

Nanny

FOR
MY

**DADDY'S
BEST FRIEND**

OLIVIA PEARL

Nanny For My Daddy's Best Friend

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS AGE GAP ROMANCE

Olivia Pearl



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ABOUT AUTHOR

ABOUT

My one-night stand is now my boss and the father of my son.

Speeding away from my wedding, my car breaks down on the highway.

And who comes to my rescue... Liam.

My one-night stand and father of my three-year-old son.

I thought I'd never see him again.

Now here I am, just as moist as I was that night.

With nowhere else to go,

He offers a haven for me and my son,

by hiring me as his nanny.

My mind was telling me no,

But “yes” was what came out my mouth.

Now I spend my days trying not to strangle him,
and my nights trying not to give up my goodies.

But he weakens my walls until my body and heart can't
resist him.

He has yet to notice the similarity in our son's eyes.

With my secret in such close proximity,
It's only a matter of time before he realizes that my son
also carries his DNA.

Prologue

Liam

“**F**uck, you feel so good,” I moaned as her back slammed into the now closed hotel room door.

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Her hand shot out and gripped my shirt as she pulled me towards her. The second her lips touched mine I was moving my hands down her back and to her ass. She rocked her hips against mine, causing us both to let out a soft moan against the other’s mouth.

I needed more though. I needed to feel her skin against my own. Apparently Kristy? Alicia? Fuck. Whatever her name was, she was on the same page, because her hands moved to the hem of my shirt and started to pull it up. I followed her lead and we broke apart just long enough to rid the other of their shirt. Her mouth was back on mine the second we were shirtless. I rocked my hips against hers, and it caused her to moan, opening her mouth just enough for me to slip my tongue inside. I moaned as I felt her tongue against my own. As I felt her body responding to mine, she traveled her hands down my

chest and abs and made quick work of undoing my belt and slacks as my hands easily pushed down her skirt and panties.

She was just about to push my own pants down, but my hands went right to her ass, and I easily picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my hips, and I walked us the short distance to the dresser. My mouth broke away from her as I started to kiss down her neck as I moved my right hand around to her wet pussy and slipped my finger inside her. She arched back and gave a deep moan at the shockwave of pleasure that shot up her spine. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me closer as my mouth worked its way down her neck and took her nipple into my mouth.

“Liam,” she moaned as she rocked her hips against me. At least she remembered my name. But now I definitely couldn’t ask her what it was again.

I slipped a second finger inside of her and worked her quickly, but efficiently as I knew her need was just as strong as my own. She continued to rock her hips against my fingers and after a moment, I removed them as I kissed my way back up her body.

I reached into my back pocket and quickly dug out the condom that I had tucked into it. It was always important to be prepared. You just never knew, especially with these conferences. I slipped it on before I pressed the tip of my cock against her wet hole before I was pressing inside of her. She arched back and gave a deep moan as she felt me entering her. Slowly, I pushed myself inside. We both moaned as I breached her, and I couldn’t believe how remarkable she felt. When I finally bottomed out, we were both panting and trembling from our need.

“Fuck, you feel so good. All wet and warm around me,” I said into her neck as I peppered it with kisses.

My whole body felt amazing, and I knew it was only going to get better. After a few moments to allow her to adjust to my size, I slowly pulled out almost all of the way before I pushed back in. I was rewarded with a deep moan from her, and I knew she was enjoying this just as much as I was. Her legs tightened around me, and she wiggled her hips slightly looking to get me to go even deeper. I knew she was ready for me, so I stopped going gently and started to truly slam into her, making sure I aimed for her sweet spot. I knew I hit it when her back arched off from the lockers and she gave a deep moan that echoed off of the walls.

“Fuck, that’s it. Don’t stop,” she begged as I felt her walls tightening around my cock. She wrapped her right arm around my neck and placed her left hand behind her to help her thrust her hips in time with mine. I moaned as I started to pick up my pace and truly pound into her.

“You’re so close. I can feel it. Cum for me Baby. Cover my cock with your sweet juices.”

I sucked on her neck and with a sharp thrust that resulted in my cock hitting her sweet spot dead on again, she was squeezing my cock as she came with a loud moan. The added tightness almost sent me right over the edge. I was so close and part of me never wanted this to stop, but I could barely hold on.

“You feel so good, so fucking good,” I chanted as my thrusts became erratic, and I could feel the tell-tale heat pooling in my lower stomach.

After a couple more deep thrusts, I was slamming into her as I came hard with a deep groan as my cock pulsed. She moaned at the sensation, and we both pulsed around each other as our bodies struggled to come down from the high. The room was filled with our heavy breaths as we both tried to get our minds to function again.

We were both in Denver for a conference, and it had been incredibly boring. It was all about networking. Normally I wouldn't be going to something like this, but one of my long running and good clients was hosting the event, and it would have been rude for me to not attend. I had accepted that I was going to be spending the two-day conference bored out of my mind. I never expected to find a woman so enticing and beautiful as my new friend was. God, I'm such an asshole. I have to figure out her name.

I pressed a kiss to her lips before I slowly moved back and pulled out of her. She gave a groan at the feeling, and I couldn't blame her. This was the part that I always hated as well. It felt like I could never get the condom feeling off my cock for a few hours, even when I showered.

"And here I thought I was going to suck at networking," she joked, and I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me.

"Small business?" I asked as I went over and tossed the condom in the trash can.

"No business. My father sent me with the hopes that this conference would, well he said inspire, but what he really meant was for me to hopefully get hired at a respectable business," she gave a slight eye roll, and I could tell the relationship between her and her father wasn't the best.

"You're what, twenty-one? Twenty-two?"

"Twenty-one," she answered as she stayed on the dresser giving me a full display of her body.

Fuck, this was one of the reasons why I tended to lean towards the younger females. They were confident in their body, and it was sexy as hell. Her having daddy issues also wasn't a big surprise. She was a twenty-one-year-old having sex with a thirty-eight-year-old. Typically that meant she didn't have the best dynamic with her father. I never worried about it too much. I

wasn't looking for a relationship, especially right now. I was just getting out of a long-term relationship that was getting very toxic. The last thing I wanted was to get back into a relationship.

"Where do you work now?" I asked as I grabbed us both a water bottle from the mini fridge.

"Bartender at a gentlemen's club," she said with a smirk.

"Can't imagine why your father would have a problem with that," I said with a chuckle as I handed her a water bottle.

"It's not like I'm the one stripping. Besides, I feel like I should get some credit for working in the first place. My parents are wealthy. I could be living off of them. Instead, I'm working."

"I have to give you that. Why the strip club?"

There were plenty of people, especially in their early twenties that had rich parents and felt entitled to not work. They believed they would be supported by their parents and shouldn't have to work. She was at least trying to work and most likely find herself.

"It's just a job. Before I was a bartender there I worked at a dive bar. Before that, I was a line cook at a dinner. I guess I am just trying to figure out my passion," she gave a small shrug, and I could tell that she was quoting her father, and he didn't appreciate her unknowingness.

"Hey, people your age are either getting drunk in college or they are working. You're not doing anything that millions of others your age aren't doing. You'll figure out who you are and what you are meant to do with your life."

I didn't typically give life advice to my one-night stands, but we were here at a networking conference so what the hell? At twenty-one she had a lot of years left in her to figure it out. Just because myself and many others

downstairs had already known that didn't mean there was anything wrong with her. Technically by society's standards, we were the freaks and were the ones destined to have a midlife crisis and ruin our lives by the time we were fifty. I was really hoping that wasn't going to be true for myself. But then again, I was thirty-eight and about to have my first divorce, so what the hell did I know?

"I'm not too worried about it. There's nothing wrong with being a free spirit," she downed the rest of her water before she finally got off the dresser. She continued as she swayed her hips and crossed the short distance between us. "You know what else my free-spirit personality lets me do?"

"Please tell me it's yoga." I would love to see how flexible she was.

"Oh it's definitely yoga," she responded with a devilish smile, and I knew right at this moment I was never going to be able to forget her or this night.

Jasmine

Four Years Later...

“Oh Honey, you look so beautiful,” my mother gushed.

I don't know if beautiful was the word I would use. It wasn't that I didn't look good. I just didn't look like myself. I understood that's kinda how it worked when you were getting married. You wore a dress you would normally never wear. You got your hair and makeup done as well as your nails. It was all a big show you had to put on and you needed to look the part. It also wasn't that I wasn't used to getting all dolled up.

I enjoyed getting my nails done on the occasion, and I wore makeup and could do my hair. I didn't tend to every day. Mostly, I went with a natural look and tossed my hair up in a ponytail or just let it hang. My nails tended to be painted because I did them, but I didn't stress if the color was all chipped off. Or I missed and got a bit on my skin. I was pretty easy going and that trickled down to my appearance. Something both of my parents hated.

“It's different,” I managed to say as I took my appearance in. The dressing room at the church had a connecting three floor length mirrors so I could see

myself from multiple angles. I couldn't determine if that was a good thing or not.

I didn't really have much of a picture of the type of wedding I thought I would have. Mostly because I didn't really want to be married. Well, that part wasn't fully true. I grew up happy to get married one day, but my mind focused on everything my husband and I could do. I thought about the trips we would take. The adventures that we would have. Having children, growing old together. It didn't focus on the wedding aspect. Kinda always figured I would elope or something. When we had gone wedding dress shopping, I had a more bohemian design in mind. Something simple, flowy, looser fabric so I could move around and pee on my own. What I ended up with was a princess ball gown that weighed a ton, and I was going to need all of my five bridesmaids' help to hold up should I have to pee. I was gonna need to watch how much I drank at the reception.

My mother had loved this dress though, and she was paying for it so it only seemed fair I got what she wanted. Especially because she was never going to let me pick the style I wanted. It also didn't help that Adam preferred this look over my usual style.

“Adam is going to love it. Remember, if you keep your husband happy, he will keep you happy. Happy wife, happy life can only happen if your husband is happy with you,” she lectured, and what was scary was she actually believed it.

Fuck, what was I doing here?

I loved Adam, or did I? I didn't know anymore. This wasn't supposed to be my life. Adam and I had been friends, sort of, four years ago. We were fuck buddies to be frank. Neither of us expected to ever be in an official relationship. Our fathers were business partners, and they had this grand idea

that we would get married and unite our families even more. Adam and I, we didn't want that. We had great sex, but that was all we were interested in.

It all changed when I discovered I was pregnant. Our suddenly fun and carefree relationship turned into something real. It was a massive shock to me that I was pregnant. I always made sure the guy wore a condom. I couldn't take birth control. I had tried it when I was sixteen, and I had a terrible reaction to it. I felt like a crazy person. I had zero control over my emotions. It wasn't something I could live with. The doctor had said my body just needed to adjust and to give it two weeks, but even after two months I was a complete wreck. There was no way I was going to be living like that. The condom must have broken though, because I was pregnant.

Everything moved so fast after that. Our parents found out, and then Adam and I were exclusively dating. That turned to living together and raising our son. Now we were getting married, which was a logical progression in our relationship. There were just two problems. I was no longer in love with him, and Jeremy wasn't his son.

That's right, our three-year-old son that he has been raising and believes is his, isn't. He's from a one-night stand with a man that I met four years ago at a networking conference in Dallas. Liam. I didn't even know his last name. I knew if the truth ever came out, people would call me terrible names. Say I am a horrible person and how could I lie to someone like this. And they would be right. The thing was, I didn't start out lying. I believed that Adam was Jeremy's father when I was pregnant. The time between sleeping with Liam and Adam was only two weeks.

The doctor's all said the timing worked to be Adam, and I didn't have any reason to go against them. It wasn't until he was around one that I started to notice that he didn't look anything like Adam and barely like me. Genetic

traits that Adam had, like his dimple chin, didn't pass on to Jeremy. In a moment of insanity, I took a glass that Adam used and sent it off for a DNA test. I told myself I was being crazy. That it was going to come back that Jeremy was his son, and I was a nutcase for no reason. Only my worst fear happened, and it was proven that Adam was not his father. That was two years ago, and I haven't told him since.

"I can't tell you how long I have been waiting for this moment. My little girl is all grown up," my mother gushed as she practically melted against me. At least one of us was enthused.

"It's just a wedding Mom," I was trying to downplay this in my mind, but I knew I was doomed to fail.

"It's a marriage to the man that you love, the father of your son. You and him will spend the next eighty years together. For the rest of your life you get the honor of waking up to him every morning and going to bed next to him every night."

Oh that was so not what I needed to hear right now. The thought of having to see Adam's face every day for the rest of my life was not appealing. It actually made me angry. This was a horrible mistake, but it wasn't like I could turn back now. Everyone was here. I was in this ridiculous dress. I was well past the point of no return.

Okay, so I wasn't in love with him. Lots of people are married and don't have any real love for their spouse. But they stay for the kids. Adam is the only father that Jeremy knows and sure, he's not the best father. He works way too much, and he doesn't spend any one-on-one time with Jeremy, but he's the only father my son has ever known. I know he loves him. We could work on the rest.

"Thanks Mom," I said, trying to sound excited. I knew I was failing in that

regard, but I was hoping people would assume it was from nerves. Or my lack of ability to get a deep breath.

“I’m going to go and take my seat. Your father will be waiting for you,” she pressed a kiss to my cheek before she headed out. I gave myself one last look in the mirror before I turned and grabbed my bouquet and made my way out of the room.

I found my father waiting by the closed church doors that led into the main church part. I could see how happy and proud he was, but I couldn’t help but wonder if he would feel the same way if I was marrying someone else.

“You look stunning,” he said with a warm smile.

“Thanks Dad. I guess we better get this show on the road, eh?”

I could see my bridesmaids standing off to the side with their respected groomsmen. Everyone was ready and waiting on me. We might as well get this over with.

“You ready?” he double checked.

“Completely.” Liar.

He turned and gave a nod to the others, and they all got into a line. Once they were ready, they opened the door and the music began to play. I stood with my right arm wrapped around my dad’s left as we waited for our turn to go. My heart was pounding in my chest. This should have been the happiest moment of my life, but I was dreading every second of it.

When it was our turn to walk, I followed my Dad’s pace and kept my eyes glued in front of me. I didn’t really care who was here. Most were business associates of our fathers. I only had a few friends, and they were all in the wedding party. Everyone else were just business people that mine and Adam’s fathers wanted to show off in front of. Again, I wanted a small and intimate wedding, but that would never be allowed by our fathers.

By the time we arrived at the altar, I felt like my heart was going to jump out of my chest. My father pressed a kiss to my cheek before he, literally, handed me over to Adam. My eyes locked onto Adam's, and I could see he was proud, but it felt more like he was proud of himself and not having me as his wife. There was no love within his eyes. Women have said that their soon to be husband would get misty eyed and the love within them oozed out of them.

There was none of that with Adam. It was as if he was standing up here with a stranger. I had thought he loved me. That even though I fell out of love with him, he still loved me. Standing up here, though, I knew that was all a lie. He didn't love me. I knew that my father would say that I was being dramatic. That Adam did love me; he just didn't show it in the traditional sense. But that was all a lie. When you loved someone you listened to them. You didn't ignore them when you got home. You didn't flirt with other people in front of them. You didn't make passive aggressive comments about what they were doing and how they were doing it wrong. There weren't even displays of affection. I couldn't remember the last time he kissed me. Adam just loved what I represented. Wealth, prestige, and bragging rights. It was like we were performing a business deal, nothing more.

What was I doing?

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of ..."
the priest started, but I tuned him out.

I should be paying attention. I should be hanging off of every single word he said, but I couldn't seem to do that. Despite my resolve, I turned and allowed my eyes to scan the crowd. Just as I suspected, I didn't know anyone personally here. I had seen a good number of them, but that was through

photographs around my parents' house or at various conferences. A few Christmas parties, that type of thing. Never in a personal capacity.

Suddenly, my heart stopped, and my stomach dropped out at the sight of the one person I never expected to see again, Liam.

This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be here. Why would he be here? And why was he sitting on my side of the church? I had only met him that one night. I didn't even think he remembered my name. There was no reason for him to be here. None at all. He didn't look all that interested either. His eyes were wandering around the church and not on us.

I couldn't help but look over at Jeremy who was standing next to the other groomsmen. He was so adorable in his little tux as he held the white velvet pillow with our rings on them. He had been so nervous about dropping them. I had tied them onto the pillow so he wouldn't have to worry. He was standing there, trying not to fidget; he had no idea that his biological father was sitting not a hundred feet from him.

"Jasmine," I heard Adam softly whisper, but there was a sharp tone to it.

I snapped my attention back over to him and a quick glance at the priest told me I had missed something. Something important. Shit, how long had I been trapped in my spiraling thoughts?

"Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband? In sickness and in health. In good times and bad. For richer or poorer. From this moment on until death takes you," the priest repeated.

I do. That's all I had to say. Just two words. I do. Come on, say something.

"I ..." my eyes trailed over to Jeremy for a moment. Almost begging me to say I do. "I don't," I returned my gaze back over to Adam's now shocked face. "I'm sorry. I don't love you. I can't do this."

Dropping my bouquet, I went over and picked up Jeremy before I turned

and began to run as fast as I could in this monstrous dress down the aisle and towards the doors. I couldn't do this any longer. Not when I didn't love him. Not when he didn't know the truth about Jeremy. And not when Jeremy's biological father sat there watching, having no clue that the ring bearer was his own son.

Liam

Well, that was the most interesting wedding I'd ever been to. When Francis told me that his only child was getting married, I knew I was going to have to attend. I had never met his daughter despite the fact that we had been best friends since early childhood. Honestly, it's a weird friendship. We were really close growing up, and then we both went to different universities and we grew apart. But where most would accept that they were no longer friends, we still kept in touch. We would speak once a month and visit whenever we were in each other's town. It was almost as if we were grandfathered into each other's lives. Like we couldn't divorce each other because the other knew where the bodies were buried.

I never expected to be sitting in the hard ass pew, and *she* walked in of all people, Jasmine. I could have sworn her name was Stacey. Or Kristy. Definitely had an 'ee' sound on the end. I really didn't expect for her to do a one-eighty and leave her poor fiancé standing up at the altar like an idiot. I had to assume she ran with her son and not some random kid.

The whole day had been odd for me. It had been a few years since I had

seen Francis in person. We often would meet up when we were at the same functions or if we both happened to be in the other's town. Typically that was me in Miami and not him out in Newport. When he had called to tell me his daughter was getting married and invited me, I knew I couldn't really say no. He hadn't been there for my wedding to Ellis, but that wasn't on him. We had decided to slip away and elope one weekend. We didn't invite anyone, and when we returned, we had a reception just to make everyone else feel better. I had invited him to the reception, but he had already promised to be at the launch of one of his newer client's product line. I understood, and it didn't truly matter if he was there or not. Our friendship was stronger than a missed spontaneous party.

I had been fully prepared to spend the day watching the happy couple express their love for each other. Even though my own marriage had gone up in smoke, I was prepared to be happy for them. Mostly for Francis because I could tell how much he loved his daughter and was excited for this.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I approached Francis where he was standing outside.

He looked like he was ready to explode. Not that I could blame him. The wedding looked expensive, very extravagant, and now it was all for nothing. He had a daughter and grandson out there somewhere. He had a future son-in-law devastated. At least I had to assume he was devastated. I didn't see where he ran off to after Jasmine ran out.

"I have never been so embarrassed before in my life," he seethed, and it was not how I thought this conversation would be going.

"These things happen. Did you know she was having second thoughts?"

"No. Amanda was with her right before the wedding started. She said Jasmine was excited. That she had no idea she was getting cold feet. I would

have taken care of it if she suspected anything.”

“Do you think this was all because of cold feet?”

I wasn't too sure who Jasmine was at her core. I spent one night with her four years ago. Anything could have changed in the past four years. She had a son now, and I knew personally how children could change you. She was a free spirit, and that was evident with the different types of jobs she had worked. It also made so much more sense knowing that she was Francis' daughter. He wouldn't have appreciated her working in a bar or a strip club. It was possible from what I knew of her personality that she could change her mind like this without any notice.

“I don't know what this is. Her and Adam had been with each other for five or six years. I know they weren't serious at first, but once she discovered she was pregnant, they became serious. They are living together. They have a son together. They should be married. Nathan and I wanted them to be together. We worked hard to make that happen, and now Jasmine has thrown it all away and for what?”

Ahh, it all made sense. He was more pissed off that Jasmine ran out on his business partner's son. He was more worried about what this could do to his business and not what his daughter wanted. This was different compared to who he used to be growing up. We both grew up with strict parents. We both wanted to have our own family and do everything different with them. I had tried, but it would appear that Francis fell into old habits.

“Maybe she doesn't love him? We never know what is going on behind closed doors. All you can do is talk to her once she reaches out.”

That was all anyone could do right now. She ran for a reason, and I had to believe it was for a good one. It sucked for Francis and everyone involved, but there was nothing anyone could do.

“I’m sorry you had to come down and see this circus.”

“You know better than that. I’m gonna head back. Let me know what happens, and if you need anything, just call.”

We were in Miami, and I needed to get back to Oregon. I had my private jet scheduled for tomorrow, but I could easily make the change and get back tonight. There was no wedding so there was no need for me to be away from my son for the night.

“Thanks Liam. How is Christian? I know you have a lot going on with Ellis and the divorce.”

“He’s doing well, all things considered. The divorce is finalized, but no word from Ellis. I am waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“It’s been what? Sixteen, seventeen months since the divorce and since she last saw him?”

“Around there,” I answered with a sigh.

Four years ago, when I was with Jasmine, I had just left Ellis. I had no plans of getting back with her, only two weeks later she informed me that she was almost three months pregnant. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure the baby was mine, but I agreed to making things work for the baby. When he was born, we did a DNA test, she wasn’t happy about it, but I wasn’t willing to budge on it. It wasn’t that I wouldn’t raise another man’s child, but I needed to know if he was mine or not. I couldn’t spend the rest of his life or my life, wondering every time I looked at him if he was mine or not.

It came back that he was, and I apologized to Ellis; I worked my ass off to make it work between us. Ellis seemed to have changed with the pregnancy, for the better. Before, we were always fighting. She was going out with her friends and cheating on me. After she got pregnant and after Christian was born, it was like she was a completely different person. She was the woman I

had fallen in love with all over again. I was happy, and I couldn't imagine getting to spend my life without her and our son.

But it only lasted eighteen months before she went back to her old habits. She started going out with her friends, which I understood. She was entitled to have her own life as well and be more than a mother. But she would be out all night. She started coming home with hickeys on her that she tried to hide from me. Her phone would be blowing up with texts and calls from other men. I caught her on a few dating apps.

Then it was weekends away followed by a week or two she would be gone. Six months ago, I just couldn't take it anymore. I filed for divorce and finally six weeks ago, it was officially behind me. I knew a custody battle could be in my future, but as it stood, she was happy to live her life in Portland and forgot about us.

"Bitch," was all Francis said, and I had to agree with him.

"If she was around, he would get to have his mother in his life. On the other side of it though, her not being around makes my life less stressful and drama free."

"Everyone says it's better to have a two-parent household over a single parent. I can understand how easier it is to have two parents there to help raise the child. I don't know what I would have done without Amanda. At the same time, I don't know how beneficial it is to a child to have one parent that never shows up and is a constant disappointment."

And that was the debate I had constantly going through my mind. I wanted Ellis to be in Christian's life. I wanted her to wake up and see what she was missing out on. I wanted Christian to have a mother in his life. I had no problem co-parenting, especially because I knew how wonderful of a person and mother she could be. She had her own demons that she was trying to

work through and until she was ready to face them, Christian was the one that would be paying for it.

“The ball is in her court. There’s nothing I can do. I better get on the road. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help you.” I had no idea what I would do, but the offer was there should he decide to pick it up.

“Thanks Liam. Fly safe and give Christian a hug for me.”

“Will do,” I said as I pulled him in for a hug and he returned the favor.

I moved back and headed off for my rental car. I would need to stop at the hotel to grab my things, but the plane would need to get ready anyways. Today had not gone the way I thought, but it did allow me to head back home to my son.

I was just twenty minutes away from the church driving down a dirt road to avoid an accident on the highway. I did not expect to drive by a car with the hood up and smoke coming out of it. I drove by not thinking much of it, but I saw the white dress out of the corner of my eye, and I knew it was Jasmine. A quick look in my rearview mirror confirmed that she was the one broken down.

I should have kept going. Let someone else deal with it. But before I could even register what I was doing, I was slowing down and pulling off to the side of the road. I was going to regret this.

Jasmine

Of course this was happening to me. I made a rash decision to run out on my own wedding, and now my car had broken down just twenty minutes from the church. With the way my luck was going, Adam or my parents were going to drive by, and I'd be stuck on the side of the road and have to deal with them. I knew I would need to speak with them at some point, but I didn't want to be in my wedding dress when I did so.

