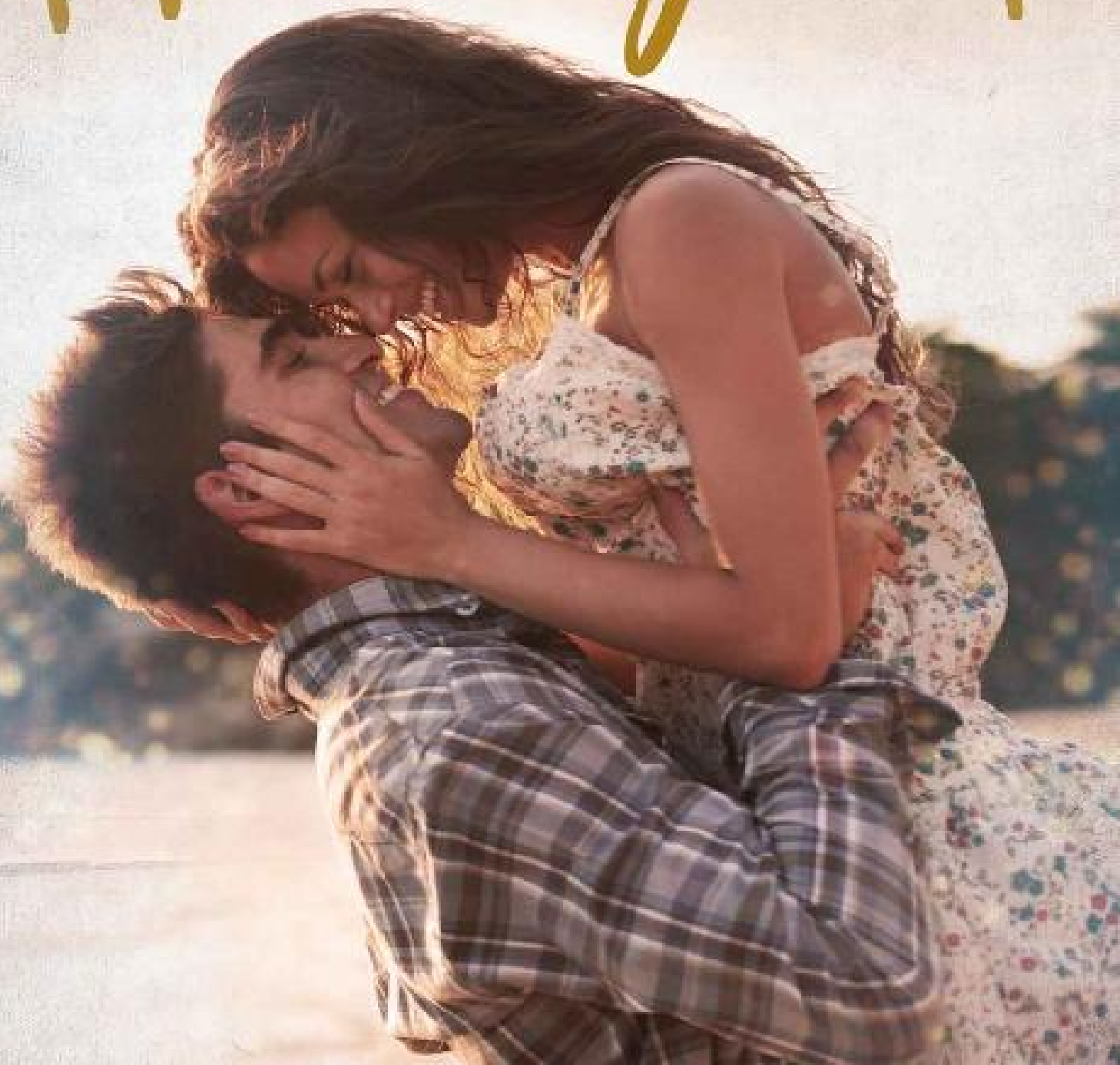


THE ASHTON FAMILY

BOOK TWO

CARRIE AARONS

# Honeyed



# HONEYED

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ASHTON FAMILY

BOOK 2

# CARRIE AARONS

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*For the daughters who keep the entire family from falling  
apart.*

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# 1

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ALANA

**T**he advice my mother has always given me is not to burn bridges.

Someday, you might need to use it to go back to that person, relationship, job, or otherwise. To not lay waste to the foundation because it will only leave singe marks on your soul and guilt or regret in your heart.

But as I cross this particular bridge, looking down into the river I've known since girlhood, I wonder if it's essential to burn bridges at some point. To give yourself no option but to move forward because trudging back into the past would be too painful.

To decimate something so thoroughly that there is nothing left to dwell on or wonder about.

It's why I'm crossing this one, my sneakers slapping on the concrete as an early spring sunrise rises over the green rafters of the bridge. This path of the Delaware Canal isn't the one I usually walk on; typically, I opt for the trail closer to my family home. That towpath has prettier stone mansions to peek in on, a group of turtles that always congregate on the same rock, and a gorgeous wildflower field I love to check up on this time of year.

But that is the path I usually take with *him*, and addressing any of the shit bubbling up between us right now is not an option.

The rapids flow over the rocks below, a kayaker visible from down in the calmer part of the river. Breathing in, my



lungs trap the cool March air, and I relish the refreshment even if I'm bone-tired.

Aside from changing up my normal morning walk routine, I've had trouble sleeping. Both are side effects of not talking to my best friend for months, even if I have to see him every single day.

Why the hell did I ever convince my father to give Warren Teal a job?

Once upon a time, Warren was my best friend. We met in sixth grade while doing a project for our science class; the two of us had to soak apples in different acids and bases to see how the liquids would affect the fruit. From the moment we'd gotten paired together, I'd been my usual exuberant self, railroading Warren into coming to my house to do the experiment while using the excuse that my mother would make us cinnamon rolls as a snack if we did so. He couldn't have looked more relieved when I suggested it, and I hadn't known why or even caught on at the time.

But I learned later. After my middle school crush on him had already turned into all-out, mind-consuming love. After my mother had taken him under her wing the first time he ever came to our house. Because she knew, as did my oldest brother, Liam, and I guess my father, too; Warren Teal was the little boy who was in the house when his father murdered his mother. He was the up-and-coming quarterback prodigy who a wealthy older couple had adopted. He was the boy everyone whispered and wondered about.

That's what happened when you grow up in Hope Crest, our idyllic Pennsylvania hometown on the banks of the Delaware River. Surrounded by pre-Civil War stone homes, thick, lush forests with acres of wildflowers surrounding them, and our bustling main street lined with small businesses, this is the perfect place to grow up. It's also an ideal setting for the fastest gossip mill you've ever seen. My family is fourth-generation owners of Hope Pizza, the world-famous pizza shop in town, and the number of rumors and talk you hear come through the doors on a daily basis is out of this world.

It's no wonder he was so quiet and relieved when I suggested he come over instead of doing the project at his house. Or, well, ridiculous mansion, I should say. The couple of times I went to Warren's adoptive parent's house, it felt more like a museum than a home. Arthur and Clara Wayborne were only trying to do good by adopting Warren and giving him the kind of money one needs to get into the professional leagues in football, but they hadn't understood the type of trauma that came along with him. Instead, it only drove Warren deeper into himself.

Until he met my family, and they all but adopted him. Throughout the years, my parents have cooked him countless meals, moved him into his college dorm, gone to his graduations, and given him a job. He is as much a brother to me as my three biological ones are, and it used to be a blessing that I got to work with my best friend.

But no one knows the truth about us. No one knows what has transpired between us, how many nights I've spent crying over a man who will never know just how much, and in what way, I love him. Except a few months ago, I saw him knock down an obstacle that he's always said has stood between us becoming something more.

And I've shut him out ever since.

My head swims with these thoughts, memories of our childhood and teen years assaulting me as my feet pound hard into the chunks of gravel and brown sand below them. My mind is so caught up, plus the pop music blasting in my headphones, that I don't notice the body I'm barreling toward until I'm smacking into it.

"Jesus, you never watch where you're going!" I catch as one of my earbuds flies out.

Hands grip my back, pushing the entire front of me into whoever I just collided with. The arms banded around me are steadying, and I'm surprised I didn't take us both down with the force in which I slammed into this person.

One flick of my eyes up into stormy gray eyes, and I know why.

Warren's jaw tics and looks even more like it could cut steel than it usually does. Said jaw is covered in chocolatey brown stubble, the same color of the waves brushed off his forehead with a little bit of sweat. He looks glowy, not disgusting in the way I feel mid-run. Which makes me think that maybe I should do a pit check, except he's still pressing my body to his. Thick black lashes blink down at me, those golden-flecked grays growing darker by the second as he assesses me.

We've always had an unspoken language, and he's understood me when no one else seems to. It irks me that he still has that ability.

It's been four months, eight days, and approximately twelve hours since either of us has uttered more than a monosyllabic word to each other. It's the longest we've ever gone without talking, including the stint where Warren was in the hospital when he broke his hand ... the injury that ended any football prospects he had.

Never in my life have I felt more unmoored than these last four months, and now he's acting as my actual anchor after almost running him over.

"Oh, so you're talking to me now?" The dig pops out as I back up, my heartbeat in my throat.

Our eyes lock and duel because he knows I'm just as stubborn as him. And that I just pointed out that he broke our silent streak, even if it was forced by me nearly plowing him down.

"You never freaking watch where you're going." He rolls his eyes, showing off his toned arms as his fists rest on each of his hips.

I try not to notice the shape of his body, how his waist tapers down and then extends into a broad, lean chest. How he's more than a foot taller than me, and that his legs look like they could go hours during *any* physical exercise. With athletic shorts hitting his mid-thighs and a sweat absorbent sport tee hugging his abdomen like it was sewn just for him, Warren looks like any famous athlete that women on the Internet are

obsessed with. With the darker hair and smoldering expressions, he's even more mouth-watering.

Shaking my head and reminding myself to keep up the scowl and stop eyeing my best friend—something I'm constantly reminding myself not to do—I raise an eyebrow as if to egg him on.

“I could have been anybody.” His deep voice should not do the thing it does to the spot between my legs, but it's been four months since he's spoken to me directly, and I've been deprived.

“What, like an axe murderer?” My voice is dripping with sarcasm.

Warren's spine snaps ramrod straight, and I know I fucked up. With his past, I should never bring that up in such a joking manner, but I'm rusty when it comes to him.

“I didn't mean ...” I trail off, feeling awkward.

I've never felt awkward around this man. Only one time previously, and we've silently agreed never to speak of it again. Other than that, we've always told each other everything. We shared every experience, every life moment since we were eleven.

Minutes pass, and streams of sunlight begin to fall over us and the towpath. Just the two of us out here alone, where no one else can hear or judge us. We could hash it all out, but fifteen years of unspoken feelings have constructed bricks around my heart. And I'm too stubborn to expose that all to him right now.

“You're really mad at me for backing Cassandra up and going against your father?” His voice is gruff, like it always gets when he's emotional.

I've never seen Warren cry; he's much too jaded and reserved to show emotions like that. But I can't deny I hear the catch in his voice, like I've really hurt him over this. If he only knew just how many nights I'd been tearing up into my pillow over this fight.

Over what it symbolized to me.

From the time we were eleven, Warren has looked up to my father like an idol. Like he is his hero. My dad has always treated Warren as one of his own boys, and the bond they share got in the way of me ever exploring the feelings I have for the best friend I fell in love with. How many times has Warren backed up my father when we argued about something? Too many to count. How many times have I asked Warren to defend me, put his neck out on the line where my father is concerned, or just talk back to the man? So many. If he'd ever done so, maybe we could finally be *more*.

But he never did, not until my brother's wife, Cassandra, came into the picture. Her being a famous actress might annoy our father, but the fact that Cass lives in the house that her father, Butch, had always occupied until his death just made my dad dislike her more. He wanted Butch's land and dispensed my brother Patrick to charm her into giving it to us. After a series of tragic events, Cassandra's safety was threatened, and my father still held ill will toward her. Everyone yelled at him about it, including Warren.

Not once has he ever stood up to my old man like that for me or for us. I'm not just pissed; I'm hurt. Warren's actions hold so much more meaning for me than just being about standing up for Cassandra. His defense of her, and his disapproval of my father's words, have shown me that he's capable of standing up to Thomas Ashton. Just not for me. Not when it could mean that Warren and I could be more to each other than just best friends. It means he'll never go against the word he gave my father to treat me like a sister and look out for me always.

"If you really think that's what's happening here, you're even more oblivious than I thought." I cross my arms, pushing my sports bra up.

I don't miss the way those gray eyes flick down to my chest and the blush that seems to be more present around him in my twenties than ever before makes its way to my cheeks. The tension between us has reached a fever pitch these days, even if we aren't speaking.

"Al, don't be like this. You know why—"

Warren's phone rings, interrupting our disagreement. He glances at the screen, his brow furrowing, and then answers with a gruff hello.

"What?" I see his face pale a little as he talks into the receiver. "No, no, uh ... thanks for letting me know. Yes, I will be there. Oh, a meeting? After? Uh, okay. Yes. I will be there."

He clicks off without saying thank you or goodbye, and I'm desperate to know not only who was on the phone but what he was going to say before the call interrupted us.

The words "you know why" taunt my brain, tickling the suspicion that I've always wanted Warren to confirm; that he is just as in love with me as I am with him but that he won't pursue it because he respects my father and family too much. My heart beats with the knowledge I want him to admit to, but he looks rattled after getting off the phone.

He looks like he's seen a ghost, and I can't help but walk closer to him and touch the corded vein and muscle on his forearm. "Who was that?"

"A lawyer for the estate. Arthur died." Warren's eyes focus on the water of the canal below, avoiding my worried gaze. "They want me to attend the funeral."

And suddenly, it doesn't matter that we aren't speaking. It doesn't matter that I'm in love with this man who won't ever give himself permission to love me back. It doesn't matter that I'm hurt and completely up in the air about what my life will be if I can't be with him.

Warren's adopted father is dead, and it's time to be by his side. To be his best friend.

Just like I'm always destined, and doomed, to be.

**F**or a twenty-seven-year-old, I've attended far too many of my parent's funerals.

My mother died when I was ten. I remember standing next to her closed casket with no one but a distant cousin of hers to stand next to me as people from all over poured in to give me their condolences. I had no idea why these people, who I'd never met before and some of whom had never met my mother, were even talking to me.

I just wanted to go home and lie down until that sick feeling in my stomach disappeared. Unfortunately, I'd never go back to the house I grew up in ... which was a crime scene.

It wasn't until much later that I figured it all out; my mother's death and my father's subsequent media campaign were on the national news. He lied for weeks about not knowing who killed her, about being distraught that his wife had gone missing. Thinking back, it's psychotic that he let me live in the house for a month after her murder, which had taken place in our living room.

Ten-year-old me had not grasped a single thread of this. From the true crime junkies who just wanted to be close to my mother's funeral, to the wicked ways of my father, to the absolute discombobulation of my life after she died and he went to prison for it. Her funeral was a blur and a purgatory I desperately wanted to escape from, yet it still played in my nightmares all these years later.

Then there is Clara, my adopted mother, who passed a few years ago. She was a sweet, if not reserved, woman who never truly knew how to emotionally care for a child. That could have been her upbringing in a wealthy British family who moved to the US when she was a girl or because she'd suffered two traumatizing miscarriages and was never the same in terms of children afterward. But she always showed me kindness and took care of me monetarily if it was the only way she could show her affection. Her death saddened me, but we weren't close like Arthur and I had gotten in the years since she passed.

And finally, some would call the day my father stood up in court and was sentenced to prison for life a funeral. It is to me, as I have no intention of ever seeing that man again. The day he was taken away in handcuffs was the day he ceased to exist on this earth to me.

Being here, standing next to the man who had become a close confidant in my adult years, is by far the saddest, though. Because not only am I old enough to remember and grasp what this grief feels like, but Arthur's death also symbolizes that I am now a true orphan.

None of my parents are left; I have no family to speak of.

That thought has a knot sitting in my throat as I stand near Arthur's casket and shake hands with people I only know by name because of my conversations with my adoptive father.

"You doing okay?" Alana asks, and I can't help but glance at her as if she's a lifeline.

Even with our rift, she's been by my side since the phone call came in on the trail just four mornings ago. It wasn't like I had to do much; Arthur had his entire end-of-life plan, will, and burial decisions made and accounted for. All that was left was signing on the dotted line, and I've done that for most of the checklist so far. I'm the only living "relative" he had left since Clara and Arthur's families were pretty much gone or so far removed from their life that it wouldn't make sense to give them the responsibility. The only thing left was meeting with his lawyer today after the funeral.



I want to get this all over with so I can grieve privately and try to figure out my next move. Not for the first time do I feel untethered and unsure of where I'm at in my life, except this time, I'm going to do something about it. I've been waiting too long to make a real and lasting change, to follow a path that feels right, and Arthur's death has given me that final push.

"I'm fine." My tightlipped answer doesn't seem to satisfy her, but she stays quiet next to me. "Where'd you go before?"

While I can small talk and placate with the best of them, today is not one of the days I want to do so. It's why I'm so good at my job, being the manager at Hope Pizza. I can calm an angry customer, smooth over a disagreement about reservations or food outcomes, and keep the whole place oiled like a machine so that no one sees the cogs behind their romantic evening out.

But today, I don't want the pitying smiles or quizzical looks. It's no secret that I hadn't lived with the Waybornes after graduating high school, and we'd fallen out of touch for a bunch of years even though they lived in the same town. Not a lot of people knew that since Clara's death, I'd reconnected with my adoptive father and he'd become a mentor of sorts. So it was probably jarring for them to see me standing up here.

"Needed a break. All the expensive perfume was getting to me. I thought my choice of scent today would be okay, but of course, money always proves me wrong." She shrugs, and I love that even at a funeral, she hasn't lost her charm or humor. It's what I need right now. "I wouldn't stand out around these designer labels and rich folks anyway."

That kind of attitude makes it seem like she's not the most stunning woman in any room. Like she doesn't steal my breath randomly throughout the day when she comes around a corner.

Alana Ashton isn't some small-town bumpkin. On the contrary, she's so beautiful it hurts to know she isn't mine when I've had ample opportunity to make her just that. Dark inky hair the color of midnight falls in loose curls around her shoulders, all the way down to the middle of her back. Sometimes, when she's so sleepy while watching a movie that

I don't think she notices, I curl the silky strands around my fingers. Those eyes, the ones that always seem to see right through me, are a shock of aquamarine. Looking into the depths of her gaze is like staring at the most beautiful Caribbean water.

Today she has on a short-sleeved black dress that floats around her waist and clings to the breasts I've been obsessed with since she showed up one day in eighth grade, and it was like her chest had grown three sizes overnight. They're round and perky and would fit in my hands like my palms were shaped for them. Her toned runner's legs are bare of any tights or sheers, and I'm sure her Nonna had words with her about that. Alana always was one to shirk rules or etiquette. The black heels on her feet are far from the ones she wears when we've gone to clubs or had a night out in Philly, and yet, I can't stop picturing what they'd look like on my bedroom floor.

Even at a funeral, even after years of pining, even after our big fight four months ago, this woman is still the center of my universe.

And while everyone in the room might see a beautiful woman, I know the other things that make her so much more than that.

"I didn't realize you were still in contact with Arthur." She interrupts my thoughts as there is a lull in the line giving me condolences.

"There are still some things you don't know about me." My answer is meant to cut, and when I hear the tiny inhale of breath from Alana, I know I've struck a nerve.

I turn forward, needing to focus on something else. Anything else.

"Clearly." Even without looking at her, I know her eyebrow is doing that raise it does when she's pissed off.

Blowing out a breath because I'm tired of being in a fight with her, and I want nothing more than her touch on my skin, I lean over so that our hands brush. Sparks ignite under my skin,

and a warmth I've been missing since our fight rushes back into my heart.

Like I was missing an essential part of myself.

Even if she is mad at me, she doesn't move away. No, Alana simply winds her arm in mine, running those bright pink nails up and down my arm, creating a delicious set of tingles that spring up under the fabric of my button-down.

How I've fucking needed her comfort.

“Since Clara passed, I've been checking up on him. More like ... well, friend lunches. He became a mentor of sorts. Maybe it was always supposed to be that way; they had no idea what to do with a child, but he turned out to be a father figure in my adult life.”

Alana nods as if she could see that idea having merit.

“Was he sick?” she asks, and I realize just how much I've been keeping from her in the last year.

Even before we stopped talking, I'd been distancing myself. After so many of Arthur's talks with me over long lunches, I'd drive home thinking about how I was wasting my life. How I was waiting for this epic *something* that I was not doing anything to try to achieve. So I turned inward, becoming very reflective and weighing my options and moves going forward.

Most of the time, I can be happy. My nature is pretty laid-back, and I often wonder what or who I'd be if my life hadn't had so many fucked-up things wound into it at a young age. At one time, I thought the pros and fame had been my life's work. Turns out, I'd been blessed with the arm to throw a football like a heat-seeking missile. But it wasn't meant to be. Compared to my mother's death, losing my football career due to a broken hand that never healed properly was a blip on the radar.

Sure, it took some dark days to get through both of those things, but I landed on my feet. Now though? I'm not sure my feet are planted where they're supposed to be.

“Yes.” My hand links with hers as she stops scratching my arm. It’s been months since we held hands, and damn if it doesn’t feel like exactly what I need at this moment. “His memory was going; he’d fall or forget or wind up miles down the lane from their house. Refused to go to a home, the stubborn old man, but he had full-time care.

“Weird they both went the same way,” she notes, and I know she’s thinking of Clara.

The Waybornes, much like the Ashtons, are local royalty. Everyone knows how she died.

I nod, gulping. “Dementia, though he was trying to keep it from everyone. I hope they’re up there now, though, holding hands.”

The two of them saved my life in a way. I wasn’t necessarily loved and shown affection every second, but I might have been too fucked up for that in the first place when they brought me to live with them. They did, however, give me a safe home. Paid for my football prospects, and when those dried up, college. The Waybornes always made sure I was okay, and my life could have turned out much differently if they hadn’t decided to adopt me.

“Me too.” Alana gives my hand a squeeze, and I go back to the multiple times that Arthur told me love was the one thing he’d done right in his life.

Clara had been his best friend. And here was mine, except she’s been off-limits since the moment I laid eyes on her.

The rest of the Ashton clan filter in to pay their respects, mingling with other Hope Crest residents and some of Arthur’s employees from surrounding locales. It’s a small area; we all know each other even if we aren’t all residents of the same town.

Thomas, Alana’s father, makes his way over to shake my hand and deliver grievances, and Leona, his wife and the woman who is the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever had, comes over to give me a big hug.

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m sorry.” She rubs my back.

Apologies about Arthur's death from her lips seem strange since she's the one who raised me when they couldn't. But I let it go, not wanting to rehash the past or point out how much Alana's parents mean to me when she's still pissed about the whole thing.

"Sorry to hear it. He was a kind man." Patrick, Alana's brother, shakes my hand.

That's followed by her other two brothers, Liam and Evan, her sister-in-law, Cassandra, and then finally, August.

August Percy has been a waitress at Hope Pizza since she was a sophomore in high school. Over the last two and a half years, we've bonded over our shit biological families, love of old Motown music, and being some of the only outsiders when it came to this adopted, or second adopted in my case, family who took us under their wing.

I don't have any real siblings, but I consider August to be my little sister. The expressions I caught, the look in her eyes when she had to head home at the end of the night ... they were the same feelings I had while living with my biological mother and father. Try as I might, I can't fully protect someone who won't report her mother's horrible behavior and emotional abuse.

So I make sure August knows I'm here and hope that when she graduates come June, she moves far, far away from Hope Crest and never looks back.

"You all right?" she asks, her voice always raspy as if she doesn't use it enough.

"I will be." I link my pinky with hers, then slide it until we do a series of short claps and shakes against each other's hands.

We've had a handshake since I found her in the alleyway by the restaurant, nursing a bloody nose. It came from one of her mom's slaps, if I had to guess, and I was ready to head over and pummel a woman for the first time in my life. But she'd made me promise not to, then did this handshake that has now become our secret language.

“We’re going to start.” The director of the funeral home walks up, signaling to me.

I take my seat in the front row, Alana at my side. I don’t miss the way she pushes her thigh into mine, how that pressure makes me feel a little less lonely today. We’ll have to talk after this, break the detente, and I have no idea what will end up popping out of my mouth. It feels like a turning point in my life; accepting a person I admired and cared about so much is gone from the world.

When it comes to Alana and what we mean to each other, it’s about time I step up or move on.

The next hour is filled with people coming to the small podium to tell stories about Arthur, from the funny to the downright absurd. He didn’t want anything too formal, nothing religious, and this feels lighter than other funerals I’ve attended. It’s truly a celebration of his life rather than a day filled with sorrow. I rise to say a few words and recount the first time he tried to help me with homework but instead taught me about high-yield savings accounts. Arthur always was an intellectual mind, so curious about learning.

It’s not until the end of his funeral that I’m approached by his lawyer.

“Mr. Teal, yes?” The man with a full gray mustache and black pinstripe suit addresses me.

I recognized Jacob Wasser from seeing him at Arthur’s home from time to time, but he probably no longer recognizes me. I think the last time I saw him, I was about twenty, and he still looked exactly like he does right now.

“That’s me. Wish I was seeing you under different circumstances, Mr. Wasser.” I walk so that we’re out of earshot of the rest of the funeral parlor, which is now emptying.

Alana catches my eye and motions as if to say she’ll be waiting by her car for me, and I nod. This might take a while, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she leaves. Because, as of now, I have no idea where we stand.

“As do I. Arthur was a good man and a good friend.” He pulls an envelope from inside his suit jacket. “This is what he left. Read it, think about the terms, contact me to sign the papers after the task is complete.”

With tense fingers, I take the sealed cream object, confused. “Isn’t there more paperwork to go over? His estate, belongings ... I don’t know? More to do?”

Arthur was a rich man with multiple companies; there has to be more for me to settle.

“That will come after the only requirement is met. Just read the letter, and here is my card. After it’s done, get in touch.”

With that, he turns on his heel and leaves the funeral.

I’m left perplexed, intrigued, and with a somewhat eerie feeling in my chest. Because this seems too good to be true, and things in my life that have felt like that always end up biting me in the ass.

Quietly, I slip away into an unoccupied hallway to read the letter. If I take it outside now, Alana will want to know the contents, and I want to read it privately first. I owe this to Arthur, to carry out his wishes like he wanted.

Carefully, I rip it open, emptying the contents into my hand and unfolding the letterhead with his name and companies listed beneath. The expensive card stock makes me miss him more.

Then, after taking a good deep breath, I read.

*Warren,*

*I’m assuming since you’re reading this, I’m gone. Everyone always starts these things that way, and I guess I’m just another cliché, even in death.*

I'll keep it brief; you were a kind soul to me even when my actions didn't warrant it. I wish Clara and I could have done better by you, but in our defense, we didn't know quite what we were up against. If anything, you proved to us that you were always far stronger than the two of us.

When I married Clara, I thought we were about to build this momentous life. That we'd fill that old brick mansion with a dozen children, but sadly, it never did work out for us. You, coming into our lives when and how you did, was something we thought we were prepared for, but we weren't. For that, I am so deeply sorry.

However, spending the time we did together in these last few years has been such a light in my dark days. Your visits were the one thing I looked forward to after Clara passed.



If there is one thing in my life I did completely right, it was falling in love and tying myself to a woman who was much better than me.

Spending my life committed to her and forming our partnership so that it was an unbreakable bond is truly my greatest accomplishment.

So, I am here to ask one more thing of you, even if it isn't fair of me. There is no one else who deserves everything I have to give more than you. And I'm prepared to leave it all in your name; the houses, the cars, the trust, the money, everything.

You just have to do one simple thing: marry Alana.

Marry the woman you've gushed about for hours on end over the past few years. I don't think you notice how much you talk about your best friend, but I didn't talk about Clara nearly as much, and I was head over heels for that woman.

Clearly, you're in love with the girl. Have been for most of your

lifetime. I'm not sure what's stopped you or what misguided sense of honor and duty has you refraining from going after what you really want, but that stops now.

If you want this money, my estate, all you have to do is marry your best friend, the woman you've always loved. If I know anything, it's that nothing in this life is worth having at all if it isn't shared with the one you love. The two of you will do magnificent things together. I just know it.

My one wish in death is to leave you on this earth as happy and loved as I can. I couldn't give that to you in life, so I figure I'll force you into it now. You deserve it. You deserve her.

Find your happiness,

Arthur

Apparently, even in death, my adoptive father is teaching me one last lesson.

I'm not getting a choice in stepping up or moving on because Arthur has decided for me. Shock radiates through me

like a flaming arrow speared my chest.

Suddenly, this turning point went from something I had an optimistic outlook on, to something I am downright fearing.

“Hi, Nonna, hi, Mrs. Spring.”

I wave at my grandmother as she takes the lunch order of one of our regulars, and I scoot past tables on the way to my office.

Hope Pizza has been in our family for four generations, and I know this restaurant like the back of my hand. I could traverse the setup of the dining room in my sleep, even with the six or so occupied four-tops of locals whose orders I’ve known since I was slinging a waitressing book at the age of fifteen.

The smell of the wood fire oven and my nonna’s cannoli cream, the red apron my mother hangs by the door each night and puts on anytime she comes in here, the stack of red-and-white checkered tablecloths in the corner after they’ve been freshly laundered—this place is my second home. And from the time I came home from college, my adult workplace.

Each sibling in my family has a passion, and luckily, we haven’t been forced to fit those into the family business because coming home again and doing so was just a natural life path. Our family is close-knit and supportive; it wasn’t a burden or heavy lift to want to come home and contribute our individual talents to Hope Pizza. For my brother Patrick, it’s his accountant’s mind for numbers. Liam, the oldest, runs our farm and retail sauce side of the business. My little brother, Evan, is the culinary mastermind who won tons of prestigious

foodie awards and just returned home to take over the kitchen reins from my father.

And me? I'm the marketing guru behind them all. I make sure our website appears at the top of search engines and that we are all over social media feeds. My job is to sign us up for the local festivals and food truck days so that we stay visible in the mouths and hearts of our favorite customers. I book us on local TV stations and submit our story for national news. When a magazine or website calls looking for a quote, I'm the one who gives it. Anything that falls into communications, PR, influencing or otherwise is my territory, and my family lets me run with it.

If my peers in my college marketing classes could see me now—they probably stalk me on social media, let's be honest—they might laugh at how mediocre my job sounds. Back then, we all had aspirations of working for top brands or firms in the marketing space. Had dreams of going to fashion week or red carpets.

But I'm much happier than I ever would have been in a big pond competing with sharks. I love my hometown, being close to my support system, and driving down quaint streets to my little office in the back of the pizzeria.

And if I'm being extremely vulnerable and open, I admit that I've never left because of the one person I always stay for. But that makes my heart ache too much for a Monday afternoon.

“Did you get that email I forwarded from the Foodie Channel interviewer?” Evan, my youngest brother, pops into my office before I can even set my blush pink work bag down and pull my laptop out.

“Saw it last night, but you know I don't do media requests on the weekends.” Working for a small business, not to mention one managed by my family, means I have to install boundaries for my own sanity.

Working very minimally on the weekends, setting office hours, and employing task charting software for each

employee are all necessary means that I set up to ensure just that.

“Yeah, got it.” My brother has some kind of sauce on his cheek, and his hair, the same dark black as mine, looks like he’s been running his hands through it all morning. “They need me in New York on Thursday to film the segment, so I’ll ask Dad to cover the kitchen. And book me a flight, would you?”

Annoyance ripples through me. Evan might be a culinary wunderkind, but he’s been pissing me off more lately than not since he returned from San Francisco. Dad, Liam, and Patrick have worked with me far longer and deliver the respect I am worthy of, while I think Evan has always been given special treatment and handholding from those around him.

“I’m not your assistant,” I grumble, gingerly lowering to my desk chair and opening my laptop.

He sighs, dropping his eyes to the floor. “Sorry, sis, I didn’t mean it. I’ve been up since three a.m. with this recipe dancing in my head and can’t get it right.”

Another one of Evan’s qualities? His compulsion to cook at all hours of the day. He’s like an artist or a musician when it comes to the kitchen; nothing can keep him from creating once he has a bug in his ear. I feel for and envy him because I’ve only known a love for something like that once, and I’m not allowed to pursue it.

Try as I might, I haven’t been able to keep Warren out of my head since the funeral two days ago. Hell, have I ever succeeded in not thinking of my best friend twenty-four seven? Probably not since I hit puberty.

It’s the look on his face, one of loneliness and discontent, that I can’t stop picturing. Because I know him best, I know he thinks he’s alone in this world now that his last parent is gone, but it couldn’t be further from the truth.

I manned up at the funeral, being the shoulder I knew he needed, even though it sliced another chunk of my heart every time I touched him, held his hand, and provided support.

Because we both know I wanted to do those things as so much more than what our relationship currently is. I have no idea where we stand, if that was meant to be a truce, or if we're still in this standoff.

Part of me hopes we are because I can't go back to ignoring everything between us. Like I have for so many years. It's either all in or ...

Thinking about Warren not being in my life, friend or otherwise, because I'd rather have everything with him is terrifying. But I can't continue to see him every single day, knowing that we could be so much more and live with myself.

The uneasy feelings in my stomach make me feel like I've had six cold brews, even though I only had my regular one this morning.

Letting go of my anger, I smile at my baby brother. "That's okay. What's it this time? And yes, I'll let them know you're coming. I'll even book your flight. As long as you do two things for me."

I've always been the best at bargaining when it comes to the Ashton siblings.

"Why do I feel like I won't like this favor at all?" Evan smirks, leaning against my doorframe.

Tickling off my fingers, I ignore his question. "One, you have to mention the new sauce Liam just released. It's a spicy blend that we want to do well, so get the ingredients from him and talk it up."

"That's easy enough. The segment is on the hotter side of Italian food, so that will actually fit in nicely." He nods as if he can see his talking points now.

"And ... you also have to join my side in the fight against dad to open up my storefront." I lean back, crossing my arms as I lay down my ultimatum.

Evan shakes his head. "No way, I'm not getting in the middle of that. I'm already fighting the old man enough about changing the menu, I don't need another layer of bricks on my shoulders when it comes to him."

“If you want me to help in your assistant tasks, because you’re a man-child who can’t function on his own, then you’ll put in a good word. Tell him how much revenue and name recognition this would bring to both a storefront and the pizzeria. Talk about cultivating the goods in this community. You’re a charmer when you want to be, that’s why Foodie Channel wants you on their segment. So turn the charm on Dad.”

“First of all, that sounds weird.” He grimaces. “Second, no. You know his answer. Liam is iffy about it too.”

“But Patrick ran the numbers and they don’t lie. We could afford a second Newton Street building. None of you would have to lift a finger.”

My idea for another storefront bloomed about six months ago when I took a trip to Savannah and saw the cutest local market. The feeling I got when I stepped foot inside was something I wanted to emulate, and I don’t often feel strongly in terms of business when it’s outside marketing and content. Something in my gut rang out, and I knew I needed to follow it.

Six months of conversations with my parents and siblings, scouting locations on Hope Crest’s main drag, drawing up a business plan, and researching local goods and vendors’ products to buy for said market, and I was still no closer.

Because of my stubborn father.

He said no at every turn, and unless I had full approval from everyone, I wasn’t going to get the money to spin our family business into a second location.

Not that I wanted it to be a restaurant or eatery; the market I envisioned would sell art and jewelry from local creators, furniture made in the area, our retail products like sauce and pastries, and more. It would be a celebration of our hometown and those nearby, and everyone who came from far and wide to visit Hope Pizza could take a little bit of our Pennsylvania sanctuary home with them.



“I don’t know, Al. Dad really seems dead set against it, and I already got in a fight with him about—”

“Who are you fighting with?”

Speak of the devil; my father appears behind Evan in the doorway of my office.

“You.” Evan chuckles. “Alana wants me to sway you into opening the market, but I’m already fighting you on adding the veal dish I created to the menu, so I said no.”

“Way to throw me under the bus, you little twerp.” I flick him a middle finger.

“Hey,” my father scolds me for the lewd gesture. “Both of you are such pains in my ...” He trails off, because I know the man hates swearing at his children.

“We’ve talked about this, Alana.” Dad chooses to focus on our fight instead of menu squabbles with Evan, and my youngest brother darts around the corner like a coward. “For generations, our family has only ever had this restaurant. We’ve preserved, worked hard, haven’t expanded past our means, and we’ve been successful because of it. And now you want to live out some cockamamie idea because of what? Social media? Ridiculous.”

Dad blows me off like I’m some idiot instead of the woman responsible for half the product and merchandise money coming into the business. Yes, a local goods market would make amazing content for social media. There were small-town boutiques on the Internet raking in six and seven figures by selling products you couldn’t purchase anywhere else. But this wasn’t just so I could put my marketing muscles to work.

For the first time in my life, I want something just for myself. I want some separation, some autonomy. To take a breath from family life and having to see Warren every hour of the day. To do something just for me.

“It’s not ridiculous, and I don’t appreciate you speaking to me in a way you’d never speak to your sons.” My voice holds all the anger I won’t let fly.

“Alana, I treat you no differently,” Dad claims, but it doesn’t feel like it right now.

“Just go argue with Evan in the kitchen. I have work to do.” My molars grind together.

It’s too early, and I’m too raw from the funeral to get into this whole thing with him right now. I need time to formulate another plan of attack because talking clearly is getting us nowhere.

Dad gives me a sidelong glance, and I think I see a flicker of guilt in his eyes, but then he’s turning around. His big burly voice coming from the kitchen is as second nature to me as my own inner thoughts.

Blowing out a frustrated sigh because of both conversations that just transpired, I stare at the watercolor of the London skyline I bought when I visited two years ago. It hangs on the wall opposite my desk, and my office is the only one that’s decorated in the small hallway at the back of the restaurant. Patrick and Warren never bothered to personalize theirs, although I think Patrick has his wedding photo on his desk now.

Normally, I love being in my hometown, in my domain, but just for today, I wish I were somewhere else. Somewhere that doesn’t involve assisting my brother, fighting with my father, or trying to forget feelings for a man I’ve been in love with since I understood the emotion was different with a person that wasn’t a family member.

Right now, though, what I wish for most of all is for a whole pile of money to plop down in my lap so I can prove the naysayers wrong.

**W**alking into my tiny office that's located at the end of the hall from Patrick and Alana, I find August asleep in my desk chair.

Something in my chest gives way, and I nearly lose it. This week has been a battle, to say the least, and seeing this girl who doesn't feel safe enough to sleep soundly at home is just the straw breaking the camel's back.

Since Arthur's funeral days ago, I've warred with every idea in my brain. Getting married to Alana is the best and worst option I've ever been presented with. On the one hand, it forces me past a line I'd never cross. On another, it could lose me the family who took me in when I felt alone.

Refusing the terms and not taking any of what he'd promised me is also an option.

My head has been in such a tailspin that glimpsing August after a Friday night dinner rush is enough to have me stumbling. Tonight was busy, per usual, with a mad rush of our local diners who all come in for their celebratory end-of-week pizzas or entrees. Evan's new menu has been a hit, and with the live music Fridays Alana insisted on drawing a larger crowd, it's no wonder August is wiped. She's our best waitress and works like a dog, putting everyone else first.

This isn't the first time I've found her asleep in my office, whether it be on a weekday afternoon or after a shift, to avoid going home. Her mother is a whack job, a narcissist who gleans joy from controlling every aspect of August's life and

inflicting emotional and verbal abuse on her daughter. Everything from sleep deprivation to forced interactions to berating this wonderful young woman about any and every decision. The number of times I've wanted to call the county on her is endless, but I hold off due to August's insistence. If anyone knows what a gamble the foster system is, it's me.

We've bonded over that, and at least it sends a twinge of hope through my chest that she feels comfortable enough to use my office as a safe space.

"Her mom went postal again." Cassandra comes around the corner, lowering her voice as we both stare in on the sleeping teenager in my office.

The scent of cleaner and pizza sauce comes off her; those end-of-night smells familiar in my bones. Everything in this place is since I've been the manager after returning from college. From the wood paneling in my office that hasn't changed since the eighties to the word art sign hanging just above the back door that reads "Mangia is Family," everything at Hope Pizza is an integral part of who I am now.

"That college start date can't come fast enough," I grumble, concern plaguing my body, knowing she has so much time before she can move out.

"Only three months until graduation, and then two months after that. I wish she'd just move in with Patrick and me," Cass muses, and I wish that August would accept their offer, too.

Cassandra Mauer, or I guess Ashton now, used to be one of the most famous actresses in Hollywood until she dropped it all to live the small-town life. What a lot of people don't know is that she grew up here as an outcast of the community due to her father's decisions. So, in that way, we're very similar.

Only Cass and I know what it's like to be in someone like August's shoes; while the rest of the Ashton clan can sympathize, they've always felt unconditional love.

She and her husband, Patrick, just bought a house on the outskirts of town that they're renovating before their first baby

arrives within the year. I'm sure there is a room available for August, but she won't take them up on moving in. Cass helps out on Friday nights at the restaurant, just like the rest of the Ashtons, and I know she's had this conversation with our best waitress too many times to count.

"Me too, but forcing her will only make us the enemy in her eyes. August has to figure it out on her own, as much as we hate it." I was in her position once upon a time.

"Anything else you need before I head out? Patrick and I are headed to the baby expo in Philly tomorrow, and my bed has been calling for hours." She rubs a hand over her stomach.

"Nah, get out of here. Let my godson rest."

"You know, if you keep making that joke, I think Liam really is going to punch you one of these times." She chuckles low.

I've been threatening Liam that his brother will pick me to be the baby's godfather instead of him, and that growly son of a bitch hates it every time. Which is why I keep doing it.

Cass gives me a side hug and then walks back down the hallway. I guess it's time to wake August and offer her a ride home, even though I know she'll refuse.

"Hey." Jostling her shoulder gently, I watch as her eyes flutter to awareness.

August bolts upright, her delicate features etched with worry. "Oh my God, my tables! I should have helped bus them, I'm so sorry. Please don't tell Thomas, I—"

"Auggy, calm down. You're fine. Thomas would never be upset with you, don't you know that by now? Everything is cleaned up in the dining room. That's beside the point, though. You haven't been sleeping at home, have you?"

Her eyes slide to the left, a tell that she's about to lie to me, and I shake my head curtly as if to tell her not to try it. She stares at me for a moment, then her mouth turns down in a frown.

“Mom has been forcing me to deep clean the house almost every night. Will wake me up to say how lazy I am, how the baseboards aren’t clean, that I can’t go out with my friends until the showers have been scrubbed. She keeps saying that my uncleanliness reflects poorly on her.”

Her voice is so small and brittle that it ignites my bones with rage. I keep it in because she doesn’t deserve any more strife, but God, I fucking hate that woman. If she wants her house clean, how about she does it herself? How about she stops deflecting her insecurities, ugliness, and delusions onto her daughter?

“Come stay with me or go to Cass’s for the night. Please? Get some rest so you can deal.” I know asking her to move out will get us nowhere.

She turns eighteen in two months, and even though she could leave without consequence, I know she won’t do that either. Sometimes it’s easier to get stung by a singular bee than the wrath of pissing off the whole hive. Her mother is both in this example, of course.

“It’s fine. I drove here anyway.” August rises and grabs her backpack that was stored under my desk.

“How is the scholarship search coming?” Trying to change the subject might disguise my disappointment at her decision.

August was accepted at most of her top choices, being the brilliant kid she is, but of course, money is the deal-breaker. Her mother’s personality won’t allow August to go far, and because of that, the vile woman has committed no financial help to her daughter’s future. She has already rebuffed Thomas, Leona, and Cassandra multiple times when they’ve all offered to pay for college. She insists on getting a scholarship or paying her way through in loans, and the thought of her carrying more burden makes me sick.

“Heard from another one. I didn’t get it.” Her head hangs so low in defeat that I want to smash my fist into the wall. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Night, Warren.”

Without a backward glance, August shuffles out of my office.

My blood pumps too fast, ideas swarming my mind, and there is a tightness in my chest that I can't ignore. The expression on August's face was a trigger, and now I know.

I know that not broaching the subject with Alana is not an option anymore. August needs help desperately. And if she won't take it from the Ashtons, and can't get a scholarship, then I'm her last lifeline. I'll marry Alana, get the money Arthur left to me, and make August take it for college. I'll create a goddamn scholarship for all I care. I'll do whatever I need to do to make August feel okay with accepting it.

She has to get out from under that roof, that control and manipulation. Before something happens that I'll regret for the rest of my days.

Before I talk myself out of it, I walk swiftly to the front of the restaurant. The overhead lights have been turned off, and nothing but the glow of the neon red Hope Pizza sign and the hostess stand lamp illuminates the dining room.

Alana sits at a table in the middle of the room, and I watch her stack pile after pile of money from the night. Her curls are piled on her head and stuck through with a pen, and even without seeing her gorgeous features, I know they're screwed in the concentration of counting.

"If I interrupt, will it throw off your count?" I joke, sitting down next to her.

Being this close after our icy interactions the last couple of months warms something in my soul.

"You already know it will, jackass." She scowls, her mouth always resembling that of a sailor's.

"Why isn't Patrick doing this?" Everyone knows Alana's weakness is money and accounting.

"I let him go home with his wife. Aren't I so selfless?" She flutters her lashes like she's some angel.

That tone might be sarcastic, but to me, she's both an angel and selfless. Those who know her know Alana would do anything for those she loves.

"The most self-sacrificing human I've ever met," I joke back, even though I mean it.

When it's just the two of us in the dark at closing time, like it's been so many times, I think about what this place would be like if we took it over one day. If we were partners in life and in business, like her mother and father. As a kid, I used to watch Thomas and Leona fold napkins together after everyone finished their shifts, and I thought that maybe that could be Alana and me someday.

That was before her father sat me down and had the talk that shifted my entire mindset.

Hope Pizza is situated on Newton Street, the main drag in our little Delaware Valley river town. The water whooshes past our stone patio out back, and the cobblestone sidewalks are filled with locals and travelers alike on warm weekends. Now that we're getting into spring, tourists and those seeking a taste of small-town charm will be all over Hope Crest. And since we're known nationally as one of the best pizza restaurants in the country, that means big business in the coming months.

Before Arthur's funeral, I thought I might take off this summer. Find a temporary replacement. Decide what my future holds now that I'm not so sure about that solid footing I stupidly relied on.

But that was before. Now, sticking around and forcing myself into the one thing I've been avoiding seems like my only way forward.

"You want to come over for a drink?" I can't keep the insecurity out of my voice.

Alana coming to my apartment after work for a drink is something we've done so often, it usually wouldn't be a blip on the radar. We're best friends; hanging out together is a no-brainer.



But after our fight and the fact that we've always been in love with each other, but I won't give in, things have been tense and awkward. Her walking over to my place with me, up the stairs, and pulling drinks from a beer I've handed her all seems foreign now.

"Yeah. Is that okay?" Case in point, she'd never ask me if it was okay under normal circumstances.

"Of course." I swallow, knowing how difficult it will be to get her alone in my space.

Especially with the terms of Arthur's will hanging over my head. How the hell am I going to bring this up without her doubling over into hysterics?

We finish the closing tasks in tandem, checking the kitchen equipment, shutting the lights, and setting the security system Thomas upgraded after Cass was attacked in the alleyway last year. Then we silently take the short walk to my apartment located just down Newton above the flower shop.

"I forgot how good it always smells in here," she says, shrugging out of her coat and placing it on the brown leather dining chair she always opts for.

My apartment works for me; close to work with a landlord who is both a friend and a decent person, not to mention keeps the appliances and maintenance upgraded to today's standards. Leona helped me pick some better-looking pieces of furniture when I moved in three years ago, and it's not so much a bachelor pad as it is a cozy place to settle on nights and weekends.

One would think you couldn't get lonely in seven hundred square feet, but as Alana moves to my fridge and grabs her own beer, I realize just how much I've missed having her here.

"Sometimes Bonnie sneaks up and puts a vase or two in here. It's nice," I agree, following her lead as I grab a beer too.

Motioning to the couch, we both sit far enough away that neither of us touches the other.

"This is ... nice." Even Alana seems to grimace at her own words as she takes a gulp from her bottle.

“You said that already.” I smirk because, damn, this feels strange.

This woman has been my closest confidant for my entire adult life, and here we are in this awkward hangout. Probably made more awkward that I’m watching intently as her simple beige flat dangles from her foot. A foot shouldn’t be so sexy, but considering it’s one of the only bare parts of her I ever get to see, I’m transfixed.

“Should we put a show on?” Clearing my throat and scolding the horny part of my lizard brain, I pick up the remote.

“Actually, the quiet is kind of nice. Whoops, there I go again.” She chuckles at her overuse of the word. “But tonight was a real shit show, and I’d just like to drink this in peace.”

“What happened tonight besides the usual chaos of the dining room?”

My eyes roam her face, taking in the way her long lashes kiss her cheeks as she sighs and lets them drift shut. How many times have we shared our problems? Shared drinks? Shared a movie?

So many. And now I’m about to ask her to share the biggest thing of all, except none of it will be real. My confidence in moving forward with Arthur’s term falters.

But then my best friend opens her mouth, and it confirms everything I know I must do.

“Dad and I had another fight about the storefront. He has no intention of helping me with what I want. Per usual, he’s only focused on the restaurant, when in reality, we could expand profits and visibility in the area by opening another store. A different kind of store. God, it’s a hard cross to bear being the only Ashton with creativity and vision.” She rolls her eyes as if her family doomed her to a life of complete boredom.

