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MATCHMAKING
The
CEO

Matchmaking The CEO

Layla Hagen

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Matchmaking The CEO

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Chapter One

Jake

“Jake, what do you mean you’re in Boston?”

I’d called my right-hand man, Ben, to let him know I was out of town. He sounded stressed out, and of course I knew why.

“My grandparents wanted me to come see them.”

“But we have that pitch with Tokyo in the evening.”

“I know, Ben. And I’ll be back in time for that.” I had a private plane that got me where I needed to be, and I’d be back in New York before that meeting.

I’d just stepped into the neighborhood florist’s shop and was heading up to the counter when the sales associate greeted me. “A bouquet of lilies, please.”

“You’re buying *flowers*.” I could almost see the shock on Ben’s face.

“Yes. For my grandmother.” I’d never show up at Jeannie Whitley’s house without flowers.

“I think I stepped into an alternate universe,” Ben said. “You never make time for anything, and now you’ve canceled your meetings this afternoon to fly to Boston and back while also stopping to buy flowers.”

“My grandparents know I’m busy. They wouldn’t have asked me here if it wasn’t serious.” Ben was right. I never did make time for much except clients. Workouts were a necessity—a way to blow off steam. And so was dating, although that was currently on hiatus. “I always make time for my grandparents and my brothers. I’ll call you later once I’m on my way back. As soon as you finish the pitch, send it to me, and I’ll review it on my way to the airport. It’ll work out. Trust me.”

“Fine.”

Even though this was out of character for me, I wasn't worried in the least. I could check in on my grandparents and catch up with my brothers, then fly back to the city in time to pitch to our prospective client from Tokyo.

Once the sales associate handed me the bouquet of flowers, I got back in the car, driving to my grandparents' home in Dorchester, a quiet family neighborhood.

Being back in Boston brought me no joy. Somehow everything reminded me of my father. My life was in New York now, and I liked it that way. I parked my car—technically my brother Colton's, as he'd dropped it off at the airport for me to use—in front of my grandparents' house, walking up to the front door with quick steps.

On second thought, this house brought back some good memories too. This place was like a time capsule. The Colonial-style house was exactly the way I remembered it from childhood—painted green, with a wraparound porch and white windowsills and railings. The tiled roof was gray. They had evergreen bushes around the edge of the property, which hid the home well from view.

I knocked on the door before ringing the bell. The door swung open a couple minutes later. My grandmother smiled from ear to ear, opening her arms wide. "Darling, you brought me flowers."

"How are you, Grandmother?" I said, kissing her cheek and handing her the bouquet.

Jeanie Whitley was eighty-nine but as fit and sharp as ever. She was thinner than I remembered, and she'd stopped coloring her hair this past year, announcing she was finally ready to own up to her age. My grandfather walked into the hallway a few seconds later.

"Good to see you, Grandson." He shook my hand, then patted me on the shoulder as I went in and gave him a warm hug. Grandfather was formal in his way, but it never stopped us from showing our affection. "We're very grateful you could come at such short notice."

“It sounded important.”

“Come on. Let’s go to the dining room,” Grandmother said, “I didn’t have time to prep a feast.” Usually she liked to cook my favorite foods whenever I visited.

She took out a vase from the sideboard, heading to the kitchen while Grandfather and I went to sit at the oversized dining table.

“What do you want to drink?” he asked. “Bourbon? Or is it too early in the day?”

“It’s always a good time for bourbon,” I said, “but I need my mind clear today.” I reached for the water carafe and one of three glasses in the center of the table.

My grandmother returned, placing the vase with the flowers back on the sideboard.

The two of them exchanged a glance. My throat closed up. Something was up.

“What is it?” I asked. “Why did you ask me to come visit? Are either of you sick?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” My grandmother sat down opposite me at the massive mahogany table, and my grandfather poured himself a bourbon, then joined us.

I’d always found this table to be insanely big. They’d purchased it years ago, insisting they wanted all eight grandkids to have a seat at the table. But as far as I was concerned, I only had four brothers.

My younger brothers had embraced our father’s *other* family as if it hadn’t broken Mom’s heart. Colton and I were the oldest and were the odd ones out on this. We witnessed firsthand what the pain of divorce did to our mother, and we weren’t quick to forgive.

“You know,” Grandmother began, “Whitley Industries has many branches.”

“I know,” I replied, careful not to sound short. Whitley Industries had tendrils reaching everywhere in Boston. It was involved in biotech, advertising, magazine publishing, coffee,

and craft distillery, among many others. My brothers were running four of the Whitley businesses, and my half brothers owned three of the bunch.

“I don’t know if your brothers told you, but the advertising branch is failing,” Grandfather said.

“We really don’t talk about Whitley Industries, Grandfather. Honestly, I don’t have time for that.” I’d built my own company from the ground up. I owned a management consultancy. I turned businesses around, and I made a very good living at it too. Besides, no one from the family ran Whitley Advertising.

“We figured you probably didn’t. It’s sinking,” Grandmother said.

“It’s been a money pit for years,” I agreed. Thirteen years ago, before the family discovered my father led a double life, everyone hailed him as a genius. He seemed to have it all together. He’d led Whitley Industries after Grandfather retired, taking it to unparalleled heights. Everyone in the area praised Ryan Whitley for being so good at multitasking companies. On the surface, he seemed to be doing great. After he’d hightailed out of town, it turned out that several of the companies he’d created under the Whitley Industries umbrella were struggling. It had forced Grandfather out of retirement.

My older brother, Colton, took over the biotech branch. He was a CEO as much as he was a scientist. Spencer ran the publishing branch, Cade took over the coffee production, and Gabe had the craft distillery. I’d chosen my own path. I’d been the one who discovered our father’s infidelity at twenty, and I’d wanted nothing to do with Whitley Industries.

It had been a hard time for all of us—my brothers, our mother, and our grandparents. They’d been shocked at their son’s betrayal. Even today, we rarely spoke about him.

“Listen, Grandson, we’re not going to beat around the bush. We want to ask you to help turn it around.” Grandfather was direct as usual, something I appreciated myself.

I straightened in my chair. “Okay. Let me check with my team, and we’ll take it on as soon as possible.” There was no sense arguing with my grandparents; I knew they wouldn’t ask this of me unless they felt they had no choice. Although I wasn’t excited about adding another thing to my plate, I would do anything for my family.

Grandfather shook his head. “No, not like a project. Not like a client. It needs more than that.”

“My team is very good, Grandfather,” I assured him.

He took another swig of bourbon before putting it down.

“We want you to come to Boston for a while, take over the reins of the company until you turn it around.”

It took a few seconds for me to realize what they implied. I wasn’t happy about where this was going. “You don’t have a CEO?”

“No,” Grandmother replied, looking none too happy. “He quit months ago, and your grandfather has tried to put out fires in the meantime.”

I couldn’t believe this. My grandfather was eighty-eight. He’d gone into retirement for the second time eight years ago. Putting out fires wasn’t the relaxing retirement the doctor prescribed after his heart attack.

I looked from one to the other. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“We know talking about the company upsets you, and we didn’t want to ask unless it was absolutely necessary. Now it is,” Grandfather explained.

I chose my next words carefully because the people sitting across from me meant the world to me. After my father’s infidelity was revealed, he left town, and Mom got sick. Our grandparents did their best to keep the family together, to keep us all from sinking. It hadn’t been easy.

“I have my own company to run, and it would be impossible for me to take over, even as a temporary CEO.” I saw the disappointment on their faces and felt like shit. “What

I can do is help you find another one as soon as possible while also putting my team on the case to start to turn things around.”

My grandmother’s smile was strained. Damn it, I hated that. I didn’t want to let them down, but I really didn’t have other options. My life was in New York and had been for the last eleven years. I had clients who personally depended on me. They wouldn’t be very happy if I suddenly moved to Boston, even if I kept up with my business by working remotely.

“All we ask of you is to consider it. Your grandfather isn’t getting any younger,” grandmother said.

I barely bit back a smile. Grandmother was going for the emotional attack, and she was very good at it. Every time I called her, I got a guilt trip about moving out of Boston in the first place. But back then, I’d wanted a fresh start, and I’d wanted nothing to do with Whitley Industries.

“That’s all we have to say, Jake.” Grandfather looked beat. I hated to think he was spending time at that damn company. I had to figure something out. Maybe my brothers could help me consider all the options.

“Are you meeting your brothers while you’re here?” Grandmother asked, as if guessing my thoughts.

“Yes, of course. I’m catching up with them later.” I looked at my watch—later being in forty minutes.

My grandfather shook his head. “Grandson, I know you’re a busy man, but don’t go around living your life in one-hour increments, counting down every minute. Before you know it, you’ll be an old man wondering how life passed you by.”

My grandmother gave him a stern look. “Stop lecturing him. He won’t want to come see us anymore.”

I chuckled. “Don’t worry, Grandmother. He can’t scare me away.”

“That’s good. Before I forget... as you know, I’m turning ninety this year.”

“I know.” My brothers were already up in arms about buying her presents.

“And I want to throw a big bash. You know, I never thought I’d actually get to this age. And now that I have, I want to celebrate it with my friends. Those who are still with us,” she added after a dramatic pause. My grandmother had been a local theater actress her whole life. She said she missed putting on performances, so she employed what she called *the dramatic flair* whenever she could with the family.

“It’s going to be grand,” she finished.

“On a weekday?”

Grandmother rolled her eyes. “It’s going to be on a weekend.”

“That’s good. I can take weekends off. Where?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I’m going to hire a very nice event planner to help me with it.”

No kidding. She meant business, then. I couldn’t remember a time when she’d hired someone else to plan a party for her. My grandmother lived for throwing big get-togethers. She jokingly called it her second job.

“I’ll be there,” I said. Even though I lived in another city, I never missed either of their celebrations.

“I’ll keep you to that, young man. Do you promise?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Something told me she didn’t totally believe me. Was I such a coldhearted bastard that my own grandmother thought I’d miss her birthday? Sure, I was tough in business, but hadn’t I made it clear to them how much I cared for them?

“It’s going to be fabulous,” she continued, putting on her actress smile. It was easy to tell it apart from her regular one. It was practiced. “I’ve already started on the guest list. I’m not sure if I’m going to invite Angela. She always brags about having great-grandkids. Keeps asking me when I’m going to have some of my own.” She looked at me speculatively. This was guilt trip number two. When was I going to settle down?

When was I going to have children? The answer was simple. I wouldn't. It wasn't in my plans. Not now, not in the future.

“Any news to share with us, darling?”

“The answer to that is always no. You know that.” I knew they thought I was being hardheaded about this, but I didn't believe in the illusion of family. I'd witnessed firsthand how easily one could be ruined. I wanted no part of it.

“I keep hoping that will change. Such a pity. All those good genes to pass on.”

That was what bothered me. I didn't exactly want to pass down the Whitley genes.

“Okay, time to let the boy go. You wouldn't want to be late for your brothers. How much time do you have allotted for them?”

I couldn't help but laugh because they knew me so well. “Two hours, and then I'm flying back to New York.”

“Goodness, Jake, you can't work eighteen-hour days your whole life.”

“I've reduced that considerably from eighteen to twelve,” I said with a straight face. “These days, I make time for other activities, like working out in the morning.”

Grandmother sighed. “If I didn't love you so much, I'd say you sound like a lost cause.”

“But I'm not.”

Kissing their cheeks, I bid them both goodbye before stepping out of the house.

I was meeting my brothers at a bar in Beacon Hill. Colton had been the one to suggest it. I'd been surprised, to say the least, when he informed me that he was joining our get-together as well. He was in the midst of a new discovery, as he called it, and the whole family complained they barely saw him these days.

I arrived in Beacon Hill twenty minutes later. The end of June was pleasantly warm in Boston and not yet humid. Even

though I grew up here, I'd been gone for a long while. I'd left two years after our life imploded. I finished my BA and went to NYU Stern School of Business to get my master's. New York felt more like home than Boston, but I wouldn't deny that seeing my four brothers gathered at a bar table made me feel like the odd man out.

I was missing a lot by not being here with them.

"The man of the hour," Spencer said when I approached, patting my shoulder. "You even got Colton to leave the lab. Good for you."

"Great to see you, man!" Cade said, and Spencer nodded.

"How much time do you have?" Colton asked. No bullshit. Straight to the point as usual.

"Two hours, and then the plane goes back." I slid him the keys to his car before I forgot. "Thanks, man."

"She drive good?" Colton had a Mercedes AMG GT, and it was a damn good car.

"Great. I need to get me one of those."

Spencer and Gabe nodded in agreement.

We were all relatively close in age. Colton was thirty-four, and I was younger by a year. Cade and Spencer were both thirty-one. They were twins, but you wouldn't know it by looking at them; they shared neither the same appearance nor the same personality. Gabe was the youngest at twenty-nine.

"What did Grandmother ask you here for? Was it about her birthday, or was it to remind you that it's a pity you're not passing on those blue eyes and that thick hair to future generations?" Gabe asked. "Don't worry. We get the same speech from time to time."

"They asked me here to be the CEO of Whitley Advertising. Why didn't any of you tell me Grandfather went back to work?" I asked.

Colton and Spencer exchanged glances. Gabe frowned.

Cade cocked a brow. “We tried to solve the issue by ourselves. Would it have made a difference if we told you?”

“Yes. Obviously. I offered to help them find a CEO.”

Cade snorted. “You think we all didn’t try that? Grandfather too? It’s not like you can pick up one off the street.”

“I know how recruiting works. I’ve assisted companies in searching for new CEOs.”

“And how long did that usually take? The job market is tough right now,” Cade countered.

“Months, sometimes up to a year,” I admitted. “There’s always somebody who’s looking for a job, or a different one. Regardless, someone has to lead the company in the meantime.”

“None of us have time, so Grandfather did it,” Colton explained. “He seemed to be enjoying getting back into the fray again.”

Although that may have been the case, he should have been enjoying his retirement years with Grandmother, not worrying about some failing advertising company that had been the bane of Whitley Industries for years.

“Someone should’ve told me,” I said through gritted teeth. It truly pissed me off that they didn’t share this with me.

“Why? So you can give us attitude?” Gabe countered. “Cheer up, man. Grandfather is in great shape. And between us, I think going to work is good for him. He told me he feels better than ever.”

Colton and I were in the room with Grandmother when the doctor told Grandfather that he should avoid stress under any circumstances after his heart attack.

“So, there’s no possibility of you actually taking up the role for a while?” Spencer asked.

“None.” I didn’t even hesitate. “I don’t have time for a second job.”

“No,” Spencer said. “We all considered taking the position ourselves.”

“You did?” I was stunned.

“Yes. But we don’t have your expertise when it comes to turning around businesses. It’s what you do day in, day out. Besides, you could probably replace yourself in your own company, better than any of us. Your work is project based, and you can divide them among your team. That’d be easier than it is for Grandfather to find a new CEO.”

I hated that he was right. My vice president of operations, Ben, was a genius, and I was grooming him to be Co-CEO in a couple years. But he wasn’t ready yet.

“Did she tell you about a party too?” Gabe asked.

“Just that she wants it to be huge. Have you decided what we’re buying her yet?”

“No,” Gabe said. “But Maddox, Nick, and Leo have something in the works. They just won’t tell me.”

I stiffened at the mention of our half brothers.

“And yes, they’ll be at the party too. You’re going to have to have an actual conversation with them. If you’d actually bother to get to know our brothers, you’d like them. We do,” Gabe said.

“I’ll be civil,” I assured him.

“You better be,” Cade said. His voice was sharp. “It’s not their fault.”

“Jesus, do we have to have this conversation every time, Cade?”

“I think we should.”

“I know it’s not their fault.” It wasn’t their mother’s fault either. The whole story came out soon after I discovered our father’s infidelity. The woman had worked with him years before he married our mom, then moved to Maine. He continued a relationship with her, unbeknownst to anyone. Back then, there was no social media where you could track

someone's every move. It had been easy for my father to keep his other family hidden. She'd never known about Mom. He'd always told her he couldn't marry her because his parents wouldn't approve. For some reason, she didn't question that.

There was a single person responsible for all this: Ryan Whitley. But that didn't mean I was going to be best friends with my half brothers. I didn't want a daily reminder of what a fuckup my father is. Cade and Spencer were on good terms with them but not friends—as far as I knew. Gabe was closest to them.

“I vote for you to move to Boston for a while,” Spencer said.

“So do I,” Gabe said.

Colton nodded. “Count me in.”

“As much as I'd love to be around the family, this is not up for vote,” I interjected.

“That way we'll be around to give you shit,” Cade went on as if I hadn't said anything.

“It would be a shame for the advertising branch to go bankrupt,” Colton said.

“Me taking up the role is not even an option.” I didn't want anyone raising their expectations. “I have my own company to run, as you do yours. Finding a CEO quickly is all we can do.”

“All right. Well, Grandmother usually gets what she wants, one way or the other,” Spencer said, and he was right.

“Is anyone slightly concerned that she seems intent on having great-grandchildren?” Gabe asked no one in particular.

We all turned to stare at him.

“She hints that her friends are bullying her for not having any. And she's even more insistent than usual,” Gabe continued.

Colton waved his hand. “That's just Grandmother thinking if she nags us long enough, we'll do her bidding.”

“Which sometimes does happen,” Spencer said slowly, as if he was thinking out loud.

There was a beeping sound, and Colton quickly checked his watch.

“I need to get back to the lab.”

“Jesus, dude, Jake just arrived,” Cade said.

“I don’t want to miss a possible breakthrough.”

“See, that one has two jobs,” Spencer said, pointing at Colton. “He’s a CEO *and* a scientist. And he does both full-time. I have no idea how.”

Colton looked very smug. “Bye, Jake. I’m going to be in New York next week. We’ll catch up, okay?”

“Sure.” I shook his hand before he left. Some days, I still couldn’t believe my brother studied biotech. Growing up, all he talked about was soccer. When Mom passed away, he completely changed his career.

“I’ll never understand him,” Gabe said. “Then again, I’m the complete opposite. Take Colton’s brain, flip it, and you’ll get mine.”

We all chuckled at that, mostly because it was true. Gabe was the creative mind in the family—he’d taken the craft distillery to unparalleled heights by coming up with new recipes.

That gave me an idea.

“Gabe, you do all your advertising in-house, right?” I asked.

“Yes, but I know where you’re going with this.”

“Really? Humor me.”

“You want me to take over as CEO?”

“Not even close.” I wasn’t a fool. I knew being creative with a product and leading a creative company were two very different sets of skills. “But I think it would help if you would

consult them on their actual campaigns, at least the ones that are related to your industry.”

“Grandfather already asked my advice on a few campaigns, but I’ll be more proactive about it.”

“Thanks, man,” I said.

“Who wants drinks?” Spencer asked.

“I can’t believe Colton left before we even had drinks.” Cade shook his head.

“Stop giving the man a hard time. He’s working on a ‘breakthrough discovery,’” I said, complete with air quotes.

“Yeah, yeah. You and Colton are like pot and kettle.”

Once upon a time, we were a team. The two older brothers who found out their father was a jackass and had to protect their younger brothers from it as well as deal with their mother’s illness. Mom learned she had melanoma six months after finding out my father had cheated on her. It was at an advanced stage, and she passed away four months later.

A waiter came by, and they all ordered an assortment of cocktails. I stuck to an energy drink.

Spencer cocked a brow. “And you’re not toasting with us why?”

“I’ve got a call once I’m back.”

“In New York?” He looked stunned.

“Yes.”

“With whom? The whole US is sleeping. Europe too.”

“Thank you for reminding me how time zones work. It’s with Asia. The pitch is at 10:00 p.m. our time. It’s eleven in the morning for them.”

“Okay. Well, cheers,” Gabe said.

I might not act like it, but it was good to be back with my brothers. I wouldn’t admit it out loud because they’d never let me forget it, but I missed the banter and catching up with them face-to-face.

I stayed with them for another forty minutes before I ordered an Uber to drive me to the private airport just outside the city.

As soon as I got inside the car, I started making phone calls, putting in motion the search for the CEO. Whitley Advertising needed one as soon as possible, and it wasn't going to be me.

Chapter Two

Natalie

“Your house is lovely,” I said as Mr. and Mrs. Whitley asked me to sit down at their gorgeous mahogany table. It looked cozy and massive at the same time. I could already picture it surrounded by guests.

“That’s very sweet of you to say.”

“Would the party be here?” I asked, running my hand through my light brown hair. It was a nervous habit I had when meeting new people. I was wearing a plain gray business dress, and I realized it was a bit too much as soon as I stepped inside the house.

“Oh no, no. I wouldn’t need your help if I were just throwing something small here.”

I barely held back laughter. Their home wasn’t exactly small, but I understood what she meant. On the phone, she told me she wanted a bash, and I was beginning to think she really meant it, which was exactly what I was hoping for.

I couldn’t believe my luck when I’d received the call. I’d barely put up my website—Natalie’s Event Agency—advertising my planning services three days ago, but I’d always been good with search engine optimization, and the efforts paid off.

She would be my very first customer, and I dearly hoped she’d hire me. On the phone, she’d seemed more interested in my life story than my experience, but I didn’t find that odd. Perhaps she wanted to know if we’d click.

“I want to do something a bit different. Usually I ask my friends and family to go to one of our beautiful restaurants around Boston. I’ve thrown parties in every banquet room imaginable, but this time I want something different.”

I looked at Mrs. Whitley, trying to gauge her personality. She seemed like a kind and warm person—she’d spoken about her grandsons and friends at length on the phone before

starting to ask about my own family. I missed my parents and two sisters to the moon and back. They'd recently moved to Greece, and I still couldn't get used to it. Mrs. Whitley seemed to like that I was on good terms with my family. I was determined to give her the best party possible, not only because I needed it for my business but because I truly liked this lady.

I had an idea. It was a bit out there, but you never knew until you tried.

"Have you thought about a destination party?"

She looked at her husband. "I haven't! Goodness, you're a genius. That would be a fantastic way to celebrate."

"The guests would have to travel though," Mr. Whitley said in his grave but very calm and soothing tone.

"Oh, I know. I know." Mrs. Whitley looked triumphant and flashed me a knowing smile that was a bit unsettling. "Jake does always speak about Martha's Vineyard." She pressed her lips together, looking pensive, and I didn't want to interrupt.

"I can look into it," I said, after a while.

"My grandson Jake has a huge house there. I could talk him into letting us throw the party there."

"I can also look into all the venues on Martha's Vineyard," I said, wondering if this Jake would really want to put up his house for thirty or so people to come in—and that was presuming there'd be enough room. "Do you want a theme?"

"Hmm, if we do a nineties theme, would that be too on the nose?"

"We could do it, if you want to," I answered politely.

"Natalie, darling, be honest with me. Judging by your reaction, you're not thrilled."

"Truthfully, Mrs. Whitley, I think parties pertaining to a decade are overdone." I honestly thought they were kitschy and reminded me of high school. "What we could do is choose a seasonal theme or something pertaining to colors. Here, let me show you. I have some pictures."

They weren't technically my parties—they were my mom's. I was glad that I always took so many pictures at her events and that I'd helped her so often. She always said I had a talent for it. Since this was my first—and so far only—gig, I was determined to make it work.

“By the way, we're not very formal. Just call us Jeannie and Abe. These look lovely,” Jeannie said as I scrolled through the pictures, holding the iPad for her to see. Abe's eyes were already glazing. I gave him five minutes before he made an excuse to leave. However, it happened two minutes later. I barely held back a chuckle. I could sympathize; if you weren't into planning these things, it could seem terribly boring.

“How long have you been doing this job?” Jeannie asked, looking from the iPad up to me.

Busted. She hadn't asked me that on the phone.

“I'll be honest. I've thrown parties for a long time with my mom, but this would be my first official event.”

“I thought your website looked unfamiliar. I'd researched event planners a couple weeks earlier, and I hadn't come across it.”

“What made you choose me?” I asked, completely surprised.

“The way you described yourself just clicked with me. I had a good feeling about you.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Jeannie Whitley was a lovely person, and I knew I'd enjoy working with her. “Thank you for saying that.”

“What were you doing before, if you don't mind me asking? I don't want to seem nosy.”

“Oh, you're not. I have a degree in computer science and had a job doing predictive analytics, but things didn't work out. I've applied for jobs in the industry, but in the meantime, I'll plan parties for a living. I've interviewed for a promising prospect, but they haven't made an offer yet. And even if they do, I'd still have time for your party.”

“So, you’re only doing this temporarily.”

“Yes.” I wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing, judging by Jeannie’s expression.

I hoped she wouldn’t probe further. I didn’t want to drag up the whole story about why I had to leave my previous job. Besides, since I’d already built a website, I was toying with the idea of throwing parties on the side even after I got a full-time job.

“Is your mother retired now?”

“Yes.”

“Where did they move, if I may ask? I remember you said they didn’t live here anymore.”

“To Greece.”

“Oh, that’s lovely.”

“It is, but also very far away,” I said before chastising myself.

Jeannie was a possible client. She didn’t need to know the details of my life. Although, I had to admit, I felt very comfortable around her.

“And your sisters also moved?”

“Yes. They’re opening a hotel there, and my older sister recently gave birth, so my parents have their hands full,” I said with a sad smile. “Anyway, back to your destination party. Aside from Martha’s Vineyard, do you have any other places you’d like to go?”

Jeannie considered this. “We could choose something else, but the more I think about it, the more I like the Vineyard, especially since a few of the guests could sleep at Jake’s house.” She looked at my left hand.

“You know what? I’m going to ask my grandson when he’s going to Martha’s Vineyard next, and you could go with him to see the property. That way he could show you around.”

“That would be amazing. If it’s not an inconvenience for him.”

Jeannie snorted. *Actually* snorted. “He’ll go out of his way to tell us what an inconvenience it is.”

“Then I can find another way.”

“Oh no, no. I think my grandson doesn’t know what’s good for him. A break will do him just fine.”

I had no answer to that. Jeannie was like the meddling grandmother I’d love to have in my life. The concern for her grandson was obvious in her voice.

“A break from what exactly?” I asked.

“He works a lot. He insists it’s just twelve hours a day, but I have it on good authority that it’s more.”

“That’s not healthy,” I said immediately.

“Exactly.” She seemed thrilled that I was agreeing with her. “And, Natalie, forgive me for being so frank, but do you have a boyfriend?”

I blinked rapidly, feeling as if someone had pulled my chair out from under me and I’d fallen on my ass on the polished hardwood floor.

“A boyfriend? No.”

If an employer had asked me that, I would flat-out have told them it was none of their business, but somehow Jeannie made me want to spill my deepest secrets. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing,” she said suspiciously quickly. “I was just wondering if traveling to Martha’s Vineyard overnight would be a problem for you. Wouldn’t want to keep you from anything.”

My ex-boyfriend was why I was unemployed in the first place.

“You wouldn’t, trust me.”

Her smile was downright bubbly. I was even more suspicious than before.

“We’d pay for your time away, of course.”

I'd expected that, which was why her previous question didn't compute. Boyfriend or not, if I took a job, I'd travel if need be.

“Let me think about it and talk to Jake,” she continued. “I really like your idea with the destination party, and I also love the pictures you've shared with me.”

“Oh, that makes me so happy.”

I could practically feel my heart swell with joy, and I chose to take it as the best sign possible. I dearly needed one.

Things would work out. Jeannie would give me the assignment, and things would finally take a turn for the better.

Chapter Three

Jake

“Ben, we’re not losing this client. You understand? It’s an order.”

Ben nodded, his eyes darting toward the door. He might be my second-in-command, but even he knew better than to lose this account.

“I’m on it. We’ll update the presentation and the numbers.”

“Good. You know what to do, so do it. I want it on my desk in one hour.”

“You got it.” He left the next second. Ben was good, great even, but he was still soft on negotiations, and he needed a push every now and then. I, on the other hand, was tenacious. He would eventually learn how to do this, but it would take time.

I got up from behind my desk, stretching my legs and glancing out the window. From up here, I couldn’t even see Wall Street properly. I was on the fortieth floor and could literally see over the tops of other buildings. The skyline of New York was lighting up. It was six o’clock in the evening. Most people would prepare to leave work for the day, but Wall Street didn’t tick like that. Burning the midnight oil wasn’t just necessary, it was expected.

I heard my phone vibrate on my desk and went to pick it up. Thinking this might be the client calling to complain about the proposal we sent, I was surprised when Grandmother’s name flashed on the screen.

“Grandmother,” I said quickly, curious as to what this call could be about. The CEO search was in motion, though I hadn’t had any time to fill in my grandparents on the latest details.

“Jake, how are you?”

“Just fine. Working as usual. You know me.”

“At this time of day? Wait, it’s practically morning for you, isn’t it?” she asked sarcastically.

“No, I’d say dinner counts as lunch break around here.”

“Oh, my boy,” she tsked. “I was calling to ask how the CEO search is going.”

“We have three leads now. I only like one of them. The rest were not a good fit.” I’d taken one look at their résumés and called the recruiting firm back, berating them for even wasting my time by sending them.

“Oh yes, it’s the one who can only start in six months, right?”

“Correct.”

“Hmm.”

I knew that tone of voice. Grandmother was preparing to emotionally blackmail me again. Ever since I came back from Boston two weeks ago, I’d been searching high and low for a CEO, putting out feelers everywhere. This wasn’t going to be an easy process, or a quick one.

“Have you given our question more thought?”

I put a hand on top of my leather armchair, looking out the window.

“I have. There is no possibility of me being able to put things on hold here to come to Boston.”

“You can’t or you won’t?”

Straight to the point as always.

“Both,” I admitted. No sense in lying. She’d figure it out anyway.

“Mm-hmm, I thought as much. Well, that was too much to ask, I suppose.”

I straightened up, suspicious of her tone. It sounded resigned, and that was not my grandmother’s modus operandi.

“Now, I know we’ve talked about my ninetieth birthday,” she continued.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The lovely event planner I’ve hired had a wonderful idea. She suggested a destination party.”

A destination party for a ninety-year-old? That was the most insane thing I’d heard.

“Okay,” I said, trying to sound neutral. “Where would the destination be?”

“That depends on you.”

“Meaning?”

“Just how much do you love your dear old grandmother?”

I could see what she was doing. First she asked me about moving to Boston, knowing full well I’d say no. She also knew I’d feel guilty as hell. And now she would make a second request, knowing I wouldn’t deny her again.

“That house you have in Martha’s Vineyard is gorgeous. I’ve always loved it,” she commented.

“Yes, I know. It’s one of your favorite places.”

I bought it because I needed a place to retreat. Everyone was on my case all the time for working like a madman, so I made time for a getaway once a month, a whole weekend just for myself at Martha’s Vineyard. My grandmother and the rest of the family used it when I wasn’t there.

“I’d like to have the party there.”

“How big is the party?” I hadn’t paid attention when she’d told me how many guests she’d have. That was a crucial detail because although my home was large and could accommodate a lot of people, it wasn’t able to house hundreds.

“I don’t know. About thirty, give or take.”

“Thirty people?”

“Yes, and I sent Natalie pictures of your house. She thinks it would be a lovely place to host it.” I already disliked this Natalie. “I agree with her. The spot is lovely. You have that beautiful yard.”

I couldn't tell my grandmother no. I'd already disappointed her by not playing interim CEO to Whitley Advertising, but I could do this for her.

"You have the green light from me."

"Excellent. You're such a darling. I want Natalie to fly out there to see the property. If I'm not mistaken, your retreat is coming up in a week?"

"Yes," I said in a measured tone, moving away from the desk and stretching my legs. "But the whole point of a retreat is for me to be alone and relax."

"You won't even notice her. She'll be discreet, and you can just show her around so she can begin planning."

I didn't point out that my showing her around implied that I wouldn't have time to myself.

"I can arrange for Natalie to go on her own," I said.

"But do you really want her to stumble around alone on that huge property?"

"I have Mrs. Winters taking care of everything." She was a property caretaker and managed day-to-day business for transient homeowners.

"I still think you'd be a better guide." My grandmother knew my one weakness: I couldn't tell her no twice in a row.

"Fine. I'll make arrangements for her to join me next weekend. She can stay there for one night."

"Oh, that's excellent. Thanks so much, darling. This means a lot to me. I can't wait to celebrate with all of you. My friend Marlow might bring her niece, by the way."

"I don't know who Marlow is." Why would she tell me this?

"It doesn't matter who she is. Her niece, on the other hand, is a darling. She's in her late twenties, gorgeous, and smart, and sometimes she talks a lot."

"Grandmother, what are you doing?" I asked.

“Why, I’m trying to set you up, of course.”

I burst out laughing.

“This is not funny,” she said, sounding a bit affronted.

“It really is,” I replied. I hadn’t laughed like that in a while. “What makes you think I need your assistance?” I phrased it politely.

“You haven’t brought a girl home since you were in college. I think that’s a pretty big sign that you need help in that department.”

“I don’t. Do me a favor. If that’s the only reason you want your friend Marlow to bring her niece, tell her not to.”

“Too late. I’ve already invited them.”

I groaned.

“Be civil when you’re there,” she ordered.

“I’m not making any promises.”

“Jake!” She was using her sternest voice. It never worked.

“I’ve got to go, Grandmother. I’m going to keep you updated on the search for the CEO.”

“Yes, please do. And I’ll send your assistant Natalie’s details.”

“Yes, do that as well.”

I set my jaw. I couldn’t see a way out of this without hurting my grandmother’s feelings. I had one weekend a month to myself, and it looked like it wasn’t going to happen this time around.

I sat behind my desk, checking my emails. The recruitment company sent me another profile to look at. I scanned it quickly. The guy had previously held the position of director in a financial institution. Why the hell would they bother sending him to me?

Instead of replying to the email, I called Danielle, the person who had signed off on it.

“Mr. Whitley,” she said, sounding stunned.

“Danielle, do me a favor. If you can’t find any suitable candidates, don’t send me any. I don’t have time to waste.”

“Yes, Mr. Whitley. I’ll be honest with you. We’re grasping at straws.”

“Then don’t send me anything until you come up with something better. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. You have all my requirements, and if you need to adjust the offering, I’m willing to negotiate. Would that help you improve your search?”

“It might. To be honest, Mr. Whitley, there just aren’t a lot of experienced advertising CEOs looking for employment. Knowing we can offer more will help with the search. In fact, I’ll begin contacting existing companies’ CEOs to see if we can draw them away.”

“Now we’re talking, Danielle. Let me know how that goes.”

I hung up the phone quickly. If there was one thing I hated, it was people wasting my time. I understood the job market was difficult; veterans were either happy with their jobs or starting their own companies. The newer, less-experienced candidates weren’t even an option. I wanted to be understanding with Danielle, but she needed to know what my expectations were. If their company couldn’t do the job, I’d find someone else.

As I was about to open the email Ben just sent me, I saw another message come in. My grandmother had copied me on the information she sent to my assistant.

Hi, Betty. Hi, Jake.

Attached is Ms. Natalie’s phone number. You can contact her for anything you need to make any travel arrangements. She’ll go with Jake to Martha’s Vineyard this month.

Betty burst through my door a minute later.

“Yes?” I said curtly. Betty was not a gossip. I wouldn’t tolerate that. But I was sure this correspondence got her

interest up.

“Did you see the email from your grandmother?”

“Yes.”

She seemed positively panicked. “And who is going to tell her that she’s made a mistake?”

I groaned. “It’s not a mistake.”

“Oh, so Ms. Natalie is your...”

“She’s my nothing,” I replied. “She’s my grandmother’s event planner. Her ninetieth birthday will take place on the property.”

“Okay, got it. And she’s going to stay there the whole weekend?”

“No. Just one night.”

Betty grinned. “You really can’t say no to your grandmother, can you?”

I groaned again. “I wouldn’t be in this position if I could. Why do you look so happy about it?”

“Because sometimes there are rumors going on around the office”—she lowered her voice theatrically—“that you’re a robot. This proves that you are human after all.”

“Betty, you know how I feel about gossip. And I have my hands full.”

“Oh, I know. Because when your hands are full, mine are too. And guess what? That happens all the time.” She threw up her hands. “Fine, I’ll make the arrangements. I wonder if Ms. Natalie is attractive.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said.

“I beg to differ. I should probably warn her that she should have thick skin,” Betty said, talking more to herself.

“Betty!”

“I’m going, I’m going. Oh, I can’t wait to see how this will play out,” I heard her say as she left my office.

I opened Ben's email, shaking my head. Betty was taking her humor a step too far, but I had a soft spot for her. I met her when I saw her son get into a biking accident. I stopped the car to check if he was okay and ended up going with them to the ER. It turned out she was in need of a job, and I was an assistant short, so I'd hired her.

That was five years ago, and I was still very happy with my choice. Betty reminded me of my mother in some ways. In others, she was a pain in my ass.

A few seconds later, I received an alert that my calendar had been updated.

Flight to Martha's Vineyard was now ***Flight with Natalie to Martha's Vineyard***.

Game on, Grandmother.

Chapter Four

Natalie

“What is this life?” I wondered out loud as I was filling my plate with free treats in a private lounge at Logan International Airport. When Jeannie told me her grandson and I would be flown in his private jet to Martha’s Vineyard, I thought she was kidding.

I could have simply traveled by car and then taken the ferry there, but all expenses were paid, so who was I to say no?

When I entered the airport, a steward was waiting for me. He led me away from the crowds of mere mortals into this blissful heaven reserved only for the elite. The lounge was small, but everything inside had been chosen with great care, such as fine leather seats and couches. My favorite part was the food. So far, I’d eaten salmon carpaccio, beef carpaccio, three assortments of pasta, and now I was trying some steak. I was fairly certain I’d fall into a food coma during the flight.

The same steward informed me that Mr. Whitley would be late, and he probably wouldn’t even make it to the lounge. I was shocked. If I had access to free food and drinks, I wouldn’t sneeze at it. But Mr. Whitley was flying in from New York, so he most likely wouldn’t get off the plane. I only had one other companion in the lounge, an elderly man who seemed to be way into his eighties. He moved very slowly, but he was dressed to the nines and had put his napkin in the collar of his shirt while he savored his cheesecake.

The staff was eyeing me suspiciously. I didn’t blame them; I was pretty sure no one stuffed their faces the way I did, but everything looked far too good. I took my plate with the steak back to the small table I’d chosen, the one closest to the windows so I had a direct view of the runway. It was somehow separate from the rest of the airport, which I suppose was to be expected. The private planes looked like toys next to the regular ones.

I closed my eyes, savoring my steak. It was medium. I usually ate medium rare, but this one was so tender. It was better than anything I'd tasted. They also had plenty of champagne and wine, but I stuck to sparkling water. I didn't want to accidentally be tipsy when I met my employer—well, the grandson of my employer. I didn't want to do anything that could cost me the job.

I texted my best friend, Larissa, sending her a pic.

Natalie: The lounge is incredible. Can't wait to see the plane.

Larissa: Looks good. Keep all details for when we actually meet. Hopefully this century. I've got so much to do before leaving for Bali.

She'd been my best friend since high school. She was a yoga and Pilates instructor and decided to move to Bali for three months and film online classes from there. I was determined to catch up with her soon.

At four o'clock on the dot, the same steward approached me.

"Ms. Summers? You'll be escorted to the gate in twenty minutes."

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate the heads-up."

After he left, I hurried to the bathroom to inspect my appearance and freshen up. It was insanely warm outside, so I was wearing a yellow summery dress with cap sleeves that wasn't too snug on my body. I put on a bit of makeup, refreshing my lipstick. I wanted to look presentable and professional.

"Okay, ready to go, Nat. This is going to work out."

I was excited to meet Jeannie's grandson. I wanted to ask him a bit more about his grandmother. Sometimes it helped to hear other people's opinion about a person. It could round out my image of her so I knew what made her tick and could deliver the best ninetieth birthday party ever.

I didn't have my carry-on with me because the steward had informed me he was taking care of transferring it directly to the private flight. I loved all the attention and could totally get used to traveling like this.

"Ready, ma'am?" the steward asked when I returned to the lounge.

"Yes."

I followed him through the narrow corridor leading to a staircase, and we went down one level. There was only one flight that seemed to be operating from here. Another steward stood behind the boarding gate. I was alone.

"Is Mr. Whitley already on the plane?" I asked.

"No. He disembarked for a moment. He'll be here shortly."

I went to the gate, glancing around. I wasn't used to this luxury, and I felt out of place. I played with the pendant at my neck, looking down at my flat shoes. They were bright red and thankfully still in good condition; I could be very hard on my shoes.

I smelled him first—a subtle but poignant scent of leather, wood, and ocean.

"Mr. Whitley." The steward straightened as if he were military standing to attention.

I looked up to see Jake, and my knees instantly turned to mush. I'd never, *ever* had such a reaction to a man, not once in my thirty years.

The suit he was wearing fit him like a glove. It was classy and looked very expensive. It was simple, dark blue, matched with Oxford shoes that were polished to a solid shine. Everything about him screamed perfection. His dark hair was ravished, but in a way that made him look sexy and put together at the same time. His blue eyes were trained on me, and something told me he didn't like what he was seeing.

I, on the other hand, couldn't even open my mouth to introduce myself. I was too stunned by Jake; it was like I was

meeting a movie star, or royalty. I'd never seen anyone carry himself with such confidence.

"Ms. Natalie Summers, I presume," he said.

Oh, that voice. The timbre was firm and sensual at the same time. But he seemed to be displeased by the mere fact that I was here, and still, I couldn't shake off my stupor.

"Yes. Great to meet you."

That's it, girl. Pull it together. You're a professional.

He offered me his hand, and I shook it briefly. The skin of his palm was calloused, which surprised me. It contradicted his polished appearance. I couldn't imagine he did any sort of physical work. Perhaps it was from his workouts. He definitely had to be doing a lot of those to fill out his suit that way.

"I trust you found this place easily?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. The staff at the airport was very professional and friendly. I enjoyed the lounge as well."

He nodded, turning to the steward. "May we proceed?"

"Yes. Right away, sir."

During our last phone call, Jeannie had told me her grandson was difficult and not a man of many words, and I had a feeling she hadn't exaggerated at all.

He motioned for me to walk in front of him. I appreciated the manners, but when I passed him, I thought I heard a sharp inhale of breath.

I glanced at him over my shoulder, and our eyes connected for a brief second. Were they even more intense than before, or was the light playing tricks on me? No, I must have imagined it. Straightening up, I followed the steward, who simply gestured us to go out of the building. I couldn't help but grin.

"I'm sorry. I have to take a photo of this," I said.

"What?" Jake looked genuinely confused.

"I'm going on a private plane!" I couldn't contain my giddiness. "I've got to memorize it somehow."

He looked at me like he'd never heard anything more absurd.

Oh, this man. I wasn't going to let him get me down. I was going to enjoy this trip from beginning to end. I didn't care if he thought me a bit of a country bumpkin. Whatever—I was going to have fun.

Taking my phone from my purse, I held it in front of me, but the angle was all wrong. I could only catch the ladder properly, not the plane. I was too close.

Peeking over my phone at Jake, an idea struck me. The way he looked at me told me he would probably threaten to leave me on the tarmac if I even suggested this, but I wasn't going to let the opportunity pass me by.

“Would you mind taking a picture of me in front of the plane?”

“Ms. Summers.”

Yup, he thought I was an idiot.

“You can call me Natalie,” I teased. Jake definitely had a stick up his butt, and to a girl like me, that was a challenge. *Game on.*

“Ms. Summers,” he repeated, “I don't have time to waste.”

“It's just going to take three seconds. Look, if you argue with me, it's actually going to take longer. Please?”

He held his hand out, and I couldn't believe my luck. I handed him the phone and went as close as possible to the plane's stairs. Then I actually took a step up.

“I think this is good.” I stretched out my arms, grinning from ear to ear. Of course, a gust of wind blew just then, whipping my hair all over my face and my lips, sticking to my freshly applied coat of red lipstick.

Great. Just my luck.

I pushed my hair out of my face as quickly as possible, then asked him, “Did you get a good one?”

“Probably.”

“Can you please take a few more?”

He stared at me, irritation evident on his face. “I don’t think you want that.”

“Please? Don’t be such a grump. Just a few more.”

He lowered the phone. “A grump.”

Shit. I’d only met this man a couple minutes ago and was already insulting him.

You need this job, Natalie. Keep your sassy mouth shut.

“Just one more picture, please?” I wasn’t positive, but I may have seen the corners of his mouth lift.

Good, he doesn’t hate me.

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

I smiled widely, and to my astonishment, he chuckled too while snapping a picture.

Well, what do you know? I’m finally getting to him. No one could resist my sunny personality for too long.

He walked with determined steps up to me, handing me the phone before we entered the plane. There were only four seats, and he instructed me to sit opposite of him for weight adjustment on the plane. It was small and nothing like the luxurious ones I’d seen in movies, but it was still the most glamorous way I’d ever traveled.

After strapping myself in, I giddily looked at my pictures, and it immediately became clear why Jake Whitley had chuckled. It wasn’t because I was getting to him in any way, sunny personality or not. It was because after the hair accident, I had lipstick smeared all over my face. I lowered my phone. He was looking straight at me, clearly barely holding back his laughter.

“You could’ve told me.”

“I asked if you were sure. You insisted. After you called me a grump.”