I still couldn't believe that I had ran. I was fully prepared to say I do, until I saw Liam. It was like a bucket of cold water was poured over my head. I couldn't do it. I couldn't stand there and lie. I couldn't commit myself to Adam when I didn't love him. When the man that was my son's biological father sat there watching his own son in a wedding. A son he didn't know he had.

What the fuck was I going to do now? We didn't even have anywhere to go. We lived with Adam. Where were we going to go? It had been years since I had made impulsive decisions. I made a point of thinking things through because of Jeremy. He couldn't just sleep in a car or find something

to eat when we arrived in a different town. It was one thing to run and change my mind when it was just me, but now Jeremy was being dragged into this, and I never wanted this life for him. I never wanted him to wonder where he would be sleeping at night. He liked his routine. He liked having certain items around him. Now he was sitting in a car that was overheated.

The sight of a car driving by me sent both hope and fear shooting up my spine. I wanted someone to drive by and hopefully help me. At the same time, anyone could be in that car, and it might not be someone I wanted to deal with. Just as I thought they weren't going to stop, they finally did. They were a good thirty feet from me though so I couldn't make out their face. The second the driver's side door opened, my heart sank.

Are you kidding me?

Liam. Of all the people that could have found me, it was one of the four people I didn't want to pull over. I moved over so I was closer to the front of my car, blocking Liam's view of Jeremy. I wasn't certain he wouldn't be able to make the connection based on how Jeremy looked. He mostly looked like me, except for his eyes. But we had worn a condom every time we had sex that night. Logic would dictate that he wasn't the father. Logic was wrong this time around.

"Liam," I said once he was close enough. I still didn't understand why he was even at my wedding. I sure as shit didn't invite him.

"Jasmine. Small world."

"Even smaller when you show up to someone's wedding. How did you know I was getting married?"

Obviously, someone had to have told him. What I couldn't figure out was who and why.

"I was invited by your father."

“Well, I guess that’s better than you being a stalker,” I lightly joked. I guess they knew each other through business.

He gave an awkward huff of a laugh before he spoke, “You might actually be wishing I was a stalker. Your father and I have been best friends since we were around six years old.”

“Oh my god.”

No, no, no. This could not be happening right now. I knew my father had a very close friend named Liam. I didn’t even think that Liam could be short for anything. And really, what the hell were the odds?

I hadn’t seen a photo of him before because my parents weren’t one for memories. They preferred to showcase their professional achievements rather than loving moments with their family. My parents actually framed a report card that I got in the eighth grade and not my graduation photo. I had never seen any photo albums from either parent growing up. I barely knew my grandparents, but based on how both of my parents were, it was safe to say they took after their parents.

“Of course you are,” I said as I turned to try and get control over my emotions.

I could feel my heart rate increasing, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I was going to have a full-blown panic attack. I didn’t actually get them, but my heart would race, and I would feel like my whole world was crashing down. Maybe a mental breakdown would be a more accurate name.

It was just my luck that the guy I had an amazing night with, that would eventually be my son’s father was my father’s best friend from childhood. Because that was how lucky I truly was. This was an absolute nightmare. I couldn’t go home. I couldn’t go back to a life where I had to pretend to love someone. I couldn’t put myself through that or put my son through it.

I couldn't go back to my parents' place. Even if they were offering, which they wouldn't, I wasn't going to be putting up with their lectures and judgmental comments or looks. I also didn't want Jeremy in that environment. They were very strict and everything had to be a certain way. I didn't want him growing up having to worry about where the dishes go or if he left his shoes by the front door in his hurry to go and play or get something to eat.

I didn't even really have any close friends. Adam and I had friends together, but not separated. I couldn't go to them. They would only pick his side and rightfully so. I did leave him at the altar. A quick look at the back of my car showed me Jeremy. He was sitting there with his thumb in his mouth, a habit I had been trying to get him to break so he wouldn't ruin his teeth.

He looked scared, but also tired. It had been a really long day, and I knew he had been trying so hard to be ready for today. He wanted to make Adam proud. Deep down, I think he wanted to make Adam notice him. To smile at him and tell him he was proud. That he had done a good job. He was only three, but I knew that mattered to him.

“What the hell did I do?”

“Look, you made a decision. Maybe it was based on cold feet or maybe you just didn't love the guy. What you have to do right now is decide how you are going to move forward. Either you need to go and apologize your ass off to that man or you need to move forward.”

I turned to see that Liam was trying his best to keep himself together, but I could pick up hints of tension in his face and in his shoulders. He wasn't angry at me; he was feeling uncomfortable. Apparently, emotional women were not his strong suit. Couldn't really blame him for that. Most men didn't know what to do.

“I don’t love him,” I admitted. “I should, but I haven’t loved him for over a year now. I can’t go back home to him. I can’t go anywhere.”

I could feel my eyes tearing up. I was starting to panic again, but Liam was right. I needed to get a grip on myself. I had made this decision, and it was on me to live with it. I couldn’t go back, so I had to go forward. I just had no idea what forward looked like.

“Don’t cry. Fuck, please don’t cry,” he had a slight panicked tone to his voice before he recovered. “Alright, look. I need a nanny for the next eight months until my son Christian goes to kindergarten. You and your son can live in the nanny suite, and that will give you some time to figure out what you wish to do next.”

Oh, yeah no; that’s a terrible idea. Him and I should definitely not be living together. He really shouldn’t be around Jeremy all the time. Not to mention he said he had a son that would start kindergarten in eight months when the new school year began. Just like Jeremy was going to start. Which meant he had another woman pregnant either when we slept together or just after me.

All of this was a terrible idea, but what other choice did I have? I couldn’t stay here. I had no idea where Liam lived, but even if he lived in Miami, it was still a big enough city that I wouldn’t have to worry about running into Adam or my parents.

“Where do you live?” I managed to ask.

“Newport. It’s in Oregon, about an hour away from Portland. I know it would be a change for you and your son. A big change,” he started, but I cut him off before he could get much further.

“I’ll take it. I’ll have to drive up, so it’ll take me four or five days to get there.”

Despite how terrible this was going to be, it was also perfect. He lived on

the other side of the country. I had never been to Oregon, so I had no idea what Newport was like. Nor had I ever heard of it. But it wasn't in Miami. There was no threat of having to run into Adam or my parents. It was a chance for a fresh start. Even if it was for eight months, it would still give me time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

The biggest concern was obviously Liam discovering the truth about Jeremy, but I could avoid that hopefully easily enough. He didn't look like Liam, and as long as there were no similarities between Jeremy and his half-brother, then Liam would have no reason to suspect anything.

"Take all the time you need. I'll text you my address, and you can let me know when you are close. Is this your car?" he asked with a nod in its direction.

"No, it was a rental one that Adam wanted to use. He wanted all of the wedding party's cars to look the same."

It was stupid and to me seemed like a waste of money, but whatever.

"I can give you a ride back to your home if you'd like," he offered, and I could tell he was just as uncomfortable with that idea as I was, but really, what other choice did I have?

"I would appreciate that. Thanks."

Oh, this was a terrible idea, but I wasn't going to be stuck on the side of the road. I had no cell signal back here. Thankfully, I was smart enough to leave my purse in the car when I had arrived at the church to get dressed. Maybe subconsciously I had been planning on running this whole time. Who knows? What I needed to focus on was getting through this car ride, and hopefully I would be able to get on the road for Newport without Adam getting to the house first.

Liam

Yup, this was not how I was expecting for my day to go. Go to a wedding, have a few drinks, eat some food, have some cake, simple right? Nope. Instead, I am taking the runaway bride to her home before she would pack up and drive to Oregon to be my nanny. I was aiding and abetting a fugitive. Francis was going to lose his shit when he discovered what I was doing. Fuck, I didn't even want to think about how that conversation was going to go. Or yelling match would be more like it.

“You said your son's name was Christian?” she asked, breaking the tense silence between us.

“It is. He's three. He was born May nineteenth. And your son's name?”

“Jeremy. He was born August twenty-eighth.”

Shit they were close. Three months roughly apart. Hopefully, they would get along. It would be good for Christian to have someone to play with during the day. He got to go to a park, but it wasn't the same thing. He didn't have a set friend. I was hoping come school time he would be able to make friends and we could have some playdates set up.

“Does he have a set routine?”

That was something I was very strict on. I wanted Christian to be on a routine, so he was getting proper sleep, food, and play time. It was vital to our family dynamic, and it was something that Jasmine was going to have to adapt to. Hopefully, her son’s routine would work with Christian’s and it would be a smooth transition for them.

“Not really,” she simply said, and I was shocked..

How could she not have a routine for her three-year-old son? Does she just let him do whatever he wanted? Surely, there was a routine.

“You don’t have a set schedule that you do for him?”

“What, like when he eats or goes to bed?” she asked, slightly confused, and it concerned me that she needed clarification on this.

“Exactly.”

“Not really. If he’s hungry, then I feed him something. He normally goes to bed around eight or nine, somewhere around there. It just depends on how long he napped or if he didn't nap. And sometimes we are watching a movie or out playing. He always brushes his teeth, and I try to get him in the bath every couple of days, but sometimes we forget and do it the next day.”

Holy shit. I was really regretting this. I figured she would have had some form of a routine for Jeremy. Wasn’t that standard for every parent, especially a first-time parent? I knew she had a more free-spirited personality, but I would have thought that tightened up once she gave birth. Apparently, not.

“Christian is on a tight schedule. I’ll make sure to write it down for you to follow.”

After that, I wasn’t so sure how well these next eight months would go over. She might also not last. I didn’t know what types of jobs she’s had in

the past four years, but she bounced around a great deal when I met her. Given her nature, she might not be able to stay too long in one job. I would need to keep an eye out for a replacement so I would be ready for when she up and left.

“I will make sure he sticks with it,” she gave me a tight smile, and I could tell she wanted to say something, but she was biting her lip.

It didn’t matter what she had to say. I wasn’t about to change who I was. I wasn’t about to change how I parented. There was going to be a learning curve on her part, and I was going to have to find some patience when dealing with her until she got used to the routine.

“Have you been to Oregon?” Fuck, conversation has to get easier right?

“No, I haven’t. I’ve traveled to a few places in the country and in Europe, but I haven’t seen Oregon. What is Newport like?”

“It’s a small town on the coast. It’s a popular tourist town, but it’s beautiful, and there are plenty of things to do. There’s an aquarium, the beach, lighthouses, whale watching, and more. It’s a great town to raise a child in.”

And not one that Ellis was happy about living in. We used to live in Portland. We both grew up there. I went to school for business in New York, and Francis ended up in Miami. We both wanted to get as far from our parents as possible. After New York, I ended up moving back to Portland. It wasn’t planned, but my parents were getting older, and my mom was starting to have some health problems. I wanted to be close by in case either needed me, especially with me being their only child. No more snow was also a nice bonus.

When I discovered that Ellis was pregnant we had discussed in length whether or not we should be raising our child in a big city. She loved big cities, and she didn’t want to leave. I had tried to find a compromise. Perhaps

living on the outskirts. We couldn't find a house that we both liked, mostly Ellis. Eventually I was able to convince her to come to Newport for a visit and she agreed to move there.

I've always loved the idea of raising a child in a small town. Less crime and less fear of something going wrong, but also, the people were nicer. There was a different lifestyle in a small town, and I wanted that for my child. I also didn't want Christian growing up in private schools and multiple nannies with rich friends that were all entitled. I wanted him to be a good person and to understand the value of money. To make real friends with real personalities and desires. People with morals.

I think part of the reason why Ellis and I didn't work out was because we lived in Newport. She loved living there for about a year before the honeymoon wore off. It was a beautiful town, but I think she kept expecting for the vacation to end and once she realized that it wouldn't, it started her spiral.

"It sounds like a great place to raise a child. I can't wait to see it and explore. How long have you lived there?"

"Three and a half years now roughly."

"And you have no other nannies or babysitters?"

"No, it'll just be you. There will be times when I will be away for business, but you will be notified in advance."

"And your wife?" she hesitantly asked.

"Divorced. You don't need to concern yourself with her." I was not about to tell her about Ellis. It wasn't her concern at all, and if Ellis did decide to reach out, then I would handle it.

"Okay," she said as she turned her attention back to the window.

A quick look in my rearview mirror showed me that Jeremy was fast asleep.

I felt bad for the kid. It would have already been a long day for him, and I knew it was only half over. I felt bad for the little guy. He was expecting to see his parents get married today and instead, he's sleeping in the back of a stranger's car with no idea that he's going to be moving across the country.

Hopefully, Jasmine would be able to work something out with Adam. Maybe he didn't love her either, and they could figure out how to co-parent together. Despite the fact that I didn't know Jeremy, I didn't want him to grow up without both of his parents in his life. I didn't want that for any child, and that was only heightened by my current position. Maybe all Jasmine needed was a chance to get away for a little bit and clear her head. Maybe once she got away and everything started to sink in, she would realize she made a mistake. That she did love Adam, and she would come back and make it work.

It was a lot of maybes and what ifs, but sometimes all it took was time for one to realize what one had before one threw it away. If nothing else, this decision will either help her to realize she made a mistake or solidify that she didn't love Adam and didn't want to be with him. It wasn't my place to tell her which one was right. Only she could do that. All I could do was offer her a safe place for her and her son to be and a job. I was just hoping it wouldn't come back to bite me in the ass.

Jasmine

“**Y**ou sure about this?” Liam asked as he pulled up to my house. Adam’s car wasn’t in the driveway, and I knew he wasn’t home yet. He had taken it over to his friend’s place last night because the groom couldn’t see the bride before the wedding. A tradition I found to be ridiculous. We had seen each other all day two days ago, and yet yesterday everything was going to go wrong today if we saw each other. Well, surprise, it all turned to shit regardless.

I had no idea how long he would be gone for, so I knew I needed to move quickly. I had to get myself and Jeremy changed before packing up the car with valuables that I couldn’t leave behind. And then we had to get on the road. I had no idea how far we would get, but it was only three in the afternoon so I could get us through some of Florida and maybe even out of it if traffic wasn't too bad or I didn’t get too tired. It was a six-hour drive to get out of Florida, so it might be a challenge for me. If I could reach Tampa, though, I would be happy.

Was I sure about all of this? Nope, not even a little. But it was too late to be

uncertain about anything. I was doing this. I was committed to it. All I could do was keep moving forward to the next step and just hope I didn't screw up somewhere along the way.

"Absolutely," I said with a confident smile, one I didn't truly feel, but he didn't need to know that.

The fact that we slept together one night and now had a son that he didn't know about didn't change that he was a virtual stranger and now my boss. Maybe keeping things professional and the personal stuff to a minimum would help me to not feel like a complete asshole for keeping his son from him. I highly doubted it, but hey, it was all I had.

"Thanks for the ride. I have your address, and I will text you when I am close. I truly appreciate the opportunity."

I meant that sincerely too. I was a stranger. He didn't need to offer me a job. Hell, he didn't need to offer me a ride home. I appreciated that he had done both. Even if they made my stomach feel like someone was putting my intestines through a vice grip.

"It's no problem at all. I will see you in five days or so."

I opened the car door and managed to get my very large ass out of his car. Fuck, I could not wait until I could get out of this dress. How was I going to do that alone? I had no clue. I went and opened the back door and grabbed my purse before I went and unbuckled Jeremy and picked him up. He stirred slightly, but he relaxed fairly quickly in my arms. The poor kid was exhausted, and I suspected he didn't get much sleep last night. Too excited for the big day.

I closed the door and made my way up the driveway to reach our front door. I hated that this special day for Jeremy had been ruined. Ruined by me. All I could do was hope that with him being three he wouldn't remember this

when he got older. Though, I suspected between my parents, Adam, and his parents, they wouldn't hesitate to make sure he remembered.

I brought Jeremy inside and made my way up to his room. I carefully placed him down on his bed for now. I needed to get him changed and obviously in the car, but right now I needed to get changed and get everything packed up for us. With some luck, the short nap would be enough for him to be more awake when we got ready to head out. He had never been on a road trip, and I knew he would enjoy some of the sights that we would drive by. I could also stop at some places along the way for him to see and take photos of.

I was hoping he would see this as an adventure and wouldn't be too upset when we didn't come back home. It was funny, because before having Jeremy, the thought of going away or moving to a new place never bothered me. Now though, all I could think about was what he would need. What I needed to make sure he had. If we were going to be there longer than eight months, I would need to make sure he was enrolled in school. Probably the same school that Christian was in. Though, I had to imagine there wouldn't be that many schools in a small town.

With a deep sigh, I turned and headed out of his bedroom and bee-lined it for mine. I couldn't get lost in what ifs or my thoughts. I had to get everything packed up and out of here before Adam or my parents showed up. Honestly, I wasn't too certain which would be worse.

The second I was in my bedroom I was moving over to the walk-in closet that had a full-length mirror. I had no idea how I was going to be getting out of this dress, but I needed to get out of it. I turned to try and see if I could see the thick ribbon that laced up my top. The knot was tight on it. They hadn't

exactly gotten me in this dress with the desire to get me out of it. I had no idea how Adam was supposed to do it.

After struggling with trying to get the right angle and the tight knot, I gave up at the sight of my scissors sitting on my vanity table. I had used them just the other day to cut off some tags for a new bathing suit and a couple of dresses that I had been planning on wearing on our honeymoon to Cancun.

I went over and picked the scissors up. They were sharp. I used them to cut fabric when I wanted to make some new curtains or a Halloween costume for Jeremy. I looked at the dress through my reflection and even though I hated the thing, I knew someone put in a lot of hours to make it. This was bad, terrible, but I needed out of Fort Knox, and right now, this seemed like the only way.

I turned my back more towards the mirror. It was awkward, but I managed to get the scissors underneath the corset top, and I began to cut. The ribbon easily fell away and so did the thicker fabric that made up the top of my dress. Once I got halfway up, I could finally take a deep breath, and it only encouraged me to go faster. I hadn't even realized just how tight the dress was. I had gotten used to it within the past ninety minutes. Once the top hit the floor, I was easily able to slip the bottom part of my dress off, and I stepped out of it.

Tossing the scissors back down on my vanity table, I made quick work of getting dressed in some comfy jeans and a t-shirt. I grabbed my suitcase and began to grab anything that I could think of. I was going to be a nanny in a beach town so I grabbed whatever bathing suits I had as well as all of the comfy clothes I could manage. I then grabbed a few of my nicer clothes just in case I had to go to an event or something to keep an eye on Christian. I had no idea, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Especially because I was only

going to have the five grand in my bank account, and that would need to hold us over until I started to get paid from Liam.

By the time I was done, I had three suitcases full of clothes, shoes, and various accessories. I had another suitcase that I was going to be using for valuable things I never wanted to lose like photos and whatnot. I buzzed around the house grabbing everything that I could and putting it away. With that suitcase finished, I got started on getting them all in my car. Thankfully, my trunk was big. I would need to get Jeremy's suitcase in the backseat, but I could keep a snack bag in the front with me. I also had a DVD player in my car so I was going to be grabbing a shitload of DVDs for him to watch.

With the car packed, I headed back inside and got to work on grabbing some things for the car. I grabbed the cooler. I would need to stop for some ice, but I made some sandwiches and tossed in some fruit and drinks. I would need to restock along the way, but it would at least be a start. I grabbed a bunch of DVDs for Jeremy and got all of that in the car. With nothing left to do, I grabbed the last suitcase and made my way back up into Jeremy's room.

He was still sound asleep, but I knew he wouldn't stay that way for much longer. He normally only slept for two hours when he napped. I grabbed all of his clothes and got them into the suitcase. I then grabbed his own suitcase and put in his favorite stuffed animals, toys, and books, plus his spare blanky. He had a favorite blanket that he slept with and was obsessed with. When I noticed that he was favoring it, I got an extra one just in case we lost it.

With the last suitcase closed, I grabbed his favorite PJs and went over to him.

"Baby Boy," I said as I rubbed his chest gently.

He stirred slightly with a groan, and I knew he wasn't ready to be awake yet.

“I know, come on Sweetie. You need to wake up for Mama.”

He groaned again as his eyes blinked open, and he moved and rubbed his eye, trying to wake up.

“Sleep, Mama,” he softly said.

“I know Baby. I just need to get you changed out of your tux, and then we are gonna get in the car and take a trip,” I said as I started to unbutton his jacket.

“Trip?”

“We’re gonna take a vacation for a little while. We have to drive all the way across the country though. But when we get there, you will be able to see the other ocean. And I have been told there is whale watching.”

“Whale watching?” he asked as I got him sitting up.

“It’s where you can take a boat ride and you see whales. Sometimes, you can even see them from the beach. And we can make stops along the way to see different spots. It’s gonna be a lot of fun.”

“Daddy come?”

“Um, no Baby. It’s just going to be me and you on this one. But we can make it fun and take lots of pictures.”

I hated lying to him, but there was no way he was going to understand any of this. It would be best for him to think we were taking a trip, and then I could figure out how to tell him.

We worked together to get him changed into his PJs before I grabbed the rest of the items for the car and we both headed outside. I got him into his booster seat before I loaded the car up and got in myself.

“I brought DVDs. Is there one you would like to watch?” I asked as I looked at him from my rearview mirror.

He had his blanket and his pillow so if he wanted to go back to sleep, he

would be able to. I was hoping he wouldn't fall asleep again, because I was going to need to be able to get him to sleep tonight.

"Nemo!" he excitedly said.

"Of course, how silly of me." I reached over and grabbed his favorite movie. I had heard and seen this movie over a hundred times. I didn't really want to listen to it again, but if it kept him calm and quiet for the drive, I would gladly listen to it a hundred times again.

After getting it into my CD rom drive, I hit play. With the opening credits starting, I put my car in drive, and we were heading off. I had no idea if this was going to be a decision I lived to regret. What I did know, it was too late to turn back.

Liam

“W hoa!” Christian cheered as a wave hit his waist.

It had been four days since the wedding that didn't happen, and today I had decided to take Christian down to the beach for some fun. He had been more withdrawn since the divorce, and I really noticed it once I got back. He had spent the night with my parents in Portland and by the time I picked him up, he was more than ready to leave. Not that I could blame him; my parents weren't exactly fun.

I was worried about Christian though and how withdrawn he was getting. I knew he missed his mom, so of course he was having a harder time adjusting to it all. However, I had hoped that it wouldn't be this bad considering how often Ellis was gone. Especially towards the end when she would be gone for a week or two without ever reaching out to us. Still, she always came home and after six weeks, almost seven now, Christian was starting to miss her deeply.

I hated that I could give my son anything he wanted, but the one thing he wanted most in this world. I couldn't buy him his mother back. I couldn't

negotiate a deal with someone that didn't even want to sit at the table. My hands were tied, and there was nothing I could do about it until Ellis decided to show up. And even then, I didn't know what to do, because there was no guarantee she would even be in his life at that point. What Francis said was true. It's sometimes better to have no parent than the parent that is constantly hurting and disappointing you. The issue is explaining that to a three-year-old that just wanted his mother back.

I was also using today as a way to speak with him about Jasmine and her son, Jeremy, coming to live with us. He had no idea I was looking for a nanny, he didn't even know what that was. It was going to be very confusing for him, and I didn't want him thinking that I was trying to replace his mother with Jasmine. That wasn't what this was at all. I needed someone that could be with him during the day and when I had to travel for business so he could be in his house and not be stuck with my parents. I had no idea if Jasmine was going to work out, but only time would tell.

"That was a big one, eh?" I said as I held onto his little hand.

He had always loved the beach, and when we moved to Newport, one of my requirements was a house that wasn't too far from the beach. We had found one within a five-minute walk, and it was perfect. We spent a lot of time here, and it was one of Christian's favorite places. That and the aquarium. He was obsessed with underwater creatures.

"Way big! We build sand castle now?"

"Absolutely," I said as I went and scooped him up. I could feel that his legs were freezing, and I knew we had been in the water for a long time. The warm sand would be good.

I got him down on the towel so he wouldn't be covered in sand as I went and grabbed the sand bucket and little toys that he had. He loved building

sand castles, and he was better at it than I was. I could never seem to get more than two up at a time. He immediately started to put some of the wet sand into the bucket and now seemed like the best time to speak to him about Jasmine and Jeremy.

“Hey Buddy, in two days someone is going to come and live in the back house at home,” I started. Jasmine was supposed to be here tomorrow, but she had hit a lot of construction through the middle states, and she had updated me on her ETA. I was fine with it taking an extra day, and I understood how hard it would be to travel with a three-year-old. I couldn’t imagine doing that on my own.

“Why?” he asked, but he didn’t look up from what he was doing.

“She is going to help me to take care of you. So when Daddy has to go to work, you would get to stay at home and not have to be with Nanny and Grandpa.”

