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STACY *Stone*

IT WENT

*Viral*

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STACY *Stone*

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*The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you.  
You just got to find the ones worth suffering for.*

*- Bob Marley*



# ABOUT THIS BOOK

**A sexy standalone novel from Stacy Stone the author of the Full Moon Series.**

*She's about to work with the man who ruined her college years...*

Event manager Isla James still burns with shame over her college infamy. Climbing naked out of the window, just to have it filmed by some frat brothers was embarrassing to say the least. The fact the video went viral made it so much worse. And though her professional star has risen since reinventing herself in a new town, returning to her old stomping grounds is not on her bucket list. But when her best friend asks her to promote her family's charity ball, she relents despite fearing she'll get stuck working with the last man she ever wants to see again.

*...but he's determined to change her mind.*

Bryan Hunter's biggest mistake was letting Isla go that fateful day. He was a stupid college boy back then, but he's a changed man now. He'll do whatever it takes to win her back. Now he just has to convince Isla she can trust... and maybe even love him.

She fled humiliation. He's a changed man. Can they make a happy ending out of a bad beginning and get a second chance at love?





# Playlist

*“We are never ever getting back together”* – Rock cover by  
No Resolve



*“Easy On Me”* – Rock cover by No Resolve



*“I won’t give up”* – Jason Mraz



*“Try”* – Pink



*“Up”* – Olly Murs ft. Demi Lavato



*“Little Do You Know”* – Alex & Sierra



*“Into Your Arms”* – Whitt Lowry



# Prologue

## Isla

*Ten years ago*

My life as I knew it before this morning is over. Even as I'm standing here, bare ass naked and living the most horrifying, humiliating moment of my life, I know for a fact that nothing will ever be the same again.

Everything I've worked for is gone. My reputation, my grades, the future I had planned... It's all crashing down around me as I clutch my clothes in my hands and try to cover my most intimate bits.

I'm trying, but I also already know it's too late. As soon as I stumbled out of Bryan's bedroom window onto this godforsaken roof, it was too late. They've already seen everything there is to see. The clothes are more about me fooling myself into thinking that maybe, just maybe, not every guy down there has seen every part of my no-longer-virginal body.

The garden below is crawling with Bryan's frat brothers and their friends. A minute ago, there was a lively game of beer pong happening in the shade and guys wrestling in an inflatable pool with a crowd around it cheering.

All that ended when the first guy spotted me being shoved out onto the roof. He catcalled and before I knew what was happening, the rest of them started hollering too.

Too many of them whipped out their phones. All those phones are still trained on me as realization hits me... I'm screwed.

Just a little over thirty six hours ago, Bryan and I had sat on this roof together. Drinking and laughing as if we had it all

figured out. This was supposed to be the best moment of my life, but look how it turned out...

Tears burn the backs of my eyes, but I don't let them fall. I can't. If I can hang onto even one shred of my dignity, then I have to do it.

Because if there's one thing I know for sure, it's that this is going to go viral. At least campus-wide, but it's very possible these photos and videos are going to be seen much further than that.

My best friend's brother just ruined my life. And there's absolutely nothing I can do to stop it from happening.



# Chapter One

## Isla

*Present Day*

My office is a hive of activity. It's chaos with twenty different people speaking over each other and trying to make their voices heard. I'm seated at the head of the massive mahogany conference table, watching and listening as I sit back in my chair, taking in some of the suggestions flying around, but mostly just giving the team a few minutes to engage in their lively debate.

I've learned at times like these it's best to let them go at it. That way, once we really get started, everyone will be more focused. All they usually need at the start of a new project is some time to get their ideas out there, then we'll be good to go. I don't like micro-managing my staff. If they need to get this out of their systems, so be it. My assistant built extra time into the strategy session for this exact purpose.

"It's an international sporting event," Allie, one of my management-level event planners argues, glaring at a newer member of the team sitting across from her. "We can't treat it like a high-school football game. We've overseen dozens of these. Even if those haven't been e-sports, we know what we're doing. Why don't you just sit back and learn from the adults in the room?"

*And that's my cue to step in.*

All it takes to get their complete attention and for the noise in the room to cut out immediately is for me to sit forward and clear my throat softly. "You're right. We have done dozens of sporting events. We've also done dozens of music festivals, street carnivals, and hundreds of other events for thousands of people. It all starts right here in this room, but we'll never get

anywhere if we don't work together. It's too much work for any one person to do by themselves."

Allie nods. "Of course, Ms. James. I was simply pointing out that we need to remember that this tournament is going to be huge. It's like the Superbowl of e-sports and people from all over the world will be attending and watching. We can't just organize a pep rally and print out some posters."

"I doubt we'll need a pep rally for this," the newbie chimes in again. "The buzz for the next tournament starts as soon as the previous one is over. Sometimes even before."

"Exactly," I say. "We need to capitalize on that buzz, but it means staying focused and delivering an event that's even better than any of the ones that came before it. It's a big ask considering the magnitude and extravagance of this event in the past, so let's skip past the talk of pep rallies and get down to business."

I'm not a bitch, but I steer this company—my company—with an iron fist. I may not have founded James Event Management—the credit for that belongs to my aunt, my mother's sister—but I took it from a small agency local to LA which specialized in birthday parties and bar-mitzvahs and built it into what it is today.

It's my baby, but it's also so much more than that. It's my great, big middle finger tossed up at all those who once thought I was done for. It's me proving to the world one mind-blowing event at a time that I clawed my way back from rock bottom and nothing and no one can keep me down.

*Not even a video of me in all my naked glory that went viral a scant day and a half after I let anyone see me naked for the first time.*

Just the thought of that video brings a bitter taste to my mouth. Even after all these years, after reinventing myself, and after building a company with an eight-figure-a-year turnover, I'm still not over it.

God knows, I've tried to rise above. To a certain extent, maybe I have. It's not like I think about it every day anymore



and I've long-since stopped wondering if every person I meet has seen the goods, but whenever it *does* pop into my mind, bile still pushes up the back of my throat and the lingering humiliation that will always be there threatens to overwhelm me.

Deliberately shoving the thoughts of the events from a decade ago out of my mind, I lean forward and jump into strategizing. Work and my determination to make something out of myself regardless of everything that'd happened was what saved me back then, and it's what keeps me going now when I feel low.

"I don't think I can overstate the importance of making sure we get this one right," I say, meeting the eyes of every person around the table while I speak. "The client may be an American company, but they very easily could've opted to use a Japanese firm for the event."

It's quiet in the room as I pause for a second to let the weight of my words sink in. "Eleven months sounds like a long time, but it'll be gone in the blink of an eye. We need everyone on this project giving their all to it from this day on."

Several heads nod while others clench their jaws or sit up just a little bit straighter. *Good. I'm glad they're getting serious.*

This is why I let their egos reign supreme for just those few minutes at the beginning of a session. Now, we can hunker down without any more pissing contests wasting our time.

"Ideally, we would've had a year or more to plan the tournament," I continue. "As it is, we're cutting it close but there's nothing to be done about it. Our predecessors messed up recently, and that's giving us an opportunity to show the client what we've got. They're already worried about the timeline though. I've assured them it won't be an issue. Don't make me a liar."

Neville, the newbie, is suddenly looking a little green around the gills. I glance at him and then at Allie. She's right about him needing to be taught, and I know just the person to do it. Training is something I've always taken seriously. I

don't throw people in the deep end and hope they manage to swim. There was a time I did the training personally, but I can't do it anymore.

Allie's not going to like this particular assignment, but she'll do it. She's a hell of a teacher, someone I trained up myself back in the day who I know can handle a new team member as well as do her job.

Mind made up, I turn my attention back on her. "You'll be heading up the team on the ground in Tokyo. I'll need you there within the week to start scouting for a venue. It should be a short trip this time but get ready to spend a lot of time there between now and the tournament. Take Neville with you and pick three more people to help."

Her teeth grind together in exasperation but as expected, she doesn't argue. No one ever does.

Moving on, I give out the other preliminary assignments and then close the meeting. My people get up immediately, eager to get to work as they filter out of my office.

Once I'm alone again, I breathe out a sigh of relief but a quick glance at the clock on my wall tells me I only have about twenty minutes until my next meeting starts. I truly love my job, but after being with so many people at the same time, I almost always need to breather to recharge.

Today, that's even more true than usual. As hard as I tried to shove at all those unpleasant memories earlier, now they've surfaced, I can't quite seem to easily shake them off.

Walking over to the floor-to-ceiling windows that make up two walls of my office, I look out over New York City and the people who move around like ants sixty-three stories below me.

Some days, I don't know how it happened. How I got from the rooftop of my best friend's brother's fraternity house to the top floor of a skyscraper on Sixth Avenue. There were some very dark days between then and now.

After it happened, I dropped out of the fancy tech school in New England Bryan and I had ended up at together. I'm not

proud of it, but I couldn't handle staying there so I ran. I ran as far as I could go, as fast as I could get there. All the way to my Aunt Julia's house in Los Angeles.

For the first few months, she let me wallow in my misery. She left me to lick my wounds and try to piece a life back together for myself. When that didn't work, she started forcing me to leave my room. Sitting around the dining room table that doubled as her office back then, she made me help her plan events and eventually, encouraged me to pursue a new degree at a new school. *Somewhere no one knew my name.*

While majoring in Business and Events Management, I kept working at her company. Some days, it was a struggle just getting out of bed and now here I am, planning what promises to be the biggest e-sports event yet. Not only that, but my next meeting is about Full Moon's new tour.

Arguably one of the most famous rock bands in the world, and I'm the one they trust with every last one of their events. Which is saying something, considering they hardly trust anyone outside of their immediate circle. I'm the first person in years they've allowed in.

Before that, the band itself took care of everything internally, but due to series of unfortunate—and truly horrible—events with their former manager they're finally looking to bring someone new to their team. It's a big deal to have them as a client, and they've been on my roster almost since I first arrived back home in New York.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I weave my fingers through my loose hair and take a deep, calming breath. *I won't let those old memories overwhelm me. Not now. I've come too far to get sucked into that spiral again.*

There's a soft knock at my door. Without turning away from the window, I check my watch again and then call out, "Come on in, Rudy."

It's too early for my next meeting to start, so I know it's my assistant. Sure enough, it's his voice that speaks up quietly from the direction of my doorway.

“You’ve got an urgent call from a Bella Hunter. She says she’s tried to reach you on your mobile and she knows you’re busy, but she needs to speak to you right away.”

I frown, spinning around to nod at him before crossing the plush carpet to my desk. “Put her through.”

My heart starts racing in my chest while I wait for my landline to ring. Bella has been my best friend since we were ten. Her brother may be the biggest asshole in the world, but Bella wasn’t there that day and I know for a fact she didn’t speak to him for a long time because of it. She also didn’t attend his wedding to the girl whose arrival had caused him to shove me out on the roof in the first place.

The phone on my desk starts ringing shrilly and I snatch it up immediately, panic washing over me about the reason she needs to reach me so urgently that she kept calling. It’s not like her at all, but she’s pregnant and it hasn’t been smooth sailing for her and the baby.

“Bella? Are you okay?”

“Uh, sort of,” she replies in a slightly dazed sounding voice. “Chase and I have just been to the doctor again. The baby is fine, but I’ve been put on full bed-rest. They’re worried this little boy is going to be making his appearance early.”

“But you’re okay?” I ask again, needing the reassurance as I press my hand over my galloping heart in an attempt to calm it down. Even my legs are feeling shaky.

Give me an event to put on for a hundred thousand people and I’m solid as a rock but let the girl who’s been like my sister for over two decades possibly be in trouble and I can barely stand. Sinking down into my chair, I wheel it closer to the desk and finally ease my grip on the phone when she replies.

“I’m okay. I’m thirty-six weeks, so even if he comes today, he should be fine, but they want him to stay in the oven just a little bit longer if we can manage it,” she says on a heavy

exhale. “The problem is that the doc doesn’t want me working at all. No added stress of any kind.”

For the first time since Rudy said she was trying to reach me, I feel like I can breathe properly. The vice around my lungs releases and they fill with air. With it, my head starts clearing as well.

“Thank God. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate at Hunter Inc., but I’m sure there’s someone at the company who can take over for you? It’s only a few weeks before you were going to go on maternity leave anyway.”

“Sure,” she agrees, but there’s something in her tone that tells me there’s a but coming. “My actual work will be done, but I need a favor.”

*And there it is.* “Anything.”

I mean it too. Aside from a few months after the incident when I didn’t talk to anyone except my family, Bella has always been there for me. If the tables were turned, she’d have my back and that’s exactly what I’m going to do for her now.

“My family’s annual charity ball is coming up,” she says almost hesitantly. “I know it’s small fries compared to the events you’re used to organizing, but is there any way you can help me out? I’d owe you forever. I promised Mom I’d do it this year, but now... I can’t just leave it to some random employee and my parents deserve to enjoy the event for once. They’ve done enough. You wouldn’t have to start right away. It’s just a ball. You could probably organize it in a few hours, and you still have a few months.”

*Damn it...* Of all the favors she could’ve asked, this is the one most likely to put me in a room with her brother again after all this time. Both of the Hunter siblings work at their family company, so I know Bryan will be around.

It’s not like I can turn her down though. All I have to do is cross my fingers and toes, and hope to all things that are holy he doesn’t take an interest in this event. I know how important it is to Bella and to her parents, but Bryan hasn’t got a

charitable bone in his body. He's always looking out for number one, himself.

Dragging in a deep breath, I send up a prayer to any god willing to listen that I'm not making the biggest mistake I've ever made. "Of course, I'll do it. Just send me the details you've got so far and leave it to me. Doctor's orders and mine. Go put your feet up, Bella. I've got this."

*At least, I hope I've got this.* But I can't let her know that the mere thought of running into her brother makes me sick to my stomach. Oh, and I also can't let her know that I'm liable to strangle him with my bare freaking hands if I do ever see him again. *Having her best friend murder her brother will probably cause her just a little too much stress, right? Definitely. Fuck.*



## Chapter Two

# Bryan

On the day I made my vows to Samantha, I should've known it was going to end this way. Not with a whisper, but with a bang. More specifically, with her banging somebody else.

It was ironic really, considering the catalyst that led to me promising to spend the rest of my life devoted to her was *me* banging somebody else. Sure, Sam and I were broken up at the time of my hookup, but I probably should've given it more than twenty-four hours after calling it quits with her to jump into bed with my sister's best friend.

I shut down that train of thought before it can even leave the station. Thinking about Isla never leads anywhere good. Inevitably, I'll only end up thinking about *that morning* when Samantha nearly caught me in bed with her, and I hate thinking about that morning.

*Hate thinking about how things might've been if I handled that differently.*

Taking another long gulp of my scotch, I stare down at the divorce papers spread out on my kitchen table and wonder—not for the first time—if I ever even should've gotten back together with my soon-to-be-ex-wife after that. Hindsight being twenty-twenty and all, the answer is probably a resounding *fuck no*.

The scotch slides down my throat smoothly, but that's not enough. I need it to numb my insides. To make me stop thinking.

Instead, it seems to be having the opposite effect. I'm not numb. If anything, I'm feeling way too fucking much right now and instead of not thinking, my brain is in overdrive. *Maybe I should've opted for cheap scotch or something even stronger.*



Since I haven't been a big drinker for years, I figured any hard tack would get the job done. *But no such luck.*

Then again, luck hasn't exactly been on my side lately. There's a reason I haven't been drinking all that much for the last couple of years, and it's not because I stopped enjoying a beer after work or a glass of wine with my meals. It's because God forbid I consumed anything that could fuck with my sperm count.

*Heh. Little did I know when I swore off booze that my fucking swimmers couldn't swim very well anyway. Melancholy rises up in me as I suck down the remainder of the contents of my glass before refilling it. How much did I sacrifice for her? What all did I give up? I'm definitely not just referring to drinking.*

The scotch sloshes into the crystal and drops of it splatter onto the counter, but I don't give a damn. I'm so far beyond giving a damn.

*Awesome. Maybe the alcohol's finally starting to do its job after all. Not enough to make me stop thinking though.*

Being sent the divorce papers by my lawyer has brought a sense of finality with it. My marriage really is over, even if the divorce is not. In fact, that fight is only just starting, but the fight to make things work with Samantha has ended.

After eleven years together, it's all over. As I raise the glass to my lips again to drink a toast to my failed marriage, I pause when I realize I can see most of the lower level of my new penthouse from here.

My perch at the kitchen counter gives me a view of the bachelor pad I never thought I'd have. It's a nice fucking place too, even if I have to say so myself. I've got a balcony with a barbecue and a hot tub on it, a flatscreen TV almost half the size of a wall, a bar in the corner, and every other bell and whistle the developer had been able to offer me.

The building has just been renovated and if I breathe in deep enough, I can smell the faint scent of fresh paint lingering on the walls. It's far cry from the house in the

suburbs Samantha bought with my money without even telling me when she decided it was time to start a family.

When we separated three months ago, I left her in the house. She can have it, for all I care. Although, my lawyer has advised me against telling her that just yet. Apparently, I need to wait until the actual settlement negotiations start.

Honestly, all I want is for it to be over for good. Things have been crappy between us for years. As I think on it, it's like the last years of my life play out like a bad movie inside my mind. I can see it all so damn clearly, it's like I'm watching it happen all over again.

Out of the eleven years Sam and I had together, only about three of them in total had really been good. The first one was great, until she took off to do a semester abroad—again without consulting me—and only told me about it a couple of weeks before she left.

That stunt culminated in our breakup, which led to Isla coming over the next day after she heard about it, which led to *that morning* I hated thinking about so much. I acted on instinct when I heard my frat brothers calling up the stairs to tell me Sam was there. She flew in to surprise me and to make up and instead, came within a minute of walking in on me with another girl.

I panicked, so I grabbed said girl's clothing, opened my window, and told her to get on the roof. What I hadn't taken into the account was that everyone who happened to be in the garden could see that part of the roof—and the naked girl I sent clambering out onto it.

Still panicking, I'd begged Samantha's forgiveness and right then and there, told her I'd spent the rest of my life making it up to her. *Stupid idiot.*

Even as I said those words, I wondered if I was making a mistake. Sam forgave me, saying I was technically single when it happened and sleeping with Isla had been nothing but a mistake, but it never felt like that to me. It'd felt right, like kismet.

Obviously, I didn't say these things to the woman I was desperately trying to keep away from the roof I had just pushed Isla onto. But a few days later, realizing how wrong I had been, I tried to call Isla. She avoided my calls—and me—like the plague and by the time I went looking for her, she was gone.

Like the asshole I was back then, I left it at that. I took it as a sign that my little adventure with Isla had been really wrong and committed myself to Sam. We got married straight after graduation. We had a few good years. But then it all went to hell, and we never recovered our relationship.

As newlyweds our lives together were how I thought things should be. We both started our careers, we traveled when we could, we ate out all the time and we were generally enjoying life. When I think back on it now, I realize we were never those lovey-dovey newlyweds who couldn't keep our hands off each other.

We fucked a lot. Everywhere. But it was always more physical than emotional. Still, it worked for me back then. So much so that I mistook it for intimacy and didn't even realize at first when we started to grow apart.

Fast forward a few years, and all of our friends were beginning a new chapter in their lives: parenthood. Naturally, Samantha decided we should do it too.

So we started trying. And trying. And trying.

Baby-making took over our lives and no matter what I said, it became planned and regimented with military-style precision. A couple of rounds of IVF later, we got to the root cause of the problem. Me.

We might as well have blown the final whistle on our relationship on the day we got the diagnosis. Regardless of everything we tried, the dietary and lifestyle changes, the supplements, the fucking medication, and the holistic shit, none of it worked. The doctor suggested a sperm donor, which I could've handled.

But lo and behold, before we even made it to that point, Samantha got pregnant. The baby obviously isn't mine.

Clinically adding someone else's sperm to her eggs would've been okay. Not ideal, but okay. The affair, however, I wasn't okay with. The deceit, betrayal, and sharing her body with another man while I sat at home like a faithful fucking lapdog was what got to me.

After using my fling against me for years to always get her way, it turned out she herself had been cheating on me for years.

After everything we'd been through together, that was the final nail in our coffin. She showed me the positive pregnancy test, and I showed myself the door on the very same day.

I lift my glass to my lips to take another sip only to find I've already drained it during my little walk down memory lane. Sighing as I reach for the bottle to refill the glass again, I pull my laptop closer to scroll through some emails before I fall back down the rabbit hole.

Getting some work done will be a hell of a lot more productive than getting caught up in a past I can't change even if I want to—which I do.

Before I can either refill the glass or open my emails though, my phone rings and my sister's smiling face pops up on my screen. A frown tugs my brows together when the digital clock above her head tells me that it's way after her bedtime these days.

Bella's been asleep by seven most nights since she fell pregnant, but it's after ten now and evidently, she's still awake. Sliding my thumb across the green bar, I press the phone to my ear.

"What happened? Did you finally give up on trying to find a comfortable position to sleep in?" I joke.

There's faint beeping on the other end of the line before her voice comes through. "Actually that shouldn't be a problem anymore. He's here, Bry. Little Chase Junior came screaming into the world a couple of hours ago."

“What?” I’m on my feet before the word is even out. “Is he okay? Isn’t he still, like, three weeks early?”

“He is, but he’s also fine. Thirty-seven weeks is perfectly respectable. Anyway, I just thought you’d want to know you’re officially an uncle. I’ve told Mom and Dad, but we’ve still got a few more calls to make.”

“I’ll be at the hospital in twenty minutes max,” I say even though she didn’t ask me to come. “Don’t even think about arguing with me. You’re my baby sister and he’s my baby nephew. I won’t be able to sleep unless I know I’ve seen both of you with my own two eyes.”

She chuckles. “I should’ve known you’d rush your protective ass over here right away. It’s all good. Come for a bit, but then this mama needs her rest. I need to talk to you about something anyway. See you soon.”

After we hang up, I put in a call to the building’s concierge service. There’s no way I can drive after all that scotch and calling my regular car service will take too long. I need to get to my sister. *Pronto*.

By the time I’ve brushed my teeth, put on some clean clothes, and taken the elevator down, the concierge has a car waiting for me. The hospital’s not far, and I give the driver the name before fixing him with a stern look in the rearview mirror. “Step on it. My little sister just gave birth.”

“Congratulations, sir,” he offers before pulling into the traffic and getting me there as fast as he can.

When I finally make it to Bella’s room, she’s sitting on the bed with a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms. Both her and her husband, Chase, are staring at the tiny human whose face is only barely visible in the blanket.

“Bryan.” My sister breaks out into a wide smile. “This is your nephew, Chase Junior. We’re thinking about calling him CJ for short.”

“I like that.” Striding to her side, I look down into his blinking, confused-looking round face. “It’s great to finally meet you, CJ. We’ve been waiting a long time for you.”

Bella reaches out and squeezes my hand, smiling even through her tears. I'm not sure why she's crying until she lifts him slightly. "Are you up for holding him? It's okay if you don't want to, considering..."

*Considering I'll never hold my own.* I roll my eyes at her. "I'm fine, Bella. Give him to me. This guy and I are going to be best friends."

After only a few minutes, a nurse comes in and tells me she's going to be back in five to kick me out. Reluctantly, I hand my sister back her baby but before I can say goodbye, her gaze latches onto mine.

"The charity ball," she says, and I sigh inwardly.

This thing has been a thorn in my side for weeks. Bella asked me to help her organize it as a distraction from my looming divorce, but I haven't even had time to get started on my parts of it and now I'll have to arrange the whole thing by myself. "It's okay, sis. Don't worry about it. I can do it."

"Actually, you don't have to," she said. "I've contacted a company to help out. James Event Management. You only need to take the meeting and they'll let you know what else they need from you from there."

I nod and bend over to kiss her forehead. "I've got us covered. You just rest up and enjoy your time with your family."

It looks like she wants to say something else, but she must decide against it. All the way back to the penthouse, the name of the company she gave me eats at me. There's something familiar about it but I just can't put my finger on.

Until I get home and look them up. Right there, on the homepage of their website, is a picture of none other than Isla. That's why it sounded so damn familiar. Isla James *is* James Event Management Company.

When I knew her, she was Isla Parker, but Bella let it slip at some point that she legally changed her last name to her mother's maiden name after the video went viral. She's Isla James now, and fuck if the years haven't been good to her.

*Well, well, well, maybe my luck is finally taking a turn for the better after all.*





# Chapter Three

## Isla

Things are *not* going as planned, which is a rarity for me since it's literally my job to make sure everything goes *exactly* as planned. However, I've come to accept the things I can't control and one of those things is that somehow, I've gotten stuck planning the charity ball with Bryan.

A company full of people at her beck and call, but Bella roped *him* in to help instead of anyone else. My dear friend neglected to mention that fact when she asked me to do this but here I am, sitting in *his* office with an entire hour long meeting ahead of me.

No matter how hard I had prepared for this, no matter how hard I had vowed not to budge, I was not at all prepared for this moment.

It's the first time I've seen him since that last glimpse I caught of him before he shut the window in my face all those years ago. Hatred pulses through me like a living creature possessing my very soul as I stare into his deep brown eyes. Eyes the color of a chestnut when it's hit by the warm glow of the afternoon sun in winter.

*Eyes I shouldn't even be noticing, let alone waxing lyrical about.*

Time has done him well though. He looks damn fine, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten he's responsible for the most humiliating thing that's ever happened to me in my life. It's simply that, objectively speaking, he's every bit as hot as he used to be and then some.

His dark chocolate hair has been pushed away from his face, the slight waves in it styled to stay off his forehead. There's a shadow of stubble covering his strong chin and the angular planes of his jaw.

The suit he's wearing is slate gray and fits like it was made for him, which it probably was. He moves in it like it's an extension of himself, the perfect example of the man wearing the suit and not the suit wearing the man.

There's a slight curve to his full lips as he stares back at me from across his desk, like he's smug about something and trying to suppress the smirk begging to make an appearance. I meet his gaze dead on, my chin slightly raised, my shoulders squared, and my spine straight.

I refuse to be intimidated by him but more than that, I need him to know I'm not here as friend for a casual chat. He leans back in his chair, those eyes never leaving mine.

"It's good to see you, Skye," he says in the same rich, melodic voice that used to send shivers down my spine. "How have you been?"

"My name is Isla." Fuck knows, the last thing I need is him throwing around the childhood nickname he came up with for me.

My parents were on the Isle of Skye when they found out Mom was pregnant, and they immediately decided that if I turned out to be a girl, they'd call me Isla. Bryan heard the story and decided to call me Skye, which I used to think meant something, but I know better now.

"Don't do that, Bryan. Don't try to pick up where we left off as friends. We're not. Maybe we were familiar once upon a time, but we're not anymore. I'm here to work, not to play catch-up."

This is the he-devil who derailed my life. There was never any way I wasn't going to shut him down right from the get-go, but I don't miss the flicker of surprise crossing his handsome features as he pulls his head back.

"Well, okay then. I thought that was all water under the bridge but if you need to talk about it—"

"The only thing I need to talk about is the ball." Lowering my gaze from his, I glance at the leather-bound folder on my lap and open it. "Bella didn't get the chance to send me much

information on what's been done so far. Tell me where we're at. I brought a checklist with me that we can work off of once I know where we are in the process."

"Organized," he comments lightly, leaning forward to take a copy of the checklist from me after I take it out of the folder and move to hand it over. "Speaking of Bella, have you met CJ yet? I've got to give it to my sister, she makes pretty babies."

"Yes, she does," I agree, but only because the baby isn't to blame for what happened between us. Neither is Bella, and she really did make a gorgeous little man.

Since I'm not planning on answering any personal questions, I don't tell him that I have, in fact, met his nephew. *Who, God-willing, will grow up to be more like his sweet, loyal father than his evil, self-absorbed uncle.*

Bryan casts another look at me when I don't elaborate, then gives his head an almost imperceptible shake. "Fine, you want to know where we're at with the ball before you talk to me like an actual human being? We're nowhere. Bella volunteered to take over organizing it this year because she thought she'd be winding down with work before the baby was born, and thought she'd have time. She convinced me to help, and that's pretty much it."

I blinked a few times. *Shit. That means we're starting from scratch, which means spending a lot more time with him than I was counting on.* But maybe there's a way to make this work for both of us.

"You're the CEO now," I say, waving a hand around his big, fancy corner office. "I'm sure you don't really have time for this. Bella might've convinced you to help, but I'm perfectly capable of arranging one charity ball on my own. You're off the hook."

"Nice try, but you're not getting rid of me that easily." He chuckles, lifting a brow at me in a silent dare to deny that he'd seen right through my very transparent attempt to do exactly what he's accusing me of.

I shrug, not about to give him so much as an inch. “I’m not sure how much Bella told you about my company when she brought me onboard, but I really don’t need help planning this ball for you. I haven’t seen a guest list or a projected guest count yet, but it’s usually, what, about a hundred people? That’s nothing. My team and I will be able to get it done much faster if we’re working alone.”

“Bella didn’t say anything, but I’ve heard about your company and its meteoric rise to the big leagues.” His expression changes, almost like he’s assessing me as his gaze moves slowly from one of my eyes to the other. “How did you get into event planning from programming, anyway? It’s a pretty drastic change of direction.”

“I was never actually in programming,” I counter. “I studied it for a while, but that’s it. I never even finished my degree. There’s a big difference between studying it and making a career out of it.”

“Sure, but you were a rockstar in your class. If memory serves, all your professors thought you had a bright future ahead of you. In programming. So…”

“So nothing.” The fact he’s even bringing up college stirs that melting pot of hatred inside me again. Narrowing my eyes, I send a pointed look to the checklist he’s holding. “Can we get to work now? As I was saying, my team and I can have every item on that list ticked off in a week. Tops. I’ll keep you updated on our progress and have my assistant run the decisions to be made by you. Deal?”

I’m already closing the folder and scooting to the edge of my chair, trying to get out of here, when he shakes his head. “Not so fast, Isla. While I appreciate you’re giving me an out and accept that you can probably organize this thing overnight and with your eyes closed, I can’t let you do that.”

My lips press into a hard line. “Why not?”

When I look at him, his chestnut brown eyes are on me. He cuts the bullshit for a minute and for the first time, I get a peek at the businessman he’s become. The air of lightness and amusement he’s had since I walked in vanishes, and he

transforms into the CEO I know him to be in front of my very eyes. He's practically radiating authority now.

"This is the first year my parents aren't going to be personally involved in organizing it. They've been hosting it every year for fifteen years and no matter how busy my father got, he always made time to help. I'm not breaking that tradition my first time out of the gate."

*Well, damn.* I might not want to admit it, but I understand where he's coming from. Grudgingly, I nod. "Okay, I understand. I'll keep you informed of every step, that way you can follow everything from a distance."

This time he can't contain his grin and those beautiful lips of his curl into a full-blown grin.

"You're going to do more than just keep me informed. We're going to organize this together."

I feel a shiver run down my spine from the way he says that. Fuck the fuck, I should have known he wasn't going to just let me go this easily.

"Are you sure you'll have time for that? I mean, you must be very busy with other things in your company."

He pushes his desk chair back and walks around the desk until he is right in front of me. He sits down on his desk and waits for me to look at him.

"Let me make one thing clear, Isla. We are doing this together. Not through mail, not through your assistant." That piercing look of his grips me. "You and me together."

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod. No matter what argument I'll bring up, I'm sure he won't budge.

"Good. I'm glad we sorted that out." He relaxes a little. "So, since we're going to be working together, does that mean you're going to ease up a little now?"

"No." I don't even need to think about it. "You hit the nail on the head when you said we're going to be *working together*." I emphasize the words. "We're still not friends. You're a client and as a client, you need to give me details

about the event. If you have a look at the first item on the list, you'll see that we need an estimated guest count as soon as possible. Do you have any idea how many people we're looking at?"

"Like you said, it's usually about a hundred." He makes a face and walks around the desk back to his chair. He finally closes his hand over his computer mouse, wiggling it to wake up the screen. "If you give me a minute, I'll check my emails. I think my mother might've sent a provisional guest list at some point."

"If you could forward that to me, I'd really appreciate it."

He nods, but while he's looking for the email, he goes back to trying to make nice with me. "I went onto your website after Bella told me you'd help. Your company has done some pretty impressive work. If you won't tell me how you got into event planning, do I at least get to know how you managed to grow the company into the powerhouse it is now?"

"Thanks for the compliment," I say, treating him exactly as I would any other client. Frankly, I'm proud of myself for even being able to keep up the veneer of civility.

If he had any idea how much I want to lay into him for what he did to me, he'd really stop acting like nothing ever happened. "Once we have an estimated guest count, we'll be able to gauge the size of the venue we need."

"Really?" His brows rise when he glances at me. "You're not going to give me anything?"

My head jerks as I stare at him. Ice coats the insides of my veins and I feel myself getting closer and closer to the end of my tether, but I'm still trying to remind myself I'm here for work and we've hardly gotten anything done.

"I'm giving you my time, aren't I? Believe it or not, that's a pretty valuable commodity these days. I don't have a lot of it and we're running out of our time together for today. Why don't we just focus and get something done that we can work off of from here?"

“I found the email,” he says, ignoring everything I’ve just said. *Typical*. “There. I’ve sent it to you. Happy now? It looks like it’ll be about hundred and sixty people.”