I pocketed my phone, looking at Jake Whitley in a new light. He wasn't just difficult. He was more than that. I had a feeling I had my work cut out for me for this weekend.

Five minutes later, we took off. After the amazing experience in the lounge today, I'd fully prepared myself for the best flight of my life. The opposite was true. As soon as we took off, I realized I preferred big planes. I could feel every single tremor in this one.

I'd taken a seat that was facing backward to the direction of the flight. I was beginning to feel a bit nauseous. My stomach began bobbing up and down dangerously. I looked around desperately, fearing I might have to throw up.

"What do you need?"

"One of those paper bags."

"Are you going to be sick?" he asked, and for the first time today, he didn't sound like a smug asshole. He actually seemed concerned.

"Yes."

"Do you have motion sickness? Why did you not notify my assistant? This can become very unpleasant and messy."

I stood corrected. He was still an ass.

"I didn't know I had motion sickness. Only seems to happen on small planes and when I'm in terrible company."

He handed me a paper bag the next second. Just in time.

I'd reached a new embarrassing low within half an hour of meeting him—first the lipstick and now puking right in front of him. Since I'd eaten my weight in food in the lounge, I needed more than one bag.

After I was done retching, I held them tightly in my hand so the smell wouldn't permeate the plane. I was feeling absolutely miserable. I couldn't even muster the energy to take them to the bathroom.

My head was swimming, and I felt like I might throw up again any second now, even though I wasn't sure I had

anything left.

“We’re going to land in ten minutes. That might make it worse for you.”

I heard him as if from a distance, but he sounded concerned again.

“Oh great. I can’t imagine how that will go.” I didn’t dare open my eyes. It seemed to make the nausea worse.

“I think it would help you if we switched places and you flew in the direction of the flight.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” I murmured.

I sensed him move and then push something soft under my left ear, where I’d been leaning my head against the windowpane. It smelled just like him. He’d put his suit jacket under my head.

“Are you more comfortable now?”

“Yes,” I replied honestly, “thank you.”

He wasn’t lying. The remaining ten minutes were truly, honestly, and sincerely awful.

“Try breathing in through your nose very deeply and then let the air out just as slowly.”

I tried to follow his instructions. To my astonishment, it worked.

“Focus on your breath—the bridge of your nose or your nostrils, wherever you feel the air coming in.”

His instructions reminded me of a meditation app I’d tried recently. I didn’t know if it was his voice or the breath itself that calmed me, but I felt much better... right until the plane’s wheels hit the ground. I nearly dropped my bags full of vomit but caught them at the last moment, keeping them tightly in my hands. The last thing I wanted was for them to spill all over this elegant, expensive plane.

After we landed, I kept my eyes closed until we stopped moving, and then I opened them. Miraculously, my head

cleared up. I sat up straighter in my seat. Jake was looking at me intently.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Better. It’s like the brain fog lifted. If I weren’t holding these bags, I would’ve thought I imagined the whole thing.”

“You definitely have motion sickness,” he said. “Be careful when you step out. Sometimes being on solid ground afterward can confuse your brain.”

“Like sea legs,” I said, things suddenly clicking for me. I cringed. “How am I going to fly back?”

“There are remedies for this. I’ll get you something.”

“Thank you.” I unstrapped my seat buckle with one hand, holding the bags firmly in the other. Then I handed him the carefully folded jacket. That had been a very gentlemanly thing for him to do.

“After you,” he said as soon as the pilot opened the doors.

I put my handbag over my shoulder and carefully walked down the stairs. The pilot took the barf bags from me and quickly disposed of them.

“Thank you.” I said, feeling truly grateful because I didn’t want to be around them anymore. I knew if I caught even a whiff of the smell, I’d be sick all over again.

Jake was right; the second my feet were on solid ground, I felt my brain whirl a bit. I turned to him. “Where to?”

He pointed left to the small building that was most likely for airport arrivals. I was a bit unsteady on my feet, and I walked slowly.

“Do you need assistance?” he asked.

“You were right about having sea legs. I’m pretty sure my legs think they’re still on the plane.”

The next second, I felt a strong arm around my lower back. My entire body sang with excitement.

“Oh!” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Are you going to be sick again?”

I cleared my throat. “No, it’s better with you steadying me. Thank you.”

I suddenly had a hot flash, and I was overwhelmed by the way he held me.

His touch was strong and subtle at the same time. My nether region was totally on fire. I couldn’t explain my reaction to him. My brain must still have been befuddled from the flight.

When we entered the building, he told me to sit down while he took care of some paperwork. I had no idea what that was about, nor did I care right now. As he helped me sit, I noticed him wrinkle his nose. I realized why as I watched him prance his sexy ass toward a counter.

I’d never rinsed my mouth. I reeked of puke.

Chapter Five

Jake

Natalie seemed steady on her feet as we walked out of the small airport. A local driver in a black Lexus was already waiting for us, standing in front of the car.

“Take the front seat, Natalie,” I told her. “It’ll make it easier for you. And try to look forward.”

She nodded, but her eyes were more alert than before. She was going to be back on her feet in no time. I’d planned to do some work on the plane, but it had been impossible with her sick. I hadn’t seen anyone have such a violent reaction to a flight before. I had half a mind to call a doctor.

We arrived at the house ten minutes later. The double gates opened as soon as the car approached. I had a great security system in place, but it was cumbersome to get through. Before I arrived, my housekeeper deactivated all the alarms. Natalie was suspiciously silent when the car stopped in the driveway by the pool.

July was my favorite month here on the island. The weather was perfect for swimming, and I started every morning doing multiple laps. It invigorated me, prepped me for the day. This was the first time I was bringing anyone who wasn’t part of the family here. It had always been my sanctuary. I didn’t conduct business on vacation, and women I’d dated had never seen this estate.

After taking out Natalie’s small carry-on and mine, I opened the car door for her. She immediately got out, and the driver left afterward. Morton was familiar with my routine, as my assistant hired him often for my stay on the island. He was on call, but he didn’t spend the night on the property. Neither did my housekeeper.

“Wow,” Natalie murmured, “Jeannie was right. This is an amazing place. It’s huge. And this is your vacation home?” she asked, as if it couldn’t possibly be true.

“Yes. It was the only acceptable one on the market when I was looking for a home, so I bought it even though it’s a little too big. My family enjoys it too when I’m not at the house.”

“You bought a small hotel because it was the only thing available?”

“Am I about to be judged on how I spend my money?”

She winced.

Fuck, I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, but the woman was very prone to turning from sassy to pushing my buttons in a split second.

“It was just an observation. I can totally see why Jeannie wants to have her party in your home.”

I opened the door, holding my breath as another wave of vomit odor reached me. She’d taken a swig of water in the airport, but she still had it on her breath.

We stepped inside, and she gasped again, looking around.

“Jake, this is amazing.” She paused, then corrected herself quickly. “Mr. Whitley, I’m sorry. We are still on Mr. and Ms. terms, right?”

And there it was again, rearing its head, the fighting gene. “Anything wrong with pleasantries?” I asked, but I had to fight a smile.

“No, I’m just wondering why you insist on them. It’s not like there’s a huge age difference between us, and your grandmother asked me to call her Jeannie. I should really take everything she said at face value, including the fact that you’re a very difficult person.” She said the last bit under her breath.

“My grandmother told you that?” I asked. Jesus, it was true, but I didn’t know Grandmother went around saying that to people.

Natalie shrugged. Even though her hair was disheveled and she reeked of vomit, I couldn’t deny that she was absolutely fucking sexy. If it weren’t for her puking on the plane, I would’ve stared at her legs like a damn teenager.

“She wasn’t wrong,” Natalie said, “but I’ll focus on the good things.”

“Oh, I have redeeming qualities?”

“No, not you. The house, I meant.”

Once again, I barely held back laughter. I’d only met this woman couple hours ago, yet she was amusing me more than anyone I’d met in a long time.

“But first things first. I desperately need a shower to wash off the smell. Where am I sleeping?”

“I’ll show you to the guest bedroom.”

She looked around curiously as we walked through the house. From the foyer, we crossed into the open-plan kitchen. On the left side was an enormous living room, on the right one, a dining room. Both had floor-to-ceiling windows that looked into the yard and doors that opened onto terraces.

Natalie seemed to catalog every detail about the place. The staircase leading to the first floor was impressive.

“Wow, I’ve only seen this kind of staircase in the movies, where you can take pictures of an entire bridal party.”

At the top of the stairs, we turned to the left.

“This is your room,” I informed her.

She stepped inside, glancing around. “Oh my goodness, are you sure this is a guest room? It’s a super king-size master bedroom.”

“I’m positive I know where the master bedroom is.”

It was on the other end of the corridor, overlooking the ocean. I’d broken down the walls of three different rooms to create it. I liked having my space.

“When do you want dinner to be ready?”

“Oh, don’t tell me Mr. Whitley is going to roll up those sleeves and make dinner,” she said sarcastically.

“No, but my private chef will. I only have to call him.”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

“Yes.”

“I mean, I can whip us up dinner if you have any ingredients. You don’t have to call anyone.”

Her reaction caught me off guard.

Natalie Summers was definitely unlike any other woman I’d met. Her childlike surprise and enthusiasm were contagious. She was naive, in a wholesome way. The women I dated in New York were thrilled with the idea of a private chef.

You’re not dating her, Jake.

“He’s already on call,” I told her.

“All right, I guess, if you insist.”

“Any requests?”

“I eat everything. Literally. I tasted a million things in the airport lounge. It’s probably why I got so sick.”

“I’ll tell him to prep something tasty.”

“Thank you.”

She closed the door, and I headed straight to the living room to catch up on the work I’d put off on the plane.

Chapter Six

Jake

Donald, the chef, arrived thirty minutes later. Since Natalie said she didn't mind what she ate, I told him to do his own thing. He particularly liked it when I gave him free rein in the kitchen.

I sat in the armchair, working on my laptop. I had three new emails, but the most pressing one was from the recruiting company.

I groaned when I opened it.

Jake, I'm sorry I don't have good news. You told me to be honest with you and not waste your time. I don't have any suitable candidates right now. I don't think you'll find someone who suits your needs for the time being. Of course, you're welcome to also contact other recruiting agencies. You are under no obligation to give the job search exclusively to us.

I stood up, pacing the living room and looking out the window. From down here, I couldn't see the ocean, just the evergreen trees surrounding the property. They calmed me down and grounded me. I stepped outside, taking in a breath of fresh air. There was a reason this place was my sanctuary. I lived a very high-stakes, high-pressure life. This time I had to myself to decompress was crucial so I could keep going at the same pace.

I knew it was no use to hire an additional recruiting company. Even though I gave her shit, Danielle's company was the best on the market. If they couldn't find a CEO, no one else could. I wasn't going to waste anyone's time, or more of mine.

"Fucking hell."

"Oh, should I take this as an omen that you'll be even more of a grump during dinner?"

Natalie's voice resounded from behind me. I hadn't heard her come up.

I turned around and did a double take. She'd changed into another dress, and she'd done something to her hair. It came over to one side, cascading over her right breast. It was light brown, almost blonde in the light filtering in through the window. Her brown eyes had been unfocused and watery on the plane, but now they were sharp. She looked absolutely stunning. Her dress was insanely seductive, dark blue with a round neckline and no sleeves. It was short enough that I could see her thighs, but not too short.

"I didn't hear you come in," I said.

She raised a rice cracker. "I stole something from the kitchen. I'm starved, even though I ate everything in the lounge. I guess my upset stomach emptied all my reserves. I'm really sorry about that, by the way." She looked uncomfortable, shifting her weight from one leg to the other.

"You don't have to apologize for being sick."

"Do I have to apologize for my sassy mouth?" she asked, the corner of her mouth lifting.

"I think you've been punished enough by being sick," I said.

"I see."

"Ms. Summers, I'm in an even worse mood than before. You guessed that correctly. I'm not going to be an excellent dinner companion."

"Thank you for the warning. But why? What happened in the meantime? I couldn't have possibly pissed you off. Was it the chef? Please don't take it out on him. He seems to be prepping something delicious, and I don't want your sunny personality ruining his mojo."

I couldn't believe this woman. Was she for real? No one dared give me shit, ever.

"I received some unpleasant news from the office," I offered even though I didn't have to share it with her.

I gestured for her to walk to the dinner table and held out a chair for her. She chuckled as she sat down, and I did the same opposite her.

“What?” I asked.

“I like how you have your impeccable manners even with someone you can’t stand.”

I blinked. “Who said I can’t stand you?”

“Oh, you mean you’re like this with everyone you meet?”

I flashed her a genuine smile. “Ms. Summers, you’re actually seeing my very best side right now—bad news notwithstanding.”

Donald brought the same crackers Natalie was already munching on with a bowl of peanut sauce. It was my favorite. She immediately dipped a cracker in the sauce.

“So, tell me about the bad news.”

She looked genuinely curious. I wasn’t used to this. The women I dated didn’t care about any of my troubles, only about the restaurants I took them to, the vacations I paid for.

Jesus, you’re not dating her, a voice said in the back of my mind.

“It’s complicated. My grandparents asked me for a favor, something I’m not able to give them.”

“Could you possibly be more cryptic?” she challenged.

I laughed because she was right. I was being cryptic for no reason. “What do you know about Whitley Industries?” I asked.

“Honestly? That it’s huge and successful.”

“That’s what most people think. Some branches aren’t doing as well. Advertising is one of them. They asked me to take over for a while until it’s back on its feet.”

She stopped in the act of bringing a cracker to her mouth. “But you’ve got your own company in New York.”

“Exactly. I promised I’d help them find a CEO, and I can’t keep that promise. There’s no one on the market who’s suited enough for the job right now.”

“Surely that can’t be,” Natalie said.

“Trust me. I’ve had a very good recruiting company try and find one for the past few weeks.”

“So, hire another one,” she said, “or just wait a bit longer.”

“I don’t like the idea of waiting,” I admitted, eating a cracker myself. “My grandfather is going back to work, and that is a terrible idea.”

She frowned as she set the cracker on her plate and darted out her tongue, licking the peanut sauce off her lower lip. My cock twitched. I had the strangest instinct to lunge over the table, pull her lower lip in my mouth, and kiss her senseless.

“Why?” Natalie asked, genuinely interested. I was enjoying talking with her. She was intriguing.

“My grandfather had a heart attack many years ago,” I explained. “The doctor’s orders were for him not to go to work. I’m already pissed at my brothers that they didn’t tell me he started going to the office in the first place.”

Her eyes softened. I saw a change in her expression instantly.

“You’re worried about your grandfather,” she said.

“Yes, of course I am.”

The corners of her lips twitched. “He has a heart,” she said.

“There’s no winning with you, is there?”

“On the contrary, this right here is definitely in your plus column.”

The chef returned with our food then. He made tuna ceviche, one of my favorites. He also brought us wine to choose from. We both went with the red from Maxwell Wineries.

“Oh, this looks great,” Natalie said.

“For the main course, there’s steak,” I said.

“I love steak. I had one in the lounge too. I’m so glad I’m feeling better.”

I immediately downed the ceviche. I was starving, as I hadn’t eaten anything since this morning. This day refused to end.

After Natalie’s first bite, she closed her eyes, humming, and I had to adjust my pants.

Fucking hell, what’s wrong with me? I couldn’t react like this. Natalie was here because my grandmother hired her to cater her birthday party. I wasn’t going to take her to bed or on a date.

“What are you going to do about the CEO?” she asked.

“I don’t often say this, but I don’t know. I’m still thinking about it. My main priority is my grandfather’s health.”

“And for the company to make it, I guess?”

“I don’t particularly care about the company,” I admitted.

“I wasn’t expecting that. Isn’t Whitley Industries your legacy?”

My jaw ticked. “No. I left Boston to build my own company.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to overstep. This seems like an intensely personal topic.”

“It is.”

We finished our ceviche in silence, and then Donald brought the main course: steak with baked potatoes and three types of sauces. One was pepper, one gravy, and one mustard.

“I can’t believe you had this made for us.” She was staring enthusiastically at all the sauces, putting a spoonful of each on her plate, separately, careful so they wouldn’t touch each other. “Oh, this is all so delicious. I could kiss the chef.”

I groaned and masked it as a cough. *What the hell is wrong with me?* The thought of her kissing him didn't sit well with me at all.

"Tell me about yourself, Ms. Summers. How long have you been doing this job?"

She leaned back in her chair, tapping the fingers of her left hand on the table. "On one condition. You call me Natalie."

"Natalie," I said.

"As a matter of fact, this is my first event."

I froze. "What?" *My grandmother hired a newbie to cater a party in my home?*

"Oh, I see that judgey expression on your face. You think I'm going to trash your house?"

"No," I replied. "I have concerns, though."

"What are they?"

"That you don't know what you're doing."

"You doubt your grandmother's hiring capabilities?"

"I think my grandmother has her heart in the right place. Sometimes she likes people and makes important decisions based on that."

Natalie blinked rapidly. "I'm not incompetent, Mr. Whitley."

"I thought we were on a first-name basis?"

"I'm reconsidering that," she replied coolly.

"Natalie, I didn't mean to offend you."

"It just comes naturally to you. I'm starting to see that. I told your grandmother the truth, and I'm going to tell it to you as well. And I would like for you to refrain from making comments. She's my employer, not you."

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. Maybe I had.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

“The way you continuously give me shit. I haven’t ever met anyone who did that.”

She gaped at me. “And you’re enjoying it?”

“No, I’m merely amused by it.”

She waved me off. “Anyway, as I told your grandmother, I’ve been unofficially throwing parties for quite some time. My mother owned an event business until three years ago. Due to... unforeseen events, I need to do this for a living. At least for a while.”

“Due to unforeseen events?” I asked. “Who’s being cryptic now?”

Her face fell. It was the first time she’d truly lost her spark since I met her, except when she’d been sick on the plane.

“Yes. Well, it’s of a more personal nature, and I don’t feel comfortable sharing it with a perfect stranger. One who seems willing to use everything I say against me.”

“Natalie,” I said, looking her straight in the eyes because I wanted her to know I meant every word. “That would be a low blow. I would never use any sensitive information against you. I was simply shocked that my grandmother would hire someone who doesn’t have years of experience in the business. Especially since the party is taking place in my home.”

The wicked smile was back. She shimmied in her seat. “So, you *are* afraid I might trash your house. Admit it.”

“That thought did cross my mind,” I said, cutting through my steak.

“Don’t worry. I’ll run the detailed plan of the party by you so you’re aware of every single thing that will happen here.”

Fuck me. That seemed like a nightmare. How many hours of my life would this party planning cost me?

“That sounds like a threat more than a promise.”

“Oh, it might be,” she admitted. “I just wanted to see your face.”

“I don’t have time to go through *every single thing* with you,” I said, stating the obvious.

“Then I guess you’ll just know the overall plan, and you’ll have to trust me on the rest. I’m going to throw the perfect party for your grandmother. Tomorrow, I was thinking you and I could chat about her. I want a bit of insider information, just so I know what makes her tick, what things she usually likes, what makes her happy. She’s told me what she wants for the party, but I find in life, and in parties, it’s the little things that give the final touch, that create that unexpected rush of happiness.”

I was pleasantly surprised by the warmth in her voice when she spoke about my grandmother. But again, I hadn’t dealt with one person who met Jeannie Whitley and didn’t love her. My grandmother was a warm person who instantly made friends.

She was also usually a great judge of character—except when it came to her son, of course, but my father had fooled everyone. Still, I was going to ask her why she’d hired Natalie specifically. Her lack of official experience still didn’t sit right with me.

“Don’t worry. That was another threat. What are you doing tomorrow?” she asked.

“I planned to relax.”

She chuckled. “You say that like your plan just went up in smoke.”

“Natalie, I usually come here alone.”

“Oh, and I’m cramping your style. It’s okay. I’ll inspect the property and not make a sound. And you have brothers, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m betting at least one of them will be more eager to talk than you are. I’ll ask Jeannie if it’s okay to contact them to get all the information I wanted on her.”

I took a sip of red wine after finishing my last bite of steak. “So, you’ve already given up on me?”

She winked. “I know a lost cause when I see one. I’ll let you do your yoga or whatever it is you do when you come on your retreat. And then, in the evening, I’ll be out of your hair.” She groaned, and her smile fell. “Crap, I should go to a pharmacy to buy something for motion sickness before I leave tomorrow.”

“I already instructed the driver to bring you a bracelet for nausea and some pills.”

“Thank you,” she muttered before lowering her gaze to the plate. I couldn’t read her, and that drove me insane. One second, she acted like I was the biggest asshole. In the next, she seemed completely taken aback by what I said. As soon as she downed her glass of wine, she rose to her feet. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to look around the property this evening, get an idea of how it looks at sundown and so on.”

“I’ll show you the best part for the sunset,” I said, keeping my eyes on her face. It was more difficult when she was standing. She was so fucking sexy that I wanted to drink her up continuously. Her waist was small, but the curves of her ass and breasts were generous and absolutely delicious.

“You just told me that you like to spend your time here alone.”

“As you pointed out, I’ll be alone tomorrow evening.”

She flashed me a smile that was different than the one before.

“Okay. Then lead the way, Jake.”

“So, you’ve decided we’re staying on a first-name basis,” I teased as I opened the french doors to the terrace.

“No, that’s still under consideration. But for now we seem to have reached a truce.”

I was having more fun this evening than I’d had in the past decade of my life. Natalie was a breath of fresh air. Despite

my reservations about Grandmother's decision, I respected Natalie. She was tenacious.

"This is the perfect place for the sunset," she murmured.

"Oh no, it's in the right direction, but there's an even better one. Come on."

I looked at her feet. She was wearing flat shoes, which would work well for our walk. "You're well equipped. Come on. Let's go."

"Okay," she said, hesitantly descending the steps. We went off the alleyway and into the grass leading into the thuja trees. There was an uphill path leading between a patch in the evergreens.

"I discovered it by accident when I was running one evening. I thought I heard noises coming from that direction. Turned out it was just a bird coming back to build on its nest."

"Oh, just a bit of a workout before going to bed," she murmured as we climbed.

I couldn't help but laugh. "This is a workout?"

"Oh yeah. After flying in that death trap and puking out my brains, this stuff definitely counts as a workout."

"Are you feeling unwell? We can go back to the house."

"No, Jake, I was just... Never mind. My sense of humor is sometimes off, especially after I've had a bit of wine. Oh, this is gorgeous," she exclaimed and then fell completely silent.

We were just in time to catch the sunset. Perhaps another five minutes. It was hovering above the horizon but so close to the surface that the reflection in the water made it seem like it was one huge twin sun.

"I've never seen anything more beautiful," she murmured. There was nothing but sincerity in her voice. I swallowed hard, looking at her. She was a genuine person, and I craved that. "I think it might be my favorite spot here," she said.

I hadn't expected that. I would've thought she'd claim a corner of the luxurious mansion as her favorite place, but no,

she liked the sunset.

We both fell silent as we watched the sun slip out of sight. She didn't even move to take out her phone and snap a picture.

She put her hands on her arms, rubbing them up and down, and I noticed she had goose bumps. It had definitely cooled off this evening. I immediately took off my suit jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

She jerked her head back. "Thanks. I owe you. I need to take it for dry cleaning anyway."

"No, you don't."

"I slept on it on the plane. I'm pretty sure I got some stuff on it."

"Forget about it."

As soon as the sun set, I said, "Come on, let's go back in the house or you'll get sick. It gets really cold once the sun's gone."

"I can already feel the chill. I stupidly didn't bring any sweaters. But never mind, I'll call it a night. I want to have this image as the last one of the day. If we stay up too late, you might turn into a pumpkin. Or, in your case, an ogre." Her sass was back, and I liked it.

I knew right then that if we stayed here any longer, I'd end up kissing her.

Chapter Seven

Natalie

The next morning, I woke up at seven o'clock, as usual. The house was eerily quiet. I took in a deep breath, walking over to my window and opening it wide. The breeze fluttered in. The air was salty and fresh and just a bit chilly, but mostly, it was simply beautiful. I showered quickly and put on jeans and my thickest shirt, which, to be honest, wasn't very thick. I wondered if Jake would give me his jacket again.

God, the man was such a contrast. I couldn't get a good read on him. On the one hand, he was guarded to the point of being rude. I could handle that side of him. On the other hand, he was surprisingly thoughtful, and a gentleman, and so damn attractive. I couldn't handle that side of him at all. The contrasts between Jake and my ex were vast, yet there were similarities too. Both were career focused, but Jake's drive was straightforward and intense. Vince was a climber and liked to take advantage of people. I learned that the hard way.

I tiptoed through the house, unsure if he was still asleep and possibly a light sleeper. My shoes clacked on the marble floors, so I took them off, holding them in one hand. The marble was cold on my bare feet. I descended the stairs, looking around and wondering if anyone else was up.

Jake was nowhere to be found, and as far as I could tell, no member of his staff was here either. This house was so gorgeous. If it belonged to me, I'd never leave it, much less go back to New York. I'd visited the Big Apple a couple times and decided it was an exhausting city with too much noise.

I put on my shoes just before stepping outside. I breathed very deeply, crossing my arms over my chest to keep myself warm.

Where to begin? Where to go?

I was tempted to head back to the spot Jake had shown me yesterday, just to see how it looked in plain daylight, but I couldn't waste any time. I wanted to scour the property and decide if I wanted an outdoor tent as well, though it was a shame to cover any part of the beautiful lawn with a tent. I wanted to consider all possibilities so I could present them to Jeannie.

I took a few steps to go around the house when I stopped, rooted in my spot, taking in the sight before me. Jake Whitley was working out.

He was wearing jogging pants and absolutely nothing else, and I was in love with his outfit. The polite thing to do would've been to turn around and head back from where I came. I wasn't a Peeping Tom, and yet I couldn't move. My eyes were fixed on him. Even from this distance, I could tell his body was absolutely insane. What did he do, hire a private trainer to get every muscle into the best shape possible? No one looked like that. At least, no one *I* saw naked ever looked like that, especially Vince. But Jake... *Oh my*. He came closer to swimsuit models on a magazine cover, but even those where photoshopped, weren't they? Jake Whitley was real. I was partly regretful that he chose to work out in jogging pants. Why not naked, if he was usually alone? Or maybe he usually did it naked but had put on the pants for my benefit.

Nat! Get a hold of yourself!

Currently, he was doing push-ups, and even though I should've let the man do his thing, I couldn't help but get closer. His dark hair was slicked back with either sweat from his workout or water. Droplets of moisture were dripping down his forehead. Maybe he'd showered first?

“So, this is what you do at your retreat?” I asked. “Wake up at seven o'clock and work out?”

He stopped mid-push-up, looking up at me, then put one foot forward, standing up and coming face-to-face with me.

Holy shit. I didn't think this through.

Up close, he wasn't just sexy. His sex appeal was out of this world. A thin sheen of perspiration covered his torso, but that somehow only contributed to his masculinity shining through every pore. His blue eyes looked brighter in the morning sun. His cheekbones seemed more angular than they had last evening.

I hadn't seen his shoulders properly before while he was in a push-up position, but now they were practically in my face. Luckily, I could inspect them under the pretense of looking behind him. I wasn't obvious, was I?

"I woke up at six. I swam for half an hour before the workout. It's what I do when I'm here, you're right. I wake up early. I train. And then I start my day."

"Mm," I replied, dragging my gaze from his sculpted right shoulder to his eyes. "You're very thorough, even in your free time, aren't you?"

"I believe discipline should be maintained at all times."

"Maintained?" I teased.

"You have a problem with my use of the English language?"

"No, you just like to use formal words."

He looked at me like I was nuts, then said, "I'll walk around with you. Just give me ten minutes to take a shower."

"You don't have to. You're a busy man."

He tilted his head. Was it my imagination, or was he looking at my mouth? It was hard to tell. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but imagination or not, my body reacted just at the thought that he could possibly be interested in me. Heat pooled between my thighs.

Great, Natalie. You're now attracted to your client's grandson, who's kind of a jerk.

"I said I'll do it."

"Fine, I'll wait."

He nodded. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him he didn't have to shower on my account. I found the sweat on him incredibly sexy, but even I knew that would be completely inappropriate, so I kept my mouth shut.

As he walked up to the house, I didn't even pretend not to look at his ass. It was impressive. That was the only way to describe it. My mouth watered. *Yum.*

Well, well, will you look at that? One night and Jake Whitley has mellowed out. Though perhaps I shouldn't chant victory just yet. Maybe after a shower and coffee, he'll go back to his grumpy self.

Either way, I was glad for the opportunity to have him show me around. I did want him to give me his approval on certain things. It was his home, after all. He should have a say in it, and if some areas were off-limits, I needed to know that as well.

He came down fifteen minutes later but didn't join me. He was on the phone, and I saw him pacing on the west terrace, frowning. Even from here, I could hear he was talking to his grandmother. He even mentioned his grandfather. A few minutes later, he pocketed his phone, descending the marble steps to join me.

"Oh, you're back to grumpy Jake, aren't you?" I asked.

He didn't smile. "Let's start the tour."

"Okay."

So, the miracle had only lasted a few minutes.

"How much time do you have?" I asked him.

"Thirty minutes."

"That's plenty. Would you like me to walk you through my ideas?" I asked.

"Sure, why not?"

"Okay, so I'm thinking there's no need for a tent. Your house is big enough to hold the reception inside. The catering team will put everything on the kitchen island and on the

dining room table. There will be chafing dishes, of course. As for the outside, I'll contact the company that has rental furniture to set up some tables and chairs on the terrace, but I wouldn't put anything on any of your lawns. They're perfect and beautiful, and it would be a shame to ruin them. Jeannie seems like a very outdoorsy kind of person, though, judging by how lovely her garden is back in Boston, so I'll try to make the outdoor area as hospitable as possible to keep the heart of the party right there by the trees."

I stopped midsentence, looking at him. He seemed lost in thought.

"Have you listened to a word I said?" I asked.

"No, I apologize. You were saying?"

My shoulders dropped. "Look, there's no point in doing this if you aren't going to pay attention. You have other things to focus on. I simply wanted you to know what I planned. Tell me if anything is off-limits. In fact, why don't we start with that? Is there anything you absolutely don't want me to do?"

"I would like the upstairs area to remain closed."

"I can do that. There's no reason for the guests to go upstairs anyway. Your grandmother said all guests will sleep at surrounding hotels."

"Good. Are we done?"

My jaw dropped. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes. We should go back to Boston immediately."

I blinked several times. "I thought you were going to stay and have your Natalie-free retreat this evening and tomorrow." I paused a moment. "Wait, did you say *we*? You're coming to Boston? To stay, or just a layover?"

It hit me then. I took in his appearance. He wasn't annoyed like he was yesterday. He was frowning, and his eyes were intent and dark, not smug.

"What happened?" I asked.

“My grandfather took a trip to the ER.” His tone was even, but his expression betrayed just how worried he was. He just wasn’t letting on.

“Oh my God, is he okay?” I exclaimed, a hand on my chest. I had the strangest impulse to put my hand on him instead, hoping to calm him somewhat, even though he seemed perfectly composed. I had this eerie feeling that, inside, he was completely undone.

“He claims yes.”

“But you don’t believe him,” I stated.

“No. My grandparents have a habit of downplaying health situations. They don’t want to worry me, or us—me and my brothers.”

“Oh good. So, that’s where you get it,” I said in a teasing tone. I wasn’t sure why I said it. I wasn’t trying to push his buttons like last night. I guess I simply wanted to alleviate the tension. It worked, because he lifted a corner of his mouth.

“What?”

“You look so stoic and calm, but it’s obvious that you’re very worried about him.”

His shoulders relaxed, but his frown intensified. “How can you tell?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Have you spoken to any of your brothers?”

“None of them are answering, which is even more concerning.” He said the word as if it felt strange to him. Like he didn’t own up to being concerned very often. I had a hunch I was seeing a side of him he usually kept for himself. For some reason, seeing him vulnerable made him even sexier. Although I was probably still rattled by all the hormones that had been rolling off him before he went to shower.

“Why did you let me babble about the party?” I asked. “Let’s go.”

“It’s important to my grandmother. I thought we could at least get this done before going back to Boston, where,

according to her, everything is fine. Except for the fact that my grandfather had to go to the ER.”

He swallowed hard.

“My suitcase is all packed. I can just go get it, and we can leave right away.”

“No, come on, let’s do this. Walk me through everything once before we leave.”

“You promise to pay attention?” I teased.

“I promise to try.”

“That’s good enough.”

“My grandfather is at home, so it’s not an emergency right now anyway. But I do want us to fly out straight after the tour.”

“Okay.” I clapped my hands once. “Pay attention. I’ll be quick.”

I swallowed hard, trying to focus.

Oh, Jesus, Natalie, you truly are in danger of losing your damn brain around this man.

I blamed his perfectly sculpted shoulders for that.

Chapter Eight

Natalie

I walked him through everything at top speed. To his credit, he was listening and asking the right questions. The second I was done, his entire demeanor changed. He rolled his shoulders and seemed even taller. He was slipping into business mode.

“I’ve got a pilot on hold. How fast can we leave?”

“I’m ready.”

“I’m going upstairs to get your suitcase.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I wasn’t going to say no to that.

“Thank you. I’m coming with you anyway. I need to get my purse.”

I felt him next to me as we walked to the house. He radiated masculinity and strength, his body language different than before. He took out his phone as we walked up to the second floor.

“Colton, finally. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you the whole morning.”

My God, that voice. That was the way he spoke to his brother? Like he was just commanding him about. I could only imagine him in a boardroom. I didn’t think anyone ever dared contradict him.

“You’re positive about that?” His tone was clipped. “I’m coming to Boston anyway. Yes, today. I want to check on Grandfather myself. It’s time he and I had a chat. Thank you.”

He pocketed his phone.

“You’re not on friendly terms with your brother?”

“Yes, I am.” He actually looked confused by my question.

“Oh, wow, my bad,” I said. “That was friendly?”

“That was me when I’m pissed at my brother.”

The minute we stepped inside the bedroom, I took my purse, and he grabbed the suitcase. My, my, his shoulders flexed deliciously when he lifted it.

“Actually, you know what? I hate to do this, but I do need to take something out of the bag. This shirt is not really very comfortable. It was just the thickest one I had.”

He set it back down, his jaw ticking. “Sure. I’ll wait outside your room.”

“There’s no need. I’ll go into the bathroom and change. I’ll be quick.” I hurried to the bathroom and got rid of my shirt swiftly. For some reason, I was nervous. Why, because I was changing while he was in the next room? That was insane.

I put on a white cotton shirt. I called it business casual, although it was more casual. Who cared? It was only a flight, and I was done trying to impress Jake. It clearly hadn’t worked. Besides, he had bigger things to worry about now.

When I stepped back into the bedroom, he was sitting on the bed. He looked down my body and then back up. I was rooted to my spot, heat coiling throughout me. *Holy shit!* He stood up from the bed abruptly, clearing his throat as I put the shirt in my suitcase.

“Ready to go?” His voice was composed, his tone businesslike.

Oh, so that was a slip before. Had he fought checking me out as much as I fought the same? Now that was a thought. The heat level in my body rose another few degrees.

Don’t blush, Natalie. Don’t blush.

Perhaps this was just a knee-jerk reaction to having a woman in front of him. I tried not to focus too much on the bulging muscle in his right arm as he took my suitcase again and we went down the stairs. There was already a car in front of the house. He picked up his own suitcase from the doorway. I hadn’t even noticed it on the way in.

“Aren’t you locking up the house?” I asked.

“No. Mrs. Winters, my housekeeper, is going to come and take care of everything.”

He opened the car door for me to get in. I accidentally brushed my arm against his chest as I lowered myself onto the seat, and the reaction my body had was simply insane. I felt goose bumps forming everywhere. And I really mean *everywhere*. Not just my arms and legs but my tummy and even lower. I didn't even know you could get goose bumps there. My breath caught. I felt Jake exhale sharply, his hot breath landing on my temple. On instinct, I looked up at him. His eyes were glued to my lips. On a shaky breath, I lowered myself into my seat, and he closed the door. I swallowed hard, fiddling with my thumbs in my lap.

He joined me a few seconds later. I searched his face, figuring I could tell more about what was going on and get a good read on him, but he didn't look at me at all. Instead, he focused on the driver.

“Morton, do you have the items I asked you to get for Ms. Summers?”

“Yes, sir. I dropped by the pharmacy this morning. Here they are, and the bracelet as well.” He handed me a small bag.

“Oh, thank you.” I was truly touched. Even though he had a million other things to take care of this morning and was worried sick about his grandfather, he'd still remembered about my motion sickness.

I frowned. “Wait, where exactly is it supposed to press?”

“Come here. I know how this works.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Hold out your left hand.”

I did as Jake said. He took the bracelet, ripping it out of the package.

“How do you know how to put it on?” I asked.

“Ben, my associate, has motion sickness too. I've seen him put it on whenever we fly somewhere.”

Feeling his calloused fingertips on my bare skin was almost too much to bear, especially after our moment before.

Oh, sweet Lord, please no—

Of course my skin turned to goose bumps again.

I bit my lower lip as he fixed the bracelet. He put three fingers on the line right under my palm, then pressed his thumb between my veins.

“That’s where it has to press.”

I cleared my throat, nodding. “Thanks.”

He secured the bracelet in a matter of seconds and then let go of my hand. I wished he hadn’t. It was soothing and sexy at the same time.

“Should I take the pills now?” I asked softly.

“As you wish,” he replied. “As far as I know, the effect is quick, but you’ll be drowsy.”

“For how long?”

“Probably the entire flight back. Maybe longer.”

“Do you think I’ll be fine just wearing the bracelet?”

“There’s no way to know.”

I didn’t want another vomit episode, so I popped a pill as well.

The result was that I slept the entire flight back, waking with a start when the plane hit the runway back in Boston.

Jake’s eyes were trained on me. “Welcome back to the land of the living. You were completely out.”

I wondered how I hadn’t gotten a cramp in my neck or something, and then I realized he made a pillow out of his suit jacket again.

Oh, God, this man.

I folded it carefully, inspecting it for any drool. Nope, thank God.

I gave it back to him just as the plane stopped. “Thank you so much.”

He nodded.

“Are you sure I can’t have it cleaned for you?”

He looked at me like I had two heads. “I have people for that. No worries.”

I felt like I’d been dismissed, so I looked out the window, but, of course, this wasn’t the same airport I was used to.

“Where are we?” I said. “It’s not Logan Airport.”

“It’s a small landing area for private planes. It was easier to get a last-minute slot here.”

“I haven’t been here before.”

“There’s no connection to commercial planes, so probably not.”

The pilot opened the door a few moments later, helping me out first. Jake came down with our suitcases.

“Umm, I’m going to take an Uber,” I said, hoping someone was available in the area. At Logan, there were taxis and other forms of ground transportation lined up to get travelers to their destinations.

“Nonsense. I’ve got the car waiting for me. I’ll drop you off, and then I’ll head to my grandparents’ house.”

He was tense again, like he was bracing himself for bad news.

“Thank you. That’s very thoughtful.” I made to take off the bracelet and give it back to him, but he shook his head.

“No, keep it. Who knows when you might need it?”

“True. Now that I know exactly how sick I can get, I’ll take it with me on most of my plane rides. How much do I owe you?”

“Natalie.” The way he said my name made me squirm with delight. “Drop it. I mean it. It’s fine.”

“But—”

“I mean it.”

And I dropped it, because he had bigger things to worry about now.

He rolled both of our suitcases through the small building and then outside on the main sidewalk to wait for our car.

“If you want, we can go straight to your grandparents’ house, and I can Uber from there. So you get to them quicker. I know you really want to see him.” I paused a moment, then said, “In fact, I have a better idea. As long as I’m not intruding, I could come with you and maybe tell Jeannie a bit about my ideas to distract her from everything that happened.”

Jake turned to look at me abruptly. “You’d do that?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“That would be a great idea. She’s a basket case. When he had his heart attack, she was beside herself for weeks.”

“That’s understandable. Oh, poor Jeannie and Abe.” My heart was hurting for both of them.

“How long are you going to stay?” I asked as the car drove in our direction, a black Lexus again. Did he have one on speed dial in every city?

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t like being here, do you?”

“No.”

“Can I ask why not?”

“It brings back memories of my father. I’m not particularly fond of him.” His tone invited no further conversation. His blue eyes weren’t bright anymore like they’d been this morning before he spoke to his grandmother. He intensely disliked being here and yet had come at the drop of a hat because his grandfather wasn’t feeling well. He was initially a grump, but underneath those thorns was a generous and kind man I liked far too much.

The car stopped right in front of us, and Jake opened the door for me again. This time I made sure I didn’t accidentally

brush against him. No matter how much I wanted to feel those hard muscles again, it was simply not a good idea.

He was going back to New York as soon as possible. I had my own issues going on, and no matter how seductive this tension between us was, I had to ignore it.

The drive to Jeannie's house took well over forty minutes. How could there be so much traffic on Saturday afternoon? I didn't get it. Next to me, Jake was on the phone the whole time, barking orders, although it wasn't fair to say barking—his tone was never disrespectful. No, he was firm, and every sentence just dripped with authority.

He drummed his fingers on the leather seat. Once again, I was struck by how alluring his hands were, and forearms too. When had he rolled up his sleeves? Probably on the plane.

I glanced out the window and tried my best to tune out the conversation, not wanting to make it seem like I was eavesdropping. I fidgeted in my seat, stretching out my arms, and our hands accidentally brushed.

Holy shit. All my efforts to not accidentally bump up against him when I got in the car were in vain. Now I'd gone and done it.

Heat pooled straight between my legs, causing me to exhale sharply. I peeked at him. His eyes were glued on my thighs. As if he could sense I was looking at him, he glanced at me. My cheeks were on fire. I abruptly cocked my head, looking out the window.

“Sorry about that. Went on for longer than I thought. I make it a rule not to ignore calls from clients,” he said after hanging up.

“No problem.”

We arrived at his grandparents' house a few seconds later, and Jake got out first. He was probably going to open the door to my side as well, but I didn't bother to wait. I unbuckled the seat belt and immediately got out.

“Are you sure this is okay with you? I can have the driver take you home right now,” Jake said as I rounded the car.

“No, I’m fine. Really. Unless you think I’m intruding.”

“No, you’re not. I’m going to have a serious conversation with my grandfather. It would actually be a tremendous help if you could keep my grandmother entertained in the meantime.”

“Oh, I see. You’re making me your accomplice. I demand to know exactly what I’m getting into.”

The corners of his mouth lifted. “You’re something, Ms. Summers.”

“Oh, we’re back to last names? Just so I know where I stand.”

“No, we’re not. We’re on a first-name basis, Natalie.”

My name in his mouth sounded different than before. It did something to my belly. Were those flutters I felt? This man had an insane effect on me.

Natalie, forget the flutters.

I couldn’t, though. My ex, Vince, had never given me flutters. Even though we’d broken up six months ago, I wasn’t looking for a relationship. Not that Jake was offering, of course.

“Should we take out our suitcases?”

“No, Cal is going to wait here until we’re done.”

I didn’t question that. I was just happy I didn’t have to carry around my suitcase everywhere.

Jake and I walked into the small garden and up the porch to the front door. He didn’t bother knocking, and we went straight inside the house, taking off our shoes and leaving them in the entryway.

“Grandmother, Grandfather!” he called loudly. “Natalie and I are here.”

Jeannie poked her head out from the living room. “Oh, goodness. You really didn’t have to come back. I have everything under control.”

I was shocked. When Jake had said his grandmother would be out of sorts, I'd expected her to maybe be a bit on edge, but Jeannie seemed a completely different person than the woman I'd met before. She had dark circles under her eyes, strands of hair escaped her strict bun, and she looked frazzled.

"Grandmother, have you slept at all?" Jake asked. His voice was full of concern.

"Now, you know how I get when things happen."

"This is what we're going to do. I'll go upstairs and talk to Grandfather. Natalie is going to walk you through the party plans. She's come up with some really good ideas." He looked at me with uncertainty, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. Should I even bring it up at all? I thought it could distract her, but maybe what Jeannie needed was just a friendly ear or some company.

"Jeannie and I will be fine," I assured him. I didn't know how I was going to achieve that, but I knew I could.

He nodded curtly and headed up the stairs. Jeannie smiled at me, and in those brilliantly blue eyes, I could see a hint of the woman I'd met before.

"Did he give you a hard time?"

"Oh, yes, actually, but I returned the favor and gave him shit."

Jeannie started laughing. She dropped her head back, putting her hand on her chest.

"Oh my goodness, I would've paid great money to see that. You know, this is part of the reason I hired you," she said as we walked to the living room.

"What?"

"You just seem like the kind of woman who could put up with my grandson."

"How did you even know that I'd get the chance to do it?"

Jeannie winced and then pressed her lips together as if she'd caught herself talking out of line. "I just had a hunch,

dear, that the chance ‘to give him shit,’ as you put it, might come up.”

I dipped my head, ashamed. “I’m so sorry I used that expression in front of you. It was not professional at all.”

“Don’t you worry, darling. It took me out of my own worries for a minute there, and I desperately needed it.”