She’s talked about the storefront a ton over the last year—well, when we’d been speaking to each other. I didn’t realize she was still having arguments with her father.

In order for Alana to get her storefront, in order to put August through college and get her away from that nightmare of a home, in order for me to be a part owner of Hope Pizza ...

All I have to do is marry my best friend.

“We should get married, then.”

It pops out of my mouth with no context, just my brain computing everything I pieced together and spitting it out as if I were already halfway into this conversation with Alana.

“What?” she squeaks, half laughing as the sound comes out of her mouth.

A twinge of guilt for springing this on her, a hidden desire to be with her, a desperate need to claim Arthur’s inheritance and help August, all of them swirl together in my gut in a combo that makes me dizzy.

Even as I turn to her, where she sits on the other side of my couch, I have to brace a hand on the back of it. “I didn’t explain this ... um, or ... shit. I meant to tread lightly as I told you what’s going on, but we haven’t talked in a while, and it feels weird.”

“For you to joke around about marrying me? Yeah, I’d say that’s fucking weird.” She looks confused but also hurt.

Because we’ve never spoken about what happened the night before we both left for college, never even talked about kissing again. And here I am proposing to her after the worst fight of our lives with absolutely zero context.

“Arthur left everything to me. The money, the houses, his businesses. Everything. I can do whatever I want with it, including getting August out of her mother’s house, sending her to college, the works. I can buy you your storefront. There is just one obstacle.”

I can practically feel the breath she’s holding and see the walls she’s erecting around her heart for protection. “Don’t say it.”

“Arthur specified that if I wanted any and all of it, you and I would have to get married.”

I drop the bomb, and we're both stunned into silence, me waiting for her to say anything, and her because I just crossed the line I promised her father I wouldn't.

Alana opens her mouth. Closes it. I hear a car door somewhere on Newton Street slam shut through my open apartment window. My beer bottle sweats in my hand I'm so nervous about how she'll proceed with this conversation.

I'm about to take her pause and turn it into more rambling on my part, but then her raspy voice hits my ears.

"This isn't how ..." The beautiful woman before me has unshed tears in her eyes.

And because she is my best friend, and I know her almost as well as she knows herself, I know what she was about to say.

*This isn't how we were supposed to end up together.* This isn't how we were supposed to get married. A love between us was supposed to be genuine and romantic and sweet, involving her family being so happy for us they couldn't contain themselves.

A marriage between us was never supposed to be struck as a deal, put in a timeframe, wrapped up with a handshake and a signature. A love between us wasn't supposed to be brokered for ulterior motives.

As much as it pains me to hurt her in this way, as much as this wasn't how we were supposed to end up together, I'm not renegeing on my ask. My proposal, for all intents and purposes.

Because if marrying me means she gets her wish granted, if it means the two of us faking it as husband and wife gets August the out she so desperately needs, then I'm moving forward full steam ahead.

"To help you, to help August. That's why I want to do this." Except that's a total lie, and we both know it.

"We can't just *get married*, Warren." Her jaw is still dropped like she'll never be able to pick it up again.

“Think about what we could gain if I get this money. How we could help August out. The ability to get your store and run it how you want with no help from your father. If I do this, if I get Arthur’s estate, I could do so much good.” My voice sounds like it’s begging her, and I am.

Not only because I desperately want to do those things, but deep down, I need to know. I need to know if this is where I belong. If she’s who I’m meant to be with. If we have any shot at this, this is the only one we’ll get.

“By me being your wife? This sounds insane, Warren. My family will never buy it. The town gossip mill will actually break down in shock. Not to mention getting married is supposed to be for two people in love who want to form a family. Welcome children into it. Live under the same roof. Marriage, Warren. This isn’t us being best friends.”

Alana waves her hands, and her voice reaches its highest octave as she gets more and more worked up. Her beer is now on my coffee table, and she’s half standing, half leaning on the couch as if she doesn’t know if she’ll bolt at any moment. Then, she starts to chew on her pinky nail, the tell that she’s incredibly flustered or nervous.

“I know it isn’t. And I’m still asking. People will only know what we tell them. We can—”

Suddenly she stands, her waves whipping around as she heads for the door. I try to reach out to grab her slim elbow, but she’s so frantic that I miss.

“No. No, I need ...” Those blue eyes dart around my place. “Space. You’ve had days to think about this, and expect me to just agree on the spot?”

“Please, take the time you need. Just ... not too long. August.” My explanation only needs to be one word.

Something dark flickers through her eyes, as if she’s pissed the fuck off that I’m dangling that grief and guilt on her shoulders. We stare at each other for a moment, everything else stripped away, and I see what we could be.

Marriage. Children. A home. Alana's words spark hope and excitement that I've pushed down deep for nearly fifteen years.

"I have to go." Her voice snaps those daydreams like a whip cracking them in half as she wrenches my door open and does just that.

Once again, I'm left in the waiting game of my life, wondering where I'll end up.

He called me an obstacle.

As if I'm the linchpin that could keep him from Arthur's fortune. As if being married to me is just some item on a checklist to get him the more important things he wants.

Finding myself still in bed at this hour is strange. Usually, I'm an early riser, and the day can't start soon enough for my energetic ass. But my phone reads nine forty-five in the morning as I turn over in my fluffy white duvet, and I sigh with exhaustion.

No sleep was had last night, even after popping a melatonin and turning on my essential oils diffuser. I tried to relax myself into a state where I could think rationally and then sleep on it, but of course, that didn't happen. Instead, I chewed half my nails off in the night and only wound myself into more of a knot over Warren's ... *proposal*.

I still can't even think the word without spiraling.

My best friend, the guy who used to watch *The Hunger Games* trilogy with me when I was sick as a teenager, the guy who called me chickenshit for not attempting a zip line course when our friends took a Caribbean beach trip years ago, the guy who I have spent years laughing and trying not to share my real feelings with ...

He asked me to marry him. To be his wife. To put his ring on my finger and skip away into the sunset.

Okay, he did not ask me that last part. Because I need to remember that this would all be fake—just a means to an end. I freaked out before Warren could give me any details, but in essence, he wants to get married so that he could claim Arthur's estate. That could mean there's an end date, a waiting period until he can offload me and keep all the trappings for himself.

It's not because he's madly in love with me or can't live without me. God forbid he feels the way I feel and wants to pursue it. He called me an obstacle, and that word burned into my heart like he'd branded me with a poisonous prod.

No way in hell could I actually go through with it ... right? So then, how come the more I toss it over in my brain, the more polished it becomes? Like a rock that needs smoothing to iron out the harsh edges.

Pulling my covers over my head, I groan at how anxious and confused I feel. The idea churns in my stomach, leaving no room for breakfast.

It's Saturday, and I promised my mom and Cass that I'd go to our childhood home to bake cookies for the high school bake sale. Even though all I want to do is wallow in bed and debate about making either the dumbest or smartest decision of my entire life.

But because I can't stand to be alone with my thoughts for one more minute, I drag myself from under the covers, slap on some moisturizer and lip balm, grab my bag, and head for the car.

The drive through my neighborhood is quiet even though the weather is warming up, and I know I'll see the kids racing down the street on their bikes and screeching through sprinklers soon. I bought my cozy two-bedroom ranch about two years ago, back when I couldn't stand to live with my parents any longer.

Sure, there had been no rent or mortgage payments—I was the only kid still living at home—and Mom cooked for me every day. But I needed independence. I needed to grow up and start living my own life despite still being in a rut of not



dating because I was in love with my best friend. My parents deserved their empty nest and golden years, even though they pleaded with me to stay since I was their princess. In our traditional Italian family, they wanted me to live home until my prince came and whisked me away into marriage.

*Marriage*, there it is again. An image of Warren physically carrying me over the threshold of my parent's home as they bid him farewell like I came with some dowry he was receiving makes me snort with laughter as I brake at a stop sign. I can't imagine what my parents will say if I just up and marry the man who has been like a second son to them since before he went through puberty.

It's just one of the many lumps I can't swallow past when thinking about accepting his offer. My family, our history, the town's opinions, and the public pressure. It's no secret that Warren and I are thick as thieves, and all the outside gossip and speculation will only bring unwanted anxiety to a marriage that isn't real, to begin with. On top of everything else, I don't want that.

My quaint little neighborhood with its craftsman and Cape Cod style homes gives way to Newton Street, where I turn to avoid the main drag and drive down by the canal instead. Sunlight streams through the trees budded with barely growing sprouts, and late morning runners and families with kids walk the red dirt path as my car maneuvers past.

Soon, the busier sections of Hope Crest flash in my rearview, and I'm taking the drive I've driven a million times. Okay, maybe not that many, but it feels like it.

My parent's house, my childhood home, comes into view, and every stressed-out cell inside me calms. If you look up the definition of home in the dictionary, a picture of this place would probably be there.

The big white house where I grew up, with its front porch full of rocking chairs and second-floor balcony, looks like the perfect oasis. Its red brick front walk and pool in the backyard are as known to me as my own two feet. This is the place where every party took place, where I snuck out of my

bedroom window to sit on the gray shingled roof. My parent's home is the one where my brothers and I had potato sack races down the sloping green front lawn and would fight over who got the remote in the vaulted-ceilinged living room. Through every tear, happy moment, self-discovery, and tough time, this place has been a refuge.

It also reminds me, every square inch of it, of Warren Teal. There is nowhere on this property that I haven't made a memory with him.

The house smells like vanilla as I open the front door with the key that's been on my ring since I was ten. "Ma, it's me."

"In here!" I hear from the kitchen, which is where you can usually find my mother.

My father might be the cook of my family, but when it comes to our house and not the restaurant, this is Mom's domain. Images of her whipping up our favorite ricotta pancakes or Italian wedding soup, our favorite sick meal of choice, bring me comfort as I walk through the rooms.

The house has barely changed since I grew up or moved out; the same beige couches, all sunken in and overstuffed, sit in the living room waiting for movie night. Going up the stairs are years of school pictures of my siblings and me, from smiling gap teeth to the awful mullet Evan grew during his senior year of school. My father still has rows of DVDs on the shelves next to the TV, even though we bought him every streaming service under the sun for various holidays. My mother's house slippers sit neatly on the stairs, and as I walk through the swinging door into the kitchen, I'm met with the drapes covered in grape vines that I've been begging Mom to take down for years.

"Hi, princess." Mom greets me with a kiss on the cheek as her hands knead dough and flour.

"You already got started, huh?" Asking me to assist was a formality anyway.

Everyone knows I'm the black sheep of cooking in this family. The one Ashton gene I did not inherit is knowing my

way around a kitchen. Give me a microwave and packaged food any day of the week.

“Eh, they need about twelve dozen, so I have my work out for me.” Mom smiles and shrugs like she doesn’t volunteer every year.

She doesn’t even have children in the school system anymore, yet she will keep contributing to the bake sale until she drops. It’s just what our family does for the community.

“She’s got me on spoon duty,” Cass says from where she stands at the counter.

Her small baby bump makes it impossible to stand flush against it as she places small cookie balls on a baking sheet.

“How are you feeling?” I ask her, using my body language to ask if I can feel her belly.

She nods, wanting me to try to get a kick from my little niece or nephew in there. “Like I’m growing a human inside me. How weird is that, by the way? All the modern medicine we have, all the biological advancements, and we’re still having babies the same way they did in caves way back when.”

“It is kind of strange. Like, couldn’t they incubate you for a week and *pop*, out comes a healthy baby, no problem.” I giggle, thinking about Cass sitting under a light like a chicken’s egg.

Mom pffts us. “You younger generations and your need for everything all at once, right this minute. It takes how long it takes. Childbirth is beautiful. Why do you think I did it four times?”

“No one needs to think about you squeezing us out of your hoo-ha, thanks very much, Mom.” I make a barfing noise just to agitate her.

“Alana Christine.” She rolls her eyes and uses my middle name.

Ignoring her, I focus on trying to get a roundhouse out of the baby. “Come on, little creature. Give your auntie a kick!”

“Patrick thinks it’s a boy, but I’m not so convinced.” Cass looks at her belly lovingly. “We have the ultrasound where we can find out next week.”

“Are you going to let us in on that revelation?” I wiggle my eyebrows.

She nods. “I’m not sure. We aren’t even sure we want to know ourselves yet.”

Mom sighs dreamily. “I’ve already begun scouring my boxes in the attic for heirloom pieces.”

The camaraderie between these two women who share motherhood in a way I don’t yet makes me ache with want and jealousy. Of course, I wish nothing but the best for both of them, but I thought by now I’d be on the path to what Cassandra is experiencing. I’ve always wanted a family just like the one I grew up in, but it seemed so far off now that I am at the age where it could begin.

“Mom, do you have iced tea in here?” I need to stop this discussion in its tracks.

“Right side,” Mom instructs, and I pull open the other door of the fridge.

“Thank you for finishing out the tips last night, it was so nice to have Patrick home early,” Cass thanks me.

“We need another waitress or two on those weekend dinner rushes.” Mom shakes her head. “Everyone is getting burned out by them, and with you all starting families—”

I nearly choke on the iced tea I just poured. “Ma, one person. One grandchild and she acts like we’re all knocked up.”

Because she clearly can’t know what Warren asked me last night. My mother knows all, but she isn’t psychic.

“Oh, I know, I know. But I’m just saying. Soon enough, one of my other children will be married and having babies, and we just need more bodies in there serving food.” She tuts as if this is fact.

Cass chuckles because we all know Mom wants a horde of grandbabies running across her floors. “Was it late by the time you got out of there?”

I shake my head. “No. Warren actually helped me, so it didn’t take too long.”

“He did?” Mom raises an eyebrow in Cass’s direction, as if I’m not even there to witness it.

I roll my eyes. “Yes, he did, Ma.”

“So you two are speaking again?” Cass broaches cautiously.

“Why does everyone act like it’s some big thing?” I know I’m acting idiotic, but I can’t help it with what he told me last night.

“Because it is.” Mom sees right through me as she adds chocolate chips to the batch she’s stirring in a mixing bowl. “You two have been attached at the hip for years, and then go months without talking? Yeah, it’s a big deal you went over to his apartment.”

“Did you hash everything out?” Cass asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You two are the biggest gossips I know.” I roll my eyes.

“Am not. I’ll tell it straight to you, that’s all. And it’s strange that you and Warren haven’t been chummy. We want to know you two are going to be okay.” Mom nods curtly.

More than okay if he has any say in it. We’ll also be more than friends, except for when we’re behind closed doors. If I was going to be his wife, did he expect we’d ...

Oh, hell, now I think I’m blushing in my mother’s kitchen.

“It’s just that you and Warren are solid. I’ve been around a lot of chaotic relationships, Al, and it’s refreshing to see two people who understand each other so well. The way he supports you in everything you do—”

“And puts up with all of your antics no matter how big or small,” Mom adds to Cass’s explanation.

“Yes, that. It’s really great to see two people have that.” She smiles at me, but I see the flash of more knowledge in my sister-in-law’s eyes.

Like she’s plotting something.

“It sets me on edge when you two fight. Come to think of it, you’ve never had a fight this bad. He’s your mirror, my princess. He’s supposed to be in your life forever. I’m just happy you’re back together.”

The words my mother uses hit me everywhere. In the gut, the heart, right between the ears. It strikes me that my entire family is invested in our relationship or friendship, as well. I guess I’ve always known that, but it just now became clear that this fight has been weighing on them, too.

If only they knew what we might be about to enter into. I wonder what my mother will have to say about all that, but there is no way in hell I’m discussing it with her. Cass, maybe. But trying to give them the details without letting them all spill is impossible.

A pang hits my gut; if I agree to marry Warren, I’m going to have to lie to my entire family. We’ll have to successfully play off that we finally gave into the mutual love and attraction instead of creating a union based on money and inheritance.

Mom sighs as she looks down at her phone. “That goddamn woman.”

“Mom!” I gasp because that’s as close to cursing as my mom ever gets. “I’m so proud.”

“Don’t get used to it, I’ll still wash your mouth out if I hear you using the F-word in this house.” She points a finger at me. “It’s that mother of August’s. The woman is a manipulative witch who I wish would just ... hell, I wish she’d disappear. The child would be better off, and I don’t say that lightly.”

“Amen,” Cass grumbles, looking none too pleased herself.

“I think we all agree on that. What has she done this time?”

Mom pops the baking sheet into the oven, closes it, then leans a hip against it. “She won’t sign the prom permission slip so that August can attend. Won’t fill out the form, give her the money, or any of it. The woman is evil, I swear it. So August asked if I would, and of course I obliged in a heartbeat. It’s not often that she’ll let me step in and help, so I jumped at the chance. But the school won’t accept my signature.”

“I swear, I’ll buy them a new library if it means I can buy her way into that prom if that’s what she wants to go to.” My sister-in-law palms her growing belly as she sits and takes a rest at the kitchen table.

“Normally, I’d say don’t make such public gestures, but for her, go for it.”

Mom nods.

Warren’s desperate eyes are the only thing I see as they discuss how to help August. Because I can help her, no problem, at least when it comes to securing her future, and it only takes one little word.

*Yes.*

My best friend claims he wants to fulfill the term of the will for August and so that I get my storefront. And while I can be offended to high heaven that he would have never given me the real deal, I can recognize what Warren is trying to do. We’re all stuck in this web August’s mother has spun around her, and we just want to help her out.

Warren and I have a real chance at doing that. This money could provide August with things she never dreamed of. It could give her a fresh start.

It could give me a fresh start.

A marriage to him could give me something I’ve always dreamed of, even if he isn’t looking at it the same way.

Since last night, I haven’t been able to get his expression out of my mind; dead serious, a little desperate, with a hint of something I couldn’t put my finger on. In the months since our fight, I have been thinking I need to pull the linchpin out of my stale life.

I just never thought that Warren would be the grenade I'd be running straight into.



## 6

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ALANA

I find him where I know he'll always be on a Sunday morning.

Down on the canal path, sitting on our bench, drinking coffee with a splash of whole milk from Vanilla Bean.

"Hey," I greet him with one word, even though we have a million things to discuss.

"Figured I might see you here." Warren doesn't even turn his head my way, as if he predicted I'd show up.

"Really? Because I thought I might want to avoid you for another week." Half-joking, I sit down.

And watch as he reaches around his other side, produces a coffee cup, and hands it to me. From the smell alone, I can tell it's the brown sugar latte that's been a favorite of mine since our local coffee shop introduced it six months ago. Something inside me melts, knowing he remembers my order and anticipated my arrival.

"That would be extremely unlike you. Remember the time you burst into my tenth-grade study hall to ask how my PSATs went? You couldn't even wait until I met you at my locker when the bell rang."

He's right; patience is so not my virtue.

We sip our coffees in silence, watching as two kayakers make their way down a small patch of rapids further down the river.

“There are so many things we need to discuss that I don’t even know where to start.” My voice is quiet, both of our eyes still trained straight ahead.

“We’re best friends, Al. We can talk through anything.”

He means this as a comfort, but its effect is the opposite. One, we just went four months without talking something through. And two, he called out once again that it’s all platonic between us.

“Why do you have to marry me? Why not someone else?”

“Arthur stated it had to be you.”

“But if he just wants you married in order to get the money, then—”

“It has to be you.” That deep voice cuts me off.

“All right.” I blow out a slow breath. “And how long do we have to be married for? Fuck, I can’t believe I just asked that question as if it was a rational one.”

Warren harrumphs in agreement. “Believe me, wrapping my head around this hasn’t been easy for me to do either. I wanted to harass Arthur in his casket about being insane, but then realized that wouldn’t do any good. And I’m not sure, I’d have to talk to the estate lawyer to see exactly what terms were drawn out. Maybe a year or two? I’m not sure though.”

A year or two. That’s all I would get with the man I pictured being with for the rest of my life so many times.

“And we’d have to do the whole thing? A wedding, moving in, merging lives?” It was dumb to say, but I couldn’t come out with the real questions I wanted answers to.

I turn to look at him, and if he isn’t the most handsome man alive. All morning, sleepy gray eyes and tousled chestnut hair in a pair of black joggers and a forest green quarter zip. He has that casual athletic look going, and my God, I want to climb into his lap and sink into his chest as we watch the water flow below us. But of course, as usual, I refrain.

“Yes, all of it. Although, we could get married at the courthouse. No big to-do, no having to explain things to your

family until after it's done.”

Depriving my family of the wedding they've probably always wanted for me, as their princess, will crush them. It dampens my mood a little bit because I've always envisioned walking down the aisle on my father's arm.

“Are we really sitting here having this conversation?” I had to point out the lunacy of it again or I'd freak like I did at his apartment.

Warren's hand seeks mine and grabs on, just like it has so many times before. But the contact of our skin feels different in light of the question he asked me.

“Alana, I know it seems insane. I know it's a lot to swallow, and we are definitely going to have some obstacles to figure out. But if we do this, if Arthur's estate gets into the right hands, if I fulfill what he wished for his legacy, if we can help August get out from under that awful woman, isn't it worth it?”

He's being so noble, but all I can hear is that I'm not worth marrying without the estate terms.

“Yes.” I can't help but choke a little on the answer. “How will we sell this to my family? To our friends?”

A smirk lifts the side of his mouth. “That'll be the easiest part, won't it? Two best friends who finally fell for each other and couldn't wait? Sounds like some movie Cass would have starred in back during her time in Hollywood. They'll eat it up.”

I can't help but swoon right on the spot because it sounds like my fairy tale come to life, only I know it's fake.

“They can't know it's fake,” I warn, not sure why I want to lie to my entire world.

Maybe because I'm embarrassed that they wouldn't believe he'd marry me for real, just of his own accord.

“People will suspect something when you pay for a storefront outright. And when I try to shove a brand-new

scholarship by an anonymous source at August,” Warren points out.

“So, let them assume, but I don’t want to admit that we only got hitched for money.” It burns just to say it to him.

“So we’re going to do this?” A note of hope fills that deep voice.

My eyes trace the golden-brown stubble dotting his jaw, and my nose fills with the faint whiff of his woody cologne as the breeze blows past us.

“You understand this means I won’t be able to marry a man who actually loves me? Who wants to start a life and a family with me. And that when, if I ever do, I’ll have to tell him about my first marriage.” I deliver this line with accusation because I want him to prove me wrong.

In my heart, a fierce yearning opens the chasm that has always bled for him. I want him to look me dead in the face and say he has always loved me like I’ve dreamed he could. That he wants to be the only man I ever marry.

But he doesn’t. “I understand what I’m asking of you, Al. It kills me to do it. To know that your first marriage won’t mean what traditional marriages mean. But know that I will always protect you, love you, and support you in the way I have for fifteen years. Know that I will do right by you, and that when it comes time for this to end, I will do it peacefully, with the utmost gratitude.”

His answer is perfect and heart-wrenching all at the same time, which describes exactly how I feel about a lot of my interactions with Warren over the years.

When I look at him, he’s hung his head so that a brown lock or two droops onto his forehead, everything weighing heavy on his shoulders. This man has been asked to adapt too many times in his young life, and here is just another task he’s taking on to try to make someone else’s life better.

But something else is niggling at my brain, and before I can let it go, it ends up popping out of my mouth.

“And do you expect that I’ll just forgo sex for a year or more?”

“Jesus, Al.” Warren chuckles under his breath like he just can’t help himself since I’m so ridiculous.

“What? A woman has needs.” Ones that, as my husband, he might need to fulfill.

If we’re supposedly married and living under the same roof, it’d obviously be frowned upon to go trolling for dick.

“I’m pretty sure fully grown adults can take care of those things themselves.” His gray eyes turn a shade of black, and I swear they’re smoldering.

“But what if—”

“Alana.” Warren’s voice rings with finality and authority. “Do you want to do this or not?”

“How romantic,” I mumble, looking down at the cuticle beds I’ve practically gnawed off in recent days. “We need rules or something. A contract. Or an agreement. Things we can do and not do. How this works. What other things we might need to—”

A hand snakes around the back of my neck, gently squeezing. It’s always been his way of calming me down when I’m wound up, but the gesture seems to hold more meaning in light of his proposal.

“We don’t need rules or any of that shit. You’re my best friend. If we’re doing this, nothing changes. Sure, we might be living under the same roof and putting it on for the outside world, but I’ll never hurt you. I’ll always support you, and you’ve always done the same. We talk things out, share our highs and lows. We’ll figure it out together, just like we always have. This is me, Al.”

Our eyes hold, unspoken feelings and moments passing between us. As much as Warren wants to talk to death the idea that we’ll just be best friends living under the same roof to help August out, this will be so much more.

Neither of us could see just how deep it would become. Not yet.

And because of that, I finally said, “Okay. Yes. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

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**A** day, due to the weekend, and another twenty-four hours after awkwardly faking our way through the act of a happy couple applying to be wed, we have a marriage license to pick up. Warren holds the piece of paper in his hand as we walk through Truesdale City Hall. Just a piece of paper, and yet it holds the information needed to join our lives.

Butterflies zip through my gut in flight, making their way up my throat as I try to swallow the nerves.

“Should I have worn something different?” he asks, suddenly stopping in the municipal building hallway. The brown paneling and stench of a place that had been put here long before we were born invades my nose.

“I don’t know?” I shrug, not sure about anything right now.

Black jeans, a denim button-up with the sleeves rolled to reveal veins on his forearms, and white sneakers with scuff marks on the toes. That’s what he’s wearing. I’m not marrying Warren in a big white gown like I dreamed of so many times but in simple blue jeans and a white cardigan with pearl buttons. My hair is in its usual cascade of waves, and Warren picked me up from my house this morning with a grocery store bouquet in the passenger seat.

No other couple is waiting out in this small-town ceremony space, seeing as it’s a Tuesday morning, and we’re sneaking in here like spies waiting to get caught. My nerves feel too big for this building, yet a weird sense of calm also settles over me.

Fingers lace through the ones on my free hand, and I blink up at Warren. “It’s going to be okay. Stop overthinking. I know

that sounds ridiculous of me to say, but we're doing what is right."

Are we? I can't help but ask myself that. None of my family are here. Not his friends. This isn't how I ever thought I'd be getting married.

"Ashton and Teal?" A man sticks his head out of the courtroom door.

Our eyes hold each other before we turn, hand in hand, and walk the rest of the way down the hall. Warren holds the door and rests his hand on the small of my back as he ushers me inside, then he picks up my hand again. The hand that holds my flowers is sweating.

The small-town courtroom is just a couple of wooden benches, the judge's bench up front, and pictures of police heroes on the wall. An American flag stands next to where a judge in his mid-fifties sits in a black robe, and he smiles amiably at us as we make our way to the front.

The receptionist, who looked at our marriage license and informed the judge of our want to get married, walks to the front and hands him the paperwork, then takes a seat at the front bench on the righthand side. Warren and I stand there awkwardly until he smiles at us again and waves us to stand in front of him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to witness the joining of Alana and Warren in the bonds of matrimony."

My stomach drops, and I grip Warren's hand tighter. I can't believe we're doing this. Every limb feels like it's both rooted heavily to the ground and floating above me somewhere, looking down at this scene.

"Marriage is a serious, honorable matter, and should not be entered into lightly. I trust the two of you have had enough time to think about what marriage means to you, and that you stand now, before this court, ready to offer each other a life-long commitment based on love, trust, and respect."

Guilt suffuses me. This judge can't know why we're doing this because if he did, he'd never marry us. I swallow thickly, doing my best not to look at Warren. If I do, I know I won't go through with it. But I do see him nod out of the corner of my eye and wonder if he's doing so to pass this fallacy off or if he truly believes that's what he's doing here.

“Good. In that case, do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in matrimony, to love her, to honor her, to comfort her, and to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

*Wow, he's just doing the damn thing.* My mind spirals as I feel out of control, my lungs begging to protest that this is all moving way too fast.

“I do.” Warren sounds so sure, and it instantly eases some of my worry.

This is my best friend; he's always had my back. So I'm not surprised he does at this moment.

“Alana, do you take this man to be your husband, to live together in matrimony, to love him, to honor him, to comfort him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

Without hesitation, and hoping my voice doesn't crack, I answer, “I do.”

The judge smiles again. “Okay. Repeat after me. I, Warren, take you Alana, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

Easily, like he's waited to do this for years, Warren turns to me. I watch his face as he parrots back what the judge said and see the easy grin he wears. Is it an act for the people in the room? Or is he sincerely pleased to be tying himself to me?

The judge asks me to do the same, and I find my voice faltering as I push through. To anyone else, it might sound like emotion. It might look like it too, since a tear slips down my cheek as I say the words. Only Warren knows why I'm crying.



Because this isn't forever. And I've wanted forever with him for my entire adult life.

"We'll now exchange the rings," the judge informs us, and Warren pulls the jewelry box from his front pocket.

Yesterday, he drove to a jewelry store a few towns over after we applied for the marriage license. He sent me a picture of two simple, identical gold bands, and I okayed it.

I'm like every other woman on the planet; when I pictured my engagement and wedding rings, I imagined big fat diamonds glistening on my left hand. So it's fitting that with this sham of a union, I wouldn't get those either.

The judge then instructs Warren, "If you could place the ring on her finger and repeat after me; I give you this ring as a token and pledge of our constant faith and abiding love."

My best friend, who is seconds away from becoming my husband, does so. His fingertips leave sparks up my hand as he pushes the ring past my knuckle. I return the favor, and then we're just standing there, eyes locked on each other.

"By virtue of the authority vested in me under the laws of the State of Pennsylvania, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Holding my breath, I watch as those gray eyes lock in on my lips. Lust, unbridled and all too familiar when it comes to him, unfurls low in my belly. We may be in front of a stranger, standing on worn maroon carpet in a room where traffic offenders are sentenced, but I might as well be back on that purple blanket by the canal.

Ten years ago. It was the last and only time my best friend ever kissed me. And now he's about to do so for the second time ...

As my fake husband.

Warren's head descends, and I stand perfectly still, my eyes fluttering closed at the last second. Lips meet mine on a warm breath, gentle and soft, as I part mine slightly to meet his mouth. We rub together, the contact lighting a fire in my bones, even if the gesture is just a hairbreadth past a peck.

Then he's pulling back, the kiss over far too soon. A blush blooms on my cheeks as I catch a slight smirk tipping Warren's lips up.

"Congratulations. May your marriage be healthy and strong." The judge claps for us, as does the receptionist, and we both bow our heads in thanks.

Hands still linked, we walk out of the courtroom two brand-new people.

In the light of that municipal hallway, we emerge husband and wife. And the world seems like it'll never be the same again.

**O**n the first night of our marriage, I dropped my wife off at her house, drove home, and fell asleep in my own bed alone.

Alana had been uncharacteristically quiet on the drive back from the courthouse. I stopped at a diner just outside Hope Crest to get us burgers, and she insisted I go in by myself and bring out take-home containers. We ate them in the parking lot in a stilted silence. Our wedding meal had been awkward and rushed, two things that Alana and I never were with each other.

Fear grips my chest on the drive to work, because by trying to fulfill Arthur's wishes, I might have ruined the best relationship I've ever had in my life. After all of this, I'm going to have to go on living without my best friend by my side, I just know it. And the only person to blame is me for convincing her to go through with this.

We sat in her driveway early evening yesterday, looking out the front windshield and not at each other, discussing the terms of our marriage. I'll move in with her, seeing as my apartment is much smaller, but I won't give up paying rent there, just in case. While everyone will think we'll be sharing a bed and each other's bodies, I'll move into the guest room.

Alana nodded her agreement, looked at where my left hand and new ring gripped the wheel, then got out of the car and let herself into her house without a backward glance. I drove

home and lay awake all night, picturing what our wedding night might have been in an alternate universe.

In my wildest dreams, I would have carried her back to some hotel room or venue suite, all the white lace she'd be wearing draped over my arm as she clung to my neck.

I'd have let her slide down my body as I lowered her to the ground, then bent on my knees to unstrap the fuck-me heels from her feet. My hands would roam up those beautiful legs, kneading the smooth skin as I teased and nipped at her ankles with my mouth. When she begged me to lay her down, I'd slowly unzip her wedding dress and let it fall, revealing whatever mouthwatering lingerie she'd picked for the occasion. If I knew Alana, she'd pick some bombshell scrap of lace to make me lose my mind.

And as I wriggled her free of it, revealing those perfectly round, bouncing tits, she'd strip me of my bowtie and tux. I'd take her to the bed, laying her down as my cock ached to be inside the woman who'd just become my wife. She'd watch me with love shining in her eyes as I settled my mouth between those gorgeous thighs and inhale the scent of her. One time, Alana let slip that she got waxed for special occasions. Thinking of all that bare skin, her juices glistening just for me to taste ... it made my head spin.

When she was good and writhing, pleading with me to take her, I'd crawl up her body and push into her on a groan. I'd make love to her, slow and diligent, while never letting my eyes stray from hers. Our climaxes would explode together, dragging us under as I wrapped myself in her. Eventually, after many days and nights of "practice" and creative new ways of exploring each other's bodies, I'd hope to make a baby with her.

Needless to say, I ended the night with my hand wrapped around my dick, dreaming of my wife whose bed I'd never share if I could help it.

I'd slowly torture myself by living under the same roof as her, but I survived this long keeping my hands off her. Surely, I could do it for a while longer ... right?

Keeping the look of nerves and fear that her eyes held in that courtroom fresh in my brain would do it. Alana was so unsure of this, so cautious. Look how easy it had been to walk away from me after our wedding? I haven't heard from her since.

No, there would be no long nights spent between the sheets. It's just agony that I know exactly what that feels like with her.

“Warren Teal, it's good to finally meet you.”

I'm so lost in my head as I round the street on my way into work that I don't notice a soul around me. With still no word from Alana and hoping I could catch her here to discuss moving my stuff in, I headed to the pizzeria to distract myself. I'm good at work; I slip easily into the role of manager that I've held for years. The customers know me and rely on me. Local businesses always come to me to put in their catering orders or request a reservation for an event or party. People I've grown up with stop by to chat on their lunch breaks over a slice.

My life isn't the fairy tale I imagined it could be when pro scouts were coming out to watch me play high school football, but I'm happy. It's enough.

My steps falter, and I direct my full attention to the man who just said my name, leaning against the brick wall outside the front door of Hope Pizza.

“I'm sorry, do we have a meeting?” As far as I'm concerned, the only thing on my schedule today is re-organizing all the chipped or broken dishes in the kitchen.

“We don't, but I've been curious about you for longer than you know.” The guy is a head shorter than I am, wearing blue jeans and a red polo. He extends his hand, and I cautiously shake it back. “Mason Klein, director. I'm here to talk to you about doing a documentary I'm shooting.”

Immediately, my hackles rise, because I have an inkling as to what this could be about. “You'll have to excuse me, I'm late for work. If you want to email me, I can grab—”

“It’ll just be a second of your time.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a card. “I’m shooting a documentary series for a big streamer on your father’s crime and sentence. We would love to get you on camera, hear about the murder from your point of view.”

This guy, Mason apparently, speaks as if we’ve had intimate conversations about my mother’s death and go way back. He stares at me, his unsettling blue eyes holding mine expectantly, as if he isn’t a complete stranger accosting me on the street about the worst moments of my life. Cass has talked a time or two about Hollywood or film types having no souls, about how they’re only in it for the notoriety and fame. I can safely say I’ve never experienced that until right this minute.

“Leave,” I grit out, trying to contain my anger. “Not only is it inappropriate for you to show up at my place of business, but it’s completely invasive of you to phrase anything like you just did. I don’t know if you’ve spoken to my father or what kind of crime junky you are, but I won’t be talking to you. Not today, not ever. Stay away from me.”

With that, I swing open the door to Hope Pizza and stomp inside, all the way to the back, as I ignore a call from Leona at the lunch counter.

Even after I stick my head between my knees and huff out some breaths, I feel like I might still pass out. A documentary. My father. Large streamer.

It’s been seventeen years since I last saw my mother alive, seventeen years since I learned of the atrocities my father committed against her. Now some rubbernecker was going to dredge it all back up and put her death on a screen for the whole world to judge and dissect.

I’m clenching my jaw so hard my molars almost crack as I stalk into my office and throw myself into the chair. A vise grips my lungs, making it hard to breathe. My vision goes spotty, like everything I’ve experienced in twenty-four hours is catching up to me and it is all I can do to stay conscious.

Out of all my friends and the Ashton family, I am the calm one—the easy, laid-back guy. I don’t get worked up easily and

never let my emotions best me, but underneath it all is a venomous poison. If I let that loose, if I let people see the immense trauma, I'll never be able to keep it from drowning me.

From the funeral to the lies to the wedding to this documentary filmmaker ... my system is on overload, and the reliable, nice guy facade is slipping.

"You good?" Patrick walks into my office with a stack of papers in his hands.

It takes my brain a second to come out of the fog and for my panic to subside. "Fine. All good."

*Except that I married your sister yesterday, and no one on this godforsaken earth knows except for two random people in Truesdale. Oh, and that I was just accosted about my murderous father. But other than that ...*

Jesus, lying is becoming a personality trait for me, I guess. Witnessed by the wedding ring I pulled off my hand and stuck in the glove compartment before I got out of my car.

My friend eyes me like he doesn't quite believe me, but I know he won't push me. Patrick and I, along with the other two Ashton brothers, have become close over the years. They know I look out for their sister, and since we all spend so much time together, it's not odd for us to strike up relationships of our own. Liam, Patty, and I all go for beers often, or we hang and watch sports on the weekends.

"The architecture firm we catered that company party for last year wants to do it again." He lays an intake form on my desk. "You'll call them?"

"I'll set it up." I nod, setting it to the side so I can call to get the details.

"And Alana has the two of us booked for some trade show next month. It's got to do with the sauces. I promised we'd show face, and apparently a big grocery chain will be there."

"Why isn't Liam going to that?" The question makes sense since the retail sauce is his baby.

Patrick rolls his eyes. “He’s grumpy as fuck these days and apparently refusing to put himself into any extrovert situations. So the two professionals are being called in.”

I return the fist bump he holds out and chuckle. “They want us to close a deal, huh?”

“Apparently, this will bring in a shit ton of revenue if we land this chain, and you know I’m all about the bottom line.” He smirks.

“What’s up with Liam, though?” If I can focus on someone else’s problems, maybe it’ll get me out of my own head.

Patty shrugs. “Fuck if I know. May have to do with a certain teacher moving back to town, but he’s tight-lipped.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Gabrielle Murphy? Damn, feels weird not to add Miss to the front of her name.”

Our high school math teacher moved back to town a few months ago and has taken a job at the same local playhouse where Cass teaches workshops at. Liam has been acting even surlier than he usually does, and now that Patrick is saying this, a feeling in my gut is trying to piece it together.

“Shit, don’t tell him I said anything. I’m just tired of how fucking grumpy he’s been.” Patrick wipes a hand down his face.

“Are *you* okay?” I ask, noticing how tired he looks.

“Cass has had some trouble sleeping the past few nights. She’s just uncomfortable and nauseous. I worry, but apparently, it’s all normal. I’m going to be a fucking wreck when this kid gets here, aren’t I?”

Even though it sounds like he’s complaining, Patrick is smiling like a fool. It’s beyond obvious that he and Cass are over the moon to welcome this baby.

“You’re going to be an awesome dad,” I assure him.

That’s coming from someone who had no idea what a dad was supposed to act like until I met Patrick’s father.



“Thanks, dude. You’ll be one hell of an uncle. Dad, too, when you decide to settle down. What’s with that, anyway? You haven’t been out recently with anyone.”

In a small town, everyone knows the dating life of the single and eligible. I’ve been propositioned to be set up with granddaughters by every older woman in Hope Crest.

Words fail me now, as I can’t exactly tell him that I’m off the market and the culprit is his sister. Fuck, I’m going to get hit when they eventually find out, aren’t I? One of her brothers will be mighty pissed, and I can’t decide which will react the worst. Or maybe it will be Thomas, who trusted me never to go there with his daughter.

A flash of dark waves moves past my office, and the hair on my arms stands up. She’s here, reporting for work, and we’ll have to sit across the hall from each other pretending to work like we’re still best friends and nothing has changed.

Until tonight, when I move into her home like it’s my own because we’re married, and not a soul we love knows it.

“**Y**ou’ve left me no room in either closet.”

My words carry down the hall as I try to shove aside the horde of hanging clothes in Alana’s guest room closet.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I’d be gaining a husband, much less a roommate, overnight. Forgive me for not predicting the absolute insanity of this situation.” Her sarcasm can be heard from the master bathroom.

I came over after we both finished our work for the day and brought with me two enormous suitcases. It should be enough to get me through the next few months, but I don’t have anything besides clothes and a few personal items that I’m bringing to Alana’s home. All my furniture is still in my apartment, along with every dish, picture frame, sports biography, and childhood trophy I’ve ever won. But being a person who never had what they considered a permanent home until I moved into my own apartment, it didn’t bother me to uproot to her place.

Alana’s house resembles her taste so well: a little small town, a little glitz and glamour, and a whole lot of pink. Of course, the pink is understated; she isn’t living in a doll’s house after all. But where dark hardwood gives way to white subway tile, there would also be a touch of a mirrored hall console. A blush velvet headboard in her bedroom is accented by a brown leather wingback chair. A sturdy dining room table that looks like it was carved from an oak tree with an abstract

painting of half-nude models on a runway sits grandly. Alana's taste is chic paired with cozy, and you can feel her presence in the place she designed to come home to.

I've been here a thousand times since she bought it, helped her haul stuff in when she moved, yet if you told me I'd be moving in as her husband even a month ago, I'd have laughed in your face.

"I can try to move some things around." She leans a hip against the doorframe and watches as I attempt to hang my sweaters and button-ups to no avail.

Setting them on the bed instead, I try not to notice that she's changed into comfy clothes since arriving home from work. That lasts all of two seconds, though. Because who could ignore the way those white sweater-material pants hug her petite legs and luscious hips? How could I tear my eyes from her cleavage encased in a matching sweater, the white of it doing sinful things to the peachy color of her skin? She looks innocent and lust-driven all at the same time, and I hate that I can't stop my cock from twitching with interest.

Then my gaze drops to the smirk she wears on her mouth, which is still painted with the deep mauve lipstick she wore to the pizzeria today.

Every time I see her now, I can't help but think about the kiss we shared in the courtroom. It had been so quick, you'd miss it if you blinked. But it confirmed everything I had been denying to myself for ten years; I am hopelessly in love with my best friend, and no amount of lying or distance I put between us is going to change that.

I kissed her, and the world made sense. Our lips met, and all the unanswered questions about my life disappeared. Every cell in my body felt *right* the moment her mouth was on mine.

"And make some room on the bathroom counter?" I tease her, knowing that's an absolute no.

She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. "Your skincare consists of a bar soap and water. No. I'm really going to regret not buying a house with a second shower, aren't I?"

The street she lives on is made up of smaller homes when considering the whole of Hope Crest. While Alana's house is pretty and well-built, it's only a two-bedroom compared to the sprawling stone mansions along the river. Of course, those aren't considered high-priced homes compared to the new builds that city couples were coming in to construct. Knocking down whatever is on priceless lots and putting up their faux farmhouses or modern boxes. They aren't my abode of choice, but they are interesting to look at.

Still, I prefer Alana's home at this stage in life. It's not like she has children to fill a huge house with or needs so much space. Yes, having to walk into her bedroom to shower is going to do nothing for my traitorous hard-on, but I won't be here forever.

The thought has something ugly and twisted settling in my stomach and gnawing at my heart. I push it away as I unload some more clothes into the guest room dresser.

"You're used to me in your hair. It'll be like sophomore year of high school all over again."

I lived with the Ashtons briefly when Arthur and Clara had to attend to some business in Ireland for a few months.

"Sophomore year when you left a cereal bowl in the guesthouse so long, ants started building a hill in it?" She shudders.

I cringe. "Ew, I'd forgotten that. But I'm a grown man now, you know I don't do shit like that."

Her eyes flash when I say grown man, and I can practically see her thoughts. But Alana recovers. "The other day, I found four empty Gatorades in the back seat of your car."

That has me laughing. "Okay, fine. I'm kind of a slob and you know it. I promise I'll try harder while I'm living here."

Alana comes in and sits down on the bed. "Eh, it's whatever. Between you and my brothers, I've seen enough boy filth that is doesn't shock me anymore."

We've been under the same roof before. Plenty of times. We even shared tents a few times when our group of friends

went on trips. But this is different. We could both play it off like it isn't, except the truth is staring us in the face.

That truth? That I can't resist fantasizing about what would happen if I pushed her back on the bed right now. What would happen if those beautiful breasts spilled to the sides, taunting me from the inside of that soft-as-fuck sweater?

Jesus, I really need to fucking stop. It's bad enough that I made her my wife.

"Speaking of your family, we have to tell them." The guilt is getting to me, especially after Patrick came into my office today.

"Let's just tell them after dinner rush tomorrow," Alana huffs out.

"Breaking the news over a dining room of your father's lasagna special as if you just bought a new sofa and didn't get married to your best friend? Yeah, that's going to go over well." The woman is the most spontaneous of the brood, but it would end badly if she announced it this way.

"How else should we do it? I'm not doing some cheesy social media post or sitting them down solemnly, like I have some terminal illness. This way, everyone knows at once, they get their thoughts and shock out of the way, and we get leftovers to bring home even if everyone is pissed."

Not everyone, just her father. I made him a promise that I specifically broke.

"Plus, we have to do it as soon as possible. We only went to the courthouse in Truesdale two days ago, and I'm surprised no one in town has caught wind yet. It's only a matter of time."

She's right, even though I hate to admit it. We chose the town over to not draw attention to ourselves at city hall, but it isn't like the residents there don't know who the Ashtons and Alana are. Or me, come to think of it. Everyone in the surrounding areas knows my name one way or another, even if I don't want them to.

Alana's parents and siblings getting word about our wedding before we tell them ourselves would be detrimental.

"Fine, you're right." An anxious knot forms in my throat.

She hops up. "Good. Now, what are you making me for dinner?"

"Ah, now I understand why you agreed to this." My chest feels lighter than it has all week.

Of course, our new situation is going to cause everlasting ripple effects in our friendship, but this conversation is like old times. The regular us.

Alana shrugs. "If it means I get free meals that are edible, I'll get married any day of the week."

"Then I guess you're in luck, because I picked up the ingredients for my famous chicken tacos on the way over."

"Have I told you lately that I adore you, my husband?" She flutters her eyelashes like some nineteen-fifties housewife as she takes on the same accent.

"Someone has to bring the bread home and support the house." I make a muscle, completely joking.

She rolls her eyes as she turns, my gaze landing on how those soft sweater pants outline the most perfect ass I've ever seen.

"Over dinner, we can discuss you bank rolling my storefront. If I'm not getting orgasms out of this deal, you've at least got to compensate me in other ways."

I nearly choke on my tongue as Alana rumbles down the stairs, laughing her head off. How she can joke about something like that is beyond me, but my best friend has always been crass and sarcastic. More than anyone I know. It's one of the reasons I love her so much because I've always been on the more quiet, shy side. Being with Alana and seeing how free she is to express herself makes me want to do the same.

But her using the word orgasms does dangerous things to the appendage just behind my zipper. And considering I

delivered her first one ten years ago, the last and only time we crossed the line, it's a goddamn forbidden fruit to mention that while we're living under the same roof.

It takes nearly five minutes for me to get my head, heart, and cock under control before I go downstairs and make dinner for my wife.

Rubbing my stomach, I sigh as I take a sip of red wine. “I’m going to pack some on with you living here, aren’t I?”

Warren rubs his jaw as he smirks, the dark blue T-shirt doing too many gorgeous things to his eyes and biceps.

“As if I couldn’t throw you over my shoulder soaking wet.”

We both know he’s done just that a couple times before; at pool parties over the years, during trips to the beach when he’d run with me into the water, and that one time I got too drunk at a bonfire, and he had to carry me to his truck with beer dripping down the front of me.

But the connotation in his voice feels different. Everything feels different. And yet oddly the same. How many times have we shared a meal? Has he cooked for me? The answer is too many times to count. So many instances of us sitting across a table laughing have happened over the years that this feels extremely normal.

Like we should have been sharing moments like this as a couple for longer than either of us cares to admit. And even though I hear the simmer of heat in his tone when he talks about manhandling me, I know things aren’t so different that he’ll act on it.

“I’m so full I might puke if you attempt that,” I warn him in a joking manner.



“Seen you puke enough times to know how to handle that, too,” he reminds me.

“Nothing we haven’t experienced with each other, huh?” I try not to insinuate, but it bleeds into my statement.

Warren chooses to ignore it. “Even marriage.”

I snort, the lunacy of it invading my brain. “This is insane, right?”

“Certifiable. But we’re here now, so let’s get down to brass tacks. Do what we set out to accomplish.” The expression on his face is serious. “We have to figure out how to help August.”

My heart melts with how diligent he is when it comes to her. I know his past, with his biological parents and the trauma stemming from his mother’s murder, haunts him when he looks at the young waitress we’ve known for years. In her, he sees himself. Yes, August lives under the roof of a mad woman, but she hasn’t experienced anything she can’t come back from. Not yet, anyway. Warren is a good man, the best kind, and he wants to make sure she never gets to the point where she can’t overcome the kind of trauma that has been dumped on him.

“You mentioned a scholarship. We could invent a fake one and have her apply to it.” I’ve been giving this some thought.

“That’s not illegal? I mean, I know it’s immoral ...”

“Do we care? I mean, I feel like it’s fine. It’s not like we’re scamming other kids into applying for it. I’ve made plenty a website and landing pages in my day. Leave it to me. She’ll think she’s applying to some fancy-schmancy scholarship, when really, she’s the only applicant and we’ve hand-picked her to have her entire tuition paid for. We’re not hurting anyone by doing this.”

