carefully ironed seams.

Gen looks at me quickly, up and down. Just a flicker, but I catch her do it, see her lips part again.

“I—” she coughs out delicately, putting her hands firmly in her lap. “I don’t think he’d be supportive of...you’re *much* older than me—”

“How old do you think I am?” I’m curious, because I’m also not quite sure how old *she* is. But *much* older? That hurts a bit.

Gen’s eyes move over my face. I have an idea of what she’s seeing—sandy hair starting to gray just a little bit here and there. Crow’s feet at the corner of my eyes, but last I checked, they were still a decently bright green. I don’t look dead yet.

She shrugs. “You must’ve been in high school when I was—what, six or so?” I met Russ and Gen the year they were adopted by the Walkers – officially. *Finally* out of foster care and settled down somewhere, by the same family, which was lucky. People didn’t usually want teenagers. But Russ was always a good kid. Better than me, at least.

I nod, considering. “Probably. You know, for a lot of women, that’s not a problem. Didn’t seem to bother you the other night.”

Gen’s mouth opens, but she pauses for a moment, then laughs. Something in her loosens, something in her look says *screw it*. I catch the mischievous twinkle in her eye before she comes back with, “True.”

“Mmm. So the issue is that your big brother might be upset?”

My fingers slowly drag the belt through the loops as I step closer to Gen. She watches the action, then looks up at me through those lashes again.

“Russ doesn’t need to know who I get into bed with,” she teases. “But—no. I’m more concerned with sleeping with a potential employer.”

There it is. Her tone goes back to brisk business, now that I have a pair of clean pants on. She pushes herself off the desk and brushes the skirt of her dress down, expression serious.

That lighthearted sexual tension is gone, and my eyes narrow. I’ve only been back in Gen’s orbit for two, three hours tops. And I can’t get a lock on her. First she’s demure, then apologetic, then teasing. Now her eyes are steel.

“I haven’t said yes yet, sugar.” The endearment spills out naturally and catches me off guard. I can’t remember the last time I called a woman *sugar*, or anything close to it.

If Gen is surprised, she hides it well. “I’d appreciate your consideration.”

Short. To the point. We’re standing in the doorway, the chatter and music from the gala floating toward us. I decide to return the favor.

“When I put someone to work, I expect them to follow every. Word. I. Say.” My eyes drag down her body.

That tight bodice, that navy blue skirt flaring out perfectly at the knee. I think about how it looked rucked up around her

thighs earlier as she knelt in front of me. “You don’t strike me as the kind of woman who plays nice with authority.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to keep her mouth shut. Back down in submission, in the hopes of getting the job.

Instead, Gen steps into the hall, limned in light from the party. She takes one last look at me and says, “Trust me, Nathan, I know how to *play nice*.”

Chapter 3

Genevieve

The subway takes me just outside of the city, no more than a twenty-minute ride. But as I step out of the car that picked me up at the station and look around, I note the landscape has transformed.

Instead of grid streets and towering buildings, I'm surrounded by spacious lots. Acres and acres of land with houses sitting far back, some behind gates, others invisible, thanks to thick stands of trees.

Taking a deep breath, I greedily inhale the clean air. It's been a while since I've been truly out of the city and it feels... good.

It shouldn't. That's where the pang of guilt comes from. I should still be feeling anxious. I'm not saved yet, not by a long shot.

When The Black Fig let me go, I put up a fight. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do, since my reaction only seemed to confirm whatever lies were spread about me to the owner. He had me out that very night, right before the dinner service. I can still remember Erik's blatant smirk from the kitchen.

Trying to get my mind off the past, I hike my bag up my shoulder and stare at the gate in front of me. It's not massive by any means, but still impressive. Ornate, kind of. Number 1124 Orchard Drive.

"They definitely took out all the orchards to put these mini mansions in," I mutter, pressing the buzzer on the stone buttress.

No voice comes, but the gears click and the gate opens. I start the decent walk up the drive, a slow winding slope; Nathan Sharpe's house hidden from view, just like his neighbors.

Why does he want me here? Why did he agree to this?

I hadn't been able to get a straight answer out of Russ when I found out Nathan agreed to this whole set. Russ, obviously not aware of what had happened between us, only shrugged and said he was probably just doing an old friend a favor. From what I gather, Russ asked Nate weeks before we ran into each other – but he agreed *after* he realized who I was, the night of the gallery event.

Whatever the reason, I'd had to bite my tongue. I couldn't say no when both men were going out of their way to help me out. Luckily, Nate's surprise decision to take me on was just enough time for me to sublet the apartment for a month, one out of the three I'll be gone.

Just in case.

Just in case this doesn't work out. Just in case we drive each other crazy. Just in case I have to give up my dream.

Scowling, I drag the roller suitcase behind me and feel my shoulder ache at the duffle bag thrown over it. But then the house comes into view, and I pause.

It's not what I expected.

Definitely not as opulent as the surrounding houses. This is more country style, low-key, and all cream and tan stone. Pretty, as much as I hate to admit it.

I scan the perfectly manicured landscape as I start up the little walkway to the door. And feel the knot of anxiety in my chest tighten.

We do not get along, I remind myself. But get this out of the way and we can...figure something out.

When Russ told me he had a friend who needed a personal chef, I didn't realize Russ hadn't actually talked to Nathan about this proposal. Or that Nathan hadn't accepted.

Or that Nathan was the mysteriously familiar guy I'd hooked up with behind The Black Fig.

There was the night of the gala—a sort of reintroduction, since I had vague memories of Nathan being around when I was a kid. Nothing very permanent, mostly just coming over

and disappearing up to Russ's room with him. Playing basketball in the driveway.

But it looks like he's come a long way from that tiny suburb we grew up in, judging by the exclusive neighborhood that is now his residence.

Before I can knock, it opens.

I wasn't expecting to see Nathan Sharpe himself answer the door. He takes me in from head to toe and I'm suddenly conscious of the loose jeans and T-shirt I opted for today. What does one wear as a private chef?

"Gen. Come in." He steps aside, all chilly indifference as I enter a decent-sized foyer. But looking around, a few things catch my attention—a pink pair of rainboots, what looks like a leather apron of some sort, a little smattering of sawdust...

Did I just enter the home of a serial killer?

Before my brain catches up with my mouth—thankfully—a little girl runs into the hallway and stops on a dime. We stare at one another, and then my memory jogs.

Russ said I'd be working for a *single dad*. Nathan has a kid.

The chill in the room eases as the girl traipses up to Nathan and holds his hand. His features actually soften a bit as I watch.

"Dad?"

"Eva, this is Gen. Gen, this is my daughter Eva. She's the main reason you're here."

"Hello," I say politely. I've never been great with kids, and anxiety rockets through my limbs. What do I do? Shake her hand?

Eva hides her face shyly against her dad's side, but then speaks. "He heats up a lot of frozen things."

Slowly, a flush covers Nathan's cheeks. I can't help smiling, which only seems to infuriate him.

“Well, I promise, everything I cook will be fresh. You can make me a list of the things you like if you want—and the things you don’t like.”

Eva’s eyes light up at that, a serious little purse to her lips. A lot like her dad’s. She nods and scoots off to another room, intriguing sounds following.

Nate and I lock eyes.

“I work a lot. And...I’ve never been great with cooking.”

It’s like pulling teeth. Like I’m torturing the guy, even though I didn’t ask for the explanation. I only nod and smile, deciding to try and keep things civil for now.

“That’s fine, most people are too busy to cook a full meal every day. That’s why I’m here, right?”

His face settles into something impassive and he leads me farther into the house. I glimpse a decent kitchen, though obviously unused per the empty countertops, and then I’m on a back patio. It’s already close to twilight, the sun hovering on the horizon behind the trees and creating a soft glow.

“That’s where you’ll be staying,” Nathan says, nodding toward a little cottage-like house separated from the main house by a pool. “As agreed on in the contract. Should have everything you need in there, but if not, you can text me.”

“I don’t have your number,” I admit. We’ve been communicating mostly through Russ, although I did get an email from someone at Ironside with the contract he mentioned.

His green eyes stare into mine as he reaches out around me and slips my phone out of the back pocket of my jeans. It sends a shiver up my spine, even though it was just the ghost of a touch. Nathan holds the phone out for me to unlock. I do, grinding my teeth.

Damn.

I’m still attracted to him.

I was hoping that would wear off, after making an ass of myself at the gala.

But no, the man still looks absolutely tempting as I hand my own phone back to him. He's quick to pull up the contacts and type a number in, leaving the name as Nate Sharpe. Habit, maybe? He seems to want to put a wall up, and the casual use of his name goes against that.

"Thanks." I take the phone back and slip it into my pocket, trying not to get hung up on the way he runs a hand through his hair. The sunset glow catches in the grays, reflecting, and almost shimmering.

"Tomorrow," he says shortly, seeming annoyed with something. I cast my mind about, trying to figure out what I did wrong now. "You start tomorrow."

And with that, he walks back into the house, leaving me alone on the patio with my bags.

Chapter 4

Nathan

In the dream, Gen is kneeling in front of me again. Only this time, the wine is on her.

It's spilled down her breasts, running in a dark river between them, coiling at her hips and thighs. My mouth waters at the sight. I want to lap it off her. I want to drag my tongue over every inch of her naked skin.

Her hands brace on my knees, then slowly move up—fingers digging into my thighs, her eyes set on my cock. It gives an obvious twitch at her attention and Gen licks her lips.

Her eyes dart up to meet mine. "Trust me. I know how to play nice."



AN HOUR and a half after waking up, that damn dream is still lingering about like a fog. I try to shrug it off as I dress in a button down and jeans; casual, but the shirt will help me focus on work more than a T-shirt would since I'll be in the home office today.

Summers are tough. Eva is out of school and I could pay for childcare, but it just doesn't feel right. Instead I try to alternate my schedule, working from home when I can, going into the office only once or twice a week.

But still working. Still locked away in my office when I have to be, waving Eva off when I'm on a call. It breaks my heart every time. Hardens it a little.

As I open the door to my bedroom, barefoot, a waft of something sweet makes me lift my nose. It's...familiar. But I can't quite place it.

Curious, I step out into the hallway and follow the scent to the landing. Down the stairs. Into the kitchen.

Someone is singing.

“She’s got eyes of the bluest skies, and if they...thought of rain...”

My brow crinkles. Guns N’ Roses? Definitely not on my list of favorite bands, and a headache is already starting to form.

Not that the voice isn’t *nice*. It’s just unwanted at the moment. I’m used to quiet mornings, and now I can hear Eva joining in on the chorus, her childlike voice pitchy and uneven:

“Wooooah, oh, oh, sweet child o’ mine!”

Turning the corner, I pause for a moment and take it in. Gen is standing at the little butcher block island bopping around, Eva perched on the counter behind her, swinging her ponytail in time with the song.

“Oh!” Gen looks up and gives me a wide grin, pretty teeth flashing. *Pretty teeth?* The headache builds as she chirps, “Good morning! How do you feel about waffles? I’ve found people have pretty strong feelings about them—”

A little Bluetooth speaker on the counter is blasting the song, and something on the stovetop is frying. Bacon, by the smell of it. I grit my teeth and take a deep breath.

“I’m working here today.”

“That’s great,” Gen rambles, opening a waffle iron that was definitely *not* in my kitchen the other day and shoveling out a massive Belgian waffle. Eva leans over, her eyes glued to the fluffy treat.

“You need to go get dressed, hon,” I say, taking in my daughter’s pj’s with a glance.

Eva huffs but jumps down off the counter. At ten, she’s tall for her age, and not afraid of scraping a knee or banging an elbow. She rips off toward her room and it’s just Gen and I, the young chef picking up right where she left off with classic rock.

“Do you mind?” I ask it quietly, in a low voice that gets her attention immediately. She snaps her mouth shut. Is this what she was like in the restaurant’s kitchen? Singing, bubbly, *very* awake at 7 a.m.?

“There’s coffee over there, if you want some.”

That sounds delicious, and my annoyance drains away. I’d worship her for a cup of coffee, but I clamp my own mouth shut, not wanting to let her know what I’d be willing to do for a drop of caffeine.

Instead, I maneuver around behind her to the French press. Another item that definitely wasn’t here yesterday.

Gen’s still humming as I pour a cup, and we both turn at the same time. She has a spoon in her hand and as we collide, it flings hot purple goop at my chest.

“Oh my—shit,” she cusses in a squeak, the curse surprising me and momentarily taking my mind off the pain of whatever just splashed on me. It’s trailing down my collarbone in a thick drip, soaking the edge of my shirt collar purple.

I look down at her and growl. We’re only inches apart, Gen’s eyes wide and mouth parted. It’s the gala all over again, only this time she’s not on her knees.

“I’m so sorry,” she gushes, putting a hand on my chest and then immediately pulling away as if she’d been burned. She stutters, hands in the air, spoon steaming. “I—it’s—it’s a berry compote, I didn’t realize you were right behind me—”

The shirt comes off. Slowly. One button at a time, our eyes still locked.

I can see her fighting the urge to drag her gaze over my body as I peel the stained fabric off, ball it up, and clench it in one hand. Her tongue comes out to wet her lips.

“I’ve got work to do today.” It comes out as another growl, ragged and frustrated. Partly because I can’t seem to keep clothes on around her, and partly because all I want is some peace and quiet. “Try to keep it down. And I hope you’re not planning on feeding my daughter sugar every morning.”

I eye the whipped cream, warm syrup, and pile of berries and compote behind her on the counter. Gen's eyes narrow and she crosses her arms, forgetting entirely about the spoon.

As it touches her skin, she yelps. There's a streak of purple along the inside of her forearm, and I reach out to grasp her wrist—again reminiscent of that night at The Black Fig.

Without a second thought, I lift her arm to my mouth and lick off the compote. It's good. Really good, though I don't need any more sweets in my life.

Gen's eyes darken and her body sways toward mine before she seems to catch herself. I move away quickly.

"I'll be in my office."

Ignoring Gen's stare, I tower past her and down the dark hallway, trying to catch my breath. Telling myself over and over, *This isn't running away; I just need some peace and quiet.*

Chapter 5

Genevieve

It takes almost the whole day to get my concentration back after seeing Nate Sharpe shirtless. Inches away. His tongue licking a perfect, slow line to my wrist...

God. Not again.

Shaking the thought off, I curl up on the little pool house sofa and try to focus on a shopping list. Opening the fridge this morning was shocking and I'm happy I brought a few essentials. When Eva ate that first waffle, her eyes lit up like the Fourth of July. When was the last time this kid had a proper breakfast?

"A shame," I mutter to myself, not sure if I mean that Eva isn't getting a nutritious diet or that Nathan eventually found another shirt.

So far, the list is long and might even take two trips...or at least a few insulated bags. I wiped down the inside of the fridge earlier and already have a great idea for dinner.

Steak medallions on a bed of kale, with ricotta salata, peaches, pickled onions, smashed lemony potatoes...

My mouth waters at the thought. Aside from the waffle I'd scarfed down this morning, I've only had half a PB&J. Never a great idea to go shopping on an empty stomach.

The clock over the mantle reads 3:17 p.m. and I startle, standing with a surprised yelp. I better get shopping. With a last glance at the cute little pool house I'm still settling into, I pick up the keys to the car Nathan is letting me drive and head out.



TWO AND A HALF HOURS LATER, my concentration breaks again.

Damn. It shouldn't be this hard to get over embarrassing myself around someone, but whenever Nathan walks into the room, it's like my whole body buzzes with a warning. Or... something else.

Something I've been suppressing for a while now.

Shaking off a shiver, I open the oven and check on the potatoes.

When I come back up out of the steamy, crisp goodness, Nate has both hands braced on the countertop and is staring me down.

"Steak medallions?"

Immediately, I bristle at his tone. What is it with this man and talking down to everyone? He's clearly used to getting his way, but then, so am I.

"Yes. Is there a problem with that?"

His lip curls in amusement and my eyes land there. I'm reliving his wide tongue pressed against the pulse in my wrist...

"You do realize my daughter is ten, right? She's not going to eat...this."

He dips a fork into the steamed greens, lifts them, and lets them *plop* back into the pan. The heat of embarrassment floods my cheeks.

"It's well-seasoned, I'm sure she'll like it."

Nate's green eyes bore into mine. "You've never done this before, have you?"

Anxiety tightens my throat. I wonder just how much Russ told him. "Cooked?"

He knows I'm playing dumb and gives me a flat glare. "Cooked for anyone under the age of forty."

My mind flits back to an earlier thought from today. *How is he so in shape for an older guy?* Adding it all up, he must be close to Russ in age, which would put him at around forty or so. A little over ten years my senior.

“I—there weren’t usually many kids at the Fig,” I scoff, recalling our menu. Shucked oysters, pork belly, buttermilk half chicken with yuzu sauce.

“Yeah...you’re going to need to rethink this.” Nate tosses the fork onto the counter, his nostrils flaring. There’s just *no way* he finds this food unappealing, but there’s a battle raging inside me.

Because a part of me knows he’s right.

I’ve never done this before. Never cooked for a family. Never made quick, easy, homemade meals. I don’t *have* a family.

That thought stings, and I lean down to yank the sheet pan out of the oven.

“Those might be fine.” He says the words carelessly, eyes trailing over the potatoes. “Just toss some sour cream on the side.”

I let out a little indignant huff, but right then Eva comes into the kitchen, curiously peeking around her dad’s hip.

“What’s that?” she asks, lip curled as she points at the pan of greens.

A slow, satisfied smile curls across Nate’s face. I *hate* how attractive he is in this moment because it makes me dumb. My mind goes blank, then catches up with the present again.

“It’s just vegetables. You should try it, but you don’t have to eat it if you don’t like it.”

Eva doesn’t look too sure about any of the food as I sort it out on the counter and snatch plates from a cupboard. The look on Nate’s face makes me want to climb him like a tree and wipe it right off, but instead I smile tightly at the two of them.



DINNER IS DEFINITELY awkward and while eating, I sneak my phone into my lap to text Russ.

Me: *You could've warned me that he's an ass.*

Three little dots pop up immediately, and I can practically hear the amusement in his typed reply.

Russ: *Rough first day?*

Me: *Let's just say no one at The Black Fig ever questioned my steamed greens.*

Eva is rambling about her day, a show she's been watching, filling Nathan in on the plot. He actually looks invested in the conversation and nods along, which surprises me. Don't parents usually just zone out...?

Russ: *Eva is only ten, Gen.*

Me: *So I've been told. Several times.*

There's a longer pause and guilt gnaws at my stomach. I know I should be grateful for this job, and for Russ pleading my case to Nathan, but the guy has been nothing but rude and bossy.

He's a decent guy, Russ's next text comes through, as if he can read my mind. *Just give it a fair shot. And maybe try turkey sandwiches or something not so...Michelin star.*

I roll my eyes and look up from my lap, gaze catching on Nathan's. He's watching me curiously. Eva is still chatting away, and that guilt in my stomach twists into something different...a fringe of nerves, a prey vs predator sensation of being watched very, very closely.

Ignoring the effect he has on me, I turn my attention back to dinner and start mentally planning out the next few days with the grocery haul I got today.

I've only failed a handful of times in my life, and this personal chef position will *not* be one of them.

Chapter 6

Nathan

The house is quiet without Eva. I find myself wandering the halls, picking up a Nintendo Switch controller she left on the arm of the couch, pushing in the stool she loves to perch on in the kitchen.

She'll be at a friend's all weekend for a sleepover. It's good for her to get out, develop friendships, I remind myself. But in the back of my mind, all I can picture is the sympathetic looks of the other moms from school. I can practically read their minds. *Poor thing. Having to make due with a single dad who works all the time.*

It's not about me, though. It's important for Eva to have friends. To get out and socialize.

I don't work the weekends, so there's nothing to keep busy with, unless I decide to head out to the workshop.

But something is nagging me...I can't put a finger on what. There's just been this restless feeling since last night, the pull of something under my skin.

Like an itch I can't scratch.

As if I've summoned her with my uncomfortable thoughts, Gen Walker comes in from the patio, a sundress fluttering around her thighs. My eyes lock onto the sight and I feel that familiar twist of desire in my stomach. It only ramps up that feeling of frustration, but now I know it for what it is.

"Oh," she says, eyeing me warily. "Sorry."

We got off on the wrong foot. But I don't know how to say that out loud.

Gen isn't the kind of woman I'm used to. She's vocal, talks to herself while she cooks, smiles a lot. That brown hair spilling over her shoulders makes her look like late afternoon sunlight. A golden glow to her no matter what, and that jaunty sway to her hips...

“I can leave.”

“No.” I clear my throat. Where the hell did that come from? “You don’t have to. I’m just trying to decide what to do.”

Gen smiles tentatively, moving farther into the kitchen. “Bored?” She opens the fridge—the freezer, actually. Takes out a pint of vanilla ice cream.

“Usually—” I admit, leaning against the counter with my arms crossed. The skirt of her dress brushes my pants as she reaches into a drawer for a spoon. “—I try not to work on weekends. But without Eva...”

Recognition lights her face. Russ mentioned Gen didn’t have any kids, or anyone she was particularly attached to. Something about a failed engagement-slash-partnership...a restaurant not doing well. But it’s all a haze as the scent of her, citrus and vanilla, overtakes me.

“I get it. I’m not good at free time, either.”

She faces me, leaning back on the counter and popping the lid off the ice cream.

“Vanilla? Really?” I raise a brow, staring down at the white cream flaked with little dark bits of actual vanilla pods. Can’t imagine how much is coming out of my wallet for decent, quality food, but I get curious as Gen raises the spoon to her lips and slips it between them.

“This is the best. Trust me, this company does it right. You’ll never think of vanilla as ‘plain’ again once you try it.”

There’s a bit of a challenge in her voice and eyes, and my lips quirk. Gen clearly isn’t used to people disagreeing with her.

I reach out and take the spoon from her, our fingers brushing languidly. The snap of her eyes makes me wonder if she feels it, too.

Russ didn’t mention a man in her life currently...and hooking up with strangers in alleys doesn’t exactly scream

“I’m in a committed relationship.” Maybe she’s just as frustrated as I am when it comes to physical satisfaction.

Gen holds the pint tightly as I dig out a bit of ice cream and put it in my mouth. I hold her gaze as I drag the spoon through my lips, tongue lapping at the cool metal.

She’s right, damn it. This is delicious.

Nibbling at her lip—a nervous habit I vaguely remember from when she was a kid—she takes the spoon back and digs out her own mouthful. But she’s shaky, unfocused, and although most of it reaches its destination, a little chunk of vanilla falls onto her chest. Right where her collarbone is.

Heat sears my body from the head down, gathering at my groin. Not thinking clearly, I step into her space, backing her up fully against the counter.

With one hand lightly on her neck, I lean in and lick the melting dessert off. It’s a blast of flavor on my tongue, her skin as hot as mine as I brush my nose up her throat.

Gen swallows. Our bodies are inches apart. Less, maybe.

Her breath flutters over my lips, and then I can’t help it. I lean in and steal a kiss.

It’s quick, cursory. Something just for *me*.

I should’ve asked permission. My stomach is dropping with the realization she might slap me, or storm out, or call her brother when—

She kisses me back.

The move surprises me and I almost lose my balance, having to brace myself with a hand on either side of her. “Mmm,” she mumbles against my mouth, teeth clashing as we feel each other out.

How am I *this* out of practice?

It’s been a while. Which is why, despite what my dick very *clearly* wants right now, I’m foggily trying to set boundaries within myself.

Gen's arms wrap around my waist and I devour her. She tastes like heaven, sweet and hot, her tongue teasing as it meets mine.

"Damn," I mutter, letting go of the counter to wrap an arm around her hips and turn us. Her bare feet brush my legs when I lift her up and set her on the island. That little dress is messily falling apart under my touch, and it's only been a few minutes.

Imagine what I could do if I took my time...

Still lost in her taste, I run my hands up her thighs slowly, feeling her shiver from bottom to top. She sucks my bottom lip into her mouth and it gives my dick even dirtier ideas, but I need to toe the line between being satisfied and taking too much, too fast.

Pulling back, I fist the flimsy skirt and meet her eyes.

"Is this okay?"

It comes out as a grumble, more of a sound than words. Gen nods, her face flushed at the cheeks, eyes glistening like she's drugged. I can feel it, too, barely thinking as I sink to my knees in front of her and push the dress up.

For whatever reason, she's not wearing any underwear.

I might just take up praying right this moment. I *am* already on my knees.

The rosy lips of her pussy are damp as I part her thighs. Wrapping my forearm around one leg and tugging her forward, I hear Gen gasp above me. She steadies herself, her muscles taut as I shift close enough to smell her. A little sweet, just like the ice cream we'd just been licking off the spoon.

I dive right in.

It's messy and wet and suffocating, all deliciously so, as I bury my face in her pussy and nudge at her clit with my nose. My tongue swipes long, slow licks up her slit until I find the combination she likes. With my free hand, I work her clit, just barely touching it, feeling her rock her hips toward my hand in desperation.

She's panting after only a few minutes, her fingers buried in my hair.

"Tell me what you want," I mumble against her wet heat.

Gen whimpers, a jumble of nonsense spilling from her lips.

"I—I—"

"Use your words."

Glancing up at her, I see fire in her eyes. She's annoyed. Good.

Squeezing her thighs to pull me in tighter, she finally bites out, "I want to come."

My dick throbs at the words. Quickly, I palm it to take the edge off, knowing it'll be a problem for later. Now, I need to focus.

Shifting my tongue to her clit, I slowly ease two fingers into her tight opening and feel her immediately clench around me. Gen lets out a desperate whine, her fingers tightening in my hair as I crook mine to find that sweet spot.

My tongue attacks her clit with fast, jerky licks as I slowly move my fingers inside her. She has one hand back on the butcher block, lifting her hips toward me as she pants, and without warning, I suck. Hard.

One last curl of my fingers and she comes around me, thighs trembling as she lets out a long moan. I grin in satisfaction against her pussy, coaxing her orgasm further, longer.

When her legs finally go limp over my shoulders, I carefully shift them off and stand. Gen's hands curl around the hem of her dress as she pushes it down, her cheeks a flaming pink, eyes wide and glassy.

"Okay?"

I'm trying to ignore my erection as it insistently strains against my pants. Gen just nods, biting her lip.

"Chicken parm."

I turn away, a small smile lifting the corner of my mouth when she stutters out, “Ex-excuse me?”

“For dinner tomorrow night. Chicken parm. Maybe a nice salad.” My eyes flit to the wood surface beneath her bare ass. “Once you get your footing again, you should probably clean that up.”

Her cheeks flame even brighter as my grin turns into a smirk. Distracted from thoughts of an empty house and the temptation to work on the weekend, I stride toward the stairway, intent on taking a shower and jerking off until the insane pressure in my loins is nonexistent.

Hopefully, that little scene in the kitchen got the desire for Gen Walker out of my system.

Chapter 7

Genevieve

The next few days are quiet, but the tension never leaves my shoulders. I keep expecting Nate to appear in a doorway. Or maybe to creep up behind me. Put his hands on my hips. Turn me around and—

I rid myself of the thought with a small exhale and straighten up quickly, hands curling in the dirty garden gloves.

Nathan probably doesn't even realize it, but his gardener has planted several herbs in the flower beds. Most likely to help keep pests away, but I'm looking forward to making my own fresh herb mixes. With the scent of oregano and rosemary still strong in my nostrils, I glance up and watch Eva closely.

Someone has to—her nanny is half-asleep in a lawn chair, open book on her chest, sunglasses pushed up. A high school kid Nate found last minute, since he's been staying later at work this week, apparently.

Pursing my lips, I look at the little girl again. Luckily, Eva seems like the type who can keep herself entertained. A side effect of having a hardworking dad, I know, because Russ and I only saw our dad on weekends. *If* we were lucky.

At least Nathan spends time at home. And he seems to genuinely make an effort with Eva. I even caught him chasing her around the house and roaring like some kind of wild animal as she giggled the night she got back from her sleepover.

As if she can sense eyes on her, Eva looks over her shoulder, her little blond brows crinkled.

“Damn,” I mutter, already knowing what's coming.

Cute kid. Probably has a future with the CIA, the way she interrogates people.

She stalks toward me, a mason jar in hand with some pill bugs in it. They're forgotten momentarily in the grass as she

sits down cross-legged.

“What’s that?” she asks, pointing at the soft sage peeking from among a bush of cone flowers.

“Sage,” I explain. “I’m going to hang it up in the kitchen, let it dry out. It’s good for seasoning some foods.”

Eva’s little face is screwed up with a serious expression and she nods, as if tucking that information away.

“Are you married?”

My hands freeze, the garden shears open and hovering over a plant.

“Um...”

Almost. That single word makes my heart throb. I push the feeling away.

“No.”

I almost was, it didn’t work out. I thought we had the same dreams—

The shears snap closed with a metallic ring. Eva flinches. Her eyebrows shoot up. “Don’t you want to be?”

“Not everyone has to get married, you know. Your dad’s not married.”

The little girl tilts her head to the side, considering. “True. But he used to be.”

To a woman named Julia, I remember...Eva’s mom. When I was away at culinary school, Russel would call to chat, and a few times he mentioned Nate’s wife Julia. I just never put it all together until now. And I have no idea what actually happened to the woman.

Asking a ten-year-old probably wouldn’t be appropriate, so I ignore that line of questioning.

“Are you looking to catch anything in particular?”

Eva glances at the jar, obviously bored with it. She tips the pill bugs out and they scatter for the thick mulch.

“No. Why did you want to be a chef?”

I sit back on my heels, looking at her curiously.

“You ask a lot of questions, you know that?”

“It’s a good one, though.”

The deep voice makes me jump, shears falling onto the grass as I press a hand to my chest. Nathan stands a few feet behind us, hands in his pockets. He must have just arrived home from work.

His eyes are narrowed as he watches us, and I wonder if it’s just because he’s protective of Eva, or because he’s genuinely curious.

The two of them are like good cop-bad cop, cornering me into answering. I sigh and shuck the garden gloves off. Nathan settles onto a lawn chair nearby, completely ignoring the snoozing nanny.

“I...okay. I don’t know. I guess I always liked cooking. It makes people happy, and I like seeing them happy when they eat something I make.”

It sounds like a lame answer, but memories flitting through my mind lend it truth—my dad after a long day of work enjoying a pot of meatballs. Mom showing me how to bake a pie. The impressed and surprised look on the face of one of my teachers when I got the poached pears just right. All those customers at The Black Fig who practically moaned over my menu, returning regularly until we knew their names and their orders.

“Dad, Gen isn’t married.”

Eva states it so matter-of-fact, it takes us both by surprise. I feel my cheeks flame as Nate glances at me, his face carefully impassive.

“That’s not really an appropriate thing to be asking Miss Gen about, Eva.”

The ten-year-old looks ashamed for a second and mumbles an apology. Then a black and blue butterfly flits by, and she stands to chase after it.

“Sorry,” Nate says stiffly. “She doesn’t have boundaries around that kind of stuff yet.”

I shrug, trying to play it nonchalantly. But I can see the curious glint in Nate’s gaze. He’s wondering the same thing. Why I’m single. Why I’m here.

My heart swells with the temptation to tell him.

After all, I don’t think I ever really told *anyone* what happened with Will. Not fully, anyway. At the time, Russ had just started at the gallery and was so consumed with his work.

“It’s not a problem. She’s a kid, they’re curious.”

“Still,” Nate says gruffly, standing and brushing nonexistent dirt from his pants. “We all have things we don’t want to have to explain to others. Private situations.”

As he walks back toward the house, calling out for Eva, I can’t help but wonder, *What are your secrets, Nate Sharpe? Why are you living in this big house with only a daughter, who you barely see? Why do you lock yourself away to work and hide in the shadows?*

Chapter 8

Nathan

“I don’t care, Trudy. We need to figure this out. You asked Nash about it and he didn’t have an answer?”

Trudy explains once again, her voice full of anxiety, that Nash wasn’t exactly forthcoming. And I get it, I do. Nash looks down on everyone. It’s a character flaw of his. But this is urgent.

“Okay. I’m coming in tomorrow, then, early, and you and I will take a look at it. Thank you for catching it.”

She mumbles an apology and I sigh, feeling like an ass.

“No, no, it’s fine Trudy. Not your fault. Really, I owe you one. You’ve got sharp eyes.”

Hanging up my cell, I drop into the armchair in my office and run a hand through my hair. It feels thick, oily, and I know I need a shower.

The glow from my laptop is the only light in the room. It’s like a beacon of some sort; a warning.

Trudy is in her early sixties and has been my assistant for the entire time Ironside has been in operation. She has old habits. One of them is keeping her own account, even if Nash, our financial accountant, oversees company-wide finances.

Which is how she caught the errors. The first ones, at least.

This morning she realized her numbers didn’t match Nash’s for the fourth month in a row. Once a month, he sends me a financial report, a giant spreadsheet that I honestly don’t even look at anymore. And that’s on me.

Luckily, Trudy ignores conventional rules and has looked at the numbers quite a few times herself. When she alerted me a few hours ago that something was off, I dug into the documents myself.

And she's right. But it's not just her office supply purchases that are off...it looks like there are several departments, going back at least eight months, that are spending just slightly *more* than I would expect.

I glance at the computer screen, which tells me it's just after 10 p.m. Eva went to bed an hour ago. The entire house is dark.

But I know I won't be able to sleep.

Standing, I start to pace the room, then angrily shuck my tie, and toss it on to the armchair. In just a few strides, I'm at the stairs and stepping into my bedroom, the door closing quietly behind me.

It's dark here, too, but there's a source of light that draws my attention. As I start to unbutton my shirt, I walk toward the windows, searching for it.

The pool house.

I watch, fingers frozen on the last couple of buttons, as Gen moves across the pool house interior.

The little cottage was built for comfort and style, but not privacy. From up here I can see everything—something I hadn't considered before, since the only guest we've ever had in the pool house was my brother, Chris, before he too moved to the city.

My hands fall away from the now open shirt. I should turn from the window, give Gen privacy. I'm not exactly a voyeur.

But I just can't look away. She moves across the space with a confident grace, her long legs carrying her easily from the little dining nook to the living area. She's wearing a cream colored nightie that barely grazes the tops of her thighs, and as she sits, it rides up, exposing the entire side of her leg right to her hip.

My mouth waters.

"What are you doing to me, woman?" I groan quietly.

Gen's hand ruffles through her hair, spilling it back across the couch. I imagine myself there with her—prowling over her

body. Teasing those thin little straps down over her shoulders, down her arms, until her breasts are exposed to the night air.

Unable to ignore it any longer, I palm my erection roughly. It does nothing to abate the aching need I feel to spread her legs and let that little nightie ride up to her hips.

I don't know what's gotten into me, and the frustration shows as I undo my belt and toss it to the side.

I don't date, but I'm not celibate, either. Maybe once or twice a year, when I get distracted by my body's needs, I give in and find a willing participant. Someone I'm passingly attracted to. Someone I'll never see again.

Maybe that's the problem.

I'm much, *much* more than passingly attracted to Genevieve Walker.

And I hadn't planned on seeing her again after that night in the alley, when her long legs and hot center tightened around me.

Out in the pool house, Gen flips over onto her belly. The nightie skims her ass and I close my eyes, groaning as I imagine kneeling behind her, ghosting a hand over her bottom as I fist myself.

This is the third time in as many days I've had to touch myself to burn off the energy and frustration caused by Gen's proximity.

I should fire her. I need to fire her.

Groaning, I turn away from the window, kicking my pants off completely and leaning against the wall. With my eyes shut tightly, I decide to just get it over with. My hand tightens its grip around the base of my cock and I go back to the memory of being between Gen's legs, her warm pussy only millimeters away, the tremble of her thighs and the sounds she made when she came.

It doesn't take long for me to stifle a cry as the orgasm rocks through me, cum spilling in ropes over my fist, a surprising amount given how often I've been doing this lately.

I *won't* look outside again.

Gen deserves privacy, not to have her pervy boss watching her from his bedroom window. It's not her fault I can't seem to control myself around her.

But this is a problem I can't deny.

And I need to find a solution for it, before things get out of hand—literally.

Chapter 9

Genevieve

A week managed to go by relatively smooth, aside from Nathan prowling around the house in a constant mood.

I can't figure out what the guy's problem is. He seems irritated by my very presence, and if that's the case, why did he agree to hire me? I know he and Russ are good friends, but still...especially taking our past tryst into consideration, it seems like there's nothing he's getting out of this.

Eva, at least, is getting healthy, regular meals. At our last breakfast together—Nate had left early, before Eva even woke up—the girl explained to me through a mouthful of toast and eggs that her last nanny was somewhere in Spain.

A few days ago I'd overheard Nate seething over the new one, who's able to fall asleep pretty much anywhere. When Eva fell and injured her knee so badly it needed stitches while on the girl's watch, that was the last straw. She'll probably be let go soon, if not already, which only has me wondering—why hasn't he let *me* go yet?

Why keep me here if my singing, chatting, and enthusiastic cooking truly annoys him so much?

“Well, I'm not going to pretend to be someone other than myself,” I mutter out loud like a crazy person as I open the patio doors of the pool house and step outside.

It's Saturday, and Eva is spending most of it at an art day camp Nate hastily signed her up for last minute. No idea where he got the notion, but it's a good one. Eva was excited. Maybe he's not quite the *absent father* I've been building him up to be in my mind...

Maybe he's been getting on my nerves, too.

Probably because he looks so damn good, a little voice in my head whispers in betrayal. I shake the thought off, holding the fluffy towel closer to my body.

I've only been on the pool patio for a few minutes and already the sun is scorching my shoulders. Picking a random lounge chair, I toss the towel and toe off my sandals.

The jarring sound of a saw blade startles me. With a gasp, I stiffen, hand to my chest, and whirl around.

The building I've been wondering about—a slate gray barn-style monstrosity—is open, a rollaway wall giving me a full view of the inside.

It's a shop of some kind.

Surprising. I tilt my head to the side, taking it in.

Some kind of winch system hangs high over an open floor, with table saws and other unidentifiable machinery lined up against one wall. The other wall houses tools of all shapes and sizes on an intricate, expensive-looking peg wall.

And then there's Nate.

He stands at the table saw nearest the door, legs spread wide, hands firmly holding down a board of dark wood.

God, how I wish I was that wood...

His calloused hands move it smoothly toward the saw and that zinging, whirring sound fills the air again. Sawdust billows up around Nate, who's wearing a set of protective glasses and a heavy apron.

The saw stops and he turns, the now split board held in either hand.

Our eyes meet.

He looks surprised to see me, and I'm too caught off guard to give him a friendly smile. Instead, I stand there like a complete idiot, hand still pressed between my breasts—where Nate's gaze drops.

The barn can't be more than thirty feet away from the pool patio, so he has a *great* view of what I'm wearing. Or rather, what I'm not.

Thinking I was alone today, since Nate is usually locked up in his office or villain's den or whatever he has going on at

the back of the house, I'd thrown on a bikini I hadn't worn in a few years. And boy, did it show.

As a chef, you're constantly tasting what you're cooking. And usually, you're missing meals, too, so at the Fig, I was used to snacking on bacon or scallops or whatever was lying around. It definitely filled out my curves a bit, and the bikini fits tightly over them, the strings cutting into my hips, triangles of fabric barely covering my ass cheeks and tits.

Nate definitely gets an eyeful as we stand there staring at each other.

He clears his throat.

"Sorry. Didn't realize you'd be using the pool today."

"Oh, I don't have to. I can—" My mind goes blank. Why am I trying to appease this man? I've never been like this, eager to obey, to get out of the way.

My thoughts wander back to the night at the gala when I was on my knees in front of him. I would've done whatever he said then, and now that I know just how good he is with his tongue, I'm *more* than willing to take orders from Nathan Sharpe.

"No, it's your day off. Sorry I interrupted. This can wait."

He carefully puts the wood aside and I catch a glimpse of what he must be working on. A dark wood kitchen island of some kind, with beautifully rounded corners.

Then his broad shoulders distract me and the way he braces his feet apart again as he works.