It looked like I’d found my angle. We sat down in the living room on the couch, and I walked her through my ideas for the party. To my astonishment, she listened intently and nodded several times.

“This all sounds great.”

“I can sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“Well, now with Abe, I’m honestly not sure if traveling anywhere is a good idea.”

Of course, she was right.

“I didn’t think about that. That’s not a problem. I can scout locations around Boston. You still have time to decide.”

She nodded, and I could feel her slipping away.

“Yes, do that.” She glanced behind her. “How long have they been upstairs?”

“Just ten minutes. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Jeannie closed her eyes. “He clutched his arm and fell to the floor, became unconscious.”

Heavens, that did sound like a heart attack. “What did the doctor say?”

“That he needs absolute and utter rest. I was such a fool, letting him go to the office.”

“Jeannie, you can’t blame yourself.”

“Oh yes I can. Whitley men are extremely stubborn—please note the emphasis on extremely—even when it’s not in their best interest. It’s my job to make sure they don’t get in their own way. God, if I lost him...”

“But you didn’t, Jeannie,” I said softly. “He’s healthy, and you’ll make sure he’s resting properly from now on.”

“Yes,” she said absentmindedly. “Jake was so furious. I wasn’t intentionally keeping it from him. I simply didn’t find any time to call him.”

“This all happened yesterday?”

“Yes. In the afternoon.”

Okay, now I was starting to understand why Jake was pissed. I could get not calling immediately, but after a few hours?

We both rose from the couch when we heard footsteps on the staircase.

“See, he’s fine,” Jeannie said.

“He’s not fine, Grandmother, and you know it,” Jake said. Although his voice was kind, the words were direct, and Jeannie looked every bit admonished.

“What did you talk about with him?” she asked.

“About how he’s not to go near Whitley Advertising again.”

The relief on her face was visible.

“So, who’s going to take care of that, then? You know your grandfather won’t let it go unattended.”

Jake looked at his grandmother, his nostrils flaring. “I am. I’ll take the position of CEO for the foreseeable future.”

Chapter Nine

Natalie

“Oh, darling. That’s wonderful news. We should celebrate. Is your grandfather sleeping?”

Jake was frowning. This was not an easy decision for him. Being CEO for both companies would be super difficult, I was sure of that.

“Yes. Let’s not bother him. We can throw a party another time.” His voice was completely flat, like he didn’t think this was a reason to celebrate.

“Your brothers are on the way, so, at any rate, the six of us can celebrate that your grandfather is home...and your decision, if you want.” She glanced at me. “Well, the seven of us.”

“I’m going to be out of your hair.”

I didn’t want to intrude, especially if the other Whitley brothers were coming. I’d done my job, and it seemed like this was exactly what Jeannie needed to feel better—to know Jake was going to take over the business, no matter if he only did so grudgingly.

“Nonsense. The more the merrier.”

Jake came close to me. “Natalie, my offer still stands. I don’t intend to stay here long. I’ll drive you home and then go to a hotel.”

“Are you sure I’m not in anyone’s way?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer because the doorbell rang.

“That will be them,” Jeannie chanted, obviously thrilled to have her whole family together.

Jake frowned. “What did you do, call them as soon as I told you I was coming to Boston?”

“Exactly. I figured you’d be more at ease if you knew all of us were taking care of your grandfather. But if you’re not too busy, we could clink a glass of champagne.”

“I am very busy, but I guess we all could use a celebration after this scare. I’ll need to rearrange a lot of things for my temporary move to Boston.”

The doorbell rang, and Jeannie opened the door. Four of the handsomest men I’d seen in my whole life walked in.

What is it with the genes in this family?

I inspected each one of them. They could all easily be models, and the eyes seemed to be a signature of the family. Their hair color varied from shades of dark brown to dark blonde. One of them, who seemed vaguely familiar, had darker hair. In an instant, a flash of recognition passed through my mind. Gabe Whitley. He’d appeared in a commercial promoting his craft distillery. I remembered it distinctly because it was strange for a businessman to appear in his own commercials.

“Overwhelmed already?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, by the absolutely stunningly handsome genes in your family.”

I realized I’d said it out loud only when I saw his expression change. I thought he’d tease me about it or just plain laugh at me. Instead, he seemed bothered. Why, because I’d complimented his brothers? This man’s mind was a mystery.

“Boys, I’ve got great news for you,” Jeannie announced. “Jake decided he’ll move to Boston after all.”

“Great news, man,” one of the guys said.

“Temporarily,” Jake clarified.

“Still a win,” Jeannie pointed out. “What you’re doing for your grandfather is beyond wonderful, my boy, and I love you for it.”

Gabe Whitley looked at me. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced before. Brother, you’ve had a girlfriend all this

time and hid her from us? That's unlike you."

My cheeks were on fire.

"I don't. Natalie is grandmother's party planner," Jake explained.

"Oh, my bad." Gabe winked at me. "I don't know anyone who would put up with my brother anyway. I'm Gabe. A pleasure to meet you."

"I know," I said. "I think I've seen you in a commercial for Whitley Distilleries, right?"

"That's right," Gabe said, clearly pleased I recognized him. I shook hands with him.

The rest of the brothers introduced themselves shortly after that—Colton, Spencer, and Cade.

Cade winked at me. "Natalie, I'm warning you. We can be a bit much to handle."

"I have a tough skin," I assured him.

"Okay, then. Celebrations are in order, I assume?" Spencer said. "The prodigal son returns home."

"I'm not returning," Jake said.

"The lost sheep is returning," Spencer added, disregarding Jake's claim. "Dude, we're gonna make fun of you with every cheesy expression there is. Give us that. We never thought we'd see you move back to Boston."

"It only took poor Grandfather to get sick to get you back."

That was Colton, I thought. I was starting to get them mixed up.

"Can you all behave while Natalie is here?" Jake asked.

"Uh, no," Gabe said, turning to look straight at me. "As Grandmother's party planner, I think it's good for you to get used to us. Otherwise, you won't know what hit you on the day of the party."

I chuckled. "Good to know."

I wondered how come all his brothers seemed to be so humorous and ready to joke around while Jake wasn't. Well, to be fair, Colton wasn't very sunny either. But still, Jake was extra broody, and his family seemed to actually like each other and were glad to have him home. This only made me wonder even more why he'd been so adamant to stay away from Boston. Back at Martha's Vineyard, when he'd spoken about taking over the company, he'd seemed more bothered by the fact that he had to be here in the city than leaving his company in New York. Then again, maybe he had a girlfriend in New York, although, judging by what Gabe said, that wasn't likely.

"My grandsons might give you headaches," Jeannie warned, "but none as much as Jake."

"Grandmother!" Jake warned, but Jeannie seemed unfazed by his outburst.

"What? It's true. He wasn't always like that either. Cade was the one who always gave us the most headaches. In school he used to surprise teachers with all sorts of pranks. Once, he brought a frog and put it in a teacher's pocket. Then he moved on to more serious pranks. Reckless, some would say."

The mood turned gloomy for a few moments, then Jeannie added, "Spencer was the one who tried to smooth things over, even though they were the same age."

"You're twins?" I asked in surprise.

Spencer nodded. "Yeah. That's me, always the pacifist."

"Except when you tried to smooth things over by doing bigger shit than Cade just to take the attention off him," Colton pointed out.

"Bigger shit? That's impossible," Cade interjected. "I was the most reckless Whitley, and I won't relinquish that title to anyone."

"Yeah, well, I'm wiser now. I have smarter strategies," Spencer said.

"Besides, I don't share my adventures with the family anymore," Cade added on a wink.

“That’s what you think, my boy,” Jeannie replied with a wicked smile, and Cade’s expression went from smug to stunned. Turning to Gabe, she added, “Gabe was also determined to give me as many headaches as possible. He tried to talk his way out of attending senior year in high school.”

“Didn’t go over too well,” Gabe admitted. “And it’s a good thing you stuck to your guns, Grandmother.”

Jeannie walked to the sideboard, taking out glasses and putting them on a tray. Colton popped open a bottle of bubbly and filled the glasses.

When had she whipped those out? I couldn’t believe that just half an hour ago, she seemed to be a ghost of herself. Now she was chipper and smiling and seemed to be the same woman I’d met when she initially hired me.

“Do the honors, dear,” she said, coming to me with the first glass.

“Thank you, Jeannie.”

All the boys reached out for a drink, and she took her glass last. They all clinked in cheers, and I stood awkwardly, unsure if I should join the toast, but Jeannie motioned me forward with her hand.

I stepped right up between Jake and Gabe. As we all clinked glasses, I accidentally stumbled backward right into Jake. He put a strong hand on my shoulder, steadying me, and I felt the contact throughout my body.

Oh, great. I shook hands with all his brothers, and no spark, zip, nada. Yet Jake touched me, through my clothing even, and I was on fire.

After taking the first sip, everyone seemed to talk at the same time. Colton and Cade wanted to head upstairs and check on their grandfather. Spencer and Gabe were asking Jake where he planned to live.

“Boys, your grandfather is resting, but I’m sure he’ll want to see you later. And you two, stop accosting Jake. He’s a grown man. He’ll figure out where he wants to live,” Jeannie said.

Gabe turned to me again. “Natalie, tell us what you have planned for Grandmother’s party.”

“Nothing is set in stone,” I replied, instantly stepping into business mode. “Jake and I flew out to Martha’s Vineyard to his vacation home because Jeannie and I first considered throwing a destination party there. But since your grandfather is recovering, Jeannie is reconsidering that.”

Stone silence followed my explanation. Gabe looked at Jake and then at his other three brothers.

“Am I hearing this right?” Spencer said. “You two flew together to Martha’s Vineyard?”

“That’s impossible,” Cade said. “He never takes anyone there.”

Colton cleared his throat. “Jake?”

I could barely hold back my smile. I liked seeing Jake in this situation with his brothers. The staff at the airport, both drivers, and even the chef tried to be as invisible as possible around him. His brothers were the exact opposite, ready to needle him about everything.

“Grandmother asked me for a favor, and I obliged,” Jake said carefully.

Gabe whistled loudly. “Natalie, you are tougher than I gave you credit for. You survived a trip to Martha’s Vineyard with Jake and haven’t quit the job yet. I have a feeling you’re going to be able to handle us just fine.”

“Thank you for the encouragement,” I told him.

Colton was suspiciously silent, simply watching Jake. Cade and Spencer seemed completely stunned.

“Wait, I need details about it,” Cade said finally, snapping his gaze to me. “How did he not run you off?”

“Like I said, I have tough skin,” I replied. Besides, I had no other option but to go through with this job, but they didn’t have to know that. And I was enjoying myself. Jeannie was simply adorable, and Jake was... well, he was delicious, but that was completely beside the point.

The man wasn't going to be here for long. Besides, we were complete opposites. I was a *happy* person. My mother always said I was the most cheerful of her daughters. I loved counting my blessings. Dad had taught all three of us girls to do that since we were little.

“Natalie, lovebug, you had a hard day, not a hard life. Remember to count your blessings.”

I did that even now.

Jake seemed determined to be unhappy. We certainly weren't compatible in the slightest. Except in the chemistry department. We had that in spades.

“All right, Natalie and I have to leave,” Jake said, putting his empty glass on the living room table. “I'm dropping her off at her home, and then I'm going straight to the hotel.”

“You're welcome to stay with any of us,” Colton said. “You know that right?”

“Oh, please,” Gabe said. “That would cramp his style, interfere with his morning jujitsu routine, or whatever it is he's doing.”

“You should try it sometime,” Jake said.

I was stunned by the subtle change in his voice. He was starting to mellow out, and he'd only needed a few minutes with his family. I had an inkling I might see another side to Jake altogether. But bottom line, Jeannie was my client, and we had yet to figure out what we wanted to do now that Jake's home was out of the question. There was really no reason for me to ever see him again. I was disappointed at the thought.

He trained his blue eyes on me, which rooted me to the spot. “Natalie, are you ready?”

I felt like we were alone in the room, even though the Whitleys were chatting loudly.

“Yeah, I'm ready. Let's go. Jeannie, I'll come up with several other options and call you to set up a time to meet, okay?”

“Sure thing, honey. I’m sure we’ll find the right way to celebrate this milestone.” Turning to her grandson, she said, “Jake, thank you for everything, and welcome home.”

He kissed his grandmother’s cheek and shook his brothers’ hands before we left the house. Stepping outside, he led me directly to the car. I climbed in quickly without giving him a chance to open the door. For some reason that seemed to be an intense moment between us. Go figure.

The second we were both inside, Jake turned and asked, “What’s your address?”

“I live in East Boston.”

“Okay. We’ll head right there,” the driver replied after I gave him the exact address, and the car jerked forward. I looked at Jake in silence. I had a million questions bubbling up.

“Ask away,” he said eventually, startling me.

“How do you know I wanted to ask anything?”

He glanced sideways at me, drumming his fingers over the empty seat between us. I had to stop obsessing over his fingers.

“You have that expression when you can’t help yourself and are on the verge of exploding with questions.”

“What made you decide to take the job if you were so dead against it?”

“My grandfather is unwell. I’m not about to let the man kill himself trying to keep that company afloat. I’ll figure something out in New York.”

He glanced out the window as I melted on the inside. From the moment I met him, I instinctively knew that Jake Whitley would always do exactly what he wanted, no matter the consequences. But today I learned that he did put someone else first: his family.

“It’s not so bad, you know,” I said. “Boston is an amazing city.”

“I know. I grew up here.”

Okay, grumpy Jake was back, and it seemed like he wouldn't slip out of this slump. I glanced outside, mentally reviewing possible party venues in and around Boston for Jeannie. She clearly liked the outdoors, so that eliminated about half the places I knew. I'd have to scout out new locations.

We arrived in front of my home about twenty minutes later. I lived in a cute neighborhood that was far away from the water, but it was cozy, and I liked it. I got out of the car and went to the trunk to get my bag, but Jake was there first. Interesting—he hadn't even attempted to open my door. Did that mean he'd realized exactly what the previous interactions had done to me? No, I was being silly. Maybe he was simply lost in thought. He took out my suitcase and rolled it right to my front door.

I froze when I saw the letter peeking out of my mailbox. I recognized the handwriting. It was from my ex, Vince. Why the hell would he write me a letter? He lived in Boston too.

“Natalie, what's wrong?”

I grabbed the letter without bothering to open it. A cold shudder ran all over me.

“Thank you for bringing my suitcase, Jake. Welcome to Boston.” I took out my keys from my bag. He was rooted to the spot at the base of the steps. I attempted to jab in the key, but my hands were shaking so badly that instead I dropped it.

Jake was next to me in an instant. He picked up the key. “Which one unlocks the door?”

“The big gold one,” I said.

He unlocked the door, opening it wide for me. I immediately threw the letter in the bin I had by the kitchen door.

“Natalie,” he said as I rolled my suitcase away from the front door. “What happened? Who was that letter from? You seemed to recognize the handwriting, so it was either a

neighbor or someone else who knows you very personally. Judging by the fact that you paled, I'd say the latter."

"You double as a detective in your free time?" I attempted to tease, but my voice was feeble.

"Do you need a detective?" Jake asked seriously.

I closed my eyes, laughing despite myself. I knew he didn't mean this in a funny way. His reaction was endearing.

"No, I don't."

He stood in the doorway and clearly had no intention of leaving until I told him what happened.

"Tell me what's wrong. I want to know. I want to help."

"Come on in," I said. "Funny, yesterday you couldn't wait to get rid of me, and now you won't leave me alone."

"You're shaking," he said.

"Want to sit down?" I pointed to my tiny sofa by the wall.

He nodded, and we both sat.

"It's from my ex-boyfriend. I have no idea how he has my new address. I moved here recently and haven't shared my whereabouts with anyone except my best friend, Larissa, and she wouldn't tell him, or anyone else for that matter."

"Is he stalking you?"

The words sent a shock wave through me.

"No, nothing like that. At least I don't think so. He's just being an asshole. We broke up six months ago, and he's tried to get back with me a couple times."

"What does he want now?" he asked.

"I don't know. I thought he gave up on the idea of getting back together. I haven't heard from him in about a month. Maybe this was his way of telling me he knows where I am. A text message would've sufficed, you know? But he always liked to intimidate me."

"I can't imagine anyone ever being able to intimidate you."

“That’s because you don’t know my ex,” I said with a sad smile.

“Does he have anything to do with the reason you’re changing jobs?”

“Yes. Everything happens for a reason, huh? Well, I’ve read somewhere that sometimes the reason is that you make stupid choices, and those lead to stupid results. It applies to me.”

“Natalie.” His voice was soft. “We own condos around the city. I can talk to my brothers right now and ask if any of them are free for you to move in.”

I couldn’t believe what he just said.

“Wait, have I stepped into an alternate universe? Why would you even offer that?”

“Is it safe for you to live here?”

“Even if it wasn’t, why would you offer?”

“Because we have condos, and you might need a place to stay.” His eyes pinned me to my spot. They were intense and also full of worry.

I shook my head. “Thanks for the offer, but that’s really not necessary. And even if it were, I wouldn’t take you up on it.”

“Why not?” He sounded exasperated, like he couldn’t possibly understand.

“I don’t know you, Jake, or your family. I met your grandmother a couple weeks ago and you yesterday. I can’t accept to move into one of the properties your family owns.”

Standing up, he took off his jacket. My little cozy home was unseasonably warm, and it had no AC.

“Anything you need, call me. I mean it.”

“That’s very generous of you to offer, Jake. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“You’re getting your sass back. Good.” Looking around, he added, “I like your house. It’s very welcoming.”

“Thanks. I wanted to make it as cozy as possible. I have a bit of an obsession with paintings. I buy them from up-and-coming artists.”

“They fit here. Looks good.”

I tried to look at it from his point of view. His villa in Martha’s Vineyard couldn’t be more different. It was huge, and every piece of furniture had been chosen by a decorator. My entire home could fit in his living room. I’d bought most of the furniture during sale season. It was why it was all a mix and match of styles, but I loved it. The gray couch was soft and velvety. The pink area rug brightened up the space. The kitchen was black with gold handles on the cupboards—they came with the house, and changing it would have been too expensive. I wasn’t fond of black, but I couldn’t deny it was elegant. My dining room table was pure wood, as were the chairs, with separate seat cushions on them. It all sat on a giant round gray rug. I had pictures of my family everywhere around the room, plus eight paintings. Some were classic depictions of nature, and others were postmodernist. There wasn’t a recurring theme in them; I simply bought what made my soul happy.

“Thank you for driving me home.”

“We’ll keep in touch,” he said.

“We will? I was ready to bet you’re delighted to finally be rid of me.”

He stared at me. I licked my lower lip, determined to maintain eye contact.

“You’re back to square zero with my grandmother’s party, are you not?”

“What’s one thing got to do with the other?”

“Unless you have any of my brothers’ phone numbers, I’m still your only *source* in regard to her likes and dislikes.”

“True.”

He nodded, satisfaction edging on his features. “Thought so.”

“You didn’t seem thrilled with the idea of being a source back at the Vineyard.”

“In the meantime, I’ve realized there are... advantages.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what those were, but I didn’t. Jake and I had crossed from enemies territory into something foreign. And I wanted to get my bearings before pushing his buttons again. The prospect of seeing more of him sent a thrill through my whole body.

“Good to know,” I murmured.

“Have a great evening, Natalie. Call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

After he left, I sank back on the couch. I couldn’t believe Vince. All I wanted was to forget our relationship had ever existed, but it seemed like that wasn’t possible.

I texted Larissa to let her know I was back in town. I debated calling her, but instead I video-called my parents. It was pretty late now in Greece, but they never went to bed before midnight.

To my astonishment, when Mom answered, the whole family waved at me. They were clearly in the backyard of the hotel, gathered around a table.

“Hey, what are you all doing up?” I asked.

“We’re enjoying the evening. It’s been so hot today that we were mostly indoors,” Mom said.

Doris and Calvin Summers had been married for thirty-five years and were as in love now as ever. Mom met my dad at the coffee shop where she was waitressing. He claimed it was love at first sight.

They had my sisters, Angie and Nellie, one and two years later. I came along five years after Nellie.

“Where’s Fig?” I asked, referring to Nellie’s daughter, Fionela. I’d nicknamed her Fig, for short.

They passed around the phone until Nellie held it over the crib. Fig was sleeping peacefully. My heart swelled with happiness.

“She’s so lovely,” I whispered as Nellie gave Mom the phone back. Seeing my niece reminded me of how much I wanted children. I only hoped to find the right man, as I wasn’t keen on raising a child by myself. I’d dodged a bullet with Vince for sure, but I wished he hadn’t turned out to be such an asshole.

“How was the trip to Martha’s Vineyard?” Mom asked.

“It was good. The villa is gorgeous. But my client’s husband got sick. She doesn’t want a destination party anymore, so I’ll have to look for a suitable location in Boston.” I decided not to tell my family about my plane ride—that was too embarrassing.

“I have no doubt you’ll find the right place. You have a knack for hidden gems.” That was high praise from Mom. I’d always enjoyed being her right hand, but she was tough.

Dad asked me how the job search was going, and my mood plummeted.

“I’m in the last rounds of interviews for the job I told you about,” I said. It wasn’t particularly thrilling, but my last one hadn’t been either. It paid well, though.

“You’ve got a fantastic degree,” Mom exclaimed. “It’s going to work out. You’ll see.”

My parents were positively bursting with pride that I had a college degree. I was the only one in the family. Dad worked in construction all his life, and Mom moved from waitressing to event planning. My sisters both worked at a hotel in midtown before moving to Greece when a new branch opened there.

“What else is new?” I asked, eager to change the topic.

They talked my ear off about all the repairs they had to do to the B&B and how they were thinking about adding a dinner menu. My parents looked ecstatic, and so did Angie. Nellie was happy too, but I could tell she was exhausted.

After finishing the conversation, I ate some leftovers I found in the fridge. It was a good call not to tell my parents about Vince's letter. They'd just worry for nothing.

I tried to focus on the positive. I was still in charge of Jeannie's party, and I was going to see Jake Whitley again.

I couldn't believe how much I was looking forward to that.

Chapter Ten

Jake

I checked in at the Four Seasons Hotel into one of their best suites until I figured out what my steps would be. I didn't want to commit to an apartment, not even to one of the condos we owned. Bottom line, I was not planning on staying in Boston that long. I was going to tell Danielle to continue the search for a CEO.

The next morning, I went to the office at seven o'clock on the dot. I needed to catch up with everything right away. My team back in New York didn't appear surprised by my decision. In fact, Ben seemed to be very excited about the prospect of leading the company for a couple months. This was his chance to prove himself. I'd have daily calls with them, and I'd talk to our biggest customers myself, even though that meant even longer work hours than I was used to. It didn't matter. I was in Boston to work and make sure Grandfather was healthy and got back on his feet as soon as possible, nothing else.

And to keep Natalie safe, a voice chimed in my mind.

Jesus, I had to stop obsessing over her. She'd repeatedly insisted she was fine, but all my instincts told me she'd only done so to appease me. I knew the signs. She'd tried to smile, but it faltered, she couldn't even muster the energy to tease me, and she'd turned completely pale when she saw the letter at her home. Recognizing the handwriting had been enough to throw her off.

Whatever it was between her and that jackass, it wasn't fine.

My driver stopped in front of the building's big entrance. Betty was in charge of hiring drivers for me wherever I went. So far, I had no complaints about Cal and tipped him well.

Stepping out of the car, I took in the structure. It had been years since I'd stepped inside Whitley Advertising. It was in

downtown Boston, near City Hall. I recognized the steakhouse next to the entrance; it had been here thirteen years ago too.

Gabe and Cade were meeting me here. Gabe was the most up-to-date with everything that went on at Whitley Advertising, and Cade had advised my grandfather and the team as well a couple times.

Whitley Advertising was a force in its industry, but the bigger you were, the faster you failed, and the more dire the cash flow problems could get even from a minor miscalculation. I hadn't had the chance to review the company's books, but I already had an inkling of what I'd find there. I always started with the books. Numbers didn't lie. Sometimes people tried to cover up their mistakes, but I knew how to dig deep and uncover everything.

My brothers were already waiting for me at the entrance.

"Ha, told you we'd manage to get here before him," Gabe said.

"Yeah, but you woke me up at the crack of dawn," Cade said, sipping his coffee. He'd always had an unhealthy addiction to it, even before taking over The Boston Coffee Expert.

"When do you usually start your day? Is it nine?"

"Yes," Cade exclaimed proudly. "It's my golden rule. No one's allowed to bother me earlier. Present company excluded."

How the hell did he get anything done if he only started work at nine?

"We're honored," Gabe said dryly before clapping my shoulder. "Welcome to Whitley Advertising, brother. Would you like a tour first, or do you remember where things are?"

"I want to take a look at the books," I said.

Cade jerked his head back. "Dude, you can't come storming in. You need to meet and greet the team, introduce yourself, stuff like that."

“I’m here to save the company, not make idle chitchat, and time is of the essence.”

Cade rolled his eyes. “Yes, but it’s not that limited that you can’t say hi to your team. Don’t be an asshole.”

“I’m efficient. Once I get a handle on things, there’ll be time for a meet and greet later.”

“How does anyone hire you to do anything?” Gabe asked.

“Because I’m very good at my job. No one cares about interpersonal skills as long as I save their company, which I do.”

“Well, you’re a Whitley, and this is Whitley Advertising. People are going to expect a bit of a familiarity in your approach, not you storming in here, cutting everyone’s heads off.”

They both stared at me. They weren’t going to let it go.

“Fine.”

“How very gracious of you,” Cade said under his breath. “Come on, let’s go.”

For the next twenty minutes, I was introduced to everyone on the management team. Many of them were part of the old guard, as I liked to call it. They’d been here for two decades and probably knew the company inside out. In my experience, those loyal employees were a wealth of information. Despite what I’d told my brothers, I knew I had to find out what made everyone tick—who was indispensable and who was not. Who made the right decisions and who didn’t. I could only do that by knowing the team.

I wondered which of them had worked for my father and if any of them knew he’d been cheating on my mother. Not that it mattered; bygones were bygones.

I was already off to a bad start. If my thoughts spiraled in that direction, it wouldn’t do anyone any good—least of all me.

“And here is your office,” Gabe said. We stepped inside a huge room.

“It’s very spacious,” I said appreciatively. “Thanks, brother.”

“I relocated the manager who had this office. It’s the biggest one available, and I know you like your space.”

“Thank you. I appreciate this.”

“Everything for Jake,” Cade said. “In case it’s not obvious, we want to convince you to stay in Boston. We like having you here. And besides, only you can turn the company around. The rest of us can manage businesses, but this one needs an overhaul. That’s your expertise”

“I already said yes.”

Cade nodded. “But we want to *keep* you here.”

“I’m not going to bail. I promised Grandfather I’ll help.”

Cade smirked. “That was your first mistake. Promising before you saw the financial documents.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

“What about someplace to stay?” Gabe asked. “How long are you going to camp at the Four Seasons?”

“I’m comfortable there.” I walked over to the desk, pulling back the leather chair and sitting in it. My brothers took the two chairs in front of the desk and brought them next to me, one on each side. We could go through reports easier this way.

“Are any of our condos free?” I asked.

“Three of them,” Cade said instantly. Our family kept them mostly for business partners. Whenever someone came into town for a longer period, they offered them a place to stay for the duration of their meetings. “You plan to move into one of those?”

I just wanted to know all the options for Natalie.

My thoughts were consumed by her, and I couldn’t deny the pull I felt toward her. I’d become aware of it at Martha’s Vineyard and couldn’t let go. I didn’t know if it was her

unabashed ability to challenge me, or the fact that she genuinely wanted to make my grandmother happy. It seemed to be more than a job to her.

“Do any of you have contacts with security companies?” I asked.

“You have to be more specific,” Cade said. “You mean personal bodyguards or security cameras?”

“Cameras, and possibly also guards. But let’s start with cameras.”

“Why? You want to install them at the Four Seasons?” Gabe asked.

“It’s not for me,” I said.

“I’m confused,” Gabe said.

“Yeah, I’m not following either,” Cade added.

Why did I bring this up? They won’t let it go until I explain it.

“When I drove Natalie home yesterday, she received a letter from her ex and seemed worried. I’m just putting out feelers,” I told them.

“Wait a second,” Gabe said. He pushed his chair farther from the table as if he needed some distance to see me. Cade mirrored his gesture, and now both were at a considerable distance from the desk, staring at me. It was ridiculous.

“Let me see if I have this right,” Cade said. “You and Natalie flew to Martha’s Vineyard. Possibly, you fucked her.”

I growled at him. “Language.”

“Okay, you didn’t, but judging by how pissed off you are, you would’ve liked to,” Gabe pointed out. “Holy shit. How did this woman get under your skin in two days?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

Cade stood up. “So, she did? You’re actually owning it. Damn. Gabe, I think we have a new angle when it comes to keeping our brother in Boston. Ms. Natalie.”

“How did we start this conversation?” I said under my breath.

“You brought her up. After you gave us your big speech about efficiency,” Gabe said. “Which means you’ve been obsessing over her for some time.”

“Let’s start reviewing the reports,” I said in a brisk voice.

“And now you’re changing the subject, so I’m onto something,” Gabe continued. “Perhaps we can get to this later, when we need a break from all this headache.”

I tensed at the word. My brother took everything in stride. If he called this a headache, it was a fucking disaster.

“When did you even have this report prepared?” I asked.

“Sunday morning.” His tone was clipped. This spelled catastrophe. My brother was also a big believer in weekends.

“Don’t panic him before we start. He’s going to bolt,” Cade said.

I shook my head. “Not my style. When I take a challenge, I see it through.”

“This is not a challenge,” Gabe said. “It’s a dumpster fire. At least that’s what it looked like to me and to Grandfather.”

“Let’s start.”

For the next half hour, we reviewed the key performance indicators. My brother hadn’t exaggerated. The situation was dire. There was no cash flow to speak of, which was problematic in an advertising agency. You didn’t have assets that you could turn into liquidity when needed. The previous management had made a mess of things. But there were still plenty of clients, which was good. It meant we could generate income, but the company was bleeding money. By the time the income from the clients got to the bank, it could be too late.

“This is just a snapshot, of course,” Gabe said. “You can look at the books in your own time.”

I nodded, staring at the graphics in front of me. They told me this was going to be my most challenging turnaround yet.

If this were a client who came to me and told me to save his company, I'd flat-out tell him to sell it to anyone who was willing to give him money. But I knew my grandparents wouldn't agree to it—they'd get a shitty price for it now. Plus, I doubted they'd ever want to sell. They lived for Whitley Industries. It was their pride and joy, especially after my father's scandal.

After he left, they doubled their efforts to make the company soar, but no one in the family had taken over Whitley Advertising. It had been floating for the past decade, and now it was sinking. But if I managed to turn the company around and get someone to offer us good money for it, my grandparents might change their minds.

"You're going to need nothing short of a miracle," Cade said.

"I told Grandfather that," Gabe added. There was no humor in his voice.

"It's going to take a lot, but I'm going to give it my best," I assured them.

"We have no doubt about that," Gabe said. "And in your free time, we're going to make sure you enjoy everything Boston has to offer."

"I won't have any time for that."

"I wonder if you would say the same thing if Ms. Natalie were part of the package as well." Cade grinned.

I sneered. "Brother, this is the second time you've being disrespectful toward her."

He clapped me on the back. "God, I forgot you're so proper. Welcome back home, brother. We've missed you."

My brothers stayed at the office for two whole hours as we went through the report. Things went from bad to worse, but my brain was already in problem-solving mode. I had a few ideas I needed to test, but first I'd have to thoroughly study the

books. After Gabe and Cade left, I pulled them up on my laptop.

I spent the afternoon assessing the accounts and realized Gabe had been completely right. This place wasn't just bleeding money, it simply had none left. That was our roadblock.

Half my brain was working on a solution to bring in income right now. The other half was on Natalie. I was tempted to tell Cade to forward me the contact information from the security companies. From what I'd seen outside Natalie's door, she didn't even have cameras. Had she ever thought about installing some?

Fucking hell, I can't believe I'm obsessing over this.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, I texted her.

Jake: Natalie, this is Jake. Is everything okay?

I tapped my pencil against the stack of papers I had in front of me. I'd printed out some crucial parts of the accounting documentation. I thought best when I had information printed in front of me.

My phone buzzed. I grabbed it the next second.

Natalie: Yes, why wouldn't it be?

Jake: Do you have any security cameras? I've asked my brothers, and I have recommendations for companies that can take care of it.

Natalie: No, I don't. Relax, Jake, I don't need any.

Is she serious? Some guy's giving her headaches, and she just waves it away, saying it's fine?

Instead of letting it go, I called her. I couldn't explain why this was haunting me, but I needed to keep her safe.

"Natalie, it's Jake," I said the second she answered.

"I figured." Her tone was impossibly sassy again, but I preferred it to the small, scared voice I heard yesterday just after she saw the letter.

“I don’t think you should minimize this issue. You should get an alarm system.”

“By all means, please boss me into what you think I should or shouldn’t do.”

“This isn’t about bossing anyone into anything.”

“Mm-hmm. That is not what it sounds like to me. What did your brothers say when you told them about it?”

“I apologize. I shouldn’t have shared this with them. They made fun of me, obviously.”

“You’re more relaxed around them, you know?”

“I like being with my family,” I admitted.

Hearing her voice had an unexpected effect on me. It seemed to calm down my nervous system and loosen my muscles. I’d been tense the whole day, but chatting with her about my brothers was thoroughly relaxing.

“What else do you plan to do while you’re in Boston?” she asked. “Besides working.”

“I have two jobs to fulfill, so that’s all I’ll be doing.”

“Right,” Natalie said. “And your brothers are just going to be okay with that? Gabe seemed like he had plans yesterday. He’s fun.”

I straightened up in the chair. My muscles went rigid. *Is she attracted to him? Is that it?*

“Just so you know, Gabe is never serious about women.”

“Thanks for this information I never asked for.” She sounded completely confused.

Fuck me, I was losing my mind. I’d never cared about a woman. Ever. I’d only met Natalie a couple days ago, yet I was obsessing over her safety and whether she was attracted to my brother. *What’s happening to me?*

“I don’t have fond memories of Boston,” I admitted, to my surprise. This wasn’t something I talked about, not even with my brothers. They suspected it, of course.

“I think that’s a pity,” Natalie said. Her voice was kind. “I think the city is amazing, and I love it so much. I like the harbor, the redbrick buildings, the history throughout, the farmers markets, the art galleries, and the ice cream. Oh God, I have my favorite gelato shop by the harbor. It’s called Gelateria Di Venezia. I love the pistachio and lemon flavors.”

“Those are the most unappealing ones I’ve ever heard of.”

“Don’t diss it until you try it. Anyway, was there anything else, Jake? Or did you just call to berate me for not having an alarm system?”

“I want you to be safe.”

“Jake, I’m okay. Trust me. Now I have to let you go. I’m sauntering around the city, trying to discover the best location for Jeannie’s birthday.”

“Good luck,” I said.

“And to you. Don’t overwork yourself.”

I snorted. “That’s impossible.”

“Ouch. Okay. I’ve got to go. I’m going to short-list the locations that are available on her birthday—and then I’m going to quiz you on Jeannie. I’ll need very detailed answers.”

“You’ll get them.”

“Oh really?”

“I’m always thorough, Natalie. In everything I do.”

She sucked in a breath. Clearly she could sense I was speaking in double entendres.

“I’ve really got to go now. Talk to you later?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Jake? You’re a very surprising man.”

It was a good thing she’d picked up on that, because I planned to surprise her in more ways than one.

Chapter Eleven

Jake

After I finished going through three different stacks of financial reports, I decided to heed Gabe's advice and introduced myself to the members of the team I hadn't met this morning.

Personal relationships were my least favorite part of the job. Numbers were easy to interpret; they were there in black-and-white and told a consistent story. People were fickle. They could say one thing but do another altogether. It was exhausting to tell the truth from the lies.

An hour later, I was beat as I went back into the office, closing the door. I didn't want any interruptions. But as I sat behind the desk and opened my laptop, I didn't pull up the cash-flow reports. Instead, I googled Gelateria Di Venezia. The picture came up. I googled it again, certain there must be more than one in the city. This couldn't be the place she meant. It was a dump. But nothing else came up.

On a whim, I took a picture of the picture and sent it to Natalie.

Jake: You can't possibly mean this place, do you?

To my intense pleasure, she answered almost immediately.

Natalie: Careful, Jake, you don't want to mess with my favorite ice cream shop. I am still throwing your grandmother's party. Who knows what could happen to you?

I laughed; I couldn't help it.

Natalie: I'm on my way. I'm going to probably be there in half an hour.

I looked between the screen of the phone and my laptop. My phone beeped again.

Natalie: What do you think about this?

She sent me a picture of a huge garden that seemed to have old trees and a bunch of umbrellas. It looked like any other garden to me. Natalie was in the picture too. She was wearing a long white dress with thin straps and gesturing with her arms wide. Her hair was wild around her head. A few strands brushed her breasts, others floating around in the air, just as they had on the airport runway. Clearly someone had taken the picture for her when she wasn't looking. I liked that it was candid, and she was natural in it, not posing.

I made a split-second decision. Instead of tackling the cash-flow reports today, I closed my laptop. Standing up, I took it with me, calling my driver.

“Cal, I need you to come here.”

“Where are we going, sir?”

“Gelateria Di Venezia.”

“I'll be at the front of the building in two minutes.”

“Perfect.”

After hanging up, I replied to Natalie.

Jake: You look fantastic in that white dress. You're gorgeous.

Natalie: I asked the staff to take a picture of the whole place. I did not realize I was in it too.

The corners of my mouth lifted. She was overexplaining. Did I make her nervous? I imagined a delicious blush spreading on her cheeks and neck.

Fucking hell, I couldn't even recognize myself. I was leaving the office early on the first day. It wasn't even six o'clock, and I was heading across town to a sketchy ice cream shop to taste even sketchier gelato. But I was determined not to overthink this. The call with Natalie had been the only highlight in this completely shitty day. I wanted to see her. I needed it.

During the drive, I sent emails to the New York office. I had some fires to put out there too. I called two of my biggest clients.

“Jake, we’re in the middle of restructuring. We can’t do it with you in Boston.”

“I assure you that I can fly over whenever necessary. I have a private plane on call.”

“I need you on top of this.”

“You’re a priority.”

“Don’t fuck around.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that. If you don’t want to continue our collaboration, that’s fine by me, but I don’t allow any disrespect.”

He sighed. “I was out of line. I apologize. I need reassurance that you’re still on top of this.”

“Listen to me, Carson. I don’t take on more than I can deliver. This project will go off without a hitch. I receive detailed feedback every day anyway.”

He huffed. “Fine.”

I was pissed, so I bid him goodbye, ending the conversation before I had a chance to lose my cool completely. He was right to question my priorities, of course. After all, that was one of the reasons why I’d resisted coming here in the first place. I knew my clients wouldn’t be happy. But I didn’t allow anyone to talk to me like that.

“Sir, are you sure this is the right address?” Cal asked as he slowed the car. The picture I found online must have been a few years old. In the meantime, the place looked even worse. The name plaque was chipped, and the letters *Z* and *N* had fallen off.

“That’s the place.”

“Do you want me to wait for you?”

“No. I’ll take an Uber back to the hotel, or I’ll call you later.”

He frowned, looking at me in the rearview mirror. “You don’t have a schedule? Betty advised that you always have strict drop-off and pickup times.”

“No.” This was the first time in years that I was doing something that wasn’t scheduled. It was damn freeing.

“Betty also said she’s sending over your clothes today. If it’s all right with you, I’ll check with the hotel to see if they received them and make sure everything is in order.”

“That’s perfect. Thank you. Also, stop by my grandmother’s house. She needs to go for groceries, and she doesn’t drive.”

“Consider it done.”

I got out of the car, looking around. Natalie said she’d be here in half an hour. Ten minutes to go. I was surprised to see a line in front of the shop. The ice cream had to be good. In my experience, when a place looked like this, whatever they sold was worth it.

I stood in line behind a mother who had a baby in one arm and a toddler by the hand. Soon, a couple came up behind me. The line kept growing. Five minutes later, I saw Natalie coming around the corner. She was moving her head slightly from side to side, and I noticed the earbuds in her ears. She was mouthing lyrics, and she was adorable. How had this woman gotten under my skin so fast? She’d gathered her light brown hair on one side and kept running her fingers through it. I didn’t make any motion to draw attention to myself. She perused the line, and then she froze. Her eyes widened, and her mouth flew open. She took out her earbuds quickly, dropping them into her pocket.

“Jake?” she asked, stepping up to me.

“Yes. I don’t have an evil twin brother.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Underneath the sass, there was a lot of confusion.

Up close, she was even more gorgeous than in that picture. This dress was spectacular on her. Looking down, I had a direct view of her cleavage. The V-neck was deep, and she wasn’t wearing a bra. I even saw a peek of her nipple, and I instantly turned hard.

I snapped my gaze up to hers. There were gold and gray flecks in her dark brown eyes.

“You sold me on the ice cream,” I explained.

She pressed her lips together, tilting her head.

“And I’ve stunned you into silence,” I said, “I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Let’s call it the day of surprises,” she replied. “I didn’t think you had it in you to make a joke. Or come get ice cream so spontaneously. You seem like the kind of guy who follows the same schedule day in, day out.”

I swallowed hard. “I do. This is the first day in about ten years that I’ve left the office at this time and don’t have anything scheduled for the rest of the evening.”

“Why make an exception today?” she murmured.

“You made a convincing case for ice cream. Besides, since my move to Boston was so abrupt, I don’t have a schedule yet.”

And I wanted to see you, a voice said in the back of my mind. Just being next to her made the rest of the day seem as if it happened last week.

“This works for me. I get to cut the line and wait with you.”

I looked behind me. Jesus. The line was now around the corner.

“It’s a very popular place,” she said.

“I believe you.”

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other as we waited. It dawned on me that she might be uncomfortable with the fact that I showed up here. “Natalie, is it okay with you that I’m here?” The last thing I wanted was for her to think I was stalking her.

“Sure. I just wasn’t expecting it. So, you never told me what you think about that place for Jeannie’s birthday.”

“I’ll be honest. It just looks like a garden to me. I can’t tell if there’s anything special about it.”

She wrinkled her nose. Clearly my answer displeased her.

When our turn came, she ordered pistachio and lemon. I did the same.

She narrowed her eyes. “You mocked me earlier.”

“I think it’s an odd choice. But I like getting out of my comfort zone.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at things.”

I took out my wallet.

“No, no, no. You’re not paying for my ice cream.”

I stared at her. “Yes, I am.”

“No, Jake. Really?”

“Yes, really. I am.” I put money on the counter before she could argue some more and then took both our cups outside. I handed hers to her as we stepped into a corner. There were a few tables, but they were full.

“I have a favorite tree where I sit when I come here to enjoy my ice cream. I don’t share it with just anyone, but I’ll make an exception for you.”

“Let’s go, then.”

I was pleased that she wanted to share something special with me. We walked for about five minutes and glanced around the neighborhood. I hadn’t been here before, or at least not that I could remember.

“Here it is.” She pointed at a bench in front of a shop selling all sorts of bath products. As we sat down, she crossed her legs, and I realized her dress had a slit. I took a good peek, noticing her legs were tan and so damn long. My fantasies instantly lit up my mind. I’d lick this woman from head to toe.

She fidgeted in her spot, exhaling sharply. My perusal of her hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“So, what do you think?” she asked.

I took a spoonful of the pistachio and lemon. “This is delicious.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I didn’t expect it. I thought they might be good at best. I’ve never had decent pistachio, and I don’t think I’ve ever tried ice cream with lemon flavor.”

“So, you just tried them because I told you they’re my favorites? Who are you, and what did you do with Jake?”

Chapter Twelve

Jake

I put my ice cream down, looking straight at Natalie. She was turned sideways to me. I was making a real effort not to look down at her breasts again, but my fantasy flared up anyway. I'd suck on her nipple until she cried out my name.

“Up until seventy-two hours ago, that answer would've been easy,” I said. “Jake Whitley, CEO of New York Management Consulting. But right now, it's a mystery even to me. I've done more stuff today that's unlike me than in the past decade. And I can only trace it back to one reason.”

“And what's that?”

“You, Natalie.”

“Jake,” she whispered. She put her ice cream next to mine on the bench. Her body was shaking slightly. I took both of our cups, putting them behind me.

Then I touched the back of her head, bringing her closer before claiming her mouth. I drew her lower lip between mine at first. She trembled in my arms. I kissed her long and deep, like I'd been starved for her for years. She tasted so damn good—like the ice cream and her own sweetness.

I savored her, exploring her mouth at a lazy pace. I felt something tug at my shirt and realized it was her hand. I deepened the kiss, moving her off the bench and into my lap, changing the angle. I wanted her closer. Fuck it, I wanted her to straddle me.

This was insane. I pulled back as a deep groan tore through my chest.

“I'm losing control, Natalie,” I warned her. Her breath was shaking. Her shoulders too. Her mouth was insanely sexy, swollen, the skin around it red from kissing. Her pupils had dilated.