Sliding my pen out of the ring in the center of the folder, I make a note of the number before looking back up at him. “Thank you. There will be some drop-off from that number, so we should aim at getting people to save the date sooner rather than later. Do you have a date in mind yet? Bella said something about it being in the fall before the holiday parties start?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Mom never wanted it to be too close to the Christmas fundraisers and events.” A faraway look creeps into his eyes. “Do you remember that Christmas party you came to at our house in my senior year? We got—”

“Drunk. Yes, of course I remember. It was the first time I ever really drank, and I swore I’d never drink again.” I level him with a look. “So, fall. I knew that much, but what I need to know is if you have a specific date in mind yet? Fall is an entire season. Lots of dates in there.”

*Jesus. Getting useful information out of him is like pulling teeth without anesthetic.*

He rolls his eyes at me, but then glances back at his computer. “No. I don’t see anything about a date.”

“It was held in October last year, correct?”

He shrugs. “I think so. Hey, do you know how old a kid needs to be before we can start taking him trick or treating? Halloween is the only thing October’s really got going for it. I used to love it as a kid. You did too, right?”

My lids flutter closed and the tenuous hold I’ve had on my self-control snaps. “Could you please just get your head in the game? If you’re not capable of focusing on what we’re actually here to do, I’m leaving.”

When I open my eyes again, his demeanor has changed. He’s glaring at me now, his eyes narrowed to slits as he huffs out a breath. “If you’re going to be a bitch all the time we’re

supposed to be working together, then maybe you should go, and I'll organize this thing by myself.”

I sigh, glaring right back at him as I shake my head. “Sorry to have to tell you this, but you're not getting rid of me that easily either.”





# Chapter Four

## Bryan

When Isla walked into my office, it felt like someone was touching a livewire to my nerves. The shock traveled through my system and despite the fact I've been trying to keep it from showing, it's still there.

She's become a real spitfire I wasn't prepared for. Not only that, but the once pretty girl has turned into a drop-dead gorgeous woman who also just so happens to be a titan in her industry. The whole package is fucking hot, even if she'd probably rip my balls off with her bare hands just for thinking it.

I've been seeing the warnings flashing in her cobalt blue eyes practically since she first got here. Every time I open my mouth to say something that isn't strictly related to business, those warnings have intensified, my words adding fuel to those dancing blue flames of fire flickering in her irises.

After what happened the last time I saw her, I probably shouldn't be pushing her, but I just can't seem to help myself. She fucking hates me with a burning passion, that much is clear, and if I don't push her and barrel through those walls she's put up around me—and probably because of me—then we'll forever be stuck in this place where she has to force herself just to be polite.

When I found out Isla's company was the one Bella hired to help with the ball, I knew she wouldn't make it easy for me. But that will change soon enough if I have anything to do with it.

While I wasn't expecting hugs, sunshine, and rainbows from her, I also hadn't thought she'd be so openly hostile. Some of it I deserve. I can accept that. If she wants to yell,

scream, and bang her fists against my chest even after all this time, then fine. I'll take it.

Making her get out on the roof was a mistake I never should've made. That was on me. When my frat brothers called up to tell me Sam was there, I either should've faced the music—it's not like I got away with it anyway—or I should've hidden Isla in the closet or the bathroom or something.

I hadn't had any time to think about it or to consider my options though. So yeah. I was a kid, barely in my twenties, who panicked and made a mistake.

But it wasn't like I'd known what was going to happen after that. I didn't realize so many of my brothers were down in the garden and I sure as shit didn't know they were going to make those videos of her—or post them anywhere.

All those were events I certainly couldn't have predicted, so while I deserve some of the fire she's shooting at me with those eyes, I definitely don't think I deserve to be hung for my crimes.

Besides, she may not know it, but I've taken enough shit from women recently. I've been having a hell of a time with Samantha and I'm over it. I'm so fucking over the women in my life thinking they can dictate to me and that I just have to roll with the punches.

It was obvious when she arrived that my darling sister didn't tell Isla she'd be working with me. Since I'm not a completely oblivious jackass, I knew she probably needed some time to adjust and get used to the idea. Which is why I tried to set her at ease.

But she's so attached to her damn checklist, it's like she's hopelessly in love with the thing. She's barely said a word to me that's not business related and then she threatened to leave, but now she's refusing to go.

*Funny how things can change...*

I knew I had to give her a challenge. Clearly, she's the kind of woman who doesn't shy away from one. Anything to make sure she stays around me longer, so I can make her realize I'm

not the young boy anymore who made wrong decisions back then.

This could be my chance to right the wrongs of my past and to see what might've been, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let her walk all over me in those expensive fucking shoes of hers. And I'm seriously not going to lie still and let her walk all over me in various directions until she figures out which way she wants to go.

“What do you mean I'm not going to get rid of you that easily?” I ask, my gaze unwavering on hers. “It was your idea to leave. All I'm saying is that maybe, if this is the way you're going to be acting for the next few months, it's better if you do go.”

An exasperated sigh comes out of her as she stares at me with absolute incredulity on her face. “Leaving your office and leaving you to organize the ball by yourself isn't the same thing, Bryan. You haven't changed at all, have you?”

“What are you talking about?” I snap.

Those flames in her eyes burn hotter. “I'm not like you. I don't just drop people in boiling water and leave them to fend for themselves. I made a commitment to my friend to help with this ball, and I'm not about to bail on her when she already has the stress of caring for a newborn baby.”

I narrow my gaze at her. I didn't get where I am today without my business instincts. I may not have been fully prepared for the savvy businesswoman she has apparently also become, but I have no intention of letting her have her way.

“Then it seems we've reached a stalemate.”

“Oh, wow. You're a really bad listener, do you know that?” She lets out a breathy, humorless scoff of laughter as she rolls her head back and closes her eyes for another fraction of a second. “When I said I was going to leave, I meant I was going to go back to my office and work on the ball from there.”

She looks at me again. “There's more than one way to skin a cat, and to arrange a charity event. We don't need to be

together to work together. It's called corresponding electronically and it actually works pretty well."

"No," I say with absolutely zero intention of changing my mind. "My mother has poured her heart and soul into this event for years. It means a lot to her and to my father. You're either all the way in, or all the way out."

Her mouth draws to a tight line. If her gaze could shoot fire, I would have turned into a pile of ashes by now. I know she will accept the challenge.

*This is going to be so much fun.*

"I'm all the way in," she says with as much fight in her eyes as I'm sure is in mine. "It still doesn't mean we need to physically be in the same room to organize the event. Clearly, it's not going to work for us to do things this way and honestly, it's not necessary. I've organized much larger events than this without ever even seeing my client in person. The internet is a wonderful creation and we'll be better off using it than wasting time doing exactly what we're doing right now."

"Go right ahead and organize all your big-deal events over the internet, but that's not going to work with this one. This is *my* family and *my* company. I won't have you half-assing it just because you can't stand me." I hold her gaze, not backing down. "For the record, stop patronizing me. I'm the one who stuck with technology, remember? I got my degree and I've got post-graduate degrees and diplomas coming out of my ass. Also, in case you haven't noticed, this is an IT firm. I know what the fucking internet is, and I know how to correspond electronically, and how well it works."

She opens her mouth to respond, but I'm not done yet. "You've made it abundantly clear that you think this event is beneath you. Trust me, I'm very well aware it's not the international extravaganzas you're used to, but it means something to us. Why are you even here, Isla? I know I'm not allowed to ask you any fucking questions today, but I'm going to anyway. Why even say yes and why not just send one of your minions over here to do it if you're so high up on that horse you can't even see the ground?"

I can almost literally see steam coming out of her ears. I've hit a nerve. *Good!* Her jaw moves as she grinds her teeth, her words coming out harsh and biting. "I'm not here for you, asshole. I'm here for Bella. I promised my best friend in the world that I'd do this, and I'm doing it. I'm not half-assing anything and I never said or insinuated that this was beneath me. All I said was I don't need your help. Also, don't you ever, ever bring up how you're the one who *stuck with technology*. You don't have any idea what you're talking about."

Both of us slam back in our seats, breathing a little heavier than usual as we face off against each other.

"If you're really all the way in, then you're not leaving this office until we've sorted this out and found a way to work together. Or not."

A long beat passes where our gazes remain locked, then she rolls her eyes and gets up despite what I just said. "I'm not eighteen anymore. You don't get to tell me what to do. For Bella's sake, we're working together. Keep an eye on your emails. I'll send through some options for a venue later and once you've had a chance to look over them, we'll arrange a time to do the viewings."

She closes the folder she'd set down on my desk with a snap, slides it back into the satchel she took it out of, and gives me a brief nod. "I'll be in touch. Goodbye, Bryan."

Without waiting for me to respond, she spins on those ridiculously high heels of hers and marches her firm ass out of my office. I can't help but let my eyes wander to it when she does.

As the door to the office closes, my head begins to spin. It's been a long time since I've felt anything like this. *So alive.*

Isla has always had a way of getting under my skin, and whatever else might've changed between us, it looks like that definitely hasn't.



# Chapter Five

## Isla

It took me awhile to cool down after my meeting with her infuriating brother, but it's been a few days and I'm calm enough again to see Bella. At some point, her and I are going to sit down and talk about why she didn't warn me about Bryan being the CEO of the company *and* the person I'm going to be planning the ball with.

I thought about bringing it up at my visit today, but when I get to her house just in time for CJ to deposit some of his milk onto her shirt, I decide to let it go for now. *Being covered in baby vomit is probably bad enough. She doesn't need me cornering her about her brother.*

"It's so good to see you, but I'm not going to hug you," she says, smiling sheepishly as she lifts the baby in her arm a little. "You might love him, but I doubt you want his baby juice on you."

"But I do love him," I agree, settling for giving her a squeeze on her upper arm as I pass her, walking into their house when she steps aside.

The sound of several voices speaking filters over to me from the direction of her living room, and I frown when one stands out. Stopping in my tracks, I turn to my face my friend with big eyes and whisper to her furiously.

"Bryan's here? Why didn't you tell me?"

She flushes, the sheepish smile spreading. "In my defense, he wasn't here when you called to ask if you could drop by. He came with my parents a few minutes ago. I knew they were coming sometime today, but I didn't know he would be with them."



My breath freezes in my lungs. *The whole Hunter clan is here?*

I've seen Bella's parents since *it* happened, but never with Bryan being there too. Thanks to that infernal video, everyone knows what happened between us. It's always been awkward for me to see them, knowing they know I slept with their son. *Oh, and that they've seen me naked.*

But this time, with him here too, it's bound to be a different level of awkward. Bella notices that I've stopped moving—and breathing—and reaches out to give me a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"You'll be fine," she says confidently. "They're over it. It's not like they thought he was an angel back then. Mom even bought him condoms when he moved into the frat house, remember? Besides, they're not here for you, him, or even me. They only came to see CJ."

"Fair enough, but can we please never talk about your brother, your mother, condoms, and me in the same paragraph again?"

"Why not?" she teases, dancing out of reach and wagging her brows at me. "You're the one who slept with him. I'm not sure if the condoms he used with you were those ones, obviously, but she did get him some."

My cheeks ignite instantly, growing so hot that I know I must be glowing. Groaning, I raise a hand and bury my face in it. "Can we not? Please? CJ is way too young to be hearing about any of this."

She glances down at the baby who's suddenly asleep and coos quietly. "CJ doesn't understand a word of what we're saying, do you, baby boy? No, you don't. One day, Mommy's going to have to explain it all to you but for now, I can say anything I want. Yes, I can."

My eyes roll, but I can't deny that it's pretty cute seeing my fierce, COO of a friend being so soft and cooing. Bella and Bryan look a lot alike with those earthy tones in their hair and

eyes. Her chestnut curls are up in a messy bun today instead of being styled the way I'm used to seeing it.

She's also switched her suits for an oversized T-shirt and yoga pants, and her face is bare for what feels like the first time since we discovered makeup. I smile as I look her over all the way to her feet, which are bare too.

"Motherhood suits you. You look incredible for someone who had a baby less than two weeks ago."

"Doesn't she?" Mrs. Hunter's voice speaks up from only a few paces behind me. When I snap my head up to look over my shoulder, she's walking toward me with her arms open and a wide, welcoming smile on her face. "The prodigal daughter returns. Where have you been, darling? We haven't seen nearly enough of you recently."

"She's been busy building an empire, kicking ass, and taking names," Bella says, teasing but still sounding proud. "I think it's safe to say she's had better things to do than hang out with us."

I scoff. "Never. I just have been really busy. How are you doing, Mrs. Hunter? Congratulations, by the way. Your grandson is beautiful."

"Isn't he just?" She shoots a fond look at the bundle Bella's holding before pulling me into her arms and hugging me tight. "I was wondering if we were going to start seeing more of you again now that you're helping Bryan out with the ball. If left to his own devices, I was worried we would end up eating takeout on a football field somewhere."

"Is that really what you thought?" he pipes up, walking out of the living room as his mother releases me and takes a step back.

He folds his arms loosely over his chest as he leans against the doorway, his eyes burning like coals in a fire that will never go out when they meet mine. "On the other hand, you're in good company. I'm pretty sure that's what Isla thought too. She wasn't too keen on letting me help."

Their father suddenly appears behind his son and just like that, I'm faced with all of the Hunters. In the same room. All at once. For the first time since I lost my virginity to him, and they found out about it in a very public way.

*Well, I mean, I didn't lose it. I gave it to him very willingly.* But still.

Mr. Hunter rolls his eyes at Bryan, but there's a good-natured grin on his face when he smacks a hand on his back. "That's because Mom and Isla both know you. Be honest, Bry. Isn't that exactly the event you'd have liked to be planning instead of a ball?"

"I'm not much of a ball guy," he says with a shrug before he straightens out. "What are you doing here, Isla?"

"She was invited," Bella retorts. "Unlike you. But since you're all staying for dinner, so is Isla."

*Dinner? With all of them? Uh, no.* Shifting on my feet to catch her eye, I give her an apologetic smile. "I can't stay. I'm sorry, but I'll have to make it up to you."

"She's very important nowadays," Bryan says with this annoying, knowing, yet sarcastic undertone to his voice that really bugs me. "Haven't you heard? Isla James only dines with rockstars, sport stars, or check lists."

Bella frowns in confusion at his last words, but I know what he's referring to. He's making fun of me for being so attached to my check list during our meeting. *For all the darn good it did me.*

He's also goading me into staying, and it works. *Because I'm not about to let him make me into some self-important dick to his parents if I don't stay.*

Leveling my gaze on his, I meet his challenge. "Actually, you know what? I can move some things around. I haven't seen you guys for much too long and I can always go back to work later."

He tries to keep a straight face, but I see how he tries to suppress his laughter. Jerk knows perfectly well what he did.

God, I hate him. I can't wait to wipe that smug grin off his face.

Chase wanders in with a stack of menus and his phone clutched in his hand. "So this is where everybody went. You know we can sit down, right? We don't have to randomly stand around the hallway."

Mrs. Hunter chuckles. "Of course, dear. We were just saying hi to Isla."

He nods slowly, the black rings around his eyes making his recent sleep deprivation a lot more obvious than Bella's. Giving me a slight wave, he smiles and holds up the menus. "Hey, Isla. How're you doing? Care to side with me? Team Hunter have all opted for pizza, but I'm going to start looking like a pizza soon if I eat too many more of those things."

"Cravings," my friend says, shrugging as if that explains everything. "We've had a lot of pizza lately."

"You say cravings, I say excuses." He thrusts the menus at me. "How do you feel about Thai food?"

"Great. I love Thai." I also love pizza, but the poor guy seems desperate.

A few minutes later, Chase has placed the order and Mrs. Hunter has seated us all around the dining room table. Bryan's pouring drinks and Mr. Hunter is quizzing me on the sport stars I've met. Since I mostly coordinate the events with their management companies and not the players themselves, I think I disappoint him when I don't have too many impressive names for him.

At least the awkwardness has melted away though. The longer I'm here, the more comfortable I'm starting to feel. It's like sinking back into a familiar, relaxed rhythm with beloved family members or friends you haven't seen in a while.

It helps that most of the attention is on the baby most of the time. We keep making small talk until the food arrives, but that's when things take an unexpected turn.

"Have you spoken to your lawyer again yet?" Bella asks after polishing off her first slice of pizza.

At first, I'm not sure who she's talking to until Bryan answers her question. He darts a glance at me before he does, but then he releases a long breath and looks back at her. "I've spoken to him. It's nothing you want to hear about unless you're okay with your son hearing a ton of expletives from his uncle."

"Keep it clean," she warns, but presses him to tell her anyway. "What did he say? Can we start planning a divorce party yet?"

I'm so surprised that I nearly choke on my green curry. Blinking rapidly, I swallow around the shock constricting my throat. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding band but since I know lots of men don't, it didn't even really register.

*He's getting divorced?*

As if he heard the thought, he glances at me again before shaking his head in response to her question. "Apparently, even though Samantha's the one who had the affair, and even though she's carrying that guy's child, it's not as cut and dry as we thought."

*What? I didn't think there was anything he could ever say that would make me feel for him, but that sure as heck did it. He must really not be having an easy time at the moment.*

Personally, I never liked Samantha and it's not because of what happened. I didn't like her before that, either. But Bryan's been with her for a long time.

*I can't believe she had an affair. Or that she's pregnant with another man's baby. It doesn't excuse what Bryan did to me, but it's a reminder that he's not the same kid he used to be anymore either. He's obviously been through, and is going through, a lot.*

In fact, I can't even imagine how he must be feeling. I remember what he was like with her. I may not have understood it, but she had him wrapped around her little finger from day one. *For her to betray him, in the worst way that a*

*person can betray a spouse, after all these years together? It's despicable.*

Although, that's my opinion about cheating and cheaters in general. While Bryan hadn't technically cheated on her with me, the whole incident had still put a completely different spin on fidelity to me.

"How could it not be as cut and dry as we thought? She's been sleeping with some other guy for months, she moved him into your house, and you said she was turning your study into a nursery. It seems pretty damn cut and dry to me."

I cringe a little more with every word Bella says. *Wow, that's really bad.*

Bryan shrugs, but there's a tightness around the corners of his eyes that wasn't there before. "You're preaching to the choir, sis. I'm with you, but the lawyer says there are still some hoops to jump through."

After he tells them a little more about those hoops and goes back to his food, Mrs. Hunter turns to me and claps her hands excitedly. "Well, that's quite enough of that. Let's focus on the positives going on in our lives, shall we? Thank you so much for agreeing to help Bryan with the ball, honey. It means the world to us you're willing to step in."

"It's no problem," I murmur. "I just hope what we plan lives up to your standards and expectations. If there's anything you want specifically, just let me know and we'll include it."

Her eyes well with tears, as real as a reminder as I'm going to get of how much this means to her. "All we want is for the children in those orphanages to have at least the bare minimum of what they need for another year. Honestly, I wish we could do more for them."

*And that's about as real as a reminder as I'm going to get about how awesome the cause of this ball is.*

The moment that thought hits is the moment that it really sinks in for me what's at stake with this event. It's not just another fancy dinner for rich people in fancy clothes. But it's also darn important to the people who will benefit from it.

I've done my fair share of fundraisers, obviously, but looking into Mrs. Hunter's glistening eyes when she even thinks about the cause she supports, a weight I've never quite felt settles on my shoulders.

*Damn it.* I might not forgive him, but I'm not going to be able to send Bryan to look at the venues with one of my employees next week like I was planning on doing. I know all of these venues inside out, and I was going to use a tiny loophole to get out of going to any of the viewings personally. *I chose them myself, didn't I?*

But now, I knew that wasn't going to happen. I was going to have to keep my promise to Bella and do it myself. I owed it to the Hunters and the children they raised money for to do at least that.





# Chapter Six

## Bryan

Isla and her checklist are back in my office. Today's list is a new and improved version, focused solely on the selection of a venue. As I stare down at the printed sheet she gave me, I get the feeling that maybe I should've delegated this task after all.

Then again, when I look up at her, I'm pretty sure she's thinking the same thing. Neither of us want to be here, doing this together. We just have different reasons for it. In my case, it's not so much doing it with *her* as it is having to do it at all, but for her, it's definitely about having to do it with me.

But we're both here. We're both going to do it regardless of our respective reasons for not wanting to, but why she told me to block out my entire morning for venue hunting is beyond me. Tilting my head, I lift up the checklist in my hand and give her a questioning look.

"Do we really need to go over all of these items for every venue?"

She gives her head a brief shake, but her eyes are glued to her folder instead of being on mine. I think it's because every time we look at each other, something seems to spark between us. There's always been a connection, but it's much more intense now.

*And I'm one hundred percent sure she'd rather stab herself in the eye with a broken chopstick than feel anything for me.*

"Some, but not all," she says, her sound of voice bringing me out of my thoughts. "That's why I wanted to meet here before we head out to our first viewing. There are a few things we need to get on the same page about before we'll be able to make our decision."

“Okay. Shoot.” I lean back in my chair and fold my hands over my stomach. “What do we need to hammer out before we leave?”

“Well, the venues I’ve lined up for us today are all ones with a variety of options available, which is why I thought they’d make a good starting point. If, however, we’re going to be looking for something more specific, or for a particular kind of feel, then I’ll add some more, and we can take a few more tours on a different day.”

My chin drops to my chest. I don’t mean to be defiant, but that’s just not going to happen.

“No. We’re choosing a venue today. There’s no way it can take more time than that, right? We’ve got the whole morning.”

“Yes, but we’ll probably only be able to do a proper walk-through of two, maybe three, venues before noon. And that’s only because they’re located close enough to one another. The venue is a vitally important decision. It can’t be rushed and it’s highly unlikely we’ll find the perfect one right away.”

She finally brings her gaze up to meet mine and I feel it again, that undeniable chemistry between us. But the cool impatience in her eyes when she cocks an eyebrow at me counteracts it just a little.

“We’re not going to argue over every little thing, are we?” she asks. “Because that will make it take even longer. It’s better to just accept we’ll need to view as many venues as we need to view until we find the right one. If we work through my checklist methodically this morning, we’ll have a better shot at finding the perfect place sooner.”

We probably *are* going to argue over everything little thing, but I don’t tell her that. Since she wanted to get an early start, it’s not even seven am yet. I need more coffee in my system before I’m going to be ready to lock horns at the level she operates at.

Glancing back down at the list, I reread the first few items before getting up to slot a pod into the coffee maker in the

corner of my office. “What’s your poison? I don’t have any of the flavored options. I prefer my caffeine strong and not nutty or overly sweet.”

“Same here,” she says. “I’ll have whatever you’ve got. Black and bitter, please. Now, while we’re waiting on that, have you thought at all about whether you want an indoor or an outdoor event? Since it’s bound to be colder by then, if you want outdoor, we’ll need to factor in things like whether the venue we choose has space for a tent.”

“Indoors, then,” I say, shrugging. “See? It’s not going to take us all that long. What’s next?”

As she picks up a pen to make a note, she pauses and frowns at me after putting the pen back down. “Are you sure? Bella mentioned your mother thought it would be nice to have it under the stars. I was thinking we could do it in an enclosed courtyard type of area with lots of space heaters, or we could get a tent with a clear ceiling to give the illusion of being under the stars while still being protected from the elements.”

I prop a hip against the table with the coffee maker on it, breathing in the rich, earthy aroma of the fresh brew as I turn what she said over in my mind. “Let’s find a place where we can have welcome drinks and canapes outside, then move inside for the actual ball. It’s the best of both worlds, and no one will freeze their goods off.”

“We can look into it, but I strongly recommend choosing one or the other. It’s possible to do both, but unless it’s a wedding and they’re waiting for a reason, people tend to want to settle. Standing around outside before they can go to their tables might not go down so well, especially for some of the older folk.”

“Let me think about it,” I say, but the truth is that I don’t really care.

If Bella and Mom want an outdoor event in the fall and Isla has a way of making it viable, then that’s fine by me. I just don’t want her thinking she can walk all over me. I know it sounds like I’m just being stubborn, but fuck. It’s my family’s ball and since I’m involved even though I didn’t want to be,

I'm going to be making decisions on my own time, in my own way.

Isla probably thinks I don't see her rolling her eyes just because she's moved them back down to her checklist, but I do. Whenever we're together, I see every little thing she does.

"Whatever you say, boss," she says, leaving the first tick box on her list empty and tapping the tip of her pen on the second. "What about the theme and color scheme? Obviously, whether we end up inside or outside might have an effect on that, but I was thinking perhaps a masquerade?"

"No." I slide her coffee out of the slot and carry it over before going back for mine. "What else have you got?"

*"Moulin Rouge?"*

I snort. "No."

*"Casino night?"*

Turning my head to look at her over my shoulder as I fix my coffee, I give her a blank look. "Have you got any original ideas in that great, big folder of yours?"

"These themes are used so often because they work well. People enjoy them. Have you got any better ideas?"

I don't, but I'm not about to tell her that. Searching the outer reaches of my mind while stirring my coffee, I finally shrug and offer the first thing I think of. "How about the Wild West?"

"The Wild West?" She doesn't shoot me down, but she also doesn't look very impressed. Letting out a soft sigh, she makes a note but sends me an imploring look as I walk back to my desk. "Let's keep that in mind, but I'd like to explore a few other options as well. How about a Hollywood theme, or the Oscars? We could also look at destination themes. Those are always fun. Paris, Japan, Africa?"

*Okay, those are better than the Wild West.* "I'm liking the destination idea. If we're going to do it, I want some time to choose which destination though."

Exasperation tightens the corners of her eyes, but she nods anyway and makes another note. “Our color scheme will very much depend on the theme, so we’ll have to shelve that for now as well. Right, are we looking for a venue with accommodation or are we okay with looking for accommodation for guests from out of town elsewhere?”

I frown. “They can find somewhere to sleep themselves, right? Hell, even some people from around here might want to make a night of it. I don’t think that’s our responsibility.”

Isla stares at me, then rolls her full lips into her mouth like she’s physically trying to bite back a retort. A long moment later, she slowly releases them and gives me a very forced smile. “Everything about this event is our responsibility. Including where people sleep. So, let’s try this again and hopefully, we’ll make at least one actual decision before we leave for our first viewing. Would you prefer to have a venue that offers accommodation, or is it simply a bonus if it has appropriate accommodation available?”

“I really think it’s better to let people find their own accommodation,” I say. “If the venue offers accommodation, it’s fine if the guests choose to make use of it but if we recommend they stay there and it’s not up to their standards, that will reflect poorly on us.”

She breathes out through her nose, gives me a tight nod, and then moves on to the next item on her list. Before she dives into it though, she points the back of her pen at me. “Did you not get the email with this list attached for you to go over it ahead of time? I don’t feel like you’re prepared with a clear vision for what you want this event to be at all.”

“Indoors. Wild West. People sort out their own sleeping arrangements. Boom. You’re the one who keeps arguing with me about what I want.”

Frustration makes her nostrils flare. “Fine, you’re the client. If you don’t want to take any advice or engage meaningfully in any of the discussions, then let’s do it your way. If it sucks, I’m taking my company’s name off it.”

A low buzz from her satchel interrupts the rant I can tell she was building up to. Turning her wrist, she checks her watch before reaching into the satchel and silencing the alarm on her phone without checking it.

“We’re going to be late for our first appointment if we don’t leave now,” she says, scooting forward on the chair before standing up. “I suppose we can go over the rest of the list in the car. My driver is waiting for us.”

“So is mine,” I counter. “I’m willing to compromise though. Let’s take your car today and we’ll take mine next time.”

“Wonders never cease,” she mutters as she slings her satchel over her shoulder.

When I fall into step behind her as we head out of my office, my hand moves up to rest at the small of her back instinctively. It’s only for a second before she steps away. What a feisty lady she’s become. All morning I have been enjoying going head-to-head with her.

Even though the physical contact was only brief, I felt it through every fiber of my body. I remember the way it was, all those years ago. Her in my bed, our bodies intertwined. Her long hair all tangled. Her naked skin against mine. Her sweet scent filling my nostrils. Hell, I can’t wait to feel more of her. To taste...

Shit! I shake my head to push that thought away. Focus, Bryan.

One thought, however, I can’t shake loose. Despite the fact that her freaking checklist is making me cringe, I am so damn proud of how she has turned everything around even after dropping out. As a matter of fact, I respect her for how she clawed her way to such astronomical levels of success after having been knocked all the way down.

With her sliding a few steps ahead to avoid having my hand on her, she’s just far enough away from me now that I can’t help but see her ass. I know I shouldn’t check her out but

she's right there and she looks so good that I can't resist sneaking just one, quick peek.

Her body has filled out a bit after college and damn... she has a nice ass. But the same can be said for everything about her. She's turned into the kind of woman that can bring a man to his knees and frankly, I'm no exception. I never have been when it comes to her.





# Chapter Seven

## Isla

“Fall isn’t that far away and our calendar for the rest of the year is filling up fast,” Lee, the venue coordinator, says. She pushes her glasses into her orange hair and sweeps a hand toward the door of the conference room where we met prior to her showing us around. “Shall we?”

“Yes. Please.” I push up out of my chair and to my surprise, even Bryan looks a little more serious now about at least putting together a short list of the possible venues.

This is our last stop for the day, but it’s the only venue I really think works. It’s the one I want for the event, but there’s a reason I padded it with a few others. I took him to the other two first to add some variety to the options I presented him with, but also so he could see for himself finding the perfect venue isn’t that simple.

An added bonus is every coordinator we’ve spoken to so far has echoed the same sentiment: we need to find and book a venue, or we might end up with no other choice but to host the ball on a football field this year.

*Which will not be happening on my watch, regardless of how happy it might make him.*

Bryan falls into step beside me as Lee leads us down a corridor and back to the lobby where we entered. I hate the fact I’m so aware of his presence. I notice everything from the faint scent of his cologne to the fact his arm is so close to mine; I could brush against it if I move even an inch.

It’s more than just the casual knowledge that there’s someone walking next to me. That would’ve been fine. Welcome. Obviously, people notice when there’s someone next to them. This is not *that*. What this is, is an acute

awareness of him. An almost overwhelming consciousness of every move he makes.

I'm so attuned to him as his dark eyes assess the place while we walk that I almost forget I'm supposed to be taking it all in too. I've been here before, but I need to be looking at it now to determine whether it's appropriate for this event as opposed to any other.

The Capital Grand Hotel, where we are right now, is a forgotten gem in the city. It's over half a century old but has had modern touches added during several renovations since it first opened. As far as I'm concerned, it's the ideal mix of old-school charm and contemporary glam. They have modern amenities, a terrace and courtyard for any outdoor needs we might have, a ballroom modeled after the original, European rooms found only in the residences of the wealthiest individuals, and plenty of accommodation that I happen to know is up to scratch.

"What do you think?" I ask as Lee steps aside to let us have a look around when we get to the lobby.

There are hardwood floors beneath our feet and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, but the furniture and thick, cream colored drapes don't look like they're going to go up in a cloud of dust if you touch them. Without looking at Bryan, I turn in a slow circle and incline my head toward the wall of glass, stackable doors that lead out to the terrace right from here.

"If you really want people to have welcome drinks outside or to somehow combine the two, this would work well," I say, then motion to the wide, double doors into the ballroom. "We could set up and have the main event in there but leave some of the doors from both sides open for the guests to move around freely. Those who want to find their seats early can do it, but those who prefer to mingle under the stars will be able to do that too."

He shifts his weight back on his heels, narrowing his eyes as he rakes his gaze across the room. "You're right. It doesn't

really lend itself to a Wild West theme, but it does seem to offer a lot to make up for it.”

As he says it, the corners of his lips twitch. *He’s trying to hold back a smile*, I realize. Then it dawns on me that he might not have been entirely serious about the Wild West thing. *Thank God.*

“There are other themes that will work better here, but if you’ve got your heart set on the Wild West, we’ll make it work. I’m pretty sure they had balls back then, albeit they might not have been quite as elegant or extravagant as in some other periods in history.”

He glances at me with laughter shining in his eyes as he lifts his brows. “Of course, they had balls back then. You had to have stones the size of boulders just to survive every day, and that’s not me being sexist. The women had to have ovaries of steel. Balls like boulders and ovaries of steel. Maybe that should be our theme.”

A soft laugh escapes me before I can bite it back. “That’s not going to be our theme, but you’re not wrong.”

“I never am,” he says cheerfully, gesturing for me to precede him when Lee opens the doors to the terrace. “So, if this place is so great, why is it still available? I don’t know much about event planning, but aren’t most venues booked up a year or more in advance?”

“It depends on what you’re looking for. A lot of them are, but not every hotel in the city is booked for an event every weekend. Especially venues like this. There aren’t a lot of people who want the touches of a time gone by as part of their event.”

“I like that it’s got an old-school feel to it,” he says. “It gives it a warmth and a coziness the other places we went to didn’t have. I think my parents will love it as well.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Strangely, it’s true. I *do* agree with him.

Although, it hasn’t escaped my notice as we’ve been spending the morning together, we’ve had a lot of interactions

that have been less than hostile. In fact, we're falling into an easy rhythm that's eerily familiar to me—familiar because this is how we *used* to be.