“I stay with Mommy,” he suggested, and I could hear the hopefulness in his voice. All he wanted was to see Ellis again, and I hated that he was missing her so deeply, because there wasn’t anything I could do to make that pain better.

“I know, Bud, but your mom is going through some stuff right now, and she needs some time. The lady, Jasmine, she has a three-year-old son too. His name is Jeremy. You guys could be friends and play together.”

It was a small constellation prize, but I was hoping that he would be excited to have someone to play with during the day. They were so close in age, I had to imagine they liked the same things or at least similar things. I was worried about how Jeremy was going to act compared to Christian. He was very well behaved, but that was because I raised him to be. I had no idea how Jeremy

would act based on how Jasmine was as a parent. Her free spirit definitely bled into her routines or lack thereof.

“He live with us?” Christian asked as he looked up. I was expecting to hear excitement, but instead it sounded like dread. Fuck, I just couldn’t win today could I?

“Him and his mom would live in the back house. You and him could have some fun together. You must be excited to have a friend close by.”

He gave a small shrug before he spoke, “Friends don’t live with you. I have to share my toys. Maybe he mean.”

Yup, there was the only child syndrome. He would have to get used to sharing, but he was going to need to get used to it in school as well. I knew it was something that a lot of kids go through. He would be fine, but it was going to take some time for him to get used to the idea of having to share.

“I don’t think he’s mean Buddy. I think you both could have a lot of fun together. You get to show him around town too. He’s never been here before.”

I had no idea what Jeremy was going to be like, but I had to assume he wasn’t the spawn of Satan. He was a three-year-old boy, how bad could he be?

“He like the beach?”

“I don’t know. I have only met him the one time, and he was asleep for the majority of it. I am sure he liked the beach though; most kids do. He lives in Miami, which is on the other side of the country. Him and his mom have been driving all across the country to get here.”

“His mommy nice?” Christian asked as he looked up at me finally.

“She is very nice. She’s looking forward to meeting you and getting to explore together.”

I couldn't really say if she was nice or not technically, but from the two interactions that I've had with her she didn't come across as a bitch. Sure, that could change, and if she didn't have the right attitude with Christian, then she was gone. I wasn't going to tolerate anyone treating him badly or less than he deserved.

"Why Mommy can't watch me?" he asked sadly.

"I wish she could Buddy. Maybe one day she will be able to, but right now, she has to work on getting better so she can be here with you."

Fuck, I needed to figure out something better to tell him, but I just didn't know what. I never expected to have to have this conversation with him, much less at his age. He couldn't understand something like this. He knew all sorts of words. I had worked very hard with him on it but knowing a word and understanding the meaning behind it was something completely different.

I didn't want to lie to him and tell him that she would be back soon. I also didn't want to give him the truth that she might never come back. I was stuck between a rock in a hard place, and I had no idea how I was going to be getting out of it. All I could really do was hope that Christian liked Jeremy and Jasmine and with time things would become more normal between all of us.

All I could do was hope.

Jasmine

The smell of salt hit my nose as we began to drive along the west coast to reach Newport. We had just left Portland not too long ago, and I knew I could have taken a faster route to reach Newport. I wanted to go along the coast and be able to check out the scenery. I had moved Jeremy over to the other side of the car. I didn't like it when he wasn't behind me for safety reasons, but there weren't many cars out this way, and I wanted him to be able to see the ocean better. His face was currently glued to the window as his little mind tried to take it all in.

I was having my own trouble taking the sight in. The ocean wasn't a foreign concept to us. We saw it all the time in Miami. People had said that the west coast was different than the east coast. I never fully believed it. An ocean was an ocean after all. However, seeing it for the first time, I was struggling to keep my eyes on the road. There were massive cliffs and various little islands. Huge rocks that were poking up through the water closer to the shoreline. The beaches in Newport were going to be breathtaking, and I couldn't wait to take Jeremy to see it.

I had done a bit of research on Newport, and it seemed like a great town. It was a very popular tourist town, and I wasn't sure how it would feel living in it. I had been to plenty of tourist towns during my travels before I got pregnant. I knew there was a different vibe. They were great to visit, but you always leave them. I didn't know how it would feel to live in one. I was gonna get to see though.

I did like that there were a lot of things that I could do with the kids. I had never watched more than one kid at the same time before, so I was a bit nervous about that. Getting them outside and doing something was going to be a huge help to make the time pass in the day. Mostly, I was just hoping that Christian and Jeremy got along. If they didn't like each other, it was going to be a living nightmare. Jeremy was very easy going and laid back, so I was hoping Christian would be the same. I was worried that he wouldn't be though.

“Look Mama!” Jeremy called out, and I turned to look to see a lighthouse.

“It's a lighthouse. Do you know why that's there?”

“Trolls?” he said with a giggle.

“That's a really good guess. It's not for trolls though. Well, maybe it is. I don't know. I've never gotten to see a troll going into one. We might have to check out a few lighthouses to see if we can spot signs of a troll. What do you think?”

“Yes please!” he cheered excitedly, and I knew he was going to be thinking about it until we went.

“I think we could make that happen. But the reason for a lighthouse is so the big boats and ships don't crash into the beach or cliffs at night. At night it would be completely black and they wouldn't be able to see anything. The

light at the top of a lighthouse would show them that danger is nearby, and they should avoid getting too close to it.”

He’s been very interested in fish and the ocean recently, and I had been trying to encourage him to keep learning about it. Even when we watch Finding Nemo, I always tell him about a different fish, and I ask him about the ones I taught him about to see if he can remember the type of fish they were. I tried to stick with what held his interest as the trends come and go. I find it’s easier for him to be interested in learning more if he’s already interested in the subject.

“Big bulb?”

“You know, I would imagine it is one of the largest lightbulbs in the world. I wouldn’t want to try and have to change it. Did you know there are also lighthouse keepers? When they first started to be built, someone would live in the bottom of the lighthouse and their whole job was to make sure the light was working. Now most live in a house close by.”

“Scary, no thank you.”

His tiny body gave a little shiver, and I knew he was thinking about how dark it would be. He was terrified of the dark, not that I could blame him. Lots of scary things can be creeping around in the dark.

“I think they got used to it. Plus, I bet you the sounds of the waves helped to soothe any fears.”

He gave me a look, and I could tell he wasn’t fully convinced on that one. He turned his attention back to his window as we finished the drive into town. Liam’s address put him more on the outskirts so as we got closer we couldn’t really get to see the actual town, and I was looking forward to going exploring with the boys this week. Hopefully, Christian would be down for it.

As we pulled into the driveway, it was hard not to gawk at everything. The house was pretty big, bigger than I would have expected for just two people. I wasn't certain if Liam preferred the life of luxury or his ex-wife. Please let it be the ex-wife.

"Okay, Buddy, we're here," I said, as I parked the car. I had no idea where I was supposed to be putting it, but I didn't have a remote for the garage door so in the driveway it was going.

"Wow," he said, amazed as he tried to take it all in. Yeah, definitely going to be taking some time to get used to it all.

I got out and went over to get him. I would need to empty the car, but I could do that once I figured out where we were living. Liam said he had a guest house. I couldn't see it from the front so I had to assume it was around back somewhere or maybe the basement was set up for a nanny suite.

I took Jeremy's little hand within my own, and we walked over to the front door. I rang the doorbell, not really sure what I was supposed to do. We were going to be living here, but it wasn't like I could just walk inside. After a minute I could hear the lock being disengaged, and the door opened to reveal Liam on the other side. He was dressed in a suit, minus the jacket, and I figured he must be working. I mean really, why else would he be wearing a suit when he was just relaxing at home?

"Hey," I said slightly awkward.

My heart was racing now that I was standing here. All I could think of was that Liam would realize he was Jeremy's father, and I would be trapped in a custody battle with a fucking billionaire.

"Afternoon, come on in," he said as he moved back, and I walked inside. Jeremy was quick to hide behind me. I knew this was going to be hard at

first, but I was truly hoping that Christian would help to make Jeremy feel more welcomed.

The sight of the inside wasn't all that surprising, but it was at the same time. It was all very fancy furniture and art on the walls. But everything was white. The tiles, the walls, the coffee table was glass, the furniture was white leather. Seriously, what parent has white furniture? And how the hell was it so clean in here? Do the maids just follow them around?

"You have a lovely home," I managed to say, because I had to say something. It's not like I could ask him if he was a psychopath.

"Thank you," he said tightly before he turned slightly and he called out. "Christian! Come here please."

It was only a second later when I could hear the sound of a door opening followed by the sound of little feet on the floor. My heart shot up through my throat at the sight of the little boy. He could have been Jeremy's twin. Holy fuck.

They both had light brown hair. They both had blue eyes. They both had the same cheekbones and facial structure. The only difference, his eyes were shaped a bit differently, and I suspected they matched his own mother. Just like Jeremy's eyes matched mine. If you put these kids side by side and ran a facial recognition program, you would easily get a ninety percent match.

Fuck, there was no way in hell Liam wasn't going to be able to figure out Jeremy was his. Sure, some kids looked alike, especially at a younger age like this, but come on. This was a terrible idea.

"Christian, this is Jasmine and her son Jeremy," he made the introduction as if we were business colleges.

"Hi Christian. It's nice to meet you," I said as I took the boy in more.

He was dressed in jeans and a polo shirt. They were both ironed, and they

looked very clean for a little boy. Jeremy was still wearing his pajamas from last night. He looked very disheveled compared to Christian.

“It is nice to meet you,” Christian said in a very proper voice as he held his little hand out to me.

I took his hand in mine, and it felt like I was in another world over here. He was so polite and proper. He was only three, he should be running around and having fun.

“Jeremy, do you want to say hi?” I asked as I turned to look at my own son who was still hiding behind me.

“Hi,” he said softly, and I knew it was going to take some time to get him comfortable enough to come out of his shell.

“Christian, why don’t you take Jeremy up to your room and show him around?” Liam suggested, but based on the tone to his voice it wasn’t a subtle suggestion. Apparently, easing them into each other wasn’t his style.

“Yes Daddy,” Christian said, but he didn’t seem too happy about the idea either. Great, we were off to a terrible start.

I felt Jeremy’s hand within mine tighten. He didn’t want to go anywhere, but I knew he needed to get used to being around Christian. I also needed to speak with Liam about what schedule he had Christian on and what being a nanny would look like for him. I bent down so I was eye level with my son.

“Can you go upstairs and see Christian’s room for me? I need to speak with Liam, and afterwards, we can check out your new room.”

I knew some people would say bargaining with your child wasn’t how you parent, but I didn’t like ignoring what he felt. He was only three sure, but he was also a person, and he had the right to feel whatever he needed to feel.

“Okay Mommy,” he gave in, and I gave him a warm smile.

“I’ll be up real soon,” I promised.

He reluctantly let go of my hand and followed behind Christian over to the stairs, and I watched as he disappeared from my view. I turned my attention to Liam and the look on his face stayed the same. Stoney. He didn't seem happy to have me here which was weird considering he invited me to be here. All of this was his idea.

"I wrote Christian's schedule down for you to follow," he started as he made his way towards the kitchen.

I followed after him, and I was hoping the schedule wouldn't be too bad. He grabbed the piece of paper on the island, and he handed it to me. I couldn't help my eyes from bulging out at the sight of it. Holy fuck, this was insane. It was like every minute of his day was planned out. From six thirty in the morning until seven o'clock at night, Christian's day was planned out. What time he ate, what he normally ate, what time he napped, bath time, snack times, and what he can have. It was nuts.

Don't get me wrong, I had no problem with a schedule and sure Jeremy had a schedule, but it was loose. God, if this was what Liam was like. If this house was always to look like this. If Christian was always dressed in clothes that looked like he was going to church. There was no way I would be able to live like this. To co-parent with someone this anal and controlling, I dodged a massive bullet.

Liam

“I make sure he sticks with that schedule, and I expect for you to do the same,” I informed her.

I knew to an outsider it would look strict. However, having Christian on a set schedule was the only way I could ensure he was looked after properly for when I wasn't around. It was mostly to ensure my parents wouldn't do something that I didn't approve of. As long as they have a schedule, they stick with it, and I don't have to worry about what Christian was eating or if he was sleeping enough.

“I will make sure to stick with it,” she said with a tight smile, and I knew she wasn't impressed by the schedule, but that was too bad. I was paying her to do a job, and I wasn't going to compromise because we slept together one night.

Before I could get another word out, my phone was ringing. I reached into my pocket to pull it out and saw that it was Janice, my secretary. She was more like a personal secretary because she took the calls even when she wasn't in the office. She was a Godsend, because I would not be able to get

anything done during the day or weekends if I had to field calls all day or have to listen to voicemails come Monday morning.

“Yes Janice?” I answered.

I held no interest in making small talk or pleasantries at the moment. She would be more than used to it by now, and she never took it personally.

“I received an urgent call from Don Peters. He says it’s vital that you meet with him today. He will be coming to your office within the hour.”

Her tone told me that she was not impressed with the demand, but I knew she wouldn’t have allowed Don to know that. Don Peters was one of my biggest clients. He had bars all over Europe and America. They weren’t franchises, just different ones. One would be a country themed bar and another would be a high-end luxury private club. It all depends on the market and what was in demand at the time. He had a global marketing budget of a hundred million dollars a year. So when he made a random call and demanded to see me, I obliged.

“I’ll be right in,” I said before I ended the call.

This was not how I wanted this day to go. I had no idea what Christian was going to be like around Jeremy and around Jasmine. I had no idea how Jasmine was going to handle two young boys. I had wanted the day to be able to observe her and ensure she was suitable enough to care for my son. Now it was looking like I was going to have to throw her into the deep end and just hope someone taught her how to swim.

“I have to go into the office for an emergency meeting. I don’t know how long I will be,” I stated as I made my way towards the front door so I could put my shoes and jacket on.

“Okay, that’s fine. I have this,” she said with a confident smile, and I couldn’t tell if she actually believed that or if she was just bullshitting me. Either way, I had to leave so I was going to take it as the truth.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I told her before I headed out, having no choice but to leave the welfare and safety of my son in her hands.

The second I walked into my office, I was expecting to be greeted by a sixty-year-old man that spent good money on Botox and plastic surgery to look like he was forty. Instead, I was greeted with the annoyed sour look on my ex-wife’s face. Fucking Ellis. I didn't doubt for a single second that she had reached out to Don and got him to lie for her. There was no way that Janice would lie to me if Ellis had been the one to call. She was loyal to me, and it was something Ellis and I often fought about. She felt that Janice was covering for me when I was out cheating. I didn’t matter that I never cheated. Or the fact that Ellis was the one always cheating on me.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked as I went over to my desk and leaned against the window sill behind it.

If she wanted to talk fine, but I was not going to be giving her the high ground here.

“That’s how you talk to the mother of your child?” she countered as she went and sat down in the chair across from me. She crossed her right leg over her left, and she gave me a smug smirk. I had no idea what she had to be smug about. She was the one that walked out on her son.

“And here I thought you didn’t even remember him.”

“Of course I remember him. I carried him for nine months. I gave birth to him. I named him. I cared for him for two years. Do you honestly think the last year has been easy for me?”

She was trying to play the victim, but I wasn't going to let her. She wasn't a mother that got her child wrongfully taken from her. She wasn't a mother that had a child die. She was a mother that walked out the front door one day and decided she was going to live her life and completely forget her son. She didn't get to act like a victim. She didn't get to act like the hurt party.

"I would have to imagine any mother that leaves their child, unsupervised, in their crib, and doesn't look back doesn't give two fucks about her son. So yes, I imagine it was very easy for you over the past year."

She pushed off from the chair as she spoke and started to pace around like a caged animal, "You have no idea how hard it was for me to walk away. I had to though. I couldn't handle all of the stress of being a single mother."

"Single, fuck off with that shit. I was there," I snapped.

She was not going to act like I neglected Christian or her. Yes, there were days where I wasn't there because I was out of the state going to meetings, but that was my job. That was the job that made sure we had a nice place to live, and she could have whatever she wanted. It wasn't just us. I had employees that were relying on their salaries. I had to make sure the business stayed in the black or my employees would lose their jobs.

"You weren't there. You don't get to act like you were the world's best father. I was alone all the time with an infant. I had postpartum that I was wrestling with, and I needed support from my husband. But you were off doing god knows what with what whore you were seeing that week."

"I never cheated on you. That was all you. As for postpartum, the doctors checked all of that and confirmed you didn't have it. So don't play that card either. You had support. You had all the help that parents would kill to have. You still chose to go back to drinking, partying, and screwing around. Just admit that you didn't want to be a wife or a mother."

“Of course I wanted to be a mother. I love Christian. I hate that I left. I have missed him every day. It’s why I am back here. I want to be a family again. The three of us.”

“You can’t be serious.”

She had to be joking. She had to have some type of ulterior motive. We hadn’t heard from her in months since she walked out on us, and now she wanted to show up and pretend like we were some happy family? I wasn’t going to allow her to do this. To allow her to think that I would be a pushover.

“Why wouldn’t I be serious? We have a son together. He deserves to have both of his parents in his life. Do you not agree?”

“That would truly depend on the parents in that situation. If both parents are loving and want what is best for their child, then of course. However, if one of those parents are constantly getting drunk, leaving the child unattended, leaving for weeks or months at a time with not a single phone call, then no, that parent shouldn’t be welcomed in the child’s life until they get their own life sorted.”

If Ellis came back and told me she was sorry, that she was through with screwing up her life and being a party girl, then this would have been a completely different conversation. I wouldn’t be getting back with her, but we could have an honest conversation about Christian and what was best for him moving forward. If she had been even the least bit apologetic and remorseful of her behavior. Only she wasn’t. She was acting as if she took a trip to the grocery store. This wasn’t some house plant that she left behind. This was our son. A living, breathing child that she gave birth to. Shouldn’t that mean she felt connected to him?

“Oh, so you think I shouldn’t be in his life?” she snapped, and I had no idea

how she could think otherwise.

I stood up and turned my body so I was fully facing her as she finally stopped pacing around, “Look me in the eyes and tell me you have not spent the last year getting drunk and sleeping around. Tell me honestly that you have sat staring at your phone every single day feeling like a complete waste of space because you left Christian alone in his bed.” I tossed my hands up as I continued, practically begging her, “Give me fucking something that shows me you are not a piece of shit mother.”

“You think I don’t feel bad about it?” she asked as her anger was starting to seep into her tone.

“I’m not seeing any remorse. You waltz in here, after using one of my biggest clients to even get me in here. You start talking about getting back with me even though we’re divorced and you think what? That I’m going to kiss you and tell you how much I’ve missed you? Eighteen months Ellis. It’s been an entire year and a half and nothing but radio silence.”

“I know I haven’t been good with communication, but I’m back now. We can be a family,” she pleaded, and I had to assume she was running low on money. That was the only logical explanation to any of this.

“We are never going to be together. I don’t love you. I can’t love you, not after everything you have done to me and to my son. As for Christian, until you prove to me that you are sober, you are not going to see him.”

“This isn’t the road you want to go down Liam. I would hate to have to fight you for full custody. That won’t look good on your reputation, and it’s not fair to Christian to have to only see you on weekends or holidays.”

I couldn’t help but scoff at that, “You actually think you would win? You abandoned him. What part of that is confusing to you Ellis? You have no

home. No income. I bet you can't even go two days without drinking. You are not stable. No judge would grant you custody."

If she wanted to go down that route, that was just fine. I would win. She wasn't going to take my son from me. I was not going to put him in that type of environment, no matter what I had to do.

"Well, we'll just see about that," was all she said before she turned and headed out of my office.

Fuck.

This was not the day I had been expecting to have, and now I have to deal with all of this shit to go with it. I knew she wasn't threatening me. Once she got an idea stuck in her head, it was virtually impossible to get it out. She was going to file. It was only a matter of time, and there was nothing I could do to stop her.

Jasmine

It had been a couple of hours, and Liam still hadn't been back yet. I had gone up to check on the boys, and they were just on opposite sides of the room staring each other down. It was quite disturbing considering they were both three years old. Not to mention half-brothers. I needed a way to get them to relax around each other and open up. I had gotten them down into the living room to watch a movie. Turns out, they both love the water so Finding Nemo came to the rescue once again. It was a small thing, but it was finally something they had in common, and I was hoping it would be a place to start.

“Hungry Mommy,” Jeremy said as they both came to join me in the kitchen.

“I know. I am working on dinner. I just can't seem to find where everything is.”

This kitchen was like a maze. There were a gazillion cupboards and each one had something in them. What made it more confusing was whatever system Liam was using. The dishes were not next to the cups. They were over where the coffee maker was. Okay fine, but the baking items were not

next to the baking ingredients. The pots and pans were not next to the stove; they were by the fridge. I mean, was it alphabetical or something?

“What do you need?” Christian asked.

“I thought I would make chicken fried rice with some vegetables.”

I had no idea what Christian liked, but according to the extensive notes he did like all of those ingredients so I had some hope that he would enjoy it. It was one of Jeremy’s favorite things to eat. He loved Chinese food. Christian gave a nod, and he started to zoom around the kitchen, handing me various items that I needed.

“Thank you. You are a great helper. Do you and your dad cook a lot together?” I asked as I grabbed the boneless, skinless chicken from the fridge.

“No. Daddy cooks while I clean my room.”

I could tell he was a bit disappointed that he wasn’t helping out more. I knew kids didn't like to clean, but what they did like was to do it with someone else, especially a parent. It gave them one-on-one time with them and something that was boring could be turned into a fun game. Cooking was the same thing. It was even more important in my opinion because you could help them learn some math as well.

“Can you do me another favor? Can you find me another set of ingredients?”

He eagerly nodded his head, and I gave him a list of baking ingredients that we were going to need. I was hoping Liam had everything we would need to make some sugar cookies. His kitchen seemed to be well stocked so the odds were in my favor.

“We make cookies Mommy?” Jeremy asked, and I could hear the excitement in his voice. He knew exactly what we do with those ingredients.

Baking cookies was one of our favorite things to do. I liked the time we got to spend together, plus he was learning fractions. It was a win/win.

“We are. Christian, have you ever made cookies before?”

He gave a small head shake as he spoke, “Daddy says eat good food to grow big and strong.”

“Your daddy is right. It is important to eat fruit and vegetables to stay nice and healthy. But you can eat a bit of sugar and still be healthy. And there is nothing more fun than making cookies and decorating them.”

Okay, technically, I shouldn't be doing this. I knew from that ridiculous schedule just how healthy Christian was eating. In my defense, though, children should never grow up not knowing what a fresh cookie smells like. Without making some to leave out for Santa. Hell, a birthday cake. Like a real one and not some carrot wannabe cake. It was my first day with Christian. I could easily play stupid when Liam got home and told me he didn't approve of my snack choice. Plus, this was bonding time for all three of us. It was completely medicinal.

I got the chicken cooking on the stove and turned to the kids. I got the mixing bowls out and all of the measuring cups that we were going to need on the table. I moved over the ingredients and got the kids to kneel up on a chair right by me.

“Okay, we are going to make the cookies while dinner is cooking. We're gonna make sugar cookies, and you guys can put them into shapes with the cookie cutters. Then tomorrow they will be fully cooled off and we can decorate them.”

There were no decorating ingredients in the kitchen, so we would need to hit up a baking store or a grocery store so they could pick out icing and sprinkles.

“Alright, so we have two bowls, a bigger bowl, and a smaller bowl. We put all of the wet ingredients into the big bowl and the dry ones into the smaller bowl,” I began to explain.

“Why?” Christian asked.

“To make it even,” Jeremy answered.

“That’s exactly right. The biggest part about a cookie is to make sure no matter how you divide it up, each cookie has what it needs to be a cookie. So you mix the dry and wet separately, and then you slowly pour the dry into the wet so everything gets all mixed up,” I further explained, and Christian gave a confident nod; I could tell he was a smart little boy.

I worked with them on each step and made sure they both had turns to measure and pour the ingredients into the proper bowl. I took over the mixing part so we didn’t get it everywhere. Once it was all mixed in cookie dough, I spoke.

“Now comes the fun part,” I started as I grabbed the flour and started to pour some of it out onto the table.

“No mess! Daddy no like messes,” Christian instantly called out, and I could hear the panic in his voice.

I placed my hand on his back and rubbed it gently as I spoke, “It’s okay. We’re gonna clean it all up. Don’t worry. We need to use the flour so the cookie dough won’t stick to the table so you guys can make shapes out of it. I promise, I will clean it all up.”

It broke my heart to see how panicked he was at the sight of flour on a table. It was nothing that a cloth or a dust pan couldn’t handle. It would only take a couple of minutes to clean up; it was no big deal. He shouldn’t be so wound up that flour was going to break him. He was a kid and a big part of being a kid was making messes.

“Always clean up our messes,” Jeremy added with a warm smile.

“It’ll be okay. I promise. And this really is the best part,” I said, hoping it would put him more at ease.

