



Forbidden
BILLIONAIRE

Next Door

KYA LANE

FORBIDDEN BILLIONAIRE NEXT DOOR

A SINGLE DAD ENEMIES TO LOVERS
ROMANCE

KYA LANE



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INTRODUCTION

I've got a new neighbor – a smokin' hot single billionaire daddy.

And apparently... he's the older brother of my douchebag ex.

Hudson's plan was to leave the city and fight for custody of his son.

Not to stir up media scandal by ending up in bed with his brother's ex.

From day one, the love-hate tension between us was real.

But our constant run-ins, his irresistible charm, and the way he adoringly cares for his son transforms me.

With one unexpected kiss, one taste, and one night of giving into temptation,

My heart's defenses have crumbled, and I can no longer resist him.

But I know this is not a win-win situation for me.

His son is his world, and I won't be the reason he loses custody of him.

Though I've fallen hard, I've accepted it and know it's time to walk away.

Now Hudson must do the same.

CHAPTER 1

GIANNA

The treadmill timer reaches 30 minutes letting me know my cool down is complete. I step onto the sides of the running belt and wait for it to slow to a stop while I take a long sip of icy water. Next to me, Claire is doing the same. “Oh, my word, that was a good workout!” She is a bit out of breath and glowing red. I smile and nod, stepping off the machine. We both had that post-workout high, and Claire always got a little hyper straight after the gym “I feel great! Are you up for a little sauna session today? Maybe grab a bite to eat?”

I shake my head. I tucked a loose strand of my long, dark, curly hair behind my ear. I wiped the workout glow off my face with my gym towel. “Sorry hon, I can’t, I’ve got two new clients I’m meeting with after lunch tomorrow and I really want to go through their profiles today and prepare for that.”

My new publishing agency is my baby and I absolutely love what I do! Unfortunately, the past week I have been feeling like I was falling behind a little because we had a new neighbor moving in and it was impossible to get a lot done with all the noise he was making!

“That new neighbor of mine is driving me crazy. Renovations are still ongoing, and it’s just been chaos there the entire time. So much noise I can’t think straight! But this morning I saw the moving truck arrive, so I really hope most of the building side of things is finished if they are actually moving in today!”

Claire's eyebrows shot up and she did a little excited jump, "Oh wow, Gianna, I can't believe I almost forgot to tell you. I heard some mutterings around the office about your new neighbor. He is some billionaire and apparently, he wanted to move to the suburbs to escape a big social media scandal! He might be famous!"

"Oh, just what we need!" I roll my eyes "Another old money asshole thinking he owns the whole neighborhood." I already don't fit in with the other neighbors, now some billionaire is right next door to me." It is frustrating for me. These rich, pompous idiots who live around me have no idea what it feels like to actually have to work for your own money. They all had it handed to them on a silver platter, while I dedicated my entire life to building what I have and being able to afford to live in my beautiful home.

I sigh and shrug my shoulders, "Well Claire Bear, let's just hope he keeps all his scandals to himself. I don't have time for rich boy drama!"

"Too true, Gianna, especially after that waste-of-oxygen ex of yours! Gosh, you do know how to pick them hey! Just remember the rule – you aren't allowed to choose your next boyfriend. Samantha and I have to approve any new man in your life because even though you are the baddest bitch in the business you absolutely suck at choosing decent men!"

"Trust me, it is going to be a long, long, long time before I am stupid enough to be interested in any men at all!"

Claire laughs as we head towards the locker room.

I need to grab a quick shower and then shoot home to finish up my preparations for these new clients. It is so exciting running my own company. Honestly, I am really proud of myself. People don't always realize how hard I had to work to be where I am today. Lucky for me I have two amazing friends who have been so supportive every step of the way and continue to be even now.

Arriving home, I close the front door behind me. Every time I step into my home, I feel this wonderful sense of pride.

It is mine. Not given to me, not some rich sugar daddy, not a trust fund – just me and a lot of hard work.

Light streams in making the place feel bright and cheerful. I breathed a sigh of relief when I noticed that it was actually quiet. For a change! I hope it stays that way as I really have a lot of work to do.

Dropping my gym bag next to the kitchen counter I grab a glass of water and head straight to my little home office. Time to get to work!

Unfortunately, to my horror, as I sit down, and flip open my laptop the loud thumping sounds from next door start again. Followed by the high-pitched whine of a large drill or some other piece of industrial equipment. Oh, my word! I put my face in my hands and fight back an angry yell. How am I ever going to get work done under these circumstances? I want to march next door and have a not-so-polite discussion with this inconsiderate neighbor about how some of us are actually trying to work and can't survive off Daddy's money!

I lean back in my chair, running my fingers through my long dark hair, and sigh in frustration. Guess my work-from-home day was going to turn into an office day.

I reluctantly begin to pack up my laptop and files, slipping them into my favorite workbag and dart to my closet to change into something more office appropriate. I swapped my soft, comfortable sweatpants for a pair of light blue jeans, a white cotton shirt, and white sneakers. I do not have to see any clients today so I can get away with dressing a little toned down.

I run a brush through my dark curls and spin my hair up into a big bun then do a quick touch of makeup before heading out to my car.

The noise continues the entire time, grating at my nerves. I am normally such a chill person, but this is really getting to me. I can't even think straight through this chaos. In my car, I turn the volume up and put on one of my favorite songs to try and drown out the building orchestra my neighbor is playing. Noise pollution is a real thing. I wonder if I could put in a

complaint. Isn't he supposed to get permission from the neighbors before he does this sort of thing? I guess he really just doesn't care.

As I pull out of the driveway, I spot an obscene sports car pulling up into the driveway. A Pontiac Trans AM Firebird. Who chooses a car like that?!? Loud, obnoxious, and over the top. He has money but he clearly does not have taste. Why isn't he driving a Mercedes or a BMW? Like all the other rich idiots who live around here.

To top it off there was a baby on board sticker on the back! I cannot stop myself from laughing out loud when I spot that. A baby? "Where do you even put the car seat!" I laugh out loud again, but then I see him turning to look at me. I quickly look away before I even have a chance to scout out his vibe and although I meant what I said I hope he did not actually hear me. Oh well, even if he did, maybe he needs a reality check.

I drive away from the noise and the ridiculous car trying to refocus my thoughts. I take a deep breath and put my mind on the work ahead of me. New clients, new business, exciting things happening, and time to get things done.

CHAPTER 2

HUDSON

I walk out of the meeting with the architect feeling more frustrated than ever. Glancing at my watch I note I still have a few hours before I need to fetch my little guy from daycare. I could pop over to the new house and see how things were going there. Everything in my life right now feels so unsettled and the stress is grinding my nerves away. Trying to juggle work, the move, the renovations, and being a single dad is challenging, to say the least.

The architect had gone through some of the problems with me about the build. I have no idea how he did not spot the structural issues when he first drafted the plan! And now I have to go and check up on the builder who quite frankly was an idiot. They were all idiots. No matter how much money you throw at projects it still does not remove the idiot factor of basic human functioning. Hopefully, this will all be finished soon. I know the moving truck is set to arrive this morning as well and I want to make sure that they put everything in the correct rooms. My little guy and I will be staying in the house for the first time tonight and I want to make sure he is as comfortable and happy as he can be. I want it to be a special night for him. He deserves that. Taylor is a good kid. A happy baby overall. Generally, he sleeps through most nights without crying, eats well, and is pretty well-behaved for a three-year-old. But I know moves like this can be difficult. It is difficult enough for me and I actually understand what is happening. Being so little he does not really understand why we are moving and that all of this chaos is just a steppingstone to a much quieter and happier life. Well, that was the goal. I chose

this area, out of the city, because I was tired of the constant harassment by the press, social media drama, and pretty much everything that has been going on in our lives these past couple of years. Both of us need change and the best way to do that is to move far away from the penthouse skyscraper we used to call home, surrounded by way too many prying eyes and nosy people. But moving to the suburbs was not without its own issues.

I cannot believe I have already had two complaints this morning about noise. Yes, people. We are building; there will be noise! How stupid are these idiots? It's not a permanent issue!

Everything will be fine. I am trying to reassure myself.

The bottom line is that this was the overall right choice for my family's appearance. Being a single dad, staying in a wholesome suburb instead of a penthouse on the twentieth floor of some modern building; it just presents a much better image.

Especially with this ridiculous custody battle going on. I still cannot believe that Karla is pushing so hard to try and get custody of Taylor. She never has been interested in being a mom! It was always and still is only about the money for her. I thought the court would take one look at her history of drinking and drug use and dismiss the case, but of course, she had fabricated a bunch of absolute bullshit to try and make me look bad, spilling the stories over into the media and actually managing to win some of those blind social media junkies over to her side. It is causing havoc for my family and it's even worse for my son. I even had to find him a new daycare after the reporters started swarming outside the one he was attending when one of their employees leaked the fact that he was enrolled there.

My blood begins to boil at the thought of it and as I pull up into my new driveway, I feel a scowl etch its way on my face. Whatever. I will take her down in court. Piece by piece. No matter how long it takes or how much it will cost, I will do it for my son. Because he deserves the world, and I will make sure he gets it.

I park my Pontiac and pull up the hand break. One really good thing about living in the suburbs is the space. I will have so much more space to do what I love. The only other thing besides spending time with Taylor that brings me some joy in this world is working on my classic cars. I will even be able to bring a few of them out of the warehouse and with a driveway this big Taylor and I can spend some time outdoors. I can teach him about how the engines work while I am rebuilding them. I know, he is too young really, but I think it is a great way for us to spend quality time bonding. I think he will grow to love these classic cars as much as I do and one day it will be 'our thing'.

My next-door neighbor is getting into her car. I watch her close the door and start up the engine. She looks sour. Scowling and grumpy. She might have actually looked quite pretty if she had bothered to brush her hair and look more presentable. As she drives by, I see her saying something but don't quite make out what it is, then she laughs again and drives off. Whatever. I do not actually have to like my neighbors. In truth, I want nothing to do with any of them. It is just Taylor and me. We have a beautiful big house, and we can hide away from the world in here.

Turning to look at the house, I sigh. Well, it will be beautiful when all of these renovations are finished.

I walk into the large sunlit foyer of our new home. Strange to think that I always thought that the adventure of moving to the suburbs would be one undertaken with my wife, as a family. Guess you can never really trust anyone. Never put your faith in anyone. People change and people screw you over every chance they get. The world is about money and status and nothing else, unfortunately. This is the dark reality of human nature.

The movers are still busy unpacking boxes. They were supposed to be done within the hour, but it was a mess.

"Where is the manager?" my voice comes out snipped and angry.

The young man carrying a box towards the kitchen jumps and almost drops everything. Is everyone completely useless?

“He’s – uh – he is –” The kid stammers over his words so much I feel instant irritation.

“Forget it. I will find him myself.”

The kid practically runs away from me.

I need to make sure that even if the rest of the house is not ready today, at least Taylor’s room has to be.

“Mr. Johnson!” I stride into the room and the manager of the moving company immediately stands up from what he was working on and walks over to me. “Yes, Sir. Welcome home, Sir.”

At least this man has some manners.

“Why are we running late? I was told you would be done before lunchtime?”

“Well, Sir, we were not aware that the builders would be here while we were trying to unload everything and it has slowed us down somewhat, but we will only be a few more hours. It will be finished today.”

“I don’t care for your excuses Johnson. I paid you to do a job. Now make sure it is done!”

The manager just nods. Good. I am so high-strung right now that if he had dared to try and spit out another reason or excuse for why the job was not going to be done on time, I might have had to kick him out right then and there.

I look around. I cannot face talking to the builders now. I do not think the site manager is here anyway. Making my way upstairs to Taylor’s room I go through the list of things I have to do today. I have done something I pretty much never do; I took the day off for the move. It is stressing me out though and my phone has not stopped buzzing all day. My assistant is handling most of it, but people in my business do not take time off. Ever. From a very young age, it was pounded into my mind that business was life. And everything in my life revolves around my family’s tobacco empire. And my son.

My father choosing to retire last year cannot have come at a worse time with the divorce and the media drama that comes with it, but I have no choice but to take over and keep things going strong. It is my job. The eldest of my parents' two sons and the only one the family can truly rely on.

It is my duty.

I am the face of the family and the face of the company, and everything is on my shoulders.

Opening Taylor's bedroom door, I feel relief to see that it is fully set up. He has chosen a 'universe theme' and the interior designer has actually done a decent job. A dark blue accent wall painted with galaxy swirls and a giant moon lamp over his bed plus a few other planets and some lights that look like stars and blue swirling galaxy printed bedding on his little bed. He is going to love it.

I cannot wait to see the look on his little face when he sees his new room. At least that is one less thing to worry about.

My mother would never approve of a bedroom like this. Even for a three-year-old! When I was growing up, my bedrooms had all been crisp and white, spotlessly clean and organized to the point of being almost military.

It is just how we were brought up. But I want more for my son. I want him to have a home, not just a place to sleep, but a welcoming and safe space. I have never felt at home anywhere. I grew up having everything but feeling very little. We were not allowed to play or laugh loudly or express happiness or our fears and thoughts. Children are to be seen and not heard. We were taught that someone was always watching, someone was always recording or taking photos, and therefore our behavior was of paramount importance. That's just the way it was.

But for my son, I want him to feel like this is his space. His bedroom and his home. A secret pocket away from the prying eyes of the world where he can just be himself.

It is very important to me.

Taking a quick look through his drawers and closet I can see that all of his toys and clothes are packed perfectly. Thank goodness I had asked the designer to include that in her fee as moving with a toddler was stressful enough to do on my own!

Glancing at my wristwatch I see I still have plenty of time before I need to fetch my little guy.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. The last thing I feel like is talking to someone right now, but dutifully I pull it out and look at the screen. My mother. Reluctantly I slide the green button across the screen to answer the call.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Darling!” She gushes into the phone. “How is the move going? Why you had to move all the way out there I will just never understand. How is Taylor taking it? It’s not too late to change your mind you know.”

“Everything is running smoothly.” I always try to keep my answers with my mother as short as possible and to the point so that I can avoid her being able to nitpick everything I say.

“Darling, I am just so stressed out with your move. You know there was another article online today about your wife.”

“My ex-wife. And honestly, I don’t want to hear. If the lawyers think it is something to look into, they can look into it.”

“Oh, but Daring, they were talking about your brother as well. Surely you care about Daniel?”

“You mean the same brother that was supplying my wife the prescription meds she became addicted to just before she went out to have a spree of affairs, including one with him... and those disgusting displays of drunken debauchery? That brother? The brother who was completely happy to sleep with my wife. You think I should be caring about that brother?” the anger in my voice is thick and obvious. I can’t believe I have let her get to me so quickly. Usually, I can navigate conversations with my mother without reaching this point. I guess I am more stressed out with this move than I thought.

“Hudson, do not speak to me like that!”

I stay quiet. Rather stay quiet than say what was really running through my mind. Why today, Mother, why add stress to the move and the court case? Why bring up difficult topics right now when I am in the middle of something chaotic enough as it is!

“Hudson, how is Taylor liking the new house?”

Excellent. Yes. Change the subject. “He is still at daycare. I am fetching him later today.”

“Shall I fetch him? Send me the address and I’ll have my driver take me. I can come over and help him settle in.”

The thought of having my mother here just when we are trying to settle in is not pleasant by any stretch. “No thank you, Mother. I am looking into hiring a nanny. It will be much easier. Thank you for the offer though, I appreciate it.”

I do actually want to hire a nanny. I had better message my assistant and tell him to set up some interviews for me.

“I am just trying to help, Hudson. You don’t have to brush me off so rudely. Why do you continue to disrespect me?” I know I have not brushed her off in a rude way. I know I have been polite. But this is my mother’s way. “And please Hudson, give your brother a call. He isn’t feeling very well after this latest article, and he needs your support.”

That is the last straw for me. “He needs my support?! He needs to get his life together. He is the reason that my marriage was destroyed, and he was never there to support me after that happened! Why in the world would I be there to support him now! You know I haven’t spoken to him in over two years!”

“I told you not to speak to me with that tone, Hudson. I am your mother. Call your brother. I am not asking you! I am telling you.”

This phone call is not worth the energy it is draining from me. Why do I let her get to me like this?

“Yes, Mother. I will call him.” I lie. It is easier than continuing to try and get her to understand the damage Daniel has done to my life. I have nothing to do with him now and I will never have anything to do with him again.

The same goes for my ex-wife. As soon as this custody battle is over, I will never speak to her again. Even now we only speak via the lawyers and mediators and that is perfectly fine with me. Whatever is going on between Daniel and Karla and this latest article is entirely their own problem as long as it does not spill over and cause issues for my son.

I reassure my mother that I will have her and my father over for dinner as soon as everything is settled down and I end the call as politely as I can manage. My frustration is worse than ever though, and I wonder if I can fit in a session at the gym that they have here at the estate before it is time to fetch Taylor. This is meant to be a really happy day for him, and I need to get rid of some of this agitation so that he doesn't pick up on my bad energy.

CHAPTER 3

GIANNA

“Hudson Drake!?” I stammer into the phone in total disbelief. “Hudson Drake as in Daniel Drake’s older brother?” I almost want to cry. Samantha is on the other end of the call. “Yes, honey I am so sorry. I just came across some paperwork at the office, and I mean – obviously, I am not supposed to be telling you. It is private legal documents, but I know what you have been through so when I realized that he was your new neighbor I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

“Okay but, Samantha, are you sure it is Hudson Drake as in my ex’s brother? Are there not maybe other Drake’s in the area? Please tell me you are wrong. Please.” The thought of this being a reality, my beautiful home being infested by that disgusting family, has tears threatening to escape my eyes. I close my eyes to make sure that does not happen. I am still at work, and I definitely don’t want to be walking out into the office area and having my assistant see me upset like this.

“Gi, there is only one Drake family. The tobacco empire. The stinking riches. The pompous, over-the-top parties—”

“The abusive, violent, narcissistic sons.”

“Yes, unfortunately exactly true.”

“But I have a restraining order against him!”

“Yes, you have a restraining order against Daniel, but not against Hudson.”

Samantha had been there for me during my traumatic relationship with Daniel and through the breakup and had been

a huge support after it.

I appreciate so much that she is calling me and letting me know this information, but with every cell in my body I wish it was not true.

“Just watch your back, Gi. I’m so sorry I have to run. I’ve got so much work to do. But call me if you need anything OK! And we are still on for girls’ night at your place on Wednesday, right?”

I realize I haven’t been listening to everything she is saying as my mind is still trying to come to terms with the new information. “Girls’ night? Oh yes! Of course! Definitely. Thank you, Sam, for letting me know. Bye, babe.”

I sit at my desk staring blankly at the computer screen in front of me. Why in the world would someone like Hudson want to live out in the suburbs. He is one hundred percent a city boy through and through. I assume he is just like his brother. I mean they were raised in the same spoiled brat style with too much money and thinking they own everything including the people around them... why in the world does he want to live in a quiet family estate for?

The drive to the city must be absolute hell for him every day. Why would living out here be worth that long commute? Nothing about this makes sense! Is there something happening that I need to be aware of? Is Daniel somehow involved in this – did he somehow find out where I live and have his brother buy the house next door to mess with me? He would not have been legally able or allowed to buy the property so close to me due to the restraining order, but if he had his brother put it in his name – that thought spikes my fears slightly. Would he be that smart?

It had been one of the worst relationships I had ever been in. If you want to know the meaning of the word narcissist you just have to meet Daniel. The charming, sexy, beautiful person that turns out to be the most fake, disgusting manipulative monster a person can ever meet. Manipulation at its finest! That’s how I ended up dating him. Pure manipulation. I still

hate myself for falling for all of his bullshit. That was back when I still believed in love.

I have done a lot of work on myself since our relationship and come through a huge space of healing and just finding myself again...truthfully it has been pure hell. I know I have terrible taste in men and have made some bad choices. Somehow, I am always attracted to emotionally unavailable assholes instead of the good guys, but Daniel had taken that to a whole new level for me and after breaking up with him I have made the choice to stay single and work on my business and my own life. I don't need anyone or anything from anyone.

One of the big things that has made me feel free and happy again has been moving into my new home, my own space, in a quiet place – now –somehow it seems that that is about to change.

I feel anger as memories of who Daniel was and what he had done surface fresh in my mind. No. I can't let this get to me. I take a deep breath and calm the bite of anxiety that threatens to surge through me. I will not let him mess with my life ever again. I am so much stronger now and I see him for exactly who he really is and he and that brother of his, Hudson, had better watch their step when it comes to messing with me. Whatever they have planned I will put a stop to it before it can go any further.

Thank goodness Sam had called at the end of the day. I am just finishing up the files for my two new clients and after that call, I just know I will not be able to focus anymore. Glancing at the time I see that it is actually pretty late already. I pack up my things just as my assistant pops her head through the open door, leaning into my office.

“I'm heading home, Gianna. Is there anything you need before I leave?”

My assistant is brilliant. She is smart, and efficient and knows how I like things done so we work perfectly together.

“No, I'm all set here thanks, Bridget. I'll see you tomorrow!”

She smiles and waves goodbye.

I stand up, get my things together, and head for my car. The drive home is too quiet without music on. I need to clear my head. So, I scroll through my playlist and find the most vibey song I can find and play it as loud as my speakers will allow. Singing out of tune but enjoying every moment of it.

In the back of my mind though the news of Hudson being my new neighbor is still bothering me. I need to figure out how to deal with this in a civilized and professional way. Perhaps I need to call my lawyer? Is that too extreme? Better to be ahead of the problem than to be blindsided, but he might take it as a personal attack.

Arriving home, I don't bother unpacking my work bag, I will need everything I have in there for tomorrow afternoon's meetings.

I slip my shoes off and pad around the open-plan kitchen in my pink socks. Pouring a glass of wine, I wander out to my balcony. Everything is quiet. No builders, no obscene cars, no city noise. I sit down in a big soft, outdoor chair and curl my feet up under myself. Comfortable and cozy, sipping on my wine I sit alone watching the sunset. It has taken me so long to get to this space, in my life, where I am happy alone and really honestly don't want anyone to ruin that for me. I have come to understand that real happiness is found in being in solitude and having the strength to be completely content alone.

The day's thoughts swim around in my head, and I am not sure if I am trying to convince myself that I want to be alone; or if I just do not want to believe that I will be alone for a long time because I just do not choose good men. Oh well. I still have great friends and good wine, a thriving business, and a beautiful home. What more could a girl want?



The morning is bright and warm as I lock the door behind me heading out for my walk. I slept really well last night, and I am feeling happy and excited to take on two new clients today.

The coffee has kicked in and I am ready to tackle anything. Well, almost anything – there are some things we can't be prepared for.

As I head down my driveway, I see Hudson leaving his house. Of all the things I was ready for this morning, facing him is probably not one of them. He has running gear on. Maybe he is just going to head down to the gym or something. I don't really care as long as he is going in the opposite direction of me. But no. He walks straight down his driveway and turns towards me.

He is taller than Daniel, and much fitter. His arm muscles are straining against his white shirt, and I can see the outline of his sculpted chest through the thin body-hugging material. His body is more muscular and toned and actually, they don't even have the same facial features. If I didn't know he was Daniel's brother, I would not have said they resembled each other in any way. Maybe Daniel was the milkman's kid, or some crazy serial killer. They are so different. It's actually hard to believe they're family at all. But blood is blood and no matter how good-looking the family is in general I know who they really are at heart.

He is looking right at me.

Fuck... now I have no choice but to greet him.

“Good morning, Hudson.” I nod towards him and keep my voice as neutral as possible.

“Good morning– Ms. –” He does not smile. Really? He wants to play games? Does he think I am stupid?

“I'd prefer it if we didn't pretend that you have no idea who I am and just cut straight to the point. Why are you here? What are you and Daniel up to?”

The confusion on his face causes confusion to taint mine but I quickly hide it. He is obviously faking not knowing me. We shared family Thanksgiving. He even made a comment about my job; now he's got amnesia. Bullshit.

“Daniel?” He stammers for a second then his face turns dark and angry.

“What about Daniel? You know Daniel?” His voice is harsh and deep. Maybe he had an accident and hit his head; that would explain his moving to suburbia.

“You know that I know your brother, Hudson. But the only important thing here is that whatever you two have planned I will not let it happen. I have a restraining order against him and if I have to get one against you as well, I will!” I am done running away from that asshole.

“Who the hell are you, woman?” Now he sounds genuinely confused, “I have no idea who you are and trust me when I say I have absolutely no care for anyone who knows my brother.” So, we share a mutual disgust; his face is contorted with absolute distaste.

“My name is Gianna. I am his ex. Now drop the act. We had Thanksgiving together, remember? You and your family are a bunch of rich narcissists and I want you, your ridiculous car, and your noisy house to stay as far away from me as possible.” I know I am yelling when a car slows down driving by.

“Look, lady – Gianna. Whatever your name is. I don’t give a shit what you want or what you think about me. I am not here to make friends, but I promise you, if you threaten me again, I will happily make an enemy.” He is fuming. I can see the veins pressing against his temple as he tries to hold his anger back. I have overreacted and might have said too much too soon.

“I got your brother out of my life, and I will get you out of my life too.” I just cannot stop myself.

“Are you crazy or just stupid? Threatening my home? My son and I live here. This is our home! I will not have some psycho bitch next door threatening where I live. Now as long as you stay on your side of the fence, and I stay on my side of the fence everything will be just fine. But if you cross me even once little girl, you will regret the day you were born.” Oh, he’s an angry asshole, just like his brother.

“Little girl?” who the hell does he think he is. I can feel my self-control slipping, and I don’t want to say something I

will regret but this family is impossible to deal with and from past experience, I know I have to let him know right from the start that I am not to be taken lightly or be seen as a push over. Boundaries, my therapist made me learn how to put them up and protect them.

“Do not speak to me like that, Hudson.” My voice is low but clear.

“You sound just like my mother.” He growls.

“Well, I am sure she is lovely, but I doubt she sounds like me. If she did, you’d not raise your voice at a lady. I’ve now had the pleasure of meeting two of her sons and neither of them has any respect for women.”

“Just stay out of my way, Gianna! Stay away from my family and stay out of my way. The last thing I need is another stupid social media scandal caused by you throwing a tantrum. I came out here to get away from people exactly like you probably did.” His voice suddenly calmed. His eyes pierce into me, dark silver grey. His jaw muscles tense. “Stay the fuck away from me and my son and we will have no problem.” A bit hard since he lives right next to me.

Then he turns and walks away, and I have to stop myself from shouting after him like an idiot just so that I can have the last word.

What in the world just happened. I just completely lost my cool. My blood is boiling, and I can feel myself breathing heavily and fast. I haven’t even had my workout yet and I am panting.

I am furious!

How dare he speak to me like that.

It’s ok. I reassure myself. You stood your ground. You called him out on his pretenses, and you made it clear that you know exactly who he is. However, even after reassuring myself that I have just done the right thing I still feel horrible inside. Wow, he is a nasty piece of work. Little girl! He has absolutely no idea how to talk to a woman. He is exactly like Daniel. A player. Probably the most charming person in the

world when he wants to get into your pants or seal some dodgy business deal but a total dickhead when he does not get his way.

Well, at least I have made myself clear. I turn back towards the house. I almost want to go right back inside and skip my walk but now I need it more than ever. I really need to clear this horrible, sick feeling away before I head to the office. My life has been going so well. I definitely do not need assholes like that to ruin my day. And I am not going to let him either.

Taking a deep breath of fresh morning air, I start out on my morning walk; making sure to focus on the beautiful things in life. Appreciate nature, the trees, and this gorgeous place I live in. Gratitude is an attitude, and I am not going to allow others to steal my joy.

CHAPTER 4

HUDSON

At the mention of my brother's name, I had done what I hated the most. I had completely lost my composure.

I'm better than that – and I know it. My fuse is just shorter than normal right now.

Walking away from that woman now I feel absolute rage surging inside of me. I cannot believe she is my neighbor. I am doing everything in my power to avoid ending up back in the media and now I have just had a very public fight with my neighbor who just happens to be my brother's ex! What are the chances of this happening? Slim to none. So how did it happen?

She is exactly his type. That exotic beauty. The long dark hair and tight curvy figure. Even while I was arguing I'd had to stop myself from running my eyes up and down her body. She's fiery compared to the ones he usually chooses; it makes sense they ended up in a flaming disaster. He's used to a pushover who won't fight back – and that woman is all fight. Jesus.

The thought of being physically attracted to my brother's ex disturbs me. Thank goodness it is purely physical, and she has a terrible personality because I do not want to find myself attracted to anyone like her. Actually, I have not even looked at a woman in that way since my ex-wife. I'm still getting over that, in so many complicated ways.