“Jake,” she murmured. Then she stood up, looking around, blinking rapidly. “Oh my God! We’re... we’re in public. And I was straddling you.”

“No, you weren’t,” I said, smirking. “Trust me, I had a vivid image in my brain of you doing just that. You were simply sitting in my lap.”

“I completely forgot where we were.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. So did I.”

“Why did you kiss me?” she blurted.

I moved closer because I couldn’t stop.

“I’ve been thinking about you the whole day. The whole night too. When we spoke on the phone today, I just knew I had to see you.”

She swallowed hard. “Jake, my life is in shambles.”

I blinked. This wasn’t where I thought this conversation was leading.

“Go on.”

She looked at me.

“I’m not... I can’t... I can’t kiss you. Well, if we’re talking... you can’t kiss me.”

I smiled, tilting slightly into her. I was desperate for another whiff of her perfume.

“Who’s trying to boss who now?” I asked.

She laughed. “I don’t think anyone can boss you into anything.”

Pulling back, I realized her expression was serious. “Message received, Natalie. I won’t kiss you again.”

Her breath caught. She bit her lower lip and balled her hand into a fist as if it was all she could do to not reach out and tug at my shirt again. She was saying one thing, but her body clearly wanted something different. She wanted me. But I wasn’t going to insist, at least not tonight. This had taken both of us by surprise.

“I think I should go home.”

“I’ll walk you,” I offered.

She laughed. Pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, she stood up.

“I won’t say no to that. Your gentleman skills are out of this world, as are your kissing skills.”

I felt the corners of my mouth turn up into a smile. It was impossible to be around this woman and not smile. “So, kissing is out of question, but talking about it isn’t?”

She sighed. “Jake, this is all very confusing to me.”

“And not talking will help?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Okay, we’ll walk in silence.”

She elbowed me lightly. “Not silence. That’s awkward. Or at least I’ve always been very awkward with silences.”

“I haven’t.”

She rolled her eyes, chuckling. “What a surprise.”

“By the way, you never did ask me things about my grandmother,” I said as we walked toward her street.

“You didn’t seem very inclined to give a lot of opinions on the location. But maybe you’re chattier about Jeannie. What kind of food does she like?”

I frowned. “Now that you mention it, she seems more preoccupied with cooking everyone else’s favorite, which is usually some sort of meat-based meal. But she likes fish, especially shrimp.”

“And is she the dancing type?”

“Definitely. You do know she used to work in theater, right?”

“No.” She looked stunned. “Really?”

“Yeah. She did a lot of musicals, so she’s very well versed in dancing.”

“Hey, that is excellent insight. I’ll think about some elaborate concept for a stage there where people can dance.”

“Do your parents live in Boston?” I asked her once the house was within reach. I immediately looked around for any notes or another letter. It bothered me that I didn’t know the whole story with her ex. She didn’t mention anything about him causing trouble again, but I was on high alert. In my experience, people like that didn’t just back down.

“No.” She sounded regretful. “They used to, along with my sisters. Then my sisters both went to Greece, working as receptionists for a hotel. They each fell in love and married there. My eldest sister gave birth to a girl last year. She asked Mom and Dad if they wouldn’t mind moving over there to help them take care of the baby. It was all my parents needed to move. They just opened their own B&B too. They’re very happy there.”

“But you aren’t.”

She swallowed hard, taking out her keys.

“I’m very happy for them and for my sisters. I just miss them so much.”

I had to employ all my self-restraint not to kiss her again. She sounded vulnerable and so damn adorable.

“But I talk to them every day, and, well, I fill them in on everything I do. My parents also went through some hard times in their lives, and they always pushed forward, and I learned that from them. They’re proud of me.”

“As they should be,” I said.

This was one of the things that attracted me to her: she was a fighter. I noticed it even at Martha’s Vineyard, and I wanted to know more. I wanted to invite myself in and ask her to tell me the story behind every picture she’d hung of her family. Her home contrasted so starkly with my suite at the Four Seasons—it was elegant but completely empty, as if my personal life was nonexistent. On one level, I supposed that was true. But on another, it couldn’t be further from the truth. I had my grandparents and my brothers.

She walked up to the door, jingling her keys, and then abruptly stopped, laughing nervously.

“What?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Natalie,” I said solemnly, “is something wrong?”

“Why does your mind jump to trouble right away?”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Nothing. I remember this movie where they said that when a woman is playing with her keys in front of her door, it’s a sign that she wants to be kissed.”

“Shall I take the hint?”

“No, no, no.” She quickly unlocked her door, pushing it open. “But thanks for walking me home.”

“My pleasure,” I said just as she closed the door.

I’d promised not to kiss her again. I didn’t say anything about getting to know her better.

Chapter Thirteen

Natalie

I spent the rest of the evening curled up with *Jane Eyre*, one of my favorite classics. I was dazed from the kiss. It had been so unexpected. Up until yesterday, I'd thought I annoyed the hell out of Jake—or, at the very least, that I was a thorn in his side. But he'd wanted to kiss me all along? Talk about reading the room—or my chronic inability to do so. Then again, many things would be different in my life if I were able to interpret people's intentions just by analyzing situations correctly.

The next day, I visited one more party location. When I came home in the evening, I wanted to call Jeannie but forgot all about it when I saw a message from Vince.

Vince: Did you get my letter?

Natalie: I threw it away.

Vince: Come on, Nat. Don't be like this.

I breathed in and out, trying to stay calm. I didn't want to give Vince any more power over me.

Natalie: I'm blocking your number. Don't contact me again.

I blocked it before he had a chance to reply. I couldn't believe he was still trying to get a hold of me. He'd done enough damage in my life.

I took in a few more breaths, bringing up Jeannie's number. Then I had another idea. I texted pictures to Jake instead. I'd tried very hard not to think about him today—and failed spectacularly.

Natalie: Okay, what do you think about this location versus the last one? This one has more space for dancing.

After what he shared about his grandmother, the party started taking shape in my head.

Jake: Looks good to me.

Natalie: Can I get a more detailed opinion?

Jake: Only if you promise me two dances.

A vision of us dancing popped into my head, him putting one of those strong arms around my waist. And oh, damn it, I really wanted to dance with him. What harm could it do? Besides, I wanted to test how good his skills were.

Natalie: Deal.

He replied right away.

Jake: I think she'd prefer the other location more because the garden is bigger. She really likes nature.

Natalie: Okay, thanks. I'll call her tonight.

Jake: What are you doing right now?

Natalie: Heading to Gelateria Di Venezia :-)) You?

Jake: Reading reports.

My jaw dropped.

Natalie: It's eight o'clock. Don't you do anything fun in the evenings?

Jake: Now that you mention it, I have some ideas. They all include you.

I swallowed hard, my pulse quickening.

Natalie: Nah, I don't want to be the reason you can't focus on work.

Jake: You already are.

My pulse was out of control now. *Good grief.* I'd already agreed to dancing with him. If we kept texting, who knew what else I'd agree to do?

I pocketed the phone when my turn came to order. After buying a cup with two scoops, I walked home.

Once inside, I headed straight to my small porch in the back. Sitting in my chair with a huge pillow in my lap was my comfort spot. I finished the ice cream regretfully only a few minutes later. *Why didn't I buy more scoops?* I was tempted to

rush back and get some more, but it was enough for one evening.

I messaged Jeannie with photos from today's venue, and then instead of relaxing until she answered, like I'd planned to do, I opened the email app. I was still waiting to hear back from a few venues I wanted to check out for Jeannie's party.

My stomach dropped when I saw the first email. It was from my recruiter.

Dear Natalie,

I regret to inform you that the position is no longer available. Among budget cuts this year, it was decided the job would be discontinued. Please call me when you get this, no matter how late it is.

What the hell? Anger simmered inside me. I grabbed the phone tightly and immediately dialed the recruiter's number, bringing the phone to my ear. It was 9:00 p.m., but she did say to call her.

"Hello, Natalie," she said. "I was waiting for your call."

"What do you mean, they decided to cut it? They wouldn't have strung me along for two months of interviews if they didn't plan to hire someone."

It was the only promising lead I had until now.

"A new CEO took over last month, and CEOs always need to cut budgets to feel like they're being productive. I'm really sorry. This is only the third time this has happened in my whole career."

I pressed two fingers between my eyebrows. My head ached.

"But I don't have anything lined up," I said. "I thought you said this was a sure deal, so you haven't gotten me any other interviews."

"I know. I'm really sorry. I was overconfident that this would work out."

“Maybe they have another position in the company they could offer me? Something similar?”

“I already tried that. I like to fight on behalf of my clients, but they couldn’t find anything.”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t believe it. “So, I’m going back to the drawing board.”

“Yes, unfortunately. Do you want me to put out some feelers?”

“I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Look, I’m really sorry.”

“I understand that it isn’t your fault that they cut the budget, but the fact that I now have no prospects at all *is*, and that’s unprofessional.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. If you change your mind about our collaboration, feel free to call me. Have a great evening.”

“You too.”

As soon as the call disconnected, I rose to my feet, walking from one side of the porch to the other one. My mind was spinning.

Oh God, what am I going to do? My savings were drying up, and my party-planning gigs were nowhere near enough to cover my costs. I hadn’t sent any applications ever since I got to round four of interviews—I’d assumed they were seriously interested. They’d even told me they didn’t have other candidates, that they just wanted to make sure I was a good match.

I would start applying for openings right away, but from experience, I knew these things took a while. It would probably take closer to three or four months before I’d get another job. I pinched the bridge of my nose, drawing in a deep breath and exhaling very slowly. Usually this helped in calming me down, but right now, it simply felt like a waste of time.

I heard my phone buzzing and hurried to the armchair. Maybe it was my recruiter again and she had another solution. No, it was Jeannie. I answered immediately.

“Hey, Jeannie,” I said.

“Hi, Natalie. I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, not at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Was it my impression, or was she disappointed?

“Did you have a lovely evening?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Were you out on your own?”

“Yes.” What an odd thing to ask. “I went for ice cream after I saw the location I messaged you about. I’m still waiting to hear from some others I want to see this week.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” Jeannie said. “The one with the huge garden from yesterday is simply breathtaking. Is it available on our date?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course. I only went to see the ones that were available.”

“Then that’s the one.”

“Great. Do you want to see it in person before deciding?”

“That would be lovely, but for now, I don’t want to leave my Abe alone.”

My heart filled with affection at the love in her voice.

“That’s understandable. I’ll go there myself and make all the necessary arrangements.”

“You are wonderful, my dear. Thank you for accommodating me. I have to say, even though you don’t have any official experience, you’re one of the very best planners I’ve worked with.”

“Oh, thanks for saying that. It means a lot to me.” I hesitated for a few seconds before deciding to be direct. No one was going to take care of me; I had to take care of myself. “By the way, Jeannie, if any of your friends or anyone at all needs someone to plan an event, I’d be happy to do it for them.”

“But I thought the job you applied for starts soon.”

“Turns out it doesn’t,” I said, sitting back in my armchair. Not even the sight of my beautiful tiny garden was going to lift my mood. “It’s been cut.” I sounded bitter, but why cover it? This was a blow.

“That’s so unfortunate,” Jeannie said.

“Yes, it is.”

“So, what are you going to do now?”

“I’ll start searching for a new job, though I’m probably going to have to expand my geographical area. Possibly even widen my search area outside of Boston. But I know from experience how long it takes to get a job, so I’ll be around for a while, in case anyone needs party planning.”

When I’d chosen my major, it had been hailed as having great career prospects. And in some ways, it did. It paid well, but the competition was huge. And my last employer refused to give me a recommendation, which put me at a disadvantage, even though I had five years of work experience.

“I’ll tell that to my book club. Those old hags love to throw a party. Each wants to brag more than the other about how great they are. I’ll talk you up. As soon as they know I snatched the hottest party planner in town, they’ll be clamoring to get you.”

I laughed despite everything. “You make me sound like quite a catch, Jeannie.”

“You are, darling.”

“We’ll see.”

“We also like to throw parties in the family. I could talk my grandkids into having one.”

“Oh no.” My stomach clenched. “Jeannie, if someone needs my services, I’m happy to provide them, but I don’t want anyone to feel pressured into hiring me.”

How embarrassing. Oh Lord, why did I tell her? This was something I had to figure out on my own. But it was normal to tell your clients you were open for referrals, right? This was the first thing I did on my own, so I wasn’t sure what the dos and don’ts were. But I didn’t want to sound like a charity case.

“Oh, nonsense. My grandkids are stubborn. It’s not like I can actually convince them to do something they don’t want to.”

“You did convince Jake to come to Boston,” I pointed out.

“Oh, dear, I think that had absolutely nothing to do with me. Abe got sick.”

“All right, Jeannie, I’m going to confirm the location tomorrow. I’ll call you back as soon as everything is set in stone. Do you want me to go back and maybe take a video for you? Just so you’re absolutely certain it’s what you look for?”

“That’s not necessary. I can tell from pictures that it’s what I want.”

“Okay. Then I’m going to take care of everything,” I said.

“Perfect. And, Natalie, darling, don’t be too hard on yourself. I’m certain something will come up soon enough for you. Maybe something even better than you imagined.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“I like your outlook. If you’re optimistic and believe the best is yet to come, you’re going to attract good things.”

Or you’re going to fall flat on your face if you trust a recruiter too much. But I didn’t say that out loud. Jeannie had been through her fair share of difficulties in her life and was still happy and optimistic, so why should I drag her down? I was usually all about noticing the rainbows and counting my blessings, but the news from the recruiter had thrown me off.

“Have a great evening, Jeannie.”

“And you too.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jake

“Grandfather, it’s good to see you at the table again,” I said on Sunday evening. Gran had called us all out of the blue, inviting us for dinner, saying our grandfather was well enough to attend and he wanted to see all of us.

He nodded. “It was time. I don’t know why the doctors were so stubborn. It was nothing bad.”

“What are you talking about? It *was* bad,” Cade pointed out. “You looked like a ghost. You couldn’t even get up from bed.”

“Hey, let Grandfather play Superman,” Spencer said. “It’ll do him good.”

Grandfather stared at him. “Young man, I don’t know what you mean by that, but I’m doing just fine. I’ll admit that I thought I’d recover more quickly, but I feel like I have my strength back.” He looked at Grandmother with a wink. “Certainly enough to be at my very best for your grandmother’s party and deliver all my dances.”

Grandmother looked pleased. “That’s still a couple weeks away. I trust you’ll be in top shape by then. Although, your doctor did say you shouldn’t move around too much for the next few weeks.”

Grandfather waved his hand as if it didn’t matter. He was stubborn, which was probably where we got it from. But I could understand his anxious state and wanting to get out and about.

“I’m glad you’re looking better,” Cade said, pulling my mind back to the moment.

“But you’re still not to go anywhere near the office again,” Gabe added. The carefree brother sounding so serious was very unusual.

“There’s no need for that,” Grandfather said, looking at me, “now that Jake’s here. How are things going, Grandson?”

Grandmother cleared her throat. We’d discussed this earlier, and I agreed with her. Grandfather did not need to be burdened with any news until it was good news.

“You’re not getting any details,” I explained.

Grandfather looked at his wife. Grandmother simply shrugged, sitting down next to him.

She’d cooked five different dishes and made sure to include all our favorites. This dinner jolted me back to my childhood. Mom and Dad would drop us here for the weekend. Grandmother would cook our favorites for every dinner, making sure that by the end of the weekend, we all had our fill. Now, it seemed, she prepared everything for one single meal.

“And what do we have for dessert?” Gabe asked.

“Ice cream,” Grandmother replied.

“Where did you buy it from?” Cade inquired.

“Oh, this quaint little shop.” She rattled off the address, and I narrowed my eyes. It was the same one where Natalie and I had gone.

“How did you find out about that spot?” I asked.

“By accident.” She sounded too innocent. “Cal came to drive me to the grocery store, and I saw that address in his GPS. When I asked him about it, he said he’d taken you to an ice cream shop. And then I remembered that Natalie also told me about it. It’s her favorite, apparently.”

“Yes, she told me about it too. We met there Monday afternoon.”

My brothers started to snicker at the same time.

“Grandmother’s onto you,” Cade said with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Yeah, I’m not sure that’s a good thing,” Gabe said.

“Grandmother, since when are your detective skills so developed?” I asked calmly.

“Oh, they’ve always been. I just don’t have many opportunities to use them.”

Spencer snorted. “Guys, I’m sure Grandmother is sleuthing all the time. She’s just being very secretive about it. Unlike now.”

“Yeah,” Colton said, sounding as stunned as I felt. Then he looked at me, shrugging. “Be on the lookout, Jake.”

“But wait, more importantly,” Gabe said, snapping his fingers as if he’d just had a light-bulb moment, “Monday afternoon? That means you actually left the office early on your first day there.”

“Define early,” I said.

“I guess anything before midnight for you,” Gabe said, looking at Cade.

“It was an intense day. I wanted to take my mind off it.”

“And you met Natalie for ice cream.” Cade sounded perplexed. “Now I understand why Grandmother is so pleased about it.”

Pleased was an understatement. Grandmother was positively smug. “She’s a wonderful girl, and she already found a place for my party. By the way, let’s get something out of the way.” She glanced at me directly. “Your half brothers will be there too.”

“You’ve told me that.”

“And you will be civil,” she said.

I stopped in the act of reaching out for the chicken quesadillas—my favorite.

“I’m always civil,” I replied quickly. That was true. I didn’t go out of my way to be friendly, but I wasn’t an asshole. I simply didn’t view them as my half anything. I was determined not to spoil Grandmother’s birthday; it was her party, after all. She could invite whomever she wanted.

She glanced at Colton as well. “The same goes for you.”

Colton didn't even muster a smile. He simply reached for the roast beef.

“This isn't awkward at all,” Cade said.

“Don't worry, Grandmother. We'll keep an eye on those two and make sure they don't sour the mood at your party,” Gabe added.

“Thank you, Gabe.” Grandmother said. “Now, any of you boys bringing a date to the party? I should know for the final number of guests.” Her voice was innocent. Her intention wasn't.

Spencer whistled appreciatively. “No. This will be yet another event where you get to complain to your friends about how awful your grandsons are, not giving you any great-grandkids or anything.”

I looked between Spencer and Grandmother. He was oblivious, apparently under the impression that the conversation had finished. Grandmother smirked as if she had a smartass reply but didn't actually say anything. That was dangerous for more than one reason. First, it meant she actually had a comeback, and that in itself was worrisome. And second, she didn't want to say it out loud, which again meant we were in for a surprise.

“Boys, don't sass your grandmother,” Grandfather said, and we all nodded in acknowledgment.

We ate in silence and then moved into the living room, where Cade prepared drinks for everyone except Grandfather. He was under strict orders not to go anywhere near alcohol. Grandmother was watching him like a hawk.

Spencer and Gabe came over to me, holding up their glasses.

“To the first Whitley to fall prey to Grandmother's schemes,” Spencer exclaimed.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Gabe said, looking at our brother.

“Grandmother is definitely scheming,” Cade said quietly. “And judging by the look she gave you, she feels very good about it.”

“I have enough to worry about with Whitley Advertising than to try and guess what Grandmother might be up to.”

“*We* can try guessing,” Cade said.

Spencer shook his head. “Makes no sense. We were never right about any of it in the past.”

After we all finished our drinks, we made our excuses one by one. Grandfather was clearly not in his best shape yet because he went to bed early.

“Grandmother, are you sure you don’t want me to stay? I can keep you company,” I said after my brothers left. “Help you clean up.”

“Nonsense. Don’t you worry about me. I know how to entertain myself. That company you hired to help with the housekeeping is arriving tomorrow morning, and they’ll finish what I don’t get to.” I’d gotten my grandparents some help around the house. Even though they did a lot on their own, I didn’t want them to overly exert themselves as they were both inclined to do. “And tonight, I have a plan. I’m going to call all my friends and ask them if they need a party planner. I’ll recommend Natalie.”

I frowned as I put on my suit jacket. “How so? You mentioned she has another job lined up. Something that uses her degree, right?”

“Unfortunately, her job didn’t pan out, so now she’s in a bit of a lurch. I want to help her.”

I didn’t like that one bit. The thought of Natalie struggling didn’t sit well with me.

“Did she tell you what she needs?” I asked.

Grandmother smiled at me, and then that smile turned into a smirk—not good.

“Yes, more clients. Why, do you have ideas?”

Suddenly I felt like I’d stepped into a trap. But this was about Natalie, and I needed to help her in any way I could.

“Between all of us, we own a lot of companies. I’m sure there has to be a spot somewhere that fits her qualifications.”

Grandmother looked at me with a huge smile. “You’re a great man, Jake. You remind me of—”

“Don’t say my father,” I warned.

Her smile faded. Damn it, I hated when I did that.

“I know it’s hard to believe because he’s hurt all of you a lot, but he was a good man once, when he was young. Sometimes, Grandson, once you go down a path like your father did, it’s very hard to get back out of it.”

My grandparents cut off all contact with my father after he moved to Sydney. Unfortunately, he never tried to make amends, not even with them. To this day I doubted he really understood what he did wrong. *Go figure*. He was quite far from being a good man—he was an asshole.

“Let’s not start this conversation, Grandmother.” To soften my abrupt reply, I hugged and kissed her cheek before telling her I loved her. She responded in kind.

“Have a lovely evening, Jake. You’ve helped your grandfather and me more than you know—with everything.”

My brothers and I were always making sure their every need was met. It was our honor to take care of them now in their old age. They deserved a hassle-free retirement. I wanted them to be happy.

Grandmother may get her way with her obvious matchmaking too. I couldn’t help but think how easy Natalie had fit in with us that day we returned from Martha’s Vineyard.

I left and headed straight to the hotel. I intended to go over the notes for tomorrow’s meeting at the agency, but instead I reached for my phone and texted Natalie.

Jake: I heard Grandmother decided on the location. She was excited about it.

Natalie: I'm glad to hear that. She hasn't seen it yet and says she can decide by photos only, which worries me. But if she's confident, then so am I.

Jake: Don't worry, she knows what she wants. We were all at Sunday dinner. My grandfather feels better.

I was volunteering far more information than I was used to sharing with strangers. I had very few friends, but the ones I had, I'd do anything for. I hadn't known Natalie for long, and yet I couldn't stop thinking about her.

I didn't like the news about her job. On instinct, I called her.

"Hey, Jake."

"Hey! What are you up to?"

There were blaring horns and sirens in her background.

"I bought ice cream to put in the freezer and am just getting home. I spoke to Jeannie earlier. She sounded very chipper. I'm so happy your grandfather is better."

I cleared my throat. "To be honest, I don't think her mood was all because of Grandfather. She found out about our getting together for ice cream."

She gasped. "How?"

"Sold me a story about seeing the address in Cal's GPS. I'm not entirely unconvinced that she doesn't have me followed."

Natalie laughed nervously. "She's a bit intense, isn't she?"

"Definitely. Natalie, I want to see you again."

"You will, at the party."

"Not like that. Just the two of us. Besides, the party is in three weeks."

I swallowed hard. My pulse thumped in my ears.

“What’s your favorite spot in Boston?” she asked unexpectedly.

“Probably the Freedom Trail. Haven’t been on it for a while.”

“Hmm, neither have I.”

“Let’s go. I’ll pick you up from home. How long do you need to get ready?”

“Probably around half an hour.”

“Good. I’ll be there.”

“Jake,” she muttered, “I don’t... I don’t know what this is.”

“I’m not sure either. Does it matter?”

“Wow. Words I never thought I’d associate with you, Mr. Let’s Stay On Schedule.”

“I told you, Natalie, you’re doing something to me.”

“What?” she whispered.

“We’ll find that out tonight.”

Chapter Fifteen

Natalie

I grinned as the call disconnected. A bout of adrenaline coursed through me. *Holy shit. Am I going out on a date with Jake?* It kind of sounded like one. *Oh, who cares what this was?*

Full of giddy energy, I took out my keys and then froze. There were three Post-its on my door. With Vince's handwriting. My insides turned to stone.

Call me

Don't play hard to get

I need to talk to you

I yanked them down, bunching them in my hand before unlocking the door. Shaking, I threw the papers into the kitchen trash bin. I put down the box that held the ice cream before pouring myself a glass of water. I drank it in huge gulps, trying to calm myself.

The man didn't know how to take a hint. I was toying with the idea of calling the police, but I didn't have a case. He'd sent me a letter, text messages, and came to my damn door to put Post-its on it. God, I didn't want to let him ruin this evening too. I took in a few more deep breaths.

Vince was contacting me more now than after we'd broken up, but he'd never been this aggressive before. Then again, maybe I was blowing this all out of proportion and letting my nerves get the best of me.

It's going to be an amazing evening, Natalie. Now, forget Vince even exists and pick out a killer outfit.

Usually I would simply dress in jeans and a polo shirt for a lazy evening out, but guess who was putting in a lot of effort in her appearance? Yup, this girl here. I put on a summery yellow dress with butterflies along the waistline and lace straps also in the shape of butterflies. Twisting my hair into a

careless ponytail, I applied minimal mascara as well as lip gloss. I looked fresh-faced and not overly made-up.

I took a step back, looking at myself in the mirror. It was a casual outfit. Oh heavens, was I trying too hard to be nonchalant so he didn't think I wanted to, what, seduce him?

I was being ridiculous. *He* kissed *me*. I wasn't doing any seducing here.

Half an hour later, my doorbell rang. I grabbed my purse and slid on flat shoes before opening the front door and stepping right outside.

"Hey," I said. Did I sound breathless? I certainly felt that way.

He was wearing jeans and a dress shirt. I would've teased him about wearing one on a Sunday, but he looked so delicious that I remained silent, simply drinking him in.

"Right on time," I said as I locked the door behind me.

"As you pointed out, I like keeping to a schedule."

Warmth coursed through me as I went down the steps along with him. I felt his nearness. It was impossible to ignore his cologne. He smelled fresh, like the woods early in the morning.

"What were you supposed to do before you called me?" I asked. I was genuinely curious. The more I found out about him, the more a mystery he seemed to be.

"I planned to read up on the memos for tomorrow morning's meeting."

I burst out laughing. "Now tell me what you were really up to."

He frowned. "That was the plan."

I stared at him. "This is what you do on Sunday evenings?"

"If it's necessary, yes."

“I feel bad now. I’ve never had such a work ethic. Not that it would have helped.”

“What do you mean?”

“My boss fired me because he couldn’t stand how much my ex and I were fighting.”

“He just showed up at work?”

“No, worse. We worked together. That’s how we met. It actually took us a while until we started dating. Three years, to be exact. Then I was promoted to the senior position over him, and he didn’t take it well at all. He started putting me down and yelling a lot. I broke up with him, but that only made the fighting worse. Eventually our boss was fed up and fired us both.”

“That’s fucked-up. Why the hell wasn’t he proud of you?”

“Thought he deserved it more, I guess. I don’t know. He was a very angry person, almost controlling, and that side of him showed up more after I got promoted. I was very good at my job. But because of how things ended, my boss refuses to give me a recommendation, which makes the search that much harder.”

“That’s not right. I can fix it.”

“Jake—”

“I mean it.”

“So do I. Just drop it, okay? Let’s change the subject.”

I didn’t like the idea of him fixing anything for me. It was important for me to do things by myself. Although, I was sure any help from Jake would make things easier.

We walked along the Freedom Trail, starting with King’s Chapel. I loved the building’s architecture—the majestic columns and the attention to detail. I congratulated myself on choosing flat shoes, as the sidewalk was very uneven. Because it was so late, most of the attractions along the Freedom Trail were closed. But that was a good thing, because it wasn’t crowded.

“I haven’t been here in some time,” he said.

“Oh, so you *can* enjoy life,” I teased.

He looked straight at me, tilting in. “Yes, when I’m with you.”

Holy shit, way to be direct! I swallowed hard, fiddling with the straps of my purse. I racked my brain for a safe topic of conversation.

“I can’t wait to go to the Boston Public Garden sometime this summer. They have a stand that serves delicious oysters. Oh, and speaking of gardens, do you think Jeannie is likely to change her mind on the location?”

“No. Once she decides something, there is no changing her mind.” Jake seemed a bit out of sorts, like that annoyed him.

“And that upsets you for some reason,” I stated.

His eyebrows shot up. “How could you tell?”

“Your demeanor instantly changed.”

He nodded as we walked in the direction of the Boston Latin School.

“My half brothers will be at the party.”

“Oh, I didn’t even know you had any. Did either of your parents remarry?”

He stared at me. “You really don’t know the story?”

“No.” I wasn’t sure why he thought I might know about his family.

“We found out—that is to say, *I* found out—that our father had a second family.”

I gasped. “Oh my God. That sounds terrible.”

“It was. I discovered it when I did an internship at Whitley Advertising during college. He was running it at that time. I found some checks he was mailing to a woman. When I confronted him about it, he told me a bogus story about her being an ex-employee who was disgruntled enough that she threatened to sue the company if he didn’t continuously send

her checks. The story sounded fishy. He was nervous when he told it.”

I couldn’t look away from him. He seemed so tense, like he was reliving all of it again. “So, I did some digging, and I hated what I found.”

“How old were you?” I asked.

“Twenty-one.”

“Oh, wow.”

Young adulthood was a terrible time to find out that one of your parents wasn’t trustworthy at all. Not that there was any good moment to find out, but still.

“I’m sorry. How did your mother take it?”

“Badly,” he said. “She couldn’t cope. God, she couldn’t cope at all. She was simply devastated. I think, for the next few months, she only got out of the house to go to therapy. Then she found out she was sick. Passed away a few months later.” His voice broke.

“So, what happened?” I asked.

“Gabe was seventeen, so he moved in with my grandparents. Cade, Spencer, Colton, and I were all of age, adults. My grandparents tried to do as much damage control as possible after my father left.”

“Where did he go?” I asked, confused.

“Appearances were very important to him.” He sounded bitter. “As soon as this was news in his social circle, he headed off to Sydney. Nancy, the mother of my... half brothers... didn’t want anything to do with him either. She hadn’t known he was married to Mom.”

I blinked rapidly. My brain could honestly not comprehend the magnitude of this.

“Australia? That’s where he is now? And that’s why you left Boston,” I concluded.

He nodded. “Yes to all. I moved to New York. I didn’t want anything to do with any branch of Whitley Industries.”

“It’s your legacy,” I murmured.

“Not as far as I’m concerned. My legacy is what I’ve built myself, not anything my father touched.”

“But your grandparents started the legacy, right?”

He nodded. “Yes, but that’s beside the point.”

Was it, though? He didn’t want anything to do with the Whitley name, and yet he’d come to his grandfather’s aid. I wasn’t sure if he cared about a legacy, but one thing was for certain: he would do anything for his family, and that made him incredibly attractive.

“At any rate, my schedule is insane while I’m here. I wake up every day at five.”

“Holy shit. I can barely wake up at seven. I need three alarm clocks.”

“I can call you in the morning if you want, make sure you’re up.”

“Hmmm... I’ll take you up on that. But back to your schedule. You know what you should do?” I said, wiggling my eyebrows.

“You’d better answer fast because otherwise my mind is coming up with all sorts of scenarios.” He lowered his voice. “Sexy scenarios.”

Heat pooled between my thighs. His flirty side was insanely delicious.

“You should go out to all your favorite places. Find things you like in Boston, rediscover them. Find your glimmers.”

“My what?”

“You know how people always talk about stuff that triggers them?”

“I’ve heard that term.”

“I once read that the opposite of triggers are glimmers of hope. It can be anything that brings you joy, you know? A walk in nature, going for a run, hearing a bird sing. You should

do that. I think it would help.” I dropped my voice to a whisper because he was staring at my mouth intently. Oh God, if he kissed me, I’d kiss him right back. I only had so much self-restraint. But what was the point of this? Even if we would have fun together, he was probably going to go back to New York as soon as he flipped the company around. As for me, I’d go wherever the job took me.

“I’ll do that, but with one condition.”

“Oh, there are conditions with it?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He flashed me that charming smile. “I want you to be my guide, Natalie.”

I licked my lips. His blue eyes grew even darker. I shuddered. Oh my God. He wasn’t even making a pass at me, and I was already melting in front of him. How could I possibly spend even more time with him?

“Hmm. I’m not sure,” I murmured.

“Why not? We can even make it a work arrangement. Grandmother says you’re looking for clients. You could consider me one of them.”

I took a step back. “Wait, what? You want to pay for my time? Why?”

“You need money. I’d love to have your company.”

“You think you have to pay for people’s company?” I asked, stunned. “Or you’re taking pity on me?” I was getting pissed now.

“No, Jesus. That was not what I meant.”

“Well, what exactly did you mean? You offered money for my company. I’m starting to get really bad ideas.”

“Natalie, stop,” Jake said. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

“Fine. Consider it forgotten.”

“You think I’m letting you off the hook that easy, huh?” I asked. I was still a bit pissed, which was insane. Obviously I

knew he had good intentions, but still, I didn't like being a charity case. "I think I'm the one who needs to put conditions on now." My tone was playful, but I kind of meant it.

"I see. You want to do this on your terms?" he said.

"Exactly."

"News flash, Natalie. I'm stubborn."

"What a coincidence. So am I."

He looked at my lips again, and before I could add anything, he closed the distance and kissed me.

I was utterly lost in him—the way he explored my mouth felt out of this world. He moved his hand from my cheek down to my neck, gently pushing my long hair back. My skin turned sensitive when he moved his fingers in small circles over the side of my neck.

"Jake," I muttered as we pulled apart. His breath was ragged. I licked my lips, rocking back and forth from my toes to my heels. I felt both his hands steadying my arms. Drawing up my courage, I opened my eyes, only to find him looking at me intently. Sometime during the kiss, I'd threaded my fingers through his thick hair. Up close I realized the dark brown was interspersed with black strands.

"I don't stand a chance, do I?" I whispered.

"Not even one."

"So, you need a guide, even though Boston is your home?"

"No, I need you, Natalie. I was just looking for an excuse."

The air between us seemed to thicken by the second. I felt his touch as if I weren't wearing any clothes.

"Where do you want to start?" I asked.

"I'd kiss your lips first and then work my way around your whole body."

Oh my God. A small explosion went off inside me, starting between my legs and spreading everywhere.

“That was not what I meant. Where do you want to start in the city?”

He laughed. “My bad. I guess my mind is in the gutter, and you know all about it now. You take the lead on that, Natalie.”

I took a step back because being too close to this gorgeous man was making it hard to think.

“Oh, I like your style, Jake Whitley. You pretend to let me be in charge, but all the while you’re leading me exactly where you want to go.”

There was a playful glint in his eyes. “I will neither confirm nor deny that.”

“At least tell me what you want.”

“Besides you?”

The explosion started again.

“Yes.” My voice was uneven.

“Okay. I’ll give you a hint. Take me to a place where you’d like to go on a date.”

My breath caught. “You’re asking me out?”

“No, I’m simply telling you to take me to a place you’d like.”

“You’re very clever and sneaky about it,” I remarked.

“Natalie.”

Oh God, he couldn’t keep saying my name like that. It felt like he was ordering me to strip naked right here in the street. And if he kept doing it, my clothes might spontaneously combust anyway.

“Fine. I’ll think of something.”

I liked the playful glint in his eyes and that he’d so openly spoken about his family tonight. When I first met him, he seemed so distant. I thought he’d always be out of reach and would keep those around him behind a wall. Perhaps he still was. Clearly he wasn’t happy about having to deal with his half brothers, but he’d opened a door for me, and to my

surprise, I wanted to pass through. Even though I had a lot going on and couldn't trust my heart—now less than ever.

Chapter Sixteen

Natalie

For the next few days, I woke up with Jake on my mind. I grinned when my phone buzzed and immediately grabbed it from the nightstand, pushing myself up into a sitting position. He'd kept his promise about waking me up in the morning. This was the third day in a row. He'd called me the first day, but I was too sleepy to have a conversation, so we'd settled on texting.

Jake: Good morning, beautiful.

Natalie: I'm up and ready to conquer the day.

Jake: I love your energy.

I felt extra feisty this morning, so I told him what was on my mind.

Natalie: This evening, I'm going to make up my mind about where I'm whisking you away.

Jake: No, you got it wrong. I'm the one whisking you.

Natalie: I thought it wasn't a date? Just someplace where I like to go. That's whisking in my book.

Jake: Too many semantics.

I threw my head back, laughing. *Oh, what a way to wake up.*

Natalie: I'm meeting my best friend, Larissa, tonight for dinner. I'll brainstorm with her. She's also very creative.

Jake: I'm having dinner with my grandparents, but I can pick you up after that. We can finalize that brainstorming.

Natalie: Trust me, you don't want that. You'll find yourself questioned about stuff you never dreamed about.

Jake: I can take it.

Natalie: Oh yeah, but I can't. Thanks for waking me up. Talk to you this evening.

I was giddy the whole day. I spoke to my parents and my sisters as I went to the print shop where I wanted to look at a couple of invitations for Jeannie's party. She'd already notified her friends via email, but she said she wanted them to have the invites as keepsakes. She was putting a lot of thought into it, and I liked that she was striving for it to be a memorable occasion and not just a big commercial party. She genuinely cared about her friends, proved by the fact that she was sending a photo of her with said friend with every invitation.

In the evening, I arrived at the restaurant before Larissa.

I sat down at the table, looking around. We were trying out a new Chinese restaurant. It had been a while since Larissa and I went out. We used to go out for cocktails once a week. The last time we went out was three months ago, before I became unemployed and started pinching pennies. But Jeannie had paid me in advance for the hours I'd already invested, and I could afford this dinner. The restaurant had great reviews, even though it wasn't terribly expensive. It was my last chance to catch up with my friend before she left for Bali.

My phone beeped, and I immediately unlocked the screen.

Larissa: I'll be a couple minutes late.

Natalie: Don't worry.

At the same time, I noticed Jake had texted me too.

Jake: How's the brainstorming going?

Natalie: Haven't started yet. Larissa hasn't arrived. But believe me, once you get us started, there's no stopping us.

Jake: Sounds promising. Can't wait to hear what you come up with.

"You've got a Cheshire cat grin on your face," Larissa exclaimed when she arrived a few seconds later.

I put the phone away. God, she was gorgeous. She had fiery red hair and bright blue eyes. She often complained that her complexion was too pale, but I thought she looked regal.

“Yes, I do.”

“It’s got to do with your client’s grandson?”

Larissa, of course, was up-to-date with everything going on in my life. Well, almost everything.

“Yes.”

“You’ve already decided where you’re going to take him?” she asked.

“Honestly, no. I promised I’d text back as soon as our girl date is over.”

She wriggled her eyebrows. “Hey, you can ask him to come over anytime. I’m looking forward to meeting him. You know I have a great feeling about people.”

“That you do,” I admitted. If only I’d listened when she told me she thought my ex was a two-faced bastard.

A waiter approached with two plates of food.

“This is a surprise appetizer from the kitchen,” Mitch, per his nametag, said.

“Oh, wow. What is it?”

“Rolls with shrimp.”

Larissa and I grinned. “We love shrimp.”

He put it down in front of us and left.

The rolls were delicious. While we ate them, we also perused the menu.

“I think I’m going to order Peking duck,” I said, finally looking up from the menu, and gasped.

I stared at Larissa intently. Her face was turning bright red.

“Larissa, are you okay?” I asked, but I knew she wasn’t. She sucked in a breath and coughed.

I looked at our plate in horror. “You think you might be allergic to something in the food?”

She nodded.

“Shit, do you have an EpiPen or something with you?” I asked, even though I knew she wouldn’t. She didn’t have any allergies, or any I knew of.

Larissa shook her head, and I jumped to my feet, looking around for help.

A waiter came running toward us, clearly noticing my distress.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Do you have EpiPens or any medicine for allergies here?”

“No.” He stared at Larissa. “But you didn’t note any allergies on the reservation inquiry.”

“That’s not helpful,” I snapped.

I thought he might worry about my friend, but he only cared about the liability. I had to take her to the ER.

“I’m calling an ambulance,” I exclaimed, yanking out my phone to dial 911.

A few minutes later, Larissa and I were in the back of an ambulance. They administered an EpiPen, and I was worried sick. Was it my imagination, or was she still swelling up?

When we arrived at the ER, she was a bit blue in the face.

The next several minutes went by in a haze. I spoke to a nurse and then filled out forms. They took Larissa into the ER on a gurney and hooked her up to an IV.

“This way, it’ll go into her system faster,” a nurse explained when I inquired why this was necessary.

“Will she have to spend the night here?” I asked.

“We don’t know for now.”

I nodded. “Can I sit next to her?”

“Sure.”

The ER was lined with beds separated by curtains. Doctors and nurses milled around. The cacophony of sounds was deafening. Larissa was lying in one of the beds, her free hand under her head. Thankfully, she looked much better than before. Her color was coming back to normal, though her lips were still a bit swollen.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Much better. That was such a scare.”

I nodded, sitting on a small chair next to her bed. “Yeah, it was. Do you have any idea what you reacted to?”

“Honestly, no. I’ve never had allergies in my life. The nurse suggested I go to an allergist and get tested.”

“Yeah, you should do that.” I was apprehensive. My heart was still racing in my chest. Watching her struggle for breath had been terrifying.

“You don’t have to stay here. I’ll wait a couple hours and then take a cab home.”

“Of course I’m waiting with you. As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing worse than being on your own in a hospital.”

“But you don’t like being surrounded by sick people.”

I wrinkled my nose. “No one does, but I love you, and I want to stay here with you.”

“You’re a great friend,” Larissa murmured. She looked tired now. Even I was feeling the adrenaline leave my body.

I kept my eyes trained on her, looking for any signs that she might swell up again. Thankfully, she didn’t. She did nod off after about half an hour, though, which left me with nothing to do, so I put in my earbuds and opened the Netflix app on my phone, starting an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*. After watching three episodes, I exited the app. I was starting to get restless, and Larissa was still sleeping. Was that normal?

I noticed five notifications on my phone. All the messages were from Jake.

Oh God. I completely forgot I was supposed to message him.

Jake: So... what's the promised destination where I am whisking YOU?

Jake: Natalie, are you okay? Get back to me when you can.

The last one was from a few minutes ago.

Jake: I'm starting to really worry here. Please reply as soon as possible or I might come to bang down your door just to make sure everything's fine.

I replied immediately.

Natalie: That wouldn't help at all because I'm not at home. I'm in the ER.

I hadn't even closed the messaging app when the phone beeped with an incoming call. I glanced around. There was no way I could answer here, and I didn't want to leave Larissa alone.

I rejected the call and texted him.

Natalie: My friend got an allergic reaction to something we were eating, so now she's hooked up to an IV. I'm probably going to be here for a few more hours. It's very loud in here and impossible to hold a conversation.

Jake: Tell me when you're done. I'll pick you up.

Natalie: Oh my goodness, are you sure?

He didn't have to do that. He was plenty busy, and he didn't have to spend his free time chauffeuring us around.

Natalie: It's probably going to be late by the time she's discharged.

Jake: It doesn't matter. Just text me when you're done, and I'll pick you up.

Natalie: Thank you.

I was feeling warm all over. My stomach was somersaulting. I smiled for no reason at all, even though I was

surrounded by sick people and the chair was uncomfortable.

Jake Whitley is picking us up.

Chapter Seventeen

Natalie

When I looked up, Larissa blinked her eyes open.

“I dozed off,” she said. Her voice was much stronger.

“Yes. How are you feeling? Do you need anything?”

“A bit of water. My mouth is dry.”

“Here it is.”

The nurses left a glass full of water on the nightstand next to the bed. I helped Larissa up a bit, and she drank thirstily, finishing the glass.

“I’ll go get a nurse, okay? Tell them you’re up.”

“Yeah, let’s get out of here. I feel so much better.”

“Let’s see what they say.”

I found her nurse a few beds away and nodded toward my friend.

“I’ll be right with you,” the nurse said with a smile.

“Thank you.”

I returned to Larissa’s bed. She was playing on her smartphone.

“There are plenty of Ubers around,” she said.

“Let’s wait to see if they really discharge you. By the way, Jake said he’d pick us up.”

Larissa nearly dropped her phone. “What? Jake Whitley?”

I nodded. And just like that, my smile returned. “Yeah, we’ve moved past flirting. I planned to tell you at dinner. Anyway, we were texting, and then this happened, and I only texted him back a while ago, telling him what happened.”

“Wait, you were having a flirting session while we were at the restaurant?”

I grinned sheepishly. “Guilty as charged.”

“Hmm. That’s not usually your MO.”

“I know, but since Jake caught me in his web, I can’t seem to free myself.”

“That’s a very creepy comparison,” she said.

“You’re right.” I pursed my lips, thinking it was more like he caught me when he walked into the airport.

The nurse came the next second, interrupting my thoughts.

“You’re up and are looking good. Let me check your vitals and call a doctor to sign off.”

Ten minutes later, a doctor declared that Larissa was ready to go home. We only needed to get her discharged. It was when I had my friend out of her bed that I realized she was a bit tipsy from the medicine.

I glanced at the nurse while Larissa was still signing the discharge papers.

“Is it normal for her to be like that?”

“Oh, yes. The Benadryl is still in her system. But she’ll be good as new tomorrow.”

“Does she need overnight supervision?”

“No, not at all. Don’t you worry.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I texted Jake while Larissa finished up.

