



*mine & to*

# KEEP

*Southern Wedding Series*

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# NATASHA MADISON

**mine to keep**

**natasha madison**

# copyright

Copyright © 2023 Natasha Madison. E-Book, Audio & Print  
Edition

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used factiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons or living or dead, events or locals are entirely coincidental.

The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/Use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owner.

**Cover Design:** [Jay Aheer](#)

**Editing done by Jenny Sims** Editing4Indies

**Editing done by Karen Hrdicka** Barren Acres Editing

**[Proofing Julie Deaton by Deaton Author Services](#)**

**[Proofing by Judy's Proofreading](#)**

**[Proofing by Becky at Bookcase Media](#)**

**Cover Picture by:** TGTRN Photo

# **contents**

FAMILY TREE's for: Southern Wedding, the Southern,  
SOMETHING SO, THIS IS, ONLY ONE & MADE  
FOR

About Mine To Keep

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue One](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About Natasha Madison](#)

[Also by Natasha Madison](#)

**family tree's for:  
southern wedding,  
the southern,  
something so, this is,  
only one & made for**

**Southern Wedding Family Tree**

*Mine To Have*

Harlow & Travis

Charlotte

Theo

*Mine To Hold*

Shelby & Ace

Arya

*Mine To Cherish*

Clarabella & Luke

Benjamin

*Mine to Love*

Presley & Bennett

Violet

Sebastian

*Mine To Take*

Sofia Barnes & Matthew Petrov

***Mine To Promise***

Stefano Dimitris & Addison

Avery

***Mine To Honor***

Levi & Eva

Selena 'Cici'

***Mine To Keep***

Grace Barnes & Caine Griffin

Meadow

**Southern Family Tree**

Billy and Charlotte

(Mother and father to Kallie and Casey)

***Southern Chance***

Kallie & Jacob McIntyre

Ethan McIntyre (Savannah's Son)

Amelia (*Southern Secrets*)

Travis

***Southern Comfort***

Olivia & Casey Barnes

Quinn (*Southern Heat*)

Reed (*Southern Sunshine*)

Harlow (*Mine to Have*)

***Southern Storm***

Savannah & Beau Huntington

Ethan McIntyre (Jacob's son)

Chelsea (*Southern Heart*)

Toby

Keith

***Southern Sunrise***

Emily & Ethan McIntyre

Gabriel

Aubrey

***Southern Heart***

Chelsea Huntington & Mayson Carey

Tucker

***Southern Heat***

Willow & Quinn Barnes

Grace (*Mine To Keep*)

Charlie

***Southern Secrets***

Amelia McIntyre & Asher

JB Normand

***Southern Sunshine***



Hazel & Reed Barnes

Sofia (*Mine To Take*)

Kaine

Denver

**SOMETHING SO, THIS IS ONLY ONE & MADE FOR  
FAMILY TREE!**

Hockey Series

**SOMETHING SO SERIES**

***Something So Right***

Parker & Cooper Stone

Matthew Grant (*Something So Perfect*)

Allison Grant (*Something So Irresistible*)

Zara Stone (*This Is Crazy*)

Zoe Stone (*This Is Wild*)

Justin Stone (*This Is Forever*)

***Something So Perfect***

Matthew Grant & Karrie

Cooper (*Only One Regret*)

Frances (*Only One Love*)

Vivienne (*Made For You*)

Chase (*Made For Me*)

***Something So Irresistible***

Allison Grant & Max Horton

Michael (*Only One Mistake*)

Alexandria (*Only One Forever*)

***Something So Unscripted***

Denise Horton & Zack Morrow

Jack

Joshua

Elizabeth

**THIS IS SERIES**

***This Is Crazy***

Zara Stone & Evan Richards

Zoey

Stone (*Made for Stone*)

***This Is Wild***

Zoe Stone & Viktor Petrov

Matthew (*Mine To Take*)

Zara

Lexi

***This Is Love***

Vivienne Paradis & Mark Dimitris

Karrie

Stefano (*Mine To Promise*)

Angelica

***This Is Forever***

Caroline Woods & Justin Stone

Dylan Stone (Formally Woods) (Only One Forever)

Christopher

Abigail (Made For Us)

Gabriella (Made For Romeo)

**ONLY ONE SERIES**

***Only One Kiss***

Candace Richards & Ralph Weber

Ariella

Brookes

***Only One Chance***

Layla Paterson & Miller Adams

Clarke

***Only One Night***

Evelyn & Manning Stevenson

Jaxon

Victoria

***Only One Touch***

Becca & Nico Harrison

Phoenix

Dallas

***Only One Regret***

Erika & Cooper Grant

Emma

Mia

Parker

Matthew

Leo

Felicia

***Only One Mistake***

Jillian & Michael Horton

Jamieson

Bianca

Bailey

***Only One Love***

Frances Grant & Brad Wilson

Stella

***Only One Forever***

Dylan Stone & Alex Horton

Maddox

Maya

Maverick

James

**Made For Me**

Julia & Chase Grant

**Made For You**

Vivienne Grant & Xavier Montgomery

**Made For Us**

Abigail Stone & Tristan Weise

Penelope

Payton

**Made For Romeo**

Romeo Beckett & Gabriella Stone

# about mine to keep

## Grace

It wasn't hard for me to walk away from my family without looking back—the time had come for me to live for myself.

New city. New job.

My new boss? He's gorgeous.

It's too bad that handsome face is wasted on such a condescending prick.

He hates me, and the feeling is mutual.

The only reason he may not be the literal devil is because he's a devoted single dad, making it clear Caine is, in fact, capable of human emotion.

## Caine

I'm good at two things:

1. Raising my daughter to be strong and independent.
2. My job.

When my new assistant walks into the office, I become good at ignoring her. She's sassy. Smart. Beautiful.

Much younger and off-limits for more reasons than I can  
count.

That doesn't mean I want her any less.

She hates me—but as each day goes by, it's harder and harder  
to remember why I hate her too.

# prologue

. . .

*D*earest Love,

*Boy, has love been busy.*

*Every single time I turn around, I see two people falling in love.*

*It's amazing and magnificent.*

*Unless you are Grace and Caine, who think their time for love has come and gone.*

*He's a divorced father.*

*She's just starting to live her life.*

*And they just found out they will be working together.*

*Can they survive without killing each other?*

*Only time will tell.*

*XOXO*

*Love NM*



# one

. . .

Grace

“*T*his is it,” I tell myself as I press the button to turn the car off before grabbing my keys and pulling the handle to open the door. The hot, humid air hits me right away as I put one foot down on the gravel and dust on the side of the road.

I slip my phone into the back pocket of my jean shorts as I turn to look at the house where I spent so much of my childhood. Scratch that, it’s the house where all of us spent most of our childhoods. It was like the foundation of our lives. The thought makes my heart squeeze just a touch, but I push it away. I smile when I look toward the back of the house, where I see the big fields. The sound of kids running and screaming fills the air. People stand around in groups talking to each other. The smell of the barbecue hits my nose as I make my way from the front of my house to the back.

As soon as I round the corner, I see there might be over a hundred people here today, which is the normal every Sunday lunch at my great-grandparents’ farm. It started with just the family, and then the workers were invited, which then led to

anyone who was in town and had nothing to do could come on over and have a place to be.

I spot my cousins sitting around a white plastic table, laughing at something that one of them said. I quickly do a scan of the yard, knowing the first people I have to go say hello to are my great-grandparents, who sit at another round table talking to a couple of friends of theirs. My great-grandmother Charlotte sits beside my great-grandfather Billy, who always has his arm draped around her chair. I even know his thumb caresses her shoulder. His cowboy hat sits on his head. In all my twenty-four years, I've seen him without his hat maybe two times, three at most.

I zigzag through the people, smiling as I make my way toward the table. "Hi," I greet them when I get close enough. My great-grandmother looks up at me, her light-green eyes lighting up even more when she sees me.

She puts her hands together before holding them up for me to bend and give her a kiss. "Sweetheart." She calls me by my nickname, but truth be told, all the girls are called sweetheart. My cousin Audrey says it's because there are so many of us, and she can't keep up anymore. "You came."

"Of course, I came." I lean down to hug her and kiss her on the cheek. "Wouldn't miss this on my last day." I smile at her as I see the tears form in her eyes. "No crying." My voice is tight as I blink away the tears starting to form.

"Come here, girl," my great-grandfather says, and I walk around to his side of the chair. He holds out his hand to me, and I grab it. This same hand held mine when I said I was

ready to ride the horse by myself, but shocking, I was wrong. He knew even then, and instead of just leaving me, he held it like a vise. “You going to ride Daisy Bean before you leave?” He asks me about my horse.

“Yup,” I answer, looking around for my dad. “I promised Dad I would go on one more ride before I leave town and ship out to war.” I wink at him as he laughs.

“I’ll see you in a bit, then.” He releases my hand, not looking at me, but I can see the tears forming in his eyes.

I don’t know why I thought leaving would be easy, but I did. I never expected it to hit me like this. I was sitting in the barn one day, looking around, and all I kept thinking was *is this it? Is this where I’m meant to be?* I had just graduated with a bachelor’s degree in business, but I still had no idea what I wanted to do. So, after college I came back home, and for the past year, I’ve been running my father’s companies. He has ten equine therapy farms. He started when he was twenty with two horses, and it took off. The busiest one of all is the military rehab facility he has. I help run the schedule and take care of the books. It’s when I started taking care of the books that I got more and more interested in accounting. So, while I go off on my own, I’ll be taking online classes to earn my accounting degree to become a certified public accountant. I haven’t even told my family about it. The minute I got accepted into the program, I told my parents I was thinking about moving. It shocked them, but then again, it didn’t shock them if that makes any sense. I wasn’t happy. I was literally just living day by day. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I was content, but they knew I was getting bored.

After I told them I was leaving, I put the second plan into motion. I sent my CV to a friend who works at a recruitment agency. I got a couple of offers but accepted one because she told me it was a family-run company. Something just pulled me toward it, so I accepted being a personal assistant to the vice president. All they know is I got a job working for a company in the city. I kept the rest to myself because everyone can get in your business when you have a family like mine.

“There she is,” I hear from beside me and look over to see my mother walking toward me, her black hair blowing in the wind. “Your father was wondering when you would be getting here.” My parents met when he found my mother unconscious after being left for dead. He pulled her out of the house and never let her go. “Did you finish packing?”

“I did,” I tell her, smiling. “It’s all done. No turning back now.” I try to make a joke of it as my heart spasms in my chest.

“I hope not,” she says as we turn and walk toward the barn. “I don’t want you to freak out,” she says, and I stop walking.

“You know, just because someone says I don’t want you to freak out doesn’t mean someone isn’t going to freak out,” I inform her, putting my hands on my hips, trying not to freak out.

“Okay, so I was talking to Olivia.” She mentions my grandmother who used to be a model, loves to decorate houses, and goes above and beyond for everyone. I must get about forty packages a month with stuff she buys for me

because she thought about me. “Well, she asked to see the apartment you’re renting.” I close my eyes because I can only imagine where this is going. “And well, she might have...” I put my hands on my face, and my head falls back. “Perhaps called Levi and set up to have it arranged and ready for you.”

“Mom,” I moan, “I’m supposed to be moving into the apartment tonight. Like leaving here...” I point down at the grass. “And flying there and moving in.”

“Um, about that.” She holds up her hand, and I can only shake my head.

“No,” I say, not liking her expression right now.

“Your grandfather—” I hold up my hand. My grandfather is, well, there are no words for my grandfather. He is a tech guru. He owns one of the highest-rated security companies in the world, and, bottom line, he’s the biggest badass I’ve ever met in my life. He’s also overly protective of us all.

“Stop right there.” I point at her. “Don’t you dare say one more word.”

“Okay.” She rolls her lips. “He sort of had someone go out there to, I don’t know what you call it. He had a couple of alarms put in for your protection.”

“What? Why?” I swear I’m at the point where I’m pouting.

“You have to pick your battles, Grace,” my mother warns. “You already aren’t moving into a place he bought for you. Instead, living in a two-bedroom condo.”

“Because I’m one person, so having a five-bedroom penthouse is just plain dumb. And then people wonder why I

never tell them anything,” I hiss. “And by people, I mean Grandma and Grandpa.”

“I can’t believe you’re leaving.” I know she’s trying to change the subject. “The house is going to be so empty without you.” She reaches for my hand.

I smile at her. “Charlie is planning on turning my room into a man cave.” I inform her of the plans my brother started to make the minute I told my parents I was moving out.

My mother throws her head back and laughs. “He did mention that he thinks we should knock down the wall between your rooms and make a huge en suite.”

I shake my head. “Well, I don’t think you have to ever worry about him moving out, like ever.” I smile.

We turn and start to walk back toward the barn. “It’s not going to be the same without you.”

“I know.” I look down at my feet. “I’m going to miss this too.” I look over my shoulder at everyone. “Even though I can’t do anything without someone knowing something.” We both laugh.

“I was wondering if you forgot about me.” I look over to see my father walking out of the barn. He’s wearing jeans and a T-shirt, his trusty old worn cowboy boots covered in dust and dirt.

“I’m not talking to you,” I say right away, and he stops mid-step.

“What did I do?” he asks, then looks over at my mother, who pretends to look around as if searching for something.

“Did you tell Grandpa Casey where I was going to live?” I ask.

“Um...” he says. I see it written on his face that he’s trying to think of something to say.

“I specifically said to you, ‘Please don’t tell anyone because I didn’t want to make a huge fuss about it.’”

“Gracie.” He uses my nickname he gave me when I was a baby. “He asked me where you were staying. What kind of father would I be if I didn’t know where his only daughter would be living? Besides, do you think you could have kept it from him?” His eyebrows rise as he waits for me to answer his question.

“The point is, I didn’t want to make a big deal out of this. I wanted to move into the place and make it my own. I wanted to move into the place and find out who my neighbors were, not be given a spreadsheet about them.”

“Did he send you his report?” he asks, shocked.

“There’s a report?” I shriek. Throwing my hands up in the air, I look over at my mother to see if she knows about this report, but I know right away she does when she avoids looking at me and instead looks down at her feet and then off to the side. Basically, she looks anywhere but at me.

“No.” My father covers his mistake. “Of course not.” He pffts out. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Unbelievable.” I put my hands on my hips. “Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t tell you where I’m working.” He then

glares at me. “Or else I’d be showing up to work, and surprise... my grandfather owns the company.”

“He’s only done that once.” My father holds up his hand. “And it was a good investment.”

“He bought a hockey team.” I throw my hands up. “He’s never even been on skates.”

“That was because...” My father stops talking to hold up his finger. “There was a good reason for that.”

“There is no good reason for that. Not one good reason for it besides trying to strong-arm Sofia’s husband.” I mention my cousin and her new husband. I actually got the apartment from his cousin’s best friend, Levi.

“I don’t want to fight with you on your last day here,” my father says. “Now let’s get going since you have a flight to catch.” He turns to walk into the barn. “Unless you want to borrow the jet, or we can drive you there.”

“Quinn,” my mother grumbles between clenched teeth, “at this point, she’s not going to come home, ever.”

My father gasps, putting a hand to his heart. “She would never.”

I smirk at him. “Never say never, Dad.” I tilt my head to the side. “Never say never.” I walk past him toward the stable that holds my horse, never thinking those words would come back to haunt me.



## two

. . .

Caine

“Chop-chop,” I prod as I walk out of the house with Meadow behind me. I wait for her to step out of the doorway before I shut it behind us. She is already down two steps when I join her, holding out my hand for her to take as we make our way toward the BMW SUV.

“Chop-chop, Daddy,” she echoes, looking up at me. Her pigtails are already starting to fall, one lopsided. One hand on the railing, the other is in mine until we get to the bottom of the steps, where she lets go of my hand. “Choppy-choppy.” She claps her hands, mimicking how I usually do chop-chop when we need to run out of the house. I shake my head at her as I walk to the SUV and open the back door. I wait to see if she wants me to lift her to put her in or if she’ll do it herself. She grabs my hand before stepping up into the car and getting into her car seat. I toss her little pink backpack onto the seat next to her before I buckle her in. “Chop-chop,” she repeats, and I smile at her, looking into her blue eyes that are exactly like mine. “Daddy.”

“Chop-chop, baby girl.” I kiss her nose before closing the door and getting into the front seat. I turn on the car and back

out of the driveway and head toward her daycare.

“Daddy,” Meadow calls me, “can we listen to *Encanto*?”

I inwardly groan at this request. “You want me to put on *Encanto*?”

““We Don’t Talk About Bruno,”” she coos in her sweet voice while she looks out the window.

“Great,” I say as I touch the screen in the middle of the console, pulling up Spotify and clicking Meadow’s playlist. In a matter of seconds, the music fills the car. It feels like fingernails down the chalkboard when the song starts to sing about Bruno. I pull into the daycare parking lot, putting the car in park, and shutting it off so the music will stop. I swear my brain sighs with relief when it happens. I was happy we were over the “Baby Shark” thing the first couple of times, but now I’m stuck on Bruno.

I open the driver’s door before opening the back door and unbuckling her seat belt and grabbing her backpack. “Do you want to take your backpack in, or do you want me to carry it?”

I always ask her because there is nothing quite like a little tantrum of her wanting to carry in the bag and then a full-blown tear fest, all this after I carried the bag into the daycare. She turned four, and her independence came crashing into her. She had to try to do everything herself. And I mean everything, from picking her clothes to brushing her own hair. It was a learning curve for me more than anything.

“Me,” she states as I pick her up and place her on the ground and hand her the backpack.

“Do you want me to help you?” I ask her. Another thing I have to do because, again, no one needs to go through the tears on a Monday morning.

“I can do it,” she says the four words I hear all day long. The words literally tattooed on my brain. I stand here for a second, watching her grab the bag from me and slipping her arm through one loop before trying to get the second one in.

I give her a second to figure it out before I speak up, hoping to speed up the process, and ask her, “Can I help you?” Thankfully she nods her head, giving me the go-ahead, so I pull it up for her. “There you go.”

She holds out her hand for me to grab as we walk into the daycare. I put in the code for the door before opening it and hold it open for her to walk through. “Dad, tonight can we have pasta?” she asks me as we walk down the carpeted hallway. Wooden cubbies line the right side of the wall with hooks under them, some with jackets already hanging, and a long wooden bench. We pass two classrooms before Meadow stops by her hook. “Can we have the pasta with the chicken and the cheese?” She slips the backpack off her shoulders, and it lands on my foot.

“Sure,” I agree, picking her bag up and hanging it on her hook with her name under it. “Maybe we can go for a walk to the park after dinner,” I tell her, and she jumps up and down.

“Yeah, I can do the monkey bars,” she announces, walking toward the blue classroom door. The bottom half of the door is closed, with a picture of a dragonfly on it, while the top half of the door is open.

“Good morning, Meadow,” Melanie, her educator, greets her as she opens the door. “How are you this morning?”

“Good,” Meadow answers as I squat down next to her.

“Have a good day, baby,” I say softly, putting my hands on her hips.

“I’m not a baby,” she reminds me. “I’m four.”

“How could I ever forget?” I reply as she comes over and kisses my lips. “Have a great day, big girl.”

“Bye, Daddy,” she says, right before she dashes off to the table where they are doing some sort of craft activity that will end up on my fridge.

I stand and close the door, seeing her sitting down talking to the little girl beside her, before I turn and walk out of the daycare. I take a huge deep inhale as I step into the heat and head for my car.

Opening the door, I get in, starting it right away before reaching for my seat belt. The phone rings as soon as I put the car in drive. The Bluetooth picks it up, so I press the connect button on the middle screen.

“Hello,” I answer, not even knowing who is calling. “Caine Griffin.”

“It’s so annoying when you do that,” my brother, Nash, gripes as soon as I stop talking, making me laugh.

“It’s professional. You should try it instead of saying *yo*.” I pull away from the daycare and head straight to the coffee shop.

Now it's his turn to laugh. "You see, old man, I say yo when I know who it is. We have something called caller ID. So, I can see who's calling me."

I roll my eyes. "I'm only five years older than you," I remind him.

"That is thirty-five years in dog years."

"Is this what you called me for, to tell me how old I am in dog years?" I ask him, pulling into the drive-through.

"As much fun as that was, no," he says, and I move my head to the side, counting how many cars are in front of me. "I'm reminding you that you have your new assistant starting today." I put my head back on the rest and close my eyes, groaning loudly. "I see you forgot."

"I don't know why Martina has to retire," I huff.

"She's seventy-five," Nash reminds me, "and it's not like she didn't give you warning." The car in front of me moves forward one spot. "She told you last year she was retiring."

"I know," I say, tapping the steering wheel, "but retiring is overrated. It's boring."

"How would you know anything about retiring? You aren't even forty yet."

"Whatever," I huff. "Do we know who this new girl is?"

"I saw her résumé quickly since Loren," he mentions our human resources director, "hired her. She said she's overqualified, so you know what that means."

“Ugh, it means she’s going to think she knows everything.”

“No,” he says, laughing, “it means you can’t be the barbarian you are. This isn’t Martina, where all you had to do was grunt and she knew what you meant. This is a new person and you and her will have to learn to work together. You know, like when you teach Meadow about making new friends.”

“Don’t you know the rule? Do as I say, not as I do.” I shake my head. “That’s your wisdom for the day. I’ll be in the office in about twenty.”

“Grab me a coffee too. Not the fancy shit you drink, just a regular coffee.”

“I don’t do fancy shit,” I deny. “It’s an iced shaken espresso with milk.”

“Whatever. See you in twenty,” he says, hanging up the phone.

I shake my head as I order our coffees. I’m driving past the office building when I see a woman walking toward the big glass door. Her blondish-brown hair is wavy and blowing in the wind. She looks like one of those fairies from the shows Meadow watches. My eyes go straight from her hair that reaches her waist to her ass. The beige skirt she’s wearing goes past her knees, but it hugs every fucking curve. She reaches out and opens the door with her free hand while the other hand holds her black purse. I pull into the garage driveway, hitting the red button before I look back over and see she’s already inside. “What is wrong with you?” I ask myself. “Ogling

strangers is a new low.” The garage door opens, so I drive into the underground parking.

I park in my designated spot, seeing my name right above the company name, Cottrell Group. A company my parents started when Nash was born. They were both working for investment firms and decided they would take their portfolio and see what they could do on their own. They worked out of an office at home for many years until they outgrew it. They then decided to open a branch in New York because of Wall Street. Their portfolio only grew bigger. I got the bug to follow in their footsteps, so I graduated from the University of Philadelphia with a bachelor’s degree in finance. I then went on to Harvard Law School, where I graduated with a master’s degree in finance with an undergrad in law.

During this time, my parents expanded to California, Chicago, Texas, and Washington, DC, where I run the show. I’m the managing director and portfolio manager. My brother, who just got his bachelor’s degree, wanted to take over California. Even though we have our own branches, we still like to occasionally drop into each other’s offices.

On one of my trips to California, I met Meadow’s mom. It was a whirlwind affair or more like what I thought would be a one-night stand, but a month later, she was still there. It was two weeks after that we found out she was pregnant. A baby was not in the plans, especially since I didn’t really know her. I did what I thought was best, I asked her to marry me. The marriage lasted a whole year, a little less if we are honest. We were too swept away by the fact we were having a baby to see we had nothing in common. I liked to stay home on the

weekends, while she wanted to hit up all the posh places. She hated living in Washington, and most of all, she hated being a mother. Two months after Meadow was born, she told me she was leaving. She gave up full custody of Meadow, leaving me to figure out how to be a dad and a mom all at the same time. She relocated in a matter of weeks, and in the past four years, she's seen Meadow twice. Let's just say Meadow isn't high on her list of things to do.

Carrying the coffees in my hand, I press the elevator button with my elbow. The ping comes soon after, and the silver doors open. I walk in, pressing the number 7 button before moving to the side in case someone comes in. It stops at the lobby, and five people get in. By the time we get to my floor, I'm the only one left in the elevator. I step out and come face-to-face with the glass doors with the company name on it. Pulling open the door, I smile at Nicoletta, the receptionist. "Good morning," I greet her as she answers the phone and lifts her hand to wave at me.

I walk past her desk into the office space. The five offices each have a desk in front of them. I walk to my corner office, passing by some of the other personal assistants as I say good morning. My office door is open, and the desk outside of it is bare. All of Martina's stuff is gone. The only things on the desk are two computer screens, a keyboard, and a phone.

I look down as I cross into my office, passing the black leather couch in the corner that is put there just for show. I've never actually sat on it. Instead, I just toss my shit on there when I walk in.



I walk to the glass desk, putting the coffees down before I pull out the black chair. I take the phone out of my inside jacket pocket and toss it on the desk. “Oh, good, you’re here.” I look up to see Loren coming into the office, followed by a girl. My eyes go from Loren to the girl to my brother, who is waiting behind the girl.

“I am,” I confirm, suddenly taking in the girl standing beside Loren. My mouth almost hangs open as I see it’s the ass I was looking at not long ago. The girl standing there must be five foot three, at most. She’s a good five foot three but she’s wearing the highest heels I’ve ever seen. Her skirt is even tighter than it looked before, with a huge band around her tiny waist. She’s wearing a light-brown shirt that flows, so it must be silk, there is a bow at her neck and her sleeves stop at her elbows with thick cuffs. My eyes roam to her green eyes, or are they a dark blue? She looks straight at me with a smile on her face. “What’s going on?”

“I would like you to meet your new PA,” Loren replies with a smile on her face as she turns toward the woman. I stare at her and then back at the girl, then at Nash, laughing suddenly.

“This is a joke,” I say, putting my hands on my hips. “What day is it?” I ask, looking at the girl in front of me. She looks like she’s in high school. “Is today April Fools’?”

“Caine,” my brother chides, and I point at him.

“This is a joke. Okay, very funny, everyone.” I nod my head at the girl. “You got me.”

“Caine,” Loren says, her voice tight, “I would like you to meet Grace Barnes.” My eyes swing straight to her. “She is your new personal assistant.”

“Wait,” I reply, holding up my hand, “this isn’t a joke? She looks like she just got out of high school. Actually, it looks like she’s still in high school.”

“I don’t know if I should say thank you or not,” Grace finally says, her voice is soft. She looks over at Loren. “Also, I’m not sure if you should assume anything. You know what they say.” She holds her hands in front of her. “It would make an ass out of you and me. But considering what I just heard, I’m pretty sure there is only one ass in the room.” My mouth hangs open while Nash snorts.

“Grace,” he says, “why don’t I show you around?”

“I don’t think that is necessary.” She looks at Loren. “Perhaps this isn’t going to work.”

*Wait a second, is she going to quit on me?* I think as Nash steps forward. “If you two would give me a minute with my brother,” he suggests, and Loren just glares at me. “You can go fill out all that paperwork and get the parking stuff figured out.” Grace smiles at Nash before she nods and walks out of the office.

“Are you out of your mind?” Loren grumbles between clenched teeth. “She’s overly qualified.”

“To do what?” I ask, and she shakes her head, walking out of the office. “Share my snacks at recess?”

“Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you?” Nash prods.

“What is wrong with me?” I huff, looking out of the office and seeing Loren introduce Grace to another PA. She smiles and laughs at something the other person says. “What is wrong with Loren? How could she hire that girl? She looks like”—I don’t know what to say—“she looks like she’s fresh out of school.”

“Well, I’ve seen her résumé.” He looks down and puts his hands in his pockets. “And I can tell you, she’s a bit more qualified than you think. Actually, I know she is.”

“Then you take her,” I spit out, acting like my four-year-old about to have a tantrum. He just looks at me. “Where is her résumé?” I ask, sitting down in the chair. “Let me look it over, and then we will talk.”

# three

. . .

Grace

The minute I walk out of the office, I am talking myself out of grabbing my bag and getting the fuck out of here. I shake my hands in front of me, trying to get them to stop shaking. Last night was beyond a clusterfuck. I arrived after eight, only to find out my apartment wasn't ready for me to move in. They were just starting to paint it, so I had to check in to the nearest hotel. I was so scared I would sleep through my alarm, I made sure to request a wake-up call by the front desk. I also had four different alarms set. I changed my outfit five times, making sure I looked the part, as they say. If I was back home, it would be jeans and a T-shirt with my cowboy boots, but we weren't in the country. Even coming in here, I arrived thirty minutes earlier than expected. It was going amazing, and I was already half in love with this place until I met my boss.

His blue suit molds his body; you can tell he works out. His light-brown hair is shaved on the sides and longer on top, and you can see how he brushed it to the side. His blue eyes pierced through me, and the minute he looked my way, I literally felt a rush up my body. I've been around hot guys my whole life. Hot country boys. I've never been around hot

executives before. But all that hotness went away the minute he opened his big stupid mouth.

Loren comes walking out of the office and her face has a fake smile on it. She is no doubt trying not to freak out, wondering if either I'm going to get the fuck out of here or if Caine is going to tell me to get the fuck out of here. "Why don't I introduce you to a couple of people?" Loren suggests, trying to sound cheerful. I want to look back into the office, or better yet, I want to glare at him but instead I decide I'm not even going to acknowledge him.

"That sounds great." I nod at her as she takes me around and introduces me to the team. I thought coming to work for a family business would be a good idea. I'll have to rethink if this whole thing was a good idea.

"This is Kayla," Loren introduces me to another PA, "she started here last year and works with Vinny."

"It's nice to meet you." I nod at her, and she smiles.

"It'll be fun to have someone new on the team, and I'm not the last one in," Kayla states, making me laugh. I can literally feel eyes on me, but I ignore it. If he is watching me, I'm going to make sure he knows I'm not bothered by him, even if I am.

"Well, it's good to be here," I tell her, as I'm introduced to Taylor, another one of the PAs.

It doesn't take Loren long to introduce me to everyone since there are about ten people who work here. Another reason I chose this place; I thought it would be like working

back home. I was wrong. “Let’s go and get all the paperwork out of the way,” Loren urges me, and I nod at her, following her back into her office.

My heart speeds up and it even feels like it’s coming out of my chest. I’m pissed I let him get to me. “Perhaps we should maybe look at something else,” my mouth says before I can stop the words, not ever wanting to sound like I’m a quitter.

“Grace,” Loren says, “you are more than qualified for this job.” She’s trying to be nice. “I’m sorry, he’s usually not like that.” She wrings her hands. “He’s usually better.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“I’ll be right back,” she tells me. “Please don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” I reply to her as she walks out of the office. Instead of sitting in one of the chairs, I walk over to the window to look outside. Maybe it’s best to just chalk this up as a learning curve and call it a day. Maybe it’s best to just do a reset. Like reset this whole fucking day.

“Grace.” I hear my name being called and turn back around to come face-to-face with Caine.

“Yes?” I’m not sure what to say to him. I mean, there are about a million little things I want to say to him. Almost all of it not good.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” he says and stops when I chuckle at his words.

“We?” I say, confused, pointing at me and then at him. “I don’t think we did anything.” I know I should be respecting my boss, but this is a two-way street, and no respect has been

given. “I think you got off on the wrong foot.” His face shows he’s surprised that I’m actually talking back. “That scene was all you.” I point at where his office is.

“Fair enough,” he admits, putting his hands in his pockets. “I got off on the wrong foot.”

“Sounds more accurate,” I mumble. “Would you like to talk now?”

“I’ve looked over your résumé; it looks like you know what you are doing.” I’m about to thank him, but he isn’t finished talking. “I’m assuming what you wrote there is the truth.”

“No.” I shake my head. “All made up.” I tilt my head to the side and smile at him. “Googled things to put on a résumé. It’s what all the kids are doing these days.” If I’m going to be fired, might as well go out big.

“I promised I would give you a chance,” he tells me, “and I’m a man of my word.”

He’s about to say something else when Loren comes back into the room. “Oh, good, the two of you are talking,” she observes, and the two of us just stand here in a face-off.

“We need to go over some rules,” he starts, “some expectations that are required to having your position.” He’s waiting for me to interrupt him because he stops talking for a couple of seconds before he continues, “But that will have to wait until after the weekly meeting. Every Monday morning, we go over the week’s projects.” He looks at Loren. “Every week we rotate who prepares the conference room. This week

it's my turn. Usually, the assistants make sure that snacks and drinks are ready."

I nod at him. "I think I can handle that." I look at Loren. "Are there any allergies I should be aware of?"

Loren smiles at me. "Not that we are aware of." She folds her hands. "No one has ever asked."

"Are there certain things I should prepare or things I shouldn't?" I ask, and he looks at Loren. "You don't know what to prepare for a meeting that you attend weekly?"

"It's not my job to stock the conference room," he retorts between clenched teeth, and I swear I see the vein in his head looking like it's ready to explode.

"You don't have to be in charge of it to know what to put or not." I turn now to look at Loren. "Is there a checklist somewhere I can get my hands on to make sure I have everything?"

She looks at Caine, who is openly glaring at me. Score one for me. "I'll show you to the conference room."

"Thank you." I turn to follow her out of the office. I'm almost out of the office when I hear his voice, stopping me in my tracks, but I don't turn around.

"Try not to get any juice boxes either," he pokes, and I just look over my shoulder at him. This time, he smirks at me, thinking he's got the last word.

"I don't think I packed any in my lunch box," I huff before walking away, telling myself not to look over my shoulder. I also maybe, perhaps, swing my hips as I walk away from him.



“Don’t worry, his bark is worse than his bite,” Loren mumbles to me as we walk over to the conference room.

I don’t know what I’m expecting since the only conference room I’ve actually ever been in has been my grandfather’s, and well, since he’s into security, the whole room is full of monitors and computers. Nothing like this long, brown table with four black chairs on each side of it and one at each end. “So, this is where the meeting happens?” I look around to see if there is anything here I can do anything with. “What do they usually do?” I ask Loren, hoping she’ll help me.

She looks around to make sure it’s just the two of us. “Okay, well, before she retired, Martina placed an order with the deli around the corner. So, all items should be delivered in about twenty minutes.”

I roll my lips. “I wasn’t going to tell him that, of course, and well, now, neither are you.”

“My lips are sealed.” I smile at her. “But there is something that I need to get.” I look at her, and she raises her eyebrows.

“How close is the nearest supermarket?” I ask, looking at my watch and seeing I will have about thirty-five minutes to get there and back.

“There is one that is five minutes away, why?” she asks, and I smile at her.

“I’m going to put my touch on it,” I inform her. “I’ll be back.” I rush toward her office to grab my purse and quickly slip out. My feet pinch as I run toward my car, getting in, and

pulling up the closest supermarket. My phone says it's four minutes. I pull out and make it there in under three. Rushing in, I snag a cart, stop in two aisles, grabbing what I need before rushing back out.

It takes me a total of fourteen minutes to go and then come back. I arrive at the same time as the caterer does. I rush to the conference room and set up everything in the middle of the table. Since everyone can grab their things, I put the water bottles, soda, and juice boxes all together. The platter of bagels and sandwiches sits in the middle, and next to that, I put animal crackers. I'm almost finished when Nash comes walking in. "You didn't quit?" he asks with a smile.

I smile back at him. "I see you took all the charm," I tell him, and he throws his head back and laughs as a couple of other men come into the conference room.

"This is going to be so much fun," Nash gloats, clapping his hands and then rubbing them together.

"You must be Grace," the man with salt-and-pepper hair says, coming to me and holding out his hand. "I'm Vinny."

"So very nice to meet you," I tell him as the man next to him with black hair smiles at me.

"I'm Jaret," he introduces, nodding his head at me as he walks around the table.

"Are we done?" Caine walks in, holding folders in his hand as he looks at me and then the table.

"Oh, cool," Nash says, picking up one of the juice boxes, "grape juice." I roll my lips at the same time Caine glares at

me. “Oh, and animal crackers.”

“I haven’t had these since the kids stopped bringing lunches to school,” Vinny remarks, grabbing his own pack.

“Oh, apple raspberry,” Jaret says, picking up one of the juice boxes. “Oh, and it’s cold.”

“Do you need me to take notes or anything?” I ask Caine, trying not to show him how happy I am my juice boxes and animal crackers are a hit.

“No,” he hisses, “that will be all.”

I nod at him before walking out and only when I close the door behind me do I snicker a bit. “Take that, jackass.”

# four

. . .

Caine

*I* watch her walk out of the conference room, and two things happen. One, I ball my free hand that isn't holding the folder, into fists, and two, my cock stirs in my pants, making me clench my fist even harder. I swear her hips swing even more and I think her ass winks at me.

“This is refreshing,” Jaret states as he takes a sip of the juice box. Fucking juice boxes just to spite me. I glance around the room at the guys each looking at the juice boxes like they've never seen them before in their lives.

“Can we start this meeting?” I toss the manila folders I have in my hand on the table. I pull out the black chair before I take off my blue suit jacket, putting it over the chair before sitting down.

“Do you want a juice box,” Nash asks me as he rolls his lips to try not to laugh, “or some fun animal crackers?” All I can do is glare at him. Of course, my luck would be that he was here to witness this altercation. I'm usually a cool, calm, and collected kind of guy, my face is poker ready, but my brother can see through all of that. “Your new assistant looks like fun,” Nash pokes the bear.

The collar around my neck feels like it's getting tighter, even though the top two buttons are open. "Don't you have to catch a flight or something?" I ask him. "Maybe run your own meeting?"

He leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his chest. "I can't express to you how happy I am that I am here today."

Glaring at him, I start, "Let's get the meeting going." I ignore all the eyes on me, opening the folder. "We have a very busy month," I start, looking down at my notes. "We have two big accounts we are trying to land, and you all know it'll be the twenty-fifth anniversary of Cottrell Group, so my parents think it's a great idea to hold a gala." I look around the table, and the men all wear the same expression. "I see this news thrills everyone." I chuckle. "But the good news is that since it's my parents, I'll take the lead on this." I swear I hear a collective sigh fill the room. "Although I was assuming I wouldn't have to handle the gala, I think this will be a huge undertaking." My head starts to go around and around as I think of the shit I'm going to have to do now.

"My parents would love for it to take place here in the city since it's basically the middle for everyone."

Nash puts in, "I'm sure Grace can help you work on this."

I glare at him. "Yeah, right." I ignore the way he is baiting me, but the rest of the meeting is smooth sailing as we work on the budget we are aiming to have. If everything goes according to plan, we are going to be above projected revenue by the end of the month.

Once the meeting is over, I'm one of the first ones to get up, grabbing my stuff before heading out. Jaret and Nash each grab another juice box and snack before following me out.

My eyes scan the work area, and I don't know why I'm shocked to see Grace sitting at her desk. It irritates me, and I just don't know why. Technically, I know it does because I don't want her sitting at the desk. I didn't like how she tested me. I also didn't like how it totally backfired on me. I stop beside her desk, and she looks up from her computer at me. "What are you doing?"

"It's called working." She turns in her chair to look straight at me, putting her hands on the desk.

"I meant, what are you doing?" I clarify. I can see her smirk start to fill her face and my whole body goes on alert, especially the one body part that needs to stay in his own fucking lane. I swear, it's like I didn't jerk off this morning in the shower.

"Well," she says, "I was reading emails to better understand the company, as well as make notes of certain things I need to watch out for."

Fuck, that was a good answer, something I would have told her to do anyway, but she beat me to it. "Grab a pad and meet me in my office." I turn and storm into my office, throwing my jacket on the couch before going over to my desk.

Pulling out the chair, I toss the manila folders on my desk before sitting down. I look up at the same time as I reach for the button at my wrist, unbuttoning and rolling up the sleeve to my elbow. "I take it the meeting didn't go well?" She saunters

in, and yes, I used the word saunter. That is the only word that can describe how she slithered in here. Her hips swinging left and right, taunting everyone. I look around to see if anyone is watching how she walks and notice it's only me. "Did they not like the snacks?"

I undo the other cuff before I speak. "The snacks were fine," I grumble between clenched teeth. "We need to go over things."

"Perf," she responds, walking over to one of the chairs and sitting down, the notepad in her hand as she sits. She doesn't cross her legs. Instead, she crosses her ankles and puts them to the side.

"Perf?" I repeat, and she smiles at me.

"Means perfect. It's what all the cool kids are saying these days." I grit my teeth as she smiles at me.

"It's one more syllable," I say. "If my four-year-old can do it, I'm sure you can as well."

"Does not like abbreviations." She writes on her notepad. "Noted."

I ignore the way her eyes twinkle when she looks at me, as if she is playing a game and she's just won. "Email must be checked accordingly," I instruct her. "There are private and confidential items that are being exchanged, so discretion is a must."

"That goes without saying," she replies, writing it down.

"My calendar is synced on my computer as well as yours, so any changes have to be done immediately. If things are

going to change drastically, I want you to come and talk to me first so we can do it accordingly.” She writes down everything. “Until you get the hang of things.” I lean back in my chair. “Every morning, I would like to go over your schedule to make sure you don’t—”

“F it up,” she pipes up. “Sorry, abbreviation again. Mess things up.”

All I can do is stare at her. She bites her bottom lip, and I swear to God, my cock gets so hard it hurts. “So, while you were in the meeting.” She taps her pen on the pad. “I was going through the extensive and impressive client list you have.” I nod at her, waiting to hear what she has to say. “And I went in and tried to find any notes on each client, and there were none. I was wondering, if it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to go over your client list so you can give me a quick rundown on the clients. Little things I might need to know in order to do my job better.”

I have to hand it to her, it’s a great question. “That is if you aren’t too busy. If anything, I can see if maybe another of the PAs can help me.” She holds up her hands. “Sorry, personal assistants.” I watch her look down at her pad, trying to hide her smile.

Her hair falls in front of her face, and she gracefully tucks it behind her ear. “I expect you to be here on time every day.” She nods at me. “The hours are from eight to five, Monday to Friday.” She nods at me, not taking notes. “There will be some times I will need you to stay after hours, depending on the workload or the case.”



“No,” she says right away, and I just look at her, not sure I heard her right. Also, I’m not really used to being told no. I mean, it’s happened occasionally through the years, but usually the boss is never told no.

“No?” I repeat what she just said, in case I misunderstood, but from the look she gives me, I know I didn’t.

“I made it clear when I was hired that I could do seven days a week, but I would have to leave by four, max,” she retorts, starting to get up. “I can’t budge on that.” She stands in front of my desk, her notepad in front of her in both hands. “I take it this is a deal breaker.”

“Why can’t you stay after four?” I want to bite my tongue the minute the words come out of my mouth. One, because it is none of my business and I know this, and two, because it looks like I care, and I don’t.

“I just can’t,” she says, not giving an inch. “I can even work before eight so I can catch up on whatever I was supposed to do after hours, but under no circumstances can I stay after four”

“This job isn’t a joke,” I tell her, and I swear to God, I can’t put my finger on why her working for me bothers me. “It’s a serious position in a serious company.”

“Did I give off that I thought this job was a joke?” she counters, not backing down from me. “Did I give off any indication from the time I walked in today that I thought it was a joke?” I just look at her. “I take your non-answer as a no. I’ve been nothing but professional since I walked into this office. I wish I could say the same about my boss.”