I am just not interested in relationships and even casual flings come with drama and scandal that I do not have time for. It makes me angry at myself for being physically attracted

to her. The way her plump lips move when she is shouting at me for no reason at all. The audacity! She is the purest example of how being beautiful is only skin deep.

I wonder if I should do some preemptive damage control. Just to be safe rather than sorry. Who knows what she is capable of and now that she has introduced herself as my neighbor, she might very well be off to sell the story to the press. If I remember the right woman, she works in publishing – God, she could sell a tell-all book. You never know with her type. Probably living off her new boyfriend’s money in this rich neighborhood. I can see she is not old money. The lack of manners for one, and she isn’t wearing or clutching any pearls.

I keep my morning walk shorter than I would have liked because all I can focus on is getting back home to call the lawyers and ask them the best way to deal with the neighbor from hell. Again, I am just really desperate to not end up plastered all over social media. My son really needs some stability and peace and not more bullshit from random exes of my pathetic brother. Dammit, he knows how to fucking pick them. I guess someone like him who behaves like trash will also attract trash.

How is it that he finds a way into my life even when I’ve made such a definite point of cutting him out? I moved into suburban hell, where there’s a neighborhood group chat in Messenger, and still he’s messing shit up.

I dial the lawyers as soon as I walk in the door, still sweaty and hot-headed after the altercation.

“Tony, yes, I just wanted to run something by you. Can you talk?”

I give him a quick run-down of what has just happened, and he is as shocked as I am.

“Lord, Hudson, the chances of that are so small! You really do just have bad luck.” I think it might be a curse at this point; maybe I should consult a psychic after this call.

“That’s not really what I want to hear from my lawyer,” I called for help; he gets paid to fucking fix shit.

“Yes, sorry, no. But honestly, nothing has actually happened. So, for now, there is really nothing we can, or should be doing apart from just being aware of the situation and my best advice would be to just avoid her at all costs.” Is he joking? The hourly rate I pay, and his advice is to avoid the woman next door.

“She lives next door to me. How do you suggest I avoid her?” I ask.

“Just do not engage. No more driveway conversations and stay out of her way. We need to be focused on the custody battle now and it sounds like this woman is a firecracker waiting to ignite so just avoid her. That’s it. If she tries to sell some story to the media about you, we will sue her. Shut her down.” He’s getting paid too much, but I also know he is right. I need my head in the game to get my son.

I sigh and run my hand over my freshly cut hair, cropped short and neat, no-nonsense, just the way I like it.

“I know, you are right. Yes. Okay. I’ll just be sure to not bump into her again. I don’t need the media hearing that I am living next door to Daniel’s ex; that alone would end up online.” Their breakup was very public, very ugly and she made him look like a Marvel villain.

“Exactly. Keep your head down. Focus on what is important and listen, I am going through the case again this week and we will need to meet up before the next court date, so I’ll have my assistant call your office and set that up okay?” Another day of being coached on what I can and cannot say about my ex. Great.

“Do that. Thanks. Have a good day.” My good day has gone to hell, and I wonder if it’s worth trying to salvage it, or just embrace the bad mood and be done.

I know he is right. I just have to keep my head down, stay out of sight, and stay away from drama.

As it turns out, avoiding Gianna is going to be a lot more complicated than I had hoped for. She is like a fucking mosquito you can’t kill.

It is late afternoon when I walk into the estate gym. It isn't empty but it isn't packed either. However, the moment I walk in I see her. She is at the weights bar, working out on her own. She stands out. Especially in those tight gym pants and crop top. Her curves are a distraction to every guy in here as she moves. I force myself to look away. Avoid her! That cute exterior is a cover; she is nothing but trouble. Beautiful trouble but trouble, nonetheless.

Again, I am annoyed at myself for being drawn to her beauty. All I have to do though is remind myself that she is my brother's ex and that thought manages to pull me out of my stupor so that I can turn my back towards her and focus on my workout. There are other pretty ladies in here to look at.

Slipping my headphones on I get right to it, not wanting to think about her now or ever. Physical exhaustion will clear my cloudy thoughts and make me too tired to think about anything – so that's my plan. Workout until I drop.

I stand up from the bench press and practically knock her off her feet as she walks past. I pull my headphones off, in time to hear her say, "Oh wow, I'm so sorry." She says it so sweetly and politely, but then turns around to see who she is talking to, and her entire expression changes. "Oh. You." That is all she says to me. But her eyes, say a whole string of words that her mouth doesn't dare.

Her long hair is pulled up into a high ponytail; she has no make-up on yet her bright green eyes are intensely beautiful, framed by long dark lashes. Her cheeks are flushed pink from her workout.

"Hello, Gianna. Sorry for bumping into you; you kind of came out of nowhere though." She just glares at me.

I guess I am not going to get an apology for her disgusting behavior that morning in the driveway or for bumping into me at the gym right now.

I realize I am standing a little too close and move to take a step to the side so she can walk past me, but as I do that she also moves, and we bump into each other again.

I catch a whiff of her scent. She doesn't smell like she's working out. She smells like an advert for body wash. My body brushes against her glowing body and for a second, I am completely lost imagining what it would be like to have her sweaty body against mine and smell her other scents.

Oh, for heaven's sake, Hudson get a grip. This is your brother's ex.

She smirks at me. I am caught. She had seen my eyes run over her body and somehow, I guess it was making her feel like she had some sort of power over me. Sorry, honey, I am not that easy. I step aside again and gesture for her to move along.

She grates me the wrong way with her sassy fucking attitude, and it infuriates me that I actually let her do it. Usually, I have so much more composure than this. What is it about her that frustrates me so much?

“So lovely to see you again, Gianna,” I say sarcastically, and then I feel a little bit childish. She just raises an eyebrow at me. But who cares. She is no one and nothing to me.

“You too, Hudson. A displeasure as always.” She replies just as sarcastically as I had.

I watch her walk away. It is impossible not to notice how her tight ass moves in those gym pants and I realize my cock is beginning to press against my grey sweatpants. I have to bend down and pretend I am retying my laces to hide the way my dick is reacting to her. Have I lost my mind? Have I lost all control of my body? I feel annoyed and turned on at the same time.

I can already tell that avoiding her is going to be an issue. We live in the same estate. Today alone I have crossed paths with her twice.

Picking up the weights nearby I get back into my workout; I need to get her off my mind. Nothing about this can end well.



The sun is setting when Taylor and I arrive home. After going through about six nanny interviews, I finally managed to settle on hiring a young man who Taylor instantly took to. I had originally wanted a female nanny, just so that Taylor can have some feminine care in his life, but the thought of the media bullshit that will come from that changed my mind easily, and besides, Taylor really did take to this guy quickly and they seem to have a great rapport.

At least that is one thing off my to-do list and things will maybe be a little easier with Taylor having a full-time nanny around to handle all the little things I didn't manage to get to or have been struggling to juggle on my own. It also means that the time I do get to spend with my little guy can be spent doing more fun things.

“Come on little man, our dinner is being delivered in a bit and you need to hop in the bath before it arrives. Do you want bubbles or no bubbles this time?” He is so grungy he looks like he needs a high-pressure washer and some laundry detergent, but I am trying to win a custody battle, so color-changing bath bubbles and a good scrub are what we have to work with.

“Bubbles!” he shouts with utter glee and runs off to grab his bath bucket full of Lego and shark toys. I start running his bath and pour the banana-scented-color-changing bubble bath into the tub, his current favorite. I keep checking the temperature as the water begins to fill up.

He rushes in and tries to push past me to splash into the tub.

“Ok, okay – give it a second, I just need to add a little cold water before you jump in. You will burn your butt.” Taylor has already thrown his clothes off and is jumping up and down waiting to hop into the bubbly tub of water. He begins to throw his toys into the tub one at a time then gives up and dumps the whole bucket in. I smile as I watch him. He loves the new house, the space, the garden.

His face when he walked into his bedroom on the first day will never leave my memory. The little squeal of joy and how

he had run in circles touching and looking at everything in his room. To be honest, the new design actually makes putting him to bed easier as he loves being in there and the starlit nightlight has him drifting off to sleep in minutes. He hasn't lasted through a full bedtime story since we moved in here and is sleeping through the night.

I am relieved. It means that I have not made a mistake in making this choice to move to suburbia. If anything, it was one hundred percent the right choice for my son. Even if I hate it, and the girl next door.

Bath time is over and after dinner, I tuck Taylor into bed. Now I finally have a little bit of time for myself, so I pour a whiskey and head out to the balcony attached to my main bedroom upstairs. It overlooks the pool which is glowing bright blue in the dark night. It is so peaceful here. Very different from city life. I might actually be able to get used to this.

Sipping my whiskey, I notice a slender figure walking into the pool area next door. Gianna. A little midnight swim apparently. I don't know why that surprises me about her. She doesn't seem like the type. Usually, these stuck-up girls don't like to get their hair wet. She drops her towel on one of the sun loungers and stretches her arms above her head. She moves so elegantly and holy fuck her body in that high-cut swimsuit. Her breasts spilled over the top and her tight, toned stomach was flat against the fabric.

I shouldn't be watching her – but I can't stop.

I feel wrong sitting here being a voyeur, but at the same time, I cannot take my eyes off her. Suddenly I remember the scent of her skin when I had bumped into her at the gym and my dick starts to stir in my pants. I watch her as she gets into the water slowly and after swimming around for a little bit she drifts to the edge of the infinity pool, resting her arms on the ledge with her back to me, admiring the night sky. Out of nowhere, I have a thought. What if I went down there and swam with her?

She'd probably drown me for trying.

I don't take my eyes off her as my mind begins to run free; fantasizing about the things I want to do to her tight little body. I allow myself a bit of a midnight daydream.

She doesn't hear me slipping into the water.

I swim over to her, and I am standing right behind her in the pool, by that time she realizes she is not alone. Before she can turn around and run that smart mouth of hers, I press my body against her back, pushing her against the side of the pool. She is so small she doesn't stand a chance of wiggling away from me, but actually, she hardly tries. She gasps when she feels how swollen by dick is against her little round ass. I cup her breasts in my hands and pull the straps of her swimsuit off her shoulders. "Wait" she murmurs, wanting to stop me, but at the same time, she arches her back and presses her ass cheeks into my swollen and pulsing cock. I am so hard I can barely think straight "Oh." That is all she can say when she realizes how much she has turned me on. "Oh? Really little girl. You had so much more to say this afternoon?"

She gasps again as I pull her swimsuit away from her breasts, freeing them in the cool water, and I pinch one of her nipples in my fingers.

"Maybe you just need a good fuck, Gianna? To get rid of that bad attitude you carry around with you?"

"Yes... I..." she doesn't know what to say, but she doesn't need to say anything because her body is speaking for her, rubbing against me. She tilts her head back against my chest as I pull her swimsuit to the side and slip my fingers inside her pussy. Even in the pool, I can feel how slick she is with her own wetness. "Do you want me to fuck you, little girl?"

"Yes." She gasps as I rub her clit.

"Yes, What? You have to beg for it if you really want it."

I am harder than ever as she utters the words. "Please, Hudson, I need you to fuck me. Please."

I'm not gentle, because rude girls don't get gentle. I thrust my throbbing cock into her wet pussy, pulling her onto me and pushing hard against her body with my hips.

She cries out in pleasure as water splashes between us. I grab a handful of her gorgeous dark hair and with my other hand holding her hip so she cannot move away I thrust into her over and over again. My cock slides in and out of her wet pussy as it throbs and swells around me. Her fingers grip the edge of the pool as I feel her pussy clench over my cock, and she cries out as her orgasm pulses through her. At the same time, I explode inside her, pressing hard into her.

CHAPTER 5

GIANNA

The restaurant is not too busy so it's easy to find Claire and Samantha when I walk in.

“Gi Gi!” Claire jumps up to give me a big hug. “How did your meeting with the new clients go the other day? Are they officially on the books?” They are so supportive of my career.

“Hey Girls! Yes, they are, I'm so excited! We are getting them set up and the work will start really soon. They are both such good clients to take on. Really good names to have on my list.” I am building my brand and A-list clients mean I look good to other A-listers.

Samantha waves the waiter over. “We are going to be needing cocktails. We have reason to celebrate.” She's smiling, and her bubbly enthusiasm is contagious. Not that they ever needed a reason to celebrate when it comes to ordering cocktails. I smile as I sit down.

It has been a long day at work, and I need cocktails either way. I'm also just avoiding going home – the fear of seeing Hudson the hot neighbor again.

Samantha's face goes serious, and she asks “But Gi, do you have any gossip about your new neighbor? I was just telling Claire that it's Daniel's brother who moved in there.” Claire looks horrified.

“Well–” I sigh, the last thing I want to do is ruin my day talking about that asshole of a man, but at the same time I do need to vent a little and get rid of this pent-up frustration.

“We keep bumping into each other and I swear, he actually had the audacity to check me out at the gym the other day. He blatantly did a full-body gaze. And every time I bump into him, he is just so incredibly rude. I mean I did already tell you guys about what happened in the driveway the first time I saw him.” It makes my heart rate go up just thinking about king-dick next door.

“At the gym? Well obviously, he is going to be checking you out, Gi, you are gorgeous. Every man in there was probably ogling your ass.”

I roll my eyes at Claire. “You know I don’t want that kind of trouble in my life Claire! I mean – he is Daniel’s brother!”

The waiter brings three strawberry daiquiris and I have a feeling this is going to be one of those nights. “Girls, just a reminder that tomorrow night is girls’ night at my place. Maybe let’s not go too far down the daiquiri rabbit hole tonight.” I remind them we have plans to get wasted then and this needs to be a civilized night out.

Samantha laughs “Oh honey it is already too late. Once the first one arrives it is just too late.”

I take a sip of the pink liquid as Claire starts to question me.

“Does he look anything like Daniel? I mean I know I want to murder that man but there is no denying he was hot as fuck.”

“Actually, Hudson is way hotter. Good genes seem to be in the family.”

Samantha grins “Looks like Hudson isn’t the only one with the audacity to do some full-body gazing.” Ouch, they’re supposed to be on my side.

I laugh. “Yes, you caught me, but damn I mean with a body like he has I don’t think he has the same lifestyle as Daniel. You can’t be out drinking and partying all the time and still look that fit.” He’s probably drinking one of those green-kale-smooshed-vegetable things right now.

“Gi, I know, we are joking around and making light of it all, but I am actually really worried about you living right next door to that family.”

I shrug, I have kind of already decided that there isn't anything I can do about it other than doing my best to avoid him. Which isn't really working because we live right next door to each other.

“I know, Claire Bear. But what is there for me to do? I have the restraining order. Hudson hasn't actually done anything wrong by moving in next door. I just kind of have to ride it out and watch my back that's all. I cannot afford to move. I just bought this house, and I was there first.” I am aware of how childish that sounds.

Samantha is shaking her head. “Absolutely not. You are powerful. Independent woman and you most certainly can do something about it. You don't have time for childish games, Gi. You are busy at work. Things are picking up and you are doing so well. You need to cancel any drama before it has a chance to even start.”

Oh dear. Here comes one of Sam's crazy ideas. What will it be this time? Last time she wanted to strap bricks to Daniel's feet and take him for a midnight swim in the middle of the ocean. Her ideas are not always as practical as they seem. She watches too much CSI on TV. But I find myself smiling and encouraging her to share her great idea anyway. I need a laugh.

“Well – I was thinking – don't laugh this is serious okay – I was thinking that you don't know what Daniel is up to with all of this if he is up to anything, but Hudson would definitely know. So basically, you should make friends with Hudson. So that you can get all the inside info.” She's lost her mind.

Claire's eyes light up “Oh my word yes! Keep your enemies closer or whatever that saying is; I wouldn't mind keeping hot daddy close.” I love my friends, but some days I wonder where they came from.

“Claire Bear!” Samantha laughs. “We are not going to talk about how incredibly sexy some of us think he is! It is not the

point here.” They’ve googled him, and I know now they have been deep-dive internet stalking my new neighbor.

The girls are laughing.

I stay quiet for a moment. Contemplating what they have just suggested. It sounds like a terrible idea. Make friends with my ex’s brother, but at the same time, it sounds like a brilliant idea. Oh dear. Maybe I just need another daiquiri before I can process this one. Or six, so I can forget they suggested it at all.

Three daiquiris in and we have formulated the entire plan. I am going to be Hudson’s new best friend and I will officially be the first to know about all and everything to do with Daniel, therefore I will definitely be able to avoid any devious plans he has for me.

In the moment it seems like the most perfect idea, even though we may have gone over the top with the details. I actually think the basis of it is rather clever. Just be civil to each other at least. It will make life so much easier at home and I won’t be tiptoeing around every time I want to go out into the estate just because I don’t want to bump into Hudson.



The very next morning as I am leaving home for my morning walk, I have the perfect opportunity to put my plan into action. Although, after a night’s sleep and the daiquiris have worn off it seems like pure madness in most aspects. I am still determined to at least come to an agreement with Hudson that we can be civil to each other. No public fights – or gym fiascos.

I walk down my driveway as Hudson is leaving his house, pushing his kid in the stroller. He looks so wholesome, and sexy-single-dad vibes radiate off him.

“Good morning neighbor.” He doesn’t exactly smile, but at least his face is not wearing the usual scowl that I have come to associate with him. “Good morning, Gianna. Enjoy your walk.”

He turns to walk in the opposite direction. “Actually, Hudson, I thought I might sort of run an idea past you.” He looks over his shoulder and glares at me, “A kind of a truce?”

He turns his tall muscular body all the way around towards me, and I remind myself to keep my eyes above the shoulders. No checking out his pecks, abs, or other hard parts.

“A truce?” his deep voice replies with one of his eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Yes, I thought, because neither of us is going to move, we are basically stuck living next door to each other, and it might be easier if we just called a truce and basically just became – friends. At least.” I say the word friends with caution because even I am not sure it is possible. He’s not exactly friendly.

“I see. So, friends on the surface to avoid any drama?”

“Yes. To make life easier.”

He stares at me for a while without saying anything and under his steel-grey gaze I feel my cheeks starting to grow a little pink. I am starting to feel really uncomfortable for making this stupid suggestion. I should really stop listening to Samantha’s ideas.

“Look, Hudson, don’t stress. It was just an idea ok. Enjoy your walk.” I start on my way, and he stops me.

“No, wait. I think you are right.” He does? I am caught off guard. Did he just agree with me?

“Let’s be friends.” He says nodding.

“Oh. Oh. Um. Ok. That’s great! Well – um – join me on my walk then?” I blurt it out without actually thinking this through. It might be my hangover talking.

He does not reply; he just starts walking in the same direction as me. Why is he so difficult to read? I am beginning to understand that he really is not like his brother. I mean sure, he is obviously an asshole, but maybe a different kind of asshole. But at least for one thing, I can see that he is a good dad.

“This is Taylor,” Hudson says gesturing towards the stroller. At the mention of his name, the cutest little blue-eyed boy sticks his head around the side of the stroller to look at me and grins the biggest grin he can muster.

“Hi, Taylor,” I say, waving at the little boy.

“Where is his mom? I mean, sorry. I know what the media said about everything, but never mind, it’s probably way too personal.” I should really work on filtering what I say.

“No, it’s ok. We don’t speak at all. I have not spoken directly to her in years; everything goes through the lawyers now.” wow, that sounds like a shitshow.

He stops talking abruptly and I have a feeling he had not meant to overshare like that, so I try to change the subject.

“How are you enjoying the suburbs? You must be going a little crazy being stuck out here? Missing the party life and all the excitement of the city.” This is not exactly the high society life he is used to.

“As presumptuous as ever, Gianna?” I shoot him a glare, but he is actually smiling, a small, crooked smile that only reaches the corner of his lips. Now I am staring at his lips. His smile gets bigger, and I realize he has caught me staring. Again.

“The suburbs are exactly where I want to be. For Taylor. I guess it is for myself as well. The city is so demanding. A person feels observed in the city, but out here you can relax a tiny bit. Not fully though, as the rumors go, you might end up with a crazy neighbor who yells at you in your driveway on random mornings.” Oh, now he’s being cocky and funny.

I am smiling.

“Well, I heard that you get crazy stalkers out here in the suburb who follow you to the gym and pretty much everywhere you go, so just keep an eye out for that.” I quip.

“I did not follow you.” For a moment I see his frustration, or is he defensive, but then he sees me smiling and shakes his head.

“I am not sure I can figure you out, Gianna, and I am known to be able to read people quite efficiently.” He can stop trying. He has no need to figure me out, I am still going to avoid him whenever possible.

“That’s what happens when you make presumptions, Hudson.”

When I glance towards him his intense grey gaze is on me and our eyes lock. His lips curl up again but this time it is a mischievous smile and a glint in his eye. Then Hudson clears his throat and comments on the weather.

The weather? While he isn’t looking at me, my eyes run over his body. Not for the first time. His arm muscles are perfectly carved, relaxed, and outstretched pushing the stroller. I find myself wondering what they would look like if he had them wrapped around my waist while he pulls me onto his lap – oh my goodness. Nope, no. Absolutely not having sex thoughts about a man while his kid is right there!

I clear my throat and roll my eyes at myself. Trying to erase those images. Friends, Gianna, make friends with your enemy.

Honestly, though, he doesn’t seem to be anything like Daniel. So, does that make him my enemy? Daniel is wild. He loves to party. He loves to be the center of attention and will never, ever be caught dead living in the suburbs. Hudson is happy to live quietly here in a house with his little boy, just being a dad and working.

“Do you do anything fun, Hudson?” The silence gets weird, so I try talking again.

He looks offended. “Of course, I do!” I have yet to see him doing anything fun. He looks so serious even now on a stroll.

But he says no more than that. So, I push a little “Like?”

“My fun might not be your version of fun, Gianna. Although, you don’t seem to be the type who goes out clubbing?” I have fun. How did he turn that on me?

“Oh, heavens no! I have had my fair share of nights out but these days I’ve learned that what really brings me joy is

reading, good wine, and a few close friends – over the fake charade of strangers you find in the party scene.”

He grins “and midnight swims?” He did not!

I raise one eyebrow towards him. “Perhaps we do have a stalker out here after all.”

Is he blushing? He looks so uncomfortable, and Hudson’s eyes are looking everywhere but at me.

“You should try it sometime Hudson; let your hair down a little.” The expression doesn’t quite fit, and he runs his large hand through his close-cropped brown hair, chuckling deeply. The sound vibrates through me, and I find myself laughing with him.

“I don’t let my hair down where people can observe and judge. My life doesn’t allow for that, unfortunately.” Must be shit having to keep your whole life picture perfect.

I shrug, “Well maybe it is time to stop worrying so much about what other people think?”

He shakes his head. “Look how well that lifestyle worked out for my brother.” True, it has been a rather public scandal.

A hint of sadness touches his voice when he mentions Daniel and I can’t help but feel that there is so much more to this man than I might have originally assumed on that first day I yelled at him in the driveway. Walking down these quiet streets with Hudson I cannot deny that he is absolutely nothing like Daniel. Oh, he is gorgeous, but not in the playboy kind of way. He is much more refined, mature, dignified, and distinguished. I laugh at my own thought.

No, they are not the same. Not in any way. In fact, compared to Daniel I guess the right word to describe Hudson would be boring.

How in the world do these two men have the same genetics.

“Let’s stop here, Taylor loves this park. Do you want a coffee?” He gestures towards the little coffee stand at the entrance of the park.

“Oh. Sure, I’d love one.”

With cappuccinos in hand, we stroll over to a bench next to the very fancy estate playground and Taylor is all but backflipping to get out of the stroller. “Ok little guy, give me a second.” He squirms like a little worm.

“Please hold this. I need to release the beast.” Hudson takes a quick sip of coffee before gesturing for me to take it from him. I laugh and murmur.

“I’d love to see you release your beast.” The words are out of my mouth before I can filter them, and Hudson practically chokes on his coffee. Shit. I said it louder than I thought.

“Be careful what you wish for, little girl.”

He raises an eyebrow at me, and that sexy corner smile is on his lips again. I shift in my seat, wondering what the hell I am doing, flirting with this man?

With Taylor out of his stroller and bolting towards the sandpit, a small plastic dinosaur in his grip, Hudson sits down next to me. His leg against mine even though there is plenty of space on the bench to not be that close.

He doesn’t seem to notice, or he is playing casual, but I can feel the electricity between the fabric of our clothes, and I wonder what it would be like to be running my hands over his muscular thighs.

Closing my eyes, I sip my coffee. Filter your thoughts, Gianna! This is not the plan you had in mind when you set out to make friends with Hudson Drake.

We sit watching Taylor play. He is such an energetic and happy kid. I find myself smiling and enjoying the comfortable silence of being here next to Hudson. But at the same time, this intense electricity between us keeps interrupting my thoughts. I wonder if I am the only one who feels it?

CHAPTER 6

HUDSON

It is early morning as I am leaving the house with Taylor in his stroller. That crazy woman from next door is walking towards me and I want to roll my eyes back. I am not in the mood for her.

But to my surprise, she has an idea that at first, I do not like, but I force myself to give it a second thought and decide in the end that it will be better to have her close on civil ground.

This means that I can actually control the information she can gather about me. My main concern here is that she knows my brother and my brother is apparently still dating my ex (if you can call their constant cheating and public-fighting dating). If Gianna knows my brother, then she can easily be feeding them both information about me which may have huge implications for the court battle I am currently in with Karla.

I hate to even think her name in my head. It is so much easier to just think of her as my ex. It is probably extremely childish of me to think that way, but she doesn't deserve anything more. Not after what she is doing to Taylor. Taking away his chance to grow up with a loving mother. And even now, dragging our family through hell with this custody battle I am fully aware that she is not interested in being a mother at all, only the financial gains she will get from it. What a disgusting person. She and my brother deserve each other.

So, with Gianna standing in front of me and making the suggestion that we should be friends, or at least friendly, I

initially wanted to tell her to go to hell. The reality is though that it is valuable to have her closer and more in my control.

The tight gym leggings she is wearing have absolutely nothing to do with my decision to go along with this. This woman has the most beautiful body I have ever seen. Walking with her this morning is a challenge as my mind keeps flashing back to the night, I saw her in the pool. It takes a lot of willpower to control what is happening in my pants. Then she has those random flirtatious comments. When she mentions that she wants to see me release my beast, images fill my head of taking her right then and there on the park bench in front of everyone. That will look great in court. I roll my eyes at myself.

I will really have to watch myself around her. She does something to me and it worries me. She makes me lose my mind at random moments, lose my self-control and I really hate that. I am the one in control at all times and no hot-bodied sassy little girl is going to change that.

I really enjoyed the morning walk-through and at the end we exchanged numbers, honestly, I already have her number saved having noted it from the neighborhood message group. I don't want to let her know that though. I don't even know why I did that. It's not like I was planning on calling her or anything. It was shortly after the pool incident – the R-rated thoughts she had given me.

I keep having flashbacks to that moment in the pool with her and it didn't even happen. It has been so frustrating for me. I am usually so focused, and it is difficult to derail me, but this woman is doing things to my mind and body.

So, I agreed to be her friend. I would like to say that it was purely for keeping control, but then after our morning walk, I realized it is more than that. She isn't who I expected. All of my brother's girlfriends (I've only met a few while my brother and I were still talking) are total airheads, clearly just wild party sluts after nothing but status and money. I thought Gianna would be the same, but she is – she is something else.

I do not want to be thinking like this though. I don't have time for these thoughts. I have a custody battle to worry about and a little boy to raise. Those are my primary thoughts and my main focus.

This daydreaming about pools and tight gym pants has got to stop.

However, in the theme of making friends, I have decided to invite Gianna to dinner. The better I know her the more control I can keep over this weird situation. For all I know her friendly demeanor is all an act while she feeds my brother information.

I am already holding my phone in my hand with her name on my screen, ready to dial but feeling hesitant. I have no idea why she makes me feel this way. I am actually nervous to ask her to join me for a simple dinner. Maybe I should have my assistant call her? Fuck no! Hudson, what is wrong with you? Just dial.

“Gianna speaking.” Her sweet voice answers.

“Gianna, it's Hudson.” I don't know if she has my number, she may not know who is calling.

“Oh yes of course, sorry I wasn't paying attention when I answered otherwise, I would have seen your name on the screen. Just a busy day today.” She does have my number, now who is stalking whom?

“You and me both.” I sigh.

“How can I help you, Hudson? Is my house on fire or something?” She is sassy as always.

I laugh. “It might be – were you cooking this morning? I swear I could smell charcoal-flavored toast.”

“Funny. I happen to be an excellent cook. I just don't follow recipes that's all.” I think of her in the kitchen and it's sexier than it should be.