Things between us were as comfortable and easy as breathing almost since the day we met. We always had a lot in common, and that made it feel like we were two halves of the same whole sometimes, but I'm not looking to get back to having that dynamic with him. *Even if it is making the planning process a little easier.*

Thankfully, Lee is waiting for us when we step outside, and she has her clipboard and questions ready for us. She asks a few of the basic questions while we're looking around, and then it's our turn to start gathering information.

Before I can say anything, Bryan takes my first question right out of my mouth. "If we do decide to have our event here, what are your catering options?"

*Wow. Maybe he did go over the list I sent.* Lee smiles, even batting her lashes at him a little. *Yeah, I can't blame you sister. He is just that pretty, isn't he?*

"We can provide plated food or a buffet," she says to him before clearing her throat and looking decidedly less flirty when she moves her gaze to mine. "It depends on your preference. We also have a cook who makes the most delicious canapes that our servers can circulate while your guests are arriving."

"Will your kitchen be able to handle plated food for so many people?" he asks, surprising me when he steals that question right off my lips too.

She nods. "Absolutely. If plated is what you want, we can make it happen."

"Plated is what we want," I say only to realize halfway through the sentence that Bryan is saying the same thing at the same time.

He chuckles when he notices it but keeps his attention on Lee. "Do you have a full bar service, or would we need to bring someone in?"

“We can do it all,” she replies, but she’s now looking curiously between the two of us. “You two are a beautiful couple.”

“We’re not a couple,” we both say again, and she frowns but doesn’t comment again.

Instead, she glances down at her clipboard. “We can set up a full bar inside and one outside, if you’d like, and we can provide either cocktails or champagne as welcome drinks.”

“Champagne,” I start saying, but Bryan gets there first. It keeps happening while we’re talking to her, even though we haven’t discussed any of this before.

When she excuses herself to ask the cook about the canape menu he’s been working on, I look up at Bryan to find those eyes are already on mine. Ignoring the way my heart skips when he smiles as our gazes meet, I send him a questioning frown.

“Why were we arguing so much earlier if we’re agreeing on everything now?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Maybe we just needed some time to get into our groove. You may not want to talk about it or even admit that it ever happened, but we did used to be pretty close. There was a reason for it, obviously.”

I sigh. *It’s like he read my mind earlier.* “Sure, but that was before.”

Bryan doesn’t pretend not to know what I’m talking about. His expression softens though. There’s a vulnerability about him now that reminds of the face of the boy I used to open up to and who used to do the same with me.

“One incident, as horrible as it was, doesn’t change the fact that we were friends or that our minds have always worked similarly. We’re still us, Isla. We might be older and a lot less starry eyed, but we’re still the same people.”

For just a moment, I let myself think back to all the good times we had together as the people we used to be. Bella might’ve been my best friend, but Bryan and I always gravitated to one another because of our shared interests. We

spent so many afternoons in his bedroom, trying to teach ourselves some new code or debating about one thing or another.

From the look in his eyes right now, he's thinking about the same afternoons I am and our shared memories zap between us, threatening to bond us again, to link us to each other once more as a foundation to build new memories on.

“Right.” Lee interrupts our moment when she comes back from the kitchen with a handwritten menu clipped into her board. “He says these are what he can do to start with, but he's been experimenting and if there's anything you want that's not on there, you're welcome to talk to us about it.”

*Thank God she arrived when she did.* The fragile connection Bryan and I just made shatters when we both turn away from each other to face her again.

It's a good thing too. While being on the same wavelength in terms of decisions to be made for the event will make things easier, I can't deal with even the thought of forgiving him just because we agree on some stuff.

Besides, forgiveness isn't what I came here for. *I'm here for the kids*, I remind myself. The kids and Bryan's family. Not for him. I'll never be anywhere just for him again.



# Chapter Eight

## Bryan

For the next few days after we start looking at venues, Isla and I really buckle down with the planning. It's taking a lot more time out of my schedule than I thought it would, but I'm beginning to think I was naive to have believed that we could just pull something like this together in a few hours.

The reality is that it's way more work than I ever realized. There's planning involved in every single little detail. Isla even sent me a catalog of options for napkin rings.

Truth be told, I respected her for her success from the minute I found out how she turned her life around after the video, but having worked with her now for a few days, I have a deep, newfound respect for what she does. *And to think, this is a small event for her.*

I almost can't fathom it, but I know it's true. While she's been with me, she's received hundreds of phone calls about other events that she's in the process of arranging and she couldn't be with me today because there was another meeting she had to take in person.

Her contacts, skills, professionalism have *really* impressed me these last few days, but it's getting tedious to pretend there isn't a white elephant in the room whenever we're together. Isla's shut me down every time I've tried to bring it up, but we need to talk about what happened.

I need to get my apology—ten years in the making—off my chest and maybe then, the awkwardness that keeps invading the moments when we're actually getting along will fade. Despite her best efforts, she's been letting her guard drop around me more and more often, and I'm surprised by how in sync we still are.



For the last decade, I've thought I lost the only female friend I ever really had, but now it's starting to look like she's still here. Still alive, and wrapped in a body I keep dreaming about doing things to that friends don't usually do together.

Seriously, waking up hard—not even just in the morning but several times during the night as well—is becoming a real problem for me. That's the Isla effect though. As a teenager, even when I knew I shouldn't have been dreaming about my sister's best friend, she used to creep into my nighttime fantasies.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I turn my attention back to my computer screen instead of thinking too much about my dreams. If I keep going down that road, the only thing that'll happen is I'll end up with even bluer balls.

She may not be here in my office with me, but she's pressuring me for a decision about which venue I want to use. I'm determined to make the call today. Her assistant compiled a list of all the venues we've placed on the short list, and they've sent me an email containing the list and all the links to the different websites again. If that's not the professional version of snapping your fingers in someone's face and telling them to get to it, then I don't know what is.

As the links open in separate tabs at the top of my screen, I think back to the tour we took of each. There were a few good ones, but I knew almost as soon as we walked into the Capital Grand that it was the one she wanted.

She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. All it took was one look at her and I knew it was her choice. Her eyes sparked, her spine straightened, and her features became animated. Interested. Almost like she opened up when she was closed off before.

Scrolling through the hotel's website, I can see why she likes this one for the ball. To be honest, I got it even while we were there. For a number of reasons, it quickly became my favorite of the bunch as well.

Eventually, I realize that I've actually already decided. There isn't even really another option. The Capital Grand is

the obvious choice. *Just like she probably knew all along.*

It has everything we need—even the stuff we’re not sure about needing yet. We were given a quick tour of their rooms when we were there, but as I click through the gallery on their website again, I nod slowly. *The accommodation really isn’t bad either.*

With that being the cherry on top, I pull my phone closer to call Isla to let her know we have a winner. When she picks up, I can hear she’s busy, but she excuses herself from her meeting and steps out to talk to me.

“What’s going on?” she asks, sounding mildly distracted but also concerned. “Please don’t tell me something went wrong on the one day I’m not with you.”

“Everything’s fine,” I assure her, but roll my eyes at how ready she is to believe I’ve already somehow fucked something up. “Better than fine, actually. I’ve decided on a venue.”

“You have?” Her concern melts into skepticism. “Which one? If it’s the one next to the water, you should know that my assistant found out there’s a terrible smell around there during —”

I cut her off. “The Capital Grand. You were right. It’s got everything we need and more. It’s the one.”

There’s total silence on her end of the line for a few seconds, then she lets out a quiet, melodic chuckle I know slips out when she’s struggling to believe something. “Well, I’m happy you came to your senses and went with my advice. Maybe if you’ll just do that a little more often, we can really get this ball rolling.”

“Don’t get used to it,” I joke. “It was solid advice though. I appreciate you making the appointment at the hotel, but what was it you said about us probably not finding an appropriate venue on that first day?”

“Without me, you wouldn’t have had a chance, but that’s why people pay me the big bucks. I know what I’m doing, and I know what my clients want even when they don’t.”

*True, it seems.* “It must help when the client is dashing and handsome and charming, right?”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t had one of those recently,” she says without skipping a beat, but there’s humor in her voice. “I’ll let you know once I have if it makes any difference to my process.”

“Ha ha,” I reply, grinning as I turn my chair to face the windows behind my desk and stare out over the city, wondering if she’s in any of the buildings I can see. “What are you doing?”

“I’m in a meeting,” she says haltingly. “I told you that yesterday. Why?”

“Sure, but where’s the meeting?” I ask, then cock my head as my gaze catches on a billboard for a huge music festival coming up in a few months. “Also, who’s it with? Is it about this rock festival being advertised everywhere?”

“It’s at my office and it’s with a band, but it’s not about the festival,” she says. “Are you bored, or did you have something else to tell me about the event?”

“What band?” I don’t answer her second question.

There are over a hundred emails in my inbox that I need to get to, I have so much work to catch up on after spending so many days on the ball that I might never have time to sleep again, and the light on my landline keeps coming on to indicate incoming calls. It’s safe to say that I’m not bored. I haven’t had time to be bored for years. I also don’t have anything else to tell her about the event.

*And yet, for some reason, I’m trying to keep her on the phone.*

She sighs but then, surprisingly, answers my question. “Full Moon. We’re about to start planning their next tour. Anything else you want to know before we can both get back to work?”

My back shoots straight and my chair pops up with a light snap as I sit up suddenly. “Full Moon? Like, *the* Full Moon?”

I've been a huge fan of theirs for years. Isla obviously has no way of knowing this, but she must catch on from my tone. "Yes, *the Full Moon*. Max and Jonathan are here. They've brought Jonathan's oldest son along today as well. Apparently, Maxim's starting to show an interest in the business side of things, and they've been showing him the ropes."

"He's a teenager now, right?"

"Right." She laughs. "I didn't know you were a super fan. Do you want me to tell them you said hi?"

"Yes." I'm not even a little bit ashamed by how excited that thought makes me. "Also, if you could ask them to save me a ticket for their next show in Manhattan, that'd be great."

"That's not really how it works, but I'll tell them you say hi. I really need to go, but thanks for letting me know about the Capital Grand. I'll have my assistant confirm with them right away and copy you into the emails. Is that all?"

"Do you want to have dinner with me tonight to celebrate that we finally have a venue?" I ask, finally getting down the reason I've been keeping her on the phone.

She hesitates, but when someone calls her name in the background, she quickly says, "Sure. Just text me the time and place. I'll meet you there. See you later, Bryan."

The call cuts out immediately, leaving me slightly shocked. I hold the phone to my ear for a beat longer than necessary. *Did she really just say yes?*

I can't pretend that I'm not surprised. I wasn't expecting her to agree so easily, but whatever the reason she said yes, I'm not planning on letting this opportunity slide by me. *Tonight is the night*. I'm going to apologize and we're going to bury this fucking hatchet even if it takes us all night to do it.

If everything goes right, maybe she'll finally be able to look at me without even just the tiniest spark of hatred in her eyes and maybe, just maybe, I'll finally be able to put the lingering guilt about the past behind me.

*Wouldn't that be grand?*



# Chapter Nine

## Isla

When I walk back into the conference room, Jonathan and Max are explaining something to Maxim. For two rock stars who are pretty much world famous, they look incredibly dadly right now.

If I didn't know any better, I never would've guessed that these same two men have charmed the panties off women on every continent—before they settled down, obviously—or that they've sold millions of albums the world over.

They're both in jeans and T-shirts, as casual and relaxed around my office as I'm sure they would've been in their own if they had one. Age has been very, very kind to these two, to all of them actually, and if anyone asked me, I'd say they look even better now than they used to.

Arms dripping with tattoos lean on the table in front of them. They're flanking Maxim, who sits at the head of the table between them. All of their heads are bent over a few sheets of paper stapled together. It takes me a second to recognize that they're looking over the draft itinerary we've put together for them for their next tour.

Max notices I'm coming back in just as I'm closing the door behind me. Those famous blue eyes sparkle like jewels in the sun when he looks up at me. *Lord, they're still the bluest eyes I've ever seen in real life.*

“Settle this for us, Isla,” he says in the deep, smooth voice that's made him one of the most popular lead singers of our time. Sticking out a finger, he jabs it down on the sheet of paper they were poring over before I came back in. “If we stay on the move during this tour, we're home and done faster but if we spend a few days in every place we visit, at least we'll get to see something this time around. I think it's better that we

actually get to enjoy the places for once, but Jonathan's afraid he's going to miss his couch too much."

Jonathan's perpetually laughing eyes fly up to meet mine as well. He flips off his friend and band mate. "It's not about my couch. I just don't know why you'd want to spend any more time on the road than we already do."

"Your wife and kids will all be with us," Max reasons. "We've never seen most of the places we've toured through. Don't you think it's about time we slow down and actually enjoy the destinations we're going to anyway?"

"Now you know why they needed you to settle this for them." Maxim grins, and even though he's *way* too young for me, I have to admit that he's already a little heartbreaker.

He's the spitting image of his Dad when he was younger, with those same piercing green eyes and the strong, gorgeous features. But he's also got his Mom's warmth and some of her lean muscle tone as opposed to only his Dad's bulk.

"I, uh," I stutter, but not because of Maxim.

The boy's cute and he's going to grow into one hell of a sexy man when his time comes but honestly? I'm still flustered because of my phone call with Bryan. *Who I agreed to go to dinner with tonight.*

Max suddenly narrows his eyes at me, then he laughs. "It looks like Isla might need a second. Do you need a cold shower after that call, James?"

My cheeks turn so red that I don't know if there's blood left anywhere else in my body, but I shake my head. "No cold shower necessary, thanks. It was just another client. Nothing to worry about."

The way Jonathan's been looking at me changes, becoming scrutinizing instead of expectant. "Actually, I think Max might be onto something."

In a move faster than lightning, he lifts up his phone, snaps a picture of me, and sends it to someone. *Jesus, how does he move that fast?*

As if he heard my question, Max gives me a one-shouldered shrug. “He’s a drummer, man. Don’t ask. No one knows how it’s possible for them to move like that, but I guess we’re just lucky he does. Without him, we might’ve had marginally less success than we’ve had.”

His phone buzzes on the table, and he glances down at the screen before he rolls his eyes. “Also, you should know that picture just made its way to our group chat. Tim and John will be weighing in any moment now.”

“Marginally less success?” Jonathan echoes, ignoring Max’s last statement in favor of focusing on the one before. “I’m the heart and soul of the band and you know it. There wouldn’t have been a Full Moon if it wasn’t for me. It only would’ve been ‘Moon’ and that just doesn’t sound right, does it?”

Maxim shrugs when my gaze meets his. “You’ve known them a long time. Are they always like this in meetings?”

I shake my head. “Not always, but it’s nice to have clients around who are relaxed. It sure makes my day a whole lot more fun.”

“We make everything more fun,” Jonathan says, then smirks when the replies to a message that’s come through. “It’s unanimous. That look on your face says that phone call wasn’t with just another client. Who’s the guy, Isla? You know everything about us. It’s only fair we get to know this about you.”

“I’ve known everything about you since you guys became my client. That’s my job to know,” I retort, lowering myself back down into the chair I vacated a few minutes ago.

“Fair enough,” Max agrees easily, but he’s propped his elbows on the table now and has one of his fists balled inside the other. “Jonathan’s right though. We’ve all seen that look before and it definitely wasn’t a client. It’s been a long time since we’ve had anyone in our group to be protective over. Let us work out our protective urges with you. Who is he?”



“You have kids,” I say, stating the obvious as I point my chin toward Maxim. “You have plenty of people to be protective over.”

“Sure, but it’s not the same thing.” Jonathan releases a long-suffering sigh, giving me a puppy-dog look like he’s pleading with me to give him something to do. “There’s something overwhelming about having to protect offspring. It’s like an all-consuming protective instinct. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a friend to be protective over even when we knew they could and would make their own decisions in the end.”

“I’m honored that you consider me a friend, but it was no one. Really. Just a client. You don’t need to protect me from anything.”

Maxim gives me a pointed look. “You might as well tell them what they want to know. They won’t stop until you do and as you just pointed out, they’ve got kids. They’re very used to dogging us until they find out every little thing.”

I sigh, but I see his point. “Fine. It *was* just a client, but it’s a client I have a past with. I’m not interested in him that way anymore. There’s no way I can ever forgive him for what happened between us the last time we saw each other, so it’s a non-issue.”

Max and Jonathan exchange a knowing look.

When Jonathan looks at me again, he’s serious for once. It doesn’t happen very often, so I know that whatever he’s about to say must really be something.

“Take it from us, guys make fucking stupid mistakes sometimes,” he says. “If you can find it in your heart to forgive him, it could be the best thing you’ve ever done. Look how well it turned out for us, and both Valerie and Camille had good reasons to be pissed off at us when we all reunited at first.”

The words give me pause. At the very least, they’ve given me something to think about, but I don’t say it. If I do, I’m afraid I’m going to have to tell them what he did that was so

unforgivable, and I really don't want to have to talk to them about the videos.

If they haven't seen them yet, I hope like hell they never do and if they *have* seen it, then they've been kind enough not to bring it up. I certainly won't be the one to do it, but especially not in front of Jonathan's son.

Since there's really no way of explaining why I can't forgive Bryan without talking about the viral embarrassment I suffered at his hands, there's no point in talking about any of it at all. Max must see the moment I make the decision because he gives me a worried look, but then he nods.

"Fine. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find us," he says. "Trust me, we've both made our mistakes. Tim and John have too, even if they didn't know their girls before. You won't find a better group of guys to talk to about stupid mistakes that never should've been made."

"Or a better group of women to talk to about learning to forgive us for those mistakes," Jonathan adds, reaching out to ruffle Maxim's hair.

The boy ducks out from under his dad's hand, quickly shoving his own hands into his hair to mess it up artfully himself—as teenagers tend to do. When his hair disaster has been averted, he proves that he inherited his father's good sense of humor.

"It's always great for kids to hear all about how stupid their dad was when he was younger," he quips. "It's got to buy me some leniency, right? My dad and all the men I'm closest to were idiots when they were even older than I am now. You heard them. They said it themselves. How much do you think I'm going to be able to get away with because of this?"

"Probably not much," I venture a guess, and Max and Jonathan nod.

Maxim shrugs, but he's still got that telltale laughter in his eyes. "I had to try. Seriously though, Mom said it's about time we have you over again. I'm sure she and the Full Moon

Council of Women will happily wing you through whatever is going on.”

“Full Moon Council of Women?” Max drops his chin and stares at Maxim.

At the same time, Jonathan reaches out again and smacks his son lightly behind his head. “What did Mom say about being so cocky, huh? I know she wants Isla to visit us, but that wasn’t the way to say it.”

“We’ve actually dubbed it the Full Moon Council of Moms,” Maxim admits to Max before shooting his dad an apologetic smile. “Hey, at least I gave her the invite.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the invitation and I’d love to come over some time, but like I said, there’s nothing to talk about when it comes to this client,” I say, smiling as I make a show of opening my folder again. “Now, should we get back to work? This itinerary is very much a draft one based on how much time you usually like to spend on tour, but if you’re considering extending the time you’re away, we can absolutely spread things out a bit.”

Max looks like he wants to say something else about Bryan and men making stupid mistakes, but eventually, he closes his mouth and drags the folder I gave him earlier closer with his fingertips. I know all about their respective histories with their spouses, and I know how well it turned out for them, but I also know it won’t be the same for me and Bryan.

There’s just too much water under that bridge. And it’s not even just water. Our past is more like crocodile infested acid that somehow doesn’t affect the crocodiles at all except to make them more deadly. It’s a damn unpleasant thing to encounter, and I’m planning on staying as far away from it as possible.

Dinner is one thing. Facing our past, forgiveness, and reaching the point that Max and Jonathan got to with their wives? *Yeah, that’s not going to happen.*



# Chapter Ten

## Bryan

Candles flicker on the table between us. A red-and-white checkered tablecloth covers the wooden top, and our now empty breadbasket sits right in the center. The restaurant I chose for dinner is nice, but casual enough to have a good time at.

Soft Italian music flows through the speakers and every once in a while, the chef himself comes out of the kitchen to perform an opera number before he goes back to cooking. Isla seemed surprised by my choice at first, but between the relaxed vibe of the place, the crisp wine, and our delicious appetizers, she's slowly unwinding.

"So," she says with laughter crinkling the corners of her eyes as she looks at me. "I didn't know you were such a fan of Full Moon. I was almost afraid you were going to go all fan-boy on me earlier when I told you who I was with. Maybe pop into my office with some lame excuse about why you were there just so you could meet them."

I snap my fingers, shaking my head in fake disappointment as I let out a heavy sigh. "Now she gives me the idea. Why couldn't you have asked if I was going to do it before we hung up? The thought didn't even cross my mind, but I might've done it if I thought you'd let me meet them if I showed up."

She laughs. "It's doubtful. I'm pretty protective of those guys. Lord knows, they deserve to have a team who rallies behind them after everything they went through. I might just be one part of that team, but I take my role seriously."

"I'm sure. You seem to take your job seriously in general," I reply, vaguely thinking back to that first day in my office when she wouldn't answer my questions about herself or her work at all. Deciding to try easing into it again, I take a sip of

my wine and keep my tone light and conversational. “They’re a pretty big client to have landed. Do you have a lot of those?”

Isla eyes me for a second, letting me know she’s on to what I’m doing but finally, she shrugs and nods her head. “We have a few. Once we became known for organizing larger events, clients who need a company capable of providing that service regularly started approaching us more and more often. We’ve been lucky that most of them have become loyal to us. They come back time after time.”

“That’s not luck. That’s the result of doing a good job.” I’m not even trying to be nice or to butter her up. It’s simply a fact. “Have you been working with Full Moon for a long time?”

“Long enough,” she says, a slow smile breaking out across her face as she watches me take in her words. “Apparently, they consider me a friend. If you asked me to dinner so you could try to convince me to introduce you to them, you shouldn’t have bothered. I won’t sell them out for some good food and a few glasses of wine.”

I sigh, pretending again that I’m disappointed before I wink at her. “Actually, I asked you to dinner to celebrate finding a venue, remember? I’d never ask you to let me know when you’re meeting with them again just so I can happen to stop by your office that day. So, when are you meeting with them again?”

She chuckles, her eyes lighting up with amusement as she mimes zipping her lips. “Nope. You’re going to have to try harder than that.”

“Well, how did they become a client? Maybe I can reach out to them and offer my own services if I know what drew them to you.”

“Are you going to keep trying to get me to talk about the company and how I grew it? Because I didn’t come here to talk about myself or the past, and telling you about how I landed Full Moon and other clients like them would require delving into the past.”

Leaning back, I lift my hands in surrender, catching a glimpse of our waiter crossing the dimly lit room with what I'm pretty sure are our pizzas. Once he's delivered them, I look back at her. "We don't have to talk about anything you don't want to talk about. I'm just interested in knowing how you went from who and where to were to who you are now. We were friends once. I'd like to get back to that if we can."

"Friends?" Almost absent-mindedly, she turns the stem of her wine glass between her fingers while considering it. She stares at me with apprehension filling her gaze, but there's something else there too. *Acceptance, maybe?* "I don't know if I'll ever be able to be friends with you like we used to be, but we're working together and I'm here, not having the most horrible time in the world. Isn't that good enough for now?"

I nod because, for now, it *is* good enough. Hell, I'll take every inch of progress I can get with her. I still owe her that apology, but now doesn't seem like the right time to bring it up. While I'm still planning on doing it tonight, it seems like a better idea to wait.

She smiles at me before motioning toward her pizza. "These look and smell delicious. You haven't turned into one of those people who eat a pizza with a knife and fork, have you?"

Remembering all the times we made fun of people doing just that, I laugh and shake my head before wiggling my fingers at her. "I've got all the cutlery I need right here."

"Good." She grips the crusts of two slices delicately between her fingers, then tears them apart and raises one to her lips to take a dainty bite. Her lids flutter closed while she's chewing, and it takes me a beat before I can yank my gaze away from her.

*Fuck, she's sexy like that.* My mind flies straight to the gutter and calls up all those old memories of the time we spent together in my bed that weekend. Forcing my brain to behave itself before I start getting hard in the middle of dinner, I focus on my own pizza instead.

While we eat, we make small talk about the ball before eventually moving on to slightly more personal topics. It's nothing earth-shattering, but it's the most she's opened up to me since she came back into my life.

"When I first started house-hunting here after spending so long in LA, I almost decided not to move back after all." She laughs. "It took me a while to get used to opening my blinds in the mornings and seeing city instead of the beach and ocean."

"I'm assuming that was the view you had back in Los Angeles?" I ask, curious about her life there.

This is the first she's said about it to me. In fact, I wasn't even sure before if she'd gone straight there from Massachusetts, or if she'd stayed there until moving back here, or if there had been a whole bunch of other places in between.

She nods enthusiastically, a faraway look crossing her features for a second before she refocuses on me. "My aunt's house is within walking distance to the most amazing little beach that almost never gets too crowded. Naturally, when it was time for me to move out by myself, I stuck to the neighborhood."

"Did you go jogging on the beach every morning and grab a kale smoothie on your way home?"

Her eyes roll in response to my question, but she's still smiling. "I've always preferred coffee to smoothies. I tried jogging though. It took for a few months, but it didn't last. What about you? It looks like you found your way to the gym after all those years swearing you'd never set foot in one."

She flushes when she realizes she's accidentally complimented me, and I smirk as I hold up one of my arms and curl my bicep. I know I must look like a complete jackass, but it's worth it when she laughs at my antics.

"I still don't like gyms, but I took up martial arts and I box a few times a week."

Her eyes go wide. "Seriously? I did some martial arts as well and I really enjoyed it, but I haven't really had time in the last couple of years since I've been back to find a place I like.



It's been on my to-do list every month though. I really should just make the time and do it."

"There are a few places I can recommend. If you tell me where you live, I might even be able to find out if there's someplace nearby you can join."

"Fishing for my address now, are you?" she jokes, but she's not entirely wrong.

Giving my shoulders a shrug, I grin and wonder if now is the time to bring up how much we still have in common. It'd make it easy to segue into my apology, but before I can do or say anything, Isla's eyes flick up to look at something over my shoulder and suddenly, she looks like she's sick to her stomach.

"Well, well. Isn't this cozy?" an all too familiar voice says behind me, immediately making it obvious why Isla looks the way she does all of a sudden.

Frankly, I haven't even seen Samantha yet, but the sound of her voice makes me want to hurl too, so I know how Isla's feeling. Sighing internally, I turn to face my soon-to-be ex-wife and narrow my eyes to give her a hard glare.

"What are you doing here, Sam?" *And could your timing have been any fucking worse?*

Just when I thought I was starting to get somewhere with Isla, of course Sam would arrive like a living, breathing blast from the past threatening to ruin the tiny bit of headway I've made. The cold smile that lifts the corners of her lips when she glances at Isla tells me that she intends on making this every bit as awkward as she possibly can.

When she brings her venomous gaze to mine, there's an edge of calculation in it that I know all too well. "You're my husband, silly. I needed to talk to you, and I wasn't going to wait until you were done having dinner with another woman to do it."

"How did you even find me?" I ask, although I'm pretty sure I already know the answer to that question. My assistant

is terrified of her. If she got hold of him, he'd have told her about my reservations in a heartbeat.

"I have my sources," she says coyly, but it also confirms my suspicions.

*Someone's getting fired tomorrow unless he can promise me that nothing like this will ever happen again.*

Isla's frozen in her chair, not moving an inch or saying a word. Samantha barely looks at her again before planting her hands on her hips and pouting at me. "Have you seen the latest offer your lawyer sent through to mine? Honestly, Bryan. It's insulting. There's no way I'm signing those papers as they are. I deserve a lot more than that."

I blow out a frustrated breath, clenching my jaw so hard that my teeth might've shattered if I didn't keep regular appointments with my damn dentist. "If you're unhappy with the offer, have your lawyer contact mine. That's how this works. You don't track me down to complain about it. In case you didn't notice, I'm in the middle of something. Good night, Samantha."

It was worth the shot to try getting rid of her, but she doesn't budge. My shot goes wide as she shifts her attention to Isla. "Of course he's out with *you* just months after our marriage hit a rocky patch. I shouldn't be surprised. You never could stay the hell away from him even though he's taken, could you?"

Isla's head jerks back like Sam slapped her but before she can respond, she-who-ruined-my-life turns back to me. Her eyes narrow to accusatory slits as she points one red-painted talon of a fingernail at my chest.

"And you! You've always been in love with her. It's your worst-kept secret. Maybe if you ever loved me, we wouldn't be where we are now. You would've gotten me pregnant instead of holding back just because you wished it was her you were knocking up."

"Are you seriously insinuating I didn't get you pregnant because I wanted Isla instead?" *What in the actual fuck is*

*going on in her head?* “That’s insane. You were there. You heard what the doctor said. It has nothing to do with Isla. I won’t let you drag her into this.”

She lets out a cruel, humorless burst of laughter before she sniffs. “She’s always been in this, Bryan. That’s the fucking problem, isn’t it?”

A loud scratch on the floor draws my gaze back to Isla. She pushes her chair back and already has her purse in her hand. “I don’t need to get caught up in this. Thanks for dinner, but I’m out. Good luck.”

Without another word, she spins on her heels and marches out of the restaurant. I’m on my feet to stop her a second later, but Samantha catches my wrist. Glee dances in her eyes as she holds me firmly, moving until she’s standing right in front of me.

“If you ever want to get rid of me, you’ll give me what I’m due.”

Yanking my arm back, I set my jaw in a firm line and scoff. “You’ve already been offered more than what you deserve. Back off, Samantha. I mean it. You don’t want to fuck with me anymore.”

She reaches for me again, but I see her coming this time, stepping aside before she can get her hands on me and then racing outside to catch up with Isla. I’ll have to go back inside to pay, but I need to get to her first. I need to explain. I need to —

My thoughts get cut off when I hit the sidewalk just in time to see a cab pulling away from the curb. Everything in me sinks as I watch its red tail-lights disappear into the traffic, taking with it my chance to set things right before this latest incident gives her even more of a reason to distance herself from me.

*Fuck.* The feeling that churns in my gut is the same as it was all those years ago when I realized she was gone. It’s the feeling I’ve let something precious slip between my fingers, and I hate it even more now than I ever have before.



# Chapter Eleven

## Isla

*How could I have been so stupid? I came this close to lowering my guard with that asshole. To taking the first steps toward letting him back into my life, even if just a little bit.*

Luckily, good ol' Samantha came by just in the nick of time to remind me why I can never get friendly with Bryan again. He's heartache waiting to happen, and I don't need any more of that in my life. Especially not when it's *him* my heart is aching for. *I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime.*

The problem with something as simple as even just having dinner with him is that it's so *freaking* easy to fall back into our old ways. Despite my best intentions to keep him at arm's length and not to let him in *at all*, it started happening without me even noticing until Sam arrived.

I've never been good with guys. Flirting and even talking to them doesn't usually come naturally to me. Back in high school, I wasn't one of the popular kids and I didn't become one after that, either.

I'm always the girl in the background. The nerd who prefers to be alone or with a handful of real friends as opposed to being the life of the party or a social butterfly.

With Bryan, however... things were always different. *I* was different. He was—and seems to still be—the only guy who makes spending time with him feel... effortless. And that's dangerous. *Because no matter what I tell myself, that hasn't changed.*

If Samantha hadn't shown up tonight, I know I would've ended up doing something much more stupid with him than just letting my guard down. It's very possible that one thing would've led to another and that, with a few more glasses of

wine in my system, I would've let go of my inhibitions enough to have invited him back to my place.

It's crazy, and I know I shouldn't even be thinking about it, but at the same time, I really can't deny that it would've been a real possibility. Just the thought of it pisses me off, because I shouldn't be so weak when it comes to him.

After all these years, I really thought I was strong enough to fight the effect he has on me. To ignore the spark no matter how natural it feels or how easily it comes. For so long, I've prided myself on having been forged in fire. On having a core made of tempered steel.

I've stood—literally naked—and faced the worst that the almighty internet has to offer, and I didn't even just come out on the other side just still standing. I came out of it like a majestic phoenix rising from the ashes, stronger and better than I ever could've dreamed I would be. I spent the entire day laughing and joking around with *bona fide* rock stars while planning their next international tour, for God's sake.

And then, in the space of one dinner, I almost caved like a house of wet cards. I almost acted like an idiot who couldn't control her vagina or her own mind well enough not to fall into the same old trap.

Angry and on edge, I give the cab driver the address for my office instead of going home. Burying myself in my work has always gotten me through and if I do it again, maybe I'll be able to erase the doubts Full Moon planted in my head about it being okay to forgive him.

Because they did plant seeds of doubt. Big, juicy ones that started growing in soil that was far richer in the capacity to forgive than I realized before.

I squeeze my eyes shut and breathe out deeply as I sit back in the cab, eventually opening my eyes again to watch the city lights creep by as the driver takes me to my sanctuary. My office. The one place I always feel sane because there, I'm always in absolute control. All these emotions are messy and they're threatening to overwhelm me.

Bryan keeps trying to call me for the rest of the night. I block him out, turning my phone off after a while when it becomes difficult to ignore it. Once the incessant buzzing ceases, I still can't quite get him out of my head.