Natalie: Hey, we’re done. Does your offer still stand? Word of caution, Larissa is still having some side effects from the drugs. She might be a very chatty passenger.

Jake: I’m on my way. I’ll be there in ten minutes.

Natalie: Thank you.

After all the paperwork was completed, I guided my friend outside. She was standing fine but was way more talkative than unusual. We waited a few feet away from the hospital’s main entrance. The sound of the ambulances approaching the building was insane. I texted Jake our exact location, and he arrived as promised a few minutes later.

He pulled the car in front of us and then immediately jumped out. It was the same one Cal usually drove.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the famous Jake Whitley,” Larissa said. “I’d hoped I’d get to meet you one day after hearing so much about you.”

He quirked up a smile, glancing from her to me as he rounded the car. He looked magnificent. His broad shoulders filled his custom-made suit perfectly. His hair was ravished, sticking out in all directions. It was a *fantastic* look on him

He fixed me with his gaze as he said, “Heard a lot, have you? I’m curious about what exactly Natalie said about me. I’ll find out later.”

“Oh, I’m happy to tell you,” Larissa offered.

I elbowed her gently. “No, you won’t. Everything I told you was in confidence.”

“But *you* are going to tell him, so what difference does it make?” she asked in earnest, confused.

“No, I won’t. What gave you that idea?”

Larissa threw her head back, laughing. “Look at this guy. Smoldering hot eyes, determined body language. He is definitely going to get the scoop out of you. Just saying, you might as well fess up. On second thought, don’t. I’m sure he’s going to employ very creative tactics to get you to talk. And that could be fun!”

“All right, let’s get you home.” Thank God it was dark. I was blushing like hell, and Jake was suspiciously silent as he opened the door and helped me get Larissa in.

As I was about to join her in the back seat, I noticed his smug smile.

“What?” I asked under my breath.

“I’ll tell you later.” His voice was mysterious and seductive at the same time. Oh Lord, I was in for a more interesting evening than I bargained for. After he got in the car too, Larissa told him the address, and we drove away.

“Jake, can I just say you’ve got a huge plus in my book for showing up here,” she said.

“Good to know,” he replied easily.

“I mean, obviously you’re hoping this will earn you points and pave your way into my best friend’s pants.”

“Larissa!” I exclaimed, burying my face in my hands. “Oh God, she’s not usually like this.”

“I usually have a better filter,” she said, grinning.

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, and I caught fire. It was as if every single inch of my body was yearning to be closer to him. Licking my lips, I moved farther back on the leather seat, wondering how many more ways Larissa could embarrass me before we dropped her off at her home. Thankfully, she fell asleep again not long after.

When we arrived, I helped her inside. Jake came with us as well, but he waited inside the front door while I assisted Larissa to the bedroom.

She was too tired for showering or even changing clothes, so I just took off her shoes and covered her with a blanket. She was out like a light. I put a huge glass of water on her nightstand before leaving her to sleep.

“We can go,” I whispered to Jake.

As I reached the entrance area, the hallway was dark because I hadn’t wanted to turn on too many lights. We left immediately. Once outside, I took a huge breath of relief.

“What happened?” Jake asked as we descended the steps of her townhouse.

“She had an allergic reaction to something. It was very scary. She doesn’t have any known allergies.”

“Good thinking to take her to the ER,” Jake said.

My hands were shaking slightly. “I think the adrenaline finally caught up with me,” I said, breathing in and out. “What time is it?”

“It’s late.”

“I’m going to take an Uber home. You should go, Jake.”

He stepped closer, putting a hand on my right shoulder. With the other hand, he tilted my chin up knowingly. “And leave you alone, Natalie? Not this evening.”

I melted at the determination in his eyes.

“My God, Larissa is right. You *are* trying to earn points to get in my pants.”

Jake chuckled and grabbed my hand. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“That’s your pickup line?”

“No, Natalie. I’m taking you out to dinner.”

“Oh.”

“I’m assuming yours was cut short since Larissa got sick.”

“True. How did you know?”

“Your stomach was rumbling in the car.”

I instantly felt embarrassed. I put a hand to my abs.

“Come on. I’ll take care of you tonight. You’ve been in a state of tension for hours. You need to relax.”

Before I could protest—not that I was going to—he put both hands on my shoulders and positioned me in front of him as we walked to the passenger side of the car. I decided to simply let this wonderful man take me wherever he wanted to tonight.

Until now, I’d always wanted to know the plan. But tonight, I simply wanted to let go. I didn’t even ask where we were going as we sped toward the city. I did, however, become acutely aware that I wasn’t looking my best. I hadn’t even checked my appearance in the mirror, but my hair was probably a mess. I’d applied mascara sometime earlier today, and after wearing it for so many hours, it typically started to smudge. I’d been wearing this dress since early morning and hoped it wasn’t too wrinkled. As cautiously as possible, I lifted my right arm, propping my elbow on the windowsill and moving my nose to the general area of my armpit as I

discreetly sniffed. At least I wasn't stinking of perspiration, but I didn't smell fresh either.

He parked the car twenty minutes later in front of one of my favorite gardens.

"Hey, this is awesome. How did you know I planned to come here sometime this summer?" I asked.

"You told me so when we were walking the other night."

"Oh, that's right. They have the best oysters here."

"Then it's oysters for the lady tonight."

I let him do his gentlemanly thing as he came around to open my door. Tonight I wanted to let him spoil me. As I got out of the car, I became acutely aware of the hungry look in his eyes. It sent shivers through me. After closing the door, he took a step back, looking me up and down.

I bit my lip. "Don't do that. Don't inspect me. I'm self-conscious already."

"What? Why?"

"I haven't had a chance to freshen up after the trip to the hospital."

"You look insanely sexy."

And just like that, all my fears went out the window.

He led the way inside the garden. It was packed with people, but fortunately, there were multiple high bar tables set around the garden. It had a fairy-tale look with twinkle lights in the trees. No, they weren't exactly twinkle lights. They'd changed them up this year, hanging industrial-style bulbs everywhere instead, but it was still romantic.

Jake ordered oysters for the both of us along with bread drizzled with cheese sauce.

"This is a feast," I said.

"Wouldn't want you to get hungry," he said, "You should eat. You've had a long evening."

The protective streak in his voice made me swoon. Truth was, I was hungry, I just hadn't realized it while I was in the hospital.

"The oysters are delicious, as usual." Straightening in my seat, I decided to be serious and ask Jake point-blank, "What are we doing here?" *There goes my resolution to simply take things as they come tonight.*

He put a hand at the small of my back. "Are you ready to call it a date?"

His body was so damn hot next to me. Pheromones were rolling off him. I was too stunned to answer.

"Then we won't," he said, misinterpreting my silence.

Instead of correcting him, I pressed my lips together. Truthfully, I didn't want to call it anything yet.

"Thank you for everything," I murmured.

"You're welcome. Just know that if anything like this ever happens again, you can always count on me to pick you up or be there for you, okay?"

"Jake," I muttered. No man I'd ever dated had offered that, and here was this guy to whom I couldn't even confirm we were dating saying such things. "You can count on me too."

"That's something I usually only hear from my brothers."

"Well, now you can add me into the mix."

"My pleasure. We can count on each other. Now come on. Let's order the main course too."

"Oh yeah. Bring it on. Somehow, I'm even hungrier than before."

The food was great, the evening turned out better than expected, and the company was beyond perfect. And yet I knew this couldn't go any further. I wanted Jake, in every way, but I knew better than to start something neither of us could finish.

Chapter Eighteen

Jake

She went from feisty and sassy to bone-tired right in front of my eyes after the main course.

“I’m not sure what hit me,” she murmured.

“You’re tired, Natalie. You’ve had a long day. Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“I wanted us to stay out longer. It’s so pretty here.”

“We can always come another time,” I suggested.

She’d let down her defenses tonight. Even though she hadn’t had any alcohol, she was exhausted from spending hours with Larissa at the hospital and was quiet on the drive home. When we arrived, she yawned as we walked up to the door. Taking the keys out of her bag, she fumbled with them and looked up at me.

“Do you want to come inside?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I want to make sure you get in safe.”

“You think I’ll trip over the stairs?”

“You’re exhausted, Natalie.”

“And you’re protective, as usual. I never admitted it before, but I love it.”

“I like you with your defenses lowered,” I whispered in her ear from behind.

She straightened up but then relaxed under my touch. Fucking hell. I had to rein myself in, or I was going to turn her around and kiss her right against this door.

She unlocked it and stepped inside, glancing over her shoulder.

“You’re still on your mission to get in my pants, huh?”

I cleared my throat. “All I want to do is make sure that you’ll be okay tonight.”

“I must work better on my seduction skills, then.”

It took a few seconds for me to react to what she said.

Fuck me. She invited me here on purpose.

Turning around, she glanced up at me. I moved closer. I wanted her so bad tonight, but I wanted to make sure I didn't take advantage of her.

“Natalie, are you sure?”

She nodded. “Yes. We had a wonderful evening, and, well, who knows how much time we have?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I was close enough to smell her shampoo, to feel her breath on my neck.

“I'm applying for jobs everywhere, so if I have to move to the boonies, then that's what I'll do.”

Every muscle in my body went taut. I looked down at her. “No.”

“What?” she asked, confused.

“No,” I said more forcefully.

Before she could reply, I kissed her hot and wet and so damn hard that she stumbled backward toward the wall. I shot my hand forward so she wouldn't crash against the tiles and put the other one on her waist. I couldn't stop kissing her, turning hard instantly. No way in hell was I going to let this woman go anywhere. Why had no one told me that she even planned to apply to other cities? Why hadn't I thought about that?

But was I even being fair? I was headed on the first flight out to Manhattan once I got the advertising business back into shape, after all.

“Jake,” she murmured when we pulled apart for a breath. I kissed her again. I couldn't stop. I wouldn't.

She put both hands on my chest and then brought one to my neck, taking a breath and then a second one. I clutched her wrist, pressing my thumb on her pulse point. It was quick, just like mine.

“Natalie,” I said through gritted teeth. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. God, Jake, I want you so damn much.”

I swallowed hard, needing to be clear on everything. “Are you sure you want me to be here tonight?”

“Yes. I want you in here, in my apartment, inside me.”

I was close to losing control. I kissed her even harder than before, pushing her against the wall. I moved both hands down on her outer thighs, tracing my fingers in slow circles before bunching up her dress. My semi-erection turned to a full hard-on, and I reached for her bare skin. It was even smoother and softer than I imagined.

“Fuck, if you knew all the things I’m going to do to you tonight.”

Her skin instantly turned to goose bumps at my words.

“Yes, Jake. You can do everything you want to me.”

“I will, because you’re mine. I’m going to show you just how good that feels.”

Taking a small step back, I pulled her dress over her head. She was wearing black panties and a matching bra.

“You’re so damn gorgeous.” I looked her up and down, trying to decide where to start feasting on her.

She was still wearing her heels and looked like a goddess, but I wanted her to be comfortable.

“Take those off,” I said, nodding toward her shoes while I took off my own.

“That was not where I thought you were going to start,” she said playfully.

“Small steps, babe. Small steps,” I said, taking one hand and steadying her as she stepped out of her heels.

Once she was barefoot, she led me deeper into the living room. I couldn’t stop looking at her. Moving closer, I touched her outer thighs again, this time bringing one hand to her right

buttock, slapping it lightly. At the same time, she glanced over her shoulder.

“Oh!” Her voice shook.

I pushed her against me right there in the living room and moved my right hand over her pussy. Her panties were already damp.

I rubbed two fingers up and down her slit, knowing the contact of fabric on skin would drive her insane. I hadn't counted on it driving me crazy as well. Feeling her whole body twist and spiral in sync with how my fingers played her pussy was insanely sensual.

“Jake... Oh, Jake.”

“You're on the edge already, aren't you?” I asked her.

“Yes. Oh God, yes.”

With my other hand, I undid her bra. I wanted to feel her breast in my palm. I threw away the bra and cupped one breast. It was round and fucking perfect in my hand. It seemed to spur her on even more. I focused on her right nipple before moving to the left one. All the while, I kept rubbing her entrance up and down without concentrating too much on her clit. I was leaving the best for last.

“Jake, Jake,” she chanted, dropping her head back onto my shoulder. She turned slightly, and I kissed her sideways, moving my tongue quickly, alternating it with long strokes that mirrored what my fingers were doing over her panties. I could make her come just like this in her dark living room without even taking her panties off. But I wanted to give her the best, and this was not it. This was merely foreplay.

I took my hand away from her panties and she gasped, trembling in my arms.

“Jake, please... please make me come.”

I nearly burst in my pants at her words.

“I will. I promise, I fucking will. So damn hard.”

I pushed the lace down her legs. She immediately realized what I was doing and took over, tugging at them before she bent down seductively, pushing them off. I shoved down my own pants but stopped what I was doing midway to my knees because the sight in front of me was too damn gorgeous. She was naked, still standing with her back to me. I took out my wallet from my back pocket, putting on a condom. She looked over her shoulder, sucking in a breath.

I leaned forward. "Put your hands at the edge of the table."

"Right here?"

"I'm not going to be inside you just now. Not right away, Natalie, but I want to make you come with both my cock and my hand."

She shivered again and stretched her hands forward, pressing her ass back. I rubbed the length of my cock along her pussy, nudging her clit with the tip of my erection in every stroke. My eyesight blurred. A shock of pleasure went through me, and I wasn't even inside her.

"Oh my God, Jake!" Her voice shook.

I circled her clit with my hand too, alternating the movement between a gentle press and a hard one, paying attention to the reactions of her body. Her legs were quivering.

"Oh, that's it, babe. Come. I want you to come," I told her, pressing on her clit with two fingers.

She exploded almost immediately. I kept her against me with one hand as she thrashed. Fuck, it was beautiful to see her like this. I couldn't wait to make her come when she was lying down on a bed. I knew she was still using part of her energy to make sure she didn't lose her balance, even though I was sustaining her. The next time she came, she wouldn't have to worry about any of that.

My cock was painfully hard now. I led her to the door just off the living room. I assumed it went to the bedroom, and I was right. It was dark as well. I kicked off my pants on the way and then tugged at all my buttons, getting the shirt out of the way too, wanting as much skin-on-skin contact as possible.

“Mm, wait.” She turned on the light and pouted as she sat on the bed. “I wanted to watch you take off your clothes.”

“There will be plenty of opportunities,” I assured her. “Now, on your knees.”

Her eyes flashed, but she did as I asked. She was right in the middle of the bed. I climbed on in the same position and moved behind her. She looked down at my cock.

“Oh wow. You’re huge.”

From behind, I positioned myself between her legs again, rubbing the length up and down, just as I’d done before. But the angle was different now. I knew she was sensitive from before, so instead of circling her clit, I gave her pussy short slaps, making sure to brush her clit every time.

“Oh my God.” She buckled forward so she was on all fours.

“Come back up, babe. I want you like this.”

She drew in a deep breath, pushing herself up. I interlaced the fingers of our left hands, then slid inside her. She gasped, dropping her head back on my shoulder as I moved in and out of her.

This was the best feeling I ever had. I couldn’t even believe it was possible to feel this good. I’d always enjoyed sex, but with Natalie, it was far more than that. It was everything.

I moved with elaborate strokes, keeping my free hand on her clit, drumming my fingers on her skin. Every now and again, I gave her clit another gentle slap. She shuddered and contracted her muscles.

“You’re so tight.” If she got any tighter, I was going to lose it. I bent our hands, bringing them to her left breast, cupping it with her own hand. While she held it, I played with her nipple. The sight was so damn erotic. I knew I was going to explode soon, and so was she. Her breath quickened. Her muscles seemed even tighter than before. She moved her hips back and forth, meeting my thrusts. I barely became aware of Natalie climaxing when my own orgasm exploded inside me. We

moved wildly, our bodies slapping against each other desperately until we both calmed down. I pulled out of her gently and turned her sideways so we lay down in bed. I was close enough that her back was plastered against me.

“Hey, someone is romantic and great in bed and likes to spoon,” she muttered, making me laugh. “Are you sleepy?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

I was fighting it, but I could feel the tiredness creeping up. I wanted to stay awake and talk with her all night long, but my limbs were heavy and my head was spinning.

“So am I.”

The next second, her breathing changed, becoming softer. I pushed myself up on my elbow, glancing at her. She was out completely. I kissed her shoulder. She didn’t even react. Clearly she was already in deep sleep.

I cleaned off quickly, then put my head back on the pillow and fell asleep almost instantly.

Chapter Nineteen

Jake

I blinked a few times, realizing a sound had woken me up. The shower was running. Natalie wasn't next to me. I must've slept soundly if I didn't hear her get up. I was usually a light sleeper. This must be the first time I slept like a rock in I couldn't even remember how long.

It was insanely hot in here. I went straight to the shower, opening the door to join her, and Natalie was... What was she doing? Dancing in the shower? She was mouthing something into the showerhead, but she was making no sound until she saw me, and then she shrieked.

"Oh my God, did I wake you up? I'm so sorry. I thought I was being quiet. I didn't accidentally start singing, did I?"

I burst out laughing, realizing what she was doing.

"Wait, were you silent singing? Is that a thing?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've made it one."

"And you're dancing to what?"

She tapped her temple, grinning. "I have the song right here. Might not say the lyrics out loud, but I know them by heart, and I know the rhythm."

I opened the door farther so I could step inside.

"Hey, I don't remember inviting you to share my shower."

I tilted my head. "My bad. Do you want me to go?"

Her grin widened. "Not at all. In fact, now that you're awake, I can do all those things I thought of when I saw you sleeping."

"Such as?" I asked, grabbing the showerhead and positioning it so it sprayed water on both of us.

She pointed at my chest and then dragged both her hands down my pecs, moving them to my abs. "You were lying on your back with all these abs on display, and with *him*."

She cupped my cock with one hand. I instantly grew hard at her touch. She squeezed me once before moving her hand back to my chest. “Anyway, yeah, all the delicious parts of you were on display. I had the hardest time not touching you or kissing you... or basically licking you all over.”

“Natalie!” I grabbed her hips, rocking into her so my cock was trapped between us. She groaned when I rubbed against her clit.

“Hell yes.” Her pupils dilated; her breath caught.

“I want to kiss you, but I’ll save that for later,” I said. “But I can still kiss the rest of you.” I put my lips on her neck. I could tell she’d already used shower gel because she smelled of flowers.

She sighed. “You stayed.”

I straightened up. “Of course. You didn’t expect me to?”

She licked her lips, averting her gaze. “I don’t know. I had no expectation at all. I mean, last night was so explosive and amazing, and, well... I would insert all the positive adjectives that are locked somewhere in my brain, but none of them are coming to my mind right now.”

“You’re not making sense, babe.”

She cleared her throat. “Doesn’t matter.”

“You’re nervous.” I touched her cheek with my left hand. She nodded once. I’d never seen her like this. I’d seen her sassy, annoyed, pissed off, sick, but not vulnerable and not nervous. Not because of me.

“I’m here,” I said. “And I’m staying today as well.”

I pressed my thumb under her lower lip. She smiled, wiggling her hips.

“So, first you invite yourself in my shower, and then you’re crashing my day. What if I have plans already?” she said teasingly as she turned off the water. She stepped out of the shower first. I followed immediately and hugged her from behind.

I looked at her in the mirror. She cast her glance at it too. “Last night I was fighting to stay up.”

She laughed nervously. “You were. I didn’t even try, not after that amazing workout.”

“So, we have a lot to catch up on today,” I said.

I didn’t care what happened outside of this house right now. I was here with her, and that was where I wanted to stay. I needed to be here.

“And that is music to my ears,” she replied. “I just have to check on Larissa first, see if she needs anything. She was so tired last night that she fell asleep in her clothes. I woke up earlier than usual this morning because I was worrying about her.”

I like that she cared so deeply about her friend.

“We can even drive out to her place if she needs anything,” I told her.

“Who are you, and what have you done with the broody Mr. Whitley? Wait, don’t answer that. I don’t want to accidentally summon the dark side of you.”

I burst out laughing, “Damn, woman, the things you say.”

She smiled, and this time it was sheepish. “Word of warning, you might have seen different sides to me, but now that I know you don’t bite, I might be even more goofy. That side of me comes out sometimes.”

I kissed her shoulder. “I can’t wait to explore it.”

“Damn, it’s so hot here. This house needs an AC.”

“I can get you one,” I said instantly.

She planted her feet wide, hands on hips. “No, you won’t. I can get my own AC, but it’s a rental. I won’t invest anything in this.”

“Natalie—”

She rose on her tiptoes, putting her hands on my shoulders, pressing her lips to mine. Every instinct inside me was

launching in overprotective mode already, but I was going to let it go. I didn't want to spend our time together fighting.

"Fine. Message received."

"What do you usually do on Saturdays?" she asked as we dried with towels.

"When I'm not at Martha's Vineyard, I work."

She blinked rapidly, jerking her head back. "You can't mean that. Who works on weekends? Isn't that, I don't know, illegal?"

"Not when you own a company, or when you're running two."

"How is that going?"

"It's intense."

"Are you regretting that you accepted coming to Boston and taking over the advertising company?"

"No, it's what my family needed. My grandparents are far more relaxed since I took over. But it's even more work than I anticipated."

"It doesn't help that I keep distracting you, does it?"

"On the contrary," I said, "you're the only thing that keeps me afloat."

She jerked her head back, and I swallowed hard. I hadn't meant to say that, but now that the words were out, I knew they were 100 percent true.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, you really are." On instinct, I lifted her into my arms by her ass. She wrapped her legs around me and put her hands on my biceps.

"I like these." She squeezed my muscles. "Especially now that they're working hard to keep me up in the air."

Laughing, I walked with her to the kitchen. She made me do the craziest things. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done something impulsive. But when I was with Natalie, I

didn't want to overthink anything—I just wanted to *be*. This was a completely different experience for me.

“Hey, do you think we should put on some clothes?” she asked.

“Only if you insist.” I put her down when we reached the kitchen area.

“Hmm, decisions, decisions... All right, I've decided. We can go commando.”

I winked at her. “Good call.”

“Do you usually eat breakfast? I have nothing except coffee.”

“Coffee is good. I don't eat at all in the morning.”

While she busied herself pressing buttons on the machine, I remembered our conversation from last night, before we lost track of everything.

“Natalie, what was it you said last night about applying for jobs outside of Boston?”

She looked over her shoulder, shrugging. “Well, competition is fierce, especially in popular cities like Boston, so I've widened my search area.”

“To where?” I insisted.

“To everywhere.”

“And have you heard back?” I was annoyed. Why hadn't she told me this before? Then again, why should she?

“No, not yet. Honestly, it's a long process. I hate that everyone makes you jump through hoops. It just makes everything last far longer than it should. How hard can it be to tell from one single interview if someone is good for the job or not?”

“It is hard,” I replied, “and very subjective. For instance, some people interview well, and they're excellent at making a first impression, but when you dig deeper, you realize there's not much to them. You usually need a couple interviews to determine that.”

“Oh God, Jake, it was a rhetorical question.”

I palmed her ass cheek. “I’ll give you rhetorical.” Clearing my throat, I added, “I didn’t think you’d leave Boston.”

She turned her head back to the coffee machine. “What does it matter? You’re going back to New York as soon as you turn the company around.”

“That’s different,” I said. “I have no idea how long that’s going to take. You could receive a job offer at any moment.”

She turned around, biting her lower lip. “What are you saying, Jake?”

“That I don’t like the idea of you leaving.”

She smiled. I could tell she was preparing herself to say something sassy, but her eyes lacked the usual spark.

“How about we do things my way?” she asked.

“And that is?”

“Stop worrying about what might happen. That’s a killjoy. We’re here now, blissfully naked. We’ll soon have our coffee. What could be better than that?”

“I have a few suggestions,” I said.

“Lucky me.”

The coffee wasn’t too strong, so I ended up drinking three. Afterward, we dressed and went into her backyard. She had her iPad with her.

“What were you saying about working weekends?” I asked when I noticed her replying to an email.

“Hey, that’s not work. I’m just sending an email confirming the guest list for Jeannie’s party.”

I stiffened next to her as we sat down on the swing.

“My half brothers are bringing plus ones?”

She looked up at me, mouth wide. “No. Didn’t they tell you?”

“I’m not in contact with them.”

“Oh. When you said you’re not close to them, I didn’t realize you meant that you don’t have any contact at all. And yes, all three RSVPed.”

“Okay, that’s good to know.”

She set her iPad next to her. “Do you want to talk about it?” She swung her legs, sending the swing bouncing back and forth.

“There’s not much to talk about.”

“You went from relaxed to being all stiff and frowning, so it clearly weighs on you.”

“Let’s just say that if I had a choice on how to spend an afternoon, it wouldn’t include my half brothers.”

She turned sideways, curling her legs next to her on the swing. “It’ll make your grandparents happy, though.”

“I know.”

“Your other brothers also have no contact with them? Just trying to gauge how awkward it’ll be.”

“As far as I know, Colton doesn’t have a relationship with them, but our younger brothers do.”

“How come?” she asked.

“Long story.”

“But I want to hear it.”

“You do?” That was surprising. I never typically spoke about our family drama, because really, who’d want to hear about all the dysfunction?

“Yeah,” Natalie replied.

“My mom tried to shield my younger brothers from the gory details of her depression and illness. My grandparents tried really hard to integrate the other Whitleys into the family. My brothers were simply excited that they had three additional siblings overnight.”

“How about their mother?”

“She was played by my dad too. That I wholly believe.”

“She won’t be at the party, right? I don’t remember Jeannie telling me anything about her.”

I shook my head. “No, she stays away from any sort of family events. I’ve only seen her once.”

“I think this is going to be a great opportunity for you to catch up with your half siblings. Every time Jeannie talks about all of you, her face lights up. It means a lot to her to have everyone in the same place.”

“I know.” In all honesty, I wasn’t dreading seeing my other brothers as much as usual. I had a suspicion that it was all because of Natalie. She was right. This wasn’t about me or my half brothers. It was about making Grandmother happy.

“Do they live in Boston too?”

“Yes. My grandparents encouraged them to move here.”

I heard her stomach growl, and it made me grin.

She smiled sheepishly. “I guess that’s my body’s way of saying I do need food after all.”

I stood up, though apparently too abruptly, because the swing moved, and Natalie almost fell out of it. She put one leg down to steady herself as I caught her by the arm, and she straightened up.

“Whew. Okay, that was close.” Her stomach growled even louder. “Damn. When it wants food, there’s no missing it.”

“Come on, beautiful girl. Let’s feed you.”

As we ate, I started thinking about her job search again. I wasn’t going to bring it up, because I agreed with her. I wanted to enjoy this, what we had right now, but that didn’t mean I could stop my brain from mulling over the issue, searching for solutions. I wanted to keep her here, and Whitley Industries was active in many branches; I had no doubt that we could find a place for Natalie at one of the companies.

If she accepted it was another story altogether.

But one thing was for sure: I wasn’t going to do nothing.

Chapter Twenty

Natalie

“Do you need anything more to drink, miss?” the waiter asked me.

“No, thank you. I’m good. I’m just waiting for my client.” I was at the restaurant where Jeannie’s party would take place. After some back and forth, I convinced her to come see the location for herself. There was always the tiny prospect of her simply not connecting with the place, and I didn’t want to risk that. She’d finally agreed. One of her grandsons was staying at the house with Abe while she was out with me. She told me on the phone that he liked to drink three types of plant teas throughout the day, and she had to make sure he took them at the right time.

I looked at my iPad, checking my notes. I had several questions for Jeannie and wondered if I was missing anything. The day was gorgeous. It was sunny and a bit too hot for my taste, but I’d dressed in a long summery dress, ready for the heat and blinding sun. I was a summer girl through and through, and I waited the whole year for it.

To be fair, I was extra happy today for no reason at all. My job search wasn’t going anywhere. One of Jeannie’s friends did call me, but her party wasn’t for another few months. Until then, I had to find a way to keep myself afloat. I could take up waitressing, perhaps. I’d done it several times in between jobs and in college.

No, things weren’t looking up for me, but I was more optimistic than usual, even for my standards. I thought that might have something to do with Jake. After our Saturday together, my energy level simply shot through the roof.

I hadn’t seen him since, but we texted throughout the day. I wondered when I was going to see him next, and my answer arrived ten minutes later, as Jeannie didn’t come alone. Jake was with her, and my body buzzed as I watched him walk. He was wearing a suit, but that was nothing new. How did the

man not overheat? Didn't he need to take a cold shower every hour or so? I could guide him to the nearest shower, perhaps jump in it with him, or just take off that shirt of his.

Natalie, focus. Jeannie is your client.

Oh God, does she know about us?

Jake and I hadn't spoken at all about any of this. I didn't want to disappoint Jeannie, or for her to think I wasn't professional.

I rose to my feet when they approached. "Jeannie, Jake. Hi." My voice sounded like I'd swallowed an egg. Holy shit, I'd never sounded like that before.

"Natalie, darling, what a wonderful day," Jeannie said as she and Jake sat down.

"I thought you were coming alone."

Jake cocked a brow. A smile was playing on his lips.

Jeannie patted him on the arm. "I thought so too. But then out of the blue, Jake offered to come with me. Such a surprise. I didn't think he'd take such an interest in my party."

Jake was now looking straight at me. I simmered in my seat, then spread my arms around, indicating the venue. "So, what do you think about this place? Do you like the vibe?"

"Definitely. I love the entryway too. It's very romantic and very festive. But the party will be here in the garden, correct?"

"Yes. As long as you like it. I was thinking of asking them to group our tables back there, between the trees." There wasn't any natural shade where we currently sat, only umbrellas, but they weren't enough. It could get really hot under them, and it was an unseasonably hot summer for Boston. The natural shade was always cooler.

Jeannie nodded. "It does look lovely back there."

"We can walk around, if you'd like. Unless you want to drink something before?"

"No, I'm good. Let's go see it."

“How is Abe feeling?” I asked as the three of us walked toward the trees. I had a soft spot for the yard. I always felt like trees had their own soul. The older they were, the more they spoke to me. Bottom line, I was just a lover of nature.

“He’s fine, his occasional ornery self,” Jeannie replied.

Jake was still holding Jeannie’s arm. I was on her other side, but even with her as a buffer between us, my body still buzzed every time I caught his eye. I hadn’t counted on that. I figured my body only reacted to him like that when we were alone. Apparently not. I was learning new things about myself every day.

When we reached the spot where I was thinking of putting the tables, we all stepped into the shadow of a huge fir tree.

“This is heaven,” Jeannie said.

“I know, right? It feels like an actual temperature drop.”

“You’re very smart, my dear.” Jeannie looked around. “Let’s put the tables here. It’ll be particularly good for Abe. He’s not good with heat.”

“Okay, let me tell you real quick how I’m thinking of arranging the tables and also defining the perimeter with decorations so the rest of the guests don’t accidentally walk in on us.”

“They’re going to keep the restaurant open for other guests?” Jake asked, frowning.

“Yes. I didn’t even try suggesting to them to close it down. We don’t have enough guests to warrant that. I’m sure they won’t agree to it.”

“I’ll talk to them.”

He had his alpha business voice on. My panties shifted down my hips a couple inches. I was surprised they didn’t drop altogether.

“No, you won’t,” Jeannie said. “I don’t mind if there are other people around. Let them do the best for their business.”

“Grandmother—” Jake began.

“My birthday, my rules, remember?”

I tried very hard to suppress my laughter as Jake looked positively perplexed. Clearly this wasn't something he usually heard from other people. But he didn't argue with his grandmother. Oh, I was enjoying this side of him very much. I found it absolutely endearing that he liked to indulge her in all things.

I felt Jake's gaze on me as I moved around, showing them where the tables would be as well as the buffet. With so many people, it was easier to have a set menu. The restaurant agreed to having chafing dishes and the staff managing them.

“And here, I'm going to set up a huge table for you and Abe and all your grandchildren.” I pressed my lips together. I specifically didn't mention which brothers. Jeannie told me to put everyone at the same table. After my weekend with Jake, I wasn't sure that was the best idea, but still, Jeannie was my client.

Jake's eyes turned hard. “All five of us.”

“Oh, don't be such a spoilsport,” Jeannie said. “It's my birthday. I want you boys to chat with each other a bit.”

“Grandmother!” His voice sounded dangerous. I had a hunch that there was a limit to his indulging Jeannie, but I just wasn't sure where that was. Sitting with his half brothers? Talking to them? Being civil? I guess I was going to find out.

“Natalie, be a dear and help me here.”

Jake moved his gaze to me. It was hard but also smoldering, like he was practically imagining me naked.

Oh no! He couldn't do this to me in full view of Jeannie... or anyone else. I was prepared to act professional and be on her side, but he was disarming me with his gaze and charming smile.

Wait a second! One corner of his lips was up in a half smile. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Oh really? He thinks he can convince me to take his side just because he's been in my pants? Because he somehow

looks even hotter today? He has another thing coming.

“I think Jeannie has a point,” I cut in. “Besides, parties are social events. It’s a great opportunity to mingle with all the guests.”

“Thank you, Natalie. You’re a darling. You’ll bring their spirited minds together.”

I was about to ask what she meant by that when she abruptly added, “I’m going to the restroom. You two carry on.”

“Do you need me to show you where it is?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if being alone with Jake was such a good idea.

“No, I saw it on my way in.”

As soon as Jeannie was out of earshot, Jake stepped closer. Now it wasn’t just my panties sliding down. My knees went weak, first the right one, then the left.

“What are you playing at?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you I’m not a fan of my half brothers.”

“Yes, but Jeannie is my client, and you’re playing dirty.”

His eyes flashed. “I always do.”

“You can’t use your smoldering glare to convince me to take your side.”

“Why not? You said I can talk you into anything when I do that.”

“Yes, precisely.”

I looked around. There was no one anywhere near us, but I still lowered my voice.

“I meant in private, not in full view of everyone, and especially not with a client.”

“There is something you should know about me, Natalie. I don’t pick and choose the moments to play dirty. I play so I get what I want.”

I smirked, taking a step back and crossing my arms over my chest. For some insane reason, my body found that tone attractive. My nipples were hard. I didn't think anyone could see that through my bra, but better safe than sorry.

"You can't boss me around, Jake."

"Let's go somewhere, just the two of us, and I'll prove different."

He stepped closer again. It was like we were doing our own private dance right here in the middle of the garden. I hoped no one was watching because only a blind person couldn't see what was going on between us.

"I've missed you these past couple days," he murmured.

His admission took me by surprise. His voice was softer. I licked my lips, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I missed you too," I admitted, swallowing hard.

"Let's go somewhere after we finish here with my grandmother, just the two of us."

"Aren't you supposed to drive her home?" I asked, but I was thrilled at the thought of spending more time with him.

"Cal is here. He can take her home."

"I don't know. Won't she put two and two together?"

He smirked. My God, how was it that when I first met him, I wanted to smack that smirk off him, and now I found it incredibly sexy?

"Knowing my grandmother, she's probably already up-to-date with everything."

"What? Really? How come?"

"She was already suspicious about me getting ice cream. But honestly, that was easy. It was so out of character for me."

I *really* liked that he did things with me that he usually didn't. It made me feel less guilty about the fact that I was standing here in public, and all I could think about was a way

to take him somewhere out of sight so I could kiss him thoroughly.

“And speaking of my grandmother,” he said, taking a very smooth step to the side as Jeannie came up to us. She was awfully fast. My heartbeat accelerated as I wondered how much she’d seen.

“My girl, I think I’ve got a good idea about how the party will unfold. I trust you to take care of all the details. Now I need to go home. Abe must already be missing me, and it should be illegal to have an old hag as a third wheel.”

I gasped. Jake just laughed.

“Jeannie,” I mumbled. “What are you talking about?”

“Darling, I’ve seen the way he looks at you. You should’ve seen how fast he suggested he come with me to the meeting. I knew right away. I had my suspicions early on, of course, but that just confirmed it. You two go and do young people things. I’m going to go home to Abe.”

“I don’t mean to... I mean, you’re my client.”

I was stumbling over my words. I just hadn’t expected her to talk about it so openly.

Before I could add anything else, she winked at me. *Winked!* And then she left.

Jake started laughing while Jeannie was still in earshot. I was sure I was red in the face. It felt like my forehead was on fire, not to mention my cheeks.

“Oh my God, did that just happen?”

“I have to admit, that was sassy, even for Grandmother,” Jake replied. “Let’s move a bit deeper between the trees.”

I was still too stunned about Jeannie’s reaction, but I let him guide me farther into the shade. It was even cooler. I calmed down somewhat, but then Jake tilted over me. His height and stature protected and warmed me. He splayed his fingers across my cheek, brushing his thumb over my lips.

“You have no idea how much I fantasize about kissing you.”

“Jake,” I muttered and simply closed my eyes.

His lips were unexpectedly soft and probing, and although I was sure he shaved earlier in the morning, a bit of his scruff was prickling my skin, causing my body to combust. He kept his hand firmly on my face, kissing and kissing until I was completely turned on and out of breath. I was a bit light-headed when we pulled apart.

He groaned. “Natalie.”

“So, you came with Jeannie for me, huh?” I asked.

“Fuck yes. When I heard she was meeting you, I didn’t even think twice. My mind was on you constantly this week.”

“How come? Imagining all the dirty things you could do to me on your desk?”

“That too. I’m glad my grandmother knows, and my brothers.”

I bit my lower lip. “Really?”

“Fuck yes.”

“Natalie?” a voice called from closer to the restaurant. I jumped and turned around, walking out from between the trees.

“I’m here.”

Michael, one of the waiters, came up to us. I’d spoken with him before about the details for the party.

“How did you find everything?”

“It’s perfect, Michael. My client agrees with the layout we spoke about.”

He nodded, looking speculatively at Jake, who’d walked up behind me.

Wait a second. Michael was looking at Jake because the man himself was throwing daggers with his eyes at the waiter.
What’s going on?

“Right. Do you want us to finalize everything later this week?” Michael asked.

“Yes. I think it’s best if I come here again alone, and then we can hammer out the details.”

He nodded. “That sounds great. Friday?”

It was Wednesday today. “Let’s make it tomorrow. That way, in case we’re not seeing eye to eye on something, I have time to change things before the party.”

“Okay, but I’m sure we’ll come to an agreement. Thursday it is. And, on a personal note, are you free this evening?”

“Oh. You want to talk about it now?” I was confused since we’d agreed to meet tomorrow.

He glanced at Jake again. Michael was not quite as tall as him; however, both were a good foot taller than me. “No, I was wondering if you’re free to grab dinner together. My shift just ended.”

Holy shit. I hadn’t picked up any flirty vibes from him, but clearly Jake had, even before the man made his move. That explained the look Jake was giving him. I was in business mode and totally missed his intentions.

“No, she’s not free. She’s going out with me,” Jake said before I could even open my mouth.

I bit the inside of my cheek, fighting hard not to laugh as Michael winced. Seriously, a six-foot man winced.

“My apologies. I didn’t know. Well, see you tomorrow, then, Natalie,” he said before turning around and heading back inside the restaurant.

“I want to be here when you meet with him tomorrow or anytime,” Jake said.

I turned around and almost stumbled backward from the intensity in his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I mean it. I don’t want you to be alone with him.”

“I think he got the message.”

“I don’t care.”

“Jake!”

He stepped closer to one of the trees, and I followed suit. We were shielded from the view of the customers. I couldn’t believe that he was jealous.

“You’re mine, Natalie.”

Yup. My panties finally did what they’d promised to since he first appeared today and spontaneously combusted.

“Oh yeah. I got the message too,” I murmured. I was so aware of his presence and the way he simply seemed to dominate the space around him.

He tilted his head, as if considering his words carefully. “What are you in the mood to do tonight?”

I perked up, remembering that we were going to spend the rest of the evening together. “I’m in the mood to hang around Castle Island.”

“South Boston, got it. Okay, let’s go.” There was still an edge to his voice, his eyes still hard. “*You’re mine, Natalie.*”

I really was. I had no idea how it happened, but it was true.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jake

“I haven’t been here in years,” I said as we walked on the Harbor Loop.

“Actually, neither have I,” Natalie said. “I’d forgotten how cool it is. We have a great view of the skyline from here.”

They had added food stands on the beach. There was even a playground in the distance.

“How can it be so busy?” I asked, looking around. People were picnicking on the grass or on the sand. It was full to the brim.

Natalie laughed. The sound was addictive. “People want to enjoy themselves in the evening, you know? After they finish work.”

“Don’t mock my work ethic. I’ve been ditching it plenty lately.”

“Oh yeah,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows. “Three or four days where you didn’t work until midnight. You think that means you’ve got a balance?”

I put an arm around her waist, pinching her ass as I did so. She straightened up with a gasp.

“You can talk me into more evenings,” I admitted.

“Good to know,” she murmured, still sounding stunned. I liked surprising her.

Her phone chimed while we went to one of the food stands by the water. She groaned, then put it back.

“What happened?” I asked, instantly on alert. Her shoulders were rigid.

“Just a reminder about my rent coming soon.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“No. I can afford it.”

She sounded stressed about it, so I decided to dig deeper.

“What would you say if I spoke to my brothers to see if anyone has a job that fits your qualifications?”

“No, I don’t want that.”

I swallowed, trying to stay calm. I hadn’t expected her to flat-out refuse. “Why not?”

“I don’t want anyone pulling any strings or giving me pity jobs.”

“Did you hear what I said? It would be one that fits your qualifications.”

She shook her head. “I’ve sent out enough applications, and I was just thinking today that while I wait to hear back, I can take up some waitressing jobs. I did it before.”

“You’d rather take up shifts in exhausting jobs than let me talk to my brothers?” All my life, I’d been used to people asking me to pull strings, and yet Natalie didn’t even want to hear of it.

“It feels desperate to ask them. Please don’t. Besides, if they had any openings, I would have seen them on job sites.”

My jaw ticked, and a vein pulsed in my neck. She was serious. I wanted to make things easier for her, spoil her, take care of her. At the very least, I wanted to make sure she didn’t have any financial problems or any kind of issues. I’d never felt that way about anyone before. I admitted to myself that I also wanted her to stay here. The thought of her moving away for a job was unthinkable. Was it selfish of me?

I was going back to New York once Whitley Advertising was back on its feet, so how could I demand that of her? Still, I knew in my gut that no matter what happened between us, I wanted her to be taken care of. I didn’t want her to struggle now, or in the future.

“Let’s get some burgers,” she said. “Last time I was here, they made some amazing ones out of soy chunks.”

“Wait, I’m not done talking about this.”

Her shoulders dropped, and she crossed her arms over her chest. I'd learned that was a telltale sign she was uncomfortable. That was the last thing I wanted, but I needed to understand more.

"It's just more difficult to get interviews because I lack references."

"Because of your ex."

"Yes."

"Tell me about him."

"Why?" she asked, sounding suspicious.

"So that I can make sure he doesn't bother you again."

"Oh, I don't think he will."

I moved my hand from her waist up to the back of her neck and pressed my fingers there. She seemed to like it, so I kept doing it. I loved pleasing her. "When did you two break up?"

"About seven months ago. Then we worked together for three more months before our boss fired us."

"And he's been bugging you ever since?"

"On and off. In the first two months after we were fired, he tried to get under my skin. I don't get why. He wouldn't make an effort to even be civil while we worked together, and then after we broke up, it was like he had a personality change. Kept going out of his way to be nice. Then he got pissed because I refused to acknowledge him. I was just done. That was a month before he sent the letter."

"Natalie, tell me if there's any trouble. Promise."

She nodded. "I promise. Now can we please drop it?"

"Sure. Thank you for sharing that with me."

She gave me a sad smile. "It's not something I'm hiding. I just don't like to think about it."

I kissed her forehead, my mouth lingering on her skin. I was trying to rein in my instinct—the primal need to protect

her from anything, be it an ex or financial issues. But I didn't want to be overbearing.

"Let's get your burger," I said when I pulled away. "I hope they have regular ones too. I'm not a soy fan."

"I promise these are worth trying."

"I'll take a bite of yours."

There were only two people in front of us. I watched the staff prep the burgers. No way in hell was I tasting the soy one; it looked like something I wouldn't even feed a dog. I took a regular one from ground beef. They were ready for us in a couple minutes.

Natalie looked around, scouring the area as I took the paper bags with burgers. "Let's find a bench."

"We can sit on the grass if you want. I don't mind."

"No, there are too many critters."

"I thought you liked nature."

"I like trees. I don't like insects."

"Let's find you a bench, then." I put an arm around her back, kissing her temple.

We found one farther away from the water, sat down and opened the paper bags, taking out the burgers. We ate them quickly. I had to give it to Natalie. It was great, and I'd eaten plenty of burgers in New York.

"I thought you were going to take a bite out of my soy burger," she said when she was almost done.

"Watching them prep it was enough for me. I don't need to taste it."

She laughed throatily. "Your loss," she said before downing the last bite.

My phone buzzed. I took it out and looked at the screen. Groaning, I rejected the call before sliding it back into my pocket.

"What was that?" I asked.

“A client.”

“Didn’t you have a rule that you never ignore calls from clients?”

“I like breaking the rules for you, Natalie. I don’t want to waste time with my clients this evening.”