Whipping that up will be no problem, and I don’t feel the least bit guilty lying to August. White lies are for someone else’s good, and in this case, August deserves every single good thing in life.

“We’ll just be lying to a girl who trusts us, despite her propensity not to trust anyone.” He chews on his full bottom lip.

“Says the guy who married his best friend for money and a shot at helping people. If this has taught you anything, maybe it will be to think outside the lines once in a while. You’re too good, too black-and-white. You try to toe a line and not end up getting anything you want. If you want to help August, this is how you’ll have to do it. Put your morals aside and look at the big picture.”

It’s clear as day that I’m not just referring to the August situation, but we aren’t discussing our history right now.

Sighing as he polishes off the IPA he brought over to stock in my fridge, he nods. “You’re right. She might hate us when she finds out, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Standing because I’m too antsy to discuss this next part while sitting face-to-face, I start clearing dishes. Warren hops up too, grabbing what he can that I’ve left behind, and we move to the sink together. Wordlessly, I grab the dish brush and soap and get to cleaning. His elbow grazes mine as I hand over the first pan for drying, and a spark sizzles between us. Even like this, doing something as platonic as washing and drying, I can’t help but staunch the desperate need for him.

For years, I’ve been fighting the ache of my body and the overstimulated beat of my heart whenever we’re close like this. It has to have had some adverse effects on my health, like not giving in to my sexual desire has taken years off my life. Holding that kind of passion in will only lead to some negative outcome.

Once again, though, I swallow it down and keep moving forward.

“August is only one part of the equation. What about the storefront?” It’s bold to ask your fake husband for the millions he just inherited, but I do think I’m owed a favor.

I see the chuckle as it shakes his chest. “Of course, you know I’d do anything for you. Hell, if I had the kind of money

Arthur's lawyer is about to send me after our meeting next week, you know I'd give it to you without making you marry me. But alas, such was the deal. And now your husband has to buy you a fancy Newton Street store. So tell me which one you want, and we'll make it happen."

My heart flutters. I don't think many people in my life would call me materialistic, but I love a good present. A nice pair of shoes, a shiny piece of jewelry, or even a delicious package of chocolates make my luxury-loving heart beat faster. Warren saying he's going to rent me out a store, whichever one I want, so that I could fulfill a dream I've been fantasizing about?

Talk about love languages.

"I want you to be involved too." The words pop out before I can stop them.

"What for? I know you, you already have a vision laid out. I'm sure you have the design plans drawn up in your head. Which vendors you'll talk to, what local artisans you want to partner with. What do you need me for?"

This sweet, gorgeous man. He always, always counts himself out. And not in a way that's not confident because Warren has plenty of easy confidence. But in a way that reveals how much people in his past hadn't chosen him. Warren looks at the world and relationships as if no one would want him there if it hadn't been for his hard work and adaptability. I guess that's a product of his upbringing, and while I should be used to it, it never fails to make my heart bleed for him.

"A while back, you dropped a casual line about not being sure you wanted to be at the restaurant anymore."

"I said that while I was drunk," he grumbles, and I know he probably thinks I forgot what he said.

As if I would ever let it slip my mind that he was thinking about leaving. Leaving me, leaving my family. Warren is as much of a staple at Hope Pizza as my father is, and that's saying something. Before he made the confession, I would

have never known he was unhappy. But perhaps, like me, he needs a change.

“Drunk words are just sober thoughts expressed.” I tap my chin, soap bubbles popping on my skin.

His hand darts out, and he swipes them away with the towel. Our gazes linger for a second too long before I clear my throat and get back to the dishes.

“We’re partners now. I mean, we always have been, but people will expect us to start this venture together. I need someone I trust, someone I can rely on, someone who knows how my brain works even better than I do at times. You mentioned it yourself that you didn’t know if you wanted to be at the restaurant, so give this a try.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, Warren might be going through the same kind of quarter-life crisis I am.

“I have been searching for some kind of shift,” he admits, stacking dry dishes on the counter.

“Then let’s do this together. It’s a chance to do something new, something that is ours alone. I love my family, and my dad and Evan, but God, I need a break. I love Hope Crest, I want to highlight its gems more. I want to collect beautiful knick-knacks and sell them to people who love that kind of thing. It makes them happy, and it makes me happy.”

One of the things I’ve always tried to explain to people who find out I’m from a small town is that I’m completely content living here. Being away from the glitz and glamour of a city, knowing every single person you run into at the grocery store, walking the sidewalks you did as a little kid ...

It’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of. There is absolute happiness in a slower, small-town way of living. And I might be the impulsive extrovert of the Ashton family, but I’ve never wanted to stray from this place. I’ve always loved the quiet of the canal in the mornings, the Fourth of July party on the high school football field, and the Christmas caroling the elementary school kids did on the weekend prior to December

twenty-fifth. There's a calm that settles over your soul when you belong to a small town.

We finish the dishes, and I lean a hip against the counter. "When do you meet with his lawyer?"

"Next week." He's looking over my shoulder, and I know he's thinking about something else.

"You miss him." We haven't talked about Arthur since the funeral, with everything else that's been unfolding.

He swallows like it's a heavy task to accomplish. "Yes. He had become a mentor, a friend, in recent years. It was like I'd rediscovered this parent I never knew I had, but the connection was more mature, more like a friendship. We'd sit and talk for hours about life, about money, about love and Clara, and things he'd seen and did. Things he wanted for me. When he got sick, I tried as best as I could to remind him of who he was. It was ... fuck. Seeing him like that, forgetting all that he'd done and all we'd shared. It was so painful to watch. Like the person you knew was gone but still sitting right in front of you."

His face holds a sheen of pain, like he remembers exactly what it had been like sitting in the room with a ghost.

"Why didn't you tell me that you were going over there to see him? Why didn't you tell me he was sick? I could have helped with that pain." When I found out initially, I'd been hurt.

We tell each other everything. Or at least I thought we did.

He shrugs. "Arthur, for all intents and purposes, was the only parent I had left. My family situation has always been complicated, and I guess ... hell, I was tired of talking about it and overthinking it. I just wanted to easily get along with one of the people in my life who'd been a guardian to me, and I finally had that. It felt special, having that time with him. I didn't want to share or overanalyze it, and talking to anyone about it would have done just that."

In his head, I'm sure it made sense. I always tried to put myself in Warren's shoes when it came to his family and

situation because, clearly, I couldn't relate.

"You know I'm always here if you need to tell me these things. I hated not talking. It was the worst four months of my life."

Something unreadable passes over his face, and I want so badly for him to take me into his arms. I want to bring him comfort. But even if our silent battle is over, it still feels like we're a million miles apart.

A yawn swallows me, exhaustion rattling my bones. It's been a tiring few weeks, and with all the mental gymnastics I'm doing having Warren move in here, I think it's catching up to me.

"You ready for bed? We don't have to watch our show if you don't want to." His fingers skate up my arm.

It's only meant as a comfort, and I hate that my core clenches, wishing he were touching somewhere else.

Before our fight, we'd been binge-watching an old sci-fi mystery show that both of us were too young to watch when it originally aired on TV. Warren probably assumed we'd settle back into the old friendship routine on the couch now that we have unlimited viewing time together. But aside from the fact that I'm tired, I need to be alone. To think, to breathe without him in the same space as me, to build up my defenses before he shatters them again by being so perfect and kind.

"Yeah, I'm exhausted. I think I'll just head up. You can watch without me ... you know, if you have been already." Part of me wonders if he watched episodes without me because I certainly hadn't.

"Like I'd do that." He frowns at me and quirks an eyebrow, knowing it was a test.

I smirk like the shit I am for trying to get that information out of him.

"Thanks for letting me stay here, Al. I know this whole thing isn't easy, but if I had to do this with anyone, I'm glad it's you."

Not for the first time, I wonder why Arthur specified me. Or what Arthur said in his letter to Warren to spur him to follow through. But I bite my tongue, knowing I might not be ready for the answer I would get.

Warren pulls me into his arms, surprising me, though it shouldn't because we've hugged a thousand times. I know he means this as a comforting embrace, an appreciative gesture for all I'm doing for him.

Quickly, though, it morphs into something else entirely. My arms wind around his neck, my nose pushing into the crook so close that I'm nestled next to his Adam's apple. Strong arms bracket my waist, one hand splaying on my back as the other travels up to cup the back of my neck. Everything inside me warms—my core to almost a boiling point, and I feel Warren pull me closer. No air exists between our bodies, and this hug goes on too long to just be a thank-you embrace.

With how he's holding me, it's like he's trying to communicate the feelings we've always left unspoken.

Warren pulls back infinitesimally, our noses nearly brushing as his eyes blink into mine. I can almost feel the scruff on his jaw scraping my cheek. For a split second, I think he's going to take this to the next level. That he'll explore the spark I know we both felt when he kissed me on our wedding day.

But then he releases me, his jaw ticking, and puts a good foot or so between us.

“Night, Al.” He nods as if he's convincing himself this is what he wants.

And because I'm bone-tired and feeling the sting of rejection, I paste on a smile and wish him good night.

Sleep comes fitfully and broken up with all the thoughts playing in my head.





A day after Warren moves in, my mother stands at the hostess stand, closing down the point-of-sale system for the night while my youngest brother is sitting at a table taste-testing the rest of the dessert left over from dinner service.

Before I can chicken out, and because the impulsive gene seems to have been bestowed specifically on me in terms of the Ashton clan, I slip my simple gold band onto my ring finger and stand firmly in the middle of the restaurant.

“Hey, everyone?”

I watch as Patrick comes around the corner with his coat in his hand like he’s about to head home to Cass.

“Huh?” Evan doesn’t even look up, and I know he’s caught up in his food bubble. He’s usually caught up in his food bubble like the rest of us live in another universe.

Holding my left ring finger up like it’s a lewd gesture, I clear my throat and announce, “Warren and I got married three days ago.”

Mom’s head whips in my direction and the fork that Evan is holding clatters to the table.

“Stop playing jokes on us.” Mom’s voice is annoyed, but I hear the tinge of caution in it.

Like she knows I’m not bluffing.

“Why are you yelling out here?” Dad moseys out, drying his hands with a kitchen towel.

“She’s saying that she married Warren without any of us there,” Evan repeats, looking skeptical.

“I did. We’re married. Husband and wife. Went to the courthouse and finally sealed the deal,” I inform them and hear Dad make a noise in the back of his throat.

Warren comes out of the back, and I see the disappointment in his eyes. If it were up to him, we would have sat everyone down, gotten them gifts or something, gotten on our knees, and begged for their forgiveness. But I’m not him, and that’s not my style. I’ve always asked for forgiveness rather than permission, and this is my family. Yes, he’s a part of it, but he always gives in to their customs of respect way more than I do. My family needs to remember I am a grown adult and can make decisions without consulting any of them. I’m tired of being the “princess” trapped in the tower.

“Goddammit, Al. You couldn’t even wait until you and I regrouped before announcing this?” Warren reprimands me, and it does nothing to make us look like happy newlyweds.

“What the fuck did you do?” Liam growls as he emerges from the kitchen, murderous gaze directed in my fake husband’s direction.

“You got married?” Patrick adds to the discussion.

The only person not here from the inner circle is Cass, and I know I’ll get a phone call later where my sister-in-law chews me out. Nonna isn’t here either, and I’m kind of glad she isn’t. My grandmother would be able to see right through me, and I need to address her psychic ass separately.

Calmly, I stand in the middle of the chaos and try to address their yelling. “Yes, we got married. We went to the courthouse in Truesdale and eloped because we didn’t want to wait any longer. It’s been coming for years.”

Extending my hand, I motion for Warren to come and grab ahold of it. We need to look like a united front right now and

need to make it seem like we're lovers who can't stand to be apart for one second more.

A sniffle from the corner grabs my attention. "My baby girl got married and I wasn't there."

Mom bursts into tears, and Evan jumps up to comfort her, shooting me a pissed-off look that I've made our mother cry.

"Mom, we didn't want a big thing, we wanted it to be just us." Guilt wracks me, and an alarm goes off in my head, telling me that this is going to be harder than I naively assumed it wouldn't be.

"How fucking dare you?" Dad growls, and this is directed at Warren.

"Thomas, I—" My fake husband's voice pleads with my father before Patrick cuts him off.

"Dad, uncalled for. But also ... dude, what were you thinking? This is nuts." My older brother shakes his head.

Surprise and hurt hit me square in the chest. "It's nuts that he would want to marry me? Gee, thanks, family, for being so supportive. Perhaps this is why we didn't tell you before we did it."

I mean, that's not the reason at all, but it's not like Warren and I are going to come out and admit our whole marriage is a sham.

"Why don't we all calm down? This isn't the craziest thing I've ever heard. They've been thick as thieves for years. If it makes them happy, then let's chill out. Congratulations, guys." Evan finally surfaces with a rational thought.

"Are you happy?" Mom snuffles again and wipes a tear from her cheek.

I do my best to plaster on the most lovey-dovey smile I can as I look up at Warren. "So happy."

He palms my cheek, and it almost feels real enough as I lean into the touch. Then he addresses my family.

“Obviously, we didn’t want to spring it on you this way. Or well, I didn’t, but you all know how she is. It’s one of the things I love about her. One day, I woke up and realized I needed to pull my head out of my ass and marry this woman before someone else did. I love you all so much, you’re family to me, and I’m very sorry we didn’t include you in this huge life moment. But standing there with Alana, your daughter, your sister, as she looked at me ... knowing we were promising our lives to each other? It was the most perfect moment of my life. I love her, I hope you all know how much. I promise we’ll let you celebrate however you want to, and I’ll make sure she doesn’t act annoyed. But please know I’m going to take such good care of her.”

If my family’s jaws aren’t on the floor, mine certainly is. That sounded like the most convincing confession of true love I’ve ever heard, and for a second, I let my heart soak in it. I let my romantic whimsies and girlish squeeing get carried away.

Then I remember; this is all a front. He’s saying exactly what everyone wants to hear, exactly what everyone needs to hear to start coming to terms with the fact that we’re husband and wife.

Liam crosses the room, sizing Warren up. He squeezes my hand in his, bracing for something, and my heart beats wildly in my chest.

That’s when my brother extends his hand to my fake husband. “Welcome to the family. *Officially.*”

Tentatively, Warren takes his handshake and nods, the two of them not breaking eye contact. It’s a huge step in the right direction, because Liam is usually the surly, stubborn one who won’t drop a grudge or an attitude for anything.

Mom walks to me, smoothing a hand over my hair, and pulls me into her arms. “It isn’t how I would have wanted it, but I’m happy it finally happened. I’ve always known he was the one for you.”

I pat her back as I stay silent. Because if I open my mouth, I might cry. Here my family is, adjusting to this idea that I am so in love I couldn’t wait a second longer when it’s not the

case at all. My eyes flick sideways to Warren, who looks like he's trying not to grind down on his molars.

Could any of that little speech he gave be true? Unease flutters through me that it might not be but hope springs in my heart that he could have been putting more weight behind those words than he's telling me.

"Married. Huh. This is so weird." Patrick grins as he comes over to hug us.

"You take care of my girl, yeah?" Mom pulls Warren into a hug. "I'm so proud of you, though. I've never wanted another son more than you."

Tears clog my throat at that. What will happen when we eventually split up?

Warren's hand is still laced in mine, and I lean into his shoulder for support. He releases my mom and pulls me into his side, a strong arm wrapping around my waist. Even with all the complications, it feels like we're a unit, and I let myself pretend for a moment.

Dad still stands rooted to the spot he came out in, and I want to say something to him. I want him to yell or congratulate us, *anything*. But he stays silent, assessing us. Everyone in the room is waiting for his reaction like we're balanced on pins and needles.

"Thomas," Warren starts but is interrupted by my father walking out of the dining room and swinging the door to the kitchen violently behind him. Mom gasps, following him on stomping feet, and Warren hangs his head in disappointment and defeat.

"He'll come around," Evan assures the room, although I'm not sure he believes it.

"Can I take you guys out for a celebratory drink?" Patrick tries to recover the good mood we've been rounding to, but it's lost.

I peer up at Warren. "Let's go home."

We'd driven separately, but I'm not letting him leave alone right now.

"Yeah." He looks completely defeated.

"We'll see you guys, later. We can celebrate later." I nod at my brothers.

Except what are we celebrating? A fake love? I swallow down past my sadness once again.

But I gather the strength for the both of us since Warren seems to be the one in need of more support right now. I drive us home, aware that my family now knows and there is no going back from here.



“**Y**ou got married!”

Cassandra meets me at her newly-painted front door, a pile of hardwood beams next to her as I step inside.

“This place looks awesome,” I comment as I look up to the new light fixture in their foyer.

She and Patrick have been hard at work with their contractors to design their forever home, and there are only a few more rooms to go until they’re fully done. Supposedly, that will be just in time for the baby, who I haven’t stopped shopping for.

“Oh no, don’t think you’re going to distract me with house talk. Get your ass in here and give me all the details. I about fell out of bed when Patrick came home and told me.”

Snorting, I follow her into the kitchen. “I know, and I haven’t stopped hearing from you in the two days since.”

She’s been blowing my phone up like I’m some fuckboy who ghosted her.

“Um, because you got freaking married. To Warren. Without telling any of us!” she nearly screeches.

“Calm down, I am not trying to meet that baby early.” I hush her as we both pull out chairs at her kitchen table.

“Spill. Now. Oh wait, but first, I got you something!” She pulls out a gift bag from another chair and pushes it toward me.



“What is this?” I eye it curiously.

“Open it.” My sister-in-law smiles.

Pulling out the tissue paper, I see a small object at the bottom of the bag. Reaching in, my hand meets something cool and heavy, and I bring it out and set it down.

“Cass ...” My words get trapped in my throat.

Sitting in front of me is a ceramic ring dish, done in creams and golds. Lasered into it at the bottom of the heart-shaped dish is “Mrs. Teal.” Tears dot my eyes because how many times had I doodled that in my teenage notebooks? It’s the first time I’m seeing it written out while wearing his ring, and now it’s real.

“I figured you’re a wife now, so you need somewhere to put your rings.” She glances at my hand. “Oh ...”

“We didn’t have time to pick one out, but I’m sure we’ll do it sometime. Right now, I’ll be honored to put my simple gold band on this.” I reach over to hug her.

She wipes her eyes as we release each other. “Sorry, the hormones have me all over the place. It’s just ... I’ve always longed for a sister. And yeah, you were already my sister when I married Patrick, but Warren is such a good man and almost like another brother. I’m just happy for you two; marriage is the best thing I’ve done so far and I’m so happy you guys will get that now, too.”

Shit, I’m going to have so much repenting to do, aren’t I? The guilt alone is going to eat me whole.

Smiling as much of a genuine smile as I can, I thank her one more time. “I hope it’s the same for us.”

“All right, now tell me all of it.”

I launch into the canned story Warren and I came up with about how we’d gone out for a walk on the canal, and it just hit us all at once. How we didn’t want to wait one more minute to be committed to each other and ran to get a courthouse wedding as soon as we could. How we were

trapped in our little bubble and didn't want to come out, even though we love our friends and family.

"That is so romantic." She sighs. "Still a little pissed you didn't have any of us there. Or that you didn't have a big old party."

"Says the woman who got married at the local theater with like twelve people in attendance," I fire back.

"Touché." She chuckles. "But it would have been nice to be there."

"All right, I get it. Mom has guilted me enough for sixty people, you don't have to add on. We just didn't want to wait. And with Warren's relationship with our family, I didn't want input beforehand. We made this decision for us."

Although, if anyone knew why we'd made the decision, they'd have a whole lot more guilt to do. And if anyone knew the real, real reason *I* actually did it, they'd take pity on me. Being in love with your fake husband isn't for the faint of heart.

"Again, so romantic. So you guys are happy? Are you going to get a house?" She leans in like she's on the edge of her seat for all of this.

"He moved into my house for now, it's all the room we need and it's so early that we haven't even talked about a forever home. We just want to enjoy this newlywed stage."

Cass claps her hands together. "Please let me send you on a honeymoon! It'll be our wedding present to you. I still have my house in LA, or you could use my agent's house in Bermuda? Oh my God, you guys need a trip to celebrate."

I haven't even thought of a honeymoon. It's been over a year since I've gone on any sort of vacation, what with the restaurant and family stuff. Going away with Warren used to be a no-brainer; we've done plenty of family vacations as teens and then overseas or beach trips as adults. But this is different. A romantic getaway to celebrate our marriage? Where we'd have to share a bed and endure rose-petal bubble baths and champagne on the beach by firelight.

“I don’t know.” I shrug uncomfortably. “Most people just get some flatware or a pots and pans set for new couples.”

Cass waves me off. “Psh, that’s boring. And you said it yourself, you already have that stuff at your house. I’ll think of the best place to send you, don’t worry.”

I can see her wracking her brain, and meanwhile, I’m sitting here thinking of how I’ll explain to Warren that we have to go on a honeymoon together.

I’m saved by having to answer her or dissuade her when the front door opens and then closes. Two seconds later, my grandmother walks into the kitchen.

“Nonna, I told you to stop driving yourself here! I would have picked you up.” Cass rises off her chair slowly, all belly leading the way, as she takes the multiple Tupperware containers out of my grandmother’s hands.

“Oh, shush, everyone in this town knows to stay out of my way if I’m on the road,” Nonna chastises her.

“As if that’s a rational excuse for why you’d be on the road.” I shake my head at her logic.

My grandmother points a finger in my direction. “I want no sass out of you today. You have a lot of explaining to do. We’re going to get into it, *bella*.”

When my grandmother speaks Italian, you know you’re in for it. I shiver internally because if anyone is going to dress me down for this decision, it’s her. I swear, the woman can see past any motive or excuse. It’s freakishly scary.

“What did you make?” Cass tries to smooth things over by asking about her cooking.

“I prepared some veal and chicken for you, some things to freeze. I plan to make you all things to freeze for when the baby gets here but wanted you to try them first.” Nonna starts lifting lids and showing my sister-in-law.

“You’re the best.” Cass kisses her cheek.

Surely, no pregnant or postpartum woman in our family would have to cook for herself for a year if the older

generations could help it.

Cass yawns. “Would you guys mind if I laid down for a little? I’m so tired.”

“Not at all,” I say immediately, trying to be supportive.

“We’ll make you lunch. You just rest.” Nonna shoos her.

I didn’t think this through though, because now I’m stuck in the kitchen with the one person who can see through every act.

“So tell me, my Alana, what is really going on?” She wastes no time as soon as Cass is out of earshot.

Sighing, I drop my elbows to the counter. “It’s real. Can’t you just believe that?”

“Maybe if I wasn’t me, I could take that at face value. But I am me, and I can tell this is as phony as those plants your brother insists on hanging from the ceiling of the restaurant.”

Of course, she can see the lie, and there is no use in trying to convince her otherwise, so I just come out with it.

“After Arthur died, Warren got a letter that said he’d be awarded the full estate. All he had to do was marry me. Then Warren talked to August, heard more about the intensifying problems with her mother, and knew he needed to do something. He asked me to marry him so we could get the money to pay for August’s college in full. He also promised to get me the storefront I wanted as a perk for me. So we went to the courthouse, got married, and here we are, I guess.”

Nonna stops what she’s doing, loading chicken into a pan on the stove, and blinks at me. Then she crosses the room, her small, frail body next to mine.

“Oh, my brave, strong girl. Always trying to do for others, even if it strains your own heart.” She palms my face with her weathered hand, and I look into her eyes.

It’s moments like this that I don’t take for granted. Someday, she won’t be here. But I’ll get to tell everyone that I grew up with such a close connection to this woman who

outlasted generations, countries, and a lot of sacrifices to provide for her family.

“He doesn’t know, Nonna.” A knot forms in my throat as I blink past the tears.

“No, he does. He knows that you’re in love with him. And he feels the same. Warren is the kind of man your grandfather was—quiet with his words but loud with his actions. His love for you is rooted deep, *bella*. He’s loved you since he was a boy, but never knew how to reconcile it. Warren has known tremendous loss, something none of us can imagine. He might have been pushed into this choice, but sometimes that’s the best thing for us. Sometimes, being forced to do something is the only way we get what we really want.”

“You really think he actually wants to be married to me?” Hope, stubborn and foolish, won’t be extinguished from my heart.

“I predict that in forty years, you’ll both be laughing about this with a grandbaby a piece on your hips.” She pats my cheek.

I can’t help but laugh. My nonna thinks she’s some psychic presence. But the picture she paints does sound like a dream.

“I’m not so sure.” I turn to grab a tissue and dab at my eyes.

“You’ll see, my girl. Everything will work out the way it’s meant to. But my one piece of advice for marriage? Things always get worse before they get better. It’s the staying the course that so many people have a problem with. Those who give up too easily when times get very tough. That isn’t you, Alana. You and Warren will stand the test of time.”

Her confidence is something I don’t feel. Not even remotely. “But what if he doesn’t love me back?”

Nonna rolls her eyes. “He’d be an idiot not to. But you’re also an idiot for not realizing he’s seen no other woman besides you since the moment you brought him home for that school project. Take this opportunity, my love. Show him that he made a mistake not pursuing you for pure reasons from the

get-go. Show him that what is between is something rare ... a love that almost no one these days finds.”

The words coming from this woman who had her love for nearly fifty years give me a renewed sense of fight. If she believes we'll look back on this one day as we rock on our front porch, who am I to say she's wrong?

I just hope and pray that my grandmother's sixth sense is right about my fake marriage.



## WARREN

**T**he papers on my desk feel like they will come up and bite me if I don't study them carefully enough.

Terms and monetary amounts jump out at me, property deeds, company structures ... all of it melting into one confusing jumble. The thing that keeps sticking in my head, though, is the stipulated five years.

Five years married to get the full amount of Arthur's estate.

That number shocked me when I first went over it with Arthur's attorney yesterday. The way Arthur had laid it out meant that his estate and money would be awarded for every year we successfully stayed husband and wife, with the biggest payout coming in year five. Of course, the million dollars we'll be awarded at the very start, meaning today, will be more than enough to fund August's scholarship and get Alana her storefront.

It's not like I need the rest of the money, and I don't care about it anyway. All I want is to get enough to do both of those things. Obviously, we won't be staying five years in the marriage.

Would we?

A week into our supposedly blissful, as far as the outside world is concerned, union and Alana and I have settled into a routine. We drive to work together every morning, get our tasks done, put on a show for her family and customers alike, then go home, where we retreat to our separate corners. Sure,



we eat dinner together most nights, maybe watch a show, but we don't have to put on the act in private.

I don't have to touch her like I can't keep my hands off her. I don't need to kiss her forehead when our friends from high school are looking just to make sure we're convincing. I don't need to chat with her about dinner plans, what we're up to this weekend, and how gorgeous she looks, just so other people overhear it.

Of course, I wish I could do all those things in the privacy of her home. I wish I could carry her upstairs to her room, lay her on the guest bed, and show her how good I'd make my wife feel if this were a real marriage. I wish I could talk about our future like we planned it all out down to the baby names. I wish I didn't have to pretend there is a giant chasm of awkwardness every night we split up to sleep in different rooms.

Thomas still isn't talking to me or her from what I know, and it's frustrating me to no end. I knew he'd be pissed, but I didn't realize he'd excommunicate us. Leona says she's trying to talk him down, but it doesn't seem to be working. I know one day he'll probably explode on me, and then Alana will know the real reason why I've put distance between us for years.

The rest of the Ashton clan is adjusting to the idea of our marriage well, though. Nonna ordered us a ceramic bowl with our wedding date on it from her favorite shop on the Amalfi coast. Alana's brothers threw me the "bachelor party" they never got to, which was just taking me out to one of our favorite local bars, buying all my drinks, then driving me home. Leona is knitting us the same kind of quilt her mother-in-law did for her when she and Thomas first got married.

Hope Crest has also run us through their gossip mill for the last seven days, with random people I've known for years coming up to me on the street to ask all about our marriage and wedding. Last night when I went to the Chinese take-out place to pick up an order for Alana and me, a couple I know from high school, plus the two owners, accosted me to know every detail of our wedding and why we eloped. I love living

in a small town, but everyone thinks everything is their business.

All the while, I've been trying my best to be completely normal with the woman who was my platonic best friend and is now my wife. Alana doesn't seem too freaked out over our situation, but maybe she's a better actor than I am.

Staring back down at the papers on my desk, I wonder what I'm supposed to do with all the businesses Arthur invested in. I'll need Patrick to take a heavy look at these, what with his accounting eye, and then get a financial planner involved. I'm the manager of a pizzeria and an ex-almost-pro football player; business isn't really my strong suit. I thrive on interacting with people, putting out fires, and filling in where needed. I'm the backbone, not the brains.

What I'm supposed to do with a small aviation company, an Irish brewhouse, two luxury car dealerships, a pharmaceutical startup, and many other companies in industries I didn't even realize existed ... well, I'm not quite sure. I want to do Arthur's legacy justice, but this doesn't seem to be anything I want to control.

Along with not wanting to analyze these documents and contracts, there is an email sitting in my inbox that I'd rather set on fire than respond to. That documentary director, Mason, who waited for me outside the pizzeria, found my email and sent another request to appear on camera. Telling him "over my dead body" might be too on the nose in this case, but I seriously feel like replying with exactly that.

Not for the first time, I wonder if my dad is putting him up to this. I haven't seen or spoken to the man in over a decade. I rip up any letters he sends. I don't watch the interviews he gives. I refuse to comment on anniversary articles commemorating my mother's death. But this documentary is going to be something I can't ignore. It'll be everywhere, strangers will be asking me about it, and it seems that this Mason guy doesn't give up easily.

The stress of it all is getting to me, a tightness pinching my chest as I lean back in my desk chair. I should be out front

helping Leona with lunch orders, but I came back when Arthur's lawyer messengered over the documents. The headache about telling Alana about the five-year stipulation rages back until my office door creaks open.

August breezes into my office, happier than I've seen her in months, and that's probably because she just returned from a school trip to Washington, DC, that lasted about five days, which means five days out of that hellhole of a house. I imagine all the freedom I can give her by awarding her that scholarship.

"I leave and you go and get married!" She hops up and down. "I thought Evan was joking when he told me you married Alana."

"Not a joke." I hold up my ring finger.

"Holy shit." She slaps a hand over her mouth. "Sorry, it's just so crazy. A lot to wrap my head around. But honestly, not at all. It's been clear since the jump that you two were MTB."

"MTB?" I ask, confused.

"Meant to be, one true loves, soulmates." The teen looks at me like I'm an idiot for not knowing that abbreviation. "You guys deserve to be happy. And together. You're two of the best people I know. Adopt me?"

She might be asking that as a joke, but we both know that if she genuinely wanted Alana and me to, we'd do so in a heartbeat.

"Thanks, Auggy. It means a lot to have your blessing."

She shrugs out of her coat and stashes her backpack behind my desk like she always does.

"Oh, I found a scholarship for you to apply to." I drop this casually, trying not to inflect any emotion into my voice.

"Really? I've been applying to every single one I've found, so I may have already filled it out." She sounds doubtful.

"Maybe, but come check to be sure." I pull up the landing page Alana fabricated two days ago and turn my laptop to

show her.

We worked hard together on making the scholarship sound legitimate so that August would have no misgivings about applying and then accepting when she inevitably was awarded the money.

“Hmm, hadn’t seen that one. Text me the link and I’ll look it over after my shift, yeah?” She’d come straight here after school.

“Sure thing. How is school, by the way, prom all squared away?”

She nods as she ties her apron around her waist. “Yep. It cost me a couple days of sucking up and accompanying Mom to a work dinner so she could tell lies about me and look like mother of the year, but she finally relented and signed the permission slip.”

I text her the link to the landing page as she stands in front of me so I don’t break into a fit about her horrible mother.

“All right, I’m going to start filling all the salt and pepper shakers. Anything else going on for tonight?”

“Not apart from the usual. I think Evan wants to try some tasting menu for this weekend, though, so you should stop in the kitchen to try the dishes so you can memorize them.”

A blush creeps over August’s cheeks. “All right, will do.”

She scurries out of my office, and I sigh. I’ve been noticing the same reaction out of her whenever I mention the youngest Ashton, and I truly hope Evan knows how off-limits she is. And that he’s not stupid enough to mess with a girl who has a chance to get out of here and get her life on track.

I make my way to the front to cash out early dinner orders for some of the teachers on their way home after school and to relieve Leona.

“My son-in-law!” She greets me with a big smacking kiss on the cheek. “Sunday will be our first family dinner as real relatives. How special.”

I've always been invited to Ashton family Sunday dinner, but this weekend will be different. It'll be a full-on performance outside of the restaurant, the first one for Alana and me. We'll have to act all lovey-dovey. My stomach dips just thinking about getting to touch her with an excuse not to hold back.

Mr. Claus, my old assistant football coach from high school, walks in to pick up an order from the counter.

"Warren, my boy, I hear congratulations are in order." He grins at me and extends a hand for me to shake.

I don't necessarily dislike the man, but he's always been smarmier than my liking.

Not wanting to be a dick, I shake his hand back. "Thank you."

"I always knew you were in bed with this family, just didn't realize it was literally." He winks at me.

Disgust and annoyance make my stomach roll. He's lucky Leona ran back to get his order when she saw him coming, or she'd have let her tongue loose on this jerk.

"I love my wife and her family very much." It's all I say because I'm very close to breaking my rule and disrespecting a customer.

"Frannie told me she saw Alana this morning at the gym, though, and the girl didn't even have a diamond. I thought you'd be a flashy football star someday. Ah, seems like Hope Crest gets some of the best of us."

I've always had a sneaking suspicion that this washed-up high school football champion with a bulging beer belly held some sort of spite and jealousy toward me. He used to make me run extra laps at practice, would berate me when the head coach wasn't looking, and always had something to say about my successful games.

"Hope Crest is my home, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else." I smile, combatting every negative point he's making.

He grumbles as Leona comes back with his order, and from her tight smile, I can tell she's not too keen on Mr. Claus either. As she rings him up and he pulls out his credit card, Alana bustles into the shop, all gorgeous smiles and wind-blown hair. She takes my breath away for a moment; my eyes lock on how she almost glides over the floor in those maddening heels she insists on wearing during the workday. She looks like a warm spring day in a flowing orange and red flower-print skirt and a white gauzy shirt that shows a peak of cleavage. I want to pull her into a private area and confess that I didn't just marry her for money, but I know we're past repressed feelings.

"Hi everyone!" she singsongs, scooting behind the counter.

Like we've been demonstrating, she kisses me chastely on the cheek. A quick peck, a gesture that a wife might give to a husband if she were arriving somewhere. I lean into it, palming her waist, trying to make it look as natural as possible.

I hear Mr. Claus snort derisively as we part. "That's how newlyweds greet each other these days? My God, when Frannie and I were first married, I was humping her in front of \_\_\_"

"Okay!" Leona interrupts him. "They're at work, and I kind of appreciate that my son-in-law is respectful in front of people."

"Or he's just not into his wife." Mr. Claus smiles deviously.

This guy is fucking unbelievable. I haven't had a real acquaintanceship with him since high school, yet he's pompous enough to come in here and spout his mouth off as if my marriage has anything to do with his opinion. As if a guy like him, so self-involved and generally gross, could have a better love life than I do. It pisses me off. It pisses me off so much that I grab Alana, sink my hands into her hair, and fuse my mouth to hers.

After a moment of shock, she kisses me back, her tongue sliding into my mouth as I make her part her lips. Jolts of

electricity shoot through me, rendering me senseless as I smoothly fit the groove of her mouth to mine. We move in tandem like I am meant for her and she for me; all the while, the entire restaurant is staring at us. But I can't care. I can't even remember that this started as a fuck you to the old high school bully coach I was trying to make even more jealous.

What starts as a gesture to prove a point molds into something incredibly deep. I search her lips for everything we've held back for fifteen years. Pouring out every forbidden feeling, every fantasy I've dreamed of her when I'm alone in the dark. I kiss her like she's really my wife, like my lips belong to her for the rest of time.

Alana's quiet moan down my throat snaps me out of the haze, and I break away swiftly, meeting her shocked blue pools as our noses brush. Her irises flit back and forth between mine, like she's trying to find the meaning of why that kiss morphed into something neither of us could control. Like wildfire, sucking us in and destroying everything in its path.

"Woo!" August fans her face with embarrassment while Leona whistles and stares at the ceiling.

"We get it." Mr. Claus rolls his eyes angrily as he stomps out of the store, and two customers who must have come in while we were making out start to slow clap with grins on their faces.

Alana wipes her mouth with the back of her hand as her cheeks turn bright red. I try to clear my throat and stick my hands in my pockets to adjust my rock-hard cock without it looking obvious, but I think I fail.

*I'm in such deep, deep shit.*

There is absolutely no way things will ever be normal between us. I mean, I guess I knew that when I asked her to marry me. But it's unlocked that thing inside me that could always put distance between us. Having to touch and kiss her in front of other people to prove our genuine connection has opened up a world of shit for me. Like I won't be able to stop if she wants to try this in private.

“I, uh, better get to work.” She shuffles her feet and runs a hand through her midnight waves.

“Or have a cold drink.” Her mother winks at her.

“*Mom,*” she mutters like she’s humiliated.

Meanwhile, my heart hasn’t stopped galloping, and I can’t seem to stop my fingers from reaching out for her. “I’ll come back to your office after dinner service starts, okay?”

“Ew, I don’t need to know what you’re doing to my sister back there.” Evan walks out of the kitchen with a grimace on his face.

“Christ,” I grumble as I head for the front door, needing some air.

Leona’s chuckle hits my back as I walk out.

But my backward glance reveals Alana, still standing in the same spot I left her, her eyes on me as her fingers dust over the lips I just thoroughly kissed.





**O**n Friday afternoon, I arrange for some of our part-timers to cover the afternoon and beginning of the weekend dinner rush so that I can surprise Alana with something.

“You ready?” I ask as I rap my knuckles on her office door.

“Just finishing up the last of this giveaway campaign.” She taps on her keyboard distractedly, chewing on her full bottom lip.

Today, it’s the color of blood-red oranges, and I wonder what her lipstick would taste like if I took it off with my mouth. Since making Alana my wife, my dirty fantasies about her have intensified. Whenever she talks, I’m distracted by the way one side of her mouth tips up. As she comes down the stairs of our joint house in the morning, I can’t help that my eyes trace every inch of muscle on those long legs. Sitting on the couch together watching a show has become torture, just hearing the little reaction noises she makes to a storyline.

Of course, all these hidden obsessions were hard to manage before we were married, but at least then I didn’t have to be around her twenty-four seven. Now, she’s legally mine to touch and hold. Yes, I’m well aware that sounds creepy and like I don’t care about consent, which I very much do. It’s just that under the eyes of the law, we should be doing what all married people do.

“What’s the giveaway again?” I clear my throat and sit in one of the fuzzy white chairs she has on the other side of her

desk.

Alana always has something or other going on with the marketing of Hope Pizza. Sure, we drum up good business by word of mouth, but Alana is responsible for the people who come far and wide for a slice. She's the one who started getting us into news segments and publications. A couple years ago, our pizzeria was chosen as the host spot for an episode of a food competition show, and the influx of customers after that was insane. That had all been Alana's doing. She's the one who comes up with PR strategy, social media budgets, creates graphics for the ads, etc. I know her parents were tough on her, but that's how I know she'll be successful with this new store. The woman has more hustle in one pinky than more of us have in our whole body.

"Giving away a free dinner for two, plus a magnum bottle of our best wine. All they have to do is follow us on all socials and tag a friend. The post has three hundred comments so far and I just posted it two days ago, but I wanted to ad boost it so that it gets more traction. Our social presence is good, but I'm trying to draw more newsletter signups, so all these people will be blasted the link all week as this giveaway goes on. Because I'm persistent as hell." She grins like she isn't the business devil.

"You're an evil genius." I reach across the desk and high-five her.

The contact makes my skin spark, like it normally does, and I can't stop thinking about our kiss at the pickup counter the other afternoon. Judging how she was trying to scoot closer to me on the couch in the living room last night, I think she hasn't forgotten either.

"Where are we headed anyway?" She still doesn't look up, keeping those gorgeous eyes glued to her last task.

"You'll see." I try to contain my smirk.

That has Alana's head lifting, a loose lock of hair drifting in front of her eye. I want to tuck it behind her ear badly but know this isn't the time or place to explore the itch to touch her.

“Being tricky today, are we?” she teases, closing her laptop and gathering her things into the oversized camel-colored bag she always carries.

“I swear, you transport a tractor-trailer in there or something.” I nod my chin in the bag’s direction.

“It’s a lot being a woman, we require many things.” She sticks her tongue out at me.

What would she do if I nipped it with my teeth? God, I would risk the potential elbow to the ribs to find out. Would she kiss me back as passionately as she did in front of the pickup counter?

“One of those things we require is a nightly bubble bath, which you’re cutting into with this little errand. So can we go?” Her casual Friday jeans hug every curve of her waist, hips, and ass.

Fuck, now I’m thinking of her in the bath, hair all piled up with some sexy book in her hands, and I have to walk slowly so as not to cause any more friction to my semi-hard dick.

“Guess I won’t bring you up front to show you the soft top white Jeep I rented, then.” I shrug, naming her dream car from when we were in high school.

Alana’s eyes light up a little. “You didn’t. What is this, the wedding transportation I never got?”

Chuckling, I hover my hand above the small of her back to move her down the hallway and out the front onto Newton Street. We wave goodbye to her family and the rest of the staff, then we’re standing on the sidewalk.

Our little river valley town teems with people, the kids already dismissed from school and hanging out on the main drag. Teenage boys try to impress the girls, shop owners put out chalkboard signs with today’s sales, and couples sit on benches sipping coffees or treating themselves to before-dinner treats. Everything is beginning to bloom and green, and the stone-fronted buildings stand astute next to the rushing of the river rapids. Music from a solo guitar floats through the street, and I know that soon, some other musically-gifted

citizens will set up with the lone player and form a rag-tag band, providing entertainment to the people.

“*Hey.*” She pouts when she realizes there is no such car waiting.

“Promise, it’s a much better surprise.” Then I lace my hand with hers.

After all, we’re in public, and I’m supposed to touch her like this. Even if her father still won’t talk to me, and I’m set on making it through this marriage without breaking all the rules, I can’t help that my limbs gravitate toward hers.

We cross the street, cars slowing for us and some drivers we know waving as they pass on their way home for dinner. The surprise I have for her is just a few more feet down, with brown paper on the windows and a sign that’s been recently taken down.

Producing a key from my pocket, I unlock the deadbolt of the glass door and hold it open for her.

“Okay ...” Alana looks skeptical as she walks in before me.

Flicking on the overhead lights, we’re greeted with an empty nine-hundred-square-foot room. Recessed lighting illuminates the space, with two exposed brick walls on either side of us and original hardwood flooring from when the block of buildings was put up here just before nineteen twenty. The two painted walls are a shade of daisy yellow, and a long black counter runs along the back wall. White bookcases stand against one of the brick walls, but they’re so in need of repair that they’re probably best left outside for the garbage truck.

Other than that, it’s just dust, some dead spiders, and a whole lot of possibility.

“It’s a nice space,” she confirms, circling slowly as she assesses it once, twice, and then a third time.

“There is a bathroom in the back, along with a small office. Then a merchandise room, although we’d have to build it out to really utilize the space. I think you’d want to tear out the black counter and do a floor-to-ceiling built-in with a

matching checkout area, and maybe a new front door to make it catch the eye more. Patrick said he'd hook me up with Cass's security company to install all of that, and we could talk to some local craftsman to do the display pieces."

My skin prickles with awareness, because she's studying me as I tell her all the ideas I've been ruminating over. Showing Alana that I am in this with her is of utmost importance. It shows that I know she didn't just agree to marry me for the money but because we could create this market/shop as a partnership. Even if our marriage isn't the traditional one, our friendship is stronger than all of it. We'd start something new here together.

"Really great ideas, although the first step would be a good deep clean." Her sneaker scuffs some dust on the floor. "But it's got good bones. I can picture the tables full of products, and it's right on Newton. Not far from the pizzeria. I like it, great option."

Now for my surprise.

"Good. Because I already rented it for the next two years."

Inky waves swing my way, and I swerve to avoid the swarm of vanilla and citrus-smelling locks threatening to smack me. "You what?"

"Well, you said you wanted me involved, and I wanted to show you I had initiative. And I thought you'd love it, with all the exposed brick, the prime location ..." I'm rambling, the nerves getting the best of me.

If she hates it, it'll be a blow to my ego. But even worse, I'll feel like she doesn't have faith in me, faith in knowing what she'll like. Not that I'll admit it to her, but this is the first "husbandly" thing I've done in terms of surprise presents or grand gestures. Yes, it's a *very* grand one, but the puffing out of my chest after I signed the lease papers, knowing I was doing this for her and us? It made me feel like someone worthy of wearing her ring on my finger.

When those full lips split into a beaming smile, a pride I've never felt fills my entire body.

Alana launches at me, wrapping her arms around my neck as she squeals with delight. “You got me a storefront!”

“I did.” I laugh, pressing my nose to her hair.

For just a moment, I let myself pretend she’s mine for real. That we can celebrate and christen this place like real newlyweds would.

“I can’t believe this is ours. We’re going to do amazing things here. Give my dad a big middle finger. But more than that, I can’t wait to fill it with all the local favorites I want to introduce to all the tourists who come. You think we could have it ready in time for the summer?”

We’re still tangled in each other, and even though I should, I don’t let her go. I press her to me, holding her waist with a medium grip, as I look down into the most beautiful face I’ve ever beheld.

“Maybe. If not, then midway through? Maybe July. It depends who we can have get to work right away. Justin or Hollis might be available, but I’m not sure until I talk to them. We may be able to open without every single thing done, but I’ll have to work with the town committees and zoning board.”

“Those people all love you, it’ll be a breeze.” She pats my chest affectionately like she has complete confidence that I can deliver all the things we need by tomorrow.

“You’ll need to be patient.” I bop the tip of her nose with my pointer finger.

“Yeah, yeah. So what paint color on the two walls? I’m thinking a sage green. Maybe we can grab some tarps from the store. I’ll have to start the socials on all platforms. And then —”

Alana is still talking, but all I can do is zone out and watch her mouth move as her eyes flit about the room. This is one of the reasons I love her so much; once an idea pops into her head, her passion and drive will do everything in their power to make it come to fruition successfully. Her creativity, the way her mind works, how hyped-up she gets while picturing the exact way she wants things ...

It's a wondrous thing to watch unfold.

A quiet chuckle works its way out of my throat. "While I love the way your brain works, maybe we could slow down a little? I brought a little celebration gift."

The bottle of champagne I brought in earlier sits in a small cooler full of ice, and I pull it out. Next to the cooler are the two coffee mugs I'd taken from the kitchen cabinet at Alana's this morning, considering I had no idea if she had flutes or not. It's not like I have them at my place.

"Now you're thinking like a boss business owner." She nods confidently, accepting the mugs as I work on popping the cork. "I can't believe you rented this place. Thank you, Warren. Thank you for believing in me."

Warmth spreads over my chest. "I always believe in you."

She nods, emotion filling her expression. "I guess I know that, but it's felt like, lately, not a lot of people have been on my side. With our fight, and then how Dad and my brothers weren't backing me on this ... it felt pretty lonely. Not that I had us getting married on my bingo sheet, but if it got us here, then I'm happy we did it. Having you support this dream enough to start acting on it, surprising me with this? It means a whole hell of a lot."

A knot forms at the base of my throat, blocking the words I really want to say. We shouldn't talk about our past, and we shouldn't talk about the feelings that have existed forever. We shouldn't talk about the promise I made her father or why we haven't spoken in months. But I want to. I want to desperately.

Today isn't about that, though. Today, I get to be her knight in shining armor, supporting her dream while others are doubting it.

So I pour the champagne and keep eye contact over the rim of the mug as we cheers and then drink. As the bubbles fill my throat and nose, I know we're dangling dangerously over the precipice of something.

And part of me wants to fall in with her.





**K**issing your pretend husband in a very real and panty-dropping way is confusing.

Having him rent you out a storefront to make your dreams come true is confusing.

Going on fake date nights and then to the bar with all of your family and friends while acting like a couple is confusing.

That pretty much sums up the past few weeks of my life. Confusing as all hell, with a side of wild horniness for the one man who won't lay a hand on me.

Until he brought me to the storefront, I'd been thinking about our kiss at the pickup counter nonstop for days. Yes, I know he did it for show, to prove that asshole coach of his wrong. We both loathed that guy since high school. It didn't erase the fact, however, that it turned into something much bigger.

That his commanding lips on mine lit something up inside me that had been dead since the last time he kissed me like that, ten years ago. That it feels, for the first time since we got married, that the tight leash Warren has on any feelings for me is slipping. Even just a little. That kiss gave me hope I shouldn't have and left me more secure than it should, and I've been operating on that adrenaline since it happened.

Then he brought me to the new store, and I've been a goner. I don't want to be one of those women looking too much into a man's actions. But Warren's are those of a man in

love. Kissing me like he'd die if he had to hold back one second longer. Fulfilling my dreams by going ahead to rent it without my input because he knew I'd simply adore the space.

Of course, he knows me like the back of his hand—we've been best friends for years. But something changed in the last few weeks, and it feels like we're walking a tightrope as he holds my hand and leads me inside the noisy, upscale bar.