Even hours later when I finally head home after a semi-productive evening, I'm still constantly aware of him lingering at the edges of my mind. My house is a brownstone that I was damn lucky to have gotten. The previous owner and I clicked when I came to look at the place, and she sold it to me even though I'm sure she could've gotten a better price than I offered. She liked the idea of passing it on to another woman who was building a company and legacy of her own—just like she had.

As I walk into the entrance hall this evening, I feel like I've even somehow betrayed dear old Mrs. Brooks. She entrusted the home she lived in all her adult life to me, and it was only because she thought I was worthy. Focused. A fellow female entrepreneur the house could lend its good juju to.

Now, I'm proving that I'm not so focused after all. Kicking off my heels, I toss my keys on the side table against the wall and set my laptop down in the kitchen.

After getting a glass bottle of water from the fridge, I switch off the lights and go upstairs to get ready for bed. I'm exhausted, but sleep is elusive.

Every time I close my eyes, it's either Bryan or Samantha I see. As much as I hate to admit it, the years haven't been unkind to the witch. With her blazing, unique green-gold eyes and her high cheekbones, she's as striking as ever. A vision with wavy blonde curls, perfectly shaped, full lips that are always painted a deep red no matter what, and legs that are two miles long, she's a stunner.

Tonight, despite the fact I've become much more confident in the way I look myself, I felt as inadequate beside her as I always used to. She's just one of those women who can get away with wearing a burlap sack and people would still admire it on her.

When she arrived at the restaurant in skyscraper heels with immaculately styled hair and in a black dress that hid whatever baby bump she has, it was almost like a part of me braced to be pushed back out on the roof. It felt like she caught us red-handed again, and even though I know what she did and the fact they're getting divorced because of it, I still felt like the dirty mistress.

Without realizing when it happens, I must fall asleep because the next thing I know, I've gone back in time and I'm nervously knocking on Bryan's frat house's front door again. The scenes that play out in my mind are ones I haven't dreamed about for years, but I recognize them. It's all there, all happening again just the way it did back then.

*My heart bounces in my chest as I wait for one of his frat brothers to answer the door. They all know me around here and it's not like it's the first time I'm visiting, but my palms still get sweaty every time I come.*

*Freddy, a junior in the same program as Bryan and me, grins when he sees it's me on their doorstep. He moves aside to let me in, using a hand with a beer in it to motion me inside.*

*"I'm glad you're here, Skye. He's been in a terrible fucking mood for two days. If anyone can bring him back to us, it's you."*

*I don't really know what to say to that, so I just smile. Freddy's cute. He's not Bryan, but at least he doesn't have a girlfriend. Neither does Bryan anymore, my brain ever so helpfully reminds me.*

*Ever since I found out about his breakup with Sam, my stupid head keeps circling back to the fact he's finally single again. And I am too.*

But that's not why I'm here.

*"I'll see what I can do," I tell Freddy, gripping the straps of my backpack as I walk into the house. It smells faintly like beer and feet, but I'm here so often that it doesn't bother me anymore.*



*Freddy chuckles. “We’ll appreciate whatever you can do, babe. He’s been insufferable. Just work your magic and bring our friend back to us.”*

*When I crack open Bryan’s door and see the scowl he shoots at me until he realizes who’s interrupting him, I almost sympathize with Freddy and the others. This brother of theirs is not a happy camper and he’s not making any secret of it.*

*His dark hair flops over his forehead, and he pushes it back as he manages to force a smile for me. “Hey, Skye. I didn’t know they called in the cavalry. You didn’t have to come.”*

*The smile becomes more genuine when I walk into his room and shut the door behind me. “No one called. I felt your misery all the way from across campus and I knew I had to come check on you.”*

*He gets up from the chair behind his desk and closes the lid of his laptop before he comes over and pulls me into his arms. Immediately, as he folds me into him, I feel like I’ve finally come home. Bryan’s not a super bulky guy, but I feel the strength in his arms whenever he holds me, and it makes me feel safer than I do anywhere else.*

*Breathing him in—discreetly, since friends aren’t supposed to care so much whether other friends opted for the woodsy body spray or the aquatic one this morning—I rest my head against his chest before glancing up at him.*

*“Are you okay?”*

*His eyes are closed as he holds me, but he nods against the top of my head. “I’ll be fine. I’m just pissed off at myself for not seeing this coming.”*

*“So your heart isn’t broken?” I ask, trying my best not to sound as hopeful as I feel. Because if his heart isn’t broken, maybe he never really loved her as much as I thought he did.*

*Bryan snorts softly before letting me go. “Nah, my heart’s fine. My ego is bruised though.”*

*“Well, I have something that might take your mind off it,” I say, sliding my backpack off and bending over to unzip it.*

*Inside, there's a deck of cards in a box that's been used so much, it's falling apart. I pinch it between my fingers and pull it out slowly, smiling as I watch him break out into a wide grin when he recognizes it.*

*"No way! Is that the same deck from the summer I broke my leg, and you wouldn't leave me alone for a minute?"*

*"Nope. It's the deck from the summer of your junior year when you broke your leg and begged me stay with you so you wouldn't be alone while everyone else was out having a blast."*

*He smirks at me, and my heart skips probably ten beats at how freaking sexy that smirk has become. "That's not the way I remember it, but hey. I have some good memories of that deck. Are you ready to have your ass kicked at Go Fish?"*

*I arch a brow at him, lowering myself down until I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of his bed. "Bring it. We'll see who gets their ass kicked."*

*"Sure. Let me get us something to drink, then we'll get right to it." He cracks his knuckles, waggling his brows at me before he walks backward to the door and disappears through it.*

*When he comes back, he has a six-pack of beer with him, and he puts it down on the floor with us. For the next couple of days, it's like time stands still. It's just the two of us, cocooned in his room playing cards and boardgames, drinking, and talking until all hours of the night. We sit out on the roof outside his window with our feet dangling over the edge while we speculate our futures, and we cover every topic to talk about from A-Z, but we don't speak much about Sam.*

*We even end up falling asleep together in his bed, but nothing happens between us. Not until someone, I don't even remember who, suggests to turn our game of poker into one of strip poker. I'm down to my underwear when I lose my next hand.*

*There's enough beer and tequila flowing through my system and making me feel surprisingly brave. Silently daring him to follow through on the hunger that's been creeping into*

*his eyes since I first took off my shirt, I thrust my chin up in the air.*

*“I’m not taking these off.” I’m standing in front of him with my fingers on the waistband of my simple cotton panties. “If you want them gone, you’re going to have to take them off yourself.”*

*A long beat passes where neither of us even breathes, but then he sits up on his knees and moves toward me, and what he does next changes everything.*

I just didn’t know yet that it wouldn’t be changing them for the better.



## Chapter Twelve

### Bryan

It's been a few days since I've heard from Isla. I've gotten a ton of correspondence from her company, but it's all from her assistants. The woman herself has been conspicuously absent, and I'm tired of her avoiding me.

I know that Sam crashing our dinner sucked, but it's not like I invited her or wanted her there any more than Isla did. It's probably safe to say regardless of how much I know Isla used to hate Sam, I wanted her at our dinner even less than she did.

Either way, I'm over being shut out. Since she hasn't been returning my calls, I've decided to take it one step further, which is why I'm in the elevator on the way up to her office. Her company occupies the top few floors of a skyscraper that I know is nearly impossible to get office space at.

Honestly, the fact she somehow managed to get not even just a few floors but the top few makes me that much more impressed by her. Clearly, she's a force to be reckoned with in business. I just wish she wouldn't be hiding behind that force to avoid me now.

When I step off the elevator, there is an army of people to get through before I can even get close to her office. Refusing to be told to come back or to wait until she can be reached, I strong arm and sweet talk my way past them until, eventually, I get to her expansive corner office.

She's on a conference call when I walk in without being announced or invited inside. There's a bank of screens against one of her walls, but I don't think anyone on them can see me. The camera sits on top of her laptop, and it's aimed away from me. I can see them though, and there's a pop artist on one of those screens who's almost as famous as Full Moon. It looks

like she's in the back of a car, but she's talking about what she requires backstage at a music festival I think is coming up in a few months' time.

It's one of the huge ones, and I had no idea Isla's company was part of organizing it. A noise in the doorway makes me turn my head to it, but I ignore the pleading look her assistant sends me. *I'm not going anywhere.*

Isla's blue eyes are as cold as glaciers as they narrow on mine. She glares at me, but then smiles again when she looks into the camera and addresses the pop star. "We've got it all under control, Justine. Just leave it to me, okay? I'm afraid I have to go now. Something just came up but let me know if you need anything else."

"Sure thing, babe," the pop star replies cheerfully, then blows Isla a kiss through the screen. "I know you've always got my back. I just wanted to speak to you about this one personally because my management team told me it couldn't be done. You can make it happen though, can't you?"

"I'll do my best," Isla promises, then ends the call by saying her goodbyes to everyone else. Her gaze fills with ice again when she lifts it back to mine. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

Her eyes cut away from mine and she raises her brows at the assistant I'm pretty sure is still standing behind me in the door. "Care to tell me why he's in my office?"

"We tried to stop him," the assistant says apologetically. "He said he was an old friend who needed to see you immediately. It's a family emergency. Apparently."

Isla sighs, but then waves the woman out. "Just go. Tell Damian to start the Jazz Hands meeting without me. It's his third year on that festival. If he can't handle it by himself yet, he'll never be able to. Also, call Max and let him know I haven't forgotten about him. I *will* get back to him by the end of the day. When you're done with that, get Allie on the line and tell her if that progress report about what's happening in Japan isn't in my inbox by the end of the day, I'm flying out there myself to check on them."

From the corner of my eye, I see her assistant's head dip in a nod with each command she fires off, then the door closes and we're finally alone. Isla cocks her head at me, raising her brows in much the same way as she just did with her assistant.

"A family emergency, huh? Did any of them actually buy that?"

I shrug. "Does it matter? It got me in the door, didn't it?"

"Evidently, I need to beef up security," she says, getting up before resting her elbow on the backrest of her chair and leaning against it. "Please don't make me ask you again what you're doing here."

Not wanting to waste either of our time, I take a few more steps into the office and speak while holding her bright blue gaze. "You weren't taking my calls, so I came here in person to find out why you've been avoiding me when we're supposed to be working together."

"I haven't been avoiding you." She scoffs but lifts a hand to scratch at the back of her neck. *Her old poker tell for when she's bluffing.* "I've just been busy, as you saw when you walked in. A charity ball, even one as important to me as yours, doesn't need me to be personally involved at all times. When I'm needed again, I'll be there. It's as simple as that."

"Bullshit." I plant my feet about a foot apart and slide my hands into my pockets, facing off with her from across her desk. "It's because of Samantha, and you and I both know it."

There's a second when I think she's going to keep trying to deny it, but then she purses her lips. "I'm not getting between you and your wife, Bryan. I think I've done quite enough of that. We never should've gone out for dinner in the first place."

"Samantha's only been my wife in name for years," I counter. "As soon as the divorce goes through, she won't even be that and she really isn't anything more than that to me. Not anymore."

"Yeah, well, I thought things were over between you two once, and look where it got me."

I glance pointedly around her office before looking back at her. “Yeah. Look where it got you.”

“Excuse me?” She blinks rapidly, her chin dropping to her chest as she stares at me like I’m an alien invader. “Where the hell do you get off making a comment like that? You have no idea what it took for me to get to where I am today.”

“Maybe I’d have *some* idea if you’d just tell me,” I retort, annoyance rising from deep within even though I promised myself I was going to remain calm. “But no. You refuse to speak to me because I’m the big, bad guy in your book, right? It’s impossible for you to see me as anything else. I have to be the villain, but look at where you are now. Do you honestly think you’d have found your way to events if it hadn’t been for what happened?”

“Are you suggesting I should be *grateful* for it because it led me to my aunt, who got me into events?” Her nostrils flare, and there’s a storm building in her eyes the likes of which I haven’t seen before. “It took everything I had to get me out of the spiral I was in after that fucking video went viral. I can’t do it again. I won’t, which is why you might not be the villain, but I’m still not interested in getting close to you again.”

“Of course I’m not suggesting you should be grateful,” I snap.

She suddenly flings her arms out to her sides and her eyes fill with angry tears. “I’ve built a life for myself even if those videos will always be out there. Don’t you dare suggest that what I went through was fate to get me into events or that I should be thankful it happened. Do you have *any* idea what it’s like to walk into a meeting, into every fucking meeting I’ve ever been in, and wonder if the people in it have seen me naked? And that’s because of *you*. You may not have made the video, but you pushed me out on the roof without even giving me a second just to get my fucking panties on.”

“I’m sorry, Isla,” I say meaningfully, my voice louder than I intended for it to be. “I’m so, so fucking sorry. I know no apology can ever change what happened, but I am sorry. I



didn't mean for it to happen, and I've wished every fucking day since that I could take it back."

"Well, you can't. Blowing up at me now doesn't change anything, either."

"No, it doesn't, but I've owed you an apology for years and this is the first time I'm getting the chance to make it." My heart thunders and my breathing speeds up, my tone still frustrated and angry. "If it makes you feel any better, I've spent the last decade wondering what would've happened if I hadn't hurried you out of the window that morning. I'm not saying it compares at all to what you went through, but my life hasn't exactly been moonshine and roses after that either. I've had to live with the question of whether I sent the wrong girl packing and—"

"It doesn't matter," she interrupts. "What happened, happened. There's no going back. There's no changing it."

Isla moves out from behind her desk as she speaks, the vehemence in her voice flashing in her eyes. "Maybe that day did set me on a track I wouldn't otherwise have been on. Maybe I'd never have found my passion for events if it hadn't happened, but that doesn't mean I won't be living underneath the shadow of those videos being out there for the rest of my life."

My feet carry me toward her of their own accord. She's gotten so close to me it only takes a few strides until I'm in her face. "You're right. I can't change what happened but look at what you've built for yourself even with that shadow hanging over you. The way I see it, you haven't let those videos keep you from holding back in any other aspect of your life, so why do it with me? Our past doesn't have to mean that we don't get to have a future."

With her face only inches away from mine and both of us breathing heavily, I can't help it. Even as the intention forms in my mind, I know there's a very good chance I'm about to get slapped, but I do it anyway.

Snaking one of my arms around her waist, I tug forward until she falls into me. At the same time, I lower my head,

sealing my mouth over hers in a kiss that's as desperate as it is hot. The best part of all? That stinging sensation I keep expecting to hit my cheek never comes.



# Chapter Thirteen

## Isla

Shock radiates through me, but I don't push him away. I hate him, but I want him. I've always wanted him. My body reacts to his in ways it's never reacted to anyone else's, and it feels too damn good to put an end to it.

*It doesn't mean I forgive him, does it?* No. No, definitely not. *It's possible to despise a person and still want to screw their brains out, right?*

What he said about our past not meaning that we don't get to have a future ricochets through my head. There was a time when I would've agreed with him that we might have a future together but now, I'm not so sure.

The problem is I'm not sure I *don't* want a future with him. Either way, his kisses burn through my resolve to stay away from him. Maybe this is what we need to get each other out of our systems for good so we can finally both move on.

Or maybe it's just lust. Pure, raw, primal lust.

Whatever it is, his lips are firm and demanding on mine, controlling in a way I don't remember his kisses being before. It makes me *want* to hand over the reins to him. To let go of all the pesky thoughts and confusion and just feel.

With my mind made up to do just that, I break away from him, staring up into his glazed over eyes for a long second before marching over to the door and flipping the lock. Both of our chests are heaving when I turn back to him, his eyelids at half-mast as he watches my every move like a predator ready to pounce on its prey. But if I am prey, I'm the most willing prey there's ever been.

Reaching for the zipper of my dress, I hold his gaze and take the opportunity to lay things out for him. *Okay, so maybe*

*I'm just a little bit predator as well.*

“This doesn't mean I forgive you, Bryan. It doesn't mean anything, actually. It's a purely physical thing and it's only happening this one time.”

His head tilts, his eyes raking over me hungrily as my dress falls to the ground. Even though it's been a pathetically long time since a man has seen me naked, I always wear sexy underwear. It's an empowerment thing for me.

It started with me trying to make myself feel good about my body again after some of the comments that were left on those videos, but it's long since become more than that. I like knowing that I've reclaimed my sexuality even in this one, small way, but I also just love the feel of silk and lace against my skin.

Shopping for lingerie is my weakness and my happy place all rolled into one. Some people spend their money indulging in food, shoes, makeup, or expensive clothes. For me, it's all about the underwear. A fact Bryan seems to appreciate as his gaze devours me as surely as his long legs are eating up the distance between us in just a few strides.

“Black and pink?” he murmurs as he slides a hand around to grip the nape of my neck. He holds me in place against him and starts walking me backward toward the wall. “I fucking love the bows.”

As if to prove his point, he fingers one of the little pink bows on my hip without stopping our momentum. My back slams into the wall harder than I expected, but the slight bite of pain seems to make my nerve endings sing.

Bryan pens me in with one arm on either side of me, a lock of dark hair falling across his forehead as he dips his head to look straight at me. “I accept your terms. If it's a hate fuck you want, that's what I'll give you.”

*A hate fuck. Right. See? It's a thing for people who don't like each other to give in to their baser instincts from time to time. There's even a term for it.* I lift my chin defiantly, my gaze still glued to his.

“Maybe that’s what I’ll give you,” I counter.

Dark amusement sparks in his eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

He pins me in place with his hips, then his mouth slants over mine again and claims it in a searing kiss which makes me forget all about the semantics over who will be fucking who. *Besides, I wanted to hand over the reins. This seems like a damn good time to do it.*

But that doesn’t mean I’m just going to stand here like a doll. My arms fly up to wind around his neck, my fingers twisting into the ends of his hair and tugging harder than I might’ve with anyone else.

A low grunt comes from the back of his throat, but he pushes his body into mine more forcefully in response. He’s hard as a rock *everywhere*, and it sends a thrill through me to know that his body is reacting as viscerally to mine as mine is to his.

From the feel of things, he’s all the way turned on already. Just like me. My panties are soaked and I’m aching for him, my clit pulsing like a beacon and my nipples straining against my bra.

I’m tempted to just rip his shirt wide open, but I’m also vaguely aware that he can’t walk out of here shirtless. My hands roam up and down the lean ropes of muscle in his back, exploring the newness of his body being all grown up before I move them to the front, my fingers immediately starting on his buttons.

He grinds into me, hitting that sensitive bundle of nerves between my legs in just the right way to send sparks of pleasure through me. My knees buckle and my back arches, but he holds me up and thrusts again.

“Fuck,” he groans, long and low as he grips my hair tight and uses it to expose my neck to his greedy lips. My scalp stings with the force he’s using to hold my head where he wants it, but even that feels good.

The shadow of ever-present stubble on his jaw scrapes against my skin as he kisses and nips his way to my

collarbone. My fingers falter, but then a renewed sense of urgency to get him naked rushes through me. I'm just about done with the first few buttons when he reaches for his collar with the hand not in my hair and pulls the shirt off over his head.

His skin is hot but soft when his torso comes back to mine, but I barely have time to process the feeling of having him there before he dips his head and sucks one of my nipples into his mouth. His tongue swirls around the bud and even over the lace of my bra, it's too fucking good.

I'm moaning like a porn star at this point, but I don't even care. I just want him to keep doing what he's doing. I drop my hands to his waist, unbuckle his belt, and undo the button that was hidden underneath it. As soon as I've unzipped him, he shoves his pants and underwear over his ass with one rough hand while I help to lift the material over his giant erection.

I remember him being well-endowed but over the years, I've wondered if it was only because his was the first cock I saw that I thought it was so big. It turns out my virginal eyes hadn't deceived me. It really is big. And thick. And the tip is slick with wetness which makes my mouth water at the thought of licking it off him.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I register that my thoughts aren't usually anywhere near this dirty. But this is Bryan, and that seems to make all the difference.

Just as I'm about to lower myself to my knees in front of him to take what I want, he growls into my mouth. "There's a condom in my wallet. Back pocket. Get it."

My fingertips brush against the leather square that must be his wallet as I dip my hand into his pocket. Quickly pulling it out, I open it and I'm feeling around for the foil packet when he takes the whole thing from me.

Deftly sliding the package out of the slot where he kept it, he brings the foil to my mouth and his voice comes out as a harsh command. "Bite it open."

He's holding it tightly enough that it's easy to do what he told me to. There's hardly a tear before he's ripping it all the way open and rolling the protection on. When it's in place, he palms the backs of my thighs.

"You wanted it rough, right?"

Without waiting for my response, he lifts me up and leverages me against the wall with his hips while he yanks my panties to the side. There's nothing gentle about any of his movements, about anything he's done so far but he's right. I *did* want it rough. I don't need him to make love to me.

It's a hate fuck, and I won't forget it.

Once he's lifted me high enough, he positions his tip at my entrance and slams his mouth back into mine when he enters me in one powerful thrust. I almost scream with the relief of finally having him where I've wanted him since he first kissed me, but I manage to bite it back at the last moment and he swallows the whimpers that do end up escaping.

Contrary to what he was like with me the first time, he doesn't take things slow now. He doesn't stop to check in with me and he doesn't wait for me to adjust before he starts moving.

Instead, it's a clashing of tongues and teeth as he withdraws before driving his hips forward again. He sets a brutal, punishing pace that I know I'm going to feel tomorrow, but I give as good as I get. I might be letting him stay in the driver's seat, but my fingernails dig into his back as I kiss him as hard as he's kissing me.

It's not long before I feel a massive orgasm beginning to build. He groans when I contract around him, my muscles milking his dick as I climb toward that peak. I don't do anything to stop it, my neck straining back and unintelligible words falling freely out of my mouth.

Everything in me tightens, and then I hurl myself off that cliff and tumble into that blissful place where only ecstasy exists. My toes curl, white lights explode behind my eyes, and



I can't be completely sure, but I might dig my nails into his shoulders hard enough to draw blood.

A few seconds later, his thrusts become less rhythmic and he sinks his teeth into the crook of my neck when he finds his own release. After, we're both panting and still coming down when he lifts his head and stares into my eyes.

"I expect to start working with *you* again from now on, not one of your minions," he says, his voice slightly breathy but firm. Arching a dark brow, he waits for me to nod before setting me down on my feet and taking a step back.

I catch myself against the wall to keep from falling over, but he's already reaching for his clothes. As soon as he's dressed, he storms out and slams my door behind him.

Letting out a shaky breath, I drop my head back against the wall and try to convince my knees to keep holding me up. It takes a couple of minutes before I'm steady enough to walk over to where I dropped my dress.

As I'm putting myself back together, I'm reeling. I can't believe I just did that, but I can't deny the fact I'm more than sated after it. My entire body feels tingly and like it's glowing. *That really was unbelievably good.*

Now that my brain is slowly but surely coming back online, parts of it are yelling at me I've just made a giant mistake. It wasn't a mistake though. It was a decision. One that I made consciously and I don't regret. I'm just not sure how I'm going to live with it.



# Chapter Fourteen

## Bryan

On Saturday morning, I'm restless. I'm sipping coffee on my balcony and watching a bird hopping along the railing, but I'm so out of it that I don't really taste the coffee or notice the bird much.

This was a hell of a long week, and I should still be in bed but for some reason, my damn brain decided to wake up just past six in the morning.

*Okay, so it's not for some reason.* I know exactly what woke me up—dreaming about Isla again. It's been a few days since the sex and I still can't stop thinking about it. It's fucking ridiculous. I swear, it wasn't this bad after I lost my virginity.

Sex is almost the only thing I can think about right now. If I'm not working, I'm thinking about sex. More specifically, sex with Isla.

It was fast, rough, and dirty, but it was also spec-fucking-tacular. I don't even know how many years it's been since I've had passionate, explosive sex like that. Hell, maybe the last time had even been with her.

*God knows, my relationship with Samantha never really recovered.* In those early years of our marriage when we fucked so often, it *still* hadn't been like that.

In Isla's office, it was like nothing else mattered. Like the only thing that existed in the world was giving her what she wanted while taking what I needed for myself. It's like my world has now tilted on its axis and I can't quite get it back to the way it used to be.

*Because now I know how much better it can be when it's like this.*

The problem? I agreed to her terms, and she was pretty clear it was a one-time thing. I've been tempted to call her up to renegotiate, but the last thing that will work with Isla is a booty call—even if it wouldn't technically be a booty call, but rather a let's-talk-about-booty-call.

I don't think the difference between those two is a technicality she's going to appreciate though. So I haven't called her. Not to talk about that anyway.

We've spoken, but she's been very careful to keep the calls short and to the point. At least it means I'm getting some work done again even though the ball is still being organized. There have been no more days out of the office, no more checklists—although I'm sure that's only for now—and no more batches of emails requiring me to make urgent decisions about napkin ring rentals or anything else.

I suppose it's possible we're in the eye of the planning storm now that the venue has been booked and the deposits have been paid to most of the other vendors who needed significant advance notice. There's really not much to say on the event front at the moment, which is why my conversations with Isla have been short.

Since I woke up with her on my mind, I'm seriously considering calling her up not to talk about the event. Our last dinner ended in disaster, and I'm kind of hoping she'll let me make it up to her by taking her out to lunch.

I'm still playing with the idea when my phone rings. Groaning when I see that it's only just past nine and my lawyer needs to speak to me, I stand up and take the call. Peter Johnson came highly recommended as a divorce attorney and he's a nice enough guy, but what he inevitably needs to discuss with me at this hour on a Saturday morning makes me too agitated to keep sitting down.

"This is Bryan," I say as I press the phone to my ear, bracing a palm against the cool metal railing around the balcony.

"I'm sorry to bother you on the weekend," Peter says after he greets me. "I'm afraid it's not good news."

“I figured.” I bow my head while waiting for him to tell me what she’s done now.

Samantha wouldn’t have taken it well that I didn’t offer her anything more when she tracked me down, and now that she knows I was at dinner with Isla... I’ve been expecting this call ever since as a result. “What does she want?”

The lawyer sighs heavily. “You’re not going to believe this, but she’s suddenly denying her affair and she’s talking about wanting to reconcile with you.”

“That’s not happening.”

“I know,” he says. “We were hoping that she was going to sign the papers last week, but she’s asking for a sit down. This morning, I received their final refusal to sign the last offer we sent, and they want our answer about meeting with them by Monday.”

He pauses for a second before adding, “She’s saying the baby is yours, Bryan.”

*Fuck.* I suck in a sharp breath, but I shouldn’t be surprised that she’s pulling something like this. “It’s not true. She’s lying. The baby definitely isn’t mine.”

I saw those test results myself. The doctor even sent me results from different labs and they all confirmed the same thing. There’s no way I fathered that child.

“After what she did, I’m not interested in reconciling or talking to her at all,” I reiterate, just in case he’s still waiting for my answer about that sit down. “This is just a tactic to delay the divorce being finalized. You know that, right?”

“Yep.” He lets out another sigh. “The thing is, Bryan, this changes our game plan. It might not be a straightforward divorce anymore. If she persists with these claims about the baby’s paternity, we’re headed for an all-out battle in court, and it could be drawn out.”

My eyelids slam shut. Honestly, it was wishful thinking to hope she’d just sign a settlement and disappear from my life. “What do we do now?”

“We prepare for war,” he says in a tone that makes it sound so much simpler than what I know it’s going to end up being. “In the meantime, I’ll keep speaking to her lawyer. Maybe he can talk some sense into her eventually, but I wouldn’t hold my breath if I was you.”

“Yeah, I’m not.” I drag a hand through my hair and exhale deeply. “What does it entail, preparing for war?”

For the next few minutes, he talks me through the process we’ll be following from here on out. It all sounds like a particularly nasty circle of hell to me, but it doesn’t sound like there’s anything we can do. It’s either settle or go to court, especially since I won’t participate in any discussions about reconciling or providing child support for a baby that isn’t mine.

By the time I get off the phone with Peter, anger runs like a current of electricity under my skin. I’m pacing along the railing like a caged lion, but it’s not doing anything to blow off any of the steam that feels like it’s threatening to cook my insides.

Needing to vent to someone who’s never liked Samantha anyway, I pick up my phone again instead of tossing it against a wall. My sister answers almost immediately, but her voice is hushed and she sounds exhausted.

“Hey you,” she says on a barely suppressed yawn. “What’s up?”

Some of the frustration eases when I hear her voice and realize I’m being an ass. Bella has a newborn baby to deal with. She doesn’t need this from me.

“I was just calling to check up on you,” I lie. “How are you doing? How’s my little man?”

“He’s good.” I hear the smile in her voice. “I think he’s going through a growth spurt though. It feels like he wants to nurse every five minutes. Are you okay? You sound funny.”

“I’m fine.” *What’s another white lie?* “Also just tired. It’s been another one of those weeks at the office, but you don’t want to hear about that right now.”

“Are you popping in today?” she asks. “I’d prefer it if I could see you when you tell me you’re okay, because you really don’t sound it. Did something happen with Isla while you’ve been working together?”

“No, she’s fine.” At least that’s true. “We’re making good progress. You’d be proud of us.”

“I’m glad.” Hesitating before she continues, she yawns again and then there’s some soft ruffling in the background and the sound of a door clicking shut. “Something else is up with you. I can hear it. CJ is sleeping now. I’ve left the room and I’m going to make some tea. Talk to me.”

“There’s nothing else going on,” I say. “I’m not going to visit today. It sounds like you need to get some sleep while CJ’s sleeping too. I’ll see you again soon though. Okay?”

“Okay,” she finally agrees, but there’s still worry in her voice. “We’ll see you soon, then. Call me if you need me, Bryan. I mean it.”

After promising I will, I hang up the phone and wander back inside the house. I could go down to the gym and beat the crap out a punching bag, or I could go take a martial arts class, but none of those options appeal to me right now.

As I pass the bar, a bottle of whiskey catches my eye. The amber liquid practically glows in the mid-morning sunlight streaming into the room. It’s like it wants me to come and get it.

Abruptly changing course, I decide to listen to it. If I’ve ever deserved to get hammered while day drinking, it’s now. Besides, it’s not like I’ve got somewhere to be today anyway.





# Chapter Fifteen

## Isla

Sunlight streams in through my kitchen windows. I have an office at home, but I like working right here at the kitchen island over weekends. The radio is on, the scent of coffee fills the air, and the doors leading to my small garden are open, letting in a slight breeze.

Sighing contentedly, I work through the emails that have come in since yesterday afternoon. I've been at it for a couple of hours, but with so many events coming up before and over the holiday season in just a few months, it feels like there's always more to be done.

I won't ever complain about it though. It's a blessing that the company is as busy as it is, and I'm infinitely grateful for it.

*There's that word again.* Grateful. Thinking it reminds me of Bryan and what he said in my office and thinking about *that* makes me think about what happened after our argument.

Immediately, the direction my thoughts take splits into two. On the one hand, my mind is hung up on the sex and on the other, I've been wondering how my life would've turned out if it hadn't been for that fateful morning.

Since I've spent a lot of time in the last few days thinking about the sex and how amazing it was, I steer myself away from it for now. It happened, it was great, and the parts of me that are south of the border wish it would happen again, but luckily, those aren't the parts in control.

My head and my heart know it's dangerous to go down that road again, and I'm just going to have to find a way to accept that sleeping with him didn't get him out of my system. Not at all. I couldn't have been more wrong on that front, but I'm okay with it.

It's the wondering what might've happened if things had gone differently that morning a decade ago that's tripping me up. I won't ever be grateful for it; I can't be. Not after how drastically it derailed my life but in hindsight, I don't think he meant I should be grateful for the humiliation or to him for having kicked me out of his room in the first place.

I think what he meant is more about how things worked out. Sure, it took a ton of hard work, but it's true there was also a certain amount of being in the right place, at the right time involved. Obviously, I've heard the saying that fate works in mysterious ways. I've just never thought about how it applies to my own life.

What happened to me was a cruel twist of fate, but even I can't deny the fact I ended up exactly where I should be. My work is the greatest love of my life, but I never even considered events management before. Which begs the question, was everything that happened meant to happen to bump me from the track I was on to the one I was meant to follow?

None of this changes anything or absolves Bryan, but it *has* got me thinking about things from yet another different angle. If anything, seeing him again has shown me that I'm not nearly as over what happened as I thought I was. Getting a different point of view to sort through things might just help me to finally *really* move on.

At least, it feels like I've taken another step forward in my journey to heal. I've always thought the fire I walked through made me stronger and now, it's finally clicked that maybe part of acceptance lies in focusing less on the past and more on where it led me.

If everything really does happen for a reason, then the reason it happened for was a darn good one. I was so dead set on my course back then that I wouldn't have changed it for anything less.

I'm not sure about any of it, but it's food for thought. My former therapist would be proud of me for not just falling into

another downward spiral and zeroing in on the awfulness of it all.

Smiling a little as it occurs to me how far I've come, I wiggle my mouse to wake up my screen so I can get back to doing what I love. I'm opening an email about the e-sports tournament when my phone rings.

My smile widens when I see that the incoming call isn't work like I expected, but from my best friend. Immediately sliding my thumb across the screen, I press the button to put the phone on speaker and leave it on the counter while I talk to her.

"Bella! How's my favorite new mommy doing?"

She chuckles. "I'm the only new mommy you know, but it's nice to know I'm somebody's favorite. The only thing CJ cares about right now is my boobs and Chase got invited to play golf for the first time since he became a dad. He couldn't get out of the house fast enough."