I'm about to get up and tell her thank you for coming and get out when I spot Nash over her shoulder. "Looks like I got here just in time." He's leaning against the doorjamb with his legs crossed at his ankles and his hands in his pockets. "Did you guys discuss the gala yet?"

"No," I answer, looking at Grace, "we were going over a couple of things."

"Good," Nash says, coming in and sitting in the chair beside the one Grace was just sitting in. "Grace." He looks up at her, and I swear, it's like slow motion in my head of me reaching out and punching him in the middle of his face. "Our parents are looking at having our twenty-fifth anniversary for Cottrell Group."

"Oh, fun." Her voice is upbeat, and I roll my eyes as she sits down and looks at him.

"It's Caine's job to plan it, and well, between you and me, he's a bit—"

"Dry," she adds in as if I'm not in the room. She doesn't even look my way.

Nash laughs at her as he turns in his chair. "Anyway, we were wondering if you could help get a list started."

"Say no more. I've got the perfect person for you." She grabs her pen and starts to write down things.

"Okay, hold on a minute." I hold up my hand. "This is a gala, not prom."

She just stares at me, or better yet, glares at me for a minute and then I see her eyes shift. "Ugh." She slaps her pad.

“There goes the balloon arch I was going to do at the entrance and the photo booth.” She snaps her fingers. “And the streamers and poppers.”

Nash throws his head back and laughs at her. “I don’t know why, that sounds like a lot of fun.” He points at her.

“I know the top event planners in the country,” she says. “If you want, I can give them a call and have them set up a Zoom meeting.”

“You know the top event planners in the country?” I repeat like it’s a joke.

“Happily Ever After Events,” she states.

“I’ve heard of them,” Nash says, and I pfft through my lips. “What? I have, look them up.”

“Anyway,” Grace goes on, “if you want, I can call in a favor.”

“You are going to call in a favor,” I repeat. “What? Did one of them babysit you?”

“Actually, she did.” She laughs, and she’s about to say something else when the phone on her desk rings. “Let me know if you want me to call her.” She turns and walks out of the room, leaning over the desk to answer the phone.

Nash whistles low when all we see is her ass. “Do you mind?” My hand goes into a fist on the desk, and Nash looks over at me. “Stop ogling my PA.”

“I’m going to see if she wants to go out with me,” he announces, and I shake my head.

“Immediately, no.” My head moves even faster. “Absolutely not, we aren’t allowed to date anyone in the company. We went over this when your last PA sued you for sexual harassment.”

“She didn’t sue us,” Nash denies, and my eyebrows shoot up. “She did it for attention.”

I look over to where Grace is and see that she’s not there anymore. My eyes roam the floor to see where she went. I can’t see her anywhere. “Whatever she did it for, we now have a no-fraternization policy.”

I’m about to tell him something when there is a knock on the door, and I look up to see Loren. “May I come in?” I just stare at her. “I’m here because there has been a complaint in the HR department.”

“No way,” Nash gloats, “I thought that only happened at my office.”

“There has never been an HR complaint.” I just look at Loren. “Who is it against?”

“Funny you should ask,” she says, folding her arms over her chest. “You.”

My mouth hangs open in shock at the same time Nash hits my desk as he howls with laughter. “Me?” I say, shocked. “By who?”

She tilts her head to the side, and just when I thought my day couldn’t get any worse, it does. It gets so much worse when she says the name of the person who reported me. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. “Grace.”

# five

. . .

Grace

“*I*t’s quitting time.” I look up from the notes I’m making to Kayla as she stops in front of my desk. “Week one down in the books.”

I smirk at her. “Going to be really honest,” I say, looking over my shoulder at my boss sitting at his desk, leaning back in his own chair on the phone. His door has been closed since Monday afternoon, only opening it when he has to come out to go to the kitchen or to bark orders at me. “Didn’t think I would make it past day two.” I shake my head. “Actually, day one.”

“Well, some of us are hitting up a bar around the corner,” she states, “you should join us.”

“I wish.” I lay my elbows on my desk, folding my hands together. “I’m moving into my new place this weekend,” I tell her. “Family is coming up to help, so I’m thinking it might just turn into a circus.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you are more than welcome to join.” She smiles at me one last time before something behind me catches her eye. “Incoming,” she mumbles before she walks off.

The door to Caine's office opens and I look over my shoulder. "I need you to see if you can schedule this client in sometime next week." He hands me the folder. "I think I have some time Wednesday to do it."

"You have all afternoon Wednesday free," I say, shocking him I know his schedule by heart, but it's a reason I'm good at what I do. "I can put them in after one, so you have time to eat."

"Fine," he huffs before turning and walking back into his office.

"Is that all for the day?" I ask him before he shuts his door in my face.

"Yeah," he confirms, and I grab the file and place it on top of the to-do pile for Monday.

"Okay, if you don't need anything else." I start to shut down my computer. "I'm going to head out." He doesn't say anything to me; he just stares at me with his dark blue eyes. His shirt is rolled up again to his elbows, something he does every single day the minute he takes off his jacket. I get up and smile as big as I can, hopefully knowing that it's going to annoy the fuck out of him. "Have a great weekend." I bend to grab my purse from under my desk when I hear the door slam shut. "You too, Grace. I hope that you rest, and I'll see you Monday," I tell myself, pretending I'm him.

As I walk around my desk, I peek into his office, seeing him looking at me while he holds a piece of paper in his hand. I hold up my hand and wave it side to side, knowing if I was as pissed and irritated with me as he is, it would make me even

more irritated. “Bye,” I sing out and I can see him gripping the paper so hard in his hand his knuckles are white.

Only when I know he can't see me do I look down at my feet and mumble out, “Dick,” before heading to the bathroom before leaving. I quickly pee and wash my hands before pulling open the door and then finally walk to the elevator. Pressing the button before looking up to see if it's close, I watch the numbers climb up on the screen coming toward my floor. “I survived a full week.” I look over to make sure no one is around to hear me talk to myself. “I deserve a medal.” The ping of the elevator arriving makes me look up to the golden doors opening. I step in and press the P1 button before stepping to the side in case someone else gets in on the way down. The doors are closing as my phone beeps in my purse, and I'm fishing it out when a hand slips between the doors to stop it from closing.

It's almost as if my body inwardly groans when I see the watch. I'd know that watch anywhere. The doors open back up and there he stands, the dick of my life. Caine. The minute his eyes find mine, I see them darken over. His jaw gets tight, and I can see the vein in his forehead start to throb. He steps in and his cologne hits me right away. Why does he smell so good? He should smell the way he acts, like an asshole.

I ignore him as I look down at my phone and see my brother just texted me.

Charlie: Due to land in an hour.  
Heads up! Grandpa Casey is joining  
us.

I put my head back and groan, not sure I'm doing it out loud or not.

“What’s the matter, frat party got canceled?” I hear from beside me and look over at him.

Instead of telling him to go fuck himself, I just nod my head. “Yes,” I reply, putting my hand to my chest, “and I was preparing for that wet T-shirt contest all week long.” I stomp my foot like a child would do. “All that work for nothing. Also, did you use an abbreviation?”

He ignores what I said and only sticks to the fact he thinks I was going to a party. “That’s why you can’t stay late?” he asks, and I tilt my head to the side, about to tell him that it’s none of his fucking business. The two of us have a stare down until the elevator doors open. I’m the one who looks away first when I take the four steps out of the elevator and head toward my SUV. The phone beeps again in my hand but I ignore it as I walk to my vehicle. I can hear his footsteps not too far behind me, and I make a mental note to park on the other side on Monday, or better yet, on a different floor. Maybe outside. Maybe around the block. I pull the car handle and the car unlocks. “That’s a safety hazard,” he says from behind the SUV.

“What?” I turn, now pissed that I’m letting him get to me.

He points at the back of the SUV that is overflowing with boxes. “You can’t even see when you are backing out,” he points out the obvious.

“Well, then I suggest you don’t stand behind the SUV.” I toss my bag into the passenger seat.



“Do you live in your SUV?” he asks me, and this is the most he’s spoken to me all week. After I made an official complaint with Loren about his inappropriate questions on what I do with my time that has nothing to do with work, his answers have been reduced to one or two words. Sometimes some grunts. I think once I brought him in his lunch and I heard a growl.

“Yes, I live in my SUV,” I answer him sarcastically. “I’m making extra money selling my feet pictures, but it’s been a slow month. My next step is OnlyFans.” I hold up my fingers and cross two of them. “Fingers crossed it takes off and I can be out of your hair.” His mouth hangs open, giving me the chance to end the conversation. I get into the SUV, and I can feel his eyes on me the whole time. I close my door, ignoring the need to look over at him and maybe flip him off before I pull out. I go through the motions of starting the SUV and then putting my seat belt on. I put the SUV in reverse and see he isn’t still standing behind the SUV. “Dick,” I mumble to myself as I pull out of the parking garage.

I make my way over to my apartment, instead of going to the hotel. I pull into the parking space before grabbing my purse and my carry-on luggage. I’m so excited, I’m almost giddy. I can’t wait. Living in a hotel for a week has been a nightmare. I’ve had to eat takeout all week long, then I had to do homework in the bed, it was just so uncomfortable.

When I slide the key into the door and turn it, hearing the click, a smile comes to my face. A huge-ass smile on my face. Opening the door, two things hit me right away, the smell of fresh paint and then the sound of the alarm beeping. I rush in

and turn toward the beeping, putting in the year I was born, expecting it to shut off but it doesn't. Which makes me panic just a little, okay a lot, as I put in the code again, this time the beeping sounds like it's getting louder. "Think," I tell myself, thinking of what the code could be when the phone rings in my hand and I see it's my grandfather Casey, who we call Pops, because we have my great-grandfather Billy who we call Grandpa.

"Hello," I answer, putting one hand in my ear so I can hear the voice on the other end.

"Having trouble?" he asks me, chuckling.

"I don't know the password," I say, looking at the keypad, seeing the red light blinking.

"It's twenty twenty-three," he shares, and I press in the code, "the year you broke my heart and left home."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, dear God, Pops." I walk into the apartment. "Laying it on a little thick there, don't you think?"

"My favorite granddaughter up and left me," he pouts, and I laugh.

"Sofia got that same line when she moved out," I remind him. "Trust me, I know, I was in the room."

"And then you became my favorite. We should be landing in about twenty minutes." I walk into what is going to be the living room. "And the movers should be there in thirty. Don't do anything until we get there. We'll change the code once I get there."

“Roger that,” I reply, ignoring him and bringing my carry-on luggage into the bedroom. “See you soon.” I hang up the phone before opening the suitcase and grabbing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I undress, putting my work clothes aside when my phone rings, and I see it’s my cousin Sofia FaceTiming me. I smile when I press the green button and watch the little white wheel go around.

“Hello, hello, hellooooo,” she sings out when I finally see her.

“Hello, hello, hellooooo,” I sing back to her, and we both start laughing.

“Have you started unpacking yet?” she asks, and I shake my head.

“The cavalry is going to be here in thirty minutes. I’ve been given instructions not to touch anything.”

“Well then, did you grab a bottle of wine to watch it all?” she asks, and I shake my head.

“I’m hoping Charlie is going to be bringing me some sweet tea from Grandpa Billy,” I share, and she snickers.

“So how is work?” she asks me. “The full first week. How did you like it?”

“I love the work,” I start to say, “love the people.” I look at her. “Hate my boss.”

“What do you mean, you hate your boss?” She laughs.

“I hate my boss. He’s a sexist pig,” I spit out, even though I’m not sure he’s sexist.

“What did he do?” She gawks at me.

“Well, the minute he met me he thought I was just out of high school.” I hold up one finger. “Then he thought I couldn’t handle getting snacks for his meeting.” I smirk at her.

“What did you do?” she gasps.

“Me?” I point at myself. “I didn’t do anything. I got him juice boxes and animal crackers.” She howls with laughter. “Then he sat me down, and when I told him I couldn’t stay after hours, he accused me of not taking the job seriously. He wanted to know why, and well, I was annoyed with him, so I went and filed a complaint with HR about him being sexist.”

“You did not.” Her eyes go big as I nod my head.

“I did too,” I confirm to her.

“What did he say?” She brings her face closer to the phone.

“There was a lot of ‘I did not say anything.’” I try to remember, listening to the conversation from the other side of the wall. “Then he said, ‘She’s a child and I can’t work with her.’” I roll my eyes. “Then he grunted, I think, or maybe growled. He apologized for asking inappropriate questions and said it would never happen again.”

“What’s his name?” she asks me, and my eyebrows pinch together. “I’m going to look him up and see if he’s hot.” *Yes, my head screams out, he’s hot and probably doesn’t get enough sex from his wife, which is why he’s always so frustrated.* I even tried to find a picture of the two of them

together in his office, but all I see is him and a precious little girl.

“I’m not giving you his name,” I tell her. “You’ll meet him sometime next week.”

“Why am I going to meet him?” Now it’s her turn to pinch her eyebrows together.

“Well, he needs a party planner to help him with a gala,” I inform her. “Obviously, I said I knew the best one in the country.” I walk to the kitchen, opening the fridge and finding it fully stocked, probably thanks to my parents. “He asked if you used to babysit me.”

“Great, I’ll look forward to it.” Her phone pauses. “I have to go. I have a client trying to call me.” She picks up the phone. “Love you. Don’t kill your boss.”

“No promises.” I smile at her. “Love you too.” I hang up the phone, grabbing a bottle of water out of the fridge and twisting the top open, bringing the water bottle to my mouth. “No promises,” I repeat to no one, trying to forget him, but the more I try to push him away from my mind, the more I see his eyes just staring at me. “Dick.”

# six

. . .

Caine

I pull into the parking garage and the first thing I spot is her SUV, which makes me grip my steering wheel even tighter. “Get over it,” I mutter, putting the car in park before getting out. I walk past her SUV and stop to look inside, seeing that it’s empty, which is a far cry from Friday when it was busting at the seams. All week I kept to myself. I spoke to her only when I needed to speak to her. I never asked her a question I knew I shouldn’t ask her because the little minx had gone to human resources about me.

Was she wrong? No, no, she was not. I asked her questions I shouldn’t have asked her and were of no concern to me. She was of no concern to me, except she was all I fucking thought about all fucking weekend long. Which pissed me off even more. The whole time I’m walking to the elevator, I have to remind myself that she’s way too young for me and in a *different league*. She’s probably dating some university kid who graduated with her. You were whacking the mole all weekend, thinking of her while she was probably planning your murder.

“I’m not going to let her get to me,” I tell myself as I press the button. “I’m not going to let her get to me.” The minute I know I’m going to see her soon, my palms get sweaty. I step into the elevator and press the floor button and then look up at the numbers.

My heart speeds up even more, which is the stupidest thing that’s ever happened to me. *Maybe this is a sign I’m having a stroke. Or maybe it’s the fact all you want to do is fuck her. Maybe it’s the fact all you see when you look at her is her sucking your cock or her bending over your desk and telling you how hard she wants it.* Just the image of these thoughts gets my cock at half-mast.

I step out of the elevator and nod to the receptionist, who smiles at me, turning and walking into the office space. My eyes scan the room, and I want to tell myself I’m just doing it to see who is here, but I’m lying. I’m scanning the room to see where she is. I spot her right away talking to Brian or Ryan or is it Kevin? I can’t remember his name. He works as Jaret’s PA. The two of them are walking out of the kitchen area, both of them with a coffee in their hand. He gives her a nod before she heads down the hall and he just stands there watching her walk away. His eyes are straight on her ass as he lifts the cup to his mouth. He watches for a second before he must sense my eyes on him. He lifts his eyebrows, trying not to panic in an *I got caught staring at her ass* moment.

My eyes watch him walk away before I turn and watch Grace walk down the hallway like it’s a runway. All I can see is legs, lots and lots of legs. That and her fucking sky-high heels she wears to taunt me. Her green skirt is mid-thigh,

which should not be worn at work. She's wearing a white shirt underneath that shows off a bit of her midriff, which again should be covered. Then she has a suit jacket that is white with some peach flowers and green, I have no idea. I just know that it looks like an hourglass. I make a mental note to redo the employee handbook before turning to see her sleeves are pulled up and I can see her wearing some gold bracelets today. Her hair is down and curled perfectly. "Good morning," she greets when I approach her desk.

"Good morning," I mumble. "I guess you being here means your OnlyFans didn't take off." My head screams *what the fuck is wrong with you* the minute the words are out of my mouth.

She smirks at me, putting her cup on her desk and leaning over. Another thing I should add to the employee handbook is no bending over desks. She's constantly bending over the fucking desk, leaving her ass on display. "That isn't how OnlyFans works," she informs me. "I want to have five hundred subscribers before I quit."

"Well, you should tell your feet people." Again, I inwardly groan and tell myself to shut the fuck up.

"Good idea." She picks up her phone. "Going to send out the email right now." She taps on her phone for a second before she turns and laughs at me; the little shit. "Would you like a coffee?" She now sits slightly on her desk, making her legs look like they need to be wrapped around my waist.

"No," I snap before walking into my office, really wanting a coffee. I grab my phone to place an order for coffee when the



phone rings in my hand, and I see it's my mother calling. "Hello, Mother," I answer, putting the phone to my ear, as I look out and see Grace is sitting at her desk.

"Caine," she says, and I can hear she's walking in New York because all I hear is honking in the background. "How are you, dear?"

"What did I do?" I ask her right away, and she chuckles. "Every single time you call me dear, it's not a good thing."

"Nonsense," she denies. "Anyway, I'm calling because I just got off the phone with Nash." I look out and see Jaret has walked in and stopped at Grace's desk. I watch him as my mother goes on and on. He lifts his hand when he catches me watching him. "So, what do you think?" my mother asks, and I have to stop glaring at Jaret and look down at my hand.

"What do I think about what?" I ask, getting up and taking off my jacket.

"Nash was telling me that your new PA knows someone who can help plan the gala," she huffs. "I need you to set up a meeting and let me know. Gotta run, love you. Kiss Meadow for me."

She hangs up before I tell her no, making me groan. I pull up the thread for my brother.

I'm about to text Nash when the phone rings in my hand, and I see Marilyn has messaged me. She actually messaged me last week, and I never opened it. I click her name and see that she sent me over five texts.

Marylin: Caine, I'm thinking of coming to town and would like to know if I can visit Meadow.

Marylin: Hey, Caine, circling around to my previous text.

Marylin: Good morning, Caine, I'm coming to town sometime this week. I'll let you know when I land.

Marylin: Caine, I'll be in town on Monday night. I was thinking maybe we can do lunch on Tuesday.

Marylin: I'll be at your place Tuesday morning instead, see you then. Please tell my daughter I'll be visiting.

I scoff at all the texts.

Caine: Marylin, just got your texts. Call me when you land, and we can figure out when it's a good time for Meadow.

I'm about to press send when there is a knock on my door, and I look up to see Grace. "You're late," she informs me, and

I stare at her. “Meeting was supposed to start five minutes ago.”

“Shit,” I swear, getting up and grabbing my files with me. “Thanks.”

She stands there, and when I get close enough to her, I can smell her perfume. “My mother would like you to set up a meeting with the event planners.”

“Your mother?” She folds her arms over her chest, and it pushes her tits higher.

“Yes,” I confirm, stepping away from her and her smell.

“Well, if it’s for your mother, I can’t say no, can I?” She walks toward her desk and bends over. This time, one of her feet comes up just a touch. “I’ll see what I can do.” I just stare at her like I’m under this fucking spell.

“Caine!” Vinny shouts from the conference room. “Are you coming?”

“Have the information ready for me when I’m done,” I snap before I turn and walk toward the conference room.

“Sorry for the delay,” I say, walking in and pulling out my chair.

“Why don’t we have any juice boxes,” Steven says, “and the animal crackers? Who did the snacks today?”

“Kayla,” Vinny reports. “I’ll add it to the list for next week.”

“Are we going to start?” I say to the table, and not giving them a chance, I start the meeting.

“There is that dinner tonight,” Vinny reminds me when we end the meeting, and I nod my head. “We’ll head down together,” I tell him, walking out of the office and seeing Grace at her desk, her eyes on the computer screen in front of her.

“Grace,” I say her name before walking into my office, tossing my jacket on the couch, and walking to my desk. I look up and find Grace is still at her desk. “Grace?” I watch her look over her shoulder at me, and I raise my hand to tell her to come here. She gets up and slowly makes her way to my office. “What are you doing?”

“I was emailing my feet customers,” she deadpans, pointing over her shoulder, and it makes her shirt rise a bit on the left side.

“I called you,” I tell her.

“No.” She comes into the office farther. “You said my name.”

“Twice,” I remind her.

“Okay, you said my name twice,” she admits. “You didn’t say anything after that, so how was I supposed to know you wanted me to come to your office?” I glare at her. “I just thought you were reminding yourself what my name was.” My eyes squint even more. “Or like a ’sup, Grace.”

“I know your name. When I call your name, it’s because I want something,” I grind out between clenched teeth.

“Well, now that we’ve got that figured out.” She claps her hands. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you have the information for me?” I ask, and she nods her head.

“I’ve set up a Zoom call,” she says, saving me a step. I should be thankful, but because I’m an asshole, I’m not. “I’ve already set it in your calendar.”

“Good. Do you have the file I gave you on Friday?” I ask, and she nods. “Can you get it so we can go over it?”

“I can,” she agrees, turning around and going to her desk. Now I’m the one looking at her ass, but the jacket covers most of it. She stops by the side of her desk and bends over again, making my cock wake up. I’ve never been at work with so many hard-ons in my life. I’m too old for this shit. She turns, coming back into the office with the file in one hand and a pad in the other.

“Okay,” she says, sitting in front of me, “give it to me.”

“Excuse me?” I reply, my heart beating so fast I hear it echo in my ears.

“I’m ready for it,” she rephrases, looking at me, and I swear all the blood in my body goes to one place and one place only, my cock, like the dirty old man people are going to call me. “Are you okay?” Grace asks me.

“I’m fine.” I look down at the paper in front of me. “Now let’s go over the client so we can get everything we need for the meeting in two days.”

## seven

. . .

Grace

“*I* can buy myself flowers.” I sing along to the radio as I head to work. I pull into the parking lot and go to the spot I always use even though I said I would stop using it, but I’m a creature of habit, so I’m sticking to my guns.

Turning the car off, I grab my purse from the passenger seat before I snatch the phone off the middle console apparatus my father installed in my car when he was here this weekend. Opening the door, I hold up my long flowy skirt before putting one foot down and then the other. I lean in, grabbing the white takeout coffee cup I picked up this morning on the way to work. I’m dragging ass today. School is beyond a doubt much harder than I thought it would be. I mean, I knew it was an intense program. I just didn’t know how intense it would be with me working full-time, then doing class five days a week for four hours every night. Plus doing homework until the wee hours of the morning. If my family hadn’t been here this weekend, I would have tried to get ahead in my homework, but they stayed until Sunday evening. The good news is I’m officially all moved in. Every box has been unpacked, and it’s starting to feel like home to me.

I shut the door with my hip before pressing the button on the door handle, hearing the beep, and seeing the side mirrors turn inward. I look around like I always do, in case I spot someone hiding between the cars, ready to come and attack me—something my grandfather Casey put in my head. Everything looks like it's supposed to, so I walk to the elevator and press the button. The doors open the minute I press the button, and I step in, moving to the side.

It's a quiet ride this morning since I'm the only one in the elevator. I step out and see Kayla getting out of the other elevator. "Good morning." I smile at her, and she looks me up and down.

"Your hands down win for the best wardrobe." She shakes her head. "I have wardrobe envy."

I look down at my outfit today. I went with a long floral chiffon skirt that reached my ankles. It looks like it's a baby blue but has pink and green pastel flowers. The top is a tight, sleeveless light-blue crochet top with ruffles on the front. I called it the butterfly shirt when I got it. Of course, the shoes match the top because otherwise, I'm called a savage by my grandmother. "I wish I could take credit," I tell her, "but my grandmother buys me all my clothes."

"Your grandmother?" she states, shocked. "Mine got me a sweater that had tassels and fringe for Christmas."

I chuckle at her as we make our way over to our desks. "Yeah, my grandmother is very special in that department." I also don't add she was a supermodel because that is just awkward. There is that, and then they go down the rabbit hole,

and I have to explain who my family is. And let's be honest, ain't no one got time for that.

"See you later," she says when she gets to her desk before I walk over to mine. Caine is obviously not in his office because, unlike me, he doesn't have to be here at eight. No, Mr. I Expect You to Be Here at Eight Every Day saunters in closer to nine. It doesn't really bother me since I get a full hour without him breathing down my neck in the morning.

"Morning," Kevin greets when he stops by my desk on his way into the kitchen. "How are you this morning?"

I smile at him. "I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm doing great now that I saw you." He smirks at me.

"Such a charmer," I reply, trying to be polite. I look at him—typical frat-boy persona in a suit I know is tailored, so either he comes from money, or he doesn't save anything. His hair is perfectly cut and styled to the side. His Rolex looks like it's brand new, again probably a gift from his parents. Don't get me wrong, I'm in the same boat he's in, but nothing about him pulls me in. I wish it did. I wish I was attracted to him instead of the ogre I work for. An ogre who is married with a child. Who is scratched off the list completely; actually, he doesn't even get a place on that list.

"See you later." He winks at me, and I swear to God I hear *eww* in my head. I grab my white cup of coffee and bring it to my lips, taking a sip, when my office phone rings.

"Caine Griffin's office, this is Grace. How may I help you?" I hold the phone with my shoulder, looking around for a



pen.

“Hey, it’s me,” Caine says, and it sounds like he’s running around.

“Hi.” I put my coffee cup down and wait to hear what he has to say.

“I need you to do me a favor,” he states.

“Sure,” I reply, then I smile. “Just, who is this?” I roll my lips when he hisses into the phone.

“It’s me, Caine,” he grumbles, and I can picture his ugly face now. Okay, maybe not ugly, but I’m pretending it is to help me get through the day. “Who did you think it was?”

“I have no idea. You just said, ‘Hey, it’s me.’” I take my pen and tap it on the pad in front of me. “It could have been a whole slew of people. It could have been Justin Bieber. It could have been Pedro Pascal. It could have been, and I’m secretly bummed it’s not Jason Momoa.”

“Grace,” he snarls between clenched teeth, “I need you to do me a favor.”

“Well, sure thing, boss man,” I say, knowing he probably wanted to rush this phone conversation, and I’m pushing him.

“I’m not coming in today,” he informs me, and I secretly do a little cheer that I don’t have to deal with him for the whole day. “I need you to bring me the file we were working on yesterday.”

“Bring it where?” I look around the office to see if maybe he got in before me, but the only ones really here are the PAs.

“To my house.”

“Where you live?” I ask him, shocked.

“No,” he snaps, “where I hang my Bat costume.”

“Really, you think you’re Batman material?” I pfft and roll my eyes.

“I could be Batman material.” He now sounds like he’s defending himself.

“A Ben Affleck Batman, maybe.” I shake my head. “Definitely not Val Kilmer Batman and definitely not Christian Bale.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” he huffs.

“Which means I’m right and you’re wrong,” I counter. “Now, what do you need again?”

“I need you to bring me the file we were working on,” he says, his voice tense, “now.”

“I don’t have your address,” I inform him, hoping he just gives up and comes to get it himself.

“I will give you the address.” My cell phone then beeps with a message from his cell phone. “I just texted you.”

“Thank God you told me that. I thought it was one of my feet clients again. You almost got a free picture,” I goad him, and he groans. “Okay, keep your panties on there. I’m leaving now.”

“Fine,” he grunts, and he’s about to hang up.

“Question. How do I deliver the file?”

“What?” he asks, confused.

“Well, is this like *The Intern* where I ring the bell and place it on the floor in front of the door?” I lean back in my chair, knowing he’s about to snap, like always. He has to be the most strung-out boss I’ve ever met. “Or is it like *The Devil Wears Prada* where I walk in, make eye contact with no one, drop it on the table, and rush out. That is unless you have twin girls who will try to steer me wrong.”

“Grace, so help me God.” If he was in front of me, I would have to try so hard to hide the big smile on my face.

“Fine, I’ll ring the bell and wait for you.” I try not to make it known I’m laughing. “Oh, wait. Do I have to tell anyone I’m leaving to come and bring you something?” I look around. “Like, should I tell Loren or Kevin?”

“You know I’m the boss, right?” he questions.

“Really? This is brand new information. Thanks for letting me know.” I roll my eyes. “I don’t want people to think I’m not working. They might think I dipped.”

“Think you dipped?” he repeats my words.

“They might think I’m not working.” I grab the file. “Didn’t mean to throw you off with some hip lingo. Feel free to use it.”

“Grace,” he barks my name. “File. My house. Now.”

“Caine,” I say his name back. “In my hand. Walking out. If you let me go. As soon as you stop talking.” He doesn’t even say goodbye. He just hangs up, and I have no choice but to laugh out loud.

I grab my purse and the file, stopping at Kayla's desk on the way out. "Hey, Caine isn't coming in today, so I'm running this file over to his house."

"Good luck with that," she tells me right before her phone rings, so I walk out. I press the elevator button, looking down at my phone when it beeps again, but it's just because I didn't open his text. Opening the text, I save his phone number under Not Batman, laughing at my joke before stepping into the elevator.

I plug the address into the map, and it tells me it's a twenty-minute drive from here. I pull out, not sure if I should tell him I'll be there in twenty minutes or just show up. I opt to just show up, and I know right away we are in a different tax bracket when I have to punch in a code for the gate.

"You would think he might have mentioned that it's a gated community," I grumble before grabbing the phone and calling him.

He answers after three rings. "Caine Griffin."

"Hey, it's me, Grace. The gate around your palace has a keypad."

"The code is the four digits of my address," he explains.

"That's not safe at all," I say, punching it in, and the gates open. "What if I'm about to rob you? All I have to do is put in your address."

"It's gated, and there are cameras," he informs me. "I think I'm fine."

“Five minutes with my family, and they can tell you all the ways you aren’t,” I mumble. “See you soon.” I hang up on him, or maybe he hangs up on me.

I follow the route until I’m in front of his house. The house is bigger than I thought it would be. But it suits him, which is strange. The grass is cut perfectly, and I bet he hasn’t mowed it a day in his life. I grab the file and exit the car, walking up the paved driveway and looking up at the three big windows on top of the double-car garage. The two steps lead to a big brown door that is all see-through glass, except you can’t see inside, which is cool. The window on top of the door is massive. I ring the doorbell, hearing the bell on the other side as I wait for him to open the door.

I hear footsteps coming to the door, but I don’t see anything, which throws me off. The sound of the lock opening makes me look up. I’m expecting him to answer the door, but I’m not expecting Caine to open the door dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, holding the sweetest-looking baby girl in his arms. Her head is on his shoulder as she looks at me, wearing pj’s with little hearts. Her blond hair is loose, and she looks at me with the same eyes her father has. My heart literally soars in my chest, and I have to clear my throat. “Hi,” I greet them, holding up the folder, trying not to look at him. He’s all hot and bothered in a suit, but dressed in jeans, he might be even hotter, which doesn’t bode well for the whole ‘I hate my boss’ era.

“Is she a fairy?” the little girl asks him, or me, and I just chuckle.

“No, she’s not a fairy,” Caine answers in the softest tone I’ve ever heard him use. “She’s Grace.”

“Hi.” I hold up my hand for her. “I work for your dad,” I tell her, holding up the folder. “Here it is.”

“Thank you.” He reaches out his hand to grab it. “She woke up with a fever this morning, so we’re keeping her home from daycare.”

“Well, you know what they say.” I hold my hands in front of me nervously. “Feed a fever, starve a cold.” He just looks at me like I have seven heads. “It’s an old wives’ tale.”

“Old wives’ tale,” he repeats. “You’re barely out of school, and you’re preaching old wives’ tales.” He chuckles, and then it is all there. All the reasons he’s a dick. I feel this weird pressure in my chest when he says it, but I push it back. Way, way back.

I ignore him, turning to his little girl instead of telling him to go fuck himself sideways with a cactus and no lube. “Hope you feel better, pretty girl,” I tell his daughter before I turn around and walk down the stairs to my car. I can feel his eyes on me, and if he wasn’t holding his daughter in his arms, I might flip him the bird. But instead, I walk back to the SUV, almost jogging when I’m at the end of the driveway. Never once do I look over toward the door, and I drive off knowing he’s watching me but making sure he doesn’t know he got to me.

# eight

. . .

Caine

“She’s pretty, Daddy,” Meadow says softly from my shoulder as we watch Grace walk back to her SUV. My heart goes into overdrive in my chest while my head tells me I was an asshole again to her.

“Yeah, baby,” I admit, “she is very pretty.” I watch her walk down the driveway in another pair of high fucking heels. Of course, she can run in those shoes, so she jogs as she gets closer to her car, and my cock comes out to play.

“Is she a fairy?” Meadow lifts her head from my shoulder and pushes her hair from her face.

“I think she is,” I tell her with a smile, “but I think it’s a secret.” She gasps. “How about we go watch some TV while Dad works?”

“Okay,” she agrees, squirming from my arms at the same time Grace drives away. I watch Meadow walk into the family room while I look up seeing Grace’s SUV turn the corner.

I close the door and wait for a second, looking down at my cock. “You’re a dirty old man,” I tell him. “She’s too young for you,” I say as my phone rings from my back pocket.

Pulling it out, I spy Marilyn's name, making my cock duck and run for cover.

I put my head back and know she'll call me every ten minutes if I don't answer. She either doesn't call for six months or else she calls too much. I press the green button before it goes to voicemail. "Hello." I turn, walking into the house, past the staircase and dining room, past my home office and into the family room where Meadow is already on the couch with a blanket over her. The remote is in her hands as she goes to her channel, so I walk back into the home office.

"Caine," she says, "I've been trying to get ahold of you."

*Yes, you have, and I haven't answered. You would think that was clue number one,* I want to say, but instead, I go with, "Sorry. It's been crazy busy."

"Well, I'm in town, and I was thinking that maybe I could come over and see you for lunch or dinner. Maybe spend the night?"

"Spend the night?" I don't realize I'm saying the words out loud until she answers me.

"Yes, spend the night. Catch up with you," she confirms, and I cringe.

"Well, Meadow woke up with a fever," I inform her, "so you can come over now if you like." I know full well she'll stay ten feet away from this house with Meadow being sick. She didn't do well when Meadow was a baby and had colic for a month. She even refused to give her a bottle at one point because the vomiting made her sick.



“Eww,” she replies. “What’s wrong with her?” And this is the biggest reason I hate this woman.

“She probably heard you were flying over. It’s enough to make anyone sick,” I finally respond to her.

“There are a couple of things I need to say to you.” She completely ignores my last sentence.

“Well, you have me.” I pull out my chair and sit down. “What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping we could have this conversation face-to-face.” Her voice goes soft, almost seductive. “That way we could, you know.”

“I have no idea what you are getting at, absolutely none.” *Nor do I care or even want to know*, I don’t add that in.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” she says, and I lean back in my chair rocking back and forth, “and I think I will be moving back.”

“Here?” I ask.

“Yes, here,” she huffs. “My family is here.”

“Your family?” I ask, confused. “What family? I thought they were all out West.”

“I meant you and Meadow,” she snaps. “My family is here, so I thought it’s time I come back home.”

I sit up straight now. “Number one, there is no you, me, and Meadow. There hasn’t been for the past four years.” That I even have to remind her of this is lunacy.

“Well, yes, I know this, but she’s getting older, and she’ll need a mother.” Her soft voice now sounds irritated.

“You don’t know this because you haven’t been around for the past four years, but,” I grind out, my tone hopefully letting her know that this conversation is as irritating for me as it is for her, “she’s been doing fine without a mother.”

“She was just a baby,” she huffs, and I can even see her rolling her eyes at me. Just like she did when Meadow was a baby and would cry nonstop, and she would just leave her crying.

“Yes, a baby who is now grown up and looking to start school soon,” I let her know. “You’ve spent a whole six days with her in four years... six days. I have food in the fridge that has been there longer.” My finger taps on the desk. “And just so we are clear on how this will go. You can stay where you are because coming back here isn’t going to change anything. I have full and complete custody of her. You signed the papers. If you want, I can have my lawyer send you a copy.”

“I know what I signed, Caine,” she snaps. “I was hoping we could talk things through.”

“Talk things through? It’s been four years.” I laugh at her. “All the talking should have been done.”

“When can I see Meadow?” She ignores me again. “I have a flight back tomorrow morning.”

I chuckle. “Well, I guess we’ll have to do it next time. You were invited to her birthday party last month,” I remind her.

“I already had plans,” she huffs. “I asked you to change the date.”

“I can’t change the date my daughter was born,” I tell her.

“Daddy.” I hear Meadow calling me from the living room.

“I have to go,” I tell her, pushing my chair away from the desk. “Good talking to you. Safe flight home.” I hang up the phone and get up, walking to the family room.

“What’s up, baby girl?” I ask as I round the couch and sit next to her.

“Will you watch television with me?” she asks, and I smile before leaning in and feeling her head, which feels a lot less hot than it did this morning.

“How are you feeling?” I ask. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Water,” she answers. I get up and walk over to the fridge to grab her water bottle. After filling it with two cubes of ice and then water, I walk back over and hand it to her. She opens the top and the plastic straw pops up as she takes little sips of water before handing it back to me. “Thanks, Daddy.” She turns on her side toward the television.

“You’re welcome, baby girl,” I tell her as she watches television. Her eyes are getting heavier, and I know that within ten minutes, she’ll be asleep again. Only when she is sleeping do I slowly get off the couch and walk back into my office, leaving the door open.

Flipping open the folder, I look down seeing the Post-it with all of Grace’s notes. I have to give it to her, she’s very

thorough. My mind goes straight back to when I opened the door and saw her standing there. She is fucking gorgeous. There isn't another word I can think of and even that word doesn't do her justice. I shake my head to stop thinking about her, looking at my phone and wondering if she made it back to the office safely.

Grabbing my phone, I call her office phone line to see if she picks up. It rings three times before she picks up. "Caine Griffin's office, this is Grace. How may I help you?"

*You can get on your knees and swallow my cock*, my head screams, and I have to shut my eyes, hoping like fuck my mouth doesn't say the words. "Hey, it's me, Caine."

"Oh, good, this saves me a phone call. I was on the phone with Dyrex about your appointment tomorrow."

"Yeah," I respond to her.

"They called and asked if they can shift it to Thursday instead. They are currently out of town and their travel schedule got shifted." I'm about to ask her if she checked my schedule. "I've just finished going through your schedule for Thursday, and the only thing you had on there was the meeting with Sofia. So, if it's okay by you, I can switch them around."

"Yeah, that's fine," I agree. "Thank you for checking."

"Just doing my job," she says. "Let me know if you need anything." She is direct.

"Will do," I reply and hang up the phone before I ask her if she's okay and if something is bothering her.

I spend the whole day trying to think of different reasons to call her, but nothing is a good enough reason, and the next day when my alarm rings, I spring out of bed, anxious to get to work. “Daddy,” Meadow calls me from her room, “am I going to daycare today?” I slip on shorts before I go to her bedroom.

“That depends,” I say, putting my hand on her head. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she states, and her forehead is cool.

“Then you are going to daycare,” I tell her even though I had Mrs. Potter on standby to come and watch her. “Get dressed, and I’ll get breakfast started.”

“Okay.” She turns over until she slides off her queen-sized bed. “I’m going to wear shorts.” I nod, watching her pick out her pink shorts with a matching top. When she’s got her outfit picked, I walk back to my room, go to the bathroom, wash my face, and fix my hair before getting dressed and walking downstairs. Forty-five minutes later, I’m parking my car in the parking lot at work. A quick look around and I don’t spot her SUV. After getting out and grabbing my coffee, I walk over to the elevator, pressing the button.

I look at my watch and see that it’s almost eight forty-five. Screeching tires make me turn my head to see her SUV pulling into a parking space closest to the elevator instead of in her normal spot. She rushes out of her SUV, and she doesn’t even notice I’m here, so I take a second to take her in. She’s wearing blue pants that are tight as fuck but go loose at her knee, with a white satin button-down top. I don’t even bother looking at her shoes because I see that she’s wearing

sunglasses. She finally looks up and sees me. “Shit,” she mutters. “Busted.”

“I would say.” I put my hand in my pocket as she comes closer. “Are you hungover?” I bark, and if I could move, I would lean in and sniff to see if she smells like lingering booze.

“What?” she snaps.

“Are you hungover?” I ask her again. “You’re an hour late and wearing sunglasses. If that doesn’t scream I’m hungover, I don’t know what does.”

“Incredible,” she huffs and ignores my question before she steps forward and presses the button for the elevator that is already lit.

“If this is too much responsibility for you...” I know I should stop, but I’m pissed. I just haven’t admitted to myself that I’m pissed she was out partying without me, or the fact she was probably out on a date. Maybe this is her walk of shame. That thought alone makes me grit my teeth.

“For the record, I’m forty-five minutes late, not hours,” she says, pulling up her sunglasses. I expect to find her eyes bloodshot, but they just look tired. “My alarm didn’t ring because my phone died.” The elevator pings. “But instead of you worrying that, I don’t know, I was in maybe an accident, the first thing that comes to your mind is I’m hungover.” She steps into the elevator, shaking her head, and presses the button five times nervously. I don’t note how my stomach clenches when she says she might have been in an accident. “Fuck that.” She walks out of the elevator. “I’m not sharing

this with you. I'd rather walk." Her heels click on the asphalt. I watch her walking, shocked at her snapping at me. "And for the record." She turns and stops walking. "I'm not hungover." She continues until she gets to the door, which has stairs written on it.

"You're going to walk up seven flights of stairs?" I ask as she pulls open the door.

"If it means I don't have to share an elevator with you," she retorts, walking in the door, and it closes behind her. I jog over to the door, pull it open, and find her at the top of the first landing. "So help me God, Caine, if you follow me up these stairs, I quit." She turns to look at me. "And I'm not joking. I will quit and walk out, which is probably something you've been trying to get me to do since I first started. But I've decided that I'm going to be a grown-up, you know, instead of the child you think I am, and stick around, even if you make my job fifteen times harder than it should be." She shakes her head. "Incredible," she mumbles as she walks up the steps and farther away from me. "Drunk. He's insane. If anyone is pushing me to drink, it's him." I stand here listening to her talk to herself, and the only thing I can do is hang my head.

# nine

. . .

Grace

I walk up the stairs, ignoring the burn in my chest, and push through just to spite him. Was I late? Yes. Did I fall asleep doing homework last night? Also, yes. Did I wake up when I almost fell out of the chair? Again yes. To say I hightailed it out of my apartment in a matter of ten minutes isn't an understatement. I literally brushed my teeth and hair, applied a light coat of mascara, and got dressed. The whole time, I cursed all forms of technology while I told Alexa to order me an alarm clock.