“Then what do you want to do?” she asked.

“I want to focus on you. Tell me about your future. How do you see it? What are your hopes, dreams?”

“You want the answer as dreaming Natalie or realistic Natalie?”

“Why are they separate?”

She sighed, toeing off her shoes. “Realistic Natalie wants to get a good job, build up her credit score, and do adult stuff. Dreaming Natalie just doesn’t want this evening to end, honestly. Dreaming Natalie also wants my family to come back so I can pop over to their place any time I want. I want my parents to be here so when I have a million babies, they’re here to shower them with love.”

In the past, hearing a woman talk about children would’ve stunned me, but for some reason, I liked hearing Natalie talk about how she envisioned life. It tugged at a primal need inside me, one I didn’t even know I had.

“Okay, now your turn,” she said.

“I’ve never thought about it,” I admitted.

“You never thought about the future? How is that possible?”

“It always looked the same,” I explained. “The work, the clients, going to Martha’s Vineyard on the weekends.”

“You never thought about changing that?” Her voice was incredulous.

“After what happened with my father, I didn’t care about anything except building a business in New York. I didn’t even think about my personal life. My parents seemingly had it all

—successful marriage, children—and the reality was completely different.”

“You felt as if a rug had been pulled from under your feet. It’s normal to put a barrier between yourself and everything else.”

“A barrier,” I parroted. I never thought about it like that. She was right, though. She was 100 percent right.

“I kept doing one thing—building my consulting business—and it consumed me. But it’s a system that worked for me.”

“A system.” She sounded stunned. “Your life is a system. I’m not judging. I’m just, well, surprised.”

I threw the empty food bags into the nearby container and then came back to the bench, sitting closer to her.

“Now that I’m here, I’m surprised too. It all seems so cold. But when you’re caught in it, you don’t have time to reflect.”

“Now you do?”

“A certain someone is making me reconsider some things.”

“Like what?”

“Like rearranging everything in my... *system*.”

She smiled triumphantly. “Oh, good. Now, if I could convince you to try a soy burger too, that would make my evening.”

“That’s a hell no. But I’m up for anything else.”

She grinned. “Challenge accepted.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jake

“This is so great!” Natalie exclaimed one week later at Grandmother’s party. She was running everything with an iron fist. I liked that about her. She was well organized and didn’t leave anything to chance, yet she wasn’t micromanaging either.

I smiled. “You’re talented at this.”

“Why, thank you. Are you complimenting me because you’re trying to get into my pants later?”

I tilted closer to her. “We can do that right now. No need to wait until later.”

She laughed, cocking her head to look at me. “Jake, you’re doing that thing again with the eyes.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Oh yes, you can. You’re doing it on purpose.”

“Fine. I am,” I admitted, “but you can’t blame me.”

“I totally can. And I am.”

“I’ve been behaving until now.”

She put her hands on her hips. “The party started two hours ago.”

“Exactly. That’s two hours too long.”

“Don’t be mean. This is a great party.”

“It is. And you promised that once things are settled, you’re going to sit beside me at the table.”

She bit her lower lip. “I’ve already danced with you.”

“Natalie!” My voice was dangerously low.

She pointed at me. “Go sit at the table and chat with your brothers and half brothers.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’ll make you a deal. You join me, and I’ll be civil to them.”

“I have a lot of things to do, to check on. I can’t exactly take off. I’m running the party.”

“You wouldn’t be taking off. Besides, you need a break every now and then. You’ve been on your feet the entire time.”

“Again, just two hours.”

“Woman, why are you so stubborn?”

“That’s how I am.”

I looked at her expectantly. The truth was I wanted her to be by my side. The family knew about her, of course, but it would be different if she sat with us at the table, if she got to know them.

“I’ll come for a snack, and then I’ll get back to work.”

“We have a deal.” I was very proud of myself.

She tapped on her iPad and then glanced around. “I think everything is going according to plan right now. I can grab something to eat and join you at the table.” She put the iPad on the small table next to the buffet where she’d set up her office of sorts.

“You can take the iPad to the table,” I suggested. “That way you don’t have to run back and forth.”

“If I take it with me, I’ll spend every moment with my nose buried in it instead of actually talking to everyone. Trust me, it’s better this way.”

“Okay.”

She took a plate and loaded it up with chicken and pasta. As we walked back to the table, I put a hand on her waist. Whenever Natalie was around, I couldn’t help touching her.

Grandmother beamed at us as we sat down at the table. She was in a great mood today. She’d loved the present my brothers and I got for her—a photography course with one of the most renowned photographers in the country. We’d also set

her up with enough equipment that she'd never have to buy anything else.

“Natalie, darling, I have to say, you two make such a great couple.”

Natalie blushed.

“I'm so happy I followed my hunch and hired you.”

“What?” I asked.

Natalie straightened up, and Grandmother gave me a mischievous smile.

Grandfather cleared his throat. “Jeannie, you don't have to tell them everything.”

“Oh, why not? It's all a bit of fun.” Grandmother looked around the table. “Well, no one here is giving me great-grandkids, so I had to take matters into my own hands.”

I could practically see the colors of my brothers' faces changing, and that went for my half brothers as well. Maddox, Nick, and Leo were sitting between Gabe and Grandfather. I'd made polite chitchat with them until now, but we hadn't really discussed anything worth remembering or mentioning.

I supposed this was Grandmother's way of breaking the ice, and damn, it worked.

“What now, Gran?” Maddox said.

No one on our side of the family called her “Gran.” We all addressed her as Grandmother—most of the time. It was something my mom ingrained in us as kids, and we kept it on.

“That's it, young man, exactly what you heard,” Grandmother went on. “Anyway, Natalie struck me as a lovely lady, and I followed my instinct.”

“Did you even want to have the party at Martha's Vineyard in the first place, or was that just an excuse?” Natalie asked. She sounded completely stunned.

“Hmm, no, I do think I wanted it there, but honestly, I just thought it would be a great opportunity for you to... see Jake in his own space, I guess.”

“Wait, when you first told me about your plans for the party, you said you’d invited a friend of yours and her niece. Why would you even tell me that? Is she here?” I asked.

“I completely made it up,” Grandmother said. “I wanted you to be on the lookout so you were more relaxed around Natalie.”

No one spoke for several seconds.

Grandmother turned to Natalie. “I should’ve warned you. Nick, Maddox, and Leo are a handful too. But they’re good people. Friendly.”

“Except to each other. For instance, when they discover they have the same girlfriend, like Maddox and Leo,” Spencer volunteered.

Natalie blinked rapidly. “I’m so sorry.”

Leo waved his hand. “It was in college. We got over it eventually. After not speaking to each other for about six months. Nick tried to play pacifier, but Spencer was better at it.”

Nick nodded. “Yeah. The original pacifist in the family. Why did you bring it up now?”

Spencer shrugged. “I like switching from the peacemaker to putting gasoline on a fire from time to time.”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“So, Natalie,” Nick said finally, “we’ve heard a lot about you.”

I stared at him. He had, now, had he? Gabe was suddenly very busy cutting his steak. I guess I knew who spilled the beans. I wasn’t mad, simply surprised. I hadn’t realized my half brothers were interested in my life at all.

“And this party is great,” Nick continued. “It’s elegant but not stuffy.”

Natalie perked up. “Exactly.”

“Yeah. Gran tells us you’re new to the party business,” Maddox added.

“I am. I’m only doing it temporarily. My mother was a professional party planner, and I helped a lot over the years. I’m actually really enjoying it.”

“That’s good,” Leo said. “I always say we all should do things we enjoy.” He turned to me. “And hats off to you, Jake, for actually coming to Boston and taking over Whitley Advertising. Must be harrowing to try to turn around a company that you’ve got no interest in. I don’t think I could do it.” There was no trace of sarcasm in his voice. He really meant it.

“It’s not as bad as I thought,” I replied honestly. “But the workload is too much.”

Leo grimaced. “As I said, hats off to you.”

“Can you even turn it around?” Nick asked.

I looked around the table, wondering if this had been Grandmother’s plan all along. I hadn’t had a conversation this long with my half brothers in years.

“I think it’s possible.” I was choosing my words carefully because I knew how important this was to Grandfather. I didn’t want to give him false hope. I didn’t like to oversell my capabilities. It was what made me one of the best in the business. Many clients came to me, claiming they’d heard I would give them the truth, no bullshitting. And that was exactly what I did. I never overpitched myself just to get a project. If I thought I could get the job done, I told them so. If I thought it was beyond saving, I told them that as well.

“But it’s too early to give a verdict,” I said.

“Good luck to you. Tell us if there’s anything you need help with. Although, it’s not exactly our area of expertise,” Nick added.

This was yet another surprise. I assumed they hated my guts, but they didn’t. What else had I been wrong about? They all had their own companies to focus on.

Leo ran Whitley Real Estate. Nick was in charge of the fitness center branch of Whitley Industries. He’d also opened an online security company recently. Maddox ran Whitley

Office Designs—they specialized in designing custom office spaces. He'd radically changed the company since he took over; with the rise of coworking and shared spaces, he'd had to keep up with the market.

Natalie smiled at me, then at Maddox. "Jeannie tells me all three of you are quite busy too, but it's still great of you to offer help."

Cade cleared his throat. "I think this is a good time for me to interject and point out that neither Colton nor Jake is exactly the type who would admit needing help."

"Just so you are all aware, keep your eyes open and read the signs, but don't expect them to come out and say it," he added.

Colton laughed. "I'd contradict you, but you have a very good point. But I can't remember a time when I actually needed help."

Cade rolled his eyes. "Yeah. You know how now you're working from early morning to late in the evening to get that drug through? This would be the time to ask for help. Not from us because neither of us are brainiacs, but you know, hiring someone else would probably do you good."

Colton lowered his arms, crossing them over his chest. "Interesting. We went from analyzing Jake to me."

"Are you going to do it to every member of the family?" Natalie asked.

Maddox whistled. "Natalie, I like that idea. Might give me a chance to find out more about these brothers. Not that Gabe isn't a good enough source."

"Hey, dude," Gabe said. "You weren't supposed to tell him that. Besides, Spencer and Cade are valuable sources of information too."

"True," Maddox said. "But Gabe takes the cake."

I'd always had a feeling I was missing out on a huge part of my life because I wasn't in Boston, but I'd never felt that as intensely as I did now.

I'd never seen my younger brothers interacting like this with our half brothers—there was so much ease and banter. I hadn't even known this type of relationship had formed between them. What else was I missing out on?

“By the way, Natalie,” Maddox said, “Gran said you want to add more clients.”

“Oh yes, I do.”

“Well, here's the thing. Our event coordinator is taking time off to care for her mother. She left two weeks ago. She'll be gone for six weeks, and we need someone to step in until then. We have some interviews with potential candidates, but you're more than welcome to throw your hat in the ring. In fact, I can consider this party your application.”

“Oh, that's so thoughtful,” Natalie exclaimed. “So, your company does event planning?”

“No. We design, and most often redesign, office spaces. We regularly throw events for customers after they inaugurate the space we worked on. They typically invite their partners, and we get more business that way.”

What the fuck? She'd balked when I suggested I ask my brothers for a job.

“What qualifications do I need?” she asked. “I don't know if Jeannie told you, but I haven't been doing this for a very long time.”

Was she seriously considering working for Maddox when she'd flat-out told me she wouldn't want me to ask my brothers?

“We're not looking for someone who's been running an event agency for decades. Obviously they'd be completely overqualified. And we only need someone temporarily, which works for you too.”

“Thank you. I'd like to apply for the job. I'll send you my résumé, pictures of events I've helped with, and things like that.”

What the actual hell?

Natalie turned to look at me. Her smile was bright but immediately fell when she saw my expression.

“If you all will excuse me,” she said, “I should go and check with that DJ. We’ve got some things planned for the next two hours.”

She went back to her desk with determined steps.

After a minute or two, I excused myself and rose from the table, heading straight to her. I thought perhaps she did that on purpose so we could talk, but she was actually engaging the DJ in a lively conversation. I waited by her desk, staring at her and tapping my foot. She joined me a few minutes later.

Her brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

“Obviously I have no idea, or I wouldn’t ask.”

“Why did you say you’ll send him your résumé?”

She blinked. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Let me rephrase. What’s the difference between you working for Maddox and me asking my brothers for a job?”

“Because he offered, and it’s a good fit,” she said.

“We could find you a party-planning position at any of the companies. Hell, we can make one.”

“See, that’s the point. I didn’t want you to make one for me. This was just something that happened to work out. Do you honestly want me to not send in my application just because he’s your half brother? Is that it? Because if it is, you’re completely out of line.”

I took a step back, reassessing my thoughts. I liked that she didn’t mind going toe-to-toe with me. Now more than ever, I respected the way she challenged me. Yes, I was pissed off. And also, yes, I was “completely out of line” by taking it out on her. Why would it matter if she worked with Maddox? She was right. He’d offered, and it was a good fit.

“I don’t know why it’s bothering me,” I said honestly.

She sighed, giving me a small smile. “Look, I appreciate that you want to look out for me and want to help me, but please try to understand. I’m sorry if I came on too hard. My ex had strong opinions about what I should and shouldn’t do, and I’m still sensitive about it.”

“I’m not your ex. And you were right. I didn’t react well.”

“I feel good about this, okay? It doesn’t feel like it’s a handout. Whereas if you hired me...”

“It wouldn’t be a handout.”

“It would feel that way to me, okay? Besides, I think Maddox is fun. All three of your half brothers seem like good people.”

I cleared my throat. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Hmm.”

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” She was grinning, though.

“Natalie.” I tilted closer. “Speak, or I’ll use some of those skills you keep forbidding me to use.”

“Oh, now you’re not even negotiating anymore, you’re blackmailing me.”

“Nah. This is called a hard negotiation,” I clarified.

“I’m wondering if Jeannie is meddling, trying to get you closer to your brothers too.”

“I’m sure she is,” I said. “She’s always tried to do that. I simply wasn’t able to get past everything.”

“Oh, shoot.” She glanced down at her iPad.

“What?”

“I haven’t checked if the candles are here. All ninety of them.”

I whistled. “I’m surprised Grandmother wants those.”

“They’ll look fabulous. I just really have to check if they’re here. Otherwise I’m going to run and buy her some.”

She clasped her left shoulder with her right hand and rotated it once. “I’ve been so tense today. I’m starting to ache everywhere.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied innocently. “I’ll take care of you later.”

She turned around with a cheeky grin. “You will?”

“Hell yes.”

Her entire face lit up. “I wasn’t counting on that.”

“I can start right here, during the party too, if you want.”

She sighed. “Oh, man, you’re *very* good at this.”

“I know.”

“I can’t come to the table again. There are too many things to check on, and if I sit down, I’ll just lose track of time because I’m really having fun with your family. Try to make Jeannie happy, okay?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Before, at the table, when you and your brothers were chatting about Whitley Advertising, I was looking at her. I could tell it meant a lot to her that you were communicating.”

“I’ll do my best. Honestly, it wasn’t so hard.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Are you sure I can’t distract you a little while later?” I winked.

“Please, please, don’t. I’m trying to make a good impression here.”

“You’re killing it, babe. I’ve heard a lot of guests say this is a wonderful party.”

“Hmm. Are you being honest, or are you just trying to settle my nerves?”

“I would never lie to you.”

“That’s true. You don’t sugarcoat things, and you definitely don’t lie.”

I grinned. “I’m glad we settled that.”

I went back to the table after that, but I kept my eyes on her. She was stunning, and I had mad respect for her. She’d been magnificent today. Every detail was thought through—she’d even found out that lilies were Grandmother’s favorite flowers and used them as centerpieces. Grandmother had insisted she also wanted this party to pay homage to her long marriage, so Natalie had asked all of us to send her pictures and videos, and she’d done a collage with both that moved my grandmother to tears. Natalie fit in with the family effortlessly, and I loved that about her.

Maddox pulled me to one side. “Jake, a word?”

“Sure.”

We left the table and walked farther into the back, where there were high bar tables set around.

“You don’t like that I offered Natalie a job,” he stated as soon as we were alone.

Fucking hell, was I that obvious? “Did Grandmother say anything?”

“No. I put two and two together. Is it a problem?”

“Not at all. I made her a similar offer a couple days ago. She turned it down, so I was surprised that she’d outright decide to apply for your job.”

He settled his cuff links. “I do make a compelling case. Don’t worry. Your girl will be in good hands with us. I wouldn’t have made the offer if I knew it would piss you off. The last thing I want is to upset Gran even more.”

For the fourth time today, Maddox took me by complete surprise. His thoughts went directly to Grandmother.

“I agree that I haven’t been very cordial in the past.”

“Man, you’ve got your reasons. We don’t need to analyze or dissect them. You do you. I do me. This doesn’t mean we’re friends. I’m enjoying the party, and I thought it was a good opportunity to help out Natalie in a pinch.”

“It was,” I replied.

“I’m glad you’re okay with it.” He patted my arm before going back to the table.

Nick and Leo immediately turned to him as soon as he sat down, and so did Gabe.

I had a few months left in Boston. Natalie was right. Maybe I could make more of an effort with my half brothers, but where did I begin? I’d spent the first few years after I found out about Dad’s infidelity pretending they didn’t exist. After that, things always seemed too awkward to turn around, but maybe I was wrong.

“No, seriously, George. I told you we needed the white candles for the cake, not the black ones. They look like we’re attending a funeral,” Natalie said from a few feet away.

I laughed as I headed her way. Natalie cocked her brow at me, and I instantly stopped. I didn’t want to diminish her authority, but just the fact that she’d said all that with a straight face was something. George himself looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

“I’ll go buy new ones,” he said and immediately left.

“Why are you smiling like that?” she asked me.

“I like seeing you in action. You’re fierce.”

George came back with white candles twenty minutes later. My grandmother was beside herself with joy when they brought out the cake. I looked at her and my grandfather closely while we sang “Happy Birthday.” He seemed exhausted. He’d only danced once with Grandmother, and then each of us grandchildren took turns dancing with her. I wanted both my grandparents to be happy and healthy. Clearly they were both at ease because we all were here and getting along. Grandfather’s health was still not back to normal, but I hoped it would be soon. I was glad I’d been able to take everything off his plate.

Maddox, Leo, and Nick stood one step away from my brothers and me. It was the first event where all of us were in the same place. From a stranger's perspective, you couldn't immediately tell the two groups were related. My full brothers and I took a lot from our mother's side, especially the blue eyes. Our half brothers had a mix of green and brown eyes and our father's trademark black hair.

After the cake, Grandmother requested another round of dancing with each of her grandsons, and we obliged, of course. Anything to make her happy.

"Oh, I'm wrung out," she exclaimed. I was the last one to dance with her. She beamed at me. "You're an excellent dancer."

"Thank you for the compliment."

Stepping back, she turned around, facing the tables. "Everyone, it was lovely to have you here today, but my Abe really must go home, and I don't want to leave him alone. So come on, let's wrap this up."

This was just like my grandmother, short and to the point.

I walked over to our table. Gabe looked up at me. "I'm going out for a drink with Leo, Maddox, and Nick. Who wants to join us?"

"I'm about to head back to the office," Colton said, standing up.

"Dude, that's extreme even for you," I said.

"We're close to a breakthrough. I have to be there." I saw the intensity in his eyes. It was a characteristic we both shared, and I immediately understood.

Cade and Spencer shook their heads. "We've already made plans, but we can catch up another time," Spencer said.

Gabe looked at me. I smirked. Maddox caught that and whistled. "Don't have to say anything, dude. I can read the plans on your face."

I didn't even bother denying it. I wanted to spend the evening with Natalie.

She was still at her makeshift desk, typing away on her iPad as I snuck up behind her.

“Party’s over,” I said.

She looked up at me from over her shoulder. “Yes, it is. I love how relaxed everyone is. I heard your brother say they’re going out. Are you joining them?”

“Hell no. All day I’ve been looking forward to the moment when I could get you alone.”

“Oh.” She blushed. “What do you want to do?”

“How about we head back to the hotel? I’ll pamper you with room service.”

She laughed. “Straight to the point, but it does sound great, especially because you have AC, and my home is like an oven right now.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Not so fast. I still have to wrap things up here.”

“Natalie...”

She winked. “I love it when you’re impatient.”

I grew even more impatient over the next twenty minutes as she spoke to staff and bid goodbye to my grandparents. When she was finally ready to go, we headed straight to the hotel. This time with the family was great, but I needed to be alone with Natalie.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jake

The second we stepped inside the suite, it hit me how empty it was. It all looked perfectly elegant. I had everything I needed. It simply lacked personality. Then again, so did my penthouse in New York and my house in Martha's Vineyard. The decorator had chosen everything with great care. It just didn't represent me. It didn't represent anyone.

I had a flash thought, wondering what it would look like if Natalie picked out furniture and art for my home.

Fuck! That was no way to think about things. We both had different paths and plans for the future, and the last thing I needed after she left for her new job was memories of this time together. I didn't want to let go, but all we had was right now, and all I needed was to have her here with me.

We stopped by the bar area next to the window. I took a step back, looking at her intently. She was like a vision, standing here in my suite against the backdrop of the city lights in the huge window. But that wasn't enough. I needed more light; I needed to see her. Up here, no one could see inside. I wanted to explore her with my hands and my mouth. I was going to kiss and touch every inch of her: the smooth skin, her full lips.

I walked right up to her, standing behind her. I drew my hands from her hips, up the sides of her body, and to her breasts.

"I want to see you," I whispered in her ear. "I want the lights on."

She moaned lightly. "Yes! Whatever you want, Jake."

I unzipped her dress at the back with slow movements, pressing my finger pads on her bare skin at the top of her back while I slowly moved my hand down. She sucked in a breath and rolled her shoulders. I loved drinking in her every reaction. The dress easily fell off her. She stepped out of it

with her back still to me. I traced the same pattern over her body that I did before when she was dressed. She shuddered under my touch, arching her back slightly, dropping her head back onto my shoulder.

I dropped my fingers from her sternum down to her belly and lower. I felt her tighten her muscles. I knew with utmost certainty that if I touched her pussy over the fabric, I'd find it drenched. She wanted me. She needed me.

I turned her around slowly, capturing her mouth. She tasted like apple and cinnamon, and I fucking enjoyed it. I wanted to explore her whole body with my mouth before burrowing my head between her legs and making her come.

"Oh," she murmured, tugging at my cuff links. She managed to get one off. I got the other one. Then she quickly opened the buttons of my shirt, grinning when she pushed it away to see my undershirt.

Despite all my plans, my cock already pulsed with the need to be inside her, buried to the hilt. Pounding and thrusting. I was going to claim her in a way she'd never been claimed before. After tonight, she was going to be all mine. Only mine.

"You're so gorgeous," she murmured when she finally took off my undershirt and traced my chest with her fingers.

I took off my pants and underwear next, then put on a condom. I was right next to a coffee table with a lamp, and I turned on the light. It had a dimmer, and I didn't turn it on all the way. I just needed a bit more light to see her. Her lingerie was beckoning me. I kissed her again, hard, unclasping her bra and throwing it aside.

Putting my hands under her ass cheeks, I lifted her, placing her on the bar counter. She looked like a wet dream sitting up there. I opened her legs with my hands, kissing up each thigh, pausing to look at her and drinking in her reactions.

Her mouth formed an *O*. "I wasn't expecting this," she murmured.

I smiled against her skin. “Good, I like to surprise you. The only thing you should expect tonight is to come hard, several times.”

She gasped, and her hips bucked forward. There was a bucket with ice next to us that gave me an idea. I took out an ice cube, and she stared at me hungrily. I circled one nipple with the ice cube, then closed my mouth over it. She juttied her hips forward, almost sliding off the bar, but I kept her in place.

“Oooooooh.” Her voice shook.

I slid a cube between her open legs, first on her right thigh and then the left one, then over her panties, between her legs. She cried out my name as tremors shook her body. My cock strained painfully. I wanted to take my time to make her come, even if it cost me my last thread of self-restraint. She deserved all the pleasure in the world, and I wanted to give it to her tonight.

I kissed up her body, pausing to close my mouth around the other nipple, teasing it with my tongue until it was so hard, she winced. I slid my fingers into the side of her panties. She rocked from one side to the other, allowing me access to get them off. Then I parted her legs again and moved her right onto the edge of the bar. She clasped her fingers on the outer edge as I put my lips over her clit, sucking it into my mouth. Her response was feral. She cried out, arching her back. Then I pushed my tongue inside her. At the same time, I pressed a finger to her clit, wanting to overwhelm her with pleasure.

I worked her with my tongue, the muscles in her legs tensing. With my free hand, I drew my fingers from her ankle up to her knee. I moved on to her upper body, finding her breast and touching the underside before flicking one nipple. Then I felt her hand over mine. Taking my mouth off her, I looked up, mesmerized by the sight of her touching her own breast.

Pressing my thumb on her clit, I brought my mouth to her pussy again. Alternating the pressure between my thumb and my tongue, I pressed the tip of my tongue, bringing her closer and closer. She exploded the next second. I kept my hands

firmly at the point where her hips met her upper body, keeping her safe as she thrashed around, shuddering. I then kissed up her belly between the valley of her breasts, lingering on her sweet spots along my journey.

Finally, I straightened up and brought my thumb to her lower lip. She leaned forward, and we kissed, slow and lazy. She rested her arms on my shoulders, leaning on me. I lifted her from the bar, sliding her down on me. She immediately pressed her legs against my sides. *Fuck me.* Her warm pussy against my cock was messing with my brain. It felt so damn good that I just knew I wasn't going to resist her for long.

Thank fuck I put a condom on before, because right now, all I wanted was to sink into her. I wanted to see her come again, but this time with my cock inside her, pulsing around me. I pressed her against the nearest wall.

“Are you ready for me, babe?”

She nodded, humming. “Yes I am. I so am. I want you so damn much.”

“Not more than I want you. You come so beautifully. I can't wait to feel you come around my cock.”

She moaned when I pushed forward. I eased in slowly. She was so damn tight from her previous orgasm.

Even though it took all my self-restraint, I only gave her my cock inch by inch. It had advantages too. I watched her gorgeous face change as she adjusted to the pleasure.

“Fuck,” I growled when I was in all the way. “Feels so damn good, babe.”

She tightened her legs around me. Her knees were pushing against my rib cage. She wanted leverage. I thrust in, and I wasn't slow about it anymore. She rested her arms on my shoulders and her knees at my sides. She was incredible. And I had her all for me. This was all I ever wanted to do with this woman, day and night. I didn't want this night to end.

Needing better leverage, I walked with her to the couch, putting her on the armrest. It was wide enough for her to be stable and comfortable. Then I tilted her so she fell backward,

and I rested one hand on the cushion. I thrust and thrust, watching her face, taking the cues of her body. At this angle, I could rub her G-spot every time I slid in.

She hummed, and I knew she was on the edge of her orgasm. I was so damn close too, and my balls fucking hurt. I needed my release. I circled her clit with my thumb. I didn't press it, didn't touch it, just simply circled around it, and she was done for. She came apart even more spectacularly than before. She tugged at one of the pillows until she dislodged it from its space. Covering her mouth with it, she cried out, spasming around my cock.

The sight tugged at a lever deep inside me, and I gave in to my own orgasm almost right away. I kept thrusting, relishing the feeling of her tight muscles around me. My entire body was burning. My eyesight blurred as my breath caught from the sheer intensity of the pleasure. I wasn't in control of my body or my mind. It was all wrapped up in her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Natalie

I was surprised when I got a call from Maddox's head of HR, Carmen. I'd sent him my résumé yesterday during the party, and today was a Sunday.

"Hey," I told her after she introduced herself. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you today."

"Oh, trust me, we're in a pinch, so when Maddox emailed me your résumé, saying he thinks you're a good fit, I jumped at the opportunity." She sounded like a can-do sort of woman, and I liked that in a person—no nonsense.

"He also said you have several other candidates."

"Yes, I spoke with them Friday. You're the only one who can start right away. And Maddox has got a good feeling for the game," Carmen said. "If he's good with you, then so am I. He did tell you it's only for six weeks, right?"

"Yes, yes, he did," I said. I had no prayer of actually receiving one of the other jobs I'd applied to during that time, so this worked well.

"We have a flexible schedule. It's not exactly nine-to-five. We would expect you to be there at the events themselves."

"That's no problem."

She mentioned the salary, and it was very attractive.

"Also, we have a flexible workplace policy. You can work from home on the days when there isn't an event."

"Got it."

I wasn't going to do that. I needed to be where there was AC, and that was any place except my home.

I leaned against the edge of the desk. Jake was watching me from the couch. He was wearing shorts and looked 100 percent sinful and 200 percent sexy.

I couldn't wait to celebrate this with him.

“I’ve got a lot of meetings tomorrow,” she said, “but come to the office Tuesday at 8:00 a.m.”

“For an interview?” I asked.

“Forget that. You’re hired.”

“Thank you. That’s amazing and surprising.”

She laughed. “We’re a pretty informal company. I’d probably make you jump through hoops if it were a permanent position, but I’m relieved someone can pick up the slack immediately because we have an event coming up.”

“I’ll be at the office Tuesday at eight.”

“Perfect.”

“Thank you, Carmen. Have a great Sunday.”

The second I put the phone down, I noticed I had five missed calls from a number I didn’t have saved. Maybe Carmen called from a different phone before switching to the one she just spoke with me on? It didn’t matter. I got the job.

Jake said, “Congratulations, babe.”

I practically ran over to him, jumping into his lap, putting my ankles at the sides of his thighs. He grinned at my enthusiasm.

“I’m so happy this worked out.” I also had a small plan. Maybe I could bring him and Maddox closer. Some barriers seemed to have lifted between them yesterday. Who knew what else could happen?

“How do you want to celebrate?” he asked me.

“We can continue in the same fashion we did last night. You can have your way with me, and then we can order some room service and so on. I really like this place.” I couldn’t believe it was so huge. “Though it’s a bit cold. Empty.”

“True.”

“One of my massive paintings could certainly fit above your desk.”

“Then bring it,” he said. “I’ll talk the hotel into hanging it for me.”

“Really?” I grinned.

“I like the idea of having something of yours here.”

His eyes locked on mine, and my breath caught. *He wants a piece of me right here!*

“You don’t have to tell me twice. Who knows what else I might bring?”

“I can take it, babe. Go wild.”

“Oh, I will.”

On Tuesday, I arrived at the office at eight o’clock sharp. The weather was warm but very humid. Clouds hung low in the sky, obscuring the sun. There was even a bit of fog.

The building was a converted warehouse in the Waterfront neighborhood. From the second floor, you could even see boats in the harbor despite the fog.

Carmen welcomed me, and we went through the formalities quickly. Then she told me to head to Maddox’s office. He was expecting me.

“We’re so glad you could start right away,” Maddox said the second I entered his office.

“I’m happy for the opportunity, and I can’t wait to get to work.”

“Right. I’ll give you the basics. We have a flexible work-from-home policy. We’ve got this lavish office because our job is to create kick-ass workspaces, so we needed one for ourselves. And it’s a great perk.”

“It is,” I said, “and this one has an amazing view and so many delicious places to eat all around here.”

“True. But we don’t particularly care where you work from. You can come to the office, or you can work from home.

You can work from out of the country, but we do need notice if you choose to do that, for the insurance.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan to leave the country any time soon, trust me.”

He grinned. “All right. You don’t have a department, per se. Marketing focuses on online advertising mostly. You’re a one-man show.”

“I can work with that. I assume I’ll have access to all the previous employee’s contacts and suppliers and so on?”

“Yes. You can use them as you see fit.”

Maddox had seemed laid-back at the party but more so now. As we walked through the open office space, I took note of the various common sectors as well as the break area, which had a little sign to identify it as such. I peeked inside. There was a coffee machine and a juicer. A basket full of apples, oranges, and lemons sat next to it.

“I can’t believe there’s a juicer.”

“People are thrilled with it. Not my thing.”

Only management had individual offices. Everyone else worked in the open office space. The desks were placed at a comfortable distance, so you didn’t feel that anyone was breathing down your neck. There were plants and sound-absorbing panels strategically placed throughout the room.

After Maddox went back to work, I introduced myself to everyone who was sitting around me. Carmen had already given me a laptop, and I started inspecting the files my predecessor had saved in the Cloud.

She’d been very well organized. Everything was labeled accordingly, the suppliers as well as the various points of contact I might need. There was also a list of the next events. She’d only started prepping the next one, and that was exactly where I planned to begin.

I couldn’t believe my luck. Even though the weather was gloomy, I felt more optimistic than I had in weeks. This wasn’t a permanent job, and it made no use of my degree, but it was a

start, and I took it as a great sign that things would turn around for me. I could finally put my history to rest and simply focus on the future. I could probably even apply for jobs in event planning after I finished this one. At least I would have something on my résumé that opened doors out of the scope of my computer science degree. And it was a better income than what I could do on my own for now.

My phone beeped as I started emailing the contact person for the next party, setting up a meeting. It was a message from Jake.

Jake: How is your first day?

Natalie: It's amazing.

Jake: How is my half brother treating you?

Natalie: He's great. He welcomed me personally. He seems like a really friendly guy. Quite your opposite, Jake.

Jake: Are you trying to make me jealous?

Oh hell no! That backfired quickly. I was just trying to tease him. It was such a pity that he didn't have a relationship with his half brothers.

He messaged again.

Jake: Natalie.

I shimmied in my seat. I could practically hear him call my name in that bossy tone when he wanted me to do exactly as he asked. Holy shit, this was not the place or time for those types of thoughts!

Natalie: You can always come and check for yourself.

I felt like a genius. The second I sent it, I realized I could make impromptu meetings between Jake and Maddox happen. Jake was a gentleman anyway, so if I asked him to pick me up, he'd probably do it. He and Maddox were too proud to talk to each another, but I had a hunch I could help them out with that.

With a chuckle I realized this was exactly what Jeannie meant when she told me, "You'll bring their spirited minds

together.” Hell, maybe it was even her own way of planting the idea in my subconscious. At any rate, it worked.

I was so happy right now that I thought nothing could drain my good mood.

I was wrong.

Midway through the day, I got an email on my personal account. From Vince.

Vince

Let's meet. I need to talk to you. Just once.

My stomach lurched. *Really? Today of all days, he chooses to email me?*

Natalie

No, we don't. Not at all. Stop trying to contact me.

Vince

I will if you agree to meet. Or at least answer the phone. I called you five times this weekend.

My stomach lurched. So, the missed calls were from him. He couldn't possibly want to try to get back together again, could he? Why now?

I didn't reply. Maybe he'd go away. He did once before. As far as I was concerned, there was no reason to see him again.

I immediately got back to work, losing myself in all the pending tasks.

After lunch, someone called my name.

“Ms. Natalie?”

“Yes!” I rose, peeking throughout the room to locate the voice.

The doorman walked quickly in my direction. He was carrying a huge bouquet of red roses.

“We’ve got this delivery for you,” he informed me.

My face instantly turned into a grin.

“Oh my God.” I put them on my desk. They were gorgeous and taking up half the space, but who cared? I knew they were from Jake.

He’d sent me flowers. I could’ve danced with happiness as I read his card.

Good luck on your first workday. I can’t wait to pamper you this evening. Jake.

I pressed it to my chest, smelling the roses before sitting down. Despite the cryptic message from Vince, I was going to consider this an amazing day. Plus, I already had an idea about how to lure Jake here. I couldn’t wait to see him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jake

I read the email twice, feeling victorious. We'd just gotten an offer for the sale of Whitley Advertising, and it was massively better than anything they'd received before I took over two months ago. This was good. It was a sign that the market was starting to see the company's real value. I'd struck four huge deals with clients in my time here and demanded up-front payment. That helped with the cash-flow issue.

Would my grandfather agree to sell? That was another story altogether. I knew how he felt about the businesses. But this was a start, and I was proud of this marker.

I didn't reply to the email. I didn't want to seem eager. Besides, it was six o'clock, and I had better things to do.

Natalie asked me to drop by. I'd promised I'd make her first evening after work memorable, and I intended to keep my word. The sooner I could start it, the better.

Maddox's company wasn't too far away. I'd given Cal the evening off, so I drove myself.

When I arrived, I parked the car opposite the entrance to the building and called Natalie.

She answered right away. "Hey, are you here?"

"Yes. Don't tell me he's overworking you on the first day already. I'll have a word with him."

"No, that's not it. It's just that a couple of us are hanging out, and they asked if I want to stay too. I figured it might help me fit in with my colleagues. You're welcome to join us. Nick and Leo are here. I'd love for you to be here too."

Before meeting Natalie, I would've flat-out said no. An evening with my half brothers sounded like the last thing I wanted to do. But maybe this wasn't such a bad thing, especially since my girl was there.

"I'm coming upstairs. Where is it?"

“It’s the second floor.”

When I stepped out of the elevator, my first thought was that I’d gotten off at the wrong floor and walked into a frat party. Then I realized there were offices all around here, and some people were even wearing suits. That didn’t stop them from playing... was that Ping-Pong? In the middle of the room? There were several games happening at the same time.

“What’s this?” I asked as Natalie came over to me, smiling from ear to ear.

“It’s a Ping-Pong tournament. They’re testing the concept of in-office tournaments before pitching it to clients.”

I looked around, stunned. “A Ping-Pong tournament in an office?”

“Yes, Jake,” Maddox said, appearing out of nowhere. “Some like to do team-building activities in the office.”

“Yeah. Rumor has it you’ve got yours eating dinner at the office. Makes sense,” Nick said.

“We don’t believe that, though,” Leo added. “Or should we?”

I couldn’t help myself from laughing. I didn’t know what was more comical, that they’d believe that about me or that they wouldn’t.

“This”—I pointed to the tables—“is not how I run things, that’s all.”

“You’re welcome to give it a try,” Maddox said, motioning at me with the racket.

“No, thanks. I’m good with watching.”

Nick gave Leo five bucks. “You win.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“We bet on if you would like to join us or not. I have too much faith in you, it seems,” Nick said.

“Or I too little,” Leo replied. “It’s all a matter of perspective.”

“Hey, don’t annoy him,” Natalie said, “or he’ll never show his face around here.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I said, putting an arm around her shoulders. Typically, I wouldn’t show public displays of affection at her place of work, but looking around, I saw there were several other couples, and this was after work hours anyway. I assumed that meant every employee could bring their better half if they wanted to.

“Okay. It’s my turn with my team,” Natalie said, rushing off to play a game.

“She already has a team?”

“Don’t sound so stunned. She’s a social butterfly,” Maddox said. “I think this job is going to be great for her.”

“She’s got many talents,” Nick said.

“I agree.” Apparently making friends with her coworkers within one day was one of those talents. I was very proud of her.

I looked at Nick and Leo. “So, you two drop by often?”

“We’ll be here for most of the Ping-Pong tournament,” Nick agreed. “We also host events at our offices, and Maddox is welcome too. I’m surprised Gabe couldn’t make it tonight. He usually joins us.”

“Are you playing?” I asked Maddox.

“No. I’m just making sure no one crashes and burns.”

We all watched Natalie play. The silence was awkward. I usually didn’t care, but I was here, and I was determined to make an effort.

Natalie looked at me, winking. She smiled, glancing between us.

“I looked up your company,” I told Maddox. “All three of yours, actually. You’re doing great.”

The three of them seemed surprised.

“That’s great praise coming from you,” Nick said.

“It’s the truth. You’ve done very well for yourselves.”

“Not like you. You started everything from the ground up,” Maddox said.

“Most of these companies were in shambles after Dad left,” I said in a hard voice. “So, in many ways, I think most of you were at least trying to turn a company around, if not starting it from the ground up.”

“That is true,” Nick said. “Although, I didn’t quite understand. By the time I took over, he’d left the company for years. How had no one taken over in the meantime who could do a great job?”

I shrugged. “I’ve seen it before in my line of work. When a conglomerate is centered around one person, it’s very hard to replace them because they typically had a very chaotic way of doing things.”

“And it seems like Dad was like that,” Leo said. His voice was strained. I couldn’t quite believe we were talking about our father, yet here we were. It wasn’t bad. Not at all. I was starting to realize my younger brothers were right. Our half brothers were part of the family and the company.

“I have so much beginner’s luck,” Natalie exclaimed, coming back to us.

“Nah, I think you’re just good at it,” Nick replied. “Maddox, I know you said you’d stay out of it tonight, but why don’t we go and play a round? Everyone is enjoying themselves too much for us to just watch.”

“Okay. Let’s go,” Maddox said.

“How is it going?” Natalie asked, smiling from ear to ear. “I saw the four of you talking.”

“I’m glad I came up tonight.”

She did a small pirouette, and her smile was different, knowing.

“Natalie, what are you up to?”

“Nothing,” she said.

I was suspicious.

“Fine. I’ll tell you one day, but not tonight.”

“Are you ready to leave?” I asked.

“Yes. I believe someone promised me he’d take care of me tonight, and I can’t wait for him to make good on that promise.”

“I definitely will.”

I enjoyed myself this evening, but now I was ready to be alone with Natalie and direct all my attention to her.

We headed to the hotel. I liked her house, but the hotel had perks too. Namely room service and air conditioning.

“You’re quiet,” I said on the drive. “Are you tired?”

“Honestly, yes.” Her voice sounded strained.

“Is something wrong?”

“Vince emailed me today.”

I glanced sideways at her. “What the fuck? Why?”

“Said we need to talk. I disagree. I’ll ignore him forever.”

“That’s the plan?” I tried to keep my voice calm and even.

“Why? Do you have any other ideas?”

“Yes. Tell me who the fucker is, and I’ll get him off your back.”

“Trust me, he’s not worth your time.”

“Natalie—”

“Jake!”

“Ignoring issues will not solve anything.”

“He’s not an issue. Just a nuisance. He likes to provoke me. When we worked together, I couldn’t ignore him. I had to engage because he was right there. And look where that got me. Fired. So yeah, I’m going to ignore him.”

“You said he was trying to get back with you after you were both fired.”

She frowned, twiddling her thumbs. “Yeah, he started sending me all these nice messages all of a sudden. It was weird, almost like he had a personality change. But now he’s switched back to asshole mode. His last message was very much like the Vince I knew.”

“Then you have all the more reason to—”

“Please, let’s just drop it. I hate wasting our time together on him.”

It killed me not to say more, but I obliged. For now.

“Fine.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of walking inside this place and seeing everything perfectly in order,” she said when we entered the suite.

Yesterday, we’d gone over to her place to choose one of the paintings. She decided on the one depicting a postmodern version of a couple dancing. I knew jack shit about art, but I liked seeing this painting hanging in here.

She took off her shoes as she came inside, and stepped on the carpet. “It’s so soft and cozy.”

I liked the things she noticed. Like what made the room cozy, not luxurious. I went up to her, putting an arm around her waist, trailing my fingers up and down her back. She parted her lips when I skimmed my fingers from the fabric of her blouse to the bare skin of her upper back.

We could always move into one of those penthouses they sell on top of hotels.

The thought popped into my mind with a refreshing energy. Where had that come from? I swallowed hard, looking down at her. I knew in this moment that it was exactly what I wanted. To live with her, to be with her. But it was impossible. I was due back in New York whenever I wrapped up things here. And in her own words, she wasn’t sure how long she was in Boston either. There was no point bringing this up.

“You’re so quiet,” she murmured. “Quiet but not broody. That’s unusual for you. What are you thinking about?”

“That I love you.”

She gasped. “Oh my God. You do, Jake?”

“Yes.” I might not be ready to admit that I wanted us to move in together, but I didn’t want to hold back my feelings.

She grinned and then did a little dance with her hips. “And I thought this day couldn’t get any better.” She twirled once, like she was dancing to an imaginary song.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Celebrating,” she replied nonchalantly before stepping right back to me, rising on her toes, and kissing one corner of my mouth, then the other one. “And I love you, Jake Whitley. I love every inch of your broody, sometimes rude ass.”

I burst out laughing and held her hands, kissing her. I started out soft, wanting to savor her. I needed to. She tasted like orange juice and smiled against my mouth while I kept kissing her. She rewarded me with a deep sigh, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning into me with her whole body.

Pulling back, she blinked. Her smile fell.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She shrugged, biting her lower lip. “I just realized that this won’t last for long.”

Her words were like a punch to the gut. “I know,” I said.

She smiled again, but it held a hint of sadness. “Some people change your life, even when they aren’t in it forever. And I’ll be honored to change yours, even if it’s just a weird painting hanging over your desk. Because you are definitely taking it with you to New York.”

“You’ve changed far more than that,” I replied with a growl. It was impossible to imagine my future back in New York. I didn’t want to take the painting back there. I wanted to take her. I didn’t tell her about the sales offer for Whitley

Advertising. There was no point bringing it up, especially since I wasn't sure if my grandfather wanted to sell.

“Did you apply for positions in New York too?” I asked.

“Yes, but I got rejected straight away. The competition for jobs in New York is fierce.”

But that didn't mean anything. There could be openings in the future. Hell, I could make one. Not that she'd take it. But I still had to keep it in mind.

“So,” she said, “how do you plan to take care of me?”

“I booked a massage room in the hotel spa,” I said.

“Are you serious? I didn't even know I needed that, but it sounds amazing. Are they open at this time?”