“Of course, you don't. The rule breaker as always.”

She makes a light musical sound that makes me forget why I am phoning her in the first place. I clear my throat.

“Right, so, the actual reason why I was calling was not to inform you that we need a fire brigade but to ask you if you had dinner plans this evening?” I pause and she goes silent.

“Why would you be asking me about my dinner plans?” She sounds genuinely confused.

My stomach tightens with nerves. Why was I nervous! “Well—er – I am new in the area, and I am hoping you would be my tour guide to a restaurant I want to try out. That Asian place on the corner outside of the estate. Is it any good?” I try to act cool, but I am not. I’m flipping out internally.

“Oooh. Yes, it’s great actually. You will enjoy it. Just don’t order the prawns they are not so great. Is there anything else?” She asks me, missing the invitation.

“Yes, Gianna, I am inviting you to join me for dinner,” I add, and there’s that weird silence again.

Have we been disconnected, it’s dead quiet. “Hello?”

“Um. Yes –shit – sorry, yes. I would love to join you for dinner.” She stutters out, shocked.

“Great. I’ll come by to collect you at seven. We can walk.” I sound lame, even to myself.

“Seven it is.”

That was possibly the most awkward call I have ever had. She had this way of disarming me and truthfully, she hadn’t even done anything particularly disarming.

At six o’clock the nanny arrives home with Taylor. Taylor clearly had an amazing day at the aquarium and is jumbling about sharks and sea horses. The nanny is booked to stay late tonight specifically because I want to go out to dinner with Gianna.

“I’ll get him bathed and ready for bed. He didn’t eat much today so is it alright if I find something in the fridge for him?”

This dude-nanny is pretty efficient. I have definitely made the right choice hiring him.

“Yes, he loves chicken nuggets. I think there is a box in the freezer. No sauce otherwise you’ll find the nuggets being thrown around the room rather than being eaten.”

He laughs and heads off to sort my little Taylor out.

Taylor is in the middle of telling me about the purple seahorse when he sees his nanny leave the room and bolts after him. “Waits for me!” he shouts as he runs.

Clearly getting on really well with each other.

I think again about how well Taylor is settling into this new lifestyle and consider my own progress in settling in here. There is an element of lower stress living here. The long drives to the city are made easier some days by calling for a driver, meaning I can work during the commute. The quietness of the suburbs is rather enjoyable, but the stress of the court date is still a big and constant burden on my mind. A constant heavy load to carry around with me.

Although, if I am entirely honest with myself, Gianna has been somewhat of a distraction from that stress. In a weird way. Maybe trying to deal with a smaller issue like a nosy neighbor is just a less stressful escape from the bigger stress of the court date.

Her fiery body is certainly enough to distract without anything else.

It’s after six when I snap out of my thoughts and realize I am going to be late. I had better hop in the shower and get ready.

At seven sharp I am standing at Gianna’s front door, dressed in dark blue jeans and a black shirt unbuttoned at the top. I am sure I did not need a suit and tie for the local sushi place, but I still feel like maybe I should have put more effort in. More effort in for what though? This isn’t a date. This is me making friends with my neighbor.

Music drifts from the other side of the door. Vibey and loud. Much louder than I’m sure her neighbors appreciate! Although I couldn’t hear it from my place.

I knock hard on the door. Not sure she can even hear it.

“It’s open!” she shouts from inside.

A little uncertain, just walking into her house, but I push open the front door and invite myself in. Maybe it is old-fashioned to greet your guest at the door these days.

Her house is not at all what I expect. Actually, I am not sure what I expected, but it is bright, modern, and feminine without being over the top or pink. She has neutral earthy tones mixed with splashes of dark grey and a lot of leafy green houseplants to fill the open spaces. It would appear that her choice of decor revolves more around plants than art. It is really soothing to stand in her space.

Her home smells like vanilla and something else? Sandalwood? It is a sweetly dark scent.

She calls from the bedroom.

“I’m so sorry I just had a tiny issue at work and only arrived home a few minutes ago, so I had the quickest shower ever, but I am almost done.”

She walks through to the living room area where I am standing. She is wearing tight jeans and an elegant white, thin strappy top.

Her legs and her ass were perfectly framed in the light blue denim. Her tiny waist and large breasts are accentuated by the soft fabric of her top. She holds her white sneakers in her hand and walks softly past me in her socks towards the couch where she can sit down and slip them onto her feet. My gaze is locked onto her, the way she moves, the way her hips sway, the way her hair flows loose over her slender shoulders. I can picture pulling the thin strap of her top down over her shoulder the same way I would pull her swimsuit off.

My cock begins to stir, and I force myself to turn away; pretending to admire the interior of her home. These jeans have zero breathing room for a hard-on to be hidden.

“You haven’t got bad taste,” I say trying to distract myself from my erection.

“Gosh, Hudson, gee, thanks so much. For the – compliment? If that is what I can call it.” She quips

sarcastically.

“I meant; you have really good taste.” I clarified that it was not an insult.

“Thanks. I know I do. In everything except men.” I hope that wasn’t an insult.

She laughs at her own joke and finishes slipping her shoes on. Standing with a little jump that makes her chest bounce, my eyes are back on her and my mind is straight in the gutter.

“Let’s get going then,” I say, “I’m about to eat that throw pillow I’m so hungry.”

“Ok, I’m not quite ready to meet Hangry Hudson if normal Hudson is already such a grumpy old man.” She laughs at her own joke again. Lighthearted and teasing, yet I still feel the need to defend myself. I bite my tongue and hold back. I don’t think I’m that old, or grumpy.

“I desperately need a glass of wine after the day I’ve had at the office.” She chats as she ushers me out of the door and locks it behind us.



The walk to the restaurant is interrupted by a phone call.

“I’m so sorry Hudson, I actually really need to take this, it’s work. I have to do damage control.” She is polite about having to take the call.

If there is anything I understand it is that work sometimes spills over where you didn’t want it to, so I nod for her to take the call.

“Mr. Radnor. I’m so glad you could call me back. Yes, I am aware we are past the deadline; our writer had a minor incident yesterday and we just need a day or two extension. I am sorry I would definitely have let you know sooner had it not been something out of my control.” Her ‘work’ voice is quite sexy.

She is quiet for a moment listening to her client's reply. She nods and paces up and down a little along the road where we have stopped. I admire how professional and calm she is on the call.

“Yes, I understand your frustration that is why I have let my accountant know not to charge you for any section of the book that goes beyond the deadline. You are a valued client and I know this deadline was set in stone.”

She is smiling now. Obviously, she has managed to calm the client down as the tone of the voice on the other line has settled somewhat.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Radnor. I appreciate that. Yes, tomorrow evening. I can come to you.” She is nothing but professional, but as I hear her informing another man that she will be visiting him tomorrow evening I am struck by a bolt of jealousy.

I realize I do not want her seeing other men.

How ridiculous of me. This man is a client. Yet I know how men think and even clients would view such a beautiful woman as a target for their desires.

I shake the thought from my mind. I am being pathetic. She is a friend. Barely a friend at that. Frenemies. Her personal life has nothing to do with me. Yet I cannot shake the curiosity now about whether or not she has a boyfriend or another man in her life.

And why does that idea grate me so much?

Gianna finishes the call with her client. “I am so sorry about that. My business is relatively new in the sense of established businesses so when things go wrong, I have to sort them out no matter the time of day.” She puts her phone back in her purse.

“It's your business? Or do you run it?” I'm curious about what she does.

She looks a little offended. “I would not have said my business if it belonged to someone else.” She is definitely offended.

Clearly, she takes pride in her work. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap like that, like I said it has been a long day at work today. Yes. It’s my business. I started it from scratch. I didn’t have any big family empires to take over, so I had to work from the ground up. Starting with nothing.” She is a success all on her own, and that takes guts and hard work. I look at her with admiration.

“Having family empires to take over isn’t always all it is cut out to be, Gianna.” I would rather do almost anything else.

She realizes she has mildly insulted me and tilts her head to the side briefly as a way of conceding. “True. I guess nothing in life is without its own challenges.”

I guess we are now even regarding insulting each other’s work.

She smiles broadly. “Alright Hangry Hudson, let us get you fed.”

I can’t help but smile back at her.

We reach the restaurant and I stand aside to let her walk in first. Without thinking I reach out and my hand is on her lower back as we are led to the table I booked. She flinches ever so slightly at my touch, but I don’t move my hand pretending not to notice. I wonder what would make a woman flinch like that at such a light touch.

Seated at our table with our drinks delivered I chat to the waiter about what platters I want to order for us. I can tell by her expression that she is not sure whether she likes the idea of a man ordering her food or if it is refreshing for her to not have to take the lead. I think she is more offended than refreshed, but I am in control of this situation not her. I invited her to dinner, it’s my date – or not date – I can do it my way.

When the waiter leaves, I say to her “I promise you will like my choices, I have pretty good taste when it comes to sushi at least.” She wrinkles her nose and then she smiles that beautiful rose-lipped smile of hers and shakes her head. “Do you always have to be in control of everything, Hudson?”

I like the way she says my name.

“Yes. I do.” It’s the honest truth.

I leave no room for question or negotiation in my response, so she changes the subject. “So do you want to talk about the weather or something more interesting?” She rolls her eyes and leans back in her seat.

Oh, she is a nosy one. Fine, I get straight to the point “Something more interesting. Tell me about your boyfriend.” I turn the tables on her, her eyes widen, and she snickers.

“Boyfriend?”

“Yes. Who are you seeing right now?” I guess the jealous side of me won over the logic of keeping it low-key at dinner. I need to know if I have any competition.

“I am not seeing anyone. Nor am I interested in seeing anyone. If you must know, your brother was the last person I was involved with, and he left – scars.” Her tone is closed off, and this topic is suddenly off-limits.

Scars? I wonder what she means by that. As she said it, she wrapped her arm protectively around her own waist and her gaze dropped to the floor. I have a feeling she doesn’t mean only the emotional kind. Rage boils inside of me. That fucking bastard. If he was here right now, I might rip his throat out.

“Gianna, I am so sorry. My brother is an animal. He damages the lives of everyone he is involved with. Family and friends alike.” I have been making apologies for him my whole life.

She lifts her head and I see her green eyes shine with the threat of tears. Blinking sharply, she quickly hides it behind her gorgeous dark, long lashes. “You don’t get along with him?” She asks as if I would be close to the maniac.

“Absolutely not. He destroyed my marriage. I mean he didn’t do it alone. My ex-wife was not exactly a reluctant player in the game, and they are still seeing each other to this day.” She is quiet but slowly relaxes her body again.

“I am sorry you went through all of that, Hudson. I know how painful it is to be hurt by people close to you.” She raises her wine glass in the air. “Here is a toast to shallow graves for

those assholes.” She giggles a mischievous teasing sound and takes a sip of her wine. How she goes from tender and vulnerable to laughing in seconds is quite astounding to me. It is a talent of resilience I am beginning to admire in her.

Behind us, a woman walks in with two children in tow. The youngest is crying. He looks about five years old and being a father, my instinct is to comfort him. But I try and ignore the scene and stay out of other people’s business.

The women are wearing far too much makeup and heels higher than the paved walkways should allow. She looks overdone and out of place. But I guess this is one of the richest estates in the area and what else would I expect to find here but overdone housewives. I glance over at Gianna, a beautiful hard-working working and down-to-earth woman who seems, despite my first assumption, to have a kind heart.

The woman tugs hard on her son’s arm, and he cries louder. Gianna is looking unsettled in her seat. She sips her wine and says nothing, but her eyes are glued to the scene. I can see she is uncomfortable with what she is watching.

When the woman turns threatening to spank her son I am about to stand and break my code of not being involved but Gianna is already out of her seat and walking over to her.

“Excuse me.” She sounds polite but there is fire in her eyes. “Do I need to call child services or are you going to keep your bad attitude on a leash rather than taking it out on a child?” The woman scowls at her.

“Mind your manners.” Gianna steps even closer.

“I most certainly will not mind my manners. In fact, I believe I should call them right now.” She turns to grab her purse and pulls out her phone.

My heart is thundering in my chest, and I find myself so turned on by her utter disregard for what anyone else in the restaurant thinks. She is, after all, defending someone so small they would never have been able to stand up for themselves. I also can’t afford to be seen in a public scene like this and wish it would all just stop.

“Look, lady, he is four years old. He has not listened all day and I am up to my neck in his tantrums and bullshit. Call them! I don’t care. Maybe they will take him away and I can live in peace.” What a bitch.

The little boy’s tears are silent now. I am sure those words have stung more than the spanking he almost received a few moments before. Those words will stay for years.

Gianna has the phone to her ear. The woman’s eyes widen in horror as she starts to usher her children out of the restaurant.

Gianna calmly says, “You can leave, Mrs. Robertson, but I am fully aware that you are staying at number seventeen Bradford Lane.”

Even more horrified the woman’s heels clacker a wild shuffle as she begins to try and run out of the place. Dying of embarrassment.

Gianna returns to the table, putting her phone away. The rest of the restaurant who had their eyes glued to the scene returned to their dinner, muttering their own opinions about what had just happened.

I don’t say a word. I barely know what to say.

Who is this woman sitting opposite me? I am dumbstruck and in awe.

She sips her wine and takes a deep breath; her cheeks are flushed a light pink. “Can you believe her!? That poor baby, I will inform the estate manager tomorrow morning and I will have someone go over there with an official complaint. I have seen her yelling and screeching at him before.”

I can see she is not joking.

As a father of a young boy, who I will do anything in the world to protect, everything in me wants to reach out and kiss her.

As her neighbor, I sit professionally in my seat and reassure her that I think she had one hundred percent done the right thing.

Who knew she was so full of fight and fire? How had my brother ever managed to date such a beautiful and feisty woman?

The rest of our dinner is much calmer and Gianna manages to shake off the irritation that the woman has left her with by making jokes about the food. She uses lighthearted humor to deflect tense situations. Another example of her resilience.

Walking home with her in the dark cool evening I have to stop myself from reaching out and touching her. I want to trace my fingers down her lower back again and feel the curves of her body. Hold her hand, anything, I just want to touch her.

She is gorgeous, carefree, smart, and so damn enticing.

I can smell her hair as the breeze catches it. That is where the warm vanilla and sandalwood scents are coming from. It is a dark and erotic scent, and I am not sure if it is the three glasses of wine or just her, but I am having a hard time focusing on anything else.

We reach her front door, and I am reluctant to end the evening. It has been the most relaxing and enjoyable night I have had in a long time.

“I might have to go for a swim now, I don’t usually drink during the week, and I have a lot to do tomorrow.” She chuckles.

A swim. Oh. She had to take my thoughts back to her in the pool.

“Thank you, Hudson, after today I –”

Without thinking I push her against her front door, cupping my hand under her chin I lift her face up towards mine. For a second, she freezes, but as I press my lips onto her full slightly open mouth, I feel her body melt into mine and she raises herself onto her tiptoes to return the kiss with a force I did not expect from her.

My heart is thundering in my chest as I wrap my arms around her waist and press my hard cock against her body. She tastes of sweet wine as my tongue dances across her lips, wanting to lick up every drop of her. She gasps as I press into

her again and her fingers are tight around the back of my neck as she tries to pull herself closer to me. I am throbbing, it is almost painful how my cock is pressing against the fabric of my jeans. I want to tear her clothing off piece by piece and thrust into her. My thoughts are uncontrolled, and I am about to reach out and open her front door when she pulls away slightly, gasping, her hands on my chest as she pushes me lightly.

“Wait, Hudson, what are we doing?”

It takes everything in me to step back. Watching her run her fingers across her moist lips. Her big green eyes are wild with lust.

What are we doing?

“Uh, yeah, it must be the wine. Sorry. That was a mistake.”
Fuck.

I step further back, and she adjusts her top which has ridden up a little revealing a sliver of her flat-toned stomach. My cock is still rock hard.

“Thank you for dinner.” She says without turning her back to me. “I’ll see you around?” She sounds breathless, and there’s a rasp in her voice.

She is right. This is not supposed to happen. I wish I could tell my body to stop reacting.

“Thank you for coming with me, Gianna. I will see you around.” I sigh, like I have just lost something I never had.

I turn to walk away. Knowing that should never have happened. Yet now I have tasted her, and I wonder if I will ever be able to forget it.

CHAPTER 7

GIANNA

It is late afternoon. Realizing I have been staring at my laptop screen blankly for the past ten minutes I close it, frustrated with myself because I cannot get that kiss out of my mind. Most of me knows that it was the right thing, stopping it. But the rest of me has been fantasizing about dragging Hudson into my bed and – I sigh.

Rubbing my eyes to try and clear my brain fog. Maybe I should just go for a run. It is a work-from-home day, but I have not been getting anything done. I can't let him get to me like this. For one thing, it is interrupting my work. That is unacceptable. For another thing, I just know it is wrong on every level. He is my ex's brother.

Dressed in my running gear I lock the front door behind me and head down the driveway. But of course, there is Hudson. Why did he have to be here now? I am specifically trying to clear him from my head.

He has just parked his car and is getting Taylor out of the car seat. I laugh quietly, still finding it amusing that such a ridiculous car has a car seat in it.

He is bending over to lift Taylor out of the car. His crisp white work shirt sleeves have been rolled up around his bicep which is flexing in the most beautiful ways. My skin starts tingling as I remember the way he had slipped those arms around my waist to pull me closer to him. The way he had pressed himself against me. All of him. And there was a lot of him.

I walk across to his side of the driveway.

“Hi.” I may as well just get this awkward situation over with and I think it’s best to just pretend nothing happened.

He lifts his head to look at me. His piercing steel grey eyes always take me by surprise.

“Good evening, Gianna.” That gorgeous smile touches his lips and then he looks away again. Perhaps feeling as awkward as I am. Or maybe he is angry with me for having stopped everything?

“How was your day, Hudson?” I should go, this is so awkward.

“It was a day. Some things got a bit heavy in the office with one of our imports being stuck at customs, but I do my best not to bring work home. At home, I am a dad, not a CEO.”

I nod. It is quite incredible how he juggles everything so well. I know how busy he is, managing an empire and fatherhood, not to mention the custody battle, and still staying so damn fit.

My eyes are grazing up and down his body. He looks immaculate. Even after a full day of work. I wish I could look that good after work. I laugh again, amused at how badly I am doing to keep the thoughts in my head clean.

“What’s so funny?” He asks with a smirk.

“Oh, um, yes, sorry nothing. Just – looking at some eye candy I should not be looking at.”

His gaze shoots up, his face a mix of annoyance and curiosity.

“Eye candy?” He lifts a brow, and his son screams.

“I also want candy!” We both laugh.

“So, I was just about to go for a run. Should I wait while you grab the stroller so you can join me?” Did I just ask him to come with me after my entire goal had been to avoid him?

He raises his eyebrows. Unimpressed?

Maybe I should not have made that comment or invited him.

The seconds that he spent staring at me felt like hours.

“Sure. Come inside, Gianna. I just need to get changed if you don’t mind.” He’s not exactly dressed for a jog in his suit.

Oh, my word he said yes.

This is a bad idea.

This is a great idea.

I follow him inside, watching his ass move in the black slacks he is wearing. Mentally lecturing myself to behave.

His deep voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Actually, it’s quite late and before we walk, I need to feed the little guy. I am just going to order something. Would you like to stay for dinner?” I didn’t think about the time, or his son needing dinner. I was insensitive.

“I don’t want to intrude?” I made a move to leave.

He puts Taylor down and the little guy runs straight over to me to wrap his arms around my legs.

“You have candy.”

“Hello little one, I do not have candy. It’s bad for my behind.” I lift him up into a hug and he wraps his tiny arms around my neck, planting a sticky, wet kiss on my cheek. I am surprised. I’ve only really met him two or three times. My heart melts a little. I gently put him back on the floor and he runs off to find his toys. Hudson watched the whole scene play out without taking his eyes off me.

“It would be a pleasure to have you here, Gianna. It’s not an intrusion.” The words are kind, but his voice is free of intonation, and I am not sure if he is being underhandedly sarcastic or not. I start shifting on my feet, unsure how to respond or if I should respond. He makes me feel like a kid in trouble. I know I am being ridiculous.

“I guess it depends on whether or not you have any decent wine in this house or not?” I smile as sweetly as I can manage

to show him that his sarcasm has no effect on me.

“I’ll take you down to the wine cellar and you can choose your own bottle?” He says, cool and collected.

“Wine cellar? Mine didn’t come with a wine cellar!” That’s bullshit, I need one.

“Well, did you hear all the noise during the renovations?” He was digging a wine cellar. That’s so typical of a man like him. Over the damn top.

“I think three streets on both sides of you heard the noise during the renovations.” I laugh remembering how annoyed I had been.

“I received numerous complaints, don’t you worry. Thankfully that is all finished now because I was about to blow a gasket dealing with those builders and the move and a little guy all on my own.” It sounds like more stress than anyone should manage alone.

Taylor is busy in the living room, digging around in a bucket of toy cars.

Again, I wonder how Hudson does it? It is hard enough for me to manage my own life, yet here he is running a billion-dollar company, being a really good dad, and dealing with massive tasks like moving and renovations and a crazy ex-wife all on his own.

I take a seat on the bar stool at the kitchen counter. He is packing his laptop bag away in his home office. When Hudson comes out of the other room, he is unbuttoning his shirt, and I am unable to take my eyes off him.

“I just want to get changed quick then we can go find you some wine.”

I make some incoherent murmur but my inability to stop staring is obvious and he begins to smile. His shirt is fully unbuttoned now and my gaze trails from his sculpted abs to the curve of his hips before the dip below the belt line. Fuck. He is hot. I can feel my face flush pink as I try and think of anything to say. He is doing this on purpose!

Instead of going to change he leaves his shirt unbuttoned and starts to fuss around the kitchen, finding wine glasses and chatting carelessly about what blends I like. “I have a very sultry Shiraz blend if you would like to try it?”

“Yes,” I say, hoping he will leave and go to the cellar to give me a moment so I can pull myself together.

“Oh excellent, I actually brought it up from the cellar yesterday in time for the weekend.”

Dammit.

He puts the glasses on the kitchen counter in front of me. He is standing on the other side of the counter, and I am so grateful that at least half of his body is covered from my view. Unfortunately, not the naked half.

I turn my body to the side, looking around his home. “I love what you have done with the place,” I say, clear and confident. I will not let him get to me like that.

He walks around the counter, standing so close to me I can smell his cologne; his body touching mine. Hudson puts the wine glass in my hand, holding it out towards me. I lift my glass, being extremely careful of where my gaze falls. I focus on staring straight into his eyes and he is grinning. Yes, he knows exactly what he is doing.

I lift my glass and chime it against the side of his glass.

“Here’s to being friends.” He says.

“Friends,” I say and take a sip of the delicious red liquid, letting the scent and flavor pull me back into my body.

“I’m thinking Chinese. Taylor loves chow mein. Are you ok with that?”

“Yes, of course. That’s perfect.”

He calls our order through and then negotiates Taylor into a bath. I enjoy watching him with Taylor. I never wanted children. I do not know if it was just me lacking that maternal gene or if I have just never met the right guy. Sitting here watching Hudson, and how gentle and loving he is with his son, I find myself daydreaming about having a little family.

What in the world is this man doing to me? I think I might be broken, or at least malfunctioning.

There is a knock at the door. "I'll get it," I shout through towards the bathroom where Hudson is wrapping Taylor up in a big fluffy towel and brushing bubbles off him while he shouts that he doesn't want to get out yet.

The delivery guy looks me up and down then says "Mrs. Drake?"

Hudson's voice behind me makes me jump. "Yes, this is Mr. and Mrs. Drake. Thank you, you can put everything on the counter over there." He gestures towards the kitchen and pulls me out of the doorway with his hand on my waist.

I raise one eyebrow and squint in Hudson's direction. He returns my glare with a broad, beautiful smile. Oh, he is teasing. Well, two can play that game.

The delivery guy is busy unloading the packets in the kitchen.

I turn to Hudson, "Darling, won't you pour me another glass of wine. I also wouldn't mind a foot massage. "

A cheeky grin spreads across my face, knowing I am playing with fire. He is giving me a glare now. Oh, he didn't expect me to play his games. I lick my lips slowly, not breaking eye contact.

He clears his throat and ushers the delivery guy out of the door.

Taylor runs into the lounge area wearing Spider-Man pajamas, shouting "Spaghetti!"

I can't help but laugh out loud. Perfect timing little guy. Breaking the tension that was about to get a little too intense.

We all sit in the lounge on the big comfy sofas. The selection of Chinese food spread across the coffee table. "You ordered too much, Hudson!"

"Well, I didn't know what you liked?"

"I thought you were just getting chow mein."

“I can’t be boring like that. I had to add some other things in the mix.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want to start thinking you were boring.”

“Next I’ll be swimming at midnight.”

That is the second time he has made a midnight-swimming comment. Obviously, he has seen me swimming at night.

I make note of that and carry on enjoying my dinner.

When we are all happily full Hudson puts Taylor into bed while I sip on my wine and enjoy the view of the evening sky.

“Finally, that little bundle of energy is fast asleep.” He startles me.

Hudson picks up his wine glass and drains the last bit out of it.

He leans over me, where I am sitting on the tall chair, to reach for my empty glass. “One more?” He says, but then he pauses. His face was very close to mine. The warm glow of wine in my blood. I don’t even try and stop myself. I just reach up and brush my fingers over his cheek as he puts the wine glasses back on the table behind me. I pull him closer to kiss him. He still has on his white work shirt, unbuttoned and there is nothing I could do to stop myself. I slip my hands around his waist. I feel his naked skin, my fingers tracing his sculpted muscular chest. Our lips lock and his tongue dances in my mouth. He slips his massive arm around my waist and lifts me off the chair onto the kitchen counter. While pushing my legs apart with his hips he pulls my legs around his waist and kisses me hard.

Grabbing a handful of my hair he tilts my head back and runs his hot tongue over my neck sending shivers down my spine. His cock pressing against me I can feel the warmth between my legs. Nothing but thin layers of fabric between us and I want nothing more than to feel him inside me. Desperately.

I gasp loudly so he puts his hand over my lips.

“Quiet, Little Girl.”

His voice vibrates through my body, and I lock my legs around his waist trying to pull him into me. Reaching down I grab his belt, unbuckling it. He pushes my hand away. Hudson grabs my hips and rubs himself hard against me. I gasped again. "I said quiet!" He growls again. Then he hesitates.

"Fuck." He says. Pulling away slightly.

He shakes his head. "We already know this is a bad idea."

He steps away from the counter, his erection pushing against his pants, barely contained within the fabric. I am breathing heavily, and the sudden withdrawal leaves me feeling stunned and confused.

"What?" I murmur.

"My son is asleep. I think you need to leave."

"Leave?" I feel so desperate to have him inside me. How in the world had he managed to stop himself.

Suddenly anger rushes through me. Maybe it was too much adrenalin. "Fine. No problem." I say, sliding off the counter. I won't say another word to him. I just walk to the front door, let myself out, and close it quietly behind me.

I hear him say something but don't make out what it is. It does not matter. I need to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Back inside my own home, I begin pacing. I am so annoyed, agitated, and sexually frustrated. Why did he have to be so fucking hot? How stupid am I? Why had he stopped everything? I know he had commented that his son was there but was it that or something else? Ugh! This feeling of rejection is horrible. I want to shout at him. But suddenly I have a better idea.

I think it's time for a swim. And I might not even need a swimsuit.

I grab a towel, strip out of my running gear, and wrap it around my waist. It is pretty late already, and the wine is still dancing in my blood, perhaps making poor decisions for me. I don't care. In nothing but a towel, I make my way down to the

pool. It is dark, but the pool is glowing a calming blue. I make sure to stand right in view of his balcony. I didn't look up to see if he was watching or not. The truth is I can feel his gaze on me. He is there, lurking in the shadows.

With my back to him, I drop the towel, standing for a moment, letting the night air run over my body.

Then I turn to face the pool. The soft glow from the water illuminates my skin. I look up, directly at him. I can see him now at the edge of his balcony leaning on the railing watching.

He does not look away. Our eyes lock over the distance.

I tilt my head to the side, pulling my hair over my shoulder, then brushing it away again. Without a word or another glance, I dive into the pool enjoying the sudden cold rush. Clearing away the alcohol fog and whatever it was that had just almost happened at Hudson's place.

I can still feel his gaze on me like electricity flowing through the water when I relax at the edge of the pool and watch the night sky.

CHAPTER 8

HUDSON

“**A**re you fucking kidding me!” I know I am shouting at the wrong person. My lawyer is just calling me to give me an update on the situation, but I am furious. Who the fuck does she think she is? I want to kill her.