I knew I looked like shit, which is why I put on the sunglasses, hoping I could maybe slip away once I was at work to put on some concealer. But luck wasn't on my side today. I also semi-ran two stop signs and four yellow lights to try to get here before him, but again, my luck was off on a coffee break. Now here I am huffing up the steps just to get away from him, pissed the first thing he thought was I was coming to work hungover, like I lived in a sorority house.

I pull open the steel door once I reach the floor, coming face-to-face with the receptionist. "Oh my gosh, Grace," she gasps, "is the elevator not working?" The minute she asks me



the question, the elevator pings and the doors open, and out pops the man of my dreams. I mean, the man I hate more than life itself.

“Nope,” I say, walking past him, not even bothering to look at him. I also secretly hope I look cool, calm, and collected, but know I probably look like a cat that’s been in the rain all night long. “Wanted to get my steps in early.” I walk by her, giving her a smile and heading straight to my desk.

“Morning, I was worried about you.” Kayla looks up at me and smiles, and her eyes go big when she probably sees Caine behind me. “Oh, boy,” she mumbles.

“Thank you for being worried.” I stop at her desk. “It’s nice of you to care.” I shoot a glare over my shoulder at Caine, who has his own glare on. “Technology is no one’s friend.”

“Well,” Kayla says, confused by this whole conversation, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thank you.” I smile sweetly at her while secretly shooting daggers at Caine’s back when he walks past me. If I was as immature as he said I was, I would stick my tongue out at him. But instead, I do it in my head along with nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah. How is that for maturity? Okay, fine, I stick it out for a second before I catch myself, but he had it coming to him. Drunk. Dick. Oh, look, starts with D.

I walk around my desk at the same time as I see him walk into his office and quickly take off his jacket. “I hope you trip,” I mumble as I pull out my chair and sit down. I tuck my purse under my desk and start my computer. The smell of coffee makes me groan inwardly, and if he hadn’t pissed me

off so much, I would go to the kitchen and make myself one. However, because I'm more stubborn than a mule, I sit my ass down in my chair and die a slow death. I'm looking at my screen reading the emails coming in when a cup of coffee is placed on my desk. I look up to see Kevin.

"Morning," he greets and winks at me before he walks away.

"Thank you." I pick up the cup, bring it to my lips, and take a sip. I don't even care how this is prepared as long as it's caffeine.

"Are you two dating?" I hear Caine say and look over my shoulder at him.

"Yes," I answer, nodding. "I'm dating Kayla also. It's sort of a polygamous relationship, but no one wants to put any labels on it." I put the cup down. "What can I do for you?"

"We have that Zoom call at eleven," he reminds me as if I don't know.

"Correct." I nod at him. "The meeting ID has been sent to all parties," I tell him. "So, all you have to do is click on the link in the notes." His eyebrows shoot up, probably not aware I already did it.

"We'll take the meeting in the conference room," he states, walking back into his office. Now I'm the one raising my eyebrows. I think about going into his office and asking him why the hell I would have to be in that meeting.

I don't have a chance to ask him because Vinny comes over to my desk. "Good morning, Grace." He smiles at me.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m doing good, thank you so much for asking,” I reply, my voice going a bit higher than it should, hoping Caine hears me and realizes he’s a dick.

“Good.” He nods his head, confused by why my voice is so high. He smiles and walks into Caine’s office. I grab the cup of coffee as I go through the emails, making sure I answer those that need to be answered, as well as make notes about a couple I need to ask Caine about.

The phone rings non-stop today, asking for meetings. I take all the information down, and when Vinny leaves his office, instead of pushing back and grabbing my notes and going to him, I pull up the team’s message board, clicking his name with the green light beside it.

Me: There are things in the email that need your attention. Also, I’ve had five calls requesting meetings with you. I’ve vetted them and think three would be a good fit.

Caine: Why are you texting me?

Me: I’m still hungover, so I wasn’t sure I could walk without tripping.

I press send, and two seconds later, I hear him bark my name. “Grace, come in here.”

I roll my eyes, ignoring the way my pulse has started to speed up. *It's fine*, I tell myself. It is what it is. I also make a mental note, in case I do get fired, to ask my family to have him completely wiped off the grid. I mean, I don't think they would do it, but I could ask. Pushing back, I grab my notes and head into his office. Even though he summoned me, he is looking down at whatever is in front of him. So instead of walking in, I knock on his doorjamb, watching him look up. It's such a shame he's an asshole. But considering he's so good-looking, it should be no surprise. "You rang?"

"Yes." He leans back in his chair and puts one of his hands on the handle of the chair, making his arm bulge more. "I think I should apologize."

I stand here in front of his desk with my hands in front of me, holding my notepad. "You think?"

"Okay, fine. I'm sorry for jumping the gun," he finally says, and I'm pretty sure the words taste like acid in his mouth.

"So, you're sorry for thinking I was hungover instead of wondering if I was dead on the side of the road?" I ask, knowing it's a bit extreme, but this is what he gets from me.

Even he rolls his eyes at the last part. "Yes," he confirms, "I shouldn't have assumed."

"Well, you know what they say when you assume things." I cock my hip to the side. "You make an ass out of you and you."

"Isn't it, you make an ass out of you and me?"

“Usually, but in this case, you are the only one who’s an ass,” I state. “It had nothing to do with me, and it was all you.” I raise my hand and do a circle in front of me toward him. “Now, I accept your apology this time, but just so you know, and we are up front, I’m not going to forget you said it, and I may probably, most likely, throw it in your face in the future.”

He smirks. “So, you forgive but you don’t forget?”

“I was raised in the South. You’re lucky I forgive,” I inform him, and he stares at me.

“You were raised in the South?” I gawk at him. Did he even look at my résumé?

“Born and raised,” I tell him, taking a deep inhale and wanting to get over it before he starts asking about my family, and I have to either lie about it or skim over them. “Anyway, here are the clients I messaged you about.” I rip the top of the notepad off and put it on his desk. “You have ten minutes until the Zoom call.”

“Let’s go,” he says, getting up and grabbing the paper. “We can talk in the conference room.”

“I don’t know why I have to be there,” I finally respond when he rounds his desk and stands beside me. Even with five-inch heels on, I still reach him at his chin, so I have to look up at him.

“You have to be there to take notes and to make sure I’m not forgetting to ask any important questions.”

“How would I know?” I ask.

“Because you’re a woman, so you ask all the important information, unlike me, a man, who couldn’t care less,” he huffs, and it’s my turn to roll my eyes at him.

“Fine,” I relent, following him into the conference room. He pulls out the chair he always sits in, and I sit beside him.

“I’ll set up the computer and stuff, then we can go down the list of potential clients.” He opens the laptop in the room, which is attached to a projector, filling the empty wall in front of him. We go down the list, and he agrees to take meetings with them, so I make a note to schedule them for him.

My phone beeps, letting me know it’s time, so he clicks the link and waits for it to load. “I didn’t even check my face,” I mumble to him as I lean onto the desk, getting suddenly nervous.

Caine’s arm touches mine as he also sits forward. “You look fine,” he assures me softly. My head nearly whips off my shoulders when I look at him, our faces really close, closer than they should be. “You look more than fine.” My heart speeds up and feels like it will rise to my throat. All I can do is stare into his eyes. “You always look good,” he whispers, and if I wasn’t sitting so close to him, I don’t think I would hear it. I’m mesmerized by his look, and I swear I feel my head move toward his, my head in a daze. I swear I think he’s also moving his head closer to mine, the both of us inching closer and closer together.

I swear we are inches away from kissing, actually inches are too big. We’re centimeters away from our lips touching, the exact moment Sofia joins the Zoom.

She clears her throat, getting us both to look at her. “Hi.” She holds up her hand. The two of us move away from each other as if nothing just happened.

Meanwhile, I feel like I’ve just walked up the stairs again, this time jogging. My chest is going up and down irregularly, and my mouth is drier than it’s ever been in my life. *I almost kissed my boss.* The thought fills my head at the same time my head also screams out *you almost kissed a married man.* Pushing down the bile threatening to come up my throat, I turn to the screen. “Hey.” I move away from Caine slowly; the smile fills my face. “Caine, this is Sofia Petrov.” I use her married name, and she still blushes about it.

“Petrov,” he repeats. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Her husband plays hockey for the Carolina NHL team,” I tell him, and his eyes go big.

“No way.” He’s clearly impressed by this information.

“Way,” Sofia replies. “It’s nice to meet you, Caine.”

“I’ve heard good things about you,” he says, and I just side eye him. “You used to babysit Grace, didn’t you?” I shake my head. “Not that long ago.”

I look over at him, ignoring the sound of someone joining the meeting. “You have to speak up a little, Sofia,” I urge her, ignoring Caine. “He’s of the age where his hearing is slowly going deaf.”

“And to think I would have missed all this fun.” Nash’s face fills the screen. “Hi, everybody. I’m Nash, Caine’s

younger brother.”

“By like five years.” Caine scoffs from beside me, but I don’t bother looking over at him. “Four and a half, really.” He mumbles that part.

“That’s like thirty-five dog years,” Nash pokes, leaning back in his chair, and I fold my arms over my chest.

“That doesn’t count,” Caine retorts.

“I think it does,” I pipe into the feud. “Nash, this is Sofia.” I introduce them. “Sofia, thank you for squeezing us in.”

“Well, now you owe me,” she jokes with me. “So, let’s get started with some of the questions I have.” I lean back in my chair, and my arm moves to the side, touching Caine’s. “What date are we looking at?”

“Okay, how realistic is it to be able to do this in two weeks?” Nash asks, and I see Sofia’s eyes bulge. Nash holds up his hand. “We already have the venue, and the invites have been sent out.”

“In that case, it can be done,” Sofia assures him. “It’s going to be a crazy two weeks, but I think it can happen. Since I’m not on-site, I’ll need to have someone from your team to work with me.”

“Perf,” Nash says, and I side eye Caine, whose jaw just clenches.

“I guess we can spread it around to the PAs here,” Caine suggests. “I’ll leave Grace in charge of handling this.”



“Sounds good,” Sofia says. “Gracie, I’ll send you all the things I need.”

“Perf,” I say to her, “I’ll text you my work email so I can cc Caine on all decisions.” I look over at him when he’s about to protest. “Wouldn’t want to have another juicagate.” He just glares at me, and the rest of the meeting runs smoothly.

Vinny and Jaret both come in as soon as it’s done, so I excuse myself. Caine never comes back to his office. He spends the rest of the afternoon in the conference room. They even order in lunch as they prepare for the big meeting tomorrow.

Shutting down my computer, I leave without seeing him. The following morning, I arrive an hour early, and the office is deserted. I put my coffee cup on my desk and open the computer, and I’m forwarding emails when the phone on my desk rings. “Caine Griffin’s office, this is Grace. How may I help you?”

“Why are you at work at seven?” Caine barks, and his voice doesn’t even sound like he’s just woken up.

“I got here an hour late yesterday,” I fill him in, “so I came an hour early to make up for it.” I take a sip of the coffee. “Good morning to you too, by the way.”

“I’m not coming in this morning. I’m going straight to the meeting,” he huffs.

“Let me know if you need anything,” I offer, and he hangs up. I shake my head. “And he’s still a dick,” I say to the

phone, hanging it up. Slowly people start to trickle in, and everyone says good morning like normal people do.

The morning flies by with Sofia and I planning the gala. I pick up the phone just after noon. “Hello, is Mr. Griffin in?” the lady on the other end inquires.

“He isn’t. Can I take a message?”

“This is Matilda from the daycare center. I’m calling about Meadow.” I sit up straight now. “I’ve tried to call him for the past thirty minutes, and there hasn’t been any answer.”

“He’s in a huge meeting,” I inform her. “Is she okay?” I ask, worry now filling my body. “I know she wasn’t feeling well two days ago.”

“She’s complaining of a tummy ache, and she has a low-grade fever,” Matilda answers.

“Can you hold on a second?” I ask, putting the phone on hold and rushing to Loren’s office.

I knock on the open door, and she looks up at me. “Hi,” I say, and she must see the panic on my face. “I need the number to Caine’s wife.”

“Um,” she says.

“The daycare is calling because Meadow isn’t feeling well. She was sick a couple of days ago, and now apparently she isn’t feeling well again.” I put my hand to my head. “They called Caine, but he’s in that huge meeting.”

Loren gets up. “See if you can go get her.”

I rush back over to my desk. “Hi, Matilda, I can’t get ahold of him. Can I come and get her?”

“I’m afraid not,” she says. “I would need his permission, or is Nash there?”

“He’s not,” I groan, “but hold on. If I get him on the phone, would he be able to give me permission?”

“Well, I suppose so,” she says. “He’s the only other contact for her.”

“Can you hold?” I ask her and put her on hold before calling Nash. “Pick up, pick up, pick up,” I chant.

“Yo,” he greets, and I have to smile at the difference from his brother.

“Nash, it’s Grace,” I ramble in a frenzy. “Meadow is sick, the daycare just called for Caine, but he’s in the big meeting. She’s not feeling well, and they won’t let me get her because I’m like no one, but you are on the list, and I was wondering if you could maybe call them, and I’ll go get her and bring her here until we get ahold of Caine.” I don’t even breathe between words.

“Whoa,” Nash says, “calm down there. You’re going to give yourself a heart attack. I’ll call her now so you can go get her.”

I hang up with him, going back to Matilda, who puts me on hold when Nash calls her. In five minutes, I’ve got the address in my hand, and I’m rushing out. Only when I get there do I laugh.

“Hi,” I greet, walking in and seeing Maddy, or as she called herself, Matilda. “I didn’t even put two and two together. I mean, I do call you Maddy, so that could be why I didn’t, you know, connect the dots.” She also laughs at me.

“I didn’t even think,” she says. I’ve been here once before when I had to pick up Levi and Eva’s little girl a couple of weeks ago when they were both running late getting back into town.

“You work for Caine?” she asks, and I nod. “Well, I feel better now that I know you,” she shares as we walk down the hallway toward the door.

The lights in all the classrooms are off since it’s naptime. “Meadow,” she calls her from the doorway, and she comes out, holding her bunny in her hand. She’s wearing a skirt and a white T-shirt with the word Princess in the middle, with a crown on top of the I. Her pigtails are lopsided, and one is almost out.

“Hi,” I say, squatting down in front of her, “do you remember me?” I smile at her as she nods her head.

“You’re Daddy’s fairy,” she states, and I just laugh quietly.

“Yeah,” I confirm. “He’s in a meeting, so he couldn’t come and get you,” I tell her softly in a whisper. “So, we will go to the office and wait for him there.”

“Okay,” she agrees, rubbing her eyes, “my tummy hurts.”

“I’m sorry.” I get up and hold out my hand for her. I thank Matilda before walking out of the daycare. “Maybe we can get you something to eat,” I suggest to her as I open the back door

of the SUV and get her in the back. I put her in the car seat that my family had installed in my SUV to always have just in case I need it. It's a weird thing to have, but with all the kids in the family, it's easier to just have one instead of getting it from someone.

I buckle her into the seat before getting into the front seat. I drive with extra care to the office, and when I pull into the parking lot, I see she's fallen asleep. I grab my purse before taking her out of her seat. Her head falls on my shoulder as I carry her to the elevator, then look around to see Caine isn't back yet. I rub Meadow's back softly as I wait for the elevator. My phone beeps, telling me my order has arrived.

Before I ran out of here, I made an order for some soup, along with some ginger ale, Gatorade, and saltines. Walking into the elevator, I'm happy no one else gets in with me, and when I walk toward Caine's office, Loren comes out of hers. "I still can't get ahold of him. I even called Jaret and Vinny, and no one is picking up the phone."

"It was a huge meeting," I say, walking into Caine's office and toward the couch, sitting down with Meadow sleeping on me.

The minute I sit down, she stirs in my arms, sitting up and looking around. "Hi." I smile at her, touching her forehead. "How are you feeling?" I don't have a chance to say anything else because two things happen at the same time.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Caine's voice booms through the office as he glares at me.

“I don’t feel good,” Meadow says right before she projectile vomits all over me.

# ten

. . .

Caine

“*W*hat the fuck is going on here?” My voice comes out louder than I want it to be. I have no idea what the fuck is going on. All I know is my daughter is in my office instead of at the daycare where I left her this morning.

“Caine,” Loren says my name softly, and I should take a second and ask what is going on, but my heart is beating out of my chest for two reasons. One, my daughter is in the arms of a woman she doesn’t even know. Second, she’s in a woman’s arms, and she’s never been in anyone’s arms but mine.

The babysitter sure as fuck doesn’t sit down and cuddle her. Not even my mother has cuddled her the way she is, making me feel things I shouldn’t. “I don’t feel good,” Meadow says right before she projectile vomits all over Grace, who sits there, not doing anything. As if having my kid vomit on her is just another part of her day. The woman has weaseled her way into my life, and now she has my child sitting on her lap.

“Oh my God,” Loren gasps, putting her hand on her mouth while I rush to grab Meadow away from Grace.

I pluck her off Grace. “Give me my daughter,” I hiss at her before turning and rushing her into my private bathroom. “Are you okay, honey?”

“I don’t feel good,” she repeats as I walk over and turn on the water in the sink, putting her down on her feet.

“Are you going to throw up again?” I ask, wetting a washcloth with the water before I wipe her mouth. She shakes her head as I wet another one to wash her face. “You feel a little warm,” I tell her. “Did they give you some medicine at school?”

“No,” she mumbles as I squat in front of her. She walks into my open legs and lays her head on my chest. “I’m thirsty.”

“Okay, baby,” I soothe, getting up and walking out of the room. I don’t know why, but my eyes scan the room to see if Grace is still here. She’s not, though. She is nowhere to be found. On the other hand, Loren is there, and she’s spraying some mist in the room.

“Oh, hey,” she says when she turns around. “How is Meadow?”

“She’s thirsty,” I state, putting my hand in my pocket as Loren walks over to the brown bag on my desk.

“I have something.” She opens the bag. “There is Gatorade, some ginger ale, a couple of juice boxes.” The minute she says that I look down at the floor.

“I want juice,” Meadow declares, and Loren just looks at me, and I nod.



“We’ll sit for a bit to drink the juice and see if you’re okay,” I tell Meadow as she walks over to the couch where she was just sitting with Grace. I can’t help but picture them again, and my hands get tight when I do.

Meadow gets on the couch and holds out her hands for the juice. Loren smiles at her, handing it to her. “Careful,” Loren cautions, “don’t squeeze it, or else it’ll spill all over you.”

“Okay,” she says softly, grabbing the juice.

“Can you explain to me why my daughter is here?” I ask quietly.

“The daycare called, said they tried to call you many times, but you didn’t answer,” she explains, her voice low. I pull out my phone from my pocket, seeing I have five missed calls from the daycare and one missed call from Nash.

“There was no signal in that building,” I say. “For security purposes, we had to hand over all cell phones.”

“She left as soon as she got the call and got here maybe a couple of minutes before you did. She had this delivered while she went to get her,” Loren continues with her voice low. “I sent her home.”

“Yeah,” I say, without saying one more word. I’m going to address this in the morning when I’ve calmed down a bit. “We’ll talk in the morning.” I walk over to Meadow. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” She holds up the juice box for me and gets down. “Daddy.” She looks up at me. “My bunny.”

“Where is it?” I ask, looking around.

“I had it in the fairy girl’s car,” she says softly.

“We can get you another one.” I squat down in front of her. “We’ll order you another one.”

“But, Daddy,” she whines.

“Here.” I look over my shoulder and see Grace walking into the room. She must have changed her top because she’s wearing a big white T-shirt. She doesn’t even look at me. “I found this in the car and thought you would want her back.” She talks just to Meadow, who squeals and smiles.

“My bunny!” She grabs it from Grace’s hand and brings it to her chest, hugging it. “Thank you,” she says, and Grace just smiles.

I can see her eyes are red and so is the tip of her nose, and it looks like she was crying. “You are so welcome.” She tries to put on a brave face, but I can see the sadness in her eyes. She turns right away, avoiding looking at anyone in my office as she walks out with her head down.

“Caine,” Loren admonishes, and I just shake my head, scooping Meadow into my arms. “Here, take this,” Loren suggests, grabbing the bag. “There is also some chicken soup and saltines in there.” I grab the bag from her. “Grace ordered it before she left to go get her at daycare.” I feel like someone just kicked me in the balls wearing spiked shoes.

I walk out of my office. I’m not even out of the parking lot before my phone rings, and I see it’s Nash. I answer it reluctantly. “Caine.”

“Yeah, I know who I’m calling,” he retorts as I put the phone to my ear. “Care to explain to me why Loren just called me and told me you were an asshole to Grace?”

“Nope,” I say, ignoring that he’s one thousand percent right.

“Well, too bad. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“What is wrong with me?” I snap. “What is fucking wrong with you? How could you let that girl go and pick up my daughter?” Even saying the words, they feel like acid on my tongue.

“Number one, that woman,” he notes, “was beside herself, freaking the fuck out because your child was sick, and no one could get ahold of you. I thought she was going to have a fucking heart attack. That’s the kind of girl I let pick up your daughter.”

“Well, you should have called someone else,” I growl, knowing there was no one else. None of my family is in town.

“Yeah, they were going to miraculously appear from across the country to get Meadow. You’re a dick,” he chastises. “You better apologize to her.”

“Don’t tell me how to handle my staff,” I hiss.

“Well, just so you know, if she quits,” he warns, and the thought alone makes me grip the phone so hard in my hand it’s a wonder it doesn’t snap. “I’m going to make sure she works here with me.”

“Fuck you,” I curse, hanging up the phone, because that’s the mature adult I am. I toss my phone in the passenger seat as

I make my way home. Once home, I get Meadow into a bath and put fresh pj's on her. I put my shorts on and a T-shirt before cuddling her on the couch.

The minute I sit down, my mind plays the scene over and over in my head. That along with Nash's words make it hard for me to even see straight. Maybe it's the fact Meadow's mother was never the cuddly type. Maybe it's the fact I've never, ever pictured a woman holding my child as if she was her own. Maybe it's the fact that thought alone scares the fuck out of me. It's making me lose my damn mind.

Even the next day when Mrs. Potter arrives to watch her, she doesn't hug her. She smiles at her and taps her shoulder. It's been me this whole time. Me who did the cuddling, me who consoled her. Just me and Meadow and we were happy.

Pulling into the parking garage, I notice her SUV isn't here, but I try not to think too much about it. Even when I step off the elevator and walk around the corner, my head doesn't want to look toward her desk. I know I have to tell her how sorry I am. I'm just not sure how to do it. Only when I get close enough to my office do I lift my eyes. My feet stop in my tracks when I see the redhead sitting behind the desk. "Who are you?" I ask.

"I'm Annie," she replies. "I'm your temp."

"What? Why?" My heart beats fast in my chest as my hand grips the cup of coffee in my hand tighter. I storm toward Loren's office, finding her on the phone. She takes one look at me and hangs up. "Who the fuck is that?"

“That’s Annie, and she’s your temp.” She folds her hands on her desk.

“Loren, why is there a temp at the desk?” My jaw is clenched so tight.

“Grace called in sick,” she states, and I don’t know why I do a little sigh of relief. “This morning at six, she left a message and sent me a text.”

“So, she’s coming back?” I look at her, waiting for her to answer.

“She didn’t tell me otherwise.” She shrugs. “All I know is she’s not here today.”

“Thank you. Send her home. I don’t need anyone to work at the desk. Grace is up to date on everything, so I’ll be fine for a day.”

“Okay,” Loren says, and I walk into my office and shut the door. I try to work the whole day, but all I can think of is why she called in sick. Is she sick, or is she avoiding me? I don’t blame her for avoiding me.

That question haunts me the whole morning, so finally, at noon, I go back home and chill with Meadow. The next morning, Mrs. Potter shows up again as I walk out to go to work. When I walk in, her desk is again empty. I pull out my phone and call her number. It rings three times before going to voicemail.

“Hi, you know what to do. If you don’t, hang up.” I shake my head before walking into Loren’s office.

“She’s not here,” I state, and Loren just looks at me.

“I know,” she says. “She isn’t feeling well.”

“Bullshit,” I snarl, now pissed. Going to my office, I slam the door closed. Putting the cup of coffee on the desk, I pull up employee records. “Don’t do it,” I tell myself, but I don’t listen. Instead, I take my phone and punch her address into the GPS.

It takes me thirty minutes to find her place and get a parking spot. I look up at the high-rise and then look around to see all the other ones. “Definitely not where I thought she would live,” I note as I make my way into the building.

The doorman is busy dealing with a delivery person, so I slip in and head toward the elevator, hoping no one will ask me anything. I press the thirty-fourth-floor button and look up, seeing the numbers go up from one all the way to thirty-four. I step out, going right, then turning around to go left.

I stare at her door for a good five minutes, maybe even more, before my hand comes up and knocks. I look down at the floor, one side of my head telling me *this is a bad idea* while the other side says *knock again*. I knock again after two minutes and finally hear movement on the other side of the door. The sound of the locks being turned fills the silent hallway, and then she pulls open the door. She’s wearing gray lounge pants with a short-sleeved matching shirt that shows all her stomach. Her flat smooth stomach makes my mouth water. Her hair is piled on top of her head, and her face looks very pale. “What the hell are you doing here?”

# eleven

. . .

Grace

Opening the door, I'm expecting the doorman to be there with another delivery from my mother, but instead, it's him. The last person on earth I would ever expect to knock on my door, and the most irritating of all, he looks fucking hot. But I push that down and ignore it, remembering what a dick he was. "What the hell are you doing here?" I almost shriek, which then makes my stomach rise, and I turn to rush down the hall toward the bathroom. "Not again," I chant over and over again. I slam the door behind me before making it to the toilet where the water and ginger ale I had an hour ago comes right back up. I close my eyes, trying to get the nausea to subside.

I sit with my back against the wall as I count to one hundred. In through my nose, out through my mouth. The nausea settles, and I attempt to slide back up to my feet. Walking over to the sink, I turn the water on, making sure it's cool to the touch before I rinse my mouth. Grabbing a towel, I dab my mouth dry before turning to walk out of the bathroom. I don't know why I'm shocked he's standing outside the bathroom door. "Who invited you in?" I ask, not sure I should

take another step because it feels like my stomach is doing the wave.

“You left the door open.” He points behind him to the door that is now shut.

“That didn’t mean come in,” I tell him, and at that moment, my head just turns, and I have to grab the door to steady myself.

“Will you please go and sit down?” he urges me, his voice low like it was in the conference room when he almost kissed me. Well, when we almost kissed each other. When I don’t move fast enough, he snaps, “You can either walk there yourself, or I’ll carry you there.”

“Hey,” I snap, “this is my house.” I do a circle with my hand. “You aren’t the boss of me in my house.” I ignore his glare and decide it’s a good idea to sit down before I fall on my ass. What a scene that would give him, me on my ass in front of him. Instead, I hold on to the wall as I walk to the living room, where I’ve been camping for the last two days. I can feel him right behind me, and I’m even afraid to look over my shoulder with the way my stomach is moving up and down. I finally make it to the couch in what seems to be eighty-four years but is probably a minute if that. My head spins at the same time my stomach lurches up, and I swear I think I’m going to hurl. I sit down and put my head down to stop the wave.

“Can I get you anything?” he asks, and instead of giving me space, the douchebag squats down right in front of me.



“No,” I say softly. “I just need to close my eyes for a second,” I tell him and lean back on the couch.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

“Like death,” I admit. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this sick in my life.” I open my eyes and see he’s gotten up from in front of me and now sits off to the side. His ass is on the edge of the couch and his elbows are on his knees as he looks at me.

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that,” he says, looking at me, worry all over his face.

“I’m pretty sure it’s just the flu,” I tell him. “It started two nights ago when I got home and took a shower.” I put my hand on my stomach. “I thought I felt queasy because Meadow threw up on me. But as the night went on, the nausea just rolled in, then the vomiting started.”

“You probably have what Meadow has.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I retort. “How did you know where I lived?”

“Employee file,” he admits, and my mouth opens in shock.

“That’s very high school of you.” I laugh and then stop when it makes my stomach move too much. “Also, very stalkerish.”

“It’s not stalkerish,” he counters. “It’s not like I followed you home from the bar.”

“No.” I shake my head. “This is even better; you went in my confidential employee file and got my address.”

“I didn’t share it with anyone. It’s still confidential.” He looks around.

“But I didn’t give it to you,” I retort. “I put it on my form.”

“A form I have access to,” he quickly comes back with.

“You should have gone into law,” I try to kid with him, but my energy is drained. “Besides, you’re just here to make yourself feel better for being a jerkface yesterday.” I’m blaming the fact I haven’t eaten in two days and the fact I’m hangry.

“It was two days ago,” he corrects me, “and I did go into law.” He shocks me with his answer, and I make a mental note to ask him about it when I’m not irritated by him.

“That’s what I meant,” I huff. “This is a common theme for you.”

“What is?” he asks, and I’m going to give myself credit for not backing down.

“You being a jerk and then coming back to apologize.” I stick up my index finger. “Usually, it’s done within a day,” I huff. “I mean, even your brother messaged me to ask how I was doing.”

“Nash,” he states, his voice filled with shock and then anger, which is weird. “He texted you?”

“Yes.” I nod. “Loren, also a couple of people from the office. But not you.” I point at him. “No, not Mr. Give Me Back My Daughter,” I say, the scene coming back and making me angry. “Also, can I point out...” I sit up too fast, which is mistake number one, making my stomach queasy. “No one

was taking her away. She fell asleep in the car, and I didn't want to wake her because she said she didn't feel well." My voice goes louder, which is mistake number two, making my head pound and turn. I quickly lie back down, but I turn on my side this time. "Then she threw up all over me," I add, right before my eyes shut. At this point, it takes too much to even try to open them. *I'm just going to rest my eyes for a second before I open them again*, I think I mumble, but I'm not sure.

The couch next to me lowers, and then I feel a hand on my head. A couple of seconds later, I feel the cover drape over me. I can't even attempt to open my eyes. "I'm sorry." I hear him moving around me but sleep quickly comes and takes me.

"Mind your business," I hear mumbled from near me. "Or else I'll kick you in the balls." My eyes flicker open, and I see Caine there on the couch in front of me. His jacket is off, and his shirtsleeves are rolled up to his elbows. His head is back, the phone to his ear. "It's none of your fucking business," he growls between clenched teeth, and then he hangs up on whoever he was talking to. He tosses the phone to the side before looking at me. "Did I wake you?" He sits up straight.

"No," I answer him honestly. "What time is it?"

"A little after twelve," he answers, and there is a knock on the door. "I'll get it." He gets up and all I can do is watch him walk over to the door. "Thank you," he says right before I hear the door shut. He walks back into the room with a brown paper bag in his hand. "I got you food."

"Ugh," I groan out, "no." Then my stomach growls. "Yes, but." My voice trails off.

“It’s okay,” he assures me, sitting down near my side, “I got you chicken broth so you can have that without throwing up.”

“I threw up water before,” I tell him, but my mouth waters when he takes the broth out of the bag, “but I can try.”

“I also got you some saltines if you want to crush them up and put them in the broth.” I look at him. “It’s a trick I learned with Meadow.” He looks into the bag and takes out a plastic spoon. “At least try to see if you can take it.”

“Fine,” I agree, getting up on my elbow and testing out the waters to see if my head will spin. I almost cheer when it doesn’t. I sit up and cross my legs in front of me, waiting for the nausea to kick in, but nothing happens. “This is a plus,” I tell him as he hands me the Styrofoam container. “Thank you.” He watches me as I grab the spoon from his hand and take a little bit of broth and swallow it. “This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” I inform him, and he chuckles.

“I doubt that,” he says as he watches me.

“You’re freaking me out,” I admit softly as I sip another spoonful.

“Why?” He turns on his seat to face me.

“Well, for one, I’m not used to this Caine,” I tell him. “I’m used to—”

“The jerkface,” he reminds me of the name I called him.

“Yes.” I figure we are past the point where I have to hide I don’t like his attitude at times. “Also, I forgive you.”

“Do you?” he states. “But you won’t forget.”

“Nope.” I smile at him.

“It was just a surprise.” He starts to talk, his voice not rising. This has to be my favorite Caine voice of them all. “I walked into the office, and Meadow was there.”

I guess I can see why he freaked out. “I just didn’t even think. Why didn’t you try to get in touch with me through their office?”

“I mean, it wasn’t life or death,” I try to make him understand. “She wasn’t feeling well. Under no circumstance was it that dire to get in touch with you. I knew how big the meeting was, so I figured I would bring her to the office, and then when you came back, you could deal with it.”

“I’ve never had someone who stepped in the way you did.” His voice is so calming he should talk like this all the time. “It’s usually just been me who has to take care of her and then all of a sudden someone else was doing it.” His declaration has my head spinning for a whole different reason.

“What about Meadow’s mom?” I ask the question I’ve been dying to ask anyone since the daycare called me but refrained. He looks down. “Forget I asked. It’s none of my business.”

“It’s fine; it’s not like no one in the office knows. She left after Meadow was born. Marriage and motherhood weren’t for her.” His eyes go soft as he talks about his daughter, and I also make a mental note that I really, really like this Caine.

“Well, good riddance, then,” I declare, shocking him and myself. “No one needs to be brought up with a shitty parent.” I put the soup down. “Luckily for her, you are a great dad.”

He’s about to say something when we hear the sound of the front door unlock. I look down the hall toward the door, hearing it slam. The sound of boots on the floor, Caine glances over at me and all I can do is look to see who is walking in. “What is going on here?” my cousin JB says as soon as he steps into the room. He’s wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, with his big-ass ugly belt I’ve been trying to hide since he turned twelve and decided a big bull buckle was a good idea. With his crusty-ass old cowboy boots; instead of a cowboy hat, he’s wearing a baseball hat.

Caine gets up as if the couch is on fire, walking over to his jacket, it takes him one step and a long reach. “What are you doing here?” I ask, leaning forward and putting my soup down on the table.

“I got here as soon as I could,” he answers, looking at me and then at Caine, who is shrugging on his jacket.

“I’m Caine,” he introduces, the soft look he had in his eyes not too long ago gone. “I’m her boss. I came by to make sure she was okay.”

“I’m JB,” he returns, “it’s nice to meet you.”

“I’ll head out,” Caine says, avoiding looking at me, nodding at JB, and then hightailing it out of here.

“He’s so scared of me.” JB laughs as soon as the door slams shut.

“Please.” I roll my eyes. “He could bench-press you with one hand.” I throw the cover off me. “Now, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Wow,” he says, putting his hand to his heart, “is that any way to talk to your loving cousin, who flew all this way to make sure you’re okay?”

He starts to walk into the room, and I hold up my hand. “If you think you’re sitting anywhere on this couch, I’m calling Grandma Olivia and telling her.” He stops mid-step. “Did you even shower, or did you come here straight from the barn?” I ask, and he smirks. “You lost the bet, didn’t you?”

He takes his hat off and scratches his head. “Charlie was supposed to come, but he bet me.” I hold up my hand to stop him from talking.

“I don’t even know why he would come either,” I huff. “I’m fine. I have the flu.”

“You tell that to your parents, then my parents, and when you are done, tell our grandparents also,” he grouses. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Go shower.” I point at the hallway. “And change your clothes.”

“Fine, but I’m choosing what we watch when I come out.” He turns around to grab the bag he must have left at the door before going into the shower.

I grab my soup and finish most of it, then look into the bag, seeing he got me ginger ale and Gatorade. I get up, going to the kitchen to get a glass, and by the time I sit back down,

JB is out of the shower and heading over to the couch. I don't know what he puts on because all I can think about is Caine and what he told me. I reach for my phone and pull up his name, typing out a message, wondering what he's doing right now.

Me: Thank you for the soup today  
and for making sure I'm okay.



# twelve

. . .

Caine

“*T*omorrow can we go to the park?” Meadow asks me when she climbs into bed, using her feet to slide under the covers in the middle of her queen-sized bed. Her face looks like it has its color back from the past two days of being sick. My head is low-key throbbing after having a minor mental breakdown with Meadow about how she wanted to take a shower and not a bath. Then from the shirt she was wearing that she didn’t want to wear but then put on backward. Let’s just say I’m really fucking happy this week is finally over. I think also she is definitely on the mend and back to her old self.

“I think we can do that,” I tell her, walking over toward the reading corner in her room. “What book do you want?”

“*The Little Mermaid,*” she chooses as I grab the book and walk over to her bed, lying on top of the blankets. “I got gadgets and gizmos a plenty.” She sings the song and then looks up at me, and all I can do is smile at her. The love I have for her is indescribable, and I didn’t understand it until they placed her in my arms.

“Okay, here we go,” I start, opening the book and beginning to read it to her. By the end of the book, she is barely able to keep her eyes open. Getting off the bed, I kiss her cheek softly before grabbing her old sippy cup from the night before. Placing the book back where I took it from, I close the door a bit behind me.

I walk down the stairs with the sippy cup in my hand as I make my way to the kitchen. The minute I get to the bottom, I hear my phone beep from the kitchen counter, where I left it before I ushered Meadow upstairs after dinner.

I turn off the lights in my office and lower the bright ones in the family room before making my way over to the kitchen. Picking up my phone, I stare at the home screen. I have emails that have come in and two text messages, but the last one is the one that shocks me. I was not expecting to see her name. My hands get a little clammy when I see her message:

Grace (Office) PA: Thank you for the soup today and for making sure I'm okay.

Two things happen at the same time, my chest gets tight and then my hand grips the phone even harder. Why the fuck is she texting me when her boyfriend is right there with her? Boyfriend. Just the word makes my jaw twitch. I mean, I knew it was a possibility, but then to see it with my own eyes. It was just an eye-opener, more or less. I mean, did I need to go to her place to see if she was okay? No. Should I have sent a message to her instead of going there? Yes. Not my best moment, for sure. I look down at the message, wondering what

she's doing right now. I wonder if she ate some of the soup. I wonder if she got sick after I left. *It's none of your business*, I remind myself.

Ignoring the pull to answer her, I put the phone back down on the counter. The minute I walk away from it to clean up the fiasco I made during dinner, all I can do is look back toward where the phone sits. "Don't even think about it," I tell myself as I pile all the dishes into the sink. As I rinse off the plates, my mind stupidly and unconsciously goes back to Grace. I am never, ever going to admit how much this actually happens. Whenever my head gets a minute to think, it's always fucking Grace it thinks of. My stomach gets tight when I remember listening to her get sick from the hall, and all I could do was wait for her. In honesty, I did try to open the door, but it was locked, so all I could do was wait. Then watching her almost fall, not even going to lie, I was one second away from calling 9-1-1. Then when she lay down, all I could do was watch her, waiting for her to jump up and be sick again, but luckily, she was fine. I should have left. I should have done a lot of things, but leaving was at the top of that list. There is also a column for things I shouldn't have done. I shouldn't have bared my soul to her about Marylin. I shouldn't have ordered her lunch and waited for her to eat it. I shouldn't have wanted to lie down and hold her.

The phone rings from the counter when I put the last dish into the dishwasher. My hand stills midway as my heart picks up its pace, thinking maybe she's calling me. I wipe my hands on the dishrag before grabbing my phone and seeing it's Nash.

“Hello,” I answer, putting the phone to my ear before turning to start the dishwasher.

“Yo,” he says, and I roll my eyes. “I’ll be in town tomorrow. Can I come and hang with my niece so I can get best uncle credits?”

I laugh at him. “You’re her only uncle,” I remind him, “so you get that regardless of if you are cool or not.”

“I’ll be there by ten, and maybe tomorrow night we can go out on the town,” he says, his voice getting excited. “Get you laid so you can be in a better mood.”

“Not interested,” I say curtly, wiping down the counter.

“In sex or going out?” he asks, his voice going to a whisper.

“In going out,” I groan. “If you want, we can go to a bar and watch the hockey game.”

“Fun,” he replies, “I haven’t done that since I was in college.”

“Goodbye.” I hang up on him. I finish cleaning the kitchen, and instead of watching television, I go into the office, going through all my emails. What an exciting Friday night, I laugh at myself when I slide into bed.

The next morning, I wake up early, opting to work out upstairs. After two hours, I’m showered and in the kitchen, making a protein shake when Meadow comes downstairs. “Morning, Dad,” she greets, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Morning, baby girl,” I say to her as she comes to me and I pick her up in my arms, laying her head on my shoulder. “How did you sleep?”

“Not good,” she complains, and I look over seeing she slept ten hours; she’s fine.

“Uncle Nash is coming over today,” I tell her, and all of a sudden, she’s fine. “He’s going to come to the park with us.”

“Goody,” she cheers, squirming down. “Are you making pancakes?” I look down at her as she skips to the living room. “With strawberries and blueberries?” I laugh, thinking this is her way of saying this is what you are making me for breakfast, or else. Nash comes in twenty minutes later and the three of us spend the day outside. I even put her to bed before heading out for the night.

“Do you know that Sofia, our event planner, is married to Matthew Petrov?” I tell him as I take a pull from my bottle of beer. The two of us are sitting at a sports bar, sharing nachos, while watching the hockey game on the big-screen television.

“No way,” he says, his phone beeping in his hand.

“You’ve been on that thing nonstop today,” I tell him, and he just looks over at me and smirks. “Who are you texting?”

“Grace.” The minute he says her name, my hand stops midway from my mouth to the bar. If I wasn’t holding on to the bottle of beer as hard as I am, it would fall to the floor. The air swishes out of me. “I’m checking to see how she’s doing.”

I put the beer down on the coaster, trying to contain my rage. I also try not to think about why I have so much rage.

“You’re texting Grace?” I ask him, thinking maybe I misheard him.

“Yeah,” he confirms, grabbing his own beer bottle and bringing it to his mouth, trying to hide his smile.

“She has a boyfriend,” I inform him, “so you are barking up the wrong tree.” I try not to glare at him but fail. “And two, you’re too old for her.”

“Okay, one, she doesn’t have a boyfriend,” he refutes me. “Two, she’s five years younger than me.”

“I met her boyfriend yesterday.”

Nash laughs at me as he puts his beer down on the coaster. “Who cares?” He picks up the phone again. “I’m checking to see how she is.”

I snatch the phone away from him. “Stop fucking playing in my office.” He snatches the phone back from me.

“If it makes you feel any better, you can play in my office any time you want.” I shake my head as he puts his phone down.

I’m in a semi bad mood the rest of the night, ignoring him and ignoring all the times he picks up his phone. The bad mood lingers into Sunday, and by the time I’m walking into the office on Monday morning, I’m a ticking time bomb.

Stepping out of the elevator, I nod at the receptionist as I walk to my office, spotting Grace right away. She’s walking out of the kitchen with that guy again, who literally has hearts in his eyes. She looks more beautiful than I remember, which pisses me off tenfold.