Christian gave a reluctant nod, and I got the cookie dough out of the bowl and onto the table.

“Now, you are gonna push down on the cookie dough and make it nice and flat. First though, get your hands covered in flour so it won’t stick to you.”

“Like this,” Jeremy said as he took a bit of flour from the bag and rubbed his hands together, covering them in the white powder.

Christian was hesitant, but he moved forward and got a small amount of flour on his hands as he rubbed it in. He added a bit more before he pushed his fingers into the dough and for the first time, I heard a genuine laugh out of him. He was being a kid and it was heartwarming to see. I went over to check on dinner while the boys got to work on making different shapes out of the cookies. I then grabbed the baking sheets so I could get them loaded up on it. There were going to be a few rounds of cooking, but that was fine. All that mattered was that the boys were getting along and having these moments to bond with each other. It also allowed Christian to just be a kid, and I was hoping that Jeremy would have a positive influence on him.

I couldn’t believe how strict Liam was. I thought Adam was bad. Fuck, he was even worse. I got that he was a billionaire, and he had to be strict and professional in order to be as successful as he was. It took a lot of work to be that wealthy, and I would never hold it against him. But there was also a time where you had to leave that part of you at the door and just be a fun and normal person. His son needed to have the freedom to be a kid and not have to worry if he got a bit of dirt on the floor.

No kid should have to live in a museum, and with any luck by being here, I

would be able to help Christian come out of his shell more and maybe get the rules a bit loosened up. Even if that was only during the hours that I would get to have with him. After all, hiding a mess was the least of my worries when I was hiding the paternity of Jeremy from him. Shaking those thoughts from my mind, I focused on not burning dinner and helping the boys with their cookies. Tonight was about fun and just allowing the boys to acclimate to each other. And so far, everything was going pretty well, and it was giving me hope for the future.

Liam

I dragged my weary bones out of my truck and made my way into my house. It was just after eight, and I was expecting for Christian to already be in bed after he brushed his teeth and took a bath. I knew it was only the first day, but that didn't change that I expected excellence and for Jasmine to follow the schedule. It was all laid out so it shouldn't be that hard for her.

After Ellis left my office I had decided to stick around and do some paperwork and get ahead of what needed to be done tomorrow. I wanted to come rushing back, but I also knew that the boys needed to get used to each other and Christian needed to get used to Jasmine. It was only the first day, but at least they were getting a few hours together, and then tomorrow would be their first all day experience.

I knew Christian would be a good boy, but I also knew he was only three, and he was going to have problems adapting to this massive change. He was going to have a meltdown and there wasn't anything I could do about that. All I could do was hope he found joy and excitement during his time with Jasmine and Jeremy.

I walked through the door of my home, and I was glad to hear that it was quiet. There weren't kids running around the house screaming in either play or fight. It was a very good sign. I took my jacket off and hung it up before I removed my shoes and headed deeper inside. I didn't see Jasmine in the living room and the TV was off, so I doubted she had stepped away for a moment.

I made my way towards the kitchen. There was a very good chance that she was out on my back patio. The second I walked through the entry to the kitchen I felt my stomach drop, and my heart started to beat faster.

It looked like a fucking bomb went off in it. The table was covered in white powder that I had to assume was flour. There were dirty dishes all in the sink and on the stove. I had been gone for roughly five hours, and it looked like a tornado went through my kitchen. My heart was racing in my chest, and it was getting harder to get a deep breath. I knew what this feeling was. It happened all the time when I was a kid, and my parents saw that I hadn't cleaned up properly.

Anxiety.

Everything had to be clean. Everything had to go back to its rightful place. That's how it was supposed to be growing up. That was how my parents expected everything growing up, and if it wasn't done right, you were punished. I don't even know how many times I had been forced to scrub the house from top to bottom with a toothbrush, and I couldn't go to bed until it was done. If that meant I was up all night, then so be it. It didn't matter if I was only seven. I was expected to get my punishment completed before going to bed or to school.

They had always been strict, but it was their house, their rules. I didn't start my adult life expecting to have this need for everything to be clean and in

order. I never wanted to be this person, but I found if the house wasn't perfect, I felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest.

The one thing missing in all of this chaos was Jasmine. Where the fuck was she? She should be here cleaning this up. Was she with the boys? Was she back at her new place with Jeremy and left Christian alone? I knew there was a chance she might be terrible at being a nanny, but this was completely unacceptable. How hard of a concept was it to clean up after yourself? To clean as you cook so there wasn't a mess left behind. And who the fuck thinks it's okay to have flour all over a kitchen table?

I couldn't even imagine what Christian went through. He liked everything to be in order too. He liked when the house was clean, and I had to imagine he felt so uncomfortable and upset at seeing all of this. Did they eat at the table with all of that flour on it? She was supposed to help. Not turn into the fucking anti-Christ.

At the sound of footsteps I turned to face the stairs and saw Jasmine coming down them. She gave me a big warm smile as she spoke.

"Hey, you're back. I just got the boys down in Christian's room. They are so sweet all curled up together."

"They shouldn't be in the same room. Your son has his own bed that he should be sleeping in. I don't want him in my son's bed," I growled. "And what the fuck happened to my kitchen?"

"One, keep your voice down," she countered with a deadly calm tone. If I hadn't been so pissed off, my mind would have clicked into how dangerous this situation could get. "Two, the boys wanted to have a sleepover. I wasn't aware this was the prince and the fucking popper. And three, you ever yell at me like that again and I am done. You can find yourself a new nanny to care

for your child. I will not tolerate you acting like a complete pompous asshole to me.”

I slowly stalked towards her. I was completely done with women today. I was done with their attitude. I was done with their threats. I was just fucking done. It was bad enough I had to deal with Ellis and whatever bullshit she was going to be throwing my way. I didn't need shit when I came home. This was my house. I had every right to be pissed off when it looked like a fucking landfill.

“I am your boss. You work for me. I pay you to watch my son. I pay you to stick to his schedule. I pay you to make sure that everything is okay in this house. I don't pay you to talk back to me. I don't pay you to make a mess of my house and not clean it the fuck up. If you don't like the expectations that I have for my employees, then you can get back in your car and go back to your fiancé that you left heartbroken at the altar and beg him to take you back.”

Harsh? Probably. Will I regret some of this come morning? Most likely. The problem was I couldn't think rationally. I couldn't calm down when it felt like my heart was going to explode out of my chest. Something that got worse every time my traitorous eyes traveled over to the mess that was supposed to be my kitchen. I could feel my blood pressure pulsing in my temples. I could hear my father's voice telling me that a home is a reflection of the man, and a dirty home means a dirty man which means a failure. Something that was never allowed to happen growing up. You didn't fail. You didn't get anything less than perfect at school.

Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.

She stepped closer to me, putting us only a few inches apart. She was pissed. I could see the fire burning within her eyes. She was the exact

opposite of Ellis. Her and I, we practically never fought and when we did, Ellis would just huff and storm away. I swear she used to start fights just so she could have an excuse to leave, get drunk, and cheat on me.

One of the biggest differences though between her and Ellis. Ellis never let the house get dirty. She knew to make sure it was always clean, and she had her own desires to have everything perfect so it looked like our family was perfect. Jasmine though, that free spirit of hers just might be the death of me at this rate.

“First of all, I don’t ever need a man. I am more than capable of taking care of myself. And I refuse to be in a relationship, much less a marriage, with someone that I don’t love. That I barely even like.”

Which was one of the things I liked about her. I knew from that first day I met her that she was a strong and independent woman. I actually never thought she would get married so her running out was both surprising and not surprising to me.

“As for you. You asked me to be here, not the other way around. So you don’t get to stand here and lecture me and try to make it seem like you were doing me the favor. You needed a nanny, and I have to imagine that any professional nanny would have ran screaming from this house at the list of your demands. You want me to leave, fine. Good luck finding someone to be your punching bag. You self-centered, anal-retentive, controlling son of a ...”

She was unable to finish her sentence as my mouth crushed hers. I had no plans of kissing her, but apparently my body had other ideas. I felt her tense for a second from surprise. I was surprised too. I pulled back, breaking the kiss, and I had no idea what to even say to her. I wasn’t certain as to why I kissed her. It happened so fast I hadn’t had time to even think about what I

was doing or why. Did I do it so she would finally shut up? Or did I do it because she had been so sexy standing up to me?

Probably both.

We were still only an inch apart from each other. I had let her go, but she didn't move back. That fire in her eyes was still there, only it was burning hotter for a whole different reason. We were both breathing heavily. Our bodies still worked up from our argument. Time seemed to stand still as we both continued to stare at each other. I should have moved back. I should have gone deeper into my kitchen and began cleaning it. It was like I couldn't move though. Moving would break the spell, and I surprisingly didn't want it broken just yet.

But the spell was broken. Not by me, but by Jasmine as she closed the gap between us and pressed her lips against mine.

Jasmine

His back slammed into the wall as our mouths devoured each other. I felt his tongue licking at my lips, and I easily opened my mouth to allow his tongue to invade me. This was probably really stupid, but he felt so good against me I couldn't resist him. His hands moved up my body, over my ass and my back until he reached the straps of my dress. He pulled them down and my breasts bounced free from the cotton material. His hands were instantly moving over to them, roughly pinching my nipples. The slight sting of pain caused me to whimper in pleasure.

This was what my body had been craving. A rough tumble. One fueled with passion and animalistic needs. I grabbed his shirt and ripped it open. The clicking of a few buttons hit the floor, but it didn't deter him away from the kiss. I roamed my hands along his bare chest, and I could feel the ridges of his muscles under my finger tips. He broke the kiss and made his way down my body. Kissing along my neck, down to my chest, and taking each of my nipples into his mouth one at a time.

I ran my fingers through his hair and arched back into his mouth. I felt his

hand slip under my dress and over to my panties. I had been expecting him to pull them down, but with one good tug, he ripped them off. He removed his mouth from my nipple as he backed us up towards the table. Once I felt my legs hitting it, he hiked my dress up enough so it would clear the table. His left hand went and pushed gently on my chest forcing me to lay down on the kitchen table.

Vaguely, it crossed my mind that I was laying in the flour that we had been arguing about. All of that went out the window though when he grabbed my legs and lifted them up, spreading them as wide as possible as he did. I held onto my inner thighs and kept my legs bent for him. I watched as he got down onto his knees as he ran a finger down my wet folds.

I moaned as I felt his thick finger slipping inside of me. It morphed into a mewl at the feeling of his hot tongue giving my wet pussy a long lick up to my clit. He sucked on my clit as he worked his finger all the way inside of me. He worked me hard and fast. He had zero interest in going slow, and I was more than fine with that. My whole body felt like it was on fire, and the need to feel more than his finger inside of me was growing too great.

“Oh fuck,” I deeply moaned as I wiggled my hips to try and get more friction.

I could feel my orgasm building in the pit of my stomach. and I knew it wouldn't be long before I was cumming. I felt him add a second finger and he began to scissor and stretch me. I was in desperate need of his cock inside of me. It had been too long since I had had a good fuck.

After a few more thrusts with his fingers, he hit my sweet spot dead on, and I couldn't help the small scream that erupted from me as pleasure shot up my spine. His tongue continued to rub fast circles over my clit in between

sucking on it, and after only another moment, I felt the walls of my pussy tightening up as a heat washed over me.

“Liam,” I groaned as I began to pulse and cum all over his fingers.

He gave a soft growl as he removed his fingers and began to lick and suck at my pussy. Trying to get every last drop that I had for him as my sweet taste flooded his mouth. He continued to lick and suck until my body stopped pulsing. I whined as he moved back, and I was denied the added pleasure. I knew something better was coming though.

He reached into his back pocket, and he pulled out his wallet before grabbing a condom. He tossed his wallet down onto the table and he opened his pants. His hard cock was quick to free itself, and I felt my mouth water at the memory of how good he tasted. How amazing his cock felt running along my tongue. My eyes had been locked on it so intensely that I didn't even notice he got the condom on until I felt his hand on the back of my neck.

He pulled me up before he quickly turned me around and pushed me down onto the table so my torso was flat against it. His hands moved to the bottom of my dress and lifted it up, revealing my ass to him as he kicked my legs part more. Just as I felt the tip of his cock at my entrance, his left hand ran up my back until it gripped the back of my neck. Not tight, but enough to keep me in place, and I couldn't contain the moan as my pleasure spiked at the possessive hold. I didn't mind a man that could take control in the bedroom.

I felt him slowly pushing his cock inside of me, and I groaned at the sensation of finally being full. It had been too long since I felt a big cock filling me up, four years to be exact. He continued to push in, and he didn't stop until he bottomed out. I could hear him groaning and breathing heavily. His right hand was on my hip, and his grip was tight as he fought to control himself. But I didn't want control. I wanted a wild animal.

“Don’t hold back. Fuck me hard and deep,” I pleaded.

Liam didn’t need any more encouragement. He pulled all the way out and then slammed right back in, making sure to hit my g-spot. I gave a loud moan as Liam did it again, picking up his pace. He didn’t hold back, not even for a second. Each thrust was power. Each thrust was anger and pent-up sexual frustration. And I loved it. The legs of the table scuffed the floor with each powerful thrust as we moved forward just slightly with each pound he gave me.

He made sure his thrusts were hitting my sweet spot dead on, causing me to see stars as my pleasure was being taken to new heights. Heights, I didn’t even think were possible.

“Oh yes, fuck. Don’t stop,” I begged as I felt my climax was in reach.

A few more sharp thrusts against my sweet spot and my whole body tensed up right before the dam broke, and I was giving a loud and deep groan as my body pulsed harder than it ever had before. Black dots danced across my eyes as my whole body turned into a wet noodle. I couldn’t even move, even if I wanted to as I continued to pulse with every deep thrust of his cock. I had never come for so long in my life, and I never wanted it to stop. Every time I felt his cock gliding over my sweet spot, it sent me over that cliff all over again. I knew women could have multiple orgasms. I just never knew it could happen all in a row without a break.

Liam picked up his pace. They were becoming erratic, and I knew it wasn’t going to be long before he was joining me in the bliss. He snapped his hips forward and let out a long growl as he came hard and deep inside of me. I couldn’t help but moan at feeling him pulsing inside of me. It was one of my favorite feelings, and it caused me to pulse right along with him.

Holy fuck.

My whole body was tingling as I struggled to catch my breath. I could feel Liam's hot breath against my back as I knew he was fighting to gain control over himself. Shit, I thought the last time was earth shattering. I had no idea what to call it this time around. Universe shattering? Is that a thing?

Maybe it was better because he was the father of my child. Some sort of connection that I shared with him. Or maybe it was the fact that the past four years with Adam had been other than satisfactory in the bedroom. Adam had always enjoyed it and got off, but it seemed like he stopped caring if I would as well. He had always had that problem though, but it got worse once he discovered I was pregnant. It was like he figured he didn't have to try so hard to give me pleasure. Or he figured I didn't need it any longer.

I felt Liam slowly starting to pull out of me and even after he was no longer inside of me, I still could feel him. I was going to be able to feel him for a couple of days at this rate, but I didn't mind. I missed good sex. Too bad it was with a guy that I couldn't seem to stand being around. How was it possible for two people to have many differences, but have a deep sexual chemistry that was off the charts?

It was like some sick cosmic joke.

I felt the heat from his body disappearing from behind me, followed by the clicking of his belt. I forced my body to move and stand up straight. I put the straps back up on my dress. There was no need to get my panties back on. He had ripped them off, which was very hot at the time, now slightly awkward as they laid in a heap on the floor.

I needed to do something, so I went over to the sink and grabbed the cloth and ran it under warm water. There was still flour all over the table that needed to be cleaned up and dishes to be washed.

"You don't have to do that," Liam's sudden voice sounded louder than it

was. But in the tense quiet of the kitchen it sounded like it was vibrating off each wall.

“I came down to clean,” I pointed out.

I didn’t want to be here either, but mostly that was due to the awkwardness that was now settling over the kitchen. Last time, things were so simple. We talked. We laughed and drank before we had sex again. This time around, it was just an awkward, tense silence, and I didn’t know what to do. I had never been in this position, not even with Adam when we fought. We never had make up sex. We never had sex in the heat of an argument. This was all new territory to me, and I had no idea what to do.

“It would be best if you just went to the nanny suite. Jeremy can stay with Christian this one time.”

The tightness was back in his voice, and it pissed me off, but it also hurt me. Why did this have to be so hard? Why couldn’t we just clean the kitchen and then go our separate ways? He was literally dismissing me from doing something that I was already coming down to do. Not to mention part of this was my job. I hated when I was dismissed from a job because my boss felt like I wasn’t capable of doing it or he could do it better.

I knew he wasn’t firing me because he said Jeremy could spend this one night with Christian. Obviously, that meant there would be other nights we were here. That didn’t take the sting of hurt away though. I turned around, fully prepared to tell him off. To tell him that I could clean up after myself, and I didn’t need his help. The words died on my lips though at the sight of him.

Sure, he was all sexy and disheveled from our spontaneous romp in the kitchen. However, there was also a hurt within his eyes that I hadn’t been expecting. He was battling with some demon; one I was not privy to. He

wasn't dismissing me because he was still angry at me. He was dismissing me because he needed me gone.

Under different circumstances, I would have argued. I would have told him no, that we needed to talk about whatever it was that was currently bothering him. However, that was the circumstance that we were facing. And despite the epic sex, I was still mad at him for what he said to me and how he treated me when he came back. Maybe some time apart was exactly what we needed.

I placed the damp cloth down in the sink before I turned and headed out the back door. I still needed to bring all of our things into the new place. A place I hadn't even seen yet. I was too busy with the boys to go and check it out. I wasn't going to be able to get any sleep just yet. I might as well turn all of my pent-up emotions into making sure the apartment was ready for Jeremy. Because whether Liam liked it or not, we weren't going anywhere. Not until he said the words, you're fired. He wanted what was best for his son; well so did I. And I didn't scare very easily.

Liam

Picking up the cloth, I went over to the table and started to clean up the flour. I ignored the slight tremble in my hands as I tried to focus on what needed to be done and not what had just happened. I didn't even know what happened. I knew I kissed her first. I knew I was very much involved in the sex. I had never lost control like that before though. Despite what Jasmine said, I wasn't controlling. I just preferred for everything to be in order and routine. Sometimes that could come across as controlling, but it wasn't intentional.

There was a peace, a comfort in knowing what was going to happen. In being able to predict what consequences could come from your actions. What happened in this kitchen tonight, before and after I got home, was messy chaos and that wasn't something I was comfortable with. I shouldn't have yelled at her. I knew that. I shouldn't have allowed my own emotions to get the best of me and for them to come out as anger.

Jasmine was easy going. She most likely would have understood if I had just told her the truth instead of allowing my emotions to get too hot, too fast.

If I had told her that seeing a mess made me feel uncomfortable and anxious, she most likely would have understood and we both could be cleaning right now and nothing more would come from it.

Only now I had just screwed an employee, a nanny no less, and it was going to make everything more complicated. It was already complicated because I had slept with her and discovered she was Francis' daughter. Before tonight, it could have been written off between Francis and I if the truth ever came to light. I didn't know Jasmine was his daughter that night. However, now, there was no excusing it. I knew exactly who she was when I fucked her.

It didn't matter that Francis and I had drifted apart in a sense over the decades. It didn't matter that we weren't very close, certainly nowhere near as close as we had been growing up. None of that mattered because we had known each other practically our whole lives. Because we knew each other's darkest secrets. We were connected and that was not going to change outside of death or a mistake of that proportion. Sleeping with his only child will pretty much do it. It would have been better if I slept with his wife in their bed.

The sudden ringing of my phone caused me to startle. I hadn't been expecting anyone to be calling me. I was praying it wasn't Janice with another emergency meeting. The last one hadn't gone over so well, and I wasn't looking for a repeat. I dried my hands off as I went over to my jacket that was hanging by the door. In my hurry to check on Christian, I didn't even think about grabbing my phone.

Oh, you have got to be kidding me. The bolded letters on my screen were mocking me.

Francis

This was the last thing I needed tonight. My stomach instantly started to twist up with guilt, and I felt like my insides were trying to rip me in two. This was the last thing I needed right now. I knew he was calling me about Jasmine. I hadn't told him about offering her a job, but by now it had been five days since he last saw her, since any of them had seen her, and I had to imagine she wasn't answering their calls or texts. They would be worried about her, and rightfully so.

I should have called earlier in the week and informed him of her coming here. I didn't though, because one, not technically my place, but two, I wasn't certain she would actually show up. There was a chance that she changed her mind, or she spoke with Adam and wanted to stay to work something out with him. I had no idea how the custody would work with them both being on opposite sides of the country. Adam was set to take over the whole company with both families believing a male should be CEO and not a woman. So it was highly doubtful that he was going to be moving out this way.

Now she was here though and based on our argument tonight, she wasn't going to be running scared anytime soon. I needed to come clean and at least let Francis know she was safe and not dead in a ditch somewhere. They would also have been worried about Jeremy. I really have been a shitty friend lately.

Letting out a sigh, I answered the phone.

"Francis. It's pretty late where you are," I said as I made my way back towards my kitchen.

"It has been a long week. After the fiasco at the church, Adam returned home to discover that Jasmine had left with Jeremy. She packed up their clothes and any valuable items she possessed. We have been calling and

messaging her, but she has yet to respond to us. Adam is considering filing a kidnapping report on Jeremy.”

The stress that was dripping from his voice only made me feel more like an asshole. I honestly didn't think things would escalate so quickly. I hadn't been thinking, which was the problem. Instead of calling him, I had taken the coward's way out and allowed Jasmine to handle it. I should have thought more deeply on how this would have affected Francis and Adam. Regardless of what I thought of Adam, he was still Jeremy's father, and any good father would be losing their shit by now.

“They're not missing. They are here with me,” I stated.

Hopefully, it wasn't too late, and Adam hadn't filed those charges. Although, I wasn't too certain how that would all play out. Yes, kidnapping charges have been laid before between parents; that happened the majority of the time. However, it was typically the mother that was reporting the father, not the other way around. I wasn't certain if the police would do anything given it was Jasmine that had Jeremy. Unless there was some weird custody agreement that I wasn't aware of.

“What?” Total shock replaced the stress, and I knew his mind was trying to process that his daughter and grandson were safe. I was hoping he wasn't getting the wrong idea though.

“After I left the church, I came across her. Her car had broken down on the side of the road. I gave them a ride back to their house, and I offered her a nanny position to help me with Christian until he goes to school. I'm so sorry Francis. I thought she would have told you and Amanda. Or at the very least send a text letting you know they were okay.”

It would appear I wasn't the only coward in this situation. I couldn't help but wonder why Jasmine hadn't sent her parents even a text to let them know

where she was and that she didn't want Adam coming down. I understood that it would be complicated, but her parents would have told Adam that they knew where she was, and they were safe. They didn't have to give her location. She was their daughter after all.

A deep breath flooded my ear, and I knew he was sagging into his favorite armchair at hearing the news.

"Okay ... okay. Good. This is good. Though, a head's up would have been nice."

"I'm sorry Man. I really thought she would have let you both know. When I didn't hear from you I assumed you were okay with it."

Liar.

"It's not your fault. She should have reached out and informed us of the situation. You said she arrived today?"

"She did. I had been expecting to ease her into everything here, but Ellis got one of my clients to lie about needing to see me. I got to the office, and there she was," I answered as I finished getting the flour off the table.

"It was only a matter of time she showed back up. Let me guess, needed money?" he asked not impressed.

"That would have been better. She actually thought we would get back together. Like she could disappear for over a year and I would welcome back with open arms. She didn't like it when I told her it was never going to happen. She left threatening me to sue for custody."

"With what money?" he said with a scoff. "She can try all she likes. No judge is going to look the other way on her actions over the past eighteen months. I'll help you with whatever you need."

"I know you will," I said with a small smile as the guilt ate away at my stomach.

Even though we weren't as close as we had once been, that didn't change that I could call him up or vice versa, and we would be there for each other. Regardless of what was needed, we had each other's back. No questions asked. Right or wrong.

"How was her first day?" I could hear he was genuinely interested.

"It's ah ... it's not going as well as I had hoped," I admitted as I leaned back against the counter. "I got home and everything looked good, until I got to my kitchen. It looked like a tornado went through it. There were dirty dishes in the sink and flour all over the table. Apparently, they made cookies."

I still couldn't believe that Christian had put his hands in cookie dough. He was never a child that enjoyed getting dirty.

"How badly are you shaking?" he asked, already knowing how I would have reacted.

"It's hard to get a deep breath. I'm still cleaning. I told her to leave me alone. Jeremy is even asleep in Christian's bed."

"The mess I can understand, but why would that bother you? They are both three. It's not inappropriate," he said, not fully understanding why that would be an issue.