Plucking at the strings of my top distractedly, I turn back to the pool and try to concentrate on cooling off. But all of a sudden, I'm *very* aware of Nate's presence and the possibility that he's watching.

Wondering if his eyes are on me, I strut over to the side of the pool where the stairs are and dip a toe in.

The water is perfect—lukewarm, heated by the afternoon sun. It'll feel like silk on my skin and I shiver at the thought,

my nipples suddenly tightening under the thin fabric of my top.

Conscious of the near wedgie I have going on—my ass now facing Nate’s workshop—I step into the pool up to my thighs, moaning quietly and lifting my hair into a high ponytail so it grazes my neck.

There’s a strangled sound from somewhere behind me, and I look over my shoulder to see Nate watching, his eyes dark and glued to my body.

My throat goes dry, but I manage to call out semi-confidently, “You look hot. Why don’t you come for a swim?”

My lips lift in a teasing smile, even as I wonder what the hell has gotten into me. Inviting my boss into the pool for a swim? While I’m practically busting out of this bikini?

Don’t forget that he’s your brother’s best friend, that annoying little voice reminds me. And your failed one-night stand.

Maybe that’s it; why my head is so fuzzy. Maybe knowing *exactly* what Nate can do with that body, and that tongue, has me thinking anything but straight.

Just when I’m sure he’s going to turn his back on me and scoff, Nate’s eyes narrow. He lifts the apron over his head, untying it and tossing it onto a workbench. I’m left with the view of a sleeveless shirt so tattered it’s practically falling off his bulky shoulders, tantalizing skin showing here and there.

Nate stalks toward the pool. I dip down quickly, suddenly self-conscious with his gaze on me. Which is ridiculous. Just a few nights ago, he was eye level with my pussy, and now I’m worried about him seeing me mostly unclothed?

He makes it to the edge of the pool and sits unceremoniously on a lounge chair, working at his boots, eyes still dragging down my body. I’m *very* aware of the trickle of water running from my shoulders down my cleavage, soaking the fabric that’s barely covering me.

“Cold?” he asks, arching a brow.

I bite my lip and fight the urge to cover up, because he's referring to my nipples—peaked under the pink cloth.

“No.”

It comes out as a challenge, a taunt, an insinuation. What I want to say is, *Your eyes on my body make me this way. I'm hot. I'm wet. I can't stop thinking about you between my legs.*

Instead, I lose the ability to speak as Nate stands, kicks off his boots, yanks the poor excuse of a shirt over his head, and starts to slowly undo his belt.

The clank of metal sends a frisson of wet heat to my core and I press my thighs together, wanting so badly to touch myself.

I'm pretty sure I could get off just *looking* at this man. He's covered in sawdust and sweat, his skin damp and dark from being in the sun.

He shucks off his jeans. Just dark gray boxer briefs doing nothing to hide that bulge. My pussy throbs at the sight, and I lick my lips, goose bumps running up my arms and thighs.

“Still up for sharing the pool?” Nate asks, taking slow steps toward me. I nod, unable to speak, and he steps down into the water.

His chest, darkened from the sun, is covered by much lighter hair. It shows his age, salt and pepper in some places, the trail leading into his boxers darker and thicker.

The cotton hem of his boxers darkens as water laps up his strong thighs. I push back into the pool, overwhelmed with how badly I want to be pressed up against him.

“It's all yours.” A breathless tease. The straps of the bikini bite into my breasts as I breathe heavily, anticipation coiling low in my belly.

Nate hums in agreement, striding toward me against the water. He backs me up against the far wall, the gritty surface biting into my skin deliciously—just like the brick behind the restaurant. The memory flashes through my mind and I want him inside me so bad I ache.

Boxing me in with an arm on either side of my waist, Nate leans in close and murmurs, “You’re tempting. I should be working right now. Not splashing around in a pool with you.”

As the last word drops from his mouth, his lips brush my shoulder. A shiver runs down my spine and my breasts arch toward him without my permission.

“Weekends are for resting, not working,” I half gasp, mentally begging for him to touch me.

Nate chuckles, the sound dark and low despite the sunlight turning his hair golden. He brushes his lips up my neck, tongue flicking out to touch my earlobe before he says, “The last thing on my mind right now is *resting*.”

A whimper slips out as I grip his forearm to hold myself steady. Nate positions himself in front of me, legs braced. He reaches out and plucks at the string holding the thin fabric against my tits.

“Don’t you think your brother would be outraged to see you like this? All wet and wanting me.”

A rebellious streak briefly surfaces as our eyes meet. His finger drags down into the little triangle of fabric, catching on my pebbled nipple.

“Who says I want you?”

Without breaking eye contact, Nate pulls his hand back and then slips it below the water, between my legs. Deftly, as if he’s a master of the art, he pulls aside the fabric and slips two fingers into my slick folds.

“This,” he murmurs, leaning in so close I can feel the heat of his chest, practically taste the salty sweat on his skin. “*This* is what gives you away, Gen. You’re wet for me, aren’t you?”

My brain turns to mush as he touches me, plying my pussy gently, teasing, never breaching. His thumb brushes my clit and I whimper again, nodding vigorously.

“Yes.”

Another deep, dark chuckle, and before I realize what’s happening, Nate spins me around and presses me against the

wall of the pool. It ends just above my belly button, the perfect angle for him to hold me steady with one hand as he rips my bikini bottom down my legs with the other. I gasp, not expecting the move or how much it turns me on.

Nate rustles around behind me, one broad hand on my lower back as he shifts himself. I frown, not understanding what he's doing until I feel his erection graze my ass.

"You're not going to move," he commands in a low voice. "Unless I tell you to. I'm going to use you, just like this, and if you're a good girl, I'll make you feel good. Understood?"

I nod, mindless, a small part of me arguing that I don't take orders. But at this point, I'll happily take *anything* from this man.

His hand splays across my belly as the other works himself. I can feel his long, firm strokes against my ass, the water starting to lap at our skin with the movements.

"Touch yourself."

"I—where?"

I'm too hazy with lust to form a coherent thought. I need him to tell me.

"Your breasts. I want to see you play with yourself."

Hastily, I undo the strings at my neck and the top of my bikini falls, exposing my breasts to the warm air. My nipples are still tight, aching, and I let out a sigh of relief as I cup myself, rolling the pebbles between my fingers. My head drops back onto Nate's shoulder. He presses closer, his fist working faster now, steady.

"Just like that," he murmurs.

His hand slides down to my pussy and covers it, the heel of his hand pressing against my clit. I whimper and try to grind against him. Nate chuckles.

"You want this?" he asks, thrusting his hips against my ass. He grips my waist, burying his cock between my ass cheeks, the hard length only getting me more wet.

“Y-yes.”

I want it so badly my core is throbbing. Nate’s fingers dance leisurely in my folds, teasing, dipping just inside my entrance.

“Don’t stop touching yourself.”

With those words, he slides two fingers inside my tight core, stretching me from an angle that I’m not used to. A moan slips out and he rocks against me harder at the sound, the head of his cock catching on my ass, skin on hot wet skin.

“Fuck, I love when you make those sounds.” His admission only makes me moan again, grinding against his hand as he pumps his fingers, thumb teasing my clit.

“I—I’m close.”

“You’re doing so good,” he purrs in my ear, bringing a hand up and covering mine with it, squeezing my breast and rutting against me. “You’re being so good for me. I might just let you come.”

A buzz of electricity runs from my pussy to the tips of my toes. I can feel my orgasm just out of reach, the two of us out of control now as we grind and press together. His chest sticks to my back, breath heavy as he pants in my ear. I can tell he’s close, can literally feel his cock throbbing against my ass as he keeps squeezing my tit, rolling the nipple between his large fingers while he plays with my clit.

With a grunt, Nate comes undone, hips stuttering as he orgasms. He curses and leans back to slide his cock in a fast rhythm against me, a hot spurt of cum covering my lower back. At the same time, he pinches my clit and I follow him immediately, eyes rolling back as the orgasm takes me over completely.

Between the feel of his calloused fingers on my pussy, the grit of the pool wall biting into my palms, and the rough thrusts as he comes down, it’s almost too much stimulation. I whimper and go limp, the only thing holding my weak knees up is Nate’s body pressed against mine.

After a few moments of us catching our breath, he adjusts himself and carefully pulls back.

“Okay?”

I nod. How am I going to get out of the pool? My knees feel useless, body still buzzing from the high of coming on his fingers.

As if he’s heard my thoughts, Nate wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me up once I turn around. He sets me on the edge of the pool and stares up at me with those piercing green eyes.

For only a second, I think about kissing him.

One of those orgasm-drunk, deep, satisfying kisses.

Then he moves away. He slicks his dirty blond hair back and climbs out of the pool, briefs showing every perfect cut of his body.

Clearing his throat, he says, “I’ve got work to do for the rest of the day. I’ll just heat up leftovers. You’re free to…”

He leaves it hanging, which only makes me feel more alone.

Free to what? I took this job in desperation, and now I have *way* too much free time. Normally, I’d be in the kitchen right now, preparing for dinner service, laughing with my prep cooks and sous-chef.

But that was before Erik pulled his coup off, got rid of me, and scared enough of the staff into backing up his ludicrous claims.

My gaze drops as Nate grabs his clothes and heads back toward the barn.

Shakily, I stand and wrap a towel around myself. My bikini is still floating in the pool.

Right then, a text lights up my phone screen. It’s from Sienna, my pastry chef from the Fig.

Sienna: *Thought you might be interested in this. You’re more than qualified!*

The next text is a link. I sink to the lounge chair as the website loads.

Saucer, one of the most elite restaurants in Germany, is hiring an executive chef.

Chapter 10

Nathan

Eva runs rampant through the house as I open the front door, less than thrilled to have been woken up at 7 a.m. by classic rock blasting in the kitchen.

“Uncle Chris!” Eva shouts as she makes a beeline for my brother, throwing herself into his arms. He laughs and swings her up into a hug.

“Hey, little bee. Missed you! Are you having a good summer?”

Eva rambles some nonsense response and then she’s off again, hell-bent on finding the perfect sheets for the fort she’s building in her room.

“What couldn’t wait until later this week?” I ask, stepping aside for Chris to come in.

He’s only fourteen months younger than me, so people often think we’re twins. But Chris is darker, smoother, has a smirk that women find irresistible. He’s also a lawyer.

“I have some information you might find interesting.”

We head for the living room, both of us sitting down in almost exactly the same posture. Chris holds a folder in one hand and tosses it onto the coffee table. “You seem stressed,” he notes.

I grind my teeth. Part of me is tempted to tell Chris about what I’ve been dealing with—the financial discrepancies that have shown, so far, a roughly ten grand loss at the company. That’s just in the last few months.

But I try to keep family and business separate.

“Let’s see it, then.” Leaning forward, I pick up the folder and flip it open. The first page is some kind of profile—for Chris. *He’s dating again?* I wonder distractedly.

Before our dad passed, Chris made a valiant effort to settle down. It didn't work, and he's been a bit of a player since. I occasionally see him in the papers, as he's made the city more of a home, whereas I removed myself and my family by buying this house.

"What...?"

I trail off, flipping to the next page. The images and notes suddenly click.

"You did a DNA test?"

Chris's smile is tight, which doesn't bode well for me. He's exuding a fake eagerness that immediately sets off alarms.

"Trisha, that woman I was seeing a few weeks ago, she did one and was going on and on about how it changed how she looks at her heritage and culture. She actually booked a flight to Puerto Rico right away, if you can believe it, to 'get in touch with her roots.'" Chris scoffs, but there's a twist to his smirk.

"Okay, so what? You discovered we're not actually Scottish-Canadian or something?"

"Uh, not exactly." He coughs discreetly into his fist, then leans forward and flips a few more pages. The heading for this one is "Relatives." Unsurprisingly, I'm not on it; I've never done a DNA test. But I'm surprised to see a tiny headshot of my mother, who apparently has her own profile, listed as one of Chris's parents. And then there's—

"A half brother?"

To say I'm shocked is an understatement.

There's no photo next to this person's name. *Jenson Sharpe.*

Sharpe. That's my last name—Dad's last name.

"Looks like Dad went and set up another family after he left Mom." Chris's smile is sad, and it hits me that he looks tired.

Everything in me has slowed down as I stare at him.

“We have a brother?”

Chris nods and I stand, throwing the folder down on the table and starting to pace. My jaw aches from clenching it.

“I can’t believe that asshole,” I fume.

Trying to defuse the situation, my brother stands, hands raised. “Woah, it’s not that big of a deal, Nate.”

“How can you say that?” I whirl around, eyes blazing. “Do you remember how devastated Mom was when he left? He took everything—”

It was actually part of why Chris became a lawyer. Our dad really screwed Mom over, hiding assets and money, leaving her with a mortgage and two kids to raise on her own. Neither of us ever wanted to be in that situation again.

“Yeah, he was a real piece of shit,” Chris agrees calmly. “But we can’t change what happened. We have a brother, Nate —”

“And what? You want to *meet him*?” I scoff, realizing that’s *exactly* what Chris wants. “You want to meet the kid our dad left us to have with some other woman?”

Chris’s jaw clenches. We’ll both have headaches later today. I’m already well on my way to one, the throbbing starting in my temples.

“We’ve already talked, actually. He didn’t know about us, either.”

My heart practically stops in my chest.

“You—you—”

“He’s up in Boston. I was thinking we could make the drive—”

“What would Mom have to say about all this?” I burst out, vision going red with anger. We never, *ever* talk about Dad. It’s a sore spot for everyone. Aside from feeling completely abandoned, I’ll never get over all the nights Mom stayed up crying. Chris probably doesn’t remember, because I shielded him from most of it.

But I'll never forget.

"Mom already knows."

My heart beats again, then drops. I have the urge to find my cell and call her right away, make sure she's okay.

"She's fine with it," Chris continues, sitting back down and shuffling the papers back into the folder. "She wasn't surprised, actually."

I huff out a strangled laugh. "Yeah? And did you tell her you want to meet this kid?"

"He's not exactly a kid anymore, Nate. He's only a few years younger than us. And he lost his mom a few years ago, so..."

That piece of information finally ignites a sliver of empathy. I unclench my fists and sit back down as Eva peeks into the room.

She hesitantly scurries over, climbing onto my lap. "You guys were yelling." She pouts, looking from Chris to me with those big eyes. Her mom's eyes.

The ache of loss echoes in my chest. I give Chris a warning look, one that says, *Don't you dare tell my daughter any of this.*

He smiles at Eva, that one-sided smirk back. "It's okay, bee. Your dad and I were just disagreeing about something. You know how he is, with his attitude."

Eva laughs as Chris's smirk widens, and it only makes me grumpier. "Dad, can we go to the park later, maybe?" she asks sweetly, batting those eyelashes at me. It doesn't actually work, but I agree anyway, feeling guilty for not spending more time with her.

"Before dinner, yes."

Eva perks up, suddenly very worried about what time it is. "When's dinner?"

"I'm not sure, you'll have to ask."

Chris frowns at my words and Eva launches off my lap, scurrying toward the kitchen. The music was turned off a while ago—when I barged in and ranted that if I have to hear Metallica *one more time* this week...

“I don’t want to see him.” I circle back to our previous conversation now that we’re alone again. “I’m serious, Chris. It’s great that you want to...connect, or whatever. But I have no interest in whatever Dad got up to once he left.”

Chris opens his mouth to argue, but Eva runs back into the room, her eyes lit up. “Dad! Look what Gen got!” She’s holding a giant container of fluff. That white marshmallowy sugary crap Julia never would’ve let our daughter have.

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I make to stand again, but Gen steps into the room, grocery bags in both hands.

“Hi—oh, I’m sorry. Eva said you two were making plans and I just wanted to touch base. Dinner at six okay?” She smiles politely at Chris, her brown hair falling out of a loose bun. “Will we have company?”

“No,” I say quickly, before my brother can invite himself to dinner. I can already see the sly look on his face. “That’s alright Gen, thanks. Six is fine. Eva and I will be going out for a bit, but we’ll be back in time.”

She nods professionally and then disappears back down the hallway, Eva close on her heels.

When I turn around, Chris is staring at me with wide eyes and that characteristic smirk.

“*Who* was that?”

“Our cook.” I sigh. “Personal chef. Whatever. I had to hire someone new and a friend needed some help—”

“So she’s just a *friend*, eh?”

I make a sour face at his insinuation but can feel my cheeks heating at the thought of just how *friendly* Gen and I got yesterday in the pool. My skin tingles at the memory of her

slick, wet body pressed against me, the way she moaned and dropped her head on my shoulder as I—

I cut the thought off and try to focus on the problem in front of me.

My brother.

“She’s actually Russ Walker’s little sister, so...”

I don’t mention that fact hasn’t stopped my desire for her or stopped either of us from tearing into each other.

Chris’s eyes narrow. “Interesting. You know, she looked at me first when she came into the room—and it wasn’t exactly *friendly*.”

Here’s the thing—being only fourteen months apart, Chris and I were close growing up.

He knows me well.

Too well.

“You know what they say, big brother. Don’t eat where you—”

“Alright.”

It comes out as a hiss. I lean forward, elbows on my knees, praying that Gen hasn’t heard *any* of this conversation.

Chris looks baffled, then shocked.

“Wait...are you two actually...?”

He leans in, too, and we’re kids all over again, conspiring.

Only this time, the consequences are very real.

And even when I was eighteen and captain of the baseball team, I never had a shot at landing a woman as delectable as Gen.

“Yes. Just...keep it quiet, alright?”

“How serious is it?”

My heart twists in my chest. A sliver of guilt surfaces. I’ve been trying to hide from it, trying not to think about what I’ve

been getting up to in the house my wife and I were once happy in.

“It’s not serious. We’re just blowing off steam.”

Chris’s brows raise. “And Russ...?”

“Obviously doesn’t know about it, you idiot.” I sigh and run a hand through my hair. “If I’m being honest, it wasn’t supposed to happen. It’s a long story. I actually met her out on the town—”

Conveniently, I don’t mention that I propositioned Gen at her restaurant.

“—and we hooked up. Just once. I didn’t know who she was then. A few weeks later, I promised Russ I’d hire his little sister as my personal chef. Lo and behold.”

“You’re kidding. I didn’t even know Russ Walker had a sister.”

“Well, you had joined the math club by then, so.”

We deteriorate to taking cheap jabs at one another and making faces, but soon a smile sneaks onto my face. I can’t help it; out of everyone in my life, only Eva and Chris have ever been able to disperse the cloud over my head.

“So what’re you going to do about it?”

My mind goes blank at his question.

Gen has only been here a few weeks, and honestly, the hookups have been cathartic.

“I don’t know. I have a lot going on at work right now. I’m pretty stressed.”

He sees the flash of guilt across my features. “And you’re using this as a way to ‘blow off steam,’ hmm?”

Is it wrong when it feels so right?

I keep that thought to myself, remaining tight-lipped. Instead, I say what should’ve been my immediate response, “I’ll just have to end it. Professionally.”

“Yeah...and in a way that’ll make sure it doesn’t get back to Russ. You guys have always been good friends, but I doubt he’d thank you for banging his sister.”

Rolling my eyes at Chris’s immaturity, I can’t help thinking that I really, *really* don’t want whatever this is with Gen to end.

Sure, as a rule, I never bring the same woman around twice. That’s how you get attached. And while I want stability in our lives for Eva’s sake, I’m not shopping around for a mom for her.

It’ll take some getting used to, but maybe cutting ties—at least sexually—with Gen is the best way to go. No one gets hurt and I don’t have to risk a friendship over it.

Plus, I should really get my head back in the game. Ironside is looking more and more like a slowly sinking ship.

And now there’s this news to process—I have a half brother, thanks to my dad’s infidelity and complete disregard for the family he had right here in New York City.

Chapter 11

Genevieve

I stare at the email from Saucer, in shock, elated, and terrified all at once.

Thank you for your application. We were impressed by your CV...

Am I really doing this?

Did I really do this?

Riding the high of getting off, thanks to Nate's talented fingers, I'd spent the rest of the afternoon soaking in the sun. And later, with a few glasses of wine...

And I'd clicked right back to the link Sienna sent me.

A small part of me hadn't actually expected them to consider me for the position. Executive chef is a big deal, after all. And yeah, I might have five years of experience under my belt, thanks to The Black Fig. But I left there with Erik's lies on my heels and was so sure it would ruin my reputation.

Apparently, they didn't get the memo in Germany.

I text Sienna quickly and within seconds, her name appears on my phone, indicating an incoming call.

"You're kidding! You're in the running? Gen, this is great!"

My mouth is dry.

"Yeah...I...I'm still processing it, honestly. They want to see a menu by the end of next month."

"Wow. Well, they're giving you more than enough time to put one together."

"They better be! They want something completely unique; it's going to take me forever. And I don't even have access to a kitchen..."

That's not entirely true. What I mean is, *I don't have access to an industrial kitchen*, but Sienna gets it.

"How's that going, by the way? The job?"

"Oh...good. You know. Pays the bills."

"You have someone subletting your apartment, right?"

"Yeah, until the end of the month."

"Well, that kind of works out. If you get this job in Germany, you won't have any ties to the city. You can break your lease and just go!"

I try to be excited about the idea as we discuss potential menu items. And I am...excited, that is.

But I'm also scared.

This isn't the first time I've attempted a big venture in life. My ex, Will, and I had a restaurant together in my early twenties.

It was a pipe dream of mine, one I thought we'd shared. I was close to achieving a Michelin star back then.

Right up until Will got greedy, started talking to investors without me, hijacked the entire restaurant, and cut me out.

Needless to say, our partnership—and engagement—ended soon after.

I got lucky back then and The Black Fig snapped me up. Within a year, I had that star. I made a name for myself in the city, and last I knew, Will was somewhere out on the West Coast.

I don't realize there's been a long silence until Sienna asks hesitantly, "Are you okay? Second-guessing the application?"

"No."

I say it hurriedly, as if to reassure myself.

"No, not at all. It's just intimidating, you know? I've been making chicken nuggets over here."

Sienna laughs at the joke and the tone lightens.

The truth is, out of everyone in my life, only Sienna knows how badly I want it all back.

Not Will—good riddance to that weasel.

But what I wouldn't give for that moment all over again. Stepping into an empty restaurant, a clean slate, being able to dream, and make it my own. The excitement and fear of starting something completely new.

A place to call mine.

Unfortunately, I spent all my savings on culinary school, and then on that little restaurant Will sunk into the ground. I'm not going to be getting it back anytime soon, even with the exorbitant amount Nathan is paying me to be his personal chef.

"You'll do great, Gen, I'm sure of it. And if you need anything, you know you can always call me. I'd offer to sneak you into the Fig's kitchen, but..."

The conversation takes an awkward turn.

When Erik went to the Fig's manager claiming I'd been verbally abusing the staff, Sienna wasn't one of the lackeys who backed him up on the lie. But she hadn't fought that hard, either, not wanting to put herself in the crosshairs.

I don't blame her. It's hard out there in our industry, harder still for a pastry chef to get a spot like the one she has at the Fig.

"It's fine," I say breezily. "How's he doing, by the way? Happy with the throne he threw me off?"

Sienna laughs. "No, definitely not. He's struggling. Half the staff doesn't take him seriously, and the other half is convinced he's going to stab them in the back, too. I don't know. I don't think he'll last, Gen. They might be giving you a call soon."

I snort.

"Yeah. If Saucer doesn't get to me first. But really, I don't think I'd go back."

“No? You didn’t seem too thrilled about the whole personal chef job last time we chatted.”

My gut twists guiltily. I should be happy Russ helped me out, happier still that Nate gave me a job, despite...

Well, despite the fact he’s seen me a naked, moaning mess on several occasions now.

The odd thing is, I realize as Sienna rambles on, I kind of *am* happy.

It’s not so bad here. Sure, making waffles and scones and finding inventive ways to get a kid to eat more vegetables wasn’t the challenge I was expecting, but...

The pool house is cozy. And the company isn’t so bad, even if Nate is a total grump and storms around the house with fists clenched and shoulders hunched. It’s actually kind of entertaining.

I curl up on the pool house couch, feeling content for the first time in a long time.

This will do.

I can be happy here until whatever the next great adventure is. I might not get to live out my dream of opening a restaurant again, but working for Nate Sharpe gives me enough time to sort out a killer menu for Saucer.

And someday this will all be behind me. Just a fond, sexy, tempting memory.

Chapter 12

Nathan

“I don’t care, Scott, you’re going to have to figure it out. I know companies typically avoid going to court. But I want to drag him through it for all he’s worth.”

“Nathan, that’s the thing. I doubt Nash is worth much if he was embezzling from Ironside. I think our best course of action is to just cut him loose and forget about it—”

The blood is practically boiling in my veins. Scott, sensing my rage, continues, “Besides, we don’t exactly have the money for a long, drawn out court battle right now. Do we?”

That puts a stop to the overload of anger that’s been coursing through me for the last fifteen minutes.

I stop pacing in my office, a buzz of anxiety moving through me from head to toe.

I can’t lose everything. I have Eva to consider.

Self-preservation and logic take over. I take a deep breath.

“Sorry, Scott. You’re right. It’s just a hard pill to swallow.”

“I know. I don’t like it, either. But we have all the proof we need. We can file a police report this week and be truthful if he tries to gain employment elsewhere and they reach out.”

My phone beeps, letting me know there’s another call coming in. I hold it away and see Gen’s full name on the screen: *Genevieve Walker*.

Odd. She hasn’t called me once the whole two and a half weeks she’s worked for me.

“Can you let me know by end of day tomorrow what the next steps are?”

“Of course, Nate. Let me talk with the team—”

Another beep. Insistent.

I frown.

“Scott, I’m sorry, I have another call coming through. Thank you again for this. We’ll touch base later?”

I tap the icon to end the call with my company’s head lawyer and switch over to Gen’s. The urgency in her voice has me moving for the door immediately.

“—vandalized the door, it’s got an actual *hole* in it—”

“Genevieve, slow down. Start over. What happened?”

Her words come out as a breathy gasp. “I stopped by my apartment quick to pick up a few things. No one’s here, but it’s vandalized.”

“Don’t you have someone subletting? Maybe they just had an accident, or—”

“No. They’re here. They told me it happened this morning, a little after midnight. Nate, the girl who’s subletting is leaving. Right now. She doesn’t feel safe here and—”

“Okay. Listen, stay there. I’m going to come check it out.” Sensing the hesitance from her end of the line, I add, “Go wait in your car. And send me the address.”

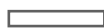
Before my call with Scott, I’d been planning on heading into the office for the day. My jacket waits on the back of a chair. I ignore it.

Something in me is stirring.

I want—no, *need*—to protect Gen from whatever it is that’s happening right now.

That fear in her voice...it’s like I’m finally waking up after years of being blind to the world around me.

On the way out the door, I grab Eva’s baseball bat. She’s over at a friend’s house for the afternoon and won’t miss it.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I pull up just down the street from a ten-story red brick building.

How did someone manage to get in here and vandalize Gen's apartment?

If I'm being honest, it's nicer than I expected. But then, she'd been on a Michelin star income before the restaurant dropped her. The Alfa Romeo beeps as I lock the doors and head for the main entrance.

I scan the street, taking in the normal foot traffic for New York and a semi-gentrified area. *How the hell?* There's even a doorman.

But then, as I approach the alley between buildings, I see it—a side door propped open. Probably for property management or cleaning staff. Maybe a resident sneaks out for a smoke now and then.

Frustration has me shaking my head. It's an easy, dumb way to be vulnerable, and it's exposed Gen to some kind of violence.

I'm practically holding my breath as I greet the doorman, who's been told to expect me.

Gen is waiting inside the foyer. She looks different than I've ever seen her, and it sends a spike of worry and protectiveness through me. Arms crossed, her cream blouse is wrinkled, the collar buttoned high.

“Hey.”

The greeting comes out gruff. I can't stop looking around, taking in my surroundings, searching.

As if the guy is going to pop out and wave a sign, saying he's the one who did this.

Gen steps toward me and her arms drop. She reaches out, then hesitates, crossing them again. I can sense she wants to be comforted and surprisingly, I want to comfort her, too. So I step into her space and crowd her toward a pillar so she isn't so exposed. She breathes a sigh of relief.

“Hi. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called—”

Brow creased with worry, she second-guesses her decision. I shake my head, hands on her upper arms.

“No, you definitely *should* have called. I’d be upset if you didn’t. Did you let Russ know?”

Gen blinks, her frown disappearing for a second.

“Oh, no, I...I think I’m just used to not wanting to bother him.”

She winces apologetically, and I can’t help lifting a brow at the implication she’s perfectly fine bothering *me*.

But again, I meant what I said. She absolutely should have called.

“Listen, even if it’s not that serious, I’d rather check it out.”

I gesture for Gen to lead the way. We end up in a bay of elevators, then head up to the fourth floor. The doors open and Gen takes a deep breath.

Instinctively, I reach out and take her hand.

She turns her hand in mine, our fingers lacing together.

Seeming bolstered now, Gen leads me down the hallway. It’s a beautiful dark wood. This building is old but well-kept. The carpenter in me can’t help admiring the character. We stop in front of door 4C, but I could’ve found it all on my own, because Gen’s temporary tenant wasn’t kidding.

There’s a shoe-sized hole in the door. The wood around it is splintered.

Not hard to do, since the door isn’t as high-quality as the rest of the building, but still. Gen’s arms are crossed again and she’s gnawing on her bottom lip.

Unconsciously, I reach out and thumb it from her teeth. She stares up at me in surprise and trying not to flush in embarrassment, I turn my attention to the door.

“This is...dangerous, Gen.”

The serious note in my voice has her focusing on the task at hand. I point out the lock on the door, where someone has obviously tried to get in. The wood around it is chipped and

scratched, part of the metal pried up. Just centimeters, but it's enough.

And then there's the permanent marker. Someone has written BITCH in heavy, thick, erratic lettering near the knob.

"You told building security?"

"Yeah. Yes. They said they can't do much, they can look at the cameras, but—" She swallows hard. "They're going to let me know in a few days, once everything has been reviewed."

"Okay. When did this happen?"

"My tenant said she heard scratching sounds a little after midnight but didn't check. She was too scared. And then this morning, when she went to leave for work..."

"How long ago?"

Gen shrugs. "Maybe an hour?"

"Okay," I sigh, straightening up and pulling out my phone. "This is what we're going to do. Your tenant needs to stay somewhere else. I'm sorry, I know they were subletting to help offset the cost. And you and I, we're going down to the police station. You need to file a report."

Guilt sweeps across her face and my heart aches for her.

All I want is to tug her into my arms and tell her it'll be okay.

But I can't, because I don't know how true that is. Whoever did this has it out for Gen; there's no way they chose a completely random door in this building.

This took effort. This took anger.

"Hey." I speak firmly to pull her attention back to me. Gen's startled eyes meet mine. "I've got you, okay?"

There's only a half second of hesitation, and she nods. The worry lifts from her features.

Guiding her back toward the elevator, everything in me wants to put a hand on her lower back. But my palm hovers just over the thin material of her blouse.

The last thing I need right now is to be distracted by how much I *want* her when I need to focus on protecting her.

Chapter 13

Genevieve

My tires are slashed.

There's no way it's a coincidence.

Just two days ago, my apartment door was vandalized. And now this.

I stand in the grocery store parking lot, staring in shock. The worst part is, this isn't even *my* car.

It's Nate's.

"No, no, no," I murmur, anxiety starting to crawl through my veins like ants. I clutch my cell phone, trying to decide—do I call the police? Russ?

But I already know what I have to do. Like I said—this isn't my car.

I text him first. Vague, avoiding the truth behind the act. That I was singled out for this.

There's a problem with the car. I can get a cab, but it has to be towed back to the house. Don't want to get you in trouble with insurance.

Do men as rich as Nathan Sharpe even need to worry about that? He could probably let a monkey drive his car and his insurance company wouldn't care. It's an older model Bentley, but still way more car than I could ever afford.

His response comes quick, which has me wondering—is he really worried about me?

What kind of problem, Gen.

Not a question. I've discovered Nate likes to give orders, and when I'm not feeling like prey being hunted down, it makes me imagine just what would happen if I disobeyed.

My hands shake as I type out, *The tires are slashed.*

A couple walks by, seeing the damage and that it's obviously not an accident, murmuring to each other as they stare. This is drawing attention now. I look up at the light posts in the lot. They must have cameras somewhere, right?

Nausea roils in my stomach and I dig a bottle of water out of the grocery bag. It's been like this for a few days, random nausea taking over here and there. Nerves, I think, with everything that's been going on.

The hot and cold from Nate, the apartment...and now this.

I should probably notify the police again and tell them about this, too. The officer I spoke to at the station didn't seem too concerned about the vandalism until Nate got involved. He was upset, borderline belligerent, half out of his chair as he told the guy, "My *wife* was stalked just after she had our daughter, and do you know how far it had to go? That creep broke into our house before he was arrested. You're going to take down this report and look into that video footage."

I'd been so caught off guard by Nate's story, it took me a second to realize the officer assumed when Nate said *my wife*, he was talking about *me*.

We straightened that out quickly, both of us clearly feeling awkward and embarrassed at the misunderstanding.

When I was asked what my relationship to Nate was, I'd hesitated. He was my...boss? Brother's best friend?

Fuck buddy?

Nothing really seemed to fit, which is how I've been feeling about Nate more and more lately. I just can't *define* him.

His reaction to the vandalism, and now this, are sending my mind into a tailspin.

Nate: *Stay there. I'm coming to get you.*

A blush colors my cheeks at the command, but obviously, I can't refuse. Instead, I stand close to the car, trying to block the view of the flat tire. Two of the other three are slashed as

well. I can't even imagine how much this will cost Nate. I should offer to have him dock it from my pay.

It takes him half an hour to get to the store, and by then, I've come down from the adrenaline rush, but I'm still worried.

"This isn't a coincidence, is it?" I ask when he steps out of the Alpha and eyes the damage.

He shakes his head slowly, green eyes like the sky before a tornado comes in. "It definitely is not. Get in the car, I already called the insurance company."

I reach for the grocery bags, but Nate beats me to it. His large hand brushes mine and a shiver of electricity goes through me.



THE DRIVE back to Nate's house is quiet.

He's been a grump the whole time I've known him, but now...I don't know what to think.

His hands grip the steering wheel, knuckles tight, eyes staring straight ahead at the road. Brow furrowed.

I can feel the anger rolling off him like clouds, and it makes me nervous, but I don't feel unsafe. Actually, it's the opposite.

Facing these things alone, I'd have been terrified.

But as soon as Nathan showed up—both at my apartment and today—something inside of me quieted.

"I want you close."

He says it so abruptly, all I can do is stare at him.

Close?

My brain conjures images of just how close we can get, and I mentally slap myself. Not *the time to daydream*.

"Close, like...?"

“Like I want you to move all of your things into the house when we get back. No more pool house.”

Scoffing, I sit up straight and cross my arms. His eyes dart my way and he lifts a brow, slightly amused.

“Nate, that’s ridiculous. Both times I’ve been in the city— they obviously still think I live in the apartment building—”

“But if they’re watching you, now they know you don’t. And they’ve seen you with me. And the public knows who I am.”

He looks at me and his eyes pin me to the seat. I feel all the fight go out of me.

What is with this man? He could tell me to service him right here, right now, and I’d do it.

“And you need to call the police to report this, too. I’ve already made sure my insurance company has it on file.”

Pressing my lips together tightly, I don’t disagree.

He’s right, as much as I hate to admit it.

We pull in the drive and the front door opens, Eva’s curious little head popping out. Her uncle’s appears right after. Chris Sharpe, I’ve learned, isn’t as uptight as he appears. Since our first run-in when I interrupted a heated conversation he and Nate were having, I’ve seen him here and there. With Eva’s babysitter being let go for borderline neglect, he’s stepped in to hang out with his niece on last-minute occasions.

My tires getting slashed in a grocery store parking lot counts, apparently.

“Nate. Gen.” Chris gives me a nod and a smirk as we approach.

A blush colors my cheeks. I can’t quite figure it out, but *something* is up. Nate glares at his brother and Eva scurries along next to me.

“Are you okay? Is the car okay?” She cranes her head around to watch her dad carrying in the groceries. Nate shoves a bag at Chris, who is still grinning. “What’s for dinner?”

“Give her a break, hon. She’s had a rough day.”

My eyes meet Nate’s, and all of me goes still again.

It’s a strange feeling. For so long, I’ve been fighting tooth and nail to pay bills, be a better chef, make my way in the world, make a name for myself, forget my broken heart.

And here I am, feeling soothed by a man who has a temperament that rivals Oscar the Grouch’s.

Ignoring the warm feeling slowly taking over my body, I turn back to Eva and recruit her to help with turkey sandwiches tonight.

“The secret,” I whisper conspiratorially, “is all in how you stack it. I’ll show you.”



JUST AFTER 10 P.M., I creep to the bedroom door, carefully press it open, and look out into the hall.

All is quiet in the Sharpe household.

Eva went to bed a few hours ago, Chris stayed until dinner and then headed out, and Nate was in his office until very, very recently.

In fact, I can still hear him moving around.

Because my new room is directly across the hall from his.

Trying to ignore the insistent *thump* of my nervous heart, my eyes dart down the hallway. Nate’s house might not be a mini mansion, but it’s bigger than anything I’m used to. Eva’s room is all the way at the other end of the house. There’s some kind of playroom, a full bathroom, and a little seating area between here and her bedroom.

The only light on making things visible emanates from downstairs. It’s the light over the stove, which Nate told me the first night to always leave on in case Eva wakes up and wants some water.

It's just enough for me to see the faint outline of furniture.
And Nate's door.

And the sliver of light coming from beneath it...

That sliver is broken by a shadow and I pull back, pressing
my back against the wall and letting out a breathless giggle.

I feel like a teenager playing with fire. Just hitting puberty,
with a boyfriend in the next room.

Nathan Sharpe definitely isn't boyfriend material, though.

No, he's *sinful*.

Tempting.

Off-limits.

The list goes on, but it doesn't douse the yearning that
makes me press my thighs together and huff in frustration.

Why did he have to be so *sexy* taking charge again today?

After dinner, I called the police station while Nate sat
across from me, watching. His eyes never left me, and it lit a
flame I've been trying to put out ever since.

"You are *not* going to knock on your boss's door," I mutter
to myself in desperation. "You're an adult. You can quench
your needs and deal with it."

That gives me an idea.

Hesitating for only a second, I slowly reach to touch
myself.

It's easy. The sleep shorts I'm wearing are light, airy,
barely there. My fingers slip beneath the hem easily and find
my already damp folds. With a small whimper, I play with
myself, teasing.

Just enough to take the edge off.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

With my eyes closed, I try to think of anyone *but* Nathan.
How about that guy I hooked up with months ago? The young
college kid visiting the city. I say *young*, but he was really just
younger. Built like a demigod, some kind of pro-athlete.

The memory of his jackhammer tactics interrupts my flow and I groan in annoyance.

Okay, not him. What about...Henry Cavill? I'm not really enough of a movie nerd to be able to excuse my interest for anything other than physical attraction. But good lord, that man is built perfectly. Handsome, talented, not to mention he seems genuinely kind.

The thought of a classy personality makes my attention drift. Do I *really* want a gentleman in the bedroom?

Before I realize it, my mind goes right back to Nathan Sharpe.

Close enough to the hunky actor I very briefly fantasized about.

Roughly the same build...Nathan has all that hulking muscle to him, hidden by professional clothing when he's heading into the city. He's a CEO, after all.

But damn. That day in the barn. In the pool.

The way sweat slicked his muscles.

The trail of coarse hair leading down his tense abs, right to

The door creaks and I gasp, pulling my hand away guiltily.

Nathan steps in halfway, his eyes concerned. "You okay?"

Oh, God. Was I making noises?

A little mortified, I nod. "Yeah. Fine. Just...winding down after a long day."

Nate's gaze moves from my bitten lip to the hands hidden behind my back and my legs, pressed tightly together, the flimsy shorts riding up. His eyes end up resting on my chest, which rises and falls with the rush of forbidden fantasies.

Then those green eyes narrow.