She smiles at him before she walks toward her desk, her pink-flowered skirt goes to her ankles and swishes around her legs. Her feet are in shiny pink sky-rocket high heels, and my cock immediately wakes up. Her white shirt is a wraparound with small sleeves to her elbows and a big bow sash on the side. I wonder if I pull it, will it open in the front? She must sense someone looking at her because her eyes find mine. Something inside me shifts, but I'm not sure what it is. It's probably irritation because her eyes shine, and I could get lost in them. "Good morning." She smiles at me, her eyes lighting up even more.

"Morning," I snap at her. "Did you just get in?"

"Nope," she says, walking around her desk, putting the cup of coffee on the desk, "just wanted to get a cup of coffee." She sits down and looks at me. "Did you have a good weekend?"

"It was fine," I deflect, walking into my office, ignoring the need to ask her how her weekend went.

"Meeting in ten." I look up to see Vinny knocking on my door.

"Yeah." I put my keys down and ignore her when I walk out. I look out a couple of times during the meeting, and every single time I look out, I don't see her at her desk. I don't even add things to discuss in the meeting, and when I walk out and go back to my office, she's not at her desk again.

This time, I spot her coming out of Loren's office. "You are never at your desk," I bark when she gets close enough to her desk. I try to keep my voice down, but it comes out a bit

higher than it should. The office suddenly goes eerily quiet as all eyes are on us.

“What?” she asks, confused.

“You are never at your desk,” I repeat, my voice is lower now. I look around, making everyone look away. “I came in, and you weren’t at your desk.” I take a deep inhale, and I should count to ten, or maybe even a hundred, but I don’t. “Then I look out during the meeting, and I don’t ever see you at your desk.”

“I’ll order myself an AirTag.” She puts the papers she has in her hands down on her desk. “Then wear it during work hours so you can track me.” She sits in her chair.

I grit my teeth before I storm into my office, closing the door behind me. I toss my jacket on the couch before I walk over to my desk. I see that she’s sent me fifteen emails since I went into the meeting. She has also worked on my schedule and added in some meetings.

The knock on my door has me looking up. “Come in!” I shout, and the door opens just enough for her to stick her head in.

Her hair falls away as she looks at me. “Hey, just letting you know I’ll be right back.” She smiles at me. The smile of evilness, her look is that of trouble. “I gotta pee.”



# thirteen

. . .

Grace

*H*is eyes look like they are shooting daggers at me, but it's his own fault. "I'll be back, okay?"

"Grace," he growls through clenched teeth, but I don't bother answering him. Instead, I just close his door before walking to the bathroom. I don't know why I'm surprised he came in this morning aggravated. I just thought after we shared that little afternoon together, he would be different. I was wrong. I was so wrong. I want to kick myself for being so stupid.

I quickly go back to my desk, seeing he's on the phone. I wait for a second to see if he'll get off, but after a minute, I turn around and start on that list of things Sofia asked me for. "Hey, are you going out for lunch?" Kayla asks when she stops by my desk.

"Actually," I say, grabbing my bag, "I think I will." I wasn't planning on it, but he's pissed me off.

I get up, walking to his closed door and knocking twice on it when Kevin comes around. "Are you ready?" he asks, putting on his suit jacket.

“Come in,” Caine barks from his side of the door. I open it, this time wider than just sticking my head in.

“I’m going out for lunch,” I tell him, and he looks over my head toward Kevin, who stands behind me. “Do you want me to bring you back anything?” I ask, and again, I want to kick myself for being nice. I should have just left a Post-it on his door with the words Out to Lunch.

“I’m fine,” he says, and I nod, closing the door before walking out. Kevin and Kayla both chat along the way. The mood is light, and I have a salad before returning back to work. His office door is open when I get back. While I’m storing my bag under my desk, I hear him bark out my name.

“Grace,” he snaps it almost as if I’m in trouble. My heart beats a touch faster than it normally does. “Can you come in here?”

“Ugh,” I mumble, walking into his office with a huge smile on my face.

“You rang?” I walk into the office.

“Close the door,” he orders me as he holds up a remote in his hand and presses a button for the shades.

“Fuck,” I mouth before turning to face him. I walk toward the middle of the room. Standing in front of his desk, I put my hands together in front of me. *Maybe you shouldn’t have poked the bear, my head screams, and just ignored him.*

He sits up straight in his chair. His hair looks like he just ran his hands through it. His white button-down shirt is rolled

up at the sleeves, and you can see his silver Rolex on his wrist.  
“We need to talk.”

The minute he says those words, my stomach sinks to my feet in a swish. I knew this day would come when he would eventually fire me, but I didn't think it would bother me so much. “Do we?” I tilt my head to the side. “I can't wait for this,” I mumble. If he is going to fire me, I'm not going to make it easy on him. Fuck that. Not that he is going to give a shit either way, but at least I'll go down with my head held high.

“I don't know if you know this, but there is a policy in the employee handbook that no two coworkers can date each other if they are both employed by the company at the same time.”

I look at him confused. “Okay,” I say to him, “noted.”

“My office is drama-free,” he says, and I really thought this conversation was going one way, but now I have no fucking idea which way it's actually going. “And I want for it to continue to be that way.”

“I'm sorry.” I hold up one hand. “I'm so confused as to what is happening right now.”

“Don't do that.” He shakes his head, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I honestly can say, without a shadow of a doubt, I have no idea why you're saying what you are or what you are talking about.”

“Dammit,” he snaps and pushes away from his desk, coming toward me.

My heart beats so hard in my chest I'm surprised my white shirt isn't moving. He comes over to stand in front of me, his blue eyes like ice. "I'm talking about the fact you have a boyfriend and then you are stringing Kevin along." His voice is tight and low.

"Okay, hold on a second. One, I don't have a boyfriend," I deny, and he rolls his eyes at me. "JB is my cousin. You're so irritating. And two, I'm not stringing anyone along. Not that it's any of your business," I say, my own voice tight, "but I'm not dating Kevin, nor do I want to, and for the record." I take a step toward him, my eyes going into slits. "Your employee handbook is a crock of shit. You can't tell me who I can and can't date. It's violating so many rights it's not even funny. Also, for someone who went to law school, you should know that it won't hold up in court. You can have something in place and frown upon it, but if all parties are still performing at a certain level, the point is then moot."

"Don't fucking lie to me," he accuses, and I don't know when I got so in his space, or when he got into my space, but either way, it's like we are chest to chest.

"There is no reason for me to lie to you." I put my hands on my hips. "Also, why would I lie to you? For what reason?" I wait for him to answer, and finally, it's me who snaps and not him. "I'm not playing this game with you anymore," I tell him. "This hot and cold bullshit is infuriating. I can't do it anymore."

"What does that mean?" he asks. Even I don't know what it means, but I know I deserve better than this job.

“It means you win,” I finally say softly, hoping like fuck I don’t either cry in front of him or he says something, and I kick him in his junk. “I quit.” His eyes go big. “So, what, I’ll be unemployed, I can get another job,” I state, trying to convince myself. “One where my boss actually sees all the hard work I do.” I glare at him. “One where I’m not going to be plotting his murder every hour of every single day.” His eyes stare into mine. “One where he doesn’t drive me to the brink of drinking.” I don’t get to say another word because now he’s so close to me that our chests are definitely touching. I shake my head, needing to get away from him. I turn and walk to the closed door. My hand grips the door handle, and I turn back to say one last thing to him. “One where my boss likes me.” My hand turns the knob. “Maybe even respects me.”

It happens so fast I’m not expecting it. The door slams shut, even before it opens, his hand on top of my hand. I can feel his chest against my back, and I make the mistake of turning around to face him. My chest rises and falls as if I just finished at the gym, my breathing is coming in pants. “I like you more than I should.” His voice is so low that if I wasn’t in front of him, I wouldn’t be able to hear him. “You drive me absolutely fucking crazy.” His head comes closer to mine. “Fucking crazy.” That’s the last thing he says before my breath hitches, and he kisses me. My eyes stay open for a second to make sure I’m actually seeing this and not daydreaming about him.

His tongue slides into my mouth, and my eyes can’t even stay open. His hands grip my hips, pulling me to him, and I

feel his hard cock against my stomach, making me moan. His tongue goes deeper into my mouth. My arms wrap around his neck as his tongue goes around and around with mine. Both of our tongues are in a fight to see who will win, and frankly, I think both of us win. I've been kissed before, but this kiss, this kiss feels different. I don't know if it's because of all the pent-up sexual energy I have. I don't know if it's because all I've been dreaming about since I started working for him is him kissing me like this.

Except the dreams of him kissing me were nothing, and I mean nothing, compared to this kiss. It's electric. I feel like my whole body is on fire. Every single cell in my body is being merged. His hands move from my hips to my ass as he presses me deeper against him. "Caine." I take a second to pant out his name before going back to attack his lips. His tongue quickly invades my mouth. He palms my ass in his hands, my back arching into him. It's his turn to moan. My greedy mouth swallows it down before he wraps one arm around my waist, lifting me. My legs automatically lock around him, my pussy right on his cock as he pushes me into the door.

"Caine," I say his name, arching my back, his hand moving up to cup my tits as his body holds me in place. My head goes to the side as his mouth attacks my neck, making me move my hips up and down on his cock. The friction of my panties makes me shiver, or maybe it's the way he just pinched my hardened nipples. Either way, I feel like I've just drunk a pint of sweet tea, and I'm floating on air. "Caine." This time, his eyes find mine, and I see he's just as gone as I am.

“Grace,” he breathes my name in a whisper.

I lean forward, biting his lower lip and then sliding my tongue into his mouth. His hands knead my breasts before he rolls my nipples at the same time, my tits wanting to be freed from my shirt. I want his skin on my skin. I have never in my life been this desperate for another man. I have never lost all of my senses over a kiss. I have never wanted anything more in my life than the way I want Caine. Never. The good, the bad, the cranky. I want all of them. My hips move up and down on his cock, trying to do the length, but I can't. My clit aches to be touched, petted, licked, fuck... anything. The more he pinches my nipples, the faster my hips start to move. I can't even control it. “I need,” I gasp once before finding his tongue again. I feel his whole body over me. I feel him pushing his body into mine, harder into the door, his hips moving to help me out, and if we didn't have any clothes on, he would be buried inside me. Fucking me against the door, and I don't think I would care. “Yes,” I hiss right before my stomach gets tight. “Yes,” I say in a whisper, “right there.” My hips buck. “I'm—” He swallows my moan as I come on his cock like a sex-deprived woman. My orgasm rips through me, and he lets me hump his cock until I'm no longer moving. His hands grip my hips to slowly let me down, my legs unlocking from his waist.

I can't even look up at him I'm so embarrassed. I literally humped his covered cock. Who does that? Me, that's who. I'm staring at his chest when he says my name. “Grace.”

“Not now,” I say softly, “just give me a second.” I avoid looking at him, instead making sure my dress is down before

turning and walking out of his office. I close the door behind me, and luckily, everyone is busy doing their own thing, so no one watches me rush to the bathroom.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I turn on the cold water. My lips are swollen from being kissed. My eyes are dilated, and my chest is still huffing. “What did you just do?” I ask my reflection, wetting my hands before placing them on my cheeks, trying to cool them down from looking like they are on fire. My head falls forward and I close my eyes and all I can see is Caine. His eyes looking into mine. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” I chant over and over again.

Taking a deep inhale and making sure my cheeks are now the same color as the rest of my face, I make my way back to my desk. His office door is still closed and so are his shades. No doubt he’s in there trying to avoid his horny secretary, who came on his cock while the cock was still in his pants.

I catch movement from the side and see a blond lady walking toward me. She’s wearing tight blue jeans with holes in the knees, a white bodysuit with a pink-and-white Chanel jacket. I know it’s a Chanel jacket because I just got one from my grandmother. She’s also wearing nude-colored high heels. Her blond hair looks like she just walked out of the beauty salon. I’m expecting her to walk past my desk when she stops. “I’m here to see Caine.”

“Oh,” I say, a bit frazzled since he didn’t have any appointments today. “Did you have an appointment?” I look at the screen.



“I don’t need an appointment,” she states, her tone totally annoyed. “Tell him his wife is here.”

# fourteen

. . .

Caine

I stand with my fists spread out against the desk in front of me and my eyes closed as I try to steady my erratic heartbeat. But it doesn't help with my eyes closed because all I can picture is me holding Grace against the door. Her fucking feet locked behind me as I pushed my cock against her like a horny teenager. "Good God," I mumble. I completely attacked her. I close my eyes again, but it's mistake number two in the last minute because my already hard cock gets even harder. I have never, and I mean never, lost control like I did today. In my office. I'm a grown-ass adult, so I should be able to control myself. She left for lunch, and I spent the whole time trying to calm myself down.

I even tried calling my mother to talk about Meadow and maybe visiting her in a couple of weeks. But the more time she spent at lunch, the more anxious and irritated I became. Then she walked in as if she didn't have a care in the world. Looking all beautiful and happy, she made me even angrier that she was having this effect on me.

So, I snapped and called her into my office. What was going to happen, I had no clue. But then she stunned me when

she quit on me. She stood there with her head high and shoulders back, and refused to take anything I was going to dish out to her. Instead of keeping my head clear, all I could think of was tasting her lips. Devouring her. Feeling her against me to see if she fit as well as she did in my dreams. I've spent the past two weeks jerking off to her, telling myself every single time it was wrong.

The kiss rocked my world. It's like the roller coaster I was on suddenly did the dive down and all I could do was hang on for the ride. The knock on the door has me jump, and I turn around with her name on my lips, "Grace," at the same time the door opens without me saying anything.

Grace stands there, her lips still a bit plump from me kissing the shit out of her. But her face, where before was tinted pink, is now pale white like a ghost. "Your wife is here."

I don't even have a chance to say anything to her before Marilyn saunters in. "Darling." She holds out her arms as she walks toward me. My eyes go from her to Grace, who avoids looking at me before she quietly closes the door. I'm about to call her back in here when Marilyn grabs my face in her hands, turning my eyes toward her. "I missed you," she says right before she kisses my lips, and my dick shrivels at the same time.

I move my face away from hers so fast I'm surprised I don't get whiplash. "Marilyn." I take a step away from her. "What the fuck?" I wipe off her lipstick from my mouth.

Her hands fall from my face, and she plants them on my chest. "You look good, Caine." She plays with one of my

buttons. “You always looked good in a suit.” She smirks at me. “You look better naked.” She arches her chest and lifts one of her legs. “You always looked better naked.”

“Marylin,” I grit her name between clenched teeth, “what are you doing here?”

“Well, you wouldn’t take my calls.” She dumps her purse in one of the chairs before she walks over to the couch, sitting down and crossing her legs. She takes off her tweed jacket and tosses it aside, leaving her in a low-cut bodysuit. Any lower and her nipples would have been out. Her tits look like two small oranges. She stretches her arms on the back of the couch. “Are you going to come and sit with me?” She winks at me while her top leg swings back and forth.

“I think I’m good,” I tell her, standing here looking at her. “Now, what are you doing here again?” I put my hands on my hips.

“Well, as per our last conversation.” She taps the back of the couch with one nail. “I was thinking long and hard, and, well, I’ve decided.” She pauses for a second, and I don’t know if she’s thinking about the words she has to say or if it’s for dramatic effect. Knowing Marylin, I’m going to say it’s all about the dramatic. “I have been thinking.” If I could roll my eyeballs in the back of my head, I would. Also, when did her voice sound like nails on a chalkboard? “I think I was a little too hasty.”

“About?” I ask her, really not knowing where she’s going with this. That’s not right, I think I know where she’s going with this, and I also know that road has come to an end. Not

only that, but there is also a huge meteor that came down from the sky and left a gaping black hole.

“About us,” she huffs. “I wasn’t ready back then for the whole husband-and-kid thing.” I stare at her for a couple of seconds, trying to make sure I heard her right.

“Husband-and-kid thing?” I laugh sarcastically. “And what, you think you are now?”

“Yes,” she answers without skipping a beat. “I’ve been thinking about it over and over, and what we had was amazing.”

“Yeah?” I say, folding my arms over my chest. “Which part?” I ask, and she looks at me like a deer caught in the headlights. “Was it the part where you left your newborn daughter to go home?” I ask. “Was it the part where you took me to court and sued me for alimony?” Her face goes from trying to be seductive to almost angry.

“That wasn’t my fault!” she shrieks. “My lawyer did that.”

“Did he?” I now can’t help but roll my eyes. “Did he also cash the checks every single month?”

“You can’t blame me for that.” She puts one of her hands to her chest. “I had to survive.”

“Getting a job wouldn’t have helped that?” I ask, and she gasps.

“I was recovering from having your child.” She gawks.

“She’s four.” I hold up my four fingers.

“I want to start over,” she declares, ignoring what I just said. “I want to have a fresh start. I want us to be a family again.”

I laugh and close my eyes, putting my thumbs and middle fingers on my temples. “You never answered me. What did we have that was so amazing?”

“The sex,” she gloats, smiling at me.

“That’s all you have?” I ask. “Let me tell you what was amazing.” I stare at her. “My daughter being born. Holding my daughter in my arms. Caring for my daughter. Watching her crawl for the first time. Seeing her take her first step. When she said Dada for the first time. When she blew a kiss at me with her one tooth sticking out. The list goes on and on, except you aren’t in any of them.”

“But I want to be.” She now sits up straight.

“That’s good to know,” I tell her, and she smiles, “but I don’t want you.”

She chuckles and stands up, pushing her chest out and cocking her hip to the side. “Why don’t you take me out on a date?”

“Umm.” I point at her. “Because I don’t want to.” Because you don’t have blue eyes that I can’t stop thinking about. Because you don’t have a smile that lights up your whole face and makes me want to do nothing but keep it there the whole time. Because you aren’t Grace.

“Are you dating someone?” she asks, like it’s impossible for me not to want to date her.

I want to date Grace. My mouth almost says the words.

“I am,” I lie to her. I mean, is it a lie? We just had a make-out session, so we might be dating. I haven’t done this in a really long time.

“Well, why don’t you date us both?” She raises her eyebrows. “See which one you like more.”

“Her,” I declare without thinking twice. “I like her a lot more than I like you. Now, I hope after this conversation, we never have to do this again.” She glares at me, grabbing her jacket in her hand. “And just so we’re clear, don’t think you can waltz in here again. I’m not interested in playing whatever game you think you’re playing. And I definitely am not letting you play this game with Meadow.”

She snatches her purse next. “We’ll see what my lawyer has to say about that.” She turns to storm out.

“Good luck with that one, Marilyn,” I say once she grabs the handle of the door, opening it. “Not sure you remember, but you signed over all custodial rights to Meadow, which means she’s mine.”

“Whatever,” she huffs before walking out and making sure to slam the door on the way out.

“Good God.” I put my hands on my hips and look up at the sky. “How can my day go from fucking phenomenal to horseshit in the matter of five seconds?” I mumble, walking back to the door and opening it to talk to Grace.

Her desk is empty, her chair tucked under her desk, and her computer is shut down. “Kayla,” I call her from beside the

desk.

Kayla looks up from her work. “Have you seen Grace?”

“Yeah,” she answers. “She and Loren left for the day to go to some florist for the gala.”

I put my hands in my pockets and walk back into my office. Walking behind the desk, I open the shades with the remote and sit down in my chair. “Should I call her?” I ask myself. “Maybe text her?” I pick up my phone and think about texting her, but what if she is next to Loren?

The rest of the afternoon flies by with back-to-back phone calls. Then I have to rush to pick up Meadow, who runs to me when she sees me. “Daddy!” she shouts, and I squat down in front of her, my arms wide open.

“Hi.” I kiss her cheek. “How was your day?”

“Good.” She wiggles out of my arms. “We did a hand cast,” she tells me as I walk toward the exit.

I stop when I see Levi and Eva walking in holding hands. “Hey,” Eva greets when we cross paths.

“Hey,” I reply, holding up my hand to both of them.

“Hi, Meadow,” Levi says, smiling at her. The two of them got married not too long ago and are now raising her sister’s baby after she died.

“Oh, I forgot,” Eva says. “We are having Cici’s birthday party in a couple of weeks.” She looks at Meadow. “And you are her favorite person.”



Meadow smiles at them and then looks up at me proudly.  
“Daddy, can we go?”

“Sure,” I confirm, looking at them. “Levi can text me the details.”

“Will do,” he agrees, slapping my shoulder. “See you two later.”

Meadow and I walk out of the daycare holding hands. She buckles herself in as she tells me stories from her day.

When we get home, she runs straight into the backyard and toward her swing set. I sit down in one of the patio chairs as I watch her swing back and forth, leaving me with my thoughts. The only thing I can think of is Grace, and how tomorrow, like it or not, the air is going to be cleared.

# fifteen

. . .

Grace

*I*'m tying the strap from my sandal around my ankle when my phone rings beside my bed. I rush over, noticing it's Sofia FaceTiming me. Looking at my watch, I see it's seven thirty in the morning.

"Hello," I greet her once the call connects, and her face fills the screen. She's in her bathroom wearing a robe while she puts on her makeup. Her hair is piled high on her head. If she'd called me thirty minutes ago, we would have been in the same spot.

"Hello," she says, looking down at the screen between doing her eyebrows. "I got the pictures you sent last night." After I walked the blond wife into Caine's office, I knew I needed to get the fuck out of Dodge. So, I went to Loren's office and asked her if she would like to come with me to the flower shop. I knew it was going to be a couple of hours, so after we finished, I would just be able to go home instead of going back to the office and facing whatever it is I had to face. Yes, I know eventually I will have to face him, but I wasn't ready to do it post orgasm.

“Yes,” I say, walking toward the kitchen to grab my bag before leaving, “and?”

“It’s perfect,” she says of the pictures I sent her of the centerpieces Loren and I helped the florist create. “I love that it’s a low one so you can talk to the person on the other side of the table.”

“I know,” I tell her, grabbing my bag, “that was the only thing I was looking for.”

“Well, you did a good job,” she praises. Finally looking into the phone, she puts down the brush in her hand. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Me?” I ask her. “Nothing, why?” My heartbeat gets jumpy.

She takes a second to look at the screen more closely, her whole face filling it. “Lies,” she says, “you look like you hardly slept.”

“Ugh.” I know she isn’t going to let up, and I also feel like I have to talk to someone about this. “Fine.” She picks up her cup of coffee, bringing it to her mouth. “I sort of...” I look up at the ceiling. “Kind of...” I tilt my head to the side. “Maybe...” I hold up one finger and then tell her, “Perhaps made out with my boss yesterday in his office and had an orgasm.” I watch her eyes go big at the same time she spits coffee out of her mouth like a fountain before she coughs.

I wait for her to finish choking before she looks at me, her face red from coughing. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Well, he’s a dick,” I tell her, sitting down on the chair at the table, “and he was extra dickish yesterday. He was barking at me like, ‘you’re never at your desk,’” I try to mimic him.

“And you thought if you gave him an orgasm, he wouldn’t care?” She laughs but then coughs again.

I glare at her. “Yeah,” I say sarcastically, nodding. “No, I went into his office to quit.”

“And?” Her hand moves in a circle to tell me to hurry the story along.

“And when I was walking out, he stopped me from leaving, and then we made out,” I explain, my stomach fluttering when I think about when he kissed me.

“Grace,” she says my name sternly, “can you fast-forward to the orgasm part?”

“Ugh, fine,” I huff. “We were kissing, and he picked me up.”

“He picked you up?” Her eyes almost bulge out of her head.

“Yeah, pushed me against the door, and well, my legs held on to him.” I avoid looking at her now, embarrassed when she starts laughing.

“Oh, you dirty dog.” She claps her hands.

“Anyway, we were making out, and I rubbed myself on him like a cat in heat,” I groan.

“Did he,” she asks, “you know, follow you to the finish line?”

“I have no idea; I ran out of the office.” I get up, grabbing my bag and leaving the apartment.

“Grace!” she shrieks. “Did you not talk to him after?”

“Well, I was going to,” I lie, avoiding it like the plague, “but his wife came by the office.”

“Grace Barnes!” She yells my name. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Relax.” I press the elevator button. “I don’t think he’s married.”

“You don’t think?” Her voice is louder than it was before.

“What is all the yelling?” Her husband, Matty, comes into the bathroom, and I can see he just got up. He’s rubbing his eyes as he buries his face in her neck.

“I’m talking to Grace,” Sofia explains, pointing at the phone.

“Hey, G,” he mumbles, using the nickname he gave me when we first met. He only uses it because he knows our grandfather hates it.

“Matty,” she says to him, “would you make out with a girl when you think she is married?”

I can’t help but laugh at the top of my lungs. “You are asking him this when he married his wedding planner?”

“Hey,” he says, putting his hand to his chest, “what did I do?”

“I’m just saying that he was almost married when you guys started your thing.” I roll my lips when Sofia glares at

me.

“We were not,” Matty denies. “I broke it off with what’s her name before we started anything.”

“You were emotionally cheating on your fiancée.” I point at Matty.

“Why are we talking about me?” he asks. “Goodbye.” He turns to walk away.

“Grace,” she says softly.

“I know.” My voice matches hers. “I know. I’m going to talk to him today and make sure that it never happens again.”

“Especially if he’s married.” The smile that fills her face is a sad smile. A smile you give someone when you know nothing good is going to come from anything.

“Yeah,” I agree, ignoring the way my stomach clenches. “I’ll keep you posted.”

“Well, on the bright side,” she jokes, “we know Pops can get rid of him in the blink of an eye.” She winks at me. “No one will even notice.”

I chuckle. “I’m sure his daughter will.”

“He’s a dad?” She throws her hands in the air.

“Goodbye,” I say, hanging up the phone. The phone vibrates in my hand. Looking down, I see it’s from Sofia.

Sofia: Don’t think I’m not going to call you tonight.

Me: I'm sorry, the person you are trying to reach is unavailable, please try again later.

Sofia: Is that so? I should message Pops and ask him to track you.

Me: Please, he got us all microchipped when we were born. We are all on his monitor beeping the whole time.

I slip my phone into my purse when I step out into the parking garage. Pulling open the driver's door, I hear the doors unlock before getting in. "It's going to be fine," I tell myself when I park my car at work. Looking around, I see his car is not here. "It'll be a conversation," I huff, grabbing my purse, "then we can carry on with the way things were."

Stepping into the elevator, I hold my purse in front of me with two hands, waiting for the doors to open on my floor. I zigzag through people to get off and smile at the receptionist as I make my way to my desk. I'm one of the few people in the office, so I dump my bag off on my desk, going straight for the kitchen. I grab a white mug and make my coffee. "Morning," I hear someone say from behind me and see Kevin standing in yet another custom-made suit.

"Morning." I smile at him.

“How was flower shopping?” he asks, walking in and waiting for me to finish making my coffee to make his own.

“Good, we picked all the flowers,” I tell him.

“Are you going to the gala alone?” he asks, putting one of his hands in his pocket.

“I am,” I confirm, and he smiles.

“We should carpool.” He smirks. “I have a car service set up for that night.”

“Oh,” I say, bringing the cup to my lips. “Thank you for the offer, but I already have things set up on my end.” I start to walk out of the room. “I would check with Kayla and see if she has someone picking her up.” I plant the seed. It took me one lunch to see she was interested in Kevin, but he literally has no clue.

“Morning.” I spot Loren walking in with a vase of flowers tucked in one arm and her coffee in the other.

“Morning,” she says, smiling. “These are for you.” She motions to the flowers with her chin.

“For me?” I ask, surprised.

“Yeah.” She smiles. “The florist made them after you left. I left mine at home.” She walks over to my desk and places the vase of pink and white flowers with lots of greenery on it.

“They smell divine,” she says, and I lean down to smell them and smile.

“They really do. Thank you for coming with me yesterday. I don’t think I would have made the decision if I was alone.”



“Thank you for getting me out of the office,” she says. “It’s getting closer and closer.”

“I know.” I pull out my chair. “I’m getting really nervous I’m going to make a mistake and choose the wrong things.”

“I’ve seen all of your choices, and it’s going to be amazing.” She winks at me. “If they complain, blame me.”

I laugh as I turn on the computer and see Sofia has sent me a checklist of things to go through titled: Countdown to the Gala. I print out the paper, getting up and walking over to the machine before walking back. I spot Caine walking in, his eyes roaming the room as he sees me. We both head toward my desk and his office. With every single step I make, it matches the thud of my heart. It also feels like we’re both walking in slow motion. He’s wearing a black suit with a white button-down shirt. I know his sleeves will be rolled up to his elbows in the next ten minutes. His jacket discarded until he leaves. “Morning,” I greet, “I just went to get a paper out of the photocopier.” I point over my shoulder, trying not to sound as awkward as I feel, also hoping he doesn’t throw in my face that I quit yesterday.

He nods at me and then his eyes find the flowers. “What are those?” He points toward the flowers.

“From the flower shop yesterday,” I say. “You can’t see it, but these are the flowers we chose for the centerpieces.” He nods his head.

“Looks good,” he compliments. “Want to step into my office?” He motions with his head, and I swallow down the boulder forming in my throat. I watch him walk into his office,

putting the piece of paper on my desk before following him in there. He's behind his desk, looking down at something on it.

“Door open or closed?” I ask, and I want to kick myself with that question. He's going to think I want to jump his boner again.

“Closed would be good,” he decides, his voice as soft as it was yesterday. I walk back to the door and close it, the sound of the click echoing loudly in the quiet.

Taking a second to turn around, I see he's still standing at his desk. “We should—” he says something.

But my mouth is faster than my brain when I blurt out, “Before you start, I know I quit yesterday, but I was angry because, well, because you are you.” I shrug, hoping he doesn't ask me what that even means. “Anyway, are you married?” I hate myself for being put in this situation. What if he is married, and he kissed me? I can't even fathom what I would do.

His head shakes from side to side. “No, of course not.” He walks around his desk and stops at the corner of it. “Do you think I would have kissed you if I was?” He runs his hands through his hair, and all I can do is stare at his lips, knowing how they felt on mine. Knowing that his kiss made me dizzy. Knowing in my whole life I've never been kissed the way he kissed me. “What kind of man do you think I am?” he asks but doesn't give me a chance to answer it. “I would never, ever do that. To you or to me. She's my ex-wife. That was Meadow's mother.” My mouth opens, and I'm not sure what to say. “She came here to—”

I hold up my hand. “It doesn’t matter,” I say. Something passes in his eyes, but I don’t know him well enough to know what it is. It looks like it’s disappointment, but it could also be relief. “I’m sorry for”—I wring my hands—“kissing you. It was wrong, and it won’t happen again.” He just watches me, his blue eyes putting a spell on me. “We have a big week ahead of us. The gala is this weekend, and for the next couple of days, I’ll be going crazy, so I’d like to ask that we have a truce.” His eyebrows rise. “We can get back to hating each other next week, but for this week, can we just pretend?” He puts his hand in his pocket, very much like Kevin did in the kitchen, but unlike Kevin, my whole body wants to shiver. “Please.”

He nods at me. “Fine,” he agrees, and I turn to walk out of the room before I turn and ask him if we can put kissing back on the table. My hand turns the handle. “Monday it is.” I look over my shoulder, which is a huge mistake because his eyes hold mine captive. “Make sure my schedule is clear after the Monday morning staff meeting.”

# sixteen

. . .

Caine

“Why can’t I come with you?” Meadow asks from the middle of my bed, lying back on my pillows with her iPad in her hand on her propped knees. “I have a dress.” She looks up at me, a frown on her face.

“Trust me, baby girl,” I say, buttoning the black vest. “You’re not going to have any fun if you come with me.” I pull down the vest once it’s buttoned all the way to the bottom. “I’m not even going to have any fun.”

“But Grandma and Grandpa are going to be there,” she whines a bit, “and Uncle Nash.”

“Good news,” I tell her, adjusting the black tie around my neck, feeling like it’s about to strangle me, “they are all coming here tomorrow for lunch.” Her eyes go big. “And Uncle Nash said he has to take you to the park.” She claps her hands happily.

“Last time, he pushed me high, high, highest in the whole world.” Her voice gets more animated. The doorbell rings right on time, and I look at her with a smile on my face.

“That should be Alexa,” I tell her of the teenage babysitter I hire for the weekends. I know her parents, and she just turned

seventeen.

“She’s my fav,” Meadow announces, getting off the bed and running downstairs to the front door.

“She’s my fav,” I repeat the words quietly. “You mean she’s your favorite!” I shout toward the stairs as I watch her walk down. Holding the railings with one hand, she tries to hurry as fast as she can. “Be careful,” I warn at the railing until she gets to the last step and then she runs to the door. I wait, listening for her to open the door, and when I hear the squeals from both of them, I walk back into my bedroom and into my walk-in closet to grab the cuff links my parents bought me when I joined their firm. The CG intertwined in some fancy script. After that, I put on my silver Rolex before grabbing the black jacket from the wooden hanger, slipping it off before putting in one arm and then the other. I pull out each cuff once the jacket is on before looking back into the mirror to make sure I look okay. Pushing my hair back to the side, I turn and grab my cell phone off the dresser before heading downstairs.

Turning toward the family room, I find it empty, seeing Meadow’s iPad on the island. I look out the back windows, finding the both of them. I smile as I make my way to the back door, opening it to find Alexa running around chasing Meadow. Her laughter is the first thing I hear once I step out into the cool air. “Catch me, catch me,” Meadow taunts, looking over her shoulder to Alexa, who is lightly jogging.

“You are too fast for me,” she tells her, making Meadow stop to give her a chance to catch up to her.

“Hey,” I say from the tip of the patio, “come give me a hug and kiss. I’m about to leave.” I look at Meadow, who pushes her hair away from her face with one hand before running over toward me. I squat down and brace myself, knowing she’ll try to plow into me. Once I wrap my arms around her, I kiss her neck. “You be good and listen to Alexa.”

“I will, Dad,” she promises, shortening Daddy before turning and rushing back to Alexa’s side.

“I shouldn’t be late,” I tell Alexa, who just smiles at me. “Probably around midnight, but I’ll let you know if it goes later.”

“It’s fine,” she replies. “We are going to have some pizza for dinner, and then I was thinking of making a fort in the living room and having a movie night.”

I nod at her, my phone beeping in my hand. Looking down, I see it’s from my driver, letting me know he’s here. “Have fun, you two.” Turning, I walk inside and then toward the front door.

The black Town Car waits for me, the driver standing beside the car on his phone. The door slamming shut behind me has him looking up. He places his phone in his back pocket before opening the back passenger door for me. “Good evening,” he greets me once I get close enough.

“Hi.” I nod at him, getting in the back door, and the cool air immediately hits me. The middle console is down and has two bottles of water in the holders. The suit feels like it’s suffocating me, so I grab a bottle and twist off the top, taking a

small sip. The driver gets into the car and takes off without another word.

I look out at the passing trees as we make our way out of my development. I look at my watch more times than I care to admit. The ride to the venue is smooth for once, with no traffic. Suddenly, I'm nervous about tonight. It's been a strange week, to say the very least. I've been overly quiet, as Loren said to me yesterday. To be honest, I've been biding my time until Grace and I can sit down and discuss whatever the fuck is going on with us. This whole week I've been watching her go crazy trying to plan everything for tonight. Wanting it to go off without a hitch, I left her to that instead of dragging her into my office every day to devour her. Instead, I sat with my door open, my head snapping up whenever I heard footsteps outside, thinking it was her. Or movement outside of the window. We exchanged hellos and goodbyes along with some messages during the day, but nothing outside of that. My nerves are on edge when I think about seeing her tonight.

Getting to the hotel, I wait for the driver to come to a stop before I reach for the handle of the car, but the door is opened by one of the valet guys. "Welcome," he says, and I nod my head at him.

Walking into the lobby through the revolving door, I see a stand with the firm's name and arrows pointing toward the stairs at the side. Making my way up the stairs and toward the venue space, I spot my parents and Nash right away, standing outside of the open brown doors. My father and brother are dressed in the same suit I'm wearing, making me laugh since

we didn't even plan it. My mother is in a floor-length black gown.

“Well, well, well,” Nash says when he spots me walking toward them, “nice of you to join us.” He brings the glass of whiskey he has in his hand to his lips.

“Is this a funeral or a party?” I ask, making my father laugh and my mother groan.

“I said the same thing,” she shares softly as I give her a hug and kiss her cheek. “I should have done color.”

“You hate color,” my father points out to her.

“No one asked you.” She glares at him, then turns to glare at Nash when he chuckles.

“Hey, Dad,” I greet, hugging him also.

“Have you seen inside?” Nash asks, and I just shake my head.

“I gave Grace the control,” I inform him, and he rolls his lips, making the hair on my neck stick up.

Surely, she wouldn't fuck with me and fuck up tonight, would she? “Oh, stop it.” My mother slaps his arm. “It's out of this world.” I do a sigh of relief. “It's so elegant and classy. She did good.”

I hold up my hand and flip him the bird, making him laugh, and putting one of his hands to his chest. “Straight to the heart.”

“You two behave yourself,” my mother scolds. “Look, we have people arriving.” She looks at both of us. “Behave.”



I nod at her as she walks over toward the guests arriving, instead of following her toward the guests, I walk into the venue space. I think even I gasp when I see the room. The drapes to the outside are opened and pushed aside, giving it just a bit of the remaining sunlight. The ceiling lights are on but look like they are dimmed. Round tables fill the room with black tablecloths, and white linen napkins fill the table, with gold centerpieces that match the gold chairs. The back of the room facing the door has black draping from the ceiling to the floor, with a screen in front of them with, “Cottrell Group Gala” in the middle of it. A black stand with a microphone attached to it sits on the side of the stage.

She didn't just do good, she fucking killed this. “Can I get you something to drink?” one of the servers asks me when she stops beside me, holding a tray in her hand.

“I'll have a whiskey on the rocks, please,” I tell her, and she nods her head, going to the bar in the corner. I see five or six other servers coming out and grabbing a silver tray with champagne flutes on them.

“So, what do you think?” Nash asks as he stands beside me.

“I think she killed it,” I say honestly. “Why? Don't you?”

“I think she killed it from the first day she put juice boxes and animal crackers on the boardroom table.” He laughs, taking another sip of his drink. “I'm just waiting for you to fuck up again so I can get her to my office.” I don't answer him because the server shows up with my glass of whiskey. “Let's go mingle.”

I take a sip of the whiskey before following him out of the ballroom. Outside is now filled with guests, and I look around for her. My eyes roam the room, not seeing her anywhere, but then I spot her. She's walking up the stairs with Kayla and Kevin, but my eyes don't leave her. Her hands hold up her dress until she gets to the top, and then she releases it. I swear I take a big inhale and then feel my chest compress, making me cough. She moves her hair off her bare shoulder as she smiles at something Kayla says. Her dress is strapless, dipping in the middle of her chest a bit. It's a light-pink color with bright pink and green flowers on it, falling all the way to the floor. When she walks, her right leg slips out of the slit you wouldn't even know is there. She looks magical and exactly like a fucking fairy with her blond hair flowing.

I don't even know my feet are making their way to her, until I'm standing in front of her. "Hi," I say to the three of them.

"Hey," Kevin greets. "I'm going to go get a drink."

"I'll come," Kayla says, looking at me and then at Grace. "Do you want something?"

"I'm good," she assures them, and I wait for them to walk away before I talk.

"This is amazing," I finally say, looking around the room watching everyone mingling. "Inside is even better."

The smile fills her face, and I have the need to bend down and kiss her. I can even see it in my head. "Thank you," she says, "it was all Sofia."

“No, it wasn’t,” I say, looking around to make sure no one is around in hearing distance of us before I say what I really want to say, “You look beautiful.”

She looks down, trying to hide her shy smile. Her hair falls to the front, and she tucks it behind her ear before she looks back up at me. “Thank you.”

I want to take a step closer to her, I want to wrap my arm around her and pull her to me. I want everyone here to know she’s off-limits. “There she is,” Nash says from behind me.

I turn and see my parents coming with Nash. He walks past me and toward Grace, kissing her on her cheeks. If we were alone, I would probably grab the back of his jacket and yank him back; instead, I grit my teeth and take another sip of my whiskey. “Mom, Dad,” I start once Nash gets the fuck away from her. “This is Grace Barnes,” I introduce her, “she’s the one who did all this.” I smile with pride. “Grace, these are my parents, Ida and Ernie.”

“Hello,” my mother says, going straight to her and giving her a hug. “We can’t thank you enough.” She kisses both her cheeks. “What you’ve done is amazing.”

“It was my pleasure,” Grace replies softly to her.

“I know your grandfather,” my father states to her, shocking me. My eyebrows pinch together. “Met him a couple of times last year.”

“Really?” she says softly. “He knows everyone, so I’m not surprised.” She’s about to say something else when Loren comes over to her.

She slowly makes her way away from me with my parents in tow. “You don’t know who she is?” Nash prods from beside me, hiding his smirk with his glass tumbler in his hand. “God.” He shakes his head. “I wish I had a camera on your face right now.”

“I’m going to kick the shit out of you,” is my only immature comeback.

“CBS Security,” he says the name that everyone knows.

“What about it?”

“Casey Barnes is her grandfather.” I just stare at him shocked, so much my mouth is gaped open. “So, if you fuck her up, he’s going to make you wish that you lived under a rock.”

# seventeen

. . .

Grace

“Amazing.” I hear Kayla beside me. “Simply beautiful.”

She stares as we walk into the ballroom. I want to say I’m surprised but I’m not. I couldn’t help myself and ran down here this afternoon to make sure everything was okay and in its place.

“It all worked out,” I say, lifting the glass of champagne to my mouth. “Thank fuck.”

She laughs at me. “Incoming,” she warns, and I look up to see Caine’s parents coming over to me with someone beside them. “Later.” She slinks away from me, leaving me with my almost empty glass of champagne.

“Grace, dear,” Ida says to me, “I would like to introduce you to Franklin.” She turns to the man. “He was just singing your praises about this event.”

“Thank you,” I say to the man. “Grace Barnes.” I hold out my hand to shake his.

“Franklin Shatz.” He smiles at me. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine.” I smile at him. “Have you been working with the Griffin family for long?”

I see Ida and Ernie share a look, Ernie nodding in approval. “Here and there,” he replies to me.

“Well, if I can do anything to help, please let me know,” I offer to him. “I work out of the DC office, but I’m sure I can help in some way or another.”

“I just might take you up on that,” he states, looking at Ernie. “Give me a call on Monday.” He smiles once more at me before walking away.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Ernie says first.

“He’s like putty in your hands,” Ida adds with a smirk.

“Like my great-grandmother says, kill ’em with kindness.” I grin and finish the glass of champagne in my hand.

“I’d like to kill him all right,” Ida declares, taking a sip of her own champagne. “He’s been wishy-washy since the beginning of time.” She looks around. “I hope Caine is okay with sharing you.”

“I don’t think Caine wants me there most days,” I mumble, hoping his parents don’t pick up on my words. I also make sure I don’t have any more champagne. Luckily, someone else comes up to them and I quietly sneak away.