"I'm sure you're still his favorite," I say honestly. "It was probably just the cabin fever that spurred him on to move that fast, not an attempt to get away from you."

"I know. I don't even blame him. The cabin fever is definitely real," she says. "I didn't even know it was possible to be this tired, but I'm trying to make the most of every day before I go back to work. Enough about me though. I didn't call to complain. Have you spoken to Bryan?"

I frown. "Not today. Why?"

"I'm worried about him." She lets out a resigned sounding sigh. "He called me earlier and he didn't sound like himself, but he denied that there was anything going on with him."

"It's probably just work."

"That's what he said, but I don't believe him." She pauses. "Do you think you can go check on him for me? I know it's asking a lot, but he said things are going better between you two and I don't know who else to ask. I don't have any of his friends' contact details."

“If he said he was fine, I doubt he’ll appreciate me showing up at his door,” I reason. “Maybe just give him a day. If you’re still worried about him tomorrow, I’ll go. He might not even be there, or he might be sleeping.”

“Just blame it on me if you wake him up,” she says, her tone edging on begging. “I know it’s unfair of me to ask you to go to him, but he sounded really messed up. I’d have gone myself, but there’s no one to stay with CJ and I don’t think it’ll help if I show up with him in tow. Besides, all my attention would be on him anyway.”

“And Chase is golfing,” I conclude for myself, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip for a moment. “He sounded really messed up?”

“Yep. It could be work, but my Spidey senses are tingling. All this shit with Samantha has really put him through the wringer these last few years. I know you don’t want to hear about her, but she’s been terrible, and I don’t think she’s letting up now just because they’re getting divorced.”

“Do you think he still loves her, or that he wants her back?” It’s none of my business, but the question sure as hell has been on my mind. “Is that what you’re worried about? That the divorce is messing him up because he doesn’t actually want it?”

She snorts. “No, he wants it. If you ask me, that’s the biggest part of the problem. They should’ve separated years ago, but they didn’t and now they’ve spent so long making each other miserable that I don’t think they know how to do anything else.”

“What do you think could’ve happened, then? I don’t mean to pry, but I’d like to know what I could be walking into.”

“I have no idea, but I’m willing to bet Samantha’s up to her usual tricks. That woman has never loved him. She just liked the idea of him, you know? Being with the guy who was smart and popular at college and who was poised to take over a multi-million dollar firm? That was like winning the jackpot

to her. I don't see her just letting all that go and making things easy on him."

I exhale quietly, but I know she's got me. "Fine. I'll go make sure he's okay if you really think she's done something that merits checking up on him. I don't know how you manage to rope me into all these things, but at least you can never question how much I love you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she says with a smile in her voice. "Thanks, Isla. I owe you. Again. Just let me know if he's okay. I hate that he's going through this by himself at the moment. With my parents' heads either on their retirement plans or on their first grandchild and with me always being busy with said grandchild, I feel like we've abandoned him."

"You haven't. He's a big boy. Besides, you know him. He'd have hated it if everyone was up in his business, doting on him all the time."

"Fair enough, but just go dote on him a little. He deserves that much."

I don't quite know if he deserves it, but since I'm choosing to focus on the present and not the past, even I can sympathize with him at the moment. While I don't know everything that happened between him and his wife, it doesn't sound like it's been easy.

After hanging up with Bella, I go upstairs to get ready before heading to the address she texted me while I was in the shower. There's a part of me that wants to put it off until I've answered all my emails, but I know it's better to just rip off the Band-Aid—so to speak.

When I get to his front door in a fancy building near Central Park, I take a deep, fortifying breath and pray I'm not interrupting him doing something I don't want to know about. *Like entertaining female company.*

God, that would be awkward.

It takes him a few minutes after I knock to open the door but as soon as he does, I realize Bella was right in asking me to check up on him. He looks like hell. There's a quarter bottle

of whiskey in his hand, a deep, angry scowl on his face, and his dark hair is standing up in all directions like he's been tugging at it all morning.

He also hasn't shaven and he's not even wearing a shirt. It takes some effort not to let my gaze drop to his washboard abs or the delicious V between his hips that I only caught a glimpse of in my office the other day.

"What are you doing here?" The harsh bite in his tone makes it considerably easier not to check him out despite the temptation to do it.

I stare back at him, trying to gauge how far gone he is before I reply. "Bella sent me. She was worried about you, and it looks like she had good reason to be."

"I'm fine," he snaps. "I don't need a babysitter."

"Good." I step past him and welcome myself into his home when I realize he's going to try to keep me out. "I didn't come as a babysitter. I came as a proxy. Maybe even a friend."

As I move past him, I swipe the bottle out of his hand. He snarls at me, the door slamming as he glares in my direction. "You're not my mother. You can't tell me I'm not allowed to drink."

I roll my eyes and keep going further into his penthouse apartment. It might be my first time here, but I see a bar at the far end of the open-plan space and I know I'll find what I need there. I could find it in the kitchen too, but I'm not sure which cabinet to look in.

"Relax," I say as I spot the glasses sitting on a shelf fixed to wall behind the bar counter. "I'm not going to stop you from drinking. I'm just getting a drink for myself as well, then we'll talk."

Since he's clearly been drinking straight from the bottle, I also take a glass down for him when I get my own, filling both up after setting them down. Once I'm done, I pick up the drinks and hand his over, motioning for him to take a seat on one of the stools on the other side of the counter.

“Right,” I say after hopping up on a stool. I place my drink down on a coaster and bring my gaze to his. “What’s going on, Bryan? What happened?”





# Chapter Sixteen

## Bryan

*Isla is here.* My alcohol-soaked brain is slow on the uptake, but it's finally sinking in that she's sitting right across from me with her hand on a drink and expectation on her features.

I blink. *She really shouldn't be here.*

For a guy who's not much of a drinker, I've had way too much to have her anywhere near me right now. I'm going to end up doing or saying something I shouldn't, and then I'll be a hundred steps back with her again.

*But she is here.* I tried to keep her out, but the girl is tenacious. She's also fast. She got around me, into the house, and took the bottle from me before I could do anything to stop her. *That might be the alcohol's fault though.*

The other thing I'm pretty sure is on the booze is the fact I can practically feel my tongue loosening while she's waiting for me to answer her question. *Yep. I'm definitely about to say something I'm going to regret.*

Yet, I can't seem to help myself. *Fucking whiskey.*

"I wanted to go after you, you know," I start, finding myself going back to the very beginning as I stare into those piercing blue eyes of hers. "That morning when Sam got there, we fought it out while you were being humiliated. I didn't know what was happening to you, but I did know I wanted to go after you instead of having it out with her."

Isla flinches slightly, but she doesn't interrupt me. Plopping my elbow on the bar, I rest my cheek in my hand and stare at her some more. "Seconds after I closed the window, she burst into my room. I actually thought I was protecting you."

A dry, humorless chuckle leaves my lips. “Can you believe it? I thought it was better that I got you out there on the roof because it would give you time to get dressed before *she* saw you naked. Little did I know...”

I screw my eyes shut against the onslaught of emotion brought on by these memories. “I couldn’t quite focus on her though. Those days we spent together before she got there...” I shake my head. “It made me realize you were so much more than just a friend. Before that, I spent years telling myself nothing could ever happen between us. You were my sister’s best friend and my friend. I told myself I couldn’t like you as anything more than that.”

Sighing as I open my eyes, I see Isla’s taken a few big gulps of her drink. She still doesn’t interrupt me though.

And that’s when it all comes out. When I realize she’s giving me the chance to tell her my side of the story. A chance I never thought I would get to tell her the story that is so inextricably linked to the question she asked about what’s going on with me today that it all just flows off my loosey-goosey tongue.

“When Samantha realized you were out there, she told me I had to choose. I could go after you, or I could stay and talk things out with her.” The words taste bitter in my mouth. “I felt like a deer caught in headlights. I panicked, and I thought I owed it to her to stay. She’d just traveled halfway across the world to see me only to catch me in bed with someone else. I guess I felt guilty and I thought I could always catch up with you later.”

Pain flashes in her eyes, but she tries to hide it by tossing back another big sip of her drink. I don’t like thinking that I’m hurting her by telling her all this, but since she’s not stopping me, I figure she might want to hear it even if it is causing her pain.

“It took me years to admit to myself that I made the wrong choice,” I confess. “Just like it took two years to face the fact that Samantha and I were never right for each other. It didn’t matter how hard I tried to make our marriage work; she was

always after the next big thing. A bigger house. A flashier lifestyle. Longer, more expensive holidays. We got to a point where we were hardly talking to each other unless it was about what she wanted to do to make our lives... bigger.”

It’s not easy to tell her any of this, but this next part is going to be even harder. “We drifted so far apart, you could fit an ocean between us. Months went by when I only saw her for a few minutes here and there. I worked and she shopped or spent time with friends. But then the next thing she wanted came along and she needed me for it. A baby.”

Picking up my glass, I drain at least half of the amber liquid inside before I carry on. I’ve had so much, it doesn’t even burn on the way down anymore.

“The houses, the cars, the lifestyle? Those were all things I could buy. I thought that if I just kept buying it, she’d eventually be happy and then *we* would be happy. Can’t buy a baby though.”

Another dry chuckle comes out of me. “Fuck. The baby-making fiasco was horrible. We went from being not much more than estranged roommates to being together all the time for a few days a month. She turned into a drill sergeant armed with ovulation kits and supplements. Everything in our lives became all about having a baby. Even the doctors suggested cooling it for a while, but she wouldn’t have it. Nothing made her happy. Least of all me.”

“That sounds awful,” Isla says quietly.

I shrug. “I’ve always believed that things happen for a reason. It’s better that Sam and I couldn’t have a baby together. It sucks I’ll never be able to have one at all, but it wouldn’t have been fair on any child to have been born into our marriage. It was a loveless arrangement we only stayed in for so long because nothing pushed us out of the comfort zone we were in until she went looking for someone else to give her the baby she wanted.”

“Is that why you’re drinking today?” she asks, eyes curiously searching mine. “Are you upset about the baby?”

I shake my head so hard and so fast that I sway a little on my stool. “I’m drinking because I got a call from my lawyer earlier. Apparently, Samantha’s asking to sit down with me next week. She wants to reconcile. She’s denying she ever had an affair and she’s alleging the baby is mine, which is total bullshit.”

Isla’s been listening patiently all the time, even when I was talking about the past, but she’s clearly shocked now. I expected her to get pissed off when I told her what happened back then from my point of view, but this is the first time I see a spark of anger in her eyes.

“Why would she do that?” she asks, reaching for the bottle since we’ve both finished our drinks. “It feels a little insensitive to allege a baby is yours when she knows you can’t have one.”

“My thoughts exactly.” I raise my glass to her once she’s refilled it. “She doesn’t care about that though. She doesn’t care I wanted kids, even if not with her, and she doesn’t care we’re staring down the barrel of an acrimonious, drawn-out fight in court if we don’t settle. All she cares about is the money. She thinks she should get more. Money. Appearances. That’s what it’s all about for her.”

“Well, that’s just bullshit.” Isla takes another long drink before putting her glass down with such a thud that some of the liquid spills out. Neither of us takes much notice of it though. “What are you going to do? Are you going to sit down with her?”

“No. According to my lawyer, there’s not much I can do except to let it play out. If I have to take a meeting with her eventually, I will, but I don’t really see the point since there’s no way we’re reconciling.” I watch as Isla mirrors my pose, propping her elbow on the counter and resting her cheek in the open palm of her hand. “You should know that I did go looking for you.”

“What?” A thin crease appears between her brows. “When?”

“Back then. A few days after it happened,” I clarify. “After the dust settled with Samantha, I went to the dorms to see you, but you were gone.”

She makes a noncommittal noise at the back of her throat but doesn't respond. Her eyes drop to her glass, and she looks into it so intently it's like she thinks she's going to find the meaning of life down there.

Since she's letting me get it all out today and the alcohol keeps pushing me to talk, I don't start trying to hold back now. “It nearly killed me when I found out about the videos. I tried to have them taken down and when that didn't work, I tried to do it myself. I got so bad that Samantha threatened to walk away again. She said it was obvious I was obsessed with you, and she kept pushing until I cracked and promised to marry her after graduation.”

When I look at Isla again, she's emptied what was left in the bottle into our glasses. She's looking shocked again but evidently, the alcohol hasn't quite loosened her tongue the way it has mine. *She probably also only started drinking when she got here*, I remind myself. *By then, I was a few drinks in already.*

Once I fall silent, she gives me a small smile. “Thanks for being honest with me. I've wondered what happened with you after everything, but I didn't think I'd ever know. To be honest, for the longest time, I also didn't really care that much. It was more morbid curiosity than the actual need to know. I'm glad I know now though. It explains a few things.”

Raising her glass, she brings it to her full lips and swigs the remainder of the contents down in one go. When it's empty, she moves out from behind the bar and heads for the kitchen.

“Drink up,” she says, turning to look at me over her shoulder while she's walking. “When you're done, come over here. This pity party has been fun, but it's over now. It's time to get sobered up and then we're going to do something to take your mind off it.”

My eyebrows jump almost all the way to my hairline. *That's not what I expected her to say at all.*

“Are you serious?”

She whirls around to grin at me, walking backward now with her arms extended to her sides. “Trust me, I know a good pity party when I see one. I’ve thrown more than a few of my own over the years, but I also know when it’s time to break it up. Let’s go, Hunter. We’re wasting daylight here.”



# Chapter Seventeen

## Isla

*What hell he's been through. I mean, shit. I've spent the last decade hating Bryan, but I wouldn't wish what he's going through on my worst enemy. Which, you know, he is. Or at least, he used to be.*

I'm not sure if he still is. Frankly, I'm not sure if he's still an enemy at all, least of all my *worst* enemy. Since I don't have any other enemies, I suppose that means I wouldn't wish what he's going through on anyone.

I thought I had it bad, but at least my version of hell only lasted a few years before I broke out of it. It sounds like he's still stuck in his. I can't even imagine having lived like he has for so long, spending year in and year out with someone you don't even have anything to say to and are just expected to buy more things for.

And that not even beginning to cover what he must feel now. It pisses me off that anyone would use infertility as an excuse to cheat, but it's so much worse that she's now trying to make it sound like he's the one lying and he's not really infertile at all. *Seriously, who does that?*

It's downright cruel, especially since I know Bryan always wanted to have children. He seems okay with not having them now, but that doesn't mean it would've been easy on him to find out that it wasn't even a possibility for him to have biological children of his own.

Then to taunt him by claiming her baby is his? He may know it's impossible, but that just kind of adds insult to injury.

All these thoughts tear through my head like a hurricane as I set my glass down in his sink, rinse it out, and then head for the coffee maker in the corner of his kitchen. Once I've got the



caffeine on the go, I rummage around for two glasses and fill both to the brim with water.

A shuffling sound makes me turn around in time to see Bryan dragging his feet toward the sink to deposit his own glass in it. He pulls a face when he sees me looking at him. “Are you sure we can’t have one more drink? I’m not really feeling coffee right now.”

“Oh, but you will,” I assure him, pushing one of the glasses across the counter. “Get some water down the hatch too. When that glass is empty, fill it up again and then go find us something to watch on TV while we have our coffee.”

“Yes, boss,” he jokes, pressing two fingers to his forehead in a mock salute before he takes the water.

Our coffee brews and it smells strong and bitter, which is the exactly the way I like it and he needs it. I’m a little tipsy myself, but I think the shock over some of the things he told me is keeping me from feeling it too intensely.

When I walk out of the kitchen with our mugs in my hands, Bryan is stretched out on one of his sofas flicking through the channels on the television. He looks up when he hears me coming and motions to the fresh glass of water on the coffee table.

“I’m on my second one already. Don’t worry,” he says. “What do you want to watch? If you were serious about turning the day around, I vote for a sitcom.”

“A sitcom it is.” I put his coffee down, then head for the sofa kitty corner to his and kick my shoes off before I get comfortable. With my legs tucked underneath me and my coffee cradled in my lap, I settle in while he navigates to a show everyone has watched a hundred times, but it’s still a favorite.

There’s a comfortable silence between us while we watch. This is nothing new for us. In the past, we spent hours just lying around in front of the television when we were feeling lazy. It’s amazing that the comfort of doing this with him is still there. None of the bad stuff has wiped away the

familiarity of hanging out with him like this. *It's nice not having to actively hate on him for a while.*

The episodes are short and punchy, and before I know it, it's two hours later. We've each had more coffee and water, and my head is much clearer. As the theme starts playing, signaling the beginning of another episode, I sit up and poke him in the arm.

He's been dozing off for a few minutes at a time, and his eyes are adorably sleepy when he lifts his head and blinks me into focus. "What now? Are we sober yet?"

"Sober enough, I think. Why don't you go have a shower and get dressed? We're going out."

He releases a long groan, but nods and pushes himself into a sitting position. From there, he gets up and looks decidedly more steady on his feet than he did before as he heads to the stairs.

Busying myself with washing our mugs and glasses so I won't think about the fact that he's getting naked in the same house I'm in, I realize that we've also got to get some food into our stomachs. There's not much in his fridge, so I mentally add *restaurant* to the list I've been making in my head.

Just because I told him we were going out doesn't mean I know where we're going just yet. *It has to be someplace fun. A place where he can really get his mind off everything and just relax. A place where—*

The perfect answer jumps into my head. I know that what I've got in mind might trigger a sense of nostalgia in both of us, but I think it'll do us some good. Besides, I've been staying away from the pier for years to avoid having to face the memories I have with him there. It's about time I reclaim a place I used to love now that I'm doing better.

When Bryan comes back downstairs, he's looking much better himself. His hair is black since it's still damp from his shower, but it doesn't look like there's a nest of tiny bugs in

there anymore. He put on a pair of blue jeans and a black T-shirt, and he's even shaved.

The clean, soapy scent of him drifts over to me even though he's still across the room. When he smiles, his eyes sparkle and shine, and I want to kick myself for even noticing it but there's nothing to be done. *I'm always going to notice those things about him, it seems. It's just the way it is.*

"So, where are we going?" he asks, walking to the couch to grab his phone. He slides it into his back pocket before turning to me. "Whose car are we taking? Did you drive here?"

"No, I took a cab but neither of us are driving," I say. "We might not be falling around drunk, but we're still not okay to be behind a wheel."

He rocks his head from side to side, but then nods. "Good point. I could call my driver if you want?"

I roll my eyes at him. "There are plenty of drivers right downstairs. Don't bother yours. Let the man have the day off."

"Okay, okay," he laughs, lifting his hands in surrender before motioning for me to precede him to the door. "You win. We'll take a cab, but you still haven't told me where we're going."

"The games arcade at the pier," I say, glancing at him to check his reaction. "It always used to be a great place to go when we wanted to blow off some steam, and that's what you need to do."

"Sure. It was a great place to go to blow off some steam after studying and doing homework in *high school*," he argues, emphasizing the words. "I'm not convinced it's going to help much now. There's a bar downtown where patrons can throw axes. Maybe we should try that instead?"

"Nope. We're going to go toss some balls into hoops and whack some moles. I've heard about those bars, but I don't think alcohol and axes are a good combination for us right now. Do you really want to drink more?"

He shrugs. “It’s better than going somewhere meant for kids.”

“Loosen up.” I shove playfully at his shoulder. “No one is going to mistake you for a child. Just go with it. You might even find that it’ll be fun.”

Despite his resistance, he does eventually loosen up and have fun, and so do I. That sense of nostalgia I was worried about is definitely triggered but instead of making it difficult to be there, it actually adds to how much I’m enjoying it.

The same seems to be true for Bryan. When we first arrive, we get fries and dip to line our stomachs, then we go straight to all our old favorite games. There are times when we can’t stop laughing and others when the competition between us is as fierce as it always was.

By the time we leave the arcade, the sun has set but almost all the tension has eased out of his features and I’m feeling lighter than I have in years. We’re both grinning when we walk out into the cool night air side by side.

Bryan’s fingers are in his pockets, and despite the fact that his profile is much more mature than it used to be, he looks almost boyish right now. Like the friend I’ve done this with a million times instead of the man who hurt me.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, nudging me with his elbow to get my attention. “I owe you dinner for today, but you seem to have checked out on me.”

“Nah.” I smile when I tilt my head back to look into his eyes, my own hands in my back pockets while we walk. “I haven’t checked out. I was just thinking how amazing it is that so much has changed, but this place is exactly the same.”

“You’re right.” His steps slow as he looks around, then his gaze comes back to mine. “So, what do you say? Dinner?”

“Dinner,” I agree. “Where do you want to go?”

A slow grin lifts the corners of his lips as he points to a food truck standing in the parking lot nearby. “How about right there? We can get some takeout and eat on the beach.”

“Sounds like a plan.” A plan I only realize the downside of once I’m seated with my ass on the sand and my food in my lap.

*It’s too romantic. The water. The moon. The stars. The neon lights and the music from the pier? Too. Damn. Romantic.* And yet, I don’t want to leave, even if I know I should.



# Chapter Eighteen

## Bryan

To say I'm surprised about how the day turned out is the understatement of the century. At first, I was beyond pissed at Bella for calling Isla, but now I think I might just owe my sister a day of babysitting or a month's supply of diapers or something for calling her friend.

Maybe it's just a reflection of how sad my life has been recently, but this was the best day I've had in years. Day drinking, sharing my story like a little girl, watching TV, and going to a games arcade doesn't sound all that great, but I know it's a day I'm not going to forget anytime soon.

On the other hand, most of what made it the best day I've had in so long was the company. It feels like Isla and I have turned a corner, and that's pretty fucking amazing.

The moon reflects off the water, and she's staring at the glowing yellow ball like she's trying to figure something out. I leave her to it for the first few minutes while we eat. We've got a lot of memories together at this place, and I'm sure she's been thinking about them as much as I have since we arrived.

While I'm leaving her to her thoughts, I fall down a rabbit hole of my own. Now that I've told her what my life has been like between then and now, I need to know what she went through. I need to hear about it directly from her.

I know I was a dumb teenager back then, but I'm a man now. I need her to tell me about the consequences my choice had on her and no matter how hard it gets, I need to face whatever wrath might come with it. After everything I told her, I decide not to beat around the bush. She doesn't have to speak to me if she doesn't want to. Obviously, I'd never try to force her, but I'm not going to ease into it again.

It's time to face all this shit head-on. Just like I've been doing all day.

"What happened to you?" I ask, clearing my throat as I move my eyes away from the moon to look at her instead.

She's so fucking beautiful with the ambient lighting making her hair glow like a halo around her head and softening her features. *How did I ever look at her and not see the most gorgeous girl I've ever known?*

My head must've been further up my ass than I thought because there's no way I should ever have let her slip through my fingers. I should've made her mine back in high school and never let her go. Instead, I was always chasing some other skirt while telling myself that this particular skirt was off-limits.

*Way to go, teenage Bryan. Way to fucking go.* I almost want to slap myself upside the head for it now, but I don't really feel like explaining that to her if I do it. *I'm sober again now. It's going to be really hard trying to come up with a plausible explanation that doesn't sound crazy for why I'm hitting myself.*

Isla's eyes are on mine, but despite the fact that I just asked about the past, they're not flashing. They're not angry. It doesn't look like she's about to tell me off or storm away.

Instead, she finishes her burger and dabs her mouth with her napkin, then pulls her knees up to her chest and stares off into the distance over the water. "When I found out I got into Central Tech, I was so excited because it meant I'd be going to school with you again."

I nod, remembering the way her entire being lit up when she told me she got into the university I was attending. We were on a video call, and I'll never forget the pure joy she radiated when she held up that acceptance letter.

"Mom and Dad were worried about it being all the way in New England, but they eventually agreed to let me go."

"Because I was there," I say, a fresh wave of guilt slicing little pieces off my gut even though I already knew this part. "I



remember.”

“Yeah,” she says softly. “Anyway, I applied to Central Tech, but I also applied at a few other schools. One of them was in Los Angeles. My aunt offered to let me live with her if I decided to go to California. Obviously, my parents loved that idea.”

I have a feeling I know where this is going, but I don’t interrupt her. She listened to me earlier, and I’ll do the same for her now.

“After I finally got back to the dorms that morning, I went to take a shower once I’d calmed down a little.” Her voice becomes slightly choked. “When I walked out of the bathroom, everyone was staring at me. They had their phones in their hands...”

She releases a shaky breath. “Needless to say, once one person in the dorms got sent those videos, they spread like wildfire. It didn’t take long before they were on every phone in there.”

Lowering her head, she drags her fingers through her hair a few times before looking up and continuing. “I knew as soon as I saw that first phone pointing up at me on the roof it was going to happen, but I didn’t realize how fast or how bad it was going to be. It didn’t take long before I figured out that I couldn’t stay at CT though. Luckily, my grades were good enough and it was the end of the semester. I managed to transfer to the school in California and my aunt told my parents I was still welcome to stay with her.”

She pauses, closing her eyes and letting her head fall back as she takes a deep breath. “I didn’t want to come back to New York for the break. I didn’t want to risk seeing anyone I knew, but especially not you or Bella, so I went straight to LA. I thought I’d be able to put it behind me once I got there, but...”

She shrugs as she trails off. “It turns out it’s not easy to outrun something that’s on the world wide web. My aunt tried to stop me from doing it, but I couldn’t help myself. I kept checking the comments, and the shares, and the likes on social

media, and it sent me into a downward spiral so steep I ended up deferring my next semester.”

My heart cracks when I think about what she was going through while I was trying to fix things with Sam. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I should've been there for her.*

“I couldn’t bear the thought of showing my face in public,” she admits in a voice barely above her whisper. Her gaze is fixed on the shoreline, but I can see the faraway look in her eyes. “Since I refused to go out, I holed up in the house for a month or two. Eventually, my aunt insisted that I snap out of it. She got me out of the house, arranged for me to see a therapist, gave me a job at her events management company, and things snowballed from there.”

“That’s a massive snowball,” I comment. “From not being able to leave the house to working on some of the biggest events around.”

“It didn’t happen overnight,” she says, her voice still quiet but at least there’s a hint of a smile on her lips now. “I discovered I had a real knack for events, but it took a long time before that started meaning anything. When I went back to college, I changed majors. I had to start all over with my degree, but it was worth it.”

“I’d say,” I murmur. “I hate how it happened, but I’m glad you found your passion. You seem really happy doing what you do, and you’re seriously good at it.”

“Thank you.” She gathers her hair in her hand and holds it up, tipping her head and taking a deep breath. “For the longest time, I thought my life was over. In retrospect, I know it wasn’t that long, but while I was in that house feeling like I’d never be able to leave again, it felt like forever. It felt like I was done and just waiting it out until I’d eventually fade into nothingness.”

The words hit me like a blow to the chest. “It was that bad?”

“Yep.” A group of rowdy teenagers pass us, and she waits until their voices are gone again before continuing. “It was a

very dark time for me, darker than I realized a person could have. Even when I finally started seeing the therapist and going out, the fear that the videos could resurface at any given moment was terrible. I'd see people laughing over a phone on campus and be sure that was what they were looking at."

"Was it?"

She gives her head a slight shake. "No. I don't think anyone in LA ever put the pieces together that I was *that* girl, but I heard a group of girls talking about it once. They felt sorry for the poor chick in New England who got caught parading around on the roof of a frat house. One of them thought I'd done it for attention."

"I'm so sorry, Isla. I know I've said it already, but it doesn't feel like just saying it will ever be enough."

"Didn't Bella tell you any of this?" she asks eventually, frowning curiously as she shifts on the sand to face me more directly. "I was pretty sure she told you everything. It's another reason why I didn't want to talk to you about it myself before. I thought you already knew, and you were being spiteful for bringing it up just because you wanted to torture me a little more."

"Bella?" I scoff. "She didn't say a word to me. For months after she found out what happened, she was too pissed off to talk to me at all, but she really used to explode whenever I dared to ask her anything about you. To this day, she refuses to give me any information about you."

I chuckle under my breath. "Even when she told me she'd hired a company to help out with the ball, she didn't say it was you she'd asked for help. Her exact words were that she hired a company and then she gave me its name. It sounded familiar, but it was only after I looked it up online that I realized it sounded familiar because it belonged to you."

Isla smiles. It's not big or bright, but it's there despite everything we've talked about today and everything she just told me. *That has to mean something.*

“Remind me to thank her for protecting whatever shred of privacy I had left after all that,” she says. “Although, I’m sure she would’ve given in if you’d kept asking but I guess I don’t blame you for not doing it. With Samantha putting you through your paces the way she was at the time, I understand that you had bigger fish to fry than to find out what happened to me.”

Turning to face her, I arch both of my brows and shake my head. “Fuck that. I stopped asking her for any information about you years ago, but in the beginning? I couldn’t stop badgering her. She just refused to budge. Like I said earlier, Sam even accused me of being obsessed with you because of how badly I was trying to find out where you were and if you were okay.”

Her eyes move from one of mine to the other, but eventually she sighs and the look she gives me is the most gentle one I’ve seen from her since that day at the frat house. “Do you still think it wasn’t a mistake? Us sleeping together back then? It seems like we’d have spared ourselves a hell of a lot of misery and heartbreak if we’d just stayed friends.”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” I reply confidently and without even having to think about it. “The mistake was what I did after. We’d have spared ourselves a hell of a lot of misery and heartbreak if I’d faced the truth sooner that I didn’t want you only as a friend.”

*And there it is. The heart of the matter. The truth of all truths.* I didn’t want her only as a friend back then and now that she’s back in my life, I don’t want her as only a friend now.



# Chapter Nineteen

## Isla

Bryan's burger has been lying in his lap, mostly forgotten while we were talking. He picks it up now, taking a big bite and chewing it, but the movements seem almost mechanical. I'm not even sure he knows that he's eating.

He's gone quiet, and I suspect he might just be using the burger to give himself time to process what I said. It's fine though. I can use a few minutes of silence myself.

Talking about what happened is one thing, but admitting the depths that I sank into is another. At the same time, it feels strangely good to have gotten it off my chest. Like a weight lifted from my shoulders with every word.

I haven't spoken to many people about this, especially not so candidly. The last person I really let in on my fears in the time that followed was my therapist, and that was years ago. Bella knows I had a tough time, but I don't even think she knows just how tough it was.

Telling Bryan about it now feels right, almost like I've come full circle. In my mind's eye, I even saw the circle closing while we talked. All of this started with the two of us. I suppose it's only natural that there's a sense of finality in finally getting the opportunity to fill in the blanks on both sides when it comes to what happened after.

I've always had questions. Did he just carry on with life as normal while mine fell apart? Was he ever sorry for what he did? Did he even take any responsibility for what happened at all?

Bella may not have spoken to him about me, but she did talk to me about him. She gave me some snippets of the full story that I only heard today but getting the answers to all

those questions directly from him is different to hearing about it from someone else.

Sitting here, talking to him without arguing or having to defend or justify my feelings, feels great. My therapist used to say that storytelling is a powerful tool and that proper conversations with those who wronged you can be tremendously helpful, but I never really bought into it. I also never thought I'd get the chance to do it since Bryan was away at school in New England and I was putting my life back together in California.

It's taken a long time to do it, but it's definitely allowing me to let go of some of the resentment I've been carrying around toward him. In a way, it feels like talking to him and hearing from him in turn has cleansed me from the inside out, and that feels pretty darn amazing after all the bitterness I've been holding on to for so long.

After he finishes his burger, he puts our wrappers back in the brown paper bag and dusts his hands off before turning to look at me. "Is it still there? The fear, I mean."

I shrug. "Sometimes. It's not crippling anymore, but the internet never forgets, you know? There's always a possibility I'll walk into a meeting with a new client and they'll have seen it, or I'll get into it with an employee and that they'll circulate the footage for the whole company to see as a way of getting revenge. There's a certain amount of anxiety that comes with the uncertainty of never knowing if and when it'll surface again, but I've learned to manage it."

He's quiet for another long minute before he speaks again and when he does, his gaze lands heavily on mine. There's no sparkle in his eyes now. In fact, even though his face is partially shrouded in shadow from the way the light is hitting him, he looks so serious and somber that it's hard to imagine those eyes ever having had a sparkle in them at all.

"Do you think you'll ever be able to forgive me?"

The question makes me freeze. As little as a few hours ago, my answer would've been a very firm no. It would've come as a reflex, an immediate denial even if I've been

wrestling with that very question myself lately. Hell, I'd have said no regardless of whether it was true or not.

But now, I consider it more carefully before I say anything. Eventually, I settle on an answer he may not want to hear, but it's the best one I've got right now. The one that's the closest to the truth I can offer.

"Maybe," I say. "I think there's a part of me that's already started forgiving you even though I never planned on doing it. These last few weeks have been an emotional rollercoaster ride for me. One minute, I'll think I can forgive you and I already have, and the next I'll be swearing I never will. What happened... It changed me, Bryan. In a lot of ways. There are a lot of different facets that come into play when I really think about forgiveness. It's not just about you closing that window in my face."

He nods curtly, letting out a sigh before pulling back his shoulders. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Again, I consider the question properly before inclining my head. "You were my first, you remember that, right?"

"Of course." His brows knit together. "It's not something I'd ever forget."