"It's not the age; it's the fact that at some point they are going to leave. I don't want Christian to get attached to Jeremy only to end up devastated when Jeremy leaves. He's had enough people abandon him. I don't want Jeremy to be another name on that list."

I knew it wouldn't be Jeremy's fault. I would never blame a child. The result would be the same, though, and I just wanted to protect Christian from being hurt like that again.

"Ah, I get it. Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do about that. They're

kids. They are going to make friends and then lose them. There isn't anything anyone can do to change that. If it helps, Jasmine most likely won't be there that long."

"What makes you say that?" Based on what I had gathered from her, she wasn't looking to go back to Adam. She certainly had no problem standing up to that fact.

"She hasn't worked since she discovered she was pregnant. Adam didn't want her to. It's been close to four years now since she last had a job. She is a good mother, but she is not the best at managing her life. She is often messy and doesn't remember to focus on the finer details. She even would forget to pay bills before she moved in with Adam."

I could hear the disappointment within his voice, and clearly, he had seen a different version of Jasmine than I had seen. Though, to be fair, I had only known her a couple of days if that when you added up the hours I spent with her.

"How is Adam holding up?" I didn't really care, but it was only polite to ask.

"He's furious that Jeremy is gone. He never expected this or to be so embarrassed. What she is doing is unacceptable. I am relieved that you have given her a job. I know her and Jeremy will be safe with you. Once she gets a taste of being a single mother and having to do it all, she will be coming back."

Jasmine didn't come across that weak to me. Being a single parent was hard, especially balancing work, but Jasmine seemed strong enough to handle it to me. Again though, I barely knew her.

"She says she doesn't love him," I pointed out.

He scoffed before he spoke, "Love has nothing to do with it. Jeremy

deserves to have both of his parents in his life. He doesn't deserve to come from a broken home like low-income families. My grandson will not be raised that way. She will come to her senses and come home. Mark my words. Until then, at least they are safe."

I didn't bother pointing out that technically, my son was from a broken home. That was the thing with Francis, sometimes he got too attached to what his parents had raised him to believe. He got too caught up in being the perfect example to high society socialites. I just wanted what was best for Christian. I didn't care about keeping up appearances.

"I'll make sure they are okay. For now, it's getting late, and I still have a kitchen to clean."

I had been hoping speaking with Francis might help to calm me down, and it did to a level. However, the guilt was only getting worse, and I needed to get off this call.

"Thank you for what you are doing for them. I truly appreciate it. Let me know if there are any problems that come up."

"I'm sure everything will be fine." As long as I could keep my hands off of her.

"Goodnight old friend."

"Night Francis."

I let out a deep breath as I ended the call. Yup, I was going to Hell.

Jasmine

I got the last of our bags into the nanny-suite, and it felt weird to be here. It felt weird that this was going to be our new home, but it also felt weird to be here without Jeremy. I knew he was just in the connecting house, but he had never been away from me before. I had never gone to sleep without him just down the hallway from me. I felt anxious, which was a newer feeling for me. I had always been good at going with the flow. There hadn't been a situation where I felt anxious or nervous really.

From what I could see, the house was nice. It was all one level, so I guess it was more like an apartment, but there was a patio just off from the living room that had a nice little patio table that would be great for meals when Jeremy and I were over here. There was also a yard, but it was connected to the main house. I still knew Jeremy would have fun running around in it, and hopefully, him and Christian would continue to bond with each other.

I didn't like how Liam was handling having the two boys together. I didn't like that he didn't want them to be close. They were going to be around each other every single day for the next eight months, at least. I could end up

getting my own place in town, and then they would be at the same school. The only reason I could see that he didn't want them to be close was because he was looking down on us. We were the help.

I was used to working, but I wasn't used to being the help. It was going to take some time for me to adjust, because despite what Liam said, I wasn't going to be crawling back to Adam. I refused to be in a relationship without love or mutual respect. Now I just needed to make sure that what happened in the kitchen never happened again. And I wasn't just talking about the mess.

I needed to adapt a bit to what Liam expected. I wasn't going to stop the boys from getting their hands dirty or having fun. However, I would make sure that everything was cleaned up properly as we went. It was the best compromise as I was going to give him and maybe as time went on, he would grow used to the small mess every now and then, and it wouldn't be such a big deal.

My phone rang, and I grabbed it out of my purse. It was getting late, and I had no idea who would be calling me. I saw my father's name across the screen, and I hovered my thumb over the answer button, but I couldn't bring myself to hit it. I knew I was being a shitty daughter by not calling him or my mom. I knew they were worried about me and Jeremy. However, I couldn't seem to bring myself to speak with them. Their voicemails of accusation, disappointment, and open hostility told me that they weren't all that worried and more pissed off at the embarrassment of me running out on my wedding.

It might be petty, but I wanted them to be calling me because they wanted to make sure Jeremy and I were okay. That they understood how difficult it was for me to do that. But they only seemed to care about Adam's feelings.

My phone stopped ringing, and I let out a sigh. I was a terrible daughter. I scrubbed a hand over my face and decided that there was nothing I could do

about this tonight. I needed some time to decompress after everything. I made my way towards the bathroom and started to draw a hot bath. I tossed off my clothes and sunk into the water as I pulled up Kenny's number. I knew it was late in Miami, but I also knew that to Kenny, it was morning.

I hit the speaker button and placed my phone on the side of the tub. After three rings, he answered, "Girl, you best be calling me from prison or something. I haven't heard from you since your epic run down the aisle."

I couldn't stop the smile at hearing his voice. I loved Kenny. He was incredibly gay and fabulous. He was also my best friend. I had met him when I was working at the strip club. He was a bartender, and you would think he would never have been hit on, but he actually got laid a lot. It was crazy how many bi-curious and in-the-closet guys went to strip clubs.

"That bad, eh?" I said as I slid back and allowed the hot water to start working my tense muscles.

"Oh Honey, you went nuclear. What the fuck happened?"

"So much," I said with a sigh before I continued. "I was gonna go through with it. I swear, but then I was standing there and looking around and I realized I couldn't do it. I couldn't devote my life to him. I don't love him. He doesn't love me. It's all fake and a business transaction. I couldn't force myself or Jeremy to live that type of life."

"I get that. Though, it would have been better for you to come to that enlightenment before you put the dress on. He could have just told everyone you had to be rushed to the hospital for something, and the wedding was postponed."

"Yeah, I'll remember that the next time I decide to be a runaway bride," I teased as I playfully rolled my eyes.

He gave a chuckle before he spoke, "So where are you? And how is little

man?”

“He’s good. Thankfully, he’s too young to really understand what is going on. Believe it or not, I am actually all the way out in Oregon. In this small beach town. It’s actually gorgeous.”

“Damn. Okay, how the hell did you get there? Or why there?”

“By choice and not by choice I guess. After I left the church, the rental car broke down. I was stuck on the side of the road, and when a car did pull up, it was Liam. He’s a man that I spent an amazing night with four years ago only to see him again at my wedding and to discover he is my father’s best friend from childhood.”

“Girl! The plot thickens! You had no idea he was your dad’s best friend?”

I could hear the excitement flooding in his voice and I knew he would be sitting up straight right now just chomping at the bit to hear more.

“They had been best friends since childhood, but my parents don’t have any personal photos up. You’ve seen their house. I had absolutely no idea.”

“Okay, so Mr. Sinful pulls up,” he presses.

“He asked if I was okay and he ended up offering me a job as his live-in nanny. He has a sweet little three-year-old boy, Christian. His mother isn’t in the picture, and with Liam being a billionaire he is often traveling for work. He needed someone to be here taking care of Christian until he is in school in the fall.”

“Oh! It’s like a romcom. You lucky bitch. Obviously, you took the job. When did you start?”

“Today technically. I was only used to get here and get settled in, but he had an emergency meeting he had to get to. This place though, it’s something else. Ya, it’s beautiful and massive, but the whole place is super clean. Like, you could perform surgery in any room of the house, clean.”

“OCD? A man with that level of wealth, kinda goes hand in hand with control.”

“I guess. He has Christian on a very tight schedule, and I figured maybe that was because he wanted to make sure the new nanny did everything the right way. But tonight while he was gone, I was cooking dinner, and I decided that sugar cookies would be a great way for the boys to bond. When I had put flour on the kitchen table, Christian got really nervous at how Liam would react. I can’t even tell you the look on that little boy’s face when his hands touched the dough for the first time. It was like they never got dirty.”

“They probably didn’t. You know from growing up wealthy how little the children actually play in the mud or finger paint. If the house is that clean, Liam probably has some type of issues. I know I joked about OCD, but it could be a real thing or maybe some trauma.”

“Trauma how though?” I asked as I turned the water off.

I had never really thought that maybe there was something more, something deeper, behind Liam’s reaction tonight. Even after we had sex, he seemed hurt, and it wasn’t what I had been expecting from him.

“Well, if he was best friends with your dad when they were children, we know your father came from wealthy parents. It stands to reason Liam did as well. You know from your own grandparents how strict they were. How strict your parents are. You rebelled against it, but maybe it was worse for Liam. Maybe he has to follow the rules, because they’re ingrained into him and going against them didn’t end well for him.”

“Shit, all your Psych classes are starting to pay off,” I lightly teased, but Kenny was very smart.

He was going to college full-time to be a psychologist. He wanted to help other kids in the LGBTQ community to feel more accepting of themselves. He had a very rough go of it when he was younger, and he wanted to help prevent other kids from his own trauma. He might have had a point here, though. My grandparents on my father's side were nuts. Their house resembled Liam's a lot. I remembered one time I got some mud on the bottom of my shoes. It had been raining, and I got a small speck of it on their grey tiles. They had reacted as if I slaughtered an animal right in their hallway.

"You might have a point, though," I continued.

"I don't know. I've never met the man. All I can tell you is that maybe there is a deeper reason for his anal-retentiveness and to give the guy a bit of a break. It can't be easy having to leave your son in the care of a virtual stranger. Even if you shared an amazing night tonight."

"You're right. Okay, I'll try and keep what you said in mind when I am dealing with him. Now I just have to make sure we don't have sex on the kitchen table again," I said with a soft chuckle.

"Hello! You over here talking about cleaning when you had sex with him again? On the kitchen table? Bitch, why are we talking about trauma? Details, now."

A real laugh bubbled out of me, and I couldn't contain the massive smile on my face. Fuck, I love this man.

"It was the best sex of my entire life. Like out of this world, I could die happy. I think I came for like five minutes straight. I could barely move; my body was flooded with pleasure. And don't even get me started on how big he is."

"Oh no, you best be getting started. How big?"

“Big, big. Like you probably shouldn’t put that in me, but please do, big.”

He gave a mewling whine, and I knew he was getting the visual. This man was a breath of fresh air, and I missed him dearly.

“I want all of the dirty details. Right now,” he demanded and I was happy to oblige. I had no idea what tomorrow was going to bring, but at least tonight I was going to have some fun.

Liam

I was dreading going downstairs. I could hear that Christian was already awake, and Jasmine was with him. I would normally get Christian up in the morning, but Jasmine must have grabbed him when she got Jeremy. I still didn't like that she had allowed the boys to sleep in the same bed. I knew it was petty, and I was being overly cautious, but given everything that Christian had gone through, I didn't think it was at an extreme level.

I had no idea how this was going to go. I should just fire her, but if I did that, then Francis wouldn't know where her and Jeremy were, and that made the guilt in the pit of my stomach worse. There was no way I was going to be able to make up for sleeping with his daughter, twice now, but maybe if I could keep an eye on her and make sure her and Jeremy weren't living out of hotels, then maybe that would help to ease some of the guilt.

I just needed to make sure that what happened last night never happened again. No matter how attractive I found Jasmine, we could not engage in sex. That was only going to make things more complicated between us and we had enough complications on the table. Letting out a sigh, I opened my

bedroom door and headed out. I couldn't exactly hide away in my own bedroom all day. I had to get to the office and get a shitload of paperwork done.

I made my way towards the stairs and I could hear their voices filling up from the kitchen.

"No, mine," Christian said.

"I use," Jeremy said back.

"Hey, Jer, that is Christian's. It has his name on it, so let's give that back to him, and I will get you a different fork," Jasmine said in a completely calm voice. I had to give it to her; she was a good mom from what I had seen so far.

"Got shark," Jeremy said, and I didn't need to see him to know he was pouting.

I also knew what they were fighting over. I had gotten Christian a plate and utensil set that had his name on it. They were underwater creatures, something he had been very interested in. I had just happened to come across them from a local shop here.

"I know you like sharks, but they are his and we have to share, but respect each other's things. Right?" Jasmine responded.

"Yes Mommy." The sadness in Jeremy's tone sent a small shot of pain through my heart. I didn't really know the kid, but he seemed sweet.

"Hey, who can tell me what the biggest shark is?" Jasmine said, hoping to change the vibe in the room.

"Great white" Christian answered as I walked into the kitchen.

"Whale shark," Jeremy shouted out.

"Whoa, do we have a couple of sharks in the kitchen?" I said, as I went over and pressed a kiss to Christian's head.

“No Daddy. Which bigger?” he asked me.

“Jeremy is right. The whale shark can get as big as almost two full school buses. Sixty feet,” I answered.

“Whoa!” they both said, their eyes big saucers at the new information.

“The great white can get to be about twenty feet, so not a full school bus, but close to one,” Jasmine added as she placed two plates down with eggs and breakfast sausages on them. “Did you know, though, that whale sharks are considered lucky by the Hawaiians. That if you are out fishing and one comes up to your boat, it will bring you good luck. Some even pet them.”

“Pet?” Christian asked, surprised.

“Mhmm. Sharks are considered sacred animals, and you are not allowed to hurt them. Whale sharks, though still a shark and can be dangerous, most are very gentle,” she answered.

I didn’t know that. It would appear that Jasmine was very involved in what interested Jeremy, which was a good sign. I grabbed some coffee as the boys ate and talked about what little facts they knew. I couldn’t help but lean back against the counter and look at them. They had a lot of similarities. They could almost pass as cousins. It was odd, but we had seen other kids at the park that could have been related to Christian. It was this age. The younger the kid, the more they appear to be similar.

Their personalities were different, very different. I didn’t need to spend much time with Jeremy to know that Jasmine’s carefree personality had been passed on to Jeremy. It was the way he presented himself. I knew he had slept here, but Christian was already dressed in his ironed clothes. Jeremy was still wearing his Spider-Man pajamas and his hair was all messy. Even his feet were bare, whereas Christian already had his shoes on. His indoor shoes. He was allowed to wear them in the house. I didn’t like him running around in

bare feet because they would get dirty. I didn't want him in socks either because he could slip going down the stairs, especially after the floor had been cleaned and waxed.

Christian was a lot like me. He liked things to be clean. He didn't like being dirty, and that was why it was so shocking that he apparently helped to make cookies. He had never shown any interest in getting his hands dirty before. He didn't even when he colored. He never put his hands in paint; he didn't even use sidewalk chalk. Part of me was worried though that it was because of me that he was this way. Ellis went with me wanting everything clean; she encouraged it in Christian. I couldn't help but worry that maybe I was holding Christian back or changing him from who he was born to be. I didn't want to do that. I wanted him to just be himself, but I didn't know how to ensure that happened.

"I was thinking about taking the boys to the park while you were at work if that's okay." Jasmine said as she moved away from the table and came over to start rinsing the dishes that she used to cook breakfast.

"That's fine," I easily agreed. Christian loved being at the park, and there was one not too far from here.

"Decorate cookies Mommy?" Jeremy asked.

"We made cookies Daddy. The dough was squishy," Christian told me with a massive smile, and it hurt my heart to see just how happy he was to play with dough. I wasn't upset that he had enjoyed it. I was upset that he didn't experience that with me. I felt like I was holding him back, and I hated that.

"Was it? Did you make it into a shape?"

"Mhmm. Dinosaurs and stars. We decorate today."

I didn't have the heart to tell him to be careful and not get dirty. The smile on his face oozed excitement and getting to do something he had never gotten

to do before. The only reason we had cookie cutters was because Ellis had picked them up with the idea of her making cookies. She never baked, though, and I knew she had done it to try and impress her so-called friends.

“Will you decorate a special one for me? I can’t wait to try it after work.”

“Okay Daddy!” he said with a little bounce in his seat.

It felt good to see him so excited, and I knew I was gonna have to sort my shit out so he was able to be a normal child more. Or at least so he wouldn’t grow up to be terrified of a mess like I was. It wasn’t fair to him at all to be worried about everything being clean, especially once he got older. I had to make that change. I had to face that fear. I had to do it for him, and I was going to.

“Okay, Daddy has to get going to work, but I will see you tonight,” I said as I made my way over to Christian and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “Have fun at the park, and I can’t wait to see your cookies when I get home.”

“Love you Daddy.”

“I love you too. And be nice to Jeremy. Remember, he’s new in town, and that can be scary. So you show him all the fun spots at the park.”

Despite not wanting them to get close, that didn’t mean I wanted them to be constantly bickering or fighting with each other. They needed to get along while they were together. I just needed them to not get attached to each other. It was going to be a fine line, one I wasn’t certain I was going to be able to pull off.

“Promise,” Christian said, and he gave me a big smile so I would know he meant it.

“Have a good day at work,” Jasmine said with a polite smile, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she was killing me in her mind.

With a final nod, I made my way towards the front door and tossed my coat

on. I was going to be busy today get everything wrapped up so I could be home at a decent hour. I was just hoping that when I walked through my door this time it wouldn't look like the cover of a disaster magazine.

Jasmine

The second we arrived at the park both Christian and Jeremy were off running towards the playground. I was still trying to take it all in. This town was gorgeous, and it seemed like everywhere I looked there was something new to check out. I couldn't wait until the weekend when Liam was supposed to be with Christian so I could take Jeremy out, and we could really explore the town.

This park was awesome. There was a massive playground for the older kids, which I expected. What I loved was that there was also a massive playground suitable for the younger kids. And that was where the boys had ran off to. All around us was greenery; you couldn't even hear any traffic, just the faint sounds of the ocean in the background of all the happy, playing children. There was plenty of space for the boys to run around without them being in danger of anything. It was a massive difference to the parks in Miami.

I headed over to one of the picnic tables that were available. It was in the shade, which was nice. Even though I grew up in Miami, I wasn't a huge fan

of the heat. Especially when the heat was, cook an egg on the sidewalk, type of heat. I had put a bunch of sunscreen on the boys. I knew Jeremy had pretty tough skin, but I didn't know about Christian. The last thing I needed was for Liam to be getting home and seeing his son all red.

I got us all set up and then sat back and watched as the boys played. I would go over there shortly to join them, but for now I wanted to watch them and see how they interacted with each other. There had been moments yesterday and this morning where they weren't too happy to have the other around, but it was natural. They were two young boys trying to get used to having someone in their environment now. Both were from an only child household. It was going to take a minute, but I was confident they would work it out.

This morning had been awkward, but it could have been worse with Liam. He seemed to be a bit more at ease with Christian. I knew everything wasn't going to change because we had sex. We needed to put the wall back up so we were just employer and employee. It was going to be difficult, but I was hoping that if I faked it, it would eventually become real.

I was broken out of my thoughts when my phone began to ring. I couldn't contain the sigh. It was either going to be my father, mother, or Adam. I wasn't all that certain which one I was rooting for at this point. I pulled out my phone and saw that it was my mother. I knew I couldn't keep avoiding them. Eventually I had to speak with one of them. I suppose my mother was the best option out of the three of them.

“Hello,” I said as I answered.

“Jasmine?” she sounded confused, but I guess I couldn't blame her for that. She most likely had been expecting for me to send her to voicemail like I had

done previously.

“Hey Mom.” This conversation was only going to go one of two ways. Either she was going to be supportive, or she was going to lose her shit. I honestly had no idea.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she started. She was angry, but I could also hear the worry underneath it.

“I’m sorry Mom. I just couldn’t go through with it. I don’t love him. I can’t marry him.”

I didn’t realize until this moment just how desperately I needed her to understand this. That I needed her support in this. I knew it wasn’t what she wanted. I knew she was embarrassed about how I ended the relationship. I knew there were a hundred other ways I should have handled this situation. However, it was too late to make those changes. I just needed her to tell me she loved me, and it would be okay.

“Marriage is not always about love. Plenty of people get married because it is for a greater purpose. What about the family business? What about Jeremy? Why should he have to grow up in two different homes?”

I knew statistically children that grow up in a two-parent household do better in life. However, I also knew that there was a serious detriment to children that were forced to grow up in a home where their parents were constantly fighting. Where there was no love. Not to mention having a child in a home where they never knew when their father would be back. Adam was always working, but even when he wasn’t, he wasn’t present. There was no affection towards either of us. Half the time, he didn’t even know what Jeremy was interested in. That couldn’t be good for a child either.

“You don’t know what it was like living with Adam Mom. It’s not just about not being in love. It’s his attitude and how he is with me and Jeremy.

Did you know that some days Adam will go all day not even saying a word to Jeremy? That he doesn't even know his favorite color or what he likes to eat. Adam likes to put on this big show of being a great man, a great father, but it's all empty."

"He loves Jeremy," my mom insisted.

"I'm not arguing that. He just doesn't know how to show it. I am not going to put my son through fifteen more years of a house filled with disdain and tension. He deserves so much better than that. Even if that means he had to live in my house during the week and Adam's on the weekends. He will adapt just like all of the other divorcee's kids."

Was it ideal? No. But it was better than the alternative. I had to think about Jeremy and his long-term mental health. Even if that made my life a bit harder, I would figure it out.

"I'm not saying he is a perfect man, but he didn't deserve to be embarrassed like that. You should have come to me and told me how you were feeling. We could have talked about it. For God's sake, we could have at least avoided a wedding," she said, her voice losing some of the anger, and understanding was starting to filter into it. All of which was a good sign.

"I'm sorry. I just didn't think you would understand. You and Dad were so happy about the wedding, especially Dad. I didn't think you would be on my side."

Growing up, my mom had always tried to make sure my dad was happy. She had a lot of pressure on her to be the perfect wife. I knew things hadn't been easy on her. There were plenty of times where we fought, and I felt like she was trying to force me to be someone that I wasn't.

However, there had been times when her true self would poke through. Always when Dad wasn't around. I remember one night when I was eight,

and she came into my room at eleven o'clock at night, she told me to be super quiet because my dad was asleep, and we couldn't wake him. She got me to toss on my shoes and coat and we got into the car and we drove completely out of the city into the country. It was pitch dark, and we got out and laid down on the hood of the car. I didn't understand what we were doing, but then I looked up and the sky was covered in stars.

It had been the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And then the meteor shower started, and I was speechless. It was stunning, absolutely breathtaking, and even to this day, I hadn't seen anything like it. We were out until three in the morning. My mom talked about the different constellations and about how she had always dreamt of having a house in the country to be able to see the stars whenever she wanted. It was the first time I ever truly saw who my mother was.

My dad never knew. He still didn't. It was our secret, and we had about a dozen of them that we both were going to take to our graves. That woman. That mom that I could tell my secrets to, that was the mom I would have opened up to about Adam. The problem was, I never knew when that mom was going to show.

“I know it might not seem it at times, but I am always on your side. I just want what is best for you and Jeremy, Honey. I know you have struggled with this life, with the expectations that society has put on you. I know things haven't always been easy. It wasn't easy for me either, but I adapted. I knew though that you never would. You have too much fire in you, and I am glad that it didn't extinguish over the years. You can always tell me anything. I'm always on your side.”

Words could not describe how great a relief it was to hear her say that. To hear that she was on my side, even when I had questioned it at times. That

didn't mean I was going to spill my guts about having sex with Liam and that he was actually Jeremy's father. Baby steps after all.

"I really appreciate that Mom."

"Now your father is going to need some time. He's on a warpath. Adam is also not happy about Jeremy being taken from him. There will need to be something done about that. Your father said you were being a nanny for Liam. Do you know how long you will be out there for?"

"I'm not sure yet. The job is for at least eight months. And honestly, depending on how things go, I might just stay here. The town is spectacular, and I've always loved being in small towns over the larger ones. I know staying here would make things complicated with Adam."

There was a part of me that wanted to tell Liam about Jeremy because then I wouldn't have to deal with Adam and the complicated matter of being across the country from each other. However, Liam discovering the truth would only bring a whole host of other problems. There really was no telling what would be better.

The guilt of the truth was only getting worse though the more I saw Christian and Jeremy playing together and getting to see how Liam interacts with his son and what he would be like with Jeremy as well. It wasn't fair to any of them, but I was in for a penny, right?

"Life is often complicated. That doesn't mean you take the easy way out. I am sure you both will be able to work through it and come to some sort of understanding. For Jeremy's sake. Maybe that compromise is that during the summer months he stays with Adam. I don't know," my mom said, and I could tell she wasn't real happy about not being around Jeremy as much either. I hated that all of this was so messy.