“Hey.” I look behind me and see Kevin coming straight toward me, holding two glasses of champagne.

“Hi,” I say, smiling at him and inwardly groaning.

“I brought you something to drink,” he says, handing me a glass.

I grab it with my free hand, still holding on to the empty glass in the other. “Thank you.”

“To tonight.” He holds up his glass in front of me. “And to how amazingly beautiful you look.” He smirks, trying to look sexy, and I even wait for the butterflies, but nothing, and I mean nothing happens when he says those words. Unlike when Caine whispered them to me not too long ago and my whole face lit up. I couldn’t stop it if I tried, and believe me, I tried. But spotting him when I walked in did two things at the same time; it shifted my soul at the same time it calmed it. I can’t even try to explain it because I don’t understand it. “To a great night.”

“Thank you,” is the only thing I say as I take a small sip. “I think it’ll be a good night.” I look around, seeing people come waltzing into the ballroom. The sound of laughter fills the air as people catch up with other people.

Kayla makes her way over to us, zigzagging through people. “Hey, you two,” she says, smiling, “I was wondering where my people went.”

“Search no more,” I state awkwardly. “I was chatting with a couple of clients,” I tell her, not wanting her to think I was sneaking off with Kevin.

“We should get to our seats,” Kevin suggests. “Are we all sitting together?”

I nod my head. “I put all assistants at one table.” I point at the table on the side, more off to the back of the room. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

“If I can have everyone’s attention,” Nash announces from the podium. “The meal will be starting in five minutes.” He smiles. “If everyone could grab a seat so we can get this show on the road.”

“Excuse me,” I say to Kevin and Kayla. “Can you take this to the table for me?” I hand her the silk purse that has been tucked under my arm most of the night. Next time, I’m sticking my lip gloss in my bra and calling it a night. “I’m going to make sure everything is going to be good to go. Save me a seat,” I tell them before walking away. I put the two champagne glasses on one of the servers’ silver trays before turning and walking to the side to see the event manager, Barbara.

“Hi,” I greet her, “is everything under control?”

“It is,” she confirms with her hands behind her back. “We are going to start plating up the food as soon as they give the opening speech.”

“I’ll go and see how long it’s going to be,” I tell her and walk toward the four of them. One look at Caine and again my heart is beating all over the place, my chest gets tight, and my nipples tighten also. I’m not even going to tell you how my panties are faring.

“What do you mean you didn’t write a speech?” I hear Nash hiss at Caine as he puts a smile on his face, trying to



pretend everything is okay. “You literally said, ‘don’t worry, bud, I’ve got it.’”

“Okay, one”—Caine holds up his hand—“I would never say bud.” I can’t help but snort, and with just my luck, all four of them turn to me.

“I can attest to Caine not shortening any words with abbreviations.” I smile at him. “Now, no pressure,” I add, “but they are waiting until the speech is over to plate the food.” I look around, also pretending I’m not going to freak out if they don’t get their act together. “Now, I’ve spent the past couple of weeks making sure everything was going to go off without a hitch.” I look at Nash and then Caine. “So, one of you get up there and welcome everyone. We can always add a speech later before the evening is up.”

“Fine,” Caine hisses, “since I’m the bigger man.”

“Older man.” Nash slaps him on the back. “Not bigger.” The look Caine gives him would have me shaking in my shoes, but Nash just folds his arms over his chest. “Whatcha going to do about it, bud?”

Caine, being the calm, cool, collected, and extremely hotter of the two, just winks. “Watch and learn, grasshopper.”

“Yeah, I’ll kung fu your ass,” Nash retorts before he turns to me. “Grace, will you join us at our table?”

I hold my hands in front of me. “Thank you so much for the offer.” I smile at his parents and continue, “But it’ll be weird if all the other assistants are at one table, and I’m with you guys.”

“Fine,” Nash concedes, “but save a dance for me.”

“Got it,” I assure him before looking at Caine, who is looking at me like he’s going to throttle me, and I didn’t even do anything. “So, what, five minutes is a good time?”

“Yes,” he confirms, turning and walking up the stairs toward the podium Nash was just standing at.

“I’ll see you guys later,” I tell the three of them, turning and rushing toward Barbara at the same time Caine’s voice comes through. “Five minutes,” I inform her. She nods her head and walks toward the black swinging doors.

I walk around the room on the outside, making my way over to my table, the dress swishing between my legs. I grab a glass of champagne, not listening to my head telling me it’s not a good idea. I down it in three gulps before making my way over to my table.

“Sit back and enjoy yourself.” I hear the last of Caine’s speech and then the applause when I finally get to my table.

“Hi,” I say, pulling out the empty chair in the middle of Kevin and Kayla. “Thanks for saving me a seat.” I look at Kayla, who smiles at me, but I can see the sadness in her eyes.

“You okay?” I ask her softly when I grab the linen napkin and place it on my lap.

“Yeah,” she replies, blinking quickly, “it’s fine.”

“We’ll have a couple of shots later.” I wink at her, and she finally laughs. “God knows I need them.”

“That you do,” she agrees as the food comes to us.

I push away from the table. “I’ll be back, I’m going to the bathroom.” I grab the silk handbag.

Making my way out of the ballroom, I head toward the small corner where there are two bathrooms side by side, men on the right and women on the left. I walk into the bathroom, taking a deep inhale now that the food is being served. Walking over to the sink area, I open my purse, taking out the small light-pink lip gloss and applying a soft coat to my lips. I turn to look behind me, making sure everything is still zipped up and in place before I pull open the bathroom door.

I take two steps outside and spot Caine coming out of the ballroom, almost as if he’s on a mission. His head is down, and when he looks up and spots me, he stops for a second, looks around, and then continues on his mission. “I was looking for you,” he declares in almost a whisper.

My breathing now comes in spurts. “Come with me.” He doesn’t even give me a choice or a chance to say anything. He slides his hand into mine, my fingers holding on to his. He walks over to the other side of the room, going down a long hallway that has closed doors. The only sound I can hear is my heart beating and the soft clicking of my heels. He tries to open one door and finds it locked before moving to another door, which is also locked. “Fuck,” he mumbles before moving to the last door, and it’s open. He pulls me through the door, and I get a glimpse of the room, showing it’s a small meeting room. The lights are dim, and I see chairs set up and then nothing else because Caine stands in front of me, blocking my view. He closes the little distance between us, pushing me with my back against the wall. My hands come up

to his chest, and I can feel his heart beating just as fast as mine. “Grace.” He murmurs my name in a whisper. “Fuck.” He licks his lips, and that’s the last thing I see or hear because he closes the rest of the space and his lips are on mine. The sound of my purse falling onto the floor is drowned out by the sound of our kissing.

Unlike the last time, I’m dying for his kiss. Dying to feel his lips on mine again. Dying for his tongue to fight with mine. Dying for him to consume me. His tongue slides into my mouth and it’s almost as if I forgot how good it was, or I tried to talk myself out of telling myself how good it was. I taste the tartness of the whiskey on his lips as my hands move slowly up his chest to his neck before his hands go to the side of my ribs. My back arches, hoping he moves his hands and cups my tits. I fight with his tongue, going around and around, never wanting this kiss to end.

He lets go of my lips, moving down to my neck, sucking in, then biting, then kissing. “You drive me insane.”

My eyes try to flutter open to talk to him, but with his mouth on me, all I can do is take in the feeling of him. “You drive me more insane,” I mumble as my heart tries to come out of my chest. His lips find mine again, and for the second time, I want to jump him like a monkey. I want him to pick me up and slide into me. I want him like I’ve never wanted another person in my whole life. He lets go of my lips once more, going to the other side of my neck. “I can’t get enough of you,” he declares as he pushes deeper into me, making his cock rub over my stomach. My pussy aches for his touch,

wanting him to duck his legs down just a touch so he can rub it against me.

I want to say all I do is think about him. I want to say I can't get enough of him. I want to say to take me home. Instead, I nip his jaw with my teeth, my eyes opening to stare into his bright blue ones. The eyes that haunt me during the day and then chase me all night long in my dreams. "I need you so bad," I admit, pulling him to me to bite his lower lip. "So fucking bad." I slide my lips onto his, my tongue slipping into his mouth as we swallow each other's moans.

The sound of voices coming closer makes us both jump apart as if you just tossed ice water on us. But not too far, his hands never leave my hips, he grips them in his hands, making me not move. His eyes never leave mine as we hear someone right outside the door. "I think we went too far," I hear a woman say. "It's probably the other side."

"We should get back," I finally urge.

"They are probably looking for you." He steps away from me, his hands falling off my hips.

My own hands flopping down beside me, I'm about to bend over and get my purse, but he beats me to it, holding it out for me. "Thank you," I say, our fingers brushing each other. A shiver goes up my spine from just his fingers touching me.

"I'll see you in there," he states, and I nod, about to turn and walk out, but instead, I walk to him. I wipe his lips of my shiny lip gloss, which only makes him bend down again to kiss my lips.

I laugh. "I just cleaned your lips."

He takes one more kiss from me. "If you don't leave now, we aren't going back in there and then we'll be asked all sorts of questions." Just the image of leaving with him sets my cheeks on fire. "That look isn't helping," he groans.

I get on my tippy-toes and kiss his neck, feeling how erratic his heart is beating. "See you out there," I say before turning and walking out of the room. I close the door behind me, walking as fast as I can away from it before doing what I really want to do. Ask him to take me home.

# eighteen

. . .

Caine

“Wasn’t last night an amazing success,” my mother declares from the other side of the table. “We should do this yearly.”

I groan at the same time Nash does. “No,” he quickly denies, “immediately no, Mom.”

The three of us sit at the table outside while my father pushes Meadow in the swing. They came over shortly after eleven this morning, and my mother prepared us all lunch, which we demolished not long ago. The only things on the table now are a couple of pieces of fruit. “We are not doing this yearly.” I reject the idea. Last night was good, but we can’t be doing this yearly. “I think maybe every five years.”

“Every five years,” my mother huffs. “Ernie,” she calls my father, “what do you think about doing a gala every single year?”

His head snaps toward us as he stops pushing Meadow. “Hillary.” All he does is say her name.

“What?” she says. “Was last night not a success?”

“Yes,” he confirms, turning back to Meadow, “but it was a success because maybe it’s our first one. Like beginner’s luck.” I roll my lips, trying not to laugh as I look over at Nash, who has his arms folded on the table’s edge and his head is looking down while his body shakes from laughing. “If we do it every year, people will be bored of it.” My mother leans back in the chair, thinking about what he is saying. “Think about all the events we go to during the year and all the times you tell me how boring they are and how annoyed you are with them.”

“Yes.” She swings her leg that crosses over her knee. “But this is different, I know how not to make it boring.”

“You didn’t even do anything for this one except foot the bill,” I remind her, leaning forward and plucking a grape from the bowl and popping it into my mouth. “Grace did all of that.”

“I thought it was a group effort.” My mother sits up straight.

“It was supposed to be, but her cousin Sofia was the event planner, and...” I trail off when Nash talks.

“It was supposed to be, but Caine pissed her off, so she was like ‘I’ll do it myself.’” Nash talks in a robot voice, then leans forward, grabbing a piece of pineapple.

“What do you mean, Caine pissed her off?” my father questions, walking up the two steps to the porch where the table is, somehow puffing out of breath.



“I was not pissing her off.” I try to defend myself as my father pulls out his chair and grabs a bottle of water.

“He was trying not to piss her off and failing miserably.” Nash leans back in his chair, one arm propped on the armrest, the other tapping the table.

“Caine.” My mother just says my name like she did when we were younger, and she was about to give me a warning.

“Don’t listen to him.” I point at Nash. “He’s trying to cause trouble.”

“Me?” He points at himself at the same time I whack his hand that is on the armrest, making it fall. “I’m not the one who barks at her fifteen times a day.”

“I do not bark at her,” I defend through clenched teeth; my jaw so tight I think my teeth might break.

“Uncle Nash,” Meadow calls him. “Grandpa said you can’t push me higher than his old arms.”

We all laugh, and luckily for me, Nash gets up. “He does have old arms,” he says to Meadow as he walks down the steps and jogs over to her.

“Caine,” my father admonishes, “tell me that Nash is wrong.”

“He’s wrong,” I semi lie to him, and he must know it because he tilts his head to the side, knowing there is more. “Okay, fine.” I put up my hands. “I may have barked at her in the beginning. But that was because I thought she was too young for the job.”

My mother pffts. “Sexist pig,” she mumbles under her breath but loud enough and also clear enough for me to hear.

“Come on, Mom,” I say, and she just sneers at me.

“That young girl closed a deal for us last night that we’ve been trying to do for years. All she had to do was smile his way and he was putty in her hands.”

“You pimped out my assistant?” I snap, and my father laughs. I’m angry anyone is going to be putty in her hands but me. I’m so far gone for her it’s not even funny.

“Her grandfather would hang me up to dry if we did that,” he discloses, shaking his head. “No, we introduced her to Franklin, and she did all the work. He went to talk to her afterward, and now we have a meeting set up next week. She is going to work with us on it.”

“Then I’m working on it as well,” I inform them. “We will fly in for the meeting.”

“Or you can Zoom in,” my mother suggests. “No need to fly in anywhere.”

“Whatever,” I say annoyed, then look at my father. “What do you know about her family?”

“Her grandfather is huge in the security business,” my father starts and grabs a piece of strawberry. “Started when he was young, was a rodeo king or something like that. Has some top-secret government deals. I think he just bought a hockey team.”

“What?” I’m shocked at this. “From rodeo to hockey?”

“From the whispers, he did it because one of the kids on the team is married to—”

Finally, all the pieces click. “Sofia Petrov,” I say her name, “Grace’s cousin.”

“Maybe.” My father shrugs. “Either way, he bought the team.”

“Wow.” That’s the only thing I can say.

“You better be nice to her,” my mother urges. “She is the sweetest thing. Last night, she was going crazy, she barely ate.” I swallow down before I tell her I know because I was watching her the whole God damn fucking night. From my side of my table, my eyes followed her every single time she got up or moved. After I dragged her into that room and kissed her again, I was waiting to catch her again, but she was always with someone. And when she wasn’t with someone, she was rushing to find someone. Finally, at midnight, she found me with my father and told us she was heading home, and if there was anything, to speak with the lady who was standing in the corner. I wanted to walk her out and make sure she got into a car safely, but she left with Kayla, and it would have caused a scene if I followed her out.

“I am nice to her,” I finally say softly.

“Now.” Nash walks back up the steps, holding Meadow in his arms, who squirms to get down. She runs over and hops on my lap, leaning over and grabbing some strawberries in her hands. “So serious question,” he says, and we all look at him, “can I ask her out?”

“Absolutely not,” I bark out at the same time my mother says, “That would be lovely.”

All eyes come to me. “He’s not dating anyone who works for me.” I grip the handles to the chair tight. “Period. Go f—” I stop saying the word because Meadow is on top of me. “Go bark someone in your own office.”

“Why are you barking, Uncle Nash?” Meadow asks me and I put my head back. “You should meow instead.” Then she looks up at me. “Can I get a cat?”

“No,” I tell her. “No to everything.” I look at Nash.

“What if she asks me out?” He leans back in his chair, and if I wasn’t holding Meadow in my arms, I would punch him in the face and then kick him in said face.

“Has she asked you out?” my father asks the question I was going to ask but didn’t because I was mentally kicking his ass.

“No.” He shakes his head. “But that’s probably because...”

“Because she doesn’t want to date you,” I finish the sentence for him. “Now shut the bark up.”

The rest of the afternoon is lighter and luckily for everyone no one brings up Grace anymore. When they finally leave a little after four in the afternoon, I take my phone out and message Alexa.

Me: Hey, Alexa, was wondering if you would be able to come and sit for Meadow. I'll put her to bed at her normal time at seven. If you can come at seven thirty until around ten?

I put the phone down before heading into the living room to sit and watch television with Meadow, her eyes getting heavy. "Don't fall asleep," I tell her, and her eyes snap open.

"I'm not," she denies, turning on her side. I know if she falls asleep now, there will be no way I'll be able to put her to bed at seven, and therefore showing up at Grace's door at eight would be a no go.

"Let's go for a walk," I suggest to her, and she looks at me, not moving. "We can go in the back and blow bubbles." I get up off the couch the same time my phone pings.

Alexa: Okay, see you then.

"Come on, sleepyhead," I urge, walking over to the side wall in the pantry, grabbing the basket of bubbles and chalk. "We can even write on the driveway."

"Can I write my name?" Meadow slides off the couch and comes over to me.

"Yes, and mine too," I tell her as we walk out to the driveway. It takes everything for her not to ask to go inside, and when it's finally seven, she doesn't even make it past the story I'm reading. I rush to my bathroom, taking a quick

shower and putting on jeans and a white T-shirt, sliding my sneakers on at seven twenty-five, when the knock on the door has me jogging toward it. Alexa comes in quietly and I quickly rush out of there. My hands tap the steering wheel the whole way over to her place.

When I park on the street and walk into the lobby, the desk is empty, so I don't have to ask anyone anything. I press the elevator button, the nerves hitting me as soon as the doors open and I walk out onto her floor. My hand shakes as I hold it up to knock on her door. One second after is when I think this is the stupidest thing I've ever done, but then the next second, I think this is the best thing for me to do. We need to talk and I'm not having this talk at work.

I look down, seeing a shadow at the door before the lock clicks and the door opens. She stands there in light-pink loose waffle shorts with a matching tank top shirt. Her hair is piled on top of her head. "Caine," she says my name, both surprised and breathless, and then I think maybe I should have called. "What are you doing here?" She puts one of her bare feet on top of the other.

"Well, I figured that we needed to talk." I don't move from the spot and neither does she. "And I didn't want to wait until tomorrow." She stares at me. I've seen her every single day at work with light makeup on, then yesterday her makeup was a bit darker. But today, she stands there without a stitch of makeup, and she's never looked more beautiful to me. "Can I come in?"

“Of course.” She moves aside from the doorway but still keeps her hand holding it. I stop in front of her, my hand coming out to hold her hip before I bend and kiss her lips gently.

“Hi,” I say as breathlessly as she was when she opened the door.

“Hi,” she responds back, and now with no heels on I can see how tiny she is. She gets on her tippy-toes, closing the rest of the distance to give me another chaste kiss. “Come in,” she invites, closing the door.

She walks by me and my fingers find hers, exactly like they did yesterday, as we walk down her hallway. “Can I get you something to drink?” she asks me as we stop in the middle of her living room. “I don’t really have much alcohol, but I think I have a bottle of beer from when JB was here.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m good.”

“Sit down.” She points at the couch where there is a throw blanket in a heap in the middle with a big textbook right on top of it and a legal pad.

“What is all this?” I point at the book and then notice the coffee table has her laptop along with graph paper.

“These,” she says, taking a deep inhale, “are my books.”

“I can see that. For?”

“I’m going to night school to earn my CPA license,” she states, shocking the ever-loving shit out of me. She shocks me at every single turn since I’ve met her. “That’s why I can’t work past four.” I swallow down the lump that formed in my

throat, thinking back to when I was a dick to her about it. “It’s an intensive course. Most of it is online from six to ten Monday through Friday.”

“Wow.” I pick up one of the papers. “Impressive.”

“Well, not so much, I haven’t graduated yet,” she says, sitting down next to the cover, moving it to her other side along with the big textbook. “This is how I usually spend my weekends.” She looks at the table. “I try to work ahead of the class in case there is some big assignment, and I can’t get to it during the week. I started doing that after I fell asleep on my desk and ended up coming to work late.”

“You can stop pointing out all the times I was a dick to you.” I try to make a joke out of it. “Fuck, I was an idiot.”

“Not all the time.” She smiles shyly at me. “Just ninety-nine percent of the time.”

“Oh, good,” I deadpan, “only that.”

“So,” she starts, turning on the couch toward where I stand, “what do you want to talk about?”

I put the pad down and sit down next to her. “I imagine it has to do with the last two times we kissed.”

“You would be right.” My chest feels like someone just kicked me in it. “I don’t know where to start.”

“How about you start by saying that kissing me was not a mistake,” she encourages softly.

I shake my head and wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her to me. My head moves down, stopping right before



her lips. “Trust me, kissing you was the opposite of a mistake.”

# nineteen

. . .

Grace

*M*y heart hammers frantically in my chest as I ask him if he regrets kissing me. It beats even faster when he shakes his head, my head in a fog, not sure what is going on. All day all I've been thinking about was his kiss, his hand, his cock. It was like a repeat film in my head all day long, then he showed up and it was like my prayers were answered. He pulls me to him on the couch and I look up at him. Into the blue eyes that seem to calm and excite me at the same time. I see his mouth moving, my brain only picking up the last part. "Opposite of a mistake."

"Oh, good," I say, throwing my legs over him to straddle him. Something I've thought about doing for the last two weeks. Okay, fine, since I first met him. "I was hoping you would say that." I sit on his lap, his cock exactly where I've wanted it all day long.

"We should talk," he says at the same time his hand goes to my hair, and he fists it in his hand, pulling me to him. My mouth opens to yelp, giving him the opportunity to attack my mouth. His tongue slides into my mouth, and my body lights up like a fucking firecracker.

My hand goes from his chest up to his face and then to the back of his neck. His body relaxes into the couch, taking me with him. His hand grips my hip as I move my head to the side, taking his tongue deeper into my mouth. “Let’s talk.” I let go of his lips and mouth, then he attacks my neck. My clothes feel like they are strangling me.

“I want to date you,” he declares when he finally lets go of my neck. I lift my eyebrows when I hear his words. “Is that stupid?” He tries to take it back, and I shake my head, not going to let him.

“No.” I smile so big my cheeks hurt. “It’s not stupid.” I hold his face and kiss his lips. “It’s the opposite of stupid.” I use his words so he knows how not stupid it is to me.

“Good, I’m also going to point out I’ve never dated anyone in my life.”

His admission shocks me. “You have a child.” I laugh, and then he smirks.

“There wasn’t really dating involved. We just fell into a routine.” He leans up to kiss my jaw. “But with you...”

“Yes?” I push, my hands going to his chest, feeling his heart beating underneath my fingers.

“With you, I want things.” His voice is soft. “Things I shouldn’t want.”

“Like what?” I ask him, the seriousness of his voice scaring me.

“Like, to be with you. To kiss you. To hold your hand. To take you out on dates and have everyone envy that I’m the one

with you.” He takes a deep breath. “Just like I was envious of JB when I thought he was your boyfriend.”

“Why do you think you shouldn’t want me?” My voice is soft and low, my heart beating at the same time as his.

“Because you are so young,” he admits, and my heart sinks. I’ve never really had my heart broken before, but I know he has the power to do this. “I’m way too old for you.”

“It’s ten years, Grandpa,” I huff, my voice going louder, “and the only one hung up on my age is you.”

“Really?” he goads me. “So, if you tell your parents you’re dating a single father who is ten years older than you, they’re going to welcome me with open arms?”

I laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous. You could be a monk in a monastery, and they still wouldn’t welcome you with open arms.” I shake my head. “No one is going to welcome you with open arms. That’s not the way it works.”

“Everyone I know loves you,” he counters, frustrated. “Nash especially,” he growls, his teeth gritted together. “Today he asked if he could date you.”

“Really?” I shriek, and it just makes his jaw even more tight. “I mean, that’s never going to happen. He’s just a friend.”

“Oh, trust me I know, and now he knows.” I stare at him. “And if he even thinks about doing anything more about—” I put my fingers on his lips.

“I’m only interested in one person, and that’s you,” I assure him softly. “So, you only have to worry about my

family not liking you.”

“My parents love you,” he says, and I smile because nothing would suck more than the guy you like whose parents hate you.

“Well, I am lovable, and that’s normal. I’m not their daughter. I’m sure if they had a daughter, they wouldn’t like any guy. Think about it,” I say. “Would you welcome anyone in Meadow’s life?” He glares at me and growls. “Exactly, especially when you know they are going to be giving her the D.”

“Can we focus on one thing right now?” he hisses.

“I don’t know, can we?” I fold my arms over my chest. “I’m trying to tell you that you are the only one hung up over your age. No one else cares but you.”

“I’m also your boss,” he points out. “I shouldn’t be dating you. You work for me.”

“I do.” I nod my head. “And I’m not quitting either. Maybe this will, I don’t know, make you less shall we say...” I look up, trying to come up with the words, but I’ve got nothing. “Less of a dick?” I lean forward onto his chest. “But not so much of a dick that they know we are dating.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” he admits. “I was especially nice this week.”

“I mean, I can do things on the daily to make sure you stay in the dick category.” I laugh. “But after work, you—”

“I don’t be a dick.” He laughs at himself.

“Yeah,” I confirm, “I don’t mind the dickish parts; it’s sort of hot.”

“Is it?” His hands go from my hips to my ass as he squeezes my ass cheeks, making us both moan. “How hot?”

“Well.” I lean in, nipping his jaw. “Obviously, me having an orgasm in your office showed you how hot you are.” I trail my kisses from his jaw to his cheek and then up to his ear. “I was so wet for you,” I whisper right before I suck his lobe into my mouth and then bite down on it. “You’ve been the star of my orgasms ever since.” He moans when I press myself deeper into his cock. “Do you think you can handle it?”

“Grace.” The way he says my name sends shivers up my spine. “With you, I’m in uncharted territory.”

“Good,” I reply, kissing his lips softly, “that makes two of us.” I slide my tongue into his mouth. His hands move from my ass up my top, catching the bottom of it and sliding his hand up my bare back. He gasps when he holds my neck with one hand.

“You aren’t wearing a bra?” he questions me, his eyes a deep ocean blue now.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m home.”

“You are killing me,” he groans. “Like, this is what I get for being a dick to you.” He puts his head back on the couch and closes his eyes. “Having you right here.”

“And this is bad because?” I say, trying not to laugh at him.

He lifts his head. “It’s bad because I don’t want to rush into anything with you.”

“Is it rushing, though?” I ask, and he’s about to answer when his phone rings.

“That might be the sitter,” he says as he lifts his hips to pull the phone out of his back pocket. He keeps one hand on my hip when I try to move off him. I see the name Alexa on his screen right before he puts the phone on speaker when he answers, “Hey.”

“Hi,” Alexa answers back, and I can hear whimpering in the background. “I’m sorry to bother you, but Meadow woke up, and I can’t calm her down. She won’t stop crying.”

“Can I talk to her?” he asks, and now both of us are looking down at the phone.

“Daddy.” Her voice comes out sad. “Where are you?”

“I just had to go to the office to get something.” He smiles at me.

“I want you to come home,” she says, and I can hear her sniffle. “Can you come home?”

“Yes,” he replies, and I can’t help but fall more for him right at this moment. “I’ll be home soon.”

“I’m going to wait on the couch,” she informs him. “Bye, Daddy.”

The phone hangs up, and he drops it beside us before gripping my hip. “I’m sorry.” He apologizes to me, his voice low.

“I’m not,” I say, and his eyes fly to mine. “If you hadn’t come here, you wouldn’t have asked me out. So, I can’t be sorry for that. And I got to make out with you.” I kiss his lips before rubbing my nose with his. “Never going to be sorry for that.”

He laughs. “I’m not sorry for that either.” He kisses me, slipping his tongue into my mouth for a quick kiss. “But I’m sorry I can’t stay longer.”

“That’s okay,” I assure him, and when his hands let go of my hips, I move off him. “This is what I get for dating a dad.”

He chuckles before he rubs his face, grabbing his phone and then getting up. “I guess.” He holds out his hand to me. I slip my hand in his and he doesn’t let it go as we walk toward the front door. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow.” He wraps his arms around my waist.

I get on my tippy-toes to get closer to him. “Yes.” I slip my arms around his neck and pull him down to kiss him. *Just a little kiss*, I tell myself and it ends up being a hot and heavy make-out session, leaving both of us panting. “I really wish you didn’t have to go.” I suck his neck.

“If I don’t leave now.” His hands squeeze my ass after they slide down to it two seconds after our kiss turns heavy. “I might not leave.”

“Ugh,” I groan, stepping away from him, knowing he has to get home to Meadow. “Go, before I change my mind, and don’t let you out of here.”



“Hmm,” he hums, winking at me, “don’t tease me with a good time.” He opens the door. “And if anyone isn’t going to let anyone go and keep them, you know, maybe tied up—” He starts off, smirking, but it goes into a full-blown smile. “It’s going to be me.”

My core gets so tight I’m surprised I don’t orgasm in front of him with just his words. “Get out of here,” I say, walking to the door, getting ready to slam it behind him. But he quickly kisses my lips before he walks away. I stand here watching him get in the elevator, holding up my hand until the elevator doors close.

Only once it’s closed do I shut the door and lock it, the smile never leaving my face as I walk back over to the couch and get under the covers. Grabbing the book and the notepad, I go about studying again until the phone rings, and I see it’s him. Not Batman. “Hello,” I answer, putting the phone to my ear.

“Hi,” he greets, and I hear his car door close, “it’s me.”

“Batman?” I reply, laughing when he chuckles.

“You’re funny,” he says to me. The sound of his car starting makes me a touch sadder, knowing he’s going away from me.

“I’m very funny.” I lay my head on the side of the couch pillow.

“So, I have to ask you something, but you can’t laugh.”

“Oh, this is going to be fun.” I smirk.

“We are officially dating, right?” he asks, and I can’t help but laugh out loud.

“Do you think I’m the dating queen of the South?” I ask him. “I mean, I’ve dated, but once your grandfather answers your front door holding a shotgun, the dates got fewer and farther between.”

He says nothing for a good minute, and I look down at my phone to see if maybe I got disconnected, but the timer numbers keep going up. “Hello?”

“A shotgun,” he echoes, and now I’m bursting out laughing.

“I mean, I’m from the South,” I start. “I don’t even think he’s that good of a shot.”

“That good of a shot,” he repeats the words.

“I mean, if anyone is a decent shot, it has to be Uncle Reed; he was with the Green Berets,” I fill him in. “And just because Granddad trained with the Navy SEALs doesn’t mean anything.”

“He’s a Navy SEAL?” he shrieks, and I have to roll my lips.

“No, he just trained with them for fun.”

“For fun?” His voice goes so loud.

“When he was younger, so it doesn’t even count.”

“Oh, it counts,” he declares. “Just my luck to start dating a woman whose whole family can shoot me in the ass.”

“The men, at least.” I tap the couch. “If you go next to my Aunt Chelsea, she’ll shoot your dick off.”

“Good to know,” he says. “Well, this relationship is starting off fun.”

“I think so.” I try to ignore the worry in his voice.

“By the way,” he says, “your new work time is nine o’clock.”

I sit up and snap, “No perks for dating you. No way.”

“Actually, it’s perks for the gala,” he points out. “Loren and I discussed it on Friday.”

“Well, I’m not going to say no to starting an hour later,” I say.

“Okay, I’m home,” he says softly. “See you tomorrow.”

“Good night,” I reply softly, hanging up the phone and setting it on the table. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” I tell myself, “because there is only one way this can possibly end.”

# twenty

. . .

Caine

*P*ulling into the parking garage, I spot her SUV right away, and I can't help but smile when I see she's just gotten here. I pull into my reserved parking spot, rushing out of my car. I slam my door shut when I look over and see her walking from her car.

She's wearing what looks to be loose blue pants and a tight white top with a white jacket. Her shoes are also a white color, the front open, but you know they are high as fuck. "Good morning," I greet her, and she looks up. Her hair is over one shoulder.

"Hey," she says, surprised I'm standing here. "Morning." She tries to hide the sly smile, but I see it.

We walk to the elevator, our hands grazing each other. I look around the parking garage before I slide my hand in hers and pull her to the side of one of the pillars. I put my hand on the pillar above her head, my cock waking up even after I jerked myself off last night and this morning thinking about her. "Hi," I say, bending my head toward hers. She meets my lips halfway, her tongue sliding into my mouth at the same time mine enters hers. The kiss is even better than yesterday's

make-out session on her couch, and that was in its own stratosphere. Her purse falls beside our feet as she wraps one arm around my neck and the other around my waist, pulling me to her. “Fuck,” I mutter when I finally let her go, “I missed kissing you.”

“Did you?” she replies, rubbing the lip gloss off my lips. “I couldn’t tell.”

“How about we don’t wear lip gloss in the morning?” I mention to her.

“I can’t walk into work without lip gloss.” She rolls her eyes, and the two of us stop moving when we hear a car door slam.

Her eyes go big as I step slowly and quietly away from her. She bends to pick up her purse and wipes her lips to make sure her lip gloss isn’t all over the place. The ding of the elevator rings, and then two seconds later, it’s just the two of us. “Well, that was fun,” I joke with her.

“It was the opposite of fun,” she hisses. “My heart was in my throat, and I thought I was going to throw up.”

“Maybe tomorrow we meet down the block and make out and then come to work,” I suggest as we walk toward the elevator.

“Oh, hot make-out with the boss before work.” She winks at me. “I think I like it.”

“Good,” I say as I press the elevator button.

“We can’t get in together,” she gasps.

“Why?” I ask her.

“Because you have this effect on me,” she says, and I look down at my dick.

“You have this effect on me also,” I note, and she pushes me away.

“You’re going to get in the next one.” She steps into the elevator and presses the button. “See you up there.” She holds her hand up, making me shake my head. I wait until the doors close before I press the button again.

The other door opens right away, so I get in and press the button to the floor. When I step out of the elevator, so does Grace, who looks at me with big eyes. “Morning.” I nod to her as I walk past her to my office, acknowledging a couple of people as I walk in. “No coffee today?” Kayla asks me when I walk past her desk, and I put my head back. “Guess you forgot it in the car.”

“That would be it,” I say, turning on my heel and almost crashing into Grace. “Sorry,” I say softly to her.

“It’s my fault,” she replies. “I wasn’t watching.”

I let her go and step away from her, my hand still tingling from holding hers. I make it back to the car, grabbing my white coffee cup when my phone buzzes, also next to the coffee. “Jesus,” I mutter, “get yourself together.” In the haste to get to Grace, I forgot all my shit in the car.

Grace: I was checking your ass out,  
and it’s in fine form.

Me: Want to meet me in my car so we can make out?

I press send and make my way back upstairs. The minute I round the corner, my phone beeps, and I look down.

Grace: Can't, my boss is due in any minute.

I smile and then look toward Grace, seeing Kevin in front of her desk laughing with her, her hands crossed on the desk. "Don't we have work to do?" I bark at both of them but more to him.

"Just going to." He points toward the conference room, and I walk into my office. I put my coffee down when there is a knock on the door.

I look up to see Vinny. "We starting in ten?" I nod at him as he stops by Grace's desk, and all I do is hear her laughter. It bugs the shit out of me even though I know Vinny would never do anything. Also, since when have I become a jealous asshole? I grab my files, walking out of the office and trying not to look over at her and failing. "Try to get some work done."

"I'll try my hardest," she mutters back. Well, at least we got this part down pat.

The meeting goes longer than expected, and when I return to my desk, there are triple the emails than usual. "Grace!" I shout her name. When I don't see her move, I have to tell her, "Can you come here?"

She gets up and walks into my office. Her white jacket is off, and now I see the top is a sleeveless bodysuit. “You rang?” she says, and I can see her shoes have straps over the top, and they are even sexier than I thought. “I should get you a little bell so you can ring it when you need me.”

“What’s going on with the emails?” I ask her, ignoring the need to shut her in my office and devour her.

“Crazy, right?” She stops in front of my desk. “Seventy-five percent of those are new clients you met at the gala.” She tilts her head to the side. “I guess you swayed them with your charm.” She smirks. “I have set up meetings with half of them. Those are just the emails so you can be informed.” My mouth opens. “See, I do work. Is that all?”

“Yes,” I hiss at her, and she turns and walks back out of the office. Her ass is just as juicy in those pants as it is in my hands.

I pick up my phone to text her, but then put it down, saving it for when she leaves. She sticks her head in a little after four. “I’m going to head out,” she announces, and I just nod at her. “Have a good night,” she adds softly before returning to her desk to grab her jacket and her purse and walking out.

I pick up my phone and text her.

**Me: Someone’s ass is in fine form.**

I put down the phone, and it pings a couple of minutes later.



Grace: You can't even see my ass in these pants. Tomorrow, I'll wear tighter ones.

Me: I'd rather you didn't. My pants aren't stretchy in the front.

Grace: Bahaha, noted.

I put the phone down and wonder if I should change her name in my phone.

Me: What is my name saved under in your phone?

Grace: Not Batman.

I swear to God, I have never laughed more with another person before. I burst out laughing so much my stomach hurts.

Me: Okay, I'll put you under Not Catwoman.

Grace: Ewww, why would I be Catwoman?

Me: Because I'm Batman.

Grace: You are Not Batman.

Me: Goodbye.

She doesn't answer me back, and I change her name to Ballbuster. When I get in the car to go pick up Meadow, I call her, and she answers on one ring. "Yes," she says, her voice sweet, making me miss her.

"I changed your name in my phone," I tell her, and she laughs.

"It better not be Catwoman," she huffs, and I hear the door slam on her end, so I know she just got home.

"Nope, it's Ballbuster."

"Aw, perfect," she says. "Now I'm going to change out of my clothes, eat, and get to class."

"Okay, talk to you later," I reply, hanging up the phone and picking up Meadow. I fall asleep before her class even ends, and when I wake in the morning, there is a text telling me she's off to bed, showing me it's after one in the morning.

The whole week we barely see each other. The only making out we do is in the morning before going upstairs, but it's not enough, and by the end of the week, I'm not the only cranky one.

"Grace." I call her name when it's almost the end of Friday.

"What?" she asks, walking into my office. She's wearing a flowy skirt today.

"Are you done for the day?" I ask her, and she nods. I look out of the window, seeing that no one is nearby. "You can take

off if you like.” She glares at me. “I’m just saying you’ve worked hard this week.”

“Whatever,” she hisses and turns to walk out of my office, grabbing her things and leaving. I roll my lips and wait five minutes before calling her.

“What’s got you in this mood?” I turn to look out at the sunlight.

“You,” she responds quickly. “You always put me in this mood.”

I laugh silently. “What did I do now?”

“Well, for one, you looked extremely hot today,” she huffs, “and I’m leaving without even kissing you. You suck at dating, by the way.”

I can’t help but chuckle out loud. “How about you come over for dinner tomorrow?” I invite softly. “I’ll put Meadow to bed at seven, and then we can have dinner together, followed by a massive make-out session.”

“I would like that very much,” she agrees finally, “like a lot.”

“Good, bring pj’s,” I tell her, and she groans.

“I’m not going to sleep over on our first date,” she huffs out.

“Who said anything about sleeping?” My cock wakes up. “Fine, sleep naked.”

“This isn’t helping, Caine,” she cries out. “You are the worst.”

“Call me later,” I tell her when I spot Kevin approaching her desk. She doesn’t even say goodbye. She just hangs up on me.

I get up, pretending to go drop something on her desk. “Looking for Grace?” I ask him, and he looks around. “She’s gone.” *And taken, kiss-ass*, my head says, but luckily, my mouth doesn’t.

“Oh, okay,” he says. “Have a great weekend.” I nod at him before turning and walking back into my office, grabbing my jacket and phone before leaving.

Tonight, I set an alarm for ten fifteen, and when I wake up, I call her. She answers after one ring, her voice filled with sleep. “Are you sleeping?” I ask her softly.

“I’m slipping into bed right now.” I hear the sheet rustle and wish I was with her. “I’m exhausted, but I set my alarm for seven. I’ll get up and do homework tomorrow morning and then nap before I come over.” I smile when she says that.

“What is your favorite meal?” I ask, and she laughs. “It’s like something I can’t make, right?”

“Either chicken potpie from my great-grandmother or—”

“How do you like steak and shrimp?” I interrupt her.

“I’m good with anything,” she assures me. “What time should I come over?”

“Now,” I joke with her, and she moans, and I honestly can’t fucking wait for her to come over tomorrow. “After seven fifteen is good.”

“Sounds good. Should I bring anything?”

“You and your sexy ass,” my mouth quickly answers without letting me think about it.

“Well, lucky for you my ass follows my body, so I will be there,” she teases, and she yawns.

“Go to sleep,” I say softly. “I’ll text you tomorrow.”

“Okay, night,” she mumbles before she hangs up.

I put my phone on the side table, falling asleep right after she hangs up. The whole day I’m out of the house with Meadow. We go shopping for food, then I take her out to the park, where we fly her kite, making her run after it for an hour. When we get back home, I feed her quickly, then take her back outside to go bike riding. By the time she eats dinner, she’s begging to go to bed. Seven o’clock comes and she’s asleep in a matter of minutes. I have enough time to shower and walk downstairs before the doorbell rings.

I smile big when I walk over and pull open the door, seeing Grace standing there. She’s wearing a gold satin skirt with a white shirt, a short jean jacket, and black high heels on her feet. Her hair is pushed back from her face. “Hi.” That’s the only thing I let her say before dragging her inside and devouring her mouth.

# twenty-one

. . .

Grace

“*H*i,” he says. His whole face lights up, making the nervous energy I had inside me all day suddenly disappear. He slides his hand into mine, pulling me into his hold. I don’t even have time to laugh before his mouth is on mine. His tongue attacks mine, or maybe it’s my tongue that attacks his. Either way, the soft kiss I thought we were going to have in his entranceway is hot and heavy. It could be that for the last two days, our kisses were sparse, and I was running late on Friday, so the fifteen minutes we usually made out for was a mere two minutes. My hands grip his white T-shirt, trying to get closer to him. “Hi,” I finally reply, practically panting for him.

My hand comes up to his face, my fingers wiping my lip gloss off his lips. His arms tighten around my waist. “Welcome to my home.”

“Thank you for having me,” I say softly. “Is Meadow sleeping?”

“Out like a light,” he confirms. “I made sure I tired her out.” I chuckle. “I might have needed a nap.” His hands slide off my hips. “Let me get your jacket.”

“Trying to get me out of my clothes already?” I joke with him, slipping my jean jacket off. “You haven’t even fed me yet.” As I hand him my jacket, his hand comes up to grab it.

“You look beautiful,” he compliments, and I don’t think another man besides one from my family has called me beautiful. Sure, I’ve been called hot, but no man I’ve been dating or have dated has said I was beautiful.

I look down, hoping he doesn’t notice me blushing. “Thank you,” I reply softly before I tuck one side of my hair behind my ear.

He slides my hand in his as he turns and walks into the house, placing my jacket on top of the bottom banister to the winding staircase. “Very regal, Mr. Griffin.” I look up at him. “Has Meadow tried to slide down the railing yet?”

“Not yet,” he says as we walk past his dining room, which has a grand table with a stunning chandelier. My eyes catch the office, and I wonder if he works in there often. “I’ll give you a tour later.” We walk into the family room connected to a massive white kitchen with gray cabinets and stainless-steel appliances.

“This is stunning,” I say as I walk over to the island, running my hand over the white counter with light-gray veins in it. “Very, very sexy.” I look up at him as his eyes shine.