Karla has taken it too far.

Using our son as a tool for negotiation. How sick and twisted is she? “How is this allowed?” I shout at the lawyer.

“Hudson, please, understand that she can try this tactic, but it doesn’t mean she will get away with it. However, we still have to go to court with a valid response.” I am out of valid, rational responses to her lunacy.

“But she is clearly just using Taylor to try and extort money from me. Isn’t it obvious that she isn’t interested in actually being a mother but rather just interested in a higher monthly payout? She never spent time with him. She doesn’t even call him. Now she wants full custody and is insisting on a ridiculous amount of child support.” I would rather he live with wolves in the wild; they’d do a better job raising him than she would.

“It is our job to show the court that her request is ridiculous. But we still have to take it seriously. If we don’t respond with valid, solid facts and an argument of our own the court could very well grant her some of what she wants if not all of it. Let me put together a response and I will call you tomorrow to run through everything.” I want to respond with

anger, and not logic or reason. That's why I pay him to respond first.

"I don't care what it takes, do you hear me, I don't care the cost or the time it takes. She will not get my child."

The call ends but the boiling rage in me does not.

I pace up and down in my large office. How can she do this? He is just a baby. Does she honestly have no heart at all?

"Frank!" I shout. My assistant walks into my office. "Yes, Sir." He looks nervous. He always looks nervous. I guess it is just the effect I have on everyone in the office. Better to be feared than walked over. That is how business works.

"Call Taylor's nanny and have him fetch Taylor from his school. I will need him to stay late tonight."

"Yes, Sir." Good. No questioning or arguing. Just do as you are told.

I collect my things and march out of the office without another word. I need air. I need space. I need to get away from everything. I am overwhelmed and allowing emotions to rule over logic.

I don't quite know how it happens, but I find myself standing at Gianna's door, knocking. Waiting for her to open.

I just cannot face Taylor feeling how I feel. I cannot let him see me this angry.

I had not seen Gianna since dinner at my place a few days before. I have managed to avoid her completely by not leaving the house all weekend. It feels stupid, but fuck, after watching her swim in the nude right after almost losing myself to her in my house. I'd already had numerous solo moments to try and clear my head and all the sexual frustration she was causing me. It has not been helping though. I want her. It is getting too easy to close my eyes and think about her. Every time I close my eyes, she is almost all I can think about and even now, through the anger, I can feel my dick reacting in my pants.

For fuck's sake get a grip, there are more important issues right now.

Gianna answers the door in pink tracksuit pants and a white crop top with no bra on. She looks incredible.

Her hair is pulled into a messy bun, and she looks surprised to see me.

“Hudson?”

“Hi.”

I don't know if it is how I look or the angry energy pouring off me, but for some reason, she just pulls me into a hug. It is so unexpected I almost push her away. But with her arms around me, I feel some of the tension easing away and I just wrap my arms around her in return and take a really deep breath.

We stand there for a moment before she pulls back, stepping aside to let me in.

“Come in. I have a really good single-malt whiskey. I don't know what is going on, but it looks like you need a double on the rocks.” How does she just know? I find my way to her couch and sink into it. Feeling agitated, uncomfortable, angry. But also, glad to be here. She has a way about her that takes away some of my tension without even saying anything.

I did not even know if we were still just friends or what we were to each other, but I was grateful to be around her right now.

She puts a glass in front of me on the coffee table. Whiskey on the rocks. She has poured the same for herself. A woman after my own heart.

She sits on the couch next to me, pulling her legs underneath her she looks casual, comfortable, and absolutely stunning. Her round breasts pressed against the thin fabric of her white crop top.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asks.

She doesn't push for information; her question is open and calm. I feel that whether I let her know what is happening or not I am still welcome. I am relieved. Then unexpectedly I

find myself opening up to her anyway. I barely open up to anyone.

“My ex. She’s playing dirty. Using Taylor as a tool in the court case. Just for money.” I hate that I once would have fallen for her manipulation.

Gianna stays quiet, showing me that she is listening but letting me talk.

“I just don’t understand how her mind works. Does she honestly have no heart at all? She has not even asked to see her son in over a year. The last time I did let her see her son she arrived drunk. How can a mother go that long without fighting to see her own child?” I feel my voice rising in anger and take a sip of whiskey, letting the fiery liquid burn down my throat.

I feel out of control.

I need to pull myself together.

Gianna casually stretched one of her legs out, touching my thigh, pretending nothing of it, but it felt reassuring. “I’m so sorry, Hudson. Do your lawyers think she stands a chance to get what she is after?”

“I really doubt it. Her history is rocky, to say the least. It’s just, that you can never say never, and I have to take this seriously. I cannot take any chances. Not when my son is at risk.” I know how easily the court of public opinion can be swayed.

“You know with the recent shit about her in the news and her still dating your brother who is, sorry to be so blunt, a raging drug addict. I doubt there is anything you have to worry about. I mean I get it; you still have to fight back and there is always that worry that you get some asshole judge who hears her bullshit and falls for it. The law isn’t always fair. But, Hudson, you are the most amazing father I have ever met. Someone would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb to not see that.” I feel like an average dad most days, but I love my son and would die to keep him from being hurt.

I nod as her words sink into me. Her voice is soothing, and I feel the negativity ease away a little.

She leans over to grab her phone and her crop top pulls tight against her skin. Why isn't she wearing a bra? Of course, she isn't, she is relaxing at home. Fuck, she is so distracting, but right now I need to be distracted.

"I'll order us some food. Just relax, kick your feet up, we can bring the bottle of whiskey here, so we don't even have to leave the couch, OK? This is what friends are for Hudson."

Friends.

I nod. Yes, I guess that is exactly what I need now. A real friend. I am just surprised to realize that my only real friend is Gianna. My feisty neighbor. The thought strikes me as odd. I don't even see her as just being my brother's ex anymore. She is so much more to me than that. In all honesty, I am growing to be quite fond of her whether I like that idea or not.

"You are right. I just need to let loose a little. Breathe. I definitely need to calm down before I go home either way. The nanny is with Taylor because I didn't want him to see me like this."

Gianna puts her phone down. "I hope you like pizza. I ordered two different kinds."

I am relieved she has just gone ahead and made the order without asking. I appreciate the fact that she seems to understand that I have a limited capacity to focus on mediocre things right now. It is so nice to have someone to just – do things for me. I mean not in a business sense. I pay plenty of people to work for me, but here she is, just doing things as a friend.

By the second whiskey, I am starting to feel a lot better. Gianna has made herself right at home around me, her feet on my lap and her cheeks flushed pink from the laughter. We are being so petty, making fun of my ex and my brother, but the jokes are helping me make light of this ridiculous situation and I haven't actually laughed this much since, actually, have I ever laughed this much.

She is still giggling at her last snarky comment about my ex while she takes a sip of her whiskey. The ice chimed against the glass.

I find myself staring at her. Her soft lips, loose strands of her messy bun falling over her cheeks. She glanced up at me and her green eyes were bright with mischief.

I am about to lean forward and kiss her when the doorbell rings.

“Pizza!” She shouts and jumps up. I laugh to myself. Apparently, whiskey hits her harder than wine because she is as energetic and entertaining as a naughty child.

She comes back into the room with two boxes of pizza, putting them down on the coffee table she does not even bring plates. She just opens the boxes and grabs a slice, biting into it as she slides back down onto the couch. I don't like the fact that her legs are no longer near me, so I lean over to grab her around her lower waist, pulling her closer to me. Then without saying a word I select a slice of pizza for myself and lean back to enjoy it, my free hand on her thigh.

She does not say a word, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, and for some reason that is exactly how it feels, like the most natural thing in the world.

The pizza boxes lay open, unfinished.

We are leaning back into the couch, hunger satisfied and whiskey in hand, but another kind of hunger threatening to burst through the seams of the room. And my pants.

I run my hand over the inside of her thigh. Dangerously close. She sighs a deep seductive sigh and does not even try and stop me.

I put my glass down, then take her glass from her hand and put it down as well. Grabbing her around both of her thighs I pull her onto my lap. Pressing her open legs onto my hard cock. I groan deeply into her ear.

“Why do you keep doing this to me, Gianna? Do you see how I can't control myself around you?”

She grinds into me, her hips rocking slowly back and forth. She giggles softly and bites my neck. Oh, fuck I am in trouble.

She senses my tension and leans back.

I think she knows it has been a really difficult day for me. She swings her legs off me, standing, reaching out grabs my hand, and pulls me off the couch. Shit. I shouldn't have started this. She is probably going to send me home.

“Come on. I don't want to be taking advantage of you and having you regret it tomorrow. I have a better idea.”

“What in the world could be better than you taking advantage of me?”

“A swim.”

Fuck. If she thought a swim was the answer to me being able to have self-control, she did not realize that nearly every fantasy I have played out in my head with her has been in the pool.

I let her lead me there anyway. Towels over my shoulder I don't resist for a second as she holds my hand and skips towards the pool.

When we get there, she lets me go. She looks so innocent, but I imagine she knows exactly what she is doing. She slips out of her pink tracksuit pants. Her white lace underwear teased me with the shadowy outline of her pussy.

In her lace bottoms and white crop top she dives into the pool. She is standing waist deep and I can immediately see that the fabric has gone transparent. The outline of her nipples pressed hard against the flimsy top. My cock pressing uncomfortably against my work pants I don't waste a moment longer to undress myself and dive in after her.

I am next to her up against the side of the pool and every fantasy I have had about her floods into my memory. All of them were insignificant compared to the real, beautiful, wild girl in front of me. I lift her almost out of the water. She wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. Her full breasts pressed against my chest. My hands cup her ass,

holding her against me. My erection pressed against the soft fabric of her lace underwear.

She breathes into my mouth. "Please don't stop, Hudson."

"We should though, you know this is wrong." I try to be responsible.

I know there is no way I am going to be able to stop at this point, but I want her to believe I am in control. She has been taunting me with her hot, tight, little body for too long and now it is my turn to tease her.

"Hudson, no." She pulls me into a deep kiss and my erection presses harder into her. I push her against the side of the pool. Knowing I want to fuck her harder than I should. I can feel the soft folds of her pussy lips against the shaft of my cock. The hardness begging to be thrust inside of her, pressing against the walls of her tightness.

I want to play it cool. I want to take it slow, to explore her body more. But I just can't control myself. There has been too much teasing and too much tension.

I lift her slightly higher, my fingers still gripping her ass, I slide them forward over her slick, wet pussy and pull the soft lace fabric to the side. I don't even hesitate. The tip of my cock eases into her while I slowly lower her down onto me as she lets out a small cry. I give her only a second to adjust to my size as her pussy clamps around me then I plunge myself all the way into her begging lips and she throws her head back and lets out a sharp breath.

After that, all control is lost, and her fingers dig into my neck as I thrust my cock into her over and over again. She isn't being quiet, and I don't care. The neighbors can have a show.

She arches her back as I hold myself fully inside her, feeling her pussy muscles clench and pulse around my cock, I force myself to stay still as she begins to beg, so close to orgasm. "Please, Hudson, let me come." The words barely are a whisper in my ear. I can't hold back any longer. Thrusting slow and deep then speeding up again she collapses in my

arms, her body shaking and her back arching. I feel her vagina walls tighten and it is all I needed to explode inside her. My cock went ridged as waves of pleasure pulsed through both of us and weeks of tension pour into her.

CHAPTER 9

GIANNA

The Saturday morning sunlight filters through my open window warming my skin as I slowly wake up. I am smiling. I feel really happy.

At the same time though I am worried because I can feel myself falling for Hudson and I still haven't managed to work out if it is a good or bad choice. My heart and my brain are at odds with each other. I know there is only one solution. Reaching for my phone I open my messenger app and navigate to my girls' group.

Me: Urgent lunch meeting needed! Need to consult the girls. You have no idea what has been going on!

Samantha: Oh, this sounds bad. Is it bad? Is it good bad or bad bad?

Me: Well, this is what I need you guys to tell me! I think I need you to talk some sense into me.

Claire: Has this got something to do with that hot man next door!? Also, gooooooood morning!

Me: Hi! And yes! Are you guys free for lunch and some cocktails?

Samantha: Let's go to that cute bistro on Tyrade Street? I'm craving their basil pesto!

Claire: You crave the weirdest things. But they do make a great Mimosa, so I am happy with that.

Me: 12:30?

Samantha: See you there!

I stretch my legs up enjoying the lazy start to the weekend. Flashes of what happened in the pool played through my mind. I pick up my pillow and cover my face. “What are you doing Gianna?” I say out loud into the soft fabric.

Okay, no point in laying here all morning wallowing in my confusion. I should go for a run before I meet up with the girls.

I am relieved and disappointed not to bump into Hudson on my run around the estate. It is better though; I know because I don’t understand what exactly is going on with me. I cannot stop thinking about him. Not only how insanely fucking hot he is and how incredible he felt against my body, but him – just everything about him. The more I think about him the more fear I feel. It has been so long since I’ve let myself feel anything and now, I am playing with fire. My ex’s brother. Why does he have to be his brother?

I climb into the shower hoping the steam will ease my tension. Along with the dirty thoughts that are playing over and over in my mind.



We are seated near the window, overlooking the busy street. The restaurant is full of energy and color, and I feel myself relaxing into the vibe. The waiter places the cocktails on the table and Claire and Samantha can barely even wait for him to walk away before they start drilling me for information.

“Hang on. I will tell you everything! It’s just all happening so fast; it is maybe a little hard to explain everything.” I take a drink and a deep breath.

“Oh, just get to the point. Did you kick him in the balls or kiss him?” Claire is not one to beat around the bush.

“Actually, the kissing happened a while ago. Last night it got a lot further than that – in the pool.” I sip my drink while they process what I have just spilled.

“The pool?” Samantha, being the bolder one of us all raises her glass. “Girl, I never knew you had it in you.”

“Not so loud. I don’t need the whole restaurant to know.” I blush.

Claire just looks puzzled. “What do you mean the kissing happened a while ago? Why did we not know all of this was going on?” I feel guilty for keeping secrets, even if it wasn’t intentional.

“I guess I was in denial myself.” I was trying to sort out the inner conflict for the inner horniness.

“Okay, well, now you have to tell us everything.” Both of them stare at me expectantly.

I take a breath, then a long sip of my mimosa. “Fine. It started after I suggested to him that we should be friends, you know, like we planned.” This is Samantha’s fault now I think about it.

“Friends with benefits is not what we planned.” Samantha chirps.

“Just be quiet and listen OK. This was your bright idea.” She nods and pretends to zip her mouth closed and throw away the key. I laugh.

“Okay, so the first time we kissed, well – I stopped him. And the second time we kissed, he stopped me. But then last night neither of us stopped each other because I think we just got to that point.” I pause for another sip of courage, “The main thing though is that – I think I have feelings.”

“Are you serious?” Claire looks concerned. “I mean is that a good decision, Gi?” I don’t usually catch feelings.

“Hello, why do you think I called an urgent meeting with you guys.” I need them to talk sense into me, and quickly before I completely lose my mind and fall in love with Hudson.

I do my best to explain everything to them. While I am talking and actually putting it all into words, I realize the depth of what is going on inside my head and my heart. I tell them

about how I see him as a father, how gentle he is with Taylor, and how he is vulnerable when we speak about what he is going through with the custody battle. I realize I have been allowed to see a side of him that no one else ever got to see and that side of him is so special. His whole serious, grumpy, closed-off outward appearance isn't the real him at all.

When I finally stop talking Samantha says. "Oh gosh, you have it bad, Gi."

I realize she is right.

"I guess I do. Now what do I do about it?" I have no idea what I should do now, run? Hide? Day drink?

"It's difficult to say because he is in the middle of this custody battle and there is so much going on with his ex still being in the picture and your ex being his family." All things I have told myself a thousand times "Is it a good idea for you to be involved with him at all?" Samantha is always the one to play devil's advocate, but Claire is having none of it.

"Are you kidding? She hasn't ever spoken like this about anyone, Sam. Name one time you have ever heard her talking like this about a guy. Never mind a freaking hot billionaire. I say she should screw what anyone else thinks and go for it. Follow your heart, Gi." My heart is stupid, my heart has got me in trouble and got itself broken too many times to be trusted.

"Is it that easy though?" I shrug, feeling a little desperate. I want to believe I can just let go of what everyone else thinks and dive in and let myself feel everything I am semi-denying that I am feeling. But I am scared. For good reason. There are so many loose ends and other factors to consider. Should I wait until the court case is over? Sometimes these things go on for years. What if I wait and lose him? Is that a good or a bad thing?

When Samantha sighs and agrees with Claire, that is when my world flips upside down. "Yip. I don't really want to say it, but I actually think she is right. I don't think you have ever spoken about a guy this way. This kind of chance at something real does not come along very often and if it is real then you

can't just ignore it. But Gi, you have to be careful." She pauses and thinks about what she has said then shakes her head. "Scrap that. Don't be careful. Just go for it." They are the worst best friends ever. Utterly useless.

I don't know if I had expected them to talk me out of it but apparently, that is no longer an option. Besides, I have to be honest with myself, and I really don't want to stop what is happening with Hudson.



It's late when I get home. Slightly tainted by mimosa, I swallow my nerves and walk over to Hudson's place, knocking lightly on the door. He opens it and immediately his face breaks into a smile when he sees it is me. "Hi, Sexy."

He pulls me inside, closes the door behind him, and kisses me gently on the lips. My heart races. His kisses are soft and slow, not the fiery urgent passion they had been last night, but tender and warm. The feeling is deeper and runs through me like electricity.

"Daddy?" A little voice comes from the room next to the lounge.

Hudson steps away, still smiling. "Sorry, uh, let me go see what the little guy wants."

I stand in the entrance hall, smiling, but feeling shy. Now that I have admitted to myself that I actually do have feelings for him I am not sure how to react around him. I'm being a dork, all blushing and weird.

He comes back into the room. "Ok, sorted, he just wanted a good night tuck in. He is settled now."

I decided the best way to approach this whole thing is bluntly. "Hudson, about last night." I start, but he quickly speaks over me.

"Last night was fucking incredible, Gianna. I won't lie to you; I haven't been able to stop thinking about you today." He has a devious glint in his eye.

“Me too.” I shift a little, feeling like a school kid standing in front of her first crush. He stands closer to me and gently lifts my chin up so that my eyes meet his. “I want – I mean – I know this is complicated.”

Complicated. Yes, it is. Suddenly I felt nervous. He is right. This is so intensely complicated.

“Maybe I should go, I just–”

“Oh, yes - sure. Uh, sure.” He steps back slightly. Have I just offended him?

He moves away from me and opens the front door. I turn to walk out but he grabs me around my waist and his lips are on mine, kissing me passionately again. I give in and melt into his arms.

“Hudson?”

A woman’s voice comes from the open doorway, and I jump.

Hudson groans out loud.

“Mother.” He says, clipped and short. “Come in.” Oh my God, his mother just saw us smooching like kids.

I take a big step away from him. “I should get going then,” I say.

His mother glares at me. “Yes. I think you should!” She sneers, looking at me with disdain. She knows who I am – she hasn’t forgotten; I can see it in her eyes.

He grabs my arm. “I will call you later, okay?” I doubt that I can see the look in his mother’s eyes.

I smile, trying not to show how much she has gotten to me. “Yes. I look forward to it.”

I nearly sprinted out of the door to escape the awkwardness of the situation. Feeling rejected and like a child in trouble, but this time one who has been caught kissing a boy she is not supposed to be kissing.

I am almost at my front door when his mother’s voice comes ringing behind me.

“Ms. Perth.” She spits my name out with disdain in her voice.

I turn to look at her. Fuck she looks livid. “How can I help you, Ms. Drake?” I am polite, and not giving her reason to lash out.

“I don’t know what you think you are doing with my son but let me be clear. You have already messed up the reputation of my younger son and now it seems you have gotten your gold-digging claws into my older son. I will not have you interfering with my family like this.” She gets into my personal space, and she smells like retirement village and secondhand smoke, “Do you understand that you are putting his entire custody battle at risk? Heaven forbid the press got a hold of this disastrous story!” she raises her voice, “Daniel’s ex now chasing his older brother. It is unheard of, and I will not let you do this. Have some morals. Think about Taylor. What kind of a social climber are you?”

Her words cut me deeper than I would like to admit.

I want to defend myself; tell her she was wrong. Tell her that Daniel’s reputation is entirely of his own making. I want to yell at her about the damage Daniel has done to me, and the trauma he has caused. But instead, I find myself nodding. I stand up straight and just agree with this bitter old woman.

Perhaps I am being selfish. Hudson and Taylor do not need drama in their lives now and in reality, if the press does get hold of this story, it will be a nightmare of a scandal and they will stretch out every negative side of the story in their favor.

“Have a nice evening,” is all I manage to say. Then I turn and walk towards my home.

“I hope you heard me young lady!” She calls after me. I heard – loud and fucking clear.

I ignore her. My heart is heavy in my chest and tears are running freely down my face. I am really stupid to believe this could have worked. The reality is that it is a fairy tale of an idea. There is no way I could be with Hudson and not cause problems for him.

It just wouldn't be fair to me. Daniel truly has ruined my life.

CHAPTER 10

HUDSON

I hear the front door slam and my mother's high-heeled footsteps marching into the kitchen where I am preparing some food. I had foolishly, completely forgotten she was coming over.

She stands with her hands on her hips, staring at me.

"Did you get whatever it was that you had forgotten in the car, Mother?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Hudson. I did not forget anything in the car. I went to talk to that piece of trash next door that I just caught you making out with. What is wrong with you? How dare you put your family at risk like this with someone so far beneath your standing and how dare you act in a way that might hurt your brother."

I blink at her in disbelief. She had done what? Had she just spoken to Gianna?

"What did you say to her?" The edge of my voice is as sharp as the knife in my hand which I slowly put down on the counter.

"Mother. What. Did. You. Say. To. Gianna?"

She rolls her eyes. "What does it matter? She is out of your life now and you will NOT be seeing her again do you understand me. You cannot be that stupid. What about your son? Your reputation? Your brother's reputation." She folds her arms. "Everything about that woman screams trouble and you want to pretend you care about staying clean for the media

during the custody battle while you are galivanting around with that slut.”

“She is anything but a slut.” I try very hard to stay calm, “You know nothing about her!” I am so angry I can feel myself shaking slightly.

“Hudson, if you want some loose piece of ass, find another one. Any other one. But this particular one is going to do damage in your custody battle. If you do not hear anything I am saying at least hear that!”

I am angry but I realize what she is saying about the custody battle might be partially true. All I care about is my son and maybe I have been so blindly selfish letting myself fall for Gianna. Make no mistake, I am fully aware that I am falling for her. She is such an amazing, kind, and beautiful woman. She is so gentle with Taylor and has been so incredibly supportive of me, but it would be bad if the media did get hold of this news. I have already experienced trial by media. And I didn’t need the social trial to interfere with the real trial.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

My mother is not wrong about that.

I turn my back to her to hide the pain in my expression.

“You know I am right Hudson.” I wish she wasn’t.

I sigh, deep and sad, feeling defeated and deflated; feeling like I have been selfish and ignorant to the overall picture; feeling like I have somehow let my son down and I have been a terrible father, and nothing can affect me more than the thought of letting Taylor down.

I concede to accept reality for what it is.

“You are right about the court date and the media. But I will not accept you talking about Gianna like that. I will stop seeing her, for Taylor’s sake. But watch your words when you

talk about her.” I correct her shitty behavior and she looks mortified.

I have never spoken to my mother in that way, but this is something I feel very strongly about.

“Whatever, Hudson. As long as I know you are going to do as you are told for the sake of the family. Now tell me when the last time was you spoke to your brother?” Never would be too soon.

My heart is heavy in my chest as I suffer through an hour of bullshit conversation with my mother about my brother and how he needs me to support him. About how I am the head of the family and in a nutshell, what I need or want is irrelevant. It is an idea that has been drummed into my mind and etched into my soul from a very young age and maybe it is time for me to let go of this fantasy, that has been in my mind, that I could actually dare to be happy for a change and just to accept the fate of what actually is.

I am Hudson Drake.

I have responsibilities.

When my mother finally leaves, I feel utterly drained. I feel depressed to my bones and exhausted. She has sucked the life out of me.

Collapsing into bed I want to reach out for my phone and call Gianna. But what will I say? The next conversation I will need to have with her will be to let her know that this is over. Whatever it was or is. It has to be over. I left my phone on the nightstand. Staring at it. I daydream about having Gianna in my arms.

Why is this hurting so much? It is time to shut down my emotions and act like I am supposed to act. Rational, logical, no emotions – this is business. Family business.

I flick the bedside light off and roll onto my side. My eyes open, staring into the empty darkness.

I don't know when I eventually fall asleep but the next morning, I wake up even more exhausted and feeling withdrawn and numb.

I have to drag myself out of bed and towards the coffee machine, feeling foggy and out of touch with reality. I should go to the gym. The nanny will be here in the next thirty minutes to take Taylor to a birthday party with some of the kids from his daycare and I am relieved that I have most of the day to myself to sort out my head and gather my thoughts so that I can focus on what really matters. The court case.

Walking into the gym I have conflicting thoughts between wishing that Gianna is not going to be here and wishing that she will be.

She is.

Fuck.

This is going to be so difficult.

Should I just go over to her and let her know straight away? Get it over with?

She has her headphones on and hasn't noticed me yet. I can just turn around and walk out before she sees me but what kind of a person will that make me. I cannot avoid her forever. We live right next door to each other no matter what happens from this point on.

Taking a breath and pressing my shoulders back I walk over to where she is standing. She sees me and jumps a little. Her eyes look swollen and pink like she has been crying all night. All I want to do is reach out and wrap my arms around her, hold her, and tell her everything is going to be okay.

She can sense my body language. I guess I am more rigid than I think I am. She takes a small step away from me and nods slowly.

“You don't have to say anything, Hudson. I am fully aware that this cannot happen – us I mean. That we need to–” She chokes back tears unsuccessfully and I see them rolling down her cheeks.

My heart shatters in my chest.

“Gi, I–” I reach out to her, unable to stop myself. But she steps further away.

“See you around. Hudson.” She turns her back on me and walks out of the gym. Her face is turned down to hide her tears from anyone who might be watching.

I can't go after her. It is one of the hardest things I have ever had to do but I know I cannot go after her. It just isn't meant to be.

When she is out of site my heartache is replaced with angry rage. Why is it that I am never allowed to be happy? I want to start throwing the equipment around. Lobbing weight across the room. Shouting at no one and everyone for judging my life to the point where I cannot even have one.

But instead, I stand incredibly still. My entire body was as tense and as rigid as an unmovable bridge. My fists are balled at my side. My jaw is clenched, and my eyes are shut.

I focus on my breathing. Just one breath in and one breath out. Nothing else to think about right now but my breathing.

When most of the anger is subsided and I feel like I can move without destroying everything in my path, I pick up my gym towel and walk out of there. I need to be away from everyone. I need the world to give me a break. I need to reset my head and shut down my heart.

I get into my car and head towards my warehouse where I keep all of my classic cars. Spending time with my arms elbow-deep in engine grease is the only thing that is going to help distract me now.

Hours later when Taylor arrives home later that night, he asks me where Gianna is. I tell him she is busy and brush the subject aside. I distract him by asking him if he wants to go for ice cream. I need a drive anyway. His excited little face lights up with joy and I smile.

This is all I need.

Just to be a dad. Taylor and I will be completely fine on our own as we have always been.

CHAPTER 11

GIANNA

It's been a few days since I last spoke to Hudson in the gym, and I can't get him out of my mind. I am curled up alone on my couch with my feet up, in my tracksuit, and not caring about anything.

I have not even seen Hudson around the estate which is probably for the best. We were stupid - or I was stupid, to ever think we might have worked out. I haven't really left the house that much though, so I guess it is no surprise I haven't bumped into him. You kind of have to go outside for that to happen. Lucky for me, if you could call me lucky because I am against that for obvious reasons, it is pouring rain outside.

The perfect weather to hide away in. Windy grey skies and wet earth, to match my mood. The sound of the rain against my windows is that small amount of comfort I need right now. But also, it makes me wish that I was curled up in Hudson's arms watching a scary movie and eating popcorn.

The girls are on the chat group with me:

Claire: Gi, you need to get out, get up, get some fresh air.

Sam: Come on Gi, join us for a drink this afternoon. It's the weekend. I will even come to fetch you, so you don't have to drive anywhere.

Me: I'm sorry guys I just can't face anything right now. I don't want to have to get dressed and trudge around in public and see actual people. Have you been out today? It's pouring rain.