Warren suggested we come to the Laura Inn after we finished the bottle of champagne on the floor of our new store. I begged to go home and take a bath, but something in his expression said he didn't want to take me there. Well, his eyes said he did, but I know his rational brain, which I hate most of the time, told him that's a danger zone.

So here we are, walking in to find our usual table by the fireplace at our favorite bar. The Laura isn't a dance club or live band kind of place, like other places after dark in Hope Crest. It's attached to a beautiful hotel, and between the romantic chandeliers, enormous piano, and black wrought-iron tables with light wood chairs, the whole place gives a modern antique vibe. With the log cabin built before the Revolutionary War attached, the original Laura Inn, if you will, the entire place gives off a warmth you can't get in other places in town.

With a mix of raw shellfish and quaint split chicken, their menu is delicious. And the drinks they serve are top-notch, not to mention top-shelf. Of course, we know the owner and often work local fairs or town events with him, so we get a discount. It's probably why Warren and I made this *our* bar when we arrived home fresh off college graduation.

This is where we downed one too many tequila shots during the big football championship five years ago and ended up having to book hotel rooms because we couldn't even walk the couple of blocks over to the friend's place we'd been crashing at. Then there was the time he challenged me to a wine tasting, and if I could guess the correct type of wine, he'd serve my weekend shifts at the pizzeria for a month. I ended up sleeping in blissfully on those couple of Saturdays.

While I love coming here, and it reminds me of the bond we have, it's not without its thorns. Nights where I watched him flirt with other women as they slipped him their numbers. Evenings when I thought it would only be the two of us and a couple of his buddies would arrive.

“You two look too chipper to sit with me.”

My oldest brother, the growliest son of a bitch I've ever had the pleasure to know, sits on the velvet maroon couch by the fireplace. It's our usual spot, either here or on the black metal barstools, and I can see he's started without us with his typical glass of whiskey. Liam acts like he was born pissed off at the world, but I remember a time when my older brother was the sweetest human walking the planet. Something changed around the time he left high school, and while I love him dearly, I wish he'd snap out of it.

“How was the end of dinner rush?” Warren asks, genuinely curious, as he squeezes Liam's shoulder and sits on the couch opposite him.

I take my place beside him, our thighs pressing together as he hangs that long, lean, muscled arm across the back of the couch behind me.

It's rare that Warren isn't at Hope Pizza, especially for a crazy weekend service, but he took the time tonight to show me what he rented for me. It made the whole thing even more special, the fact that he put our new project and my wants over the job he's so dedicated to.

“Fine, until Auggy's mom showed up.”

“Fuck.” Warren sits up, his back going ramrod straight.

Liam holds a hand up. “It's taken care of. She and Mom got into it, with that bitch accusing us of manipulating her daughter and holding her against her will. Meanwhile, August stores her tips in a coffee can above the frozen dough in the walk-in freezer so the money she's saving won't get taken at home. I swear to God, if I could ...” He trails off, knowing it's better to leave some things left unsaid.

My hand rubs up and down Warren's back in gentle circles because I know how much August's problems stress him. He doesn't always come right out and say it, but I know he sees the younger, damaged version of himself in her. We exchange a look, and I know without a doubt it was one hundred percent worth it to marry him. Even if this ends with my heart being smashed to smithereens, at least August will get the help she needs with college.

"Aside from that, it was good. Everyone loved Evan's new fish dish, even though I could murder him for abusing my tomatoes the way he did to plate them just how he wanted."

I'm still trying to calm Warren as I hear him taking deep breaths in and out of his nose. "Our little brother has increased revenue and given me very pretty food pictures to put on Instagram, so you do what he says."

"Then he should respect my produce." Liam waves the waitress down to order another glass of whiskey.

Evan is the culinary brain behind Hope Pizza, having returned from his Michelin-star gig in California to take over for our father not too long ago. Liam runs the family farm, where we source most of our ingredients, which is what gives our food an edge and a secret that many can't replicate. The two butt heads constantly because the farmer and the chef are at odds about how to treat certain produce. I stay out of it but wonder what will happen when Dad truly retires. Will there be a blood bath for taking the reins?

"Warren rented me a storefront." I beam, bragging to my brother as I change the subject.

"Hell of a wedding gift, huh?" Liam snorts.

Looking back at me, I can tell my husband has let go of some of the stress and worry, and I beg him with my eyes to come all the way back. To be present with me, enjoy the moment.

"Anything for my wife." Warren grins at me as he puts in our drink orders; an IPA for him and a glass of white for me.

After all, he knows me well. The way he says my wife, though? Has wetness coating my thong. Jesus, who knew matrimony could make one so feral?

“Dad is going to have a coronary,” my grumpiest brother grumbles. “I’m not dealing with that.”

“You won’t have to, and neither will we. Considering he isn’t speaking to us, we’re free and clear to do whatever we want. Also, it’s not his money, so he can fuc—”

“Hey, that’s your father,” Liam interrupts me, scowling. “He might be a grumpy bastard at times, but he loves you. He’s crushed he couldn’t dance with you at your wedding or walk you down the aisle. You know that, right?”

“Shit,” Warren curses.

“Shit,” I echo because I hadn’t even thought about it.

We were so wrapped up in the wedding, Arthur’s estate, and our own stubborn pride, I never even stopped to consider it. I thought Dad was pissed at us because of that weird pact he and Warren had that my fake husband would never tell me about, even to this day. I didn’t stop to realize that I robbed my father of the couple of moments he’d probably been dreaming about since I was born.

Once upon a time, I dreamed about them too. My father walking me down the aisle, picking the song we’d dance to before I formed a family with another man, the speech he’d give, and how he’d try to swallow back his tears. My father is a very proud man, and this has probably been a huge blow to his ego. I’m his only little girl, and I’ve taken this from him.

“Yeah, shit. So give him some grace. We’re all proud of you about this store, he just had his reservations about the financials, which it seems you’ve worked out on your own.” He eyes Warren and I like we’re hiding something. “Give him time. Hell, we’re still adjusting, even if we’re happy for you two.”

Warren pulls me closer to him, and I know he can sense my guilt and unease. Per usual, I railroaded my way into getting what I wanted and didn’t consider the feelings of those

around me. It's one of my faults, and I reconcile with myself right then to apologize to my father.

"I need to have a conversation with him." Warren leans over to whisper in my ear.

And even though we should both feel like shit for cursing my dad and going behind everyone's back to rent the shop, all I can focus on is this intimate connection in a room full of people who've known us for a very long time. I've always felt like Warren is my person and me his, but this takes us to something so much more. People probably see this exchange, with me leaning into his side and him tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, and wonder what we get up to in the bedroom. They're probably curious about the dirty things that happen behind closed doors.

The thought, however voyeuristic, turns me on. It could also be the alcohol we've consumed.

But before I can walk my fingers up Warren's thigh, with him not being able to brush it off since we're in public, we're interrupted.

Patrick, my middle brother and the closest one to me, walks in and finds our group. "Thanks for taking off before mopping the kitchen floor."

"You owed me, I stayed late three nights last week for you," Liam reminds him.

"Because I have a pregnant wife at home and worked all day balancing the books. Man, we really need to get some more bodies in there for orders and service." Patrick shrugs out of his coat.

I feel Warren looking at me once more, and the silent thoughts we have mirror each other; what will happen when we open a store of our own and need to split our time?

Hope Pizza will always belong to our family, but maybe it's time to restructure. If no one wants to dedicate every hour of their life to the place, something would have to change. With a baby on the way for Pat and Cass, and our storefront,

August going to college ... things are changing and we'll all have to figure it out together.

Tonight, though, I'm not going to worry. "Cass joining us?"

He nods as he rises to go get something at the bar, I presume. "We're not staying long, but she promised Wilson she'd come with him after their workshop ended."

Liam's glass hits the table too hard as he sets it down. "Just the two of them coming?"

Patrick rolls his eyes. "Yes. Gabrielle won't be joining us."

"You mean Miss Murphy?" Warren chuckles. "Still weird."

"You have no idea," Patrick mutters as he walks off to the bar.

Meanwhile, Liam is studying his glass with a deep frown on his face like he'll find the meaning of life inside it, and I can tell something is up.

"What is going—"

Before I can get it out, Cass walks in with Gabrielle and Wilson, the two other people who work at the Hope Crest Playhouse with her in tow, and waves to us. All three make their way over to where we're sitting, and Liam is now bouncing his knee like he's about to yell fire in this crowded room.

"Hi, gorgeous." Patrick stands to plant a wet kiss on his wife's lips and palm her belly like he is one with the baby.

"Ah, Alana! I didn't realize you'd be here." Cass comes over to give me a big hug.

I greet Wilson as well, who gives Warren shit about not getting me a proper, fat diamond, and then turns to Gabrielle. While she and Cass have become good friends, I haven't spent much time with her since she moved back. She was never my teacher, but with Liam's reaction, my interest is immediately piqued.



“Gabrielle, good to see you out. I feel like the three of us need to go get dinner at some point.” I point to Cass and myself.

Her eyes flit around nervously, and I’m surprised that this woman who has some years on me looks completely intimidated by my suggestion.

“Uh ... yeah, we should.”

She’s answering me, but her eyes are glued to Liam. I watch their interaction like it’s a tennis match, my eyes pinging back and forth, and see my brother down his glass of whiskey in one large gulp.

“I’m going to head out.” He abruptly stands and brushes past all of us.

“Liam!” Patrick guffaws, and Cass shakes her head with a disappointed smile.

“Let him go, it’s fine.” Gabrielle collapses on the couch in the spot Liam just vacated, and I’m burning to know what that was all about.

“Come on, let’s get you a drink.” Cass pulls her up by the hand and then motions me to follow them.

While I want to ask a million questions, I barely know Gabrielle yet and am dealing with a huge drama of my own, so I keep them in my brain. I do, however, ask her a bunch of questions about herself and learn that, like Cass, she kind of grew up around here but moved away before going to school in town. Then, about ten years ago, she taught at the high school for a year before leaving again.

“My grandmother recently passed and left me her house, so I came back and realized I didn’t want to leave this time. There is something magical about this town.” She sighs, stirring the cocktail straw in her vodka soda.

“I hear that. It’s why I can’t manage to sever the umbilical cord.” I snort, far too tipsy now to filter my mouth.

Cass sucks on her lemonade. “Can we not talk about umbilical cords? I’m scared enough that this kid is going to

pop out of my body like an alien.”

“You’ll probably be glowing like a supermodel during childbirth, shut it.” I roll my eyes because my sister-in-law is the most gorgeous actress on earth.

“That kid is going to be so freaking beautiful.” Gabrielle sighs.

One drink turns into two, turns into three, and I’m suddenly swaying as I make my way back to the couches my brothers are occupying.

I’ve had enough alcohol to put me out for the night, and because I’ve sat on his lap hundreds of times, and because he’s my husband and we’re in public, I plop down on Warren’s lap like it’s my favorite seat.

“Hi, husband.” I smack a kiss on his cheek.

“Hi, wife.” A mischievous twinkle lights those gray eyes.

“You two are adorable,” Cass squees.

I wiggle in his lap, and Warren’s hands tighten on my waist. That’s when I feel it, the hard ridge of him pressed against my ass cheek. My heart and pussy both give a happy dance at knowing I affect him like this and grind discreetly down just to drive the point home.

“You’re in dangerous territory,” he growls in my ear in a voice I’ve only heard directed at me once or twice when it comes to him.

“Do you think I’m afraid?” Twisting my head, I smirk at his stormy expression.

Before I can taunt him further, though, two girls I was friendly with in our teenage years come by our group and squeal at my position on Warren. It’s that point on a Friday night when all the people we grew up with congregate at the Laura and where vision and minds start to get hazy. They coax me to do a shot with them, and I watch as Wilson pulls Gabrielle into an enticing salsa, and Patrick has another drink since his pregnant wife agreed to be his designated sober driver.

I lose Warren for a bit in all of it, the crowd growing as the hour gets later.

Kate and Rebecca were in my grade, and we were close enough in high school. We had a few nights out here and there in our early twenties, and while I typically stick to my family and my best friend, now husband, these two girls were friends. Which is how I end up drunkenly gossiping at the bar with them.

“I can’t believe you got *married*. To *Warren*,” Kate blurts as Rebecca giggles at the idea.

“It’s pretty funny, actually.” I giggle and then snort, bubbles of the beer I’m drinking filling my nose.

“Remember when you guys were paired as parents in health class? You had to take care of that fake baby? Warren was so adorable during the whole thing, I totally swooned over him.” Kate sighs dreamily.

“You and the entire sophomore class.” Rebecca giggles.

Jealousy, big and green with talons and fangs, grips my stomach. These two have no idea that while Warren might appear to be my husband, nothing could be further from the truth. Knowing that the entire town wants him and that they could have him when he eventually breaks this off makes me want to hurl.

“I forgot about that.” Warren laughs as he comes up behind me. Instantly, I’m buzzing with warmth and a need for his hands on me. “Mrs. Hodgkins talked so much about how horrible childbirth was that I just wanted to give you, the new mom, a break.”

Every other feeling besides pure, unadulterated want vanishes from my head and heart. Because all I can imagine is Warren as a father, holding a tiny baby and cooing softly to his son or daughter. And how badly I want that to be my baby, too.

“If you are half the father you were as a teenage boy faking the assignment, Alana will be a *very*, very lucky

woman.” Rebecca’s eyes dance with an ulterior motive as she eyes Warren.

It doesn’t escape me that my best friend used to be the most eligible bachelor. But he’s mine now, at least for as long as I can keep him, and even though I consider Rebecca a friend, I want him to myself.

“I’m already a very lucky woman.” I palm his cheek and sink into his body, his arms wrapping around me like it’s a reflex.

“You about ready to go, tipsy?” His cut, masculine jaw tics up with a siren’s grin, and I lean up on my toes to plant a kiss on his lips without thinking.

Only I am privy to the quick gasp of shock he intakes as my mouth meets his, but then he’s leaning in, giving them all a show. Part of me wants to stay in this bar because I know the minute we leave it, I won’t have a reason to do this.

“I suppose. Take me home, husband.” I like using that word way more than I’d like to admit.

“Yes, wife.” He chuckles and bids our high school friends farewell. I hug Cass and Gabrielle, who are heading out soon as well, and wink at Wilson as I watch him chat up an older gentleman at the bar.

The warm night air feels good on my heated face as Warren leads me to the parking lot, and I lace my fingers in his.

“Good day?” he murmurs.

“One of the best. Thank you for my store.” I grin, looking at him like he’s simultaneously a meal I want and my knight in shining armor.

“Anything for you, Al.” Those gray eyes bore into mine as he walks me to the passenger side of the car.

Something in the air shifts, and I half expect him to push me up against the side of it rather than open the door. But when he does and tucks me safely inside, all hope deflates from my chest like a sad balloon.

Warren is quiet as he gets in, turns on the car, and backs out of the parking lot. Soft rock hums through the front seat, and he sings along under his breath.

And because I'm drunk and because I'm tired of wanting this man and not being able to have him, I cross the boundary of the center console and rest my hand on his knee.

"Al, what're you doing?" His voice is sharp.

"Touching my husband." I lean into the little pet names we were using at the bar.

"You know we only do that in public." A warning is issued in those words.

"There are benefits to having a wife." I ignore him and go with my typical bulldozing.

"I have all the benefits I need being married to you. A best friend, a support system, a confidant. We don't need any others." Although he's trying to be gentle, Warren is only reiterating the stance he's held for ten-plus years.

"We're married. We could have *those* benefits." The alcohol has made me unhinged when it comes to my level of horny.

As if I haven't wanted this man desperately for years and am using our predicament as an excuse to get in his pants. My hand skates over his thigh as I try my best to act seductively.

"Cut it out, Al." He means to sound definitive, but I hear the nervous crack in his voice.

"Why? You know it'd be good. It was good, even as fumbling teens." I drop this tidbit like it isn't the first time we've acknowledged it out loud.

Warren's shocked intake of breath demonstrates just how far over the line I've gone. "You're drunk, you don't know what you're doing. Hands off and let's focus on getting you to bed safe."

The car zips through town as the feeling of rejection seeps into my bones. Leaning as far as I can away from him, I stare out the window while trying to keep my tears behind my eyes.

The twinkle of lights from the houses still awake in Hope Crest grows few and far between as we drive away from downtown.

“This is what happens when PDA leads to confusion,” Warren grumbles, and as I swing my eyes to him, I see he’s keeping his on the road.

“No, this is what happens when you make someone bury feelings for decades and then ask that same person to marry you,” I snap, losing my temper and all control on my thoughts and emotions.

That shuts him up, the interior of the car silent for the rest of the short drive home. Between being in drunk hysterics internally and the ever-present sting of Warren not wanting to admit he loves me the way I love him, I know I need to make it to my room to break down.

Once he parks the car, I’m immediately bolting out and heading for the front door.

“I’m trying to be a good man. A stand-up friend. The kind of guy I never saw modeled until I came in contact with your family. Please, let me be him.”

His quiet voice is what spurs me to stutter and turn. When I do, Warren’s entire frame is slumped, his eyes on the pavement, as if he’s sorry he has to do this to me ... but not sorry he’s doing it.

Rolling my eyes, I try to keep it together for one moment more. “I don’t want you to be him. I want you to stop acting. I want you to do whatever is in your heart. Whatever you feel for me, that’s the man I want. Stop thinking about the person you think you need to be.”

With every step he takes toward me, our eyes locking, my heart hiccups. Is this finally the moment he’ll put an end to my madness?

Warren’s gaze roams over my face when he comes within an inch of me, and I unconsciously lean forward, desperately trying to telepath to him to do something.

A beat passes. Then two. The tension is so electric and frustrating, I wouldn't be surprised if the power lines around us started sparking.

"I can't." He shakes his head as if dispelling all the possibilities he just thought about acting on.

My heart plummets, a sickly feeling moving through my cheeks as bile gathers in my throat. The tall, strapping man nearly runs inside like a shark is chasing his ass, leaving me on the driveway in dejected horror. My heart hangs by a thread, threatening to rip itself from my body altogether.

If marrying him hasn't given him the go-ahead to act on how he really feels, I'm fearful that nothing ever will.

Mere minutes ago, I told him this had been one of the best days ever. In seconds, he brought me crashing back down to the reality I'll always be trapped in.





**I**t's rare that I spend a day just lounging around my house.

Work isn't work to me since the other employees are my family, and the business is our lifeblood. Since I could be on social media all times of the day, I am typically on my laptop or phone at home, connecting with customers on messenger or doing fun interactive series on our various platforms.

Some would call me a workaholic, and I'd say that's true. Especially with all the to-do lists I've been making for the new store recently.

If I'm not working, I'm usually getting a meal with friends, walking the canal, trying to go into the city to see a play or concert ... I'm not good at relaxing or sitting still. It's probably because my house makes me feel lonely, and it reminds me that if I stay here more, I'll primarily be alone.

Once Warren moved in, not only did I want everything that came along with having a husband in the physical aspect, but I look forward to having a roommate to do things with. Cook, watch shows, and have a drink on the back deck when it gets warmer.

Unfortunately, that bliss only lasted a few weeks. Because since the night out at the Laura Inn, things have been so tense and awkward that we haven't talked in more than monosyllabic words for over a week.

Warren is pretending that none of it ever happened, or maybe he thinks I was too blackout to remember. And I'm so

sullen and dejected that I can barely look at him. It's cliché, but I keep wondering what's so wrong with me that he'd marry me but still not cross this stupid fucking invisible line he set for himself.

I'm not the kind of person who sulks in bad moods or lets myself get stuck in a funk. But after that, and a hard week at work trying to put up with all the negative energy coming at me from all directions, I find myself in bed at two p.m., scrolling through my phone like a zombie.

My stomach growls, and I have a crick in my neck from lying in this position too long, but I've heard Warren bustling around down there all day, and I'm being a coward.

It's bad enough that I'm hiding the storefront from my parents, the nature of our marriage from my siblings, and what I really want from Warren now that he's shut me down. To be actually hiding out now, though? Like some fearful child who won't face the music?

This isn't me.

Throwing back the covers, I puff out my chest and avoid the mirror, because my goblin-like state will only deter me from stepping the fuck up and going downstairs.

Slowly, I emerge from my cave, looking around the corners to see if my fake husband is anywhere I might be able to avoid him. My feet are soft on the stairs, my stomach bubbling with hunger and anxiety. As I hit the bottom one, I hear him.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Warren swears under his breath at the kitchen counter.

He's leaning against the cabinet in a white Hope Crest Football T-shirt and black joggers, and it's criminal how edible he looks. It's also damn unfair that I have to live and be married to this man, but he refuses to give me any of the perks. I'm about to creep back upstairs like the chicken I am, but then I get a look at his face.

Pure, raw fear marks every handsome feature, and his hand shakes with the letter he's scouring. His teeth are sunken into

his bottom lip, and I've only ever seen him look this ruffled once before, and that was when a kid in middle school brought up his mom's murder.

Something in my bones tells me to put everything aside and go to him.

"Are you okay?" I touch his arm, and he jumps, and I realize he didn't even register me entering the kitchen.

"Fine." He crumples up the letter and proceeds to hide it behind his back.

Even though I'm mad at him, even though we're in this weird non-talking stage again, I chuckle a little at this childish move.

"Really? We're not five. I see you holding that behind your back." I pop a hip and cop an attitude.

"It's nothing, Al. Drop it. I can get out of your hair if you want the house to yourself."

"Oh good, I see we're going to continue completely avoiding each other." My saucy side comes out because even if I've been ignoring him, it doesn't mean I like it when he points out trying to do the same to me.

"It's a letter from a director," he grits out, that strong jaw ticking like he's grinding down on his back molars.

"Huh?" I'm usually the one that media reaches out to about the restaurant, so I'm confused. "For something for Hope. Let me see."

My hands make a grab around him for the letter, and all of a sudden, my body is pressed to Warren's. He must be so in his own head, though, because he doesn't back away or push me off.

"It's a letter from a directory who has been harassing me about doing a documentary about my father. About my mother's murder. He's apparently in touch with him in prison and wants me to sit down for a full interview."

The pain in his voice makes me want to burn the world down.

“Harassing you ... wait, how long has this been going on?”

“Since the week we got married. He was waiting outside the restaurant the first time he approached me.”

That was two months ago, and it only now registers that we’ve been married for two months. I brush that revelation aside to focus on him, though.

“What the hell, that’s a new one.”

This isn’t the first time the media or a filmmaker has attempted to ask Warren about his mother’s murder. Movie rights, life rights, interviews ... he’s been offered big bucks to sign off on all of them and never has.

“It’s going to be on a big streaming service. They’re apparently doing the full treatment for it, dragging out jury members, the original detectives on the case, my father. My mother’s old friends, even grade school classmates of hers, have signed on. These fucking people. Can they not let her rest in peace?”

The balled-up letter flies across the room as he violently chucks it like he wants it to smash like glass. But it’s not satisfying whatsoever, just floating to the ground.

“Can you stop it at all?” I ask dumbly because I don’t know what else to say.

Warren stares at the floor, and I hug him tight, realizing my arms are still around him.

“How would I even do it? No, there is no way. They’re not asking for permission, the guy is bulldozing me. Keeps sending me emails and release letters, saying he’s moving forward without me. That without my own words in the documentary, they can put out whatever they want without my side being told. I don’t even know what the fuck that means, *my side*. I was ten at the time. I didn’t do shit, I wasn’t involved.”

“You were a victim.” I gasp, astounded at how insensitive it sounds like this director is being.

“This guy is aggressive. It’s unnerving. This thing is supposed to be a multi-episode series, and I just want it all to go away. Is it not enough that I live with her death daily? That I know what an evil monster one half of me is? I fucking hate this.”

I’ve seen Warren upset. I’ve seen him injured. I was at the hospital the day he broke his hand, and his dreams of being a football legend flew out the window. I’ve seen him pissed off, exhausted, annoyed.

I’ve never seen him defeated. Not until now.

I wouldn’t say it’s shocking that another special about his mother’s death is being produced. It’s local lore in these parts, and his mother was so gorgeous that it’s a no-brainer why she became this news cycle phenomenon. Her murder was also complicated by the fact that Warren’s father misled the cops and press for weeks, made the show of the ultimate husband and father. That was before they discovered he’d killed her, hidden her under her vegetable garden in the backyard, and cut off her ring finger, including her wedding band, to keep as a souvenir. Yes, I read all the gory details. No, I never told Warren. But I needed to know what was out there about his family so if he ever wanted to talk about it, I could be prepared.

In all the years we’ve been friends, he’s never gone into detail about it with me. For him, it’s the secret he wishes would stay buried forever.

Now it was being dredged back up because of some asshole looking for a paycheck and notoriety. Whoever this director is could go straight to hell, and I’ll personally deliver that message if he keeps bugging Warren. Who the hell is he to keep bothering someone who lived through something like this? If Warren said no the first time, the guy should have gone away.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I hug him as tight as I can and rest my cheek against his chest.

Those strong arms come around me, holding equally as tight, as if I’m his lifeline.

“I kept his goddamn last name. I kept it because it was hers, and now it’s yours and I just ... I’m sorry, Al. I’m sorry this is going to affect you, too. This stain will never come off, no matter how much I scrub it. No matter how much I try to be the exact opposite of the man he is.”

Now the words on the driveway click even more; Warren wants to be the good, respectful, responsible man his father never was. He wants to keep his promises and doesn’t want to cross any lines or ruffle any feathers. He’s lived his life on this tightrope because he thinks that part of him could do something like that.

What a foolish man he is to think that, but right now is not the time to point that out.

“Let’s get out of the house,” I blurt out, having no clue where my mind is taking us.

“I thought we were avoiding each other.”

“Right now, we’ll call a truce. Imprisoned father issues trump fake marriage issues.”

Thankfully, Warren snorts at my completely inappropriate joke. I knew it would bring some levity because I know *him*.

“Where are we going?” The expression on his face is all skepticism.

I tap my chin, trying to figure out what will take his mind off this insanity. Then it clicks.

“I have an idea.”



**W**e spend the rest of Saturday going to the hardware store for paint and the accompanying essentials, then set to work on the two walls that aren't brick in the store.

True to Alana's word, the work does take my mind off the letter I received from Mason. The monotony of painting those brush strokes, making sure I'm cutting in perfectly, doing even coats, distracts me enough to make my brain go blank.

I'm just finishing the final roll of the second coat onto the opposite wall Alana decided to take, and the rich, creamy white-beige we picked out makes the store look fresher already, even if it is still in need of a deep clean, and all the merchandise and signage.

"That was exhausting and satisfying. I forgot how rigorous painting can be. Thank God we didn't have to do the whole room." She collapses onto the floor, paint flecking her cheeks and hair.

Goddamn, those cute denim overalls she changed into before we left the house; they're so innocently sexy and highlight her ass in such a way that I almost couldn't concentrate when I was meant to be concentrating.

Along with painter's tape, rolling brushes, extenders, and cut-in tools, Al stopped into the local market to grab a six-pack as a reward for us finishing. Setting my roller aside, I join her on the floor and crack two open, handing her one. She



clinks her bottle to mine and sits up enough to drink a large gulp while I do the same.

And because those overalls are so distracting, and I feel the need to touch her, I pull off her sneakers for her and start massaging her feet. At least if I'm going to touch her, let it be under the guise of helping a friend feel better.

"Oh fuck, you're a god." She moans, and I regret this instantly.

I can picture her sounding and saying the exact same thing as I drill her into a mattress, my cock filling her up. Honestly, I've probably fantasized exactly that while jerking off.

"Just trying to say thank you for getting me out of my own head," I murmur, my thumbs caressing her arches.

She lets out a sigh that's way too close to a sound I want to hear in an entirely different context, and I have to count to a thousand to keep from getting it up for my very hot wife.

Picking up my beer bottle, I bring it to my lips and gulp until I'm sure I can get myself under control.

Alana is still lying here with her eyes closed when she starts laughing out of nowhere.

"Remember the cruise we took my parents on?"

It's a random topic to bring up, but I know how her mind goes on tangents, and I'm expected to keep up.

"We bet Liam two hundred bucks that he'd be the one to attract a cougar during one of the on-deck social events. Within three minutes, that lady in that crazy leopard-print hat nearly had her hands down his pants."

She dissolves into a fit of giggles, rolling back as if the hilarity is too much to sit upright. My stomach tightens like there is a fist around it because she looks so goddamn beautiful this relaxed that it hurts to witness. It hurts to hold myself back from all the ways I want to make her laugh like this.

"God, that cruise had been a great time," she reminisces. "The figure skating show, on board a freaking cruise ship, was

one of the coolest things ever. And that ice dancer took me to get drinks, remember?”

Did I remember? Of course, I fucking did. I'd been so jealous, I'd taken myself to the casino and lost a hundred bucks at the blackjack table because I could barely concentrate. I was sure I'd hear them through the walls of my cabin that night.

The cruise was a gift for Thomas and Leona's thirty-fifth anniversary of marriage, and all the kids, including me, sprung to put them in a presidential cabin. We did excursions to the various Caribbean islands the ship docked at, spent some time in the casino, and everyone got burnt to a crisp daily at the on-deck pool.

“Evan was such an ass to that one waiter, asking about their cuts of meat.” I snort because her little brother could be so pretentious sometimes.

“Patrick and Liam got into that push-up contest on deck and could barely lift their dinner forks for the rest of the three days we were there. Imbeciles.”

We both crack up at that because their mother had to apply sunscreen to them, they were so sore and useless.

“I could use another vacation soon. I feel like everything has been so hectic, and it'd be nice to get away.”

“You should.” I speak without considering.

Because it would look pretty stupid to the outside world for my brand-new wife to go on a vacation by herself.

“Cass offered us a honeymoon on her dime. Maybe we take her up on that.” She shrugs, sitting up as she takes her feet from my hands and has a sip of her beer.

A honeymoon? We completely skipped over all the other traditions that I hadn't even thought about it. But imagining Alana on some white sand beach with her hair in the wind at sunset, a romantic room covered in rose petals, endless hours to lounge about during the day ...

It sounds like my personal heaven and hell.

“Hmm.” Is all the answer I give her because I don’t know if I should agree to something like that.

We lapse into silence, observing the space, when I decide to change the subject.

“I think we should call it ‘Lily.’” I share the name I’ve been thinking about since I rented this place for her. For us.

“Hmm?” Alana is busy with the countertop samples she just stood to go look at.

Hollis dropped them off yesterday while I was here on the phone with the town zoning board president. Our high school buddy turned renowned local contractor is doing a rush job for us as valued customers, and he’ll be here installing the built-ins and checkout counter sometime in the next two weeks.

Our luck is also cashing in with the zoning board and town committee, who are calling a special meeting this week to get all our permits approved. I still need to find an electrician and a plumber to make sure all the parts in the one small bathroom work. Alana has been hard at work contacting local vendors, sellers, artists, and goods makers to stock the store. Of course, she’s already practically gotten them all on board; there aren’t many people in this town who don’t respect the Ashton name or owe one of them a favor. And promise them prime real estate on our shelves when they know Alana could market the shit out of this place? Selling their stuff here is a no-brainer.

“We should call this store ‘Lily.’ It’s a pretty name, simple and short. Good for marketing and gives an obvious symbol or graphic to play around with. We could get a cool sign made for out front. But mostly, it ties back to your Italian roots. Lily is the national flower of Italy, and since you want a little recognition with who owns this place in regard to Hope Pizza, it’s a subtle tieback.”

Alana blinks at me. “That is absolutely genius. You ... you’ve really thought about this. Given it a lot of consideration.”

“I want this place to be everything you’ve dreamed it could be. It’s ours, of course, I want to give it a lot of

thought.”

She studies me. “You really mean that.”

It isn’t a question.

“I took what you said to heart, about us really doing this together. It’s not just me gifting you something in lieu of the marriage; this is our business, a venture we both needed to grow as people and as friends.”

With those counter samples in her hands, she stays very still until a small smile breaks out on her lips.

“Lily it is, then.”

I bow my head, secretly loving that she adores the name I proposed. And loving that she thought to come here, that she knew I needed an outlet to get out of the dark clouds my past left looming over my head.

She knew that because she knows *me*.

This is my best friend. We can do this. We can make it through this. We’ve shared too much of our lives to throw it away. We’ll find a way to mend whatever we break while being married, we can find common ground again. Or maybe I’m just being stupidly optimistic.

Today, though, had given me the same warm feelings I always got when I spent days with Alana. The hours were easy, and the conversation relaxed. There’s no judgment or choosing which version of myself to be with her. In Alana, I’ve found my person. My place to be completely myself.

Nothing is going to ruin that. She might not know about the five-year term of Arthur’s will or the dirty past of my parents I’ve never shared with her, but she knows me. Deep down, she’s the only one who understands me.

We’ll make this work. Even if I have to break my own heart over and over again.



“Walking into the house for the first time as an actual family member. A husband, no less. Is this fucking weird or what?”

Evan starts with the taunting bullshit the minute I step inside Thomas and Leona’s foyer, and I know it won’t stop until I get in my car at the end of the night.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Alana rolls her eyes at him as she makes off for the kitchen with the pie we picked up on the way.

“Hi to you too, asshole.” I ruffle his hair harder than I normally would, and he swerves to get out of my grasp.

“I can’t believe you’re here as a son-in-law for the first time.” Leona bustles out of the kitchen, tears in her eyes, and envelops me in a hug.

Even if some members of the family, or really only one, don’t want me to be with Alana, it seems that her mother has completely gotten over the whole surprise elopement thing. Last week, she brought me her grandfather’s cufflinks into the restaurant during a shift. They’re the ones he wore on his wedding day, and since Patrick wore his father’s for his ceremony, she thought I ought to have a family heirloom of my own.

I choked back tears as she explained it to me. This family has already given me so much, and here my new mother-in-law is putting her feelings aside to welcome me with open arms.

“Do I finally get to call you Ma?” I half-joke.

She sniffles as she pulls back. “It would be an honor. Oh gosh, you have me sobbing and I need to get the burgers on.”

“What can I help with?” I offer, knowing there is always something to do for these dinners.

Since we eat Italian food entirely too often, the Ashton kids insist that Sunday dinner be a rotating menu that doesn't include any of the fare from Hope Pizza. Tonight is a barbecue, all-American menu to usher in summer, and I am looking forward to Nonna's famous baked beans with bacon bits.

“Lots of corn to be shucked in there, go help your wife.” She smirks, giving me a little wink.

I say hi to Liam, Cass, and Patrick as I pass the dining room where they're setting out condiments and silverware, then enter the kitchen I've had meals in a thousand times.

I've been to the Ashton family house for Sunday dinner more times than I can count. Holidays, regular summer barbecues, you name it, and I've been on the list. Coming here at the beginning of each new week is a sacred tradition, and I am always welcomed with open arms.

Until, of course, I married the crown and only princess of the bunch, and her father stopped talking to both of us.

It's been two months since either Alana or I have spoken more than one word to her father, and Thomas has actively ignored both of us. Every time it happens, which is almost daily considering I work for the man, another part of my “good pseudo-adopted son” image dies inside me.

This is the man I looked up to since I was eleven years old. He's my role model, the kind of father and husband I've always dreamed of being. Thomas gave me life and career advice when I had no one to turn to, taking me under his wing like I was one of his sons.

To have him so ashamed and disappointed in my actions, so angry with me, that he hasn't spoken to me in multiple weeks? It's crushing.

“If you tell me that you’d rather watch Salt Lake housewives over New Jersey one more time ...” Alana grumbles, shooting daggers at Evan, who is stirring something at the stove.

He guffaws. “How can you even say it? They have Sundance! Do you know how many cool catering events happen there?”

“So, per usual, you’re only watching reality TV for the food.” My wife rolls her eyes.

“I mean, it’s a miracle if I’m switching from anything on the culinary channels. *Ultimate Chef*? Yeah, I’m going to need that spoon fed to me every day. Hope to compete on it one day.”

“Somehow, I think that would actually happen.” I chuckle as I step next to Alana and grab an ear of corn.

“I’d root against you. We don’t need your ego to be any bigger.” Al sticks her tongue out at him.

“Guess I won’t take you on the winner’s vacation, all expenses paid, because usually families can accompany.” Her youngest brother throws down the gauntlet.

“On second thought, tell me who to call to secure you that prize.” Then she stage-whispers to me, “We don’t ever pass up a vacation, do we?”

My smile splits my face. “Especially not one on Evan’s dime.”

Everyone begins piling into the kitchen to take dishes to the dining room table, and out of nowhere, my father-in-law appears, ambushing me.

“Warren, a word.” Thomas stands, and every single pair of eyes lands on me.

Great, we’re really going to do this. Here we fucking go. “Of course, sir.”

Patrick snorts across the room at my use of the word, as if my paying his father respect is laughable. Probably because I haven’t called Thomas Ashton “sir” in nearly ten years.



Considering I'm married to his daughter now and did so behind his back, I would be remiss not to start brown-nosing a little bit.

Without a backward glance, he makes his way out onto the porch. The sun has dipped below the tree line, painting the spectacular Ashton land in shadows. While the cover is still on the mosaic-tiled pool, I know it's only a matter of time before one of the sons comes over here to open and shock treat it.

Fields of produce stretch as far as the eye can see, and in the small-ish barn are the cows Liam keeps to provide specialty milk and cheese for the restaurant. It's a smaller operation than most farms in rural Pennsylvania, but they're only supplying one store—their own.

My heart beats wildly as I come to stand next to Thomas Ashton, who shoves his hands in his pockets as he looks out at the land he's owned for decades.

“Do you remember the conversation I had with you, right in this very spot, years ago?”

Dread sits heavy in my stomach because, of course, he's going to bring this up. And, of course, I remember it. That discussion changed the trajectory of my life. It's held me back but also brought me to terms with reality.

“You told me not to get involved with her. Not to pursue her. You told me that if it ended badly, things with this family would get complicated. You said that if I couldn't be sure it was her, that if I didn't yet know myself, I shouldn't go there. That I should focus on finding out who I truly was and what I wanted before I asked us to commit to each other.”

He nods his head, as if I passed his test in remembering correctly everything he'd told me. As if those words aren't seared into my memory.

“When you broke your hand, I came with you in the ambulance to the hospital. Do you remember that?”

What is this, twenty questions? My frustration with Thomas grows because he's not cryptic and closed off with me. At least he never has been before. Our relationship has

always been one of mentorship and good will. Now that I've apparently crossed him, he's going all monosyllabic holier-than-thou on me.

"I guess I do. It's a bit of a blur." Not only because it was so long ago, but because I was half-conscious with the pain.

"The day you picked up a football, I was there. I took you and Patrick to practice at twelve years old after first signing you up, and you weren't sure you even wanted to play. It was a Pop Warner league, nothing crazy, but the coach handed you a ball during drills and, my God, I'd never seen a more perfect spiral. I think half the men on that field were stunned to silence. You clearly had this natural gift that can only be given from birth, and you were just discovering it. Watching you on that field was incredible."

That day, I finally felt like I belonged somewhere, or maybe it was because everyone told me that's where I belonged. I threw a football like most people breathe air; it was effortless. I immediately joined a more advanced team and started working with coaches who had ins at the top leagues and colleges. The buzz started around the country about this random kid from Pennsylvania who'd never played until he was nearly thirteen. In high school, I was being recruited by every program you'd seen at bowl games, and I thought my future was to play the sport on a professional level.

Until homecoming my senior year, when a lineman from an opposing team ran through my guys and sacked me. He landed on my right hand and bent it in such a way that I broke my wrist and a bunch of bones inside the hand. The doctors did all they could, but because of the way the bones broke, they said I'd have a slim chance of having full mobility in my hand.

While I could live daily life and do everything everyone else could, my hand would never be up to professional football standards. At my checkup a year ago, the ortho doctor I saw told me I had about ninety-five percent function in my hand. It's not something I ever noticed, but if I were a professional quarterback, I definitely would.

“When they told you you couldn’t play football, might never gain full mobility of that hand again, you looked so ... unaffected.” Thomas wipes a hand over his face. “I never asked you this, but you didn’t care all that much, did you?”

In my mind, I go back to that moment. “Sure, I did. I mean, I loved football. It was something I was good at. But ... I guess it wasn’t my passion. I played because everyone told me what a talent I was, and I enjoyed it. When it was taken away, it sucked, but it wasn’t something I couldn’t get over.”

I have no idea why he’s bringing this up.

“The expressions you made during that conversation about Alana were depression and devastation, compared to the moment they told you your football career was over. The thought of never having her was so severe, it bowled you over. I don’t think you looked in my direction for weeks after that talk. I should have known that night in the hospital, should have talked to you then.”

He’s not wrong, but a lightbulb goes on in terms of what I think he’s trying to get to.

“To tell me what?”

Thomas’s eyes flit down to his shoes, then he squares them up to me, holding my gaze.

“To tell you that she could search the world far and wide, and my daughter would never find someone as loyal, true, and worthy as you. To tell you that it would be an honor to welcome you officially into our family, if falling in love with her was what you truly wanted. To tell you that I’d been an overprotective, short-sighted asshole, and to disregard the warning I issued years prior.”

Shock radiates through my body. And something akin to relief because how long have I waited to have that caution tape lifted by him? It’s like he’s taken the key to the chains he placed around my heart and is giving me full permission to use it.

“Which is why you haven’t spoken to either of us since we told you about our marriage?” I can’t help but give him some

bluster back because it's been a bit ridiculous.

“You surprised me. I truly never thought you'd defy me, and that was ... damn, that was a hard pill to swallow, kid. You're a man now, and you're more than capable of making your own decisions. I'm a proud man, Warren, and a stubborn one at that. I've raised you kids with a tough hand, and my old bullish ass can't stand to be wrong most times. But about this, I am wrong.”

My eyes flutter closed because I've dreamed of hearing those words for so long, it felt like they'd never actually come. Before I can say anything, though, Thomas continues.

“She's my little girl, the only one I've got. I've never wanted to let her go. I thought no man would ever be worthy, and Alana is a lot of woman to handle. She deserves to have every ounce of respect and value placed on her. You do that. You see her for exactly who she is and let her be that woman. You love that she *is* that woman. I've been too stuck up my own ass to call off the dogs, but I see the way you look at each other. I know true love when I see it. You may have pissed me off doing it, but I can't be mad anymore. I'm sorry for my reaction. I'll have a talk with Alana, too, because you two deserve all my congratulations.”

I think hell might have frozen over, and I barely keep those words from popping out of my mouth. It's an ass-backward day when Thomas Ashton admits he's wrong, but here he is, almost groveling at my feet.

“This is ... not at all what I thought you'd say.” My voice croaks because I think I'm still in disbelief over his apology.

Thomas chuckles. “Thought I was bringing you out here to rip you a new one?”

“Honestly, yeah.” I rub the back of my neck, some of the cold sweat that sprung to the surface of my skin dissipating.

“I have to admit where I was wrong, and life is too short not to celebrate the love of two of my favorite people in this world.” He shrugs, sticking out his hand for an olive branch shake.

I take it, only for him to pull me into a hug like he's always done when we have heart-to-heart moments.

"Love you, kid," he says gruffly, never the kind of man who hasn't told his children he loves them.

"Love you, too." I have to swallow a sob because it feels like a boulder has been thrown from my frame.

As I back up, I catch the grin on his face.

"I'm sorry we shocked you. I'm sorry I didn't man up and ask for her hand, but I thought you'd say no." And secretly, we didn't have that option if we wanted to fulfill Arthur's will.

"Probably would have. Or at least I would have made you jump through a thousand hoops to get it. Honestly, you impressed me, Warren. I never thought you had the balls. It's part of why I'm not as upset as I should be that you deprived us all of a wedding. You saw what you wanted, decided on your life path, and went to go get it. It's exactly what I told you to do during that talk all those many years ago."

In a way, he's right. Still, it's not like I don't feel guilty taking his apology right now, considering our marriage is fake. Thomas's acceptance only makes it all that more confusing. And blurs the lines I once clearly saw that I couldn't cross.

"Thank you, sir." I nod, acknowledging how significant this moment is.

"I think it's Dad now, right?" He grins.

The pieces of my heart that have been patched and sewn together over my lifetime begin to mend as if some witch or wizard poured a magic potion over them. Between Alana marrying me, her father taking back his warning, and her family accepting me with open arms as her husband, I've officially been instated as a part of this grand tapestry of people.

"I'm going to head inside before my wife scolds me, and I advise you to do the same. The only person more demanding than my wife is her daughter." That has him booming his signature laugh as he walks inside.

Looking out onto the land I got into too much trouble on with all the Ashton siblings throughout the years, I take a deep breath. Thomas's blessing feels like a weight off my shoulders, but it's only replaced with another one. Even with some of the secrets of my past, I haven't revealed to her, this opens up a new path to *really* be with Alana.

But will she want this marriage to be real? Will we finally talk about the things we've silently sworn never to talk about?

"They can't tell it's fake, you know."

I nearly jump out of my skin as I turn to the voice in the dark.

"Nonna, you scared the living shi—"

I stop myself from cursing in front of Alana's grandmother, but not before I make out that devilish, knowing grin in the corner of the deck. She's hidden from view where Thomas and I were talking on the lawn, but I wouldn't be surprised if her bat ears heard the entire thing.

"Everyone in that house thinks the marriage is real, including that son-in-law of mine. Glad he finally got his head out of his ass."

Shock steals the breath from my lungs, and I stutter, looking completely guilty. But no way am I admitting anything, even if Nonna can definitely tell I'm lying."

"That's because it is real," I bluff, though in my heart this marriage is more real than anything I've ever done in my life.

A snort comes from her. "Of course it is, but you didn't think that when you married her. Still trying to convince yourself it's fake, even if you're lying through your teeth to me. This marriage is more real than most I've seen, and you're an idiot if you aren't celebrating it in every sense of the word."

That has me choking on my spit, and I can't help myself when I say, "Are you telling me I need to sleep with my wife?"

"I'm not saying I want to know what goes on in other people's homes, but let's cut the bull, shall we, my boy?"

You've loved my granddaughter since before you knew what the word really meant, and I don't want to hear that this marriage is a means to an end. She's blindly in love with you, and you need to take down these walls you've built to keep her out. Thomas just gave you his permission, so don't use that as an excuse anymore. I'm shooting you straight here, my boy, because I love you like you're one of my own grandchildren; stop wasting time on hurts and notions that are preventing you from being truly happy. Take it from me, you only get so long to love the person you're meant to be with. You found her long ago and haven't let yourself have her. Time is up. This marriage is real. Start treating it as such."

Out of everyone in my life, I can always count on Nonna to come at things with a hard, brute stance. She doesn't cut corners or pussyfoot around. I appreciate that, but in this case ... I'm still terrified. A lot of the pressure I put on myself where Alana is concerned was just wiped away in five minutes, and I feel like I have whiplash.

Before she lets me answer though, Nonna is changing the subject. Perhaps she knows I need to digest this all.

"Let's go in and have dinner before all of these fools steal my baked beans." She extends her hand so I can take it and help her up. Once she's standing, I tuck it into the crook of my elbow and make for the back door.

"I'll be pissed if these little heart-to-hearts made me miss a steaming heap of them." A pout turns my mouth down, but I'm only joking.

"Stop wasting time," she warns me once more as we're about to enter the dining room, putting a wrinkly palm against my cheek.

Now that I don't have one half of my excuses, can I really admit to my best friend that I want her as so much more?





## WARREN

**T**he next ten days pass in a blur, with planning board meetings, the issuing of our temporary license to sell on Newton Street, and more construction decisions than I can handle anymore.

Alana meets every challenge like a trooper, carrying around her planner and all-things-Lily binder like her greatest weapons. She's taken nearly every meeting with local vendors, creators, and artists, and by now, we've been promised enough stock to fill the shop for the summer months.

After that, she wants to change products up by season, so she'll go out for another round of scouting goods before autumn hits.

There are so many little nuances to opening a small business or a store, and we're learning on the fly. So much so that it feels like we might be in a little bit of free fall without a safety net, but as long as I have her, I'm confident we'll get everything done. Though, unfortunately, even with Thomas's blessing on our marriage, he still won't budge on the idea that the store is a bad idea. That means we're not getting much help or assistance from her family, but it kind of gives us the chip on our shoulder we need if we're going to succeed.

On the way home from a meeting with the mayor over a grand opening celebration, I stop by the only upscale jewelry store in town. The moment I walked in the first time, about three weeks ago, every woman in the store squealed with delight. Mrs. Owens, the jeweler who's owned the store for

more than twenty years, knew exactly why I was there and had been more than happy to throw every sparkly setting at me for my choosing.

My fake wife and I never talked about what she would have wanted were she to be presented with an engagement ring. Sure, we're best friends, but I'm a guy. Stuff like that isn't exactly what I have on my topic of conversation agenda. Now that I've tried to pick one out, though, I wish we had.

Ultimately, I went with a princess cut for the princess of the Ashton family. A big ole fat diamond winking at the center of a thin rose gold band. I paired that with a rose gold wedding band circled in diamonds because the plain gold one I bought for our courthouse ceremony just doesn't suit her.

While this marriage might be fake, and eventually, she'll take them off, I want to give Alana something to smile about. I always want to be the one to make her smile if I can help it.

If I could see past all the lying I'm doing to myself, I'd admit that I dreamed about putting a diamond ring on her hand in such a real way since I had my first wet dream during puberty. And that this little exercise in presenting a gift is way more than just wanting to see her smile.

Her car is in the driveway as I pull in and park, the sun still high in the sky even on a weeknight as we move into summer territory. Some nights, she'll drag me to the back deck to watch the sunset and drink wine like an old married couple.