“They are for me.”

She grinned. “Okay. I'll change into the hotel robe, and then we can go.”

She was back in seconds, and it was downright amusing. I liked that she was eager. I was doing something that clearly pleased her, and that made me feel good. Taking her hand, I led her out of the room.

“You're walking me there. How gallant of you. Although, I think I'd have no problem finding it on my own.”

I didn't reply, just kept walking.

I'd booked her a massage—but with a twist.

I was the twist.

I swiped the admin card to open the spa area, which was typically closed at this time in the evening, then led her to the room they'd reserved for us. City hotels didn't usually have much of a spa area, but this one was great. Soothing music filled the room, and it smelled like eucalyptus.

“Where is my masseuse?” Natalie asked.

“You're looking at him.”

“Oh, I see. That's so clever of you. Do you have the appropriate training?” she teased, taking off her robe.

“I believe I do. Now climb up on the table and turn onto your stomach.”

She got up and lay facedown, and my cock twitched at the sight of her perfect ass. This was going to be an exercise in self-restraint. I poured massage oil onto her back, and she shifted on the bed.

“Are you comfortable?” I asked her.

“Yes. This is so dreamy. I can’t believe you bribed them into letting us be here alone.”

“I didn’t bribe them. I just made them a very good offer.”

I started at her lower back. She hummed when I pressed at the base of her spine and then traced it back up. I studiously avoided touching the sides of her breasts. I was going to focus on those later. When I reached her shoulder blades, I pressed all my fingers into them before kneading her flesh. She hummed again.

Fucking hell, the sound went straight to my cock. When I moved my hands lower on her back, I pinched her right ass cheek.

She looked over her shoulder, grinning. “Just so you know, once you’re done with me, I want to be your masseuse.”

“Hell yes, babe.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jake

“David, you’re a genius,” I said, reading over the official offer he sent. He was the buyer interested in Whitley Advertising. Over the past three weeks, we’d gone back and forth over the details of the offer. I hadn’t told the family anything yet, but with this last offer, I knew I could at least get Grandfather to consider it.

I had calls with Ben and Betty later today to discuss New York business, but I could make time for a lengthy chat with my grandparents.

I was about to call my grandmother when my phone lit up with an incoming call from Maddox. I frowned. *Interesting*. I’d gone by their office a couple times since Natalie started there, whenever she stayed after hours for the tournaments, but Maddox hadn’t called me before.

“Hello, Jake,” he said.

“Hi.”

“I’ll keep this short. You know our biggest event is coming up. Well, the biggest one Natalie organized.”

“Yeah, she told me the details.”

It was tomorrow evening, and she couldn’t stop talking about it. She lit up from the inside whenever she spoke about her work. I kept wondering why she’d gone into the computer science and predictive analytics field in the first place.

“I wanted to officially invite you too. A lot of important names and companies will be there. Potential clients for Whitley Advertising.”

“Natalie will be there, so count me in.”

“I like your priorities.”

Over the past weeks, I’d been juggling things more than usual, negotiating the sales offer on top of conducting daily

business at Whitley Advertising and the daily checkups with New York.

“Thank you for the invitation.”

“Sure, anytime. I won’t keep you any longer. We both have stuff to do. See you, Jake.”

“See you.”

After hanging up, I immediately called my grandmother. Even though Grandfather felt much better than he had a couple weeks ago, I still called her to check in. He rested multiple times during the day, and I didn’t want to accidentally wake him.

She answered immediately. “Well, if it’s not the prodigal grandson.”

“Will you ever stop calling me that?”

“Yes, whenever you come home for good.”

“Subtle as always, Grandmother.”

“Darling, I never said I was. To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

“I’ve got some news important enough that I’d like to discuss it with you, Grandfather, and my brothers. When can we drop by?”

“I can throw together a dinner. Does tomorrow work?”

“No, I’m going to an event in the evening.”

“Then lunch! It’s Saturday, so hopefully I can get everyone together. Especially Colton. That boy is starting to worry me.”

If I was honest, he was worrying me too.

“I think so too,” I replied. “And, Grandmother, do you mind if Natalie joins us?”

“Mind? Darling, it’s all I ever wanted. Remember my scheming?”

“Hard to forget,” I admitted.

Despite my best effort to persuade her, Natalie couldn't join us for lunch on Saturday. She had to be on location to prep everything for the event starting at eleven in the morning. I was disappointed because I wanted her here with me today when I shared the news.

"Damn, Jake. Now you've got a big fat minus point with Grandmother for showing up without Natalie," Cade said.

She'd cooked three whole meals for the lunch.

"Grandmother, you don't have to cook up a storm every time the five of us are together," Gabe said, kissing her cheek. He was the last one to arrive.

Colton kept checking his phone. I cocked a brow at him, and he didn't even shrug. He looked exhausted.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Breakthrough didn't happen, so now we're back to square one."

"Darling, we're so sorry," Grandmother said.

I suspected that he was beating himself up for the discovery not working. He'd always had a strong sense of responsibility, but that was life in research. Sometimes things worked out and sometimes they didn't.

Gabe and Cade exchanged a glance. I was betting they were thinking about ways to take our brother's mind off his troubles.

Spencer's eyes were fixed on Colton. "Dude, you can't lock yourself up in your office or the lab until the next breakthrough happens. You're going to burn yourself out."

"I agree," I said. He was driven but in different ways than the rest of us. This was never about money for him. It was his life. I was all for following your passion as long as that didn't completely consume you.

"By the way," Gabe said, turning to me, "I heard you're going to Maddox's event."

I looked at him in surprise. "How do you know about it?"

“Because all of us are going.”

“Obviously,” Cade added.

“Except Colton. He hasn’t RSVP’d yet,” Spencer said.

“We’re not going to convince that one to come,” Gabe said.

Spencer frowned. “Yes, I will.”

For the first time today, Colton chuckled. “I like it when you talk about me as if I’m not here.”

Spencer shrugged. “You’re clearly lost in that big brain of yours. It’s not so far-fetched, really.”

Cade turned to me. “Grandmother said you have news.”

“Yes, I do,” I said.

“Good. Time to share it with us,” Grandfather responded. It was the first time he’d spoken since we sat at the table. No one was touching their food. I could tell everyone was on edge.

I got up and grabbed the file I’d left on the console table by the entrance.

“I’m going to guess that whatever you want to say has to do with that,” Grandfather said, pointing at the folder as I sat down.

I nodded. “Yes. This is an offer to buy Whitley Advertising.”

Grandmother sank lower in her chair. My brothers didn’t react at all.

Grandfather frowned. “One of the first things you said is that no one is going to pay what it’s worth.”

“That was months ago. Whitley Advertising is in much better shape now, and the offer reflects that. It’s a very good price, if I say so myself. I’ve done the calculations.”

“Who wants to buy it?” Grandfather asked.

“David Kazinski from The Advertiser. You know him.”

“That’s a reputable company. Give me the folder.”

I handed it to him, and he immediately opened it. I put the dollar amount on the first page. The details were in the rest of the stack. Grandfather seemed too stunned to speak for a moment.

“I wasn’t expecting this.”

“David is a smart man. He knows the value of the company. He knows we have a huge client base. And the recent mismanagement of cash flow does not reflect on the creative work the team does.”

He put down the file without looking through the rest of the stack. Then again, I hadn’t expected him to. If he were inclined to consider this, he’d go through it later.

Grandfather looked at Grandmother, who simply nodded, and then he looked back at me. “We’d prefer for the company to stay in the family, but ultimately it’s your call.”

“Why would it be my call?”

“Because you’re the CEO now. You’ve worked hard to turn it around.”

“It’s still not my call. It’s your company.”

“It’s yours too,” Grandmother said softly. “It’s all of ours.”

“Yeah, no pressure,” Spencer said. He leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest, seeming completely relaxed.

Cade looked at me. “We should celebrate this. I’m not exactly sure what the celebration would be about, but it does feel like it’s worth remembering.”

Colton turned to them. “Drop it. This is not a joking matter. Jake is under enough pressure as it is.”

I didn’t understand why Grandfather left this up to me to decide. I’d sell it in a heartbeat. He had to know that. And yet he wanted to keep it in the family.

“Would you prefer me to start the search for another CEO again? I estimate that in about four months, the company will

be fit to be taken over by someone else.”

“You can do that too, of course, if you think you shouldn’t sell it,” he replied.

I hadn’t counted on this. The only reason I’d taken so long to break the news to the family was because I wanted to have a solid case to convince my grandfather to sell it. I wasn’t expecting him to relegate the decision-making to me.

Usually, this came easy to me. Some said I was ruthless in business, heartless even. But the truth was, I always followed the numbers. And right now, the numbers indicated that selling was the smartest thing to do. I’d hand Whitley Advertising over to David Kazinski, and I could go back to New York and continue my life.

Only a couple months ago, this decision would have taken me no time at all. Even with my grandfather telling me he’d prefer for it to stay in the family, if he left the decision to me, I’d sell without a second thought. But right now, I had to think. I needed to talk to Natalie. I didn’t want to do it before her big event this evening, but I’d waited long enough. I wanted her to know about everything.

“Now he’s hesitating,” Gabe said.

I glowered at him.

“Obviously. Grandfather basically whiplashed him,” Colton said. He sounded as stunned as I felt. On the upside, it seemed to have shaken him out of his downward spiral.

“Well played, Grandfather. You managed to surprise him,” Cade said. “Actually, all of us. Do you have any other surprises up your sleeve?”

“No.”

Cade cocked a brow. “I’m not sure I believe you. You and Grandmother are very... feisty lately.”

Grandfather chuckled. “Your grandmother’s business with you boys is *her* business, not mine.”

He was determinedly avoiding looking at Cade. Something that didn’t escape my brother’s attention.

“No, but clearly it’s mine. What are you hiding, Grandfather?”

“Nothing.”

Cade groaned. “What is Grandmother hiding?”

“Not my place to say. Always have your wife’s back. Always. Remember that. You might need the advice one day.”

Cade opened his mouth, then pressed his lips together, frowning.

Grandfather started to serve himself roast chicken. “I cannot pretend that I can decide on the future of any branch of Whitley Advertising. It wouldn’t be fair. Especially since Jake invested so much time in it.”

“Okay. Now I think business talk is over. Jake will obviously need some time to think about it. There’s no need to beat a dead horse. Let’s change the subject. When does Maddox’s party start? And did Natalie organize it?” Grandmother asked.

“It starts at seven, and yes,” I said. “She’s very excited about it.”

“She’s very talented in event planning, that one. All my friends were thrilled about my birthday party. Has she got any other work lined up? Jake?”

“Earth to Jake?” Cade asked, shaking his head mockingly. “There’s no point trying to engage him in conversation.”

I glowered at him, and he held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Fine, fine. I’m just saying. Natalie is going to dump your sorry ass if you show up with that face. What does she think about this offer?”

“She doesn’t know yet. That’s why I wanted her to join us today. But I’ll tell her tonight before the event.”

Colton blinked. “Do you think that’s a good idea? She needs to work afterward.”

“I know, but I don’t think it’s smart to wait. I’m on edge. She’ll pick up on that.”

“I’m with you,” Gabe said. “One look at your sorry-ass face and she’ll know something’s off. You’re going to need all the luck in the world.”

“That sounds so encouraging,” I said.

“It wasn’t meant to be encouragement,” Gabe clarified. “Just the honest truth. Or ugly truth. Depends how you want to look at it.”

We all fell into silence as we helped ourselves to Grandmother’s roast chicken and all the other fixings.

No, it didn’t have to be ugly, but I agreed with Gabe: I did want luck on my side.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Natalie

“Oh, honey, don’t be nervous,” Mom said in the phone. My earbuds’ batteries needed charging, so I was holding the phone between my ear and my shoulder.

I had a couple hours until the guests arrived, and I used the time to call my parents. It was nearly midnight for them, but both were night owls.

“I am, but it’s the good kind of nerves.”

“I’m glad you’re having so much fun doing this.”

“I’ve always liked it. I helped you for so many years.”

“Yes, it’s true, but it was a bit different because I was the one bearing the responsibility for the event. I didn’t know if that would take the fun out of it for you.”

“On the contrary, I’m really enjoying it.”

“Still, I hope a real job offer will pop up soon.”

My heart sighed. I knew my parents would be terribly disappointed if I ended up not using my expensive college degree. If I was honest, I’d be disappointed in myself too, mostly because I’d wasted so many years of my life studying something that didn’t make me too happy.

“How is everyone?” I asked Mom.

“Honey, we spoke two days ago.”

“I know, but babies grow so fast. And you and Dad do so many things on a daily basis.”

“We’re thoroughly enjoying the work at the B&B. That’s true,” Mom said before venturing into Dad’s latest fight with the local fishermen about where he was allowed to fish.

Once we finished talking, I texted Larissa. I missed her terribly. I couldn’t wait for her to come back from her trip. Just before leaving, she’d gotten that allergy test. Apparently she was now allergic to peanuts—something she’d never had a

problem with before. But doctors said allergies can pop up at any time.

Natalie: Hope you're having fun.

Larissa: It's a blast, but I miss being home. How is the event?

Natalie: Hasn't started yet, but I'm happy with everything.

I'd loved throwing Jeannie's ninetieth birthday because it had been such a personal milestone. My work had genuinely made her and the family *happy*. But I loved these corporate events too. I'd tried to personalize it as much as possible—but I might have ordered a tad too many flower arrangements. I'd gotten Maddox's approval for the extra cost without issue. I really liked working with him. It was a pity that I only had this job temporarily.

I sat down under a huge umbrella, guzzling lemonade. The event was along the water, on the beach.

After I finished my drink, I hurried home to change. I'd spent the day in jeans shorts and a tank top, and I wanted to switch to something more professional. Even though it was a beach party and the dress code was casual, I wanted to make a good impression.

Once I was home, I quickly changed into a cream-colored skirt and a light pink blouse.

Jake was picking me up from home even though I told him we could meet at the event. After all, I had to be there a full hour earlier than the guests.

I was thrilled he'd accepted Maddox's invitation. I'd gently nudged Maddox over a couple weeks, hinting in that direction, until he eventually got my drift.

I was ready at five forty-five. I couldn't wait to hear how the lunch at Jeannie's and Abe's went. My heart was still hurting a bit that I hadn't been able to attend.

I opened the front door as soon as I heard a car door shut.

He looked absolutely beautiful. He was wearing a linen shirt today, and I chuckled.

“What?” he asked.

“I like that your response to a casual dress code is still a dress shirt.”

“You’re wearing office clothes,” he pointed out. “And you look delicious in them.”

I shimmied my hips. I loved it when he complimented me.

“Yes, but I’m working. How was lunch?”

“Good.”

His response was a bit curt, and I realized he seemed tense. “Is something wrong with Abe? Is he sick again?”

I’d harbored that fear ever since Jake told me he was meeting them for lunch.

I was getting nervous. “Jake? I’m freaking out. Did something happen to Jeannie?”

“No, nothing like that. I met with them because Whitley Advertising got an offer from a serious buyer. A very good offer.”

I felt nauseous. *What is he telling me? That he’s returning to New York?*

“Wow. That’s good, right? It’s what you wanted. What did your grandfather say?”

“He wants me to decide if I want to sell or not. He said he’d prefer if it stayed in the family, but the ultimate decision is mine.”

“But that’s a good thing, right? You said if this wasn’t your family’s company, you’d turn it around and sell it.”

“I did,” he said slowly. “Natalie.” He cupped my face. “I know this is not the best timing to tell you, but I figured you’d be able to realize something was off with me while you were working. Best to rip off the Band-Aid now.”

“No, it’s good that you told me. I’m happy for you.”

He frowned. “You’re happy for me to sell the company and go back to New York?”

I licked my lips. His touch was setting me on fire.

“It’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“It was, yes.”

Was. My heart felt like it was getting bigger.

“So, you don’t want that anymore?”

He dropped his hand, leaning against the car.

“I don’t know. Even though my grandfather said it’s my decision, he also made it clear that he’d prefer it to stay in the family. I can continue my search for the CEO. I’d stay for as long as it takes until we find someone.”

And my heart dropped yet again. Why did I hope he was going to say, “*No, I want to stay here with you in Boston, marry you, and have a million kids*”?

That wasn’t what was in store for us. We both knew it.

“I think your grandparents will be happy with that option.”

He was looking at me intently, as if he was expecting me to add something. Honestly, I needed to process this first.

“We should go,” I said. “I don’t want us to be late.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

I was lost in thought on our way to the event location. It was only when we arrived that I realized Jake was too, because he hadn’t attempted to make conversation at all.

Jake

Maddox had not overpitched his event. The who’s who in Boston’s business world were attending, and more than one of the guests I ended up speaking with were very interested in using the services of Whitley Advertising.

“Jake, I’m glad to see Whitley Advertising is turning around,” Derek Casin said, patting my shoulder before he left.

He was the tenth or eleventh guy who was interested in becoming a client.

Gabe, Cade, and Spencer had arrived about half an hour after the party started, and they were mingling with the guests. They hadn't convinced Colton to join us.

"Brother, you're very good at this," Maddox exclaimed, coming up to me. I brought my glass of whiskey to my lips. I'd only managed to take one sip in the last ten minutes. It was disgusting. Some of the ice had already melted. "I saw you talk to at least half a dozen people."

"Most of them are interested in Whitley Advertising."

"So, the rumors about you not being a people person weren't founded."

"They were. But I'm making an effort," I said, setting my glass on a nearby table.

"You should take another one. That looks like a sorry excuse for a drink."

"It really is."

I looked for Natalie in the crowd. I hadn't seen her for some time. I'd expected our conversation earlier to go differently. I wanted her to ask me to stay—or at least say she was keeping an eye out for jobs in New York.

"I heard the news," Maddox said, snapping my attention to him.

"So fast already? Gabe?"

"No, this time it was Grandfather himself. I think he's hoping I can convince you to view things from his vantage point."

"He made his point loud and clear." I still looked around to see Natalie, but she was nowhere in sight.

"Look, part of the reason we moved here was to be closer to our grandparents," Maddox said, taking me by complete surprise.

I turned my whole body in his direction.

“We wanted as little to do with Dad as possible after everything that happened, but Mom wanted to move away from Maine, and we were at an age where we could decide things on our own.”

I hadn't realized that. It must have been shitty for them too. Their mother was alive and healthy, that was true, but these kinds of things left marks.

“The three of us actually made a pact that we would never, ever touch anything that was related to Dad.”

“Then how did you end up working in Whitley Enterprises?”

“We saw how much our grandparents hoped the legacy would live on, so we set aside our resentments.”

“That's very noble.” I meant every word.

“But as Gabe would say, no pressure.”

“You really do sound like him,” I said.

“No, he doesn't. No one can top me,” Gabe himself said, coming up to us. I hadn't noticed him at all. Cade and Spencer were right behind him.

“We're the ones who'll decide that,” Cade said.

“Yeah, you're impartial,” Spencer added.

Maddox shook his head. “Nah, this isn't up for debate.”

“Course it is. You're even more impartial,” Cade pointed out. “Were you talking about Grandfather's bombshell?”

“Obviously,” Maddox answered.

“Yeah, we're not going to solve that one tonight,” Spencer concluded.

“I agree,” I said. “And now if you'll excuse me, I saw someone who'd be a great client for Whitley Advertising.” I turned to Maddox. “Thanks again for inviting me.”

“My pleasure.”

While I headed toward Holden Delaware, the CEO of a huge international company in the fast-moving consumer-

goods industry, I continued looking around for Natalie.

Damn it, where is she?

I spoke to Holden for about twenty minutes before I finally saw her, then immediately excused myself.

She was talking to one of the servers who was bringing out finger food. I caught her eye and made a come-here motion with my finger. She smiled, coming up to me after finishing her conversation. Damn, I loved this woman. My life had completely changed since I met her.

“You’re enjoying yourself,” she said.

“I am. Good party. Then again, it’s managed by an amazing planner, so I had no doubt it was going to be great.”

“No one’s tempted to steal you yet?”

I frowned. “We’ve had plenty of people who want to work with Whitley Advertising.”

She ran a hand through her hair. “That’s not what I mean.”

“I’m not following.”

“I’ve seen at least five women eye-fucking you. I have no doubt they’d like to do the real deal.”

“Who? When?”

She quirked a brow. “You really didn’t notice them?”

“Natalie, you’re the only woman for me. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t notice other women.”

“Yes it fucking does. I only notice you. And if you want, I’ll kiss you right here and make it clear to everyone that I’m yours.”

She licked her lips, taking a step back. “You’d really do it, huh?”

“I’m tempted. But I know it wouldn’t reflect well professionally for you. I’ll keep all these thoughts for tonight when we go back to your place. It’s much closer than the hotel.”

“Ah, and you’re inviting yourself again. What am I going to do with you?”

“Just say yes.”

“Oh, I’m weak for you, Jake. I can only ever say yes.”

“Never wanted to hear anything else.”

“I’m warning you. It’s hot as hell at my place,” she said.

“That’s no problem. We’ll just take off our clothes.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jake

She wasn't kidding. It was past midnight when we arrived at her house, but it was still hot inside.

"What is this hell?"

"I told you," she muttered. Her stomach grumbled as we took off our shoes.

"Did you eat anything?" I asked her.

She slapped her forehead. "I forgot. I was running around all the time."

"You have to take care of yourself. You can't just go without eating. Do you have anything in your fridge?"

I headed straight to the kitchen, opening the fridge. "I can work with this."

"You don't have to feed me," she said. "It's midnight."

"Yes, I do."

"Is this because you plan on a thorough workout afterward?"

"That too. Come on. Just sit and I'll do everything."

Instead of sitting down, she came next to the counter, looking at me. I found eggs, so I decided I'd make her sunny-side ups.

"Do you have bread?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's right here." She pointed to an overhead cupboard.

I took out two slices, putting them in a pan as well.

"You're a genius," she said. "That way we don't have to use the toaster."

I was starting to sweat bullets. I needed to buy her central air.

“You’re my hero, you know,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because you’re standing in my kitchen, which is hotter than hell, and you’re making me sunny-side ups. If that doesn’t say perfect, I don’t know what else does.”

I took out the toast, putting it on a plate, and then immediately arranged the eggs.

“If I don’t pamper you, no one else will.”

She sighed. “That’s true.”

She immediately took the plate, eating one slice of toast and then the other one. My woman was hungry. At least for as long as we were together, I was going to make sure she was well taken care of.

As soon as she finished eating, she put her plate in the sink and said, “Let’s get far away from the kitchen. I feel like it’s gotten even hotter.”

We’d moved to the living room when Natalie cleared her throat and said, “I thought we had a plan to strip naked as soon as we got home.”

I pulled her against me and kissed her the next moment.

My cock twitched. I slipped my fingers under her blouse, digging into her skin. She rolled her hips against me, straight against my cock.

Oh fuuuuuuck.

I deepened the kiss as I searched for the zipper. There was none. She had damn buttons in the front. I undid them quickly, all the while kissing her senseless. I took it off, revealing a white lace bra. Her breasts looked absolutely delicious in it, so much so that I wasn’t going to take it off yet. I lifted her in my arms, laying her on the dining table. I wanted to feast on her, and I needed the proper conditions to do so.

I traced the swell of her left breast with my mouth before moving to the right one. Her hands were working tirelessly on the buttons of my own shirt. I helped while moving my mouth

farther down to her navel. Then I went up, back to her breasts. I liked how that lace looked against her pale skin. The sun hadn't touched her here. Nothing had for months but me. And no one would ever again. I was the only one who could please her like this. Who could make her beg.

"Jake," she murmured, tugging at my hair.

I bunched her skirt up to her waist. It was the easiest way to access between her thighs. I knew she needed pleasure. Her panties were wet. Actually, the part covering her pussy was so soaked that I could see her flesh. I liked that I could get her wet so fast, that she responded to me like this. I took off her bra and clamped my mouth around her nipple at the same time. Pushing the fabric of her panties to one side, I rubbed my thumb up and down her entrance, applying just the right amount of pressure to drive her crazy.

I intensified the rhythm of my movement, wanting to give her exactly what she needed.

"Jake, Jake, Jake," she muttered before exploding beautifully. At the same time, I slipped two fingers inside her. I knew it would intensify her orgasm, and I wanted to feel her pulse around me. My cock threatened to explode even as she came down from the high of the climax.

"Oh my God, I can't believe this. You made me come without even taking off my skirt."

"Fuck, I love when you talk like that."

"I'm no match in the dirty talk department." Her lips were red, and the lower one had bite marks from how much she'd tugged on it. She hopped down from the table.

"You look so damn sexy like this," I said, and I couldn't stand not being inside her. "Turn around."

"Oh." She did just that, looking at me over her shoulder. "You're really impatient tonight."

I brought my mouth to her ear, palming her ass before pushing down my pants and kicking them off along with my boxers. We'd gotten rid of my shirt before, throwing it to the side.

“And you’re still going to keep me like this, half dressed while I’m mauled by you?”

“I want you like this,” I admitted. Turning her around, I pushed her hair to one side while I rubbed my erection between her legs. I didn’t touch her pussy at first, but she gasped anyway when she felt the length of my cock against her inner thighs. She started rolling her hips again like she needed me. I gripped my cock at the base and pressed the head against her clit. Her thighs shook so badly that I thought she might lose her balance.

She fell forward onto the table, straightening her arms on it before bending them at the elbows and resting her head on them. I liked seeing her like this—ready for me and anything I wanted. She was putting herself in my hands completely.

“Jake,” she murmured as I kept circling her clit. I was driving her crazy, but I was driving myself crazy too, and I didn’t want to embarrass myself by coming right now like a teenager.

She looked over her shoulder, biting her lower lip. “Jake, I’m clean and on the pill. If you want, we can...”

“Yes. Fuck yes. I’m clean too.”

I slid inside her, completely stilling.

“Jake.” Her voice shook. Her thighs trembled, and her inner muscles pulsed around my erection.

“Fuck, this feels good.” I dropped my head back, breathing in through my nose. I still wasn’t moving, relishing the feel of her bare flesh around me. It was exquisite.

I should have taken her panties off. I could feel them rubbing at the side of my cock, but it was too late now. Nothing would make me pull out of this woman, not until I’d had my fill of her. I palmed her ass cheek with one hand and leaned over her so I could kiss her shoulders and even the tops of her arms.

When her contractions slowed down, I started moving.

“Oh, Jake.” She was already on the edge, and I had only started thrusting inside her. She moved with me, balancing on her heels and then back onto her toes.

I couldn't be gentle. I slid in fast, needing to see this wild side of her, to know it was all for me.

She cocked her head to one side, and I tilted even closer, capturing her mouth. She groaned against my lips. I tangled my tongue with hers, moving it almost as fast as I thrust inside her. I brought one hand up to cover her left nipple before pinching it lightly. A groan reverberated through my body, though I didn't know if it was mine or hers.

I played with her nipple until I felt her clench around me, and then I lowered that same hand to her clit, flicking two fingers over it. The next moan was definitely hers. It was guttural, almost animalistic. She clenched so tight around me that my thighs buckled. Fuck, I was unprepared for the spasm of pleasure rolling through me, but she was there. I knew I could make her come before I did.

She pulled her hand back, laying it on the table. Clearly she needed to brace herself. She couldn't kiss and fuck me at the same time. I loved that I overwhelmed her so much that she only could do one thing at a time.

I started thrusting slower, drawing it out. I kept playing with her clit. I knew she was going to come before even she did. Her left leg gave out, and then I felt the muscles in her lower abdomen clench under my splayed hand.

She exploded with my name on her lips, and she was so tight around me that I didn't last much longer either. She was still clenching and pulsing around me when I climaxed violently, almost losing my breath and my vision.

Fuck me, this was beyond intense. It was out of this world. The way she made me feel was unreal. It couldn't be real because if it was, it meant I'd lived all these years for nothing.

“You know what the benefits of heat waves are?” Natalie asked the next morning.

“No, enlighten me.” We were both buck naked, drinking our morning coffee.

“We don’t have to wear any clothes.”

“We can do that even with the AC at the hotel. How come this place doesn’t have any?”

She shrugged. “The owner doesn’t want to invest in it. I guess it’s one of the reasons why people didn’t want to rent it. It was empty for a while before I rented it. The place where I lived before had all the comforts, but it was far too expensive after I got fired.”

Fuck this. I wanted to provide all the comforts money could buy for her. It would be my privilege.

“Did you and Vince live together?”

“No, we never took that step. Thank goodness.”

I stepped closer to her and traced a straight line from her shoulder blade to her right ass cheek, palming it.

She grinned. “I see you’re becoming a fan of the no-AC life as well.”

“It does have perks,” I admitted, kissing her shoulder.

“By the way,” she said, looking sideways at me, “you haven’t been on a retreat to Martha’s Vineyard since you moved to Boston.”

“True.” I didn’t take a step back as I turned her around by her hips. Her breasts were against my skin. “Is that a hint that you want to go?”

She pursed her lips. “No, I don’t think it would be possible. Most of the events at the company are on Friday evenings, and the two gigs I have coming up are on weekends. But you can go. I don’t want to mess with your retreat.”

“I haven’t needed it since I met you.”

Her mouth formed an *O*. “Why not?”

I drew my fingers across her mouth, kissing at her lower lip, sucking in a few drops of coffee.

“I don’t know, Natalie. I think I was searching for something before, and I wasn’t sure what it was. But right now I have everything I need. I have you. We can go to Martha’s whenever you have time, but I have no desire to go there alone.”

“Jake,” she murmured, putting down her cup of coffee as I placed my arms around her. “God. I can’t believe it. I’m already sweaty. How can you hug me like that?”

“I happen to like you when you’re sweaty,” I said. I kissed along her jawline before descending to her neck. She tasted salty, but I liked it. “I like the scent of your skin. It’s sweet and salty and delicious.” I drew the tip of my nose up her neck and then bit at her earlobe. She gasped, rolling her hips, pushing her pubic bone straight against my cock.

“I like spending the weekends with you,” she admitted, “especially after having events.”

“They take a lot out of you, huh?” I asked, taking a step back as the coffee machine started making whirring noises. It was doing its cleanup process.

“I know, but I love them so much. Just between you and me, I’m enjoying this much more than what I did before. I definitely chose the wrong degree.”

I liked where this was going, but I didn’t want to put any pressure on her. “Have you thought about changing careers altogether?”

“I have, yes. But honestly, I think it would disappoint my parents tremendously. They’re so proud that I went to college, that I got a ‘serious degree,’ as they call it. I’m proud of it too.”

“Look, I haven’t met your parents, but from what you told me about them, I think they would eventually understand, even if they might not react well in the beginning.”

“I’ll see how the applications go,” she murmured.

A vibrating sound in the room startled both of us.

“That’s my phone,” she said, picking it up from the kitchen table. “I don’t have the number saved. It could be one of the companies I applied to.”

“On a Saturday?” I asked skeptically.

“Carmen did call me on a Sunday,” she pointed out.

“True.”

She clicked Answer and put it to her ear. “Natalie here.” The color drained from her face the next second. “Vince, I don’t want you calling me. No, fuck you.”

I was instantly on alert. “Give me the phone.”

She hesitated.

“Natalie!”

She handed it to me the next second.

“Listen, fucker,” I growled.

“Who’s this?” the asshole asked.

I didn’t bother answering him. “Don’t call her number again. Ever. Or I’ll make you very sorry.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” The little twerp tried to sound tough.

“Someone you should not mess with. She’s not alone, you know? I’ve got her back.”

He hung up.

“What did he want?” I asked Natalie.

“I don’t know. He didn’t get a chance to tell me. He was too busy insulting me.”

“Natalie—”

“Let’s forget about him, okay? I don’t want him to ruin our day.”

“You can’t sweep this under the rug.”

“I’m not. But eventually he’ll get bored and stop.” She laughed humorlessly. “I bet you wish you were in Martha’s

Vineyard right about now, huh?"

"No chance in hell." Putting the phone down, I cupped her face, and then I moved my hands down, pushing her up by her ass. "If I went away, I couldn't do this." I took her up in my arms.

She smiled, putting her hands on my shoulders. "I see."

"I'm right where I need to be," I assured her, kissing her again and then going down the column of her neck. "Right here."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Natalie

“How is my favorite event planner?” Maddox said on Tuesday evening.

I startled a bit in my chair. I was among the last ones at the office. Looking around, I realized I was actually *the* last one.

“When did everyone else leave?” I asked.

“When you were busy tapping away at your computer.”

I smiled sheepishly. “I have a few fires to put out. Our caterer bailed on our next event. Apparently they had a wave of people who gave their notice. I think it’s because they have a very draconian schedule. But I’m pleased to say I found someone who treats their workers better.”

“I like you, Natalie,” Maddox said.

“Great. It’s good for my boss to like me.”

“I also like how you and Grandmother are scheming to bring Jake and me together now and again.”

“I have to clarify that I’m not scheming with your grandmother. It just occurred to me that it might be a good idea for you to invite him.”

“It was, I think,” Maddox said. “He and Colton are the two half brothers I never got to know. Jake left before we even moved here.”

“And Colton?” I asked.

“He’s always busy in his lab or CEO-ing.”

I laughed. “I never heard that. I’ll remember it. CEO-ing.”

“It’s what I call people in suits. Maybe cuff links.”

“Especially cuff links,” I agreed with him. “Should I talk to Jeannie about plotting how to put the two of you together as well?”

“From what Gabe said, they’re not seeing much of Colton either, so I don’t think that would help.” He glanced at the door, then back at me. “Now, come on. Let’s get out of the office. I believe in being dedicated, but I don’t believe in burning the midnight oil, or the evening oil. Next thing you know, my brother’s going to beat down the door and take you out of here.”

“He totally would do that,” I said with a laugh. “Okay, fine. I’m probably not going to get an answer from them tonight anyway. It’s pretty late for everyone.” I shut off the laptop before standing up and putting my phone in my purse. “I’m going for dinner at Jeannie and Abe’s house, so I figured I’d stay until it was time to leave and get caught up on some of this stuff.”

“Listen, if you think there’s too much to do, we can always try to assign an assistant to you.”

“The workload is more than fine. This situation doesn’t come up too often, but I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry.”

We went down with the elevator and then stepped out of the building.

“Finally. I thought I had the wrong address.”

I winced. It was Vince’s voice. I turned around, zeroing in on him. I hadn’t seen him in about five months. He looked exactly the same, with black hair that was all messed up.

Ugh, what did I ever see in him?

“Natalie?” Maddox asked, then turned to Vince. “Who the hell are you?”

“Tell him who I am. Is this the fucker who answered the phone?” Vince growled.

I shook my head. “No, this is my boss. Vince, what are you doing here?”

“I told you I need to talk to you. You need to give me another chance.”

“What?” I was completely bewildered. “You’re delusional if you think that’s happening.”

“Look, things got weird between us because you got that job instead of me.”

Oh. My. God. We were not going to rehash this all in the street in front of my new boss. But I couldn't help myself and antagonized him. “I deserved it.”

“No, you didn't,” he spat. “I hated that you were my boss. But that's beside the point.”

I burst out laughing. “You're joking if you think I want to get back with you. Just listen to yourself. Besides, I'm with someone now.”

“Listen, don't you play coy with me—”

“Fuck off.” Maddox stepped in front of him. “Leave the premises right now.”

“I'm not on your premises, jackass.”

“No, but I can still call the cops for disturbing the peace.”

“Really?” Vince looked at me.

“You're not getting it,” I said. “For God's sake. Maddox is right. I'm going to call the cops on you if you don't walk away.”

“No, you're not,” he said, coming closer.

Maddox stepped between the two of us. “Who the hell do you think you are?” Vince asked him.

“Maddox Whitley.”

Vince attempted to push him away. Next thing I knew, Maddox pushed him even harder, and Vince stumbled back. And then, to my horror, he came forward with his fist, but Maddox easily blocked it as if he was trained in martial arts and lowered his arm forcefully. Vince howled in pain.

“You try that again and you're going to need an ambulance.”

Oh my God. He'd attempted to assault my boss. My eyes stung.

“You mess with Natalie, you’re going to have a big problem. Get the fuck away from here.” Maddox turned to me. “Natalie, come on. Let’s go.”

I had no idea where Maddox was leading me. I was shaking and couldn’t hide my tears. I was so high-strung today because I’d put a lot of energy into finding another caterer. Now this.

“I’m so sorry,” I said between sobs. Belatedly, I realized he’d led me to his car, a Range Rover.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for,” he said once he was in the car too.

“He literally tried to hit you.”

“I think he got the message. Who is he, anyway?”

“He’s an ex.”

“I got that.”

“And we worked together. I was his boss.”

He nodded. “I got that too.”

“He’s always had anger issues. And after I was promoted over him, he... well, I think he couldn’t deal with it.”

“Fuck him.”

“I agree. Anyway, he started throwing these fits at the office, and eventually my boss decided he’d had enough of both of us and fired us.”

“That’s fucked-up. Did you try suing?”

“No. After everything, I didn’t want to work there anymore.”

“And you can’t get this fucker off your back?” Maddox asked.

I laughed. “You sound like Jake.”

“He knows about this?”

“He knows who Vince is and that he tried to contact me.” I sighed heavily, finally somewhat composed. “Could we keep

this between us? I don't want to worry him."

"I think he'd like to know," Maddox said in a measured tone.

"Yeah, I think he might too, but honestly, I don't want to waste any of our time together talking or even thinking about Vince."

"He didn't seem like he was going to back off."

"Once my predecessor comes back, I won't be here, and hopefully he won't be a disturbance for you. I'm really sorry he showed up."

"This isn't about him being a disturbance to me, Natalie. It's about the fact that he's basically harassing you. This is not even remotely okay."

"I need to think about that," I admitted. "I figured he'd give up if I didn't engage, but I'm beginning to understand that won't happen."

"Are you sure you don't want to tell Jake?"

"Yes." My time with Jake was limited, and I didn't want Vince to spoil it.

"As you wish," Maddox said. Disapproval dripped from his voice.

"Maddox, I don't think Vince followed us. I can just get out of the car at the next red light."

"I'll take you to my grandparents' house."

"You don't have to do that."

"Come on, I insist. You've had a shitty day and an even shittier evening."

"Thank you, Maddox." Since I didn't get to go to the lunch on Saturday, they invited me today, and I was beyond excited. At least I was before Vince showed up.

We spoke about the next event for the rest of the route. Usually I was excited when I shared details, but today I couldn't muster up any sort of enthusiasm.

When we arrived, Jake was already there. I hopped out of the car quickly. Jake frowned, looking at Maddox, who immediately drove off, nodding at Jake as he passed by.

“Everything okay?” he asked. “Why did Maddox drop you off?”

“I was the last one in the office, and he’s apparently a gentleman, just like you.” It wasn’t a lie exactly, just not the whole truth.

“Is everything okay? You seem upset.”

I sighed. “The caterer bailed for the party on Friday, so I’ve had a hell of a day.” Again, not a lie—but not the whole truth.

Jake looked at me and nodded. “Come on, let’s go inside. Grandmother probably cooked up a storm.”

When I went inside the house, it smelled delicious. “Oh my God, did she make stuffed zucchini?”

Jake smiled brilliantly. “Yes, she did.”

“How did she know they’re my favorite?”

“From me, obviously. It’s my grandmother’s thing. She tries to find out everyone’s favorite dish. Usually she makes everybody’s when we come over.”

It turned out tonight it was simply stuffed zucchini for everyone.

“I stand corrected. Apparently you’re the guest of honor tonight, Natalie,” Jake said. “I don’t see any roast chicken.”

“Oh, I spoil you boys all the time. Tonight is all about Natalie,” Jeannie said, kissing my cheek. I did the same back. “And for dessert I have cheesecake with pecans.”

Another one of my favorites. I looked at Jake with warm eyes. “Thanks for paying attention.”

Jeannie served everyone a zucchini. “Of course, I don’t know your mother’s recipe, but I looked quite a few up online, and I think I whipped up something delicious.”

I took a mouthful. It was delicious. I hummed, giving her a thumbs-up.

She laughed. "I'll take it."

"Abe, you look much better," I told him.

"I'm feeling great. I started to do some workouts again. My doctor gave me the approval. Says the heart needs some cardio now and again."

"How much cardio?" Jake asked sharply.

I loved it when he was overprotective with his family.

"I'm doing it under the strict supervision of my physiotherapist. I'm not overdoing it."

"Okay." Jake calmed down instantly. "By the way, I have news. I already spoke with a recruiting company to search for a new CEO. I won't be selling Whitley Advertising."

He took my hand under the table, squeezing it lightly. My heart was beating so fast, it was about to jump out of my chest.

His grandfather beamed. "That's a good decision, my boy, but you know this might take a while."

"I know, and I'm ready to wait until the appropriate person comes around. I know the process is grueling."

Jeannie smiled, but it was obviously sad. Oh, I related. I knew she was happy that Whitley Advertising was staying in the family, but the fact that Jake was searching for another CEO meant he wasn't staying here.

He caressed the back of my hand with his thumb, and we held hands during most of dinner. The conversation slid to easy topics, such as a short vacation Jeannie planned only an hour away from Boston. Apparently that was where Jake had picked up his retreat habit. She and Abe had gone to the same hotel for forty years. It had been passed down to the next generation, and they were happy it was still open.

After the main course, we all helped take the plates to the kitchen.

Abe and Jake went back to the table with drinks, and I stayed with Jeannie as she cut the cheesecake.

“This looks delicious.” Oh, I was so happy.

“My Jake knew what your favorite dessert was. I wanted you to feel like you were at home. He told me how much you miss your family.”

I was moved. Not only by the fact that he told her that but that she made the effort of preparing my favorite food.

“I do.”

“Family is important. You’re always welcome in our home, no matter what. Okay?”

“Thank you, Jeannie.”

My heart felt heavy as we returned to the table. Jake trained his eyes on me. As I sat down, Abe and Jeannie started bickering.

“No, the doctor did absolutely not say you could drink a shot after dinner for digestion.”

“He said if it relaxes me, I can.”

“He was talking about wine.”

Jake leaned into me. “Babe, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

I looked sideways at him. There were so many things, I didn’t know where to start. Vince showing up today, making it clear he wasn’t firmly in my past like I thought he was. Him threatening Maddox, and of course the news that Jake was searching for a CEO. It was all overwhelming.

I’d been determined to enjoy this evening with Jake, but it seemed like it wasn’t possible.

“Just a tough day,” I muttered. And here I was, serving him another incomplete truth. I didn’t like it.

He frowned, nodding. I knew he didn’t buy it.

“Fine, I won’t drink anything!” Abe sounded exasperated.

“Thank you,” Jeannie said. I hadn’t heard her sound so stern, not once since I met her. “And, Jake, you’re not drinking

any either, or your grandfather might get ideas.”

“I didn’t ask for one in the first place.”

Jeannie turned to Abe, putting a hand on her hip. “So, you were lying to me?”

“No, I was just trying to soften the situation. Jake clearly *wants* some.”

Jeannie exploded.

Jake grinned. “If they fight in front of you, you’re truly part of the family. Want to go to the kitchen and get some more of the approved iced tea?”

“Yeah, let’s get away.” I felt honored to be considered a family member, but eavesdropping on their argument was weird.

Once in the kitchen, Jake took the iced tea from the fridge and some huge ice cubes from the freezer. They had fruit in them. He also picked some mint leaves from the plant Jeannie had at the window.

“Does she have a special recipe for this?” I asked.

“Yes. And messing it up is not an option.”

We didn’t go back to the living room once he was done sprinkling the mint leaves. Instead, he caught my chin, looking at me.

“Are we okay?”

“Oh, yes. It’s just been a long day.”

A small smile took his lips. He looked at one corner of my mouth, then the other. “I’m glad you’re here tonight.”

“I’m happy too,” I admitted. “We should probably be going back to the living room. I’m in the mood for that cheesecake.”

“Sure, let’s go.” He sounded... *dangerous*.

“You want to add something?”

“Yeah. I’m in the mood for *you*.”

“Jake!”

I loved this man so completely. He was the first person I could see spending the rest of my life with. Perhaps it was the way he cared for those around him, or his overall sexiness? Whichever, or both, Jake Whitley was wedged deep into my heart and my body.

Chapter Thirty

Jake

I spent most of the next week looking over the résumés the recruitment company sent me. I was pleased there were at least two promising candidates on the list. I remembered the crappy applicants they'd sent me when I asked for a CEO months ago. Still, I wasn't chanting, "Victory."

I needed to interview them first, and I didn't have time for that this week, and neither did they.

"You should take it easy," Gabe said. He, Cade, and Spencer had stopped by my office in the evening, trying to corrupt me to go out for drinks with them.

"I am."

"Yeah, we should give him credit. He's making progress," Spencer said lazily.

"A lot of it," Cade added. "I'm honestly suspicious. Is it our influence?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Gabe replied. "It's all Natalie. Thank God for Grandmother and her instincts."

I pointed at him. "You just wait until she turns that instinct on you."

Gabe instantly grimaced.

Cade burst out laughing. "Grandmother is cooking up something for me. I'm sure of it by the way Grandfather acted."

Spencer shook his head. "Jake is keeping her occupied."

I shrugged. "Yeah, but only until I find the CEO."