He steps into the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

"What were you getting up to so late?"

“It’s not *that* late. You’re still up.”

My lighthearted scoff doesn’t deter him. He steps closer, invading my personal space just a little bit.

Just enough.

I sway toward him and Nate reaches out, his fingertips grazing my hip.

“I’m having a hard time winding down,” he admits gruffly, his eyes raking over my body. Why does the way he speaks turn me on? Am I that desperate?

My mouth waters and I lick my lips.

“Maybe I can help with that. It’s my fault, after all.”

Confusion flashes across his face. Seriously, he points out, “None of this is your fault, Gen—”

But not wanting to be lectured again, I interrupt by closing the distance between us. Hand on his chest, I press him back against the door. His shirt is unbuttoned just enough that a light sprinkling of chest hair tickles my fingertips.

“Let me take care of you. You’ve been taking care of *me*.” I look up at him through my lashes, knowing what it’ll do to him. It works—Nate holds perfectly still, not even breathing. “It’s my turn now.”

I get on my knees, using his body for support, hands dragging down his cut abs, to his hips, hooking into the side of his jeans.

Part of me wants to go slow, but I can’t. The word *desperate* comes to mind again as I undo his belt and slip it from the loops, then drag the zipper down.

He grunts and lifts his hips off the wall so I can pull his pants down. When they’re cast aside, I look up to make sure Nate’s watching.

He’s totally focused on my every move.

Licking my lips again, I drag my nails up his inner thighs. Lightly, but enough that his cock twitches through the fabric of

his boxers. Those come down next, and now it's *my* turn to stare.

He's been inside me, bent me over and rutted against my ass, knelt between my legs, and I still haven't gotten a good look at his cock.

It's impressive.

It's perfect.

Not massive, but just above average enough to make my body quiver in anticipation. It throbs with his heartbeat, the vein standing out more and more as I run my hands up his thighs again and grip the base.

“Mmm.”

His hand delves into my loose bun and tightens. It sends tingles down my spine and spurs me on. Peeking my tongue out just enough to wet the tip of his cock, I grip his shaft and stroke firmly, then run the head over my lips, pouting.

Deciding to go for the kill instead of taking the normal route, I pump his length and dip down, dragging my tongue over his balls.

Nathan curses and straightens up, his attention fully on me again as I keep licking in long, slow, rough strokes, pumping him slowly until he's rock-hard.

Unable to hold back from what I want, I move back up and finally wrap my lips around him. Nate's hand guides me down just a few inches, then back. He's trying to gauge how far I want to go. That makes me smile as I pull back, then take him deeper, until the tip of his cock hits the back of my throat.

It feels good, and as my eyes water, I feel my pussy gush just enough that when I reach between my legs, I can easily rub my clit.

Nate pulls his hand from my hair and grips my jaw instead, stopping the blow job. I stare up at him in surprise, lips parted.

Was it not—?

Before I can ask what he wants, or what wasn't working, he takes my arm and pulls me to my feet.

Roughly, Nate yanks down my shorts and pulls my shirt over my head. As soon as the clothing is gone, he scoops me up and stalks toward the bed, his cock bobbing against my thighs.

"Geez," I gasp, landing on the bed with a little bounce. "You could've warned me!"

I can't suppress a grin as he climbs over me, his eyes feral, mouth set.

"You're going to be the death of me," he growls.

Nate sits back on his haunches and unbuttons his shirt, tossing it to the side. His abs flex as he moves over me again. I reach out and drag my fingers down them, unable to resist. My hand drops to his cock and holds him steady as I work my pussy against him, slicking him with my desire and teasing myself at the same time.

I stutter out a moan as he hits my clit and Nate takes control, pulling back and covering my hand with his. He guides himself to my entrance and thrusts shallowly, just the head of his cock stretching me, my whimpers breathy with want.

When I start to cant my hips desperately, wanting more, he puts me out of my misery. With one hand, he holds me down as he plunges in. The sound of us fucking, wet skin and moans, fills the room.

Nate buries his face in my tits and licks, sucks, kisses, bites. In the morning, I'll be covered in bruises. I don't care. It's summer and I'll wear a turtleneck every damn day if he fucks me like this.

"You drive me insane."

His teeth are clenched as he drives into me over and over, hips bruising mine. It's rough and wet and I'm going to come soon, sooner than I've probably *ever* come.

"Come here."

Before I can process what he's asking—or telling—Nate leans back, grips my thighs, yanks me forward, and enters me at a whole new angle.

On his knees, his cock pounds an ache deep into my pussy that has me panting immediately.

“Oh, fuck. Just like that, Nate.”

“Come on my dick, Gen.”

Hearing my name fall from his lips shouldn't be what sends me over the edge, but it is.

The taboo of acknowledging what we're doing makes my orgasm even more intense, a crushing wave of satisfaction and euphoria, tantalizingly forbidden. I cry out and tighten my legs around his hips as he keeps pumping into me, grunting as he comes, burying himself deep inside me.

Nate braces himself with a hand on my lower stomach.

Two more shallow thrusts, towering over me as he fills my pussy.

It's almost enough to make me come again, but I bite my lip and ride it out, gripping his upper arms as he rocks into me.

Chapter 14

Nathan

Chris shows up at the *wrong* time.

Also, under the wrong circumstances.

I look up from the monthly project report to see Genevieve walking through my office door. She's a goddess, or close to it.

All loose, flowy clothing, brown locks up in a ponytail, plate of scones that smell delicious.

And then...there's Chris.

He strides in behind her, a goofy grin on his face, jacket folded over his arm.

"Brother."

I rub a hand down my face at his teasing tone. Gen lets out a giggle, purses her lips tightly, and puts the plate down on the corner of my desk.

"Thought you could use a snack," she offers. "Just until dinner."

Chris hums, leaning against the desk. His characteristic smirk is already annoying me as he comments smoothly, "Oh, and here I thought *you* were the snack."

It's such a bad line that Gen busts out laughing.

I should be laughing, too, because I can tell Chris is just messing around. He's always been the flirty little brother making girls crack a smile.

Instead, my blood boils as I shut the laptop and grind my teeth.

"Is there a reason you're here, *brother*?"

Chris feigns offense, his eyes wide. "I need a reason to visit? What happened to family always being welcome?"

“You’re welcome to call me and let me know you’re coming,” I growl in response.

Gen’s still smiling, her full lips quirked up at the corners. It takes the edge off my annoyance...for a moment.

“I brought Eva a kid’s science set I saw in a store, thought she might like it. And I wanted to discuss a few things with you.” Despite the smile glued to his face, I can tell the last part is serious. His eyes flick to Gen.

Whatever it is, he doesn’t want to talk about it in front of her, which probably means I should take him seriously and ask her to give us a moment.

Instead, I lean back, tapping a pencil on the desk. Gen’s eyes dart to me and dance down my torso. A coil of desire flexes in my groin and I take a deep breath to tame it. Last thing I need Chris to see is how turned on I get around this woman, like a helpless sap.

“Why don’t you stay for dinner?”

Chris and I practically snap our necks looking at her.

“What?” I blurt as Chris says, “Really? That would be great.”

Insecurity flickers across Gen’s face and she bites her lip. The move is so commonplace now that I almost, *almost*, stand and reach out to pop that lip from between her teeth.

Maybe take possession of it myself.

“It should be ready in about an hour. And that would give you two time to talk.”

“Will you be joining us?”

Chris is trying to cut the tension in the room, but my annoyance surfaces again at his flirty words. Gen blushes and crosses her arms under her breasts, which only accentuates their delectable curves.

“Oh, I have some personal work to get done, but—”

“Don’t feel obligated,” I rush out, keeping my tone flat and uninterested. I don’t want to offend Gen, but I also don’t want

Chris to see how ticked off he's making me.

Unfortunately, my brother knows me too well.

Pushing himself off the desk, he looks at me closely for a moment, and then turns his attention back to Gen. His eyes glint with mischievousness, and that smirk is back.

“It would probably be bad manners if you left your guest with a grump, wouldn't it?”

Gen mirrors his grin and then catches herself, raising a hand to hide it. She turns a laugh into a cough and then gives in.

“Okay. If Nathan—Mr. Sharpe—doesn't have a problem with it, I can make time to sit down with everyone.”

My temples start to throb with an incoming headache. Caught between a rock and a hard place, I say in a strangled voice, “Of course. You're welcome to join us, Gen, if that's what you'd like to do.”

My brain is being pulled in a hundred different directions.

On the surface, sheer rage boils at my brother for not only flirting with Gen but making me look like a complete ass.

Then I can't help wondering, is *that* what she thinks of me? That I'm a grump? That I walk around in a sour mood all day, crushing the fun out of everything?

Last, the animalistic part of me wants to hear her say *Mr. Sharpe* again. And again. And again.

In a totally inappropriate, unprofessional way.

In fact, I can think of a few different positions I'd like her to be in when she says it.

Chris snaps his fingers in front of my face and I jerk back to reality, blinking as Gen leaves the room. Her hips sway just enough to draw my attention.

“Alright there, Nate?”

Slapping his hand away, I half rise out of the chair. Chris laughs in a nervous, childish pitch from when we were kids

and I see Gen's ponytail turn with curiosity at the end of the hall. Trying to keep my composure, I walk to the door and close it calmly.

Then I turn around and barrel toward Chris. We pseudo-wrestle for a second, grunting and batting each other around the ears, landing halfhearted punches. Chris keeps laughing, the sound making me grin through the fake fight.

"You're an ass, you know that?"

Catching his breath, Chris sits on the edge of my desk. "Sorry. Didn't realize you'd be so upset if I hit on your *personal chef* a little bit."

I glower at him, but join him, propped up against the desk. "She's not even your type."

His smile softens. "She's not," he admits. "I like petite women, and Gen looks like she could match me round for round in the boxing ring."

One of Chris's favorite hobbies—slumming it in the city gyms. I can't count how many times he's had to apply foundation to hide bruises, but he seems to get enjoyment out of working the energy off.

"Trust me. I doubt you'd be able to handle her."

He raises a brow at my slip. "Oh, so you're admitting *you* know how to *handle her*?" At my glare, he backs off, but adds, "Don't worry, she knows I was just joking around. She has eyes only for you, big brother."

I frown sourly, not liking the twin feelings of jealousy and longing.

She's not yours, I remind myself.

Doesn't change the fact I don't want anyone else to have her. Not even my brother who, in my opinion, deserves love.

Love—that's a strong word. It sends a frisson of nerves through me and I shake it off, literally.

"Hey, are you okay?" Chris asks, tone turning serious. "You know I was just kidding, right? She seems like a nice

enough woman, but I can tell there's something between you two."

"There's not."

"Um, okay...that's really what you're going with?"

"Chris. I told you, she's Russ's sister. And she's my employee."

Chris snorts. "Yeah. That kind of setup has never stopped, I don't know...the entirety of humanity. Haven't you heard the old stereotype that couples meet at work?"

I make a face, never having liked that opinion. But my wife used to say the same thing. We met when we both had the same client. I was doing a build for them and she was part of an interior design company at the time. She insisted it counted as "meeting at work."

"Besides, it's more like contracted employment. Not permanent, right? So she's up for grabs once summer is over. If she's game for it, that is."

I stay silent.

Conspicuously silent.

Chris's brows rise very, very slowly.

"*Is* there a reason for you to think she might be game, Nate?"

A quick glance at the door gives me away and Chris chuckles, moving closer and nudging my shoulder.

"Did something happen? Something else?"

I open my mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. So I snap it shut, instead.

"Nothing that hasn't already happened."

My brother looks genuinely surprised. After our conversation last week, I must've really convinced him I was calling it quits on this whole thing.

"So you two are still...?"

He says it loud enough that I shush him and check the door again. Gen should be calling us for dinner any minute now, and I can hear my daughter's chatty voice downstairs, too. It hits a new level of excitement—she must've found Chris's gift.

“Yeah. Just the other night.” Wincing at the confession and Chris's surprised-slash-ecstatic reaction, I try to get him to quiet down again. “It's...it just happened. It's complicated, we'll have to discuss it some other time. But Gen's staying in the house now. In the upstairs bedroom.”

I admit the last part like a guilty teen, and Chris guffaws.

“Well, then. I can see why it's *still happening*. Close quarters, huh? But I can't blame you. Like I said, she's not my type, but I can see the attraction. She's definitely *yours*.”

Not sure how to feel about that comment, I frown. Gen is...my type?

Before I can ask what exactly he means by that, she calls out that dinner will be ready in ten. And that there's a glass of wine waiting if we're interested.

“I'm definitely interested.” Chris starts for the door, then notices the look on my face. He holds up his hands placatingly. “Hey, seriously, Nate—she's all yours. I'm sorry. I wanted to see if I could catch you out.”

His mischievous smirk appears again, quieting my unease. I believe him. It was a jerk move, but I don't think my brother would do that to me.

“I had a feeling you were having a hard time admitting it to yourself, so...thought I'd give you a nudge.”

“Admitting what?” I ask, following him out to the hallway.

But Eva runs toward us, pieces of the science kit in her hands, and from the kitchen, Gen watches with a gentle smile on her face.

Our eyes meet and all that jealousy and worry just drains right out of me.

Maybe Chris is right and I should stop fighting so hard. Even if I don't know *what* it is I'm fighting.

Maybe for once, it's more important to slow down and appreciate what I have right in front of me.

Chapter 15

Genevieve

In the car, I can't help twisting my hands nervously in my lap.

The move keeps bunching my skirt, and Nate glances over, making me very aware of my nervousness.

I smooth the skirt back down over my knees.

Then I start chewing my lip.

It makes me remember his thumb running along it. My lips parting, tongue coming out to lick and suck until I had him groaning.

No, no, no. Now is *not* the time to think about sex.

Eva kicks the back of the seat and immediately says, "Sorry!"

She's excited. We're popping into the city on a Saturday. Hanging out around the pool this morning, Eva explained her dad doesn't like to come into the city unless he absolutely has to, since he's here all week.

But Eva's still young enough that she sees New York as a city of excitement. Today she has her eye on a bookstore she likes, and I catch a glimpse of her scrunched up face in the rearview mirror. It makes me smile.

"Are you alright?" Nate grumbles.

My breathing picks up automatically. It's like a reaction now, one I need to learn to get a hold of. I can't be turned on by every single word this man utters.

What's up with me lately? My libido has been through the roof.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little..."

I shrug, not sure how to explain. Or rather, not wanting to say *I'm nervous to be spending actual time out on the town with you. Nervous to get to know you, and your daughter,*

better. Nervous to realize there are little things I like about you.

It's already hard enough at home.

At *Nate's* house.

I'll be out of there in a few months. Once again footloose in the world, trying to find a place to land.

Hopefully, that's what Germany ends up being. Until then, I need to remember Nate is just passing through my life, a few hookups to satisfy a dry spell, nothing more.

"Nervous."

He says it like he's reading my mind. I freeze, not breathing.

"To be back here, right?" He glances in the mirror, then continues, "You're probably worried about that psycho. But I've got you."

His eyes cut to mine and steady me.

My breath comes back in an exhale and the tension melts from my rigid muscles.

"Yeah." *That's definitely it. It has nothing to do with the way you're looking at me right now.* "Yeah, it's a little weird knowing someone's out to get me."

Nate hums in agreement, his eyes on the road as he navigates tight traffic.

"Is it easier for you in the house? Do you feel safer, I mean."

Almost choking on where my mind goes with his question, I manage to nod.

Do I feel *safer*?

Actually, yes, I do. I don't think whoever vandalized my apartment and slashed my tires followed me back to the country yet, but it feels safer in the house. Behind multiple locked doors and the insanely expensive alarm system Nate has.

But at his words, the memory of that first night is conjured. The way he groaned, his hand buried in my hair, as I sucked him off. The way he carried me to the bed, his arms hard as iron beneath my body, his face in my breasts.

I clear my throat and try to focus on where we're going. I'm vaguely familiar with this area, but it's not one I've visited much. Cute shops line the streets, little boutiques, and thrift stores. It seems an odd place to picture Nate Sharpe, the man I've seen in perfectly tailored suits most days.

The thought makes me smile.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nate watching me, and when I look at him, his features soften into a smile mirroring my own.

“Dad, how many books am I allowed to get?”

Eva's enthusiastic question brings us back to the present, both of us inhaling and breaking eye contact.

“As many as you want, hon. But no games today, okay?”

She sulks for a second, expression falling at the decree. Then her face brightens. “Can I get a bookmark, though?”

Nate tries to suppress his smile, but I see it.

“Okay,” he bargains seriously, “but only if we can get ice cream later.”

Eva and I both laugh, and Nate pulls into a parking garage, his body looking more relaxed than I've seen it the whole time I've had the pleasure of being a part of Nathan Sharpe's world.



“OH MY GOSH! Are you Chef Walker?”

I blink in surprise and half turn back to the young woman. She has her fingertips held to her mouth in surprise, brown eyes wide. Somewhere ahead of me, I feel Nate pause.

“Yes, I am. I'm sorry—do we know each other?”

“No, I just saw your profile in *The Times* last year. My husband and I went to your restaurant for our anniversary. He surprised me with a table, said it took weeks to get a reservation!”

I smile kindly, giving her my full attention. It’s definitely not everyday someone recognizes me on the streets.

“Oh, thank you. I’m happy you guys got to experience the Fig.”

The woman is blushing, obviously embarrassed now that her actions have caught up to her. “I’m sorry to interrupt your day, I just wanted to let you know we really loved your food.”

Laughing, I thank her and watch as she hurries in the other direction, back to a small group of friends who look bemused.

When I turn back to Nate and Eva, Nate has the same look on his face.

“Fan of yours?”

I shrug, a little embarrassed and a little proud. “Apparently. She likes my food.”

Nate squints into the distance as the flow of pedestrians continues around us. “You know, I never mentioned it, but dinner the night I was there was great.”

Eva looks up at her dad with wide eyes, her hand swinging in his. “You went to Genevieve’s restaurant, Dad?”

My face heats at the innocence of her question. And the memories.

Nate coughs, then casually answers, “Yes. Before she came to work for us, I went with Marian and Nel to the restaurant Gen was a chef at. The food was very good.”

Lips curling into a smile, I can’t stop myself as I lean in and whisper, “Was there anything *not* on the menu you enjoyed that night?”

Nate’s smirk surprises me. It’s a lot like his brother’s, but he has a dimple that I never really noticed. Distracted, I

stumble on a broken piece of concrete and Nate catches my elbow as our gazes meet.

“I can think of a few things, yes. Dessert was...delicious.”

Heat rushes to my core.

My eyes sweep the streets as I look for an alley to drag him into before reality catches up with me.

It's the middle of the day, and we're out in the city for a day of fun. *Not* for hooking up in alleys.

Eva sees a patisserie and begs Nate for a hot chocolate. Unsurprisingly, he gives in almost immediately. I'm starting to realize Eva has her dad wrapped around her little finger, but it's actually sweet. He sets down rules when they're needed. Otherwise, he indulges her, and it obviously makes him happy to see *her* so happy.

It also just happens to be...attractive.

Which is a bit of a weird thought for me. I've never been too interested in kids, even when my ex talked about the family we would raise in the city once the restaurant was established.

But seeing Nate, a single dad, interact so selflessly with his daughter—and so openly—is captivating.

He must sense my eyes on him, because as we step into the café, he looks over his shoulder, and that glowing grin falters for a second.

Don't turn back into the big bad wolf, I mentally beg. I like you like this—silly, unselfconscious, strolling down the city streets like any other guy.

Except he isn't any other guy.

He's a billionaire trying to lead a company, raise a daughter alone, be present, be responsible, be professional, and be an attentive brother.

Honestly, it's amazing he even found the time to climb into my bed.

We get Eva a hot chocolate and settle down at a table as she stands at the front window and watches the world go by. I catch the scent of something familiar and nausea rises in my gut. Searching the patisserie, I catch sight of the culprit—ripe strawberries on top of a pastry drizzled with glaze. Since when does *that* smell make me sick? It normally reminds me of summer.

“Does that happen a lot?” Nate eventually asks after a comfortable silence.

I raise my brows at him, blowing on the latte I ordered to get me through the second half of the day. Hopefully, the scent of it will outweigh that of the strawberries. “Hmm?”

“People stopping you on the street.”

For some reason, my body goes cold, and then very hot.

The room tilts oddly. I brace myself for—what?

“Not really. Here and there, a few times a year, maybe. It didn’t start happening until magazines wanted to profile me.”

“I’m sure the Michelin star helped.”

He offers me a lazy smile and I exhale, realizing just how tense I was for a moment there.

But why?

Will, the little voice in my head whispers. *He never liked it when you got attention.*

I go back to sipping my latte in silence, mind elsewhere as I remember what it was like with my jealous ex.

He was the brains of the operation, once I spilled my dream to him. Will was the one who made it all happen. He found the investors, interviewed and hired staff, and set up relationships with vendors.

Me?

Well, I cooked.

And I found the restaurant itself. That was an important part, one we argued about. Will didn’t like the old bank I

wanted to turn into my dream restaurant, but it was the only thing I really pushed for. Hard enough that it almost broke us up.

Would've saved me a lot of trouble if it had ended then.

I sneak a glance at Nate as he flips through a real estate journal, making faces at the obscene prices of penthouse apartments and park-adjacent townhouses. It eases the rest of the tension from my body to see him so relaxed.

“You don’t think it’s weird?” I ask impulsively.

Nate looks up. “Think what’s weird?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Russ didn’t really believe it when my name started getting passed around. I think he thought I was just...so young.”

A blush colors my cheeks. I don’t want to sound vain, and I’m really not. It’s just something I’ve always been self-conscious of.

Nate looks at me long and intently, his green eyes like forests. He doesn’t realize it, but several women in the café have already done double takes when he caught their eye.

“No. It’s not strange. You’re talented; age has nothing to do with that.”

He says it so easily, I actually feel the sting of tears and press my lips together tightly to fight it. The last thing I want is to embarrass myself by crying in front of him, especially over something like this.

It would sound ridiculous, whining that I’m a recognizable, top-tier chef.

“Did Russ really give you that hard of a time about it?” He sounds genuinely curious, and I smile over the top of my cup.

“Not as much as my ex. I think *he* found it even harder to believe. I found the perfect building for the restaurant, and he was convinced it wouldn’t get any traffic. But I knew it would if I attracted attention. And I knew my food would attract attention.”

Nate listens intently, the journal forgotten on the table. Eva has returned and climbed up into a chair next to her dad, but the exhaustion of the day seems to have set in. She leans against him, eyes half-closed.

“Your ex. At the gala, your brother mentioned that—sorry if this is private. But that you ended a relationship recently.”

I tip my head, considering. “You could say that. It wasn’t *too* recently. A few years. I was engaged, and...” What’s the best way to put it? “I think my ex was always a little intimidated by me. He was used to being the breadwinner.”

Nate’s brows rise. “That’s not surprising. I’ve run across a lot of men like that.”

“Mmm...but you don’t consider yourself one of them?” I can’t help teasing him a little, and that smile comes back.

“I don’t think I got the chance. My wife made it very clear when we met that she was going to have a career, no matter what *my* plans were. It’s part of why...” He glances down at Eva, gives a little nod. “We put some things off a little longer than normal.”

“What did your wife do?” I’m curious; I know a little bit from talking to Russ, but I never got the full story. And he seems comfortable talking about her, which surprises and intrigues me. Most people never get past the initial grief of losing someone.

“She owned her own company. Staged houses for rich people, ran the whole thing by herself with only a few college kids to help move furniture around.”

“Oh, wow. That’s really impressive. Yeah, I can see why she didn’t waste time with men who couldn’t hold their own.”

Nate grins and wraps an arm carefully around Eva, who snuggles in closer. He seems unfocused, eyes faraway with memories.

“Yeah, she was something else.” Our eyes meet, his piercing green. They quicken something in me. Not desire, which is confusing, and sends my world off-balance for a moment. “You two would’ve gotten along, I think, if you’d

ever met.” He sighs and shakes his head. “She’d say you were good for me.”

Another surprise, another spike of curiosity. “Really?”

“Oh yeah.” This time when our eyes meet, his are calm. A little sad. “Anything that gets me out of my comfort zone and out of my own little world. You’re good at getting on my nerves, and if Julia were here, she would approve.”

I let that soak in, sitting back and finishing off my latte as Nate turns his attention to gently waking Eva.

Maybe I should be a little weirded out. After all, the guy I’ve been hooking up with just told me his dead wife would’ve liked me...

But it’s oddly reassuring. This whole day has been oddly reassuring, and I’m left once again feeling settled and secure.

Perhaps a little less untethered than I thought.

Chapter 16

Nathan

The headache that's been building all day is just starting to ebb away when Nash storms into my office, quickly followed by Trudy, my assistant.

The look on her face has me rising immediately. Trudy is always immaculately put together; a stout little Jamaican woman, she knows how to handle every unruly, privileged client that Ironside has ever had. But Nash has her frazzled.

Her deep brown curls look frizzy as she stumbles in behind him, eyes wide. Nash is sneering, fists clenched and breathing heavily. He opens his mouth to speak and I cut him off.

“Trudy, I’ll handle this. Thank you.”

She looks from me to my *previous* head of finances and closes her mouth hopelessly. I’m not sure who she’s worried about in this situation—me or Nash.

Trudy knows me from back when the company just started. She was a single mom then and I was blazing a trail through the construction sector.

“How *dare* you!”

It comes out at a higher pitch than Nash intended. I can tell by the fury in his eyes and the way his neck flushes to his ears. A smirk starts to wind its way across my jaw.

“How *dare* you slander my name! My lawyer will be opening a defamation suit—”

The laugh that erupts out of me is dark and harrowing. Nash looks like he’s been slapped.

“How dare *I*?”

I prowl across the office, aware that Trudy and a few other employees are watching from the hallway. My door is closed, but they can see everything—and probably hear the thunder in my voice, despite the even tone.

“How dare *I*? You seem to be forgetting that a defamation lawsuit only works if what I’ve said about you is untrue, Nash.”

The red flush turns to purple as he sputters.

Casually, I flip open a file on my desk—one I have several copies of. One that the company lawyer has several copies of as well. Just in case.

“You might have gotten away with it, but you failed to realize Trudy keeps a careful eye on the numbers, Nash. Apparently, she’s more meticulous than you led me to believe *you* were.”

He scoffs and half turns, as if to look for my assistant, but in two strides, I’m right in front of him.

Towering over him.

Nash is tall and lean, but I’m taller. Broader.

And I know the effect I can have on people when I want to.

“What did you expect? You’d have a potential employer call Ironside and we *wouldn’t* tell them what you’ve been up to?”

The growl is back, I can’t help it crawling up my throat as Nash bends under my will, his hands sweating.

“I suggest you walk out of the building and never come back. And *my* lawyer will be in touch.”

Whatever Nash came in here to say has left him; he’s deflated like a balloon. Taking an unsteady step back, then another, he turns and hurries from my office. On the way, he bares his teeth at Trudy, who puffs her chest out. All five foot two of her bristling.

I go to the open door and nod to two security officers, who Trudy must’ve called. They go after Nash quickly to escort him from the building. He was officially let go last week. I can’t believe he had the balls to try and get a recommendation from us.

“That rat.” Trudy is absolutely seething, and I fight the urge to herd her into my office. Right now, I need to be a boss, not just a protector. But if I have to, I’ll take Nash down—and not just legally.

“Once things calm down, why don’t you take off early?” I make the suggestion calmly, smiling at Trudy’s incredulous look.

“Mr. Sharpe—it’s only three o’clock!”

The smile remains as she describes the rest of her tasks for the day—typing up the monthly minutes from our meeting with a city representative, sorting through contract applications to make sure they’re properly filled out, placing a supply order, and finding a caterer for the company luncheon at the end of the month.

My mind flits to Genevieve.

Goes blank.

The image of her face, her wide smile and laugh, takes over. Blots out the headache that was slowly forming into a raging migraine.

Wednesdays are always the peak of my frustration.

I can’t help it; I’ve been in the office half the week, wanting to be home instead. The barn is full of half-finished projects I’d rather be spending my time on, instead of approving building plans for high-end apartment-slash-retail buildings hours outside of the city.

The problem is, my company is built on construction. Not the carpentry I’ve loved for most of my life.

“Go home, Trudy. Take an early day. You deserve it after —” I chuck my chin toward the elevator bay “—that conflict.”

Rolling my shoulders, I peel off the suit jacket once she’s left. It’s pointless, as we’re now at the height of summer and the city is sweltering. Inside Ironside’s two-story office building, it’s nice and air-conditioned. Unfortunately, that doesn’t cut down on my annoyance.

As the owner of the company, I can leave whenever I want. But I still feel an obligation to stay for the duration of a “normal” workday.

A few more hours and I’m out of here.

The thought of coming home to Eva running down the hallway and the scent of whatever Gen has cooked up calms me momentarily. Settling behind my desk again, my brow creases when there’s an urgent knock on the door.

Trudy pops her head in.

I *just* told her to go home. The last thing I need is for her to get overwhelmed and stressed-out.

“Nathan, there’s someone here for you.”

Her expression is a mixture of curious and worried, which has me equally curious and worried. I rise as someone steps into my office.

And then I realize what caused Trudy’s curiosity.

The man looks strikingly like...me.

We have the same shape to the jaw and eyes. The same general build.

And the suit he’s wearing—a deep blue—doesn’t help. At my full height, we’re almost identical, aside from our hair color and the few inches I have on him.

With a glance at Trudy, I dismiss her politely. She’s reluctant to leave, but gathers her things and with one last look, heads for the elevator.

“You are?”

The words come out short, even-tempered. But a foreboding throbbing is building in my head, because I already have an idea of who this might be.

“Nathan. I’m sorry to interrupt your day. My name is Jenson.” He reaches out a hand, adding, “Sharpe.”

At the mention of our father’s last name, I breathe in deeply and try to force down the adrenaline rush that’s back

again now.

We stand in silence. After a full minute of nothing, I can tell he's starting to question his choice to come here. He begins to turn back toward the doorway.

"I didn't mean to catch you off guard."

"Really? Because you didn't make an appointment. Or call, as far as I know."

His eyes flatten at my challenge. But the pieces are all coming together now: this is my half brother, the one Chris told me about a few weeks ago.

The one I wasn't interested in reaching out to. Now that he's here in front of me, maybe I should care. Maybe it says something horrible about me that I don't want to concern myself.

But really, I just want this day to end.

The previous blissful thoughts of going home, relaxing, losing myself in a good meal and company—that all goes away. Jenson's jaw ticks.

"I'm in the city for the rest of the week and I wanted to introduce myself. Chris mentioned you work here—"

"I own the business."

His brows rise. "Ah. Okay. I'm sure there's a story, but you obviously don't want to tell it." His dry, flat humor matches mine, and I almost smile. *Almost*.

"Chris said you weren't interested in meeting, so I have to admit, this is selfish of me. I'm trying to...come to terms with my past. And I wanted to meet the family I didn't know I had."

He clears his throat, and for a moment, I feel sympathy, but it passes. He's right—it was selfish coming here after I clearly stated I didn't want to meet.

"I can see your side of things, but I'm not concerned with patching things up with my father's *other* family."

Jenson's expression goes hard, cold. It catches me off guard.

"I'm not here to 'patch things up,' and my mother certainly isn't involved. She doesn't know I found you," he admits. "And I don't want to expose her to someone like—"

My half brother manages to catch himself before an insult tumbles out, but from the fire in his eyes, it's obvious I hit a nerve. Interesting; it's a tidbit about him that gets my attention. He's very attached to, and protective of, his mother. The woman my father left *my* mother for.

"Well, you've gotten a look at me now, so you can cross that off the list." Breathing deeply through my nose, I try to take the high road. "I understand your interest in wanting to connect with family, Jenson, but I just don't share it. I *have* a family. I have responsibilities." Gesturing around me, I add, "I have a company to run. I have little time for bonding with secret siblings."

He glares, but it's gone quickly. Jenson rolls his shoulders, just as I did moments before he walked into my office—and my life.

"Fair enough. I'm sorry for encroaching on your time and space. If you are ever interested..."

Digging into his pocket, he pulls out a black business card and steps forward, tossing it onto my desk. Must've guessed I wouldn't take it from him.

Jenson strides back toward the door, giving me a last glance over his shoulder. "Chris and I are having dinner this weekend. Just in case you reconsider."

With that, he's gone. A dark specter moving down the hallway.

I deflate into my chair again, everything going out of me. I feel drained. Emotionally, mostly, but also physically. In the last hour, I've had two stressful interactions, both of which stirred something protective in me—and filled me with rage.

I can't fall apart at Ironside, not in front of my employees. Closing my eyes, I realize I can't fall apart at home, either.

Can't let Gen see me like this. Or Eva.

My fists clench as I try to breathe out some of the stress. It doesn't work, and I fight the urge to text Chris, because there isn't anything to say, really. It's not like *he* sent Jenson here. And Chris is a grown man—I can't tell him who he can and can't go to dinner with.

Absently, I pick up the business card. Black with silver lettering.

Jenson Sharpe. Dupont Analytics, Owner & CEO.

Against my better judgment, I type the business name into the search engine and a few articles come up, including one on his recent marriage to a woman named Mel. Looks like my little brother rose in the ranks of the data analytics industry to inherit Dupont from the founder, Roy Dupont.

I huff, a little impressed. I'm not the only business owner in the family, then.

Coming down from the high of two confrontations in one stressful day, I decide to cut out early. It's almost four, and I just want to be home. Maybe holed up in my office or walking out my frustration around the property.

Just as I'm about to click out of the screen and shutdown my computer, the news page reloads.

And right there, front and center, is my company's name: Ironside.

Followed by a headline declaring stock has dropped and investors are questioning where their money is going since someone got wind that my financial lead was let go under suspicious circumstances.

Just what I need.

Chapter 17

Genevieve

Sienna wraps me in a hug that's so comforting, I melt into it.

"Aww, babe, are you okay?"

I pull away, blushing at the show of affection. In the kitchen, it was important to keep professional boundaries, but hard to keep Sienna at arm's length. Maybe one of the good things about leaving the Fig is that I can actually be *friends* with her now.

"Yeah. Sorry. Just super tired."

We walk up to the counter of our favorite diner, Handy's. It's got a junky, old-school look to it, everything red leather and chrome. There's an ashtray near the register—definitely a health and safety violation—and it smells like grilled cheese and pancakes. Exactly what I need.

"Is it the new job? Stressful?"

I shrug. Sienna knows the basics of what I did, setting up this little side business as a personal chef until I can figure something else out. Which, hopefully, will be Saucer.

"Yes and no. Not the way you think it is. I mean, the food I'm making is pretty basic. It's for a ten-year-old and she's happy with pasta that isn't undercooked, at this point."

Sienna laughs. "Single dad life, huh?" I try to suppress a smile as we both peruse the menu, even though I already know what I'm ordering.

"He's actually a really good guy. I think he's just got a lot on his plate, and summers must be tough with kids...right?"

We both share a blank look. Sienna doesn't have kids, either, and isn't planning on it. At one time, I thought we were in the same boat, but now, having spent so much time with Eva, I'm not sure.

Her eyes narrow. “I didn’t think you’d have a thing for single dads. You usually go for the no-strings-attached type.”

I give her a nudge, cheeks flaming as I protest, “Sienna! It’s not like that. He’s my—” I almost choke on the word “—*boss.*”

What I don’t say is what I’m really thinking. *I’d let him boss me around any day.*

She gives me a cheeky little grin that lets me know it was truly just teasing. The waitress pops up with a cherry red lipstick smile so classic it’s like a flashback to the eighties.

I order a milkshake and a steamed burger, plus a side of onion rings. Sienna goes for the tuna melt, a milkshake, and fries. We settle in and catch up, Sienna filling me in on how it’s been going at The Black Fig since I’ve been gone.

“It’s only been a month and a half, and we’ve already had to switch vendors twice because Erik keeps insulting them. I don’t know what it is. I guess Marla got a call from the last one...”

Marla, the manager, was quick to let me go. Probably because her ex-husband was a little too interested in me. It doesn’t matter that I never reciprocated—she got the restaurant in the divorce, and I got constant judgment.

I can’t help the way my shoulders round as I sulk a little, Sienna relating how they had to cut one of my best dishes from the menu because Erik just can’t replicate it.

“But let’s not talk about that. Tell me about the place you’re working; if it’s one of Russ’s friends, they must be well-off, right?”

She rushes on to the next topic, sensing my drop in mood. I start to tell her about Nathan’s place outside of the city but describing it just doesn’t do it justice. I end up taking out my phone and scrolling through a few photos—the pool house, Eva holding up a fuzzy caterpillar, a gorgeous sunrise over the acreage.

Then I swipe to the next one and Sienna stiffens.

“Wait.”

My eyes scan the screen quickly and I realize Nate’s in the photo.

It’s a shot of the barn. I couldn’t help it, the building is just so gorgeous. But one of the sliding doors is open and you can see him just inside wearing that apron of his—for some reason it’s so sexy—his hair damp with sweat.

But Sienna zooms in on the photo and points to a graphic I’ve never noticed before. It’s an owl’s head, sort of tribal style and simplified, on one of the doors. Maybe two feet across, in slate gray paint.

“This is the guy you’re working for?”

I don’t want to drag the photo over to reveal Nate because Sienna will definitely remember we hooked up. I feel guilty I haven’t told her yet. “What do you mean?”

“Owl Factory.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. It shows on my face, because she quickly pulls out her phone as our food appears and starts tapping away.

An article comes up on the screen.

“Owl Factory: a Mogul Making Magic”

Skimming it quickly, I get the gist. Some bigwig from the city has a hobby making boutique carpentry projects, and it was a secret until someone spilled it, and...

And then it clicks.

“Wait.” I pull her phone closer and scroll through, but there’s no photos of Nate. Only of his projects which, I have to admit, are gorgeous.

“This is your guy. It has to be, that’s the logo for his business.”

“But...his business is Ironside.”

Sienna’s eyes snap to mine. “Ironside...isn’t that the massive construction company that builds, like, every

apartment or retail building in the city?”

I nod absently, still half reading the article to see if they drop Nate’s name. “Yeah. That’s where he gets his money from. But this makes sense...I saw some of what was in that barn, and he’s definitely talented.”

Sienna frowns. “Wonder why he doesn’t just do that, then. It sounds like his work is sought-after. Actually, the article makes it seem like he backed off after people started showing an interest in Owl Factory.”

“I have no idea...”

Actually, thinking about it now, I can’t help feeling like Sienna’s right. Nate is good at what he does and he spends every spare minute he can—outside of work and hanging out with Eva—in that garage.

She’s still holding my phone and squints, zooming in again as I poke around my onion rings. The scent of them, which I’ve always loved, suddenly makes my stomach heave and I sit back.

“Damn, Gen. This is the guy you’re working for? He’s—”

Her eyes narrow farther as she stares at the photo. I know what she’s looking at. Nathan in work coveralls that leave his arms and shoulders bare. No shirt beneath. Sandy-blond hair, the muscles in his back standing out.

“Isn’t this the guy...?”

Turning her head, she gives me a suspicious look. I stare over her shoulder wide-eyed.

“Uh—listen, I’m not feeling too well.”

It diverts the conversation, but it’s also true. Sienna’s expression changes from suspicious to concerned.

“Yeah, you’re looking a little green, Gen. Are you okay?”

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I shake my head as she continues, “I’ve never seen food affect you like this. You’ve always been up to try *anything*, even that disgusting century egg that was fermented for months—”

Pressing a hand to my mouth, I stand up, effectively cutting her off, striding quickly toward the bathroom.

The *only* positive part about throwing up in a diner restroom is it allows me to completely avoid having to explain to Sienna I've been hooking up with my boss.

Chapter 18

Nathan

A dark car pulls up in the drive and I turn, staring it down. Ever since someone started messing with Gen, I've been keeping an eye out for this sort of thing.

The door opens and I breathe a sigh of relief as Gen steps out, her ponytail swinging. She thanks the driver and smiles tiredly.

I can't help the rumble of jealousy inside; she said she was meeting *a friend* in the city for lunch, but what friend? A male friend? Is she seeing someone?