My hands shake as I get out of the car and put the ring box into my jean pocket. Is this how every dude feels before he gets down on one knee? I already convinced her to marry me, and here I am, sweating like I'm sitting on the edge of the sun. Jeez, no wonder guys have their voices cracking and minds going blank the minute they try to put a ring on it.

"Al?" I call as I unlock the door and walk in, the whole coming-home routine feeling very domestic every time I do it.

"Up here!" she calls, and I know she's probably been lying on her bed half-dressed from work and half in pajamas since the moment she arrived home.

With every step up the stairs, my heart beats harder, and my resolve gets more fragile. This is a big deal, even if it isn't real and even if we're already committed.

Just like I thought, she's lying on the bed with her eyes closed, comfortable black leggings on with the same blush pink sweater she wore to the restaurant today. Her hair is splayed out around her, and my God, she looks so close to an angel that I want to kneel down and worship her.

"Hey." I join her, sitting on the edge of the bed.

My hand moves like it has a mind of its own, reaching out to stroke through her dark hair that feels like silk under my fingertips.

She groans in a way that shoots straight to my cock, but I keep focused.

"Mmm, massage my scalp. It feels so good when you do that."

Fuck, why does she make it so difficult not to turn everything she says dirty?

I do as she asks for about half a second before I slide off the bed and get on one knee. When thinking about giving her these rings, I knew I had to do it the right way. The way I proposed the idea of marriage to her was definitely not traditional, but she deserves this to be.

"Warren?" she asks, and I can see her eyes are still closed and she's annoyed that I stopped touching her.

Staying silent, I wait for her to glimpse my position. Down on one knee, rings presented with pride.

Alana flips over onto her stomach, unassumingly looking to see where I went and why I'm not skating my nails over her scalp, before gasping loudly.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Launching up to her knees, she takes in my pose.

"Proposing?" I chuckle because we're technically already married.

“You got me a ring. Rings.” She blinks, her expression one of astonishment.

I grin up at her. “Even if it isn’t real, you deserve to wear something beautiful. You’re a princess, Al. Your ring finger should show that accordingly.”

“These must have cost ... Warren, this is too much.” She shakes her head, and I frown, handing the box to her because I want her to take them and put them on.

The best friend I knew would never turn down a gift, especially one like jewelry. So why is she placing them back in the box and handing it to me?

“What are you doing? I bought those for you to wear. They’re yours.” I shove them back at her.

“They’re not. I’m fine with my gold band.” She twists it around her finger as she shrinks away from me, pushing back toward the headboard.

“Too many people have made comments about me not buying you a proper ring, and I’m sick of it. You deserve the full treatment, the whole shebang. Diamonds, included.”

Crawling across the bed, I scoot toward her until our knees brush, and then we’re sitting face-to-face. Without another word trying to convince her, I simply take the rings out of the box, take her hand gently in mine, and slip off the simple gold band to replace it with the new ones.

“Beautiful rings for a beautiful wom—”

I don’t get the sentence out. Because before I know what’s happening, Alana launches into my lap, wraps her arms around my neck, and buries her nose in my neck.

Out of surprise, my arms go out to brace her waist and to keep me from falling backward. We’re hugging, her sitting in my lap on her fluffy white duvet, and it feels ...

More.

So much *more*.

This is my best friend, the number one woman in my life, my wife to everyone looking in from the outside, and now she's wearing my rings.

Real rings, expensive ones I purchased just for her to make her feel even more special. To make her aware of how much I value her.

Just a week ago, I rebuffed her. Told her I couldn't act on the feelings we've had since we were kids. But something unlocked inside me during that conversation with Thomas, and the invisible cuffs I've always held myself back with are off.

So when she leans out of the hug, I pull her back, taking her lips in private the way I've wanted to a thousand times.

A shocked little gasp slips out of her mouth and into mine, which I swallow. Thrusting my tongue past her lips, I move with her, cradling her body until she's leaning back against the pillows, and I come down on top of her. Our pelvises connect, the friction drawing moans from both of us as I grind into her the way I've always dreamed of.

"Touch me. Touch me everywhere." Alana breathes against my lips as her hands push up and under the T-shirt I'm wearing.

She doesn't have to tell me twice. The restraints are off, and nothing can stop me now, even if it tried.

Pulling my shirt over my head so she can get to the expanse of skin she's raking her nails down, I connect us once more as I give her my weight and my mouth. Kissing her is a drug, an addiction that I'll never be cured of as long as I live. I could do this until air ceases to pump into my lungs, and I'd die a satisfied man.

Only one other time. One time, when we were fumbling idiot teens who didn't know the intensity of this act. Who were fulfilling a duty so no one else got there first.

It won't be like that now. Unfortunately, or fortunately, in some cases, our lack of honesty and openness with each other has led to other partners. Thinking about Alana with other men

has always made me green with envy and sick to my stomach. She probably feels the same.

All I know is we're about to ruin each other for anyone else forever, and I couldn't be happier.

"Feels like I've waited a lifetime to do this again." I lean up on my knees, peeling the leggings down her luscious limbs, watching as all that creamy skin comes into view.

My dick aches against the jeans I'm in, the head throbbing with blood as it punches against my zipper.

"If you don't touch me, I'm going to scream," she threatens, my needy woman, writhing as I take my time with her.

"Let me go slowly, baby. I need to commit this all to memory." I lock eyes with her.

"Memorize later." She cups me through my jeans, and I falter, choking on air as her thumb strokes roughly over the material.

The thing that does me in, though? Seeing those diamonds sparkling on her finger. She traces the bulge in my pants with that specific one, making me shudder with anticipation at what's to come.

"God, those rings on your hand ... you have no idea how sexy that is to me, baby." The nickname slips out again, and I watch Alana blush.

Actually, blush. My best friend, who has the mouth of a trucker and isn't embarrassed by shit, is freaking blushing.

Slowly, I push her sweater, caressing her stomach and rib cage as she sits up to give me access to take it off. When I do, I bend, holding her as I whisper in her ear and remove her bra at the same time.

"You like that I bought jewelry to show everyone you're mine?" It's a taunt, but my fucking God, I'm turning myself on with the power and knowledge that I'm claiming her.

"About time you sent that message to the world." She nips at my earlobe and then sucks, sending electric jolts down my

spine and straight to my balls.

Then, to tease me for all the time I've wasted, she lies back. Rosy-pink nipples, stiff little buds, dot her breasts like a cherry on top of the voluptuous mounds I had wet dreams about when I was sixteen. She's naked except for the pale blue silk thong clinging to her hips, and I undo my pants, needing to stroke my cock to this image.

Hovering above her as I take mental snapshots of the beauty laid out before me, I catch Alana smirking at me. This isn't the hot young thing I spent afternoons lazing by the banks of the canal with. This is a confident woman who has grown into her curves and long lines over the years, tempting in her power and brazen sexuality.

Alana bites her lip as she watches me fist myself, the slow, coarse feel of my hand replaced with her own as she sits up and takes over.

"Fuck ..." I groan, the feel of her soft palm on me so heady that I almost topple over.

"Has it somehow gotten bigger with time?" She smirks, looking up at me through her lashes as she pulls on my stiff dick.

I love this. I love how it feels so natural between us, no awkwardness like I've always thought there would be if we ever fell back into bed. We're best friends who also happen to love each other, even if we don't admit it, and the camaraderie we have outside of this bedroom is the same that's spurring the closeness between us now.

"How is it that you're both complimenting and insulting me at the same time?" I growl, pushing her back as I lower myself down her body.

My cock brushes the mattress, and I suck in a breath, knowing I won't last long when I get inside her, so I need to make her feel incredible first.

"*Warren.*" She chokes out my name as I plant kisses on the inside of her thighs, lapping at the stray freckles on her skin.

“I’ve imagined you saying my name like that so many times.”

“And I’ve touched myself, imagining you’re the one whose tongue is buried inside me.”

“Fucking hell, baby ... you can’t say things like that and expect me to contain myself.” I drop my forehead to her mound, breathing hotly down her slit, still covered by her panties.

The wet spot in the middle doesn’t help much either because I can see how she’s leaking for me.

“You’ve contained yourself for nearly ten years. I think it’s time you go a little wild.”

Those words from her lips, the little minx smile she flashes me, have me wanting her to eat crow.

Which is why I pull her thong to the side and stick my tongue directly into her hot, dripping pussy. Alana bucks off the bed, gasping and moaning a curse, but I hold tight as I lavish her slit with alternating licks and kisses. Her clit throbs as I bite gently down on it, causing her to arch violently off the mattress but deeper into my grasp.

“Fuck, Christ, holy shit ...” She’s running through the curse-word dictionary, and I smile into her damp flesh because I’m the one who is doing this to her.

As I feast on her, I shimmy out of my jeans, using one hand. Pulling down her panties quickly and tossing them across the floor so that we’re both stark naked and free to explore every inch of each other.

Kneeling once more, I lodge two fingers inside her and curl them up until she’s grabbing the duvet in fistfuls and mewling like a desperate animal.

“You’re so fucking beautiful like this. So fucking beautiful all the time. I’m so lucky to get to witness this, to feel you. I need to feel it, baby. Come on my hand, Alana.”

Pressing my thumb to her clit, I watch as the little dip at her throat sucks in with her inhale. Her eyes are glued to mine,



both of us watching as her climax steals over every cell of her body.

“Warren,” she whispers. My name on her lips as her eyes wink shut and she begins to come.

Wetness coats my fingers which keep their rhythm, milking her release as I watch with rapt attention. It’s the most intoxicating sight I’ve ever beheld, this gift she’s giving me after I squandered it for so long.

She reaches up and grabs behind my neck, fusing our lips together. I feel the cut of her diamond into my skin, the band having turned around in her fist as I finger-fucked her.

“Thank you.” She breathes against my lips, her body stretching like a satisfied cat. “But now I need you inside me. I want to feel you. I want to watch as you fall apart.”

Just the thought that her words trigger has me close to coming. This feels like a fever dream I never want to end, but I also want to reach my climax inside her sweet tightness.

“Let me get a condom, I—”

“No.” She strokes my cock harshly, making my balls draw up tight, and I nearly choke at the idea of taking her bare.

Alana’s heels press into my ass until my cock has nowhere else to go but nudging the first inch inside her pussy. Gulping back the nerves, emotion, and overwhelming feeling of this moment, meaning something bigger, I notch myself inside her tight, scorching heat.

The crown of her head is pressed to the mattress; her eyelashes flutter to the ceiling, and my gaze intently focuses on her features as I slide slowly into her to the hilt until my balls are nestled against her ass. My teeth graze slightly over her exposed throat, and she makes a whisper-sweet moan.

“Holy shit, Warren.” She gulps, leveling those blue eyes at me.

“I know.” Every part of me vibrates with awareness of her around and on me.

We were meant to be like this, connected with not a shred of anything between us. Protection doesn't matter, the future doesn't matter, consequences don't matter. Not when I know I will never be apart from her. Not now. There is no me without her any longer, for that, I'm sure.

"I swear, you've gotten bigger over the years." She wiggles her hips, my cock weeping inside her, and reaches up to palm my cheek.

Alana isn't saying this as a joke but to tell me how full she is. As if I don't feel it, as if my cock isn't pained with pleasure from being inside her.

Thrusting my hips, even though I'm fully seated inside her, makes us both groan with need.

"Please move. I need it." She presses her thumb to the corner of my mouth, and I nip at it before kissing it.

"Anything for you." It's true.

Then I start to move. Really move. Long, languid strokes where I tip my hips up as soon as I bottom out, hitting her at an angle where she screams each time I'm in to the hilt. It's driving me mad, this crazed pace, but I can't stop. Not when I look at the way her features are transforming with pleasure with each thrust.

"Every morning when you come down, I ache to know what color those lips are going to be painted. A siren red, an innocent pink, a subtle peach. But this color is my favorite; the shade where I smudge whatever it is you're wearing with my own mouth. The color of me tattooed on you, just a little bruised in how intense I'm kissing you." So, I do just that, marking her lips the color I love to see them.

"I've dreamed of this for years. You, making love to me, feeling you bare against me, inside me," she whispers as I stroke so deep inside her; it's like we're one.

"Only you, Alana. Only ever you." I don't know if she understands that while I've been with other women, she's the only one I'll ever do this with.

The only woman I'm actually making love to, the only woman I've ever gone bare with.

"Warren, you're going to make me come." That breathless rasp is one I've heard in my dreams a hundred times.

"Good. Come for me. For us. Show me how good I make you feel, baby." I grunt because it's all I can do to keep myself in check.

Her pussy is a goddamn vise around me. Alana pulls me in for a searing kiss as she orgasms so beautifully, and I feel the wetness gush around my dick. That sets me off, the feeling rocketing from my tip. I come in long, deep spurts, coating her insides as my brain turns to mush. Alana is the only thing I register anymore.

For a few seconds, I exist in a world where it's just her and me.

And I wish we could stay there forever.



WARREN

S ometime in the night, Alana and I stir at the same time and fall back into each other.

We lie face-to-face on our sides, with her leg hitched up on my hip as I slowly thrust in and out of her. Driving us wild, making us moan sleepily in a haze that almost feels like we're dreaming all of this happening. After we come together in the dark, I tuck her back into my body and fall into a deep slumber.

For the first time in years, I wake and don't immediately haul myself from the bed. With Alana's hair draped over my arm and the heady scent of our bodies tangling beneath the sheets, I stay right where I am to admire her as her eyes flutter open, becoming conscious of the world. She's gorgeous, completely natural, and nude, wrapped up in my body. The warmth of her skin catches on mine, the room baked in a golden glow.

It's the single best moment of my life.

"Morning." I lean down to kiss her, taking my time as I explore her mouth lazily.

"Morning." She smiles a megawatt smile, one I've realized, over the years, is reserved for times when we're together.

"I think I want to wake up like this every single day," I murmur against her lips because I can't stop tasting them.

“I’d say we have a lot to talk about, but apparently husbands and wives do this all the time, so I guess it’s normal.” She shrugs, bringing her hand up to her face to rub some sleep out of her eyes.

Her rings catch the light, and I take her hand in mine, kissing the diamonds there. “To think, I could have broken the boundaries with diamonds years ago.”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one who set them.” It’s a serious topic we need to discuss, but making it lighthearted feels okay in the morning light. “What do you want to do today?”

She asks the question like we’re just going to gloss right over the fact that we’re best friends who just had sex with each other while fake married, and it’s just so Alana that I burst out into laughter.

This is the woman who swept into her twenty-first surprise birthday party like she knew we’d been planning it for months and just expected us to throw her the bash to end all bashes. Alana’s blunt and keep-it-moving nature is one of the reasons I love her so much.

*Love.*

Yeah, we have a lot to talk about. But right now, I just want to hold her in this bed a little longer.

“I have to meet with Arthur’s director of business later today. I promised I would during the weekend since we’ve been so busy with getting Lily ready. So I have to run over there at some point, but other than that, I’m yours.” Always will be, but we’ll get to that later.

“What’re you talking about with him?” She stretches, her breasts peeking out from beneath the sheet as it settles on her midriff.

I palm one, unable to help it because I’ve dreamed of being able to touch them with free rein for years. She sighs, pressing her lips to my collarbone as we’re dragged into the lust we’ve fought for a decade once more.

“A little bit of this, little bit of that,” I murmur, much more interested to start our morning with no talking.

Her spine goes rigid under my hand, and before I know what's happening, Alana pulls back and sits up on the side of the bed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask immediately, touching her shoulder.

She shrugs it off, rising angrily as she half-stomps her gorgeous naked body across the room.

“I thought we told each other everything,” she mutters, pulling on a pair of sweatpants she pulls from a drawer.

It feels like I have whiplash, that’s how sudden the shift in moods hits me. “We do, Alana ... come back to bed. It was a throwaway comment. Are you ... are you freaking out about what happened last night?”

If she is, I feel like I would have picked up on it. But we both seemed cool as cucumbers just seconds ago, as if we were in the most natural place either of us could be.

Her brows furrow together as she looks over her shoulder to give me a scowl. “You know I’m not. I’m not ‘freaking out,’ Warren.”

“Baby, I don’t get what’s happening.”

“Don’t *baby* me. Don’t use pet names just because you finally stuck your dick in me last night.”

My heart twinges like she flicked it, the feeling more a reflex of the muscle than pain. I called her baby because I’ve been waiting years too, and thought I was allowed to use it now. Apparently not.

“Alana, I don’t understand what I said, please, explain it to me.” Am I just an idiot male with no idea what he did wrong?

Or is this woman freaking out about something I don’t even get.

Her blue eyes are incredulous as she stares at me, tapping her foot like I’ve pissed her off more by having to explain this. If she weren’t so furious right now, I’d go over there and take her again, she looks so goddamn beautiful with her tits still hanging out like that.

“For years you’ve been keeping little things from me. The fact that you had a relationship with Arthur. You not being happy as the manager at the restaurant anymore. We were supposedly best friends, and yet I didn’t know such important details about your life.”

Defeat suffuses my chest, because now I understand what set Alana off. I didn’t mean it like that, not in the slightest, but it’s been a sticking point, even if we’ve never discussed it.

I get up, locate my clothes, and pull my boxers on so I don’t talk this out with a half-hard dick just swinging in the breeze. Much to my displeasure, Alana also pulls on a shirt in the time span it takes me to cover myself.

This is when I have to tell her, when we get it all out on the table. I thought we’d get a minute’s reprieve from all the obstacles facing us, but true to form, Alana and I never get the peace I’ve so wanted for us. If we want everything, we have to walk through fire to get it.

“I had to distance myself somehow. My life, who I am, is so entangled in you and your family. I needed something for me.” My voice breaks with this knowledge, offloading it and finally sharing the truth with her.

I know it will hurt her, but I need to be honest now. If I want to finally keep her, I have to be honest. When I dare a glance at Alana, I’m correct in thinking this revelation will gut her. Distrust and apprehension mark her expression, and she’s folded her arms around her as if trying to comfort herself.

But before she can talk, I continue.

“Warren, the failed football star. Warren, the adopted son. Warren, the murderer’s son. Warren this, Warren that. There are so many labels people have pinned on me over the years, I didn’t even know who I was. It took time, baby. And yes, you stubborn woman, I’m calling you that because I have gone sixteen years not calling you that, and it’s killed me every single day I don’t get to say it. I had no idea who I was and needed space to figure that out. Without strings attached or expectations from anyone else.



“So yes, I had things I kept to myself, because it was essential in order to get me to this place. With you. Arthur saw it, or else he wouldn’t have forced me to marry you. My God, the old man was one hundred percent right in doing so. You may not have known little things, but you’ve always known me. Every part of me, you understood. It took me a while to realize it, but Arthur saw it. And he pushed us together to make this happen. Please, don’t quit on me now. I know we have a lot to overcome and to talk about. But everything changed last night, you have to know that. I want us, for real. Forever.”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t have crossed the line of friendship, last night wouldn’t have happened, if Arthur hadn’t forced you into it? Wow, way to make a girl feel special.” I should have known she wouldn’t take my confession well.

Alana is a dog with a bone when she’s in fight mode, and she’s not dropping this until she gets every answer she wants.

She begins removing the diamond rings I placed on her finger last night, and I rush her, anger biting at my heart. Grabbing her hand, I hold it in mine, not allowing her to take them off.

“Jesus fucking Christ, don’t you get it? I’ve spent my whole life bouncing around, fighting for what I thought would help me survive, would someday make me happy. But none of it fulfilled me. Not a thing made me content. Nothing except for being with your family in the town I’ve loved since the day I moved there. And then I thought, ‘well, if I can’t have Alana, if I can’t love her the way I want to, then I can at least be with her every day.’ So I got a job with you, to be where you are at every second, because you’d have to be blind not to see that we should have been together from the beginning. Arthur is the one who made me pull my head of out my ass, but he didn’t make last night happen. He didn’t make me want this marriage for real, from nearly the second I kissed you after saying I do. For a long time, I didn’t know who I was or what my dream was supposed to be. But it’s always been the same ... my dream is you, with me, in Hope Crest, forever. For a

long time, I thought I could get by on us being just the way we were. I was so fucking wrong, baby. So wrong.”

My eyes feel like they’re bulging with how desperate I am to plead with her. To make her see how incredible my need is to be with her.

“We could have had this so long ago.” She chokes on a sob. “Why do you think we didn’t speak for four months, Warren? You say you wanted me from the start, but you never tried.”

“We’re really getting it all out there, huh?” I challenge her because if we do this, some things can’t be unsaid.

“If the ship is sinking, I guess we’re both going down with it.” A tear slides down her cheek.

How badly I want to tell her that she’s wrong. That I’m not going down without her or a fight and that we’ll never sink as long as I can keep us treading water. But she deserves these answers, so I’ll give them to her.

“Your father could see what was happening. I’m sure everyone could. Or maybe they’d just seen one too many rom-coms. You and I were headed for this thing that was bigger than us. So he sat me down and gave it to me straight; if I decided to pursue you, if I fell in love with you and you with me, I better make sure it was the forever kind. As a sixteen-year-old kid, I was scared shitless. Not only is your father this intimidating presence, but he’d been my role model for as long as I could remember.

“Thomas Ashton brought me into his family when I didn’t have one. He taught me how to tie a tie and helped me fill out the job application for Hope Pizza when I wanted to work as a waiter. I looked up to him and how he showed up as a husband and a dad. I was also terrified of making sure whatever happened between us was the forever kind because hell if I knew anything about love. My father murdered my mother, the woman he was supposed to love most. I had no idea how to connect with my adoptive parents. And I was a teenager, I couldn’t see that far into the future. Your father told me he didn’t want me hurting you or breaking your heart, but more

than that, he worried about me. Looking back, he really did mean that. Your father could see how broken I was, how lost I could have been had I not figured my shit out and carved my own path. Latching on to you simply because it felt good, because I loved being with you, would have hurt us both.”

“You don’t know that. You couldn’t have possibly known that.” Those aquamarine eyes glisten with tears I can see her struggling to keep from falling.

But Alana isn’t surprised. We might not have had the discussion, and I’m sure her father never mentioned his warning to her, but his daughter is a sharp cookie. She probably figured out quicker than anyone why I was keeping my distance. It’s why she grumbled any time I agreed with him over the years and why she stopped talking to me for four months after I stood up to him. She wanted me to stand up to him for *us*.

“I guess I couldn’t have. But I made a promise to myself right then that I would honor what your father was trying to do for me, for both of us. We were too young, too close. If it had happened back then, we probably would have been in such a toxic cycle, we’d never have been happy.”

“Again, you don’t know that at all. And you didn’t honor his words. Or are we still pretending we didn’t take each other’s virginities the night before we left for college?”

My stomach drops to my feet because Alana just said the one thing we’ve both silently sworn never to talk about.

That night had been coming for a lifetime, an inevitable force of magnetism that neither of us was strong enough to fight anymore. For years, we circled each other like fated mates, like animals whose scents were specifically, scientifically, made for each other. Like penguins who were destined to be together for life.

After my talk with Thomas and subsequent injury that left me scrambling for a shot at some kind of future I never envisioned, I tried my best to constantly stay in the friend zone with Alana. Until the last night of the summer. When she came to me with those gorgeous sun freckles sprinkled on the bridge

of her nose, a white cotton dress swinging flirtily at her thighs, and a wish she wanted me to grant.

To take her virginity before she went to college.

Little did she know, I'd been holding out, if I were being honest, for her. Not that I ever allowed myself to cross that line. But something about that night, with its humid haze, the full moon, and the two of us lying out on a blanket in my favorite hidden spot by the canal, I couldn't tell her no.

We were inevitable.

We took each other's virginites in the way everyone probably dreams of losing it; in a romantic spot with a caring partner you've loved for a very long time. She came to me and said she didn't want to lose it to someone random at college or when she was drunk and wanted her first time to be with someone who mattered.

Being the selfish idiot I was, I wanted her too much to deny her. I burned with jealousy, thinking about some stranger taking her virginity because I wanted to be the one she gave it to. So we'd taken that leap together, and even though I was a bumbling teenager, it's still the single best sexual moment of my life.

The morning after, I woke up on that blanket alone to a purple rising sun, Alana nowhere in sight. So I'm not taking all the blame for how things panned out, because she started the vow of silence.

"I didn't hear you making objections. There was never any push from you, no diatribes about how we should be together, no matter the obstacles. You stayed just as silent as I did, Alana. You were the one to leave first on that day we both went to college, left no note or anything."

"Because I was scared!" she cries, throwing her arms wide. "I was terrified that you wouldn't pick me, not over the entire future you had laid out before you. That summer, I felt like I was walking on eggshells, Warren. I was about to leave my entire family, the town I love, and you. God, thinking about

leaving you was hell. You didn't want us to go to college together, so I chose to go far, far away."

"You loved college," I reply weakly because what the fuck else am I supposed to say.

"Eventually. After I let you go. For a time, I let you go. And then we came back, and the silence had gone on too long. I couldn't bring it up, not when I thought you moved on. You forget that we didn't talk about anything relevant during those college years." Tears leak down her cheeks, and I brush them away with my thumb.

She's right, of course. I did my best to give her space, to plant her firmly in the friend zone. I tried to find another girl while I attended college, anyone who even came close to the feelings I had for Alana, but it was a hopeless cause.

"If we had gone to college together—and believe me, I wanted to follow you so fucking badly—I wouldn't have been able to stay away from you. I made your father a promise and living far away from here with nothing standing in my way, I would have broken it."

I will her to understand my mindset back then because I was only trying to protect us both.

"You decided not to love me first because my father warned you off. Then you didn't step up when you had the chance because you didn't want to hold either of us back. Then it was this or that. You know what these are, Warren? Excuses. A whole tractor trailer full of them. We're fucking married and you're still holding me at arm's length."

Alana backs away so I'm no longer touching her, a sob hiccupping up her throat.

"I'm not trying to, I promise. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for all of it. I've been a coward for so long, thinking I was doing the right thing, the respectful thing. And then we got married and it just ... none of it mattered. Why the hell was I doing any of it when I could have had you? The minute you slipped that plain gold band on my hand, nothing in the world felt more right. I've been yours for far longer than just these months

married, baby. Since the beginning, my heart has belonged to you. I'm so sorry, Al. I'll try harder. For a long time, this was my main setting, keeping things in and forging ahead alone. But you're right. It's us now. For a lot longer than now if you'll have me."

My insides heave from exhaustion, my brain frazzled from the twists and turns of this conversation.

"That's all I've ever wanted." She breathes, her voice seeping with tiredness too. "I'm sorry, too. We should have had this talk much sooner, shouldn't have avoided it for so long. It's just that answers like the one you just gave send me right back to doubting that this could be real. That we could actually be together ... even though we are together."

That has us both chuckling.

"I guess we've never done things in the proper order, huh?" She finally lets me pull her into a hug, and I stroke her cheek as I look into her eyes. "Last night meant everything to me, baby. I've been wanting to do that for so long, and you giving that to me again is the greatest gift. We'll figure this out, I promise. Let's just keep talking, keep being open. And definitely, let's keep doing that."

I point to the bed, and she hits me in the shoulder, not hard, and my sentiment has her giggling. And blushing again. Dammit, that blush has my morning wood turning to stone.

"You're the only boy I've ever seen." She entrusts me with this knowledge, and I can tell it's the most vulnerable she's ever been with me, even if we were stripped naked and joined together last night.

Alana is tough as nails and in control of most everything. But with us, she has to trust I'm going to meet her in the middle.

Instead of saying anything, I take her mouth, trying to answer that openness with a gesture instead of more words. She pushes her body against mine, and we pour everything into this kiss, our teeth knocking together messily as I try to convey all the love I have for her into this action.

It's a Herculean effort to keep those three little words in my throat. I've been in love with her since we were kids, and now I'm finally in a place to be able to tell her, but I can't. Not like this. Not after hurling our past in this way.

Plus, it feels like everything is too raw right now. Between the sex, the unpacking of our history, our proximity to each other at all times ...

Yes, I've never stopped being in love with her. But there is time to develop all of that without putting more pressure on us right now.

At least we've spilled all the tea onto the table and are finally trying to sop up the mess.





**E**ven though Warren and I technically put our past to rest with that fight and made up with many long kisses, things feel stilted between us.

We got everything out in the open, all the hurt and miscommunication, but we haven't had sex again. It's been five days since he rocked my world and shattered every boundary between us. But now, every time he looks at me, I can see the hint of sadness and difficulty in his eyes. Like he's done me wrong and needs to repent but isn't sure how to handle me with anything but kid gloves.

Except the only way I want him to make it up to me is on his knees, between my thighs. I'm too scared to admit that, and thus has begun the vicious cycle of silence we always fall into. Why the fuck can't we just be on the same wavelength like I wish we could?

Sure, we ride to work together most days, sit at the same kitchen table for dinner, cuddle on the couch at night while he watches a game and I read a book. Something is still off, though, and I know he can feel it too.

Case in point, he won't touch me or kiss me with a ten-foot pole. Not even when we were in front of my family or our friends. For five days, he's basically avoided me at all costs when we're at the restaurant. Which is how I find myself sitting in the dining room with my laptop, Evan's feet propped up on the chair beside me.

“What if we do some sort of cooking lesson with me?” He taps his chin, trying to brainstorm an auction item for Hope Crest Restaurant Week.

The celebration, which features the bars and restaurants of our little Delaware Valley town and nightly specials or discounted price fix menus to entice residents to come out and sample the local cuisine, kicks off with a big town square “gala.” Not that it’s fancy, but there are live bands playing all night, appetizers from the participating restaurants, and an auction to raise money for the small business fund the township board created ten years ago.

“Are we trying to scare people off? Because that would accomplish it.” I don’t look up from the Lily logo I’ve been trying to perfect in Photoshop.

It’s been weeks, and I still can’t create a design I like.

“What are you talking about? I’m a kick-ass teacher!” He throws up the tennis ball he’s been attempting to bounce off the ceiling.

“You made Lucy cry no more than ten days ago,” I deadpan, reminding him about our aunt, our actual flesh and blood, who asked to come make ravioli with him in the kitchen.

“She wasn’t rolling out the dough correctly.” Evan’s stare is completely serious, as if I should understand why he sent our father’s sister into hysterics.

“No, we’re not auctioning off cooking lessons with you. No one would end up coming to dine here. I should have August show them the ropes of service. That might be fun, an experience.” It would definitely be something out of the ordinary.

“She is the best of us.” A look flits over his face, and I swear it’s something close to admiration.

Which, from my youngest brother, is extremely rare. But before I can delve deeper into whatever he just felt, there is a crashing noise from the kitchen, followed by Cass pushing through the swinging door ass first.

“What’s going on?” I ask Cass, watching as she lugs a suitcase to the front of Hope Pizza.

“You should not be carrying that.” Evan comes up behind her, plucking the big bag from her hands.

“Are you guys taking a baby moon?” I wonder, even though neither she nor Patrick made mention of it.

She shakes her head, giving me a devilish smile, and my stomach drops immediately. “Nope. This is yours, I ransacked your drawers for the sexiest bathing suits and vacation clothes I could find. Even threw in a brand-new negligee, you’re welcome and can call it a bachelorette party present since you never let me throw one.”

My brain isn’t computing what she’s spitting out. “Um, okay? Why? What’s going on?”

“Please don’t talk about my sister in lingerie.” Evan cringes and makes a face like he just sucked on a lemon.

Warren comes out from the hallway that leads to our offices holding a matching suitcase, Patrick trailing behind him, and gives me a confused look.

“What’s going on?” he asks, setting the bag he’s carrying down next to the one Cass just hauled out.

“You’re going on your honeymoon!” She claps her hands together in delight, palming her belly as the baby probably kicks her violently due to all the jostling.

“No, we’re not.” I cock my head. “I’ve got a million things to do. we have Lily to worry about; there is that big corporate event in the dining room in three days—”

Patrick shakes his head at me, a scowl aimed in my direction. “Stop that, right now. We’ll cover it all. You two deserve a vacation anyway, and you never had a wedding, much less a honeymoon. Your flight leaves in two hours, so you better go get in the limo I ordered.”

“We can’t let you do this, it’s too much—” Warren starts to argue, but Cass literally presses a hand to his mouth.

“Shut it, you upstanding gentleman. I have more money than I’ll ever need, and I get to say what I want to spend it on. Right now, I want to send my sister-in-law and one of my family’s oldest friends, not to mention new brother-in-law, on a romantic honeymoon to a beachfront mansion in Turks and Caicos. Private chef, hot tub, infinity pool, you guys deserve the works. And you’re going. Do not argue.”

Her voice is so sharp, so much more severe than I’ve ever heard Cass speak, that I can’t say a thing in return.

“Can’t argue with a pregnant lady.” Patrick shrugs, putting a shoulder around his wife.

Warren’s eyes finally meet mine, and thank God I don’t see any lingering shreds of emotion from our fight. All I see is a question of concern; he’s making sure that I want to go away with him. I nod, letting him know I’m good with this if he is.

Maybe getting away is exactly what we both need right now.

“You guys are nuts.” Warren guffaws but picks up both suitcases as if he’s ready to get us out of here. “I hope you packed me enough underwear.”

“Are you kidding? I live with the king of last-minute packing. I’ve learned to prepare for men who act like babies when it comes to traveling.” Cass pats Patrick on the shoulder affectionately.

My brother scowls. “I do not.”

She waves him off. “Call us when you get there, and send pictures of how incredible it is. But most of all, have fun. Enjoy each other.”

The last sentence is laced with innuendo.

“Gross.” Evan shudders, stalking off to avoid sex talk about his sister.

“You really want to go?” Warren pulls me aside, searching my face.

“If you do ...”

“You’re not indecisive. And you don’t pander.” He instantly calls me out because, of course, he knows me.

“It’s just that you’ve been distant since ...” I gulp, my vulnerability showing at full force. “If a honeymoon is too intense right now, or you need time to think, then I want to give that to you. This week has been weird, and we have a lot going on. It’s okay to say no.”

Even though my heart and head are both begging him to say yes. To put me before whatever else is on our schedules.

“It’s my fault things have been weird. But maybe ... maybe we should talk about that on a white sand beach. It’s a much better locale for a make up than here. And you deserve this. I made you skip over everything wedding related, and our family loves you so much that they want to do this for you. I want to go for us.”

For the first time in a week, I feel like Warren might be fighting to make this marriage more than the farce it started as. So I take his hand, even if it’s clutched around a suitcase, and nod my agreement.

Hopefully, paradise will take our fake relationship and turn it into the real thing.

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**E**ight hours later, we’re pulling past wrought-iron gates in the dark, the scent of the ocean blowing through the open windows of the luxury Jeep that picked us up.

“This feels like some kind of *Alice in Wonderland* scenario. No way are we here.” Warren’s thumb strokes the back of my hand where we’re connected as the driver winds us through palm trees up to the front of a stoic white stone mansion.

“I think I’m suffering from whiplash,” I confirm because there was no way we were in Hope Crest this morning, and now here we are.

“Even if you pinched me right now, I wouldn’t believe I wasn’t dreaming.”

We both peer up at the house through the open-top Jeep, taking in its stucco facade and ornate shrubbery. Enormous flowering bushes are trimmed neatly, lining up to pull the eye to the front door painted the color of a sea-green ocean wave. Palm trees dot the yard, and a pair of white Adirondack chairs sit to the left side of the lawn, looking down a sloping hill straight into the ocean.

As the car rounds the circular driveway and stops, we get out hand in hand, a man appearing out of nowhere to start unloading our bags.

“Hello.” I smile warmly at him. “Thank you.”

He nods in greeting at me. “I’m Ralph, the house manager. I’ll be tending to anything you might be needing during your stay. Miss Mauer assured me you’d let me know if there is anything you need.”

Cass is too sweet for doing this, even if it’s completely unnecessary. “Oh, thank you, that’s very kind. I’m sure we’ll be very boring. Neither of us get to lounge by a pool much, so I assume we’ll be doing a lot of that.”

Warren shakes his hand. “Thank you very much, we’re very excited to be here.”

“Let me show you the house.”

Because we’re on our honeymoon and because I can use staff watching us as an excuse, I grab Warren’s hand as Ralph shows us inside.

The mansion, because that’s what this place is, is done in beach coastal decor but elevated, as if the finest of “summer people” reserve this house as a vacation home. White wainscoting everywhere, beiges and light blues, overstuffed couches, fresh hydrangeas on every surface. Palm tree print wallpaper with light wood floors, a scent through the whole place like the saltwater is right upon us, and something that smells close to chocolate chip cookies coming from the kitchen. I can’t wait to get into what the chef—yes, Cass hired

a chef for the week—has prepared for us. We haven't seen three-fourths of the place, and already I am in love with it and equally relaxed.

Once Ralph gives us a quick tour of the downstairs, which consists of a sitting room, a media room, a dining room, a professional-sized kitchen with appliances to boot, a screened-in porch, the pool deck and patio with stairs leading to the beach, and a billiards room, he leads us upstairs to the primary bedroom we'll share.

“If you want to freshen up, we have a little late-night dinner and dessert I can bring up. Or you could let me know if you want it in the dining room. I'll leave you to it.” He smiles and excuses himself.

I take one look at Warren, grin, then launch myself at the bed loaded down with about twenty overstuffed pillows.

“This feels like that scene in *Home Alone* where Kevin jumps on his parent's decadent bed.” I roll around, stretching my sore limbs from sitting on the plane for so long.

Warren's eyes light as he watches me, leaning against one of the four posts on the California king canopy bed we'll share.

“This is a fucking joke.” He snorts, directing his gaze to the other side of the room.

Walking there, he throws open the balcony doors. This bedroom is bigger than the first floor of my house, the entire wall opposite the bed is made of glass, including the doors my husband just opened, and it's as if the ocean tide might wash up right at the foot of the bed.

“They'll have to pull me out by the ear to go down and eat dinner. This bed is just to die for. I'm parked for the night.” I groan, mashing my head in a pillow.

At the back of my mind, I wonder if Warren will have a problem sharing a bed tonight or this week in general. He hasn't tried to touch me, but we're on our honeymoon, and if anything is supposed to happen on a honeymoon, it's sex.

My question is answered when I feel the mattress dip beside me, and I blink my closed eyes open to see him lying next to me.

“Are you happy?” His eyes search mine with genuine concern.

I can’t help myself from reaching out to touch his face. “It’s definitely not where I thought I’d end my day, not by a longshot. But yes. I’m happy to be here with you. Are you happy?”

If he says he regrets making this marriage more than it started out as I’ll be crushed. I probably won’t ever recover. But Warren is the one who said we should come here, so he must want to work things out. Hopefully? Dear God, I’m banking on it.

Before I realize he isn’t answering me with words, those big hands are tangling in my hair and pulling my lips to his. I meet his kiss with just as much fervor because I’ve been horny as hell ever since we’ve gone without.

So much emotion and sexual frustration are packed into this kiss, and I need to feel him entirely on me rather than us lying on our sides. I roll over to straddle him, our cores connecting, and groan loudly when Warren rubs up into me.

“I need you so badly,” I admit.

My skin is sizzling, and only he owns the match to set it aflame. I want him to burn me, brand me, put an end to this purgatory, and fall fully into what we could really be.

Warren’s still silent when it comes to words, but his actions speak for everything the two of us are trying to overcome. Quickly, our clothes come off, fumbling hands pulling the fabric until we’re bare against each other. He flips me, rolling my nipples between his fingertips as I squirm below him.

“I’ve missed you.” He sighs, tracing a line with his tongue between the valley of my breasts.

“Why did you stay away?” I whisper, not sure if I want to know this answer.



A brown lock flops over his forehead, his eyes sparkling as the moon illuminates our figures. “I was giving you space. What I said the morning after we had sex ... it was a lot to process. Those were secrets and emotions I’ve been holding on to for a long time, baby. I just ... I need to know you’re in this with me, all the way. That we’re both not holding back or holding grudges anymore.”

Doesn’t he know I’d give any of those up if it means I get to be with him? I guess since we’d denied ourselves for this long, maybe he didn’t.

“I’m here. I’m yours,” I reassure both of us.

“This may have started out one way, but I promise you, Al, I’m in this. You’re my wife, I’m your husband. No more faking it. This is the real deal, this marriage is everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Those three little words are on the tip of my tongue, but they feel too big to say right now. We may not be holding back, but part of me feels like I need to hang on to this last shred of self-preservation.

“Show me again. Please,” I beg him to make love to me like he did the other night.

Warren’s eyes heat to black, the gray vanishing with his lust. When he buries his tongue inside me, I gasp, thanking the heavens for this once-in-a-lifetime chance.

We make love to each other slowly, our moans swallowed by kisses while our eyes never leave the others.

By the time we’re finished, our dinner sits outside the door on a warming tray. I guess Ralph took the hint. I think I’ll grow fond of him by the time we leave.

So I sit in bed naked with my husband, feeding him delicious clam chowder off my spoon as he spoons crab cake into my mouth, laughing about memories past and looking to the future of the two of us together.



**F**our days of sand, sun, sex, and delicious food cooked by someone other than ourselves, and Alana and I might never return to Hope Crest.

We sit under an orange-and-white striped umbrella sipping strawberry margaritas with sugar on the rim, the ocean lapping at the shore of the private beach before us.

“I think I’ll give it all up and go live in a hut to experience this for the rest of my life.” She sighs, grabbing my hand across the space between our loungers.

“You’d have to move to Hollywood or Silicon Valley and make a shit ton of money to live this life.” I snort, although her dream does sound perfect if I get to watch her move around in a bikini all day.

Right now, she has this skimpy magenta one on that I want to untie with my teeth. But after delivering countless orgasms all over our bedroom, bathroom, and the kitchen, once the staff was asleep for the night, Alana made me swear to give her a break because of how sore she is.

The head of my dick aches with how much it’s been used, but that still doesn’t keep me from wanting to tackle her on the sand and see what sex on the beach would feel like.

“Fine, fine, I’ll return to my beloved little hometown. But this is a nice break. We should do this often.”

The way she speaks so easily about our future makes my heart bubble up out of my chest and float somewhere over us.

Alana talks like it's natural we'll be going on vacation and exploring the world together as a married couple, something I've dreamed of for years but never thought in my wildest dreams would come true.

"Deal. Every year, we'll pick somewhere new." It's a promise I intend to keep.

"Where should we go next year?" she muses.

"Wherever you want. I've always wanted to go to London. Or Paris. Maybe your Nonna's hometown in Italy." The Ashtons made many trips to their motherland over the years, but I have never gone with them.

Alana's eyes fill with appreciation. "I'd love to take you there. Hmm, maybe I'll have to change my passport to reflect my new last name."

She hasn't changed anything legally yet, and as far as I know, no one in town is even calling her by her new last name. She's still an Ashton to everyone, and part of me cringes at making her change that.

Considering I've always been ashamed of the man who provided my surname.

"You don't have to do that." My voice is drearier than I mean it to be, and I underestimate how well she reads me.

Because, of course, she knows exactly why I'm saying that.

"You know I'm more than proud to be Mrs. Teal, right?" She traces her hands over my hips, and lust sparks from the small touch.

"Yeah?" I smirk lazily, like a creature that's been thoroughly sated and satisfied, mostly because part of me doesn't want to show how much my past bothers me. Not when I'm sitting on a beach next to my beautiful wife.

She sits up, leaning over me to look directly into my eyes like I really need to hear her.

"I mean, that I'm proud to take your last name. Because to me, the only thing I think of when I hear Teal, is you. How

incredible you've been to me my entire life, how good of a human you are. You told me, the day you got that letter, you regretted keeping his last name. But I don't ever regret taking it. It only reminds me of you, of the last name I used to dream about having when I'd doodle it on my notebook in eighth grade. It's the name I wanted whenever I dreamed of the future, so think of it that way. This name is a gift you gave me, not some stain of the past. We can recreate it however we want."

My entire face lights with wonder, and dare I say tears, as I stare at her with unabashed emotion. My palm slides across her cheek, fingers sliding into her hair, and I close my eyes as I pull her to me to kiss her forehead. The gesture is supposed to be sweet, but I let my lips linger there as if tattooing myself on her brain.

"Thank you. I don't know how I ever deserved you in my life, but thank you." Because her words are a balm to my bruised and wounded soul.

For so long, I wanted to hide from my past. Hide who I am. Stay quiet in the background so that no one would notice where and who I came from. With just a few words and years of gestures, Alana has granted me the solace to be proud of who I am. Proud of the name that I've given her and the family we are now creating together.

And though I still haven't told her I am in love with her, it feels too soon despite the predicament we started out in, I feel it in every ounce of my bones. Coming here is exactly what we needed, the final thread to sewing up our past issues and putting them to bed, literally, forever.

"You're you. That's how." Al presses a sweet kiss to my lips.

A subject change is needed, and I clear my throat. "What else do you want to do today? We could be lazy and just read, eat, drink? Ralph said there's a pretty cool dinner spot in town if you want to venture out?"

We haven't done much else than relax since we've been here, and that's perfectly fine by me. I want to make sure she's

having the best time she can.

“Bet you can’t stand up on a surfboard.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“I’d rather you use me as a surfboard.” I give her a charming, cheeky smirk.

Alana rolls her eyes. “The image of that really has me wet, but I need a break. And I need to watch your ass faceplant into the ocean.”

“Bet you can’t last longer on it than I can.” Another innuendo has me inches from her lips, taunting her.

“Winner gets to be on top?” She licks her lips.

“Fuck, guess I better concentrate then.” Even though I’d enjoy watching her bounce up and down on me just as much as I would drilling her into the mattress.

“Last one in is a rotten egg.” She dashes through the sand, pert ass jiggling as she runs to the water’s edge where Ralph set up all kinds of water toys and equipment.

Even though we’re married now, even though I’ve been inside her body six ways to Sunday, even though the love we share has morphed, deep down, we’re still best friends. We still joke around, challenge each other, taunt, and tease. It’s what makes us work, and it’s what’s always made us work.

I got to marry my best friend by accident. Or, well, by Arthur’s meddling. And I can say now I’m damn glad he did.



**W**hen we arrive home from our honeymoon, the hint of summer and warmer weather is fully upon us.

Balmy temperatures greet us on the tarmac, and Warren opens all the windows in his truck as we drive home along the highway. He's rocking a sexy tan and stubble that borders on a beard, and this wild island man look has me all kinds of squirmy below the waist. How we controlled ourselves on the flight is beyond me because we've acted like sex-craved newlyweds for the last week, and I'm still yearning for more.

"You're never this quiet." He keeps his eyes on the road, but one big hand flexes on my thigh as the other grips the wheel to steer.

"Why is it so hot when you drive one-handed? Is there a drug you take to make me *more* attracted to you?"

Warren smiles, flashing me a look from behind his aviators. "You don't know how much I love hearing that after years of trying to suss out whether or not you thought I was attractive."

I lace my fingers in his. "Oh, baby, I always thought you were the sexiest thing in town. Just had to keep it to myself."

"Well, I'm glad we both don't have to anymore." He moves our conjoined hands to the apex of my thighs, and I want to brush against our fingers for some friction.

Except all too soon, we're driving down Newton Street, and Warren parks in front of Lily.



“Oh my God!” I clap my hands, completely distracted from any other thought than the store I’m looking at. “They got the signage up!”

Warren smirks like he knows something I don’t.

“Did you know they were installing?”

He unbuckles and opens the car door. “Might have had a call with Liam while we were away about progress on the store.”

Liam agreed to look after our little passion project while we were on our honeymoon, but I hadn’t realized my brother had been giving my husband updates, much less been in touch at all.

“I wanted to surprise you, plus I didn’t want you worrying about this stuff while we were supposed to be on vacation.” He joins me at the hood of the car, wraps an arm around my shoulder, and directs our gazes up to the custom lettering at the bottom of the roof.

Above the door hangs a sign with the same brand logo, a simple script with a lily flower replacing the *i*. The letters have a shadowing effect on them, almost making them look 3D, and are outlined in a pretty violet color. The script on the front window is in white and violet, reading “quality goods from local creators.” The entire branding makes the store look so beautiful and legitimate that I can’t help but tear up.

“Thank you,” I choke out, leaning into his shoulder.

“Hey, you picked out all the font colors and design. I just made sure Liam made sure they were installed properly.”

“I know, but I just mean, thank you for trusting my decisions and my desire to open this store. I haven’t ... not everyone has supported this dream. This need to branch out on my own. You did, do, unwaveringly. You’ve always been my person, Warren. But this really proves it more.”

Every single word is from the heart, no matter how sappy.

“I ...” He cuts himself off, and I swear he was about to say it. My breath clings to my throat, unable to exhale, and I stare

at him.

“Let’s go in and see the rest of the progress.” He shakes his head imperceptibly.

Disappointment soaks my gut, even if I haven’t said them either. Part of me needs Warren to go first, but I put those thoughts on the back burner as we walk inside Lily.

“Wow,” I breathe, trying to inhale the magic I know will happen inside this space.

The floors and the built-ins for the checkout counter and displays around the shop are finished. The white paint on them looks fresh and elegant, while the white granite on the counters is perfect. Mismatched antique end tables, dining tables, and a few refurbished chairs sit around the room, waiting to be staged to display the goods we’ll sell.

“The bathroom looks great. Toilet and countertop plus sink are in, just needs one more coat of paint,” Warren relays as he walks back up front from the small single-person room in the back of the shop.

“We have to order the racks for the storeroom this week,” I say idly, walking around.

Everything seems to be on track, looking beautiful, and I’m optimistic. That is, until I go to turn on the lights.

“Why aren’t the lights working?” I flick the switch again, doing it twice more, as if the lights will magically come on.

“You’re kidding.” Warren walks over, flips the switch a couple more times for good measure, then curses under his breath. “Liam didn’t say anything about this, so someone must have nicked a line in the days since he last checked in.”