*Well, that's another answer I've wanted.* I glance at him, not quite sure if I can tell him this part but also knowing I have to if I want to scrub at the remaining bitterness inside to finally wash it all out.

"You can't imagine what it did to me to have my first time end that way," I say once I'm ready. "It put me off sex for years. Eventually, after a lot of counseling targeted specifically at reclaiming my sexuality, I got involved with a guy but it still took me months to take the plunge. That's gotten better too, obviously, but there are still some things I know I'll never be able to do that I might've wanted to experience if it hadn't been for that."

"Such as?"

I look around us, letting some sand run through my fingers before patting it back down. "Sex in public. Some people



would take the chance of going at it right here, for example. I won't. Ever. There's way too much of a risk someone will get another video of me flashing my bits."

"That's understandable," he replies as he lets his gaze wander over the beach. "Never say never though. You might get there eventually."

"Nope." I chuckle and open my eyes wide as I shake my head. "It's not really an issue. You can't miss something you never had, and I don't even know for sure if I would've wanted to try it. It was just an example. Another layer of emotional scar tissue."

"What else?" he asks, the tightness around his eyes cluing me in to the fact that while it's not easy for me to say this, it's not easy for him to hear it, either. It's funny, but it's comforting to know that he actually cares.

"There's a lot of stuff," I say. "Some of it is so random that I can't even think of it right now, but in general, I'm a lot less trusting than I used to be. I can also be a tyrant at work. Every morning before I go in, it's like I cover myself in armor to make sure none of the cracks are visible to the outside world."

"Your staff respects you," he says sincerely. "Even I've seen that. You can't be so bad."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "It could be respect, but it could also be fear. Either way, it's served me well. At least I try not be unreasonable about it. I like to think that I'm stern, but fair. I never used to be that way. If anything, I was soft. A bit of a pushover."

We lapse into silence again, both watching the gentle lapping of water to the shore before he reaches out and slings his arm around my shoulders. He pulls my upper body to him, and I let it happen because a hug is exactly what I need right now. There aren't a lot people in my life to hug these days, and the gentle pressure feels good.

"Do you want to keep talking?" he murmurs.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I glance up at him. "No, I think that's enough for one day. You?"

“I’m ready to go if you are,” he says, releasing me when I start moving away. Together, we make sure not to leave any of our trash on the beach and then head back to the parking lot.

While we’re waiting for a cab, I realize that I don’t really want our day to be over yet. It’s been an emotional one, but in a good way. It doesn’t feel right to end it when we’re both still mulling over what the other has said, so stuck in our heads that I doubt sleep will be coming for either of us anyway.

“Do you want to come back to my place for a drink?” I ask, surprising even myself when the question slips out. “Just a drink. It doesn’t have to be a euphemism for anything else.”

He laughs, sweeping an arm out to open the back door of the cab pulling up in front of us. “Sure. Just a drink sounds good.”

We’re quiet again on the ride over, but things feel more peaceful and settled between us. When we get to my house, he whistles between his teeth and rocks back on his heels to look up at the brownstone while I’m unlocking the door.

“This is nice,” he says. “It’s also really not far from my place. I don’t know why I was expecting a mansion in the suburbs or an ultra-modern condo with an infinity pool on your roof.”

My nose wrinkles. “Living in a mansion by myself would be depressing and I’ll leave the ultra-modern condos and penthouses to you. I don’t need an infinity pool. I have a hot tub on the deck though. If that counts.”

“A hot tub?” His eyes light up. “God, it’s been forever since I’ve been in one of those things.”

The door swings open and we walk in, Bryan behind me as I set my things down on the table in my entrance hall. Once my purse and keys are in their proper place, I lead him to the kitchen. “What would you like to drink?”

“What have you got?”

My teeth sink into my cheek as I mentally take stock of what I have available. “Soda. Water. Coffee. Maybe some

wine somewhere. I've been given a few bottles of red over the years, but I haven't opened many of them."

"Wine, then," he says, then waggles his brows at me when I send him a questioning look. "Don't judge me. I spent a long time not being allowed to drink. It's Saturday, right?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It is Saturday. I'm just surprised you're up for more alcohol."

He shrugs. "Someone forced a whole lot of water and coffee down my throat. I'm fine. I can't even remember the last time I had red wine. Plus, having a glass of wine in the hot tub sounds very fucking good to me right now."

"Who said anything about going in the hot tub?"

"Me." Walking toward the kitchen door, he flips the lock and sticks his head outside. I'm getting a bottle of wine out of the rack, but I know what he's seeing.

There's a semi-enclosed deck against the house with a roof over it and privacy walls around the area where the hot tub is. On the other side of the deck is a barbecue I haven't used since I moved in, but Mrs. Brooks enjoyed entertaining. The rest of garden is beyond the deck, and there's a table with chairs underneath a big tree in the corner.

Bryan turns in the doorway, a big, goofy grin on his face as he starts unbuckling his belt. I nearly drop the bottle when I realize that he's stripping.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my voice dropping to a stage-whisper for some reason I'm not sure about. "Are you getting naked?"

"I am." He smirks. "It really has been years since I've been in one of those things. I'm tired of being the CEO who always has to be responsible or the man whose actions are controlled by a cheating, deceitful bitch. I'm going in."

As he says it, he kicks off his shoes and heads outside, leaving a trail of clothes in his wake. *Well, so much for this being just a drink.*



# Chapter Twenty

## Bryan

Indecision dances across Isla's features when she joins me on the deck. She's not holding the wine like I expected her to be, but she's also not yelling at me to put my clothes back on or turning the tables by tossing me out on my half-naked ass.

I'm down to my boxer-briefs, and I'm undoing the latches on the cover over the hot tub. When all the latches keeping the cover in place are off, I pull it free to find clean, shimmering water in the tub. There's some steam rising off it, telling me that it's not only clean, but heated as well.

I know this might be pushing it, but fuck it...

I don't cut loose often. Spontaneity has been missing from my life for a long time, and I feel like being in a hot tub. It's been an interesting, fun yet difficult day and the water is going to feel so damn good on my tense muscles that I can't resist. I also don't want to resist, which is why I'm not even trying.

It turns out talking can be equal parts liberating, terrifying, and stressful. I really am glad she finally told me about what she went through, but I'm ready to hit pause on the emotions and the guilt and regret. There's only so much I can take for one day and luckily, she reached her limit at the same time I did.

If she wanted to keep talking back on the beach, I'd have kept listening. Obviously. But I won't deny that I was relieved when she opted out and said she'd had enough for the day.

What I want now, and what I think we both need, is to relax and unwind. I was prepared to go home and do it on my own but it's going to be much better to do it here, with her. If she doesn't chase me away, that is.

Looking back at Isla, I see her go back inside. Shit, was this a step too far? I just felt like we had made so much progress. By opening up and both of us sharing what we'd been through.

Disappointment slides over me. I knew when I started taking off my clothes that she might not be too eager to join me, but a big part of me was really hoping she would.

*Seems I was pushing a little too hard.*

Fucker the fuck. I bend down to pick my clothes back up so I can go after her. I'm standing with my one leg already back in my pants when I see a movement in the doorway. I look up and see Isla standing there. She has a few towels in her hands and my heart skips a beat. In addition to the towels, she's also holding the bottle of wine and two glasses.

"I knew the spontaneous girl who lives underneath your hardworking exterior was still in there somewhere," I joke. "You had me going for a minute there though."

"I had myself going for a minute there," she admits. "But why not? No one can see us here. It's nothing you haven't seen before, and I'm tired of always being so aware of what I'm doing. It might be nice to just be for a while."

I pull my leg back out of the pants and drop it back onto the floor.

"My thoughts exactly," I agree, but then my mouth dries up and my cock stirs when she starts pulling her clothes off.

She's not making a show of it, but she doesn't have to. Even just the action of her pulling her shirt off over her head and wriggling out of her jeans is sexy enough that she's got every ounce of my attention.

As she reveals her smooth, creamy skin, I swallow. Hard. I nearly bit my tongue off the other day when I saw her underwear, and the set she has on tonight is even better. It's a deep red that contrasts with her skin and her hair, and the cups of the bra dip low between her breasts.

The panties are a barely there scrap of lace that rides the tops of her thighs and leaves the lower half of her perfect ass

exposed. Her cheeks flush when she lifts her gaze to meet mine, and she sucks her lower lip into her mouth but doesn't stop moving.

After tucking her hair behind her ears, she shifts on her feet to reach for the wine. She sets the glasses on the edge of the tub, fills them up, then puts the bottle back down on a small table against the wall.

Once our drinks are organized, she takes a breath big enough that her chest rises visibly before it falls again. As she exhales, she grips the side and raises a leg over it to climb in with me. As soon as she submerged, her gaze wanders to me and she cocks an eyebrow.

“Are you coming?”

Since she kept her lingerie on, I decide not to push my luck, and keep my boxer on as well. I climb in the tub and it feels amazing.

She sighs. “Okay. You were right. This was a good idea.”

“A great one,” I correct lightly, reaching behind her for the glasses and taking one for myself while holding the other up for her.

Her fingers brush against mine when she closes them around the stem, and our gazes catch for a second before she lifts the glass to her lips. Leaning back again, I do the same, savoring the taste of the rich liquid on my tongue.

It's very fucking difficult to ignore the fact she's practically naked beside me, but I reign it in. She invited me here for a drink and I've already pushed my luck. I won't let my dick be in charge of the decision-making here.

Isla relaxes next to me, her head on the edge while her body drifts up to expose flashes of skin between the bubbles. *Fuck, she's hot.*

Jerking my gaze away from the red triangle between her legs that I know is totally bare underneath, I take another swig of wine. At this rate, it's going to be a *long, hard* night.

“Are you ever sorry that you went into the family business?” she asks after a few minutes have passed. Her eyes cut to the side, the bright blue of them holding mine as her cheeks flush again. “I know it’s always been the plan. It’s just something I’m wondering since we’ve been talking about me going in such a different direction. Was there ever anything else you wanted to do?”

I take a second to think it over before I shrug one of my shoulders. “Honestly? I’ve never really thought about it. I knew it’d have to be either me or Bella who took over from Dad, and she’s always leaned more toward the financial and operations side of the business. I got into IT early and never looked back, so it just made sense for us to assume the roles we’re in.”

“You’ve never had a secret dream of becoming a fireman or an astronaut or something instead?” she teases. “I seem to remember a time when you wanted to become a rock star.”

A surprised laugh tears out of me. “God. I can’t believe you remember that. I was, what? Sixteen? It was stupid. I should’ve taken up an instrument long before then if I actually wanted to do it.”

She giggles, a melodic, girly sound I haven’t heard from her before. Well, not recently, anyway. “You could always have become a singer.”

“You’ve heard me sing. I’d have had better luck trying to learn an instrument from scratch as a teenager than I would’ve at someone actually wanting me to sing for their band.”

Cocking her head in thought, she finally dips her head in a slight nod. “Fair enough. I don’t know if you’ve gotten better at it over the years, but I have to agree. You weren’t the most amazing singer the last time we did karaoke together.”

“We should do that again,” I say. “Soon. It’ll be fun. We can even try to see if we can get my parents to watch CJ for the night, then we can drag Bella and Chase with us.”

“If memory serves, neither of them loved karaoke, either. They might want to do something else if they can get a night



out.”

“Nah. I’ll talk to them.” Just the thought of a night out on the town with Isla sends energy rushing through me. “If they don’t want to, we could go by ourselves.”

Her gaze snaps back to mine and lingers. We’re both floating on the surface now, and our bodies are so close together that we keep touching from the movement of the water. Renewed electricity suddenly passes between us, the arc prompting my eyes to drop to her mouth.

“What are we doing, Bryan?” she asks.

I swallow, glancing back up at her eyes before scooting an inch closer to her. “I don’t know, but do you want to stop?”

“No.” She doesn’t hesitate before saying it, and it’s like that one word is the starting pistol I’ve been waiting for.

Lifting one of my hands out of the water, I rest it on the side of her neck and raise myself up on my knee to let my face hover above hers. Slowly lowering it, I drag my nose along the length of hers, kissing her eyelids, the space between her brows, and the tip of her nose before finally sealing my mouth over her lips.

The kiss is a slow and languid at first, but it ignites something in me I can’t explain. A rampant fire of need that burns so hot, I quickly lose control. Isla’s right there with me, her fingers traveling into my hair and holding it tight as he brings me closer to her.

With the water holding her body up, it’s easy to slide in underneath her. Easier to bring her down on my lap as my mouth ravishes hers. She moans when her pussy grinds against my dick, harder now than it’s probably ever been before.

My hands roam over her body, feeling every inch of her that I didn’t get the chance to touch the other day. Her skin is so fucking soft, and she shivers against me as I drag my fingertips across her ribcage and brush along the undersides of her breasts.

*As sexy as the bra is, it needs to go.* Hooking my arms around her back, I undo the clip and slide the straps down her

arms, not breaking the kiss as I pull it free and drop it in the water with us. She gasps when I pinch her nipples, and my cock swells even more at the sound.

She slides up a little so I can take off my boxers. She also hooks her fingers into her panties and throws them on the floor next to the hot tub. I immediately pull her back against me, and close my mouth around her nipple. With my last bit of restraint, I break the kiss.

“I don’t have a condom,” I manage to bite out. “Obviously, we don’t have to worry about me knocking you up accidentally, but—”

“I’m clean,” she replies, throwing her head back as her fingers dig into my shoulders. “You?”

“As a whistle.” I had myself tested after I found out about Samantha’s affair, and I haven’t been with anyone else since. “Are we good? You’re sure you want to do this? It doesn’t have to go any further.”

She drops her chin, and her darkened gaze holds a challenge when it meets mine. “I thought we were all about blowing off steam and doing what we want today. Don’t you want this?”

“Of course, I do.” I take her hand and guide it to my crotch under the water, hissing between my teeth when she squeezes me firmly. It feels so fucking good that my hips buck into her palm, and she smirks as her free hand slides around to the nape of my neck.

“Then shut up and kiss me,” she demands, and though I like to be in control when it comes to sex, I pull her back to me and claim her mouth in another searing kiss. *Who am I to say no when she asked so damn nicely?*



# Chapter Twenty One

## Isla

Holy smokes!

Our tongues intertwine in a passionate tango. The kiss lasts until we both have to gasp for breath. His hands slide down to cup my ass. Never thought I'd need this, but my God, this is so hot.

He brings his mouth back to my nipple. He sucks it into his mouth and I feel the pleasure shoot through me.

His lips are so soft, but strong at the same time. He sucks harder, causing my body to jolt forward and I feel his erection pressing against my insides again. He lets go of my nipple, opens his eyes and looks at me. His gaze is hazy, filled with lust. Jolts of pleasure shoot throughout my body.

The warmth of the hot tub surrounds us and I think it has gone to my head by now. He brings his mouth to my ear and whispers, "You're so fucking sexy."

I moan and slowly start to glide up and down over his erection. I let my pussy slide down the entire length of his cock and he guides me up and down with his hands. Harder and harder, more forcefully. My nails dig into his shoulders. The water sloshing over the edge from our furious movements.

He lets go of my ass and moves his hand to my hair. He entwines it in his fist and then presses his lips against mine. When he breaks the kiss, our eyes lock.

"Are you ready for me, Isla?" He kisses my neck and then turns his lustful gaze back on me. "Is your pussy ready for me?"

I bite my bottom lip but then nod my head. He pulls my hair a little harder. It causes a small stabbing pain, but at the same time feels so, so good.

“Words, Isla. I need words.”

When I look into those deep brown eyes of his, I can see the promise in them. A promise that he can give me everything I need. And that’s exactly what I need right now. Have some fun, let my hair loose. Not thinking about the consequences. Since that time in my office, I’ve had vivid dreams about this. It felt good. Too good.

I need this. More than I care to admit. “Yes, Bryan. I’m ready for you.”

He grins after which he lifts me off his lap. He turns me around and places me on the edge of the hot-tub. The sensation of the cold wind across my naked, wet body makes me shiver. But I think it’s mostly because of my excitement than the cold. And when he spreads my legs to push his head between them, I’ve already forgotten all about the cold.

His tongue strokes my opening and clit in one long stroke, and I moan loudly. With one hand I support myself and with the other I grab his hair and push him harder against me.

He chuckles against my body. It’s pretty funny because we’re both fighting to have the upper hand. Just another thing we can’t seem to agree on. Then he sucks my clit between his lips and I feel it tingle all the way to my little toes. This man is a sex god. That should be obvious by now. He knows just the right spots to hit. I feel my legs go limp and an orgasm threatens to overwhelm me.

As if he can read my body and knows I’m dangling on that edge he stops and brings his head up to kiss me. I can taste my own arousal on his tongue, which only makes me hornier. I bite his tongue for a moment, which causes him to growl, pull me back into the water, and abruptly turn around.

He gives me a slight shove, causing me to lean forward and place my hands on the edge of the hot-tub. With my ass facing towards him, I feel him come up behind me. I didn’t think it was possible, but his cock is even harder than it was a moment ago. I look over my shoulder at him and watch as he grabs his erection by the root, pushing it right in front of my opening.

He grins at me, then grabs my hair in his fist and pushes himself deep inside me with a deep thrust.

“Oh,” I gasp.

With one hand he holds my hip in place, and with the other he holds my hair. He pushes harder and harder, deeper and deeper, hitting that delicious spot deep inside me. I’m not going to last long if he continues this.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he growls.

His words make my insides tighten and make my pussy contract around his cock. It makes him growl even louder.

“You like it when I talk to you like that, don’t you, Isla?”

Oh my, he can read my body better than any man ever could. I bite my lip because I refuse to admit it out loud.

He pulls back, which causes a whimper to escape my lips. He chuckles and then pushes his dick against my throbbing clit.

“Bryan,” I gasp. “Don’t tease me.”

It only makes him chuckle louder. “Your body is showing me what you refuse to admit out loud, Isla.”

He strokes his dick over my clit once more and it causes my legs to tremble uncontrollably. I groan, he laughs.

“So close,” he teases. “On the edge. Ask me, Isla, and I’ll give you what you want.”

He lets go of my hair so I can look at him. He now has one hand on my hip, the other is holding his cock at my opening. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow. Daring me.

“Please Bryan, please don’t stop.”

I hate that he can get me to beg, but right now I would do anything to get that release my body so craves.

His smile gets so big and I can see the satisfaction in his eyes. And then he pushes back inside me. Hard, deep, and merciless. He slides his hand between my legs and squeezes

my clit. Thank God he's holding me tight, because I lose all control of my body.

My knees buckle, my arms shake, and the most powerful orgasm ever rolls throughout my body. I squeeze my eyes shut and stars twinkle behind my eyelids.

He continues to thrust for a moment, but after a few thrusts I hear him growl loudly and feel him swell up inside of me before he comes.

For a moment we just stand still, his cock still buried deep inside me. We both try to catch our breath, and then he turns me around, steps out of the hot-tub and helps me get out as well. He grabs one of the towels and wraps it around me, before putting on his own towel as well.

He sits down on the lounge chair and then pulls me against him. We lie down and he puts his arm around me. His deep masculine scent fills my nostrils and I feel my heart skip a beat.

I'm so so so so screwed.

I had envisioned it to be nothing more than sex, but slowly but surely he is making his way to my heart and I am no longer able to stop it.

The thing is... I don't hate him. I hate what he did to me. But now that I heard his side of the story, I can understand it better. Who never made a wrong choice when we we're younger?

He strokes through my hair and gives a soft kiss on my nose and then on my lips, making my heart skip another beat.

Yep, it's official, I'm screwed.





# Chapter Twenty Two

## Isla

*Confusion, thy name is Isla.*

After this past weekend, my feelings for Bryan are all over the place—more so even than they were before, which is really saying something. Like what happened with us the very first time we got together, we ended up staying in bed for the rest of the weekend until reality tore us apart on Monday morning.

As if that wouldn't have been confusing enough, it was only the start of it. All week, we've been texting and flirting over the phone. We talk before we go to bed and when we wake up, and we send each other totally random messages about how our days are going in between.

It's like my old fantasies are finally coming true and there's something real brewing between us. Something pure and good that was always meant to be. But as much as I want to believe it, I just can't. I'm enjoying it, but I don't trust it.

At least, I don't think I do, but that's part of the immense levels of confusion. Because there is a part of me, no matter how small, that *does* believe it. That's starting to trust him again, and I don't know how to feel about that.

I've considered calling Bella to talk to her about it more than once, but I keep deciding against it. She's the mother of a newborn baby. I doubt she'll know more about how Bryan's feeling about everything that's happening between us than I do, and I don't want to burden her with our drama again. Especially not now.

So I'm sucking it up and figuring it out for myself. Today will be the first time I'm seeing him again after we turned my house into our love nest this weekend. *No, not love. Sex. A sex nest.*

We have a full day planned meeting with potential vendors for the ball, and I'm a little apprehensive about how things are going to go between us. My money is on awkward, more awkward, or back to business as usual.

*Probably awkward.*

Standing in front of the mirror in my dressing room at home; I give myself a final once-over. I've chosen a navy blue dress that hugs my figure and hangs to my knees. The neckline is high, but my boobs look awesome in it. *Shallow? Yes, but I'm not the only girl who likes it when her girls look good, right?*

On my feet are a pair of silver, strappy sandals with heels that are manageable to walk in without the fear of snapping an ankle. My jewelry is silver too, a thin chain around my neck and one around my wrist. There are small hoops in my ears and my trusty, wide-strapped watch around my other wrist.

The outfit probably won't have him drooling when he sees me, but it's sexy enough to give me the confidence boost I need to see him after all the changes there have been between us since last week. A soft chime from my phone lets me know that it's time to leave, and I smooth out the dress before turning and plucking my purse from the dresser.

*Here we go. If it's awkward, at least we have a lot of work to do to keep ourselves from focusing too much on it.*

When I open my front door to head out, I pull up short when Bryan gets out of the black SUV parked at the curb. He looks like a million bucks in a pair of gray slacks, a black button-down shirt, and a light blue tie. His dark hair has been pushed away from his face and those gorgeous eyes crinkle at the corners when he sees me.

"Bryan?" It's stupid to say his name. I know it's him and that he's right there, walking toward me, but I'm so surprised to see him that I say it anyway. "What are you doing here?"

"Giving you a ride to our first appointment," he says, surprising me even more when he wraps his arms around my waist as soon as he reaches me and pulls me in for a deep kiss.

When he finally releases me, he steps back to take me in from top to bottom and back up again. He smiles when his eyes reach mine. “Wow. I’d have come earlier if I knew you were looking like that this morning.”

My cheeks burst into flames, but I really like that he thinks I look good. Even so, I roll my eyes at him and smack him lightly on the shoulder. “Come on, Romeo. We’ve got work to do.”

“Unfortunately,” he says cheerfully, his hand falling to the small of my back as we walk to his car. “What are the chances I can convince you to play hooky and stay in bed with me all day?”

“None, but not because I don’t want to. We’ve got people waiting for us and they need your decisions before they can start with their planning. Interrupting our own planning would’ve been okay, but we can’t do that to anyone else.”

He feigns exasperation, but then shrugs and grins at me again as he helps me into the back of the car. “I had to try, but I didn’t think you’d go for it. Especially not since there are other people waiting on us.”

Once we’re buckled in, he glances at me. “So, what’s our first stop?”

“Do you ever read the emails I send you?” I ask as I lean forward to give his driver the address. “We’re meeting the chef at the Capital Grand. I hope you got the part of the message about not eating breakfast before we go, or else you’re going to be bursting real soon.”

He chuckles. “Somehow, I read that part of the email. I’ve been looking forward to the tasting, actually. Do you know what they’ve got on the menu for us?”

“It’s as much of a surprise to me as it is to you.” The driver eases us into the traffic, and I rummage around my purse for my phone. “All I know is that we’re sampling everything today, dessert included. It should be good.”

“It sounds good,” he says, taking my hand and twining his fingers with mine as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“Do you think they have tiramisu on the menu? Mom loves tiramisu.”

“If they don’t, we can always ask for it.” I make a mental note to do just that. If Mrs. Hunter loves tiramisu, she’s getting tiramisu at her ball. “After the tasting, we’re seeing the band I like for events like this where there will be dancing. If you still want to consider getting a DJ instead, then we desperately need to start looking for one. I’ve put out feelers, but until you make the call, I can’t pull the trigger on arranging for us to see anyone.”

“You’ve been saying since the beginning that a band will be better, so let’s get the band.”

I frown. “Is this just because—“

“No.” He squeezes my hand, rolling his head on the backrest to face me. “I trust your judgment, Isla. I have since the beginning; I just didn’t want you steamrolling me because of it. The only reason I said I might want a DJ was to keep the option on the table, but I also know bands are better for occasions like these. People tend to enjoy them more, and especially the older guests will appreciate it more.”

“Okay.”

“What?”

I smile. “I said okay. If you’re happy with a band, then we go listen to this one and if you don’t like them, we audition another. I’m not a steamroller, Bryan. I get why you thought I might try to force decisions on you, but I’m not Samantha. I don’t operate that way.”

“I know.” He brings our joined hands to his mouth and kisses the back of mine. “Let’s go eat some food, then we’ll hear what this band of yours has got, and then we’re on to a million other things.”

“It’ll be fun,” I promise, and it is.

The Capital Grand chef is amazing and everything he prepares for us is an option for the ball as far as I’m concerned. Bryan and I eat off each other’s plates and several

times, the staff members comment on what a cute couple we make. One also says that she can see we're very much in love.

I'm pretty sure she's mistaking us for a couple who is getting married at the hotel soon, but neither of us corrects her. We just play into it and carry on.

When we're on our way to the studio to see the band later, Bryan suddenly turns to me in the back of the car. "You know, you never told me how you ended up landing Full Moon as a client. How does one go from finishing a degree in events management to working with a band like them?"

"Hard work and grit," I reply, but then I wink and sit back in my seat, thinking back to the first time I got a phone call from Max. "I never thought I'd have a client like them either, but they were actually one of the first very well-known names that I signed. My aunt and I were getting into events for the music industry. They performed at a festival we did out in Los Angeles that they all enjoyed, and one thing led to another. They're actually part of the reason I moved back to New York."

"What are they like?" he asks curiously, his melting caramel-chocolate brown gaze on mine. "I still can't believe you really know them. How did they play a part in getting you back here?"

"They're pretty great guys," I say honestly. "We really hit it off. After the first few shows I helped them with, Jonathan mentioned that they were tired of being in a long-distance relationship with me. I'd already been playing around with the idea of moving back and opening headquarters here so we could expand our reach, but all the referrals they sent my way really sealed the deal. I commuted back and forth so much to meet with all the people they referred to me that I eventually just moved."

"I guess I owe them a thank you." He leans over and plants a chaste kiss on my exposed shoulder.

"Maybe one day, I'll introduce you and you can tell them yourself," I say before I think about what I just implied. That

we'll be doing something together in the future—a future way past the charity ball.

*Shit. The dude isn't even divorced yet. The last thing he probably wants right now is someone else planning the future for him.* There's still a serene expression on his face when I glance at him though, so I don't think he's freaked out by it.

Deciding to leave it be instead of possibly making it worse by trying to explain, I turn toward the window and try not to freak out about it myself. *Just maybe, it could happen that we'll have a future together. Who the hell would've ever thought that was possible after everything we've been through?*



## Chapter Twenty Three

### Bryan

Bella smiles down at CJ, who's all bundled up in his mommy's arms. They're sitting in an armchair in their living room and CJ's little legs are kicking underneath the blanket as he holds my sister's pinkie finger in his hand.

The weather outside is miserable, with rain coming down in sheets and lashing against the wide bay windows in the room. All the lights that are on in here are dim at the moment, since CJ's supposed to be winding down before his nap soon.

"Do you want to hold him?" she asks when she looks up at me again.

"Sure." I've held him a few times, but I'm still clumsy when trying to pick him up. My sister giggles and holds him in her palms, raising him in an attempt to make it easier on me.

"Relax," she says. "You won't break him. Just remember to support his neck."

There's almost no weight when she places him in my hands, and I marvel at the fact that something this small is an actual, fully formed human being. Sitting back down slowly and carefully, I pull him to my chest and stare down at his reddish cheeks, tiny mouth, and round, curious eyes looking up at me.

"Hey, you," I murmur. "Do you remember me? I'm your Uncle Bryan. Your cool Uncle Bryan. If Mommy and Daddy give you any trouble, you just come to me. Okay?"

He makes a soft cooing noise that I take as him agreeing to what I've said. Bella stands up from the chair and stretches, grinning at us as she works the kinks out of her muscles. "Thanks for coming by. I'm going stir crazy here by myself most days. Seeing him reach all his cute baby milestones



makes it worth it, but it's nice to have adult company for a change."

"Chase is back at work?" I ask.

She nods, raising her arms above her head and bending side to side at the waist. "He's working from home as much as he can, but he still needs to go into the office for a couple hours a day at least."

CJ wraps his fingers around mine, drawing my gaze back down to him. "You're a strong one, aren't you? Feel that grip. Daddy must hate being away from you when he's at work. Even I hate being away from you."

"Yeah. I don't know how I'm going to leave him when my turn comes." Bella sighs, but then perks up again. "His grip really is strong, right? I thought maybe it was just me, but if you've picked up on it too, then obviously it's true. Such a strong little man. You should see him at tummy time. He's already trying to lift himself up off the ground a bit. It's adorable."

"Tummy time?" I glance at her, frowning as I try to figure out what the hell she's talking about.

She rolls her eyes, but she's also trying to fight another smile. "It's the cutest thing. He has to spend some time each day on his stomach, and he hated it at first, but he's slowly getting used to it. You should see his facial expressions though. He has a scowl almost as good as yours when he gets annoyed."

"He gets annoyed?" I ask. "Isn't he a little young for that?"

She doesn't even try to fight the smile this time. "Nope. His personality is really starting to shine through, and he definitely knows what he wants."

"He takes after me, then." My brows waggle when I look at her, then I drop my gaze back to his surprisingly intense one. "I can't quite believe you've already got a personality but knowing what you want is a good trait. Don't let anyone tell you any differently. Just stick to your guns."

“Trust me, he does,” she says, moving over to the coffee table to grab one of the glasses of soda she poured when I first got here. Taking a long drink, she moves back to sit down again. “There are these little exercises I need to do with him every day, and he’s getting so good at it all. He’s also following his rattle with his eyes and he smiles all the time. I never thought it could be so satisfying to watch a tiny person grow and figure out how their own body works.”

As my gaze sweeps over his face once more, I can’t even imagine how it must feel to be in her shoes right now. I haven’t often been jealous of my sister. We never really had any sibling rivalry and we’ve always been close, but I can’t help feeling that green monster deep down inside rattling its cage when I’m looking at CJ, knowing that I’ll never have this for myself.

While it wasn’t exactly the best time of my life, there’s a reason I put up with Samantha’s shit for so long during our attempts to get pregnant. Sure, I did it for her, but I also think it would’ve been amazing to have a child of my own.

I meant it when I told Isla it was for the best that it didn’t happen with Sam since we never would’ve lasted in the long run, but still. Whenever it hits me that it’ll never happen for me at all, it sucks. And it’s hitting me pretty hard right now.

*At least I have you, buddy,* I think at the precious miracle in my arms. *I’ll always have your back.*

It’s not just about me though. While Isla and I are only in the beginning phases of what might or might not turn out to be something, I don’t even know if she wants kids. She knows about my diagnosis, and it doesn’t seem to bother her so far, but I also don’t know if she’s thought about a possible future with me and what it might mean for any dreams she has of having a family.

If this thing between us goes any further, it’s a discussion we’ll need to have sooner rather than later. It might be very early for it, but there’s no point in us even thinking about the future if being with me means she’ll have to sacrifice something that might be important to her. There are other

options to have a family, obviously, but adoption, sperm donation, and whatever else might not be what she wants.

Having said conversation might spell disaster for us, but it's a disaster I have to prepare for. I won't be the reason she doesn't get everything she wants out of life. *I've taken enough from her already.*

Bella's voice brings me out of my depressing thoughts, and I force the bite of jealousy down. None of it is my sister's fault and more than that, I refuse to let any bitterness fester and taint my relationship with her or her family.

"So," she says, "other than telling you about his milestones, all of which he's ahead on, by the way, I don't have much going on in my life. What's new with you? Catch me up."

I shrug. "Same shit, different day mostly. With the exception of having to plan the ball, there's really not much happening."

"Is that true?" she asks bluntly, raising her chin and looking me squarely in the eyes. "I know you and I know Isla. Both of you have been sketchy on the details about what it's been like to spend so much time together and neither of you is saying much about the other."

"So?"

Her brows shoot up. "So, I think it's because there's something going on between you two that you don't necessarily want to talk about."

"Why ask about it, then?" Isla and I haven't discussed keeping our relationship or whatever it is a secret, but there's also not much to say. "We're working things out and we haven't killed each other yet. That's the crux of it."

Bella's eyes narrow in disbelief and she blows out a breath through her nostrils before giving me a look that means business. "Be careful with her, Bry. She might seem like an all-powerful woman of steel now, but she went through a very tough time back then. I don't know if she's told you this, and I'm only telling you because you need to know why I'm so

serious about it, but she battled with depression and social anxiety for ages.”