Claire: Well, we are coming to fetch you, so you have two choices - get up and get dressed or get thrown into the back of the car wearing whatever it is you are wearing right now?

Me: I know you guys mean well and I love you so much for it, but I am not going out today. Please.

Sam: OK. Fine. We understand. But know that we are thinking of you OK. And if you need anything at all just call!

Claire: Love you GiGi. Just text or call if you need anything.

Me: xx

I am so relieved that they have not pushed me to go out. Honestly, I have not even showered in days. I am still wearing the same pants from two days ago as well. Actually, it is a bit embarrassing. I really should at least get up and shower. I think about it for a moment and then roll onto my side on the couch and bury my face in the pillow, tears pouring down my cheeks again.

The first day I experienced loud, heartbreaking sobs that I was not able to control. It was the third day now and the modus had changed. I have silent heart-breaking tears that I cannot control. I just do not have the energy to actually sob. But the ache is the same.

My heart physically burns in my chest.

I just want to feel nothing at all. I even Googled how to stop heartache ache and guess what – my diagnoses are either a heart attack, acute depression, or a mental breakdown. Google even kindly provided contact details for some local emergency numbers and suggestions included temporary admittance to a psych ward or a hospital. Sigh. Thanks, hey, so helpful. I guess Dr. Google has to avoid taking things too lightly, but it annoys me. All I need is a ten-step list. I just need some magic pill to shut down emotion so that I can function like a normal human being.

Maybe I should go see my doctor this Monday? I have never felt like this in my life. Maybe she could help me. I could be sick, maybe it is a heart attack.

I must have dozed off. At least sleeping took some of the pain away, just shutting down and not existing for a little while. But waking up is pure hell because every time I open my eyes, I remember all over again that Hudson and I are – what are we? Broken up? We have not even had a chance to date yet. So, what are we? It does not even matter. We are nothing. That is what we are. We are an almost, the most heartbreaking word there is – almost.

I swing my legs off the couch and force myself to sit up. My eyes are hurting, and my head is hurting and I really, really need to act like a grown-up and go shower at least.

Standing up my body feels so heavy. I am thinking of a quote I had read somewhere on social media. I would not call what Hudson and I had a ‘situationship’, but the quote seemed to work. What is it now? It’s hard to let go of someone you never even had the chance to have because you are left with an imagination full of potential for what could have been.

I sigh deeply and pull my unwashed hair into a very messy bun. I walk towards my kitchen, very careful to avoid the entrance hall and the full-length mirror near the door. The last thing I need right now is to actually see myself and the wreck of what I am feeling in person.

I nearly jump out of my skin when there is a loud knock at the door. “Open up, Giiiiirrrrrr!”

Samantha. She does not stop knocking. Even when I shout “Stop! I’m coming!” She just carries on knocking. “Open! Open! Open!”

Shit, she can be annoying when she wants to be.

I swing the door open to find Samantha and Claire standing on my front step. Their hands are full of food, drinks, and something that looks like a giant rainbow blanket. What in the world?

They both stand there staring at me. Claire actually drops her mouth open in horror. Samantha says “Holy fuck, Gianna!? Did a truck hit you?” She quickly puts the things she

is holding on the floor right at the open door and pulls me into the biggest hug.

I stand with my arms at my side and start crying again.

“You smell like old gym equipment girl.” Samantha starts to laugh, leaning back to wipe tears from my face with her sleeve.

The girls push their way into my house. I stand at the door feeling overwhelmed, dazed, and confused.

“I am not going out guys.” I manage to say.

“Oh no, sweetie, don’t worry. You aren’t going anywhere. Not looking like that. But we certainly are not going to abandon you here to wallow in self-pity alone OK. We have plans. But first,” She scrunches up her face looking me up and down “Claire? Will you get this roadkill into a shower while I set up?”

Claire laughs, grabbing my arm. “Come on roadkill. Let’s go sprinkle some fairy dust on whatever it is you have got going on here.” She leads me to the bathroom and turns on the shower, adjusting the temperature, finding all my soaps and shampoos, and demanding that I strip down and climb in.

I do not even bother to think about what is going on. It is easier to just do what I am being told. It actually helps to not be the one having to make hard choices, like what temperature I want the water to be and things like that.

I stand under the hot steamy flow and instantly regret not having done this sooner. While I am busy in the shower, fogging up the windows and filling the room with steam, Claire grabs my clothes off the floor and goes to put a load of laundry in the washer.

I hear the girls chattering in the living room and laughing and joking. It is so good just to have that sound in the house. I choke back tears and turn the water off.

Wrapped in a towel I step out of the bathroom, but before I can peek into the living room to see what they are up to Samantha grabs my arm and ushers me to the bedroom. On my

bed is a giant fluffy unicorn onesie. “What in the rainbow fuck is that?”

She laughs.

“Put it on. Don’t ask questions!”

“I want to dry my hair quickly.”

“Take your time sweetie. We are still setting up. Just don’t you dare come out of this room unless you are wearing that!”

She points at the colorful onesie. “Okay?”

I nod.



It does not take me too long. When I eventually saunter out of the bedroom, wearing what was actually such a cozy and warm onesie, Claire shouts “Close your eyes!” And runs to meet me at the entrance to the living room.

Even though my eyes are closed she still puts her hands over them and tells me to trust her.

I just go along with it. Still feeling heartache but also feeling so grateful to be distracted.

She guides me until I am standing wherever it is that she needs me to be and then lifts her hands away from my eyes.

Samantha and Claire are standing near me both wearing onesies of their own. A cat and a frog. I crack up laughing at the frog. Claire looks hilarious. “Told you it would make her laugh!”

The lounge is full of scented candles, glowing warmly in all the corners. They have moved the coffee table to the side and laid out a big blanket in the middle of the room which has been turned into a massive picnic area. All kinds of different foods are spread across the floor. Crackers, cold meats, sushi, chips and dip, marshmallows, and hot chocolate. Champagne.

I start crying again.

“We love you, Chipmunk.” Both of them run over to wrap their fluffy onesie arms around me. “I am not a chipmunk,” I mumble “I am a unicorn.”

We are all sitting cozy on the picnic blanket. Sam puts some music on in the background and the champagne is already adding sweet bubbles to my head. We are giggling a little and for the moment I can forget about my heart.

“Gi,” Sam says cautiously, “I know you probably do not want to talk about him, but I found something out yesterday afternoon at work.” I sit up, of course, I want to talk about him. All I want to do is talk about him.

“What do you mean?” I ask cautiously.

“Well, it’s just something I thought you should know.” That doesn’t sound good.

“Ok, well geez Sam, don’t leave me hanging here.” Fuck, she better spill it fast.

“Okay – look it’s a bit intense, but here goes. So, there was actually a third brother. A younger one, Jason. When they were all quite young Jason, Daniel and Hudson were out at a party and just being young and stupid you know, nothing bad, and the media managed to get a lot of photos of them dancing with these girls. Then the next day one of the girls accused Jason of assaulting her. Both other brothers swore he had not even left their side the entire night, so it was not possible. Anyway, later she came forward to say it wasn’t true ok, but she accused him and went public with it threatening to take the family to court for compensation.” She rattles off faster than a news presenter.

“So, for a few months, it was all over the media and Jason got pulled out of school and refused to go outside and became severely depressed. Eventually, he committed suicide.”

Samantha pauses to double-check that I am following. She sits quietly for a little while then carries on. “Hudson took it really personally. He blamed himself for not being able to protect his baby brother from all the media shit. He became super strict about everything and anything about himself and

his family that got into the media.” He hates the media; I know he does. “Daniel, well fuck – NOT that he gets an excuse for his disgusting behavior. We think that might be why he hates women so much. That and his mom is a tyrant.” She is a crazy, bitter old bat, but it makes sense knowing this. “Who knows. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that this is most likely why Hudson is so extreme about his private life being on social media and why it causes him so much stress.” He’s afraid it’ll happen again, that he will lose someone he cares about.

I sit in silence absorbing the information.

It is both heartbreaking and enlightening.

In high school, my best friend committed suicide. I took it so personally as well, going over and over in my mind about what I missed, what I could have done to help her, how had I not known? I had spent so many nights, even to this day, wondering if I could have saved her. Now they are telling me that Hudson’s younger brother had killed himself.” I know that blame game too well.

“So much more about him makes sense now don’t you think?”

I almost spill my champagne trying to get up. “I need to go over there and talk to him.” Clearly, the bubbles are more in my head than I had thought because my legs feel like jelly.

“Oh no, you won’t!” Claire grabs my arm and pulls me back to the floor. “You need to eat some actual food, drink more champagne, and just relax here with us OK. Today is not the day for going to talk to Hudson.” She raises her beautifully shaped brows at me, and I nod. Goodness, maybe I am a little more drunk than I think.

Well. Who cares anyway. It’s not like I have a man to impress or stress about. I sigh deeply and nod again. “Yes! Okay! Picnic continues with my bitches!” With friends like these, I better pray I have no enemies.



The next morning, I woke up on my couch. Sam and Claire are still asleep, draped across the other couch. The lounge is a mess.

I smile. My heart is still so heavy, but how in the world did I luck out with friends like these two beautiful souls.

I tiptoe out of the living room doing my best not to wake them and make my way back into the shower. I want to go and speak to Hudson. I want to let him know that I understand. That I can wait out the storm to be with him.

Freshly showered and dressed up, I even put a little makeup on, I am about to sneak out of the house when Samantha rolls over and mumbles “I know where you are going.” She’s not trying to stop me this time.

“I won’t be long. Make some coffee you might need it.” I say looking at all the empty bottles.

Before she can answer I close the door behind me and walk over to Hudson’s house.

“Gianna.” His cold, professional demeanor throws me off slightly. No smile, no friendly eyes.

“Hi, Hudson. Can we talk?” I ask cautiously optimistic.

He doesn’t invite me in though. He steps out of the house and closes the door behind himself, standing on his front step I feel awkwardly unwelcome.

“What can I help you with Gianna?” He’s curt and to the point.

I trip over my words, trying to let him know that I understand but also trying not to bring up the sensitive past.

“I – I just want to let you that I understand that the media is such a big deal for you.” I feel his intense steel glare and dare not look up to meet his eyes. “I just think, Hudson, that it’s fine we can’t date but can we at least just be friends again. I’m struggling—”

He is standing coldly silent, observing me. His expression does not change at all. “That’s all we ever were Gianna; there really was not anything else there, just a misunderstanding

ok.” I have been a mistake, a fling, all sorts of things, never a misunderstanding before.

The words cut into me.

They do not sound like his words. This is public Hudson, not the Hudson I had the chance to get to know, briefly.

“Gianna, we are still friends. May I go now? Was that all?” He huffs, shoving his hands in his pockets.

I finally gather the courage to look into his eyes and as I catch his gaze he falters in his hard exterior and I glimpse the Hudson I know.

His eyes fall onto my lips. I want to kiss him. I want nothing more in the world than to kiss him. He leans towards me, his eyes locking onto my lips, and I raise myself just slightly onto my tip toes.

Then he blinks numerous times in quick succession and steps back.

“Is that all Gianna?”

“Yes. I just wanted – I just wanted you to know. I am here if you want a friend.” I would rather be his friend than nothing at all.

“Sure. Goodbye.”

He goes back inside, closing the door without saying another word to me. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe we can't be friends. Friends don't shut the door on friends.

Or maybe he just needs to see more of me to realize that we can be friends. I think I am going to have to start going to the gym again, resume my morning walks, and just make sure that I am out and about as much as possible. The more chances I get to bump into him, accidentally of course, the more chance I have of making him see the truth.

CHAPTER 12

HUDSON

I close the door behind me, blocking out the thought and idea of Gianna. Why did she have to come over? She is just causing problems for me, and I do not need that in my life.

Taylor comes running through to the entranceway shouting “Geeena.”

“No buddy, it’s not Gianna.”

“I heard Geena!”

I pick him up.

“Sorry buddy, she had to go. She just stopped by quickly.”

Taylor starts wiggling and shouting in my arms. Demanding to see Gianna. My nerves begin to grate. “Stop it!” I shout at him. His big blue eyes stare at me in horror. I never shout at him. He is such a soft kid I have never needed to; he just listens when I speak sternly but I never raise my voice. My heart sinks.

I pull him into a hug. “I’m so sorry little man, Daddy didn’t mean to shout. I’m so sorry.”

I can feel that I am on the edge of sanity lately. Losing my mind. I have not been focused at work or at home. I have been shouting at everyone in the office for practically no reason at all and I had even yelled at the nanny, earlier today.

My heart has been feeling heavy and empty and it was not until this morning, standing in front of Gianna on the doorstep, that I realized why.

Because I am a complete idiot! That's why.

Why did I listen to my mother? Gianna is the reason I am so edgy, snappy, and sad. I want to be with her. I want to hear her laugh and wrap my arms around her. I actually need Gianna in my life. She made me a better person. The reason I have been going crazy these last few days is because I am trying to deny the truth.

I don't actually care that she dated Daniel. Who is Daniel to me anyway but a complete stranger these days. We're not close enough to make this matter – at least not to me.

Maybe it was time I let Gianna know the truth, about why I really loathe the media. Why I am afraid to invite chaos into my life.

I put Taylor down. "Little man, I just have to go next door. Go find Marcus OK. I won't be long." The nanny has been staying here full-time for the past few days because I have not been able to function like a real adult. The help has been a relief and it makes me feel less shitty about my state of mind.

"Daddy bring Geena, okay?" His optimism is amazing; he always sees the best outcome and does not give up on what he wants. Toddlers are stubborn – almost as stubborn as me.

"Daddy is going to invite Gianna for dinner," I say because otherwise, he will ask every ten minutes for the rest of the day.

"Yayyeeee." He runs off to find Marcus.

I take a deep breath and head over to Gianna's house. The short walk feels longer today.

I knocked hesitantly on the door.

There is music coming from inside and more than one voice. Laughter. The door flies open, and I am greeted by a girl in a frog onesie. Surprised, I am not sure what exactly I have interrupted.

"Is Gianna here?" I stammer, cautiously asking.

I glance behind the frog at the total chaos happening in Gianna's normally tidy living room. It looks like Taylor has been unsupervised in there.

“Unicorn, come here! Hot daddy from next door is here.” Who? Oh, my god! She just referred to me as ‘hot daddy’. I’m both flattered and offended at the same time.

Another girl comes running to the door. Pulling the frog away.

“I am so, so, sorry. I think she is still a little drunk from last night.” The other onesie-wearing character says, “Gianna! You have a visitor.” The one in the cat outfit drags the frog away and Gianna arrives at the door.

I grin at her. “Unicorn?”

“The one and only.” She says with a giggle, “It’s a funny-onesie story.”

“I – let’s just say I am an idiot.” She says nothing. Her bright green eyes watching me calmly and making my heart stir in uncontrollable ways. “Please join me for dinner tonight at my place.” I invite her over, hoping I am not too late to fix the fuck up I made.

“Is there a dress code? She looks behind her at the aftermath of the party. I happen to have an interesting outfit you might want to see.”

“No dress code, unless you want to make it a pajama party.” I joke.

She laughs light-heartedly then says, “I’ll see you there, Hudson.”

Without warning she stands on her tiptoes and pulls my face closer to her level and plants a soft kiss on my cheek. Reaching out to her I pull her against me and kiss her lips. Everything rushes back to me, and I wonder how in the world I ever thought I could let her go. The frog girl starts giggling behind her. They’re enjoying the show.

“Six?” I smile and step away reluctantly. She nods, blushing, and watches me walk away.



Late afternoon takes forever to arrive. I am so impatient waiting for six o'clock. I think I may have over-prepared. I've ordered almost every kind of sushi on the menu, way too much of it. I have chilled three different wines and lit candles, and Taylor has his own plate of kiddy sushi which mostly consisted of avocado and rice and crumbed chicken.

Now I am pacing up and down the living area.

Five-forty-five. I want to check the clock batteries because I'm sure it is stuck.

Okay, I think it is safe to pour a glass of wine while I wait for the last fifteen minutes. I definitely need to calm my nerves; this is ridiculous. We have had dinner before, and I wasn't a wreck about it.

There is a soft knock at the door and before I can answer it Taylor is there with his face pressing against the long glass pane next to the door.

"Geeeeena is here, Daddddy!"

I hear laughter float into the house from outside.

Soft, beautiful laughter.

I gently move Taylor out of the way so that I can open the door. As soon as he can squeeze past me, he crashes into her and wraps his little arms around her legs. She reaches down to pick him up. "Hey, little guy. I missed you." He stays in her arms while I manage to steal a one-armed hug of my own.

"I was just about to pour some wine; would you like some?" I offer, as we walk inside the house.

"I'd love some thanks." She smiles.

Taylor wiggles free; shouting about wanting her to see his new spaceman and runs off to collect the astronaut teddy that I had bought him the day before.

"What have you done, Hudson?" With a fright I turn around, wondering what she is talking about. But she is smiling gesturing towards the dining room table covered in sushi.

“You know me” I shrug.

She laughs. Taylor comes running back in bowling straight into her again repeating “Up, please. Up.” She picks him up again, resting him on her hip and admiring his new toy.

“That is a very awesome spaceman.” She indulges his enthusiasm.

“Come on Taylor, time for sushi.” I wrangle him free from her and into his chair.

I can see he is over-excited to have her here. I haven’t really considered the impact she had on him as well, never mind on myself. He is beaming from ear to ear and will not stop talking.

We sit around the dinner table sampling all the different sushi pieces and flavors, enjoying each other’s company. Laughing and feeling more relaxed than I have felt since - well since the last time I had the pleasure of having her near me like this.

Under the table, I reach over and squeeze her thigh gently. She smiles.

“Ok, Taylor. It’s bedtime little guy.” I am relieved when Marcus comes into the room to gather him up into his arms. I need to talk to Gianna, and it’s not the sort of things you say in front of kids.

“Once I’ve tucked him in is there anything else you need from me?” He asks me.

“No, that’s it for tonight, thank you, Marcus.” I am sure I can handle the rest of the evening alone.

“It’s late? Why is the nanny still here?” She asks me, confused. I don’t normally have him here if I am home.

“It’s been a difficult time these past few days. I kind of lost myself for a moment without realizing it. I had him move into the cottage at the back of the property so he could be around full time.” I’m not ashamed of the fact I needed help.

“Well, that’s handy. It’s nice to have company and someone to help.” She smiles and shifts in her chair.

“No Gianna, what’s nice, more than nice, is to have you back here with me.” I want her here, all the time.

She watches me closely, not saying anything. “I am really sorry for pushing you away like that. I guess I need to explain why. Because it is not just my overbearing mother or this custody battle – it’s actually something that happened long ago when I was much younger. I had a younger brother; his name was Jason.” I am about to bare my soul to her when she stops me.

“It’s ok Hudson. I know about Jason. You don’t have to speak about him if you don’t want to.” I have no words in that moment.

I am shocked to the core. “You know about Jason? It’s not what you think it is though. He did not do anything to that girl. I was with him the whole night. I just–”

“Hudson. I know. I know the whole story. I am so sorry for everything you went through.” She reaches out and puts her hand on my leg. My whole body warms when she touches me, even just an innocent touch.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change anything. Nothing matters Hudson except that I want to be with you.” I want that too; I want to put my irrational fears aside and start living my life.

I have been so nervous to tell her, assuming that she would think my family are monsters, especially after Daniel hurt her so badly, I thought she would have sided with that bitch who made up the story about Jason, but she didn’t. Her eyes are soft and tender and full of care.

I reach out and pull her onto my lap, kissing her softly, smelling her vanilla and warm sandalwood scent. I hold her in my arms and then bury my face in her soft chocolate curls. Everything melts away and my heart feels happiness it has not felt in way too long.

She strokes her hands over my back and rests her head on my shoulder. “I know it won’t be easy, Hudson. But I want to

be with you.” She is amazing, and I am so fucking lucky I moved in next door.

“Not being easy is sort of an understatement.” I laugh, leaning back to look into her eyes. “Let me pour us another glass of wine and we can go sit in the living room where it’s more comfortable.”



She is curled up on the couch when I come through with a glass of wine in each hand. Her shoes kicked off and her beautiful legs tucked under. I look at her and feel like this is how it should be. This is the life I want. Her, here in my home.

“Hudson, I know there is a lot that complicates this. Your mother for one.” She pulls a face; bless her heart my mother has a way of rubbing everyone the wrong way.

“Forget about my mother.” I’m not going to listen to her bullshit, not this time.

“It’s difficult when she makes herself so unforgettable.” I chuckle, that’s one word for her.

“I know. I know.” I sit next to her and pull her into my arms. She fits perfectly against my chest. “It’s my mother, it’s my brother, it’s my ex-wife, and this horrible custody battle that is getting nastier by the day. It’s the media. It’s basically the whole world against us.” It’s like we’re losing before we even start.

“But do you think we can do it?” She asks me, making it my decision.

“I do,” I say gently and kiss her forehead while she looks up at me.

“I think we can do it, Gi.” I answer, “I want to do it, all of it, with you.”

CHAPTER 13

GIANNA

Wrapped up in Hudson's arms the world fades away and my heart thuds in my chest. We can do this. We will have to be careful, but we want to be together, and I have a feeling nothing will stop him from getting what he wants.

I lean my head back and pull Hudson towards me, wanting to feel his lips on mine. My body begins to tingle as his fingers run through my hair and he pulls gently locking my lips against his.

He lets out a deep moan that vibrates through me sending shivers down my spine.

I manage to blindly reach out and put my wine glass down as he pulls me onto his lap. Straddling him I can feel his cock pressing against me and I gasp remembering just how big he is.

He raises his hips slightly pushing into me and I rock back and forth teasing him, but perhaps teasing myself even more.

"We can't" I gasp, trying to catch my breath "Taylor is in the room right over—"

"Ssshhh Gianna. I am sure you can be a good girl and stay quiet." He has high hopes.

I giggle. I am not so convinced that I can do that, but I don't want him to stop. He stands up, my legs still wrapped around his waist. He gently lowers my feet to the floor and starts slowly undoing my jeans. He sits down in front of where I am standing, kissing my body as he slips my legs free from

my clothing. Teasingly he kisses the inside of my thigh, slowly moving upwards. Then his tongue dances over the lace fabric of my underwear teasing my clit. Warm and wet, he licks me then moves the lace aside and slides his tongue inside my pussy. I gasped in delight.

“Quiet, Gianna.” He leans back and smiles at me then slips his fingers under the delicate fabric and slowly slides them inside me. I shudder with pleasure and my legs feel weak. Hudson turns me around and pulls me back onto his lap, my back against his broad chest, legs straddling him. His jeans are pulled open, and his cock is standing free and erect. He lifts me with ease, pulling the lace to the side, and then lowers me slowly onto his hard cock. I try to push down but he won’t let me. I want all of him inside of me, but he holds me hovering just above him. Teasing me. Easing into me slowly.

I gasped again. Then suddenly he lets me slide onto him, his huge cock filling me up, stretching the walls of my vagina. As he thrusts into me, he puts his hand over my mouth and muffles my shout.

“Be a good girl, or I will stop.”

Don’t you dare stop!

He gently teases my breast in his large hand. Pulling lightly at my nipple, kissing the back of my neck.

He begins to rock in and out of me. Lifting me up slightly so that he stays in control. He speeds up and slows down sending pulsing shivers through my body. I give in to his control and let him use my body however he wants to. The pleasure is soon overwhelming, and I feel my pussy begin to pulse. It intensifies as he becomes harder and starts to move faster inside me. Again, his hand is over my mouth; he can feel I am about to come, and I cry out a muffled sound into his hand as he explodes into me, and his hard pulsing cock causes my vagina to clamp around him as an orgasm rushes through me.

I collapse with my back against his chest, and he grabs a handful of my hair pulling my head back to press his lips against mine.

“We are going to have to practice being quieter than that, Gianna.” He grins at me.



The days that follow are absolute heaven.

I am suddenly able to focus at work again. I am full of energy and laughter. Hudson and I are spending a lot of time together but making sure that it is under the radar. We have discussed the best way to go about everything and think that if we can keep it quiet until after the court date it will be safer for everyone.

The funny thing is that sneaking around like naughty teenagers is way more fun than we could have imagined.

Samantha: what's up lollipop?

Me: Hey girl! I'm good how are you?

Sam: just wanted an update!

Me: I'm in heaven! I'm so happy.

Sam: Aah sweetie. I am so happy for you!

I had actually expected the girls to try and talk me out of getting back together with Hudson, but they have been so supportive. I think they just know. They know that it is not something that anyone can stand in the way of anymore. Some things are just meant to be.

Me: Good afternoon Mr. Drake. I was wondering if you were available for a meeting this evening at around 11 p.m.? My place? The key will be under the mat ;)

Hudson: Hi. Sorry just in a meeting with the lawyers can we talk later.

Me: Yes of course.

He doesn't reply again, and I begin to feel a little worried. The clock ticks over for a few hours and I still hear nothing from him. I hope everything is ok. When I still have not heard from him by nine, I start to worry.

Me: Hi. Is everything OK?

Hudson: Sorry. I am still at the lawyers. We are going through the case. The ex has thrown a curve ball. I won't be able to see you tonight. Not sure how long this will take.

A curve ball – What is that bitch up to now?

I feel stress and worry for him as I get ready for bed. I want to hold him in my arms and tell him everything will be okay, but I have no idea what is going on.

It is so unlike him not to reply, especially lately when we are constantly in touch whenever we are apart and cannot keep our hands off each other when we are together.

I struggle to fall asleep. Eventually, I give up and stand out on my balcony.

It is almost two in the morning.

Standing on the edge of my balcony I can just make out the outline of Hudson sitting on his own balcony. He is home. I want to grab my phone and message him again, but he is

sitting there with his head in his hands. He looks exhausted and broken. I guess I should respect that he has chosen not to message me and give him the space he wants.

It took me hours to fall asleep and I woke up later than I intended to.

I immediately reach over to pick up my phone but there is no message from Hudson. I dial his number but then stop myself. Surely if he wanted to talk to me, he would have called.

I put the phone back down. Then pick it up again. No, I am being silly. Let me send him a message at least.

Me: Good morning. I hope you are ok. Just wanted you to know I was thinking of you.

I can see the message has been read, but no reply comes.

I feel a little lost. Unsure what to do. He is obviously busy again, or maybe he is struggling to find time for me? What has happened with his ex?

I sigh and toss my phone onto the bed. Heading towards the kitchen to make coffee, I did not have enough sleep to function without it today. Worry seeps into my thoughts as I wonder if this is going to work. Can we keep this secret while he is going through everything with work and the court issues? Maybe it is all getting to be too much for him.

I decided that for the rest of the day, I would do my best not to bother him. I figure that when he is ready, he knows where to find me. I'm right next door.

I am not able to stop myself from checking my phone every five minutes though and each time I open his chat to see nothing from him; my heart feels a little heavier in my chest.

I drop my phone into my bag and decide to get lost in my own work. I have a lot to do, and I should rather just focus on

that instead of driving myself crazy waiting for Hudson to respond.

Perhaps whatever it is that we have going on is too much for him to deal with now and perhaps I am being unfair by putting that pressure on him. I hope with all my heart that this is not the case, but the seed of fear is already planted, and I am struggling not to panic a little.

Just give him time, Gi, he needs time. He is going through a lot.

I have still heard nothing and it's well after ten and climbing into bed I want to cry. I pull the blankets over my head and bury my face in the pillow. I feel selfish expecting him to message me. I feel demanding and selfish. But I also think he is being so unfair by not at least letting me know he is okay. I fall asleep hoping he will use the key I left under a rock to sneak into my house like he has been doing since we have gotten back together.

CHAPTER 14

HUDSON

It is dark when I pull into my driveway and pull up the hand brake. I sit in my car, taking a moment to enjoy the absolute silence. The last two days have been complete hell, and I am exhausted. I miss Gianna and felt terrible realizing I had not replied to her. I glance at my wrist, pulling my sleeve up to see the time, eleven-fifteen. I look over at her house. There are no lights on inside. She's probably asleep.

Still – I really want to see her. I need to see her.

Taylor will already be asleep anyway, so it is not like I am needed at home right now. I will spend some time with him in the morning. Right now, I need to be with Gianna.

I close my car door quietly and head towards her house. The key is where she has been leaving it for me the past week or so, under a little rock to the side of her walkway.

I slip it into the lock and gently open the door without a sound.

Closing it softly behind me.

I drop my things at the front door and take off my shoes. In her room, the soft moonlight filters through the window and I look down at her, fast asleep. Her dark hair spills across the pillow and her soft lips are slightly parted as she drifts in dreamland. Her phone is in her hand. I feel another tinge of guilt that I have not messaged her back.