All of a sudden, a woman with long brown hair beelined it for the boys.

Christian's head turned, and the biggest smile I had ever seen overtook his face.

"Mom, I have to go. Someone is here to see Christian. I'll call you in a couple of days," I said as I got up.

"Okay Honey. I love you and give Jeremy a big kiss for me."

"I will. We love you too," I said before I ended the call and tucked the phone into my back pocket.

"I missed you," the woman said as she picked Christian up.

"Excuse me," I started as I closed the gap between us. "Hi, I'm Jasmine. Christian's nanny. Whom might you be?"

I didn't want to be rude in case this woman was his aunt or something. Christian clearly knew who she was and wasn't scared by her.

She turned to me as she spoke, "My name is Ellis Mitchell. I am Christian's mom."

Oh, well that wasn't what I had been expecting. I knew Liam was divorced, and he needed a nanny obviously. However, I didn't really know anything about Christian's mother.

"Mommy back?" Christian asked.

"I am my sweet boy," she said to him before turning to me. "I was away on business for what felt like forever. I am now back in town and going to steal this little one for the day." She tickled at Christian's belly, and he gave the biggest of laughs.

"Does Liam know you are back?" I didn't really know what the situation was between them, but I also didn't want to step on anyone's toes.

"He does. I spoke to him just yesterday. I wasn't sure what time today I would be able to stop by, and as I drove by, I saw Christian. I'll bring him

back tomorrow morning,” she said, and there really was nothing I could do about her taking him. She was his mother after all.

“I guess, I will see you tomorrow morning Christian. Jeremy and I will pick up the decorations for the cookies, and we can all do it tomorrow morning.” I didn’t want him to miss out, and I knew Jeremy would survive waiting another day.

“Yay! We made cookies Mommy.”

“Yum. Maybe on the way home we can stop in at your favorite bakery and pick up a couple to hold you over until tomorrow,” she suggested, and it made Christian very excited.

“Well then, I will see you both tomorrow. I hope you have fun Christian,” I said with a warm smile.

I watched as Ellis headed off with her son, and they both seemed over the moon excited to be spending the day together. She seemed really nice. I turned to Jeremy, and I could tell he was a bit upset that Christian was leaving, but that could easily be changed. We now had the day together, and I had every intention of spending it exploring with him.

Liam

This day had been exhausting. I had spent most of it going through one Zoom meeting after the next. I was looking forward to getting home and relaxing with my son. We could curl up on the couch watching his favorite movie, eating popcorn, and just relaxing. I also wanted this night alone with him so we could talk and get to spend some time together like we normally do. I didn't want him thinking that things were going to change between us because Jeremy and Jasmine were here.

Walking into my house this time reflected a great deal of the last time. I couldn't help but feel anxious at the prospect of what the kitchen could look like. I slowly walked through the entrance into the kitchen, and I couldn't help but sigh in relief to see that it was clean. Everything was clean and quiet. The quiet was odd; it was only seven at night. The boys should have been up and running around still. I couldn't even hear them up in Christian's room.

A light caught my attention out my kitchen window, and I noticed that the lights in the nanny suite were on. Huh, I guess they decided to have some fun over there. I put my briefcase down and took off my jacket. I didn't need it to

be over there. I had a feeling they were decorating cookies and to avoid me coming home to a mess, Jasmine had smartly suggested that they do it over there. The nanny suite could look like a fucking hurricane for all I cared as long as I didn't have to see it or live in it.

I crossed the distance between the houses and knocked on the door. I would typically go right in, but technically, it was her residence, and I wouldn't have appreciated her barging into my house whenever she wanted. It was different in the mornings because part of her job was helping with Christian before I headed into work.

After a moment, the door opened, and Jasmine gave me a friendly smile that I could tell was more forced than meaningful.

"Back from work I see," she said, but she didn't move out of the way so I could enter.

"You gonna let me in to see my son?" I demanded. I didn't like the fact that she was blocking the doorway with her body. She didn't even have the door open all of the way.

The wave of fear that washed over her face was completely unexpected, but it was gone so quickly I couldn't determine if I actually saw fear or something else.

"Did you forget that Ellis was getting him today?" she asked, and my blood turned to ice.

"Ellis?" I barely managed to get out.

"Yeah, she came by the park this morning and took Christian. She said you both spoke yesterday, and you knew she was back in town from her business trip. Christian was over the moon to see her. She said she would drop him off in the morning."

"How fucking stupid can you be?" I seethed as I saw red.

The rational part of my brain knew this wasn't her fault, but Ellis wasn't here for me to kill. Jasmine was. Her hand was suddenly on my chest, and she pushed me back away from the doorway as she shut the door behind her and spoke.

"You will *never* speak to me like that again. I don't give a fuck what your problem is, but you will speak to me with respect."

I could see the tremble within her body, and she was just barely containing her rage. She was in the wrong though, because she let a stranger for all she knew go off with my son.

"You let some woman take my son and you expect me to not be pissed off about it?" I roared.

"She was his mother. I had no idea she wouldn't be allowed to see him. If there were people that needed to be kept from him, then it was your responsibility to tell me. You told me practically everything else in his day, right down to bathroom breaks. You didn't think I wouldn't need to know about this?" she snapped back.

"You don't allow my son to go with anyone unless I give you permission. I don't care who they are; no one takes him. The whole purpose of your job is to make my life easier, not fuck it up!" I yelled as I stormed away. I didn't have time to argue with her. I had to go and get my son.

I tore through the house to go out the front door and got into my car. I was spinning out of my driveway within seconds and back on the road. I knew where she would be. I knew what house she was living in because I had called my parents, of all people, this morning once I got to work to see if they had heard from her. They had known she was planning on moving back, and they were hopeful that our marriage could be rekindled. It didn't matter that we were officially divorced.

My parents had never been okay with us ending our marriage, or specifically me ending it. They didn't like Ellis, but they really didn't like having to tell their friends and associates that their only child was divorced. It didn't matter that I was raising my son and doing what most fathers didn't tend to do. Just like it didn't matter that I was a billionaire with a global empire.

Ellis had gone to them to see if they would be supportive of the idea of us getting back together. They had gotten out of her where she lived, and I suspected my parents were actually the ones paying for the house. There was no way she was working, and she would have blown through the settlement money I gave her in order to end the fucking divorce proceedings. She took the money and didn't think twice about it.

She had said she changed and a small part of me wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that she would change for Christian and be the mother that I knew she was capable of. However, I was a realist, and I knew she hadn't yet. There was no remorse in her and until there was, there was never going to be a change in her.

I slammed my hand against my steering wheel. I had to try and calm down, because storming in there boiling with rage was only going to make everything worse. The problem was I didn't know if I would be able to keep my cool the second I saw her. All of this could have been handled differently if she had just come to me and asked to see Christian. I could have arranged something where Christian could see her with me being present.

I was not about to go out of my way to keep them from each other; it just had to be done in the right manner to ensure that Christian would be safe. And she better be sober when I get there. Otherwise, all of my self-control was going to explode, and it was not going to be pretty.

The second I saw her house in the distance, I could feel my heart beating against my chest. I had to get a grip on myself, but it would appear I needed to lower my expectations on it. If I could just get through this without having an all-out screaming match, I would consider that a win for tonight.

Fuck please be sober.

The house itself was on the smaller side, but it was still as extravagant as I knew she wanted. It was always about the show for her. I would have been happy in a simple two story house on the beach, but that always seemed too lower class to her. The house was very modern, most of it built out of glass walls. Something that was odd for the town and it stood out, but not in a good way. Not in my opinion anyways.

Small towns should stay as a small town and not be modernized. They needed to sustain, but that doesn't always mean expanding and compromising on what makes them special. It was why I loved this town so much. The tourists helped with funding the town and as long as tourists were interested in everything Newport had to offer the town would stay the same.

I pulled into her driveway and parked my car. I was tempted to leave it running, but I turned it off. A small part of me was really hoping that everything was fine inside, and I could leave Christian here. The last thing I wanted to do was drag him out of there. I knew how important it was for him to spend time with Ellis. I knew he had been waiting for this for a long time now, and the very last thing I wanted to do was hurt him.

After turning my car off, I got out and went over to the front door. A brief thought of barging in crossed my mind, but I rang the doorbell and waited for her to answer. Hopefully answer. When no one came, I knocked on the door. The doorbell was more than loud enough; she should have heard it. Her car, the one I bought her, was in the driveway, so she was obviously home.

The longer I was left standing here, the more angry and anxious I became. It was after seven. Christian should have been in the bath by now. She knew that, so I couldn't imagine they were out in the nearby forest playing. Not to mention it would be getting too dark for that, and the mosquitoes would be out. Not that Ellis ever went into the woods to begin with. Her idea of camping was staying in a beach resort. Not that I was one to talk. I didn't care for camping either.

When no one answered the door, I tried the handle and was surprised to find it unlocked. I knew this was a small town and crime was non-existent. But still, anything could have happened. It's why I always made sure the doors were locked and the windows at night. I walked in and I didn't know what to expect. I had been hoping for the best, but I was prepared for the worst.

Walking into the house I noticed that the TV in the living room was turned off. The house was quiet and for a second I thought maybe they were sleeping already. It wouldn't be unheard of for Christian to burn himself out, especially if he didn't get a nap. I headed towards the kitchen, where the stairs were located just outside of it. I didn't even get one foot on the bottom step when I turned my attention to the kitchen.

There were empty wine bottles all over the counter. The kitchen was clean outside of that. But it didn't matter how clean it was; all I could see were the bottles. The back door opened and Ellis stumbled in. She actually stumbled into the door jam as she walked through it.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I seethed, doing my best to keep my voice down. I didn't know where Christian was, but if he was asleep I didn't want him waking up hearing our fight.

"What are you doing here?" She said, shocked that I had even gotten in the

house. Jesus fuck. Just how drunk was she?

“You show up and take my son without even speaking to me about it? What did you think was going to happen when I got home from work to discover your lies?”

“I don’t need your permission to see my son. And what lies? I said we spoke yesterday, and we did. No lies there,” she said with that drunken smirk that I couldn’t stand.

I wanted to scream at her. I wanted to grab her and shake her. Tell her to open her damn eyes and see what she was screwing up. What she was missing out on. Try and shake something back into place so she would go back to being the woman that I knew three years ago.

I didn’t do any of that though, because it was pointless. Arguing with Ellis drunk was like arguing with a wall. She was never going to understand where I was coming from. All she would do was give smart ass remarks and that fucking smirk.

“You know Ellis, one day you are going to wake up and realize how much you have missed. You’re gonna look at your reflection and not recognize the person staring back at you. I just hope Christian isn’t an adult by the time that happens.”

She rolled her eyes, actually rolled them. And this was why arguing with her while drunk was completely pointless.

“I’m gonna get Christian and bring him home. When you can prove to me that you have been sober for three months straight, then we can talk about you seeing him again.”

“You can’t keep him from me. We’ve been over this. I’ll sue you for custody and win.”

“You can sue all you want, but you won’t win Ellis.” I shook my head as I

continued, “Look at you right now. What would you do if he got hurt? If he was sick? You couldn’t drive him to the hospital. You hadn’t seen him in over a year. This was your chance to prove to me that you weren’t this person any longer. To show him how much you love him. And you couldn’t even stay sober for one night.”

I honestly didn’t know if I was more pissed or just sad. This was pathetic. I had been pissed. I spent every day since she walked out on us pissed off and hating her. Now that I was getting to see her like this, that anger was receding. In its place was pity and disappointment. I hadn’t been expecting it. I really hadn’t. That didn’t mean I was going to allow her to put Christian in harm’s way.

“Get help Ellis. Before you lose him,” I said before I turned and made my way up the stairs.

She could rant and rave all she wanted, but I was not going to keep Christian here, not when she was like this. I needed to get him home so he could get some sleep and there was a very long conversation due between Jasmine and me.

Jasmine

It was after nine when the back door opened, and I saw Liam coming out onto his deck. I had been sitting outside trying to enjoy the night air. Jeremy was asleep, and I didn't feel like watching TV. I had suspected that Liam had returned with Christian, but I hadn't seen them since they arrived. I had been waiting for the pounding at my door for when he did come back wanting to continue to yell at me for something I had no idea shouldn't be done. This man was making it easy for me to not reveal to him the truth about Jeremy's blood.

I was also aware that still made me a bitch.

Liam didn't look surprised when he saw me sitting out here. I was in my section, but I had brought one of the chairs from the front of the house around to the back. I wanted to be able to look up at the sky and see the stars. I had been hoping to relax for a bit before going to bed. Today had been really good, except for my fight with Liam.

Jeremy and I had explored some of the town and did a bit of shopping. I was hoping to get him to the beach soon and maybe do some of the tourist

stuff. We hadn't seen the aquarium either, because I wanted to do that with both of the boys. I figured it would be a great bonding time for them with their love of underwater creatures.

I couldn't contain the sigh as I saw Liam starting to make his way towards me. I was gonna have to apologize and the thing was, I technically was sorry. Even though I had no idea that Christian's mother wouldn't be allowed to take him, I did allow someone to take Liam's son without speaking with him about it first. I had seen enough real-life crime drama shows to know that in a kidnapping, it was typically a parent that was the culprit.

I just hated that I was gonna have to apologize, and he was gonna get all up on his high horse and lecture me about how he was the boss. Yadda, yadda, yadda. Suck it up girl; you need the money.

"Jasmine," Liam started, but I cut him off before he could get any further.

"I'm sorry about today. I shouldn't have allowed Ellis to take Christian, not without confirming it with you. Is he alright?" I was hoping asking about Christian would deter him from jumping on me. Plus, I really did want to make sure the little guy was okay.

"He's fine," Liam answered as he walked over and grabbed one of the chairs and brought it back over to me. Oh goody, we were going to chat more.

"It's important that no one takes Christian without me informing you of it first. Never will there come a time when someone spontaneously shows up for him. You will be forewarned."

"Understood," I offered him a smile which I was hoping would be more warm and polite, but really, I was fairly certain it came across as bitchy.

"I'm sorry too, for how I reacted. You had no way of knowing that Ellis couldn't be around Christian. I should have disclosed that to you on the very

first day.” His tone was sincere; maybe we were starting to make progress.

“Why isn’t she? If I can ask.”

I really wanted to know, because it was odd for a mother to not be allowed to be with her child. She seemed like a nice person. Sure, I only got to meet with her for a couple of minutes, if that, but she didn’t scream horrible person to me.

He let out a deep sigh as he scrubbed a hand over his face and leaned forward, placing his forearms on his knees. I could tell this wasn’t going to be a simple answer, and for a brief second, I could see the debate behind his eyes on if he should be telling me or not. My interests were piqued, and I was hoping he would tell me.

“When you and I first met at the conference, Ellis and I had broken up. I had no interest in getting back with her. We were drifting apart. She was partying more and with that came the drinking and cheating. My lawyer was drawing up the divorce papers. It wasn’t long after I got back she discovered she was pregnant.”

“I am guessing that was a surprise,” I hedged as I crossed my right leg over my left.

“Yes to me, no to her. She had been on the pill our whole relationship. She had always talked about having kids one day, but then changed her mind about it. I was happy to have a child-free life. I certainly wasn’t expecting to be a father at thirty-nine. Plus, with the amount of traveling that I was doing for my company, I didn’t want to get a puppy because I thought it wouldn’t be fair to it. A child would have been a hundred times worse. When things got rough between us, she stopped taking her birth control.”

“Wow. Trapping a man one-oh-one right there. You said she was cheating though,” I started, but I didn’t need to finish the thought for him to know

what I meant.

“I got a DNA test done just as a precaution. She swore she always used condoms with the other men, but even they can break, and they are not one hundred percent effective.”

You’re telling me.

“So you stayed when you found out she was pregnant. Why stay though? You had all of these problems and I had to imagine you fell out of love with her.”

“I did fall out of love. But we were having a child together. I wanted to try and make it work for him. I wanted my child to be able to grow up with both parents in their life. And she got better. The whole time she was pregnant, it was like she was the woman I fell in love with. Even after Christian came, she was a wonderful mother. Everything was going great for the first two years roughly.”

There was a pain within his voice. This still wasn’t easy for him to talk about. I had to imagine it was a wound that took a long time to close. When you break up with someone, you can make it a clean break. When you have a child with them though, there was no such thing as a clean break, because you both were going to be in that child’s life no matter what. Those years could either be pleasant and amicable or it could be a living Hell every time you had to be in the same room. What that looked like was dictated fully by the people who made the baby.

“Postpartum?” I had managed to avoid it, but I knew most women weren’t so lucky.

“Doctors cleared her, though she is using that as her excuse for her behavior. There are plenty of women who suffer through it every day and some barely make it through. The fact that she is throwing that word around

like it's nothing is disrespectful to them." He gave a deep sigh before he continued, "I think reality kicked in. I think she figured that things would eventually return to normal. That she would get to go shopping and on vacations to beach resorts like she got to before she became pregnant."

"That doesn't really happen when you have a baby that is relying on you. I know there were times when Adam got frustrated with being a father. He loved the idea of it. The notch it gave him. But he didn't like not being able to go out to fancy restaurants or coming home thinking he was gonna get laid and there was a baby crying."

"The vanity wears off and when it does, you either stay because you love being there or you start to distance yourself and eventually leave. Ellis left. She would go out partying and at first, I was fine with it. She got to have her own life as well, and it wasn't healthy for her to be stuck inside all day taking care of Christian. But then going out twice a month turned into once a week, and then she would be gone for a couple of days. That increased to being gone for a week or more."

"She was just out drinking?"

It seemed crazy to me that someone would turn around and leave their child just so they could get drunk. But I had never been much of a drinker, so maybe I wouldn't understand it. Often people were surprised that I didn't drink much after working in bars and a strip club. But I think that was why I didn't drink. I had seen the result far too much.

"And cheating. A bit of party drugs as well. I had tried to talk to her, but nothing I said ever worked. I filed for divorce almost a year and a half ago when I came home and Christian was crying his head off in his crib. She was nowhere to be found. She had packed her things and left him alone for hours."

Jesus. No wonder he didn't want Christian with her. She had abandoned him in his own crib. Anything could have happened to him. Just because he was in his crib didn't mean he was safe. He could have climbed out in his desperate need for someone. He could have slipped and hit his head. A crib was safe to sleep in, to be playing in for a short time while a parent was home. It was not some babysitter.

"I don't even know what to say. I can't imagine doing something like that. You have every right to be pissed off at her and at me for letting Ellis take Christian. There's no excuse for her behavior." It was just downright disgusting.

"You didn't know and as I said, I should have told you right away," he said with a small shrug.

"When did she get back?"

"Yesterday and we did speak, but she never told me she was picking up Christian. She expressed interest in getting back together with me, but I quickly shot that down. Now she wants to play this game."

He rubbed his face again, and I was beginning to suspect that was a tell of his for when he was tired. Not physically tired, but mentally and emotionally tired. That type of exhaustion that seeps into your bones and there's not much of a cure for it.

"Fucking exes, eh?" I said with a small smirk, and it got a chuckle out of him.

"You heard from Adam?"

Now it was my turn to sigh. And wasn't that a loaded question.

Liam

I didn't have any intention of sitting here for very long with her. I just wanted to explain myself and then call it a night. I couldn't help but ask her more about Adam though. Francis' words in my head were constantly playing on repeat in the back of my mind. I knew he wanted her and Adam back together, but I wasn't certain that was going to actually happen.

"He's called and left voicemails. Each one more hostile than the last. I know I need to call him. I know I can't just disappear with Jeremy and expect for him to understand or be happy about it. I just don't know what to say to him. I know my father wants us back together, but that's not going to happen. Thankfully, my mom seems to be coming around to my side."

"That's good, though, about your mom. And your dad is traditional and stubborn. He'll come around."

I didn't really believe that, but eventually he would give up. He would accept the current reality and move on from it. He wouldn't be happy, and he would never understand why Jasmine had to do this, but he would stop yelling at her every chance he got.

“Sure.”

Her tone told me she knew I had lied to her, but she was letting me get away with it. The beauty of white lies.

“Fucking exes, eh?” I said, echoing her words just moments ago, and this time she gave me a genuine smile that had my heart beating faster.

“You know what we need?” she asked as she turned more towards me, our knees touching.

“A time machine?” I countered with a smirk, but I knew neither one of us would trade having our sons for anything in this world.

“No, but that’s tempting,” she said with a fond look before she continued. “A stress reliever. Something we can do to work off all of the stress from our no-good exes.”

She gave me a sultry look, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. It was a terrible idea. Just this morning I had sworn to myself it would never happen again. That I would keep the wall up between us and we would never cross that professional line. Now here I was twelve hours later considering blowing up that line all over again.

What was it about her that made me so stupid and reckless?

“We shouldn’t do that. It’s not wise to mix business with pleasure,” I told her, even though I moved closer to her. It was like my body had a mind of its own, and it wasn’t looking to take no for an answer.

“I could argue that we mixed pleasure with business. After all, we did have sex first,” she expertly countered as she leaned forward, and I got a clear view down her shirt at her breasts. Fuck, she wasn’t wearing a bra.

She had been wearing a t-shirt and jeans earlier, but at some point she had changed into a simple dress or maybe it was a night shirt. Either way, it had spaghetti straps with a deep V-neck line, and it only went to the middle of her

thighs. It was a deep blue color that was really bringing out the brown mixture in her eyes.

“You are technically off the clock,” I said as I moved in closer, shortening the gap between us.

“I am. Right now we are just two people that are in need of a release.”

Was I going to regret this come morning? Absolutely. I should walk away. I should go upstairs and jerk off before getting some sleep. That would be the smart decision to make right now.

She took her bottom lip partially into her mouth as she bit down on it as her eyes traveled down my body and landed on my hardening cock in my pants.

Ah fuck it.

Reaching out, I grabbed her by the back of her neck and pulled her towards me. Closing the gap between us as our mouths crashed into each other's. She was instantly responding to me, and she didn't waste any time before I felt her tongue seeking entrance against my lips. I opened my mouth and deepened the kiss.

Just kissing wasn't enough; it was never going to be enough. I had to feel her against me. I had to taste her and feel her pulsing around me. I stood up and pulled her up with me without even breaking the kiss. I moved us over to the grass and laid down on my back. She had no choice but to join me on the grass, but before she could get too comfortable, I ran my hands down her back and under the hem of her dress. I grabbed the strings that made up her thong and pulled them down. She tossed her one leg over me to help get the damn thing off before she straddled me and grinded her pussy down on my hard cock.

We broke apart from the kiss as we both gave a deep moan. It was insane how badly I wanted her. How deeply I craved the feel of her skin against

mine. I grabbed her by the hips and picked her up, bringing her sweet pussy up to my mouth. I wasted no time before running my tongue along her slick folds and up to her clit. I was rewarded with a deep moan as she wiggled her hips slightly to get more friction. Fuck, she tasted so sweet, like fucking honey. I was never going to get tired of this.

The feel of the fabric of her dress was suddenly gone, and I knew she was now naked on top of me. What I wouldn't have given to be able to have watched her glorious naked body grinding against my mouth. She couldn't stop moaning as I feasted on her sweet nectar. I loved how responsive she was to me. Like a starving housewife in desperate need of a good fucking. We worked together, me licking and sucking, and her riding my face. I was going to enjoy watching her ride my cock after this. I desperately needed to watch her marvelous tits bouncing.

“Oh fuck, yes.” she wivered as her grinding picked up. She was close.

With a few more thrusts of my tongue deep inside her pussy, she was giving a soft scream as she came hard. I moaned as I continued to lick up every drop that she gave me. I could have drank her all day and never get tired of the taste. There was something I wanted more right now though.

I lifted her up by her hips and moved her down so she was straddling my lap. She worked on opening my pants as I dug out a condom from my wallet. Thankfully, I remembered to replace it. We worked together as I got the condom on, and I felt her hand on my cock as she guided it over to her hole. I allowed her to take complete control over the pace, and my eyes rolled back as I felt the heat from her pussy surrounding my cock.

By the time she was fully seated on my cock, we were both breathing heavily as the pleasure was coursing through us. She sat up as she rocked her hips back and forth. I slid my hands down to her ass and gave it a small slap.

She mewled as she began to bounce up and down, making sure she took all of my cock deep inside of her.

“Fuck that’s it; ride me Baby. I want to feel you cum all over my cock,” I groaned as her inner muscles squeezed my cock.

Shit, at this rate I was not going to last very long. I snaked my hands up her body to her plump tits. She hissed as pleasure shot through her. I knew she was getting closer to cumming again as she picked up her pace. She leaned back a bit, putting her hips at the right angle for my cock to hit her sweet spot dead on.