There’s an edge of worry in her tone that I can’t ignore, but her expression has also softened some. “Why do you think she chose to do events? She’s amazing at it and she loves it, but she got into it because if she’s working behind the scenes, she can still feel like she’s part of the world even if she’s on the outside looking in.”

“I haven’t thought about it like that.”

A soft but still worried chuckle escapes her. “Of course, you haven’t. That’s why I’m explicitly saying it. Don’t fuck around with her. I can’t tell either of you what to do, but I’m asking you to keep it in mind that you’ve got the power to really hurt her if you’re not sure about what you’re doing or what you want.”

“What I definitely don’t want is to hurt her again.”

“Well, that’s good because I’ll kick your butt if you ever pull anything to hurt her,” she says vehemently. “I’m begging you, if you’re not sure, just leave her alone now before too much damage is done.”

Her plea and warnings stick to the inside of my brain. I care deeply about Isla, but I really don’t want to hurt her and I’m not even divorced yet. Fuck knows how long it’s going to take before I am, or how much of a protracted, unpleasant process it might still become. It’s already pretty fucking awful, and we haven’t even gone to court yet.

Combined with the fact I won’t be able to get her pregnant, the baggage I come with might be too much for her. It might not even be fair to ask her to deal with any of it at all.



# Chapter Twenty Four

## Isla

The charity ball is around the corner. Almost everything has been finalized, but I know better than anyone how important it is to get the last touches right.

Wrapping my fingers around my glass, I bring it to my lips and cross my legs where I'm sitting on the rug on his living room floor.

"It was a good idea to do this at your place," I say, setting the glass down next to my laptop on the coffee table to key in my password. "I might have to take some calls and pay attention to a few other things while we're busy, but there will definitely be less interruptions than there would've been at either of our offices."

"That's the idea." He grins, then gets up from the floor with his empty water glass in hand and glances pointedly at mine. "Can I fill you up before we get into it?"

"Sure. Thank you." I push the glass to his side of the table and focus on my laptop until I catch a glimpse of him walking away from the corner of my eye.

The view is too good to ignore, so I ignore my emails instead. *Just for a minute.*

Bryan's black drawstring pants hang low on his hips, teasing me with the possibility that I might catch a peek of his ass if they move just a little bit lower. His bare feet pad across the floor, and it's crazy to think that I find even the fact that he's barefoot at the moment attractive.

He's shirtless too. The planes between his shoulder blades are defined, but not bulging like they might be in some gym-monkey. His muscles ripple gently as he moves, and even though we just had a shower together when we woke up less

than an hour ago, I already can't wait to get my hands on him again.

“Close your mouth,” he teases without turning around. “I can feel you staring at me. Do I need to bring you something to mop up the drool?”

I laugh. “You wish, Hunter. There's no drool to be found anywhere near me. I'm not even looking at you.”

“Bullshit,” he says slowly, dragging the word out. When he reaches the kitchen, I can still see him. He shifts to face me while filling the glass from the faucet. “You were checking out my ass, weren't you? I know, because I do the same thing whenever you walk away.”

“You're an ass man?” I muse, drumming my fingertips on the table as I pretend to think it over. “Considering how long you spent soaping up my torso earlier, I thought for sure you preferred the upper half.”

“You mean your tits? Breasts? Whatever you prefer to call them, you can say the word, Isla,” he teases. “More to the point, I do love those too. I'm a you man, it seems.”

Even though he's referring to loving my body and not necessarily the rest of me, my heart does a somersault. He's been saying a lot of stuff like that recently, stuff that makes it sound like there's more going on beneath the surface than what he's saying outright.

*I'm a you man.*

It leaves me feeling all starry eyed, which is making the confusion take a back seat. I've decided to take it easy on myself and just go with what feels right—and that's being with him, regardless of our past. He made a mistake when he told me to get out on the roof, but he didn't know what was going to happen after.

Those are the facts. Neither of us can keep obsessing over the what ifs and the what happened. It's not healthy and it's in the past. I'll never forget, but I can forgive, and I have. He's apologized time and time again, and I know he means it. I also know there's nothing else he can do, nothing that will turn

back the clock. We both just need to live with it and to move on to the best of our respective abilities.

Maybe we even move on together. That's what I'm hoping will happen, but I'm cautiously optimistic. Very cautiously. It's far from being a done deal and I'm walking an emotional tightrope between wanting to trust him fully and not knowing if I can.

Time will tell though. And I'm willing to give him that time. That's all I know, but it's enough.

There's a hungry glint in his eyes when he walks back to me. It's one I've become intimately familiar with, and it sends a pleasurable shiver through me to have it aimed in my direction, but I turn my head at the last moment when he bends down to kiss me after handing over my water.

"Oh, is that the way it is now?" he murmurs, sighing as he straightens up and heads back to his side of the coffee table. He shakes his head at me as he sits down, but the corners of his lips are slanted upward. "I thought we were at the point where I could kiss you any time I want."

"We are. Just not right now." I push one of the open folders over to him, tapping my finger at the top of the page. "Let's make this fun. We'll have rewards system. For every task we get through, whoever has done it can choose what they want from the other."

Those burnt caramel eyes light up as he nods at me. "Done. What's first?"

"The emcee, the program for the evening, and the table placements," I say without having to check the list I just passed him. "There's a shortlist of potential emcees who have all confirmed their availability. We just need to choose one and make the booking. I've sent you a draft program to finalize and the same goes for the table placements."

"All of that for one reward?" he grumbles, but then opens his laptop and gets to work. Or at least, that's what I think he's doing but when I get up to make coffee, I come back to find



my Post-Its have suddenly rearranged themselves into a heart on the page.

Bryan's frowning at his screen like he's deep in thought, but I feel him watching me in his periphery when I sit back down. "Pranks, huh? You're on, mister. Two can play that game."

His lips twitch, but he's the picture of innocence when he looks up and blinks at me. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm sure you don't." The post-its he took were ones from places in the folder I've already worked through, so I don't put them back. Instead, I leave the heart where it is and try not to smile about the fact that he made a freaking heart. *So adorable.*

Even so, when he leaves the living room to take a call, I decide to get him back. Once I've made sure he's on the balcony with his back turned to me, I slide in behind his laptop and change his playlist to one featuring only children's songs.

As he sits down, he hits play again and instead of the soft rock music we've been listening to all morning, his computer starts blaring "The Wheels on the Bus." His eyes grow big, then he stabs at his trackpad to lower the volume before he glares at me.

"You know it's going to take me ages to teach the program that I don't actually want children's music on my recommendations, right?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I echo, feigning innocence and fluttering my lashes.

An evil sounding chuckle escapes him as he rubs his hands together. "We'll see."

As the morning progresses, we keep playing little pranks on each other in between collecting our rewards. It's a bit of lighthearted fun while we're working, but it also eventually leads to us becoming sidetracked.

One of his rewards is a kiss that turns into a heated makeout session right there on the couch. It leaves me feeling

hot and bothered, but I break it off before it goes any further.

My cheeks are flushed and my breathing is labored when I sit up, reaching for my water and pouring it all down my throat while fanning my face. Bryan's still lying down with his eyes closed, sucking in deep breaths before he groans.

"Remind me not to ask for anything like that as a reward again. It feels more like a punishment right now. How much work do we still have to get through before we can call it a day?"

"A lot." I eye the folders lying open on the floor. "Distract me. Tell me something I don't know about you."

He groans again, tossing his arm over his face. "Everything I want to tell you right now is stuff you already know. Like how tempted I am to type up a to-do list for our assistants, send it through, and then take you back to bed."

"As much as I like the sound of that, it's going to take us longer at this point to send them all the details they'll need to have a complete picture and then to check it all after than it will to do it ourselves. Plus, we've come this far. We both promised to handle it personally, so that's what we're doing."

One of his hands snakes down to adjust his pants, then he sighs and props himself up on his elbows. "Fine. I want to go to Vietnam."

My eyebrows tug together as I frown at him. "What?"

"You said to tell you something you don't know about me," he says. "That's my something. I want to go to Vietnam, but not just for a week or two. I'd like to buy a one-way ticket and go backpacking for as long as it takes me to make my way through the country."

"As long as the trip includes a few days cruising on Halong Bay, I'm in. We can be travel buddies."

Surprise shoots across his features. "You're the first person I've said that to who actually knows the name of a place outside of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City."

“Vietnam has been on my bucket list for a long time,” I admit. “Although, I’m not sure about an open-ended or a one-way ticket. I’d have to know when I’m coming back. There’s no way I could leave the company for too long.”

“That’s why I haven’t gone yet,” he says with a contemplative expression as he looks at me. “Travel buddies, huh? I’m going to keep you to that. Any other places on your bucket list that might coincide with mine?”

“Depends on how you feel about places that are more off-the-beaten track. There are a lot of places I want to see, and I’d love to go to Italy, and France, and all of those, but I’m more interested in Romania and Mozambique, for example.”

A slow grin curves his lips. “You’re on. As it happens, I’ve looked up itineraries for both of those places and more. I’m hoping I’ll be able to figure out a way to travel more in the future. Maybe work remotely for a year or so to make it happen.”

“There are a few events I’ve told myself I want to plan before I go. If I can get them, the company will be on solid enough footing that I’ll be able to appoint someone to oversee the day-to-day while I manage them remotely, but I’ve been thinking about doing the same thing eventually.”

“Iron-woman Isla wants to leave her empire behind for a year to go traveling?” he asks. “Wow. I really didn’t expect that.”

“Iron-woman Isla?” Disbelief rings in my voice, but I can’t deny I like the sound of it. “For your information, even us Iron-folk need a break and I’ve never really taken one. I’m hoping I’ll be able to slow down in the future and not only when I get to retirement.”

“Hey, you’re preaching to the choir,” he agrees, sitting up fully and slinging an arm around my shoulders, pulling me to him as he leans back. “What else have you got?”

“You mean what other hopes and dreams for the future?” I ask, relaxing against his chest and putting my legs up on the couch. “Apart from traveling, I want to start a charitable

foundation. I haven't done it yet because I haven't quite settled on a cause, but I either want to start a charity or become silently affiliated with one. I don't want to do it for the press. I just want to... help."

A low chuckle rumbling in his chest vibrates against my back and he presses a kiss to the side of my neck. "That's me too. I don't just want to give money though. At the moment, I can't offer my time, so I've just been making donations to a bunch of places, but I'm hoping to be able to be more hands-on in future."

"That's definitely my goal as well." I lean my head against his shoulder and look up, past his strong jawline and into his eyes as he glances down at me between lashes that seem impossible long from this angle. "What else?"

His chest inflates behind my back when he takes a deep breath. "Despite my current situation, I haven't given up on the idea of marriage. I'd like to be a husband again someday, but to do it better this time. I want what my parents have."

I melt into him a little more. We're talking about our hopes and dreams for the future and what we want to become from where we are now, but not what it means for our relationship. I know that and yet, even though I know we're not talking about us, there's a big part of me that's hoping we'll get to do all those things together.

Since I'm finally in a place where I've forgiven him, when I look into my future now, I can see him in it. I *want* him in it. "I never thought I'd admit this out loud, but I want what they have too. I want to find the *one* and devote myself to him. Build a life with him, you know?"

"Yeah," he says after keeping quiet for a beat. "I know exactly what you're talking about."

His fingers slide underneath my chin and as he lifts it gently, our eyes meet. Something real and pure and true passes between us, but I can't put my finger on what it is. I know what it feels like, but I'm not ready to say it or to hear it. I'm also not ready to say it only to hear that he doesn't feel the same way.

When his lips come down on mine in a feather-light kiss, I turn into him and take his face between my hands. Just because I'm not ready to face how I feel doesn't mean I can't pour my emotions into him and hope that finally, after everything we've been through, he feels the same way.



## Chapter Twenty Five

### Bryan

Despite how fucking badly I wanted to ravish her right here just a few minutes ago before she pulled away, it's not my intention to go back to that when I kiss her now. Sure, I always want her and it's no different in this moment, but this is about more than slamming into her and hearing her scream my name.

There's a tenderness to this kiss that tells me she's feeling it too—this almost overwhelming urge to become one in more ways than just the physical. It's not like me to think poetically at all, but fuck... I love this girl.

There's no two ways about it. I love her. I think I always have but regardless of whether that suspicion is true or not, I know I always will. From here on out, there's a big chunk of me that will always belong to her.

No matter what happens, she's the one and I'm done fighting it. I've been fighting it for most of my life and I won't do it anymore. When I fell in love with Samantha, I let go of any unspoken, mostly even unacknowledged feelings that I had for my sister's best friend. I told myself it was just a crush and her and I wouldn't—and couldn't—ever work.

It's not like I've been pining for her or that I was only ever halfway in with Sam, just waiting for my chance to be with Isla. I gave it my all with Samantha from the word go. If she hadn't betrayed me, I still would've been with her.

I don't even know how long I would've ridden it out, trying to fight for our marriage and to bridge the distance between us. But what I have with Isla is different. It always has been. From the minute I started getting to know her when she spent all that time over at our house with Bella when we were kids, I had this innate sense she was my other half.

Now that I'm with her, actually trying my hand at a relationship with her, that feeling is back and it's so much deeper than I ever would've thought it could be. My sister's warnings about taking it slow with her and not letting it go any further until I'm sure about what I want run through my mind.

I'm still not divorced yet, but I'm going to do everything in my power to make it happen so I can move on with Isla. I won't hurt her again. Not ever.

I've never been surer about anything, so while I understand and appreciate Bella's concern, she has nothing to worry about. If there was any doubt in my mind, I'd have done what she asked and backed off.

But that's not what's going on here. I'm not some sap on the rebound after his marriage hit the wall. I'm not looking to sow my wild oats after getting out of a longtime relationship, nor am I simply going after Isla to make some teenage fantasy come true so I can feel young again.

What I have with her and what I feel for her is very fucking real. And to my mind, that makes all the difference.

As my arms wind around her waist and I pull her into my lap, I let my hands slide up her back and into her hair. She washed it earlier and left it down, and the soft locks glide between my fingers. Her heart beats against my chest and her lips move effortlessly with mine, deepening the kiss as I lower my head to give her better access.

She moans into my mouth, and the sound has the same effect on me as her soft fingers wrapping around my dick. It might not have been my intention to go back to that same, desperately needy place we were in before, but we're quickly heading there.

It's still not just about sex though. I want her. Mind, body, and soul. It's selfish, but it's also true.

The heat of her pussy grinding against my rock hard shaft drives me crazy. She's wearing thin cotton shorts that don't make any secret of the fact that she's hot and wet for me, and that's what almost got me undone earlier.



My own pants don't provide much of a barrier to feeling her, either. They're also made of thin fabric and despite us both still being clothed, I can feel enough of her on me and against me that my muscles are already tensing, and it takes everything I've got not to keep thrusting into her, chasing down a release that'll be happening too soon if I'm not careful.

Breathing shakily, she pulls away and looks into my eyes. Her pupils are dilated, but lust isn't the only thing in her gaze. There's something heavier and more intense there, like she's thinking the same thing I am about how much more there is going on between us than just the obvious.

Neither of us says a word to break the spell. We both know that we need to get back to work, but it doesn't look like that's going to stop us again.

The way I'm feeling right now, a freight train driving straight through the penthouse wouldn't stop me. Without breaking eye-contact, I reach for the hem of her shirt and roll it up slowly, tugging it over head and dropping it on the floor. Her teeth sink into the corner of her lip as her hands reach behind her back, unhooking her bra and pulling it off to reveal her puckered nipples.

We're still looking at each other when I move my head forward to suck her breast into my mouth. It ramps things up to a different level to be keeping our gazes locked while we're doing this, but I like it. I like seeing her every reaction to what I'm doing, every flutter of her eyelids, and every time her lips part.

With my mouth on her chest, I run my hands down her sides and push my fingertips past her waistband. Her head falls back, hips rolling into mine as another moan spills from her. I don't want to tease her today, but I also don't just want to fuck her.

It takes everything in me to scoot to the edge of the couch, but I do it anyway. When she feels me moving, she shoots me a questioning look but doesn't ask.

"I'm taking you to bed," I murmur, holding her to me in one arm while using the other to brace against the couch to

stand up. She nods, getting to her feet and holding my hand as we walk to my bedroom.

Once we're there, she stands in front of me and lets me push her pants and her panties off before she kicks them to the side. Her gaze comes back to mine as she does the same to me, and then it's my turn to step out of the pants.

We move to the bed together, and she loops her arms around my neck as she lies down. I go with her, spreading my body over hers and kissing her deeply, cradling the side of her neck with one hand while the other is on her hip.

The tip of my cock finally dips into her tight, slick heat and I swear the sound that comes out of me is a fucking whimper. *That's* how bad I want her.

Sinking into her slowly is torture, but I manage to keep a pace deserving of the intensity of the emotions radiating from both of us until I feel her starting to contract around my shaft. As soon as it happens, it's game over for me. I can't hold back, and I lose the fragile hold I've had on my control all along.

"Bryan. Yes. Fuck." Isla's features tighten, her mouth opening as her eyes squeeze shut. A second later, her climax hits and then she's gushing, her inner muscles milking me until I give it up.

Heat zips up my spine and before I can even try to stop it, I'm coming so hard that my vision blacks out for a second. Panting as my hips jerk in the final throes of my orgasm, my head drops to the crook of her neck, and I breathe her in, my mind blank.

The first thought that filters back in is that I love her. I love her so much that it almost hurts to keep the words in. I want her to know how I feel about her, but I know that if I tell her right now, she might think it's just a knee-jerk reaction after how intense the sex was.

*I'll tell her at the ball, I decide. Hopefully, it'll be a fairy tale moment that she'll never forget.*

After how badly I fucked up with her in the past, she deserves the best I can give her and the best time I can come

up with to tell her I love her is once we've pulled off the event of the century together. We'll both be dressed up, we'll be flying high with our success, and I'm sure I'll find a candlelit moment when we'll be alone to make it really romantic.

*Yeah, that'll do it.* Hearts, flowers, and romance. I've always thought it was all corny and overdone, but maybe there's a reason why it's such a cliché. And maybe that reason is to make a girl who's always deserved to be treated like a princess feel like a real queen. Because that's what Isla is to me.

A queen. *The* queen who rules my heart, and it's about time I finally do something right by her.



# Chapter Twenty Six

## Isla

Everything came together beautifully in the end. The Hunters can't stop talking about how thrilled they are with the event and so far, all the guests I've spoken to have been very impressed as well.

It's going off without a hitch and even though it's one of the smaller events I've done recently, I'm damn proud of it because it means so much to people who mean so much to me. The food was incredible, band is a hit, and everyone seems to be having a blast.

With white drapes against the ceiling, twinkling lights in between, and lit oil lanterns in candelabras on every table, the atmosphere in the ballroom is enchanting. The terrace outside has been done up in an equally romantic way, with strings of lights having been strung overhead and space heaters ensuring that people can comfortably move between inside and outside without having to don their coats.

People are laughing, talking, and dancing all around us, and I feel a little like I've been transported to another dimension where I'm just about to get my happy ending. Bryan's holding me in his strong arms, sweeping me around the dance floor like we've done this together a million times before. He's looking at me like I'm the only person he can see, but since we're not crashing into other couples as we move, I have a feeling he's somehow keeping an eye on that as well.

"We did darn good," he says, cottoning onto what I'm thinking as if he can see my thoughts reflected in my eyes. We've been in tune like that a lot lately. Sometimes, it even feels like we're sharing a brain. I've never, ever felt I was part of a unit before, but I feel it now and it's intoxicating to be on the same wavelength with him this way.

One song flows seamlessly into another, and he bends his head to kiss me on the forehead. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to thank you for helping me with this, but I owe you. Big time.”

“Bella’s already covered the IOU part.” I smile, my fingers toying with the hair at the nape of his neck. “She’s the one who enlisted my help, remember? You’d never even have dreamed about asking me.”

He arches a dark brow, but those earthy eyes are still sparkling in the light as he stares down into mine. “Only because you never would’ve dreamed about agreeing if I had asked.”

I shrug. “True, but at least it gets you out of owing me. Bella’s already made big promises. There’s even talk about a girls’ weekend away as soon as CJ’s old enough and a trip to the spa.”

“A trip to the spa, huh? I’ve never been, but I wonder if I can get in on that action. I could do with a massage. If you ask me, I helped enough to deserve one.”

“Probably, except that I think she figures you were doing it for your own parents and therefore, if you want a massage, you could get it for yourself.”

“I could, but it’s not the same.” He grins, pulling back and narrowing his eyes as he scans the room. “Where is my sister? I need to have a word with her.”

“You go ahead and do that.” I laugh but step out of his arms even though I’m pretty sure he was only joking. “I need to check on dessert and run to the bathroom. Meet you back here in a few?”

He tugs me back to him to graze a soft kiss against my temple. “While you’re checking on dessert, I want to go find out how the silent auction is going.”

“I’m curious about that too,” I admit. “Do me a favor and find out about that meet-and-greet with Full Moon. Max and the others are dying to know how much they managed to raise

by sponsoring it. They're convinced face time with them is worth millions."

He chuckles, but I know how much he wanted to bid on the meet-and-greet himself. It's against the rules for the family or anyone involved with the event to bid, but he was tempted. "I'll find out for you. Will you let me be on the call with you when you tell them?"

I roll my eyes, but there's not much feeling in the action. "I could be convinced to let you talk to them."

"That's why I lo—" He cuts himself off, flashing me a rakish smile as he runs a hand through his hair. "That's why I'll go find out how much it's going for. See you in a few."

He spins around and strides away while I'm still wondering what he was about to say a minute ago. *Because I really think he was about to say, "that's why I love you."*

It makes my heart do all kinds of gymnastics to even think it. While I wasn't ready to hear it a couple of weeks ago, I am now. I'm also sure it's what I'm feeling for him. Excitement jitters through me. *Maybe we're finally ready to take that next step.*

Just the thought of it has me floating on sunshine as I check in with the kitchen before ducking into the bathroom. I can't stop smiling, but that's only until I see Samantha behind me when I look into the mirror while washing my hands. I have no idea where she came from, but the hard glint in her eyes and the set of her jaw sends an ominous shiver skating down my spine.

"Having fun dancing with my husband?" she asks, her voice as cold as I've come to think her heart is. "You two are looking awfully cozy out there. In public. Together. You just don't have any respect for me, do you?"

For a long minute, all I can do is stare at her and frown in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"The way you're carrying on with him out there," she practically hisses, her eyes narrowing to glare daggers at me. "It's disgusting, but you've interfered with our relationship for

the last time. You might not have any respect for me, but he's *my* husband and I'll make sure he never sees you again."

"You're getting divorced," I say flatly, folding my arms once I'm done washing my hands. "If you think he's going to listen to anything you say, you're crazy but good luck. I don't know what your problem is, but I suggest you take it elsewhere. It's got nothing to do with me."

"It's got everything to do with you," she spits, then shakes her head. "You're the one out there with my husband, laughing and dancing like he belongs to you when you know he never has."

"You're. Getting. Divorced," I repeat slowly, carefully enunciating each word.

Samantha grins, but it's not a humorous grin at all. If anything, it makes her look unhinged but that might just be because I've never been her biggest fan. Finding out how terrible she's been to Bryan over the last decade has only made me like her that much less.

She pats her growing belly, definitely showing tonight in the skin-tight, bright red dress she's wearing. I don't think it's a maternity dress since it looks a little like her stomach is going to tear right through it, but my attention is ripped away from her outfit when she chuckles.

"Oh, sweetheart. You don't really think we're going to get divorced, do you? Bryan's going to be raising this baby with me. The divorce isn't real."

"Excuse me?" I *know* they're getting divorced for real. Not only have I heard about it from him, but his whole family has told me, and I've been there when he gets calls from his lawyer.

She laughs, clapping her hands twice like she's delighted about something. "We're not going to get divorced, honey. You poor, naive little girl. Bryan has always been mine. He and I are meant to be together. This whole phase we're in is just a hiccup. Just like our previous breakup was."



Before I can say anything, she continues. “You remember what happened last time, don’t you? Why do you think this time is going to be any different? You tried coming between us once and it didn’t work. You won’t be successful this time, either. Mark my words.”

“If you think the divorce isn’t real, that’s a conversation you need to have with your lawyer. Or your shrink. Take your pick.”

I push away from the sink and go to walk around her, but her hand shoots out and wraps around my wrist. She’s not gentle at all when she tightens her grip on me, yanking me closer until I can smell the sickly sweet scent of her perfume even in a public restroom.

“He chose me once, darling. As soon as I ask him to do it, he’s going to choose me again.” Her sharp gaze latches onto mine. “Just watch. All I have to do is snap my fingers and he’ll be back with me. It’s always been that way. You’re just a little toy he likes to play with on the side when things get rough between us. I’m the love of his life and he knows it.”

“You’re wrong,” I say after dragging in a deep breath. “He’s done with you this time. There’s no way he’s taking you back after what you’ve done.”

Samantha just smiles and exhales through her nose as she releases me. “If that’s true, then why is he dragging his feet on our divorce? Why is he so scared to see me that he’s been avoiding me at all costs? It’s because he still loves me. He’s still pissed at me, which is why he doesn’t want to see me just yet. He knows that when he does, he’ll come right back to me. It’s what he does, or have you forgotten? All it takes for him to kick you out on your ass is for him to see me and for me to say the word.”

She leans in a little, her perfectly glossed lips inches away from my face. “This is me saying the word. You’ll be gone from his life again by morning. Just hopefully without a tacky little video this time to try get him to feel sorry for you.”

My brows shoot up. “A tacky little video to make him feel sorry for me?”

“I know what you tried to do. I know you planned it so he’d feel guilty and come to you, but it backfired then and whatever you try now will backfire as well.”

“I didn’t try anything then, and I’m not trying anything now,” I say, proud of myself for keeping my voice even despite her playing on all my insecurities about what might happen if she does go after him again. “This conversation is over. I don’t recall seeing your name on the guest list. Feel free to see yourself out before I have to ask security to escort you.”

As I storm out of the bathroom, I run into Bella. She gives me one look and then takes my hand, dragging me to the bar to get a shot. When the bartender puts the tequila in front of us, she gives me a worried look.

“Take that, then tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened,” I lie, but toss the shot back after raising it briefly. “I just need a minute. That’s all.”

My friend gives me a look that says she knows I’m full of shit, but she doesn’t push me to tell her what’s wrong. Instead, she tries to cheer me up by making up funny stories about other people in the room and speculating on what the elegantly dressed crowd are probably like at home.

It takes a long time for my heartbeat to slow down but when it does, I do my best to brush the incident off. What’s happening between me and Bryan now is nothing like what happened before. Those things she said that dredged up every insecurity I’ve had about them since we got together don’t mean anything.

*After what she put him through, he’s not going to take her back again. He doesn’t love her, and he hasn’t loved her for a long time. What we have is real.*

I repeat the words over and over again in my mind until I start believing them. What we have *is* real. He hasn’t just been using me as a distraction or a plaything because he’s been pissed off at her.

*It’s real, Isla. Relax. Just because she pushed your buttons doesn’t mean she’s right. I love him and he loves me. Only, it*

would've been a hell of a lot easier to believe that if he'd actually said it. Which he hasn't, but there has to be a reason, right? And I refuse to believe the reason is because he still loves her.



## Chapter Twenty Seven

### Bryan

“Thank you for coming, Your Honor,” I say to the judge my parents are standing with. “It’s a real pleasure for us to have you here. I truly hope you’re enjoying the evening.”

The woman nods, grinning from ear to ear as she lifts her champagne glass in my direction. “This is quite a party you put together, Mr. Hunter. For such a good cause too. It’s wonderful to see the next generation stepping in to make a difference for those who need it most.”

“Speaking of the next generation,” my mother says, her gaze sweeping across the room, “where did Isla go? We told Judge Carstens about all the help her company gave us with the event, and we’d love to introduce her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be back in just a few,” I say, even though she’s been gone for a while. I’m not worried about her, but I *am* curious about what’s keeping her. “You know how it goes. She went to check on one thing and probably got dragged into ten others.”

“That’s so true.” Mom’s smile is so radiant when she reaches out to touch my arm that it makes me smile right back at her. “While we’ve got you here without her for a minute, there’s something I’ve been meaning to say.”

I have a feeling I know what’s coming, but I ask anyway. “Yeah? What’s that?”

“Your father and I are so happy that you and Isla have finally found each other,” she says, her eyes suddenly shiny. “It’s been a long time coming. So long that there have been times when we wondered if you’d ever find your way back together, but we love her like she’s another daughter and we couldn’t be more thrilled you’ve finally realized that girl was made for you.”

“If I get my way, she’ll officially be part of the family soon,” I say, not even really caring that the judge and her husband are hearing every word. If it was up to me, I’d shout about it from the rooftops. “I know it’s still new, but it’s also old. I don’t want to waste any more time we could have together. If things work out the way I hope they will, we’ll have a wedding to plan soon, and it’ll be my last one.”

Mom and the judge both chortle, but I’m not just saying it to amuse them. It’s absolutely true.

“Have you heard from Mr. Johnson about your divorce again yet?” Dad asks, serious but with a small grin on his lips. “It might be best to get that sorted before you start talking about making Isla part of the family and planning another wedding.”

“Last I heard, Sam is still stalling for some reason,” I admit. “I’ve been pushing Johnson to get it done, but she seems to be up to something.”

“Divorces are tough,” Judge Carstens says sympathetically. “Unfortunately, if one party starts with delaying tactics, it makes them so much tougher. Johnson is a brilliant lawyer though. If anyone can get you through it regardless of how difficult your soon-to-be ex is, it’s him. Just hang in there.”

“Thanks.” I offer her a polite smile. “He’s doing his best, but this particular soon-to-be ex isn’t quite buying what he’s selling just yet. I’m sure it will be over soon though. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go see what’s keeping Isla. If there’s a problem she’s sorting out, I want to help.”

My parents both nod, and I say goodbye to the judge as they close their circle and go back to talking like we were before they waved me over. A few more people stop me as I make my way around the room, but I’m finally almost to the side where the bar and the restrooms are when an unwelcome sight steps into my path.

Samantha’s wearing a dress so tight, it looks like it’s been painted on. Usually, I love pregnant women showing off those bellies. On her, however, it only serves to remind me of her

recent lies about the baby being mine all so she can try and leverage or guilt a better settlement out of me.

I sigh, and I'm not kind when I set my jaw in a firm line and stare her down. "What are you doing here, Samantha? You're not on the list. Security shouldn't have let you in."

"What is it with all of you and security?" She giggles and waves a hand dismissively. I'm not sure who 'all of you' is, but before I can ask, she takes a step closer and sends me a sickeningly sweet smile. "I came for you, silly. You're my husband and I know this event is a big deal for your family. Our family. Of course, I'm here. Where else would I be?"

"I don't know. How about at home with your boy toy?" I suggest, my tone dry. "Shouldn't you two be turning my study into a nursery or something? Frankly, I don't really care what you do. The point is that you shouldn't be here."

"Bobby was means to an end, honey," she says imploringly, giving me her best version of puppy dog eyes. "He's not my boy toy. He was someone I needed, but he doesn't mean anything to me. I've been working on the nursery all by myself, but I shouldn't be. You should be there with me, Daddy."

My stomach rolls and my gut lurches. "Nope. No. Just no. Don't ever call me that again. It's wrong on so many more levels than I can even fathom. Snap out of it, Sam. This isn't my baby and I'm not interested in raising it with you. We're done. It's over. Move on."

Samantha gives the pleading look a try for another minute, then her gaze darts to the ceiling and when it comes back to mine, it's filled with irritation. Her nostrils flare and her high-heeled foot taps beneath the ridiculous dress.

"Stop being childish," she snaps. "I did this for us, and you know it. Who cares how it happened? We're going to have the baby we always wanted."

Aware of all the people around us and not wanting to cause a scene, I take a couple of steps closer to her and lower my voice. "We were over for a long time before you fucked

someone else, Samantha. We just didn't want to admit it. I'm happy for you that you're having this baby, but it's got nothing to do with me. There is no more us. No more we. Go start your family with the man who knocked you up, or don't, but leave me out of it. I'm done."

Not giving up, she closes the distance remaining between us, standing so close to me now that our chests are almost touching. "We're not over, Bryan. There have been so many rocky patches in our relationship, but we've always worked through them. Come back to me. Be a father to this baby just like you were always meant to be."

"This isn't just a rocky patch. We've been estranged for years and not even trying everything we could to have a baby together changed that. It's time for you to face the facts. Sign the damn papers so we can both get on with our lives."

"I'm not signing anything until I get what I deserve," she says sweetly, but with malice glinting in her eyes and lacing her tone. "If you really wanted a divorce, you would've offered me a lot more than the pittance your lawyer has been trying to sell mine on. That's how I know you want to be with me, even if your ego is bruised because I had to get the sperm to make the baby elsewhere."

"None of this is because of my ego," I seethe quietly. "That *pittance* you're referring to is millions. It's more than you could ever deserve, but I'm offering it because I do want the divorce. Take it before this turns into a real fight."

"This is a real fight," she murmurs. "A fight for us. It's me fighting for you and you being too blinded by lust for your little sister's best friend to see what's really going on here."