Slipping out of my work clothes I walk quietly to the other side of her bed and slip under the covers. Wrapping my arms around her waist I pull her gently against my body, the curve

of her back against my chest. She is naked and the beauty of it sends electricity through my body.

She stirs awake and sighs softly. Half asleep, half dreaming.

“Hudson?” she whispers.

“Shhh baby, keep your eyes closed,” I reassure her it’s me.

“Mmm?” She moans and moves herself against me.

She is tired. So am I, but with her in my arms, I am quickly forgetting that.

I brush her hair away from her neck with my fingertips and kiss her warm skin. Her scent intoxicates me. She presses her ass cheeks into me and lets out another soft sigh.

My cock begins to harden against her soft, warm skin and I press it against her.

“Where were you?” She whispers a little more awake now.

“Sshhh. Just relax. I am here now.” I don’t want to talk about my day, I want this – her.

My fingers run down the front of her body and between her legs, I spread her pussy lips open and find her to be soaking wet. She is always wet for me.

I gently roll her body so that she is lying on her back and move on top of her. Kissing her neck, kissing her face, and then as I guide my cock slowly into her pussy, I kiss her lips.

She arches her back and opens her legs wider for me.

She lets out a sigh of relief as I push myself all the way into her and move my hips in small circles. She is tight and wet, and she smells amazing.

Her nails run along the skin of my back and in the darkness, I knot my fingers in her hair and begin sliding in and out of her. She wraps her legs around my waist, opening herself more for me.

The tension of the past few days feels far away as I push into her over and over again. My cock is wet with her juices

and those cute sounds she always makes drive me to move faster and push harder. I lift myself up onto my arms, towering over her. Her bright green eyes catch mine and I see she is fully awake now, the glint of mischief in her eyes sparkling in the dark.

“Come for me, baby,” I whisper.

“Harder.” She replies.

I slip my arm around her back and lift her hips up towards me so that she is arched even more, and I begin thrusting into her over and over again, harder and faster until she begins to moan loudly. She calls out my name as her vagina tightens around my cock and her body shakes in my arms. I explode into her.

We lay facing each other in the dark.

“Hi, Baby.” I brush hair out of her eyes and look at her. “I am so sorry I didn’t reply. Everything was sort of crashing down around me and I was not even sure how to reply by text. I needed to talk to you in person.”

She props herself up on one elbow. Concern tainting her beautiful features.

“What is it, Hudson? What has happened?”

“Tomorrow morning—,” I don’t quite know how to tell her.

She watches me closely. “Tomorrow morning there is going to be an article in the newspaper about us. I’m so sorry, my Love. I tried everything to stop it, but the press already had their paws on the story and there was nothing I could do.” I hate the vultures for this, so damn much.

She sits up fully, the blanket falling away from her beautiful breasts. “What story?” She says nervously. “Is it something that is going to damage the custody battle?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. All I do know is that my ex-wife’s brother is a reporter and he is putting a story together about you and me and apparently the gist of it is that I am only dating you to get back at my brother. A revenge move of

sorts.” It’s not true, but the droves out there reading it don’t care about truth only juicy gossip.

“Oh no.” She looks horrified.

“Gianna, that is not the reason I am with you.” I don’t want her to doubt me, to doubt us.

“I know Hudson. Of course, I know that. I am just worried about what this will mean for us.” So am I, but I can’t control everything.

I pull her into my arms and kiss her. “It doesn’t change anything between us. I love you, Gianna.”

She stiffens. I have said it. I have been wanting to say it for the longest time, but now I have just said it out loud to her. I run my thumb over her lips. “I love you, Gianna,” I say it again.

Her green eyes are pools of wonder as they pierce into me.

Her lips curve into a gentle smile.

“I love you, Hudson.” She replies softly.

“Everything is going to be okay, Gi.” I want it to be okay, so much.

I wrap my arms tightly around her and hold her until she falls asleep.



I walk into the office early. I wanted to get here before everyone else so that I did not have to walk through a building full of people whispering about whatever they had just read. I drop the newspaper onto my desk and put the takeaway coffee cup next to it. I may as well just get this over with. Read it. See what bullshit they are claiming and then figure out how to deal with it. I know my lawyer is already aware of everything and will already be working on a response. I sigh and unfold the paper. Front page. There is a massive picture of Gianna and me. It was taken as we were leaving one of the restaurants.

She looks beautiful, elegant and poised. My hand is on her lower back. Neither of us is looking at the camera.

I read through word for word. Then read it again.

The article is written by my ex-wife's brother but it is the words of my own brother. He is claiming that I only pursued Gianna to hurt him and that I have stolen away the love of his life as revenge for my own wife wanting to spend time with her son. He suggests that I have been physically violent towards him when he had tried to come and talk to me; brother to brother to try and resolve our differences so that my wife could at least see her son and said that it broke his heart seeing the man that I was turning into.

The story goes on to claim that I had actually been having an affair with Gianna long before my ex-wife and I had divorced and that is the real reason for our divorce. I throw the paper across the office. Pages explode out of it as it hits the wall.

Fuck.

This is not good. This is definitely going to impact the case.

I sit at my desk for a long time, watching my coffee get cold. Not knowing what to do.

Eventually, the office begins to fill up and my assistant sticks his head into my door and says, "Your lawyer is on line one sir, can I put him through?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He knows better than to comment on the article even though I know by now the entire building will be aware of it.

I pick up the phone. "What is your plan?"

Straight to the point, my lawyer skips over the polite greetings, knowing I just want to know what the solution is. "You have a press meeting booked for eleven and you are going to publicly deny any association with Gianna. You can say you just happened to bump into her leaving the restaurant and—"

“No.” I stop him in his tracks.

“What do you mean no?” He’s shocked at my response.

“I mean, no. Gianna and I are together. The story is total bullshit, but we are together. Keep the press meeting. I will make a public statement, but that will not be what I say. I will prepare something and send it over to you in a bit.” I am not going to put her through me telling the world I don’t love her – fuck that. My brother will not win.

“You are making a mistake, Hudson. This is not good for the case. It’s not just the one paper with the story. Every newspaper that came out this morning has it plastered on the front cover.” I am aware that they have their claws in this story – I just don’t care.

“All the more reason for me to tell my side of things. How can my telling the truth be a bad thing?” I’m done with all the bending to make the world like me.

I hang up the phone.

At eleven sharp, I am standing outside my company building. Reporters are swarming around me and it is pure chaos. I stand silently waiting for them to shut the fuck up; no expression on my face; giving nothing away.

Finally, as someone steps forward to hold a microphone close to my face, the crowd begins to hush.

“In response to this morning’s article, I have a few things I would like to say.” I start and hushed whispers move through the crowd. “I will not be answering questions or making further comments after this, so I request that you do not waste your own time or my own by pushing me.” I wait for them to hush again, “My brother, Daniel Drake, has made some untrue claims about the reason my ex-wife and I split a few years ago as well as the reason for me choosing to be in a relationship with Gianna Perth.” There is a dull murmur running through the crowd again, so I stop talking, waiting for silence. I am not going to be repeating myself.

“To begin I would like to say that my brother has not made any attempt to contact me for several years and the scene that

he describes did not take place. We have had no contact of any sort. He and my ex-wife are following their own path that I play no role in whatsoever. My main focus is to be a good father to my son. I will do everything in my power to keep him safe and away from these false accusations my brother has been making.” They start to yell questions and I simply stop talking until it is quiet again.

“All and any contact between my ex-wife and myself is between our lawyers. I do not approve of her or my brother’s behavior as we have witnessed over the past few months. I do not condone spreading rumors or false accusations.

“Regarding Gianna. I love her.” The crowd erupts into a flurry of questions. They’re clambering for a story, for something they can twist. I raise my hand to remind them that I will not be answering anything.

“I love her, and we are happy together. This has absolutely nothing to do with my brother or my ex-wife. That is all I have to say, and I thank you for your time.”

The reporters all leap forward trying to shove their microphones and cameras in my face, but I turn my back to the noise and walk back into my building, security stepping in front of the doors as they close behind me.

I take a steady breath and make my way to the elevators. My phone is already ringing. My mother. Of course, it is my fucking mother.

I slide the green button across the screen to answer the call. She won’t stop until I do answer there’s no point in putting it off.

She is shouting into the phone, which is unusual for her. She rarely ever loses her composure.

“What have you done Hudson! How dare you go ahead and make public announcements like that without consulting me. How dare you throw your brother under the bus. How dare you claim that you love that piece of trash on live television!” She’s madder than hell right now, and I am not in any mood to deal with her.

She continues to yell as the elevator carries me back to the top floor of my building. I say nothing at all. I allow her to rant, and yell and call me names.

Walking into my office I can see that everyone at their desks keeps their gaze down. The office is silent.

I close my office door behind me. My mother is still yelling. I do not think I have ever made her this angry.

“Mother—” I try and interrupt her. She ignores me and continues her rant. “Mother—” Again she ignores me. I have had enough of this. I slide the red button across my phone to end the call. Almost right away it is ringing again. Her name glared at me on my screen. I put my phone on silent and toss it into my desk drawer.

It’s done.

I know I’ve done the right thing, but my stress levels are through the roof.

I will have to leave through the back of the building today. I had better call my driver as the reporters will inevitably be swarming around my own car.

I begin to pack up my things. I need to get out of here. I can feel the tension in the office, and it is not helping my own state of mind. I want to get home to Taylor. I want to make sure he is alright. We can draw the curtains closed, shut out the world, and watch cartoons all evening.

I notified the driver that I wanted him to pick me up at the back entrance. I know I cannot risk a food delivery that evening either. Things are going to be very tense for the next week or so, or at least until the media has a better story to obsess about.

Sitting in the back of the car I take out my phone and dial Gianna.

“Hi.” She answers. “I saw the news.” I figured she would have by now. I wanted to tell her before, but it didn’t work out that way.

“Hi. Sorry, I didn’t have a chance to call you before the media release. Are you ok?” I ask her, this is her life too.

“I am fine, Hudson. Are you?” She replies.

“Not really. I hate this sort of thing. I hate everything about those pathetic hungry vultures. Things are going to get a little crazy on social media for a while. I am so sorry I dragged you into this.” She has a job, and a business, and this will affect her.

“You did not drag me into anything. I make my own choices. Do you want me to come over later?” She asks me, and I know it is because she cares.

“I think it is better if you don’t. They are going to be posted outside the house with cameras in hand, ready to capture everything.” I am hopeful our security will be able to keep them out, but I know how sneaky and relentless they can be.

“But they know we are together now, why does it matter?” She is confused.

“Trust me it matters. Everything and anything they can get their hands on is going to be targeted and twisted for a better story.” They will make us the villains, and she is not a bad person I won’t allow them to make her out to be one – not again.

She is quiet on the other end of the line.

“I will see you soon though, Gi. We just have to be a little more careful about how we go about things. Just until this is over. I need to be extra careful as the court date is really close now.” I sigh, I want to hold her and hug her, and tell her this will blow over.

“I understand. I miss you already.” Her sadness is audible.

“I miss you too, Baby Girl.”

Over the next few days, the internet is drenched with made-up stories about myself, but worse are the stories they are making up about Gianna. They are claiming she earned her money by being an escort. They claim that she targets the

richest of men and uses them for her own financial gains. Her business becomes a target in a few of the articles as well and her family history is twisted and put on display for the world to read about. There is even an article about her having a secret child with my brother and questions about how she can abandon that child and then pretend to want to be a mother to my child. I know it is all bullshit and all I want to do is tell her how sorry I am for putting her in the middle of everything. I wish that there was some way for me to fix this.

CHAPTER 15

GIANNA

The phone is hot against my ear. I have been talking to my mom for ages already and she is still so upset. I can't seem to say anything to calm her down.

“I know, mom. It is all just made-up stories. Please try and ignore it. I know it's difficult.” I am the one that should be angry.

“But they are saying you had a child with Daniel?” I roll my eyes.

“I did not, Mom. I think you might have noticed if I got fat and had a baby. It's not true. None of it is true.” The lengths they'll go to are unreal.

“They have said horrible things about our family, Gianna.” I hate that she is taking this as a personal attack.

“I am so sorry. I don't know what else to say other than I am sorry.” I did not do this – once again I know Daniel did. He's a sore loser.

I am exhausted to the bone. My poor mom is struggling with all the attention. Even she and my dad have had reporters approaching them asking for a comment and they live hours from where I live.

This really is not fair to them at all. I know that the media can be ruthless, but I have never experienced it like this. It was bad with Daniel, but this is just ridiculous. Now I understand even more why Hudson is so careful about everything and so withdrawn in his public life.

I actually lost a client, yesterday, because they no longer want to work with me. Their email had commented that I was a disgusting human being for abandoning my child for money. That had made me cry, even though there was no child! And talking to my mom now I feel like crying again, but I want to be strong in front of her to try and show her that it is not worth getting upset over. Unfortunately, I have been more than upset over it and I am struggling to hold everything together.

To top it all off Hudson and I are finding it extremely difficult to spend time together. There are reporters outside the entrance to our estate and while security is excellent, there have been one or two who have managed to sneak in and take photos of us again. We are both nervous to leave our houses and I have been working from home a lot just to try and avoid everything, but now my business is suffering and that is causing me a whole new level of stress. I have worked so hard to create my business. It is crazy to think that just because I am choosing to be with Hudson, I am possibly risking losing everything.

I know Hudson is no longer in contact with his family. His mother has publicly disowned him in a press conference of her own. How heartbreaking is that? His own mother. I don't know if he needs me more now than ever or if he needs me to stay away from him more now than ever.

He has been quiet even on the phone. Minimal texting and hardly even one phone call a day. He is drifting away from me, and I am starting to wonder if he still wants to be with me if this was all just not worth the risk for him, or if it is even worth the risk for me.

Is what we have even real if he can push me away so easily? He did publicly declare his love for me, but honestly, I am not feeling any of it lately.

I sit at my desk at my home office, with my feet curled up on the chair, my head resting on my knee while I stare at my calendar. I have an important agency conference coming up this week. There will be literary agents from all over the world attending and I have invited my biggest client to join me for the conference. The invite had been sent out months ago, way

before all of this began. Now she is saying she is not sure if she should attend with me just because of the negative publicity and that it might affect her own brand.

I cannot lose this client. I pick up the phone to call her.

It is time for me to stop focusing so much on all of this drama and to focus on my own life and keeping my clients happy. I have bills, and they don't take a break when the media gets crazy.

I might need to pull away from Hudson for now. The thought terrifies me, but the reality is that I am not able to sacrifice everything that I have worked so hard for – not for a relationship that at this point seems like it might not even be real.

“Brenda, it's Gianna. I hope you are well?” I speak as soon as she picks up.

“Gianna, good to hear from you. How are you holding up?” She asks, with a genuine tone of concern.

“I'm doing alright. I wanted to chat with you about the event that is coming up this week.” I need her not to back out of this; I can't afford to drop my big clients over this fiasco.

“As I explained in the email, I am a bit concerned about the repercussions of going with you. I know that the media is full of shit, ok, so I know that ninety percent of everything they put out there is total horse radishes, but I still need to tread carefully nonetheless.” I know she is right, but I desperately need her to take a chance on me.

“I do understand. What I was thinking was that I would send a private driver for you, so we don't have to arrive together. I can meet up with you inside. It is a very exclusive event, and the media is not allowed inside so we don't have to worry about them being in the building. And if you don't arrive with me then you won't be caught in the crossfire of photographers on arrival. It is just that it is such a great event and will be a good experience for you as an author. I don't want you to miss out on it because of the chaos going on my

side of things.” I’m all but begging, and I am ashamed that I even have to.

“That sounds like a possibility. Let me run it through in my head and get back to you tomorrow, but that does sound like a plan I could go with.” I know she is going to ask her publicist, and they will say no. But it was worth a shot.

“Thank you, Brenda. I appreciate it. Chat tomorrow.” I let her go. This whole thing has me sick to my stomach. I can feel the knots and the acid churning up an early ulcer. If I lose my clients, I will lose everything.

Well, at least I feel confident that Brenda is still happy to be my client. She just doesn’t want to be seen with me. Honestly, I am feeling nauseous about attending any public gatherings with the press hanging around, but I need to. I can’t sit back and let this all control my life anymore. I need to get back into the swing of things. With or without Hudson, I have to do this for me; I am not going to lose everything, not again.

Out of my window, I can see the swimming pool. My heart sinks. Oh, what I would give to go back in time and be swimming in that pool with Hudson. I wish I could just be with him, somewhere quiet, where no one else was able to find us. The need to reconnect with him is burning inside me.

It is past one in the morning when I hear Hudson letting himself in using the key I have left for him. I actually have a moment of heart failure thinking it might be a reporter breaking in. You never know what they are capable of.

“Gi?” His voice drifts from the living room.

“I’m in here,” I call out from my bedroom.

He comes into my room looking exhausted. Wearing all black and a peaked cap. He flicks the light switch off as he comes in and I put the book I am reading down. I lean over to turn on the bedside lamp and he gestures for me to stop. “It is better if we leave it off. Safer. You never know who is watching.” Now I have to worry about peeping toms too.

“Are you serious?” I huff, feeling annoyed that he is so ashamed of being with me.

“I am sorry, Gi. It’s just for now. Until things blow over.” I wonder when that will be, or if we’re in a hurricane and this storm won’t end.

He goes around the bed to pull my curtains closed before undressing and climbing under the covers to pull me close to him.

“I’ve hardly even heard from you, Hudson.” I move away a little; he has hurt me without even realizing it.

“I know. I – it’s just everything you know.” I don’t know because he has been a ghost, and has not shared any of it with me.

He tries to kiss me. I am sad when I pull away. I just can’t when there’s so much left unsaid.

“Hudson – it’s just – I just don’t think I am in the mood.” I’m not, I am down, angry, and hurting. This isn’t how to fix it; sex will just be a band-aid on the problem.

He looks surprised. “I’m so sorry, Gianna. That’s okay. Let me just hold you.” He pulls me closer, and I can’t push away the anger inside me.

“I just feel like your dirty little secret with the way we are going about things at the moment. I don’t want to feel like you are ashamed of me or hiding me but that is exactly how I do feel.” Tears sting my eyes and a lump forms in my throat stopping me from saying anything more.

He pulls me close to him. “You are right, Gianna. I don’t think I have been fair to you at all. I am struggling so much as well trying to navigate this nightmare and keep Taylor safe. I have no idea how to do this, what to do, what not to do?” His voice is strained like he is fighting his own tears back too.

“Maybe you should just focus on Taylor and stay away from me completely. This doesn’t feel right.” I start pulling away so I can roll over.

He wipes my tears away. “No, Baby. That is not what I want. Please just bear with me for a little longer. This is right,

we are right for each other, I know it.” His voice cracks, “The court date is early next week. It is right around the corner. If you can just give me a little more time this should all, be over soon.” I don’t think my heart has time to give right now.

I sigh, feeling deeply hurt by everything that is happening.

“I guess, maybe you are right. But with the court case so close now I have a feeling things are going to get worse before they get better.” I admit my fears to him.

“We will just keep our heads down and get through it. As long as you know that even when you are not with me, I am thinking about you.” He is all I think about, and that is a problem on its own.

He kisses me gently and I melt into his arms. Feeling his body against mine, feeling his arousal, I move closer to him and press against him.

Maybe everything will be okay.

CHAPTER 16

HUDSON

“**W**hat do you mean it was delayed again? I want to get this custody battle settled, but it is become more and more impossible. How can they move the date again? It is the third time now.” I am so frustrated I could spit; my whole life is in limbo and it’s making me go crazy.

“It is only delayed slightly. Two days from now we will be in court. There was an issue with the judge who was meant to attend and – look Hudson honestly, I think it is because of all the media attention you have been getting. It is so hard to know what is going on with everything constantly changing. Did you see the new article out today? They are claiming that Gianna and your brother were spotted together two nights ago at a nightclub.” I saw it, “The photo is blurry and proves nothing at all, but you know how the public is. They love this stuff, and they are eating it up.” I’m not though; neither is Gianna. I am worried about her, and I feel her slipping away from me.

“Gianna was with me two nights ago; regardless of any of that what has the public opinion got to do with my son and my custody battle?” This is utter bullshit. He knows it too.

“You know that law is not entirely without influence. We need to tread carefully around all of this publicity.” I am done walking on eggshells.

“I don’t CARE about the media sideshow anymore. I want my day in court. I want this over and done with. I want my son to be able to go back to school and see his friends. My whole

life is being torn apart here!” I am yelling now, and I don’t give a fuck.

“Honestly, Hudson, as your lawyer – for the sake of your son – perhaps you are focusing on the wrong thing. Perhaps the thing you need to decide is whether or not this woman is doing any good for you at the moment? For you and for Taylor.”

“Fuck you.” I seethe.

I slam the phone down. How dare he say that.

I sit in my home office staring at the phone. How dare he say that to me. But the anger begins to subside and with a heavy heart, I begin to process his words. For Taylor. For my little boy. Every choice I have made in my life since he was born has been for him. Now, with Gianna, I am making choices for myself as well and they are affecting my son. It is not fair of me and guilt weighs heavily on my shoulders. My parents have not spoken to me since the day my mother hosted her own press conference. My son is unhappy as I have kept him out of his daycare. My life is falling apart.

Am I being fair to anyone, even Gianna, by continuing this relationship?

My life is public. It is just the nature of the game. I have the family name, the money, and the status. I have no choice on that matter. No matter how irrelevant I want this to play out, it will always be in the public view. Maybe I need to just accept that and my responsibility as a public figure, as a father, and as a businessman – maybe I just have to let Gianna go. I don’t get the happy-ever-after, I just get to be alone.

Relationships only make things worse. I have proven that to myself when I married my ex and now in a different way, I am proving it to myself again. Gianna is beautiful, kind, and smart. She does not deserve what she is going through right now and it is all because of me. I am hurting her.

Reluctantly I realize that I will need to talk to her and let her know. I am not able to do this anymore. I cannot expect her to do this anymore; she can’t wait forever for my life to be

in order. It might never be, and then what? She has hung on for nothing. She will be better without me, and my son will be better without this drama, even though he loves her almost as much as I do. This is definitely not a conversation to be had over the phone though. I cannot be that cruel. I will need to wait until I can see her in person.



It's my day in court – finally.

I feel nauseous and my clothing is too tight. I have a headache from nerves, and I am wound tighter than a spring. But looking at me no one will know any of this. I straighten the collar of my shirt and run my fingers over the cuff of my suit. On the outside, I am the perfect example of a man who has it all together.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror of the courthouse.

I have still not spoken to Gianna. I hate myself for it because honestly, I have been avoiding her at all costs as I just could not face the conversation I need to have with her. But today was not the day to be thinking about that. I am here now. I am here at this courthouse and I need to be entirely, solely, completely focused on one thing. My son.

Leaving the bathroom, I turn down the corridor towards the public area of the court building. Crowds are standing outside the glass doors. Cameras pointing in my direction, I ignore them, knowing that only court-appointed media are allowed in the building so any photos they manage to snap would just be of me walking in this corridor.

As I walk towards the designated courtroom, all of the breath in my lungs is punched out in shock. Gianna is standing about three meters away from me, in the doorway, waiting for me. She smiles. I glance at her and then back towards the glass doors of the building where hundreds of paparazzi are snapping photographs.

What is she doing here? What is she thinking? My brother walks out of the courtroom and stands next to her. He reaches out and touches her arm as the camera flashes fire over and over again. She pulls away with anger on her face and I see her mouthing the words don't you dare touch me. Daniel is smiling. He steps back and then laughs a little then turns to walk in the opposite direction.

I walk over to her, but we are in such public view that I cannot say anything to her. I am furious! Why have we spent so much time being so careful about not appearing together publicly only for her to arrive here today, on the most important day of all.

I brush past her without saying a word and enter the courtroom.

When I take my seat, I glance back towards the door. She is still standing in the doorway, looking confused and lost. I shake my head at her. NO! She turns and walks away from the courtroom and out of my sight.

CHAPTER 17

GIANNA

Tears stream down my cheeks as I walk out of the courthouse. I have to push and shove my way through the pack of wolves that call themselves reporters. They are screaming questions in my face, but I can't even make out what they are saying. I try and hide my face behind my hand wondering how in the world that had gone so badly.

As I duck into my car, I realize that I have been played. I have been played and it had worked and now I have no idea what the consequences are going to be.

Late last night I had heard a knock on my front door and one of Hudson's assistants, wearing an official Drake Tobacco Empire uniform, had handed me a sealed envelope.

Inside the envelope was a note from Hudson.

Gianna,

The court date is confirmed for tomorrow morning. My lawyer has asked me to have you come in as a character witness for me as a father to my son. He believes that because you are close to me you will be able to provide the judge with insight that may be valuable to the final decision.

Please come.

8:30am. Courtroom 17.

With love,

Hudson

In hindsight, as it always is with hindsight, I realize that the message has obviously been fake. And who else would have access to Drake Tobacco Empire stationery and uniforms. Only his brother – fucking Daniel again.

I feel sick to my stomach as I drive away from the courthouse. What have I done?

I run it over and over in my head. The way that Daniel had come out at exactly the right moment so that the media could grab a photo of all three of us in the same frame. The way he had touched my arm and smiled at me as though we were best friends. The way he had laughed that sick laugh of his when he walked away knowing he had achieved exactly what it was he had wanted to achieve. I can't stop looping the thought in my head. Daniel's hand on my arm. The look on Hudson's face when he had seen me. How angry he had looked and how he had mouthed the word no. The expression on his face when he had said no was not short of hatred. Again, and again the scene plays in my head. Again, and again, and by the time I arrive home, I am crying so hard I can hardly see.

I ran into my house and shut the door. My whole body is shaking. I curl up on my couch and cry until my eyes are swollen, burning, and dry.

I am too scared to look at my phone. Too scared to look out the window. Too scared to do anything but stay curled up on the couch waiting for something, anything, anyone to tell me that it was going to be okay.

The sun sets and the house slowly grows dark.

The court case will surely be over by now. Hudson will most likely be heading home soon – perhaps he is even already home.

I don't know what to do.

Finally, I gather enough courage to check my phone. There is a missed call from him.

With shaking hands, I press the green call button to call him back.

“How dare you do that to me? Was it all a massive game to you? Was your goal to try and sabotage me the entire time?” He is all but screaming into the phone.

“Stop yelling at me, Hudson, just listen for a second.” I plead.

“You will never come near me again. Do you hear me? You are out of my life. How dare you put my son at risk like that. Who the hell do you think you are?” He is not even making sense, and he won't give me a chance to talk.

“Hud–” he ends the call before I can get another word out.

My whole body starts to shake. Anger. Hurt. Shock. How can he speak to me like that? Surely, he knows I wouldn't hurt him intentionally. He reminds me of his brother when he yells that way. I feel sick to my stomach.

Should I try and talk to him again? I don't think he is going to listen to me, not now. I think I just need to go to bed. Today is a write-off. It is possibly one of the worst days of my life, which is saying a lot considering everything that I have been through in the past.

I curl up in bed and try to drift off to sleep but the events of the day haunt my thoughts in a continuous loop. It's as if Daniel is never going to be gone; he will destroy my life forever.



Morning comes and I sit up. Not having slept at all. I am drained and miserable. I drag myself out of bed and into my running gear. I need to walk. I need to get some fresh air. Anything to try can clear my head and lift the ache I am feeling.

Heading down my driveway I see Hudson walking towards his car. I run over to him. "Hudson."

"I don't want to hear it, Gianna. Stay away from me." He stops me.

"You aren't being fair! Just let me explain." I demand that he at least listen to me, then he can do whatever he likes.

"What could you possibly say to justify such a selfish act? You are selfish and there is no other word for it. You need to stay far away from me Gianna and if you don't leave me alone, I will ensure that my lawyers get involved." He is seething with rage; I can feel it even ten paces away.

"Stop threatening me and just fucking listen for a second." I deserve to tell my side of this – I am not selfish. He is wrong.

He climbs into his car, slamming the door, and all but the wheel spins out of the driveway. I have to jump to the side to avoid being knocked down.

Rage sweeps through me. Who the hell is this man? He is disgusting. He would not even give me a chance to explain what had happened. I would never have gone to court if I had not believed that he was the one who had asked me to be there. The only reason I had gone was because I thought I could help his case.

I stand in the driveway in shock, absorbing what has just happened. Then with tears running down my cheeks again, I remind myself that I have made a promise to never let a man treat me like that ever again. No matter how much I love him. He has no right to talk to me like that.

I guess he is just showing his true colors. The Drake family genes are finally coming out. No. No matter how angry he was he could have at least let me explain myself, but he did not even have the decency to do that.