“I’ve never been so jealous of a counter in my life.” He puts his hand on my lower back before bending to kiss my lips. “In case I don’t tell you later or I forget to tell you because I’m so nervous.” He smiles at me shyly, not moving

his face away from mine. “I’m happy you came over.” I can’t help the smile that forms on my face with his words.

“I’m happy you asked me,” I say quietly. My hand comes up to hold his face, and my thumb rubs his cheek. “Really, really happy,” I admit, my chest tightening as I lean forward to kiss him softly on the lips.

“If you keep kissing me”—he slides his tongue into mine for a second, sending a shiver up my spine—“we aren’t going to cook anything.”

I laugh as he lets go of my lips and steps away. “I’m trying to decide,” I say as I watch him walk around the island and toward the massive fridge, “if I like the suit Caine or the jeans Caine.” He looks over his shoulder, smirking at me. “I’ll save judgment for the naked Caine.” I wink at him, and he glares. I walk around the island to join him. “Can I help?”

“I don’t think you standing next to me is going to help,” he huffs as he grabs things out of the fridge and places them on the island.

I giggle like a school girl. “I’ll stay on one side, and you can stay on the other,” I barter as he holds my hips to walk around me even though he has enough space to just walk past me. “What are we making?”

“I was thinking we could have some steak.” He opens a couple of drawers, removes some knives, and places them on the counter before grabbing two cutting boards. “I got some shrimp I thought we could throw onto the grill also.”

“Love surf and turf.”



“Are you saying that,” he asks me, putting his hands on his hips, “just to make me feel better?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I actually like steak and shrimp.”

“Good, I started marinating the steak this afternoon and also the shrimp.”

“What can I do to help?” I ask as he walks around the kitchen, grabbing things.

“You can prep the salad while I throw this on the grill,” he states. “How do you like your steak?”

“Medium rare,” I say, and he kisses me chastely before walking out the back door. I walk around the sleek kitchen, washing my hands before making the salad. Looking out the window toward the outside grill, I see him standing there looking even better than he does at the office. I knew the minute the door opened and I saw him there, tonight would be the night. My hands start to shake when I think about it. My stomach feels like it’s going to roam all the way up to my throat, and then my chest compresses at the same time. I’ve never been more nervous in my life. Never. He looks over his shoulder at me, probably feeling me staring at him. His face goes into a smile, and then he winks at me. I have to hold the counter to keep my knees from giving out.

“Can you focus on not making a fool out of yourself?” I mumble to myself as I continue to make the salad. “He’s just a guy.” I toss the cut-up salad in the bowl, adding the tomato and cucumber.

The back door opens, and he comes in with a plate in his hand. “Steak is done,” he announces, putting down the plate on the island.

“I just need to add the dressing,” I say, and he nods.

“Stay here.” He holds up his hand to me and goes to the dining room that we quickly passed when I walked in. He comes out a couple of minutes later. “Okay, you may enter.”

I walk to him as he slides his hand in mine, and I see he’s dimmed the lights and has set two candles in the middle of the table, next to the two table settings. “Sit and I’ll bring the food.” He pulls our joined hands to his lips before walking back to the kitchen.

I sit down in one of the chairs, anxiously waiting for him. He comes in and sets the plates down and goes in and out of the room ten times before coming back and sitting down. “On a scale of one to ten.” I look over at him. “How nervous are you?”

“Seventy-seven,” he answers right away, making me laugh. “And that is high since I cook for a toddler every single day, and when I try something new, I hold my breath, hoping she doesn’t throw it at me.”

“Stop.” I laugh. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

“But I did.” He grabs my plate and puts a steak on it with some shrimp. “I should have done more.”

“Like what?” I ask as he hands me my plate.

“Like taking you out and wining and dining you. Instead, we are sitting in the dining room. I forgot the wine.” He

pushes his chair back, and I stop him.

“I don’t really drink wine,” I admit, “so this is perfect.”

“You’re just saying that,” he says as he cuts his own steak, “so I don’t feel like a complete and utter loser.”

I shake my head as I cut my steak. “If it makes you feel better,” I state after I chew my steak, “this is the best steak I’ve had in my life.” I lie to him. “The best.”

“I know you’re lying,” he says, chuckling, “and I’m just going to be the big man and pretend you aren’t.”

The meal goes off without a hitch, both of us trying to keep the moment light. I help him clean up the dining room, and he just dumps everything in the sink before grabbing my hand and dragging me to the couch. “I’m not letting you clean my kitchen.”

I tuck my feet underneath me as he sits facing me, my knees at his hip. “But it’s the universal rule,” I remind him. “Whoever doesn’t cook, cleans.”

“But then I’ll get less time to spend with you,” he reasons softly, leaning in and kissing me. “I like how much I like you,” he admits between his little kisses. “I’m crazy about you.” He slides his tongue into my mouth. I arch my back to him, getting up on my knees before he wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me even closer to him.

“I like how crazy you drive me,” I confess as I pick up my skirt and then throw my leg over his, straddling him, “at work and out of work.” His hands grip my hips as I kiss him.

“I like how you make me laugh.” His hands move up my back, and I can’t help but throw my head back and laugh.

“When do I make you laugh?” I ask him as I place my hands, palm open, on his chest.

“When you have the snarky comebacks,” he admits, picking up a strand of my hair and twirling it around his finger.

“Did you laugh when I got juice boxes?” I roll my lips when he glares.

“I did not.” He snickers. “I one thousand percent did not like that at all.”

“I like how hard you work.” I kiss his jaw, right before my lips trail kisses to his lips. My tongue comes out to lick his bottom lip before sliding it into his mouth. The kiss is all tongue and hands. I fist his shirt in my hands before getting the courage to pull it up and slipping my hands under it. His stomach contracts at the touch of my hands, my mouth swallowing his groan. I move my head to the other side to deepen the kiss, my body feeling like it’s on fire. I want his hands on every single part of me. He wraps his arms around my waist as he sits up straight and his cock pushes up against my covered clit, sending shivers through my body. He lets go of my lips so he can reach behind him with his free hand and try to rip his shirt over his head. When he takes one second longer than I think is necessary, my hands frantically join his in shedding his shirt.

He tosses his shirt to the side, and all I can do is sit here looking at him. There is no mistaking he is a man’s man. His

chest is broad with no chest hair, but then he has a bit of dusting on his stomach going down to below the belt.

“Grace,” he says my name softly as my hands trail over his chest, “you’re killing me.”

“Sorry.” I snatch my hands away from him, and if his arm wasn’t wrapped around my waist, I would jump off his lap and die of embarrassment.

“Hey,” he says, putting his hand under my chin and lifting it up to make sure I’m looking at him. “I want your hands on me,” he reassures me, making me slowly start to smile. “In fact, I want them all over me.” He bends his head to bury it in my neck, and my eyes close as his tongue comes out to lick my neck as he trails kisses down it. His hand slides under the hem of my shirt, and I can’t help but get goose bumps all over my body.

“Caine,” I whisper his name in a plea, wanting him to go lower. Wanting his mouth on me everywhere. His fingers trail up my back while his mouth attacks my neck, and my hips start to rub against his cock.

“I feel the heat from your pussy right through my jeans,” he states, and I’m ready to be naked with him. I cross my hands in front of me, grabbing the hem of my shirt to pull it up over my head, leaving me in my white lace bra that’s the most delicate thing I’ve ever touched. I knew the minute I put it on today that I wanted him to tear it off me. I mean, not literally tear it off my body, but enough to drive him crazy to want to rip it off.

His two hands come up; his eyes mesmerized on my tits. My stomach gets all the butterflies that are humanly possible, making breathing hard. My chest pants as his hands come up to cup my breasts. His thumbs rub the peaked nipples, aching to be touched. “Um,” I start to say but stop when his head moves, and he sucks my nipple into his mouth through my bra. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever felt. “Shit,” I say when my head falls back.

His mouth goes to the other nipple, and when he looks up at me, his eyes are like the deep ends of the ocean. All I want to do is get lost in him, get lost at this moment. “You’re exquisite,” he praises, kissing me in the middle of my chest. “You leave me breathless.”

I wait for him to look up at me, his eyes staring into mine. “I have to tell you something,” I say, and my heart speeds up for a whole different reason, “but I’m afraid you are going to freak out.” He wraps both arms around me, making sure I don’t leave him.

“I promise not to freak out,” he assures me, his voice soft and clear.

I take a deep inhale and try not to laugh, but I’m so nervous it comes out anyway, along with three words that might change everything. “I’m a virgin.”

# twenty-two

. . .

Caine

*I*'m sitting on my couch with the most gorgeous woman I've ever laid eyes on straddling me. I've just made her dinner and tried to woo the fuck out of her. The whole time my hands shake just to feel her, just to hold her, just to touch her. My eyes blink I think twice, maybe a hundred times, to be honest. "Caine." She says my name, which shoots straight up my spine and then right to my dick. "Hey." The softness of her voice has me blink one last time until it feels like I'm back on earth and not floating on a cloud close by.

"I'm sorry," I apologize for what, I'm not even sure right now. "What did you just say?" Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe all the blood had drained from my head to my cock. Maybe...

"I said don't freak out," she repeats as her hands move from my chest toward my neck. "But you should know I'm a virgin." Yup, I didn't dream those words; she actually said them. "You're freaking out."

I swallow down the lump; at the same time I feel like my heart is going to literally burst out of my chest. "I'm not." I say the words, but my head screams at me to act cool. "I'm fine."

“You don’t look fine.” She tries to joke with me, and I shake my head.

“It’s just that—” I start to say, and she pulls herself off me, and I stop her midway, turning her so her back is to my chest, one leg dangling between my legs. “Stop it.” She looks over at me, her chest rising and falling. The thin lace bra hiding nothing, her nipples pebbled from me sucking them.

“No,” she huffs, “I will not stop it. I’m finally with a guy I want to do all the things with.”

“All the things with?” I ask, repeating her words, still trying to process what she just said. Also still doing it miserably.

“Yes, all the things with,” she repeats in frustration. “I want to get naked with him. I want him to finger fuck me. I want to suck his cock, and then I want him to actually fuck me.” Her eyes stare into mine. “I want to do all those things.” She raises her hand to my face. “And I want to do them with you.” Her voice goes soft. “I want someone other than me to make me come.”

“Stop talking,” I urge, biting down on my teeth, the images of me doing all those things with her fill my head like a porn movie.

“No.” She shakes her head. “I want you to hear me. I want you. I’ve never wanted anyone in my life before. Not like this.” She moves the leg dangling between my legs and puts it over my other one, pushing me back onto the couch as she moves her hands to her skirt. “Never like this.” She grabs the silky skirt, moving her fingers and the dress moves up with her



fingers. "I want you to touch me everywhere." Her skirt moves over her knees, showing me the milky white of her upper thighs. "Your touches make my skin burn." Her skirt gets even higher, swishing right and left as she lifts it to the edge of where her panties are. "You make me tingle in places." She moves the dress up, showing me the matching white lace panties. "Places where I need you to touch." The dress is finally on top of her stomach. "Places I've touched thinking of you." She moves her hands up her stomach to her breasts, running her nails over her pebbled tips, arching her back when she does it. "Places I want you to touch now." She pulls the bra down, her tits nude. "Will you do that for me?" she whispers. "Will you touch me?"

"Fuck," I swear, trying to do the right thing and not go apeshit and lock her in my house, making her my sex slave. "Grace, are you sure about this?" I ask again, waiting to see if she will answer me. Holding my breath, she nods. Then her mouth meets mine, her tongue going into my mouth, my arm wrapping around her waist, moving up, and cupping her tits, rolling her nipples. She lets go of my mouth to moan. "Put your feet on the couch and open your legs for me." She follows my directions. "Do you know what I do every night and every morning?" I ask, seeing her chest rise and fall in short pants. "Every night in the shower I make myself come, thinking of you." I move her up to suck her nipple into my mouth, then bite down on it. "And every morning after my workout, I do the same thing."

"Yes." She lifts her hips, making my hand move to rub her covered pussy, the heat coming out of the lace, the wetness on

my fingers. “I dream about making you come,” she says and stops when I rub her again, stopping at her clit and moving right to left. She looks at me, the lust in her eyes. “With my mouth.”

I devour her mouth. Her tongue fights with mine as my fingers move her panties to the side, and then my fingers trace the side of her lips as they slowly move to her slit. I slide my two fingers down her slit. There is no mistaking she’s wet. “Caine,” she pants out my name when I rub a circle around her clit. “I—”

“Shh.” I hush her before I suck her nipple back into my mouth. “I know what you need.” I slide my index finger down and slide it into her. Both of us moan; her wetness sucks it in. “So wet for me,” I note as I slide my finger out to the tip and back in again, her pussy convulsing around the digit. “Milk my finger.” I suck her nipple again as I fuck her. “Think you can take another one?” I ask, and she lifts her hips, trying to get it deeper into her. “My girl wants another.”

“Yes.” Her eyes are glazed over, her breathing is now in pants. “I want more.”

“What does a good girl say?” I ask, pulling out of her pussy and sliding up to her clit. “A good girl says please.”

“Please, Caine,” she begs, “please finger fuck me with two fingers.” She licks her lips. “Make me come. Please.” The last word is a plea, and even if I wanted to stop right now, there is no way I would be able to.

“Your mouth will get you into trouble one day,” I tell her as I slip back down and slide two fingers into her. Her pussy

strangles the fuck out of them. “One day when I’ve got you spread-eagle in my bed.” I move my fingers slowly at first to get her used to it. “And you’ve taken my cock a couple of times.” I suck her nipple as I pump into her, going a bit faster. “I’m going to tie you to my bed.” She moans and closes her eyes. “And fuck all that sass out of you.”

She opens her eyes. “Promise?” She moves her hips without even knowing she’s doing it. “Don’t make me those types of promises if you aren’t going to do them.”

“I’m a lot of things,” I hiss, “but a liar isn’t one of them.”

“How long?” she asks, and then moans when my other hand plays with her clit. “How long until you can tie me to your bed and fuck all the sass out of me?”

“You want that?” I ask as her pussy gets even tighter and so wet that my fingers drip. “You want yourself spread for me?” She doesn’t answer; she just nods. “Fuck you with my fingers until you beg me to fuck you. Lick your sweet pussy until you are delirious and then fuck you until you cry.” My hands move as fast as her hips. “Is that what you want?”

“I want you,” she declares, her legs shaking, “and everything you can give me. I’m going to—” I know, I can feel it. “I’ve never—” she starts again as I move as fast as I can without hurting her. “It’s too much.”

“Come for me,” I urge her, staring into her eyes as her mouth opens to say something and nothing comes out. “I want all your firsts,” I tell her, and her head drops back. “I’m taking all your firsts. This pussy is mine.”

“Yes.” She tries to close her legs, but it’s too much for her, so she opens them back up again.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” I tell her as she clamps down on my fingers.

“Oh my God,” she blurts once I curl my fingers into her G-spot. “I’m—”

I swallow her moans, as she comes over my fingers, clamping them over and over again as she rides the wave. Her pussy drips from my fingers onto my legs. “That’s a good girl,” I praise her when she lets go of my mouth, her feet falling from the couch. “I want to make you come again,” I tell her and see her eyes go big. “But first—” My fingers slip out of her, and I bring them to my mouth. As she looks me in the eyes, I clean my fingers. “You are going to wrap those lips around my cock.” She hustles to get off me, her hands frenzied to get to my cock, the both of us helping work to get my jeans off. She doesn’t waste any time when they are at my hips, she pulls my boxers down, and my cock springs out.

Her eyes go big. “That’s bigger than I thought.” I can’t help but laugh at her, but the laughter stops when she wraps her hand around the base of my cock. “I can’t even close my fingers around it.” She gets on her knees and then leans over, licking the pre-cum. “Hmm,” she hums, “I’ve never done this before.” She looks at me. “But I’ve watched how.”

“Is that so?” I ask her as she nods her head and leans her head down, her hair falling around her face, hiding everything. I don’t even see my cock enter her mouth; I only feel it. “Fuck,” I hiss, closing my eyes. “Grace.” I move her hair so I

can see her swallow my cock until she gags on it. “Easy, baby,” I caution, and she looks up at me in all her innocence, and I don’t think I’m going to last with her hot mouth.

She licks up the shaft like she would a lollipop. “Is this okay?” she asks before she twirls her tongue around the head of my cock. “I need you to tell me if”—she sucks the head in—“I’m doing this wrong.”

“Trust me,” I assure her through gritted teeth, “nothing you are doing is wrong.” She smiles before she takes my cock into her mouth, each time her gag reflex getting better and better. I watch her work my cock, mesmerized. The way she tries to get me all into her mouth, the way she moves her hand up and down. “I don’t know how long I can last,” I tell her, knowing I’m going to blow any second. “I’m about to come.”

“Good,” she states before she swallows me back into her mouth. “This time, you come in my mouth,” she says, her fist getting tighter. “Next time, my tits.” Just the thought makes me get closer. “Then, eventually, inside me.” I can’t help but throw my head back and blow into her mouth.

# twenty-three

. . .

Grace

*I* swallow everything he has to give me. I've never been more in control of something in my whole life. Knowing I've brought the big and powerful Caine to his knees makes me feel like a real woman. "Grace," he calls my name as he finishes coming in my mouth. "Fuck, Grace."

I look up at him, my body feeling like it's never felt before. I take him as much as I can in my mouth before I gag, something I obviously need more practice at. I knew he had a big cock, but the minute his pants came off and his cock was free, it was like Christmas morning and getting that big gift on your list. I also almost blurted out, "This is a work of art." He was big and thick and a bit scary to think of it all buried inside me, but the thought made me shiver.

"Was that okay?" I ask him once I let go of his cock. "Like, did I scrape your dick with my teeth?" He just stares at me. "We were talking once, and teeth are a huge issue."

"Okay, one, who is we?" He holds up his finger.

"My cousins and me." I roll my eyes. "Anyway, after that night I thought I would research."

I shrug. “I didn’t think there were so many different ways to suck a dick.”

“Grace,” he says to me as he lifts his hips and covers his cock, and my vagina literally boos.

“Why are you covering yourself?” I ask. “Isn’t it sex time?”

“Are you insane?” he asks, and my eyebrows pinch together.

“We just had foreplay, so isn’t what comes next the main event?” I pull my bra up, covering my tits because I feel like I should cover myself also, except I just want to get more naked with him. I want us both to be naked.

“It’s the first date,” he states, shocked, “I’m not having sex with you on the first date.”

“Eww,” I reply, getting up. “You don’t put out on a first date?” I joke with him while my heart goes pitter-patter about him respecting me enough not to just bang me but also wanting him to bang my brains out. “Had I known this, I would not have agreed to date you at all.”

“Grace,” he mutters, rubbing his hands over his face, “you’re killing me right now.”

“Killing you enough that you might think this is date two and maybe have sex with me?” I tap my mouth with my finger. “Wait, at what date do you put out?”

“I have no idea.” He gets up, standing in front of me with his jeans hanging low on his hips, showing the abs you knew were there but are now more defined when he stands up, his

arms bulging when he puts them on his hips. “I’ve never dated before, so I have no idea.”

“I think one and a half is the going rate these days.” I close the distance to him and put my hands on his sides. “I can run out and then run back in.” He puts his hands on my shoulders before moving them to hold my neck. “Ooh, are you going to choke me and then throw me down on the couch and—” He puts his hand over my mouth.

“Jesus, what kind of porn are you watching?” He chuckles as I wink at him.

“Want to watch one together and recreate it?” I ask him, getting on my tippy-toes and kissing his jaw.

“Grace, why are you making this so hard?” he groans as he looks at the ceiling.

My hand cups his cock. “I’m not the only one hard.” He looks back at me and kisses my lips. “Are you sure you’re okay with what I told you?”

“Which part, because I’m getting whiplash tonight,” he says softly, leaning down to kiss my lips again gently. I have to admit, I love every single time he kisses me. The passionate ones, the ones where I know I’m making him crazy, but his soft ones... those might just be my favorite.

“The part about me having my V.” I try to joke about it. “It’s like walking around with a big A on my shirt. No one wants to touch me.”

“No one better fucking touch you,” he growls, and I laugh.



“Simmer down there, big man. I don’t want anyone but you to touch me,” I admit, “even when you were a dick to me.”

“Yeah, well, it was the only thing I could do except lock you in a room, and, well, do things that, well, I shouldn’t want in the first place. But—”

“But.” I kiss his neck. “I’m just that irresistible.”

“You really are,” he agrees, kissing me again. “I want nothing more than to bury myself inside you.” The minute he says these words I think I purr. I definitely hum. “But I also want to take it slow.”

“Ugh, just my luck.” I chuckle. “I fall for a gentleman.” I shake my head and walk over to grab my shirt and put it back on. “I guess I’m going to call it a night since you aren’t going to put out.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” He glares at me. “You aren’t leaving in the middle of the night.”

I laugh at him, looking over at the kitchen to the big clock on the wall. “It’s almost midnight. I’m not sure that constitutes the middle of the night.”

“If something happens, then what?” I roll my lips to keep from laughing in his face. He’s really cute when he’s protective. Another reason he’s so hot. “If your car breaks down in the middle of the road?”

“Well, if that happens—” I now can’t help but laugh a little. “Then I’ll call you.” I hold up my hand. “I also have

roadside assistance.” Something that even though I didn’t want my grandfather had put on my car.

He stares at me for a second. “Okay, wait here. I’m going to go and get Meadow.” He grabs his shirt off the couch and puts it on. I think he’s joking until he actually starts to make his way to the stairs.

“You aren’t going to wake her up to drive me home.” I rush to grab his arm before he gets any further.

“Then I guess you are staying here.” He turns back around to face me. “We can set the alarm for five thirty and then you can leave.”

“What difference does it make?” I try not to laugh at him.

“It makes a huge difference.” He throws his hands up. “Don’t you watch those murder shows?” I have to roll my eyes. “Evil lurks in the darkness.” His voice goes low and monotone, and he uses his hands to scare me.

“That’s creepy,” I point out to him. “Also, it’s like a twenty-minute drive, most of it on a bright highway.”

“If you want, we...” he says, “we can sleep on the couch.” He raises his eyebrows. “Or you can sleep in the bedroom with me.”

I’m the one looking up at the ceiling, wondering how to get out of this. “But what if Meadow wakes up?”

“She usually shouts my name.” His face goes into a smirk. “Because, apparently, that’s what princesses do.” We laugh together, and he waits a couple of seconds before he wraps an arm around my waist. “What’s it going to be?”

I can't help but wrap my arms around him, getting on my tippy-toes and crushing my chest to his, suddenly wishing we were shirtless again. "You aren't giving me a choice."

"I am." He wraps the other arm around me, crushing me to him. "Couch or bed? See, choices."

"Is this what having a boyfriend is, annoying?" I smirk at him.

"I guess so," he admits to me, "and he gives you phenomenal orgasms."

I roll my eyes. "It was decent," I joke with him because it wasn't just decent. I think I saw fucking stars it was that good.

"Decent, my ass," he retorts, and I laugh out loud. "Now, couch or bed?"

"Ugh," I huff, "might as well get you a good night's sleep since you have to be a dad in the morning." He smiles. "Don't smile like you won the fight, big boy."

"Are you sleeping here?" His smile is even bigger if that's possible.

"I mean, technically, you did, but it's still under review." He nods. "But you set the alarm for five thirty."

"Let me close up down here, and we can go up," he says, letting me go. Walking over to the kitchen, he turns off the lights but leaves the light on top of the stove on before he slips his hand into mine, and we walk up the stairs to his bedroom.

He walks in front of me and turns on the lights, and I stop in my tracks. "This is a lot different than I thought it would

be,” I admit as I look around the light room. The exposed beams on the ceiling make the room seem older. The king-sized bed faces a wall with white and beige bricks holding a television and a fireplace. A sitting area off to the side makes you want to sit down and look out the back window, which must have a patio since the doors look like they slide.

“What did you think my room would be like?” he asks as he walks toward the bed and turns on the lamp on the mirrored side table. A picture of him and Meadow when she was a baby is front and center.

“I thought for sure a dungeon.” I turn around. “Some chains, maybe even a swing.” I look over at the big bed that has a white cover with a brown throw blanket on it, with a bunch of throw pillows. “You make this every day?”

He shakes his head. “Nope, the cleaning crew comes every Saturday, so it’s like this on Saturdays. The rest of the week all this stuff is there.” He picks up the throw pillows and tosses them over to the couch. He walks over to the door and closes it all the way, then walks over and pulls out the baby monitor from the top drawer.

“I have a toy in my top drawer also.” I clap my hands. “Can I borrow a T-shirt?” I ask, and he motions with his head to follow him. I walk over to the side where the walk-in closet holds all his clothes. He walks over to the rack with his T-shirts and puts out his hand for me to choose one. I grab a white one in my hand and pull off my own, along with the bra, before I slip off the skirt and then put on his T-shirt. “This is

good,” I say as it falls to my mid-thigh. “What do you sleep in?”

“Usually naked, sometimes boxers,” he says, his eyes going dark as his gaze roams up and down. My nipples rub against the material, and when I look down, you can see them a bit through the shirt. “This is going to be a long night.”

# twenty-four

. . .

Caine

“You can’t go to school in that.” I look at Meadow as she walks into my bedroom as I put on my jacket.

“What? Why?” she asks, looking down at her green shorts, pink shirt, and then orange socks.

“You have too many colors on,” I say, and she looks down at herself.

“But I like this,” she explains, and I just nod.

“You need to either change your shirt or your socks.” I give her the option to change one of them. “And put on white of either.”

“But I like this,” she starts to whine, and I look at her. “I don’t want to change.”

“You can wear that outfit as soon as you come home.” I try to reason with her. “How about you wear the outfit I put on your bed for now, and you can change when you come home?”

She takes a couple of seconds to think about it before actually storming off to her bedroom. “That was easier than I thought,” I say as I walk out of the closet, kicking one of the

throw pillows to the side before I look over at the bed Grace was lying in yesterday morning.

The whole night I didn't let her go. The minute she slipped out of my arms I would find her and pull her back to me. When the alarm rang at five thirty, I shut it off. She quietly got out of my bed, went into the closet, and came back out wearing her skirt with my T-shirt, her shirt and bra in a ball in her arms. I didn't want her to leave and tried everything to get her to stay, but she had homework to do, and she wasn't sure how Meadow would react, and neither was I. We did have coffee in the kitchen together and then a hot and heavy make-out session at the front door before she finally left. She even texted me when she got home, and I called her last night before I crashed. My alarm rang this morning, and I already had my workout done by the time Meadow woke.

I walk out of my bedroom and head to her room, finding her in the middle of the bed reading a book. "Meadow, we have to go."

"I'm reading a book." She holds the book up for me to see. "I need to finish it."

I take my phone out, knowing if we don't leave now, there is no way I can get to work at the same time as Grace and maybe corner her a bit before we start work. Pulling up my text messages, I send her a message.

Me: I am going to be late this morning. We had a wardrobe situation followed by a reading situation.

It doesn't take her long to answer me.

Grace: That sounds like an eventful morning. I'll see you when you get in.

I put my phone away and it takes me another twenty minutes before we get into the car. It was *I have to brush my teeth. I need a drink. I need to get my vitamin.* I quickly put her in her classroom and stop to get myself coffee before getting into the office. I also order one for Grace, grabbing a napkin and writing *I miss you* under it.

Pulling into the parking garage, I see she's already here, so I grab the cups of coffee, wrapping the napkin around hers. When I walk into the office, my eyes go to her desk, finding she's looking at the computer. Her hair is in a ponytail today, which leaves her neck bare for me to kiss. "Good morning," I mumble to Kayla before reaching Grace, who looks up with a smile. "Morning."

"Just in time," she says to me. "The meeting started about a minute ago." She motions to the conference room with her chin.

"Thank you," I reply, regretting not getting to kiss her this morning. "I got this free," I lie to her, handing her the cup of



coffee, “they made me two by mistake.”

“Thank you.” She reaches out for it, grabbing the cup with the napkin. She sees my writing on the napkin, putting it down and then looking back up at me.

“The meeting,” she reminds me, and I nod, turning and walking into the conference room.

“Sorry I’m late,” I tell the guys. “Hope I didn’t miss anything.”

“Nope, we were just getting started,” Jaret says. “We got Goldfish crackers this week.”

I pull out the chair and look around the table. “And Gushers.” Vinny holds up the yellow packet. “Give Grace a raise.”

“Noted.” I take off my jacket. “Let’s start this meeting.” I sit down and look out the window toward Grace, seeing that jack-off talking to her again. “Do you not give that kid work to do?” I motion with my chin, and the whole table looks out the window. “He’s always sniffing around her.”

“He likes her,” Jaret states. “And tried asking her out a couple of times.” I try to act cool instead of making the chair fly through the office space while I aim it at his head.

“He needs to fuck off,” I grumble between clenched teeth, obviously not keeping it together.

“I’ll let him know that you don’t approve,” Jaret says, trying not to laugh. “Now, let’s start. I have a meeting in an hour.”

The meeting goes quickly, and the whole time, I try not to look over at her desk. She is usually by herself. A couple of times, she gets up but comes back quickly. I see she's wearing another loose skirt, which I'm starting to love. I get up when it's the end of the meeting, grabbing my jacket and cold coffee and walking toward my office. "Nice touch." I stop at her desk, and she looks up at me. Her top shows off her tits that I got well acquainted with last weekend. "The Goldfish and Gushers."

"Thank you." She leans back in her chair. "The Gushers are my favorite." She tries to hide that wicked smile of hers.

"Of course they are." I walk into my office before everyone sees the boner I've now got. I toss my jacket on the couch and make my way to my desk. I pull up my emails and see a couple of calls I have to return. I pick up the phone at the same time Grace stands up to walk somewhere. But the person answers the phone, so I don't see where she is going, and then I switch into work mode. I'm on the phone most of the day, and when I look up and see it's almost four o'clock, I grab my phone and text her.

Me: You look beautiful today.

I watch her look at her phone, and then she must read my text because she looks over her shoulder at me before my phone pings.

Grace: I wore this skirt so you could have had easy access.

Followed by the peach emoji.

I hold the phone so tight in my hand, I'm surprised it doesn't snap. "Grace!" I yell her name, my cock ready to explode. I see her get up and round her desk, coming toward my door.

Her blue dress swishes, showing me her strappy blue heels. "You rang?" She walks in, and I swear my mouth waters now that I've had a little taste of her.

"Close the door," I bark. She raises her eyebrows, and then she turns and shuts the door behind her at the same time I press the button to close the shades.

"What's the matter?" she asks, walking back from the door.

"I want you to come and sit on my desk," I tell her. I thought this was a good idea, the best idea I've had today, until she looks at me like she is going to step on my balls with her heels.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" she whisper-hisses.

"No." I shake my head, while my brain says, *You're out of your fucking mind. Why would you do this here at work where anyone could walk in on us?*

"I'm not doing this here." She shakes her head and starts to storm out. "You are insane."

"Fine," I say to her back, and she never turns around. She doesn't even stop in to say goodbye when she leaves, and I know she's pissed at me.

I pick up Meadow, who changes as soon as we walk into the room, and when it's her bedtime, I message the sitter to see if she can come over for a couple of hours. Luckily for me, she comes over at the exact time Meadow falls asleep.

I don't even bother giving Grace a heads-up that I'm going to her. Parking my car, I get really nervous when I raise my hand to knock on her door. She opens the door a couple of minutes later. Her hair is piled on her head, and she's wearing a long gray skirt and a white tank top.

"What?" she asks, shocked to see me, I guess.

"Hi," I greet, holding up my hand. "Busy?"

"I'm in class," she replies as I step in, pushing her into her apartment. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I know," I say, looking around. "You left work, and you didn't say goodbye."

"Picked up on that, did you?" she retorts, and I hear sound coming from her office.

"I did." I push her toward the room where the teacher's voice is coming from. "You got mad at me."

"I sure fucking did," she confirms when I look into the room. "What are you doing?"

"Is the camera on?" I ask, and see she is trying to get what I'm saying or figure it out.

"No, I turned it off and muted it when I heard the knock."

"This is what we are going to do," I tell her. "You are going back to class, but don't turn on the camera until I tell

you to.”

“What?” she whispers. I grab her hand, taking her to her chair and having her sit in it. Lucky for me, it’s a high table and she has it stacked on a couple of books.

I step in front of her, my hands going to her hips as I grasp the cotton of her skirt in my hands and pull it up in bunches. “I’m going to sit you down in that chair.” My hands finally feel the softness of her skin. “And I’m going to taste you like I wanted to taste you today at work.”

“But—” she starts, and I shake my head.

“Can you stay quiet?” I ask, and her eyes are filled with lust, unlike this afternoon when they were filled with anger.

“I don’t know,” she replies, and I lift her dress up and push her down in the seat.

“Spread your legs.” My voice comes out tight. “Open yourself for me.” She isn’t sure what to do. “Do it, or I’ll turn on this camera, and they can watch me eat that pussy.” Her cheeks turn a soft pink, and I know once we get on to actually having sex, it’s going to be mind-blowing. “You want that, don’t you?” I squat down in front of her chair. “People to watch me make you come.” I move one of her knees to the side. “Maybe we can film it and then watch it after.”

“Caine,” she breathes out heavily.

“Yeah, baby?” I answer as I lean down and kiss her inner thigh. “It’s time to unmute yourself.” I nip at her, trailing the path with my tongue to her heat. “And turn the camera back on.” I watch her watching me lean in and lick up the side of

her panties, my tongue sliding underneath it. “Now.” She leans forward, and I hear her click the button. The teacher’s voice goes louder as I move her white satin panties to the side, seeing her wet for me already. “Hmm,” I say before my tongue licks her slit. She jumps in her chair. “Shh.” I look up at her as she grips the armrests. I don’t go slow. Even if I wanted to, I can’t. My mouth devours her. I suck her clit into my mouth at the same time I slide a finger into her. She moves one of her hands to her mouth to stop from moaning. I smirk before getting back to my meal. I could eat her pussy every single day and twice on Sunday, fucking twice every day and all fucking day on Sunday.

I suck her clit into my mouth before sliding my finger and my tongue inside her. My finger rubs the soft spot inside her I know that will make her go crazy. She slaps the table in front of her as she tries to close her legs, but one of my hands stops them from closing. “Pay attention or I won’t make you come,” I whisper right before I feast on her. I lick, bite, and touch until I know she’ll explode. “Mute it,” I order her, and she moves her hand so fast I’m surprised the laptop doesn’t fly off the table. She leans back in the chair, and her hand goes to my head as she pushes my face deeper into her. It takes her a second more before I taste her cum on my tongue and she moans my name.

# twenty-five

. . .

Grace

“Good morning,” I mumble when I turn over, grabbing my phone from the bedside table. I put the phone under my ear on the pillow before burying my hand back under the covers.

“Morning,” Caine also mumbles, and I sink even more into the bed with his voice. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” I lie. “I was about to get up.” My eyes are still closed, and my body makes not one move to wake up.

He chuckles, and my nipples get tight just from that sound. I can picture him beside me pulling me to him. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

“What are you doing?” I try to change the subject. “Running a marathon?”

His laughter is low. “Lying in bed, wishing you were here.” His voice is thick with lust, making my knees weak.

“Ugh, same.” I turn on my back. “But if you were in bed with me, what would you be doing?” My eyes flicker open as I look over to the empty part of my bed, wishing he was here also.

“That depends.” His voice is smooth and soft.

“On?” I ask, but then I turn the phone in my hand and press the FaceTime button.

He presses accept, and I wait for us to connect before his face comes into view, and I see he’s in the same position I’m in. “Morning,” I say again, looking into his eyes as I place the phone on the pillow beside me.

“Morning.” He smiles at me, and I see he’s not wearing a shirt.

“Are you shirtless?” I ask, and he points the phone so I can see he is, in fact, shirtless, and the covers are at his hips, showing me just a bit of his boxers. “Hmm,” I say, “I like it.”

“Glad you approve,” he says, his eyes twinkling. “Let me see what you’re wearing.”

“I thought you would never ask,” I reply, trying to be seductive but then stopping when I hear Meadow calling his name.

“Daddyyyyyy,” she sings and shouts at the same time, “I’m up.”

“Ugh,” he pouts, “cockblocked by my own daughter.” I can’t help but laugh.

“I guess this means I’ll talk to you later,” I say, a little twinge of jealousy that I’m not able to share his morning with him.

“Yes,” he says, tossing the covers off him, “dinner tonight, my place.”



“Um, sure,” I respond. “I have a family thing this afternoon, so I can text you when I’m done with that, and we will see.”

“Okay, beautiful,” he says as he walks down the hallway, the sound of Meadow’s voice coming closer and closer, “let me see if I can find a sitter and I can take you out.”

I smile, and as much fun as that sounds, I just want to be with him. “I don’t know,” I hesitate. “I was kind of digging making out with you and hopefully getting you N-A-K-E-D.” I spell out the word instead of saying it out loud, just in case he’s close to Meadow and she hears.

“That sounds much better than what I wanted to do. I’ll call you later.”

“Sounds good,” I reply and hang up the phone, tossing it to the side. I turn back over and try to go to sleep, but instead all I keep thinking about is Caine and how crazy this week has been. Monday night he showed up and went down on me while my class was in session. It was the hottest thing in the world. It took everything inside me not to scream out. After that night, we would sneak out over lunch for a couple of minutes of making out. But yesterday, he said he was going out for a meeting and to take the rest of the afternoon off. What he didn’t tell me was he was going to be following me home, where he spent the rest of the afternoon making me scream over and over again. My nipples get tight when I picture him spreading my legs on the couch and burying his head between them. “God, that man.”

I pull out my phone and text him.

Me: You left me hot and bothered.

I toss the covers off me and head to the kitchen to make myself coffee, seeing that it's just after seven thirty in the morning. My eyes burn from tiredness. I stayed up until close to two last night, making sure I finished all my homework for the weekend. Knowing I had the birthday party for Cici today, and then hoping I would spend the night with Caine and hopefully have tomorrow to sleep.

I'm walking back to my bed with my coffee in my hand when I hear my phone beep. Sliding into bed, I pick up my phone and see it's a text from Caine.

Not Batman: I promise to take care of you tonight.

I smile, getting into bed and taking a picture of my shoulder after I pull the strap down from it to tease him. I attach the photo with a little winky face.

Me: Promise or else you'll watch me take care of myself.

I grab the remote from the side table and flip on the television before the phone beeps again. This time, I see he's sent me a picture of him dressed in shorts. His hard-on cannot be missed.

Not Batman: How am I supposed to make pancakes like this?

I giggle to myself, ignoring that little pang of sadness that I don't get to share this with him. I've never woken up with him or even spent the day with him. I've also never dated anyone, let alone a single dad. So, I know I have to make a few sacrifices, and maybe some time down the line, I can go over for pancakes.

Me: Want me to kiss it better?

The three dots come up right away followed by an angry face emoji.

Not Batman: That is not helping.

Instead of answering, I send him three kissy face emoji and then put the phone down.

I catch up on my *90 Day Fiancé* before it's time for me to head out to the birthday party. I slip on a pair of tight jeans and a white T-shirt, with matching white sneakers, tucking the front of the shirt into my jeans. I comb through my hair, thinking about maybe pinning it up when I opt to grab a baseball cap that Matty gave me for Christmas.

I put my phone in my back pocket before picking up the big, boxed gift I ordered for her before walking out of the apartment. Plugging in the address before taking off, the drive is smooth on a Saturday afternoon. I pull up seeing the balloons in the air, and then seeing kids running around. "This must be it."

I get out, grabbing the box from the trunk before starting to walk over. Stefano sees me and starts running across the grass

toward me. “Hey,” I say when he gets close enough, “I didn’t know you would be here.” He takes the box from me and then leans in to kiss my cheek. Stefano was the one who drove me down here to visit when I was thinking about moving here. His best friend, Levi, and cousin, Eva, lived here with their little girl, Cici, who is now turning one.

“Couldn’t miss the big day,” he says to me. “Sofia was going to come, but apparently, your grandfather was going to get the new crib wired.” He looks over at me, and I can’t help but laugh.

“It’s going to be like that scene from *Mission Impossible* when Tom Cruise breaks in.” Stefano starts to laugh. “If I didn’t value my life, I would try to break in to see.”

I’m about to say something to him when I see him out of the corner of my eye, walking toward us holding Meadow’s hand. His head is down, holding a little gift bag in one hand while holding Meadow with the other. “The fairy,” Meadow says, pointing toward me, and his head snaps up. He’s wearing blue jeans and a white dress shirt under his dark-blue sweater, the bottom of the button-down sticking out. My eyes roam him up and down as I take him in like a cat does right before she pounces on the bird.

She lets go of his hand or he lets go of hers in shock that I’m there. “I know you,” Meadow states when she runs to me, “you picked me up when I was sick.”

“I did,” I say, squatting down to look at her. “I’m Grace.” I put out my hand, and she shakes it.

“Hi, Grace.” She looks over at Caine, who now stands behind her.

“Hi,” I greet, smiling at him, “fancy meeting you here.”

“I was just going to say the same thing,” he says, then looks over at Stefano. “I’m Caine.” He is about to put out his hand but notices the big box. “I’m Grace’s boss.”

I don’t know why that title bothers me, but it does. “Hey, you two,” I hear from behind me and look over to see Eva coming toward us, wearing a shirt that says Cici’s Mom on it. “So glad you could make it,” she says and hugs me, “and Caine.” She nods at him. “Have you met Stefano and Grace?”

I shake my head. “Caine is my boss,” I say, and Eva’s face says it all; her mouth hangs open. “Yup, that one.” Not knowing what she heard, but from the look on her face, I’m sure the family talk has been doing the rounds.

“What a small world,” Eva recovers. “Levi!” she shouts over her shoulder at her husband, who is holding Cici in his arms. He comes over to us, Cici with a hat on her head and a shirt that says I’m One. Levi is wearing a shirt that says Cici’s Dad. “Caine is Grace’s boss.”

“No way.” He chuckles. “We’ve heard all about you.”

I roll my lips and look over at Caine to see him just staring at them. I honestly don’t know what he’s going to say, but what I’m not expecting is for him to come right out with a dig. “Juice boxes, am I right?” he jokes with them, and we all laugh. It would take nothing for me to go and stand beside him. But instead, I stand where I am. Everyone goes away

slowly, and Stefano moves to put the gift down. Eva and Levi go to greet other guests, while Meadow looks at Caine and asks if she can go play. He nods his head. “Not too far,” he tells her as she joins a couple of kids at the party, and they start chasing each other.

“Well, this is fun,” he finally says as we stand next to each other.

“On a scale of one to ten, how shocked are you to see me here?” I ask him as my shoulder touches his arm.

“In the words of Meadow, one thousand million and half trillion,” he exaggerates, and I can’t help but laugh, leaning into him. I catch myself right before I kiss him. In my head, I can feel his arm wrap around my waist and pull me to him, and then he leans down to meet my kiss. But it’s only in my head because reality is two different things.