She couldn’t contain the loud moan that erupted from her. Just the sight of watching her using my body to chase her own orgasm and watching her tits bounce was almost enough to make me cum.

“Oh fuck, Liam,” she gasped as her movements became erratic.

It was only a second later when I felt her pussy pulse, and a heat washed over my cock. She gave a soft scream, and I moved my hands down to her hips and started to thrust up into her at a frantic pace. After a few more thrusts, I was slamming Jasmine back down onto me as I came hard and deep inside of her with a loud groan.

Our bodies pulsed around each other and my whole body felt like it was floating. I was normally pretty quick to recover from sex but being with Jasmine always felt like an out of body experience. It was as if our bodies were made for each other. Fuck, she looked like a goddess sitting on me with her long ebony hair flowing down her back and over her right breast.

“That gets better every time,” she managed to say as she fought to regain control of her breathing.

“If it gets any better, I’m gonna die,” I said with a goofy smile.

She gave a huff of a laugh as she slowly moved up and off from me. She

collapsed onto the grass as she tried to get her legs to work. With a deep breath, I sat up and for a second, black dots danced across my eyes. Fuck, now I really needed some sleep. I reached over and grabbed her dress for her.

“Thanks,” she said as she took it and tossed it on.

I forced myself to stand up, and I tucked myself back into my pants. I would need to get rid of the condom once I got inside. I held my hand out and Jasmine easily took it. I helped to get her standing, and once I was confident she wouldn't fall over, I released her hand.

“I guess I'll see you at breakfast.” She said, slightly awkwardly.

She wasn't the only one feeling it. I wasn't too sure how to go about this. Normally my one-night stands leave or I do. We both lived here, technically. I closed the small gap between us, and I pressed my lips to her forehead in a gentle kiss before I pulled back.

“Sleep tight.”

“Don't let the bed bugs bite,” she finished with a radiant smile that filled my chest with warmth.

She moved back and started to make her way towards her house. I didn't start to make the journey to my own home until I saw her go inside where I knew she would be safe. I couldn't explain it, but there was a feeling within my gut that was telling me tonight had changed something between us. I just couldn't determine if that was a good or a bad thing.

Jasmine

I had just finished cleaning up after breakfast when a knock at the door came. I had no idea who it could be. Liam hadn't mentioned that anyone would be stopping by. This morning had actually gone better than I had expected it would. Things were a bit awkward, sure, but it was more of a comfortable awkwardness rather than painful. We had all sat down for breakfast at the table this morning, and I couldn't stop my mind from thinking how nice it would be to do it all the time.

It was natural for my mind to be making these silly daydreams given that Liam was Jeremy's father. It was as if I had walked through a mirror and ended up in another reality where I had been honest from the jump about who's Jeremy's father was. Maybe Liam and I would be together, and we would be raising the boys together as a family unit. Or maybe Liam would have turned into even more of an asshole and tried to take him from me.

I shook my head at the thought. No, even I had to admit he wouldn't have done that. As much, as desperately, I needed to believe it, it just wasn't true. He had every reason to keep Ellis away from Christian, but he wasn't. Yes,

technically he was, but he was doing it because of her behavior not because he was being petty and controlling. Once she straightened up her life, I had no doubt that he would allow her to have Christian as often as she wanted.

This whole situation was growing messier by the minute, and I really didn't like what that would mean for the future.

Another couple of fast knocks were banged onto the door and the fierceness had me hesitating for a second. Who the hell was in that much of a hurry to get someone to answer it? I was really hoping it wasn't the police on the other side. Or the Sheriff I guess I should say. This town didn't have police; they had a Sheriff's department. That's how you know you have reached small town status. This was only my third official day here, and I really didn't want any drama today.

I crossed the remaining distance and opened the door. It was at that moment that I realized I should have looked out the peephole to see who was on the other side first. It wasn't a Sheriff standing on the other side. It wasn't even Ellis, which would have been a drastic improvement. No, it was Adam.

A very pissed off looking Adam.

"How ... how did you find me?"

That wasn't the first question that should have come out of my mouth. Hell, it wasn't the first thing I should have said, but it was what my mouth decided to say. He stepped inside and pushed past me as he spoke.

"Francis told me."

Of course my father did. God forbid he just respected my decision and allowed me some time to sort out my own emotions. He wasn't butting in because he cared about my welfare. He was doing this because his business partner was pissed, and now he was trying to force a genie back into the lamp.

“He had no right to tell you,” I said as I closed the door, but as the words left my mouth, I knew it was the wrong thing to say.

He snapped back towards me and the anger was radiating from him, “He had no right to tell me where my son is? He had no right to tell me where my fiancée had ran off to with my son?”

I had to bite my tongue to keep the words, *he’s not your son*, from escaping. We rarely argued, but when we did, it was always about his old beliefs. It was always about how I should be a certain way. That Jeremy was his pride and joy, but he only cared about him in a public setting. He treated us like he was achieving a society status upgrade. Not like two people he claimed to love.

“First, I am not your fiancée. We are done. That was made perfectly clear when I left you at the church. And second, he’s our son and if I want to take him to live in a different city I am allowed. I don’t need your permission.” I said, as I moved so we were more in the living room and not standing by the front door.

My eyes went over to the second level and I was relieved that the boys were hanging out in Christian’s room. I wanted to take them out to go and look at some of the lighthouses. I figured we could go to the beach later in the week. I had to talk to Liam first before taking him, because I didn’t know how well Christian could swim or if there was something special I had to do for him. Where water was concerned, it was better to be safe than sorry.

“You are fucking right you need my permission. He is my son, and I will not allow you to take him and move across the country,” he seethed.

He was angrier than he had ever been. Where was all this passion when we were together? Where was the desire to be a family then?

“You are going to pack and get in the car and come back home. Now,” he

demanded, and I couldn't help but laugh.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? You don't get to order me around. I'm not your servant. Jeremy and I are living here. I am working here. He likes being here, and we will continue to be here until I decide I wish to move us. I don't love you. I am never coming back to you. You can either accept it and move on, or you can go fuck yourself. Choice is yours.”

I have never been submissive to a man, and I sure as shit was not about to start now. He wanted to talk to me this way. He wanted to treat me like this. Then he was in for a rude awakening. I was not his employee or slave. I was not going to bend to his will because he had the dick. And it was just further proof that he didn't know me, because if he did, he would have known that speaking to me this way was only going to result in me cutting his dick off.

“I am not going to allow you to take my son from me. You don't want to start this fight. You won't win. I can have a whole boardroom filled with lawyers. They will tear you apart, and I will be the one with sole custody of Jeremy. You'll never see him again until he turns eighteen. I know you don't want that. So stop this foolishness and come home. We can work it out,” he gave me a smile, but it only turned my stomach.

How could I have not seen how disgusting he was? He was a used car salesman, and he was trying to convince me the car was perfectly safe even though it was missing two tires.

“You think I'm going to be happy to settle? That I'll come home and pretend for the next fifteen years that we're so happy? I don't love you Adam. You don't love me, and you know it. I don't even think you love Jeremy. You just love the idea of what we represent. You don't even know his favorite color. You don't know anything about him, and that's because you don't want to.”

“Don’t be stupid. This is a mistake that you won’t be able to walk back,” he threatened.

“You Adam, might have a boardroom full of lawyers. You might dig into my life, my past, and try to find any reason to discredit me as a mother. But I am an amazing mother, and you know it. I know Jeremy. I am the one that has been in his life every single day since the moment he was born. You’re the father that doesn't even know what he likes. And let’s be real here; out of the two of us, you’re the one with skeletons in their past, not me. I’d rather do this amicably, but if you want a war, that’s fine.”

This was the last thing that I wanted. I just wanted him to be an adult and to handle this with dignity and respect. Apparently, that was too wishful thinking, because he was going to fight dirty. He reached into the inside of his coat pocket and pulled out some papers. I didn’t need to look at them to know what they were. He tossed them down onto the coffee table before he spoke.

“Life as you know it, is over.”

He gave me one last menacing look before he turned and headed for the front door, slamming it close in his wake. He didn’t even ask how Jeremy was. I took in a deep and shaky breath before I moved over and sat down on the couch. My hand shook slightly as I reached over and grabbed the paperwork. A quick look at it told me that he was suing for full custody and complete control over visitation rights. The reason was stated unsuitable living conditions and incompetence. According to the document, I didn’t work and haven’t in four years. That I didn’t have my own home and I had become emotionally unstable. That I was a risk to Jeremy’s welfare and mental health.

Fucking asshole.

He was going to try and discredit me as a mother. Make it seem like I was making irrational decisions, all because I didn't want to marry him and play pretend any longer. Fucking perfect. I had money in a trust from my parents and grandparents over the years. However, it wasn't much. My father had expected for me to get married and have a man take care of me. I would have maybe enough for a lawyer for this court proceedings, but it all depended on how long it went on for. I was going to have to be very careful with my paychecks and save everything I could.

If I could go back and kick twenty-one-year-old me's ass, I would. I had made a decision out of fear and desperation. I should have been honest from the jump and told Adam that I didn't know if he was the father. I should have just taken my lumps and got through it. The problem was, I had been afraid of what my parents would say or do. I had been afraid of what it would mean for my child's life.

And now that lie was going to bite me in the ass as the man who thought he was my son's father was suing me for custody while I was working for the man that was my son's father. This was some Jerry Springer shit.

"Mommy!" I looked up as I heard Jeremy's voice. Him and Christian were running down the stairs. "We go now?"

They were both very excited to check out some of the lighthouses. I gave them a smile as I folded the papers up. "Absolutely. Get your shoes on." I stood and headed over to my purse. I would worry about all of this with Adam later. For now, I was going to enjoy the day with my two favorite boys.

Liam

Paperwork was going to kill me. I was either going to die sitting in this chair or a stack was going to collapse onto me, crushing me to death. I had no idea how I got to this position. I knew I ran the company. It was mine after all, but I didn't have this much paperwork when I started the company. Somehow, as I got bigger, the piles got bigger and now everything needed to be filled out multiple times for various people. This wasn't exactly the idea of what being a CEO was to me when I was fourteen and started my own car detailing business.

Car detailing. That was laughable now. It was me washing cars and vacuuming the inside. As I got older, I got better at it and added different things, but it had been my first business and I had loved it, specifically the marketing aspect of the business. I loved being able to create different ads and ways to create flyers. Marketing was logical, strategic, but it was also creative and my brain was craving that combination. I saved up every cent that I could for four years, and when I turned eighteen, I went away to college

and lived off my own income. I didn't want my parents' hand in any of it. I wanted it to be my own.

They weren't happy about it at first, especially my father. It wasn't that they were upset at my choice of career; they both believed that marketing was a strong career. One they could brag about. What they didn't like was not being able to pick the college I had chosen. The direction I had taken my company. It wasn't enough that I was worth billions of dollars. That my company would still be sustainable even three generations from now. They didn't approve of how I spent my money.

Most would assume I was spending it on drugs and hookers, but I was actually donating it to various charities all around the world. Close to half a billion dollars a year from the revenue out of my company. To my parents it was good to donate to charity for a tax credit and to brag about it. However, most didn't know I was donating and the amount was unacceptable.

What was unacceptable to me was rich people hoarding the money that they won't be able to take with them when they die. They had the funds to help, so why not help? If I could help feed children in starving communities, why shouldn't I? If I could help provide a school for girls in Africa or the Middle East, then why shouldn't I? To my parents, though, it was lowering my net worth, and that was unacceptable in every way. One of the many differences we had.

My attention was thankfully disrupted by a knock at my door.

"Come in." I knew it would be Janice.

My door opened, and Janice stayed in the doorway as she spoke, "A lawyer is here for you. A Jonathan Jackson."

I had never heard of him, but I didn't exactly travel in a legal circuit.

"Send him in." At this point I would gladly take any distraction that I could

get.

She gave a nod and left the door open as she went and grabbed Mr. Jackson. A moment later, a younger man walked into my office, and he was not what I was expecting. I've had visits from lawyers; that wasn't too uncommon. Most would show up to gather paperwork for their client on a merger or new business venture. I dealt with the marketing aspect, but each client had to sign a contract with me, and I worked closely with them to ensure their branding was properly expressed. Sometimes, there was a crossover in what I did and what a lawyer did. So they would come down, and we would work on the paperwork together to skip a couple of steps.

“Mr. Jackson, what can I do for you?”

He pulled out a set of papers that were loosely folded from his inner suit pocket and handed them to me as he spoke, “I am here to serve you with court documents.”

Of course he was. I took the papers, but I didn't open them. I already knew they would be from Ellis. She was suing me for full custody as she said she would. I had seen it coming. After all, she gave me plenty of warnings. On the other side of things, I didn't see this coming. I figured she was just talking out of her ass, and she would go back to her carefree, no kid, lifestyle.

“I need you to sign,” Mr. Jackson said as he held out a piece of paper and a pen.

I took it and signed my name where I acknowledged that I received the papers. I handed it back to him, and he gave me a nod of thanks before he headed out. He was a man of few words, but I suspected he was just relieved I didn't get irate with him.

“I'm sorry,” Janice said from her position in the doorway.

I wanted to tell her it wasn't her fault. She had no reason to be sorry. I

needed to get back to work. I had meetings all day. I didn't have time to linger on this right now. But all I could think about was getting a beer or a whiskey. Definitely a whiskey. I wasn't much of a drinker, certainly not a day drinker. Hell, I hadn't really done that in my twenties. Today though, today was a whole different story. I needed to go to those meetings but going when I wasn't mentally ready would only make me appear incompetent, and that wasn't something I would tolerate.

"Cancel my meetings today," I told her as I started to pack up.

"Yes Sir," was all she said before she turned and headed over to her desk to do her work.

I grabbed my coat and the custody papers before I headed out. I left my car. There was no way I was going to be driving home later, so there was no point in bringing it with me. There were multiple bars within walking distance, and it was a nice day out today. I headed down to the local's bar that I have lunch at once or twice a week. I tended to avoid tourist spots, just because it is usually busy. I preferred the more local hang outs. Even if they were busy, it was a different atmosphere compared to a group of tourists.

Once I arrived, I walked through the bar to the back where the patio was that faced the ocean. It wasn't too busy, which was nice. I didn't want to be bothered by anyone. I grabbed a table and sat down. It was only a moment later a waitress came over and I gave her my order for a whiskey on the rocks and a bacon cheeseburger.

It wasn't until I was alone did I finally pull out the court documents. I knew she wanted full custody, but I was more interested in the reasoning she stated. Negligence of child's welfare. Controlling and abusive behavior.

Fucking bullshit.

I was the one neglecting Christian's welfare. I was the one that stayed; she

was the one that ran away and abandoned him. Fuck, this was the last thing that I needed. People say when it rains, it pours, but it could go and pour somewhere else now. I already had enough problems with keeping my hands off Jasmine. I didn't need Ellis and her drama to go with it.

I gave a quick thanks to the waitress when she put my drink down. She had walked away, and I thought I was alone. That was until I heard a voice that I held zero desire in hearing at this moment.

“Day drinking? Really Liam.”

I couldn't contain the annoyed sigh as I looked up and saw not only my father, but my mother as well. Fucking great.

“A little far from home aren't you?” I countered as they both sat down across from me.

“I will never understand why you like this dreadful town,” my mother commented as she looked out at the ocean.

That should have answered her question, but she held zero interest in the beach. Her idea of beauty was skyscrapers. She wanted to be in a massive city that didn't have winter. She would have loved to be in LA, but my father wasn't about to move and lose everything he had worked for.

“Why are you both here?” I wasn't about to get into some debate about why I preferred a small town.

“Ellis informed us that she has been forced to file for sole custody. After the disaster of the divorce, this was the last thing we needed,” my father said, getting down to business.

“Right, because my life and the welfare of my son is really an inconvenience to you,” I said as I fought to keep my eyes from rolling.

“Your actions reflect upon this family, and I will not have my reputation soiled because you are unable to keep your house in order. The divorce was

bad enough, but now a custody battle,” my father started.

“Why can’t you simply work this out with Ellis like a civilized human being? She is his mother; it only makes sense that Christian is with her,” my mother finished.

“You have done nothing but criticize her for over a year since she abandoned Christian. You have gone on and on about how a horrible mother and human being she is. And now you want me to hand over my son because it’s more convenient for you both?”

I couldn’t believe the hypocrisy. For over a year they have done nothing but berate me about how I chose Ellis and married her. That she was a gold digger and I wasn’t smart enough to see through it before marrying her. Now they wanted me to just go quietly into the night and give her my son. This was fucking bullshit. I knew they were both old fashioned and I knew they didn’t want this to get dragged into the press. But that didn’t mean I was going to hand my son over to make things easier for them. For them to save face.

“When did she even call you? Was it last night after I had to go and get Christian and bring him home because she was too drunk to even take care of him? That’s the life you want for your grandson, whom you supposedly love?”

“We do love him,” my mother instantly argued.

“She called last night upset about how you were keeping Christian from her. I hardly think drinking after he was in bed is any crime. You’re here in the middle of the day drinking,” my father countered.

“While my son is being taken care of by a sober adult. He’s not sitting here watching me.” I held my hands up slightly in surrender. “I’m done talking about this. If you came down to show me support during this difficult time,

then order something. But if you came down here to lecture and dictate my life, you can leave.”

I wasn't going to tolerate anyone ordering me around, and I wasn't going to allow anyone to tell me what was best for my son. They weren't impressed by my refusal. Apparently, they weren't here for me though, because they got up and walked away.

This morning fucking sucked.

Jasmine

It was just after ten when the front door opened and Liam came home. I had been staying with the boys after they had gone to bed. I knew Liam didn't want them sleeping in the same bed, but he hadn't come back home yet and it was past their bedtime. I couldn't exactly leave one boy alone in the house. It was one thing to sit outside for thirty minutes and another to be in a completely different house. I was just hoping that Liam understood that.

I turned from my spot on the couch to see Liam walking into the living room. He was looking a little rough though. His coat was off, his dress shirt was untucked, and his tie was draped around his neck.

"Are you drunk?" I asked with a smile.

"Maybe," he answered with a goofy smile as he tossed his jacket towards the chair, but missed, and it landed on the floor.

"Oh my god you are. Mr. Tight Ass Control Freak is drunk," I gave a soft laugh at the sight of him.

Shit, maybe this man was full of surprises.

"I'm not a tight ass," he countered as he went and collapsed down into the

chair. I shot him a look that said it all and he rolled his eyes, “Fine, I’m not always a tight ass. Where’s the boys?”

“Asleep in Christian’s room, and before you start, I couldn’t exactly leave one of them alone to sleep in their own bed.”

He waved a hand at me in a dismissive manner, and I knew he didn’t care that they were sharing a bed. At least not right now.

“Why are you drunk on a Tuesday?” I highly doubted this was a typical thing for him so obviously something happened.

He reached over to grab his jacket that was on the floor. He almost fell out of the chair and I had to fight not to laugh at him. He finally dug out what he was looking for and tossed the papers down onto the coffee table. I picked ‘em up and looked to see they were custody papers from Ellis.

I couldn’t help but laugh. It wasn’t appropriate at all and I was certain he would take it the wrong way. I went and grabbed my own custody papers from the coffee table and placed both sets of paperwork down as I spoke.

“I see your custody papers and I will raise you more custody papers.”

“What?” he asked as he leaned forward and looked at my own. “When did this happen?”

“Today, not long after breakfast. Adam showed up. Apparently, my father is on his side and told him where I was. He showed up here and started demanding that I come back home with him. He didn’t even care that there was no love between us. He just wants his reputation and image restored.”

“He must miss Jeremy, though.”

“I wish I could say that with confidence. I can’t though. There were days where Adam didn’t even speak a single word to him.”

“What? How do you go all day not speaking to your kid?” He couldn’t keep the disgusted look from his face.

“He wasn’t like that at first. When he first discovered I was pregnant, he was excited. He was over the moon when we found out it was a boy. Things started to change though. He didn’t want me working. He stopped helping around the house. Then once Jeremy was born, he was working all the time. He didn’t help to feed or change his diapers. We’d go over six months before we would have sex, and it was different. He stopped caring about my own pleasure. The love was gone long before I gave birth.”

I should have let Adam go a long time ago, but I wanted to have a proper family. I wanted to make my parents proud, and he wasn’t that bad in the beginning. I never expected for him to change so much. He had always made me feel like he accepted and loved who I was. Turned out, not so much.

“Wow. I couldn’t imagine not even speaking to Christian for day. Some people weren’t meant to be parents. It’s unfortunate, and the children are always the ones that get screwed over. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry about your ex,” I countered.

“We make one hell of a pair,” he said with a small chuckle. “I’ll tell you what, tomorrow night I’ll watch the boys, and you can go out and get drunk.”

“Tempting, but I’ve never been one for drinking. At least not as a stress reliever.”

He gave me a sexy smirk as he spoke, “Maybe there is another way you could work off the stress.”

“Oh, now that is very tempting. But you are drunk, and I wouldn’t want to take advantage of you.”

“You can always take advantage,” he countered as he removed his shirt and tie.

The man looked like a god sitting there. It would be reckless to keep having sex with him. Right now, all I could think about was how stupid it would be

to not sleep with him.

“Take your pants off,” I ordered.

He quickly stood, stripping off the rest of his clothing. He made sure to grab a condom from his wallet though and set it off to the side. I rose and crossed the room. Once I was close enough, I pressed my hand against his chest and pushed him back down to the chair. He sat, very proud and not the least bit ashamed of his body. Not that he had any reason to be.

I slowly slinked down onto my knees. I ran my hands up his thighs and gave him a sexy smile as I inched closer to his already hard cock. I locked eyes with him as I bent forward and gave his tip a lick. I gave a sultry moan at his sweet taste on my tongue. He groaned as a shock of pleasure shook him. I took his tip into my mouth and sucked on it before taking him fully into my mouth. I was rewarded with a deep moan from him, and it only fueled me on.

I felt his hand threading into my hair, but he didn't demand control. Instead he just rested it there. I could feel him getting harder within my mouth, and he thrust his hips up slightly, pushing his cock all the way into my mouth. I moaned around him, sending vibrations down his cock. He groaned, and the grip on my hair tightened slightly.

“Fuck, you're so good at this.”

His cock was growing harder by the second and I knew he was too close to last much longer. His panting picked up, and his grip on my hair tightened as his hips snapped forward. He gave a deep moan as he pulsed in my mouth. I easily swallowed what he had for me, and I moved back up and sucked on his sensitive tip before moving off completely.

Liam moved his hand from my hair and down to the back of my neck. He pulled me up to him, and I straddled his lap as he pulled me in for a heated

kiss. A fire erupted within my chest, and it spread all over my body. I easily melted against him, and when I felt his tongue against my lips seeking entrance, I willingly gave it.

We both moaned as our tongues danced with each other. I ran my hands down his bare chest and my fingers glided over his hard muscles. His skin was smooth and warm beneath my fingers, but it wasn't enough. I needed to feel more of him. I felt his hands on the hem of my shirt, and I easily pulled back as he removed my shirt and bra before his mouth was making its way down my neck and towards my chest.

“Liam,” I moaned as he took my nipple into his mouth.

His hands moved down my back and grabbed my ass. I grinded my hips down against his and we both groaned at the pleasure scorching through us. I needed more though so I pulled back and got up. I made quick work of getting my jeans opened and slipping them off along with my panties. While I did that, Liam reached for the condom and slipped it on.

His hands went to my hips and pulled me back towards him. I straddled his lap, and I felt his tip against my wet core before I slowly started to push his cock inside of me. He was so thick, but he felt amazing. By the time I was fully seated on his cock, we were both breathing heavily.

“You know what I just realized?” I said as I tried to adjust to his massive cock.

“What?”

“We never make it to a bed.”

Even when we were at the hotel that first time, we never got on the bed. We had sex on the dresser, table and in the shower.

“Huh, you're right. I guess we'll have to aim for that next time.” He squeezed my ass as he continued, “I'm more interested in this time though.”

“You do make a valid point,” I said as I lifted up until his cock was almost all the way out of me.

I slowly sat back down, and he groaned at the sensation. I kept my pace slow at first, and once I fully adjusted to his size, I picked up my pace. He kept both of his hands on my ass, and he thrust up into me in time with my movements. I arched back slightly to adjust my position of my hips. The new position caused his cock to hit my sweet spot dead on, and I gave a soft scream.

“Oh fuck,” I moaned as our movements became more erratic.

“You feel so good. All wet and hot around my cock. I want to feel you cum. Cum for me Baby.”

He began to truly thrust up into me, and my whole body was beginning to tingle. One more deep thrust and I saw a kaleidoscope of colors dancing all across my eyes as my whole body tightened, and I gave a deep moan as I came.

“Fuck,” Liam growled as he pounded into me even faster. I knew the tightening of my walls was squeezing him, and it only took a few more thrusts before he thrust his hips one last time before I felt his cock pulsing inside of me.