Later in the day, I managed to find an article updating the public about how the court case had gone. There is another delay. They have not said, nor have they indicated if the case is leaning toward Hudson or his ex. Basically, the whole article is full of nothing but drama. It's a fluff piece, just filling print space.

I close my computer. At least I have managed to get a lot of work done today. Fuelled by anger and too overtired to think about more than one thing I somehow managed hyper-focused on just work and nothing else.

Thank goodness.

But even now, when I should be ready to collapse into bed and fall into a weeklong slumber, I am wired awake with rage.

I will suffer through a gym session and hopefully, by the end of it, I will be able to sleep.

I arrive at the gym at the same time as Hudson and groan inwardly. I can't handle another screaming match and I am still so angry I barely even want to greet him. While half my brain is yelling at me to just go home and forget the gym the other half is reminding me that no man will have that kind of control over me.

I see the defiance on his face as well.

Neither of us is backing down. We arrive at the doorway at the same time, and he steps aside to let me in first. "Don't pretend to be a gentleman." I snap at him. "I am not interested in your fake politeness." I refuse to walk through the doorway first.

"You are being pathetic, Gianna." He growls at me and walks into the gym ahead of me.

"Not as pathetic as a man who doesn't even take the time to hear the truth." I snarl at him.

“There is no truth that can fix your stupid choices. Now remember what I said. Stay away from me.” I was here first; he can move if he wants to get away from me.

“With pleasure.” I snap back and walk to the other side of the gym.

He does not say anything more to me and apart from a few angry glares across the gym, we ignore each other for the rest of the time. When I gather my things to leave, he is nowhere to be seen.

With a heavy, but angry heart, I head home to see if I can fall asleep.

CHAPTER 18

HUDSON

“Sir?”

My assistant knocks at my office door.

“Come in,” I reply or he will hover there until I do.

“Sir, a young lady dropped this at the front desk for you. She said I had to make sure it was placed directly into your hands and to make sure that you read it.” I frown, what the fuck is this now?

“What young lady?” I side-eye him; he’s usually better at this.

I have no idea who would be dropping things off for me at my office, especially under such odd circumstances. Security is tighter than ever.

“She didn’t leave a name, sir. She looked maybe early twenties, with long dark hair. Very pretty.” He is lying, through his teeth.

Gianna. I take the envelope from him. A slight elevation of anger at the thought of her name. But it is mixed with sadness. What in the world would she be dropping at my office? I told her to stay away.

“Thank you, you can go.”

“Sir she said—” I glare up at him, and he stops.

“I don’t care what she said. You can go.”

He leaves my office and I stare down at the envelope. It has my company stamp on it. That’s alarming. Did she take

company stationary from my house?

I flip it over to see that it has already been opened. Sliding the note out I open the page and read it.

Then I read it again.

And then again.

My heart is thundering in my chest. I can feel myself breaking out into a cold sweat; I should have known. I should have listened to her.

Everything becomes clear and my blood runs cold. My brother had tricked her; she thought I wanted her there. That is the only reason she came.

Oh, fuck I am such an idiot.

The way I spoke to her. How could I have doubted her? Why hadn't I just given her a chance to explain herself? I let my anger and my pride get in the way.

I shove the letter into my pocket and grab my things, running out of the office. I dialed her number on the way to the car, but she declined the call. I dial again and she declines again. Shit.

She has every right to be furious with me. I wouldn't talk to me if I was her either.

All the way home I hold onto the hope that she is there. I need her to be there. I desperately need to fix the mistake I have made.

Pulling into my driveway I breathe a heavy sigh of relief. Her car is in her garage which is standing open. Well, I remind myself, that her being home is just the first step. I now need to find a way to get her to give me a chance to explain how sorry I am.

I run over to her front door and bang a little harder than I meant to.

Her voice calls from inside. "Give me a second. I'll be right there." I am glad she doesn't know it is me otherwise she might not want to answer. The door swings open and she looks

up into my face and just as I am about to speak, she tries to slam it shut again. I move quickly, putting my foot in the door frame and pushing it back open. “HUDSON!” She shouts, sounding a little scared.

“Wait, please Gianna, wait. I am such an idiot. Please.”

She pauses and steps back. Letting go of the door.

I hand her the crumpled paper from my pocket.

She stares at it for a little while. “I didn’t think you would read it. I – I just took a chance.” She looks at me and waits.

“I read it. I understand exactly what happened. I understand why you showed up and I am so so so sorry. Please, Gianna. I am so sorry for how I treated you and how I spoke to you.” She says nothing, and I know I made a monumental mistake.

She turns to walk towards her kitchen. Leaving me hesitating in the doorway before I follow her in and close the door behind myself.

“My brother – he is so sick in the head. I can’t believe that he and my ex played so dirty and worse than that, I can’t believe that I doubted you.” I want her to know that I am sorry and that I should have known better. I was stressed, and angry.

“Well, don’t feel too bad because I can’t believe that I fell for that stupid note.” She says, her voice pained.

“My Baby Girl, please tell me you forgive me.” I walk up behind her, where she is pouring a whiskey for both of us, and slip my arm around her waist. Whispering in her ear I say again, “Please forgive me, Gianna.”

She turns, still wrapped in my arms, to face me and kisses me. The world fades away and nothing else matters but this kiss. She can forgive me. The tension leaves my body and relief washes through me. She has forgiven me. I lift her up in my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist, and kiss her harder. She moans sweetly.

“But Hudson,” she whispers, “does this mean I am no longer in trouble?”

“Oh no, Little Girl, you are definitely still in trouble,” I growl at her. “And I will make sure that you know it.”

She giggles. “Oh, is that so?”

I drop her to her feet.

“Undress. Now.” I demand.

She keeps her gaze locked on me as her pants slide to the floor. She lifts her oversized shirt over her head and stands naked in front of me. Her tight curves demanded my attention.

“Hands on the counter.” She walks over to the kitchen counter and places both hands on the cold surface with her back to me.

“Bend over. Now don’t move.”

I stand back and admire the shape of her shoulders, the curve of her back, her round ass. The way she is leaning forward just enough for me to see her pussy, already wet and waiting.”

I run my fingers down her spine, over her buttocks, and let them slide over her wet pussy lips. She arches her back and pushes into my hand. “I. Said. Don’t. Move.”

She giggles again. “Do you think this is funny, Gianna?”

Before she can answer I slap her butt cheek. Hard enough to leave a red handprint. My hand print. She gasps and shudders. I step back to admire the view of her while I unbutton my shirt, dropping it to the floor. My pants are off now too.

I stand behind her and let her feel my cock pressing against her soft skin. “Turn around.” She turns to look at me. “On your knees.”

She drops obediently, a playful smile across her lips. “I want to see your lips around my cock. She licks her lips and then teasingly she licks the tip of my cock. I groan out loud. “Fuck.” She slides my cock into her tiny mouth, struggling with the size of it. She moves slowly back and forth, back and forth until she gags and has to pause. She looks so

uncomfortable on her knees on the kitchen floor, but so fucking hot.

I pull her to her feet and spin her around to face the counter again. “Hands,” I say, and she places them back on the counter.

“Spread your legs. Now don’t you dare move.”

I hold my cock in my hand and rub the tip over her pussy lips. She moans excitedly. Rocking ever so slightly backward to try and push herself onto me. “If you move again, I am going to stop.” I know I will never be able to stop.

I press my cock against her pussy again, this time letting it slide into her a little. “Fuck” She whispers.

I slide in a little further and she groans louder. I can’t take it anymore and I grab her hips and push into her all the way to the base. The sensation of being inside her sends shivers down my spine. She starts to grind against me, with me deep inside her, and this time I did not tell her to stop moving. I let her arch her back higher and lower rocking against me in small movements. When I can’t take it anymore, I pull almost all of the way out of her and then thrust hard into her again. She cries out loudly and I do it again. Driving myself into her. Filling her up and stretching her out in the most delightful way. Her fingers dig into the counter, and she throws her head backward. My cock is dripping with her wetness as I begin to pick up speed. Soon her body is convulsing and shuddering, and her legs are buckling under her as her orgasm shakes through her. I grab her around the waist and hold her steady as I thrust into her again and again until finally, I explode into her body, pressing hard against her, holding her tightly.

She giggles softly in my arms as I slowly pull out of her. “My legs are shaking.” She says with a smile. She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

“Come hop in the shower with me and then let’s cook some dinner.” She says.

“Let’s order in. I am so tired and all I want to do is hold you.” She nods, still smiling, and we head towards the shower.



We lay in bed satisfied after a good meal and another steamy session in the shower. I am not able to keep my hands off her. I stroke the side of her face gently as she lies there with a dreamy smile on her lips.

“Gianna, I don’t want to hide this anymore. I want to do this properly. I don’t care what the media thinks. I want the world to know that you belong to me.”

“The court case isn’t finished yet, Hudson.”

“I know, but honestly, I think it is going well. Besides, what difference does it really make to the court case? The media has done anything and everything to try and make us look bad. What more could they do. I have made up my mind. I want you in my life and no one and nothing is going to change that.”

She buries her face in my chest and breathes deeply.

“I want that too. I really do love you, Hudson.” She says.

“I love you too, Gi.” I love her so damn much.

I wake up before sunrise and kiss Gianna goodbye before heading home so that I can start breakfast for my little man before he is out of bed.

It is going to be a beautiful day and I want to take him to the zoo. Gianna is going to join us. Before we leave though I want to make a call. An important call. To my mother.

I want to set things straight; even if it means swallowing my pride and letting my mother have the last word. I want my family united again.

The phone rings a few times before she answers it. “What is it Hudson?” she says starkly.

“I want to settle differences. For the sake of the family. For the sake of the business and more importantly for the sake of my son. He needs his grandparents in his life.”

My mother stubbornly stays silent for a few moments, and I let her have her moment of control.

“Fine, Hudson. On one condition. You agree to also reconcile with your brother.”

Shit. She is playing that card. I think it through for a moment and in the end, all I can think is that my brother is part of the reason my ex-wife and I have split up, and technically on those grounds I can thank him because if it was not for him, I would never have met Gianna.

“Alright. I will give him a call and maybe we can go to dinner and put everything behind us.” I probably won’t but she is appeased for now.

“Excellent, darling. I am so pleased to hear that. Let me know how it goes okay and let me know when I can come and see Taylor.”

I ended the call feeling a lot better than I expected to feel. It has been easier than I thought and even though I know I still have to call Daniel; even that is not able to dampen my mood.

I make waffles for Taylor and while he is gobbling them down, covered in way too much syrup, Gianna arrives, ready for our day at the zoo.

Taylor can hardly contain his excitement on the drive to the zoo. He is laughing and wiggling in his car seat in the back of the car. Gianna is sitting next to me in the front; my hand on her leg and her fingers locked in mine. I don’t recall ever feeling happier.

This is the future I want. This is the future I have always wanted but did not know I could have.



After an amazing day at the zoo, we drop Taylor at home with his nanny and head out for a romantic dinner at one of my favorite restaurants in the city.

Everything about today is perfect. I sit across from Gianna, mesmerized by her beauty, both inside and out. How have I been so lucky to meet her, even with everything that happened to try and tear us apart here we still were. My heart is filled with happiness, hope, and love.

Dinner comes to a relaxed end, and I take her hand as we walk down to where the car is parked.

As we step out of the restaurant building and onto the busy city street, we are both in for a surprise. An unfortunate one.

My brother.

I know I have promised my mother that I will reconcile with him, but now is not the time or the place. I only want to focus on Gianna and enjoy being with her, not face my brother and the trouble that always follows him around.

“Hudson!” He oozes fakery.

“Daniel.” I nod, barely smiling. Gianna remains as silent as midnight in the desert. Her green eyes are almost icy as she gazes at him.

Daniel points his chin in her direction. “Still fooling around with this one, eh?” I’m not fooling.

“Daniel, I will only ask you once to show respect. Yes, Gianna and I are together.”

Daniel laughs. It is a cold, nasty laugh. I can smell the alcohol on his breath even though he is not standing that close to me.

“Well, brother” he snorts “You can have my sloppy leftovers. I’m done with her anyway. Unless you want another ride, sweetheart.” He turns towards Gianna and grabs her ass.

My vision goes dark. I lunge towards him knocking him off his feet. He keeps laughing until I land a solid punch across his jaw.

“Fuck you, Hudson!” he screams and throws a punch from the ground, missing by a fraction. His drunken state and position on the floor do not help his situation.

But his mouth keeps running “That little slut is only good for one thing! Eating cock! Apart from that she is nothing but trash!”

I punch him three more times in the face before he stops talking. Then I realize Gianna is shouting at me. She is trying to pull me off him. A crowd is standing around watching us, cell phones in hand and obviously recording everything.

Then suddenly two large men pull me off Daniel. Police.

Fuck!

They are handcuffing me and mumbling some legal jargon that I have no care for. Daniel is laughing again. Fuck. I want to break out of these handcuffs and smash him in the face again.

Gianna is frantic. “He was defending me. Please. He isn’t the one who started it.”

The cop says, “Don’t worry ma’am; we are arresting them both.”

I turn to Gianna, “Take the keys out of my pocket. You will need them to drive home. My lawyer’s name is Tony Gardane. Please call him.” Then the police lead me away and as I am guided into their police car, I can’t take my eyes off Gianna. She looks so disappointed, and it breaks my heart.

CHAPTER 19

GIANNA

It is almost three in the morning when Hudson's lawyer finally sorts out bail and his release. I am furious. I am angry and exhausted and that is not a good mix. I want to yell at Hudson about how hot-headed and stupid he had been, but now is not the time or place and I do not have the energy.

He walks out of the holding cell area and comes to wrap his arms around me, whispering in my ear "I am so sorry, Baby."

But I stand rigid. not able to find it in me to hug him back.

The drive home is silent. Not the comfortable silence that we might have enjoyed together, but tense electric silence that has me shifting in my seat. I keep my gaze turned away from Hudson, watching the scenery, forcing myself to stay quiet.

Arriving at home I step out of his car before he can open the door for me and start walking towards my own home.

He comes running behind me and grabs my arm, turning me to face him.

"Hudson," I warn.

"Gi, please. I am so sorry. When he grabbed you, those things he said about you, they were unforgivable."

"They might have been unforgivable but trust me he has done and said far worse things to me. And nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing is worth you landing up in jail over or risking losing your custody battle for your son!"

Hudson blinks in shock. Has he not even considered the impact this will have on the court case.

“I could not have just walked away and let him disrespect you like that!” He is upset. “I know it was a stupid thing to do okay. I know I made a mistake, but Gianna, if anyone ever hurts you—” his eyes darken.

“I am not worth losing your son for, Hudson. I am not worth it!”

He is taken aback by my comment.

I can't do this anymore. I need to sleep.

“Good night,” I say and walk away, feeling broken down and heavy.

When I collapse into my bed tears are streaming down my face.



It is late morning when I wake to a knock on my door. I stood up and woke in a daze to see who it was. My body feels like lead, and my brain feels groggy from exhaustion.

Hudson is standing in my doorway holding two coffees and a brown bag that smells of bacon and fresh croissants.

“Please, can we have breakfast and just chat?” He asks and I am too tired to try denying him.

I gesture for him to come in and I go to the bathroom to splash water on my face and try and wake up properly. Looking in the mirror I sigh at the dark circles under my eyes.

When I come back into the living room Hudson has breakfast laid out on the coffee table. I flop down into the soft sofa with a sigh and reach for the coffee.

I am not sure I can stomach food or conversation but here I am.

“Gianna, I want to apologize. For my behavior. It was completely out of line, and you have every right to be angry

with me. I need you to know I reacted out of love. I did not react appropriately, but my actions were out of love. For you.”

He stares down at his coffee. Swirling the paper cup in his hand.

He looks depleted and tired.

I sigh again and lean over to rest my head on his shoulder. I do not have it in me to fight with him. I have said what I needed to say last night. He breathes a sigh of relief and wraps his arm around my shoulder pulling me closer. “I am really sorry, Baby Girl. Please believe me.”

“I do. And I accept your apology. But it isn’t really me you need to be sorry to. It’s Taylor. I know he doesn’t understand any of what is happening, but you need to realize that what happened last night affects him the most.”

“Trust me I do.”

“And just because I forgave you doesn’t mean you aren’t still in trouble OK. I am still angry. I just need time to process.”

“I understand. Let’s eat some breakfast and then go for a walk?”

“I’m actually too tired. I’m really worried, Hudson. I’m really scared we are making a mistake.”

“A mistake with what?” He asks.

“Is it worth it for you? You know – I mean – I meant what I said last night. I am not worth losing your family over.” His son is far more important than me. I’d get over losing him; a little boy never gets over losing his dad.

“No, No, No Gianna.” He pulls me into his arms, wrapping me up in his body. “You are the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me and to Taylor and you are worth the world. I am not going to lose my family. You are my family.”

“I just feel like Taylor should be the main focus here. What is best for Taylor?”

Hudson lets me go. I lean back on the couch and sip my coffee again. Trying not to make eye contact, because my eyes can't handle any more tears right now. I need more sleep. I need – I don't know what I need but I feel stressed and wrung out.

I feel as though I should be pulling away from Hudson, to keep him and Taylor safe. I feel like maybe it is my responsibility to not let them get hurt anymore. I am causing so much drama for them without ever intending to.

“Let's just go for a walk, Gi. We will both feel better.” He says the words but he doesn't sound convincing.

I reach for my phone to check what the time is but as I do, he says “Don't. Er – don't go online.” He cautions me.

Of course.

The videos.

Social media must be on fire with the videos from last night. Frustrated I put my phone back down. Hudson and I sit in silence. He is leaning forward on the couch. Staring at his feet. There is nothing more to say.

After some time, he whispers. “I am not giving up on us, Gianna.”

“I know. Me either.”

But neither of us reaches out to touch the other and it feels like there is a wall between us.

Maybe I am making a mistake. Maybe the best thing for everyone is if I just do what I know I should do and walk away for good. But I can't. I can't let him go – and I don't want to try either.

CHAPTER 20

HUDSON

I sit at the lawyer's boardroom table. My ex-wife is sitting opposite me smirking. I have won the custody battle. But I felt empty.

The contract lying on the table in front of me is stark white and glaringly hideous.

Karla is evil to the bone. She has proven it again today.

Most of the contract is pretty standard for a custody case, most of it. One clause stands out though.

Karla is willing to walk away and give me full custody of Taylor on one condition. I am not allowed to be in a relationship with Gianna.

That was it. Such simple words. There is no misunderstanding to be had. But the impact is monstrous.

Karla is a monster.

She knows exactly how to inflict pain and she delivers it with a sharpened blade. All she cares about is hurting me. She doesn't even care about the consequences her actions will have on her own son.

I look at my lawyer. He has not spoken since I sat down to read the contract. He has already read it and he knows which clause will be the one to cause issues. He can see that I am at a loss for words and knows it is better if I hold my words back at this moment rather than saying something I will regret. He turns to my ex-wife's lawyer.

“Thank you for your time. We will take a few days to go over the contract properly and will come back to you when we are ready.” Trying to buy me time and avoid yet another day in court.

Karla leaps out of her seat, “No! He has to sign now!”

“Please, sit down.” Her lawyer reaches out and touches her arm. I can sense his embarrassment, “They have every right to take the time they need to read through your offer.”

He turns to my lawyer. “We will wait to hear from you.”

Then he stands up, taking Karla by the arm, and leads her out of the board room.



I look at Tony. Not knowing what to say. I can see that he does not have anything to say to me either. No reassurance, no words of encouragement. I have to make this choice on my own. I have to decide between the love of my life, my soul mate - and my own son.

Picking up the contract and sliding it into my work bag next to my laptop I stand up to leave. There is nothing more to say about anything right now.

“Thank you, Tony. I will be in touch.”

He nods sadly and watches me walk out of the room.

I go straight to Gianna. I have to tell her. This is not something I can keep from her. She has a right to know.

I spent the entire drive here wondering how I could word it. How will I say it? How will she react? Who am I kidding? I know exactly how she will react; she will tell me to sign it immediately because she will never want to be the reason, I can't have my son and end this nightmare of a court case. But it will absolutely not be that simple for me.

She opens the door for me, looking fresh and beautiful.

“How did it go?” she blurts out as soon as I walk in.

“I – it–” I sigh.

“Ok wait, sorry, it must have been a really long day. Go take a seat in the living room. I made dinner and I’ll pour you a drink. Take a moment to yourself.” She stands up on her tiptoes to kiss me softly. Her lips against mine and for a moment I forget the horrors of the day. Then she walks away, towards the kitchen.

I leave my things at the door and sit down in her living room. I can’t get comfortable. I know the words I need to say but they are stuck in my throat. I can’t seem to say them out loud for Gianna to hear.

She walks in with a tray of food and drinks. Handing me a whiskey on the rocks she starts chatting about silly things in an attempt to try and ease the tension she can obviously feel around me.

I sip the drink and watch her. I love the way her lips move, and how they curl into the most beautiful smile. I love the way she sits on the couch with one leg wrapped under her. I love the way she speaks with her hands in excited gestures. I love the way she is doing everything she can to help me feel more relaxed.

I can’t help myself. I lean over, pushing her so she is lying back on the sofa. I tower over her, pulling her shirt up I kiss the soft skin of her belly and her pale round breasts. I run my tongue over her nipple, and she sighs softly, her fingers in my hair.

Grabbing her around the waist I pull her further down the couch so that she is underneath me and pull her shirt over her head. Kissing her. My tongue slips into her mouth, and I taste her sweetness. She unbuttons my pants and I stand up so that I can pull them off while she pulls off her own jeans. It is an almost frantic rush. She lays naked on the couch, and I lay on top of her, pressing my body against hers. I pull her legs apart and push myself between them. Rubbing my pulsing cock against the outside of her pussy, she moans and lifts her hips trying to guide me into her. She is so wet I cannot resist and my cock slides into her, plunging into her tight pussy as it

clamps over me and her body shudders. I bury my face in her neck and thrust into her. Hard and fast. The frustration of today is all being released as I push into her over and over again. She arches her back and turns her face to muffle her cries into the pillow as her body begins to shake and convulse. She orgasms much sooner than I expect and much more intensely than I expect. I push hard into her and feel her vagina muscles wave over my cock, pulsing and pulling me. I release into her. It is the best stress relief a man could wish for.

“That was really intense,” she whispers in my ear. I kiss her neck again, wrapping my arms around her back. I lay there for a moment realizing there is no way that I can tell her what the contract says.

“Baby, I am absolutely exhausted. I know you prepared everything for me for dinner and everything but honestly, I need to go home and sleep.”

Her fingers dance over my scalp sending shivers down my spine. She kisses my head softly.

“Go and rest, gorgeous. We can chat tomorrow. We can have leftovers for breakfast and go for a morning walk. But go and rest.”

I make my way home. Ashamed that I had left her like that. Stressed because I had not told her what was really going on. Exhausted and worried because of what my ex-wife had put in the contract.

As a father, I know the right choice I had to make, but I am desperate to find a loophole, even though there seems to be no way around this. In my heart, I feel I have already lost Gianna, because how can I ever not choose my son?

CHAPTER 21

GIANNA

Hudson has been avoiding me.

I do not know if he is just tired and stressed or if it is something more. My instincts are telling me it is something more. He never came for breakfast this morning and when I went to knock on his door no one was home. He had left so early and without a word. No message or phone call.

I dial his number, feeling anxious.

Relief washes through me when he answers. “Hi, beautiful.” His voice is strained. He must be exhausted.

“Good morning, you. You missed our breakfast and our walk.”

“I know. I’m sorry I’m just in the middle of something; can I call you back.” “Oh, sure.” He hangs up.

It stings my heart. Like a small blade has been slipped between my ribs. He didn’t even say goodbye. In fact, it feels as though he actually could not wait to get off the call with me. Is he avoiding me?

I wish I knew what was going on!

Me: What are you guys up to today?

Claire: I have a date this evening, but I’m free till then? What were you thinking?

Me: Ooh, a date! Another Tinder disaster? :)

Claire: We can’t all have hot billionaire daddies OK!

Samantha: ya, Gianna, some of us have to use Tinder just to get a little lucky every now and then!

Me: Gross hahaha. Do you guys want to do lunch?

Sam: I'm in. Shall we do it at that place?

Claire: You know if you just say 'that place' we are all going to end up at a different place. I think you need to be more specific.

Sam: the place with those big plants around the entrance. The one Gianna loves so much. I swear if that plant fit in her car she would have stolen it already.

Me: oh that one! Yes let's meet there.

Claire: 11?

Sam: See you there!

Me: See you there!

I absolutely love this place. They have a sort of city jungle theme going on with real plants everywhere. Most of these restaurants use fake plants, but the owners of this place are plant lovers and take pride in their plant babies. It's like an indoor-outdoor sanctuary.

To my relief, neither of them has mentioned the video of the fight. We have already spoken about it a little bit over chat, but I am not in the mood to get into it again.

Claire and Samantha are chit-chatting about Tinder and how awful it is. Personally, I have never been on Tinder and no matter what direction my life goes in I will never be on Tinder. It just is not my thing. It seems dirty and shallow. They are teasing each other and trying to rate who has had the worst Tinder date.

They laugh and I enjoy the relaxed atmosphere. I want to talk to them about Hudson being so distant and how it is worrying me, but also want to just enjoy not having to think about that right now.

Sam looks at me and raises her eyebrow. "How are you handling that ridiculous clause Hudson's ex put in the custody

contract? I mean how nasty can a person be! She obviously has it in for you and put it in there just to hurt him!”

What? Me?

I am so confused. “Uh - what clause?”

Samantha choked on her wine.

“Oh. Shit. I am so sorry Gianna. I thought - I just assumed you knew!”

“What clause, Samantha?”

“You know my office drafted the contract. I just happened to see it when my boss asked me to make copies. Fuck, Gi, fuck.”

She shifts in her seat, her expression one of horror.

“Just spit it out. Please!” I cannot take this anymore.

“Karla put a clause in the custody contract. She is willing to give Hudson one hundred percent custody if he signs the contract to say he will never date you or be romantically involved with you in any way.” She did what? That’s why he skipped breakfast. He is not allowed to see me.

I am stunned into complete silence. I can’t speak. I can hardly think. Or am I thinking too much? Yes. A thousand things run through my head at full speed.

Claire reaches out and gently touches my hand. “Gi?”

I look at her, but I can hardly see anything as the tears fill my eyes.

She hands me a napkin and I quickly wipe them away taking a deep breath and pulling myself together.

“It’s alright,” I say with an empty voice. “It’s alright.”

“Gi, it’s ok to cry.”

“No – no. It’s alright. This is good news for Hudson. I mean. He can have his son. He can have full custody of his son!” That’s what he wanted, and I will not be the one to get in the way of that.

Claire squeezes my hand again.

“I’m so sorry, Gi.” Samantha’s eyes are full of love and care. Soft and heartfelt.

I nod again.

“I’m so sorry guys. I think I have to go home.” I need to get out of here; it feels like everyone is looking at me.

“Don’t worry babe, we understand. Please drive carefully. Let us know when you are home safe.”

I nod and gather my things, putting my dark glasses on before I even leave the restaurant.

I manage to hold myself together until I walk into my home and close the door behind me. Then everything comes pouring out of me. I collapse with my back against the door and slide to the floor with a thump. Tears are streaming down my face and thick heavy sobs choke me. My chest aches and my lungs burn. Now I understand why Hudson has been avoiding me. He has had no choice. Of course, he has no choice.

I cry until I am hollow and drained.

Then I pick myself up, wash my face, and go over to let Hudson know that I understand. I know what choice he has to make. There is no choice – his son is the only choice.

I knock twice on his door before he answers. He looks tired and drained but the first thing he says is “Shit, Gianna, what happened?”

He pulls me inside into a warm, safe hug. I stay in his arms. Fighting tears, I think to myself that this might be the last time he ever holds me.

Then I take a deep breath and pull away from him.

“Hudson. I know about the contract. I know why you have been distant.” I just say it, like he should have.

“Gianna–”

“Wait. Before you speak just let me finish.” I want to say my peace this time.

He nods sadly.

“I know what you have to do, as a father. You don’t have a choice and I fully, completely, and totally understand this. You and I cannot be together any longer. Taylor comes first. I will walk away quietly; I love you enough to do that.”

He stands staring at me in silence. His eyes shine as though he wants to cry but he is fighting it back.

I carry on talking, desperate to let him know that I will not let him make the wrong choice here, that there is only one right choice. That I will never, ever hold it against him. In fact, I take the choice away, I won’t allow him to choose me.