“Fucking great.” I rub my forehead like a headache might be coming on. “How much time and how much money is this going to cost us?”

We wanted to open relatively soon to capture some of that summer crowd magic, and electrical issues are no joke.

“Let’s just try to stay relaxed about this, it could be something little. Something easily fixable.” Except Warren is

chewing on his lip as if he's just as worried as I am.

Worst-case scenarios fly through my head, and for the first time since he leased the space for us, doubt creeps in. I'm usually detrimentally driven and positive, to the point that I won't let one of my ideas fail. But this is a huge leap, and a problem like this could set us back financially and time-wise.

"It'll be okay." My husband pulls me in, rubbing my back as I breathe in the last scents of the island that cling to his clothing.

After a quick check of everything else, we walk down the street to Hope Pizza. Neither of us is working tonight, but we've missed the place and our family, so it's only natural we visit before going home to unpack. Or, more likely, fall into bed together, but no one else needs to hear about that.

"You're back! Oh, hi, hi! We missed you!" Mom comes at me with an enormous bear hug, and I lean into her, letting her embrace warm me.

She must be manning the hostess stand tonight because otherwise, the place is empty before the dinner rush.

I'm nothing if not a mama's girl, since we have to put up with all these men around us. She's always been a source of comfort and a friend; my mom is the kind of mom my friends would go to for advice and say they wished she was their mom. I always concurred.

"We missed you, too. Although we didn't want to leave paradise." I smile at her, then back at Warren.

"The pictures you sent were beautiful, it looked amazing. You all rested and relaxed?" She still has her arms around me but reaches out to squeeze Warren's hand.

"Yep, but ready to get back to work. Lily has a bit of a problem we'll have to—"

"Oh good, you're back. We need a whole marketing campaign done for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the pizzeria. I'm not sure what you have on your plate with *that* store, but we need all hands on deck. It's going to be a huge

night.” Dad completely interrupts our nice recap of our trip and my wading back into the water of my job and family.

Plus, he talks about Lily like I’m opening some seedy business that deals in illegal things. My blood begins to simmer because everything about what he just said is so condescending, and yet he doesn’t see the problem with any of his words.

I grind my molars together to try to keep my cool. “First of all, I’ve had our campaigns on social media scheduled for the event for a month, plus all the graphics for it are done. Local stations and newspapers are waiting on a press release closer, and Evan is sitting down with one of the local morning shows to do a full-length piece on the evolution of our family restaurant. I’ve been actively planning every square detail of the anniversary, but please, tell me I don’t know how to do my job.”

Mom admonishes him with some words spoken under her breath that I can’t hear, and Warren moves to my side. I feel him bristle with the tension in the air about how my father just spoke to me.

Dad rolls his eyes, but I can see it in his posture that I’ve taken his ego and bravado down a notch. “Well, good. I just know you’ve been distracted with that store, and this is our family’s legacy. Don’t need someone dropping the ball.”

As if I haven’t always been one of the backbones of this business since I joined it.

“I’m not some weak little girl, Dad. You don’t treat the boys like this. I can take on more than one project at a time and get it done in half the time they can.”

“No one is saying you can’t.” His brows furrow like he’s confused that I’d be challenging him.

“*You* are, right ... you know what, forget it. I have other stuff to worry about.” I flick my wrist in the air as if to dismiss it.

I just had an amazing week in paradise with my husband, my store is almost done, and I’ve seen to my responsibilities

here for months to come. He doesn't get to burst my bubble with this pompous asshole mood. Not today, at least.

"What's going on with the electrical stuff?" Mom tries to lighten the room by showing interest in Lily.

"We're not sure, but the lights weren't working when we just went to check on the progress," Warren fills her in, and I know he's trying to use his voice to downplay how serious it might be.

"Well, you'll get it worked out. We have tons of contacts, I'm sure one could help." Mom nods in my direction reassuringly.

I look to Dad because I'm still buzzing with anger toward him and don't want to swallow it down.

"You could call George, get him to come out and fix the electrical issues with no problem." I plant a hand on my hip, acting like a stubborn child.

"I only do business favors or rush referrals for those I believe in. For businesses I know were thought through, planned, and are making a conscious effort to build slowly, so they stick around in a town as special as ours."

His response stings worse than almost any words I've ever heard in my life.

"Thomas!" Mom gasps.

She probably can't believe he said that just as much as I can't. Sure, I've always felt more challenged by my father than I think my brothers have been. Maybe it's my perception, but he seems harder on me. I've thrived in a lot of ways because of it, but this adverseness to me branching off and starting my own business is way over the top. It's coming from a hostile place, and I can't believe my own father would leave me hanging like he seems to be doing.

"I love you, Dad, but you're being an asshole right now." The lump in my throat makes my words come out choked and emotional.

Warren pulls me to him, the warmth of his body giving me some semblance of comfort. I notice, though, that his other hand is in a fist by his side.

“If you don’t want to hear what I have to say, Thomas, you’ll walk back into the kitchen now.”

It’s rare that he’s ever said boo to my father, and a very selfish, very teenage part of me revels in the fact that Warren is siding with me over him.

“Go, now. We’ll talk about this when you’ve calmed down.” Mom glares at her husband.

Dad wavers, angry, hurt eyes taking us all in before harrumphing grumpily and lumbering back to the kitchen.

Mom turns to me. “I’ll call George and have him fix it, no worries, sweetheart. You two go home and relax.”

She’s trying to gloss this over, be the good cop, but the pain of Dad’s words is nearly tattooed on my skin.

I let Warren guide me to the car, my happy bubble burst, and I think of nothing else but the doubt and lack of support from the one man I’ve always tried so hard to impress.

No matter how many good things I’ve done in recent months, I don’t think I’ll ever measure up to my brothers in his eyes.



“**Y**ou were totally avoiding our canal walk when we weren’t talking, admit it.”

I point my finger at Warren as we walk along with iced coffees, the early morning light washing over the red dirt under our shoes and water rushing next to us.

“Of course I was, but you were, too. I couldn’t bear to come here without you. It felt wrong.” He traces my face with his palm, and I lean into it.

“Same here. We’ve been doing this walk since that morning after Jeremy Ham puked on you at that National Honor Society induction.” I chuckle, remembering how disgusted Warren looked in that auditorium.

“And you let Chuck Easton ask you to the winter formal. I was so fucking jealous.” He smirks.

“You could have asked me yourself.” I bat my eyelashes at him.

He shrugs. “Eh, I got the girl in the end. And now she’s wearing my ring, how smart am I?”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, shove it, brainiac.”

He pulls me into his side, and we take a quiet moment to sip our coffees through the straws—the summer air whips past our shorts-clad legs. We got up extra early today to come down here, and Warren promised me scones from our favorite valley bakery after as a reward. But he didn’t want to get



caught in the summer crowds who would no doubt pack the canal after nine a.m. now that Memorial Day has passed.

“I almost asked, you know. That night I drove you home from that bake sale we worked. It was dark in your driveway, no one was home, shockingly. I almost leaned over and spilled my guts then asked you, but I thought you might say no.”

Warren stops our motion and turns me to him, holding my waist with his free hand.

“Even after all this time, you thought I didn’t feel the exact same way?” It’s a miracle he didn’t notice how I mooned over him.

“I guess I was an idiot kid. Or maybe I didn’t think someone as perfect as you would want someone like me.”

“Good thing you were forced to marry me, then,” I joke, pushing up on my toes to brush my lips to his.

But Warren moves back. “Hey, that’s not true. I had an option, and I chose the one that gave me you. Don’t say it like that.”

“I was joking.” Although, it’s not like I haven’t been insecure about this.

“Even so, I’m with you because I want this marriage. In every single way. You’re it for me, Al.” Now he kisses me, sweetly, purely.

Picking up his hand again, I set us in motion, wanting to earn my bakery treats.

“Everything worked out with George?” I ask, knowing he was in contact with my parent’s trusted electrician.

The subject still hurts thinking about how my father wouldn’t help us out, but I’ve been swallowing down the awkwardness.

Warren nods. “It was just a simple snipped wire, all fixed. Thank God. It won’t take any time from our opening day timeline, so we’re still on track.”

“I scheduled a bunch of vendor product drop-offs this week, so we’ll have to start the stock room organization.” I clap my hands together because I thrive with challenges like that.

“You’re the only person I know who likes cleaning and putting stuff in its right place.” He laughs.

“It speaks to my soul.” I throw my coffee away in a bin on the canal.

“And you speak to mine.” He wraps his arms around me as we stop so he can nuzzle my hair.

A thrill runs through me at how open he is with affection these days. And it’s not like it’s fake; we’re not in front of anyone we have to prove our marriage to. That’s because ... well, it’s not. Not anymore. Since our honeymoon and opening up about all the feelings we kept under wraps, everything between us has been smooth sailing. We’re a real married couple, going through the newlywed stages of never being able to keep our hands off each other.

“I thought we were getting a little break from sex. Didn’t you tell me your dick might fall off?” I tease him, sticking my chilly hands up the back of his sweatshirt to feel his bare skin.

Warren jumps a little from the contact but doesn’t let go. “It’s so sore from overuse, but somehow still doesn’t care with this view of your ass in leggings.”

“Horndog.” A laugh bubbles out of me.

“Says the woman who climbed me like a cat at three in the morning. God, you’re so fucking sexy.” He squeezes my ass as he burrows his face into my neck.

“Come on, I need to get some steps in. And you promised me pastries.”

We walk hand in hand for a little while, the birdsong the only sound between us.

“Don’t you have a meeting with the lawyer this week?” I ask, trying to figure out our schedule as it rotates and takes shape in my head.

*Our schedule.* It's been a pipe dream that someday I'd tie myself to someone, hopefully him, and create a routine with a husband that turns into our life. But that's what Warren and I have done.

He nods. "He wants to go over all of Arthur's business holdings, many of which I still don't even understand or know about. It's a lot to take on, I just hope I'm doing him proud. A lot of the companies he created or was involved with, I think we're just going to end up selling his shares or stepping down. I don't have the time or the want to take them on. But the ones that were very important to him ... well, I want to try to honor him. Take them on if I have the wherewithal and the knowledge."

"He'd be so proud of you." My heart warms at his dedication to preserving his adoptive father's legacy.

Warren shrugs like he's not so sure of that. "I hope so. I miss him more than I ever thought I would. He was a good man, and even if I resented he and Clara for some things, the truth is, they saved me. I could have ended up in a much worse environment, and they also let me become so close with your family, which also saved me. You all saved me. If I can do right by Arthur, I feel like I'm giving him what I can back, in a way."

My thumb rubs over the back of his hand where we're conjoined. "You are. Of course, he didn't expect you to keep those businesses, I'm sure he was proud of you for the work you were doing at the restaurant. Plus, you're starting your own business. I didn't know Arthur that well, but I like to think he'd have been so interested in what we're doing."

Warren laughs. "You're right, he would have asked me a million questions, and probably would have put on a hard hat himself."

"I'd have loved to see that." As much as we're making new memories of our own, my heart bleeds for the life Warren should have gotten from his childhood.

"Speaking of things I'll be going over with the lawyer, I didn't tell you something that was stipulated in Arthur's will."

He looks nervous, which causes nauseous butterflies to start flapping around in my stomach.

“Okay ...” Part of me thinks perhaps I don’t want to hear this.

“The lawyer pointed out that his will stipulates we need to stay married for five years to inherit all of his estate. Obviously, the bulk of it was given to me once we got married, but if we want full control, we have to stay married for five years.”

Surprisingly, as I take in this information, not one emotion passes through my chest. Not upset that he didn’t tell me about this, not anxiety that maybe he doesn’t want to stay together that long, not fear that we won’t be able to make it. No, the only thing I feel is a quiet calmness out here on our river walk.

“Okay.” I shrug, giving him a cheeky little smirk.

Warren all but stops walking. “Okay? That’s all you have to say? Sheesh, Al, I thought you were going to kick my ass.”

“For forcing me to stay married to you for five years? Do you know how long I’ve tried pushing you to ask me on a date? Now I’ve got you for at least five years? Jackpot.” I wrap an arm around his hip and try to pull his large form to me.

He runs his hands through those dark locks, and I can’t stop staring at how gorgeous he is in this morning light. He’s gorgeous all the time, but there is something about a relaxed weekend-Warren that does it for me.

“I thought you were going to feel pressure or fear or ... I don’t know, I didn’t expect this.”

“You know I’m pretty much the calmest person under pressure,” I point out.

He nods. “You’re like a diamond, you’re so tough to break. But this is a big ... well, sticking point. You don’t feel any way about it?”

My husband looks at me like I’m the kind of woman to tell him *I’m fine* but really mean that I’ll give him the silent

treatment for hours until he figures out what's really wrong.

"I really don't feel any way. We're married; I love being married to you; I don't plan on changing that anytime soon. Or hell, ever. Five years? Give me fifty. I'm good, truly."

"You're incredible." His eyes light with awe as he gives me a thorough kiss, then pulls me along the trail to finish our walk.

We're nearing the parking lot now, having turned back to return to the car. A sheen of sweat coats my eyebrows and beneath my sports bra, but I feel good, energized. I love simply walking and talking about the mundane with him.

"What the hell?" Warren whispers under his breath, and my gaze shoots to him.

He, however, is looking at the parking lot, his steps becoming increasingly quicker. His face has gone pale, and I know a panicked Warren when I see one. And that isn't very often, which throws me into a downward spiral. Usually, I can count on him being calm, cool, and collected.

"Baby, what's going on?" I try a gentle voice with a pet name, trying to bring him back to me from whatever has him spiraling.

"That motherfucker is following us?" he growls to himself, and I've never seen him so wound up.

This is Warren, my gentle giant. The guy who doesn't get pestered or furious, who goes with the flow, and has resolved problems with the patience of a saint since we were in middle school. I follow the direction of his eyes and see a man standing by our car. He looks like an average thirty-something with dark hair and the outfit of a suburban dad: blue jeans and a white polo. He doesn't appear menacing, but I know something must be up if Warren is acting like this.

"That's the director I told you about, Mason. The one who is trying to convince me to do the documentary about my father," Warren grits out between his teeth as we come to stand before the man.

It all clicks into place; while this person might not seem like a threat, the message behind his reappearance threatens to shatter my husband's world. Not only does he rarely talk about his past with those who love him most, but he'd never want to broadcast it to the world. Apparently, this Mason will not take that for an answer.

"What are you doing here? Are you following me?" Warren's voice is quiet but lethal, and anyone who doesn't know him intimately wouldn't understand that he's on the edge of going off like a time bomb.

"You must be the wife." The man, Mason, as Warren identified him, shoots his hand out and leers in my direction, ignoring my husband.

I rub my arm uncomfortably as Warren shoulders in front of me slightly, as if I'm in danger. "This is more than enough. I told you no, you know my answer. Don't bring her into this and stop following me."

Mason has never met me, so he must be checking into Warren actively since our marriage is somewhat new. It's not like we put it all over the Internet, either. Suspicions and panic crowd my mind, and I keep my mouth shut, not wanting to give this creep an inch.

"Come on, man, don't be like that. I came to give you something and to implore you to tell your side of the story. You landed on your feet. Got picked up by a rich family. Almost made it pro before you flamed out. Don't you want to tell that story?" The filmmaker sneers and alarm bells go off in my head.

This doesn't sound like someone trying to pursue a human-interest story. This sounds like someone who knows entirely too many things about the man I love most and is using them to manipulate him in some way. This sounds like the opinions of another man, one locked behind bars, bleeding over into a person who has the platform to spew lies.

Warren looks like he's about to pummel this guy, and I need to get us out of here.

“The next time you show up somewhere unannounced or uninvited, we will be contacting the local authorities. Warren has said no, and that’s final. Do not bother us again.” Trying to keep my voice neutral, with no waver of nerves or fear, is a feat.

Mason’s eyes flash with something I can’t read, but his grin creeps me out more than anything he’s said or done before this. He whips something out of his pocket and holds it in Warren’s direction.

“If I can’t convince you, maybe he can.” The guy still won’t leave, and I’m getting scared that something is about to happen.

Warren won’t touch the envelope Mason extends, so I grab it and push my husband to our car. We don’t say a word as he pops the locks and climbs inside, my feet rushing to the passenger door to shut myself in.

Mason stares at us, unmoving, as Warren pulls out of the parking lot and drives off, his limbs stiff as a robot. When I look down at the envelope in my lap, I see a scrawled scratch addressing it to my husband, and I know.

I instantly know. This is from his father. The envelope suddenly feels like it’s burning an evil hole through my skin, but I gingerly set it on the floor of the car so as not to incite Warren even further.

The drive back to our home is silent.

As Warren parks the car, I feel all the energy leave his body. He slumps forward once he’s in park, resting his forehead against the steering wheel.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Where I come from, the part of him that will always be tied to me ... I hate it. I hate that you’re involved in it now.”

He’s not looking at me, but I feel every ounce of pain and frustration coming off him.

“Let’s go inside.” It’s all I say as I take his hand, urging him to get out of the car.

I don't ask him because my home is his now. This is our sanctuary, and I should tell him to give up his apartment as soon as we talk this thing out.

Following the front walk up to my door, I hold his hand and lead the way as if he's a lost pet in need of comfort and direction. He requires both right now, and I'm going to give that to him. I'm his wife, in every sense of the word now, and only I can provide the kind of love he needs at this moment. The kind that makes him lose himself, erases thought, and makes the world fade away.

As soon as we're inside the door, I'm shedding my clothes, making sure to catch his eye as I fling my tank top over my head. Push my leggings past my feet as I toe off my sneakers and discard my bra and underwear. The front hallway of the house is swathed in sunlight, and anyone walking close enough to our windows could probably make out what we're doing, but I can't care right now.

When I'm fully undressed, Warren not having taken his eyes off me the entire time, I walk to him and pick up his hand, setting it on my heart.

"Use me to forget. Don't feel a thing but me," I tell him, giving him permission to lose himself in us.

Those skilled lips crash violently onto mine, not taking another second before he shuts his brain off. Hands cup my breasts, my sex, fingers pushing in as he uses his other hand to tear at his clothes.

His boxers and athletic shorts are at his ankles, pooling around the sneakers he doesn't bother taking off as he hoists me against the front door. My legs fall open and around his waist, my core lining up perfectly with his rock-hard dick sliding against my wet opening.

And when he pushes inside me in one deep, long, harsh stroke, I hold on to his shoulders for dear life, hoping I can erase some of his pain.





**W**e're in a heap on the floor in front of the front door, our breath coming in pants as we come down from our climaxes.

"Thank you." Warren brushes my closed eyelids with his lips, and I knew he needed that before he even did.

Even though we're naked as newborn babes with all the windows open on the first floor on a weekend morning, I don't move.

"Has he written you before?" I ask, not knowing if he'll tell me the truth.

Warren picks me up like I weigh nothing, and even with the heaviness in the air, I can't help the giggle that escapes. "What are you doing?"

"We both could use a shower. Call it aftercare for fucking you against the front door." His voice is deep and sounds clear, so I hope that alleviated some stress for him.

"You owe me pastries, too." I try to keep the lightness of the mood going, even if he hasn't answered my question.

"After the shower. We'll go eat there." He promises.

When we're both standing under the spray, his gorgeous lean form towering over me as we hold each other in the warm water, he finally speaks.

"Yes, he's written, but not in years. Or maybe because I moved around a lot, he never knew where to send it. Either

way, this is the first time in probably seven or eight years.”

Shock squeezes my lungs because that means he was writing to Warren in high school and even college, and he never told me.

“Why don’t you talk about it? I mean, I know why. But it’s me. If you need it, you can always vent to me.” My voice is small, like I’m unsure of our connection, even though he’s naked in my shower after an afternoon of exploring my body.

He palms my cheek. “It’s ugly. And horrible. I’ve never wanted to stain you with that, much less recall it. But with this fucking scum, Mason, coming around, dredging it all up, I just can’t stop thinking about it. What kills me is that I know exactly what he looks like. I can’t avoid the pictures that pop up every once in a while when I’m scrolling the Internet. But ... I can’t remember her face. I don’t remember what her voice sounds like or what she smelled like. It’s been so long, and I don’t have a scrap of anything that belonged to her. People love to talk about how insane my father is, what a crazy murderer he is, but I only ever focus on my mother. Ultimately, I lost the one woman who was biologically disposed to love me. I think she did, I think we had good times. It’s so hard to remember back to that, to before he began beating her down, spirit or otherwise. She hid a lot of it from me, but my God, I wish I saw more. Maybe I would have reported it, gotten her help. Before he did anything ...”

“You were a little boy, Warren. You did all you could. And I’m sure she hid it because she loved you so much, she didn’t want any of that touching you.” My voice breaks as I eliminate any space between us.

Inside, my heart is breaking for the little boy he was. Breaking for the mother who deserved to live, to see him how he is now.

“She’s gone, and I have no one to turn to now. They’re all gone, every parent, and the only one surviving writes me letters out of some sort of nightmare. It’s hard to reconcile that you don’t deserve a life like this when it’s all you’ve ever known. I know you don’t understand that, but for a very long

time, I thought I wasn't worthy of any kind of love. These crime junkies or news personalities think that all I'm good for is their yearly updates on what the son of a psychopath is up to. Everything I am is tied to him, whether I like it or not."

"That's not true." My words come out harsh, but only because I can't believe he truly believes that. "You don't have no one, first of all. I would follow you to the ends of the earth. So would my family. You are one of us. And you're everything to me."

Those three little words still evade me, and I can't reason why, but right now isn't the time to think about myself.

"As for deserving any of it, or being tied to him, that's so wrong, I feel like hitting it out of you. If anyone can't realize, within seconds of meeting you, that you're made of pure, unfiltered good, they're an absolute idiot. Warren, you are the kindest, most gentle person I know. Every inch of you radiates goodness, to the point that it gets annoying when you won't talk shit with me sometimes. You are not your parents, any of them. You have always been your own person, to me and to anyone who knows you. Fuck whatever the outside world thinks. You know who you are, even in moments of doubt. And if you forget, I'm right here to remind you."

He sighs into me, neither of us making a move to actually shower.

"Will you read it?" I ask the question that's been burning inside me since Mason handed it to me.

Warren answers immediately. "No. I never do. Nothing he says will ever change my mind. I will never go see him or want to make amends. The day he killed her was the day he ceased to be in my life. There is nothing I want from him, to say to him, *nothing*. I have no lingering thoughts or regrets, no questions. I'm living for me, in the present."

While it might not make sense to some, those who might want answers, I understand. Not only do I not want him opening that can of worms for his own peace, but Warren knows what he needs to live a life he's proud of and happy in. Only he can make that decision.

I hug him tight, trying to use my body and gestures to pour all the love I hold into his body.

After a few minutes, he clears his throat. “We should get cleaned up before we get all pruned. Plus, I owe you sugar and dough.”

I rub my stomach. “My second dessert, after you, of course.”

His smile at least hints at flirting, which is a good sign. I hate that he feels like this, that our morning was derailed because of that fucking creep director.

“Why does your shampoo and conditioner smell so much better than mine?” he muses, squirting a pump into his hand as he massages it into my hair.

I groan from the heavenly contact. “Because I spend a small fortune on it, so it better. Speaking of that, I do want to try to find some local beauty companies or small creators who make high-end products like this but just don’t have the scale to get their name out there.”

“Always thinking about Lily, huh?” I can hear the smile in his voice. “Me too, but mostly how we’ll juggle it with our schedules.”

“We’ll figure it out. Or we’ll hire some local kids, or maybe we can steal August away, she likes us best.”

“Not a bad idea. Plus, it would mean longer hours she’s out of the house. We could make her the manager, it would look great on her résumé for future employers no matter what she wanted to do. Speaking of August, has she applied to the landing page?” he asks.

I nod, knowing she did about a week ago. “I’ll send an email this week that she got it. Why do I feel guilty for funding her entire college tuition and lying about it?”

Warren grimaces as we switch positions, and I shave my armpits while he washes the shampoo from his hair. “Because we shouldn’t have to in the first place. Either her mother should support her and pay, or August shouldn’t have a

problem taking the tuition straight from me. But we know both of those things will never happen, so this is how it has to be.”

In my heart, I know we’re doing the right thing. “You’re right. Okay, brainstorming; what else do we want to add to our product lineup at the last minute?”

I already met and secured contracts with a clothing designer, a soap and body product company, a candlemaker, a CBD and essential oil creator, three local authors who are going to sell their signed books in our store, a candy company, two women who make the dreamiest knit blankets and baby-wearing devices, and a coffee roaster. I still have a couple more deals in the works, but we have enough product to open tomorrow if we want to.

All local, all manufactured in the US or specifically in Pennsylvania, all small batch. It’s exactly what I’ve been dreaming of, and one obvious but clutch thing about Warren’s inheritance is that we can afford to give these people a space to sell their products while not worrying about operating in the black. Of course, we’re getting a small cut from the deals I negotiated, but it’s more about showing the community and the tourists who come here what our river valley has to offer. How many special creators we have.

And no, I no longer feel bad about using some of the inheritance money Warren received because of our marriage deal. One, we are now legitimate in every way that matters. And two, I worked just as hard on Lily and on our relationship as he has, and as he keeps telling me, what is his is mine now.

It’s too exhausting to question it any longer, especially when I’m able to put our local creators on display like this.

“Your business mind never rests, does it?” Warren chuckles as he turns off the shower.

“Somebody around here has to make money since you’re so broke,” I deadpan the joke as I know he watches me get out and wiggle my ass in a towel.

“You trying to incite me?” He quirks an eyebrow as I watch water rivulets trickle down his abs and the muscles that

lead to his cock that is already semi-hard again.

“Maybe later, hot stuff. Right now, my husband promised me sugary treats to stuff my face full of.”

I can't even mask the giggle as he sweeps me off my feet again and hops onto our bed with me in his arms. I do eventually get those pastries, it's just way after breakfast has ended.





I've just drilled the last hole into the wall for the hooks Alana asked me to hang to display aprons and sweatshirts when the overhead bell to Lily rings.

My head snaps up since I'm extra cautious of unexpected visitors these days, but it's only Leona.

"Hey, you." I smile warmly at her because she's always been a source of comfort and support in my life.

Leona took me in as her own when she already had her hands full with four teenagers, and I'll forever be grateful for that. Over the years, she's always been the one who speaks straight with me but comes from a place of motherly understanding and no pressure. She's the one who insisted we hug both hello and goodbye, giving me a physical comfort that I hadn't known in my life.

If I've grown up to be half the man she thought I could be, I am happy with that.

"My favorite son-in-law." She beams as she sets down a thermos of something that is probably delicious and going to make me derail my efforts to get the rest of the products displayed tonight.

Alana has been in newsrooms and studios all day, promoting the upcoming seventy-fifth anniversary of Hope Pizza. She looked absolutely gorgeous on the morning show I watched her on, and I promise I've worked hard at Lily today. We plan to open next week before the summer season starts and still need to install some shelving and sort through

product. It's grunt work, so while she's being the marketing extraordinaire, I've locked myself in here to get it done.

“Your only son-in-law, but I'll take it. Please tell me that's \_\_\_”

“Your favorite tomato soup? Yes. Plus, I brought along that gouda grilled cheese you loved as a freshman in high school.” She winks at me like a mother who surprises her kids on the regular.

“I'm a grown man and still worship that grilled cheese.” I set down my drill and cross the room to hug her.

“It looks like you could use a break, and I came over to help since you've taken all the tasks upon yourself. So put me to work. Everything okay with the electrical now?”

Purposely, I haven't brought up the tension with Thomas to Alana. I know she's internally stewing over it, and trying to sway her either way now would only upset her. Again, because I know her, I know she takes time to digest her feelings and make a decision about what she'll do next. When we got into a fight our sophomore year of college because I didn't want to intrude on parent's weekend at her university, it took her until Halloween to call me with tears in her voice, telling me she missed me and that my costume in social media pictures was subpar.

But it's not like I've talked to her father either, and even if Leona is here to smooth things over, there is still that wedge that's been driven.

“Everything is good, great actually. I only have to sort through the clothing sizes and hang them accordingly, but if I'm eating so are you. Let's sit over there.” I point to the two folding chairs and card table Alana and I set up so we didn't get any of the real furniture pieces in here dirty.

Leona brings the food over and sets it out, complete with disposable bowls and silverware she brought along.

“You're the best mom I know.” I grin. “Although I know Cass will definitely take some pages from your book.”

We sit down, and she sighs happily. “I’m so excited for my grandbaby to be here, I could cry every second of the day. It’s bittersweet watching your babies turn into real adults, but it’s also the most rewarding thing ever. Seeing Patrick and now Alana find the loves of their lives to create homes and families with like Thomas and I did? It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

I look down at my soup as I take the first spoonful, not wanting Leona to see the war going on in my eyes. I’m so happy with Alana, but there are still so many complications. The one at the forefront of my mind is my past, which seems to be creeping up, trying to poison me and her in turn. I could see how rattled she was that Mason followed us, that he knows who she is. Part of me still wants to find that motherfucker and beat him to a pulp for scaring her. Hopefully, he’s gone, but if I know anything about my father, it’s that he isn’t remorseful and only wants more attention during the anniversary of my mother’s murder.

Alana must have thrown the letter away or buried it deep in some drawer because she hasn’t brought it up since. I told her the truth when I said I’ve never read a word from my father. What good would it do? I’m never going to forgive him; I don’t need closure. All it will do is serve his self-interests, and I’m not going to feed into that. But the fact that this Mason guy is creeping around now, trying to open a can of worms he knows nothing about? It scares me when it means Alana is in the crosshairs, too.

“Making you happy is one of the most important things to me,” I tell her because it’s true.

We eat in silence for a few moments, and then Leona looks up at me and clears her throat. “But something has been bothering you.”

She knows me too well; the entire Ashton family does. I forget that at times. But it’s not like I can give her the whole truth. So I settle for some of it.

“A director is bugging me to be a part of this documentary about my ... my biological parents. I’ve told him no, but he

doesn't seem to get the memo. I just worry about Alana getting tangled up in this mess."

Concern flits over her elegant features, a face so similar to Alana's that I know what my wife will probably look like at Leona's age. "Our girl is strong. Don't underestimate that."

I snort. "You think I don't know that? I worry she'll try to outwit and fight this to her detriment when I don't need her to. I want to protect her, is all."

"Which is why I knew it was you for her from day one." Leona places her palm on my cheek. "But you can't push these things, even if you two drove me insane at times."

I can't exactly tell her that Alana and I had a fake marriage initially, but I can't disagree. I always knew that I would be in love with Alana for my entire life, even if we weren't together. It's on the tip of my tongue to divulge everything to her, but even though Leona loves me like a son, I don't know what her reaction would be to that. It's not often that I wish I had someone outside of this family to confide in, and it's both a blessing and a curse.

Arthur was that safe haven for me for a time, but growing up, I was pretty much alone with my innermost thoughts. If I had a real problem, I went to Leona and Thomas. But where Alana is concerned, I'll never put them in that position, even if they were to try to give me advice.

"For a while, I lost a bit of faith. There were ... complications holding us back."

*Your husband* doesn't come out of my mouth, but it might as well. Of course, Leona knows. How couldn't she? She's been here the whole time.

"Thomas will come around. His ego is bruised, and lord knows my husband is pigheaded. More than most men I know. It also makes him very protective, and that's what he is when it comes to his children. All of them, including you. You two rattled him. He owes you both an apology, a large one. Again, we can't push these things."

“Did you know about his talk with me, all those years ago?” I ask because that question has always bugged me.

Even more than the documentary discussion, I want to know what Leona thinks—and thought—of Alana and me together. And even though Thomas seemed to have apologized for that conversation with me, and told me I was worthy of his daughter, his actions with the store seem to belie that. Sure, he might have given me his blessing, but his actions are speaking a different language.

Her eyes light with flames of what looks like anger. “Not until very recently, no, and believe me, Thomas has some answering to do to me for that. I’m so sorry, sweetheart. While his intentions might have been good, his approach was all wrong. I do think it gave you both time to mature as your own people, but it made your hearts struggle and for that, I am so upset with him. In the end, though, true love finds a way. That sounds like a silly fairy tale, but in the case of you two, I believe it. And do you know why it will last?”

“Why?”

“Because you are best friends at the center of your love. You’ve got years of supporting each other, talking without the complications of romance, confiding in one another unlike you did with anyone else. That’s what makes a strong foundation. So trust Alana to know that she’ll fight for you to the ends of the earth, even when it comes to something as painful and messy as your biological father trying to pull a stunt like this documentary. My daughter would slay dragons for you.”

I clear my throat from the lump lodged in the middle of it. “Thank you. You know when it comes to my past, I’m ... I don’t want it clouding anything in my present. But you’re right.”

“I know.” She gives me a small smile and then takes a few bites as I polish off my grilled cheese with a happy sigh. Leona’s food is medicinal in a way.

“Now, tell me you’re going to let me plan a little wedding for the two of you.”

I chuckle through my emotions. “So that’s why you came over here.”

“To help, but yes, to meddle. I think giving Thomas his walk down the aisle with his daughter will allow him to move on more quickly from this hurt. And heck, I want to plan a wedding for her. I’ve thought about it since she was born. Even if it’s small, will you help me surprise her?”

“You know she doesn’t love surprises,” I hedge, nervous just at the word because I know the woman I love detests them.

Leona scoffs. “Oh heck, she’s surprised us enough for a century in the last few months. Least I can do is throw a party without her knowledge. Let me do this for you.”

On the one hand, a big party celebrating our marriage in a real way that includes all our friends and loved ones is exactly the kind of thing I want to give Alana. She’s a woman with a big personality who deserves a big celebration. But, on the other hand, she might kick me in the balls for surprising her like this.

I’m willing to wear a jockstrap at the reception for the risk of throwing the wedding.

“Yes. But only if you help me sort and fold these shirts and sweatshirts because I’d rather chew my hand off.”



“An hour until open and we can’t find a giant pair of scissors, whatever will we do.”

August taps away on the point-of-sale system computer at the checkout counter in Lily, mocking Alana and me for running around like chickens with our heads cut off.

We extended the manager position to her a few days ago. Of course, I watched as the insecurities her mother planted in her reared their ugly heads when she asked if we were sure she could do the job. Alana knocked down that question pretty quickly, building our mentee up quickly with all the examples of how she’d helped the restaurant since she started working there.

With summer employees coming on at Hope Pizza, August is more than able to take on more shifts at work for Lily. Leona said she’d be able to grab a waitressing shift whenever she felt like it, but the position at Lily will give her résumé a leg up for college jobs and internships alike. Being a manager, no matter where it is, shows responsibility and initiative.

And August has brought her signature sense of calm to our finishing process to get the store open. She works diligently with little complaint, knocking tasks down one by one without getting rattled. She kept my wife and me in check when we stressed that we wouldn’t hit our deadline for opening, and now she’s sticking it to us by taunting us an hour before we plop the sidewalk sign out for the first time.



“Sometimes, I wish my attitude was unflappable as yours, kid.” Alana chuckles at her.

I’m carrying a bunch of candles, making sure I don’t smash them all over the floor, as I put them up on a shelf as backfill items. Newton Street is already buzzing with summer tourists and locals alike on this weekend morning, and a very small crowd is waiting outside the door for our opening to start. It helps that Evan is passing out small slices of breakfast quiche he whipped up this morning and that Nonna has an espresso machine brewing cup after cup—for free. Our family knows how to show up when you need them.

“You two just need to chill out. People are so excited about this, Al, you’ve seen the social media stuff and comments. It’ll be a success. Plus, I won’t let you down.”

“You never have.” I give her a thumbs-up. “We’re just nervous. We’ve put a lot of work into it.”

“So let it show and take a deep breath,” August advises, and Alana scoffs at me like she can’t believe an eighteen-year-old just said that to us.

“When did you get so wise? I’m so proud.” Alana bats her lashes at August and then walks down to tickle her side in a warm gesture.

“Oh, I also have some news.” August’s face is painted with nerves and anxiety.

My stomach drops because when it comes to August, you never know what will come out of her mouth. And I’m used to it being something terrible where her mother is concerned.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

She waves me off. “I’m fine. Better than fine, actually. That scholarship you sent me? I got it. A full ride to my top choice provided by this scholarship fund.”

August is trying desperately hard to keep any glee or emotion off her face, but I see the small smile that breaks through. For her, it might as well be hysterical laughter shouted from the rooftops.

“Auggy! Are you serious? That’s incredible!” I act completely surprised, even though I’m the one who drafted the email back to her before Alana hit send.

“Oh my God! What? How come you didn’t tell us sooner?” Alana may have just hinted that we sent that email two weeks ago and August has been keeping it to herself, but our young employee would never know that.

Still, I raise a private eyebrow at my wife, who shrugs from where she stands behind August.

August lets a giggle break loose as I hug her. “I can’t believe it. It feels too good to be true. But I have the email to prove it, and the financial details in the paperwork that they sent me. I’ll be enrolling at Bethson University in New York City in the fall, on a full ride. I can’t believe I’m getting out of here.”

Alana’s lip wobbles behind August’s shoulder, and I know she’ll miss this young woman who has become such a staple in our life. Just like I’ve been taken in by the Ashtons, so too has August. But I’m more relieved that she’ll be getting away from her mother than the fact that I’ll probably be the one to drop her off and say goodbye when she starts her semester.

So, I push the emotion to the back burner. Being able to give her this gift of freedom, of escaping from a home life I know all too well, is the reason why I agreed to Arthur’s will terms in the first place. Yes, I got my entire life along with it, my own happiness with Alana, but supporting August had been the driving factor. To see her this excited about something when I watched her at her lowest in the past year is priceless.

“So, so happy and proud of you. You did it. *You did this.* And we can’t wait to see what you do next.” I smile at August, then Alana.

“Well, don’t get so sappy about it, big guy.” She rolls her eyes at me like the typical teenager she is. “You have a store to open. Can’t get tears staining your shirt.”

Alana snorts at August's blunt rebuff of the emotion but comes over to kiss me on the cheek.

"You could not be more attractive to me than you are right now. You've always looked out for her and look what you sacrificed to provide for her. You're an incredible person, Warren Teal," she whispers in my ear as August walks out of earshot to check over the front displays one more time.

"I could only do it with your help. We did this for her, Al. I'm so grateful that you agreed to be my wife so we could." My forehead meets hers.

She shrugs but doesn't break our connection. "I guess the mind-blowing sex is a good perk, too."

That has me blushing because she's saying it while half our family and friends wait on the sidewalk outside.

"Good to know. I guess I know what I'm giving you as an opening day gift." The lust I lace into my voice backfires and has me turning myself on.

"You sure you won't be too tired after being on your feet all day, old man?" She wiggles her eyebrows, but I see how her irises dilate.

"Who said I'm doing all the work? I know when to lie on my back and let you take the lead." I have to readjust how I'm standing because my cock is way too interested in the words I'm spewing.

"Settle down, horndog. We've got a store to open." Alana struts away from me but throws her hair over her shoulder and looks at me. "But I'm holding you to that."

A sneaky smirk plus the nerves from being half an hour away until opening has me jittery as hell.

The next thirty minutes are spent making sure everything is picture-perfect. Shelves free of specks of dust, the POS system up and running smoothly, complimentary samples lining the checkout desk, and every little detail that we hope will make people come back to shop again. By the time the alarm on my phone goes off to give us two minutes to compose ourselves before we cut the red ribbon Alana

installed at the front doors of the shop, I can tell she's full of nerves.

"It's going to go off without a hitch," I assure her.

"You can't know that," she whisper-hisses as we walk to the doors.

"I know that, because I know you."

The woman I've loved since before puberty turns her eyes on me and reads me like an open book, just like she's always done. Then she takes a deep breath, nods, and I take that as her being ready.

The three of us walk outside, a small roar of cheers going up, and August takes her place at the front of the crowd, giving Alana and me centerstage. I wrap one arm around her waist, standing shoulder to shoulder, and take in the next few seconds before we start a new chapter. One that is just ours.

Our family stands in the crowd, with Patrick and Liam beaming at their sister, as I catch the eyes and waves of many of her high school classmates. Leona's eyes are glassy, and Nonna is whooping and hollering to just get on with it already.

"Here we go." Alana squeezes my hand.

This moment feels *bigger*. Like something in the universe was leading us here. I felt it the day I met her, the night we finally slept together, the night I married her. There are certain instances in my life that feel like I'm watching them from out of my body, and right now is one of them. With her hand in mine, all the hard work we've put in here, the risk we took to branch out on our own, the pride shining in Alana's eyes knowing that she did this despite naysayers ... it feels *momentous*.

Handing her the regular-sized scissors, I give a short little introduction.

"We're so happy you could all be here today. My wife had a vision, and she made that come true, as you're about to see when you walk inside. You all know I'm the less talkative one in this pairing, so I'm going to let my very verbose and

beautiful wife talk now. But I just needed you all to know how incredibly hard she worked. Baby, it's all you."

She grins up at me while rolling her eyes. "I wouldn't say very verbose."

The crowd laughs, and many shout out that I'm correct, proving her wrong.

"All right, all right. Well, my husband is making me blush, which I don't normally do easily, but he may be right. I had a dream, didn't even know what to call this store when the idea first came to me, but Lily is so much more than I ever imagined. With the help of a lot of hardworking people, plus Warren who does not give himself enough credit, we've brought a storefront and display market for the best local products and creations. We wanted to highlight the vast talents of our community, one we love so much, and I feel we've succeeded in doing so. Without further ado ..."

Alana looks to me, I nod, and she snips the red ribbon.

"Come on in!" she cries, ushering the crowd into Lily.

Hugs, handshakes, and first-time greetings assault us as people filter into the store. We try our best to catch every single person, telling them hello or asking how they found out about us if we don't recognize them.

I spend the next four hours watching my wife assist every customer who walks through the door, a lot of them the same locals she's waited on at the restaurant for years, since she was a teenager. But there are a lot of new faces with the early summer crowd, and it excites me to no end to overhear so many of their conversations saying they'll be back at the end of the week to buy more before they depart for home.

Alana moves through the space with effortless grace and immense knowledge of each item we decided to sell, and I'm in awe of her. She doesn't drop until the last sale is made and the last customer is escorted out as August goes to lock up the front doors well after dusk.

"We did it," my wife exclaims, sinking to the hardwood floor that a hundred or more people walked over today.

“Yes, we did.” I can’t help but let out an exhausted laugh as I sink down right beside her.

“Half the store is nearly sold out, we have to do a ton of inventory and re-stocking, and my feet are killing me,” August complains.

“You were a warrior today,” I compliment her.

“This place was a zoo. But damn, everybody loves the stuff you stocked in here, Alana.” Our store manager moseys around, picking up misplaced products and putting them back in their place.

“Seriously, they loved it.” I shake my wife’s shoulder to jazz her up.

Not that she needs it, her energy was off the wall and infectious today. It caught wildfire to the customers, who bought so much that I had to make an unexpected trip to the bank to make a deposit and get us more bills and change for those cashing out. We surpassed all our estimated sales for the first day, and we’ll need to ask our creators and local vendors for way more product moving forward.

“I’m not even attempting to organize a thing tonight. We’ll regroup early tomorrow morning. Go home, August.” Alana waves good night.

“You guys are the best.” She grins, then takes off.

For a moment, I worry about if she’s going to go home or find somewhere else to crash for the night. But I’ve provided all the help I can. Now we wait for the end of summer when she gets to move out, and I don’t have to worry so much anymore.

“Watching you today ...” I shake my head in disbelief as I cradle Alana’s cheeks.

Cerulean blue eyes meet mine, and her faith in me is mirrored back. “I feel the same about you.”

“It was like I could read your mind, know exactly what you needed at any given moment. You were electric in here,

baby.” I can’t help but get mushy with how delirious and happy I am.

“God, I’m so happy right now. Genuinely, insanely happy. I mean, I’ve been content throughout my life. Happy by anyone’s standards. But right here on this dirty floor next to you in a shop we opened with our own blood, sweat, and tears? This is the happiest I’ve been in my entire life.”

The three little words are right there, floating between us. But I don’t say them. This is Alana’s moment, and I want her to celebrate without anything overshadowing it.

So I just whisper, “me too,” while kissing her knuckles as I lace our fingers together.

Alana sighs dreamily as she looks up at the ceiling, taking it all in. But I know we can’t stay here all night, and she needs rest. Plus, we have a huge job come the morning, because we open tomorrow at nine.

“Let me take you home.” I offer her a hand as I stand, which she takes.

Instead of helping her to her feet, I scoop her up and begin carrying her to the back door toward the parking lot.

“You remember your promise?” she asks with exhaustion but lust in her voice.

“Of course I do. You think I’m ending this day anywhere but inside you.” I half growl, getting a second wind.

“Take me home, husband.” She bats her eyes dramatically and wraps her arms around my neck.

“Anything for you.”

Ain’t that the truth.





“I bought Skittles because you said you only wanted popcorn, now you’re stealing mine,” I hiss at Warren as he tries to pilfer another handful of my candy.

“They’re addicting. And sweet. Kind of like you.”

Now the man has the audacity to plant his very large, very skilled hand on my thigh, too close to the inner portion that makes my skin sizzle with need.

“You’re ridiculous tonight, you know that?” I glare at him, but there is no heat behind it.

Well, I guess there is heat behind it, but it’s the kind that makes me want him to pull me into the back seat. Which is totally possible right now, considering we’re sitting in Warren’s truck at a drive-in movie.

“Something about being here just hits all the teenage fantasy boxes for me. We used to come here all the time, and I wanted you to sit in my passenger seat, but it never happened.” His hand is still on my leg, but we’ve both stopped eating.

“I remember burning with jealousy the one time you let Katie Newport sit in your truck.” I pout.

Warren brushes a fingertip over my diamond. “You do know you married me, right?”

“Still, teenage me mourns for the girlish dreams she had.” I flutter my lashes as if I’m a damsel in distress.

His hand wraps around the back of my neck and pulls my mouth toward his, the kiss starting slow and heated. Our tongues dance together, searching and entwined. This is the gesture of two soulmates, not two fumbling teens away from their parent's supervision, and I'm almost glad I waited until now to go to the drive-in with him.

A car horn is the only thing that brings me back to reality, and when Warren and I come up for air and look over, old Mrs. Cotole and her husband are staring at us with disdain.

Warren waves at them and mouths *sorry*, then turns to me, and we crack up as we press our foreheads together.

"Damn, maybe we should have tried to get further under the football bleachers," I joke, straightening in my seat as I pop another piece of candy in my mouth.

"You really are trying to make me keep this boner the entire night, aren't you? Blue balls are bad for the soul, Al," he chides, adjusting himself in his pants.

I pat his cheek affectionately. "I'll kiss them better when we get home. Fuck, I'd give you road head right here, but I don't think our elderly spectators would appreciate that."

"*Fuck,*" Warren swears, his eyes snapping to me as they turn molten with lust.

A month has passed since Lily opened, and things are going so well that Warren dragged me from the shop tonight for a date. Because things going well means we spend every second and ounce of energy on the store; on stocking, assisting customers, selling, marketing, new inventory, accounting, payroll, etc. You name it, I've tried to master it in the last month. The two of us work around the clock to keep up, and while I'm basking in every minute of it, I'm glad he asked Mom and Liam to cover the shop with August tonight so we could get a much-needed break.

Chuckling at my cruel taunting of my husband, I finish off the last of my candy. "See, now I need chocolate. You should have bought me chocolate."

He's tuned back into the movie and talks without averting his eyes from the screen. "My mistake, baby. Let's go get some."

We get out of the truck and walk hand in hand through the rows of cars back to the refreshment stand. Really, I just needed to get out of the cab. Warren might show physical signs of his need to be inside me, but I was also lit up like a Christmas tree inside. If we didn't take a food break, I'm not sure we would have made it through the movie without flashing the cars beside us. Something about being here is ticking all my naughty fool-around-in-public boxes as well.

The line for the refreshments has about ten people already waiting, so we hop on the end and turn around to watch the screen playing the movie.

Kate and Rebecca, our friends from high school, wander past where we stand waiting at the snack stand.

"Hey, you two." Kate waves in a friendly manner.

"Hey, guys," Warren and I say almost in unison.

Rebecca, however, looks shifty, and it's very unlike her. It could have nothing to do with me, but once Warren starts talking to Kate about the upcoming Fourth of July festival, which her family usually takes charge of, I lean into Rebecca.

"Hey, you okay? You look like you're about to jump out of your skin." I lay a hand on her shoulder.

She nearly does jump out of her skin. "Oh, jeez. Sorry. It's just ..."

Her eyes dart around.

"What? Do you need to get out of here?" I'm suddenly worried.

"No, it's not ... I'm fine. It's just seeing you is kind of awkward."

My chest constricts with the weirdness she just planted out in the air between us. "Um, okay?"

Rebecca blanches. “Oh, God, I’m really making this worse, aren’t I? Shit. Uh, I’m just going to tell you because I feel horrible knowing this and not telling you. So here goes. I overheard Mr. Claus, you know that old football coach, telling people here tonight that you and Warren weren’t really married. Or that you married him for money or something. And that it wasn’t real. That Warren was a no-good snake trying to get in with your family for years.”

The awkwardness Rebecca put out is immediately erased by red-hot anger. “What the hell?”

I want to add *why would he say that*, but I don’t want to give it any more credence. No one knows about the terms of Arthur’s will, and Mr. Claus’s assessment is far enough away from what went down that I know he can’t know the truth, but still. If anyone finds out how Warren and I started, it will bring a whole lot of shit our way, not to mention stain my family’s reputation.