I look over at him, and he looks back at me, smirking now. “You look cute in that hat.”

“Do I?” I ask, and he nods, trying not to look at me more than is normal, which bothers me even more because all I want to do is look at him.

“Yeah, you look even younger,” he teases, “which makes me feel even creepier.”

“Oh, stop it.” I push his shoulder with my hand, moving down his arm, and I’m about to slide my hand into his, but instead, I let our fingers graze each other. “Come on, Grandpa, let’s go mingle.”

# twenty-six

. . .

Caine

The minute she calls me Grandpa, I put my head back and laugh. Something I've been doing a lot lately. "That mouth of yours."

She turns and stops in front of me, her eyes twinkling in the sun even though her hat covers most of it. "Yeah, what about it?"

I shake my head and look around to make sure no one is listening to our conversation. "I'm going to keep it real busy tonight."

"Is that so?" She looks up at me, an innocent look on her face. A face I want to hold in my hand and kiss because I can. My fingers tingle thinking about it. "I look forward to it."

"Hey," a woman says when she walks up to us and hugs Grace. "Stefano said you were here."

"I am, Addison," Grace introduces the woman. "I'd like you to meet my boss, Caine."

Her face is like all the others, shocked with a touch of glare. "You don't say?" She tries to keep a smile on her face, a fake one but still.

“The one and only,” I confirm, holding out my hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Addison.”

“Trust me, the pleasure is mine.” She smiles big. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“That seems to be the running comment.” I look over at Grace, who just looks away. “I hope I’ve gotten better.”

“Time will tell,” Addison says to me, then looks at Grace. “We’ll catch up tonight.”

“Oh, no,” Grace quickly says, “I have plans.”

“Oh, a date.” Addison pushes her shoulder, and my stomach tightens at the thought.

“No.” She shakes her head. “I have a huge assignment due next week.” She lies to her, or at least I hope it’s a lie.

“Oh, that’s a bummer. We leave tomorrow,” Addison says. “Next time, or you can come down and spend the weekend.”

“That sounds like fun,” Grace replies, and I ignore how I feel about her leaving for the weekend. Especially since it’s the only time we get with each other. I look down, hoping she doesn’t see I’m bothered by it and then makes me out to be too needy.

Addison is called away, and I turn to look at Grace. “I’m afraid to even ask what you told them about me.”

She tries not to smile. “It’s not a secret how much of a dick you were, Caine.” She folds her arms, pushing her tits higher. “It was within ten seconds that you were a dick.”



“I’m never going to live that down,” I state. She’s about to say something when Meadow comes running over. Her ponytails are now slanted to the side as she pushes the stray hairs out of her face.

“Daddy, I have to go pee,” she says, and I look around, seeing a little brown building with one door for women and one for men.

“I can take her,” Grace offers. “It might be easier than taking her in the men’s bathroom.”

“Usually there is a family bathroom,” I tell Grace, looking around once more. “Are you sure?”

“Yup,” Grace assures me, holding out her hand. “Let’s go, Meadow.” She turns and guides her to the bathroom. I watch both of them walk away and everything in me shifts, or perhaps it shifted a while ago.

I walk over behind them and wait for them to come out. When they do, they are both laughing. I see Meadow’s ponytails are now fixed, and she is looking up at Grace with a smile. “Hey,” I say, and they both look at me. “What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Grace was making funny faces at me in the mirror when she was fixing my hair,” Meadow replies, “like this.” She sticks out her tongue and tries to do something with her eyes. “I’m going to play,” she declares, running away from us.

“Want to go and make out somewhere?” Grace asks. My head snaps back to her, and she winks at me. “It was just a thought.”

“A good thought,” I say as we walk back over to the party. Even though she knows everyone here, she stays pretty much by my side and includes me in the conversations. I hate that she introduces me as her boss, but it is what it is. When it’s time to sing “Happy Birthday,” our fingers graze and I want to wrap my arm around her.

After we each have cake, Meadow comes over to us. “Can we go play in the park before we go?”

“Yeah,” I agree, looking around, thinking of how I’m going to ask Grace to come with me.

“Come on, Grace, you can come too.” She grabs her hand, and I’ve never been happier in my life. She gets to eat two desserts tonight. She skips over holding Grace’s hand. “We can go on the swings,” she tells Grace who just nods.

“I have a trick to go high, high,” Grace shares with her, and Meadow looks over at me like I’ve been keeping her from the state secrets. “I’ll show you.”

They run their way to the swings. “When I push, you keep your legs bent, and then when you go high, put them out again, and then when you come back down, bend them.” She sits on the swing. “Look at me,” she instructs her and shows Meadow, who watches her like a hawk. “You got it?”

“Got it,” she parrots, and I sit back and watch the two of them. She sets Meadow on the swing. “Okay, I’m ready,” Meadow calls, holding on.

“Don’t let go,” Grace tells her as she pushes her on the swing. “That’s it, bend your knees tight.” I listen to the two of

them giggle with each other, and it fills my soul.

“Dad, I’m going to fly to the moon!” Meadow shouts, and all the words are stuck in my throat.

“Come back,” I say as I listen to the two of them laugh when Meadow thinks she’s too high, but really, she isn’t.

“That was so much fun,” Meadow says when she finally gets off the swing. “I’m hungry.”

“It’s almost dinnertime,” I report, looking at my watch. “Do you want to come over for dinner?” I ask Grace, thinking it won’t be that much of a stretch since they spent today together.

“Yes, yes,” Meadow says to her, “it’s pizza night.”

“Is it?” Grace replies, looking at Meadow. “Well, I love pizza.”

“We should say goodbye,” I suggest, pointing over my shoulder at the party as we head back toward the group of people that is shrinking as the day has gotten later.

“I will meet you at your place,” Grace says when we are almost close. “See you soon,” she says before she walks away. I walk up to Levi and Eva while she heads over to the other side. I thank them for inviting us and leave, looking over my shoulder the whole time.

“That was fun,” Meadow says as she gets in the car, and all I can do is agree with her. I’m trying not to hate that she has to sneak over to my house. Meadow talks my ear off about how much fun she had and how she went high, high, high to the moon. “She’s better than Uncle Nash.”

I chuckle. “We should call and say that.” I look into the rearview mirror at her.

We pull up in the driveway and see Alexa walking down the steps. “Alexa,” I call once I get out of the car.

“Hi.” She smiles, coming toward the car as Meadow emerges. “I’ve just invited Tamara and Joyce over to my house for a slumber party.” She mentions the other two kids on the block she watches. “I promised them all I would do it, and it’s the only weekend when I’m free, and my parents are home to help me if I need them.”

“Oh, wow.” I hear a door slam and look over to see Tamara walking down her steps with a pillow and a backpack. Meadow gets out of the car at the exact time Tamara comes over to our driveway. I don’t even have to ask her; she’s already going up the front steps to grab her things.

“Are you sure?” I ask Alexa, and she just nods at me. It takes Meadow a full minute to return with a bag that looks empty and her pillow. “Can I see the bag?” I ask, and she swings it to me. Opening it, I see it has pj’s, and that’s it. I open the trunk and remove a change of clothes and panties from my daycare spare bag. “There you go,” I say to Alexa, handing her the bag while Tamara and Meadow hold hands. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Will do,” Alexa assures me as they walk with her to her house, four doors down. I’m standing in the middle of the driveway, watching until she walks up the steps and closes the door, when I spot Grace’s car.

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” she says, getting out of her car, the cap gone and now it’s just her hair loose.

I wait for her to be close enough to me before I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her to me, realizing she fits perfectly in my arms. “Hi,” I say right before my lips crush down on hers. She puts one of her hands on my cheek as our tongues meet.

“Meadow,” she reminds me softly when she lets me go.

“Gone to a sleepover at the neighbor’s house,” I share, “so it’s just the two of us.”

Her eyes go big. “Just the two of us,” she whispers as the smile fills her face. “Like, for the whole night?”

“For the whole night,” I assure her. “Will you stay over?”

“Umm, will your dick be on the menu?”

I throw my head back and laugh. “I guess I could put it on the table.”

“I’d rather you put it in my mouth.” She moves out of my arms, sliding her hand in mine. “Or inside me is a good option.”

“Is it?” My cock automatically gets up. “I think we can do that.”

She stops moving. “I need to take a shower,” she states and rushes back to her SUV, grabbing a bag out of the back. I put my hands on my hips. “It’s not what you think; my grandmother sent these clothes for me, and I never put them away.”

We walk up the steps holding hands. “You go and shower in my bedroom, and I’ll shower in the spare.” She smiles and looks down shyly. “Then I’ll meet you in the bedroom.”

“It’s a date.” She kicks off her shoes and gets on her tippy-toes. “See you soon.” She walks up the steps to my bedroom as I hurry and make my way into the other one. My cock is rock hard when I get out and dry myself off. I wrap a towel around my waist and walk back to my room, seeing she’s not out yet, but the shower is off. I’m putting my boxers on when the door opens, and she steps out of the bathroom.

She’s wearing a white shirt off the shoulder with nothing under it, and it’s completely see-through. Her hair moves to the other side, where her shoulder is covered. “Hi,” she says softly.

I walk to her, or maybe I lunge; either way, she’s in my arms, and my mouth devours her. “Fuck,” I curse when I lift her, and she wraps her legs around my waist, her wet pussy on my stomach. “I feel how wet you are.”

“I touched myself in the shower, thinking of you,” she admits, and I have to remember she’s a virgin. I need to remember I have to go slow and not hurt her. “Just the smell of you and I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Did you make yourself come?” I ask her, looking in her eyes, and she nods. “Show me,” I urge, putting her on the bed. She lies back on the million throw pillows and lifts her shirt up above her tits that are pebbled, and then spreads her legs, the wetness evident. “I want to fuck you so hard.”

“Then come and fuck me,” she offers herself up to me.  
“Make me yours.”

I get on the bed, getting between her legs. I move my nose over her inner thigh and then grab her hips with my hands before moving my mouth to her stomach and kissing her softly. I look into her eyes before I move, and my mouth covers her pussy. Her taste wakes me up even more. “Every single day, I think about eating this pussy,” I tell her as I lick up and down her slit, getting her ready for me. I suck in her lips, and then slide my tongue into her. “Your pussy is my favorite meal,” I say, and her hand moves to my head as her nails rake my skin. I push her knees back and lick up her slit, then suck on her clit, working it with my tongue and my teeth. Her hands move to her tits as she rolls her nipples. I let her go, moving one hand up the side of her and one hand on her pussy as I slide a finger into her. Her hands come up, and she moves my boxers down to take my cock out. She fists my cock with her hand as I finger fuck her. “I can’t wait to sink my cock inside you.” My eyes are on my finger as it works in and out of her. “I can’t wait to see how your pussy looks with my cock inside you.”

“Yes.” I look back at her, and her eyes are also transfixed on my fingers. “Put another one in,” she urges before I slowly bend my head and slide my tongue into her mouth. I let go of her mouth for a second to add another finger, trying to get her as wet as possible. She moves her head down, taking my cock between her lips as I watch her work half of it in her mouth. My fingers fuck her as she sucks me. My finger and her mouth

work in unison, both of us moving at a slow pace. Both of us savoring each other.

“I need to get inside you,” I finally hiss when she’s about to come on my fingers. Leaning down, I suck her clit into my mouth. “Fuck, I want to make you come all night long,” I tell her as I feel her getting tighter. “I want you to come on my fingers.” I move a touch faster. “Then my tongue, and finally my cock.” I don’t say anything else because her eyes are closed, and she’s coming on my fingers.

“Yes,” she pants, letting go of my dick. “I need you.” She leans back on the throw pillows and opens her legs for me, my fingers still buried inside her. “Now.” I move them a couple more times before I lean over to the night table to grab a condom that I stocked there last weekend.

“Caine.” She says my name. “I’m on the pill.” I look at the condom. “And obviously I’m clean. I don’t want anything between us.”

I don’t even think twice about it. “Are you sure?” I ask, and she nods. I move between her legs, and for the first time in my life, I’m so nervous.

“You’re beautiful,” I say to her as I get where I need to be. “You tell me if it hurts, or you want to stop.” She nods her head at me. “Put me inside you.” Looking into my eyes, she reaches between us, grabbing my cock in her hand, sliding it up and down her slit before she places it right at her hole.

“Now fuck me,” she says, and all I can do is close my eyes and count.



“After I’ve broken you in,” I grind through clenched teeth because she’s so tight my cock feels like it’s being squeezed, “I’m going to fuck you so hard you are going to feel me all week long.”

She looks down at her pussy with my cock head halfway in. “Promise?” I move my hips a bit more until my cock head is inside, and she grunts out. “More,” she says, trying to move her hips, “but slowly; you are much bigger than my vibrator.” I slide in a touch more, the heat seeping through me. “Hmm.” She tries to move her hips, but I stop her. “Caine,” she begs, “just do it.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I explain as I slide a bit more in, moving my hands to the side of her. “You have to let me in,” I tell her, and she opens her legs wider as she moves her hips back.

“If you don’t move, then let’s change places and I’ll move.”

I move another inch in and see her eyes open, I think she’s going to tell me to stop, but instead, she hisses, “Yes.” I slide a bit more inside her until not even I can hold back anymore, sliding the rest into her hot pussy. I bend my head to take her mouth in mine before I bury myself all inside her. Her hands tighten on my arms by her hips. “Yes.” She lets go of my tongue. “Fuck, that hurts and feels good all at the same time.”

“What hurts?” I ask, looking down at her.

“I’m going to hurt you if you don’t move and finally do me.” I pull out a bit and then slide back into her, her pussy tightening like a vise. “Fuck, that feels good,” she says at the

same time I feel her pussy spasm. “Move more out this time,” she says as I pull out halfway this time before going back into her. I do that a couple more times, each time her pussy gets more wet. “Caine,” she says as I move one of my hands to her tit to roll her nipple before leaning back over her and kissing her. Her pussy is getting used to my cock now, so it makes it easier to enter her. I sit back down and make her move her hips up and down on my cock, the whole time my thumb is playing with her clit. “That feels—” She moves one of her legs above my arm. “Come on, Caine,” she encourages, “show me how much you want me.”

I lean forward and look into her eyes. “I can take it,” she assures me as I slide out and see her wetness coat my cock. “Slam into me once and see,” she suggests, and I can’t even stop my hips as I do it. She arches her back at the same time. “Again,” she says, and I pull out and then slam in twice more before she cries out my name, this time because she’s coming all over my cock. “Oh my God,” she says when I don’t stop fucking her. I can’t, my balls get tight, and I know I’m going to come.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her, and she wraps her legs around my waist.

“Come inside me,” she says before I roar out her name.

# twenty-seven

. . .

Grace

*M*y eyes fly open when I feel his tongue slide up my slit.

I'm on my back in the middle of his bed, one arm by my head, one arm draped beside me where he is supposed to be. "Hmm," I hum when I look down, watching him slide his tongue around my clit. "Sensitive." I arch my back up but move my hand to his head, keeping him there. "Yes," I hiss when he slides a finger into me, trying not to wince from the tenderness. Last night was the best night of my life, hands down. "More," I urge as he slides another finger into me, and this time, I hiss, and he stops. "I will hurt you." I glare at him. "Then I won't be able to get dick for a while and have to turn to my trusty side table friend."

"I shouldn't have started this." He smirks at me. "But I woke up, and you were there. Naked. Open." He takes another lick. "And I wanted to slide into you."

"Yes," I agree, pushing his head back into my pussy. "But first, make me come like this."

"I've created a monster." He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I can't help but open my legs wider.

“It’s your monster cock that created this monster,” I inform him as soon as he flexes his fingers in me, rubbing over the spot he knows will drive me crazy. “I might be addicted to it.”

“Just like my cock is addicted to your pussy,” he replies, and I can’t answer him because my eyes roll to the back of my head as I come on his fingers. I clamp down on them and try to ride the orgasm out, but his fingers are taken out of me, and before I have a chance to complain, he fills me. “Yes,” I say when I feel him on top of me, but he quickly flips onto his back, having me on top of him. “Oh.” I look down at him. “Is it my turn?”

“Looks that way,” he says as his hands go to my ass, squeezing it before he moves me up and down a bit.

“If it’s my turn, stop moving me,” I hiss, and he laughs. “Let me ride.” Placing my hands on his chest, I move up a bit and then down. I lean forward on his chest and start moving a touch faster, my hair falling around us. He moves one hand from my ass to push my hair up and away from our faces.

“I love watching you come with my cock inside you,” he states as I ride him, my forehead on his as I move up and down on his cock.

His hands go back to my ass. “You know what I love?” I can’t even speak because his cock is rubbing all the right spots.

“My cock.”

“Yes,” I hiss, “but also when you roar out my name right as you come, knowing I made you lose that control.” I close

my eyes because I'm so close it's taking all of my concentration.

“Your pussy is getting tighter, choking my cock,” he growls between clenched teeth. “I’m close.” I slam down on his cock and don’t move because I can’t, I’m too busy coming on his cock. His hands move from my ass to around my waist, and he’s flipping me over again. “My turn,” he states, and I don’t have time to catch a breath before he pounds into me, unlike the first time when he went easy. “Fucking done, ruined.” He pulls out and slams back in again. His balls hit my ass, and just like before, I’m coming again. I wrap my legs around his waist just as he roars out the name I love to hear. “Grace!” He plants himself to the root of his cock and then buries his face in my neck.

It’s my second favorite thing I love that he does. I wrap my legs and then my arms around him as he gets his breathing back to normal, basking in everything that Caine is. “That’s my second favorite position,” I say, and he unburies his head from my neck, looking at me. “I think I still like you on top of me better.” He smiles at me. “But then I really did like when you bent me over in the kitchen last night.” His smile gets even bigger, probably remembering it. “But I would like to try on my hands and knees.”

“Make a list,” he says as he slips out of me and out of my arms, “and we can work down it.”

“My list is really long,” I inform him, and he holds out his hand for me. “We should work through the *Kama Sutra*.” I get out of bed at the same time his phone alarm rings.

“What time is it?” I ask as he walks over to the bedside table he put his phone on last night.

“Six thirty,” he replies, and I gawk at him.

“On a Sunday?” I put my hands on my hips.

“Every day, plus not sure when Meadow is going to be home, but I figured you wouldn’t be down for me being buried balls deep inside you when she gets home.”

“You would be right.” I point a finger at him, and it dawns on me that even though I didn’t get much sleep last night, I feel refreshed. “Do I have time for a shower?”

“Yes,” he says, “and then we can make breakfast.”

“Pancakes?” I ask as he walks to me and wraps an arm around me.

“Anything you want, baby,” he says softly before kissing my neck.

“I like that,” I say softly, putting my hand on his chest and kissing him right where his heart is beating. “I’m going to get in the shower.”

“Okay, I could join you, but I don’t think I could keep my hands off you.”

“I promise not to hog all the hot water,” I say over my shoulder, stepping into the bathroom and walking over to the shower.

It takes me no time to shower without him. Walking over to the bag I brought in the day before, I grab my white jeans and a gray short-sleeved crop top, then pull out a long light-

pink sweater to go over it when I leave. I pack the rest of the clothes in the bag and walk out of the bathroom, expecting him to be waiting, but all that is there is an empty bed. The covers are all over the place, pillows thrown left and right. I walk over to the bed, pulling the sheet up but then think he might not want to sleep in the same sheets we had sex in. I walk out of the bedroom, calling his name. “Caine,” I shout and see him walking out of the kitchen wearing shorts and nothing else, “do you want me to change the sheets?”

“I want you to get your ass downstairs and not worry about my fucking sheets.” He shakes his head. “How am I going to even sleep without you there is what I’m trying to figure out. At least I can smell you.”

I roll my lips, walking down the steps, stopping at the last one so we are almost the same height. “That’s really romantic in a non-creepy way.” I put my hands on his shoulders and feel them damp. “Did you shower?”

“Yeah, in the spare shower. I figured it was safer.” He kisses my neck, his stubble pinching a bit. “Come. I made you coffee, and I’m about to start the pancakes.”

“First, you give me the best sex of my life, and then you cook for me,” I say, and he glares at me.

“I’m the only person to give you sex,” he retorts, and I laugh at him.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, you set the bar high.” I raise my hand to the sky. “Like infinity and beyond.”

“You should stop talking,” he says, grabbing my hand and dragging me to the kitchen where my cup of coffee is on the island, right in front of a stool. “Sit,” he orders.

“Bossy, even at home,” I huff, getting on the stool and taking a sip of coffee.

He shakes his head as he walks around the counter to the other side. “Question?” I say as he picks up his own cup of coffee. “When can we do anal?”

He spits out his coffee and then immediately starts to choke. “Are you trying to kill me?” he asks, coughing and walking over to the sink to grab a rag to wipe up the mess he just made.

“I’m just asking since I’m new to this. What is the waiting time?” I tap my finger on the counter. “Matty’s cousin, Franny, was talking about it, and you have to ease into it.”

I wait for him to answer when the doorbell rings, and I look over at him with huge eyes. “I’m going to table that question.” He points at me as he walks to the front door. I get off the stool and want to kick myself for not putting on my shoes before coming to sit down. I hear shrieking from Meadow and then Caine thanking whoever took her last night.

“Guess who is here for breakfast?” Caine says from the front door. “Grace.”

“She came back?” Meadow asks, and I close my eyes, thankful she’s too young to put two and two together.

“She did. She missed eating pizza with you,” he explains, and I hear her feet running into the kitchen.



“Gracie,” she says, using a nickname for me, her hair loose, “you came to eat with us.”

“I did,” I confirm, getting down. “How was your sleepover?”

“Good.”

“They woke up at four thirty, so today is going to be fun,” Caine states from behind her.

“We are going to the zoo today,” Meadow says, and I smile at her. “Do you want to come to the zoo with us? There are all the animals.”

“That sounds like so much fun.” I look up at Caine. “If that’s okay with your dad.”

“Oh, more than okay,” he agrees. “Did you eat breakfast? I’m making pancakes.”

“I want some,” she says, jumping up and down.

“Go change your clothes,” Caine instructs, “and then I’ll fix your hair.”

“I can do her hair.” I look over at Caine. “While you cook.”

“Do you know how to do braids?” Meadow asks, almost in a whisper. “Daddy does them, but they fall out.”

“I’m trying,” Caine defends. “Those YouTube videos do not help.”

“I know how to do braids,” I say, getting up. “You cook, and I’ll do the braids.”

“Do you know how to do mermaid braids?” Meadow asks when she turns to walk up the stairs, grabbing my hand. I walk past Caine, who slips his finger through mine as I walk by.

“I do know,” I tell her as we walk back upstairs, and she heads into her bathroom. Seeing towels hanging, I know Caine took a shower in here. “Where are your elastics?” She opens the top drawer, and I am about to laugh. The drawer is all organized with brushes in the middle and then little containers for her elastics, smaller elastics, hair pins, barrettes. Of course, all color coded. “Okay, so what color are we doing?”

“Pink is my favorite,” she says, pulling a stool from the side and standing on it. “First you have to spray my hair with this,” she instructs me, and I can’t help but laugh, thinking how very much she is her father’s daughter.

“Got it.” I take the detangler out of the drawer. “Can I put water on it first?” I ask. “This way, it’s easier to comb out.”

She looks at me through the reflection of the mirror, not sure. “Dad,” she yells, “can we add water to my hair?”

I look over at the door, seeing if he’s going to answer. “Whatever Grace wants!” he hollers back, so she nods her head at me.

“Usually,” I tell her as I turn on the water in the sink, “I have a little spray bottle that I can wet my hair with. But when I don’t, I just wet my hand and then put it on my hair,” I explain what I’m doing. “Then I spray it.” I pick up the bottle before brushing out her hair. “Tell me if I hurt you, okay?” I look in the mirror as she watches my every move. “You have pretty hair.” She smiles at me, and for one second, I think back

to when I met her mother and wonder why she would give up her child. How anyone could is beyond me. “Let’s start the mermaid braid. You have to split your hair into two sections,” I tell her as I look down at her hair. “Now the fun starts.” She smiles so big and bounces up and down. “You take a little piece from the side and move it to the other side,” I explain to her, going a piece at a time. It takes me about five minutes to finish, and when I’m done, she turns her head to the side to see it. But she can’t really see it.

“Caine,” I call his name when I walk out of the bathroom.

“Yeah,” he says, and I can smell cooking.

“Do you have a hand mirror?” He comes into the hallway, and I see the confused look on his face. “That’s a no.” I shake my head. “How is she supposed to see her hair?”

“Take a picture,” he suggests, and I smile.

“So smart.”

“My phone is on the bedside table.” He points over at his bedroom. I rush into his room, grabbing his phone that is next to mine. Smiling, I grab both phones, putting his in my back pocket and grabbing mine.

“Okay,” I say when I walk back in the room as Meadow tries to look at her hair from left to right. I snap a picture, then turn it to her so she can see.

She gasps. “I have a mermaid braid,” she says, throwing herself into my arms. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” And just like that, I’ve fallen for the man and his daughter.

# twenty-eight

. . .

Caine

“Are you sure you’re okay with me coming to the zoo with you?” Grace asks quietly as she brings the plates to the sink. We have just finished eating pancakes, and Meadow is on the couch watching television.

“I’m more than okay with you coming to the zoo with us.” I grab the plate from her. “Are you sure you’re okay spending the day with us?” I look away from her, not willing to see her eyes if she isn’t sure.

She moves close to me, close enough I can feel her, but she doesn’t put her hands on me. “I would love nothing more than to spend the day with the two of you.” My eyes look back at her when she says the words, and I see the smile on her face and the way her eyes light up.

“Then it’s a date.” I wink at her before I look over my shoulder to see if Meadow is watching, and I bend and kiss her lips chastely.

“Then it’s a date,” she repeats, and she motions with her head to the side before she walks out into the hallway and away from the television.

I follow her out into the hallway, wondering what she has to tell me. I stop in front of her. “Just so you know, Office Caine is really hot.” She puts her hands on my bare chest, and my cock stirs in my shorts. “But Daddy Caine is”—she gets on her tippy-toes—“flaming hot.”

“Is that so?” I put my hands on her hips, dragging her closer to me so she can feel my cock.

“I wish I could show you.” She rubs her nose against my jaw. My hand moves from her hip to her head, burying it at the nape of her neck, fisting her hair before pulling her to me. My tongue slides into her mouth for a second before we hear Meadow.

“Dad.” We both look over to see her staring at us. “Can I have an apple?”

“Yeah,” I reply, not moving, “I’ll get it now.” She turns and skips away, her braid going back and forth.

“Oh my God,” Grace says, “she just caught us making out.”

“In her defense, I don’t think she knows what she saw,” I remark, letting go of her.

Grace shakes her head. “She doesn’t; it’s not like she’s ever seen me kissing a woman before.” I put my hands on my hips. “Let’s just not freak out.”

“Oh, easy for you to say,” Grace retorts. “I’m going to be the one who sucks face with her dad.” I can’t help but laugh at how nervous she’s getting. She’s usually cool, calm, and collected, always has been. Heck, she went toe-to-toe with me

on day one, and I'm a big scary guy, but she's scared of my daughter. "I'm going to go cut her an apple, so she likes me."

"You made her a mermaid braid," I remind her, "so you outrank me, and I've been with her since she was born." She smiles at me. "Now, let's go in there and pretend nothing happened."

"Okay," she agrees, and I slide my hand in hers until we get to the kitchen, and she walks over to the fridge. She moves around me as I clean up the breakfast plates, while she cuts an apple for my daughter. I've never had someone who has helped me with Meadow, and for some reason, it feels so fucking right with Grace.

Even when we get into the car an hour later, she knows how to buckle her in. When we get to the zoo, she's the one telling me we should hydrate often. She makes sure Meadow is right there beside us. It's one thing to fall for someone, and it's a whole other ball game when you fall for a woman who likes your daughter. It's like a game changer in my book. I never thought about dating before Grace. Sure, I thought about perhaps in the future, but I never knew when it was the right time. With Grace, it just happened so naturally that I didn't even know it was a part of my life I was missing. I watch the two of them holding hands most of the day as they point out different animals to each other. Even when we stop to eat a hot dog, she and Meadow talk about which animal is their favorite.

By the time we leave the zoo, Meadow is dragging ass and half asleep when I pull into the driveway. "Dad, I'm tired," she

says when I put the car in park, making Grace laugh.

“It’s hard being a rock star,” she tells her, and I laugh as we get out of the car.

“I think I’m going to head out,” Grace says quietly when we walk up the stairs to the front door. “Let you get back on your routine. I have to prepare for the week anyway.”

I don’t want her to go, but I know she has to go anyway, so I just nod. “I’ll go get your bag,” I whisper to her when I open the front door, and Meadow kicks off her shoes.

“I’m going to go and watch TV.” She walks away from us.

“Thank Grace for today,” I tell my daughter, and she turns to run back to her, hugging her around her waist.

“Thank you for giving me a mermaid braid.” She looks up at Grace, who just smiles down at her and hugs her back.

“Thank you for the best day ever,” she says before Meadow drops her arms from around her and walks into the living room. I walk up the steps to grab her bag, ignoring the dread I’m also fearing.

“Meadow, I’m going to walk Grace out to her car.”

“Okay, Dad!” she shouts back.

I walk down the steps with Grace beside me, heading to her car. I put the bag in the back seat and then stand with her at the driver’s door. She steps to me and wraps her arms around my waist, looking up at me. “Thank you for the most amazing weekend.” She smiles at me as I pull her even closer.

“I’m going to go on the record. This has been one of the best weekends I’ve ever had.”

She rolls her lips. “Imagine after we do anal.” She winks at me while I throw my head back and laugh.

She gets up on her tippy-toes and kisses my neck, and all I can do is look at her. We stare into each other’s eyes for a second, neither of us saying anything before I bend my head and close the distance to devour her mouth. We stand in the middle of the driveway, lost in each other. “You should get back inside,” she suggests when she lets go of me. “If she falls asleep now, you’ll regret it.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say softly, kissing her one more time before opening the door for her.

“I’ll be there,” she replies, smiling as I close the door and watch her drive away. Something about her driving away bugs me, but I don’t know what it is, or if I do, I don’t want to think about it. I wait until I can’t see her car anymore before I jog back into the house, just in time to stop Meadow from falling asleep.

She barely can keep her eyes open, and when it hits seven, she’s already sleeping in her bed, the mermaid braid untouched. I pull out my phone to FaceTime Grace, who answers after two rings, and I see her sitting up in bed. “Are you in bed?” I chuckle as I walk into my own bedroom.

“I am,” she confirms, “all that fresh air and extra activity has me done for.”

“Really?” I slide onto my bed. “You don’t say.”



“I do,” she says, “even took a bath.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, wondering if it hurt or anything.

“Yeah, I think I read online that we should keep having sex daily and it’ll feel better.” She smirks at me. “I read it on I’m addicted to Caine’s dick dot com.”

I howl in laughter. “Well, maybe tomorrow we can sneak off and have a business meeting?”

She shakes her head. “We shall see.” We spend two hours talking on the phone, and after the fourth yawn, I let her go, putting the phone on the bedside table, then turning in the bed. Feeling empty without her.

The next day, she waits for me in her car, and kissing her isn’t enough anymore. Not being able to hold her hand is starting to really get to me. It’s so bad that on Friday morning I’m barking at everyone and everything. It’s only after lunch when she comes into my office, and I look up. “So, I was thinking,” she says to me as she walks to my desk and then looks over her shoulder to make sure that no one else is in the room, “that I skip tonight’s class and come over and maybe—”

“Yes,” I snap, “come at five thirty.”

“People usually say please,” she huffs and puts her hands on her hips. The tight white pants she’s wearing haven’t helped my mood all day long, and that fucking clown Kevin or Ryan or whatever his name is keeps fucking sniffing around. I thought of putting rat traps around her desk.

“I’m skating on very thin ice, Grace,” I growl between clenched teeth.

“Then I expect you to take it out on me all night long.” She winks at me before she saunters out of the room.

She leaves work, sticking her head in and wishing me a nice weekend before leaving. I rush out, grabbing Meadow, and then shower quickly once I get home. The doorbell rings just a bit before five thirty, and I’m not the only one rushing to the door. When Meadow found out she was coming over, she was so excited, obviously for other reasons.

I can’t help the smile on my face when I see her shocked to see both of us. “Well, if it isn’t my two favorite people,” she greets us.

“You look like a fairy again,” Meadow states, looking at her. She changed her white pants, and in their place, she is wearing a long white skirt that has red flowers all over it, and a white top that shows off a bit of her stomach, ruffling at the hem.

“Thank you,” she says, stepping in. “I got you a present.” She holds up the bag in her hand and squats down so she’s on the same level as Meadow. Closing the door behind her, I watch Meadow take out the gift.

“Look, Dad.” She picks up the gift, which is the head of a Barbie with long blond hair.

“I bought it so when I do your hair, you can do this hair,” she tells her. “So, we can practice together.”

Meadow gasps. “Can we do mermaid braids?”

“We sure can,” she agrees, and Meadow gets up at the same time that the bell rings again.

I open the door, thinking it's the delivery guy but come face-to-face with Marilyn. I'm in shock when she throws up her hands. "Meadow," she says, ignoring me, "come see Mommy." Meadow rushes to her. "How are you, my princess?"

"I got a Barbie head to do braids," she tells her excitedly.

"Meadow," I say, finally snapping out of it, "go put that away."

"Okay," Meadow says, not catching the impending drama. I wait for her to walk up the stairs to her room when I turn on Marilyn.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I hiss.

"I came to visit," she says, looking at me and then catching that Grace is here.

"Oh, are you going out?" she asks. "You got your assistant to babysit for you." She shakes her head.

"I just came to drop something off," Grace states nervously. "I was just leaving," she says, avoiding looking at me. "Have a nice night." She rushes out of the house before I can stop her.

I watch her walk out, not able to chase after her because I have Marilyn in my house, and I don't want her in my house. "Marilyn, this is ending today," I snap between clenched teeth, "from now on before you come to my house, my place of employment, or any other place I'm going to be, I want notice or else I'm filing a police report for harassment. This is the third time that you've pushed your way into my space."

“I came to see my daughter,” she huffs.

“And like I said, you call before.” I open the door. “We’re busy tonight.”

“But I’m here.” She throws up her hands, shrieking, “I came all this way!”

“Well, you should have called. We have plans this weekend.” She stares at me, or better yet, looks at me in a way that says if looks could kill, I would be dead.

“I wasted all that money coming here,” she huffs. “I have no place to go.”

“Not my problem.” I shake my head. “Now, are you leaving, or do I call the cops?”

“I’m going to talk to my lawyer about this,” she huffs again as she walks out the door. “To be treated like this is unacceptable,” she rants, and I slam the door behind her.

I’m pulling the phone out of my back pocket when Meadow comes back downstairs. “Where is Mom?” she asks, looking around.

“She had to go. She said she would call you later,” I tell her, and she doesn’t even bat an eye.

“Where is Grace?” She turns to walk into the living room.

“She had to go and get something,” I lie to her, and she looks disappointed. “She’s coming back.”

I pull up her number and call her, and the call goes straight to voicemail. I close my eyes, ignoring the hammering in my chest.

Me: Can you please call me, or better yet, come back?

I wait for a second and then two before I call her again and still it goes to voicemail. I leave her a message as I walk back into the house and go to the couch.

Me: Please call me.

# twenty-nine

. . .

Grace

*I* look down at my phone as it pings again in my hand.

Not Batman: Please call me.

My heart beats erratically hard in my chest. From the minute he opened the door until I left, I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. Seeing Marilyn there and then hearing Meadow say Mommy, I felt like I was an intruder. Instead of watching it, I took myself out of the situation. As I walked out of the house, my hands shook, my knees wobbled, the back of my neck was on fire, and I generally thought I was going to be sick in the middle of the driveway.

I put my head down on the steering wheel as my phone pings again in my hand, but there isn't a new message. It's just alerting me of the ones that came in. I think about calling him, but instead, I just send him a text.

Me: I'll call you later.

I'm about to press send when I delete it and think about what to write.

Me: I don't want to be in the middle of this. I don't want to be in this fight.

I press send before I can take it back. I see the bubbles come up right away and the phone pings in my hand.

Not Batman: You aren't in the middle of anything because there is nothing to be in the middle of.

I close my eyes as they start to burn and itch.

Me: I'm going to head home for the weekend. Give Meadow some time with her mom without someone else there.

I press send and pull up the number I know can help. He answers after half a ring. "If it isn't my favorite granddaughter." I have to laugh at him.

"I know that's a lie." He chuckles. "Hi, Pops," I say, feeling more conflicted than I have in my whole life. "I was thinking of surprising Mom and Dad with a visit this weekend."

"Yeah?" he says, and I can hear a car door slam. "I can be there in an hour."

I shake my head. "An hour?" I look around. "How?"

"I'm close by doing business. I was just about to head home but could do a pit stop," he says, and I know he's lying.

He would move heaven and earth for his family. He also knows that me calling him has to be the last thing I would do. We, including him, all know when we call him, it's to make things happen.

“Okay, where do you want me to meet you?” I ask, and he laughs.

“I'll pick you up.” I roll my eyes.

“Pops, I have to be home on Sunday, and I'm going to have to drive home. This will save everyone time.”

“Negative,” he says. “You are probably going to be home late on Sunday, and I don't want you driving at night. Do you know the dangers of driving at night?” I close my eyes, my head going back to Caine and hating that I miss him. “I'll have a driver pick you up in forty minutes.”

“Oh, I can't drive alone at night, but you can hire a man to drive me home? Do you know how many people go missing with a driver?”

He laughs. “You think I'm going to let just any old driver drive you? These men have training.”

“Jesus, Pops, I'm not the president's daughter,” I huff. “I'll be ready in forty.”

I hang up the phone and look down to see if he answered my text, but nothing after my message to him. I put the phone down, making my way to my place, packing a small bag since I still have some clothes at home. The doorbell buzzes, and my heart speeds up, thinking that it could be him, but instead, it's a man wearing a black suit. “Ms. Barnes, I'm your driver.”



I ignore the pang of regret, grabbing my bag and walking out with him. He quickly takes the bag from my hand. My phone feels ever so heavy in my hand. Every single step I take feels like I'm climbing a hill. I get in the back seat of the car and think about calling him, but maybe we just need time to settle things. He has a whole ex-wife sniffing around, and the thought she is still there with them eats me up inside. I wipe away the tear from my eye, knowing my grandfather is going to see right through me if I even shed one tear.

The plane lands at the same time the car gets there, and the stairs come down, followed by my grandfather, who is wearing jeans and a T-shirt. "Hey there."

"Business?" I look at him. "Since when do you wear jeans for business?"

"I was at Sofia's place hooking stuff up," he explains, pulling me in for a hug. I wrap my arms around his waist. "I had to show Matthew how it's done."

I look up at him and laugh. "You and Matthew," I mention Matty's uncle, who since day one the two of them have been so over-the-top competitive.

"Let's get you home," he says, walking to the plane and making me go up the steps first. It takes forty-five minutes for the plane to land back home, and walking down the steps I feel like I shouldn't even be here. Something feels off, but I push it away. Ten minutes later, I'm walking up the steps to my childhood home and ringing the doorbell.

I look over and see Pops standing by his truck to ensure I get in safely. I can hear footsteps behind the door, and then the

door unlocks before being pulled open. My father stands there in shorts and a T-shirt, the shock on his face making me laugh. “Surprise,” I say, holding up my hands.

“Willow!” he yells over his shoulder before lunging for me and wrapping his arms around my waist and picking me up. “My baby is home.”

I roll my eyes. “Can we be more dramatic in this family?”

“Willow,” he calls again, and I can hear my mother’s footsteps before I see her in the hallway.

“Why are you yelling?” She stops mid-step when she sees me, her mouth hanging low. “Oh my God.” She puts her hand to her mouth, my father dropping me so I can go over to her.

“Hi.” I take her in my arms. “Surprise,” I say softly.

“What’s all the noise?” Charlie complains, coming out of his bedroom. “Ugh, why is she here?”

“Why are you still here?” my father asks. “Come and get her bag.”

“Dad, I was up at five this morning,” he huffs at him but comes downstairs anyway to get my stuff. “We don’t like unannounced guests,” he says, and my father slaps him upside the head. “Ow.”

“You know what we don’t like?” my father grits with clenched teeth. “Having you try to sneak a woman out of the house at five a.m. wearing your clothes.”

“Idiot.” I shake my head.

“What about Jim Preston?” he accuses me, and my eyes go big as he mentions the high school boyfriend I dated for six months. “He jumped out the window in the morning.”

My parents look over at me. “He did not,” I deny, avoiding looking at them. “If it makes anyone feel better, we didn’t do anything.”

“Grace,” my father growls between clenched teeth.

“It was like six years ago.” I throw my hands up. “I’m hungry.” I try to change the subject; luckily, my parents drop it, and so does Charlie.

“I can eat,” he says to my mother, who shakes her head.

“When can’t you eat?” She turns now and heads to the kitchen, and for the rest of the night, it feels like I’m sixteen again. Charlie and I always throwing gibes at each other, with my mother telling us to behave. I slide into my bed, picking up the phone, and reading through the messages I’ve sent him. The last one still unanswered. All night I dream of him and Meadow. I can even feel his kisses in my dreams, and when I wake up the next day, I feel lost.

I turn over in the bed, seeing it’s a little past nine. Stretching before getting out of bed and walking down the stairs, I find my mother sitting on one of the stools doing paperwork. “Morning,” I mumble, going over to the pot of coffee and making myself a cup.

Pulling out a stool, I sit next to my mother. “Where is everyone?” I ask her as I take a sip of the hot coffee.

“Your father and brother went to the barn,” she explains. “They got some new horses yesterday, so they went to check them out to see how they are doing.”

“Oh, fun,” I say, “maybe I’ll go over there and see.”

“Your father would love that.” She closes the computer, and I look at her. “So do you want to talk about why you’re here?”

“I came to visit.” I take another sip of my coffee, hoping she drops it.

She laughs. “Honey, that may work on the men you have wrapped around your finger. Like your grandfather and father.” She tilts her head, and her eyebrows shoot up. “But you are going to have to do better than that with me.”

“It’s nothing.” My stomach gets tight. “I just needed to get some space is all.”

“That doesn’t sound like nothing.” Her voice is soft.

“I’m seeing someone,” I admit, and her eyes try to hide the shock of it. I always dated, but it never stuck. It would last one date, maybe two at the most, but then it would fizzle out.

“That’s a big—” She stops talking when I hold up my hand to stop her.

“He’s older than me.” I hold up one finger. “He’s got a daughter.” I hold up a second finger, and I can see her eyes get bigger and bigger. “And he’s my boss.” Gosh, saying it all out loud sounds so much more intense than I thought it would be.

“Grace,” my mother says between clenched teeth.