"What will happen afterward?" Spencer asked, sounding serious. "With Natalie, I mean?"

"We haven't discussed that yet."

Cade sat up straighter in his chair. “What do you mean? You’re the god of planning.”

“Yeah, dude. You’ve made a five-year plan for the company. You haven’t discussed with Natalie what you’re going to do once you find the CEO?” Gabe sounded skeptical.

I glowered at him. “No, and I’d appreciate it if you would butt out of our business.”

Gabe held up his hands. “As long as you promise to come for a drink with us.”

“I am, but Natalie is coming too.”

“That sounds fair to us,” Gabe said. “We can ask her if Grandmother has any plans for us.”

Cade cocked a brow. “That’s irrelevant. Let’s figure out how to help Jake.”

I scoffed. “I don’t need your help.”

“We’ll be here when you change your mind,” Cade replied easily. He was relentless, but so was I.

We drove in separate cars. I hated to admit my brothers had a point. I always liked to plan in advance, but when it came to my relationship with Natalie, I had done the exact opposite. I hadn’t even wanted to look to the future because I was enjoying the present so much, but I couldn’t postpone the conversation forever.

These past few days, she’d seemed more distant than usual, and I had a hunch it was because of my announcement about searching for the CEO.

As I turned onto the street where her office building was, I realized that wasn’t true. She’d already been in a state when Maddox dropped her off at my grandparents’ house last week.

When I got close, searching for a parking space, I immediately noticed something was off. Maddox and Natalie were both outside, and they were fighting with a guy.

What the hell is going on? I parked the car and jumped out of it, joining them.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Oh, Jake,” Natalie said in an exhausted voice. Maddox was completely red in the face. The other guy was looking at me viciously.

“Who are you?” I asked, and then it dawned on me. “Vince. What are you doing here?”

“Vince was leaving,” Maddox said in a strained voice.

“No, Vince is not fucking leaving,” Vince seethed. “I told you I’m not leaving until Natalie and I have a word—alone.”

“She’s already told you she’s not getting back with you, man. Are you insane?” Maddox asked.

“Get the hell out of here. It’s over and has been for months, Vince. I don’t know what else to tell you, but you better leave now. I’ve already called the police,” Natalie said.

Vince jerked his head back. “No, you didn’t.” The guy was as red as a beet, obviously someone who couldn’t control his rage. And someone who was going to learn how the fuck to stay away from my girl.

“Want to call my bluff? Fine. Then stay and wait around,” Natalie spat.

“This is the second time you’ve shown up here. And the last. Go now.” Maddox spoke through gritted teeth.

“I have witnesses for both times you showed up here. That’s enough for a restraining order.” Natalie nodded to Maddox and me.

Both times? What the fuck is going on? When had Vince shown up, and how did Maddox know about it? More importantly, why didn’t I know about it?

“The police are on their way,” Natalie continued. “If you believe it or not, that’s your problem. And don’t doubt that I’m going to file for a restraining order.”

Vince looked at me. “The bitch is probably fucking both of you, just so you know. I wouldn’t put it past her.”

That was the last thing he said before I got right into his face.

“Never show your face around Natalie again, or a restraining order will be the least of your problems. Do you understand me? Now, unless you want your face to meet my fist, fucking leave.” I kept my restraint, but the volume of my voice emphasized my disdain, and the dude got it loud and clear.

For the first time, he cowered. He actually cowered. Then he scurried away just as I noticed Gabe, Spencer, and Cade. I hadn’t realized they were here already.

Once we saw Vince get into a car, I turned to Natalie. “Are you okay?”

She was shaking. I put my arms around her shoulders, and she curled into me. “Yes, I am.”

“Did you call the police?”

“No, it was a bluff.”

“I asked my assistant to watch out the window. If he hadn’t left, she would’ve called the cops,” Maddox said.

“When did he come last time?” I asked.

“Last week,” Natalie said in a shaky voice.

“When Maddox brought you to my grandparents.” Understanding dawned on me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She just shook her head.

I looked at Maddox. “Why the hell didn’t *you* tell me?”

“Because she asked me not to,” he said in a cold voice, “and I respect people’s choices.”

“You don’t keep things from me. Do you understand? Not when it comes to my woman.”

“Maybe you earn her trust if you want her to tell you everything.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that,” I growled. “You don’t know me. You don’t know us. You have no right.”

“Please don’t fight,” Natalie pleaded.

“No, let him say whatever he’s got on his mind, please. Apparently he’s bursting with it,” Maddox said.

“What the hell is your problem?”

“I just wanted to keep her safe.”

“It’s my job to keep her safe.” A vein pulsed in my neck.

“Clearly you’re shitty at it. You should’ve taken care of that asshole already.”

He was right, but that only pissed me off. Keeping Natalie safe was my job, and I failed at it.

“This is none of your business, Maddox. Don’t get involved in this.”

“I already am, whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Guys, come on. Don’t do this in the street. You’re upsetting Natalie,” Cade said, coming between us. Gabe and Spencer seemed too stunned to say anything. “Maddox, why don’t you go back to your office, and we’ll let the two of them talk it out? Come on. We’ll go up with you, have a drink. Clearly we all need it.”

Gabe looked at Natalie. “Should I bring you something? I’m not sure what my brother keeps upstairs. Maybe whiskey?”

Natalie laughed. “No, I don’t think I could drink anything right now. God, Maddox. I am so sorry he caused a scene again.”

“That’s the last thing you should worry about, okay? You should file that restraining order.”

“I’ll take it from here,” I said a little too possessively, because Maddox rounded on me.

“Man, you’re impossible.” Looking at Gabe, he asked, “How do you deal with him?”

“He’s our brother. Comes with the package.”

“Not for me. I’m only a half brother. And I’m done here.”
He went back into the building. My brothers followed him.

Natalie gasped. “No. Oh God. I didn’t want you two to fight, least of all because of me.”

“Natalie, come on. Forget about this. How are you feeling? Are you hurt? Tell me.” I should’ve focused on her instead of fighting with Maddox. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m so annoyed. I can’t believe Vince is doing this again, causing trouble where I work. I’m only a temp here, but what would’ve happened if I weren’t? Is he just going to ruin my life all over again every time I get a new job?”

“Not if you get the restraining order,” I said.

“I’m filing a request for one as soon as possible.”

“Do you want to go home or at least get in the car?”

“No. I don’t want us to leave. I want us to go back upstairs so you and Maddox can patch things up.”

I stared at her. She was clearly shaken from Vince’s visit, and she cared about me and Maddox?

“Natalie, all I want tonight is to take care of you. I don’t give two shits if Maddox never talks to me again.”

“No, don’t say that, please. You two are starting to finally... This is all my fault.” She looked like she was going to burst into tears.

“What are you talking about?”

“You wouldn’t have gotten in your fight if I wouldn’t have brought my drama with Vince into all of your lives.”

“Babe, why didn’t you tell me when it happened last time?”

She started crying harder.

“Babe, don’t cry. Just tell me how to make this better.”

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “I didn’t tell you because I only have you for so little time before you move back to New York. I didn’t want us to waste any of it on Vince. He called a

couple times and sent me emails. Once he put Post-its on my door. But I didn't have enough incidents for a restraining order. And after he showed up here last time and I made it clear that I'm not getting back with him, I really thought he wasn't going to come near me again. God, I'm so stupid."

"No, you're not."

"And now I got you and Maddox into a fight."

"If he wants to fight, that's his issue."

After taking a deep breath, she dried her tears and took a step back.

"No, it's not his issue. It's yours too. He's your brother. And I know it means a lot to you that you're building a connection with him, even if you don't want to admit it. The last thing I want is for that to fall apart because of me."

"Nothing is falling apart. Babe, let's go home. I'll cook for you. Or let's go to the hotel and order room service."

"No. I want to go home."

"Okay, then let's go."

"Alone."

"What?" I asked, taken aback.

"Alone. I need to be on my own. I just need some time to regroup, Jake. Please?"

"Why? What if Vince shows up there?"

"I'll call the police instantly. I promise. Jake, please."

"What if he's there when you arrive? At least let me drive you there."

"No, I'll take a cab, and if I see him at any point, I'll just wait in the car and call the police."

"You can't be serious. Why do you not want me with you tonight?"

She swallowed hard, putting both hands on her belly. I briefly imagined her announcing that she was pregnant, that we were going to have a baby. *Jesus, where did that come*

from? I had no idea, and yet I desired it so intently that when her next words came out, they felt like a slap in my face.

“Because I want you to stay here and fix things with Maddox. Please, Jake? It would mean so much to me, to your family—Jeannie. Don’t ruin your relationship with your brother for a fling.”

“This is not a fling, Natalie,” I said. “It’s not. I love you.”

“I love you too. But it doesn’t change things, does it? And I told you once that I want to be someone who changes your life for the better, not for the worse.”

“Natalie!” It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that this was all a bit dramatic, but I knew that wasn’t going to help the situation. Besides, she was visibly hurt. I wanted to be with her tonight. It frustrated me that she pushed me away.

“Look, there’s a cab coming now. I’m going to flag it.” The next second, she raised her hand, and the damn cab stopped in front of her.

“Natalie, I’ll follow you in my car.”

“That’s not what I want, okay? Fix things with Maddox.” The pleading in her eyes was visible, and though I wanted to do what she asked, I didn’t know how to make it up to Maddox when all that was on my mind was my woman. The need to protect her was fierce.

“Doesn’t it matter what I want?” I asked.

“Yes, it does,” she said. “I just... I can’t tonight, okay? Just tonight.”

I could see I was getting nowhere with her. Natalie could certainly be stubborn at times, and I didn’t want to be a controlling asshole boyfriend like her ex.

Fuck! I probably was being overprotective. I needed to accept this, even though all my instincts told me to do the opposite.

“Text me when you’re in your house so at least I know you’re safe.”

She got into the car and closed the door behind her before I could add anything else.

Chapter Thirty-One

Natalie

I stretched out on my couch, wishing more than ever that I had AC. How was it this hot in here in September? It was definitely cooler outside. I went to the fridge, opening it and standing in front of it for a couple seconds, but that only made it worse. The living room seemed much hotter after that.

I couldn't believe Jake and Maddox had gotten into a fight over Vince. The guilt was choking me. Had I been too naive to think I could simply start a new chapter in my life and Vince would stay in the past where he belonged? Maybe I'd fooled myself into taking everything as a positive sign: meeting Jake, falling for him, and then getting this job with Maddox. I sat on my couch, putting my legs under me. I felt utterly defeated.

The hurt on Jake's face killed me, but I knew I needed time to think things through, and if he were here, I couldn't do that.

Why couldn't Vince simply have cornered me at home? Why did he have to go and make a spectacle at my workplace? I was so mad at him. He'd broken that tender peace Jake and Maddox had finally found. I'd seen them over the past few weeks. They'd definitely gotten closer. Now they were at odds again because of me. The last thing I wanted was to drive them apart. I remembered Jeannie's joy at her birthday, seeing all her grandsons together at the same table.

I messaged Larissa, desperately needing to talk to another human being.

Natalie: Hey, can I call you?

She replied a few seconds later.

Larissa: Sure.

Then she actually called me. I answered right away.

"Are you okay?" She sounded frantic.

"Why would I not be?"

“Because you’re not a phone person. You prefer to message.”

“True. I’m just feeling like crap. I miss my parents and my sisters. And with you gone too...”

She laughed. “I like where I am on your list of priorities.”

“You know I love you.”

“I know. What happened?”

“Vince happened.”

“He showed up at your work again?”

I’d told her about the incident last week.

“Yes. And this time Jake was there too. He got mad that I didn’t tell him, then got mad that Maddox didn’t tell him. They had a fight, and then Jake and I had a fight. And I simply want to wake up and feel like none of this ever happened.”

“Oh, poor baby. Wait, Jake left you alone? I’ll kick his ass.”

“No, he wanted to come with me. I just told him I needed to be alone.”

“Why? If I had that hunk of a man, I would jump his bones every chance I got. I definitely wouldn’t tell him to leave me alone.”

“I don’t know. I just... I was so distraught watching them fight.”

“You have to do something about Vince.”

“I know. I’ve been far too relaxed about it, but obviously he’s just going to keep bothering me, and that won’t do.” I couldn’t believe I’d brushed this off for so long. To be honest, until he showed up at work, I genuinely thought he’d give up. I didn’t like conflict, but I wouldn’t allow anyone to simply walk over me like this. His temper was even worse than I remembered. We fought a lot, and he often yelled, but he’d never behaved like this. “Whatever’s happening with him, he’s definitely on a destructive course, and I want him out of my life ASAP.”

“What are you going to do about Jake?”

“Right now, I don’t know. And I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I want you to distract me. Tell me something cool.”

“Well, I didn’t want to spoil my secret yet, but honestly, coming to Bali is the best thing I ever did.”

“I’m so happy for you. How long do you think you’ll stay away? No pressure.”

“I might extend my stay here a bit longer. I like it, and people seem to really respond to the online classes I shoot out here.”

“It does look very soothing.”

She was always posting yoga classes with a backdrop of lush green scenery. Sometimes I was so relaxed by the view and the sound of birds chirping and water flowing nearby that I forgot to do the routine altogether.

“Natalie, we can’t *not* talk about Jake.”

“I know, but not tonight. I know I’ll lose him, so I don’t think I can talk about it at all.” My body was physically rejecting the idea. My stomach cramped, my heart was heavy, and my throat was itchy.

“Okay. Then I’m going to talk about something else,” Larissa said. “I’m going on a date tonight.”

“Tell me all the details. Wait a second. My phone is beeping. Mom is calling,” I said, surprised. She was usually asleep at this time. “Sorry, I need to answer so I can make sure nothing’s wrong, okay?”

“Sure. We’ll talk another time. I have to go film a class anyway.”

“Okay. Bye.” I switched calls, putting the phone back to my ear. “Hey, Mom. Is something wrong? Why are you up?”

“We’re having a party. And, darling, I have to say, it’s quite a doozy.”

My parents were partying at... what was it now? Two o’clock in the morning on the other side of the ocean. I

chuckled. “Good for you. I’m glad.”

“I figured I’d give you a call. I know it’s late for you, but I just had this feeling.”

She always said she had a sixth sense when it came to her daughters needing her. That had always proved to be true.

“Mom, you’re really good at this.”

“Darling, tell me everything.”

I hesitated because I hadn’t told them about Vince showing up last week either. But I had to brace myself and fess up. I didn’t like to have secrets, not with my parents or anyone. Look what happened with Jake.

Mom listened carefully, the way she always did.

“Oh, baby girl,” she said when I’d finished. “I’m so sorry we’re far away from you. Dad and I can book the fastest flight back we can afford and be with you.”

“No, Mom. Don’t do that, okay? My sister needs you more than I do.” Right now I wasn’t sure that was particularly true, but I couldn’t be so selfish. I’d get back on my feet, whereas my sister had a colicky baby to deal with. She definitely needed my parents more.

“There’s nothing you can do about Jake and Maddox. Don’t blame yourself.”

“You don’t know them, Mom. They just recently found a balance.”

“If it’s so precarious that one fight was all it took for it to destabilize, then it wasn’t very good to begin with.”

I disagreed with Mom but didn’t tell her so. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She was only trying to help.

“Natalie, you’ve always tried to fix stuff without anyone interfering. If you had trouble at school, you didn’t want anyone involved. Not your sisters, or your dad, or me. I respected that we’re all different. I knew you’d always love us because we were family. I know how you feel about Jake, but don’t let him doubt it, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom.”

She was right. But the truth was I didn't know if it would make a difference. But I loved him to the moon and back, and I wanted to make sure he knew that without a doubt.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jake

Jake,

We need you for an interview right away.

I stared at the email. For fuck's sake, it was eight o'clock in the morning. I definitely didn't want to start my day like this. I'd given Natalie enough space and time; now I wanted to see her.

I realized they'd sent me a second email.

This is the best candidate we have. We cannot let him slip away. The other one already got another job.

I put on a shirt quickly, typing my reply with one hand.

Will be online in five minutes.

I hadn't even had breakfast or my morning coffee. I sat at the desk, positioning my chair and laptop so I had Natalie's painting in front of me.

The sooner I got this over with, the better. Danielle wasn't lying. The candidate was indeed a good fit; he'd led a huge competitor before, so he was more than qualified.

I didn't have time to research their recent numbers, but I had no doubt they looked good. In the market research reports I read, they were always one of the major players.

I connected to Zoom. Two minutes later, the screen split in two. One was Danielle, and the other one was Harold, the candidate.

"Jake, we are so happy you were able to connect on such short notice," Danielle said.

"Good to meet you, Jake. I heard a lot of good things about you," Harold said.

"Likewise. Your reputation precedes you," I said. "Let's cut right to the chase. Why are you looking to change jobs?"

“Danielle here accosted me on LinkedIn, asking me if I was up for a challenge. And I’d say I am, provided the money is good enough to leave my current position, of course.”

I didn’t like that he was leading with money, but it was a fair point. “I assure you that, should we come to an agreement, our offer will be very fair. It would be a big change for you from where you are now to Whitley Advertising.”

“I’ve never worked in a family-owned company before. It’s going to be a nice change of pace for me, and probably also for the people who work there. I know that in those environments, employees often get self-indulgent.”

I didn’t like that arrogant tone of voice.

“Our workers are quite talented, and they’re doing their very best.”

“Then why do they need you to come from New York and save them?”

“The finance department was not top-notch, I admit.”

“Then I can start by trimming the fat there.”

“Look, we’re not looking for someone to come and flex their muscles and try to improve profits by firing as many people as possible,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes. I knew how CEOs worked whenever they started in a new company. They wanted to prove they had balls, which usually meant cutting what they considered unnecessary costs.

“Our employees are the most valuable asset of Whitley Advertising,” I continued.

“I’ll be the judge of that once I take over. I’ve got great plans for Whitley Advertising. For years, I thought they could do so much more if only they squeezed their resources a bit more.”

“Tell us about how you plan to bring in more clients,” Danielle cut in, correctly interpreting my expression.

I was not impressed, and he was clearly the best we could do. He was a reputable CEO from the same industry.

“I’d have to be careful not to step on anyone’s toes. I don’t want to be sued for a noncompete clause.”

“We wouldn’t want you to approach any of your existing clients,” I said categorically. The last thing I wanted was for Whitley Advertising to be accused of stealing someone else’s clients.

He prattled on about client acquisition, but in my mind, I’d already discarded him. He hadn’t mentioned the company’s legacy at all. My grandfather had built it, and some of those people had worked there for a long time.

Jesus, when I first arrived, I probably sounded just like him.

I interrupted him midsentence.

“These ideas all sound great. Put them in a pitch presentation. I’m afraid I must go.”

He jutted his chin forward. “If you’re not interested in it, then just tell me face-to-face. I don’t want to waste my time with a presentation.”

“Fine. I’m not entirely convinced you’re a good fit.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You seem to forget it’s a family company. In fact, it looks like you want to change that.”

“Isn’t that the next step?”

“No, it’s not. I think this concludes the interview.”

“Have a great day,” he said.

I didn’t even wait to talk to Danielle after he logged out and just did the same. She would get the drift.

I closed my laptop, staring at it. I was a hypocrite. I spoke so much about family, and yesterday I’d shit all over it.

I’d been pissed, yes, but Maddox didn’t deserve my wrath. He was right—he’d done what he could to protect Natalie.

I got up and paced the room.

Focus on the company.

I couldn't let a stranger be in charge of Whitley Advertising. It was impossible. No one would respect the family's legacy.

For the first time in a long time, I was willing to admit the legacy went far beyond my father. It belonged to my grandparents and to my brothers—and my half brothers as well. Damn it, I had to call Maddox. I'd been too pissed last evening to go back to his office.

I went to the desk again, grabbing my phone and calling him right away. I was surprised he answered. If the roles were reversed, I wouldn't have done so.

“Good morning, Jake.” His voice was tepid.

“Morning. I won't keep you long.” We both appreciated brevity. “I want to apologize about last night. I said shitty things.”

“Yes, you did. I appreciate the call. I was also way out of line. Sorry about that.”

“So, we're good?”

“Yes. But if this happens again, I'll cut off ties for good. I don't have time for shit like this. You understand?”

“Yes, and back at you. You ever talk to me like that again, we're done.”

“Then we're good. By the way, Natalie came in a couple minutes ago, and she's not looking good. What's going on?”

“About that. I've got an idea. It involves you too.” I couldn't believe she'd shown up at work. Then again, this was Natalie we were talking about. She wasn't about to let Maddox down.

“Before I forget, are you still at the hotel?”

“Yeah.”

“I think Cade might bang down your door soon enough. Last night, he said if you didn’t come up to the office, he was only going to give you the night before he came for you himself.”

“I can see him doing just that.”

“So, you were saying you have an idea that involves me too?”

“Yeah. Here’s the deal.”

I spoke with him for about five minutes before someone knocked at the door.

“Here he is, as you predicted,” I told Maddox.

“I think we’re done here anyway.”

“Yes, we are.”

After hanging up the phone, I went to open the door.

“I was shocked when reception said you were still here. I called before I came. Figured you might already be gone.”

“I had an unexpected call with the recruiter and the potential CEO.”

“And?”

“I won’t hire him. I won’t hire anyone. I’m going to move to Boston and run Whitley Advertising.”

“Are you serious?” Cade asked.

“Hell yes.”

“You already told the family?”

“No, but I will soon.”

Grandfather told me to act according to what I considered the best option. I knew exactly what the best was: for me to stay here. I was a Whitley, and this was part of my legacy. I’d learned in the past couple months exactly what that meant. I was going to promote Ben back in New York as CEO. Most of the clients I worked with were happy with him. And those who weren’t would have to take their business elsewhere. The incoming ones would know from the start that he was handling

the operation. I'd simply take an advising role. My life was going to be here with Natalie and my family.

“What made you change your mind about staying?” Cade asked. “Was it our constant nagging?”

“No, it's called teasing, bro. ”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “Ah, man. It was Natalie, wasn't it?”

“Yes, but the family was also a factor.”

His eyes widened in question. “A factor? You're nothing if not direct.”

“I don't have time to give you details now. I have to go.”

“Are you going to break it to the family?”

“Later. Right now, I need to go get my girl. She's got some weird ideas in her mind, and I want to convince her otherwise.”

“Good for you.” He looked at me expectantly. “Right, okay. I'll hear the details later from Natalie herself, or probably from Grandmother. Those two are tight.”

“Yes, they are.” It was one of the things I loved most about Natalie: how thoroughly she'd embraced my family, even the extended one.

“Isn't she at work now? I mean, you might have changed your work ethic, but I don't think Natalie has,” Cade said, walking next to me as we left the suite and headed to the elevator.

“She was, but I asked Maddox to do me a favor.”

“You apologized to him?”

I nodded.

“It's good to see you acknowledging that our half brothers are also part of the family.”

“I know it took me long enough,” I said.

“All right, then. Good luck,” he said as we stepped out of the elevator. I turned right in front of the building, taking out

my phone and messaging Maddox.

Jake: Everything went as planned?

Maddox: Yeah. I was just about to write you. Good luck, brother.

I stared at the word, feeling completely comfortable writing back, **Thanks, brother.**

He was a genius. I told him I needed Natalie at our ice cream shop, and he immediately came up with an idea. He said he'd simply ask her to get a huge box for his team. They didn't do any delivery service, so she would have to go there in person.

I was so excited on the drive there that I couldn't even hear my own thoughts thumping in my ears. This was happening. Natalie was mine. She had to know that no matter what, nothing would come between us ever again.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jake

I told Cal to drop me off a block away from the ice cream shop. After all, I didn't want Natalie to know I was showing up too. It was raining, but that meant there was absolutely no one in line. I stood a few feet away with an umbrella, waiting for her to get out of the Uber. She opened her umbrella as she approached the counter. I cut her off.

“Great minds think alike,” I said.

She startled, tilting the umbrella backward and looking up at me.

“Jake, what are you doing here?”

“I was in the mood for the best ice cream in town.”

“Wait, how did you know I was here?”

“From Maddox. Told him I needed you here.”

“Oh my God, wait a second. If Maddox orchestrated this with you...” She swallowed hard. “Does it mean you two are okay?”

“Yes. Babe, come on, let's move out of this rain. We're going to get sick. It's coming from all directions.”

We went around the corner in the covered outdoor area. It was empty. We closed the umbrellas, putting them on the table nearest to us. I looked her up and down. Her hair was a bit wet at the edges.

“Are you cold? Do you need my suit jacket?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Always a gentleman, aren't you?”

“Always,” I confirmed.

“I'm not feeling cold, but thanks. Tell me more about you and Maddox.”

“I didn't come here to talk about him and me. Just know we're fine. I want to talk about you and me.”

Her cheeks turned red. She looked at her feet, then crossed her arms over her chest and glanced back up.

“When did your eyes go from serious to smoldering hot?”

“I’m gonna need everything I’ve got.”

“For what?” she murmured.

I put both my hands on her shoulders. “To convince you that we belong together.”

“Jake, wait.”

“Before you go on, I made a big decision today.”

“Okay.”

She licked her lips. I wanted to lean in and kiss her senseless, but that had to wait or I would get carried away.

“I decided to move to Boston. I’m going to run Whitley Advertising myself.”

She gasped. “What’s going to happen to your company in New York?”

“I’ll promote my vice president of operations to CEO, and I’ll just consult and fly in from time to time.” Ben had done well while I’d been in Boston. I was confident he could do the job as long as I advised him on crucial decisions.

“Oh my God, Jake, this is great news.”

“You’re the first one who knows. Well, you would be the first one if Cade hadn’t surprised me with a visit first.”

“Jake, your grandparents are going to be so happy,” she gushed. “And all your brothers too.”

“I love that you think about them first thing, babe.”

I leaned forward, kissing a corner of her mouth. I just couldn’t help myself; I needed the contact. “You’re my life, Natalie. You have my love, my heart, my dreams, and my future. I wanted to bring you here to your favorite place in the city to tell you that.”

She grinned, staring into my eyes. “You really are something, Jake Whitley. I’m stunned. I’m not even sure what

to say.”

I frowned, cupping the side of her face, pressing my forehead to hers. “Tell me you feel the same. Tell me you want the same.”

“I do. God, I do.” She tugged at the collar of my shirt with one hand, sighing. “I didn’t realize I had to say that aloud.”

“Yes, you did because I needed to hear it.” I pulled back, putting two fingers under her chin. “I also never want to hear anything about you getting between me and my family, okay?”

She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath before opening them.

“The fight between me and Maddox is fixed, I promise. But even if it wasn’t, even if my brothers and I never talked to each other again, that wouldn’t change what I feel for you, how much I love you, how much I need you.”

Then I couldn’t help myself any longer. I kissed her so hard that I was struggling for breath, and so was she. I wanted to consume her, and I wanted to do it for the rest of the day. I stopped only when I heard her moan, and then she pulled back.

“Oh God, Jake.” Her mouth was red. She was shaking slightly. My cock twitched at the sight.

“Let’s go to the hotel,” I said.

“But they’re expecting me back at the office,” she murmured.

“It was just a ruse to get you here. No one’s going to expect you to go back.”

Her blush intensified. “But what will everyone say? Won’t they get mad at me?”

I winked at her. “I know the boss. I’m sure something could be arranged. I want to spend the rest of the day with you.”

“Oh, I want the same,” she said. Then she grinned and pointed at the ice cream shop. “But I’m not leaving here without something delicious.”

“You’ve read my mind.” I wanted to buy her ice cream, but not for the reason she thought. I had plans for it. “Let’s go to the counter and take a box to go.”

She chose a lot of flavors. I couldn’t wait to taste them on her and explore her body.

I’d let Cal go because I didn’t know how long this would take, so we just took a cab to the hotel. The rain had stopped somewhat, so we didn’t open our umbrellas as we raced to the lobby, then headed straight to the elevator. She was shivering when we reached our floor.

“Oh, now I feel the cold,” she said. “But I have a feeling it’ll take no time for you to warm me up.”

“What gave me away?” I said as I slid the card through the door, pushing it open. The second we entered, I took the ice cream from her hands, putting it on the small stand in the entrance. Then I kissed her. This wasn’t like back at the ice cream shop—I really kissed her with everything I had, taking all I needed from her.

She responded in kind, tugging at my shirt. She wanted me naked, and I obliged, taking off my pants. I made no show of it, just quick, practical. I wanted to be naked, needing the skin-on-skin contact. It was easier to take off her clothes. She only had a dress and that damn lingerie that was surely going to kill me one day. It was lace too, of course, and it contrasted with her skin in the most delicious way. The bra was almost see-through, which I appreciated, with a larger piece of lace covering her nipples. The sight drove me insane.

“You shouldn’t go out of the house looking this sexy,” I growled, pressing her against a wall.

“Really? You’re going to fuss about that?”

“About everything,” I said. “All this belongs to me. Only I can see you like this.”

“Of course, only you.” She sounded shy.

I palmed her breast over the lace.

“Mine,” I whispered. I felt her nipple turn hard through the fabric. I felt a feral claim over her, and I wanted her to know it.

She looked at me with darkened eyes. Fuck yes. She knew it, and she liked it. This was my woman. She knew what I needed and had no qualms about giving me exactly that.

I moved one hand farther down, splaying my fingers wide on her stomach, pressing gently on her pubic bone and then pressing even harder as I slid it to her pussy, cupping her over the fabric.

“Yours,” she said before I could say anything and then smiled.

I kissed her again and then took off the rest of my clothes, including my boxers. Stepping back, I grabbed the box of ice cream, leading us deeper inside the suite. I put the box on the desk, opening it. She swallowed so hard that I heard her.

“That’s why you wanted a box to go,” she said.

“Oh yeah, babe.”

She turned her back to me. The scrap of silk between her ass cheeks was insanely sensual and sexy. She peeked at me over her shoulder as she unhooked her bra and then turned back around, showing me her breasts.

“Sit on the bed,” I said.

She did as I said.

“Part your thighs now. Very wide.”

She did that too. Her breath caught.

“Touch yourself. I want to see you.”

“Over the panties? Or do you want me to slide my hand in?”

My cock twitched. It was fully erect now. She licked her lips, looking at it.

“Start on the outside.”

She did exactly as I asked, rubbing her fingers up and down over the fabric.

I walked straight to her, dipping two fingers in the ice cream and smearing it around her nipple. I waited for a few seconds so the cold would seep into her, and then I put my mouth on the same spot.

“Oh, Jake.”

I felt her press her thighs together, and then she immediately slid her hand inside her panties. I was gloriously proud. I turned her on so fast that she couldn't bear not touching herself.

“Move it slowly.” I spoke against her skin while smearing ice cream on her other nipple. Then I repeated the same scenario, waiting for the cold to take effect before applying heat.

“I need to move faster,” she begged. Her voice was my undoing.

“No, babe. Now I'm taking over. Lift your gorgeous ass.”

As soon as it was up in the air, I slid her panties down.

“Lie down,” I ordered, and she did. The next second, I put a fine trail of ice cream from her navel right down to her pubic bone.

“Please, please, please,” she panted.

I didn't touch her pussy first. I licked the ice cream, letting it melt on my tongue so it was cold but not uncomfortable on her sensitive flesh. Then I pressed the flat of my tongue against her clit. She jackknifed, nearly kneeing me in the ear.

“Oh my God, Jake.”

I didn't give her any reprieve. She was so turned on already, I knew she would only need a few minutes to go over the edge. There was nothing I liked better than seeing her come. Scratch that. There was one thing that was better—feeling her give in to the pleasure.

I kept her thighs wide apart, so she wouldn't have the chance to knee me in the head again, and feasted on her pussy. I could still taste her underneath the ice cream. It was intoxicating. I kneaded her clit, alternating between that and pushing my tongue inside her until I heard her muffled scream. She'd covered her face with a pillow, yet I could still hear her. She was so sexy, and she was going to be mine forever.

When she let the pillow drop, I moved up on the bed, watching her. Her face was completely red. Her whole body was still shaking. She closed her eyes as if she wanted to internalize the last drops of bliss. I cupped her ass cheek, pulling her farther up the bed, and she blinked her eyes open.

"Jake, we'll need to buy ice cream more often and bring it home with us."

"Oh, we will," I assured her.

Then I turned her onto one side as well, facing me. She wiggled her toes, rotating her hips. She wanted me closer.

I kissed her slowly, savoring how relaxed she was after her orgasm but still on edge—waiting for the next one. I liked bringing her pure satisfaction. I pushed my cock in while I still kissed her. She moaned softly against my mouth. This feeling of utter and complete perfection would never cease to amaze me.

It felt like home, where I'd belonged all along. I thrust in and out, touching her everywhere. Her breasts were sensitive, even more so than usual, an aftereffect of the hot-and-cold game. I touched each, watching her beautiful face change as she gave in to more and more pleasure. And when she pressed her eyes closed, exhaling sharply, I knew it was time to heighten everything and bring her closer to the edge. She was there before me, reaching for her clit as I looked between us. I was beside myself. Her fingers touched her flesh, but they also touched my cock on every thrust, and I was done for. But I wanted my hands to touch and explore her, so I shifted us. She gasped, opening her eyes wide. I pulled her on top of me. She gave me a wicked grin, and then she started riding my cock in

earnest, moving up and down. She still had one hand on her clit. She was fucking gorgeous.

I pushed myself into a sitting position, kissing her torso as she rode me. I started going over the edge faster than I thought. Ecstasy pulled at every cell in my body, rolling through me. I lay down on the bed, giving in to this overwhelming sensation. She fell forward, bracing her arms on my chest, and rode me until she drew out every drop of our orgasms. Then I pulled her up to me so she was lying on my chest, her hot breath landing on my skin.

“I love you.”

“Hmm.” She moved her cheek against my skin.

“I take that to mean you love me too?” I asked.

“Presumptuous as always,” she murmured, a smile tugging at her lips. “But you’re right. I do love you. So damn much. I can’t believe you’re staying in Boston.”

“That’s where I belong,” I said without any hesitation.

She blinked her eyes open, pushing herself up a bit. “I also made a big decision.”

“Let’s hear it.” My heart was thumping fast.

“I’m going to follow my heart and stay in event planning and search for a job in that area. I’m sure I’ll find something in Boston. I’ll also keep my own company on the side, and hopefully, over time, I’ll build a brand strong enough that I can do it full-time. Although, honestly, I don’t mind a job either.”

“Babe, I’m putting this out there, but you don’t even have to work if you don’t want to.”

She glowered at me.

“Okay. I take it back.”

“Yes, please do. I like having a job.”

“I just love taking care of you.”

“And you can totally do that,” she said with a sly smile. “As long as you don’t let the ice cream reserves get too low

and you do one of those massages, I'm blissfully happy."

"Consider it done."

Epilogue

Natalie

One month later

“Hey, Mom, I’ve got some news to share with you and Dad.”

I was sitting cross-legged on the couch in the enormous living room in Jake’s home in Martha’s Vineyard, holding the phone with both hands. Jake was leaning against the huge window on the other side of the room, eyes trained on me.

“Let’s hear it,” she said. Dad came on the screen as well. They were both tan and had many blond strands in their hair.

“What is it?” Dad asked.

“Well, you know how I’ve been enjoying my work here with Maddox?”

“Yes. You told us about it,” Mom replied.

“I’ve decided to stay there for good.”

My predecessor, Susan, returned last week, but our last events had been such a success that Maddox decided we should host more of them. He needed a team of two for that.

My mom blinked. “What do you mean?” Her voice was a bit sharp. My stomach rolled.

“I didn’t feel fulfilled at my previous job. I did it because I didn’t want to let my degree go to waste, but I was never happy.”

Mom huffed.

“Darling, I realized that a long time ago. I just figured you’d want to persevere,” Dad said.

“You realized that?”

“It was written all over you. You never got excited when you told us about your work. I always assumed it was because Vince was making your life hard.”

“It wasn’t just him. Anyway, I’ll also keep planning gigs on the side until I can build my clientele. Mom, I know you’re disappointed, but I really love it.”

“Honey, I could never be disappointed in you. I did that job for years because it was the only one I could do. I figured you’d be safer with a degree and that you’d have more options. That’s all I ever wanted for you. But if this is what makes you happy, then by all means, go ahead with it. We’re proud of you no matter what.”

I could see in my mom’s expression that she was still a bit regretful, but this was good enough for me.

“Thank you both. That was honestly all I had to say. What are your plans today?”

“We’re spending some alone time with our granddaughter. That way, we can pamper her away from your sister’s scrutinizing eyes.” Mom’s smile was smug.

“Mom, don’t piss her off. She’ll revoke grandparent privilege.”

“No, she won’t. She likes the free time too much.” Mom sent me an air kiss. “Bye, darling. And say hi to Jake for us.”

I turned the phone. “He’s right here.”

I’d introduced Jake to them in one of our phone calls. As soon as we’d hung up, Mom texted to inform me he had their full approval.

“Hi. Nice to see you two again,” he said.

“Jake, finally we get to talk to you again. Our daughter is keeping you away from us.”

“No, I’m not, Mom,” I huffed. “But last time you kept him on the phone for forty-five minutes.”

“Course I did. It was the first time we met him. Had we been in Boston, I would’ve cooked a nice meal and we’d have had *hours* together.”

“We can’t wait to meet you at Christmas,” Mom said.

I sighed.

I so wished they would visit sooner, but I understood that it wasn't possible. Jake and I were toying with the idea of visiting them, but we had so much going on at the moment that we weren't sure when. He'd moved from the hotel into my cozy but tiny home, and we were looking for something bigger. Thankfully, since October had rolled in, it wasn't boiling hot inside anymore.

"Likewise," he said.

Turning the phone around, I gave them an air kiss before hanging up. I could barely believe my life now. The restraining order worked, and Vince was out of my hair. He even sent me a cryptic message that he'd moved to California and never wanted to hear from me again, which sent Jake and me into fits of laughter. *He* was always the one to contact *me*. But I was certain that was all over now.

Jake grinned and sat on the couch next to me. "Told you your parents were going to take it well."

"Yeah, I think they took it as best as they could, but they'll eventually get used to it, especially Mom. I think if they ever come back here for an extended time and see how happy I am, they'll agree it's the right decision."

I was so happy that things were falling into place. Jake made me happier than ever. I had my dream job. What more could I ask for?

"I love this place so much. Thanks for agreeing to come one day early," I said. Abe's birthday was tomorrow. We came up to the Vineyard yesterday, very late at night. They were all arriving in about two hours: Jeannie and Abe, Jake's brothers, and his half brothers. Abe insisted he only needed his family around him.

"Whatever you want, babe," he said. "I told you. You have me wrapped around your little finger."

"Hmm, one of these days, you're going to regret you ever said that to me because I'm going to make full use of it."

"I can't wait."

From the kitchen area, we heard a loud bang. The chef was cleaning up. We had a delicious dinner. Donald had prepared tuna tataki with sesame for starters and delicious cannelloni filled with feta and spinach as the main course. We had ice cream for dessert, and now he was cleaning up all by himself.

“Shouldn’t we help?” I asked.

“No, don’t worry about it, baby, okay?”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Want to take a walk around the property? These are our last moments alone for the rest of the weekend.”

“Yeah, let’s go. It’s going to be fun having everyone here.”

“I know. But I want you just for me for a while longer.”

I chuckled as we walked down the terrace, hand in hand.

“What?” he asked.

“Could you have imagined throwing a birthday party for someone and inviting your *whole* family here?”

“No,” he answered without hesitation. “Although Grandmother had convinced me to throw it for her.”

“Yeah, but you only begrudgingly agreed to that, right?”

“I’m nothing if not honest,” he said with a shrug and a huge smile.

“Hey, it’s about time for the sunset,” I noted. “Do you think we could still find that spot?”

“Yes, we can.”

He said it so quickly that I was immediately suspicious. Had he timed this? Knowing my schedule-obsessed, broody guy, he might have. Then again, I didn’t mind, because I didn’t want to miss out on the sunset. It truly had been a magical experience, and I was eager to relive it now that things were so different.

Jake loved me, and I loved him. I’d never been so happy in my life. If I was honest, I had never imagined a person could feel so much joy anyway, every day of their life.

He put his hand on the small of my back as he led me up a small trail between the trees.

“Oh yeah. This is a magic spot. Truly.” We looked through the trees, and sure enough, the sun was so beautiful. It felt almost unreal.

It was a different color from what I remembered. Not as orange, more pink, or was it the sky reflecting in the water, making me think the sun was also pink? It didn't matter. It was breathtaking no matter what.

“Thank you for showing me this place.”

“Natalie,” Jake said. His voice sounded different. I turned to look at him. “Thank you for being part of my life. You showed up so unexpectedly, and everything about you just drew me in.”

“Everything?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I puked on my way here.”

“You were adorable, and I was trying very hard not to acknowledge that. But I don't have to pretend anymore, ever. You're all I ever wanted.” He took a step back. I wondered if that meant he already wanted us to go. The sun had—

Oh my God, he was on one knee.

On *one knee*.

He brought his hand out from behind his back. I hadn't even realized it had been hidden out of sight. There was a velvet ring box in his hand, and he opened it, revealing a gorgeous translucent stone.

“Natalie, I think this is where the story first began, right here in this spot.”

His eyes were a bit glassy. My throat closed up.

“This was where I knew you were different and that you do something to me.”

“What?” I murmured.

“I didn’t know back then, but now I do. You gave me an appetite for life and happiness. I want to live through everything that life has to offer with you at my side. Will you be my wife?”

“Yes, Jake. Yes, I want to—” The words got lost as my throat clogged up even more. I had to cough to clear it. I was completely teary-eyed, but I didn’t care. I saw him as if it were through a misty rain as he put the ring on my finger before getting up.

“I love you, Natalie.”

“Oh, I love you so much. So, so much.”

I was swooning when he kissed me. His lips were soft but also demanding. I put my hands around his neck and pressed my whole body to his. He groaned against my mouth as I kissed him in the most wicked way I knew. I was burning for him: my body, my heart, and my mind.

I loved this man to the moon and back, and I couldn’t be happier.

The Whitleys arrived two hours later.

“You’ve got a great place here,” Maddox said, looking around the yard as everyone came in from the driveway. Leo and Nick were right behind him. Since this was the first time they’d been here, I could totally relate to their surprise. Leo looked from one side of the yard to the other as if mentally measuring how big it was. Yeah, I could *totally* relate.

As we walked inside, Jeannie took my hand. “Oh, I had a feeling Jake was going to propose.”

Several of the guys whistled while they congratulated us. Jake nodded, looking proud of himself. He was rolling Jeannie and Abe’s suitcase inside. Everyone else was in charge of their own.

“Oh, who knew he could be such a romantic?” Jeannie went on.

“You two want the same room as always?” Jake asked his grandparents.

“Yes, please,” Abe said.

“Okay. I’ll take your luggage upstairs.”

“Our chef has prepped some finger food for you in case anyone is hungry,” I offered.

There was a chorus of “No, we ate in Boston.”

Abe went directly upstairs. Leo, Maddox, Nick, Colton, and Gabe followed him, carrying their bags. Only Jeannie, Spencer, and Cade remained downstairs with us.

“I’m going to the kitchen anyway,” Cade announced. “I brought some coffee. Last time I was here, my dearest brother had one that sucked. Not like I own a coffee company or anything.”

Jake chuckled. “Knock yourself out, dude. Coffee’s coffee to me.”

Cade just stared at him. I bit my lower lip. “You do not say that to a coffee connoisseur,” I said.

Cade nodded. “Thank you, Natalie.”

“Have at it,” Jake said. “I’m going upstairs real quick.”

“I’ve been a connoisseur since high school,” Cade said as soon as Jake left.

Jeannie straightened up, rolling her shoulders. Her blue eyes were suddenly full of mischief.

“Speaking of high school, have you heard from Meredith lately?” Jeannie asked as Cade walked to the kitchen island, putting the huge paper bag he was carrying in one arm on the counter.

Cade’s eyebrows shot up. “Meredith? No.”

“Right,” Jeannie said with a knowing smile.

“What’s this about?” Spencer asked Jeannie, eyeing his brother as if calculating if he was far enough away to be out of earshot.

I grinned, remembering what Jeannie said about the twins: Cade was the troublemaker, Spencer the peacemaker. And here he was, looking after his twin brother.

“I was just curious. They used to be friends in high school. I always wondered if there was more between them or if there *could* be more. I guess they’ll find out soon enough.”

“Grandmother, what did you do?” Spencer asked in a sharp tone.

Jeannie just winked. “Cade’s in for a huge surprise. Now come on. Let’s go to the kitchen. I’m suddenly in the mood for that finger food Natalie praised so much.”

Spencer and I exchanged a glance as the three of us headed to the kitchen. Jeannie was playing matchmaker again. Seeing how successful she’d been with Jake and me had probably convinced her it was the right thing to do. Then again, we were immensely happy, so who was I to argue?

“Do you think we should warn Cade?” I asked Spencer.

He shook his head, chuckling. “No. When Grandmother plans something, it’s better if you don’t see anything coming.”

Dear Reader,

This is the end of Jake’s story. To find out when Cade’s story will be published [please sign up HERE to my NEWSLETTER to receive news about upcoming releases and giveaways.](#)

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