"You're not fighting for us." I scoff. "You're fighting for more money and if you can't get it, then you'll settle for stringing me along for another few years while you fuck whoever you want."

She glares at me, but then her gaze drifts to a point over my shoulder and the next thing I know, she curls her hands into the front of my jacket and she smashes her lips to mine.



I'm so shocked that I can't move for a second and she leans into me, moaning as she pulls me closer.

A muffled noise behind me yanks me out of my frozen state and when I spin around to see what it was, I feel the blood draining from my face. Isla and Bella are standing just a few feet away, Isla as white as a sheet and my sister glaring murder at me.

"It's all true, then," Isla mutters, blinking rapidly as tears fill her eyes. "Once again, I was just the placeholder until you and Samantha got your shit together. I just can't believe I fell for it. Again."

The tears threaten to fall, but she keeps her head held high and jabs a finger at me. "Stay the hell away from me, Bryan Hunter. I never want to see you again. I should've known it was all true. You've made a fool of me for the last time. Enjoy the rest of your life."

Her voice breaks on the last word, but she's already turning and storming away. I'm confused as fuck about what she said about it all being true, but I can't even begin to think about what she meant before it dawns on me I might've lost her. For good this time.

With her piece being said and her work for the evening being done, she runs out of the ball like fucking Cinderella—except that she doesn't even leave a shoe behind. She just disappears into the crowd, and then she's gone.

*Well, that's not exactly the fairy tale moment I was hoping for tonight... Fuck.*



# Chapter Twenty Eight

## Isla

My front door slams behind me so hard the frame rattles a little, but I'm hardly even aware of it. I'm too busy kicking myself for ever having gotten involved with Bryan fucking Hunter again. What's worse is that I fell for him, head over freaking heels.

I fell for him despite *knowing* Samantha was still in his life, but for some unknown, stupid reason, I didn't really think he would end up going back to her again. Maybe, on some level, I did and I just didn't want to listen to those warnings in my head because I attributed them to paranoia.

Honestly, I don't even know anymore. All I know is that my heart is shattered, and my brain keeps telling me it's my own fault. I should've known better. Hell, I do know better.

Racked with sobs, I don't even make it to my bedroom. I just stumble to the couch and collapse on it, finally giving in to the onslaught of emotion I've been fighting since I saw them kissing and my newly-built world came tumbling down around me. Again.

When Samantha cornered me in the bathroom, I should've known what was coming. Instead, I dismissed that niggling feeling that she was right just because I thought she was playing on my insecurities. Insecurities, it turns out, I was right to have had. Insecurities that could've protected me if I'd just fucking listened to myself.

Now here I am again, with my head buried in a pillow that's already getting damp from tears I'm shedding over a man who has never been mine. *God, how many times am I going to get my heart broken by him before I learn?*

What's that old saying? Fool me once, shame on you but fool me twice... The shame is squarely on me this time.

My shoes land with dull thuds on the floor after I kick them off and curl my legs in underneath me. Falling to the side, I lie in a fetal position on the couch and let it all out. The anger. The disappointment. The shame. The pain. It all leaks out of me in big, fat tears that I can't stop.

Eventually, the sound of hammering filters through me to. It starts as a faint knocking that quickly turns into pounding.

There's someone at my door.

*Bella.* It's got to be her. I hate that she came after me on the first night she and Chase have had away from CJ since he was born, but a tiny wave of gratitude swells in me anyway.

I don't want to see anyone—her included—but I appreciate that she cares about me so much that she'd come after me. *I'll just tell her that I'm okay and that she should get back to her date with her husband.*

And it's her parents' big night. She shouldn't be forced to leave early just because her brother is a world-class dick.

Gathering every ounce of strength that I can find, I sit up and push myself to my feet. Walking to the door takes a lot more effort than it should since my heart aches with every step I take, but I wipe my cheeks with the backs of my hands and do my best to stem the flow of seemingly never-ending tears.

When I open the door, both of Bryan's fists are raised to keep hammering on it. As soon as it sinks in that my unexpected visitor isn't the Hunter I wanted it to be, my fingers flex on the door and I put all my effort into slamming it again.

Only, he catches it before the lock snicks into place. There's a tortured, pinched expression on his normally handsome face. His dark hair stands up at all ends and he shoves his shoulder into the space between the door and the frame before I can try to shut it again.

"It's not what you think," he says, his voice tight and ragged. "I swear, Isla. Whatever she said to you, it's not true.

Rage swirls through me, creating a vortex in my stomach as I wrap my arms around myself to keep it from tearing me

apart from the inside out. “It’s not what I think? You were kissing her, Bryan. I saw you with my own eyes. There’s no thinking necessary when you’ve seen something.”

“It came out of nowhere,” he explains, his eyes wild when they meet mine. “You have to believe me. She kissed me out of the blue. I’m pretty sure she saw you just before she did it. She was definitely looking at something or someone behind me, and then her lips were on mine a second later. Before I could push her away, you saw it.”

“Does it even matter? Because I don’t think so. The fucked up games you two play are between you. I’m done getting in the middle. I never even should’ve been there to begin with.”

I tighten my grip on the door. “Unless you want your shoulder to get hurt, move. I have nothing more to say to you.”

“Please just hear me out,” he begs. “You’re not in the middle of anything. Samantha might be playing some fucked up game, but I’m not playing with her. She just wants more money, Isla. That’s all this is about.”

“Again, I don’t really care what it’s about because it should never have involved me. You two can do whatever the hell you want. I meant what I said back at the hotel, Bryan. I don’t want to see you again. Stay away from me.”

He pushes the door open further and steps into it, not far enough that he’s in my house but enough that there’s no way for me to slam it. That tortured expression is still on his face, his tie has been loosened, the top button of his shirt is undone, and his jacket is missing. He looks troubled. Disheveled.

But there’s a flare of determination in those chocolatey eyes that I can’t miss, even if they do still look wild. “I love you, Isla. It’s taken me a long time to realize it, but you’re the only one for me. I know that now. You’ve always been the only one for me. My other, better half. The one true love of my life who came into it so early that I was still too stupid to recognize you for what you were. What you are.”

My entire being suddenly stings like he slapped me everywhere at the same time. “That’s not funny, Bryan. An

hour ago, you were kissing your wife and now you're here, telling me that you love me? You're either confused, insane, or both. But I'm done letting you hurt and confuse me. Leave."

"No." He pulls back his shoulders and draws himself up to his full height. "I'll stay out here all night if that's what it takes, but I'm not leaving. I'm not giving up on you or on us. I love you and I wasn't kissing my wife an hour ago. The woman I'm divorcing kissed me, but it didn't mean anything to either of us. She either did it as a last-ditch attempt to get me back after I told her I wouldn't offer her more money, or she simply saw you and decided to cause a little drama. Probably a bit of both."

"You can't stay out there."

He shrugs. "Then let me in. I'll wait however long you need before you're ready to talk to me, but I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here, Isla. With you. Where I always should have been."

All of his pretty words are getting to me, but I can't... I can't let him in. Not into my house and not into my heart. Not until I know for sure. "You say you're divorcing her, but she says you're dragging your feet. After what I saw, who do you think I believe?"

Instead of answering me right away, he digs into his pocket and pulls out his phone. Once he's got it in his hand, he keys in his passcode, navigates to something, and then holds it out toward me on the palm of his hand.

"I'm not dragging my feet and I can prove it," he says. "Those are all the emails between me and my attorney. We've been trying to push the divorce through for weeks. If you read the last email, the one I sent earlier tonight, you'll see that I've even asked him to look into getting a restraining order against her. She keeps showing up and I won't stand for it."

"A restraining order?" I repeat slowly. "Why?"

He huffs out an exasperated breath. "Because I don't want her anywhere near me and if she won't listen to my requests to stay away, then we've got to take legal steps to make sure she

does. I'm not getting back together with her and once I get this order, we won't have to worry about her anymore."

Even though I want to trust what he's saying without needing to see the proof, I take the phone. There are tons of long threads of emails between him and the attorney, and in every one that I scan through, Bryan stressed that he's not interested in reconciliation. It sure as heck doesn't seem like he's just not ready to see her because he's not ready to forgive her. He's even agreed to sit down with her as long as it's to discuss settlement and not reconciliation.

The replies from the attorney also paint a clear picture that Bryan's being honest about her being the one who's stalling. From what I can see, it's definitely also true that it's because she wants more money. The sum she's asking for in settlement is exorbitant. The Hunters are well off, but I'm not surprised he's not offering what she's asking for in order to finalize the divorce if that's what she expects.

"That's a lot of zeroes," I say so softly that it's almost a whisper.

When I look up, he nods. "Exactly. I'm not dragging my feet. I just can't afford to give her what she wants. My lawyer is putting together financials to send to hers. Hopefully, it'll make them see that there's no billion dollar payout to be had."

Glancing back down at the phone, I have to acknowledge that his story checks out. It's all right there in black on white. A tiny spark of hope lights in the center of my chest.

"You're serious about the divorce?" I ask.

"As serious as I've ever been about anything." He makes a tentative move closer to me and when I don't push him away, he reaches for my hands. "The only thing in the world I'm more serious about than the divorce is my relationship with you. I love you. You're the only one that I want."

My mind spins as I try to process this latest development in what has been a very long, very emotional night. The fact he's even here instead of with her means that she was wrong about him going back to her pretty much as soon as she snaps

her fingers. He's also proven she lied about what's happening with the divorce. It's abundantly clear he wants it and he's doing everything in his power to get it.

That spark of hope turns into a flame when he squeezes my hand and gently tugs me closer to him. His free hand comes up to cup my jaw, and he strokes his thumb lightly across my cheekbone, his gaze intent on mine.

"I'll grovel for your forgiveness for the rest of my life if that's what it takes. All you need to do is give me one last chance and I promise that I'll spend every day proving to you how much I love you and only you. Samantha is my past. I can't do anything to change that, but you're my future, Isla. If you'll have me, I won't ever give you another reason to doubt that the only woman for me, is you."

As I look up into those eyes that I've loved since I first figured out what love was, I feel my resolve to protect myself from him melting away. Kissing him just because she saw me coming is something I believe Samantha would do and he's already proven that everything she said to me in the bathroom was a lie. A play on my insecurities, just like I thought when she said it.

Dragging in a deep breath, I realize I'm at a crossroads. I can either put my faith in the man I love, or I can walk away. Since there's not a single part of me that wants to walk away now that I've heard him out and it's dawned on me everything that happened tonight was a manipulative ploy, I step into him.

"Okay," I say. "You can come in, but I'm going to keep you to that promise about groveling a bit more."

"You're really going to make me work for it, aren't you?" The corners of his mouth tip up as he walks us into my entrance hall without letting me go. When I nod, he kicks the door shut behind us, then lowers his head to brush kisses over my eyes, my nose, and finally, my lips. "Good, because I was serious about doing whatever it takes and I'm ready to put in the work. I love you, Isla James."

I tilt my head back to look directly into his eyes, and then I say the words I never thought I'd get to say out loud. "I love



you too, Bryan Hunter. Just do me a favor and don't break my heart again, okay? I really don't think I can take it."

"Never again," he promises, then seals it with a kiss that makes my heart race and my toes curl.

It's the stuff kisses in romance novels are made of, the type that people write songs about, and I know, in this moment, that it's the kiss that's going to start the rest of our lives together.



## Chapter Twenty Nine

### Bryan

After what happened at the ball six months ago and the subsequent negotiations between our lawyers, Samantha finally signed the papers. She claimed not to want me when I never wanted her back and tried to blame it all on Isla but in the end, it didn't matter. Our divorce is final whether she took responsibility for why our relationship ended or not.

And that's the important part: she *finally* realized that we were over for good and signed the damn papers. After making doubly sure that there was no more money to be gotten, obviously.

It's been a few months, but sometimes I still can't believe how things turned out. Isla's tucked into my side in the back of a limo we hired for the evening. She's laughing at something Bella is saying about CJ and her head is resting on my shoulder, her hand casually draped over my thigh.

Nothing has ever felt as right to me as being with her these last months has. A month ago, I even gave up my bachelor pad and moved into the brownstone. Domesticity with her is incredible. It's effortless, as natural as breathing.

We laugh—a lot. We've both rediscovered our love of boardgames, we dance around in our underwear often, and we're taking an online cooking class together to avoid the inevitable debates about what's for dinner.

It's every dream I've ever had come true, and I know it's the same for her. We've even crossed the bridge of talking about children, and she's assured me that I'm not stealing that part of a future she had planned for herself away from her.

Chase leans back in his seat against the window and whistles underneath his breath. "Wow. There are a lot of fans

out there. I know the show itself is going to be small, but it doesn't look like that's kept people from coming out."

Isla smiles, and my heart stammers in my chest at the sight of it. *Damn, I've got it bad for this girl.*

"It's Full Moon," she says as if that explains everything which, I suppose, it kind of does. "They always draw big crowds. It doesn't even matter if people can get in or not, they just want to get close to the guys."

Bella nudges her husband's ribs with her elbow. "Aren't you lucky you married someone who's connected?"

He laughs and turns his head to plant a wet kiss on her forehead. "Ah. I've been wondering why I married you. Now I know it's because your best friend knows Full Moon and can get us into their special, intimate shows."

"Exactly," she teases as she wipes her forehead with her fingers. "You don't have to wait outside the venue for hours hoping that they'll come out and wave at you. You're going in *and* you've got a backstage pass."

"It's pretty awesome, right?" I grin at my sister before dropping my head to nuzzle Isla's hair. "I still can't believe you got us access to the band before the show."

"Technically, she didn't get us access to them. She booked the venue and organized the event. *They* have access to a place *she* arranged, which is even cooler."

Chase shrugs, but he can't contain the excited grin that splits his face. "The coolest is that we're going to get to meet them. I told the guys at work today, and at least five of them asked me to get them autographs."

Bella sighs dreamily, pressing her hands to her chest as she gets a faraway look in her eyes. "Do you think John will run away with me?"

"Mom and Dad only agreed to babysit tonight," I remind her. "If you take off with a rock star and Chase goes after you, what happens to CJ?"

She chuckles. "I've heard he likes kids. Maybe I could convince him to take on one more."

"You're only running away with him if I get to come too," Chase says, wagging his brows. "I wonder if he'd be okay with a group thing. I'd be okay with sharing as long as it's with him."

"Jesus," I mutter, covering my face with my hand as I laugh into it.

My sister arches a brow at me. "I happen to remember that you had a poster of Max back when posters were still a thing. Are you telling me you wouldn't run away with him?"

"They're just people, guys," Isla says, her shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. "People who happen to have families that they'll never run away from. Not even with you. I'm glad you're so excited to meet them though. They're pretty excited to meet you too."

I smile to myself, hiding it by facing the window and pretending to study the long lines of fans behind the barricades outside. Isla doesn't know it yet, but I've actually met the band already. Well, sort of. I spoke to Max and the others on the phone. She was right. They're genuinely nice guys.

Bella scoots to the edge of her seat when we're almost at the entrance to the venue. She pulls her neck into her shoulders to get a good look at the signage hanging outside. "How did the radio station convince them to put on this show, anyway? I don't think I've ever heard of them performing for only a couple hundred people."

"They liked the idea of putting on an intimate show for once," Isla says. "When they heard it would only be for contest winners and that the contest could only be won by people who are their biggest fans, they jumped on it. They're as loyal to their fans as their fans are to them."

Chase frowns. "What do you mean it could only be won by their biggest fans?"

"Did you hear the questions they were asked to win?" She makes her eyes big at him. "I've known these guys for years

and I pride myself in knowing quite a lot about them so I don't accidentally open any cans of worms by asking or saying something I shouldn't, but even I didn't know the answers to most of those questions. They were insane."

Our limo pulls up outside the venue, and a security guard steps up to open our doors. As soon as Isla gets out, he taps his earpiece and barks her name. Another guard appears, nodding at her and motioning for us to follow him.

"I'll take you right through, Ms. James. Is this your whole party, or are you expecting others?"

"This is it," she replies, threading her fingers through mine and holding my hand tight as he starts leading us through the crowded hallways inside.

A huge guy guards the doors at the far end of the corridor. He's built like a tank, but he breaks into a friendly smile when he recognizes Isla.

"How're you doing?" he asks, getting up and reaching for the doorjamb behind him. "They're going to be thrilled to see you. Fair warning though, it's chaos back there. It's a full house tonight. Everyone insisted on coming. Kids, spouses, some of Maxim's friends..."

"Thanks, Mike," she says, smiling until she gets a peek of whatever is going on behind the door he just opened. "Shit. You're not kidding. It really is everyone. Do they have enough food and stuff? Max said to cater for ten, but that's at least twenty."

Mike chuckles. "Camille and Karen picked up enough food to feed an army. They know how it goes when everyone gets together."

He waves us through and almost immediately, even I'm a little starstruck. There are a ton of people back here, but the four guys who make up Full Moon seem to be everywhere. Sure, they're running around after kids, which is not what I would've expected from rock stars before a performance, but their tattoos and their presence can't be missed.

There's a yelp, then suddenly a teenager with dark hair is using Isla as a human shield to protect himself from Jonathan. The drummer grins at my girl. "Hey, you. Glad you're here. I'm gonna be with in just a minute.

He focuses his attention on the boy behind her. "Maxim! You're not getting out of this. You said you'd watch them and we're holding you to it. Mom's going to be out in the crowd tonight, and you know the little kids can't go out there."

I watch as Maxim and Jonathan have it out but while they're arguing, Max comes over and rolls his eyes at their antics. "Ignore them. The teenager versus the dad is the age-old battle that no one ever wins. Camille really wants to be out there tonight though. Jonathan's not going to let Maxim win this round."

He glances at me, and my palms start sweating but not because one of my music idols is right in front of me. It's because I know why Camille wants to be in the crowd, and it's not to see her husband perform. As it turns out, they're all a lot fonder of Isla than she realizes, and Max told me all the girls want to see her reaction to what I'm about to do. That's why they're all here.

"You must be Bryan," he says, extending his hand toward me and not giving it away that we've spoken before. "Max. It's nice to meet you. Welcome to the *I've Made A Stupid Mistake But My Girl Was Amazing Enough To Forgive Me* brigade. We meet on Sundays around any available barbecue to discuss and atone for our sins."

There's a scoff behind him, and then Tim appears just as I shake his hand. "Dude, give it up. Just invite them to your house for a barbecue and a beer. Stop trying to sound cool. No one's buying it anymore. We're too old now."

"Who are you calling old?" John glares at his bandmate as he comes up behind him.

My sister gasps next to me when the whole band is gathered around us, and then lets out a surprised sound when they each lean in to hug Isla hello and shake my hand. Every last one of them smirks when he meets my gaze, and I see the

understanding and empathy in their eyes, but also the excitement.

After she introduces Chase and Bella as well, Isla wishes the band good luck and then turns to us. “It’s time to find our seats. You guys ready?”

It’s obvious my sister and her husband would rather stay backstage from the longing looks they give the couches where some other people are seated, but they nod and follow us out anyway. Our seats are right up front and the show is blast.

Toward the end, Max steps up to the microphone again and puts a hand up to shield his eyes from the bright lights. “Bryan? Dude? Where are you? Come on up here for a sec.”

*Fuck.* I knew this was coming, asked for it even, but I’m still damn nervous.

Isla stares at me as I get up. She sits forward, frowning as she whispers urgently, “What the heck is going on?”

I smile, bending over to plant a soft kiss on the crease between her brows. “You’ll see. Come on, Max is waiting for us.”

Taking her hand, I pull her up on the stage with me. Max beams at her as he steps away from the mic and waves at me to take his place. The lights are damn bright and it’s hotter than I ever expected on this side of them, but that’s the least of my worries right now.

There are some murmurs around the venue, undoubtedly people wondering who we are and why the hell we’re onstage. Sending them what I hope is a charming grin, I lift the mic out of its cradle and bring it to my lips.

“I bet you’re all thinking the same thing,” I say into it. “You want me to get off the stage and give it back to the guys you came here to watch.”

A ripple of laughter passes over the crowd before I continue. “Don’t worry. I won’t hog the microphone for long. I’m up here because I wanted to introduce you all to someone extremely special. This is the woman who put all this together,” I say, motioning toward Isla. “Her name is Isla



James, and she's not only the woman in charge of getting these guys up onstage all over the world, she's also the love of my life."

There's a round of "awwws" but mostly people are going nuts cheering for her. I'm not surprised. Full Moon's shows are notoriously well organized these days and as their biggest fans, these people will know that it's because of her.

When the audience quiets down again, I reach into my pocket and pull out a square, velvet box. They were quiet before, but there's a hush that falls over the room as I lower myself down on one knee and turn to her.

Isla's bright blue eyes are shining like the sun, filled with tears. Her hands cover her mouth, and she's looking at me like she thinks I've gone crazy and hell, maybe I have. *Crazy for her, anyway.*

"Isla, I love you. There are so many things I could say, but that's what it comes down to. I love you and with every day that passes, I only love you more. We've been through so much together and I still can't believe we're here. Together. But the only place I want to be is with you. For the rest of our lives. Will you marry me?"

Despite the fact we're surrounded by hundreds of people, my field of vision narrows until she's all that I can see. She sinks down on her knees with me, taking my face in her hands and mouthing the one word that will cement us together for as long as we both shall live.

"Yes."



# Epilogue

## Isla

“You look beautiful,” Bella says softly in my ear. She’s standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders as we study my reflection in the mirror in front of us.

“Thanks.” I smile, but it’s one of those that make me look slightly constipated. It’s the nerves, I know, but I’m terrified I’m going to end up looking like that on all our wedding photos.

Taking a deep breath, I run my fingers over the delicate lace covering my torso and meet my friend’s soft brown eyes in the mirror. “This is really happening, right? I’m not going to wake up alone in bed and find out that it was all a dream?”

Bella chuckles and slides out from behind me, pointing to a wet spot on her dress just above her breast. “If this was a dream, would your maid of honor have spent the last twenty minutes trying to scrub baby food off herself?”

I shrug, but my lips inch up at the corners as I wrinkle my nose. “You still smell a little mushy peas and sausages, but I’ve had weirder dreams. I’m not sure if that’s sufficient proof it’s real.”

“Well, then this should be.” She holds out her hand and helps me step off the small podium the hotel placed in the bridal suite.

Once I’m safely on the ground and steady in the silver slippers I chose over sky-high heels for the occasion, she leads me across the expansive suite to a picture window overlooking the gardens below and the bay beyond them.

When we reach the window, she comes to stand next to me and points at the people milling around on the grass. “There are my parents and CJ, Chase is with Bryan, who is really here

and getting ready right down the hall. And look, if this was a dream, would the whole Full Moon crowd be down there trying to corral all their children?"

"Maybe." I press my fingertips into the lace at my hips. It's so darn soft, but I can feel the gentle ridges of the pattern on it. When I see one of the Full Moon kids running smack bang into my mother, my eyes go wide and a giggle escapes me. "Now that, on the other hand, might not have been in my dream. Thank God she wasn't carrying a drink. Mom would've hated to spend the day with a big stain on her dress."

"Exactly." Bella turns me around by my shoulders when I shake my arms out at my sides. When my gaze lands on hers again, her eyes are twinkling with laughter but there's also understanding in them. "We're really here. In Fiji. For your wedding. I promise you, it's not a dream. This is really happening and if you ask me, it's about freaking time."

"Hey," I protest. "Bryan only proposed four months ago. It didn't take us that long to pull this together."

"Maybe not, but it took both of you long enough to pull your heads out of your behinds and realize that you were meant to be together all along." She narrows her eyes in thought, then sighs. "Well, at least you're here now. And there are rock stars at your wedding, which is pretty freaking cool."

"They insisted." I smile when I think back to the conversation we had with the band after their show the night Bryan proposed. "Max and Jonathan are taking a lot of credit for me forgiving him. They seem to think their conversation with me made a huge difference. John and Tim just said that since they were there when the question was popped, they should be there when we tie the knot."

"By that logic, there are a couple hundred other people who should be here." She chuckles. "They were all there when the question was popped, weren't they?"

I pull a face at her. "Inviting them all would've definitely taken this from small and intimate to a wedding extravaganza, which is the opposite of that we wanted."

“To be fair, the only thing Bryan wanted was to marry the girl he should’ve married in the first place.”

“And yet, he said no when I told him I’d marry him at city hall, wearing a tracksuit and with only you and our parents as witnesses.”

Bella holds up her hands and laughs, her dark hair shimmering in the sunlight filtering in through the window. I hear a soft click and when I glance in the direction it came from, I’m glad the photographer got back in time to capture that moment.

We asked her to do her best to snap natural pictures instead of just a bunch of posed ones. I can’t wait to see how it turns out, but even if the photos are terrible, I’ll still be happy. I’ve been deliriously happy since Bryan and I worked things out after the ball and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

“You have to admit that Fiji is a touch more beautiful than city hall.” She glances toward the window again, and I nod my agreement when I do the same.

Together, we pause for a moment to take in the view, both of us drinking in the crystalline blue sky, the impossibly gorgeous sea-green color of the ocean, and the low-key setup in the lush, tropical garden below. When Bryan and I started thinking about where we wanted to get married, we decided to get a head start on all that traveling we’ve both dreamed about doing and have the wedding here.

“How did we even get here?” I whisper before I can stop myself.

“We took a car, a plane, and a shuttle from the airport,” she jokes before shrugging and shaking her head. “I don’t know, but I’m glad you did. The two of you have always been perfect together, but it’s never been more true than it is now. You’re the ultimate power couple, but you still know how to have fun. You’re both building empires, but you’ve also started the foundation now. Honestly, I don’t even know how you ever find the time to see each other but somehow, you’re almost always together. Say what will you, you were meant to get here eventually.”

“That’s how I feel about it too. It’s just surreal sometimes, you know?”

She dips her head in a nod. “Definitely. After today, you’re officially going to be my sister. I don’t really want to think about what you’ll be getting up to with my brother while you’re away on your honeymoon for three whole months, but I am glad you’re finally going to be part of the family now. Even if it does mean having to do unspeakable things with my *brother*.”

“They’re not unspeakable things.” I laugh and give a pointed look out the window to where her parents are trying to wrestle CJ into his stroller. “You have a child. That’s all the evidence I need that you’ve done some of those things at least once.”

“Once?” She snorts. “You know what they say about practice making perfect, right? Look at that little boy. He’s as perfect as they come.”

Still laughing, I move back to the mirror to a last-minute check but incline my head at her. “Exactly. See? Not unspeakable.”

“They are when you’re doing them with my brother.” She scrunches up her face, following me back to the podium. “Speaking of your mega-honeymoon, let’s go over the rules one more time.”

“No calling more than once every two days,” I recite, counting them off on my fingers. “Trust that Bella and the moms have the foundation covered even if it still in the startup phase and we’re worried we’re the only ones who can take care of it.”

She nods. “Mom has a ton of experience in dealing with charities focused on abused children and orphans. Honestly, she’s still thrilled it’s the cause you guys chose and she’s going to be running point. The foundation will be just fine. We know it’s your baby. We’ll take good care of it. What else?”

I grimace. “No checking emails more than once a week. Between your dad, my aunt, and our assistants, neither

company is going to be run into the ground while we're gone. We have to enjoy the few months we're taking off and send lots of pictures of the places we visit."

"Good, and the last one?"

"Have fun and don't forget to bring home lots of presents," I say, my eyes welling with tears as I turn on the podium to hug her. "Thank you for everything. We're going to get you the best gifts in the world from everywhere we end up having the time to visit. I promise."

"I'm adding one more rule," she murmurs, her voice as thick with emotion as mine. "No getting weepy a few minutes before we have to go down there. The makeup artist will kick my ass if she thinks I've gotten you to ruin your mascara."

I squeeze her tighter. "I don't care if I look like a panda bear. Bryan's not marrying me for my makeup. Well, hopefully not."

"Definitely not," she corrects softly and lets me hug her for another minute. "He's marrying you because you're the one for him. Sure, things went horribly wrong, and it went viral, but you're finally getting your second chance and I know you won't need another one. This is it, babe. Are you ready?"

I sniff and swipe the tiny bit of moisture that leaked from eyes away from my cheeks before smoothing out my dress and straightening up. "I'm ready. Let's do this."

The dress swirls around my ankles as we stride out of the room together. It's a simpler dress than I ever thought I might choose if my big day ever came but it's feminine and whimsical, and I loved it the minute I saw it. *I just hope Bryan loves it too.*

Nerves zoom around in my stomach when I think about what we're about to do. I'm in an actual, honest-to-God wedding dress and he'll be a tailored, specially made suit. Wedding clothes. *Our* wedding clothes.

All our closest family and friends are waiting to watch us promise to be together for the rest of our lives. To be fair, my parents took some time to get onboard with the idea of me

even being in a relationship with Bryan, never mind marrying him, but they're here and they've finally come to terms with the fact that I've forgiven him.

Dad had a few choice words for him, and I'm pretty sure there were some warnings involved, but they're good now. Friendly, even.

My father is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, and he dabs his eyes with a handkerchief before holding his arm out to me. Bella gives each of us a quick hug, then goes ahead to take her place for walking down the aisle ahead of us.

"I'm always going to be there for you, baby," Dad whispers as he puts his hand on top of mine in the crook of his elbow. "I don't want us to cry, so I'm not going to get sappy on you. Just remember that we love you, okay?"

"Always." I pull him closer and let my head fall against his shoulder, holding him tight until we're in position behind Bella.

Instrumental music swells through the air, and my friend flashes me a smile over her shoulder before taking her cue and starting forward. We wait for a few seconds, and then it's our turn.

The aisle is a red carpet laid out over the grass, and there are flower petals sprinkled along the edge. On either side of it, there are a few rows of chairs and right at the end, there's a gazebo that's completely covered in natural greenery.

I'm aware of it all, but only just. As soon as I see Bryan waiting for me, everything else seems to fade. The nerves that have been bugging me on and off all day vanish, and it's suddenly all I can do not to run toward him.

His rich brown hair glints in the sun and he's got his hands folded in front of him, the light gray suit stretching and bulging in all the right places. Those eyes I love so much are fixed on me, and the most beautiful smile spreads on his lips as he watches us approach.

I know he's been worried as the wedding has gotten closer that I'll realize that I'm making a mistake by marrying a man



who can't give me children. For now, we've decided not to have any and I'm happy with that decision. Kids have never really been something I've had my heart set on, and we'll have Bella's little ones to spoil.

When I see Bryan now, I know he's all I need. I'm not making a mistake and I'll keep setting his mind at ease about it for as long as it takes him to believe I really mean it.

When Dad places my hand in his and goes to take his seat, Bryan winds our fingers together and leans in to brush a kiss to my temple. "You're breathtaking," he whispers into my ear. "Consider my mind blown. Wow."

I smile but before I can reply, the local officiant clears his throat and gets started. The ceremony is short and sweet and before I know it, it's time for the vows. Bryan goes first, turning to face me and holding both of my hands in his.

"When I was writing these, I didn't have any idea how difficult it was going to be to get any words out in this moment." There are a lot of understanding hums and chuckles from our guests. He grins, but then takes a deep breath and refocuses on me. "I didn't really know what to promise you today, because I want to promise you everything and we might be here for a while if I try to say it all, so this is what I've got."

Slight, small tears gather in the corners of his eyes, but he ignores them. "From this day forward, I take you as my wife, as my partner in life and crime, my best friend, my confidant, and my one true love. I promise to listen and to really hear, to be there for you when times get tough and to celebrate with you when they're good. I promise to take you to all those places on our bucket lists, but to make every day at home just as amazing. I promise to love and protect you, to honor and cherish you, and to do everything in my power make all your dreams come true."

My cheeks are soaked by the time he's done, but I don't let go of his hands to wipe the tears away. Instead, I close my eyes to center myself and when I open them again, I take my turn. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to follow that, but I'll give it my best shot."

Bryan smiles and when he does, the words just stream out of me. “Bryan Hunter, you have been my friend, my best friend’s brother, my study partner, the thorn in my side, and for the longest time, the biggest ass I thought I knew.”

His smile doesn’t falter, and neither does mine. “There aren’t many hats you haven’t worn in my life, but the overarching one is that you’ve always been my biggest crush and eventually, my greatest love. Even when I hated you, I knew deep down inside that I only hated you so much because I loved you even more.”

I tighten my grip on his hands. “So now, in addition to all those other hats you’ve worn, I also take you as my husband, as the one person I choose to argue with for the rest of my life but who I will make up with at least twice as often. I take you as the one person who is legally obliged to see me in my pajamas and love me regardless. I promise to always make enough coffee for two in the mornings and only to mess with your playlists when you prank me first.”

“I promise to forgive you for stealing my phone to get a rock star’s personal number so you can surprise me, and I promise to drag you to an arcade to cheer you up whenever you’re feeling down.”

Bryan’s chuckling through the tears glistening in his eyes, and I hear a few other people laughing quietly as well. Smiling at him, I push myself to get through the last bit without crying. “On a more serious note, I promise to stand by you no matter what and to always hear you out. I promise not to jump to conclusions if I can help it and I promise to face whatever storms will come our way with you. Hand in hand. No more running. Just us, together, being us and finally getting our happily ever after.”

And we did get that. Our happily ever after started that day in Fiji and we’re still living it. Every day. Just the two us, taking on the world and making our dreams come true together.



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