"It isn't any of my business," I mutter, turning away. It's easy to hear the car pulling away and then the crunch of gravel as Gen starts down the path toward the pool house. She'll have to pass right by the barn where I'm working and my shoulders tense as she does so.

But the crunch of footsteps stops.

I look over my shoulder, going for stoic, though it probably looks more like stressed-out. Or intimidating, maybe. Trudy has always said I should try smiling more.

"Good lunch?"

She looks startled at my words. Her eyes dart away from the iron cutout of an owl head hanging on the barn door.

"Oh. Yeah. Well, no, actually. Something about the food turned my stomach. But it was good to see my friend and catch up."

My throat tightens with the urge to ask her just who this *friend* is. Instead, like an idiot, I say, "A little ironic that a chef gets sick at another restaurant."

Gen gives me a characteristic glare. She seems a little more like herself since stepping out of the car.

"What are you working on?"

The curious lilt of her voice as I turn back around has the hair on the back of my neck rising. It's so like Julia's—the way my wife would creep into the barn, lean casually against a support beam, and ask exactly the same thing.

Clearing my throat and rolling my shoulders gives me just enough time to get my bearings.

“Blueprints for a client. Screened in porch.”

Hesitantly, Gen creeps a little closer. I sigh and give in, one shoulder sagging as I step to the side to let her see. She eagerly stands on her tiptoes and gazes down at the drawings. It's just a draft, all pencil drawn, and my ears heat with embarrassment. It's like I'm in high school all over again, waiting for the teacher's approval.

“Oh, wow. This is huge! There's an upper deck, too?”

“Yes. They requested an outdoor sleeping area, so...” I point out the general layout of the porch, which will be built in a few months up in the Adirondacks. “A large dining table here with a built-in fire feature. Custom chairs here, here, and here. This opens for a dart board. And this will be where the stairs drop down. It'll be a kind of wire pulley system.”

It's so easy to get lost in the excitement of the project. I find myself leaning over the blueprints with Gen pressed closely against me, her ponytail grazing my arm as she hums along.

“They must be loaded.”

It comes out as a mutter and I can't suppress my grin. “Oh, they are. He's an investment banker and she's a well-known artist. Actually, your brother showed some of her work last year, I think.”

The mention of Russell grounds us both. It's a slightly humid day, and the air feels thick between us. I swear, I can feel the press of her skin against mine, even though there's inches between us.

My eyes drag down her cute little outfit. Cutoff shorts and an airy blue blouse that brings out the color of her eyes. Sandals that leave her toes bare, nails painted pale pink.

I'm not a foot guy, but I wouldn't mind getting on my knees and giving her a massage just to hear her moan.

Her gaze drops. I'm suddenly aware of just how sweaty I am. It's hot out, hot enough that my shoulders are a little slick to the touch and I must have a decent tan by now.

Gen's tongue darts out to lick her bottom lip.

My mind goes blank, then brings forward the memory of that mouth wrapped around my cock, the jolt of pleasure when it bumped the back of her throat.

"So, is this what you *really* like to do?" She looks anywhere but at me, taking in the length of the barn. "Play around with wood all day?"

It's that teasing tone that's attracted me to her over and over.

I can't get enough of it. My head buzzes as heat crawls up my body, and suddenly the coveralls are too constricting.

Gen's outfit is looking a little warm, too. Maybe I should do us both a favor and divest her of it.

The barn doors are half-open, enough for the lazy breeze and some light to come through. The house is empty; Eva is at a friend's for a playdate.

No one can see us here.

No one will know what I intend to do to her.

Reaching out, I settle a hand on Gen's waist and wait.

Her eyes cut up to mine and her lips part. But she doesn't say "no," doesn't push back.

Instead, she steps toward me, one hand going to my wrist and the other to the rough fabric of the coveralls.

"This is a bad idea," she murmurs, licking her lips again.

I nod. "It is. We don't have to do it." Leaning in, my lips ghost up her jaw, to her earlobe. One swipe of my tongue is all it takes to make her shiver. "We could stop right now. If you tell me to stop, I will."

My other hand grips her waist. It's narrow, and despite the fact we almost stand eye to eye, Gen feels delicate in my hands. I drag them up her body, the blouse coming up with the movement, exposing her stomach. She sways forward, hips brushing mine.

"Tell me to stop."

With her eyes closed, she shakes her head, ponytail brushing her shoulders.

"No, don't stop."

In one easy movement, I lift her onto the worktable. It's just like the night in the kitchen all over again. And just the same, there's a sense of urgency and being out of control that I don't feel in any other part of my life.

"Take these off." Her words come out as a gasp as she lifts her hips. I flick the button of her shorts and yank them down quickly, exposing the hot pink underwear she's wearing.

Gen doesn't have time for my raised brow. She's fumbling with the buttons on the coveralls, tossing the straps over my shoulders. The fabric is heavy enough that it falls on its own. Her hands travel from my shoulders down my chest, dragging through my chest hair, to my lower abs.

My cock flexes in response. I've been steadily getting harder since she made that joke about *playing with wood*.

It's childish; I'm too old for such things to affect me. But the thought of Gen playing with herself, spread out in the guest bedroom upstairs while I'm right across the hall...

My erection throbs painfully. Gen's fingers find the waistband of my boxer briefs and pulls those down, just enough for my cock to spring free. Unable to help myself, I move forward like some heat-seeking animal.

And the heat I want is between her legs.

Her eyes are wide, pupils huge when our gazes meet. She pulls me in by my hips as I position myself over her, using the table as leverage, a palm planted on either side of her ass. Gen leans back and wraps her legs around my hips.

“Undo this,” I growl, jerking my chin at her blouse.

She lets out a huff of protest but tightens her thighs to balance as she undoes the little pearly buttons. It takes long enough that I decide to punish her.

Reaching between our bodies, my fingers play against her stomach, trail down farther...until I find her clit and give it two hard rubs.

Gen cries out. Her hands slap onto the table, taking her weight as I lean forward and bury my face in her tits. It's an angle that pulls our hips apart and she whines, the sound making my cock throb. I want to fulfill her every wish. Buried right here, between her legs, making her babble and croon and cry out.

“Please,” she gasps, reaching again for my shoulders. Pulling away, I give her chest a little love bite that shouldn't hurt but will leave a bruise. No one will see it.

But I'll know it's there.

Gripping her thighs, I pull her to the edge of the table and push aside her panties. She's already soaked through them and the realization she wants me just as badly as I want her only makes me harder.

How is it I've had this woman several times already and still feel like I can't get enough?

Led by instinct, my hips tilt against hers and I push myself inside her. It's rough, rougher than I mean to be, but Gen's guttural moan lets me know it's working for her. That's all that matters.

Her wet heat grips me immediately and I groan, dropping my head back. Shallow, fast thrusts get her even wetter. The sounds our bodies are making are sinful, dirty, luscious. Her waist and tits beneath my hands feel plush and full. Warm. All my senses are taken over by Genevieve as I bury myself inside her over and over, the electric buzz of pleasure sending a shiver down my spine.

Her nails dig into my shoulders as she ruts against me messily. Our skin slaps, echoing in the barn, and there's a

dangerous edge to this, even though I know no one else is here.

We could get caught.

I shouldn't be fucking her; she's so young, so needy, so responsive to everything I do to her.

The thought drives me crazier with each thrust. I pull Gen tight against me and grind into her, pressing my pelvic bone down on her clit. My hands grip her thighs as I rumble out a command.

“Come.”

Her pussy tightens around me as Gen cries out. The pain of her fingers digging into my shoulders burns into pleasure, and my own orgasm finds me quickly, rocketing through me like fire.

I don't let go of her even after it's over. I can't help it; my hands rest at her lower back, holding her up as she droops against the table.

Both of us are sweaty and trying to catch our breath. Her blouse is open, breasts spilling out, a bruise already forming on the plush skin. I lean in and press a kiss to the spot, then feel my face heat with embarrassment.

When I pull away, Gen is staring up at me with wide eyes.

Carefully, I step back and get my boxers on before adjusting her panties and helping her down. Her legs quiver for a moment and she sighs. Anxiety rolls through me like a storm.

“Was that...okay?”

She presses a hand to her forehead. “Yes. Yeah, it was—” with a rueful laugh, she finishes “—perfect. I'm just tired. Exhausted, actually.”

Her brow creases as Gen stares down at our feet.

Then her face goes blank.

She pulls away and strides to the doors, then slips through, calling apologetically, “I'm sorry—I forgot I—I need to—”

But she doesn't come up with an excuse. And I can't help wondering if she actually wanted me this time, and all the others.

Or if I'm just taking advantage of the woman living in my house.

Chapter 19

Genevieve

Nate catches me tiptoeing down the stairs and I freeze like a deer in headlights.

His eyes narrow as Eva wraps her arms around his waist in a tight hug. His large hand sits on his daughter's head.

“You're going out?”

I can't really deny it. My purse is slung over my shoulder and I've changed out of comfy sweats and into a skirt.

“Um...yeah. Just need to make a quick stop at the pharmacy—”

His features tighten and I sigh internally. Nate has a habit of bossing me around, and although under the right circumstances I'm *very* into it, right now, I find it frustrating.

“You shouldn't be going out alone. Not with that...” His eyes drop to Eva as she watches the two of us curiously. We've been careful not to talk about the last few weeks' events in front of her. She's too excited about having me in the house to bother asking why I moved out of the pool house in the first place.

“...person still around. I'll drive you.”

“*No.*”

The denial comes out fast and harsh. Nate's face goes blank as he stares up the stairs at me. Eva, fully aware of the vibe we're putting off, looks anxiously between us.

“No. I'll be fine. And you have Eva, anyway.”

“Eva, honey, go put the rest of your game away. We talked about cleaning up after yourself earlier, remember?”

She gives her father a sullen look but heads off to the living room. Nate turns his attention back to me.

“What's going on?”

I think I might be pregnant.

That's a bomb I don't want to drop. Especially not to the guy who is *definitely* the dad if I am pregnant.

My stomach knots in anxiety and I press a hand to it. Nate's gaze drops.

"I'll be fine. Really, Nathan, I can get to the pharmacy and back by myself."

"Last time, they slashed your tires. We still don't know who it is and it's been a while since they tried anything."

A little over a week, actually. Not that I'm counting...or awaiting the next attack full of adrenaline and anxiety.

"I was just in the city yesterday!"

Right before we fucked. In the barn. On the table.

Oh, God.

That's exactly how this whole mess started. A night of anxious googling led to the conclusion that I'm either pregnant enough for symptoms to start becoming obvious, or there's something seriously wrong with my digestive system.

Unfortunately, all signs point to...

Nathan Sharpe.

"What about Eva?"

He glances into the living room, where she's gone suspiciously quiet. Taking two slow steps up the stairs, so that we're almost nose to nose, he says quietly, "She can go to the neighbor's. I'll let Liz know it's an emergency."

Rolling my eyes, I insist, "It's *not*, though."

"You seem like you're in a rush to get whatever it is you need. And you have a stalker. So, yes. It is an emergency."

"*Stalker* is a strong word."

"Is it? Forget about the slur on your apartment door, did you?"

I clamp my lips shut, annoyed that he's right. I really shouldn't be going out alone, not when someone is keeping an eye on me. If I go into the city this late in the evening and get my tires slashed, there's no guarantee that I'll make it back to Nate's house.

“Okay. Fine. But you have to wait in the car for me.”

He looks suspicious as I skirt around him, clutching my purse close. But Nate turns and calls for Eva, explaining that she's going to hang out at the neighbor's house for a bit until we're back.



THE CAR RIDE is painfully tense.

It's obvious Nate has questions, and I'm guessing my demeanor isn't helping. I'm practically sweating through my T-shirt in the passenger seat, pharmacy bag held tightly in my lap.

I can't let him see what's inside. Two pregnancy test boxes, four tests total. That should give me a good spread of data, right?

Chewing my lip, I don't realize it until Nate reaches over and bumps my chin with a knuckle.

“Hey. Calm down. I'm sure whatever is going on will be just fine.”

I scoff, then cross my arms, hiding the bag further. His gaze drops to my lap. He hasn't asked, but I know he wants to.

We pull into the drive and I open my door quickly, stepping out. Overhead, the sky is so dark the stars look like tiny pinpricks of light in black fabric. I stare up in awe; you definitely don't get *this* view in the city. And for the past few weeks, I've been bundled up in bed or working on the menu for Saucer at this time of night.

“Alright?”

Nate's low rumble startles me and I jump. The bag falls from my hands, rustling on the gravel. Before I can snatch it, Nate leans down and picks it up.

As well as the boxes of tests that fell out of it.

The pink is somehow obscene in this setting, a low-key summer night, amber light spilling out of the nearby houses and fireflies flashing out on the property.

My breathing stops.

Nate stares down at the boxes in his hands.

“Are you...?”

His voice is tight, strained, as our eyes meet.

Unable to speak, I only nod. So many emotions are rushing through my nervous system right now, I don't know whether to fight or flee. Instead, the floodwaters break and I find myself rambling.

“Yes. Maybe. I think. I've been sick for about a week now, *really* sick, and onion rings made me throw up, which they *never* do, and I've been exhausted. I sleep all the time.” I wince here. Two days ago I was late getting up and Eva actually crept into my room to ask if I was okay or if she should make us cereal for breakfast. “And my boobs—”

Oh, God. I wish I could stop the rambling, but I can't.

It hit me the other day after...well, after what happened in the barn.

The combination of getting sick, being exhausted, and then very happily opening my legs for Nate.

“You're not on birth control?” His harsh tone brings me back to the present and, thankfully, erases my nerves.

Snatching the bag and tests out of his hands, I snap, “Of course I am. You're *old enough* to know that's not one hundred percent effective.”

Nate's face flushes, then goes pale. He must be feeling the same wave of emotions I am right now.

Disbelief, terror, self-loathing.

Walking around him, I head for the front door. He follows quickly. I can feel his presence just behind me, like a heavy cloud bearing down. It makes me grit my teeth.

“Genevieve.”

I practically run through the door and toss my purse to the side.

Nate’s hand catches my arm.

“Gen! Stop. We need to talk about this.”

His touch isn’t rough or too tight, just insistent. I pull away, but stay in the foyer, afraid to meet his eyes.

“There’s not much to talk about. Not until I take these tests.”

Silence forms between us. After a few beats, Nate nods.

“Okay. Yeah. You’re right; go do that and I’ll be right here.”

Pregnancy tests clutched in my hand, I start up the stairs. Tears are pressing at the backs of my eyes. The last thing I want right now is to cry.

“Gen.”

At the landing, I turn, looking down at him. He looks tired, but steady. It makes my erratic heartbeat slow.

“It’s okay. However it turns out. It’s okay.”

Chapter 20

Nathan

Genevieve is crying.

My first instinct is to call her brother and ask him to come over.

But I don't think either of us want to explain this situation.

I'm part of why she's crying. A large part.

My fears the other day, that she might be seeing someone in the city, were completely unfounded. When I tried to gently ask if there were other men in the picture, she shouted—then started crying.

Needless to say, Liz is going to have Eva for longer than I planned.

“What can I do?”

It's the only thing I can think to ask. Gen lifts her face slightly, enough that I can see the tear tracks glimmer in the low light of the kitchen. She's made this her place of refuge, and she's tucked up against the counter as I lean against the island opposite her.

“Gen. How can I help?”

She coughs out a laugh, finally meeting my eyes. “I don't think there's much you can do in this situation, Nathan. I'm already beyond help.”

I frown as she wipes her tears and puts on a brave face, continuing, “I'm not asking you for anything. But—I'm going to keep it.”

All the air goes out of me.

Not for the reason she suspects, though. I can tell as her face falls.

“Obviously, I wasn't planning on having a child, or children, maybe at all, but now that we—*I*—am in this

situation, I don't think I'd be able to bring myself to—”

Her breath catches, a hand going to her still flat belly.

Earlier, before she took the tests (all four of them—this girl is thorough), she changed back into sweatpants. Now it all makes sense, why she's been wearing comfortable clothes and nodding off more and more.

“I don't want you to have an abortion.”

Gen's head tips to the side as her mouth snaps shut. She's watching me closely, eyes narrowed.

“You don't?”

“No. I think it's your choice. If you *wanted* to, I would support that. But if you'd like to keep the baby, I think you should.”

My chest swells with the need to continue. To reassure her I'll give her and this baby everything they could ever want.

A home. Even if it isn't here with me. Money. A permanent job. Or just a stipend. Whatever. Whatever she needs, whatever I can give.

I'd give all of me.

The realization is sobering as I stand only a few feet away from the woman who crashed into my life almost two months ago.

Who would've thought we'd be brought together like this? It feels like a lifetime ago when we were kids—Gen a shy girl hiding around corners while Russ and I tumbled about in adolescence.

Russ.

He's going to kill me.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. This time when Gen speaks, it's careful, as if she's trying to feel me out.

“You're okay with me keeping the baby. But you seem a little stressed-out.”

A chuckle slips out before I can catch it. “Well, yes. I just thought...your brother.”

Silence.

Gen starts chewing her lip again. That means she must’ve thought about it, and must be worrying about it, too.

“I don’t want to tell him yet,” she blurts out.

“Okay. That’s fine, we don’t have to tell him.” But inside, my heart is breaking. I don’t like the thought of keeping something this big from my best friend—even if it’s something that could end the friendship. I can feel the scales tipping as my allegiance shifts from Russ Walker to his sister, the woman who will be having my child.

A rush of heat fills me as memories come flooding back.

Julia laughing as I stood, awestruck, holding a positive pregnancy test. Listening to her sing in the morning as she got the nursery ready. The rush to the hospital, my wife a beacon of calm as I hounded the doctors and nurses, making sure over and over again that everything was okay.

When I come back from the past, the steady reassurance I’ve been trying to offer is muted. And Gen is chewing her lip again.

Reaching out, I thumb her lower lip from between her teeth.

Our eyes meet. Her lips are parted, my fingers resting just beneath her chin.

Head tilted up.

I could almost...

If I wanted to, I could lean in and...

Shaking the thought off, I step back hastily. The last thing Gen needs is the man who got her pregnant kissing her in the middle of this mess. Even if it’s a happy mess.

She still looks worried, though, and my mind races as I try to think of how to calm her. Old habits die hard. I start talking business.

“Obviously, you’re going to need time off for appointments. And shopping. If you’re as tired as you say you’ve been, we can move breakfast back for now. It’s summer and I’m sure Eva won’t mind sleeping in—”

Slowly, a smile spreads across Gen’s face. I’m making a complete ass of myself as I rant on, but she puts it to a stop with a shake of her head.

“Nate, I’m fine. Really. For now, anyway.”

I open my mouth, but she cuts me off. “I promise I’ll let you know if all of this is too much.”

“Hmm. Okay. I’m going to hold you to that. And I insist on you taking the time to take care of whatever needs doing for you and the—”

I gesture to her belly and she slides a hand across it protectively. Then she frowns.

“You’re not...?”

“Not what?”

Gen shrugs. “I don’t know, upset? Scared? Worried?”

“I’m all of those things,” I answer honestly, leaning back against the island with my arms crossed. “But it’s not exactly new to me.”

Surprise lights her eyes, then understanding...followed by an emotion I can’t name. Her gaze cuts away as she mutters, “Of course.”

Feeling like I need to bridge the cavern between us, I offer more information.

“When Julia—my wife—told me she was pregnant, I think I almost passed out. Would’ve been a mess for her to try and drag me to the couch. I panicked pretty much the whole time she was pregnant with Eva, right up until the birth. And after that, I was scared to leave them. I took a month off work, then two. It was only when my CFO stepped in and insisted I come back that I...”

I trail off, the memories infiltrating.

All that wasted time in the city.

All those days I could've been with them before Julia...

I look up, meeting Gen's eyes. I don't want her to be scared like I was, and I don't want her to do this alone. Not if she'll let me help.

"I know you'll be fine, Gen. You're a capable woman. And whatever you need, I'm here."

The words sink in and hesitation settles on her face. Steeling herself, she says, "Right now, all I need from you, Nate, is to not talk to anyone about this. Definitely not Russell. I don't want to try to explain..."

She gestures between the two of us.

How *would* she explain it, I wonder? We're both adults, after all, but we act like teenagers around one another. Unable to keep our hands off each other. I can't count how many nights I've gone to bed or taken a shower palming an erection, fighting off the urge to conjure thoughts of her body, her mouth.

"I won't say anything until you're ready. He'll notice eventually, though, you know."

"Oh, I know. But I have a plan for that."

It's a cryptic response, but she doesn't offer anything more. A comfortable silence settles between us. There will inevitably be more discussions of what the future looks like. I'll probably keep making an ass of myself, trying to offer help she doesn't want. Just in case.

But right now, we have an understanding.

Pushing away from the island, I fight the urge to go to her, and instead cross my arms to keep from reaching out.

"I should go get Eva."

She nods, a hand pushing her hair behind her ear. She looks more relaxed without the ponytail, more comfortable, but still tired.

Walking out of the kitchen, I pause in the entryway and look back, trying to fight the overwhelm at what the world has in store for us when we least expect it.

“Get some rest, Gen. It’s been an exciting day for you.”

Her laugh is like water in the middle of the desert, her smile bringing relief.

“That’s one way to put it. Thanks, Nathan. Tell Eva I said goodnight.”

Chapter 21

Genevieve

“I just think you should try some of Dad’s ice cream.”

Eva pouts. Sprinkles cover her mouth and she has buttercrunch melting on a shoe. Nathan and I stand side by side, stumped. Because the only way to get her out of this little tantrum is to give in.

“Just do it,” Nate mutters, holding his cone out toward me.

I scrunch my nose at the white and pink mountain of icy confection. Interesting fact about Nathan Sharpe—the man can’t resist a large cone, even if it is stacked three scoops high.

Giving the little girl a cutting glance, I lean in close and swipe my tongue across the ice cream. Trying not to look up and make eye contact with Nate. Trying to ignore the fact that I can smell him—wood, sweat, some kind of cologne that’s always lingering but I haven’t put a name to yet.

The shock of cold dims the desire gathering in my center.

What is this? I don’t remember learning in high school that pregnancy causes a high sex drive, but here I am, salivating over the man who helped create this little issue.

Not that I’d take it back.

It’s a strange thought, and I pull back, quickly thumbing a drip from the corner of my mouth.

“See?” Eva pipes up, elated she got her way. “It’s not bad, right?”

I shake my head, making a face. “I just don’t like white chocolate and strawberry, Eva. Sorry.”

She makes a sound of disbelief and stomps away toward the pile of boulders where other kids are climbing and playing made-up games.

It’s Saturday. Three days since I found out I was pregnant.

Three days since *Nathan* found out I was pregnant.

With his child.

After the initial shock wore off and he, rather quickly, agreed I should keep the baby, we set down the ground rule of not telling anyone.

I have two more months in his employment. I have a few more weeks to put together a menu for Saucer and try to snag a job as their executive chef.

Then, if everything works out, I'll be raising a baby alone in Germany.

The thought makes the sunny afternoon seem gloomy. Locked away in my thoughts, I don't realize Nate's watching me until he asks, "It wasn't *that* bad, was it?"

I raise my brows and look down at the double chocolate sundae in my hand, cherry sliding to the side, down a mound of whipped cream.

"It's really just not my thing. Nothing will ever compare to chocolate, Nate."

He rolls his eyes and I grin at the resemblance between him and his daughter. It makes me wonder if the baby will have the same habit, will have the same green eyes and one-sided dimple. Blushing at the thought, I clear my throat and dig a spoon into the ice cream.

"Here. Try it."

Astonishingly, Nathan is more adventurous than I am. He leans in and licks the scoop of chocolate, fudge, and whipped cream right off the spoon, pulling back and dragging his tongue across his upper lip. The move makes my heart stutter in my chest and there it is all over again—an embarrassingly high sex drive.

Ugh.

"So," I choke out, turning to look back toward the skyline and the general direction of Nate's company, "how's work been? I...I saw the headlines last week. It sounds like you guys have a bit of a scandal going on?"

He scowls. Why the hell did I bring that up? Way to ruin the mood.

Not that there was one.

Eating sweet melting ice cream with the man who very recently had his way with me in a sweaty carpentry shop definitely does *not* create a mood.

“It’s been a little rough. But my lawyers are on it and it should be resolved soon.” His jaw clenches for a moment, and then he confesses, “It’s putting me way behind. I’ve had to push a lot of personal work to the side, and a few company projects are on hold while we reassure our investors. The money will be fine in the end, I’ll finance things myself, if I have to, but it’s stressful.”

Curiosity piqued, I focus on the little tidbit he tossed out there.

“Personal work, like the things you make in the barn?”

I watch it happen as the words come out of my mouth. Nate’s face closes off, goes emotionless. He faces forward, arms held close to his sides, a little ridiculously defensive looking for a guy holding an ice cream cone.

“Yes,” he grunts.

Trying to act nonchalant, I play with my sundae and continue the line of questioning. “How did you get into that kind of stuff? Carpentry, I guess.”

There’s that same look I’m sure I gave Eva only a few minutes ago when my own defenses crumbled. Nate gives in, his shoulders loosening.

“My grandfather. He was a carpenter but he made furniture. Not the contractor stuff that goes on today. Everything was handmade, durable, and solid when he made it. I wanted to be like him.”

Rapt with his story, I press for more details.

“So that’s what you were into before you started Ironside?”

I get a shrug in reply. “Yeah, for a little while. I did odd jobs here and there. When I was in college, I worked under a general contractor, and it was good money. Their admin had surgery, and I covered for her at the time. Started to learn the ins and outs of the business. Once I finished school, I started my own company, and...”

He gestures in the direction of where the company must be, buried somewhere in this city where everyone is constantly competing and stressed.

Frowning, I ask, “Why do you bother?”

Nate looks at me in surprise, mirroring my knit brow. “What?”

“Why do you bother with...with the company, I guess, when that’s not the work you love?”

For a moment, his eyes look far away. It’s like he’s looking through me, and the expression drops from his face. On one of the boulders, Eva shouts triumphantly, playing a game of hide and seek with a small group of kids. Ice cream drips slowly down Nate’s hand, and then he’s back.

“It’s what makes money.”

With an eye roll, I turn away. “Hmm. Why am I not surprised?”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that you’re taking the same route everyone else is. Focusing on money instead of what makes you happy.”

Nate stares at me incredulously. A few women in the area are checking him out, but he doesn’t notice as he scoffs.

“Oh, because money had *nothing* to do with it when you started a restaurant with your ex?”

Caught off guard, I stare at him as his neck and then cheeks flush pink. He clears his throat awkwardly.

“You know about that?” I try not to say my ex’s name whenever possible.

“RUSS MENTIONED that something didn’t work out.”

I laugh, and it lightens the mood. “Well, a few things, actually. My engagement for one. But yeah, the restaurant, too. And no. I wasn’t in it for the money.”

I send him a sidelong glare, tossing my empty cup into a trash can.

“Really? So head chef doesn’t make good money at a place like The Black Fig? Michelin star, getting recognized on the street?”

Shaking my head, I explain. “No, actually. I was at about seventy grand a year. Which wasn’t bad. But up until last year, I was still paying off my loans for culinary school. And there was all that money I tanked in the partnership with my ex... and it took most of my career to work up to that seventy grand.”

With sincerity in my eyes and voice, I state, “I can honestly say I did it just because I love it.”

Nate is silent, letting it sink in as he stares out at Eva climbing over the rocks. She seems to be in some kind of disagreement with another girl, but they’re handling it. Both with hands on their hips, hair tossed back.

Feeling maybe a little too comfortable, I lean against a tree and point out, “You obviously have more than enough money. Hiring me as a favor. Putting your own finances into the company to boost it and reassure investors.” Another glance, another hint of curiosity. “I’m just saying, you never know how much time you have left, Nate. Might as well enjoy it.”

What was supposed to be a casual conversation takes a turn for the worse, though I’m not sure why.

As Nate watches his daughter navigate childhood, his face goes pale and his breathing stops.

Shoot.

I’m going to have to do CPR on the guy I’ve been trying to avoid even brushing arms with if he topples over.

But Nate blinks and literally shakes it off, a little jerky movement that brings him back to the present. Only it looks like what we were talking about—or what I thought we were talking about—hit him harder than I meant it to.

And once again, the thread drawing us together feels tenuous. Because if Nate wanted to get rid of the bungling, opinion-sharing, white chocolate-hating woman he hired, who is now inconveniently pregnant, he could have me out on the street tomorrow.

I'm just hoping there's more to him than this grumpy exterior he shows the rest of the world.

Chapter 22

Nathan

The security alarm goes off at 2 a.m., and I'm out of bed immediately. I've never been more awake in my life, and the first thing I do is grab the billy club I keep under my bed.

The heft of it in my hand is reassuring as I open the bedroom door. Movement makes me tense up, but it's just Gen opening her own door a hair.

"What is that?" she asks loudly over the sound of the alarm.

I can hear Eva crying out but can't make out her words.

"The house alarm. Someone's on the property. Can you go to Eva?"

Gen's gray eyes widen, her face going pale as she nods.

"Lock the door. I'll be up when I check everything out."

A large part of me wants to turn lights on, but I fight the urge, knowing it'll be hard for an intruder to navigate the house in the dark. Whereas, I know it like the back of my hand.

Staying close to the wall, I move down the stairs and immediately to the front door. It's locked and bolted.

I do a quick check of the windows, pulling the curtains, and then stride into the kitchen. We always keep a light on in here, and in the amber glow, I look over at the French doors and the windows here as well. Then into my office.

Everything is secure.

Going back to the French doors, I switch off the light and stand in darkness, looking out at the property. It's a few acres and fenced in completely. But that doesn't mean someone couldn't get over it.

The motion light has turned on and the entire area encompassing the patio, pool, and pool house is flooded with light. A sound shatters the silence—glass breaking.

“Nathan?” Gen calls from upstairs.

“Call the police,” I shout back, billy club raised as my eyes scan the illuminated area.

And then I see it—a dark figure moves from the side of the pool house closest to the edge of the property, sprinting. I jerk open the French doors and stride out onto the patio, but they’re gone in seconds.

Behind me, the alarm continues to whirr loudly. My chest rises and falls with each adrenaline-filled breath, heart pounding.

There’s a sinking feeling in my gut.

I already know who it was. Or at least, I know who they were here for.

And I know in that moment, I’ll do everything I can to protect Genevieve and the baby we swore to keep a secret.



IT’S NOT EVEN five o’clock when Chris knocks on the door and thunders into the house without an invitation.

His eyes are wild, his usually perfect hair mussed.

“Are you okay? Is Eva?”

“We’re fine,” I reassure him as Eva runs by me and latches on to her uncle.

It hurts my heart to see my daughter so terrified in her own home. After the cops left, I walked her through the alarm system—how it works. How it’s meant to keep us safe.

But I don’t think it did much to abate her fears.

Gen, too, is worried. She stands in the living room with her arms crossed, a floor-length gray dress on. She looks tired and

pale. Hopefully, Chris will assume it's just the events of the early morning hours.

“Honey, it's okay. Your dad and I will always be here to protect you, okay? You have nothing to worry about. No one can get into your home.”

Eva nods along with Chris's words as he hugs her, but she's still sniffing. Gently, I encourage her to go upstairs and try to sleep a little longer. Almost all of the lights in the house are on and we've just had several cops come to take a statement and search the property.

“What's going on?” Chris asks flatly as soon as Eva disappears at the top of the stairs. “What happened?”

Gen and I share a look. She gives me a faint nod, and I take a deep breath, leading Chris farther into the room and speaking in a low voice.

“It's someone who has it out for Genevieve. A stalker.”

She gives me a frustrated glance, but at this point, she can't deny it. Two windows on the pool house are completely shattered, and a slur is scrawled across the side of the small building in black spray paint.

Chris looks back and forth between us. “I'm going to need more than that.”

With a sigh, Gen sits down to explain. She fills Chris in on what's been happening: how someone targeted her apartment, though they must not have realized she wasn't there. And then slashed her tires the next time she went into the city.

And now this.

“So they know you're here.” It's a statement, and as he says it, Chris gives me a look that tells me, *I don't like this*.

“Yes. But I think whoever it is thought I was staying in the pool house. I don't think they realize Nate moved me in here.”

She seems hesitant to share the information, and I know she's wondering if Chris has any idea what's happened between us. And if I'm tempted to say anything about the baby.

Her hand moves involuntarily toward her belly, but she pulls it back, presses it beneath her thigh.

“The property alarm went off as soon as they climbed over the fence. They didn’t try to get into the main house, just vandalized the pool house.”

“That doesn’t really matter, Nate. Things like this—people like this—they escalate. Whoever it is, they know she’s here and they’ll probably keep looking for her. When they realize she’s in the house...”

His words echo my worst fears.

Someone getting in.

Someone finding my daughter. Finding Gen.

Someone hurting them.

“What can we do, legally?” It comes out gruffly, which my brother knows is only a sign of just how worried I am.

He sits back on the loveseat with a sigh.

“Not much, if you don’t know who it is. I’m sure the cops told you as much, though, and were just as helpful.” He snorts after the sarcasm.

“To be fair, they don’t have much to go on,” Gen throws in lamely.

Chris nods in agreement but leans forward and locks eyes with her. “You understand this is serious, right? That it isn’t going to end until we find out who it is?”

She swallows, nods.

“So there’s nothing we can do right now?”

Chris shrugs. “Keep everyone safe. Beef up the security here, if you can.”

“Already called a company.”

“Good. I know you and Julia never liked the idea of cameras, but it’s a good one right about now. On the property and at certain junctions of the house. I’m sure the company

will be able to discuss the details with you and make some suggestions.”

Gen is watching the conversation ping-pong back and forth between us. It’s like a sixth sense, the way I can feel what she’s feeling. A wash of exhaustion and fear, confusion and worry.

We all sit in silence for a while. It’s a little eerie after having the place filled with officers checking corners and window locks.

Looking over at Genevieve, I see her eyes drifting slowly shut, then jerking open again.

“Hey,” I say, trying to keep my voice even and reassuring. “You should go upstairs, too. Try to get some rest.” She starts to shake her head, but I insist. “I’m already awake. I’ll work from here today. Can’t leave Eva alone, anyway, and Liz won’t be able to watch her.”

Reluctantly, Gen nods and stands.

As she passes Chris, she reaches out and squeezes his shoulder. It stirs an unnecessary, fleeting feeling of jealousy in me. “Thank you.”

“Of course. If you need anything...”

Gen gives us a weak smile and starts slowly up the stairs.

We wait until we hear her door close and the lock click into place.

Then Chris’s serious eyes cut to me.

“Is this a good idea?”

A surge of protective instinct rises in me and I almost, *almost* stand up.

“What am I supposed to do, Chris? Toss her out into the city with some creep ready to hunt her down?”

My brother shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. It’s a very old habit—one I still have, but as a lawyer, Chris presents a more controlled and professional appearance.

“No. But...I don't know. Eva is here, Nate. You have no idea who this guy is, and if his actions keep escalating...”

“Then I'll take care of it.”

He scoffs. “Really? How?”

I have no real answer. I'm a big guy, bigger than most men, and in good shape for my age. But I don't own any guns—just the billy club next to my bed. And this house suddenly feels so big, so insecure.

“Have you talked to Russell about this?”

“No, of course not.”

I don't mention the other reason I've been avoiding reaching out to Russ—that I knocked up his little sister when I was supposed to be providing her a safe place to land until her career picked back up.

Chris knows, though, that we had *some* kind of physical relationship. He watches me closely, trying to find the chink in my armor. I do everything I can to steel myself against that brotherly instinct.

I promised Gen no one would find out. And I intend to keep that promise.

“Well, I think that's a bad idea. For everyone involved. The more people who know, the better, Nathan. You need a network. People checking in on you guys.” He takes a deep breath and goes in for the kill. “I know you've gotten used to operating on your own. This isn't the time for that.”

It gets me right in the heart.

Chris is right. We've just never brought up my forced solitude out loud before.

Ever since Julia's accident seven years ago, I've done everything I can to function fully on my own. Caring for Eva, running the business. I've made not needing anyone such a huge part of my life.

Now all that is crumbling around me. All because Gen Walker stepped into my life.

“She’s going to be pissed.” It’s a warning more for myself than for Chris, who doesn’t know Gen very well yet.

He snorts. “Yeah, probably. But she’ll be safe. And that’s what matters.”

“You’re right.” I sigh, digging my cell phone out of my pocket and tapping out a quick text asking Russ if he can talk sometime this morning. Chris waits patiently, and then we talk logistics—how the updated alarm system should function, fail-safes for if someone does get in the house. He makes a weak joke about getting us a German shepherd, but I consider it pretty seriously.

It’s almost 6 a.m. when he stands and tries to straighten out the wrinkles in his shirt, face scrunched in distaste.

“I have an hour until I need to be in the office. Honestly, should’ve been there already.”

And Gen thinks *I’m* the workaholic.

“Sorry to drag you out here.”

Chris holds up a hand. “No, absolutely don’t apologize. I want to be here, Nate. For you, for Eva—” he nods toward the stairs “—and for that woman who has you so captivated. Just...be careful, okay?”

I agree, following him toward the door to see him out, feeling the exhaustion finally creeping up on me. I doubt I’ll get much sleep, though, today or any other day after.

Turning in the doorway, Chris claps a hand on my upper arm and squeezes tightly.

“Call me as soon as you have a name, okay? I’ll clear my schedule for this. I’m serious.”

Without warning, he yanks me into a hug.

When was the last time I hugged my brother? Probably when we were kids. I can’t even remember.

“Don’t turn into Dad,” I hear him mumble almost incoherently, and then he’s gone—striding quickly toward his Tesla and getting in without looking back.

Those words hurt. The last thing I want is to be like my dad.

Chris is right. To avoid that, I need to let others in.

A small voice in my head points out that maybe that's already been happening...maybe I took the first step weeks ago, when Gen Walker became the unexpected whirlwind in my life.

I'm in it now. No matter the outcome.

Chapter 23

Genevieve

“Who are you?”

My head snaps up at Eva’s words. I rush out of the kitchen and down the hallway, seeing the slightly open front door.

“Eva?”

She looks over her shoulder innocently.

“Who is it?”

The question comes out harshly enough that she looks abashed and steps aside. The door pushes open a little more, enough for me to see the person standing on the front steps as my heart pounds in my chest.

It’s Russell.

“Russ?”

He grins sheepishly at my confusion. “Excuse me, miss.” Eva steps back as he enters the foyer. Like me, my brother inherited our father’s height. He towers over the ten-year-old, who stares up at him in shock. Russ cuts an intimidating figure, especially in his gallery clothes. He looks like sleek professionalism with a hint of danger—especially with that dangling earring.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, thinking immediately of our foster mother. Russ and I were in the system for a handful of years until he got out at eighteen and I settled into a somewhat normal home. Despite being a few hours away, he always came to visit—always.

“Yeah.” His eyes cut to Eva. “Well, no. Can we talk?”

“Um, I’m watching Eva, but...sure. Eva, are you okay to watch your show alone?”

She nods, already completely forgetting about the company. Eva’s pseudo-babysitter, Liz, wasn’t able to watch

her today, so I offered. Nate seemed stressed by asking me to go beyond my regular duties. I'd be here all day, anyway, working on my menu for Saucer.

Eva flits off to the living room and Russ follows me into the kitchen. He raises a perfectly manicured brow at the six plates set out on the butcher block island, and my face heats.

Oh, no. I can't tell him about this—he'll tell Nate.

I know I should've mentioned to Nate by now that I'm planning on moving to Germany if this restaurant takes me on. But there's just been so much stress lately with the pregnancy. We've barely talked about it, except for Nate confirming I made my first OB-GYN appointment.

And then it hits me like a stone in the gut.

Did Nate tell Russ...?

"I'm just killing time and experimenting a bit. You know how it is," I explain lamely, crowding the plates to the side. "So what's...what's going on?"

My stomach churns with nausea. An unfortunate side effect that'll be hanging around for a bit. After googling it, I found out that stress will only make it worse.