I am starting to mumble and fall over my words so I just look at him, into those beautiful grey eyes and I say, “I will always love you, Hudson. But we both know this is what has to happen.”

Hudson grabs me around my waist and pulls me close to him. Holding me so tight I think I might lose my breath. “I am sorry, Gianna. I am so sorry. I love you. But my son—”

“There is nothing for you to be sorry about. You are doing the right thing for Taylor. Be happy that he is going to be yours and yours alone.” I am happy for him; this fight has been a hard one.

I pull away from him for the last time. Knowing that it is truly over. Knowing that the universe has dealt us a bad hand. There isn’t anything more to say at this point, so I smile. Trying to be brave and strong and let him know that everything will be alright.

But as I turn away from him tears start to run down my cheeks again. I do not turn back though, and he does not try and stop me.

We both know there is no other choice. We love each other enough to let go.

CHAPTER 22

HUDSON

It has been three days since I was given that disgusting contract. It is still lying on my kitchen counter unsigned. I know I have to sign it. I know what I have to do, but every time I have picked up a pen to do that, I just have not managed to find the strength to go through with it. I am giving myself some time to process the inevitable and accept it for what it is.

There is a light knock at my door. For a second my heart leaps, thinking it might be Gianna, but then I remember that I saw her leaving for work that morning and she would not be home yet.

Curious I go over to see who it is.

Two girls are standing at my door, and I recognize them as frog girl and cat girl from the onesie party Gianna had hosted.

Confusion splashes across my face.

“Uh - can I help you? Gianna is not here - I think she is still at work?”

“Hi Hudson. I’m Samantha and this is Claire. Sorry we haven’t actually had a chance to meet you properly, but can we come in. It’s kind of important.”

“Frog, and Cat?” I smile and I step aside to let them in wondering what in the world was going on. Then suddenly I am struck with panic. “Did something happen to Gianna? Is Gianna OK? Is there—”

“Hey, wait, hold up cowboy. Gianna is totally fine. And please, she does not know we are here so don’t you dare go

messaging her!” These are her friends, her people, the ones who keep her going when she’s down.

“I don’t get it - what is going on?” I frown, why are they in my house?

“We have a plan. It all comes down to how much you love Gianna and whether or not you want to find a way to get rid of that stupid clause in the contract?” The Samantha one says. She’s smarter than she looks; I can hear in the way she speaks.

“How do you know?”

“Again, sorry to interrupt, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is your answer. We know how Gianna feels about you. We have never seen her this way. Ever. The only question that we need to have answered is, do you love, Gianna?”

“With every fiber of my being.” That’s a stupid question.

“Okay. Then we have a plan!” The way she says plan makes it sound like a terrible idea before she even starts.

Samantha and Claire are crafty and devious, and sitting there talking to them I realize that they are fighting fire with fire which is something I have not considered. The plan revolves around – a little blackmail – to put it bluntly. At first, I was against it but then came to realize that my ex is playing as dirty as dirt can get and the only way to beat her is to play her at the same game.

Samantha is taking most of the lead in explaining what they have come up with “So you see, then we can have that recorded and basically use it as leverage to get them to back down. We don’t actually have to use the recording, because while we are playing a little dirty here, we are not actually aiming to ruin lives - we just want them to know that they are up against someone who does not back down as easily as they might have expected?” I think about it for a moment.

“Gianna is not going to like this at all.” I say, skeptical but curious about the plan. They have explained it twice and after the second time I am not sure if it is a good plan or not but I am so desperate to grab onto any strand of hope that is available to me, so I am agreeing to this crazy idea.

Samantha chirps “Don’t worry. I will get her to do it.”

“No” I shake my head, “let me call her. I don’t want to cause more issues than I need to. Let me talk to her. If she is genuinely not comfortable with this then I won’t push her. I am sure both of you know her history with my brother. It isn’t fair to put her in a situation that is going to hurt her in any way.”

“Oh, our Gianna is much stronger than you think, Hudson.” Cat onesie says.

“Still, I will be the one to call her.” It doesn’t feel right not to.

They nod. “Well, you better let us know what she says after you have spoken to her.” I need friends like hers in my life.

The girls leave and I sit at my kitchen counter wondering what the hell I have agreed to. But there it is. Hope. I will never let go of hope. I stare at the contract. Stark white and glaring back at me.

Picking up my phone I get Gianna on the line.

“Hudson?” She sounds shocked.

“Hi, Gi. I need you to hear me out OK. I know it is going to sound completely mental, but I need you to listen and not talk right until the end.” I want her to just hear the whole idea before she flips out.

“Uh, okay?”

I explained the plan to her. More than once. I am fumbling over the words and taking a little too long to explain, but the truth is that I have so much hope now that I am terrified she is going to say no and crush the last chance I have of having her in my life. So, I talk and talk. Eventually, I have to accept that there is nothing more to add and I wait in silence for her to process what I’ve said. She did not speak for a long time, and I began to fear the worst. “Gi?”

“It sounds horrible, Hudson.” That was the response I expected. It was my first reaction too.

“We need to beat them at their own dirty game, Gi.” I try, hoping she’ll at least consider it.

“I know, but a bargaining chip. Is it like blackmail? It’s so dirty.” Gianna is nothing like my ex and my brother.

“Gi - you need to understand that at this point I will literally do almost anything to have you in my life. I can’t lose you, baby. My life is incomplete without you. Please. We have to try.” I all but beg.

Gianna is reluctant, but finally, she agrees. My heart leaps in my chest. This might actually work! We might actually be able to get them to back off with their ridiculous conditions in the contract!

She sighs. I can feel she is nervous, but at the same time, I know that hope is infecting her as well.



That evening Gianna is wearing the most elegant outfit I have ever seen. The short sequin dress hugs her body and curves in all the right places. Her breasts are full, and the plunging neckline shows them off elegantly. She is wearing red bottom heels, and her legs look absolutely incredible.

“OK, so keep the earpiece on at all times. I will be listening to everything and recording it all OK. It has a really good range so don’t worry too much.”

She is climbing out of the taxi, looking nervous. We couldn’t take my car as it would have been spotted. They need to think she is here alone. Finding out where Karla and Daniel are going to be this evening is easy as they love to let social media know their movements. “I’ll be right around the corner ok.” I squeeze her hand for reassurance.

She nods and walks away into the cocktail bar where she is about to find my brother and my ex-wife.

CHAPTER 23

GIANNA

I walk over to the bar and stand they're trying to look relaxed. The bartender asks me what I want. "Martini, please."

I do a small glance around the room and spot Daniel sitting at a table to the far right. I know I do not have to go to him or make any attempt to get his attention. If he sees me, he will not be able to resist coming over here to let his presence be known. That is just how his ego works.

I sit on the tall bar chair, looking as elegant as possible, feeling like my stomach is in a thick knot. It does not take long at all. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Daniel watching me. I ignore it. Soon after that, he is headed my way, holding Karla's hand, and pulling her in tow. She doesn't look pleased.

"Gianna, what a lovely surprise." He reaches out to hug me. I give him a sideways half hug. "Good to see you, Daniel. Karla." I nod towards her. "I'm surprised to see you out and about, Gianna." She smirks at me.

"Why is that?" I ask.

"Well, you know after your breakup I would have expected you to lay low for a while." I'm sure they did.

"Oh, don't be silly. It was never that serious." I laugh lightheartedly. "I mean, sure, he's ridiculously rich but let's be honest, he really is a bit boring you know what I mean." Karla's eyes widen in surprise.

"Girl? I thought you two were a proper item!" She says and glances at Daniel.

“Oh goodness no. It would never have lasted. You know he didn’t even want to go clubbing with me.” Daniel and Karla look confused.

I smile, broadly, feeling more confident. “Can I buy you two a drink? Bartender. What are you guys having?” I smile, and they both look at me as if I have two heads.

“Uh, I’ll have whatever you are having, but tell me then, I mean did he break up with you?” She’s taking the bait.

“Actually no. It was kind of amusing though. I broke up with him a day or two before you two sat down to have your final custody contract discussion. Then afterwards I found out what you put in there. Geez Girl, you are wicked.” I laugh again and place their drinks order with the bartender as though it were the most casual conversation in the world.

Daniel speaks, “You guys broke up before the contract?” He sounds upset.

“Yes, it just wasn’t working. I guess you missed a chance to put something better in the contract to annoy him with.” I poke at her fragile ego.

I laugh again.

“I – uh,” she starts.

I speak over her “I mean, I know nobody wants to be a full-time mother these days; having a child is so exhausting, so I know you didn’t want that, obviously.” I shrug “but then to get at him you really should have just asked for money. He is obsessed with that child. It’s a bit annoying really.”

“How much do you think I could have asked for?” Karla is glued to this conversation. “Not sure honey. But he certainly has enough to go around.” I keep going, feeding the monster.

“Daniel, maybe we should change the contract. She is right. I definitely don’t want that kid, but if we can get money instead– with you being cut off and all.”

Daniel doesn’t even look bothered to be having this conversation in front of me. How arrogant is he? “There is still time to change the contact, babe, he hasn’t signed yet. We can

take him for everything he has. He can keep the brat and we can take the money.” It makes me physically ill.

I want to slap them both, but instead, I say, “Wasn’t that your goal anyway? You wasted it on that clause about me.” She has this evil look in her eyes.

“It was the goal, yes, but court wasn’t going well, and we ended up just trying to get back at him instead. I mean, like I said. No thanks to the brat, but I didn’t think he would pay out money.” She’s stupid. He’d have done anything to keep his son.

Daniel is on his phone. “I am going to call the lawyer now and have them draft a new contract.” Not wasting any time, I should have known.

“Yes, baby.” Karla did a little happy jump.

I have what I need. “Gosh guys, I didn’t realize the time, I have to run. There’s a party waiting for me somewhere. It is so nice catching up. Let’s do this again sometime.” I give my best fake smile.

Karla hugs me, grinning from ear to ear.

“Bye, Gianna, let’s go for drinks some time.” I would rather chew my own arm off.

“Sure,” I say, not able to hide the sarcasm in my voice.

I step out onto the street and Hudson is waiting for me around the corner.

“Gianna, wow. That was perfect.” He picks me up and spins me around. “Let’s get out of here. I need to call Tony and set up a meeting with Karla’s lawyer.”

Needless to say, the moment Daniel and Karla found out that there was a recording, they went deathly pale and silent. They were apparently all sitting in the boardroom when Hudson mentioned it. He took his phone out and placed it on the table in front of both teams of lawyers. He pressed play and the room fell icy quiet as their words drifted through the air.

Karla's lawyer had apparently turned to steel. All he had said to her was, "Karla, there is no coming back from that. If the press gets hold of it, just sign whatever Hudson wants you to sign and walk away with whatever dignity you have left." She has no dignity at all, so there is none to salvage.

Karla had not said a word. She had not argued. When Hudson's attorney slid the new contract over to her she did not even read it. She just picked up a pen and signed every page and walked out of the room.

Hudson won the case and Karla did not even get a penny. I get to keep the two most important men in my life, him, and Taylor.

We are out celebrating with Samantha and Claire at a fancy cocktail lounge in town. Hudson is standing with his arm around me, holding me close and my heart is screaming with joy. This is the first time we can be out in public and completely open about the fact that we are together. This is the first time that we can be standing here, surrounded by strangers, and feel totally safe. He leans close to my ear and says "Hey, beautiful. Do you want to dance?" He does not wait for my reply, just takes my hand, and leads me to the dance floor.

He holds me close, sliding his hand down my back and cupping my ass cheek. "Behave!" I laugh.

"Let them watch," he kisses me deeply. We see the flashes going off. There will always be a reporter hiding somewhere, but we honestly do not care. Let them see how happy we are together.

It is the most magical night. We dance and laugh and do not have a care in the world. It is so relaxing.

"There's just one more problem, Hudson," I say.

"What is that, my love?" He sounds worried.

"Your mother still hates me." Hate isn't even a strong enough word.

He laughs a deep loud laugh that fills the room.

“Oh baby, don’t you worry about that. She will warm up to you. As soon as she gets to know who you really are, how could she possibly not love you too.” Has he met his mother? Eskimos are warmer.

He kisses me again and my body shivers with pleasure.

CHAPTER 24

HUDSON

My mother is fussing about and it's driving me a little crazy.

“Everything has to be perfect, Hudson.” She keeps saying as she scratches through boxes filled with floral arrangements and elaborate decorations. “Where did they put the rose petals?” She asks as if I would know anything about roses.

“Please, Mom, I need you to focus here. The car I rented is parked around the side of the house. You can go ahead of us and set up everything. I wish you had just let me hire a decorator for this, anyway, you can set it up and then you guys can leave the key there for me.”

“Oh, I am focused, honey. Claire, are the fairy lights packed? I want them all across the balcony that overlooks the ocean, the one in the main bedroom.”

I roll my eyes. I have asked them to help me set up the house for Gianna and my surprise weekend away, to make it beautiful and special because tonight I want to propose to Gianna. But I am beginning to wonder if maybe I have made a mistake involving everyone in my proposal. I look around the room. Claire and Samantha are in a serious conversation with my mother about who will collect the balloons and where the balloon archway should go. I laugh. Everything is actually perfect.

My house is chaos though. They are sorting and packing decorations, getting them ready to be loaded and taken to the

weekend house. It is a beautiful place on the beachfront. I have spent hours choosing the right place and finally settled on this one. Away from any big cities, away from crowds, where Gianna and I can just be together alone.

Taylor and the nanny will stay home, here for the weekend and Samantha, Claire, and my mother will drive through in the next hour to decorate the place before Gianna and I get there.

So far, the plan is going well.

I hear Gianna's car pull into her driveway and I know she will come right over. I shout, "Red alert!" and even though the curtains are all closed Claire almost ducks behind the sofa. I laugh again, "I will distract her. You guys carry on."

I slip out of the door just as she is walking towards it, careful not to open it too wide. I closed it quickly behind me, trying to hide the grin on my face.

She notices the weirdness of my actions and tries to peek into the house. I step in front of her to block the view. "Let's go in, Hudson. I am dying for a glass of wine."

I block her again as she tries to step around me.

"Sorry, we have a – plumbing issue. Let's go for a walk instead." It's a lie.

"A what?" She looks skeptical.

"Plumbing issue. Water everywhere. The plumbers are busy in there right now. It smells horrible." I keep going with my very bad lie.

She lets me take her hand and lead her away from the house. But her frown lets me know that she is not buying any of it.

"Where is the plumber's van?"

"They -- uh, the one guy had to run out to the hardware for some pipes or something. I'm not sure. But the other guys are inside." I try and sound convincing.

The entire walk around the estate I stress about making conversation. Talking about the most random shit and hoping

with all my heart that I do not slip up and give anything away.

I can see she is uncomfortable. She keeps glancing over at me, unsure of what is happening.

“What is going on, Hudson? Are you ok? Is it really plumbing? Should I be worried?”

“Yes, yes.” I brush her comment off. This is not going well.

I need to get out of here before I say something and give everything away.

“Listen I should probably get back and see that they are not breaking anything.” I walk her to her door.

“Maybe I can help?” She offers.

“No, don’t be ridiculous. Just go home.”

“Go home?”

The comment seems to hurt her. I think it has come out wrong.

Shit. I am really bad at this. My nerves are on edge.

“Yes, baby. Sorry. I’m a bit stressed with all the mess. I am going to finish up there and then come over for dinner. Definitely can’t be hanging out in my place for a while; they will need to do a big cleanup.” She frowns.

I quickly add, “Don’t make dinner. We can just order when I get here OK.” I practically push her into her house. I feel terrible about leaving her so concerned. She looks so worried. But I have to do this.

“Hudson, just tell me - did I do something wrong?” She asks me.

“You? No, of course not. Sorry, I have to go.”

Her face is strained with stress as I walk away. I wave at her, trying to look casual but I think I just look like a total douche.

Slipping back into my house I say, “Guys, we really need to move now. She suspects something is up, I don’t think I

handled that as well as I would have liked to.” Samantha gives me the side eye.

“We have already packed most of the stuff into the car around the back. Sam and I are going to leave now. We want to get everything set up and be out of there before you guys are even close. What time do you think you will be arriving?”

“To be safe, I will say six o’clock?”

“Plenty of time.”

My mother comes over to me. “I am going to drive with the girls. Honey, I am so happy for you.” She kisses me on the cheek and gives me an awkward hug. She has never been a hugger, but it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that she has finally accepted Gianna and she is actually happy about what I am planning.

Finally, they snuck out the side door and left in the rental car, stuffed full of decorations and anything else that I needed for the surprise.

I pack a weekend back and taking a deep breath I lock up behind me and head over to Gianna’s, nervous as hell.

“Hudson.” She was a bit upset when she opened the door. “I haven’t seen a single sign of a plumbing van or any van for that matter. What is going on?”

“Baby, you are being silly. There is absolutely nothing to worry about. But because the house smells so bad I have sent Taylor to stay at a friend’s for the weekend and you and I are going to stay in a little hotel outside of town. I thought it might be a fun way to relax.”

A hotel. I laugh inwardly. It is a mansion, not a hotel. But I want to sound casual.

“Really?” She raises her eyebrow, still skeptical. She knows when I am not telling the whole truth.

“Yes, really. Let’s get you packed and then we can head out?”

“What about dinner? I mean it’s still early; what is the time? Three o’clock. I am really hungry. Can we get a little

snack on the way?” She asks me.

“That sounds perfect.” It also gives the girls a little extra time to set up so I am all up for that idea. How do I keep a straight face through a whole meal though?

She doesn't take too long to pack and soon we are on the road. She is fidgety and a little worried, but I can tell that the plumbing story is starting to stick. I hope she does not have any idea what is really happening.

After a stop along the way, a very light lunch, and a glass of wine, we arrive at the mansion at half past six.

It was summer and the sun was still in the sky. I want a sunset proposal, so everything is going perfectly.

I get out of the car and walk to her side to open the door. She is standing next to me. Looking less than impressed with me.

“Ok, Gi,” I say nervously. “I need you to trust me.”

“Is this the hotel? This looks like – this doesn't look like a hotel.” She is not buying what I am selling.

“Do you trust me?” I ask.

“Of course, I do.” She says but her tone tells me she's not really believing me.

I lean into the back of the car, grabbing what I need and handing her a black box wrapped in a silver ribbon. “Don't look inside yet. Just follow me. Leave your things in the car.”

I take her hand and lead her to the front door. I know all the decorations are set up, hidden around the corner of the entrance hall, leading up the stairs.

I guide her in, not letting go of her hand. “Oh my word this place is beautiful,” she says.

I lead her to the downstairs guest bedroom.

“I need you to go in here. Take as much time as you need, get dressed. Your outfit and everything you need is in that box.” I gesture towards the black box she has in her hand.

“Hudson?” She laughs nervously. “What is going on?”

“I said trust me.” I laugh. “When you are done, come find me upstairs.”

“Okay.”

I walk out of the room. My heart is thundering in my ears. I close the door behind me so that she will have complete privacy and not be able to see anything I am up to.

While she is busy, I sprinkle the last of the rose petals from the guest bedroom door all the way up the stairs to where the decorations the girls have put up begin. I quickly change into a black suit and then run upstairs to wait.

They have done such a magnificent job. The stairs are covered in roses and the floor is covered in petals. Leading out onto the balcony is a pale blue balloon archway and once you step onto the balcony you are surrounded by fairy lights, floating balloons, and floral arrangements with delicate soft fabric floating in the breeze, all leading you towards the edge of the balcony and the most breathtaking ocean view.

The sun is starting to turn the sky pink and purple when I hear Gianna’s footsteps. She walks slowly onto the balcony. I can see she is taking in every detail, but suddenly none of it matters to me, all I can see is her. The elegant long black dress I have chosen for her glitters in the late afternoon light. The slit rides all the way up her side to her hip to reveal her toned legs. The black stilettos compliment every curve on her body. Her make-up is absolutely stunning. Soft and effortless and her hair is loose and flowing around her shoulders. She walks over to me, and I reach out my hand. She places her hand in mine. “Hudson? What—”

“Gianna.”

The sunset glows behind us and the fairy lights twinkled like stars in the sky above us. She looks up at me with her green eyes glowing bright and curious.

“Gianna. You are the most beautiful soul I have ever met. Your heart is an endless pool of warmth that I want to swim in

forever. You are home for my soul and for my body. You are my entire world.”

I drop down to my knee and her breath catches in her throat.

“Will you marry me, Gianna Perth?”

She throws herself into my arms, bowling me over. She shouts, “YES! YES! YES! Oh my word YES!” We lay on the floor of the balcony laughing and neither of us can contain our happiness. She keeps kissing my face and saying yes.

I pull her away from me, holding her at arm’s length. “Baby. Wait.” I laugh. “Let me put your ring on.”

She giggles and sits up on her knees, my legs wrapped around her. I slip the pink diamond ring onto her finger and pull her into my arms, never ever wanting to let her go.

Gianna lifts her gaze to mine. “I am so happy.”

She kisses me deeply and I feel my cock swelling against my suit pants. I stand up, scooping her into my arms, and carry her to the bedroom, overlooking the entire ocean. She stands there smiling at me, glittering in her black dress. Slowly I reach behind her to unzip it.

“Actually, I don’t want to take it off just yet” she laughs.

“All the more fun for me then,” I say as I stroke my hand up the slit of the dress and find her warm wetness. She isn’t wearing any underwear. “Oh, you are full of surprises,” I say as my cock pulses, eager to feel her.

She unbuttons my shirt, painfully slowly, teasing me and moaning at the same time. I am so hard against the fabric of my pants that I feel as though they might tear. She unbuttons my pants, and they fall to the floor. I push her onto the bed, standing over her, running my hands up her legs, inside her thighs. She moans and arches her back. “I want to see all of you, Gianna.” She laughs. “Alright you can take off my dress, but I am wearing it to breakfast tomorrow morning.”

She lets me unzip her dress, the silky fabric sliding off her skin. Her plump breasts fall free.

“Just leave the shoes on.” She grins.

I kneel in front of her on the bed, her legs wrapped around my waist. I lift her stilettoes foot to rest it on my shoulder as I stroke her thigh again, letting my cock tease the entrance of her pussy.

She breathes out, pressing against me. “Please don’t make me wait, Hudson” she begs.

I slip my cock into her, feeling her pull me into her warm wetness. The sensation is divine.

“You are mine, Gianna,” I say as I thrust into her. “You are mine and you always will be.” The words send shivers through her as I thrust harder, letting myself fill her and stretch her.

“Do you understand?”

She nods.

“I want to hear you say it.” I thrust again.

“I am yours.” She gasps. “I always will be.”

I run my thumb over her clit, rubbing in small circles while I slowly push my cock into her pussy and then pull it out again, and then slowly press hard into her.

Her body begins to shake as her orgasm rushes through her. She arches against me causing me to explode into her in blissful release.

I cannot believe that this beautiful creature is going to be my wife.

I am the luckiest man in the world.

CHAPTER 25

GIANNA

My heart dances in my chest as my father leads me down the aisle toward the man I love more than anything in this world.

Hudson stands at the altar in his black and white tuxedo looking like everything I want and need in my future.

Our family and friends are seated on both sides of the runner, but I am not able to take my eyes off Hudson. He is smiling at me, the most beautiful smile I have ever seen.

My dress is flowing behind me in a long white trail of delicate lace with flowers stitched around the edges and around the bodice.

I feel like a princess who is about to be crowned a queen.

My heart flutters as I step up to stand alongside Hudson and my father lets go of my hand, kissing me on the cheek and whispering, “I love you, sweetheart, you look beautiful.”

I reach out to hand my bouquet of flowers to Samantha who is standing next to Claire to the side of the altar. They are both smiling from ear to ear.

Then I turn my attention to Hudson.

My Hudson.

The man I am about to marry.

It feels like an hour, and it feels like mere seconds when the words are finally announced “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

Hudson wraps his arm around my waist, dipping me backward and pressing his beautiful lips against mine. Our family and friends shout and cheer around us filling the air with happiness. He pulls me to my feet and kisses me again.

“I love you, Gianna Drake,” he says for everyone to hear, and I cannot stop smiling!

We walk back down the aisle hand in hand. Both of us smile as white rose petals float from the sky around us.

The entire day is a magical blur of happiness and laughter. We are whisked away shortly after the ceremony to do a photo shoot, where we play in the vineyards. Hudson is swooping me up in the air and spinning me around, laughing and kissing me. There is nothing but joy around us and I know that my life is only just beginning.

Soon we settle at the bride and groom’s table, elegantly laid out in gold and white. His mother comes up behind me, she slips her arms around my shoulders to hug me. “I am so happy to have you as part of the family, dear.” She kisses my cheek and I smile warmly. Hudson squeezes my hand as the speeches start. I have been nervous about them, and I had given Claire and Samantha strict instructions to behave themselves.

They both tell beautiful stories about our friendship, and I find tears of happiness running down my cheek.

Finally, it is time for Hudson to speak. He stands up, squeezing my hand and giving me a slow, deep kiss before reaching out for the microphone.

He stands next to me, looking down at me. His eyes are warm and caring. Deep pools of love that pull me in.

He raises his glass to the ballroom of guests. “First I want to thank everyone for making this such a special and unforgettable night.”

The crowd cheers and raises their glasses. He thanks individuals, making special comments about my parents and his own. Then he turns to me and my heart flutters in my chest.

“Gianna Drake, my beautiful wife. You came into my life in the most unexpected of ways and you have done nothing but support me and love me ever since. You are my strength and my weakness. You are my best friend and the most beautiful lover I could ever have asked for.” Someone in the crowd shouts in agreement and I feel my cheeks flush pink. Hudson just laughs, “Gianna, you are my world, my everything and I want to ask you a question.”

“She already said yes, Hudson.” Another chirp from the crowd, but he smiles and ignores them. His attention is fully on me. “Gianna, I could not imagine a more perfect person to have come into our lives, mine and Taylor’s.

You have touched our hearts. I want to ask if you would formally adopt Taylor as your own and become his real mom. So that we can be a true family.”

I cannot stop the tears from falling as I nod my head with pure happiness in my heart. “I would love that, Hudson.” He lifts me out of my seat to embrace me in his strong arms, holding me tight and making me feel safer than I have ever felt in my life.

It is well past midnight when Hudson carries me into our hotel room. With all the dancing and laughter, I have been becoming more and more eager to get Hudson alone and rip his clothes off. I want to feel his skin on mine, his lips on mine, his body pressing into me. I am desperate for him. My husband.

He kicks the door closed behind himself and carries me to the bedroom. I turn my back to him and glance over my shoulder as he slowly unties the ribbon that laces my wedding gown. It falls to the floor, and I step out of it. His eyes widened when he sees the white lingerie, I am wearing underneath and I see his cock pressing against his pants. He traces his fingers over my shoulder, cupping my breast in his hand, pulling my face up towards him so that he can kiss me. His tongue presses in my mouth as he frees his cock from his pants and lets his clothes drop to the floor as well, lying next to my wedding dress. My eyes dance over his sculpted and broad shoulders. Hudson lifts me up in his strong arms,

wrapping my legs around his waist and pressing himself into me, teasing me through the white lace.

“Fuck I am so hard for you right now.” He breathes into my ear and slips his fingers into my pussy. “You are so wet, baby.”

I gasped, still wrapped in his arms.

“I’m yours, Hudson.”

The words send shivers through him, and he throws me onto the bed. “You are mine!” He kneels at the edge of the bed, pulling my legs towards him and wrapping my thighs around his face. He buries his tongue inside my pussy making me cry out in pleasure. He licks up and down my clit, then slides his tongue into me again and again, fucking me with his mouth making my body shiver and shake uncontrollably. Soon I can’t take it anymore and I start to shudder as I orgasm onto his tongue. He grins, climbing on top of me, pushing my legs apart with his hips. He kisses me and I taste my own sweetness on his lips. Then he thrusts into me, everything at once and pleasure shakes through me again as he pushes his hard cock into my wet pussy over and over again until pleasure steals us both away and orgasms crash through my body as he explodes into me.

THE END

Hey there, love! I trust you’ve been swept away by the sizzling allure of **Forbidden Billionaire Next Door**, the second steamy novel of my “**Grumpy Billionaires Next Door Box Set.**” ☐☐

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He was always perfect in my eyes. But my brother made sure I knew he was off limits.

I had a simple plan for my life ~ get a degree and become a successful sports agent.

After landing my dream job, I never imagined I'd be getting a fat paycheck to be his fake girlfriend.

This living arrangement, his morning wood, and the tingling in my body is starting to blur all the lines.

And all this faking is starting to feel too real.

He says he needs to stay loyal to his best friend ~ my brother, but his strong arms wrapped around me tell a different story.

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