“I know, it’s totally out of left field and horrible. I don’t really know him like that, and overheard in passing, but I’ve had at least two other people at the drive-in ask me if I think it’s true. Of course, I immediately said no, you two are destined to be together. If anyone knows you, they know that. But I thought you should know what’s going around.” Rebecca looks sympathetic and guilty at the same time.

“Thanks for telling me.” I feel stunned and allow her to squeeze my shoulder in support. “It’s not true. At all. For the record.”

“Of course, we know that,” Kate cuts in, giving Rebecca a side-eye like maybe she shouldn’t have told me.

“What’s that?” Warren asks, and I hate that I’m about to wipe his smile off.

Turning to my husband, I deliver the blow. “Mr. Claus is here telling people we are faking our marriage and that I got with you for money.”

To his credit, Warren keeps a completely straight face, giving nothing away. Well, except for pure anger. “What the

fuck?”

“I know.” We have to get somewhere private because one of us will do something dumb if we stay out here discussing this. The best way to squash a rumor like this in a small town is not to give the flames any fuel. What Claus wants is for Warren to go postal or something, to make himself look bad, and I won’t allow that to happen.

“Thanks for telling us. I hope you guys have a great rest of the night. The movie is a good one.” I give Kate and Rebecca an appreciative smile, then pull Warren back to the truck.

I’m sure they’re watching us go with sympathy and whispers, but I can’t worry about that right now.

As soon as we’re back in the truck, Warren slams his hand against the center console out of frustration. “I can’t believe he’s fucking messing with us. With you. Does the guy have nothing else to do? This small-town gossip has always driven me insane.”

“That piece of shit. He always had a fucking hard-on for making you suffer for some weird reason.” I ball up my fists like I’d hit him if he were in front of me.

Warren looks just as pissed off and nearly cracks a molar as he talks. “The asshole never went pro and hated that I was going to. Honestly, if I found out he vexed me so that I sustained the injury I did, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“And now he’s fucking with your reputation and our marriage.” I want to cry or maybe scream at the universe.

Just when we’re finally getting our footing, making this thing between us real.

“He can’t know any of this for sure. Honestly, Claus is probably just spouting bullshit and rumors because he hates me and is jealous. But it’s too dangerous that he’s almost hit the right mark. What the hell are we going to do?” Warren cups my face across the car, as if feeling my skin will bring him comfort.

“Nothing. We’re not going to do anything.” The idea is so clear in my mind. “Stooping to his level will only bring him

satisfaction. So, we completely ignore his existence. Go about our business as if none of this bothers us, give it no mind, run our shop, and appear in town with our family. Go on dates, show up at the summer parties and festivals. Give him nothing to speculate on, and the rumor will die. No one knows about Arthur's will, it's for your eyes only, and no one will know the details of the finances. He's got no leg to stand on and soon enough people will grow tired of him trying to talk shit."

Warren nods as if trying to convince himself of my words. "You're right. You're right."

Silence descends over us for a few moments as we try to grapple with the anxiety this rumor brings. Of course, the nature of our relationship now isn't what it started as, so what Mr. Claus is saying is technically false. But the thought of anyone discovering how it started? That sends my stomach dropping to my feet like the worst of roller-coaster nausea.

"I want to get out of here. Between Mr. Claus and the chastity police over here, I'm about ready to call it a night." I hike a thumb in the direction of the car next to us.

"Do you want to go home, or somewhere else?" he asks, starting the engine.

"Cass and Patrick texted to ask if we want to have a drink after dinner service with everyone." I stare down at my phone just as it vibrates, chewing my lip.

I've avoided Hope Pizza since the fight with my dad, which still hasn't been resolved, and it's another piece of anxiety pie heaped on my plate to try to go there if he's working tonight. Which, let's face it, he's always working.

But my need to be around those who love Warren and me and root for us always is greater than the fear of facing my father.

"If you want to go, I'm in." Warren puts his hand on my thigh as he slowly pulls out of the drive-in.

"Yeah, let's go there. Why not? Plus, Mom will probably be back and will tell us how Lily ended up doing today."

While being home with Warren is one of my favorite places on earth, it might do both of us good not to be alone with our thoughts at this moment.





**T**he minute we walk into Hope Pizza, I feel the air shift.

Alana and I are chatting about something insignificant, smiling at each other as I push through the doors of the restaurant that's been like a second home to me when the hair on my arms stands on end.

"What's going on?" I ask immediately, noting that Cass is sitting in the empty dining room with her head in her hands.

She shoots up to stand too quickly and almost topples the chair. "Oh shit, I forgot I texted you to come have a drink. Pregnancy brain, I'm *so* sorry."

"What are you guys doing here?" Patrick comes rushing out of the back, eyes panicked, as he takes in the scene.

"Cass texted us to come have a drink ..." I'm thoroughly confused.

His eyes shoot to his wife. "What were you thinking?"

"It was before we heard the rumor!" Cass whisper-hisses to him.

Dread coats the back of my throat, and Alana's hand tightens in mine. "What rumor?"

"You know what rumor." It's Patrick who speaks, his voice leaden.

"Who told you?"

Liam and Evan hustle out of the back, Alana's youngest brother motioning for us to skedaddle before trouble comes around the corner. I know that trouble has to be Thomas because if Patrick and Cass know the rumor, someone was definitely in here for dinner service spreading it around.

"Gregory Reardon. He was in here with the guys from the dealership, talking about your marriage being fake and wondering if it was true. You two should get out of here," Evan warns, looking over his shoulder frantically.

"Sweetheart, now is not the time—" Leona enters stage left, and now it's a whole embarrassing party we get to walk into.

My palm is sweating where Alana still holds it because I know this is the moment we truly get found out. It's one thing to not give this gossip any credibility to the outside world or our small-town neighbors, but I won't lie to our family. I won't act like they're delusional when they probably know there is validity to this.

"Some nerve you have showing up here, parading this farce in my face." Her father's voice shakes with fury as he glares at me.

"Thomas, let me explain—" I move in front of Alana as if she's in danger, even though I know it's just natural instinct instead of rational thought in this situation.

"Don't even speak to me. You betrayed the understanding we had, you made a fool of my daughter, of my family! I gave you my blessing, told you I made a mistake telling you to stay away from her all those years ago, and you lied to my face. I said you were worthy of her, that I loved you like a son, that I wasn't upset for stealing this special moment from our family ... and the whole time you knew you were faking it all. That you were treating her like a business deal!"

Leona gasps. "Thomas, we've talked about this. Warren is the exact right man for Alana, he is our family. I would trust no one else with her heart except for him."

My heart bleeds at her words because her husband is right; I have made a fool of their family.

But Thomas is done addressing me as he points at Alana and booms, “You didn’t need to marry someone who didn’t love you just so you could spite me and get your own storefront!”

“You have no idea why I did what I did. And I don’t like you insinuating that I couldn’t have done this on my own had I chosen to.” Alana folds her arms over her chest and looks exactly like she did arguing with her father as a teen.

Thomas’s frown turns deeper, and his eyes go soft with sympathy. “Alana, my little girl. All I’ve ever wanted was a man who would choose you above anything. Who would know what a treasure he had. To find out that you did this as a part of some deal? It kills me.”

Somewhere along the way, with that rumor floating around, the Ashton family must have figured out the truth.

“How did you ... who told you that?”

Nonna appears. “I did. They all have a right to know, even if you two are serious now. Lies keep us sick, Alana my dearest.”

I can’t even be mad at her grandmother because she’s right.

“It makes sense,” Evan hedges, holding his hands up as if surrendering before Alana and I attack him. “The elopement was so quick, and Arthur had just died. Not that I don’t think you two are real, but ... hell, you have to realize it does make some sense when we think about it.”

“No one is questioning how much you love each other.” Cass gives the entire family a death stare in our defense.

“We just worry about you.” Leona’s eyes switch back and forth to focus on both of us, almost like she doesn’t want to believe this is how I got her daughter to marry me.

Thomas continues his rant as if he’ll convince Alana I’m bad news. “He used you as some piece in a game, a term to

fulfill a contract. All I, all *we*, have ever wanted for you is a husband who loves you the way you deserve to be loved. That's why I told him to stay away all those years ago. Because I knew something like this would happen, and it did!"

That's when I snap. Because no way in fucking hell is he taking those verbal swings at me without a fight.

"You don't think I know what a rare gem, a diamond, I have?" My voice is deadly as all eyes in the room swing to me. "You don't think I've loved this woman since I was eleven years old? You think that just because I had some fucking deal set down in front of me, that was the only reason I married her?"

At my side, Alana gasps. Because I've barely made these sentiments out loud, and here I am, confessing it in front of everyone.

"I've been in love with her every minute of every day since I can remember. I've sacrificed my own heart because I thought that was best for her. That's not putting her above everything? The push may have come from Arthur's last wishes, but make no mistake; I asked your daughter to marry me because I have been in love with her for a very long time. Whatever her desire, I plan to fulfill that. If, at some point, she doesn't love me the same way, I'll sign whatever papers she serves me with. If she wants to open a hundred storefronts, I'll buy them just to see her smile. If she wants to run away to an island and live in a hut on the beach, I'm going too. Whatever she wants because that's what I want. Because she deserves to be the happiest version of herself. And if she ever decides that isn't with me, then I'll break my own heart again so that she can be that."

The entire Ashton family is looking at me, some with tears in their eyes, one with a scowl on his face, and another with pure wonder and shock on hers. But I'm not done.

"That is *my wife*. No one on earth gets to speak to her this way. I have respected the hell out of you for years, Thomas. But if you ever talk to her like that again, you'll regret it."

Beating my chest would probably be too dramatic, but that's what I feel like doing now. Never in my life have I had something to claim as my own. I've always been an afterthought or a hanger-on. But Alana and me? We're our own little family now—a unit. And I'll defend that with everything I have.

All of a sudden, I'm nearly bowled over by the impact of a body slamming into me. I catch Alana before we topple over, and she buries her face in my neck as her legs wrap around my hips. I crush her to me, feeling the all-consuming love of her so close to me in front of everyone who matters to us.

There is no question whether this is real, not to me for a while now and definitely not to them after my words and her actions. I walk us out of the restaurant, leaving them all standing there in our wake. Sure, we have things to settle. Right now, though, I need to tell my wife something I should have told her years ago.

Of course, though, she beats me to it.

The minute I get us into the alley beside Hope Pizza and press her back to the brick wall, she's on me.

“I love you.” She breathes, peppering my face with kisses.

My heart flies. Not only have I been waiting for years to hear those words from her, but I've been waiting for that sentiment to mean everything it's supposed to. I've heard others say they loved me throughout my life, but none of it meant anything until it came from Alana.

“I love you so much, it's hard to breathe at times when you're in the room. I remember the first time it slapped me upside the head, that you were the only person on the planet for me; we were sitting at your kitchen table after having a snowball fight and a marshmallow got stuck to your upper lip. I swiped it away and you held my gaze for a minute, then giggled at the way the marshmallow had melted into my fingertip. I knew, right then, that I would be in love with you for the rest of my life.”

She holds my face in her delicate hands, our noses brushing as we basically breathe for each other. Air in through my mouth and exhaled into hers, then back again.

“It was never fake, do you hear me? I’ve loved you from the start.” She needs to know I’m serious about this.

“I’ve wanted to say those words to you for weeks. Months, since we stood at the courthouse altar. Years, since I first saw you help my mother bring in groceries in the eighth grade. You volunteered while the rest of my family sat on the couch. Hearing you defend me in there took away the last shreds of doubt. All I’ve ever wanted was to come first, be your top priority, like you’ve always been to me.”

“Alana, I love you more than anything on this earth. I’ll keep trying to show you that every day that we are together.”

“I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you,” I say back again.

I want to kiss her, to take her home to our bed, but part of me doesn’t want to break this moment. It figures I’d tell her here, for the first time, outside of the pizzeria that saw us through so much of our lives.

“I love you,” she says again.

“I love you.” I laugh because we can’t stop.

“Are we doomed to stay in this loop, repeating it forever?” She giggles.

“Fine with me.”

Only when my arms get tired do I let her down, grab her hand, then drive her home so we can spend the night tangled in each other, using those three little words over and over again.



## ALANA

**T**he last thing I feel like doing today is spending hours around my family, smiling for the sake of a new life coming into our clan, but I have no choice.

It's not like I'm mad at Cassandra, and I'd never miss something as momentous and special as her baby shower, especially since I planned it, but not more than thirty-six hours have passed since the family blowup in Hope Pizza. I'm still smarting from the things my father said, the way my family looked at me, and reeling from the fact that they all know the truth behind the start of our marriage.

Yet here I am, trustworthy Alana, sucking it up once more to pull off impossible things for my family. Such as turning the dining room of Hope Pizza into a beige and white balloon dreamland worthy of those extravagant parties Hollywood celebs throw. Let's be honest, Cass has probably gone to many of those parties considering she used to be a celeb, and my sister-in-law loves a design aesthetic.

There are baby carriage-shaped cookies, plush teddy bears on each place setting, balloon arches for the eye to see, and a handcrafted blanket ladder containing cashmere baby throws. It's beautiful, elegant, and understated, like my brother's wife. Since they don't want to reveal the gender before the baby is born, I went with neutral colors because that's what Cass is going with in the nursery anyway.

"Alana, this is just gorgeous." Cass covers her mouth as her eyes fill with tears when she first walks in.



“I hope those are hormonal and not sad.” I hug her, and she laughs in my ear.

“No one could be sad in a room decorated like this, also Wilson will kill me for the sad beige aesthetic.”

Wilson, her best friend and manager at the playhouse they both work at, clucks his tongue from behind her. “I heard that. And yes, I like extravagant color, but anything for my pregnant bestie today.”

He escorts her to her seat, a white velvet throne, because who doesn't want to feel a little extra on a day all about them. Planning this baby shower has taken my mind off the fight with my dad, the rumors about Warren and me, and the director who followed us to the canal. That letter still haunts me even if I didn't open it; just knowing Warren's father touched that paper makes my skin crawl.

My husband refuses to address it further, which worries me all hours of the day, but there isn't much I can do to pry more of it out of him. I fear that the documentary will make something in him snap or that the media and true crime fans will go out of their way to find out more about him if it truly does air. Warren has always been so conscious of his past and not acting anything like the man who ruined his family, and I know it's a wound that will never be closed.

I don't know how to help him through it, so I say nothing instead. Meanwhile, I've taken to sweating over bumps in the night because the way Mason's eyes traveled over us in that parking lot still lingers at the forefront of my mind. His interest is more than purely for documenting purposes.

“Honey, this came out wonderfully. Thank you for showing up for Cass today.” Mom embraces me as she flits around, greeting guests.

“Of course, you really think I'd miss this?” My voice takes on a tone of accusation.

Why does my family think I'm so over-emotional that I can't see reason?

She smiles that motherly smile I'm so accustomed to from her. "Never. You never cease to amaze me in all you do for your family. I just want you to know that."

"Don't pacify the girl, dear. She's a hell-raiser and can handle her business accordingly. Glad you finally got the lie out on the table." Nonna drinks from her glass, which I'm pretty sure is spiked even though it's only eleven a.m. at a baby shower.

"I have a bone to pick with you." I point at my grandmother.

She waves me off. "No, you don't. You might be smarting at this moment, but you're happy it's out there. Also, who cares anymore. Your love is real, we all heard it very loudly from Warren last night."

"That was so romantic." Mom sighs.

And while I could melt just thinking of his declaration, I keep up my glaring. "Dad cares. Very strongly."

"Your father and I had a chat. I think he'll be hand delivering apologies soon." Mom looks pleased with herself. "Now, let's go celebrate this baby and the mama to be."

I shelf my ire with them and do as I'm told, but also, because I'm so excited for this new baby, I can hardly contain myself. Thinking about Cass and Patrick becoming parents makes me think about what Warren will be like as a father. What I'll be like as a mother. Having children has always been a non-negotiable for me, and while I know Warren is skittish—as friends, we had the kid discussion many times over the years—due to his upbringing, he'll be an incredible parent. The moment he sees his baby, I have no doubt he'll transform into the best father on earth.

We spend the next hour playing silly shower games, guessing weights and hair color, and whether Patrick will faint in the delivery room or not. Cass opens some gifts and cries at the hand-knit blanket Nonna gifted her, which was one of the originals her grandmother made back in Italy.

Once the family-style lunch is served, I grab a quick plate and then make my rounds, making sure no one needs anything as I am acting as the hostess today.

Gabrielle, a former Hope Crest teacher and current playhouse employee, stands along the back wall, looking mighty uncomfortable. I can tell she feels out of place because her eyes keep shifting, she takes a sip of her drink every three seconds, and has her arms hugged around herself.

Despite all my drama and complications over the last few months, I'm not blind. I know something is happening between her and my oldest brother, Liam. Patrick said something about it, not that I can remember his offhand comment now.

She's beautiful in that elegant, refined sort of way. Girl-next-door meets sexy librarian with an air of standoffishness. She's been in town for half a year now, and I've barely seen her outside of the rare social situation that Cass drags her to. I wonder what brought her back here, but we're not close enough for me to ask that.

So instead, I walk up and try to bridge the gap.

"Hey, Gabrielle, thanks for coming."

She smiles warily, like I might attack her or something. "Of course, I'm excited for Cassandra."

I glance at my sister-in-law. "She's going to be the best mom."

Gabrielle nods. "No doubt about it. We should all be so lucky."

I don't say that I am because my mom is spectacular and because it feels like there is a backstory there. "How about you? Do you have any nieces or nephews?"

She shakes her head. "Not right now."

Dragging words out of a wall would be easier. "Got it. And you have family in town, right?"

"Used to. My grandmother owned the used book shop over on Grant Street before it closed."

That surprises me. “No kidding? I used to go in there and get old Harlequin paperbacks from time to time.”

That earns me a small grin. “That would have made my grandmother happy.”

“Lucy, right? She was your grandmother. She was always so nice when I went in. I was sorry to hear of her passing.”

Gabrielle looks down at her shoes. “Me too. We weren’t ... we weren’t all that close but she was a wonderful person.”

This woman has a backstory that I can’t seem to stop wanting to pick apart.

“You know my brother, right?” I have to say something because I’m a nosy sister, and Liam could use a little matchmaking.

Gabrielle all but chokes on her lemonade. “Uh, not really.”

“You taught him, right? Before you left the school district.” Patrick said as much, and Liam’s been acting mighty weird about her reappearance.

What my two brothers can’t do is subtleness, so it’s my chance to suss out what went on between my eldest brother and the hot teacher.

She nods but doesn’t say anything.

“He’s single. Liam, that is. And I see the way he looks at you.” Fine, I’m pushing. But I’m happily in love and want everyone else to be, too.

Her head whips up so fast, and the words fly out even faster. “He doesn’t look at me.”

Well, that wasn’t suspicious as hell or anything. “He does, and I think we both know it. But hey, I’m pushing. I get it. I just ... you seem like you like it here, and I’d love to be a person for you to lean on. I guess I don’t necessarily know what it’s like to be new in this town, but I do know how loving its people can be, and if you need someone to show you that, I’m here.”

Now she genuinely smiles. “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

“Alana, can we talk?” Dad appears out of nowhere, wringing his hands together like he’s extremely nervous.

My mind blanks as I look at him, and shifting gears from my conversation with Gabrielle to the one I’m about to have takes me a minute. I look to the dining room door to see Patrick, who showed up for the end of the shower. Dad must have come with him to corner me without Warren here.

The thought has me sweating, which is strange because my father and I have always had a wonderful relationship. I’m a daddy’s girl, the only one, but recently it’s been so strained, and I don’t know how to handle this.

“Okay.” I’m nervous too.

While I’ve had the usual teenage fights with my parents, little tiffs with my siblings, and general disagreements, this fight feels bigger than any of those. It feels malicious and personal, and I’ve hated the weight it’s put in my gut. Since he first started putting up objections about the store, I haven’t been able to act normally around him. Then came my marriage and his outright refusal to accept it, and we haven’t spoken more than sentences to each other in months.

Still, I follow him outside, knowing we need to have this out.

“Thank you for talking to me,” he says, his eyes full of emotions.

My dad is a good person; I know this deep down, but he isn’t always the most emotionally self-aware. He hates admitting he’s wrong and is one of the most stubborn people I know. Hey, wonder where I developed those personality traits.

“You showed up, I guess I had to.” I don’t give him anything because I’m still rightly pissed about what he said to Warren after finding out about the origins of our marriage.

Dad takes a deep breath and then holds my gaze.

“I’m so proud of you. I hate that my words and actions haven’t portrayed that. What I said to you was so wrong, and I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I’m so proud of you; you’ve always known exactly who you are and exactly what you want. It’s

scared me at times, and you're right, it's because you're my little girl. My only girl. I'm the one who is supposed to protect your heart and dreams, encourage them, and make sure you're okay. That might seem bad compared to the boys, but it's all I've known in terms of family.

“Then, all in a month, you go and get married without me there and buy a store that will take you away from the legacy I've always wanted to leave to my children? I didn't know how to react. So I lashed out, giving you angry words instead of congratulating you and helping wherever you needed me. Warren couldn't be a better man to pick to spend your life with, and of course, you know what you're doing with Lily.

“Part of me has a hard time letting go of my children, but especially you. My only girl. When I held you in my arms for the first time, I knew I had a special job when it came to you. I just ... I want you to have every single thing you hope for. I'm a selfish old man at times, and not being included, well, it only became more apparent that I was losing you.”

By the time he finishes, tears are streaming down both of our faces, and I'm struggling to take a deep breath.

“It's all I've ever wanted to hear from you, Dad. Deep down, I knew all of that, but when you say the exact opposite and act as if nothing I do makes you proud, it kills me inside. I know I messed up leaving you and our family out of a lot of my decisions, I'll own that. But they're my mistakes to make. You always told us growing up that even if we made mistakes, you'd always love us. That you'd always stand by our sides. And then you didn't, and it hurt so much. Lily is one thing, because I'm thriving with that in spite of you, so I guess I should thank you. But Warren? My marriage? I never thought you'd actually disapprove of that, even if you felt sad not to be included.”

“I don't. I'm so sorry, sweetheart. It's all I can say and show you that I can do better. That I can be there for both of you like I should have from the beginning. There is no excuse. I'm so proud of all you've accomplished not just this year, but in your life. You've gone for everything you've wanted and achieved it, without help from us and even in spite of help

from us. I owe Warren an enormous apology; he is the type of man any father would want their daughter to be with, and you deserve every ounce of support and love he gives you.”

Exhaustion seeps into my bones. While I’m still sad, and words don’t cure things instantly, I hate fighting with my family. I don’t want to avoid my dad. I want to include everyone in how happy Warren and I are together.

“I don’t want to fight anymore,” I say, stepping into him.

His arms come around me like they always have, safe and protective. “I don’t either. I’m sorry once again. I know it’ll take time to show you that with more than words, but I promise I’m going to try my hardest, little girl.”

We stay locked like that for a few minutes, a father hugging his daughter as if he could see her as the small girl who skinned her knee and needed him for comfort.

It’s strange, fighting with your parents when you’re an adult as well. They’re still up on this pedestal, but you realize they’re human. They make mistakes just like you. And for one of the first times in your life, you realize that you’ll have to *work* on having a relationship with the person who is predetermined to love you.

“After this is over, can I take you out for waffles? Diner date, just like we used to do?” Dad asks with hope in his eyes.

We haven’t had a diner date in forever, but when I was little, he used to take me there almost every Sunday afternoon, just the two of us.

“I’d love that,” I tell him, genuinely meaning it.

So after we celebrate the little baby on its way to be the next generation of our family, I go to the diner with my dad, just the two of us.





If you grow up in Hope Crest, you know that Fourth of July is spent in a lawn chair on the banks of the river, drinking and eating until it gets dark enough for the town council to set off fireworks from the boat anchored in the middle of the river.

The only thing different about this year is that I'm sitting on my husband's lap while he occupies said lawn chair.

We're one unit, enjoying our beers in bottles as the rest of the town lines the lapping shores around us, the smell of caramel corn, hot dogs, and cotton candy wafting in the air around us. Little kids play in the shallow waves, skipping stones as the sun sets, and we all wait for the bursts of colors to fill the sky. Somewhere close, a local amateur band plays a cover of a country song, and some people dance barefoot in the grass.

"Why are they letting those two teenage morons who almost blew themselves up last year do this year's display again?" Evan asks as he sips a beer in the chair beside Warren and me.

"Because no one else feels like getting blown up." Liam snorts, in a rare good mood these days.

Tonight is one of the only nights of the year that my parents close Hope Pizza entirely. We don't do any kind of meals or takeout from the restaurant on Fourth of July so that the family can relax and celebrate together. Just like around Christmas time, Patrick bitches that it could bring in a shit ton

of money for the people who don't want to cook on the holiday and will just order pizza, but money has never meant more than family to my parents.

“Remember the year Warren helped the EMTs put on the show?” Patrick cackles.

We all burst out laughing, and Warren nuzzles his lips into my neck from behind, making me titter with something more than just hysterics.

“He almost fell off the damn platform into the water when the first firework went off.” Liam booms with a laugh.

Warren flips us all the bird. “Laugh it up, chuckleheads. I got paid a hundred bucks for that since no one else volunteered. They felt so bad for me that they gave me the leftover fireworks, too.”

“*That's* where we got those for the end of summer bonfire!” Patrick hits his head as if he's just remembering.

“You guys burned your eyebrows off at that party.” I remember, belly laughing at the memory of Warren's singed hair.

“Half an eyebrow, and you still thought I was cute.” Warren pinches my butt.

I lean back to whisper in his ear, “And it didn't stop you from taking my virginity.”

Underneath me, I feel him shift. “You keep it up and I'll show you some fireworks of my own in public.”

I roll my eyes. “Promises, promises.”

The fact that we're halfway through summer feels surreal. Lily has been open for a month, and we don't seem to be slowing down at all. Dozens of customers come in to shop each day, and I'm burning through the product local vendors have sold us and am on the hunt for more to feed the appetite of the tourists and locals. Warren and I work day and night to think of new displays, marketing, and fun signage for the sidewalk. It's the most fun I've had at work in a long time, considering this is my passion project.

Meanwhile, Hope Pizza is in its busiest season, and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the restaurant is upon us. I've been up to my ears in marketing for the event, an all-out ode to the Hope Crest community with free food, a DJ, door prizes, and a ton of speeches that will honor those who helped us most. Dad is over the moon about the party, and Nonna is emotional. I know she sees her family who have passed on when she looks at the restaurant, and it will be a bittersweet day for sure.

Cassandra and Patrick are that much closer to having the baby, and we're all getting antsy to hold the newest family member when he or she arrives. Evan is still bossing us all around, August is packing for college, and Liam is still avoiding doing anything about Gabrielle ... even talking about her.

Warren and I observe and discuss this all as we lie in each other's arms at night, our marriage feeling much more valid and real now that the secret is out of the bag to our family. As I predicted, the gossip about it around town has died down, even if Mr. Claus is still running his mouth. We don't care, though, because I'd much rather occupy myself making love to my husband and go on the hundreds of dates we missed out on over the years than give thought to some cranky old teacher anyway.

Life is good. I've always considered my life to be good, but it's amazing what can happen when you stop being afraid of the things you want but won't say out loud. Ever since I went for them, specifically Warren and then opening Lily, my life has blossomed in a way I only dared to dream about.

"Do you guys want another drink?" Patrick asks as he lifts the lid on the cooler.

"Can you get me a lemonade, babe? The frozen kind from the stand over there?" Cass flutters her eyelashes at him.

He smiles and bends to kiss her. "Anything for you, babe."

As he walks off, Evan mocks him. "*Anything for you, babe.*"

I chuckle. “Can’t wait to see the day that some woman whips you into shape, dear brother.”

“Won’t happen.” He puffs out his chest. “August, you want a beer? I’d let you have one.”

Auggy looks at him with a blush on her cheeks and nerves in her eyes. I don’t miss that look, but it doesn’t mean I want to encourage it. August has her entire future ahead of her, and my brother isn’t the kind of guy to cherish her like she deserves.

“Absolutely not.” Warren rolls his eyes and smacks my brother on the back of his head. “Don’t follow his lead, August. Aside from being a genius in the kitchen, he’s not the role model you want or need.”

“Hey!” Evan acts fake outraged. “I resent that. I’m only slightly more fucked up than ole Liam over here.”

My oldest brother growls.

“I can’t wait to see how you two turn into complete softies for your niece.” Cass covers her mouth.

Every head whips to her.

“I’m sorry, did you just say niece?” I whisper.

“I’m going to have a granddaughter!” Mom yelps, jumping from her chair to dance around and pump her fists.

“Nice going, babe. I knew you wouldn’t be able to keep it under wraps until the birth,” Patrick teases her but does so while beaming and kissing her temple.

“Oh my God!” Yelping, I jump up and rush to my brother and his wife.

We form some sort of family hug, with all of us practically jumping up and down.

“I can’t wait to buy the town out of every pink piece of baby clothing,” I coo at Cassandra’s belly.

“Coolest uncle, now on duty.” Evan pats himself on the back.

Liam scowls. “We all know I’m going to be the mushy core uncle who is wrapped around her finger. She’ll like me best, don’t start, little bro.”

Mom and Dad pepper the two parents-to-be with questions as Nonna performs an old incantation over Cass’s belly for good health and a beautiful daughter.

But it’s something across the river that catches my eye. Maybe it feels like someone’s watching me, that prickle of awareness chilling my skin in the summer heat. I don’t know for sure, but I do know that when I turn and focus on the dusky banks across from where I stand, I see him.

Mason.

Watching us with that strange smile on his face.

I must make a noise, even though I feel numb, because the next thing I know, Warren is shaking me from the moment.

“Baby?”

“I thought I saw ...” People pass in front of my eyes, making it hard to see if I glimpsed who I think I did.

“What is it?” Patrick asks because he’s the next closest to me.

“Al?” Warren asks as I’m still trying to peer through the crowd.

He comes back into focus with a grin on his face as he waves at me.

“Mason. That director. He’s over there on the other side of the banks.” I point, my voice breaking with anxiety and the fear that rushes through my veins.

“You’re sure?” Warren pulls my face so that I’m looking at him, concern, fear, and fury painting a worried expression in those gray eyes.

I nod, trying to gulp past the lump in my throat.

“No one stands over on that side, though, unless they have a house.” Evan peers into the darkness.

The first firework goes off, rattling me and sending me skittering into Warren's arms.

"Alana, calm down," Patrick soothes, rubbing my back as Warren hugs me.

"I swear, I saw him. I'm not making this up."

Because I'd recognize that unhinged stare of his anywhere. I've seen it in my nightmares lately, and maybe it's my brain's way of sending up red flags about him.

"I believe you. I ... it's weird, I thought I felt someone watching me." Warren scrubs his jaw as he pulls me closer to him.

"There is no one over there now," Evan confirms, cluing in on our conversation.

"What's going on?" Dad asks.

"Alana thought someone was watching them. Is this a person you know?" Liam asks.

We're now surrounded by family, protectiveness radiating from my male-dominated nuclear family.

I have to push the words out even though my tongue feels heavy. But they don't come. I feel nothing but confusion and a looming threat, which is strange when only moments before, I felt nothing but contentment and happiness. Like it slammed up against me, this tidal wave of danger, I should look out for.

"Mason Klein is the director for a documentary. He's asked me to be a part of it, and I've said no repeatedly. This isn't the first time he's shown up somewhere that Alana and I are, and this is starting to feel less and less kosher or coincidental each time," Warren grits out, filling in the blanks.

"What's the documentary about?" Evan looks confused.

"My father." Warren's voice is quiet, but the gasps that come from my family are not.

"How incredibly inappropriate of him." Mom is indignant. "Not only to ask in the first place or give that monster any

airtime at all, but then to keep following up after you say no. Is he ... is he following you?"

"Seems that way," I answer grimly.

"We'll report it to the police," Dad answers, and it feels nice to have him believing our word right off the bat.

"And tell them what exactly?" Patrick's voice is skeptical. "If you all remember, the police department in town isn't necessarily on top of things and trustworthy."

He's biased since the incident with Cass last year when a local cop sought revenge for something her father had done when we were all kids.

Cass tuts at him. "They cleaned house after all of that, and I'm sure have much tighter standards. I do agree though, there is nothing to report. Filing something against this guy could just make him focus on you that much more."

"I'm sorry," Warren chokes out. "If he wasn't my father, if I wasn't involved in this mess, you wouldn't be—"

"Don't even finish that sentence, my boy." Mom scolds him but presses a palm to his cheek. "You owe nothing to anyone. Your past doesn't define you, and this person can't intimidate you into talking about it. You are kind, gentle, and upstanding. I trust you with my own flesh and blood, and I don't trust many people with them. We love you and would stand in front of a moving train for you, each one of us. If you hurt, we hurt, too."

"She's right, Warren. If you've taught me anything, it's that we don't have to take responsibility for the actions of our parents," August pipes up, and the connection she has with my husband shows between the two of them.

He nods at her, gulping as if trying to swallow down the feelings of shame.

"We can't report it," I tell him because we both know it's true.

"But if you see him one more time, even in passing, we're putting the private investigator on it," Cass warns us. "Part of

me wants to call him now.”

She used one last year to help with the threats she was receiving.

“Not yet,” Warren says. “If he knows we’re going to lengths to keep him away or investigate, it’ll only get worse. I’ve not seen my father in years, but I know this about the man; he loves attention and stirring up drama. This will incite him, and Mason seems to be his lap dog or something.”

Our family looks at each other ominously.

The fireworks boom overhead, but they no longer feel like a celebration. If anything, they feel like warning bells going off, signaling a much larger explosion to come.





**W**hen Thomas asked if he could accompany me to my meetings and on errands today, I thought it was a joke.

Not only does Thomas Ashton rarely leave the kitchen at Hope Pizza, but he certainly doesn't do so to run errands that have nothing to do with him.

But as Alana pointed out when she told me about his apology to her, he seems to be trying to fix the error of his ways. And I guess it's my turn for his groveling or as close to groveling as a pigheaded old man gets. Either that, or he's trying to see if Mason Klein is following us and giving him his own threat to stay away.

After Alana thought she glimpsed him at Fourth of July, the Ashtons have been on high alert, not letting anyone walk to their car alone after shift, taking buddies out for every errand, and calling to check up on each other constantly. It's starting to get on Alana's nerves because I know she's trying to deny anything is going on, but I understand why they're doing it.

With Cassandra's incident and Patrick landing in the hospital because of the guy seeking vengeance against her, they have already gone through something traumatic like this with a family member. As much as my wife wants to act like nothing affects her and it isn't happening because it's easier than fearing every second of the day, I tend to err on the side of the Ashtons. We need to close ranks, at least until I know he's gone.

Today's plan is for me to go out and see Arthur's mansion, a place I haven't been since he passed. I've avoided coming to the house I spent my middle school and teenage years in because it wasn't home then, and it certainly isn't now without Arthur and Clara here. Their estate was always more well-suited to art parties and dinner soirees than the rambunctious nature of a young boy, and it always felt like a hotel to me.

In my later years, when Arthur and I would have lunch catch-ups while sitting in the gardens, it was a little more cozy but still not a place I would have chosen to spend that much time.

Now, I must decide what happens to it, since I technically own it.

Thomas whistles as we get out of my truck, the atmosphere weird and awkward inside the cab, and I'm thankful to escape.

"This place is even bigger than I remember it."

The only time the Ashtons came here, from what I can remember, was for the huge party Clara threw for my high school graduation.

"It's mammoth, and I don't even know what kind of condition it's in or if anyone has been keeping it up. I guess I should, because Arthur left it to me, but I've had a lot on my plate."

Thomas glances at me. "He would have understood that."

I use the black cast-iron key to open the one-of-a-kind door, fashioned from wood imported from Scotland. Arthur wanted the house to resemble an English nobleman's country mansion and had all kinds of expensive materials and antiques shipped over from the UK. He and Clara loved designing it together, and I remember them giddy over new rooms to re-do as I sat in the butler's kitchen doing my homework in high school. They weren't bad people, but they had unique interests that only the uber-rich could partake in, and I never inherited those hobbies.

Our footsteps echo as we enter the enormous foyer done in gray stone tile, wood-paneled walls, and rich green carpets and

drapes. It feels like you're stepping into another time when you enter this house, but my heart pangs for the man who once enjoyed it so much.

"This is something," Thomas mumbles, clearly not understanding any of this decor or pageantry.

"Arthur loved it here. Clara spent most of her time in the greenhouse they had built in the gardens," I tell him, the fact popping up out of nowhere.

"Do you plan on moving in here with Alana?" he asks as if I haven't contemplated the same thing.

She and I haven't talked about it, or I haven't brought it up, I guess because I know what our collective answer would be.

"Definitely not. It's too big, first of all, and I just know we wouldn't want this much space even in the future. Also, it's not Alana's style. She loves the house she bought, and I'd never make her leave it before she's ready to. No, this house doesn't feel like home to me, so I wouldn't utilize it. I'll probably hire someone using the estate money to go through the pieces, see what I'd like to keep for sentimental value, then sell the rest before I put the house on the market."

I thought about that part, though. Arthur wouldn't expect me to live here; I barely spent time here when I was legally required to live here. Someone else who is passionate about this type of house will be happy to live here. I'll make sure we find a buyer I find worthy and who deserves to occupy it.

"Smart. And I agree, this isn't the home you two want. You'll find that someday."

"We're happy where we are now."

Things aren't necessarily bad between us, not since he made up with and apologized to Alana, but I can't forget what he said to me the night we walked into Hope Pizza. Thomas has always been a trusted confidante and father figure, and the tension between us is palpable.

I don't say a word as he follows me around the house while I check on things like if the stove is working, whether I

want to take anything from my old bedroom, or if anything looks out of place or tampered with. It's been months since someone's been in here, and it feels like ghosts are around me.

"They would be proud of you, Warren." His gruff voice speaks up from behind me.

Turning my head to look at him as we walk up the stairs to what used to be my wing of the house, I examine his expression.

"You didn't really know them."

"But I know you, and you're living an admirable life. A steady job, you're a hardworking man, you keep your promises and love with your whole heart. You found a path even when so many were closed to you. They would be proud. We're proud, Leona and I. All of us."

We walk out onto the balcony overlooking the English gardens Clara had landscaped out back when I was seventeen. This view would have been some kid's absolute dream, but I rarely noticed when I lived here. Much of my childhood was spent under this dark cloud of gloom I swore followed me around.

It's time to level with him and put an end to this tension once and for all.

"You told me it was okay to love her, then spent the next months glaring our direction and demonstrating the act of a father who very much disapproved. I've spent a lot of my life trying to measure up to the goodness of a man like you, to impress you, to make you accept me. Then you find out about this rumor, one that wasn't even explained properly, and you attacked me like I wasn't someone who would go to the ends of the earth to protect Alana and your family? That hurts, Thomas. I thought you knew me better than that, or at least trusted me more than that. Yes, I technically lied to you when we had that conversation about me being worthy of your daughter. But it wasn't a lie, not really. I've loved her since before you told me not to as a teenager. You knew that. You've had to have always known. Even with the origin of our

marriage, you should have at least trusted that I would take care of her come hell or high water.”

He hangs his head. “I do know that. I do, I swear. I just ... my ego got so stubbornly caught up in the moment. I’m trying to do better, be better for you two. Us parents don’t know what we’re doing half the time either, we just pray we get it right but oftentimes, we get it wrong. Like I told Alana, there is no excuse. I can just take the next many years to make it up to you two.”

We’ve both said our piece, man to man, and I know I’ll forgive. I know this man has looked after me unlike any other father in my life. But it had to be said, and now we can work on moving forward.

“I know you will. We’ll all try harder.” I pat him on the shoulder, and the gesture evolves into a bro-hug that has emotion sticking in the back of my throat.

Thomas and I tour the property a little more, checking out the chef’s kitchen with its priceless appliances, the library whose books seem to still be dust-free despite no one living here, and the wine cellar that is still fully stocked.

“It’ll be a big task getting this place emptied and ready to sell. Whatever help you need, we’re here,” he says as we walk outside, rounding the pool and heading for the tennis courts yards away.

I nod. “It will take some time for sure. I need to go through it first and see what I want to keep. Arthur had a few things, books and knick-knacks, that really meant something to him. I’d like to keep those for my own family, to show to my children someday.”

That has my father-in-law smirking quietly to himself, and I chuckle at him trying to hide his reaction.

“If that means more grandchildren, Leona and I are more than ready.”

“We’re not in any rush, but I won’t lie and say I haven’t dreamed of a family with Alana for a long time, even when I thought it would never happen.”

The two of us enter the tennis courts, and a set of old rackets hangs on a shelf built into the side, along with a sleeve of balls. Thomas raises an eyebrow in question as he removes them, and I cross to the other side of the net.

Silence descends as we hit around lazily for five minutes, the activity bonding and peaceful out here on Arthur and Clara's land, where no outside noise permeates and reality seems to be suspended. We both needed it to find a path to forgiveness and understanding.

I hit a ball out of bounds, but instead of chasing it, Thomas lowers his racket and walks to center court.

"I guess it's time we discuss something else, then." Thomas gives me a searching look. "This documentary."

Air deflates from my lungs like he just popped a balloon. "There is nothing to talk about because I'm not doing it."

"And I don't think you should. But this guy Mason won't stop sniffing around. You know he came into Hope Pizza a few weeks back and questioned whether Leona and I would be a part of it?"

Shock, fury, fear, and a number of other things paralyze my chest. "*What?*"

Thomas nods emphatically. "Yes. We sent him packing straight away, but this guy seems ... off. No one else accompanies him, there is no production manager or anyone following up to try to get us on board, or an agency associated with the project. At least that's what Cass said, and she knows what the order of these things should be. I think you need to be more careful."

Rage burns deep inside my gut. "I haven't done a thing to incite him, and yet he won't stop. Part of me thinks my father has something more to do with this than we think, but I don't want to look deeper to find out."

"He knows who Alana is, this director. That isn't a coincidence. He's been looking too much into your life and it's ... frankly, it's setting off all kinds of alarm bells in my head. This is my daughter, this is my son-in-law who I have always

tried to protect from the crime junkies who take things too far. This Mason guy seems like one of them.”

“What else can I do though? Alana thought if we ignored him, he’d go away.” Unease settles like a weight in my chest.

“And maybe he will. But he’s sniffing around too much for my liking. One more incident and promise you’ll let Cass call the private investigator?”

The trees overhead sway in the summer breeze, and it feels like nothing can touch us here. Maybe I should move Alana in, shut her up in my castle like some fairy tale so no one can harm her.

But that’s not reality. “I promise.”

And everything in me prays to the universe that this threat never makes good and we can all move on without anything going sideways.





**T**he pizzeria has always been a place of warmth, happiness, community, and damn good food.

But tonight, that's amplified tenfold. All the preparation, hard work, and scuffles with my family about this event have paid off, considering the incredible turnout and dull roar of conversation within this building. Our friends, extended family, colleagues, local board members, former teachers, old coaches, and everyone in between have come out for Hope Pizza's seventy-fifth-anniversary party.

All the food is free, a feat that Patrick had a hard time agreeing to but one I insisted on. Mom, Liam, and Evan thought it was a genius idea too, because it will only reinforce how delicious our menu is and convince people who don't dine with us regularly to start coming more often. Plus, this night is a chance to give back to the town that has welcomed our family and has kept the lights on for all these decades.

The place is hopping, with a local DJ we love spinning old-school Sinatra and Italian artists Nonna loves. Evan and Dad keep bringing out piping hot pizzas and pastas while Mom mans the cold food buffet offering a range of seafood and antipasti. Cass hired an event designer for tonight on her own dime, and they've turned the charcuterie table into a work of art, not to mention the entire restaurant. A photo booth with different food props and signs has been set up, along with a memory-making Polaroid table where people can snap themselves and then write their favorite dish from the restaurant over the years.

Local newspapers and media personnel have come out to report on it and enjoy the offerings, and we worked hard to make five hundred gift packages of our dough and sauce for people to take home and create their own little pizza. Warren is waiting tables, Liam has a booth set up selling our sauce, and Nonna is doing to-order dessert preparations and talking everyone's ear off. The family is all hands on deck tonight.

More than that, though, my heart feels light as a feather and soaring. Adrenaline, love, giddy happiness, and a bit of delirium from the lack of sleep this week combine for a heady mix. I'm in the place I love most, with the people I love most, doing what we do best.

Things since the blowout at the restaurant with Warren and my dad have been better. All three of us have had separate conversations, and I'm pretty sure my mother put him in the doghouse over it, and while tension isn't completely erased, we're getting there. Family is everything, after all, and it's not like this is going to put an end to the love we all share.

Especially not Warren and me. If anything, we've become infinitely closer after my father's words and my husband's confession. He said the thing I'd needed to hear all along; that he's loved me from the start, even if he wouldn't let himself. Both he and I had been pushing our feelings so far down, refusing to be the one to get hurt and take the risk, hoping that our friendship wouldn't be damaged by much stronger feelings.

The love we share, though, only makes everything better. I'm married to my best friend, the boy who held my hand through our hardest moments growing up, and the man I find irresistible and ridiculously kind all rolled into one.

Yes, a request out of our control is the thing that tipped the pendulum, and I guess I have Arthur to thank for our marriage. We're the two making it work, though, and waking up to do life with him every single day is something I still can't believe I get to do.

“You look gorgeous.”

Speak of the devil. I hear that deep voice in my ear as he comes up to hold my waist while I fill drinks from the fountain.

“You said that this morning.” Jutting my butt out a little, I graze against him.

Warren’s voice is tighter when he responds. “In the shower, I know. I had you pinned against the wall, the water dripping down your nipp—”

“Oh my God!” I squeal, not usually one to be embarrassed. “Control yourself, there are about three hundred people just on the other side of this half wall.

A low chuckle makes sparks shoot down my spine. “It’s this apron and the pencil behind your ear, they’re doing something to me. You look like you did when we’d wait tables here as teenagers. Damn, I had so many fantasies of getting you alone in the kitchen and making out while your father wasn’t looking.”

That does sound enticing ...

“Maybe we can recreate that little scene later because it does sound all kinds of lusty and exciting. But if I don’t get these eight sodas over to the school board’s table, we all might be living with those trailers on the baseball field again next year.”

My father is exceptionally good at holding the town decision-makers hostage with how good his food is. Dangle a buffalo mozzarella pizza in front of certain key players, and he’ll be able to guarantee a school budget that favors what the town wants. With Evan’s cooking now on the menu, I’m pretty sure we could lobby for much more.

“Fine, but I’m holding you to it later.” He kisses my temple before I turn around, holding the tray of drinks.

“I wish I could kiss you without dropping these, but I’m out of practice.”

“Then I’ll do you one better; I love you. That’s not something I used to be able to say when we were teenagers.”

The words from his perfect lips still light me up inside like nothing else. I'm not sure I'll be used to hearing them even when we're eighty-five and sipping lemonade on our back patio. For years, I waited for him to validate my feelings, to tell me I wasn't alone. It's surreal that out loud, in public, for anyone to hear, Warren Teal could admit that he's in love with me and only me for the rest of his life.

"I love you, too. So much."

We stare at each other for a beat, the tension and heat building.

"Jump each other later, please, we have tables waiting." August breaks up our moment with her teenage eye rolls, and I can't help but laugh as I leave Warren adjusting himself at the drink station.

Hours later, my arms and feet whine at how much I've been using them tonight. It's possible that I've carried more than two hundred plates to and from the kitchen, and I know we'll all have to break everything down later. Maybe I should require Warren to give me a foot massage later before I let him in my pants.

"Al, can you jump on the mic about the fifty-fifty?" Liam shouts.

I nod, making my way to the DJ booth, and grab the microphone as the song ends.

"Hello, everyone!" I singsong and get a rowdy greeting in return.

"My family and I can't tell you how much tonight means to us, and we're so grateful that each and every one of you came out to celebrate with us. Make sure you eat it all, we don't want anyone leaving with anything less than a bulging belly." A round of laughs go up. "If you would be so kind as to buy tickets for our fifty-fifty, all proceeds are going to a cause near and dear to one of our own's heart. We've selected a nonprofit that is on the forefront of dementia research, and all the money raised tonight will be donated to their efforts."

My eyes flit to Warren, who goes stock still as his gaze collides with mine. I watch as emotion washes over his face, and he nods his head solemnly, as if thanking me without words. Arthur and Clara meant a great deal to him, and when Patrick suggested a fifty-fifty to excite the community, I immediately asked if we could donate the proceeds in Warren's name.

He's a huge part of our family, one of the integral parts, and it's time we all show him how much. I try every day to, but reinforcing it over and over doesn't hurt anyone.

After the claps die down over that little announcement, I thank everyone again and get off the mic to help with the clean-up efforts. The night is winding down, at least here since they've eaten us out of house and home, and while Newton Street will light up with bar-goers and people walking the parks during a summer night, we have a heck of a breakdown to do in an hour or so.

My eyes wander over the crowd, loving the energy buzzing off everyone like a natural high. Mom meets my eyes, and hers crinkle with emotion at what we've done here, how our family's legacy has come together. I know that someday soon, she and Dad won't be able to be here full time or maybe won't want to. That puts a bittersweet taste in my mouth; they deserve the most peaceful kind of retirement, but at the same time, this is their lifeblood. It's the place where I watched them work as a team, and so much of their interaction here taught me what marriage was and is.

All of a sudden, the hair on the back of my neck goes up as if someone is standing too close behind me. I whirl around, the feeling making my skin crawl, and I almost run smack dab into Mason Klein.

“Holy shit—” My hand flies to my heart.

Not only does he startle me, but the jump scare is from him being here at all.