And Russell showing up here is definitely stressful.

Absently, he dips his finger into a little saucer of beet puree and tastes it as he sits. Scrunching his nose, he comments, "Tastes like dirt."

I roll my eyes. "That's because it's for coloring, not flavor."

Keeping myself busy, I avoid his eyes and wait him out. When it doesn't work, I glance up and find Russ watching me with an expectant look on his face.

"Did Nate tell you?"

I get a nod in response.

A lump forms in my throat. Ghosting a hand over my belly, I try to fight back the feeling of desperation. Russ is the only family I have. If he's upset about this baby...

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” he asks, clearly trying to hold back his frustration.

“I was worried what you would think.”

He frowns. “Worried what I would...? Genevieve, you can’t possibly think any of this is your fault.”

Um...it takes two to tango?

But I don’t say that out loud. Instead, I sigh and move around the island to sit next to him.

“Why don’t you start at the beginning,” he asks. “With the apartment.”

The apartment?

My face must go blank, because Russ looks concerned. He raises a hand and puts the back of it to my forehead. “Are you alright, sis? You look a little pale.”

Relief, nausea, and exhaustion wash through my body. I lean forward and practically fall into Russ’s arms, needing a hug from my big brother right now.

“I’m fine,” I mumble against his shirt. “Just tired. And scared.”

It’s the truth, about both situations—although it seems like Russ only knows about one.

Once my emotions are under control, I straighten up and start at the beginning, just like he asked. I tell Russell about attempting to sublet my apartment, and the mess all over the door that my tenant found before she promptly moved out. I tell him about the slashed tires in the grocery store parking lot.

Then his eyes go to the French doors. He’s looking out at the pool house.

“So when did that happen, then? And how long has this been going on?”

“*That*...happened a few days ago. Nathan said he has a security system set up around the perimeter of the yard, and it went off. I waited upstairs with Eva while he came down here and...”

My throat closes again as I think of what Nate described—the shatter of glass. Someone running through the backyard. A dark figure disappearing over the fence line.

A shiver racks my body and Russ squeezes my arm reassuringly.

“Altogether, it’s been about a month, I think? Maybe a little more?”

In that moment, my mind goes inappropriately to the *other* big event in my life. This clearly isn’t the time to think about it though so I try to push the memory of a positive pregnancy test away.

Russ sits back, taking in the information. After a few moments, he states seriously, “Don’t be upset with Nate, okay? He called me because he was concerned.”

I nod mutely, though a small flame of anger is still flickering inside. *At least he didn’t tell him about the baby.*

“Did he tell you we have a plan?” When Russ shakes his head, I explain. “His brother came over—Chris. The lawyer? And we talked about what we can do legally. Which isn’t much. But Nathan has the security company coming to install cameras and a system directly in the house instead of just on the property.”

Russell snorts, shaking his head. “Not sure why he didn’t do that sooner. He’s a billionaire. They always attract weirdos.”

I smile weakly, *very* aware of the fact that I’m the one who attracted the weirdo, and I’m definitely not a billionaire.

“The cops came out and dug around out there, but they didn’t find much they can use. We need some kind of DNA evidence or something, I guess? A fingerprint? And that’ll only be helpful if they get a hit in the database. So the alternative is this guy comes back and we get his face on camera. Figure out exactly who it is.”

My brother’s face goes white. “You want him to *come back?*”

“Well there isn’t much choice, is there? We need *something*.”

Russel stands and sputters in exasperation, running a hand down his face. He looks tired. I haven’t been a good sister lately—haven’t reached out to see how he’s doing. Instead, I’ve been worrying about my own problems, all of them of my own making.

All I had to do was *not* sleep with my boss and brother’s best friend. But here we are.

The reminder makes my face flush with heat, but Russell is too stressed-out to notice. He’s pacing back and forth in the kitchen. I know him well enough to know he’s looking for a way to solve the problem, but the truth is, he can’t.

Not unless, like I already told him, we get something to identify the person doing these things.

Russ’s cell pings and he looks down at it, annoyance flashing across his features. “I have to go. We have a big shipment coming in tonight for the new showing, and...” Striding over, he wraps me in a bone-crushing hug.

I wave off his apologies and walk him to the door, smiling as Eva calls out an enthusiastic, “Goodbye!”

Russ turns in the doorway. “I guess the one thing I should be happy about is that you have Nate.”

The words are like an arrow to my heart.

Nate isn’t mine, that little voice in my head reminds me. *We’re just tethered together now, but he’s not mine*.

“He’ll take good care of you.”

Russ sounds so sure of it. I wish, in this moment, I could let go and tell him everything. How scared I am to be a mom—how scared I am to give up on the opportunity I have to go to Germany, if they pick me. How confused Nathan makes me.

But as much as Russ loves Nate, he’d never be okay with the two of us together. Aside from the age difference, I doubt he’d be happy about his little sister climbing into bed with his best friend.

Trying my best to smile reassuringly, I promise Russ we'll catch up soon. Maybe I can convince Nathan to let me drive into the city if I go straight to the gallery and don't stop anywhere else.

Closing the door and locking it firmly behind me, I turn and put my back to it. It hadn't occurred to me how *hard* lying to my brother would be. Or how much I need his support.

My eyes start to fill with tears as it hits me just how alone I am. Tipping my head back, I refuse to let them fall.



“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?”

Nate drops his laptop bag near the front door and looks around for Eva. I gesture up the stairs to indicate she's playing in her room.

“Did I miss dinner?”

Ignoring my question, he strides toward the kitchen. His nonchalance makes my blood boil and I stalk after him, fuming.

“Nathan!”

“What?” He whips around, the few inches he has on me seeming like a long way. His green eyes are piercing.

“You told Russell. He came here today.”

With another glance at the staircase, Nathan moves in closer. His body is so close to mine, it makes my skin heat up and prickle. I try to shake it off; must be the hormones.

“I thought it best more people than just the two of us know what's going on.” His voice is low, a rumble that pulls at my core. I sway on my feet and try to find that annoyance and frustration I was feeling all day while he was at work.

“Well, you should have *told me* so I wasn't surprised by him showing up on the doorstep. Besides, your brother knows, too, so it's not just us.”

“If something happens, Gen...”

“Nothing’s going to happen.” I say the words firmly, but I don’t feel them.

Nathan is the one who came to my apartment, picked me up when the tires were slashed, stomped downstairs with a billy club ready to beat someone to a pulp.

But here *I* am reassuring *him*.

Maybe he’s just as scared as I am. The way his eyes drop to my belly, I bet he is.

“I thought he was here about...”

At the mention of the pregnancy, Nate’s eyes snap to mine. Impulsively, he reaches out and circles my hand with his, tugging me close.

“I made a promise.”

He murmurs it, so close I can feel his breath on my lips.

My eyes flutter.

Nate leans in.

And then Eva appears at the bottom of the stairs.

“Ice cream?” she chirps.

Chapter 24

Nathan

The perimeter alarm goes off and the two reps from the security company stare at me in surprise.

“You expecting guests?” one asks gruffly.

I’m not.

A car is pulling into the drive, one I don’t recognize. The windows are deeply tinted and I hold my breath as it approaches. There’s no way Gen’s stalker can afford a car like this, though, which sparks my suspicion.

They pull up next to the security company vans. The two men are uncomfortable, sensing my growing bad attitude.

“Mr. Sharpe, if you don’t mind, we’ll need full reign of the house to make sure the system is working properly.”

I give them a sharp nod and an apology, then start toward the sleek car. The door opens and out steps the only person it could be.

Jenson.

This guy doesn’t give up easily.

Exhaling hard through my nose, I stalk toward him. “What are you doing here?”

He’s actually wearing sunglasses, even though it’s closer to twilight than noon. Jenson takes them off, hangs them in his shirt pocket, and doesn’t bother with a smile.

“Sorry—am I interrupting something?”

My chest swells with annoyance. He’s scanning the vans, the security company name more than clear. I don’t want to explain the whole situation to him. Part of me wonders if Chris already has, since he seems so on board with suddenly having a half brother.

“Yes. I believe I told you to leave me alone.”

“You did.”

“Then I have no idea what you’re doing here.”

Jenson’s gaze makes its way back to mine. He stands his ground, not budging under my thundercloud of a glare.

“I’ve seen the headlines. Heard there’s probably going to be some legal trouble, so I wanted to reach out and offer help.”

Inside, I wince. He’s talking about this whole debacle with Nash, who it seems like was actually stupid enough to try and find legal representation. I only found out about it two days ago when I finally made it back into the office.

“I don’t need help.”

“That’s not what it looks like.” He scans the vans again, the two men conferring as they enter my house. The house I’ve been temporarily kicked out of. “I know you don’t want to be friends, and that’s fine. But hear me out, for business’ sake.”

Too tired to argue and also a little intrigued, I agree. Since we can’t go inside, I end up leading him around the side of the house to the pathway that goes to the patio, pool house, and barn. Jenson takes it all in without a change in expression.

I’ll admit to having done some googling after his last unannounced visit. He has an impressive background. A part of me wants to hear him out just to see if I can find a weak spot—and prove to Chris that this stranger isn’t worth our time and attention.

“Alright. What’ve you got?”

Leaning against the outdoor fireplace, Jenson takes a deep breath. “I’ve got a top-tier PR team. I think they’d be able to help you get this whole thing under control. I’d be willing to lease them out for consultation to Ironside, at a discount, of course—”

A laugh of incredulity comes out more like a bark. The nerve of this man.

“You came here to try and make a *business deal*?”

Jenson's mouth presses into a flat line. "No. I came here to offer help—"

"Help I'd be paying for."

"You're a business owner, Nathan. You know I can't just loan the team out for free. Especially since we're related. It all has to appear aboveboard, or you'll just be digging yourself—and me—a deeper hole."

I hate that he's right.

I also hate the liberties he's taking after suddenly discovering we're brothers.

"We might be related, but I owe you nothing."

"Exactly. Just as *I* owe *you* nothing." Jenson's cool gaze sweeps over me. "You're not used to accepting help, are you?" he asks drily. There's something smug about his attitude.

Trying to turn the tables and tamp down my frustration, I cross my arms. "Just what makes you think this team of yours can get my situation under control?"

He shrugs. "We had a similar issue last year. Company employee who stepped over a line. Several women came forward and accused him of harassment."

A dim lightbulb goes off in my mind...I vaguely recall something in the papers about that. Wasn't it the founder's son, too? Even more scandalous.

This has me looking at Jenson a little more closely. "And Dupont Analytics just bounced right back from it, hmm?"

A small smile spreads across his face. He's caught me; he knows that at the very least, I kept and read his business card if I know his company's name.

"It took a little time, but the way we handled it—and we *handled* it—Dupont Analytics came out clean in the end. After all, you shouldn't be faulted for one bad apple. And it sounds like this financial adviser you've got ready to fight a legal battle is definitely a bad apple."

I let out a huff of agreement. Once, I would've considered Nash a loyal employee. Someone who helped me build Ironside from the ground up. Where did that go wrong? Is the company too big now for loyalty?

Silence sinks in around us as I consider his offer. To my frustration, I can't find anything at fault with it. My own PR team is scrambling, never having had to deal with something like this before. They handle marketing, mostly, and making sure I look presentable when I go out to major events. But with investors ready to break down the door and get their money back, the team has been in a panic.

I'm still not ready to accept Jenson's help, though, so instead I ask, "Let me guess, you got started in the analytics business thanks to Dad."

His eyes go wide. He actually looks so baffled, I momentarily regret mentioning our father.

"Wha—? Dad was an analyst?"

Now it's my turn to be surprised. Isn't this the kid our dad left us for? A part of the whole new life he wanted?

"You didn't know that," I rumble. Chris must not have mentioned it. Had they even discussed Dad yet? Or was Chris being careful about welcoming our half brother in with open arms?

"Yeah. Out here, actually. Didn't own his own company, but he made it pretty high up and was heading a department."

Jenson is quiet for a few long moments. Then he offers up, "We didn't live in a city. He was a wastewater plant technician."

That nearly knocks me off my feet.

I stare at him, trying to reconcile the man I once knew—the one who wore suits to work every day—with a blue-collar version of my father. Wearing a uniform, doing equipment maintenance, checking fluid levels, and logging results.

"I..."

I'm truly at a loss for words. Jenson, as if the floodgates have now opened, blurts out more information. "He was an alcoholic, too. It's what did him in, in the end."

"That doesn't surprise me at all." It comes out flat, emotionless. "It was an issue with us, too. He used to hide it well, though." Shaking my head, I settle onto a lounge chair, elbows braced on my knees.

"So, yeah. He had nothing to do with where my life stands now. Actually, he nearly ruined it." He laughs ruefully. I can't help the urge to know more.

"How?"

"My wife. We grew up together as best friends. Dad was a mess, of course, and he just didn't set a good example. For relationships," he explains tightly. I wonder if, like Chris, he's gone to therapy. He doesn't seem comfortable discussing these intimate details of his life, and I can't blame him. Getting me to talk about my dad is like pulling teeth.

"Anyway. My wife, Mel, left town pretty quickly, right before college. Dad had already passed away. I didn't know how to handle things in a healthy way, so I shut down. Focused on work. When Mel showed up in Boston, working at Dupont, I was closed off. I almost lost her. Again."

My heart aches with the thought of what Jenson must've gone through. Dad was a monster hidden in plain sight here. Did he get worse when he took off to Boston and left Mom for Jenson's mother?

"I don't like to give him more credit than is due." Jenson clenches his jaw. "Had no idea he was in analytics. I got into it myself, found my own way. Roy Dupont...he's been like a father to me. A real one."

Our eyes meet. This time, the anger in me is snuffed out. We're level, he and I. We've seen the same things—more or less. There's an understanding now, a connection, that wasn't there before.

I'm almost okay with it. Until the alarm in the house goes off, in testing mode, jerking me back to reality.

Gen. The stalker. The baby. Keeping this secret from my best friend.

No, the last thing I need in my life right now is a half brother to bond with over teary-eyed trauma stories.

Standing, I put on my business face. One that Jenson knows well, because as soon as he sees it, his eyes narrow.

“I have things to take care of today. I heard you out, and if I decide to take you up on your offer, I’ll reach out. But I think it’s time for you to leave.”

This time, he can’t say no. He walks stiffly in front of me, back around the house.

His gaze catches curiously on the barn. I’ve left the doors open again. A bad habit of mine; Gen’s been sniffing around, too, praising every project she comes across.

In the driveway, Jenson turns and offers his hand.

This time, after a moment of hesitation, I reach out and shake it.

Chapter 25

Genevieve

Saturday night, Nathan surprises me by coming into the kitchen and saying, “Why don’t we order out?”

Tucking away the notebook I scribble menu ideas on, I look at him with wide eyes. “What?”

One corner of his mouth quirks in a smile. “You too good for takeout, Walker?”

The casual use of my surname has me returning his smile. “Definitely not. You like Thai?”

Nate laughs, coming lazily farther into the room and leaning against the counter. “I do. Love it, actually. But...it’s not Eva’s favorite.”

My smile softens. Nate managed to spend the whole day at home without setting foot in his office once. A thunderstorm rolled through earlier, and at the whir of a table saw, I looked out and saw him working in the barn. Making out his muscular form through the deluge of rain had my heartbeat picking up.

I’m not sure what’s changed, but something has. Maybe the alarm system getting installed yesterday? He seems calmer, less stressed-out, and I heard him on a call early this morning telling *someone* not to reach out unless it was an emergency.

Maybe he’s finally learning to take a step back from work and focus on what he loves.

The thought of Nate as an attentive dad, fully present, stirs something primal in me. I have to bite my lip to keep from swaying forward and finishing that almost-kiss that happened the night after Russ came over.

“What’s she up for then? Pizza? Italian? Mexican?”

Keeping eye contact, Nate smiles and pulls open a little drawer. Inside is a stack of take-out menus. I half groan and

half laugh, a hand on my forehead.

“Nathan...you’re kidding me. This is *bad*.”

He shrugs with a sheepish grin. “Before you, we were a mess, Gen.”

My heart pounds again, a feeling I’m growing used to these days. It seems like every time our eyes meet, I have to catch my breath. And we haven’t even been intimate since that day in the barn.

Except for that almost-kiss.

Why am I so stuck on a kiss when I’ve had this man literally on his knees?

Shaking off the flash of memories, I leaf through the menus as Nate calls Eva down. She perks up at the mention of a night in with takeout, maybe a movie.

“A movie?” I mouth, brows raised. Nate’s eyes practically twinkle.



FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, the three of us are curled up on the couch watching *The Godfather*.

“Are you sure this is age appropriate?”

I murmur the question when Eva ducks out quickly to find paper towels, keeping the burger-and-fries mess to a minimum.

Nathan gives me a flat look. “Just *try* turning it off. This girl is obsessed with Marlon Brando.”

I make a face and he chuckles. Eva climbs back on the couch between us, feet dangling as she takes another bite out of her burger. Unsurprisingly, Nate finished his in the first few minutes. I’m delicately working my way around the double-stacked deliciousness, even wiping the corners of my mouth. It’d be a shame to ruin this couch, which I’m sure cost more than I could ever afford.

“Here, try this.” Nudging Eva to get her attention, I pop the top off my milkshake and dip a fry in. She scrunches up her nose, but Nate encourages her to give it a shot.

Begrudgingly, Eva dips a single fry in her Oreo shake and takes a tentative bite.

Her whole face changes.

It’s like watching someone discover nirvana, and Nate and I share silly grins.

“This is amazing!” she yelps, dipping two more in.

“Don’t eat too quickly,” her dad warns, an arm slung over the back of the couch. We’re crammed in so close together, with the lights off, that his fingertips graze my shoulder. I hold my breath; was that intentional?

Once she’s finished her burger and managed to wipe away most of the ketchup, Eva snuggles up into my side and watches the film with rapt attention. At a slow part, she comments, “Mom loved *The Godfather*.”

Questioningly, I look to Nathan. Part of me expects sadness to fall over his features. Or even a tightness, shutting out the past.

But he just smiles softly, the light flickering across his face.

“She did.” Glancing at me over the top of Eva’s head, he adds, “Pretty sure that’s where she gets it.”



BY THE TIME the last twenty minutes of the movie play, Eva is barely able to keep her eyes open. Nathan is only semi-paying attention, his eyes faraway.

I’m...comfortable. More comfortable than I have been in a long time, actually. Snuggled up on the warm couch with Eva’s head lolling against my shoulder and Nate’s slow, easy breathing, I feel safe. It’s a new feeling for me.

Even before the stalker, I was always stressed-out. Or running on fumes and caffeine. I can't remember the last time I just *relaxed*, stayed in, didn't give myself work to do, ate junky food.

"I'm going to get her up to bed," Nate whispers, carefully getting up.

I nod and help maneuver a groggily-protesting Eva into his arms. Nathan hefts her easily and once again, I'm filled with that warmth—the feeling of wanting something like this.

This isn't yours, the little voice warns. This isn't permanent.

My heart sinks as I watch him carry her to the stairs and start up them. His lips are pressed to her blond hair, muscles taut to keep her safely enveloped in his arms.

When he returns, there's only a few minutes left of the movie. I'm holding my breath again like a scared animal, wondering what will happen next.

Nate sits back down, the distance between us almost nonexistent. I can hear each breath he takes and feel the brush of his shirt sleeve against my bare shoulder.

Somehow, naturally, we fall into one another. He slings his arm carelessly over the couch and I tuck in against him. The credits roll and the room darkens.

Is he going to kiss me now?

Do I want him to?

Indecision swirls in my belly as I think of how the last week and a half has changed things. Something shifted after we found out I was pregnant. Things became more serious, more tenuous.

I've been walking a tightrope with Nathan Sharpe since the moment we ran into each other at the gallery and I realized that he was my brother's best friend. Not once did I expect the one-night stand to turn into anything more, but all of a sudden, I can't help wondering...

What if it did?

What if I wasn't just passing through, planning for a future in another country? What if I told him about leaving and he asked me to stay? What if I had the baby and we raised it together and I got to watch Eva be a big sister?

What if—

Nate shifts, ribcage expanding in a relaxed breath.

This isn't yours, the voice reminds me insistently. It could all be gone in an instant.

Chapter 26

Nathan

The sweet, melodic sound of Cyndi Lauper's "All Through the Night" is what I wake to early Monday morning. It's playing low, so low I almost don't catch it as I groggily turn over and blink awake.

All through the night

I'll be awake and I'll be with you

Slipping out of bed, I pad to the hallway and poke my head out.

Oh, all through the night today

Knowin' that we feel the same without sayin'

I'm down the stairs, sleep still dogging me, head fuzzy with dreams. I can almost grasp them...someone laughing. Then I hear her singing and turn the corner into the kitchen.

Gen stands at the stove in a cutoff T-shirt and high-waisted pants. The relaxed fit shouldn't be flattering, but it is, somehow. As is the messy ponytail swaying along with the song as she sings quietly.

I lean against the wall, soaking it in. It can't be much later than dawn. The light coming through the French doors and windows is gray, the room's edges blurred. It's almost like a dream.

And then I realize—I've been dreaming of her.

Gen turns, a hand spoon in her hand, and lets out a startled yelp. I chuckle at her reaction, sliding a hand over my mouth to hide it.

"Nate! Oh man, you scared me. Oh—I'm sorry, did I wake you up?" She's whispering loudly, scrambled eggs and cheddar cheese in the pan behind her. I can smell toast and fresh orange juice. When was the last time I had fresh orange juice?

“No, don’t worry about that. I woke myself.”

Stepping into the room, it hits me. This is the life we could have.

I could wake up every morning to this—Gen cooking all of us breakfast, singing mediocre rock songs, annoyingly awake at 6 a.m.

“Eva has her art lessons today, right? I thought I’d just get breakfast started and pack her a lunch.”

My heart is pounding as I try to make sense of what’s real, what could be, and what I want.

What do I want?

I want her.

The smile falls from my face. I step back, clearing my throat.

“The ultrasound appointment is today, right?”

Asking her is a facade. The moment she told me the date and time, I had it memorized. I notified Trudy immediately that I wouldn’t be in until noon today.

Gen nods, her lighthearted expression dropping slightly at the change in my demeanor.

“Let me shower and get Eva up. We’ll drop her off on the way.”



ONCE EVA’S out of the car and running toward the group of ten-year-olds at the library, I let out a forceful exhale.

“Um...are you okay?”

Somehow, I forgot Gen was in the car. Ridiculous, since the whole reason I have the morning off is to accompany her to the appointment.

I nod. “Yeah, sorry. Just juggling a lot right now.”

She pulls her knees up in the passenger seat. A protective stance.

“You don’t have to do this, you know. You can just drop me off.”

Looking at her with a frown, I state, “I *want* to come, Gen. I didn’t sleep well last night. And I have some tough decisions to make this week.”

My own PR team is still falling apart at the seams.

I might need to take Jenson up on his offer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Gen chewing her lip again. Maybe the doc today will tell her to stop doing that. It drives me crazy for a variety of reasons.

“Did you...ever want to have another kid?”

Pulling up to the corner, I turn and stare at her. “Are you asking me if I want this baby?” How can she even doubt that?

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, Eva is amazing, obviously, but if your wife hadn’t passed away...”

My heart aches at the thought of Julia. I remember right after she passed, it felt like heartbreak was literal. As though every day the muscle in my chest was contracting too much, shriveling down to nothing, wearing itself away.

“Yes. Julia and I planned to have at least one more, but then the accident happened.”

Gen looks stricken. I know she knows about my wife, but we haven’t talked directly about what happened. Not like this.

Taking a deep breath, I dive in. She might as well know; we’re going to have a child together, after all.

“Julia owned and operated a home staging company. She was good at it, really good. But she insisted on working alone a lot of the time. Especially on last-minute clients. She was in a townhouse in the city, carrying something upstairs—I can’t remember what—and she tripped and fell. Hit her head. They said she was knocked out immediately, and then the blood loss happened quickly.”

Gen gasps, a hand to her mouth. My throat feels tight, swollen, so I try to swallow.

“The townhouse was empty, of course. No one found her until...until I got home later that night and called the police. By then it had been...”

Hours. Almost seven hours. I was always home late those days. The nanny had picked Eva up from preschool and I was probably heading some project, and the whole time Julia was a few miles away from Ironside, bleeding out on someone’s parquet floors.

There are no more words. The car is silent as I take the last few turns to the OB-GYN office.

After parking in the monstrosity of a garage connected to the building, I watch Gen carefully as she gets out of the car. I can’t help it, even though she’s not showing yet, I still feel protective toward her and this baby.

We take the elevator to the second floor, check in, and the receptionist greets us as “mom and dad.” Gen’s face reddens; mine is blank. She must realize she’s made us uncomfortable because she stutters as I take the clipboard and turn my back on her.

“You okay to do this?” I keep my voice low so as not to startle Gen, tilting the clipboard toward her once we’re sitting down. She nods and takes it gently.

As she reads and jots down answers, I realize just how much I don’t know about her. It hits me all over again that she and Russell grew up mostly in foster care, and they were separated for a long time. The last two years of high school for Russ and I, they managed to be taken in by the same family—which wasn’t always the case. Then Russ graduated and decided to make it on his own in the city.

Did Gen even know much about her family’s history? Were there genetic disorders we should worry about? Was she healthy enough for this pregnancy?

Anxiety starts to overwhelm me as I surreptitiously try to see which boxes she’s checking. After this, I want badly to ask

if she can fill me in—but it feels so personal.

Personal? You're having a baby together. Doesn't get more personal than that.

I think back to exactly how we got here...the nights with Gen...that afternoon in the barn.

Yeah. I'd say we're on a personal level at this point. If I didn't have to rush to work after this, I'd broach the subject. But it'll have to wait.

“Um, I think this part is for you?” Gen hands the clipboard over on a new page. Questions for the dad. All over, I'm reliving doing something similar with Julia—sitting in an office like this.

But instead of feeling nervous, I'm excited. Having Eva was one of the best things to ever happen to me. Welcoming another baby into my life—however Gen decides to split the time up between us—can only be a positive.

I fill everything out quickly and can feel Gen watching, so she must be curious about *my* background as well. Good. I'll tell her anything she needs to know.

Then we're being called in, and I stand behind her, a hand hovering over her lower back as we head to an exam room. She leans back into it momentarily. Hopefully, she feels safe and supported.

The tech introduces themselves, explains what's going to happen, and sets Gen up on the table. Gen glances up at me shyly as she pulls her shirt up her belly, rolling the top of her pants down as the tech covers her lower pelvis with a blue sheet.

I try to give her as much privacy as possible while this all happens, but the room is cramped. A blush creeps slowly up her cheeks and a smile curls my lips. Funny time for her to be shy about her body.

A few minutes later, the image is pulled up on the screen. All three of us smile. Gen has a momentary stunned look on her face.

“So you’re at about seven weeks. Does that sound right?”
The tech glances between the two of us. I add it up in my head, stupidly relieved. A part of me has worried I’m not the only one taking up Gen’s time.

How would I feel if this wasn’t my baby? If I didn’t have this tether to her?

Right away I know the answer. I’d be disappointed.

As Gen stares at the screen with wide eyes, in that moment, I know I’ll do anything for her and the baby. Whatever they need—whatever they want.

I’ll give it to them.

Chapter 27

Genevieve

By Friday, I can't avoid it anymore. I need to tell Nate about Germany.

Saucer received my preliminary menu and they're reviewing it—but I got a private email from their sous-chef, who said he was excited to see something eclectic and challenging for once.

Sienna is thrilled, but she doesn't know I'm pregnant. I'm guessing she'd be *less* thrilled if I volunteered that information. Either way, I'm not sure I'm willing to give up this opportunity in Germany.

Once breakfast is cleaned up and Eva is preoccupied with a new box of glitter she got from her art classes, I wipe my hands on a towel and peek out the French doors. It's a gloomy day, clouds looming overhead, but the light from the Owl Factory barn is a warm amber glow. Nate took the day off to spend time with Eva and work on some personal projects. A small triumph that I didn't want to celebrate too loudly, in case his logical brain kicked in and insisted work was more important.

With a hesitant glance at the gray sky, I slip out through the doors and jog toward the barn. Risky business, since Nathan is already watching me like a hawk and constantly telling me to "take it easy." He wanted to switch to a dinner menu of takeout twice a week, but I put my foot down.

When I reach the heavy barn doors, I skirt between them easily. In a few months, I'll need to squeeze through. The thought makes me nervous, giving up my body...but I'm excited, too. Seeing that little bean on the ultrasound awakened something in me I was afraid I was missing.

With Will, I was never excited to have kids. Whenever he brought it up, I'd feel a panic attack coming on. *Kids? So*

much responsibility. So much time away from the restaurant... preparing formula instead of duck à l'orange...could I do it?

The problem was, I knew if it came down to it, Will would've forced me to be a stay-at-home mom. He would've hired a new executive chef for our restaurant without telling me, much less included me in the process.

And that...

Well, that just didn't feel like *my* dream.

Which, I guess, is why we didn't work out.

Nate is working shirtless, bent over another spec sheet. A dull pencil is slotted behind his ear, a freshly sharpened one in his hand as he jots down some kind of list.

"Hey."

I make an effort to say it quietly, but Nate still jumps. He turns and I can't help my gaze dragging down his bare chest to that V-cut at his waist, the chiseled lines leading down into his dark jeans.

My eyes hit his work boots and I swallow. Am I really still *this* attracted to him, or is it pregnancy hormones?

"Hey. You surprised me."

"Yeah, sorry. I just—what's that?"

The drawing on the work bench catches my attention. Nate moves to the side so I can see it. His shoulders stiffen. "It's a gift. For a family member."

The strained way he says it has me curious. I know he and Chris have argued, and I haven't tried to eavesdrop, but the two of them have such strong, deep voices. It's hard not to overhear...so I know something about a DNA test happened recently.

Did the Sharpe brothers discover an unknown relative?

As a product of the foster care system, that piques my curiosity. But it isn't my place to ask, so I take in the drawing—some kind of hope chest, intricately carved along the front—and I hum in appreciation.

Slowly, Nathan's shoulders relax. When he starts breathing in a calmer rhythm, I decide to broach the subject.

"Do you have a minute to talk?"

He frowns at the professional bent to my tone. A businessman himself, Nathan probably knows this conversation might lead somewhere a little tense.

I can't imagine why he'd want to keep me here, though. He's done more than enough hiring me for the summer, letting me stay in the house with that psycho out there, and even driving me to my OB-GYN appointment.

Really, I couldn't ask for more.

"Sure. Here."

He leads me farther into the barn, where I haven't been before. For the first time, I notice what I thought was a stall is actually an office. The door is still a half door, bottom only, but a desk lamp bathes the comfortable space in a glow. There's a leather couch along the far wall, a desk, computer, and a chair.

There's even a photo of Nathan, Eva, and a dark-haired woman who must be Julia on the wall just over his desk.

He gestures toward the couch, but I end up staying near the door and leaning against the wall. Shoving my hair out of my face, I try to keep a neutral expression when Nathan sighs.

"It's bad, whatever it is, isn't it?"

A forced brightness in my voice, I say, "Not at all! Actually, I got some really great news."

His brows furrow immediately. "About the baby?"

Does he always worry this much? It wouldn't surprise me; he's as brooding as those storm clouds outside.

"No...well, it kind of involves the baby. But it's not from the doctor's office or anything." I rush the reassurance out as Nate sits down, moving the chair closer.

We're only a few feet apart. He's eye level with my chest, and all of a sudden, I imagine climbing into his lap. Scratching

this itch that's been keeping me up late at night as I twist and turn in the very bed he had me in that time we...

Blinking the thought away, I try to focus on the task at hand.

"I might have an offer on the table for work soon."

His brow lifts, green eyes genuinely interested.

"Really? Back in the restaurant industry?"

With a nod, I explain, "It's with a top restaurant, actually. I'd have a shot at another Michelin star."

His expression as he waits for me to continue is so open and vulnerable, I feel a crush of guilt.

What should you feel guilty about? It's not like he wants this baby. Or you.

He's just doing what's right.

"It's in Germany."

It comes out stronger than I intended. A statement, not a question.

Nate's face goes blank.

"Germany."

"Yes."

"As in, the country Germany?"

"Yes." Feeling my face heat with a rush of nerves, I blurt out, "It wasn't planned, but Sienna—my old pastry chef—she sent me the application, and they asked me to curate a menu. So I did, and I sent it over a few days ago. I haven't heard back officially yet, but it seems like they're seriously considering me."

Nathan is staring dead center at my chest. His face is entirely shut down, and it reminds me of the gala. Flashes of that night go through my head—his growl of frustration, the glower as he stared down at me while I tried to soak wine out of his trousers, his low, commanding voice in the office we ended up in.

He's been so open these last few weeks, I'd totally forgotten he's an industry mogul. A man to be feared.

"You think going to Germany, pregnant, is a good idea? What are you going to do for health care? What are you going to do when the baby comes?"

The feeling in my gut is a hot twist of indecision. I've been trying not to think about that part too much. Instinctively, a hand goes to my lower belly—covered by a baggy Tina Turner shirt.

"I'll figure it out." I say this with an air of authority. After all, I've been commanding kitchens for almost a decade now. I've learned to stand my ground.

Nathan scoffs. My face burns with embarrassment and anger, the former of which feeds the latter.

"I don't think you've thought this out, Genevieve. You'll need childcare. You'll need a place to live, and someone to look after the baby, and don't you think they should be raised by family? Not some stranger—"

"*I'll* be there. I'm the baby's family."

"I am, too."

The words come out harsh, sharp. My breath catches for a moment as Nathan's eyes burn with his claim. Taking a few deep breaths to calm myself, I say, "I didn't ask you to be involved. I actually told you that you didn't have to be."

"*I want to be.*"

"And what *I* want doesn't matter?"

My brain goes all lightheaded. This is so reminiscent of arguments with Will, late nights where he casually tossed around the idea that one day I'd step back from the kitchen.

Nate grinds his teeth. "It does matter. But the baby matters just as much. You need to do what's right for the baby, Gen."

"What makes you think *this* is what's right?" Incredulous laughter slips from between my lips as I cross my arms. "Did

you think I was just going to live here, in the pool house? Give up cooking to raise a baby for you?”

“Not in the pool house,” he growls. “Not until we catch the person stalking you.”

“*Exactly.* The farther I can get away from here, the better.”

It’s a standoff. Nate’s green eyes are piercing, and if I was a weaker woman, I’d be intimidated. But I’ve spent so long compromising on what I wanted for other people. I let Will sink our restaurant into the ground, I let Erik push me out of the Fig with some offhand rumors because I was too busy with the work.

I won’t let Nathan Sharpe shove me into his idea of a housewife.

But, no—I wouldn’t even be that. We’re not married; we’re not dating.

We’re just two people who fuck occasionally.

Unwilling to concede, I move to the doorway and take one look back over my shoulder.

“I’ll let you know when I hear from them. And when I’m leaving.”

And with that, I leave Nathan fuming in his work barn. The place he hides *his* dreams while I’m trying to chase mine.

Chapter 28

Nathan

The last thing I expect to see first thing Monday morning is a beast of a creature coming through my front door.

It's huge—the size of a small human—dark tan, a black muzzle, and eyes locked right on me where I freeze on the stairs.

Chris follows gingerly behind the beast, a leash in hand.

“What the hell is this.”

If I said these words in the office, flat and cold, everyone around me would become paralyzed.

But my brother only bends down, unhooks the leash, and lets this animal wander farther into the living room. I can hear the sniffing—it's a big *whoofing* snuffle as jowls drag over the couch and coffee table.

“You got a dog?”

Chris grins at me sheepishly, running a hand through his hair. “Well, kind of. Actually...*you* have a dog.”

“Oh my God!” The squeal from the kitchen is one of shock and terror. I march in that direction, already fuming at Chris.

The dog has Gen backed up against the counter. His tail is wagging gently as he sniffs her thighs, probably because there's pumpkin pancake mix on her apron.

“Um, Nate?”

“Just stand still. I'll take care of this.”

“Puppy!”

Eva launches herself into the kitchen from the patio where she was reading a chapter book. A surge of fear goes through me at the sight of my daughter reaching for this *thing*.

“That is *not* a puppy,” Gen deadpans as the dog turns its attention to Eva, sniffing her outstretched hands as she holds

them palms up. At least she got her excitement under control enough to *not* touch a strange dog.

“What is this?” I ask, turning to face Chris, who stands in the doorway. He has a half-hopeful, half-guilty look on his face.

“Well, remember when we were talking about the whole situation with...” He glances at Eva, gestures at Gen. I nod sharply. “And I mentioned you should get a dog. This—” he walks over and pats the dog’s sizable rump, which almost reaches my hips “—is Brutus.”

“Brutus.”

“Yes.”

“Hi, Brutus!” Eva is on her knees now that the dog has sniffed her, giggling as he snuffles around her face. It takes everything in me to suppress the paternal instinct to step between them. But Brutus—whatever he is—is actually being gentle. He turns his attention back to Gen’s apron as she’s removing it.

“You can’t just get someone a dog, Chris.”

“Yes, well...you guys are on an adoption trial!”

He exclaims it brightly, as if I should be excited.

“Okay. You better spill everything. Right now.”

Again, if anyone at the office heard this loud growl, they’d be hightailing it as far away from me as possible. But Chris only moves farther into the kitchen, looking surreptitiously at the stack of pancakes on the counter.

“You said you were going to be working from home all week. One of the aides in the office volunteers at a shelter and she was telling me all about Brutus. He’s a bullmastiff—very docile around family, but protective when provoked. Anyone trying to get into the house would have second thoughts.”

I shoot Eva a worried glance; she doesn’t know the full extent of what’s been going on. But she’s preoccupied with asking Brutus to sit, which he does with a thud. She rewards him with laughter and a bite of toast as Gen shakes her head.

The thing Chris so conveniently left out is that I'm working from home because I finally reached out to Jenson. His PR team is going to be collaborating with mine this week, and I just don't want to be there. Last night was a wealth of troubling dreams about this whole thing imploding. Nash has already spoken to a few papers, claiming Ironside is the one embezzling money, and trying to pin him as a scapegoat.

"Look," Chris comments cheerily, "he's settling right in."

Brutus circles on the rug near the French doors and lies down with a huff. Eva settles in happily next to him, laying her head on his massive flank.

My head is pounding.

"I need a minute."

Chris's face goes blank. He knows better than to try and keep talking as I walk away, down the hall toward my office.

The lights are all off and it's cloudy enough I can only see shapes in the room. That's why, when someone slips through the door behind me, I'm about to burst out in anger, thinking it's Chris.

But then I catch Gen's distinct scent, and suddenly everything in me calms.

She steps tentatively toward me.

"Are you okay?"

Propping my butt against my desk, I sigh. "I'm just a little overwhelmed. There's a lot going on lately."

Gen mirrors my half sitting stance, her arm brushing mine. To my surprise, she chuckles. "What, you can't handle an unplanned pregnancy, your company being under attack, my stalker possibly casing the house, and now this massive dog?"

A smile curls my lips. Suddenly everything seems a little less daunting. "A bullmastiff. This is a bad idea."

"I don't know...Eva seems completely enamored right now. And it's not as if you don't have the space in this big house." She gestures expansively, pointing out something I've

always been self-conscious of—with just Eva and I in the house, it feels pretty empty.

I'm not sold on the dog. But if Eva is, and if he helps her feel less alone...

Besides, after my conversation with Gen the other day, it doesn't sound like she's planning on staying. Whether she gets the job in Germany or not.

It takes everything in me to smooth down feelings of frustration. Now is *not* the time to get into another argument about that.

Plus...Gen is too much like me.

And I know myself well enough to know the more someone tries to bully me, the more I'll push back. You attract the most flies with honey, as they say.

"Thank you," I rumble.

Gen looks up at me in surprise. "For what?"

"For being the voice of reason right now."

I can't help it. My eyes drop to her lips. Ever since finding out about the pregnancy, we haven't touched each other. My body is thrumming, craving her.

Leaning in, I press my mouth to hers. Warmth flows through my entire body. Gen sighs and gives in, boneless against my chest as I wrap an arm around her back to steady her.