“I know.” I push off from the counter and get up, not to go anywhere but to pace while we talk this out. “But what part are you more surprised at?”

“All of it,” she admits. “How much older?”

“I don’t know, maybe nine years,” I say. “Which doesn’t bother me, but it bothered him.”

“Past tense, so he’s over it?” she asks. All I can do is shrug because I’m assuming after last weekend it doesn’t bother him anymore. “How old is his daughter?”

“She’s four.” I smile, thinking of how much Meadow would love it here. “And she’s amazing.”

“Grace,” she says my name softly, “he’s your boss.”

“I know.” I throw up my hands and slap the counter in front of me.

“You hate him,” she reminds me of all the times she called, and I would rant about him.

“I know.” I hang my head. “I did, but now—”

“But now you’ve gone and fallen in love with a single dad, who is your boss.” She sums it up, and I just shake my head, not looking up at her.

“So why are you here and not there?” she asks me the million-dollar question.

“His ex wants him back, I think.” As I say the words, I put my head down on my arms.

“You think?” I look at her as she leans back in her chair.

“Well, I went over there yesterday for dinner, and she showed up.” The memory makes me ill. “And before that, she showed up at the office, not when we were dating, and said she was his wife.”

“What did he say about this?”

“He said that I’m not in the middle of anything because there is nothing to be in the middle of,” I admit to her, “and then I came here.”

She gasps, “Grace.”

“I know.” I shake my head. “I know I should have gone to him.” She nods her head. “But I was scared.”

“Scared of what?” she asks.

“Scared I’ve fallen in love with both of them, and he’s going to tell me he’s going back to his wife.”

“But how are you going to know if you don’t talk to him?” She uses her mother voice.

“Mom, this is the first time in my life I’ve ever been in love,” I admit. “It’s the first of many.” I hope she gets what I’m saying. “So, I’m in uncharted territory.”

“Well, rule number one is communication.” I roll my eyes at her. “You think I knew what love was when I met your father?” I know she didn’t because she was left for dead by her stepfather. “I knew nothing, but I knew he was different.”

“Mom.” I put my hand to my stomach. “There is so much going through my head right now. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Well, start at the beginning, besides the baby momma drama.” She smirks. “What is bothering you?”

“Well, besides the fact he’s my boss.” I close my eyes. “It sounds even worse when I keep saying it out loud.” She laughs at me. “What is everyone going to say?”

“Who is everyone?”

“Dad, Pops, to name a few.” I put my hands on my head. “My coworkers.”

“Don’t worry about your family. They will accept anyone who makes you happy,” she tries to tell me. “Your father was my boss also, and then I married him.”

“Mom, it’s different,” I tell her.

“How so?”

“Well, for one, he’s got a child,” I point out.

“Okay, well, if your father had a child, I would still have fallen in love with him,” she informs me, “even with the baby momma drama.” I inhale deeply. “The question is, are you really in love with him? Put everything aside, what you think people will say, what you are afraid of. How do you feel about him?”

I look at her, knowing this answer. “With one thousand percent certainty, I can say I’m head over heels in love with him.”

# thirty

. . .

Caine

I pull into the parking lot later than normal because I knew if I came early, she would be here, and I'm not sure I'm ready to see her. I avoid even looking at her car while I walk over to the elevator.

I tap my phone with my finger as I look up at the numbers going up, stepping out when it pings, and the doors open. Every step I take echoes in my ears, and I feel a tightness in my chest. The same tightness I felt all weekend long, knowing she wasn't going to be around me. During the day, it was easy to pretend it wasn't there, but once Meadow went to bed and it was just me in the house, I couldn't pretend anymore. I was in love with her. I was head over heels in love with her. No matter what I said or how I put it, that was the conclusion every time. No matter how many times I told myself it was wrong. No matter how many times I pointed out all the cons, all I had to do was picture her smiling face and all the excuses were out the window.

"Good morning," I greet the receptionist before I round the corner, and my eyes go to her. She's looking at her computer and the tightness in my chest gets even tighter, making it hard



to breathe. Instead of going to my office, I make my way straight to the conference room. The meeting has already started since I'm so late.

"Hey," I mumble, sitting down in my chair. I look over at Grace, who appears unaffected by this whole thing. I don't even listen to what is being discussed in the meeting, and when I look back, I see her laughing at something Kayla says to her, making her more beautiful than my memories of her that played over in my head all weekend long.

The meeting finishes, and when I walk out, I'm more pissed than ever, and I don't even know why. Well, I do know why. It's because she just left. She left and didn't even stick around to talk about it. I walk toward my office, and she looks up at me, her face going into a full smile when she sees me, making my stomach tense. "Good morning," she greets cheerfully.

"Yeah," I bark before walking past her desk and not stopping. I put my still full coffee on my desk before I take off my jacket and toss it on the couch. I'm rolling up my sleeves when I look over and see her knock on the doorjamb. She's wearing a black top and a long black skirt with her high heels. "What?"

She walks into the office just a bit, and my hands itch to touch her. "I was wondering if we could set a time to talk."

I raise my eyebrows. "Time to talk." I laugh sarcastically as I finish rolling up my sleeves. "The time to talk was Friday," I hiss, "and instead of talking to me, you took off."

“You’re right,” she agrees softly, and I can see she’s breathing heavy because her chest is heaving. She is also holding her hands together, nervously wringing them. “I was just—”

I stop her, holding up my hand. Even my head tells me to relax, but I can’t. All the anger of her leaving has just bubbled over. “Instead of having a conversation with me like adults do, you pulled a tantrum like a child.” The minute the words come out of my mouth, I know I’ve fucked up. She takes a step back on one foot as if I hit her. Her eyes cloud over and not in a good way. “Grace.” I take a step toward her, but she holds up her hand, which I see is shaking.

“Thank you for your time,” she says, turning on her heel and walking, almost running, out of my office. She stops at her desk, leaning over to grab her phone before turning and rushing away from me.

“Fuck.” I shake my head and put my head down. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I turn back to walk to my desk, taking a huge breath in before I pull out my chair and wait for her to come back from the bathroom. My eyes are on her desk like a hawk. One minute turns into two turns into five. I look at my watch every thirty seconds, wondering if I should go and check on her. But how would that look if I just stormed into the women’s bathroom and kissed the ever-loving fuck out of her? I’m tapping my finger on my desk when I see Loren come to her desk with a box under her arm, placing it on Grace’s desk. I’m

out of my seat like it's on fire. "What are you doing?" I snap at her as she starts putting things in the box.

"Grace just quit," she says, and the blood drains from my body, "and asked me to box her things up."

"What?" I ask, feeling like the floor is being ripped out from under me.

"She said thank you for taking a chance on her," Loren relays, picking up one of her coffee mugs she used all the time, "but she's going to focus on school." My heart hammers in my chest so hard it's all I can hear. "But from her storming out of here, I'm assuming whatever you said to her was the final straw."

"I didn't—" I start to say, but she holds up her hand.

"Save it for someone who's going to believe you," she says, turning with the box of Grace's things.

"Give me the box," I snap. "I'll go take it to her."

"Funny you should say that. She said tell Caine he can show up, but I'm not going to be there." I was wrong before. Right now, at this moment, it feels like the floor has been ripped out from under me.

I rush back into my office, grabbing my phone and my jacket before I race to the elevator. I press the button to the elevator once again, then I don't stop for a full thirty seconds. I'm about to take the stairs when the doors open. I press the P button as soon as I step in, along with the button to close the door. Luckily for me, no one else gets in, and once the doors open, I'm dashing to my car.

I speed the whole way there, parking in the front of her building, not giving a shit if they tow me or not. Every single second is agony. Every single second feels like a lifetime. Every single second I pray that it's not too late.

I get to her door and knock. "Grace, baby," I say softly, knocking and knocking. "Please." I put my head on the door, the tightness in my chest so much more than it was before. It's even getting harder and harder to breathe. "Grace, please," I say again, pleading. "I'm not going anywhere. If I have to sit out here all night, I will." I take out my phone and call her, my hands shaking the whole time. It doesn't even ring. It goes straight to voicemail.

*"You've reached Grace. Leave a message."*

"Grace, baby," I say, my voice broken. "Please call me back. I'm sorry." I close my eyes. "I'm so, so sorry." I hang up the phone and knock one more time, hoping she answers, hoping she puts me out of my misery even though I don't deserve it. I don't deserve her. "Please," I beg to the brown door. I put my hand on the door, feeling the coolness on it. "Grace." I knock again softly. I take one deep breath before I walk away. She said she wouldn't be here, and I know in my gut she was not bluffing. Not this time. This was my third strike.

I leave her building, and the dread settles in. I pull up my phone and call the one person who might actually be able to help. He answers after two rings. "Yo," he says, and I close my eyes, putting my head back on the headrest.

“Nash.” My voice comes out raw, and I look out the window.

“What happened?” The worry is in his voice now.

“It’s Grace,” I say. “I fucked up.”

“What else is new?” His tone changes as he laughs. “What did you do now?”

“It’s bad.” I look at the door to her building, hoping to catch her walking in, but the door doesn’t open. “So fucking bad.”

“How bad?” he asks.

“She’s gone.” My voice breaks. “Man, I have no idea what the fuck to do.”

“What did you say to her?” I put my head back when I think of how to explain.

“I’m with her.” I’m expecting him to gasp, but instead, he laughs.

“Shocking,” he states, and now I’m the one who’s shocked. “Dude, you were jonesing for her from day one.”

I refute, “I was not.”

“Dude, I thought you would have throat punched me at the bar when you found out I was texting her.” He can’t help but laugh at me.

“I was not. I thought she had a boyfriend,” I remind him. “Anyway, things progressed.”

“You fucked her, didn’t you?” The words bring a rage to me like I can’t explain.

“Talk about her like that again, and I’ll break your fucking jaw myself,” I hiss. “I’m not fucking playing with you.”

“Jesus, Caine,” he says softly.

“I’m in love with her.” The words come out for the first time.

“Then what the fuck happened?” I spot someone walking to the door, and my head whips around, wondering if it’s her, but it’s not.

“She came over on Friday to have dinner with Meadow and me,” I start, “and then Marylin showed up.”

“Fuck,” Nash swears. “Clusterfuck.”

“You have no idea. Anyway, Grace left and didn’t look back.”

“Shit,” Nash says again. “What did you tell her?”

“I didn’t tell her anything because she never called me. She spent the weekend with her family.”

“Okay, so how did she quit?” he asks me.

“I was so pissed when I saw her. I mean, not really at her. More with the whole situation, and I said things I shouldn’t.”

“Shocking,” he says to me again.

“I thought she went to the bathroom. Next thing I know, Loren is packing up her desk and telling me she quit.”

“Did you go see her?” he snaps. “I can just imagine what you said to her.”

“She told Loren to tell me she’d be gone.” The words taste like acid in my mouth. “I have no idea where she is.”

“She probably went home to the farm,” he says the words I was so afraid of.

“I need help finding her.”

“I’ll call you back.” He disconnects on me. I start the car, but instead of going back to the office, I head straight home.

I’m opening the front door when the phone rings in my hand, and I see it’s Nash. “Hello,” I answer after half a ring.

“Yo,” he says.

“Did you find her?” I ask, ready to go to wherever she’s at.

“Oh, yeah.” He whistles. “I don’t think you’ll like what I have to say.”

My stomach sinks, wondering what the fuck he’s going to tell me. “She’s going home.” I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I’ve been told you aren’t welcome.”

“Yeah, well, unless they shoot me,” I say, running up the steps two at a time, “that is the only way I’m not going there.”

“Thought you would say that,” he says. “I’m getting on a plane and coming to you.”

“Really?” I reply, shocked and surprised but also happy I will have at least one person at my back.

“Well, someone has to be there in case you get shot or you open your mouth,” he states. “Just sit tight. We’re going to get you your woman back.” He laughs. “Or die trying.”



# thirty-one

. . .

Grace

“Good morning, pretty girl.” I smile at the horse as I walk into the stall. “Did you have a good night?” I hold out my hand to her as she cowers in the corner. She’s a little white horse my father rescued last week. She takes a step back as I walk to her, not sure if she can trust me or not. “I’m coming to give you some water.” She watches my every move. “I know how you feel.” I put my hand up, waiting for her to come to me. “Not sure who to trust.” She comes to me cautiously. “You’re so pretty,” I tell her as she puts her head down but keeps her eyes on me. “I’m not going to hurt you.” She huffs a little as she takes one more step to me. “Do you want to go for a walk?” I rub her neck. “Yeah, let’s go get some fresh air.” I grab the halter from her neck and walk out of the stall with her. Grabbing a saddle, I throw it over her, and she moves back a bit. “It’s okay.” I rub her side. “This isn’t going to hurt.” I finish and then hold her reins in my hand, looking into her eyes. “Now I’m going to get up on you, and you will not buck me off.” I put my foot in the stirrup, throwing my leg over the horse. She moves right and left to try to get me off, but she doesn’t buck, which is better than yesterday when she

really made sure I knew she was not happy with me. It lasted a whole five minutes before she calmed down.

“What do you say we go for a nice walk in the woods?” I ask her as I lead her to the path on the side where it’s quiet. We walk for a couple of minutes slowly. She’s still unsure of where to go or of me. “What a pair we make.” I chuckle at myself, trying to pretend I’m okay, but to be honest, it’s fucking exhausting. It’s been two days since I showed up close to midnight, shocking everyone, especially my parents. I didn’t even know I was going to drive home. All I knew was I needed to get away from the whole thing. I walked into work with a heavy heart, especially after waiting twenty minutes for him. I knew he was either avoiding me or pissed at me or maybe both. I spotted him walking in ten minutes later with his coffee, going straight to the conference room.

I waited for him to come to see me, and I knew right away he was off. I should have waited, but I couldn’t wait anymore. I wanted to talk to him. I hoped to have a conversation with him, but the words that came out of his mouth were like stabs right to the heart. It showed me he would never, ever be over my age. There was no going back for us. I couldn’t stay there and work for him day in and day out while in love with him, so I left.

I called Loren and told her I was leaving and to please pack up my stuff. I knew he would try to come and talk to me to get me to go back and work with him. I also knew I couldn’t see him. We were over. There was nothing he could say to change my mind. So, I just drove toward home, turned my phone off, and took off. I thought once I got home it would be

fine, except I missed him so much it hurt. Like a constant pain in my chest, a throbbing of sorts. Like a fist squeezing one of those stress balls. That's how it feels every minute of every single day. Even at night when I close my eyes, it's all Caine. This morning I woke with my pillowcase wet with my tears. "Don't fall in love, Dixie," I tell the horse as we pass the creek. "It's not worth it."

We spent a couple of hours going along paths I used to take when I was a teenager, pointing out little things to her. I told her about the rock where my cousin Sofia got engaged and where my aunt Kallie fell in love with my uncle Jacob. Only when we are ten minutes out do I push her a bit more, and she handles it like a pro. "Look at you go," I praise her as I get off the horse near the barn. "Dixie Pixie." I rub her neck. "I think I'll keep you."

"You're still here?" Charlie says as I walk past him while he washes one of the other horses he rescued.

"I could ask you the same thing." I shake my head when we hear a truck pull up and look over.

"Great," Charlie says, "he looks like he's looking for you." He chuckles as our grandfather comes to us. He's wearing old jeans and a shirt covered in dust, along with his cowboy boots that have seen better days. "Hey, Pops," Charlie says.

"Hey, buddy," he greets him and then looks at me. "I brought you something." He pulls out a phone from his back pocket.

"What is that?" I ask him.

“It’s your new phone,” he states. “Your grandmother said she hasn’t been able to get ahold of you. I’m assuming the other phone isn’t working.”

“Pops,” I say to him, pointing at my nose, “your nose is growing by the minute.” Charlie laughs at him.

“I spoke to Grandma Olivia this morning. After she came to bring me breakfast.”

“Nailed, Pops,” Charlie teases, and he glares at him.

“You better hope your father doesn’t watch the cameras inside the barn.” He points at him, and I gasp.

“She just came to—” He smirks, and I hold up my hand. “It’s nothing like that.”

“What’s going on here?” My father comes toward us.

“Charlie is having sex in the barn.” I try to keep the focus away from me.

“Charlie,” my father grumbles between clenched teeth.

“Would everyone relax?” He holds up his hands. “She came to return my sweater.” I snort out laughing because he’s lying through his teeth.

“You haven’t worn a sweater since you were eight and deemed them a waste of time,” my father says, and I’m about to say something to him when we hear the crunching of rocks. All of our heads turn toward the side when we see a brown truck stop. I put my hands up over my eyes to see who it is. I spot Nash right away, coming out of the driver’s side door, and then look over when I hear another door close, seeing the man

who I ran away from. He opens the back door and holds out his arms to Meadow, who jumps down from his arms and looks around, spotting me.

“Gracie!” she yells my name, running toward me.

“Friends of yours?” Pops asks.

“Oh, someone has some explaining to do,” Charlie says, and all I can do is look over and glare at him.

“Gracie!” Meadow calls my name again as she gets closer to me. “Is that your horse?” she asks me, her hair in a ponytail going side to side.

“Hi,” I say when she stops in front of me, ignoring the way my heart races. “This is Dixie Pixie,” I tell her, and then I look up to see Nash and Caine approaching. My body comes alive as if it knows he’s right there. All I can do is watch Caine, his eyes on mine, never leaving mine. Nash is telling him something, but all he can do is look at me.

“Can I ride her?” Meadow asks, and I blink, looking away from her father.

“Um,” I start to say to her, all the words suddenly stuck in my throat as I feel him in front of me.

“Hi,” Nash starts to talk, but Caine interrupts him, as usual.

“I’m Caine.” He sticks his hand out to my father, who takes it, not sure what is going on. Then he goes to my grandfather, who has his hands on his hips.

“I know who you are,” Pops says to him. “Question is, why are you here?”

“I’m here to see Grace,” Caine states, looking at me, and I have to look away from him when the tears threaten to come.

“Hi, Dixie,” Meadow says, coming to my side, slipping her small hand into mine. Little does she know that she is in the middle of a standoff. “Can I touch her?” Then she looks over at Charlie. “Are you a cowboy?”

“No,” I answer at the same time he says, “Sure am.”

“So how do y’all know Grace?” Charlie looks at the guys.

“She works with us,” Nash replies.

“Used to,” my grandfather quickly chimes in, making my head snap toward him. He eyes Caine, who doesn’t even notice he’s in Pops’ death glare.

I have to stop this before it gets out of hand. “Meadow.” I look down at her. “This is my dad, Quinn.” I point at my father. “He’s the best cowboy I know.” I side eye my grandfather, who still stares at Caine with his arms crossed over his chest. “I bet if you ask him, he could take you for a ride.”

“Really?” Her voice goes high as she looks over at my father, who just smiles at her. “Can you take me on the horse?”

My father looks at me, then looks down at Meadow, then back to me, hoping he can sense the need to defuse the situation. “It would be my honor.” He holds out his hand for her. “But first, we have to get you a helmet,” he tells her. “See that man here?” He points at my grandfather. “He can help you

do that, can't you, Dad?" he calls to my grandfather, who finally looks at him. "Can you take Meadow to get a helmet?"

Meadow lets go of my hand and walks over to my grandfather and puts her hand in his. "I like horses," she tells him in a soft sweet voice that not even he can resist.

"I have a special horse for you." He looks at my father before the three of them start to walk away.

"Be careful," I tell them, and they both look over their shoulders at me and then share a look with each other. Fine, I'm protective of her, whatever. Just because her father is a jerkface doesn't mean she should pay for it. Pops lets go of Meadow's hand for a second before he walks over to Caine. Everyone goes on alert as he leans in and whispers something in his ear. No one but Caine can hear it, and all he does is nod his head at Pops before he goes back to Meadow.

"I guess you're stuck with me." Charlie looks at Nash. "Come on, I'll get you a beer."

"It's nine o'clock in the morning," I gasp, and Charlie just shrugs.

"It's five o'clock somewhere," Nash adds, slapping Caine on the shoulder. "Don't say anything you'll regret," he mumbles, and I want to laugh because all Caine knows how to do is say things he's going to regret.

I wait for the two of them to walk away before looking back at Caine, my chest stinging from not being able to go to him. I put my hands together, afraid I'll lean forward to touch him. "I don't know why you are here," I say, trying to get this

over with as fast as possible. “There is absolutely nothing you have to say that I want to hear.” I shake my head, fighting back the tears. “You can wait here for Meadow.” Turning, I run away from him.



# thirty-two

. . .

Caine

*M*y eyes never leave her during this whole showdown.

All the words are stuck in my throat, but the only words that want to come out are I love you and I've missed you. However, I don't think having this confrontation in front of her father, grandfather, and brother is something she wants. I don't know what, if anything, she's told them about me. "I don't know why you are here." But her standing here in front of me, blinking away the tears, it breaks my heart that I'm the one making her cry. "There is absolutely nothing you have to say that I want to hear." She shakes her head and looks down. "You can wait here for Meadow." Turning, she storms away from me.

"Grace, would you wait a second?" I shout at her retreating back, my heart hammering in my ears as the panic runs through me that she is going to get away from me. Her grandfather's voice plays in my head. "*If you hurt her, you'll never forget it. I'll never let you forget it.*"

She turns on her feet, and it's only then I realize she's wearing cowboy boots, and she looks sexier than with the heels. "For what?" she shouts back at me, her voice angry. "I

think you've said everything you have to say." Her voice breaks. "Don't you?"

"No," I say, walking to her. I stand in front of her, not willing to be too far away from her. "There is so much more to say." My voice comes out in almost a whisper, and all she can do is shake her head furiously side to side. "Yes," I say, taking another step toward her, closing the distance. "I was so wrong."

"I'm not doing this." Her voice cracks as she turns away from me, and my hand comes up to grab her arm.

"Grace, just give me a second to talk," I beg her as she rips her arm out of my hold, and I'm afraid I've lost her. The fear this may be the last time I get to talk to her fills me, and I know if it is, then she's getting it all.

"I gave you a second." She wipes away the tear. "I came into your office and asked you to talk to me." Her words are like a kick to the balls. "And where did that get us?"

"It got us right here, right now," I tell her. "I don't deserve for you to listen to me." The words are like acid on my tongue. "I've missed you so much I—" I start to talk but then stop when all the words want to come rushing out, knowing I might not have the time. "I was so wrong about everything. When you left me, I was so mad, not at you, but at me for not coming after you right away. For not making sure you were okay before anything else. I swear to you, swear on us, that she was there for two more minutes before I kicked her out." She starts to say something, but I put my hand up to stop her. "All weekend long, I wanted you with us. All weekend long, it hurt

me that you didn't give me the time of day. It was like we weren't important, and that is stupid, I know."

"All weekend long," she says softly, "I sat thinking of you. Of Meadow. Of us. But that was all pushed aside. It was all gone the minute—" I hold up my hand, not sure I'm ready for her to call us over. Actually, I know I'm not ready. It can't be.

"What I said was uncalled for, and I'm the biggest jackass in the world," I repeat the words Nash told me hourly since this whole thing started. "Jesus, Grace, I've never in my life been more broken than I was when you left me." The wind blows her hair, and my hand comes up to touch it, to tuck it around her ear. "I've had a woman marry me and leave me, and I don't think I ever blinked an eye that it was over. But you..." I move my hand from her hair to her shoulder. "But with you, it hurt to breathe. It hurt to think about you. It hurt to live."

"Caine." I see her lips quiver. "Please stop."

"No." I shake my head as I put my hand on her cheek, wiping away the tear. "Never. I will never stop fighting for us."

"You say that now." She looks into my eyes. "But then—"

"I say that now, and I vow until I stop breathing, I will fight for us." Then I say the words I've wanted to tell her since I got out of the car and laid eyes on her again. The only words I've wanted to say to her since she walked out on me. The only words that matter to me. "I love you, Grace." She gasps. "I'm so in love with you it makes me do things I don't even know I'm doing." My other hand comes up to hold her face.

“Like, show up on a farm where you know her grandfather is basically a Navy SEAL. Her cousin is a Green Beret, everyone knows how to shoot a gun, and you just hurt her. Because you are a total and complete idiot.” She chuckles, and it’s like music to my heart. “Tell me I’m not too late.” I put my forehead on hers. “Tell me you can find it in your beautiful heart to forgive me. Tell me even though I’ve hurt you, it’s not the end of us.”

“Caine,” she says, “I can’t do this.”

I close my eyes. “Don’t give up on me,” I beg her. “Don’t give up on us.”

We stare at each other for what feels like an eternity. “If we are going to try this again, there have to be rules.”

“I’ll agree to whatever you want.” My heart soars in my chest.

“No more hiding that we’re a couple.”

“Agreed,” I say. “It was killing me anyway, and fucking Kevin was getting on my last nerve.”

“You need to let this age thing go,” she demands. “I don’t care if you are older than me by one year or a hundred years.”

“You’ll keep me young,” I joke with her. “I might even try to abbreviate things.”

She chuckles. “I have a rule also,” I state, and she just looks at me. “I want you to spend more time at my house. Even if you have school, I want you to do it at my house.”

“But Meadow,” she quickly chimes in, and another reason I love her, she’s more worried about what my daughter thinks than I am.

“We had a chat in the last two days,” I tell her. “As much of a chat as you can have with a four-year-old. I told her I wanted you to have sleepovers.” Her eyes go big. “She said she liked sleepovers.”

“I love her,” she finally shares with me.

“I know,” I admit. “I know you do.”

“I think I fell in love with her the second she threw up on me.” I chuckle. “I mean, I was already starting to fall in love with her father, so—” It’s my turn to gasp. “I love you, Caine. You and your stupid, stubborn head.” I don’t let her say another word before I squeeze her face in my hands and kiss her lips. Her hands grip my waist as I pull her closer to me. The kiss is better than I remembered it being. I’m about to turn my head to the side when we hear the crunching of rock, and she turns her head to the side.

An old pickup truck parks, looking at us. The driver’s door opens, and a man steps out wearing old jeans, a button-down shirt, with a cowboy hat on his head. “Shit,” Grace curses as the man walks toward us. The rim of his hat blocks me from seeing his eyes.

“Well, well, well.” His voice comes out when he gets close enough. “Thought I’d find y’all here.”

“Grandpa,” Grace says, putting her arm around my waist, “this is Caine.”

“Aha,” he says, smirking, “the face behind the voice.” He extends his hand. “Nice to meet you finally.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.” I shake his hand. “Thank you for all your help.”

Grace looks at her great-grandfather and then looks at me, about to ask me something when we hear horses coming from the other side. A big black horse stops near us, and I see it’s her grandfather on the horse, and beside him is her father with Meadow in front of him. “He’s a real cowboy.” Meadow points at Billy. “Can you ride horses?” she asks him.

“Grandpa,” Grace states proudly, leaving my side, “this is Meadow. Meadow, this is my great-grandfather Billy. The best cowboy ever.”

“Excuse me,” Casey says, “I was the rodeo king.”

“A million years ago,” Quinn deadpans.

“Why don’t you bring her over to the house?” Billy says to Quinn. “Get her on her own pony.”

Meadow gasps, “My own pony?” Her eyes go big. “Do you have a pony?” She looks at Grace.

“I have three,” she tells her, and I swear Meadow looks at me like I’ve given her nothing in her life.

“There is a horse in the barn,” Quinn says to Billy, “saddled up.”

“Then I’ll be out in a second,” he says to them, turning to me. “I take it you will be staying for dinner.”

“No,” Casey answers.

At the same time, Grace looks at me and says, “Yes.”

“When will you learn?” Quinn tells Casey. “Remember Sofia? You now own a hockey team, and you still can’t skate.”

“I can too skate,” Casey defends. “I just can’t stop on time.”

Grace turns to me. “How does my great-grandfather Billy know you?”

“I called him yesterday,” I tell her. “I figured if I had to come here, I would get at least one person on my side.” Her mouth hangs open. “He hung up on me the first four times.”

“Wow,” she says.

“I would have taken on the whole family if I had to,” I inform her. “Nothing was going to stop me from getting to you.”

She looks up at me, the tears a distant memory, her eyes glimmering in the sunshine. My chest fills with a different feeling this time. A feeling of fullness, a feeling of peace, a feeling of happiness. Here in the middle of this farm, I’ve never felt more at peace. “You know what we have to do next, don’t you?” She gets up on her tippy-toes and whispers in my ear, “Make-up sex.”

# epilogue one

. . .

Grace

“*S* hhh,” Caine warns as I close my eyes and sink down on his cock until my ass hits his legs, “you have to be quiet.”

“It’s so good.” I hold on to his shoulders as I lift myself to the tip of his cock, then sink back down again, this time faster than the last. His mouth swallows the moan that comes out of my mouth.

“Baby,” he says softly before he bends and takes one of my nipples into his mouth, biting down and then sucking in, sending shockwaves through me.

“Caine,” I try to whisper, “I don’t know if I can keep quiet.”

“You’ll have to try, baby.” He leans against the headboard, and one of his hands moves from my hip to my nipple as he rolls it. I slam down on him, our panting filling the room. “That’s it, baby.”

I’m delirious at this point and can feel the orgasm coming within my fingertips. “Caine.” I don’t know if I’m asking him or begging him.



“Take it, baby,” he urges, his hands on my hips helping me move up and then slamming me down, making his cock go deeper into me. “Take my cum.” He wraps one arm around my waist, picking me up and then slamming me down on his cock. “Your pussy is going to suck the cum right out of me.” I lean back a little so his cock can rub my G-spot, and he knows it. “That pussy is getting tight,” he whispers, “strangling my cock.” His thumb slides between us, rubbing it down my slit before he rubs my clit with it. “Greedy for my cum.”

“Yes,” I pant, “I want it all.” I close my eyes as he helps me ride his cock, something I wanted to do all by myself, but I knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off me. “I want it in me.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “I want it on me,” I whisper in his ear. “I want it dripping out of me all day long.”

“Fuck,” he groans, and I know that he’s as gone as I am. “I’m going to—”

“I’m there.” I close my eyes as I squeeze his cock, his mouth covering mine as we both come at the same time. He slides his hand from between us to wrap it around my back, pulling me to him. I let go of his lips before I sink deeper into him, burying my face in his neck.

“That was nice,” I say with a sigh before his alarm starts ringing from the nightstand. He lets go of me for a moment to shut it off.

“Morning,” he murmurs softly.

“Hmm, good morning.” I kiss his neck before I lift my head, his cock still buried inside me.

“I’m going to have to get the contractors to come in and soundproof this room,” he declares, and I can’t help but laugh.

My whole body shakes in his arms. “I can be quiet.”

“Baby,” he soothes softly, “you think you can be quiet.” I rub my nose along his neck. “I also love when you scream my name.”

“I don’t scream.” I sit up and his cock twitches inside me. “I talk.” I tilt my head to the side. “Loudly.” I lean forward and kiss his lips. “What are the chances we can get in and out of the shower before she wakes up?” I ask, and he smirks.

“Are you starting the shower on your knees?” He winks at me, and I wiggle my hips and squeeze my pussy. “Hmm.” He bends to nip my jaw, making me laugh. “Definitely starting on your knees.” He tightens his hold on me as he lifts me from his bed and walks into his bathroom.

“What if Meadow wakes up?” I look over my shoulder.

“She’ll yell, and when she can’t find me, she’ll come looking for me. She’ll hear the shower and then go downstairs and eat the Froot Loops cereal I don’t let her eat.”

“We’ll make it fast,” I say, wrapping myself around him before he lets me go. I start the shower and get on my knees.

He’s out of the shower before me because even though I tried not to get my hair wet, it got soaking wet after I swallowed him down, and he said he would wash me. That ended up with him finger fucking me from the back and me holding on to the wall in front of me. “Making sure you have

my cum deep inside you,” he whispered in my ear right before I came all over his hand.

“I’ll bring you coffee, baby,” he says before he walks out of the door with shorts on, my stomach getting tingles every single time he calls me baby. Something he’s been doing since we got back together last week.

It’s been a roller coaster of a week, to say the very least. Once we got back together, we didn’t come home right away. No. Not with my family. The only one who left that day was Nash after he whispered in my ear, “Go easy on him, he means well.”

Obviously, my mother and grandmother got to the barn within minutes of us making out hot and heavy. Caine wanted to die. I, on the other hand, was floating on cloud nine. My heart was full, my hand was in Caine’s, and he was there.

My grandmother didn’t even want to hear anything about him staying in a hotel in town. Instead, she gave him the keys to the white house. I rolled my lips knowing he would freak out once he got in there. You see, the white house is the house no one wants to stay in because it looks like it’s out of a magazine. Everyone is afraid to touch it or dirty it.

The women were over the moon to meet Caine, the men—well, not so much—but Meadow wrapped them around her finger, so they didn’t do anything to him besides giving him dirty looks. That night when he went over to the white house, there was no way I was not going with him.

So, we spent the week riding horses, and we even had the big Sunday lunch that wiped Meadow out so much she slept

the whole way home, barely waking up when we got in last night.

I turn the water off and grab the towel, stepping out at the same time Caine comes back into the bathroom holding two cups of coffee. “Guess who is still sleeping?” he asks as I wrap my hair in a towel and then grab his white plush robe, which is five sizes too big for me.

“Is she really?” I ask, reaching for my cup of coffee. Meadow didn’t blink an eye with me and Caine being in bed together after the first night. I felt so guilty, but after talking to my cousins about it and them explaining that at four you don’t really get things if you haven’t been around them, I was relieved. So, this might be new to her, but she also didn’t know it wasn’t normal.

“Are you ready for today?” he asks, leaning one hip against the counter.

I let go of a big breath. “As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.” I take another sip. “Have you talked to anyone in the office?”

He shakes his head. “I sent Loren a message to let her know you’re coming back.”

“What about Vinny and Jaret?” I stand in front of him as I lean against the counter.

“I’ll tell them at the meeting,” he states, and he leans over to kiss me at the same time the door opens, and Meadow comes in.

“I called you, and you didn’t come.” Meadow rubs her eyes, walking to Caine, who picks her up and kisses her head.

“Can we go see my horse?”

“We can go on Saturday,” Caine replies, shocking me.

“I promised your grandpa Billy that I would bring you back often,” he explains as Meadow cuddles on his chest.

“We were just there,” I remind him.

“She has a horse there now,” he reasons, “so we have to go weekly.” I gawk at him. “It’ll be nice.” He leans in once more to kiss me before he walks out with Meadow to make breakfast.

It takes me forty-five minutes to dry my hair and put my makeup on. I’m grabbing my clothes when Meadow comes upstairs. “Gracie,” she says, “will you do my hair?”

“You bet.” I walk with her to her bathroom. For the past week, I’ve been doing her hair every morning since we got back together. It’s our little time when she says what she wants to do with her day. The past couple of days it’s been all about her horse.

“Grandpa Billy said I’m the best rider in the whole world.” She holds out her hands to the sides. “Ever.”

I smile at her. “Well, if he said it, it’s true.” She nods her head as I finish the braid. “Now get dressed.” I kiss the top of her head as she jumps off the stool and goes to her bedroom.

I walk back into the room seeing Caine come out of the closet, buttoning his dress shirt, and I can’t help but smile at him. He’s the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on. “Everything good?” he asks as he tucks his shirt in like we’ve been doing this forever. Like it’s not just been a couple of days

but instead years. I just nod at him, walking back into the closet and grabbing the white pair of pants I hung up last night before he dragged me to bed. I slide on my lace panties and matching bra before stepping into the pants. I grab the green silk blouse that is a light green with white flowers on it, buttoning the three buttons before tying the sash around my waist. I have enough time to grab my shoes and put them on before we are driving to work together. Something I think he planned since my car is at my parents' house.

We drop off Meadow and park the car in his spot. My hands shake as I get out of the car, and we walk toward the elevator, his hand slipping into mine. He presses the button with his free hand before bending down to kiss me. "You ready?" he asks, and I shake my head at the same time my stomach sinks. The ping of the elevator sounds, and we walk in, his hand slipping out of mine. "We will just ease into it," he says, and I hate we didn't have a better plan than just easing into it. In fact, it's the stupidest plan I've ever heard of in my life.

The doors open on the floor, and he puts his hand on my lower back as I step out. "Good morning," the receptionist says. "Welcome back."

"Thank you," I say softly, avoiding her eyes, somewhat embarrassed about storming out and then quitting and now unquitting.

We walk together down the hallway. Kayla smiles when she sees me. "You're back," she says to me as Caine just nods at her and continues walking toward his office.

“I’m back,” I confirm. “This time perhaps for good,” I joke with her before walking toward my desk. Kevin is coming out of the kitchen and spots me, his eyes going big when he sees me.

He makes his way toward me, the both of us getting to my desk at the same time. “Hey,” he greets softly. “I didn’t think we would see you again,” he admits, and my heart hammers in my chest.

“I might have overreacted.” I laugh nervously. “A touch.”

“Well, I tried to call you, but I think your phone was off,” he says. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” I assure him, and I’m about to say something else when we both look over to see Caine walking out of his office.

“I’m off to the meeting,” he informs me, and I nod at him, but he steps forward and in front of everyone bends his head to kiss me on the lips. He smirks at me after he kisses me when he turns to Kevin. “Hey, Kevin, how was your weekend?”

“Um,” Kevin says, “it was good. I’ll catch up with you later.” He takes one more look at me, then walks away.

“You had to do it, didn’t you?” I look up at him, and all he does is smile at me.

“It was that or throat punch him,” he declares, laughing out loud, making all eyes turn to us. “So, I went with the one that wouldn’t get me arrested and then sued.” He puts his hand around my waist. “You’re welcome.” He bends and kisses me again, but this time all eyes are on us.

“Well, we didn’t see that coming at all,” Vinny says from behind me. “I owe Jaret a thousand dollars now.”

“I’ll pay it for you,” Caine offers, his hand dropping from my waist. “See you later.” He walks away from me toward the conference room, eyes still on him, and a couple of mouths are hanging open. “Oh, Grace and I are dating,” he announces to everyone, winking at me before leaving me with everyone staring at me.

I put my hands on my hips, ready to throttle him, shaking my head in his direction. “Well, this is—” I start laughing. “Yeah,” I say, walking to my desk, looking up and seeing people still in shock, “we’re dating.”

***THE END.***

*Dearest Love,*

*Here were are.*

*Eight weddings under our belt.*

*Some of those came really close to never happening.*

*All they needed was a little push in the right direction.*

*Now everyone is living happily ever after.*

*Except Charlie.*

*What a tangled web that is.*

*One you don’t want to miss.*

*XOXO*

*Love NM*





***Want a bonus epilogue of Grace and Caine??***

Sign up for my newsletter and have the exclusive content delivered straight to your inbox!

**[Click here to sign up!](#)**



**Are you ready for the Dream Series?**

**Charlie**

It was supposed to be a regular day out.

Four couples celebrating the last days of summer.

When tragedy struck.

I thought I was going to marry her.

But instead, I was burying her.

I blamed the world for this pain.

I buried it all.

I became a man I didn't even recognize.

**Aurelia**

In the blink of an eye, everything changed.

My best friend was gone, and I was responsible for it.

I may not have been driving the car, but I didn't stop it.

Escaping the town was the only thing I could do to survive the  
guilt.

I thought I was strong enough to go back.

I was wrong.

One look from him and I knew I wasn't welcomed.

But this is my home and I wanted to come back.

One night turned into more.

But at the end of the day, I know that he'll never love me.

Besides, we all have shattered dreams

[Pre-Order Shattered Dreams](#)

**Are you ready for Stone Richards?**

**[Pre-Order Meant for Stone coming March 1st now!](#)**

# acknowledgments

Every single time I keep thinking it's going to be easy. It takes a village to help and I don't want to leave anyone out.

**My Husband:** I love you, I don't tell you enough. Thank you for letting me sit in bed most of the day writing, and for not busting my chops when I don't cook. Oh wait you do!

**My Kids:** Matteo, Michael, and Erica, Thank you for letting me do this. Thank you for being proud of me, I love you honey bunches and oats!

**Shauna:** I don't even know where to start. Thank you for putting up with the messages that make no sense and knowing what it means. For doing whatever I need to have done without me even knowing!

**Dani:** Thank you for taking me on and not quitting on me when I started to message you twenty times a day! I don't know what I would do without you.

**Madison Maniacs:** This little group went from two people to so much more and I can't thank you guys enough. This group is my go to, my safe place. You push me and get excited for me and I can't wait to watch us grow even bigger!

**Karen:** Thank you for loving me and for making my words look pretty!

**BLOGGERS & INFLUENCERS.** THANK YOU FOR TAKING A CHANCE ON ME. You give so much of yourself

effortlessly and you are the voice that we can't do this without.

**My Squad:** To my family aka favourite nieces and aunts group chat. Your support during this whole ride has been amazing. I can honestly say without a doubt that I have the best Squad of life!!!!

**And Lastly and most importantly to YOU the reader,**  
Without you none of this would be real. So thank you for reading!

# about natasha madison



When her nose isn't buried in a book, or her fingers flying across a keyboard writing, she's in the kitchen creating gourmet meals. You can find her, in four inch heels no less, in the car chauffeuring kids, or possibly with her husband scheduling his business trips.

I would love to keep in touch with you!

[Newsletter](#)

[Website](#)

[Reader's Group](#)



**also by**  
**natasha madison**

**Meant For Series**

[Meant For Stone](#) *coming March 1st*

**Southern Wedding Series**

[Mine To Kiss](#)

[Mine To Have](#)

[Mine To Hold](#)

[Mine To Cherish](#)

[Mine To Love](#)

[Mine To Take](#)

[Mine To Promise](#)

[Mine to Honor](#)

[Mine To Keep](#)

**Made For Series**

[Made For Me](#)

[Made For You](#)

[Made For Us](#)

[Made For Romeo](#)

**The Only One Series**

[Only One Kiss](#)

[Only One Chance](#)

[Only One Night](#)

[Only One Touch](#)

[Only One Regret](#)

[Only One Mistake](#)

[Only One Love](#)

[Only One Forever](#)

**Southern Series**

[Southern Chance](#)

[Southern Comfort](#)

[Southern Storm](#)

[Southern Sunrise](#)

[Southern Heart](#)

[Southern Heat](#)

[Southern Secrets](#)

[Southern Sunshine](#)

**This Is Series**

[This Is Crazy.](#)

[This Is Wild](#)

[This Is Love](#)

[This Is Forever](#)

**Hollywood Royalty Series**

[Hollywood Playboy.](#)

Hollywood Princess

Hollywood Prince

**Something So Series**

Something So Right

Something So Perfect

Something So Irresistible

Something So Unscripted

Something So BOX SET

**Tempt Series**

Tempt The Boss

Tempt The Playboy.

Tempt The Hookup

Tempt The Ex

**Heaven & Hell Series**

Hell and Back

Pieces of Heaven

Heaven & Hell Box Set

**Love Series**

Perfect Love Story.

Unexpected Love Story.

Broken Love Story.

Mixed Up Love



Faux Pas

Until Brandon