“Nice party, must warm your heart to give out all this free food. You guys clearly don't need the money.”

The sneer of his upper lip has alarm bells ringing in my head, and I want to cower back when his hand comes up as if he might touch me.

“What are you doing here? You’re not welcome.” I try to keep the fear out of my voice.

“It’s open to the public, of course, I am. Can’t a guy trying to learn more about Kyle Teal, see where his son has worked for years?”

The use of Warren’s father’s name paralyzes me. I haven’t heard it mentioned in conversation in ... well, ever. Warren refuses to say it. Here is this guy who keeps showing up out of the blue, and something is definitely not right with his fascination.

“No, you cannot. Leave before I get the cops involved.” No one has caught on to his presence yet.

“I’m just trying to tell a true documentary from all sides. Warren doesn’t even know what a bitch his mother—”

“Stop. It. Now.” My voice is pure steel, anger radiating from my pores.

How dare he come in here and say something like that for Warren to overhear? At the same time, what kind of objective documentary maker speaks like this? No, something is definitely not right where this project is concerned.

Mason smirks. “He’s lucky to have a sweet little wife like you. Not everyone is so lucky. Not every kid who goes through that winds up in a rich family with a nice perk of a woman who just falls in their lap.”

Awareness covers my skin in goose bumps. His words sound like a vendetta, like a poison meant to corrupt us from the inside.

“Do you ... are you ... I don’t think you’re giving us the whole story.” I have no idea what compels me to entertain him, but I need answers about who this man is.

His laugh sets my teeth on edge. “I’m making this documentary for all the men who have been wronged by

women. Who are painted in this light, whose children are alienated from them through lies and the court system.”

Holy fuck, this guy thinks Warren’s father is innocent. That’s why he’s been pushing for interviews, information, and time with the man I love. This isn’t an objective look, it’s a smear campaign. It’s a dangerous message that he and the madman behind bars want to spread.

“I told you to stay the hell away from us.” Warren walks up snarling, and immediately I know this is bad news. There are too many people here who could witness something going down, and Warren is too touchy when it comes to this guy. I was just getting somewhere, uncovering the truth of why Mason keeps showing up, and now he’ll clam up with more cryptic passive-aggressiveness.

“This is a free event open to the public.” Mason looks smug, and I know Warren is minutes away from hauling him up by the collar.

“What are you doing back in my restaurant?” Dad comes barging through the crowd, and my head snaps in his direction, surprised he knows who Mason is by looks alone.

“Is there something wrong here?” Billy, one of the guys we went to high school with who has become the new sheriff after the old one was removed for what happened with Cassandra, breaks through the crowd.

“This guy has been harassing Warren and Alana.” Patrick is the first to speak up from where he had just joined us.

“You have no evidence of that!” Mason cries. Meanwhile, Liam comes to stand in between us all and separate him from Warren.

“Security footage will show him outside the restaurant numerous times,” I chime in, grasping at straws.

“I’m a fan of the menu here, love the pizza.” He grins, besting me.

“Any physical altercations?” Billy asks Warren.

My husband hesitates. “Well, no, but—”



“Has he followed you home or shown up on private property?” He’s just doing his cop duty, but I could strangle Billy.

“No.” Warren’s expression is stone.

“I’m shooting a documentary about his father and have been trying to get him to participate. Perhaps a little overzealously, but I’m a film maker. We want Warren’s story.”

A gasp goes up around the restaurant, and part of me almost forgot the entire town of Hope Crest is crammed in here. Now, they all know what is going on, and Warren has to deal with the looks and assumptions he’s been running from his whole life. I could strangle Mason Klein for that alone.

“We’ve all said no, definitively. You know that, and now it’s becoming harassment.” Dad’s eyes squint in fury. “Leave my children *alone*.”

“He’s crossing lines now, Billy, come on,” Liam implores our childhood friend.

Billy seems to be weighing things, having heard all sides, and my stomach twists with anticipated dread because we have nothing, not really.

“Get lost, buddy, and don’t come back here or I will have cause to at least bring you down to the station.” Billy sighs, a sympathetic look in his eyes.

“Billy! What the hell? Do something!” Patrick yells at him.

Mason still hasn’t taken his big break and gotten the hell out, and I see Warren’s hands form into fists.

My arms go around his waist, and I whisper only to him, “It’s not worth it. Baby, look at me.”

He does, reluctantly, and I shake my head while trying to send a telepathic signal that this weasel is not worth the consequences.

“There isn’t anything I can do, Patty. He didn’t put hands on anyone, we have no cause right now, unless you all can supply me with some.”

As much as I want to invent something, I know he's right. Warren has email requests for the documentary, we have a few run-ins with him around town, but nothing that looks like more than a persistent director.

Even if I know, deep down, that he's been borderline stalking us. That he's been snooping and sulking around where he shouldn't be. That there are dark, toxic ulterior motives for him wanting to get close to Warren and my family.

The crowd is all hushed whispers and awkward stares as Mason grins at my family as if he's won something.

"If you need to talk, Warren, you know where to find me." He reaches into his pocket and plucks out a card.

"Do you want me to arrest you? Get the hell out of here before I actually do." Billy grunts at him.

Mason skulks off like the creep he is, and my heart won't stop galloping in my chest. I grab Warren's hand and pull him along, his dead weight making it hard to do.

"Baby, listen to me ..."

Half my family interrupts us in the quiet kitchen, and Warren won't look me in the eye.

"Do you want me to get my PI on that guy?" Cass asks, looking nervously over at Warren.

"Yes, immediately," Dad answers for him.

"I'll go call him now." Cass scurries away as fast as her belly will allow, with Mom on her heels.

"You take him home, get him out of here. He doesn't need any more of the gossip or attention going on out there, and you both need to comfort each other now. You did nothing wrong, you hear me? We'll get this guy to stay away one way or another. I love you." He says this last sentence to Warren as he grips my husband's shoulder, trying to break through the numbness that has stolen over him. My hands shake with nerves and fear because I've never seen him so distant. I know Dad is right, but I'm terrified to be alone with Warren right now for some odd reason.

Part of me knows he's about to try to make some rash decision, and I won't be able to stop him because I know him that well.

But we need to get out of here, so I grab our things and speed walk to the car, Warren's hand still clasped in mine. We don't speak the entire way home. Not when we get past the front door, and not after I've toed out of my shoes and set my purse on the stairs.

My husband climbs them silently. I follow minutes later and find him in our bed, fully clothed, with the lights out.

I crawl in next to him and cradle his body as much as he'll allow me to.

And we don't speak through the night.



**M**orning light filters through the curtains of our bedroom.

Or I guess this is Alana's bedroom, but over the past few months, we've made it our home. I've come to think of her place as mine, of this house as the place where we belong together as a couple.

Now, all I see is every which way my past is going to burn it to the ground.

Alana is breathing softly next to me, one arm thrown over her eyes and the other resting on my chest. Her cool feet are pressed to my calves, and the blankets are a tangle in the clothes we kept on and shed last night. I'm still in jeans, and I guess I took off my celebratory T-shirt in my fitful sleep, and Alana is naked from the waist down but still wearing said T-shirt of her own.

I close my eyes and inhale, savoring the last moments before I ruin everything between us. Last night, or early morning, depending on how you look at it, I awoke with a start in the pitch-black of the room. I stared at the ceiling and let everything from the anniversary party come back to me.

The rage of seeing Mason there, the imminent threat I felt poised in my wife's direction, the shame of having the entire town hear him announce the documentary, the absolute fury of the cops being able to do nothing but dismiss him from the premises. Numbness doesn't even begin to describe the out-of-

body sensation I feel because I almost can't believe it happened.

But it did, there is no doubt. Even if Cassandra's private investigator finds something, even if Alana and I talk through what Mason said to her before I came over, I know what I have to do.

I've already put her in enough danger and have subjected the Ashton family to criticism for years because of the family I was originally born into. They've been shouldering my burdens for far too long, and I won't let them get caught in the crosshairs of it any longer.

She stirs next to me, and my heart sinks to my toes, shattering somewhere down on the floor because I know I'm about to lose the woman I've loved forever.

Those aquamarine eyes blink to awareness, the world coming in muted tones at her, and I palm her cheek one last time before removing all my body parts from her touch. Leaning up on an elbow as Alana stretches the sleep from her bones, I deliver the blow.

"We need to get divorced."

The air around us stalls for a moment, as if my saying those words have caused the earth to stop spinning.

"Is this a nightmare? Am I still dreaming?" She sits up, hazy and dizzy from the whiplash I just hit her with.

"No. We should get a divorce, as soon as possible." Just saying the words makes me want to throw up.

Alana backs away from me and recoils like I've thrown a dagger at her chest. The bed we've made love in, where we've physically strengthened our marriage, is now a pit of untruths and disloyalty. I did that, but I'll cut my own heart out to make sure she's spared any harm.

"No. You're not doing this." A tear trickles down her cheek. "I knew you'd go here or make some rash decision like this. I know you, Warren. And I say no. I'm not letting you do this."

Alana hits the mattress with her open palm like that will get all her frustrations out.

“It’s too dangerous for you to be involved. Now that August has accepted the scholarship and is all enrolled at school, and the store is open and thriving, we should get ...”

I stutter, not able to speak the word just one more time. Alana stares at me with disappointment, anger, and painful sadness, marring that beautiful face.

“This wasn’t supposed to be permanent, we both knew that. It was a means to an end. We got everything we needed out of it, and now it’s time to realize that this isn’t serving either of us. Our marriage was a contract, and we’ve both fulfilled it. Now there isn’t a need to keep doing this when so much is on the line, so we should just call it.”

Every word feels like a knife being twisted tighter and deeper into my gut, and I have to physically restrain myself from doubling over and heaving. I don’t mean any of it, but if this separation can save her from what always seems to be looming over my head, I’ll do it every time.

The bedroom is eerily silent and tense, and I want to take it all back, but I bite my tongue to stop myself.

“Stop being a coward. Fight for us, or I will. I won’t divorce you.” Even she stalls over the word like it’s impossible to get out.

“Alana, please, see reason. You understand why—”

“NO!” she cries, tossing a pillow off the bed in anger. “*You* see reason. This is ridiculous, Warren. We both know what you’re trying to do, and I’m not listening to this fucking bullshit for one minute. I love you, so deeply and for so long that it’s ingrained in me. I don’t know how not to. It’s the same for you, we both know it. You’re the only man I have ever and will ever love, which means that when things get tough or downright dangerous, I stick by you. We weather the storms forever. When I said for better or for worse, I fucking meant it, whether you think our beginning was fake or not. You go down? I’m sinking right there with you. You have a scuffle

with some asshole director, I'm by your side to fight our battle together. We're a package deal, and nothing is going to end that. *Ever*. Not even when you're being fucking stupid while acting like you're selfless. Just don't. Love me as fiercely as I know you can, that's all I need. Now, in five years, in fifty years, it's you and me. Just us two, no one else. So you can act like an idiot, but I won't sign anything you fucking serve me. I'll fight you tooth and nail, because I love you that much and I'm not denying that for one second longer of my life."

By the time she finishes, we're both panting from the emotion swirling around us.

"Al, if I ever lost you, I couldn't ..." My voice breaks as I trail off, and I'm shocked to feel the tear sliding down my cheek.

She launches herself onto me, and I topple over, my hand unconsciously spanning her waist to make sure she's okay as she straddles me. Her mouth fuses to mine, and at first, I fight the kiss. I don't give in to her writhing on me or assaulting my mouth until her tongue pushes past my stiff lips, and then I can't help myself.

Because this is the most beautiful thing on earth to me, the lover I'll never get tired of, the wife I still can't believe is mine in any real way. And she knows me so well that she won't let me give up on us or use any of my old excuses. Alana is my match, time after time. We know each other more intimately and deeply than any other person on the planet. When I can't fight for us, she will, and vice versa.

The will to fight this, to put distance between us, seeps out of my body with each lash of her tongue on mine. The kiss is a punishment for trying to break us up. Alana is teaching me a lesson as much as she's proving that she'll never stop loving me.

We're furious and scrambling in our attempt to get naked, the passion and desperation reaching a fever-pitch. Hands grapple on skin, tugging and stroking and trying to convey the frustration and love bleeding out on the sheets bunched beneath us.



Alana is biting my lower lip when I slide into her, bare and hard and shaking with every pent-up emotion.

She writhes, moaning my name as her slickness coats me, her body allowing my intrusion.

Everything in me throbs with the need to show her how much I love her, how terrified I am that something may happen to her. Taking a deep breath, I still, when I'm fully seated, our eyes connecting.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." I press my forehead to hers as we pause there, connected from mind to body to soul.

Alana's hand grabs my chin, holding it so I look at her. "I will never leave you. Not by choice, not by force. You and me, that's forever."

I gulp, knowing that this is the single most pivotal moment of my life. I thought it was the day I realized I was in love with her, or maybe the day I injured myself and my future was taken from me. I used to think that maybe it was our wedding day.

But no, it's right now. Because for the first time in my life, I'm looking fear and risk right in the face and deciding to stay. A person I love with everything in me is looking me in the face and telling me that come hell or high water, they'll never abandon me. Those two things have never happened, which makes this exact second a revelation for me.

"I love you. So much that I'd lay my own life down for you. Knowing that something might happen ..." I break off, never having felt this much emotion during sex. A tear slides down Alana's cheek, and I swipe it away with my thumb. "You're the best part of me, of my life. Have been since I can remember. I never want to live without you."

"You won't have to, I promise. Now make love to me."

Clasping both her hands, I pin them back to the mattress and hold tight as I stroke into her slowly from root to tip. A sighed plea leaves her lips as her gaze goes to the ceiling.

"Eyes on me," I say softly, quietly, because I need her with me right now.

We're lost in the pleasure, daylight coating our bodies, as I make love to the only woman I've ever loved. And when we unravel, it's with our gazes locked, love existing like this pulsing, tangible object between us.

The world could be falling on our heads, the bad guys could be closing in, and I know we'll never be separated.

That both terrifies and thrills me with the looming threat I feel on the horizon.



**T**wo weeks pass with nothing crazy to report or follow up on.

Cass's private investigator is doing his thing, Warren and I are crazy busy with Lily in a mid-summer tourist rush, and my parents and siblings are busy with the restaurant. At least my marketing tasks have taken a back seat; during the summer, it's easy to get people in for meals or taking out food. What's the easiest thing to do after a sun-kissed, exhausting day on the shores of the lake or in a boat? Grab a pizza. It's an age-old tradition. So, aside from our specials or weekly family night announcements, I don't have to do much more than schedule social media posts and plan a few media interviews scattered throughout the summer months.

Lily has become my biggest project, from coordinating new product drops with our vendors, to stocking orders, to rearranging the displays to keep everything fresh. The marketing efforts of promoting a new business are a heavy lift, and I've been growing our socials in a steady manner that I hope is helping us bring in revenue. Every day Warren and I are learning more about owning and operating a business in a way we never got to experience with Hope Pizza. This thing is truly ours alone, and it's only made us closer as a couple.

After him trying to break us apart and briefly trying to manipulate me into divorcing him, we're stronger than ever. Warren has not had many people in his life who loved him unconditionally through the worst of times, and I saw it in that

moment when he tried to sacrifice his own heart to save me. Or so he thought that was what he was doing.

Being able to show him that I'm not going anywhere, outright refusing to leave even if he locked me out, has proven that our love is stronger than anything thrown at us. We're moving away from the honeymoon stage of our marriage to being real and not a fake contracted thing anymore, to the part where real love thrives. Where contentment and companionship rule all. Of course, the sex is still insane, and he blows me away every time he walks into a room, but even after years of deep friendship, this stage in our relationship is different and exciting while settling us into something long-term.

After a couple weeks of no surprise drop-ins from Mason Klein, no news from the cops, and our regularly scheduled programming, Warren is a little more agreeable to let me out of his sight. He's been like a leech pressed to my side, checking in at all times or sending someone to shadow me if he can't be there. I understand how nervous he is about this whole thing, seeing as what happened to Cassandra last year, but with each passing day, I think we're out of the woods.

Which is why I'm here to help Nonna with her dessert prep for the week while the restaurant is quiet this morning. It's still early, before the lunch rush, and my grandmother just left to go home and take a rest. She spent from dawn until now, around ten a.m., up to her elbows in flour with me. While I'm not the cook of the family by far, I've always liked assisting my grandmother with the baking. Today we made a ton of rainbow cookies together as she told me the funniest anniversary gifts my grandfather ever gave her.

Now I'm sitting enjoying one of those cookies with a cup of cappuccino Evan made for Patrick, who is in the back working a half day. When he came in to do lunch prep, the cinnamon and brown sugar he added made it a perfect combination. I enjoy slow, solitary mornings like this, even if I crave the energy my family brings around. It's nice to just sit in a place where decades of traditions seep into my bones and sip my coffee.

Then the bell over the entrance jingles, and I sigh, knowing that my solitude is probably over for the day. My sister-in-law comes through the front door as fast as her belly will allow. She's due any day now, and I'm confused about her showing up here; Patrick is going to have a field day she isn't on his prescribed bed rest.

"Are you okay? What're you doing here?" A lightbulb goes off that she might be in labor and drove here to get my brother.

"I'm okay." She nervously chews her lip as she pulls out the chair beside me.

I scramble up, helping her get seated, then search her face. "Is it the baby? You want me to get Patrick?"

My heart is suddenly racing with the idea I'm about to become an aunt for the first time.

"No, no, nothing like that. This little girl is still cooking, she seems as stubborn as her father and I have a feeling we won't see her for a week." Cass rolls her eyes. "No, I came to talk to you. I got some information back from my PI."

And that has my stomach dropping like I'm on some world-class coaster. "Oh, okay. Um ... fuck, I didn't want there to be anything to find."

The longer we went without any news, I thought maybe there just wasn't anything to find. I almost convinced myself that Mason Klein is just a scummy Hollywood type who wouldn't take no for an answer. The concern on my sister-in-law's face tells me otherwise, that we do actually have something to worry about.

"I'm sorry, Al. I didn't want there to be either, but it's a lot and I ... you both need to know urgently. Should I get Warren down here?"

I shake my head. "He's at Lily by himself. Plus, if it's as bad as you say, maybe filter it through me first and I can deliver the hard news. Shit, I hate this. With everything he's already been through in his life, why does there have to be more?"

Cass gives me a sad smile. “I hate it for him, too. Sometimes the hard stuff happens to us so the good can come. But this? This is dark. Ugh, I don’t even want to talk about it, but you all need to know this.”

I steady myself internally before she starts.

She pulls out her phone, pulls up an email, and then starts talking me through what he found.

“So yes, Mason Klein is a documentary filmmaker, and he has a few titles under his belt. None of them took off, and the studios that produced them haven’t ever worked with him again. To me, as someone who used to be in that industry, that’s kind of a red flag.”

I nod, trying to follow her without letting my emotions cloud my mind.

“He went to school for it, has a degree in videography and cinema, and seemed like he was on the straight and narrow for a time. But recently, more like the last five years or so, something changed.” Cass eyes me warily. “My private investigator found out what.”

“Mason Klein grew up in Pennsylvania, a few hours away from here. His family was the typical suburban one, only child of a teacher and a mortgage lender, vacations to the beach, Christmas church goers. Until he was nine ... when his father murdered his mother.”

The gasp that rips from my throat feels almost out-of-body. Puzzle pieces begin to click into place as Cass continues.

“Except, no one knew about his mother’s death for months. Somehow, Mason’s father was able to keep it covered up? The mother had no family, no one checking up on her, and I guess he told the school that she’d been unable to work due to a mental illness. It gave his father time to indoctrinate Mason, to fill his head with these scary ideals and thoughts. It’s all recorded on his school paperwork and the subsequent foster file my PI found. After his father was sentenced and went to prison, Mason bounced around in the system until he turned eighteen. Bad homes, fights, a couple arrests. There are

old posts from an online blog he had that my PI included and they're ... dark."

It's almost too much for my body to process, for my mind to hold. I try to grasp it all, but this news is shocking me to my core.

"Mason seemed to get it together in time for college, where he was exemplary and graduated with honors. Little did anyone know, he'd visited his father in prison since the time he went away. Spent almost every weekend traveling to see him, to sit with him, and I can only guess how those conversations continued the ideas he'd given his son in the wake of his mother's death." Cass presses a hand to her throat. "Excuse me, I ... this is just so disturbing."

"I know," I whisper. "But we have to know it all."

"Five years ago, his father ended up dying in prison because of some unrelated illness that went undetected, something with his heart. I guess Mason was in search of a new role model. My PI isn't sure how he found Warren's father or latched on, but the visits started about three years ago."

"The reason he wants to make this documentary isn't to tell the story, to honor Mason's mother, it's because he worships the ground his father walks on. He ... he wants to vindicate him?" It all clicks into place.

Cass nods her head gravely. "That's what my PI suspects. That he turned his pain from the loss of his father into this obsession with Warren's."

This will gut Warren. First of all, even if he's going about it all wrong, Mason's the victim of something exactly like what happened to Warren. On a human level, you can't help but feel empathy, and for my husband, relate completely.

That's where the comparisons stop, though, because it clearly twisted Mason in a way that's poisonous and harmful. Warren will have to deal with the fallout of his father corrupting another's mind, aiming them at him, and putting his family in danger. I hate that I'll have to break this news or be



present when the man I love discovers exactly what's been going on. That it's so much worse than either of us thought.

We're going to have to put a stop to this and interact and engage even more with two people who are clearly not right in the head.

"I just need to ..."

Looking around the empty pre-lunch restaurant, my head swims a little. "I need to take a breather. I'm just going to go get some air, I'll be back in a minute, okay?"

Cass bites her lip like I might have a meltdown right here but nods her head.

Staggering to my feet, I try to collect myself as I go out to the alley between Hope Pizza and the next block of buildings on Newton Street.

I've kissed boys in this alley, smoked my first cigarette with a former busboy, done homework on overturned crates, and video-chatted with college friends I missed during the summers back home. Right now, though, all I can do is brace myself against the wall and try not to cry.

Thinking about telling Warren this information makes me want to vomit and sob. Not only are we in more danger than we ever thought, but now we'll have to do something about it. There will be legal filings because of this, of that I'm sure, and I have no idea if Warren will have to get involved with something about his father. Whatever this is will be an uphill battle, and then to have to possibly see some half-cocked documentary release after it if we can't shut Mason down?

I'm so angry and upset that I don't see the shadow looming over me until it's too late.

"I've been trying to get you alone since you kicked me out of this place."

A sinister voice, quiet but cringe-inducing in its approach, makes my whole body freeze.

"You can't be here." My voice miraculously works, even if I'm quaking at the sight of Mason Klein in front of me.

“Those stupid small-town cops have nothing to charge me with.” He rolls his eyes and lifts his hand like he might touch me.

Backing away, my eyes dart around to see if anyone, *anyone* is walking by or coming around from the back. But there is no one.

“I know who you are and why you keep coming after Warren. Soon they’ll know too, and we’ll stop you.” It’s probably not smart of me to make threats, but I can’t help it.

I’m never one to back down, and I won’t let this asshole intimidate me.

He smiles a creepy grin. “Good, then you know why it’s important for Warren to sit down for this documentary. The children of murderers need to tell their stories. Or, well, Warren needs to listen to his father’s side. No one understands them quite like their children can. After sitting with Kyle, I understand the turmoil he went through. Warren will get it once they have a conversation.”

It strikes me just how much he’s been hiding his true intentions and delusions. I need to get away from him, but if I show any weakness, I have no clue what he’s capable of.

“Warren will never see his father, and he’ll never talk about this on camera. Out of anyone, you should know how devastating a loss his was. To see his mother go through such pain at the hands of his other parent. You know, Mason, you did, too.”

I’m trying to connect on some level that might speak to him, that might break these grand illusions he’s dreamed up. Or well, they’re more like nightmares than dreams, Except this seems to have the opposite effect because Mason corners me, my back meeting the wall. I shift uncomfortably because he’s too close, and look for someone, anyone, to get me out of this once again.

“Except I don’t! Because I didn’t get plucked out of the dirt like your pretty boy husband did. I wasn’t whisked away to some mansion and handed a second chance at life. I lived in

houses where they ignored me, abused me, or starved me. There was never enough to go around, no one gave a fuck about me. But your goddamn husband got the lap of luxury, a tight little piece to fuck, and his happily ever fucking after.”

His eyes, his voice, his mannerisms ... they're all becoming unhinged. And now I see the truth, the real reason he keeps coming after Warren; he believes, truly believes, that Warren getting a beautiful life after tragedy is the reason he didn't get the same. In that twisted brain of his, he's convinced himself those two things are mutually exclusive.

“Think of the money your husband could make talking about his father, doing this documentary. Think of the fame it will bring. Pretty little thing like you, you'll be perfect on camera.” The way he says it has my insides crawling.

As if he's imagining something completely different than a documentary on a killer that gets me in front of a camera.

And then he's touching me, his fingertips grazing down my face.

“You'll never get away with this. We'll never be pawns in this game.” But my voice is too shaky, and Mason cackles.

“Take your fucking hands off *my wife*.”

Warren's growl is like nothing I've ever heard from him before.

“Well, well, well, the knight in shining armor comes to get his happily ever after once more.” Mason rolls his eyes for only me to see, but he doesn't back away or remove his hand from my face.

“Baby ...” I warn, trying to signal to Warren that this man is not in the right frame of mind.

Warren stalks forward, trying to make a move for me, but Mason tilts his body, getting between us. My husband looks feral, like he'll kill him in two seconds flat, and I know I need to get someone else involved as soon as possible.

“If you don't fucking move away from her right now, I'll  
—”

Before I know what's happening, Mason turns and jumps Warren. Tackles him straight to the ground, the two men flying through the air.

Mason isn't bigger than Warren, not by a long shot, but he has surprise on his side because my husband is a good man, a trusting, kind soul who doesn't see it coming when this vile person springs into action and topples him over.

Warren hits the ground with a thud, everything moving in slow motion and warp speed equally. Mason dives onto him, getting his hands on Warren's throat before I know what's happening. My husband's arms flail, shock pinning his body down momentarily, and I leap into action.

"Get your hands off him! His life has nothing to do with yours!" I grab Mason's elbow, hoping that somehow, he lets up on Warren's windpipe.

That makes his grip slip, and Warren is able to land a punch to his ribs that has Mason staggering up and back. I almost have my hand extended to Warren, seeking to help him up so he can take on the madman that's attacked us when a burning at the base of my scalp has me rearing back.

With a fist in my hair, Mason drags me back, and I let loose a bloodcurdling scream out of fear more than agony. Someone will hear us soon; a group or authorities will come around the corner any second. At least that's what my delusional mind is telling me.

"Stupid bitch," he growls before slamming my head back against the wall.

The pain that astounds me as my skull hits the bricks is the last thing I register before I fall into blackness.



**O**f all the shit I've been through in my life, none of it scares me more than watching Alana's eyes roll back in her head, and her body go limp.

Because when she does, I see my whole life flash before my eyes. My love for her, her smile, the future together, the babies we'd have, sitting on a porch holding her hand when we're old and gray.

After Mason took me down, the wind was knocked out of me, so it takes me a few seconds to register how he just hurt her. But the second my limbs become aware, they move without permission. Toward him, the man who just hurt my wife. The person who let her crumple to the ground.

"You monster!" I shout, tackling him away from her as I swing blindly.

My fist connects with his jaw as we go down, his head thudding on the concrete. My vision blurs as I fall, and when I realize I'm on top of him and he's not moving, I get up and immediately move to Alana.

"Baby? Baby?" I cup her face, trying to gently rouse her but terrified to move her even an inch.

A choked gasp comes from her, and then a groan. Looking over my shoulder, I see Mason is still out cold, and I know I need to get the cops down here this instant, but I won't leave her.

“Al, wake up for me. Come on, baby, do it for me. Open your eyes.” I need her to open her eyes before my heart stops beating.

Because if I lose her, I lose everything.

“Warren ...” Her voice is so weak and quiet, but it’s there.

“Baby, I love you. So much.” I nearly choke on the tears in my throat.

I need her to know that as she regains her surroundings. That I love her, I’m here, and I’ll never let her get hurt again.

“My head hurts so bad, Warren.” She groans, clutching at her temples.

“I know, I know.” I look around like someone is going to come help us. “I’m going to get you up, okay?”

She protests with little mumbles, and maybe I shouldn’t move her for fear of more damage, but no way am I going to let her lie there on the ground. I cradle her into my lap, pulling her against my chest, before I start yelling.

“Evan!” I shout it at the top of my lungs. “Evan! EVAN!”

Finally, I hear the back door of Hope Pizza creak with someone exiting it and see Alana’s youngest brother swing around the corner.

“What the hell are you yelling—oh. Shit, what the hell happened?” He surveys the scene, and I can tell he’s freezing up at what to do with these two people lying on the ground.

“Is Patrick in there?” I demand, coming up with a plan on the fly.

Evan gawks at me as he stares at the blood on my fingers. I realize it’s coming from Alana’s head, and my stomach bottoms out. But I have to focus.

“Evan! Is Patrick in there?” I ask again more forcefully.

He nods, gulping.

“Go get him. Tell him to come out here, he needs to make sure Mason doesn’t go anywhere if he wakes up. Then you run

down to the police station, sprint. Go as quickly as you can. Get Billy and whoever else back here. They want their proof, here it is.”

This needs to be documented, filed away, and Mason charged with whatever would get him away from my wife.

“Okay. Okay.” Evan nods to himself like he’s trying to shake himself from the cloud that lingers over him.

He disappears, and I sit with Alana, trying to control myself. Trying to get my breathing under control and my heart to stop racing because it feels like I’m on the edge of a panic attack.

“He could have ...” I say to myself, but Alana’s hand comes up to my cheek.

She winces like the movement is agony. “You saved me. I’m here. You got me.”

Those blue eyes blink up at me like I’m her hero, even though I feel like the chump who landed her in this position.

“Why did he come back? What the hell was he doing here?” I ask, even though it’s not the time to delve into answers.

Alana is struggling. I can see how much pain she’s in, and her body is becoming limper as she melts into my lap. I need Patrick out here now, and we need to call an ambulance or the EMTs.

“His father murdered his mother. He was ... like you.” Her breaths are coming in pants, and I know the pain is taking over.

“*What?*” Her explanation is so out of left field with zero context that I feel I might be having a practical joke played on me.

Like any minute, some camera crew is going to pop out of the bushes. But all that happens is Patrick running into the alleyway.

“Evan just ran down to the police station. They’ll be here any minute—I’ll call an ambulance—Alana—how bad is it?”



he asks, jumbling all the information into one long rambling sentence.

“She’s bleeding. I don’t know what else. In a lot of pain.” I can’t seem to string thoughts together after she delivered that bit of news.

My ears are buzzing with thought as Patrick fades into the background, kneeling beside an unconscious Mason to make sure he doesn’t go anywhere while calling the EMTs to check them out.

At some point, Alana closes her eyes again, but I can feel her breathing even out and am not as afraid that she won’t open them again. What feels like hours, but is probably mere minutes later, Evan comes speed walking up with Billy and two other cops.

“This asshole just couldn’t listen to reason, could he.” Billy shakes his head as he kneels between Mason and where I hold Alana. “You doing okay, Warren? She okay?”

I gulp. I’m not doing okay, not in the slightest, but I hope the worst of it is over, even if it feels like something bigger is about to be discovered.

“We’re as okay as we can be?” The words feel strange coming out of my mouth. “Alana definitely has some injuries, but I’m fine. He still breathing?” I nod in the direction of the scumbag who did this to her, and Billy checks his pulse.

“Yes. What happened?”

“I walked up on him attacking her, backing her up and she looked terrified. He’s been following us, we told you this, but something in him was unhinged this time. He came at me, got me by the throat. Alana tried to intervene, and he slammed her head into the ...”

Nausea sweeps over me, cold and dreadful.

“Okay, okay. I get the picture. I’ll need your full statement, but let’s get her checked out and you can go with her for now,” Billy relents.

The ambulance pulls up at that moment, and they rush to us to attend to both Alana and Mason. We're swept up in it all, so much so that I can't think about what Alana said for the next half hour as I'm poked, prodded, and questioned. I watch as Billy escorts a now conscious Mason to the back of a squad car, the former protesting and griping the entire way.

"We're going to take care of this. He will never be able to get close to you again." Billy nods at me, trying to reassure me, man to man.

One of the EMTs checking Alana out lets me know they need to transport her to the ER for further tests and some stitches.

I don't hesitate to jump into the ambulance, and my eyes catch Patrick's as I do.

"Go, we'll take care of this. I'll be by in a little to update you. Take care of her."

The rest of the Ashtons present seem to echo his sentiment because no one else volunteers to come or follow us. They realize I am her family now, the two of us are a unit that comes first.

From here on out, I'm in charge of protecting her. It's the only job I've ever wanted.

One I'll never fail at again.

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**T**hree hours, six stitches, and one concussion diagnosis later, I sit next to Alana's hospital bed, clasping her hands in mine as she sleeps. She'd been awake no more than half an hour ago, but between the pain meds they gave her and the exhaustion of everything that went on today, I told her to rest.

If not, just so she can get some relief, so I can be alone with my thoughts for a moment.

The doctors wouldn't let me in while they were running tests, concussion protocols, and stitching her up. That's when the entire family arrived and held me through the waiting in a conference room the hospital staff let us occupy. And that's also when Cass let me read the email from her private investigator.

I couldn't help falling back into a rolling chair as if the breath had been knocked from my lungs when seeing the detailed words on the screen.

Mason had nearly the same childhood as I did. A murderer for a father, being so young when it happened, going into foster care. But unlike me, he was groomed to think that what his father did was right. Needed. Justified. He thought that something so out of the realm of normality was normal. Then he bounced around the foster system and never found a forever family. No one cared for him or showed him the error of his father's ways.

That stoked a poisonous streak in him, one which he had hidden well up until now. Under my father's tutelage, he became a real monster, seeking revenge on my family and me for something he went without.

Shock, cold and terrifying, grips my throat as I read. As I realize what could have happened had I not had a gut intuition and gone to find Alana. I was standing in an empty Lily when this need to see her arose. I didn't want to let her go to Hope Pizza without me that morning, but I had to relent. She's an independent and fully capable woman. We trust each other.

What neither of us was expecting was an unhinged man to attack her. Even now, as I hold her hands, knowing she's healthy and going to be okay, mine shake with the reality of what could have happened had I not been there.

Patrick showed up with the rest of the Ashtons about an hour into my wait and told me that Billy had booked Mason on charges of stalking, assault, and harassment. He's currently in a cell at Hope Crest PD but will be transferred to the country at some point to await trial. Leona and Thomas's lawyer is already setting up everything we need to mount a defense and

protect us, and again I can't repay how much this family has helped me and always has my back.

Alana stirs and sighs, those baby blues blinking open.

"Warren." She says my name like it's her lifeline.

"I'm right here." I sit up a little straighter.

"Mmm. I love you." She seems a little hazy still, but hearing those words unlocks the tension in my chest.

"I'm so sorry, baby. So sorry I couldn't protect you." My heart is crestfallen, devastated.

He hurt her because of her ties to me. This ugly past of mine brings about all kinds of unwanted people and attention, and for the first time, it was taken out on someone other than me. Someone who I love more than anything on earth.

We haven't had a chance to talk about any of this, to have a moment alone, and now that we are, I'm breaking down. All the panic and fear that has been weighing on my shoulders seems to break, and my forehead meets the bed as I take deep breaths.

"Stop it," Alana demands, just like she did the morning I tried to make her divorce me. "I have three brothers, I don't need any more protectors. I need someone to love me. And not just someone, you. The guy I fell head over heels for somewhere along the way when we were pretending to be best friends."

"But I failed. You almost—"

"You didn't. You saved me. You could feel that I was in danger and you came running. I can only attribute that intuition as us being so close, so in love, that you feel what I feel. Warren, don't break under this. I need you to fight because we have a hell of one coming up."

How is she so much stronger than me? I am in awe of her, lying here injured and still behaving like a warrior.

"I can't believe he ... I read the PI report," I tell her, and a look of empathy flickers over her face.

“I’m so sorry. We never could have known who he truly is. But don’t you dare disappear into that head of yours. None of this is your fault, you couldn’t have prevented this.”

“How does one kid end up on a path like mine, and another on one as horrible as his?” It’s what’s been plaguing me since I read the truth.

She squeezes my hands in hers. “It’s just life, baby. It happens. It’s horrible and sad and a part of me does feel for him, but again, none of that is your fault. You went through just as much trauma, had so many obstacles that others haven’t had to deal with. Someone like that ... I don’t know. Mason didn’t seem right from the start so maybe he was always that way, but what do I know.”

That thought sinks in, and I hate that we’ll have to deal with more of him with whatever trial he’s going to get.

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better,” I say, and Alana nods in agreement.

“We’ll get through all of it. Because we’re us. You and me, we’re forever.”

She promises this, and I straighten to my full sitting height. It’s time to be the man she’s always deserved, the hero in my own story and the boy with a tragic past who finally gets a say in what happens to him.

I’ll do all of that with my wife, my best friend, by my side.



“Can I get you anything else? An aspirin, a pillow, maybe another iced tea?”

Mom fusses over me like I'm five and home from school with a fever.

“Mom, I'm fine.” I try to swat her away, but Warren pins my hand to my lap.

“She's just a concerned mama bear.” He kisses my temple.

“At least someone appreciates my care.” Mom smiles warmly at my husband.

“Honestly, you don't have to be so obvious about how much you prefer him over me.” I roll my eyes.

“Eh, she does the same with Cass.” Patrick shrugs.

“And August,” Evan chimes in, and August fiercely blushes. “Wait! Do you like everyone more than your actual children?”

Mom scowls at him. “I won't hear any more of that. I'm allowed to be worried about my little girl after all that.”

It's been a week since Mason Klein attacked us in the alley behind Hope Pizza, and my family still won't let me out of their sight. Case in point, they all showed up at our tiny two-bedroom house for Sunday dinner, bringing along a ton of food, concern, and even some friends in tow. Wilson is currently helping Nonna scoop ice cream sundaes, August has been kicking Dad's butt in a relaxed game of poker, and even

Gabrielle stopped by to drop off some flowers. At which time, Liam promptly disappeared to do God knows what.

“I love you,” I tell her earnestly because I know she’s just flustered with being unable to control everything that’s happened and will happen.

“To the moon and back,” she answers, using the age-old line.

Warren holds me closer, almost inside his arms like they’re caging around me. He’s been doing this the last couple of days, as if he can protect me from anything. It not only gives me comfort but makes me feel safe when the shaky anxiety comes. Mostly at night, when the nightmares do.

Hopefully, none of those come true since Mason is behind bars. A temporary restraining order has been put in place for the next four weeks until the hearing will be held, at which time we’ll be asking for a permanent order to be put in place for both of us. Hopefully, we won’t have to deal with him coming back around due to him being in prison, but trials can take a long time, getting out on bond is a thing, and there is no guarantee how long he’ll go away for.

The prosecutor has a strong case, and we have very good lawyers at our disposal advising us what to do, but it’s not like he’ll get put away for life on the charges stacked against him. We can hope for a good long while and hope that whenever it comes to sentencing, the judge on the case sees what a threat he poses to our family, but that will come in time.

Right now, all we can do is try to live each day with positivity and love, putting the dark cloud behind us.

“I’m so happy you said yes to marrying me,” Warren says this for only me to hear.

I lean farther into him. “Me too. Even if it only means I get you for five years.”

I give him a little shit for keeping that part of the contract hidden from me until recently.

“I don’t want to be married to you for five years,” he deadpans.



“Oh. You don’t?” The grin I give him is goofy.

“I want to be married to you for a lifetime. I want to be married to you until I’m old and gray and forget my name. I want to be married to you through centuries and ages, until there isn’t a point where you end and I begin. I don’t care what that contract says, because we’re exceeding it. I don’t give a shit about what we get after the five years, because none of it matters if I don’t have you. So no, I don’t want to be married to you for five years. I want forever.”

It’s hard to breathe when he says things like that.

“Way to make a girl swoon, Mr. Teal.”

“Only you, Mrs. Teal.” He swoops down and captures my lips, the kiss a little too lingering with this much company.

“Ew, get a room,” Liam grumbles.

“You all came to my house and barged in, you do realize that, right?” I point to each one of my family members.

“Alana, I have a new vendor for the shop I want to introduce you to. I met a local artist who makes digital silhouette art of kids, family members, dogs. It’s the sort of thing I thought would be perfect for Lily,” Dad says.

I’m still shocked whenever he wants to be involved with the store he gave such pushback about originally. But over the last week, when Warren and I were definitely more insular and at home, he even volunteered to work most of his hours there and let Evan run the Hope Pizza kitchen alone. He’s stepped up, showing us with his actions that he wants to be better where we’re concerned.

“Thanks, Dad, that would be great.” I lift my eyebrows at Warren, and he shrugs with surprise.

Over the next few months, we’ll need even more help as Warren begins to dig through the mountain of property and businesses Arthur left him. We don’t plan on keeping much, just the items that were sentimental to his adoptive parents and some of the nonprofits that Arthur championed. While I’ve never struggled financially because of the family I was born into, it’s a whole other ballgame with how much Warren and I

are now worth. There will need to be a lot of meetings with Arthur's lawyer and our new financial advisor to inform us about how to smartly keep this wealth for our future generations.

It will all become easier with time and thank God for the support of the best family a girl could ask for.

“Um ...”

We all watch as Cass stands, a wet liquid dripping onto the floor as she does so.

“I think my water broke.” She giggles like this whole thing is a joke.

For one moment, the entire room is completely still. And the next, movement is everywhere. Evan is jumping from the couch to grab car keys, Patrick is sprinting to his wife's side, Mom is in a tizzy of tears, Warren is asking what he can do, and Dad is bossing everyone around, but no one is even listening.

“Calm down, calm down. This baby is probably not coming for hours.” Nonna strolls in with two bowls of ice cream. “Have some dessert, labor here with us, and when it gets further along, then go. They won't let you eat at the hospital, and wouldn't you rather scream into a pillow here than in a cold hospital?”

“She's right.” Mom tilts her head, considering all of this. “All right, let's get her comfortable. Patrick, call her doctor and tell him what's happening.”

As we all shuffle around to do just that, I end up catching my sister-in-law alone for a second or two.

“How kismet that we can all be here for the early hours of your labor?” I speak quietly to her, knowing this is a special moment we'll never get to experience again.

“I kind of love it, knowing this baby will be starting its journey into the world surrounded by the people who love her the most. I never had that, and that's all I want for her.” Cass smiles at me.

“Oh, you’ll never have to worry about an overwhelming amount of love directed at her.” I chuckle because this family is crazy.

Just like they say, it’s the circle of life. Everything in this universe is cyclical. Death and trauma give way to life and new hope. We’re witnessing it right in front of our eyes.

As we all wait together in my and Warren’s living room, telling family stories from our childhood, I hold on to the hand of the boy I’ve loved since way back in the playground days.

“I love you,” I whisper when everyone else is preoccupied with something or other.

Warren looks to me, the emotion shining from his face, and delivers the only words I’ve ever wanted from him.

“I love you, too.”

# EPILOGUE

WARREN

## One and a Half Years Later

“Can I have another ice chip?” my wife requests in a pained voice, and I can see the contraction rippling through her. I swear, men could never do this. There would be no freaking babies in the world anymore.

“Of course.” I scramble to get one, rubbing it over her lips before letting her take it into her mouth.

“Thank you.” She sighs as if the coldness brings a sliver of relief.

She’s been in labor for twelve grueling hours, and I feel so helpless not being able to take the pain away as the intensity ramps up. Even with the epidural, she still feels the stab of our baby girl trying to make her way into the world.

“You’re doing so amazing, you’re a warrior. Fight for us,” I whisper in her ear, my hand being used as a pincushion once more.

“That’s it, Alana, I can almost see the head,” our doctor tells us, working between her legs while I support her head.

Anxiety, nerves, love, and so much anticipation rumble through my chest. Any minute now, I’m going to meet another woman who will absolutely steal my heart.

*Our daughter.*

There was a time when I didn’t believe I’d get the first one to fall in love with me.

Alana got pregnant on our wedding night. Or, well, I guess it was technically our second wedding night. On the one-year anniversary of our courthouse wedding, about seven months after Rebecca, Cass and Patrick’s daughter, was born, I surprised Alana with an all-out bash on the back lawn of her childhood home.

A place that held all of our firsts, means so much to us, and could hold the two hundred people who came out to party and dance the night away with us. Cass was in charge of

kidnapping my wife and getting her wedding ready, so of course, she already had some idea when she got dropped off in a sparkly white princess dress, looking absolutely radiant.

It wasn't until her father, in a tux, met her out front and held his arm out that she realized what was happening. There wasn't a dry eye in the joint as we exchanged our own vows and gave our family exactly what they'd missed the first time around.

And that night, when we got back to our house, and then I carried her over the threshold and unbuttoned the row of buttons going down her back, we created this little miracle of life that's about to come into the world.

Over the last year and a half, we've gone through so many ups and downs that this being the final hurdle is the peak of it all. Lily is thriving, and we're busier than ever, especially with having to hire a staff and a new manager. Between Hope Pizza and the local goods store, we were taking on way too much work. August left for college, and we struggled there for a while, working fourteen-hour days to make sure both jobs were done to satisfaction.

After our wedding, during our house search, while discovering Alana was pregnant, we knew we needed help and delegation. That's where the three new members of the Lily family entered; two full-time store employees and a manager who holds it all down. We are still there almost daily, but now we can balance a lot more. Especially with Evan bringing in some more help at Hope Pizza now that Thomas has tried to retire.

And by tried, I mean failed. His bossy ass is still there four times a week, even when Leona tries to drag him out by the ear. She's ready for the next chapter of life, traveling and babysitting baby Rebecca, while he can't help sticking his nose in the business he's left in the capable hands of his children.

That's how this family is, though, always in each other's business. Nonna spoiled our pregnancy news when she could tell Alana was pregnant the moment she walked into a Sunday

dinner a little over seven months ago. And when it came to helping us through the trial, I'm not sure we could have done it without them.

Six months ago, Mason Klein was sentenced to nine years in prison for what he did to Alana and me. After searching his files, following up on his visits with my father, and all the other evidence, the jury had enough to put him away for a long time. Of course, not as long as we would ultimately want, but justice was served.

The trial and coverage of it were brutal for me, having to relive what my father had done. It swept up a lot of media about my mother, my childhood, and the murder in general. Comparisons between Mason and I were made, and it was just a difficult time to get through. Alana and our family had been there every step of the way, holding me up when I didn't think I was strong enough to bear it alone.

Everything Arthur had wanted for me when he signed that will is what I got. A wife who would go to the ends of the earth because she loves me so much, a dream of my own that we got to build together.

Arthur left me a legacy, catapulting me into something I might not have otherwise chosen for myself, and I'll always be grateful for that. I only wish he and Clara could be here to meet the little girl they would have spoiled rotten.

But the family still left out there waiting; Patrick and Cass with their daughter and their son arriving in four months. Evan, Leona and Thomas, who are probably pacing the hallway. Liam, whose own crazy path is a doozy for all of us. August, who's been video calling me from college, wanting to know if the baby is here yet. She still hasn't discovered who's funding it, and I'll keep the secret till my grave if I can.

The whole cast of characters is waiting for their newest member, but no one is more eager to meet her than Alana and me.

“One more big push, Alana,” our doctor tells her, prepping for what feels like will be the final big one.



My wife bears down, a scream ripping from her throat, as she squeezes my hand hard. I silently kiss her head, rubbing her neck as she brings our child into the world like the warrior she is.

The next moment, I hear the sweetest sound I've ever heard in my life. A little cry, a mewl almost, followed by an intake of breath.

"She's here. Your daughter is here," one of the nurses informs us as they wrap the tiny human in a blanket and examine her.

They lay our little girl on Alana's chest, and we're both crying. She's so small and delicate, with a head of black hair just like her mother's. As soon as she suckles onto Alana's skin, she grows quiet, her blue eyes going wide with wonder.

"She's an angel." Alana sobs, grabbing my hand as we both rub our other ones on the baby's back.

The doctors and nurses check everything to make sure she's healthy, and once they clear Alana and the baby, most of them leave to give us some time to bond.

Mostly, we do nothing but stare at her.

"I'd like to name her Phoebe," Alana whispers, stroking our daughter's cheek.

All at once, it feels like I can't breathe. "*Really?*"

She nods, tears spilling from her eyes. "After your mother."

Something in me loosens, some weight that has been dragging me down since I was ten years old suddenly vanishes.

"That would be ... *perfect.*"

Looking down on them, the two most radiant creatures I've ever beheld in my life, I feel nothing but deservedness that I get to share my life with them. It's taken me a long time, but I've stopped questioning whether I'm worthy of this.

I was put on this earth to love Alana, of that I'm sure now. Just took me a while to be confident and brave enough to do so.

Now I get to double that love and extend it to our daughter and whatever other children we bring into our family. My past and how I got here don't define me, this does.

My little family right here. The love I get to build and grow every single day moving forward.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of romance novels such as *Fleeting* and *Love at First Fight*, Carrie Aarons writes books that are just as swoon-worthy as they are sarcastic. A former journalist, she prefers the love stories of her imagination, and the athleisure dress code, much better.

When she isn't writing, Carrie is busy bingeing reality TV, having a love/hate relationship with cardio, and trying not to burn dinner. She lives in the suburbs of New Jersey with her husband, two children and ninety-pound rescue pup.

Please join her readers group, [Carrie's Charmers](#), to get the latest on new books, exclusive excerpts and fun giveaways.

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