"Ahem."

We both jerk back at the sound of Chris clearing his throat. He has one hand on the office door, half inside, his brows raised, eyes on the ceiling.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we should probably talk, Nate."

"Oh, of course." Gen rushes to stand and straightens her clothes. Even though she's not ruffled at all. If we had more time, if he hadn't interrupted, I'm sure I could find a way to muss her up a bit...

She gives me a tight smile before awkwardly squeezing past Chris. He looks like he's having a hard time suppressing a grin as she leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

“So.”

“So,” I echo.

“So that's still happening?”

You have no idea. A part of me wishes I could tell Chris just what's going on, but I promised Gen we'd keep this quiet for now. And until I'm more sure of the future—for me, her, and our baby—I'm hesitant to say anything.

In answer, I shrug. There's no real way to explain *what* is happening with us. I don't want him to think Gen has gone from a summer season personal chef to some kind of live-in hookup. But he did just see us kiss.

He walks across the room and sits down in my chair, ignoring a glower from me. “I know I joke around a lot, Nate, and I'm the last one who should be giving advice about this kind of thing. But I think you need to figure out what you want. It's not fair leading her along like this.”

I scoff, caught off guard. That was the last thing I expected my little brother to come out with.

“I'm not leading her along, Chris. She's been a willing participant in all of—” I gesture around, at the house, at my life “—this.”

He cocks a brow. “Oh, I can see that.” Then his face goes somber, the lawyer coming out. “But really, Nate, what *do* you want? Ever since Julia, you've shown no interest in dating. And I don't think that's what's going on here.”

When I shake my head, he continues the lecture. “Gen seems pretty cool. Relaxed. I mean, she took to Brutus better than you did.” He chuckles and I open my mouth, about to ream him out about showing up here with a rescue dog, but he holds up a hand. “She's laid-back where you're uptight; she can cook and you can heat up takeout. A few times I've come over, I heard her belting out some songs that make me

question her taste in music. But my point is, she seems good for you. So what does she *mean* to you?"

Frowning, I let his question sink in.

What does Genevieve Walker mean to me?

She's frustrating. She's fun. She challenges me, annoys me, cares about Eva, and can cook a mean steak. She also stresses me out whenever she feels the need to argue back and she's a little too willing to run around while some psycho is out there waiting for her. Especially now that there's a baby involved.

"She means a lot to me," I admit. "But I'm not sure the timing is right."

Chris sighs, slumping back in the chair. "Is the timing *ever* right? Do you remember when you and Julia met? She had to show up at one of your builds to get you to agree to a date."

A smile ghosts my lips at the memory. Julia, her dark hair topped by a construction hat, heels sinking into the newly broken earth. How could I say no?

Gen has the same kind of tenacity. But she isn't trying to pin me down or force her way into my life, which I appreciate. I hadn't realized that until right now.

"Eva seems very attached to her," Chris comments quietly.

As he talks about how I should find happiness and open myself to the possibility of dating again, my heart breaks a little bit. I'm the only one who knows this really might not last through the summer. Not just Gen's employment. If she leaves the country...would we ever see her again?

Eva would be heartbroken.

"I'll think about it." I sigh, interrupting my little brother. His mouth snaps shut, surprised at how quickly I agreed. "You have to remember, though, she has a say in this, too. Just because I want *her* doesn't mean she wants *me*."

Chris smirks smugly at my casual admission.

I want her.

It's stupid to hide from it anymore, at least when it comes to him. He can see right through me, always has. But I'm not ready to tell him the whole truth.

"And Brutus?"

"The dog?" I level him an incredulous look. "Did you really think that was a good idea, or are you just screwing with me?"

Chris stands, hands up placatingly. "All I'm saying is, give him a chance. You won't even notice he's around."

I choke out a strangled laugh. "He looks like he weighs two hundred pounds, Chris."

A shrug. "Closer to one fifty, I think."

We head back down the hallway and find Eva in the living room with Brutus on the couch. She's telling him all about a show that's on, explaining the plot and characters as his ears perk in interest.

"Alright," I agree begrudgingly. "*Just* the week, and I'm not promising we'll keep him."

But from Chris's triumphant laugh, Gen hiding a smile, and Eva babbling away, I already know he's here to stay.

Oh, well. Why not just pile more on top of this mess?

Yet somehow, I find myself smiling, too.

Chapter 29

Genevieve

Someone is trying to get into the house.

I know it's not Eva or Nathan...the door handle is jiggling. Which means they're having a hard time.

I hold my breath and tuck up against the wall dividing the kitchen from the hallway that leads to the foyer. A metallic jingle sounds from outside. Do they have keys? Or tools to break in?

Glancing at the newly installed alarm system, I pray it'll work and scare off whoever this is immediately.

The door opens.

A figure steps in, looking down. Keys in hand.

The alarm beeps and Chris Sharpe finally turns toward me, relief flooding through my body as he types in the six-digit code.

"Oh Gen—hi. Sorry, I wanted to bring this over." Turning around, he hefts a giant bag of dog food into the house, then closes the door behind him. With a smile, he adds, "Peace offering."

"You scared me," I breathe, hand to my chest as I step into the hallway.

Realization flashes across Chris's face. "I'm an idiot. I'm so sorry, I should've called." He glances around the quiet house. "Where's Nate?"

"He and Eva took Brutus for a checkup with the vet. First one now that he's ours."

I catch the slip and almost bite my tongue.

Ours.

From the way Chris's eyes flick to me and away, he caught it, too. He keeps his expression neutral as he hefts the bag and

follows me into the kitchen.

“So Eva and Brutus convinced him, hmm?”

“Oh, yeah. It wasn’t much of a battle. As soon as he saw Eva dress Brutus up in one of her old Disney princess costumes, that was it.”

Chris grins, settling in at the kitchen island. “Good. I think it’ll be good for her to have a companion. Probably good for Nate, too.”

I give him a wicked grin back. “Pets lower blood pressure. If anyone needs it...”

We share a laugh at Nate’s expense for a moment. Chris asks what I’m up to, and I show him my write-up of this week’s meal plan. It doubles as a shopping list. Scanning it, he asks, “Nate’s still going with you to the store, right?”

“Yup. Won’t let me out of his sight if I’m not in the house.”

Chris nods approvingly. “If I had a woman like you around, Gen, I’d do the same.”

It seems like a compliment hidden within a compliment, but I can’t tell quite how, exactly.

“I just feel bad he has to worry about this. If living here for the duration of the summer wasn’t in the contract, he wouldn’t have to deal with it. And I’m sure he’s worried about how it’ll affect Eva, too.”

“Eh, Nate’s stronger than you give him credit for. I’m pretty sure he’d hide a body for you if needed.” He readjusts on the stool, sneaking a peek at the notebook this sheet of paper came from. My cheeks flush; in it is the preliminary menu I sent Saucer.

“May I?”

Hesitating for a moment, I realize it’ll look suspicious if I don’t let him see. So I slide the notebook over and bite my lip as he reads through the appetizers, entrées, desserts, and even a mock-up of a cocktail menu. Just some ideas; I’m not much of a drinker. But I do know flavors.

“This is impressive.” His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline, his locks much darker than Nate’s. “Really impressive.”

“Thanks. It’s just a side project.”

I’m downplaying it, not wanting to admit this very menu might get picked up by one of the industry leaders in the European restaurant scene.

“Hey.” He sits back. “I know you and I have just chatted here and there, but I wanted to ask you—what are you planning on doing after this?”

Chris levels me with a serious gaze. Oh, yeah...he’s a lawyer. Each time he’s been here, his goofy personality has come out, but *now* I can see the professional intensity. I’d hate to be on the stand with this guy interrogating me.

“Honestly...I’m not sure.” It’s not exactly a lie. “This is really just supposed to be a summer job until I figure out my next move.”

“Any chance you’d stay on?”

I laugh, imagining Nathan’s grumpy morning face—waking up to that every day as he trudges into the kitchen, ready to turn Van Halen down on the radio.

“I don’t think Nate would have much need for me once Eva’s back in school and he finds someone permanent.”

“Sure, but *you* could be the someone permanent.”

Permanent.

Okay, I’m definitely not imagining it—Chris is implying two meanings here. His gaze is direct, but there’s something else in it. Something he’s trying to communicate.

What has Nate told him about me?

My heart picks up speed a bit. Those (too few) racy nights come to mind...surely Nate and Chris don’t indulge in locker room talk?

“It’s just, Eva is fond of you. And so is Nathan. You’re good for him.”

I grin again, impulsively. “If only you could see how he is ninety percent of the time you aren’t here.”

Chris returns my smile. “Trust me, I know my brother. He might have a permanent scowl on his face, but you’re easing a lot of the stress he’s going through.”

“With the company.”

“Yes...but more than that, too. Has he mentioned we have a half brother?”

I shake my head. “No, but I figured something like that was going on. He’s reluctantly taken a few phone calls. I’m guessing he’s not excited about the news?”

“No,” Chris sighs. “Not exactly. Although, I’m surprised *he’s* surprised. Our dad wasn’t the most faithful guy, you know? I don’t know why Mom wanted to hang onto him so badly.”

Having seen a few people in my life go through unfaithful relationships, I get why they stick around. Why people cling to what isn’t good for them. Sometimes it’s hard to give in to happiness when you don’t think you deserve it.

“Well, I don’t know that I’m really helping out with that... like I said, he hasn’t even mentioned it to me.”

“Oh, no, I think it’s just having you around. You lighten the mood here. Kind of like his wife used to.” Chris’s smile is genuine, not quite the prankster he usually is.

“Julia, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” Our eyes meet across the island, sharing in a serious moment. “You two would have gotten along, I think. That same carefree attitude. If she could see you shaking things up here now, I’m sure she’d approve.”

My cheeks burn and I try to turn the conversation, not sure how to take the compliment. “I’m not the only one shaking things up. Did you know Brutus actually climbed in bed with me a few days ago?”

Chris laughs. “The rescue said he was a snuggler. If he catches you sleeping in, he’ll probably join you. Must be

making Nate jealous.”

Was that a wink, or did I imagine it?

The truth is, I haven’t slept much in the last two weeks. Between morning sickness and this bone-deep fatigue, Nathan and Eva have been living off muffins and precooked egg bites I make late at night. So, yeah, Brutus and I will probably spend a lot more time cuddling up together—until this stage of the pregnancy passes, at least.

I bite my lip, going back to the thought of what’s stressing Nathan out. As someone who didn’t have my brother around all the time—only when we got lucky and had two years together in the same foster home—I can’t imagine being *stressed* by finding out I have more family.

I’d love to have more family. More roots.

A reason to stay...

The train of thought makes me sad.

“What can I do to help?” I ask. “With this whole half brother thing. Do you think he needs to talk about it, or...?”

Chris laughs, but it’s a sour sound. “Nate’s never been one for talking things out. He’s more of a brooder. But—” a quick glance at my Saucer menu “—maybe we could come up with something.”

“Like what?” Wary, I stand up and give Chris a once-over. He’s a sneaky guy, but not in a malicious way. I can see the puzzle pieces clicking together in his head.

“What do you think about a dinner? At my place. I’ll invite Jenson—that’s our half brother—and his wife.”

It’s not a bad idea. I try to imagine how Nate will handle a dinner with the surprise guests. Is he the kind of guy who will get embarrassed, angry, or embrace the spontaneity?

“Alright. I’m in. Give me a time and the address, and I’ll come up with a menu.”

Chapter 30

Nathan

“Why do you have to be so rude, Dad?” Eva hisses quietly in disappointment. “That was so embarrassing.”

My spine is stiff as we make our way back to the car. Trudy got a call earlier today from Eva’s art camp. One of the teachers was, apparently, violently sick and they had to shut down for the day.

Which means I pulled out of work at only 1 p.m. to pick my daughter up. Gen is spending the afternoon with Russ, helping set up a new exhibit. His assistant is on vacation.

All this is incredibly frustrating, and I can feel my teeth grinding as I clench my jaw.

“Buckle your seatbelt, please.”

Eva does so, sullenly staring down at her knees. “Everyone is going to make fun of me next week. *Why* did you have to say those things?”

Pulling out of the community center parking lot, I take a deep breath and try not to tune out my daughter. It’s tempting. Normally, I would, but I’m trying to be better. To be present.

Which is why I feel so bad about snapping at the director of the camp.

It was a busy day, not that that’s an excuse. Equally as frustrating is the fact Jenson’s PR company actually managed to save my ass. And now I feel like I owe him, even though he’s reassured me repeatedly, professionally, that I don’t. After all, Ironside paid the consultation fees.

A headache starts to pound in my temples.

And then there’s Brutus...he’s home alone, hopefully not chewing on a shoe. Or the furniture. As someone who didn’t have a pet growing up, I’m finding it hard to adjust.

“Why don’t we stop and get a treat?” I say tightly, turning the wheel to head to a little bakery nearby I know Eva likes.

When I glance in the rearview mirror, she’s still pouting. Only it’s not the dramatic act of a ten-year-old. She looks... sad.

“I just wish it didn’t bother you to have to spend time with me.” The melancholy in her voice breaks my heart as I open the door for her.

“Honey. It doesn’t bother me at all. I’m sorry, I just had a really long day.”

“It hasn’t even *been* a whole day, Dad. And even when you’re home, you’re working.”

She trudges ahead of me into the shop. I stand on the sidewalk, her words sinking in.

She’s right.

Chris has been subtly pointing out the same thing to me for years. Trudy has tried to push me out of the office earlier, to make me take an extra day off work every week. *That’s the perk of being the company owner*, she’d insist.

But I’ve never taken her advice. I work just as hard now as I did when I was first starting Ironside.



WE GET HOME and the kitchen smells like heaven.

Actually, it smells like homemade pasta sauce. Which is basically the same thing.

Eva drops her bag just inside the door and plods toward the stairs. “Hey, hon.” I catch her little hand, tipping her chin up to make her look at me. “I’m sorry. I promise I’m going to be better.”

She nods, but my heart sinks as I realize she doesn’t believe me.

“I love you,” I call as she’s halfway up.

“Loveyoutoo.” It’s a mumbled mess.

With a sigh, I turn toward the kitchen. Gen is watching me surreptitiously out of the corner of her eye, a sad smile on her face.

“Rough day?”

“You can say that again.”

She pauses for a second, then opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of wine. Within seconds, she’s dug out a wine opener and popped the cork.

“Give it a minute to breathe.” She pushes a wine glass and the bottle toward me. “You look like you need it.”

“Thank you.”

Even that’s hard to say, hard to accept. Why is it so hard for me to let people in?

“So what happened?” Gen pulls down a glass of her own and comes around the island to sit next to me. She looks beautiful today, her face clean and fresh, hair pulled back. I wonder if the morning sickness has passed. She looks well-rested.

“The camp had to close early. I left work to pick her up, and I...I might’ve snapped at the camp director out of frustration.”

Gen nods understandingly. Realizing she isn’t going to scold me or judge me, the tension starts to ease out of my shoulders.

“I just have a lot going on right now.”

Her hand ghosts over her belly. “I’m sorry.”

Reaching out, I cover that hand with mine. “Don’t be—that’s not what I meant, Gen. I don’t want you to think...”

Don’t want her to think what?

That I don’t want her.

I want her more than anything.

Unable to keep the barriers in place any longer, my self-control slips. I close the space between us and brush my lips against hers.

Gen goes still. Not in a bad way, though, and I'm no longer afraid she doesn't want this, because I remember the last time we kissed. How she melted against me, her lush body pressing against my chest.

Slotting my mouth over hers, I suck her bottom lip between my teeth and bite gently. Gen lets out a whimper. For the first time in weeks, my body responds to something other than stress and exhaustion.

With my other hand, I reach out and firmly pull the stool closer to mine, so her body is facing me. Widening my legs, I tug Gen into the space and deepen the kiss, tongue dipping out to lick her bitten lip. She breathes a breathy sigh and arches her back, breasts flush against me now that there's no room between us.

It gets hot and heavy fast. It's like I'm a teenager all over again, hands roaming her body and squeezing her lush thighs and the swell of her breasts. They're perfect, already filling out with the pregnancy, sumptuous and filling my large hands perfectly.

Just as I slip a hand beneath her shirt and graze bare skin, Brutus *harrumphs* from the rug near the back door.

We break apart, Gen looking over her shoulder as I level a glare at the dog.

His big brown eyes are totally innocent. He has no idea what he interrupted. But Gen is smiling and laughing quietly, her head dropping to my shoulder.

"This is a bad idea," she whispers. My heart sinks, she's going to put an end to it. Insist we stay just friends. Or, worse, employer and employee. "We shouldn't be doing this where..." She nods back toward the dog. "And with Eva upstairs."

Is that her only reservation? She's right. With a newfound eagerness, I stand and hold out a hand.

“We can go somewhere more private.”

A shiver goes through her at the sound of my voice and I know I have her. Her eyes are locked on mine.

She can't say no to this, just as much as I can't. There's no denying the pull between us.

Gen takes my hand and I pull her toward the hallway that leads to my office. We're a mess, kissing as soon as we hit the shadows, my back and shoulders bouncing off the walls as Gen laughs against my lips and tries to steady us.

“Mmm.” I squeeze her ass. She's been wearing baggy jeans, probably because her waist is starting to thicken a little bit. But I love it; I could worship her body every second of every day if I didn't have any responsibilities.

The office door creaks quietly as we stumble inside.

“Eva,” Gen gasps.

“She's on her tablet,” I reassure her, having heard the sounds of my daughter's favorite show earlier. “Won't even know we're gone.”

“The pasta's going to get cold.”

But Gen doesn't stop me when we reach the desk and I turn her around to face it. Pressing her up against the edge, I reach around and flick open the button of her jeans. It's easy to delve a hand inside, ghost over the cotton panties, find her clit. Working her slowly and deliberately, I soak in the sound of every moan she makes.

I wrap my free hand around her throat, just at her jaw. Not tightly, just enough to steady her. My hips press into hers to bend her forward until her ass grinds against my already throbbing cock.

“Yes, baby. Just like that.”

The praise comes out in a whisper. Gen's hips roll against my hand as I rub firmly and slowly, not giving in to the temptation to make this hard and fast. I want to. More than anything, I want to have her right here, just like this, pound into her until I find my release after weeks of pent-up desire.

I want her, I want her, I want her.

It's like a mantra, flooding my mind as I undo the zipper of her pants and yank down. Her ass jiggles as she gasps. "Nathan!"

"Tell me how you want to come," I murmur. Slowly, I pull her shirt up her waist, lifting it just enough to sit at her breasts. The cool air coming through the open windows grazes the undersides of her breasts and she shivers, pressing her hips back again. I thrust against her.

"I—I want to come like this," she pleads. "I want to come like this on your cock."

Those words somehow get me even more hard. All the blood and reason rushes from my brain. Yanking her sports bra up over the tops of her breasts, I roll and pinch a nipple with my left hand, undoing my pants with the other.

It's late enough in the afternoon that the sun is on the other side of the house. But enough light pours in to blur the edges of her body beautifully. I was right, she's thickening a little, her hips and waist full, her ass plush as I squeeze a cheek impulsively.

"Are you wet for me?"

Gen moans in response. She reaches a hand around and grips my now bare thigh. Taking myself in hand, I rub the head of my cock against her cotton panties. With an impatient whimper, Gen pulls her underwear down and tugs my hand back, situating it between her legs. My eyes close at the feel of how wet she is. She's practically dripping as I work my fingers between her folds, collecting the slickness to tease her clit.

"Fuck, I want to come," she gasps, trying to stay quiet as she rubs her ass against me. "Please, Nathan. Make me feel good. I've been thinking about this—" She breaks off into a choked sob as I slip two fingers just into her entrance. Her pussy tightens around them.

"You've been thinking about this? How long?" I growl it into her ear, reveling in the whimper and shiver my words pull out of her.

“Since—since last time,” she admits. “Before that. I don’t know. I think about it all the time. I—I want you to fuck me. Like you did in the bed that night.”

Chuckling darkly, I tell her, “I can’t promise that, Genevieve. I was a gentleman that night. Today, I’m anything but. I’ve been thinking about fucking you, too, and I’m not going to be able to take my time.”

Her pussy gushes as I press a palm against it, then pull my hand back to pump my cock. The slick of her desire is enough to create a delicious friction that has my head dropping back as I fuck my hand.

But it’s been weeks of getting myself off. No, I need more tonight.

I need her.

She’s *mine*.

“Mmm, please,” she begs as I press a hand down on her lower back.

“Don’t move,” I warn. “Be a good girl for me and I’ll make you come.”

Slowly, I ease my cock into her tight pussy. She’s soaked, the muscles gripping me as I ease in. It takes all of my focus not to come right there. I made her a promise.

The first stroke almost undoes me. My eyes roll back in my head as I curse, pulling almost all the way out until her pussy throbs and tightens.

Then I thrust back in.

Hard.

Stretching her until she’s quivering, buried inside her with my hips pressing into her ass and my hand still on her lower back.

“Good,” I murmur, leaning over and reaching for her throat again. I tip her head up and back so I can steal a sloppy kiss, thrusting again in fast, short bursts. “You’re being so

good for me, Gen. You want to come on my cock like this? You like when I fuck you against the desk?”

Her tits are dragging against the wood as they bounce, nipples hard and peaked. “Y-yes,” she mumbles, biting her lip. “Fuck, yes, Nate, just like that. Please. Can I—”

She doesn’t finish the question but snakes her hand between her legs.

“What?” I grunt. “You want to play with yourself while I fuck you?”

Her back is arched, perky ass slapping against me rhythmically. Gen whines and nods, her fingers working quickly.

“You can.” And then I demand, “Kiss me.”

She tips her head back and lets me devour her mouth again. I plunge my tongue between her lips, wet and messy, sucking and licking. The combination of her hot mouth and her wet, pulsing pussy almost pushes me over the edge.

I need to finish this before it’s too much.

Pulling her hand away from between her legs, I replace it with mine and work at her clit unforgivingly. Circling, pressing, giving it a gentle pinch that startles a yelp out of her. Gen’s legs are shaking beneath me. My cock throbs, thickening as I get closer and closer to the edge, balls tightening. I tower over her and pound into her harder, changing the pace of my fingers on her clit to an unpredictable rhythm.

She makes a strangled sound of pleasure, orgasming so hard I can literally feel her pussy milking me for all I’m worth. My body gives in readily, filling her with hot cum as I keep thrusting on autopilot, vision going black around the edges.

In that moment, my other senses take over. Her body is flushed, hot, her skin damp with sweat, her belly a little swell under my hand. In my other hand, her breasts bounce and jiggle.

When it's over, I want nothing more than to sink to the ground with her. There's something feral about this, about wanting to stay buried in her while she's full of my seed. Somehow, I want her even more now that she's pregnant with my child.

"Damn," I breathe, trying to catch my breath. "You're going to be the death of me, Gen Walker."

She's catching her breath, too, and doesn't speak right away. Anxiety makes me wonder—is she regretting this? Is it just the hormones making her want me like this?

But her body relaxes against mine and I sling an arm around her waist, holding us both up on weak legs. Our breathing syncs and in that moment my life seems whole. Perfect.

"I should clean up," Gen whispers after a few minutes. "And dinner..."

She turns and gives me a shy smile, looking up through thick lashes.

"Sorry if that was..."

"Abrupt?" I ask, shooting her a grin. "Took me by surprise. But I don't regret it."

Normally, I'm not so forward. I need to see it, though. See her reaction.

And to my relief, *she* looks relieved. A blush colors the high point of her cheeks as she shimmies the baggy jeans back on and buttons them.

"Come on." She tips her head to the side, then takes my hand.

We walk out of the room like that. Fingertips brushing. Palms warm, connected.

I'm absolutely starving.

Chapter 31

Genevieve

Chris casually walks into the kitchen and gives me an amused look.

“What?” I ask, irritated.

“Is there anything I can help with?”

I give him a flat look. “Unless you can sear scallops, I think I’m good. But thanks.” The words come out sassy, which only prompts a wider grin from him.

Nate will be here soon. I managed to escape earlier this evening by promising that I was going straight to Sienna’s, not stopping anywhere on the way. Instead, I did the opposite and drove to the residential area of the city—to Chris’s town house.

It’s a brick monstrosity. Tall, narrow, overly decorative in a luxurious way. Actually...I kind of like it. But there’s no way Chris waters all the plants in here. It has the feel of a bachelor pad well cared for by a small team of people.

The kitchen on the second of three floors is stunning. All bronze and black with custom tiling. Cooking has been a hazard with how distracted I am, and I suck at a small burn on the outside of my palm as I ready another pan.

It’s a simple meal, which means I need to get it perfect. Scallops with steak as an alternative—I know Eva won’t eat seafood—a pomegranate and spinach salad with balsamic vinaigrette, a simple linguine, brown butter polenta, and baked zucchini rolled into rosettes.

Two different wines and a dessert of panna cotta.

Hands on my hips, I look over the dishes as they stay warm and covered, waiting for the finishing touches. I don’t want to start the scallops until everyone is here and settled in.

And we’re only waiting on Nate and Eva.

According to Chris, Nate is under the impression they're coming over for pizza. The premise of a casual dinner shouldn't be a problem, since when I briefly met Jenson and Mel, they were both wearing jeans.

It seems like the other side of the Sharpe family inherited the same habit of understated luxury. Comfort over drama; quality over appearance.

There's a knock on the door and I jump, straightening the black shin-length skirt I'm wearing. It's something I've worn before to professional functions, but it doesn't quite fit around the waist anymore. A flush of anxiety warms my cheeks as I realize that soon, this pregnancy will be very visible—whether I want it to be or not.

A list of worries plays on a reel through my head.

How will I tell Russ? How will we tell Eva?

If Saucer takes me on, when do I let them know?

I need to have another talk with Nathan about Germany. Make him understand.

Pushing the worries from my head, I tentatively walk out into the main area. It includes the landing to the staircase that leads right to the front door, a large living space with an insanely huge fireplace, and the dining area. I'm guessing that somewhere on the top floor is the main master suite and maybe an office.

Chris, like his brother, occasionally works from home.

Jenson and Mel join me, both smiling nervously as Chris chats to Nate downstairs. Eva's little voice perks up and Jenson's eyes go wide. A hopeful warmth fills my chest; she'd love to have another uncle, and although I haven't interacted with Jenson and Mel much, they seem like people who genuinely care.

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs syncs with the anxious beat of my heart. Chris comes first, all nervous excitement. Then Nate—he glances up, catches sight of me, and does a double take.

“I thought—” he starts, taking the top step.

And then he sees his half brother.

My heart stops as his face goes blank.

Chris’s eyes move from Nate to Jenson and Mel. Now the edge of excitement dims, and he plasters on a smile. “Surprise—I know we didn’t talk about this, but—”

“But you thought it would be a good idea to corner me into a dinner with them.” Nathan’s tone is stiff. I’m frozen in place, both horrified and enraptured all at once as this train wreck unfolds. Eva is tucked up close to Nate, staring at Jenson and Mel with curiosity.

“You.”

His piercing green eyes land on me. Hands intertwined in front of my body, I take a calming breath. *Someone* has to hold this situation together. At least until we get past this initial shock.

“You said you were in the city with Sienna.”

“I know. But I wanted to be here for this. Chris and I...we talked about it a few days ago.”

A sweeping sensation of panic goes through me at the thought of how this is very similar to betrayal. The plan with Chris and then taking advantage of Nate the other night...

Okay. Not exactly taking advantage of him. But I could’ve told him about this. Given him a heads-up. Maybe worked it into casual conversation by asking what he’d like to eat for dinner with his half brother and sister-in-law.

“Sorry, Nate, I just thought it would be good for everyone to get together.” Chris’s words are earnest and diplomatic. He truly looks apologetic as Jenson and Mel await Nate’s reaction.

Nate wraps an arm around Eva’s shoulders and brings her forward. She looks up at Jenson and Mel with a tentative smile.

“Eva. This is Jenson and his wife Melanie. Jenson is my half brother. He had the same father as Uncle Chris and me.”

I hold my breath. He didn't say *Jenson is your uncle*. But he also didn't turn around and slam the door behind him.

There's hope yet.

“Hi, Eva. It's nice to finally meet you.” Mel breaks the tension with a sweet smile as she holds a hand out to the little girl, who shakes it shyly. Jenson does the same, hamming it up with exaggerated pumps of his arm until Eva giggles.

“Nate,” he greets evenly.

Nate gives him a nod.

“So...” I decide to try and move the evening along. Maybe try to find some common ground for everyone to relax. “If you're all hungry and ready to settle in, I just need to sear the scallops and we'll be good to go.”

Taking a cue from me, Chris holds out his arm to lead everyone into the dining room. The table is set beautifully but simply. Eva pipes up and asks for a ginger ale when I offer drinks, and I give her a warm smile.

“I'll help,” Mel offers, leaving the men to chat stiffly.

She follows me into the kitchen, letting out a pent-up sigh. “That was rough,” she mutters.

I nod, shoulders drooping. “Yeah. I'm not sure why I thought this was a good idea, to be honest...not that I don't want to get to know you guys,” I rush out.

Mel smiles reassuringly. “No, I get it. I've been trying to convince Jenson to let things happen naturally. Give Nate time to come around. I knew their dad—he was...he had some issues. I'm sure it's not easy finding out he had a whole other family after leaving the city.”

She whispers the information as we both grab a wine bottle and pop the corks. I do so effortlessly; Mel has to hold the bottle between her thighs and strain a bit, which has us both giggling like kids.

We set the bottles down to breathe and lean against the counter. Oddly, I'm already so comfortable with her. I have the feeling she doesn't come from money the way the guys do, which puts us on even ground.

"I do think he'll come around. He's just been dealing with a lot lately." Lips pursed, I busy myself with arranging the dishes to go out.

A completely ridiculous "what if" goes through my mind.

What if...I just spilled everything, right now, to this almost stranger? What if I told Mel about how I had a one-night stand with the man who I failed to recognize as my brother's best friend, then ended up working for him over the summer? And to top it off—thanks to not being able to keep our hands off each other—I'm now pregnant. And planning on fleeing the country. To pursue my dream, though. So it's not crazy, right?

A smile settles on my lips at the thought. Mel is arranging glasses and asks, "Red or white?"

"Oh, no thanks," I reply unthinkingly. "I'm sticking to water tonight."

She stops moving.

A flush starts at my throat. I glance over at her wide eyes. They flicker over my body, taking me in, in a more calculating way than when we first met earlier tonight.

She steps forward and asks quietly, "Are you...?"

It's as if I manifested this moment with my roller-coaster imagination. When I don't answer right away, my mouth open in hesitance, I know the jig is up.

"Sorry," Mel rushes out. "Sorry, I just...You know, we just had our baby a few months ago and I just recognized..."

She gestures up and down my body. Suddenly, I'm self-conscious about the tight fit of this skirt, wishing I was back at Nate's in baggy sweats, eating out of a Ben & Jerry's pint.

"No, I understand. It's just..." I glance toward the dining room, where the conversation seems to be flowing a little

easier. Eva's little voice even pops in now and then. "I just haven't let everyone know yet."

"Nathan?"

The flush crawls up to my cheeks. "Oh, he knows." A discreet cough. "Just, um, Eva and Chris. I'm only employed by Nathan over the summer, so I didn't think it was worth making a big deal about it."

Mel turns back to the bottles, carefully pouring wine into each. She glances my way again, curiosity obviously piqued. "How far along are you? Can't be much, you're really *wearing* that skirt."

I grin indulgently at the comment. "Two and a half months, about. I actually have an appointment soon—I'm a little behind."

Mel hums. "You'll be hearing the heartbeat, then, if you haven't already."

My own heart jumps at the thought. So far, I've been thinking of the baby as that little bean shape on the ultrasound screen. Aside from the nausea and fatigue, both of which are wearing off a bit, it doesn't quite feel real yet.

"Well, I hope the rest of your pregnancy goes well." She reaches out and lays a hand on top of mine. For a moment, I feel a frizzle of connection. She's a genuinely compassionate person, and those are rare.

"Thank you. I really appreciate that."

Mel carries two of the glasses back into the dining room, lightening the mood with a soft joke.

Alone, I listen to the soft chatter as I gather the rest of the glasses. All of a sudden, I'm filled with a yearning I haven't felt in a long time.

Family.

It's something that's always been missing in my life. I have Russ, of course, but...

Seeing Nate with a whole family like this. Not just one brother, but another—and a sister-in-law as wonderful as Mel. And Eva, who I can hear chiming in to the laughter of the adults, is obviously enjoying the expansion of people to dote on her.

My mind goes back to the baby.

If—when—I leave Nathan and go to Germany, or wherever I end up, it'll be just the baby and me. Like I did, they'll grow up in a stunted support system of two. Always questioning their worth; always having trouble navigating how to let others in.

Even with Will, I struggled with that. I always have. Until Nathan and Eva.

Settling into the ache in my chest, I make sure to savor this moment. Surrounded by laughter and the tentative conversation of two halves of a whole getting to know each other.

If only I could have something like this.

If only I could stay.

Chapter 32

Nathan

Gen clears the plates, half listening to Mel's story about some trouble she and Jenson got up to in high school. It was surprising to learn about his background as a small-town kid. His childhood was disturbingly similar to mine and Chris's, minus falling in love with his best friend.

I can see the connection between the two, and as they lean into each other, my eyes seek out Gen. I can't help it. She picks up a stack of plates in both hands and heads off toward the kitchen, separated by two large rooms.

Excusing myself quietly from the conversation, I follow her.

She jumps a little when I appear. The plates clatter.

"You scared me. I can handle this, Nate. You should go spend time with everyone."

It's getting late—almost 8 p.m., and I'm mentally and emotionally exhausted. Maybe that's why the lightheartedness of the last few hours slowly bleeds out of me.

"I wish you'd told me about this."

She's turned away from me, that black skirt stretched sinfully across her ass. As a bubbly, grinning brunette, Gen always looks great in her floral sundresses. But seeing her like this, hair up in a tight bun, almost business casual...it gives me ideas.

She places the plates in the sink and turns around, a grim expression on her face.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I just don't understand how you thought this was a good idea."

Why am I doing this? This isn't an argument I need to have, but it's swelling in my chest like a balloon. If I don't

speak, I feel like I'll explode.

Her mouth opens, then snaps shut. I get a fleeting glance of annoyance before she calmly explains, "It was Chris's idea, as I'm sure he'll tell you. I got a little ahead of myself. You know I like to plan this kind of thing."

Crossing her arms, she pops her hip against the counter.

"Did you have a problem with dinner?"

I take a deep breath in through my nose. "No. Dinner was delicious." It was, and it almost takes the fight out of me. Almost. The way those delicate scallops melted on my tongue reminded me of...

I shake off the memory of her naked body, legs spread before me on the kitchen counter back home. Gen reaches for a tray of little plates with panna cotta. Dessert.

Stepping closer, I try to explain myself. "I know you and Chris had good intentions. I just don't think this was the best way to go about it. You can't force these things, Gen."

The annoyance is back. Her eyes are daggers as she stares me down. "Weren't you the one saying the other day that you need to let more people in? For Eva's sake?"

Hot frustration floods my veins as she uses my own words against me. The worst part is, she's not wrong. "Yes, but this isn't what I meant. I only just found out about Jenson myself. I wanted to protect Eva until I was sure—"

"About what?" she scoffs. "Jenson and Mel are wonderful. What more could you ask for, Nathan? They've been nothing but open, patient, and polite. In fact, I heard you chatting quite a bit with them tonight. So what's really holding you back?"

Now it's my turn for my mouth to snap shut. That lightheaded feeling is back, the one that's been haunting me for weeks now. The sensation of being overwhelmed.

First Gen, a temptation in my own home, then finding out I have a half brother. And a baby on the way. And then Chris casually letting a dog loose in my house without asking me first.

It's all boiling over again.

Why can't I get this under control?

"You're never going to understand, Gen, because you don't know what real life is like."

It's like I slapped her. She stares at me in shock. "What?"

I just can't shut up. But talking more only makes it worse. "You live this weird mix of fairy tale and struggling artist. You broke off your engagement. Got fired, then had your brother find you a job. You have an apartment, but you're not living there because some weirdo is stalking you, and I needed to put an entire security system in my home because of it. You lack a sense of responsibility."

Her face crumples.

"I just don't see how you think you're going to make anything work, Gen. You have no regard for others. You make bad choices. And this—" I gesture at her belly, at the baby. Our baby. "You're setting yourself and this kid up for failure. You think you can make it out there pregnant and alone? With no source of income? Lying to your own brother?"

My pulse is pounding in my ears by the time it's all out. Regret leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but at the same time, everything I said feels like the truth.

Or at least, the things I've been afraid of since she stepped foot in my life.

Blindly, Gen reaches out and takes hold of the tray. She clutches it like a lifeline. Uses it to create even more space between us when it already feels like an insurmountable distance.

"I didn't know you felt that way." Her response is calm and even. And terrifying.

In this moment, I can see the woman she was at The Black Fig—a leader. A source of calm in the chaos of a busy kitchen.

Pressing my lips together, I try to explain. "I just want what's best for everyone."

She nods curtly, walking to the far end of the kitchen island so she doesn't have to pass me. "Yes, it sounds like it. You're just looking out for the people who matter to you the most."

Yes, I want to agree, but the words are stuck in my throat. She's already out of the kitchen, anyway, stepping into the dining room like it's another world.

Yes, I'm worried about the people I care about. The people I love.

And that includes you.

Chapter 33

Genevieve

The call comes early in the morning, although it's probably late afternoon in Germany.

I recognize the international number from having stared at their website for hours on end. Picking it up, a wave of nausea and lightheadedness hits me.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Genevieve Walker?”

“Yes, this is her.” Somehow, my voice is firm and professional.

“Genevieve, my name is Otto Koch. I'm the general manager at *Untertasse*—Saucer. I'm calling in regard to your application for our executive chef position.”

“Oh, it's good to hear from you, Otto.” Unless this is bad news... “How can I help?”

The momentary silence on the other end of the line makes my heart pick up its pace. Any second now, I'm going to hear the words. *We're sorry to inform you, but...*

“I'm calling to ask you about the accusation that you are having an inappropriate relationship with your current employer.”

It's like hitting a brick wall going eighty miles an hour.

“Wh-what?”

Silence again. Then Otto speaks firmly. “Ms. Walker, normally I do not concern myself with rumors. But the individual reached out directly to the restaurant's marketing manager, so there is some concern on their part. Given your otherwise impeccable reputation, your resume, and the preliminary menu you sent to us, I wanted to give you a chance to explain or defend yourself.”

Cold fury floods my body from head to toe. I sit at the desk in my room, clutching the phone to my ear in a death grip.

“Mr. Koch, I don’t know who called you, but I feel that I should make you aware of a situation I’m currently dealing with. Involving the New York City police.”

“Polizei?” Otto repeats sharply. I can hear the rustle of papers, as if he’s taking notes. “Is this something that would affect the possibility of you working with us, Genevieve?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Actually, getting out of the country might be one way to solve this problem.

Over the next ten minutes, I relay to Otto the very basics of what’s been happening in New York. The stalker, the slashed tires, and my employer’s offer to allow me to live in the main house with an updated security system. Otto hums and asks a question here and there. He seems genuinely concerned, and slowly, my anxiety and anger melt away.

“Well, it sounds like Mr. Sharpe is doing everything in his power to keep you safe.”

What’s this warmth sweeping through me? Nathan’s face comes to mind, but not his frustrated expression from dinner with his brother. No, the Nathan in my head that plays on a loop is Nathan Sharpe laughing, chasing Eva around, smiling at me across the kitchen island, licking ice cream off a spoon, settled in next to me on the couch.

I swallow.

“And I can see how this situation could be misconstrued,” Otto continues. “I’ll speak to our marketing team. I’m not sure if you’re aware, Ms. Walker, but I also happen to be majority owner of Saucer.”

I am aware, but for tact’s sake, I murmur interestedly and don’t let on just how much research I’ve done on the restaurant. I’m sure he knows. I wouldn’t be a good chef if I didn’t know what I was getting into.

“I feel confident, then, in my decision to offer you this position.”

My mind goes blank. With how this call started out, this is the last thing I expect.

“I—Mr. Koch, don’t you want more time to discuss this with your team, or—”

“Please, Genevieve. We would be honored to have someone of your caliber join us. Your ideas are fresh and innovative. I think it would be good to open a new chapter here at *Untertasse*, if you’re still interested, that is.”

Nathan’s eyes crushing closed as he holds himself over me; Nathan in the barn, bent over blueprints; Nathan pacing the patio on his work cell, suit jacket perfectly tailored to his strong shoulders.

“Yes, I’m very much still interested.”

“Good. In that case, let me notify the team and we’ll connect next week to begin the hiring process. I’m sorry for what you’re going through right now, Ms. Walker. Hopefully things take a turn for the better very soon.”

We end the call with polite goodbyes and my hand drops into my lap as soon as it disconnects. Staring ahead at the blank wall, I can hear Nathan moving around down the hall—or maybe it’s Eva, back from her friend’s house.

But I don’t hear the usual chatter or Nate’s laugh at his daughter’s antics. In this moment I feel...alone.

More alone than I’ve felt in months.

I should be dialing Russ, telling him the good news, texting Sienna with a thousand exclamation points.

But all I feel is...guilt. And a sense of loss. Am I ready to leave New York, the place that has been my home for the last decade? Am I ready to leave my big brother, my roots, Eva, the father of my child?

Getting the job at Saucer should be big, exciting news. As I gently stroke my belly, which is beginning to show just a

little bit, it feels like the one thing I've made a secret *should* be the exciting news.

Chapter 34

Nathan

Flowers are a bad idea.

Gen doesn't seem like a "flowers" kind of woman. She's barely interested in the gardens out on the property, aside from the one time she was excited to find a bright orange bloom she insisted was edible.

Eva and I refused to eat them.

Definitely not jewelry. I know enough about the restaurant industry to know she won't wear it at work. And work is her life.

With a groan, I drop onto my bed and throw an arm over my eyes. What would Chris's advice be? I haven't talked to my brother for three days, not since the dinner.

I can hear his voice in my head, complete with sarcasm. *Just suck it up and apologize.*

Why is that so hard for me? Julia used to point it out, too. That I always found nonverbal ways to do so instead of just owning up to whatever mistake I'd made.

But did I really make a mistake? Setting my jaw, I'm not so sure. I still think I had the right to be upset about that dinner being sprung on me. It's not how I wanted Eva to meet her half uncle. I haven't even come to terms with Jenson's place in my life, not fully.

Yes, he helped me immensely with digging Ironside out of that giant hole. Nash is serving time and has been ordered to pay back the thousands of dollars he stole, which I'm assuming we'll never see again. I lost only two investors, and as Trudy put it, good riddance to them. If anything, Nash probably saved me a headache down the road.

That being said, I've thanked Jenson, but I haven't had time to figure out how and if I want him to show up in my life—and the life of my daughter.

Mostly because I was completely blindsided by the dinner.

With my eyes closed, my mind goes back to that night. Shortly after our discussion in the kitchen, Gen smiled politely and excused herself, claiming she had to get back to the house to meal prep for the week.

Chris, across the table, had leveled his gaze right at me. Jenson and Mel stood to hug Gen and thank her. Eva pouted a little bit but got over it quickly as she started asking Mel more questions about their new baby.

When Gen breezed by she didn't say one word to me.

Which was all Chris needed as evidence to confront me later, when everyone left and Eva was knocked out on the couch, tucked out from the evening.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay. Then what did you say?”

Turning to Chris, I'd told him the truth—it was the theme of the night. “I told her that she overstepped. As did you. You should have asked first, Chris. We talked about this.”

“It wasn't her idea,” he ground out. “It was mine. She went along with it.”

“That's not an excuse. She still overstepped.”

“Well, that can't be all that was said. I've never seen her shut down like that before, Nate.”

“What are you talking about? You barely know her!”

“I'd like to get to know her better, but if you keep doing whatever you're doing, you're going to push her away.”

If you keep doing whatever you're doing, you're going to push her away.

That, coupled with Gen's news that she was seriously considering leaving the city, has had my body in panic mode for the last few days. Getting home from work today, I shut myself in my office to try and decompress.

It didn't work.

Because deep down, I know I have to apologize.

I just don't know how.

A sound breaks the silence. With a quick glance at the clock, I wonder who it could be at 11:30 p.m.

Walking quietly to the bedroom door, I open it and peer out into the hall. Gen's silhouette is tiptoeing toward the stairs, the guest room door propped open. Her baggy pajama pants billow as she turns the corner.

I follow, padding down the hall and staying just far enough behind so as not to alert her that I'm there.

What the heck is she up to? Finally making a run for it? I wouldn't blame her, based on the things I said to her that night.

The light over the kitchen stove bleeds amber into the hallway as I walk toward it. Gen is trying to be quiet, but the sound of her bustling around in there makes me smile. I used to like peace and quiet, now I don't mind this so much.

Leaning against the doorframe, I can't help smiling when she curses quietly after dropping a dish towel. Gen stands, tossing back her hair, and our eyes meet.

Chapter 35

Genevieve

When I stand to find Nathan staring at me with those intense dark green eyes, I should jump—I should be startled.

But he has the opposite effect on me. Instead, everything in me quiets. All the worries piled up from today go silent and for once, my body doesn't feel like a complete mess. Even the fluttery feeling of the baby goes still.

Nate pushes off the doorframe and pads into the kitchen. He's heartbreakingly handsome in his low-slung sweatpants and bare feet.

“What're you doing up?” he asks quietly.

“Couldn't sleep.”

We're close enough now, with just the island between us, that when he leans against it, I can smell him. My body wants to reach for him, to sway toward him. I fight it, clutching to the dish towel like it's a lifeline.

“Sorry if I woke you.”

He shakes his head. “No, I was already up. Too much on my mind.”

His face shutters, as if he's turning inward. When it's obvious he isn't going to say more, I start pulling ingredients from the cabinets. That gets his attention.

“What are you making?”

“Risotto.”

“This late at night?”

With a glance over my shoulder, I give him a raised brow. “You're the one who said I have free rein of the kitchen.”

That little half smile is back and my heart does a flip.

“True. Alright, how can I help?”

Nathan straightens up and the muscles under his T-shirt ripple with the movement. Seeing him like this—laid-back, dressed down, casually seductive—does something to me. My body throbs with wanting him.

When will that stop?

When I'm out of this house?

When I'm out of the country?

“You *really* want to attempt this? I can be a hard-ass in the kitchen.”

His green eyes flash brighter now with amusement. “Oh, I've heard. Yeah, I'm all-in. What can I do?”

He prowls around the side of the island and my breath catches.

Stop that. It's not like anything's going to happen, there's still that huge chasm between you two.

When he's inches away from me, our hips brushing, I explain how to prepare risotto with meticulous precision. It's just a simple dish I'm going for—risotto with butternut squash. The problem is...

“I have to stir for *how* long?”

With an eye roll, I explain, “It's a touchy dish, Nathan. It needs attention.” Moving around him, I grab the cutting board and garlic. It's like trying to navigate around a brick wall, he's so solid and takes up so much space. “And we can take turns.”

As I peel and dice the garlic, Nathan grabs the already cut butternut squash from the fridge. I prepped it earlier today while I was distracted and morose.

“Why risotto?”

I pause in cutting. When our gazes meet, his is curious and open. To respond or not to respond? He's been shut down for a few days, and I've been resenting that.

But I want to be better. I don't want to hold onto petty grudges. Especially if I'm leaving; I want to leave on good terms.

“It was the first ‘difficult’ dish I learned how to make,” I explain, returning to dicing as the broth on the stovetop heats. “I think I had to prove to myself that I could be a chef, because no one else in my life really thought I could.”

Nate is silent, staring down at the squash now browning gently in a pan. Then he asks, “What about Russ?”

“Oh, Russ was always supportive. But I think even he had some doubts. In the foster homes I stayed in, it was mostly quick sandwiches and cereal. So Russ hadn’t ever seen me make a meal, you know?”

I know where his train of thought goes. Talking about Russ makes him think about what Russ doesn’t know, which has him glancing down at my belly. Which prompts him to ask, “How was the appointment today?”

His voice is quiet, wary, as if he expects me to get upset or shut down.

Instead, I take a deep breath. This is his baby, too, even if things between us aren’t permanent. He at least deserves to know how things are going.

“Everything’s good. I’m a little over two months now, and the OB-GYN said the fingers and toes are developing.” It’s quiet for a moment as I decide whether or not to tell him the next part. This was my second appointment, and Nate wasn’t there. I didn’t ask him to come along and he didn’t ask. Though, by the way he lingered around the house this morning, a part of me thinks he wanted to.

“I got to hear the heartbeat.”

Something physical happens to him at the words. He blinks, his hand with the wooden spoon in it going still. When he exhales, it’s like he’s deflating and my heart pangs with guilt.

I should have asked if he wanted to come. I should have put that crappy conversation behind us, or at least pushed it to the side.

Then time catches up to us again and he takes a deep breath, stirs the contents in the pan. “That’s good. Good to

know you two are healthy. If you need anything...”

The strain in his voice is so palpable it breaks my heart a little bit. I can feel how bad he wants to get over this mess, but there’s still news I need to tell him. And better to do it now than keep pretending everything’s okay.

But I don’t get to, because we switch positions so I can take the squash off the burner and Nate takes over with the risotto. “Like this?”

I nod, busying myself with getting the other ingredients together as well as a measuring cup to dip out the broth. Over the next ten minutes, we work in silence, Nate’s muscular arm taut and then relaxed as he stirs, his nervous gaze on the pan.

“Uh, Gen? How do I know when to add more broth?”

Distracted by trying to find the rosemary and thyme, I come back to his side. “Oh! Okay—here.”

Dipping out about a cup of broth, I put it down on the counter and then squirm my way under his stirring arm. One hand goes almost around his waist, resting on his hip, to steady myself at the awkward angle.

Nate tenses up for a moment. Then he shifts to the side a bit so I can fit in next to him easier.

“Here—see this?” I wrap my hand over his much larger one and we drag the spoon across the pan. The thickened broth mixed in with the risotto settles but doesn’t move in to fill the gap. “See how it’s staying in place like that? That’s when we add more broth. We do that four more times until the risotto is cooked and the broth isn’t thin anymore.”

He reaches over me as I duck and picks up the cup of broth. His movements are a little clunky and I grin, imagining him trying to cook in here for Eva when he didn’t have a chef.

Completely forgetting about the herbs, I end up settling in against Nate and watching. His actions are a little more comfortable and natural now. Almost hypnotic, which is part of why I’ve always loved cooking.

It quiets the mind.

Eventually, I extricate myself and get back to prepping. I pull two beautiful small white bowls down and get out spoons. Then I grab the bread I bought at the farmer's market the other day. It's still crisp on the outside but has a give and a yeasty scent that makes my mouth water.

"I think it's done."

When I join Nate again, his scent lingers in my nose. Pine, wood, that *man*-smell that's indescribable but enticing.

"Perfect. Okay, take it off the burner and let's mix in the squash."

The two of us work together seamlessly. That hits me as odd; after all, I've only really known Nathan for a few months now. But even with his inexperience in a kitchen, we move around each other comfortably, Nate spooning out risotto as I top it with squash and herbs.

We stand back, taking a look at our work. To get a better view, Nate stands behind me, bracketing me in with his hands on either side of me on the counter.

"This looks delicious."

"Mmm," I agree, distracted by the heat of his body. I want so badly to press mine back into him.

Giving in, I turn in his arms and stare up at his eyes, now dark again.

"I was going to get you something." His voice is rough, as if he just woke up, even though we've both been sleepless.

"What?"

Like, something for the baby, or—?

"I was going to get you something, a gift, to make up for..." His Adam's apple bobs. He's so close, I could stand on the tip of my toes and brush my lips over the stubble on his jaw. "For being an ass at dinner."

My brows knit. A little surge of annoyance shivers up my spine.

"A gift? I don't need anything, Nathan—"

“I know, I just...” His face goes stoney for a moment. “I’m just not good at apologizing.”

I let the words hang between us. He seems partly relieved to get that out until he realizes I’m not going to respond.

The moment drags on...and on...

“I’m sorry.”

It’s a murmured apology, but one that sounds genuine. His body folds in toward me as he says it, shoulders dropping. Unthinkingly, I reach out and fiddle with the hem of his shirt.

A taunt flashes through my mind. *What if I just pull it up a little bit...just enough to get a peek of that tan body...*

Now that he’s apologized, it feels like water under the bridge.

No, the stronger part of me argues. It isn’t. You can forgive him, but don’t forget. This is your life. Yours to make choices and decide your future.

Germany.

I swallow and glance up at him. I’m not sure what the expression on my face looks like, but Nate takes it some kind of way and leans in. I don’t move, letting his lips ghost over mine.

And then the truth spills out between us.

“I got the job in Germany, Nate. I’m going to take it.”

Chapter 36

Nathan

Getting home from work, I walk in to be greeted by Brutus. My biggest fan, apparently, since both my daughter and the mother of my unborn child are missing.

The big dog stares up at me with adoring eyes. His tail thumps on the ground.

“Brutus. How was your day.”

I have to admit, I’ve found a soft spot for the beast. Mostly because he follows Eva around so loyally. But sometimes, when I’m working from the home office, he’ll nudge the door open and come nap under my desk. I should find it annoying. Instead, the big brute is a welcome reminder that my entire life doesn’t begin and end with Ironside.

If only I’d figured that out sooner. Maybe Gen wouldn’t be leaving the country in less than a month.

Leaving my bag at the staircase, a bad habit that’s been sticking lately, I peel off my suit jacket and meander through the house.

It’s quiet. No girls whispering conspiratorially, no predinner ice cream bowls, no TV on with Gen writing up the week’s shopping list.

Movement flickers outside and catches my attention.

My first thought, as I glance at the dog, is *the stalker*.

Did he somehow get the girls alone, outside?

But Brutus is calm, tail thumping again like he’s waiting for me to let him out. I stand just to the side of the French doors and look out on the backyard.

It’s the last dredges of summer, the tail end of August with the hottest days past us. I haven’t scheduled the pool to be closed up yet, though, and Eva and Gen have clearly been making use of it.

“Look at that,” I murmur, unable to keep a smile off my face.

They’ve both been swimming, that much is obvious. Eva is wrapped in a thick towel and curled up next to Gen on a lounge chair. Gen, wearing a one-piece that somehow still makes her alluring, is reading to her from a chapter book.

In that moment, I realize I’d rather be here than anywhere else. Everything at the office can wait. *I should call off tomorrow. Trudy would be thrilled. I can take the girls into the city, maybe Gen will want to stop at a store for the baby—*

With thoughts of the baby, the future looms ahead.

I have no idea what will happen. If Gen goes to Germany, how long will she stay? Will she have the baby there? Will I ever even find out if it’s a boy or a girl? Will she accept child support, come for visits, allow me and Eva to visit her there? Would she ever move back to the US, or closer to us? Back to the city?

I wish there was someone I could talk to about this. My first thought is Chris, but I still need to make amends with him. And for once in my life, I’m not sure how he’d react to this kind of news. He was thrilled when Eva was born—but would he be as thrilled to find out that sleeping with my attractive personal chef turned into a surprise pregnancy?

Then there’s Russ, the only other person I’m really close to. We don’t talk as much anymore. I have a feeling that ever since Gen started working for me, he’s wanted to keep more of a professional distance. If he knew just how *unprofessional* the two of us have been...

I can’t go to him. I can’t go to Chris.

It’s just me and...

Brutus.

He paws my leg and whines to be let out. Opening the door, I watch as he bounds out toward Eva and Gen, enthusiastically sniffing their toes before running out into the yard. Eva laughs and Gen looks toward the house.

Our eyes meet.

Is she happy to see me, or is that just what I want to see?

Chapter 37

Genevieve

As soon as I wake up, I know what today is.

My stomach does a little flip, and even though I know it's too early to feel the baby kick, I feel even more connected to her or him. According to the brochure the OB-GYN gave me, this week—week eleven—the baby is the size of a fig.

Pretty ironic, considering where Nate and I met.

Sitting up in bed, I listen for movement in the house. It's a Saturday and not unusual to hear Eva playing down the hall or the whirr of Nate's table saw out in the barn.

Instead, it's quiet.

This is the date Julia passed away.

Eva told me a few days ago, when we were curled up after swimming in the pool. She was somber when she gave me the news, but it seemed like that's just because she felt like she should be.

"I don't remember my mom," she confessed, tucked up against my side. "Dad has a lot of pictures of her, though."

"Do you do anything special on that day?" I'd asked, heart in my throat. Was this inappropriate to ask about? Would Nate want me out of the house?

Eva only shook her head. "Not really. We go to the cemetery. Otherwise, Dad stays home."

So that's about what I expected today.

What kind of breakfast do you make on the anniversary of someone's death? "Wasn't expecting this to be part of the job," I mumble to myself, getting out of bed and stumbling into my jeans.

Downstairs, Nate is already up and reading a paper at the dining room table.

“Good morning,” he greets distractedly. He’s wearing reading glasses, which I haven’t seen before. If this was any other day, I’d make a joke, but I only smile and nod.

At the sound of Eva tumbling around upstairs with Brutus, I realize I need to come up with something quick. An inventory of the fridge and freezer seals the deal—breakfast sandwiches it is.

Fifteen minutes later, I slide a plate in front of Nathan. He glances at the sandwich and murmurs a thanks. Eva is a little more enthusiastic about her breakfast, but I see her throwing furtive glances at her dad.

Nathan isn’t dressed in black or openly mourning. I think back to the day he told me about Julia’s death. How devastating that must’ve been for him. The circumstances were heartbreaking, and Eva was so young...

“Is there anything specific you’d like for dinner?” I ask tentatively. “I was going to go shopping today.”

What are you expecting him to say? that little sarcastic voice in my head sounds. Think he has a whole dinner menu planned for something like this?

He takes off his glasses and puts the paper down, face serious but not sorrowful.

“Any ideas?” he asks Eva.

She stops chewing for a second, little blond brows furrowed. “Tacos.”

My eyebrows raise.

“Tacos?” Nathan chuckles. When Eva nods firmly, I slip out a Post-it note and jot down the makings for carnitas tacos. As I’m doing so, I don’t notice Nathan turn his attention to me.

“Think you can wait an hour or two to head out? Brutus needs another bath, and I wanted to throw a load of laundry in.”

The domesticity of the statement throws me off, and I stare at him.

“I—you don’t have to drive me, Nate, I can—”

He shakes his head. “I know it’s been quiet for a few weeks, Gen, but I still don’t trust that—” he glances at Eva, who’s been protected from the existence of the psycho stalking me “—person. I’d feel better if we all go in to the city together. Just have to make a stop at the cemetery.”

He says it so casually. My stomach knots.

“Oh, Nathan, you really don’t have to. I know it’s—” I swallow, face flushing from the awkwardness. “I know what day it is, and I don’t want to intrude on your privacy.”

Nate gives me a soft smile. His eyes move over my face. Then he plucks the shopping list from my hand and tucks it away in a pocket.

“You won’t be intruding. If you’re uncomfortable, you can stay in the car; it’ll just be a quick stop. Promise.”

He stands and inexplicably, a part of me expects him to bend down and place a kiss on my lips.

Why? *Why* would I think that on a day like today?

My mind is a messy jumble as he walks away, calling for Brutus, who has no idea what he’s in for as they head for the bathroom.



THE CAR RIDE feels awkward to me, but Eva is humming along to a song on the radio, and Nate’s eyes are glued to the city streets.

Now that I’m back in the mess of it, I realize I kind of miss the hustle and bustle. But there’s an edge of anxiety to being here, too. Even in the safety of Nate’s car, my eyes dart here and there, looking for a threat.

“You okay?”

His rumble of a question makes me jump, and I realize I’ve been rubbing the little swell of my belly.

“Yeah—sorry. Just...distracted.” Trying for a friendly smile, I’m pretty sure I just look constipated instead.

His eyes track the motion of my hand.

“Did you want to stop at any other stores?”

It takes a second for the meaning of his question to sink in. When it hits, my eyes widen and a blush covers my cheeks.

“Oh! No, that’s ok. Thanks, though.” I shoot a glance at Eva, trying to silently communicate, *how would we explain that one? Shopping for baby items.*

Nate’s better at figuring out hidden meanings than I am. He checks on Eva in the rearview, then nods.

“Okay. Are you ready, honey?”

Eva looks up and nods passively. Half turned in the seat, my whole body clenches like a fist.

Nathan reaches out and covers my knee with his hand.

“Don’t worry about it, Gen.”



A DINNER of carnitas tacos followed by Black Forest cake.

It’s a lot.

Nate is laughing at Brutus putting his droopy jowls on Eva’s lap as she giggles. I clear the plates and can’t help but chuckle. All the while, marveling at how today turned out.

“Dad, can I go watch a movie?” Eva flutters her lashes and Nate gives in immediately.

“Of course, darling. We’re not staying up too late tonight, though.”

She shoots us a mischievous grin and darts off for the living room as I sit down next to Nate.

“I was such a mess today. I feel like it’s *my* turn to apologize.”

“Gen, what’re you talking about? You were great today.”

“No,” I insist resolutely, “*you* were. I’ve never seen someone deal with loss like this before. You keep Julia’s memory alive for Eva, and that’s...”

Choking up a bit, I blink away tears.

Nate shrugs, as if juggling grief, a ten-year-old, and life as a billionaire in the very public eye is nothing. “Julia wouldn’t have wanted to be mourned. She always approved of a good celebration, though.”

I can’t help smiling back at his cheeky grin as he continues, “And this—it was her favorite.” He swipes a finger through the chocolate frosting and licks it off.

“Ahh, I thought so. It was a very specific request.”

“Mmm, well, it’s also delicious.”

Laughing, I swipe my own bit of frosting and enjoy the sweetness. I appreciate the lightheartedness, but still need to speak a truth.

“I just wish someone cared for me the same way when I was Eva’s age. Foster care...they’re dead set on making you forget where you came from.”

Nate’s expression turns somber. He reaches out under the table, fingertips ghosting across my belly before he takes my hand.

“I care about you.” Clearing his throat, he adds, “Eva does, too. I know you’ve made up your mind, Gen, but if you ever need a home to come back to...this is it.”

If it’s possible for your heart to heal and break at the same time, that’s exactly what happens in this moment.

Chapter 38

Nathan

The next day feels peaceful in a way my life hasn't for a while.

Until a scream shatters the air.

From the barn, I turn and stare across the property to the front of the house. A dread sweat breaks out on my forehead as I drop my tools and run for the house.

The French doors are open. Barging through them, I turn, then shut and lock them before striding through the rest of the house.

“Eva!?”

“Daddy?” she calls back, voice full of fear.

It wasn't her; she's fine, upstairs somewhere.

But I already knew that. Because I recognized the voice.

Doing a full sweep of the first floor, I shout for Eva to lock her door.

As I turn the corner toward the foyer, I see that the front door is open—the decorative glass door closed and marbling outside, so I can't tell what's happening in the driveway.

But I can hear the struggle, and so can Brutus. He's beside me in an instant, hackles raised along his back as he skids on the hardwood floor.

“Gen?”

She doesn't answer. Somewhere out there blurred, dark figures are struggling. It's late afternoon, almost twilight.

I swing the door open forcefully and run out into the driveway, Brutus barking aggressively only a foot behind.

Damn this long, private driveway. It's curved enough to hide the struggle from sight, but I already know what I'll find.

Gravel scatters under my boots as I take the curve fast. My eyes search the area for a weapon, anything. The yard is too well-manicured.

Brutus rockets ahead of me, the growl coming from him thunderous.

“Get off me!” Gen screams. As I run up to them, I see her struggling with a man.

One who looks vaguely familiar.

He has her by the hair, by the ponytail to be exact, and is pulling her *hard* toward the ground. But Gen is tall and strong. With one hand wrapped around the base of her hair she pulls back, both of them off-balance.

Then Brutus joins the fight.

He goes right for the wild-eyed man, latching onto his thigh. The guy screams as I pick up a massive branch from the ground, something that must’ve come off during the windy nights. Heaving it over my head, I bring it down in a wide arc, realizing only at the last minute I might hit Gen instead.

Luckily, she yanks hard in the other direction and the man stumbles right into the line of impact. The branch cracks over his shoulder and he cries out, then releases Gen, focusing on dislodging Brutus. The dog isn’t backing down, though, and neither am I.

I wield the branch again, managing a glancing blow off his temple. He staggers to the side and falls.

“Brutus!”

Despite only having lived with us for a few weeks, he hears the sharp tone in my voice and backs off.

I don’t.

Stalking up to the man scrambling away on my driveway, I lean down and grab a fistful of his shirt. It’s thin, worn, and a ripping sounds out as I yank him upward. It’s easy to drag him off the drive and into the grass.

With an adrenaline rush, I pick him up and slam him into the trunk of an oak. His face is scratched up from the gravel and he's snarling like an animal.

Why does he look so familiar?

Gen is steady now, breathing heavily a few feet behind me. A surge of protectiveness goes through me. I want her and the baby safe in the house, but I also want to hurt this man. Torn between the two, I just hold him there and growl.

"Erik, what the hell are you doing?" she pants.

Her sous-chef.

I saw him in the kitchen that night at The Black Fig—only he was lurking in the back, surly.

"Slut," he spits out, feet scrabbling on the grass.

I slam him back into the tree trunk again, only mildly satisfied by the sound it makes when his body hits the hard wood.

Gen goes from frightened to furious in a matter of seconds. With my hand tight on the sous-chef's throat, she stalks right up next to me and shoves an accusatory finger in his face.

"*You*. This whole time it was you! Getting me fired with baseless rumors wasn't enough for you, was it? Are you the one who called Saucer?"

He scoffs and spits. "They should know what they're getting into. You like to fuck your employers, hmm? I'm guessing this one went a little further than expected."

His eyes drop to Gen's stomach as he sneers. Blind rage whites out my vision momentarily.

Did this psycho follow her *everywhere*? The only way he could know she was pregnant is if he stalked her to her doctor's appointments, too.

"Gen, call the cops."

She opens her mouth, ready to keep going on him, but I give her a steady look over my shoulder.

“I’ve got this. Don’t waste your energy on this scum. He’s not worth it.”

Her chest is heaving as she stares down the sous-chef, who’s slowly turning purple, thanks to my tight grip. With one deep breath through her nose, she turns on her heel, picking her cell up off the ground and dialing.

Erik struggles weakly under my hand. He’s staring at Gen with such hatred I can’t help wondering what she ever did to him. But then, men like this don’t need a reason; they’re usually too far gone in their own delusional beliefs.

He calms down enough to look away from her and meet my eyes.

“So. Was it worth it?” he asks, lip curling in disgust. “She a good fuck?”

The punch lands square on his nose before I even realize I’ve pulled back my fist.

Blood spurts in a fine spray over my forearm and chest. Gen shouts, runs toward us.

“Nate!?”

“I’m fine. It’s his blood, not mine.”

Erik is moaning, his upper body limp and held up only by my hand around his throat. “You bitch,” he spits out brokenly. I’m not sure if he means Gen or me. Doesn’t really matter.

“Are they coming?”

She nods, worried eyes searching my face. “Yes.” Then her attention cuts back to the man trying and failing to staunch the flow of blood from his nose. “You’re stupider than I thought, Erik.”

“Me!? Stupid? I’m the one who organized a coup at the Fig—”

“Only because of your *lies and threats*.”

“Lies and threats everyone believed.” There’s a triumphant light in his eyes.

But Gen's smile is slow and satisfied.

"Not everyone. I got the job at Saucer, Erik. You'll never come anywhere near what I've achieved."

This close, I can see the manic fury light up his eyes. He scrambles against my grip for a moment, shoes dragging against the bark. With a sharp slam, he goes perfectly still.

"Move like that again and I'll snap your neck."

"I'll claim assault," he hisses. "I'm covered in blood, you're unharmed. And this one." He nods to Gen. "She has a reputation already for harassing coworkers."

Now it's *my* turn to smile as I scan the property line, nodding at an inconspicuous white camera.

"Good luck. I'm pretty sure we have multiple angles of *you* coming after *her*, asshole."

Only moments later, the sound of sirens chirps from far off in the distance. Gen wraps a hand around my stiff forearm, but I refuse to let go. When our eyes meet, I try to communicate all the impulsive thoughts throbbing through me right now. *Never again. I'll never let someone hurt you like this again.*

I'll die first.

Chapter 39

Genevieve

“Nothing major,” the doctor reports, turning my chin one way and then the other. “From what I hear, the other guy is in much worse condition.”

“That’s because he dealt with me,” Nathan growls in a voice so low I’m not sure the doctor hears him. He’s too busy jotting down notes for his report.

Though he *is* in worse shape, Erik had a head start by catching me off guard. He ripped out a few chunks of hair and my scalp is bleeding in those places. I also have serious gravel burn down the side of my left calf, enough that I had to undress and get it cleaned and bandaged. Already I can see pink blooming through.

“Dad,” Eva whispers from her seat next to Nathan, “I don’t like this place. Can we go home?”

I smile at her, but it doesn’t quite reach my eyes. “Sorry, Eva. If it makes you feel any better, I don’t like hospitals, either.”

The problem, I think, is that we came in through a *very* busy emergency room. The bustle and loud noises, the moaning patients, and security guards shouting really freaked Eva out. On top of that, I was taken ahead of the two of them—Nate was asked to stay behind at the house and give a preliminary report while I was transported right to the emergency room.

Outside the room, a cop shifts from foot to foot. I’m not sure if it’s one of the cops I’ve talked to before about all the crap Erik pulled these last few months. My shoulders hunch forward and I feel suddenly weightless, relieved, and exhausted.

“We’ll go when we know Genevieve is okay,” Nate explains quietly, his eyes never leaving me.

My body goes warm at being watched so closely. It feels... good. Safe.

But I'm also embarrassed. Embarrassed one of my previous coworkers somehow got so obsessed with me that he's been stalking me for months. That he managed to get me fired, and then tried to sabotage my entire career. That he harassed the poor girl who was subletting my apartment and slashed the tires on Nate's car.

"I'm sorry."

It comes out as a whisper. Nate frowns.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Gen."

The doctor, who I didn't even realize was listening, chimes in. "My colleague is doing the workup on your guy and trust me, he's going to have a visit from psych." His eyes snap to mine. Cold, calculating, honest. This is a man who would tell you if you were dying. "There won't be much of a legal battle here at all."

Nate nods in agreement.

"Is it on video?" I ask, hesitant to find out. If the security cameras caught the attack, it might be all I need to get a restraining order, at the very least. Ideally, Erik goes away for a few years.

A small hand burrows into mine. I look down, then back up at Eva, who smiles self-consciously. *Thank you*, I mouth. My heart swells with love for the little girl.

Nate slings an arm around his daughter and his previously satisfied expression melts away. He looks at the top of Eva's head, contemplating.

I want so badly to be able to read his thoughts right now. Is he angry I put the two of them in jeopardy? Is he regretting hiring me and getting him into this mess?

There's a light knock on the open door and Chris Sharpe is standing there *looking* sharp. He's wearing a suit—the first one I've ever seen him in—and he steps confidently through the door.

“Dr. Wong, my name is Christopher Sharpe. I’m representing Genevieve Walker.”

The doctor nods, giving Chris a tight smile. “Pleasure. She’s all set, I believe, unless they need to take another statement from her. The nurse took photos before the evaluation, so I can have all of the materials and my notes sent over to you by the end of the night.”

Right—it’s, like, 10 p.m. or close to it.

Chris hands over a business card and thanks the doctor. Dr. Wong steps out, leaving our crazy little bunch alone in the room.

“Um...I’m going to put my pants back on,” I warn, slipping from the bed and grabbing my jeans. Chris politely turns his back, facing Nathan, asking his brother questions about the events.

“You checked the cameras before you left the house?”

Nate holds up his cell, taps an app. The footage shows up as a saved file.

“Got it all.”

“And they’re aware of the previous reports?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, good. Gen, they’ll probably want to talk to you again. Get a more detailed explanation so they can press charges.” He raises one well-manicured brow. “You *do* want to press charges?”

Chris and Nate chuckle the same laugh as I nod vigorously. “Yes. Please. Whatever you can do—and I’ll pay you, of course.”

Chris raises a hand. “Not at all. You’re practically family.” The statement is complicated, but I can’t quite tell why...is it just my own stomach tightening in knots, because I *want* something like a family with them? Or is it the blank look on Nate’s face, as if he’s staring at someone far-off again?

“Ms. Walker, if you’re all set, I’d like to escort you down to the station.”

The cop who leans into the room can’t be older than twenty-one or twenty-two, but I smile politely and grab my wallet and cell. The latter is cracked from bouncing across the gravel driveway.

“Of course.”

Before I can take a step farther, arms wrap around my thigh. I look down to find Eva latched on to me like a vice.

“Are you coming home tonight?” Her voice is pleading, an edge of fear to it.

Oh, darling. If only I could take away everything you experienced in the last few hours.

But now, Eva’s had a glimpse of what it sometimes means to be a successful woman in life. People might hunt you down, try to ruin you, lie, let jealousy overtake them.

“Yes. I probably won’t be too far behind you and your dad, okay?”

She nods and lets go reluctantly, corralled back into Nathan’s arms.

“I’ll see you at home?” I ask, trying to meet Nate’s eyes. But he doesn’t look directly at me, more like over my shoulder.

I swallow, turn, and follow the cop out into the hallway.

All the things I want to say are stuck in my throat.

I’m sorry for this mess.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Did you really mean it when you said I had a home here?

The last one makes my eyes water, and I blink away tears, not sure what’s coming over me right now. Fear, probably. But maybe, a little bit, Eva’s worry softened me up a bit. And Nathan’s palpable fury when he threw Erik against that tree.

What would it be like, having people like them in my life all the time? Every day, every minute?

I can't even imagine.

Because if I let myself, I might want it too badly. And I was never meant for something so precious.

Chapter 40

Nathan

For the first time since I let her in my home, Genevieve Walker steps into the kitchen hesitantly.

She's barefoot again, her toes painted a pretty pastel green that reminds me of the forest in late spring. Relaxing, quiet—everything I'm not feeling right now.

Rolling my shoulders, I try to get rid of the knot that's been there for two days. Since the incident. Chris is working quickly to press charges and get a restraining order in place in case Erik makes bail. I highly doubt he will.

“Hey.”

Her voice is quiet, a higher pitch than usual, self-conscious.

“Hey,” I say without turning around. I'm wrist-deep in the sink, scrubbing dishes from earlier in the night.

“You don't have to do that, you know. I can just load up the dishwasher before I go to bed.”

“It's fine,” I answer curtly. “I like doing this. Always have.”

Memories flow of Julia and I flicking soap bubbles at each other, laughing. The drying towel balanced on her belly when she was pregnant with Eva.

How strange to be standing in the same kitchen with another woman who's carrying my child. But there's no laughter right now, and Gen—she's leaving.

It hit me hard at the hospital.

Eva's concern and fear, the way she reached out for Gen almost on instinct. She's attached to her, and I don't know why I didn't see this coming. Why I didn't try harder to keep it from happening.

Eva's heart is going to break when Gen leaves.

In just two short weeks, summer is over. She's free to pack up and book it to Germany, far away from me. Taking the baby with her.

She could disappear, if she wanted to.

"You okay?" Gen asks quietly, leaning against the counter.

"Just been a long few days."

She goes still. The kind of stillness I recognize. Despite trying to mask my frustration, it's seeping out, and she's noticed.

"If this is about mixing you up in everything, I'm sorry."

"No. It's not that," I answer immediately, sounding sure of myself. "I'm happy I was there. I'm happy I stopped it and that you're safe."

Gen is quiet for a moment. She turns her body toward me, looking up at me with serious dark eyes.

"Then what's going on? You've been distant. Ever since it happened. Did I do something wrong, or...?"

"I don't think you should be here."

The words spill out before I can stop them. It's like she's been slapped. Her mouth drops open, her eyes go wide. Then a flush starts high in her cheeks.

"Wh-why?" Now there's anger tingeing her words. "Nathan, what did I do? You owe me an explanation. If this doesn't have anything to do with Erik, then what is it?"

Pulling my hands from the water, I jerkily dry them on a towel and turn to face her. Stare her down. Try to impart just how serious I am about this, because now it's flaring within me, this insecurity I've felt for months now.

"I don't think you should be here. Eva is too attached to you. I—there's just no—" Snapping my mouth shut, I try to get my brain to work. To explain properly, firmly. "You're leaving, Gen. You've made that very clear." My eyes drop to her belly, regret thickening my throat. "And if you're leaving,

you should go sooner rather than later. I don't want to see Eva get hurt."

Looking away from her pleading eyes, I turn my attention back to the sink. Shoving my hands into the water, I quickly yank them back out. A knife—it caught the pad of my thumb and now blood trickles out in a steady stream.

For just a moment, Gen sways forward, as if she's going to reach out and take my hand. Then she catches herself.

"That's what you want?" Her voice is stiff, unnatural.

I can't look at her.

So I just nod.

Because it's not what I want.

But it might be what I need.

Chapter 41

Genevieve

Crying and cooking.

Who knew the two could go together so well? Not me.

I've never cried *and* cooked at the same time in my life. No, cooking was always a way to avoid crying. To throw myself into something.

So that's what I'm doing now, but it doesn't work.

The house is completely empty. Nathan's threat wasn't a threat at all, even if I took it that way. He's back at work in the city and Eva is with Chris for the day. He's so adamant I don't hurt her that he's sent her away, at least until...

Until I'm gone.

A hole opens up inside of me. A bottomless pit I can't stop filling with self-pity.

Why? What are you sad about? You got what you wanted—the job in Germany. Erik, that maniac, is going to court and probably being locked up, according to Chris. You have more than enough money for the trip, your lease is up in three weeks, and yes, the baby is the only thing—

The baby. Is that why I feel so terrible?

This whole time I've been ignoring how much Nate wants to be involved. How he fishes for any information, any details about my OB-GYN visits or how I'm feeling. I even saw him eyeing a display of cribs in the city.

"New York isn't home anymore," I mutter firmly to myself, portioning out fettuccine Bolognese into the stack of glass dishes I bought.

There are thirty of them—enough to get them through until Nate finds someone to replace me, maybe. Or maybe not. Eva's going back to school soon, anyway. She won't be waking up late to eat waffles with messy hair, or making faces

at shrimp dishes, or asking me a million questions about why mushrooms are shaped the way they are.

Maybe she'll forget me.

That doesn't seem to be what Nate's worried about, though. Can I blame him? Already, I'm so attached to this baby growing inside me, and I kind of get it. I'd do anything to defend him or her. I'd even tell someone to leave, even if—

My heart stutters to a stop. A whole body hesitation before I think the words, but they whisper through my mind anyway.

Even if it was someone I loved.

A laugh bubbles out of me, but it's a broken sound. I clap the top down on the last fettuccine serving and turn my attention to a pile of breaded chicken breast and roasted veggies.

Love.

"I thought I was in love once and look where it got me." Am I talking to myself or the baby? Doesn't matter, I guess. I'm alone, anyway.

But there was Will. So focused, so supportive—I thought. Until he tried to take the restaurant from me, then wrecked it when he couldn't handle running it on his own. I've been piecing my life back together, climbing an impossible cliff all for my career, and I almost made it at The Black Fig. Until Erik.

"Men," I mutter. They're the problem.

Even here, everything was fine. Until Nate. Until he turned cold and distant and told me to leave.

That's not true, the little voice whispers in my head. *What has Nate ruined?*

I swallow, blinking blindly as a montage plays through my head like some cheesy movie. That first night at the restaurant; a hookup in the alley. But then seeing him at the gala...the way he is with Russ, so supportive and serious. Their deep laughs. The way he is with Eva, fostering her curiosity, patient

with her. Even how immediately he accepted Brutus, despite acting like he hated the idea of having a dog.

He's so *good* even though he acts so *grumpy*.

I wish I could call Russ right now. Longingly, I stare at my cell on the counter and want to pick it up and dial his number and spill everything. The affair, the pregnancy, how torn I feel over Saucer, my feelings for Nate.

Feelings for Nate? Where did that come from?

But my face heats, even though I'm alone, as the realization hits. I can't deny it anymore. It hasn't been just physical attraction drawing me to him. It's much, *much* more than that, which is why...

I need to leave.

Staring down at the neatly stacked meals ready to be frozen, it's like my brain finally catches up to reality and clicks into motion.

I need to get the hell out of here, because I'm in love with Nathan Sharpe. My brother's billionaire best friend, the single dad trying to protect his daughter from *me*.

Good thing I still have a few weeks left on the lease.

Chapter 42

Nathan

Nathan,

Sorry for making you and Eva uncomfortable and for bringing trouble to your door. I really enjoyed my time here and I hope you two enjoyed the food. There's a lot more stockpiled away for you. Hopefully it'll get you through until school starts back up, but I know you know how to order takeout. Tell Chris, Jenson, and Mel I said bye.

Tell Eva, too. And tell her I said I'm sorry.

Gen

I stare down at the note on the counter as Eva enthusiastically lets Brutus out into the backyard. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her run after him, dress flying around her knees.

She's gone.

What did you think was going to happen, you idiot? You told her to leave.

I just didn't expect it so soon.

Damn. I'm going to have to tell Eva.

This is what I've been dreading the whole time, not that I ever thought of a way around it. How best to break it to her? Would it have been easier if she could've said goodbye to Gen face-to-face? No, maybe a clean break is better.

It doesn't feel better.

My phone buzzes, startling me out of my reverie.

Russell's name shows up on the screen. As if I didn't feel guilty enough. Habitually, I squash all thoughts of Gen before picking up.

"Hey, Russ."

"Nate. What's going on?"

His voice is tight. I have no idea why, because just days ago when we talked he was *thrilled*. Thrilled that Gen's stalker was temporarily behind bars until they found him a permanent home, thrilled to find out I made the guy bleed.

"What do you mean?"

Did something happen to her so soon? She only just left—must've been sometime after I brought Eva to Chris's before heading in to work.

What if we were wrong and Erik was working alongside someone else?

"I just got a text from Gen saying she's moving to Germany. She's not picking up her phone, which is definitely on purpose. So I'm asking you. What's going on?"

Silence takes over the line.

"Nathan. You need to talk to me. I know I sort of pushed Gen on you, but I also know she's—I don't know how to explain it. She's been more comfortable since she started working for you. More herself, and I just need to know what's happening. I'm worried."

Guilt nibbles away at my insides, because I know whatever I say right now, things will never be the same.

And Russ. Well, I don't lie to Russ.

She's already gone. It's not like you can rebuild the bridge you burned.

So I take a deep breath, and I tell Russ Walker exactly what's going on with his sister—the woman I'm in love with.

Chapter 43

Genevieve

Even with Erik locked up, the knock on the door makes me jump.

I open the microwave door, letting the scent of popcorn waft out, and scan the apartment quickly.

It doesn't feel like home anymore, even though a lot of my things are still here. But did it ever?

It's a short walk to the door and I find myself stopping abruptly. The clock over the stove says 7:30 p.m., which is a bit late for anything, really. My landlord wouldn't be checking in this late, and I'm not close with any of my neighbors.

Keeping the chain on the door, I undo the latch and open it just a few inches. Peer out into the hallway.

All the breath is sucked from me.

"Nathan? What are you doing here?"

I don't mean for it to sound rude, but it must, because he shifts uneasily from one foot to the other. His brow is furrowed, his hands clenching. A nervous habit.

"Gen, we need to talk."

Disappointment washes over me quickly. What was I expecting, some Hallmark moment? Nathan Sharpe confessing his love for me instead of using his serious billionaire CEO voice on me?

I push the door shut, undo the chain with a clatter, and open the door fully.

"You might as well come in, then." Can't exactly have him stand in the hallway, can I?

It's a little tempting, mostly because I want to avoid embarrassing myself further. I can already feel my face burning with shame.

As Nathan follows me into the apartment, I register the time again and turn around.

“Where’s Eva?”

“She’s at Chris’s for the night.”

My heart does a stupid little leap.

“Is—is everything okay?”

His jaw clenches, the tendon working. “No.”

Oh, God. They didn’t let Erik out, did they? Or Brutus—did I leave something on the counter that could make him sick? Or maybe Nate just came here to tell me he regrets hiring me...

Before my train of thought can spiral even more out of control, Nathan’s face softens, throwing me off. He’s taking in his surroundings and suddenly I’m self-conscious of the little apartment.

His eyes land on a record player and a stack of old ’80s and ’90s rock. He grins. “Ahh. The culprit.”

“What do you mean?” I protest, following him into the living room as he flips through a few records.

“*This* is why I had to listen to Def Leppard, Whitesnake, and The Cranberries every morning.”

Instinctively, I bump into him playfully, arms crossed. “It’s *good* music. You just don’t have good taste.”

He shrugs. “I guess I’m not really a music guy.”

That’s true, I can’t think of one time in the last three months I heard him listening to a radio or playing music from his phone.

His shoulders loosen and he turns to face me. “Gen, I need to tell you something. Russell called me earlier today.”

Confused, I tilt my head to the side. “Okay. Is he alright?”

“You never texted him back.”

“Oh, damn. I totally forgot. I didn’t have any groceries here and I ran out—”

It hits me just where this conversation might be going. If Russ couldn't reach me, he probably got worried and reached out to Nathan. But Russ already knows about what happened to Erik, so the only thing he and Nate could've talked about that would warrant showing up at my door...

"I told him."

My body goes hot like it's on fire, then cold as ice.

"Told him what, exactly?"

His gaze drops. I cover my stomach with my hand.

"Please, *please* say you didn't tell him I'm pregnant, Nathan." I'm almost begging, but the embarrassment is overridden by horror. "Oh my gosh. What am I going to do?" I turn and pace, feeling hot and then cold all over again.

"Gen, calm down."

"I can't calm down. Did you tell him—does he know it's ___"

Yours.

"He's not upset. Not like you think, he just...he doesn't understand why we didn't tell him earlier."

"Oh," I scoff. "Is that it?"

Nate and Russ are best friends, but there's no way in hell Russ would be okay with this.

"I explained how—" he clears his throat with an awkward cough "—how we ran into each other and didn't recognize..."

My face heats with embarrassment. Great, now my brother knows all about our hot hookup in the alley. That's not at all humiliating.

The pacing begins again as I try to think my way out of this. I *just* told Russ I'm moving to Germany, which must be why he was worried. But now...he's never going to talk to me again. Should I show up at his apartment? At the gallery? Or would surprising him like that, cornering him, only make him angrier?

“He must think I’m out of my mind.” It comes out on a moan. I cover my face with my hands. Nate is reaching out but doesn’t touch me. It’s like he’s trying to calm a wild animal.

“He doesn’t think you’re out of your mind, Gen. He’s actually excited about Germany, I think you just...caught him off guard by telling him in a text.”

There’s judgment in his voice and I shoot him a glare. He rolls his eyes.

“And the pregnancy, yeah, he was upset at first. Not because of the baby,” he rushes to insist. “Because...well, obviously because it’s us. But I talked to him, Gen. That’s what I’m trying to explain. We had it out, and Russ isn’t mad at you, he’s not even mad at me.”

“Hmm. Really. So you two are going to stay best buddies?” I ask sarcastically, crossing my arms and facing him.

Nate takes a deep breath.

This is different from the last time I saw him.

He’s looking right at me, with something unrecognizable in his eyes. Fierce, passionate—like he’s never going to look away.

“Our friendship is going to be rocky for a bit, probably, but we’ll recover. He got over being pissed off, because I told him I’m in love with you. And that I’d do anything for you and the baby.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks.

I’m so in shock, my emotions going haywire, I almost miss what he says next.

“Even if you’re going to Germany. I think you *should* go to Germany. I know you want your career back, and I know it’s a top restaurant, so I’d never tell you not to go. I just...I’d like you to stay in touch. Let me pay child support, at least, so you don’t have to worry about money, and maybe when you’re settled in, Eva and I...”

He trails off. He's totally self-conscious, his face crimson and his eyes darting nervously around the room.

"I was thinking maybe we could visit. I know you probably won't want me there for the birth, I understand that, and I'm not asking to be involved more than you want me to, but I'd...like to. Be involved." Another clearing of his throat. "If you'll let me."

That hot-slash-cold sensation that's been running over my body like a wave settles into a steady warmth.

"You're in love with me?"

It's not the question he thought I'd ask. His face screws up for a second, then goes slack in affirmation.

"Yes."

"You're *really* in love with me. You're not just saying this because I'm—"

I gesture at my belly. Nate doesn't even break eye contact. He nods.

"I'm in love with you. With *you*, Gen. I have been this whole time. I've also been an idiot."

I can't fight back the grin that takes over my face.

"You *are* an idiot."

He opens his mouth, probably to ask again that I just consider his proposal of neutral parental rights, but instead, I interrupt him and say, "I'm in love with you, too, Nathan Sharpe."

There's only a second of hesitation before he launches himself at me, arms wrapping around my waist and tugging me in close as I laugh, completely unbalanced.

"Say it again," he growls, nose brushing my ear.

"I'm in love with you." It comes out like a murmur. Nate buries his face in my neck. I press myself against him. I missed this. I missed feeling safe, feeling like *his*.

When he pulls back, it's inevitable that our mouths find each other. His lips ghost over mine before diving in to capture them, a fervent kiss that leaves my knees shaking and something deep in my core swelling.

"I am an idiot," he murmurs against my lips. "I shouldn't have told you to leave."

I just can't find it in me to argue right now. All I want is for him to keep touching me, his hands roaming my back and sides as we breathe each other in before going back for more.

"You should have told me you were telling *my brother*."

"Maybe. But like I said—he's not upset. And once he gets over the shock, I think he'll actually be excited."

His hand settles between us, on my belly.

He pulls back and gives me a charming, lopsided smile.

"Who wouldn't be with everything we've got, Genevieve Walker?"

Chapter 44

Nathan

Jenson is in the barn again, only this time, I'm not ready to fight him.

He's bent over an open binder, comparing photos to the sheath of blueprints I've pulled out. Six years' worth of a hobby. Of *work*. At least, that's what Jenson's trying to convince me.

"You need to pivot. Every company does, eventually. And this is it, Nate."

He stands up, gesturing to the portfolio. Specifically, an intricate China cabinet I created a few months ago—before Gen, when I tried to fill my anxious time with staying busy.

"You want Ironside to go from a construction business to boutique carpentry?"

"Not exactly. I think you can meld the two together. Obviously, you should keep Owl Factory small-scale. But clients will pay for this kind of craftsmanship, Nate. And this way, you can step away from Ironside—stay an investor, if you'd like, and have a say on the board. But it won't have to suck the life out of you anymore."

That sounds...

Nice.

It sounds like exactly what I need. Since winning Gen back, all I can think about is her. *Life*. Eva and our baby, who is well on its way. Hell, even the dog.

I want more of that.

I want more of the things that matter. Making more money just doesn't hold the same appeal anymore.

"Not everyone has to get swallowed up by their work," Jenson suggests, as if reading my mind. He settles into a junky computer chair nearby and crosses his legs.

“That’s pretty ironic, coming from you. You just took over ownership of a company a year ago.”

He smirks. I can see us in it, the Sharpe family genes. At least, the pieces of it we’re finally fitting together.

“True. But I’m playing a long game, Nate. You’ve been at this for, what, two decades now? Maybe it’s time you slow down.” He tips his head to the side, a sly look on his face. “Heard you’re going to need some vacation time, anyway.”

My eyes narrow.

Chris and Jenson already know. All of it—I finally admitted it to Chris—that my feelings for Gen were more than just physical. And when I broke the news about the pregnancy, he literally jumped up and let out a ridiculous *whoop!*

I’ve decided to try and forge a relationship with Jenson. Not one like what Chris and I have, but something close, maybe. A few days after getting Gen back, we went to brunch with my half brother and his wife. We broke the news there, and though I know he has a lot of questions, the pair were happy for us. Which is good enough, for now.

Can’t talk about the pregnancy without talking logistics, though, so it also came out that Gen’s taking over as Saucer’s executive chef. It’ll be a four-month stint, and then planned maternity leave. But hopefully long enough to establish a new menu and get the team operating sufficiently.

Shaking my head, I try to bring the focus back to the present.

“So. *If* I were interested in doing this, how would I go about it?” Genuine curiosity takes over as Jenson starts to explain the details of scaling down Ironside and building up Owl Factory.

As much as I want to focus, though, my mind is elsewhere...in a few days Gen has her next ultrasound appointment.

We’ll be finding out if we’re having a boy or a girl.

And later, at home—at *my house*, I mentally correct, having honored Gen’s wish to live separately until we figure out what comes after Germany—we’ll tell Eva the news that she’s going to be a big sister over lunch.

My heart does a little jump in my chest at the thought of how excited she’ll be. It’s been tough for her, being an only child. And while this isn’t really the classic family setup, it’s the one we’ve made for ourselves. And one that makes me feel whole.



LATER THAT NIGHT, I stop by Gen’s and bring a big greasy pizza. She laughs when she opens the door, taking the proffered bottle of red wine I hold out.

“Really? *This* is how you want the night to go? Also, you know I can’t drink wine, right?”

I shoot her a grin. “You said you were hungry. Figured you didn’t want to cook. And the wine is for me. This” – I pull out a root beer – “is for you.”

“Fair enough. And you’re right, I’m pretty drained from packing.”

It’s odd to see her apartment mostly packed up in such a short time, just when I was getting to know her space—the bits and pieces of who she is, where she came from. I feel young all over again, discovering this person I’m in love with.

“Did you tell Eva?” she asks nervously, looking over her shoulder as she shifts some boxes off the couch. “About us... dating?”

“Let me get those. And yes, I did.”

There’s a weighted pause.

“And?”

“And she asked if we can go get ice cream this weekend. But I explained to her you’re flying out Monday and will probably want to rest.”

Gen practically leaps up from where she settled on the couch, pizza box now on the table.

“What? No, I can fit ice cream in. I won’t see you guys for a month, Nate. And if she’s okay with it...”

There’s still a little nervousness there. I lean down, give her chin a light tug, drag her lips toward mine.

I’ll never get sick of kissing her.

“Of course she’s okay with it, hon. She *loves* you.”

Gen blushes a pretty shade of pink, one that only makes me want to steal another kiss. But I’ve been trying to course correct since we made this official. Spend more time getting to know her and less between the sheets.

As tempting as the latter is...

I flip open the pizza box as Gen turns on the TV, the glow somehow making her even more beautiful.

“What time do you have to be home?” she asks worriedly, glancing at the clock. I lace our fingers together, pull our entwined hands onto my lap.

“Don’t worry about it. She’s with Chris, and you and I... we have all night.”

Okay.

So maybe I’m bad at resisting temptation.

But I’m going to get every minute I can with this woman before she jets off to take Europe by storm. After months spent in denial, I have a lot of time to make up for.

Chapter 45

Genevieve

It's one of those early fall mornings when the morning air is crisp, chilly, and the light is golden. It spills through the closed windows and *should* be warming my body, but something—or someone—else is.

Nate's tongue plays me like an instrument, pulling every muscle taut as my back arches from the bed.

“Oh God, right there.”

He chuckles against my clit, then buries his face in my pussy again.

A whine of disappointment slips out. He's been edging me like this all morning and at this point, I'm not even sure I could orgasm if I wanted to. Everything feels overstimulated, oversensitive, and my thighs are exhausted from trembling around his shoulders.

He licks one last long path and then comes up for air, tossing the thin quilt off. His muscled shoulders ripple smoothly as he climbs back up the bed to drop beside me.

I pout.

“You're going to kill me, Nathan. And make me late for my flight.”

Another chuckle and that characteristic Sharpe one-sided smirk. All the brothers share it, but in the last few weeks, I've seen it more and more on Nathan's face.

“You won't be late. Just gotta make sure you get a proper send-off.”

For a moment, while he rustles around in the bed, I marvel at the man in front of me. He's clean-shaven and his haircut makes those green eyes pop even more, somehow. Later this week, when I'm getting settled in Germany, he'll be officially

presenting Owl Factory to the public. What was once a hobby turned into something he can do full time.

He reaches out, grabs me by the hips, and maneuvers my body around.

“What are you doing?” My legs flail clumsily as he situates me on top of his abs. They’re rigid as he flexes to hold me up, each dip making my mouth water as I look down at him.

“I haven’t had you like this yet.”

His cock throbs and bounces against my ass. Unable to help myself, I wriggle against him, getting wetter at the thought.

“True. One last thing to check off the list before we won’t see each other for a month, hmm?”

That smirk again as he grips my hips, lifting and pushing me back, just a few inches, until his cock slips between us and slides against my pussy.

My head drops back, a moan slipping out as a shiver rides up my spine.

“God, that’s so good.”

A dark rumbling laugh. “We haven’t even started yet, baby.”

Leaning forward, I lose myself in kissing him. It’s almost as good as the sex. I want it all the time now that we’re “official” and not just two adults sneaking around. I grind against him, biting Nate’s lip as the head of his cock nudges my clit and makes me gasp with pleasure.

He scoops an arm behind my back, expertly lifting me just enough to line himself up and drop me back down on his thick length. My pussy aches deliciously as he stretches me. I straighten back up with a shudder and grind down on him again.

My eyes flicker up.

“Stop looking at the time.”

He slaps my ass just hard enough to sting and I yelp. Nate's hand comes up, weaves into my loose hair, and he pulls carefully. My back arches, following his unspoken instructions, hips slanted. It's instinctive, inevitable. Slowly, I start to ride his cock.

The friction and the push and pull sensation on my skin send sparks to my nerve endings. Nipples tight, I reach up to touch myself. Nathan growls, slaps away my hands, replaces them with his.

My hair cascades down my back as his calloused palms massage my tits. "Just like that," he murmurs, thrusting up to meet my quickening pace. "Good girl."

The praise sends a spiral of need through me and each time I drop down onto his soaked cock, the loud sounds of our bodies meeting pushes me closer and closer to the edge. Only this time, he isn't stopping me.

He grips my thigh with one hand and my ass with the other, grinding me down on him harder. I try to pull up but he shakes his head, determined, thrusting into me, filling me until the sensations are overwhelming.

The orgasm hits me like a train. Everything goes white as pleasure pulses from my center, burning through my body to the tips of my toes, my scalp, muscles shivering with satisfaction.

I lose control completely but Nate keeps a firm grip, guiding my body against his. When I come back to myself, licking my lips, he's staring up at me with blown-out pupils. His gaze drops to my tits as they jiggle with each thrust. He reaches up and pinches and tugs at my nipple, earning a desperate whine from me.

Can I come again? Is there time?

I really shouldn't be pushing my luck. There's only one flight to Frankfurt today, and I need to be on it.

My mind goes fuzzy as Nate's pace picks up. He's breathing hard, chest bunched with muscle.

I rise up on my knees until he's just barely slipping into me. With each shallow thrust, the head of his cock catches on my entrance, a feeling that's as frustrating as it is delicious.

"Fuck," he curses, eyelids fluttering shut as he comes, an arm wrapping around me to yank me back down as he spills into my pussy.

I finally go boneless, draping myself over his chest. The feeling of him still buried inside me is so satisfying, I could stay here forever. Dreamily, I wonder why the hell I'm going to Germany.

After a few quiet moments, Nate sighs. He rubs small circles across my shoulder blades. "We should get moving."

There's a sadness in his voice that breaks my heart. A swell of anxiety fills my chest as I realize just how much I *don't want to leave him*.

But I can't turn my back on this. This opportunity is something I've been working for since I started my career as a chef. If I don't take it, someday I'll regret it—I'm sure of it.

I roll off him carefully, thighs pressed together so as not to make a mess all over his bed. Nate stands, stretches, and strides to the bathroom. He comes back with a warm washcloth and hands it to me.

"Thanks." I grin up at him shyly. It's ridiculous that I've spent so much time in bed with this man, but he still makes my stomach flutter with butterflies.

We go about cleaning up and getting dressed in comfortable silence, something I've gotten used to over the last two weeks. With Eva back at school as of yesterday, the house is quiet. Except for Brutus snoring somewhere downstairs.

Nate dips into the bathroom and I take a moment to gaze around the bedroom. It hits me right then that I'm going to miss this place, miss the pool house, the guest bedroom across the hall, the kitchen. I'm going to miss Eva climbing onto a stool to ask a million questions and begging for sweets.

The doorbell rings. Unthinkingly, I start for the hallway. This house feels so much like *home* now that I don't even hesitate to answer the door.

Russ stands on the stoop.

His eyes are hooded, guarded.

“Morning, sis.”

I swallow, wishing I'd taken a quick shower or tried harder to put myself together. “Morning. Do you want to come in?” I step aside, but Russ shakes his head.

Nate comes downstairs and as soon as he sees my brother, he mirrors his somber expression. *Men*.

But my belly is twisted in knots. Despite the tentative understanding with everyone—that Nathan and I are a couple now and expecting a baby—there's still an edge of betrayal anyone would feel.

“Russ,” Nate greets him with a nod. Russ nods back.

So awkward. Will they ever get over it?

“Ready?” Russ asks stiffly, stepping back. He's driving me back to my apartment to pick up my luggage and then to the airport.

Nate slips an arm around my waist and presses a kiss to my temple. “I'll see you there.”

I give him a tight smile and check that I have everything before heading out to Russ's car. He's clearly still uncomfortable, staring out through the windshield as Nate closes the door.

Once we're out on the road, we sink back into ourselves. Brother and sister. All the crap we've been through, with foster homes and trying to stay close.

“Are you sure about this?”

The question is abrupt. I look at Russ, his brows furrowed as he glances my way. A hand automatically goes protectively to my belly.

“Yes. Russ, I know it’s weird for you with Nate and I getting together, but—”

He shakes his head. “Not that. Are you sure you want to leave? To do this whole thing with Saucer?”

My eyes go wide. I definitely was not expecting *that*.

“I think I need to,” I admit. I haven’t talked to anyone else about this, not even Sienna. About my misgivings and the urge to stay. “I think I just need to know I can have this if I want it, and I can do it and do it well. You know? And then when that’s out of the way, I can come back to...”

To Nate. To Eva. To the little family we’re making, even thousands of miles away from each other.

He sighs. “It is weird for me, Gen, but if you’re happy...” A shake of his head. “Nate’s a good guy. I think I told you that right when you started working for him. I meant it then and I mean it now. Am I thrilled with how this all worked out? No. But I kind of get it.”

His lips curve up in a sly smile. “You two make sense. You balance out his grumpiness, and he tones down your attitude.”

I laugh at that because he’s right. We’re just good for each other.

“I know it’s going to take time, but I just want you to know—if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be this happy, Russ.”

I reach out and give him an awkward side hug over the center console. He chuckles and shimmies my arm off. “Yeah, yeah. You are happy?”

It’s a serious question, and I give him a serious answer. “Yes. Very.”

All the tension that’s been lingering since he found out about Nate and I slowly dissipates. His shoulders relax, his face softens, and I don’t feel that edge of panic at keeping a secret anymore.

“Good. That’s all that matters, then.” Russ steps on the gas. “Let’s get you to Germany.”

Epilogue

Genevieve

One Month Later

As I step into the airport, I seriously consider calling Otto right now and telling him I won't be returning to Frankfurt. Ever.

Almost eight hours on a plane, pregnant and exhausted. At least the nausea finally went away a few weeks ago.

Hefting the little carry-on bag I brought with me, I look up at the signs and head for baggage claim. JFK is as crowded as ever, even on a Tuesday morning.

What a mundane day for something so wonderful—*coming home*.

“Thank God,” I sigh as I step onto the escalator. The baggage claim comes into view little by little, a crowd of people waiting as the carousel turns.

I would know those shoulders anywhere.

My heart does a little skip, and I take the last few steps of the escalator quickly. A little blond head in the crowd turns.

“Gen!”

Eva runs toward me as her father turns behind her, my luggage in both his large hands. She dodges through a few people and finally crashes into me.

“Oof!”

“Eva, be careful!” Nate's voice rings out as he strides toward us. His worried gaze finds mine and I smile, reassuring him silently. *I'm fine, she didn't hurt me or the baby.*

My pregnancy is now fully visible at nineteen weeks. Nate notices the oversized Van Halen shirt I'm wearing and shakes his head, smiling.

“Didn't know they made maternity band shirts.”

He drops my bags and sweeps me into a kiss. Right then, my selfish brain is sure of it. I can't go back. I can't leave *this*.

"I missed you," he murmurs against my lips as he pulls away. People are staring at the affectionate display, but I don't care. His hands skim under the hem of my shirt, palms on my belly.

Then he feels it.

His eyes go wide.

"Is that...?"

"Yes." I laugh. "She's been kicking a lot lately."

Eva scoots in excitedly, asking if she can feel, too. When I nod, Nate guides her hand to where the little foot is pressing. She squeals and pulls away, then tentatively reaches out again, totally transfixed.

"That's your sister." Nate's proud grin makes my chest swell with love. How did I get lucky enough to find the perfect man, completely by accident? If it weren't for that hookup in the alley...

"You look tired," he says worriedly, hefting the bags again. I try to wave off his concern, but I'm sure I look like hell. "We can just go right home if you'd rather."

I shake my head, curious at Eva's darting gaze as she looks back and forth between us. "No, I still want to see it. It's on the way anyway, right?"

"Wait till you see it, Gen!" Eva takes my hand, tugging me excitedly toward the exit. I eye the pair of them, not sure what's going on...but something is up.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we pull up outside a row of shops in an older district of the city.

"There," Eva points out, though I recognize the area from driving through in the past and from my FaceTime calls with

Nate. It's exactly what I had in mind.

The front of the restaurant is painted black wood, the windows massive and dark with butcher paper. Antique style wine red lettering over the lintel reads "Bittersweet Roux."

My dream.

Right here in New York, where it all started, and where new beginnings are taking root.

Nate opens the car door and helps me out onto the sidewalk. Eva slips out herself, running up to the door.

"You did this?" I ask, running my hand over the ornate but understated carvings just below the windows. We got the property for a relatively cheap price, for the city, but only because it was pretty run-down. I wasn't sure at first, but Nate took one look and reassured me it just needed polishing.

He nods, a mischievous smirk on his face. "Ready to see the inside?"

Eva yanks the door open excitedly and runs in. I follow, squinting as my eyes adjust to the dark.

Then Nate flicks on the lights.

"Surprise!"

The dining room is small, intimate, and filled with everyone I love. Chris is as ridiculous as ever, arms raised high to draw attention to a banner that says *Welcome Home, Gen* hanging from the ceiling. Russ moves forward to wrap me in a tight hug, and over his shoulder, I see Jenson and Mel tucked in closely to one another, their baby in Mel's arms. Sienna is standing in front of an array of pink cupcakes and food, nothing elaborate that I can see, but all of a sudden, I'm starving.

"What is this?" I laugh, moving farther into the room once Russ releases me. Nate slips an arm around my waist.

"Thought we'd kill two birds with one stone. You get to see your restaurant, and we can have a quick party to welcome you home."

Chris rolls his eyes at the idea of a “quick party.”

“Slash baby shower,” he adds, proffering a gift bag.

“Welcome back, Gen,” Mel chimes in, standing to wrap me in a hug, radiating warmth. I sink into it and find myself on the verge of tearing up, which is embarrassing, but indicative of just how much everyone here means to me.

“You guys didn’t have to do this.”

“We wanted to,” Russ says easily with a shrug. Sienna comes around to take my bag and leads me to a chair at the table, handing me a plate.

“I know you. You’re starving,” she deadpans, earning a laugh from me.

I immediately go for jalapeño poppers, prompting everyone else to dig in as well. Eva makes a beeline for the cupcakes as Nate chides her to eat real food first.

As everyone settles in, I get my first good look at Bittersweet Roux.

It’s a tiny restaurant. Just what I wanted. Enough room for maybe ten tables, low lighting, shelves high on the wall where I’ll put trailing plants. And the open-style kitchen I always loved.

“It’s almost done,” Nate leans in to tell me. “The crew will be finished up in there this week, and then the inspector comes in. After that, it’s all up to you.”

Our eyes meet.

He’s not asking me to come back, not right away. Which only makes me want to leave Germany sooner.

But I have a job to finish there—Saucer’s team is training on the new menu while I’m gone, and I’ll need to find my replacement.

Then I can come home to this. My dream. A little tasting menu-style restaurant in the heart of the city. No showy PR, no power couple articles. Nathan’s insisted on backing off

entirely, except for the carpentry work, which he refused to hand over to anyone else.

Bittersweet Roux is everything I ever wanted. And Nate, well, he's everything I didn't know I needed.

"How's business been going?" Jenson asks Nathan. They don't see each other often but stay in touch. As far as I know, this is Jenson's first time back in New York since I left.

"Good, really good. Fighting to keep it small, but we knew that was coming when we were talking everything out." Nate gives his brother a nod of appreciation. Just as he pushed me to follow *my* dreams, Jenson pushed Nate to go all-in on his.

He's officially hands-off with Ironside, focusing full time on Owl Factory. Right now, it's still operating out of his barn, with only four employees to help out.

"That's the tough part about boutique," Mel chimes in. "Once something becomes popular, everyone wants it. And it's not surprising your work has become popular." She gestures at our surroundings. It's like everything else Nate creates—simple, but flawlessly beautiful. There are little details here and there in the woodwork that give Bittersweet character.

"Thank you," I murmur, twining our hands under the table. He squeezes back in reply.

"I know you're not officially back yet, Gen, but if you're ever looking for a pastry chef..." Sienna raises her brows. I've known her long enough to know she's only half joking.

"You'd leave the Fig? Really?"

She shrugs. "They lost my loyalty the day they cut you out without hearing an explanation. And now they look like complete asses with Erik serving time. I'm just saying. The idea of a tasting menu appeals to me, and I know how much you like to play around with innovation."

It's quick, but a silent conversation takes place between us. Sienna is letting me know her offer is genuine. And I smile back, more than ready to take on the challenge of this place with her by my side.

“What do *you* cook?” Eva asks curiously, licking pink frosting off her fingers. Sienna nods at the cupcakes.

“Dessert.”

Eva’s eyes light up, her head whipping around to look at Nathan. “You can do dessert as a job?”

We all laugh, relaxing into the moment. The baby kicks again eagerly. I wonder if she knows we’re home, and just how much she’s loved.

After what must be close to an hour of chatting and catching up, exhaustion starts to set in. I lean my head against Nate’s shoulder, lids drooping as I get lost in the comfort of being around friends and family.

Nate rubs a gentle circle on my back. The way he shifts his weight has me sitting up. When I look around, everyone’s eyes are on me, as if they’re expecting something.

“Gen, I know it hasn’t been long that we’ve known each other, and doing this long-distance hasn’t been easy, either.” He slips a hand into his pocket.

My heart jumps.

“But you know me better than anyone. You know where I came from and what I struggle with.”

Across the table, Jenson and Chris lock eyes, both thinking of their father, no doubt.

“Despite how much of a grump I was and how much I struggled to come to terms with how I feel about you, I want you to know that I’m completely in love with you. And even with an entire ocean separating us, I want you to be mine. If you’ll have me.”

He thumbs open the box, revealing a silver band with a round diamond bracketed in a little floral halo. He takes my hand and our eyes meet over the ring.

“Yes.”

Yes, yes, yes!

I want to stand up and shout it, leap into his lap, but I'm pretty sure that would startle everyone in the room.

Instead, I can only grin like a complete lovesick fool as Nate slips the ring on my finger, the look on his face as ecstatic as mine.

Eva bounces excitedly in her seat as everyone calls out their congratulations.

But in this moment, it's only Nate and me—our eyes locked—as he leans in to steal a kiss.

THE END

Did you like *Broken Daddy*? Then you'll LOVE [*Boss's Fake Fiancée: An Enemies to Lovers Romance*](#).

* * *

The big bad boss wants me to play fake fiancée for the weekend.

We played this game once when we were kids.

Then I broke his heart.

Now he's here to huff and puff and blow my little house down.

Today is the first day at my new job!

New outfit. New hair. New me.

Everything was excellent,

Until I took a wrong turn into the men's locker room...

Shock doesn't begin to describe seeing my ex half naked with nothing but a towel around his fit as hell v-line.

Some called our young love, puppy love.

I called it, down right insanity.

The way I wanted him would turn a housewife into a nun.

But then I pushed him away, afraid to get hurt.

Most stories say the guy is the problem.

But in this tale, I'm the problem.

So when he had the audacity to ask me to play fake fiancée for the weekend I was dumbstruck.

I almost said no.

I most definitely...

should have said NO.

* * *

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Boss's Fake Fiancée Sneak
Peek

Melanie

“Jenson?”

There’s a mostly naked man in front of me, but instead of taking in every cut of those perfect abs or curve of his pecs, I’m staring at the little tattoo on his hip.

What the hell?

The towel drying his hair—not the one around his waist, unfortunately—comes down and I’m standing face-to-face with my former high school boyfriend.

His gray-blue eyes are emotionless as they take me in. Shouldn’t he be at least slightly curious about what I’m doing in the men’s locker room of Dupont Analytics?

What company devotes an entire floor to an employee gym? How was I supposed to know I’d get lost in it while trying to find my new office?

“Melanie.”

Jenson Sharpe says my name easily, as if it hasn’t been over a decade since we’ve seen one another. He’s definitely changed from the eighteen-year-old I used to get wrapped up in. His once too sharp jaw is now just right, square and proportionate. There’s that same bow to his lip and he’s still just over six feet tall. When we were younger, he was gangly.

Not anymore.

He’s definitely grown into...everything.

“If you’re done staring,” he says flatly, tossing the towel in his hand away. The other is still wrapped precariously around his hips, just under that elegant tattoo he got on his eighteenth birthday. A week before I dumped him.

My eyes linger on the shell, beautifully shaded and realistic, but broken into the Fibonacci sequence. The tattoo of a true math nerd.

I rip my gaze away. “Sorry.”

“What are you doing here, Melanie?” Jenson’s tone is still cool and calm. Despite my heart thundering and my brain telling me to run, I look at him and feel...safe.

The same way I felt all those years ago.

Before I can explain, two men breeze by. They look very awake for 6:30 a.m. and wear amused and curious expressions.

“Mr. Sharpe.”

“Dean. You’ll have those financial reports on my desk by eight?”

A submissive nod. I look at Jenson with narrowed eyes as the pair exit the gym. *Financial reports.*

There’s only one reason I’d run into Jenson Sharpe in a place like Dupont Analytics; one reason why he’d be getting financial reports from men who clearly defer to him.

“What do you do here?”

His eyes run down my body and it sends heat through me, as if he’s caressed me with his hands. Memories of nights spent in his beat-up Honda flash through my mind. His fingers playing my body sinfully, teasing and taunting.

“I’m the CEO. I should be asking what *you’re* doing here.”

The towel around his waist loosens just slightly. Mortified—and tempted—my eyes snap back to his face. “It’s my first day of work.”

“And you just happened to wander into the men’s locker room. Before business hours.”

My face heats. It looks bad, but is that a glimmer I see in his eye? A hint of humor? Does he still remember the fussy girl I used to be, uptight about not only arriving somewhere on time, but needing to be early?

“I...wanted to get settled in before everyone else got here.”

“Stay right here.”

I blink in surprise. It comes out as a command, one he obviously expects me to obey. This definitely isn't the Jenson I knew, and neither do I recall the cold, unaffected attitude he wears like a mask.

“Excuse me?”

Arms crossed, I can't help popping out a hip. Jenson Sharpe may be half-naked, damp, and delicious, but that doesn't give him the right to be rude. Even if he is the CEO of the company I just started working for.

His eyes cut into me.

“I said, stay here. I'm going to change.”

The thought of that towel coming off momentarily takes my breath away. I watch him walk into the other room where the changing area is, the muscles of his back trailing down to two dimples just above his ass.

“I must be in some kind of alternate reality,” I whisper to myself, feeling crazy. “I'm still at home, dreaming.”

But no. A few minutes later, Jenson walks back into the room.

He's wearing a suit that fits him perfectly, one that compliments his eyes and accentuates his broad shoulders.

“Come.”

The word sends a thrum of...*something* through me. I try to ignore it, following him blindly. I don't even know if this is the same way I came in, but we end up in a hallway. People are starting to arrive, hurrying down the hall here and there.

A few look at Jenson fleetingly before dropping their gazes to the ground. Frowning after them, I try to keep up with his long strides.

“What department did you get hired to, Melanie?”

Melanie. He's using my full name. All of a sudden I'd give anything to hear him say *Mel* the way he used to.

But it's been twelve years, and we're practically strangers now.

“Marketing.”

His eyes flicker with curiosity as he glances over his shoulder. Back in high school, I was adamant that I’d go to an art school and become a great photographer or painter. He must be wondering what I’m doing in a massive corporation that is slowly taking over the healthcare sector. *I’m a sellout.*

I shake the thought off. It’s the money that matters, and Dupont Analytics is paying me a lot to head up their marketing division.

Jenson doesn’t speak, not even when we end up alone in an elevator. He hits a number—the fifth floor. There’s a directory inside the doors that tells me we’re heading for both marketing and strategy.

In the small space, it’s agonizingly quiet.

The doors open and Jenson steps out. Even more annoyed now, I follow him...because I don’t know what else to do. He *is* bringing me to my office, which is where I was trying to end up in the first place.

A small part of me hopes to get him alone for more than an elevator ride and ask...what? How he’s been? What the heck he’s doing here? In the deepest part of my soul I know I owe him an apology for disappearing all those years ago, but my stomach twists at the thought of bringing it up.

Jenson turns a corner and someone lets out a startled sound. I peer around his broad back and see a woman with dark pixie cut hair. She’s quite short and stares up at Jenson in near horror.

“Mr. Sharpe, I’m so sorry—”

She sees me and all color drains from her face.

“I—Melanie, what are you doing—?”

The woman looks mortified and upset. I look at her company badge: Liza Honenfield. My boss’s assistant, who I was supposed to be meeting. Right now.

“Hi, Liza. I’m sorry. I got...caught up.”

Staring at your nearly nude CEO. Who is also my ex. No big deal, though.

Suddenly, I can't get away from Jenson fast enough. Liza looks disapproving but starts heading back the way she came. Before I can escape, Jenson's hand wraps around my wrist almost gently, and I feel a jolt of electricity run up my arm.

When I look from his fingers to his face, there's no expression there. He's a blank canvas.

"When you're settled, come find me. I have a proposition for you."

I pull my hand away and ignore the tingling sensation, something I haven't felt with a man...well, since him.

"Okay. Yes. I'll...I'll come find you."

Flashes of memories come back to me as I march toward an open area of cubicles and offices. A teenage Jenson, laughing so hard I can see all of his perfect teeth, the feeling of his mouth curving into a smile against my skin.

The last one sends a shiver up my spine that I hope Liza doesn't notice.

"What were you doing with *Jenson Sharpe*?" she hisses, blocking me into a corner near the water cooler.

"He was just helping me out after I got lost. I took a wrong turn—"

"You'll be lucky if he doesn't go straight to HR and tell them to let you go."

I scoff. "He can't do that."

Liza's eyes are wide with warning.

"Yes, he can. Jenson Sharpe is practically God here. Whatever he says, goes."

My heart drops into my stomach like a stone as Liza dives into a tour of my new work space and team.

A part of me wants to run far, far away from Jenson.

But I need this job. I took it for a reason.

I'll just have to ignore the guilt gnawing at me and do whatever I can to remain employed. Hopefully, Jenson has moved past me disappearing from his life and realized that we were just kids with crushes. Fooling around in the back of cars, going to the movies as an excuse to touch in the dark.

Was that all it was? The omniscient voice in my head asks saucily. I ignore it and decide to focus on one problem at a time.

And right now, that's getting to know every detail about my job as the head of marketing.

Even if it means having to face my past. Every. Single. Day.

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