The only sound in the room was our heavy breathing as we both continued to pulse against each other. Sex with Liam was always amazing, and it seemed like each time we out did ourselves. I leaned forward and placed my forehead against his as we tried to get control over our breathing. Things between us were getting out of hand, and I should be trying to get us back on track. The trick was, I didn't want to. I was enjoying this time with him, even if we were opposites, and I knew there would be plenty more fights to come our way.

Not to mention I was keeping a massive secret from him. Regardless though, the sex was epic, and I didn't want to lose it. Maybe there was a way that we could keep both without it affecting us negatively. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking.

Liam

I groaned as I started to wake up. Typically when I woke up, I was doing pretty good. If I didn't stay up too late, I could jump right out of bed when my alarm went off. This morning, not so much. I hadn't gotten too drunk yesterday, but I had gotten drunk, and now I was paying for it. I slapped my hand out and grabbed my phone without opening my eyes. I turned the alarm off, and the sudden silence was a blessing on the pounding that was my head.

Ugh, I was not looking forward to going to work today. I had too many meetings to cancel though. I had already done that yesterday, and I couldn't afford to do it twice. It wasn't just about the clients; it was about time management. If I canceled, then it would push everyone back, and it would become a nightmare. I also had to call my lawyer and get him started on the custody case.

I forced my body to get up and the room spun for a second before it stopped. I grabbed my phone, and I sat back against my headboard. I pulled up my lawyer's name, and I hit the phone icon. When I had gotten a divorce,

I made sure to pick a lawyer that also did work in family court. I suspected it was only a matter of time before I would have to go through this process, and it would be easier for someone that already knew the history.

“McCormick.”

“Alvin, it’s Liam Mitchell.”

“Liam. How are you doing?” I could hear the smile in his voice, and I was hoping that meant he wasn’t too busy.

“I’ve had better days. Ellis has returned, and she is fighting me for full custody of Christian. The papers arrived yesterday.”

“Ah, well, you knew it was a possibility that this could come up in the future. Are you able to bring me the paperwork, or would you prefer for me to send someone to pick them up?”

“If you could send someone to my office to pick them up, that would be greatly appreciated. I am already behind the ball today.”

“Not a problem. I will have Jeffery go by later this morning. I am assuming you would like to keep sole custody.”

“She’s still drinking. Two nights ago, I came home only to discover Ellis had gone and picked up Christian at the park and brought him to her house. When I arrived she was drunk. There were empty wine bottles all over the kitchen. Christian was up in his room. I took him out of there, and yesterday she served me.”

It still pissed me off, but I was a firm believer in not stressing over something I couldn’t control. I had to remember that for this custody battle, because Ellis was going to do and say things that were designed to hurt me. Designed to make me furious and cause me to make a reckless decision. I had

to keep my emotions in check and prove that I was stable and better suited for Christian at this time.

“I’ll add that to the file, and I will have it where her hair is tested so there is a record of how often she is consuming alcohol and if there are any other drugs within her. We need to establish a base for concerns. Any text messages that you receive from her, keep them on your phone and only politely respond. Do not engage in an argument with her,” he strongly advised.

“I will do that. There is one other matter I was hoping you could help me with as well.”

I was hedging my bets that Jasmine wasn’t going to be furious over this. However, I wasn’t too certain on her financial situation, but I did know that her trust wasn’t very large. Francis made a point of keep his money close to him, even when it came to his only child.

“Of course. What can I do for you?”

“There is another court case I would like for you to take on for me as well. Jasmine Garcia. She has a three-year-old boy, and her ex-fiancé is suing her for sole custody.”

I had no idea how Jasmine was going to handle the news of me paying for her legal bills. And technically, I should be speaking to her about this first. However, I had more than enough money to cover the cost. It wasn’t even about the money or if she was able to afford it. It was the fact that I didn’t like Henry, Adam’s father.

I had never liked him. He was a shady character. He had always been shady. He had no problem backstabbing someone or blackmailing someone even to get what he wanted. The man had no morals, and when Francis informed me that they were going to be business partners, part of me

understood it. Francis had always been the one that wanted more. It didn't matter what it was; he wanted as much of it as he could.

Being partnered with Henry allowed him to go to any lengths to make more money. To make so much that he could rub it in his parents' face. It allowed him to embrace the darker aspects of his personality without the negative image being painted on him. I hadn't met Adam. The only time I had seen him was at the wedding that never happened.

If he was anything like Henry, he wasn't a good man. Based on what few pieces of information Jasmine had shared with me, he wasn't a good father either. I still couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that he wouldn't speak to Jeremy some days. I couldn't imagine ever doing that. Even on the days where I was away for business, I still called and did video chats with Christian. I made sure the time was available so I could call him before bed or in the morning when he got up. Being a parent wasn't easy, but it was worth all of the effort that went into it. I wasn't going to allow him to use his father's reputation or money to win this court case.

"Alright, I can look it over and meet with her to see where she would like to go with it. I am assuming she wants sole?"

"To my knowledge she does. Her ex lives in Miami. I don't know if she is looking to stay in Oregon or move back to Florida. That would be something you would have to discuss with her."

I was truly hoping she wanted to stay. Staying here would be a fresh start for her. It would also be good for her and Jeremy to not be influenced by Adam or either grandfathers.

"I will set something up with her and we can go over it. Is her contact info on the documents?"

"It is yes, and I can text you her phone number as well." After I dropped

this bombshell on her.

“Perfect. I will send over one of the associates this morning to pick up all of the paperwork, and I’ll get in touch to set up meeting times.”

“Sounds great Alvin. I really appreciate it.”

We ended the call, and I had no choice but to get up and get dressed for the day. As badly as I wanted to spend the day nursing this headache, I actually had work to do. I made quick work of getting ready before I headed downstairs. I heard breakfast being made in the kitchen, assuming all of the noise was anything to go by.

Walking into the kitchen, I saw both boys sitting at the table already eating. Jasmine was standing up with a plate in her hand and her phone in the other as she leaned against the counter. I knew I needed to tell her about Alvin, and I had to do it before I handed over her papers to him. I grabbed a mug and started to get some coffee as she spoke.

“Morning Sunshine.”

I looked over at her and saw the smirk on her face. She knew exactly how I was feeling.

“Morning. Any plans for today?”

“I don’t know yet. I have to find a lawyer, but outside of that I figured I would see what the boys wanted to do.” She answered with a small one shoulder shrug.

And that would be the perfect segway into my news.

“I found you a lawyer. He’s my lawyer that I am currently using for the custody battle. I also used him for the divorce. Alvin McCormick, he’s a great lawyer and can take your case.”

“Oh, um ... thank-you, I appreciate that. I’ll set a meeting with him and see what he charges.” I could tell she was worried about costs, and I was hoping

this next part would go over well.

“You don’t need to worry about that. I already told him I would cover the costs.”

Despite it being good news, I found myself feeling nervous and anxious at how she would react. Typically, when someone offered to pay for something expensive for you, they say thank you and accept it. However, Jasmine was anything but typical. She was a strong woman, and I knew she was independent. She wasn’t going to be too comfortable with something like this.

“What?” she was shocked, and she turned to look at me. I could see the upset in her eyes. I really should have spoken to her about this before doing it, but the result would have been the same. I wasn’t going to let this one go.

“I’ve already told him that I would cover all costs. He’s going to take your case. He’s having someone coming by the office to pick up all of the paperwork. He’s the best family lawyer on the East Coast.”

“You are not paying for my legal fees,” she instantly said with an edge to her voice, and I knew I would need to handle this very carefully.

“I know what this looks like,” I began, but she cut me off.

“Do you? Because it really doesn’t seem like it.”

“Did I overstep? Yes. But it wasn’t because I thought you needed me to bail you out. Or that you weren’t capable of handling this. I don’t know Adam, but I know his father, and I know what he is capable of doing. It’s not going to be a typical custody battle. He will blackmail the judge if he suspects that his son is losing. Based on what you’ve said about Adam, he’s not the type of man you want raising a child. Jeremy will bounce around from one nanny to the next, and he won’t see his father for weeks. No child deserves that.”

Clearly, I wasn’t against someone having a nanny. They were better than a

string of babysitters coming and going. However, I was also a firm believer that you raise the children you created. Having a nanny allowed me to work and made it so Christian didn't have to be stuck in daycare. He got to have the comfort of his own home with one-on-one attention. Or in our case two-on-one. It was better for him. But that didn't mean I was going to disappear for days and not even speak to him.

"I don't need anyone, especially a man, to pay my way," she stressed every single word, and I knew she would have heard plenty of times from Francis, most likely, that she did need that.

"I know you don't. This isn't me stepping in and being a stereotypical man. It's a brother in arms type of deal. You need the best lawyer, one that won't allow Adam or Henry to try any shady shit. Let me help you with this. Let me help Jeremy. It's pocket change to me."

She wasn't happy. I could clearly see it all across her face. This wasn't easy for her to accept. It was a lot of money to her, and that was always difficult to accept. But it was more than the financial aspect. This was her son's life. She barely knew me, and I was asking her to trust me with helping her with it. She needed some time to get her mind to process it.

"Look, how about this. Let Alvin look at your paperwork, and if you decide to go with another lawyer, then there's no harm done," I offered.

"Fine," she caved, but she wasn't happy about it. For now, it was all that I could ask for, and hopefully she would agree to allow me to help her with this.

Jasmine

I was finishing up the dishes, but my mind couldn't seem to focus on anything but Liam's offer. I had washed the same plate three times now, and I knew I needed to get my head back down to reality. I was very uncomfortable with the idea of Liam paying for my legal fees. I was more than capable of paying for my own expenses. It might not allow me to have the best lawyer, but it would be a lawyer that I could pay for. There was an accomplishment within that.

More than anything though, I couldn't allow Liam to pay for my custody battle when it was his son I was fighting for. The guilt was eating away at me, and the closer we got, the worse it got. One of my biggest concerns about having the same lawyer as Liam was what his lawyer might tell him. I knew there would be a confidentiality agreement in place; however, I also knew that there could be loopholes, and if Alvin was also Liam's lawyer and he was paying the bill, he might feel inclined to inform him that Jeremy was his son.

I needed to be able to speak to a lawyer because I had to know what would

happen if the truth came out. Would that mean Adam wouldn't be able to sue me for custody? Would he have any rights because he was on the birth certificate and had been in Jeremy's life for the past three years? And if he held zero rights, that eliminated Adam, but I would then be in for a fight for my life with Liam.

Liam was trying to keep the door open for Ellis, but she hadn't lied or hid a son from him for three years. Sure, I wasn't around Liam when I discovered the truth, but I also couldn't say I couldn't find him. I knew his name. I could have easily located him and got in touch. I chose to put my head in the sand, and now it was all starting to blow up in my face.

Ahhh!!

I needed to stop stressing over this. It wasn't going to help me right now. I had two little boys that needed some attention, and I desperately needed a distraction. I put the last plate into the dish rack. I wasn't too certain what we were going to do today. I had been hoping that we could go outside, maybe to the beach, but it was cloudy and supposed to rain. Which meant we needed to find something to do inside for some fun.

"Okay guys, what would you like to do?" I asked as I joined them at the table.

"Build a fort," Jeremy tossed out.

"We could do that," I easily agreed.

I suspected that Christian had never built a fort before. It would have been considered too messy. I would just need to make sure it was all cleaned up before Liam got home.

"What about you Christian? Is there anything you would like to do today?"

"What's a fort?" he asked as his little eyebrows scrunched together.

"You don't know what a fort is?" I asked with a warm smile, and he shook

his head. “A fort is when you take blankets from around the house and put them over chairs or the couches. You make your own hiding space. Inside we can put pillows down, and we can even have it so the TV can be seen. You guys could watch a movie, and we could play some games. It’s a great way to spend a rainy day.”

I would have suggested that we go outside and jump in the puddles, but I suspected that might be taking things a bit too far for Christian right now. We would have to build up to that. The fort would work great to keep them distracted so I could do my own research on lawyers. I had no idea if I was going to go with Alvin, but if I didn’t, I needed to make sure I had one ready to go. I knew I needed to respond to the request for sole custody within thirty days in the Portland family court house.

“Messy?” Christian asked, still very unsure about the idea of getting anywhere in the house a bit dirty.

“It can be, but I promise we will have it all cleaned up before your dad gets home. He’ll never know. What do you say?”

I couldn’t exactly make the kid build a fort, but I was hoping he would be open to the idea of some fun. He needed more fun in his life. The type of fun where you didn’t have to worry or question if it would get something dirty. He needed to be able to completely let himself go and just be a normal kid. Even if that had to happen when Liam wasn’t around to see the pure joy on his face.

“Mmm ...okay,” he said, but I could hear the hesitation within his voice. It felt so wrong to hear coming from a three-year-old.

“Don’t worry. You will have a blast. I promise.” After all, what kid didn’t like a fort?

“Alright, we need to hunt down some blankets!” I cheered and the boys got

up, and we all made our way up the stairs.

I was going to have to use the dining room chairs in the living room to make it work, but hopefully we could find enough blankets that would work to cover them without it being too heavy. There was a science to this after all. The good thing was there was plenty of room in the living room for it.

We all ran around and grabbed everything we could think of that would be great for the fort. Once we had our building materials, we headed back down to the living room, and I grabbed some of the dining room chairs and got them spread out. There were plenty of them so it was going to be a great fort for the boys.

With the blankets tossed on top, we got a couple blankets down on the floor and added some pillows. The boys crawled in, and there was a massive smile across both of their faces.

“What do you think?” I asked them.

“Cool!” Christian answered, and his eyes were practically sparkling.

“Do you guys want me to put on a movie for you or do you want to play a game?”

I wanted them to keep bonding. More so because they were brothers. I didn't care that they were only half-brothers. I was never one to distinguish between full or half blood in a family. Family was family, and it came in all shapes and sizes. It was important that they got along. That they could form a bond, even if they thought that bond was friendship.

“Nemo!” Jeremy cheered.

“Yeah, Nemo!” Christian agreed, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes and beg them to pick any other movie.

“I'll queue it up,” I said as I got up and went over to the TV. The movie was already in it because what else could we ever watch?

After I got up running, I left them alone so I could head over to my house to grab some things. I wanted to do some crafts with them later. It would not only keep my mind busy, but it would let them get creative. I wanted Christian to have more creativeness in his life. It was perfect to help with his mental development. Plus when you paint and use scissors, it works your fine motor skills, and that was something every child needed.

Afterwards, I would make some calls and see about a lawyer. I had no idea what I was going to do about Liam and his offer. Thankfully, I had some time to think about it and try to determine the right course of action. For now, I was going to enjoy the day with the boys and see what mess we could make. And hey, maybe tonight I could convince Liam to make our own mess.

Liam

I had got through the drive thru when my phone started to ring. I had been running from one meeting to the next all morning. I hadn't had a chance to stop. I wasn't much of a fast-food guy, but every now and then, I would hit up a drive thru to get something greasy and bad for me. Today was going to be that day. I needed some serious fuel and grease to help with this hangover that seemed to be dedicated to lingering. I stuck a fry in my mouth as I hit the speaker on my phone.

“Hello?”

I didn't look at who was calling. That was my first mistake.

“What fucking game are you playing Liam?”

The penetrating anger bounced off the walls of my car. I really should have looked at who was calling.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Because really at this point it could be anything.

Chances were Francis had heard about me sleeping with his daughter. I had no idea how he heard other than Jasmine had told someone and it trickled

down to him. It was really only a matter of time before the truth came out.

“You are paying for Jasmine’s legal fees,” he seethed.

“Wait, what? How do you know that?”

It had only happened this morning, and Jasmine hadn’t even agreed to it technically. There was no way for him to know about this. I highly doubted Jasmine had called him to talk about it.

“I heard it from Jefferson.”

Which meant he heard it through the grapevine. I didn’t think he would hear about this that way, especially this fast. Something else must have been going on for word to spread to him this quickly.

“I’m not understanding why you are so angry about this.”

“You have no right to get involved in what does not concern you.”

“I could argue that she is living in my house. Same as your grandson. It does concern me to some level. And you know just as well as I do that Adam is going to go to Henry, and he’s going to use whatever connections or schemes that he has to make sure Jasmine’s life is a living hell.”

Out of all the things that could have pissed Francis off, this was one of the ones that he was overreacting for. He should be the one to offer to pay for her bills, not me. He should be on her side, and it seemed like he was on Adam’s which made no sense. I didn’t care that Henry was his business partner. We were talking about his blood.

“She has been doing this to herself. Adam gave her the chance to come back home and quit this nonsense. She wants to be rebellious and make poor decisions. Of course Adam filed for custody for Jeremy. A boy needs his father. It is the only way for him to learn how to be a man. Jasmine is not capable of doing that. She will have him running around making a mess and being feminine. I will not have my grandson bring disgrace to my name.”

Jesus fuck. I knew Francis could be extreme with his views at time, but I never thought he would ever act like this. Say these things. Jeremy was only three years old. He had plenty of years to go before the type of man he was going to be would emerge. Even if he was creative, so what? There was nothing wrong with raising a creative child. Just like there was nothing wrong with a single mom raising a boy. Especially when the male in the child's life was someone like Adam.

“Jasmine is a fabulous mother, and Jeremy will grow up being a kind and good hearted man. One that will respect women. You're in the wrong this time Francis.”

I couldn't believe I was having to have this conversation. I never would have imagined that I would have to convince Francis that he needed to support his daughter and not some outsider. This was insane.

“No, you are in the wrong. You have no business getting involved in my family's affairs. When I learned that Jasmine would be working for you, I thought it would prove to her that she was not capable of being a single mother. That she was not capable of raising a child while working. I needed you to make her life harder, not easier.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Come on, Francis. This is your daughter. Do you really want her to fail that badly that you will go out of your way to try and harm her?”

This was just bullshit. Where the hell did the protective and caring kid that was my best friend go? Sure, he had always been tougher. There had always been a bit of darkness in him, but that was always directed towards someone that was threatening the people he loved. He should be going above and beyond right now towards Adam. He should be the first person standing in

front of Jasmine and Jeremy, ready to go to war, to kill, and to protect them. And yet he was acting like some traditionalist asshole.

How could we have grown so far apart? How could we have become so different from each other?

“She is my daughter, and you have no right to try and dictate what you think is best for her. This is my family, and I will not tolerate anyone threatening it. She needs to be with Adam. They will get married, and the three of them will be a family. That is how it is supposed to be. It was decided four years ago when she got pregnant.”

“She doesn’t love him. And from what little I have heard of him, he doesn’t love either of them. What type of father goes days without even speaking to their child? You have no idea what has been going on in that house. You only want to see what you want to see and not what is right in front of your face.” I had to pull over, because I was getting too worked up. I had a meeting I needed to get and at this rate, I had no idea how I was ever going to be able to be present and calm for it.

“You are the outsider here. You have no idea what they have been through. What Adam has had to put up with. She is a mess. She can’t stay organized. She is a bleeding heart and won’t think twice about wasting her money away. She refuses to grow up and do what is needed to be done as an adult. If you want to take pity upon her and allow her to work for you, that’s your choice. But you will not support her at all.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do with my time, my home, and especially my money. I will spend it however I wish. My life is not for you to dictate. I am not going to kick her out. I am going to help her, especially when I know the fight is going to be rigged against her. I know Henry will

pull whatever strings he can to ensure Adam wins. I am not going to allow that to happen.”

It wasn't like Jasmine was going into this as a fair fight. Henry had zero morals, and I was not going to stand around and allow Jasmine and Jeremy to be destroyed. Not while it was within my power. Maybe things would be different if they weren't living in my home. Maybe I wouldn't think twice about it. But they were living in my home. I would be there to see the fallout and the destruction that Adam and Henry caused. I couldn't stand around and do nothing.

“If you do not stop this insanity, then I will be given no other choice but to inform Ellis of what I know.” I could practically hear the smug smirk on his face.

“Are you actually threatening me?” Surely he couldn't be that stupid.

“I've known you practically my whole life. I know where your skeletons are buried. It would be a shame for the courts and the press to discover them. You'll lose clients and you will lose to her in court. Jasmine isn't the only one facing a custody battle. I can very easily make it that Ellis wins, and you never see your son again.”

I was so pissed off, I was vibrating. This son of a bitch was actually threatening me. He was trying to hold decisions that I had made when I was a minor against me. To try and ruin my reputation and put my son's welfare in danger all because of what? I got drunk too many times underage and slept with dozens of women.

Did I have skeletons? Sure. I stole some things from stores. Again, I was minor in my desperate act of rebellion. But I had never done anything illegal as an adult. I've never had to resort to blackmail to keep or win my clients. I've never cheated on an exam. I've never drove drunk and did a hit and run.

I had no idea what skeletons he thought I had, but it didn't matter. The fact that he was actually genuinely threatening me and my son was what infuriated me.

“I think you are forgetting which one of us actually has skeletons in their closet. You think I forgot about how you slept with the Dean of Miami State for you to even get accepted into the business program? Or about the multiple drunken bar fights that left one man in a coma who later died. It's still an unsolved case. Or all of the women, young barely turned eighteen women, that you cheated on your wife with and got pregnant that you had them all get an abortion.”

He was far from a good man, and it was exactly why Jeremy couldn't be raised by someone like him. Couldn't have that type of influence in his life because there was no telling what type of man he would grow up to be. Francis never used to be all bad, even over the past decade he's had a lot of good moments. He did a lot of good in various communities. He did so because they were tax deductions, but he was still helping. He never wanted to be like his parents, but somewhere along the way his lines got blurred. I knew he was threatening me because he didn't believe that I would ever act on any of the knowledge that I possessed of him. But when he brought a child into this mess, then all bets were off.

“How about the offshore accounts that you hide money in from the IRS? You want to threaten me Francis, I'll destroy you. By the time I am done with you, you'll be sitting in prison for the rest of your miserable, pathetic life. And that is exactly what I will do if I find out you did anything or had someone else do it, to try and ruin my son's life. We clear?”

Practically forty years of friendship, and it was gone. It went down the drain over an issue that shouldn't have even been an issue to begin with.

That's what was ridiculous about this whole thing. He shouldn't have been pissed off that I was helping his daughter and grandson. If he wanted to play this game though, that was fine. It would be his undoing, and I wouldn't just take him down, but his company and Henry in the process. If he wanted a war, he would get one, but it was going to leave him bloody and dying in no man's land, not me. And sure as shit not Christian and Jeremy.

"This isn't a war that you want to start Liam," he warned in a deadly tone, and I knew he wasn't happy about me pointing out all of the areas that I could ruin him with.

"I'm not starting. But I sure as shit will finish it. Consider this your only warning," I told him before I ended the call.

Fuck, my whole body was shaking I was so pissed off. This was not what I needed today. I had enough shit going on; I didn't need to worry about Francis and if he was going to be stupid. And if he was telling me this, I could only imagine what voicemails he was leaving for Jasmine. I scrubbed a hand over my face. I had to shake this off. I couldn't allow for Francis and his stupidity to disrupt how I did business. It was out of my hands, and all I could do was hope he didn't do something that he would live to regret.

Jasmine

I had just sent the boys up to play in Christian's room. I was in the middle of cleaning up dinner. Today had gotten a bit away from me. I had managed to clean up the fort mess in the living room. However, I was still trying to get the kitchen cleaned up from dinner, not to mention the mess on the table from our art projects. We were painting and using glitter to make different art pieces. The boys had a lot of fun doing it, but there was a mess of newspapers and paint all over the table. I had no idea when Liam was going to be getting back, so I was working hard to get it all cleaned up. The last thing I wanted was for us to have a repeat of the first night I was here.

Well, we could repeat the sex, but the argument and massive freak out would be great to avoid.

Unfortunately, all of my hopes and dreams were crushed when I heard the front door opening and closing. I wiped my hands on the dish towel and turned to see Liam walking into the kitchen. The smile that was plastered on his face melted as his mind absorbed the mess.

“Don't freak out. I'm cleaning it up. I swear within twenty minutes it will

be like it never happened,” I quickly said.

I had no idea why he had such a hard time with messes, but this was his house, and I had to respect that. Even if it was hard at times. But that was why I made sure to save all of the messy stuff for when he was at work. What he didn't know or see wouldn't hurt him.

He placed his briefcase down on the floor, and spoke, as he started to loosen his tie up. “I never expected to be this person.”

“What person is that?”

Was he about to open up to me? We didn't really do anything personal or deep, I guess I should say. The most personal we had gone was discussing our exes. I still hadn't decided what I was going to do about him wanting to pay for my lawyer. I had called every lawyer in Portland that were any good at family court. All of them said they couldn't help me. As it turned out Adam had gone and had meetings with all of them. He hadn't hired them as his lawyer, but it didn't matter.

The damage was already done. They couldn't take my case because it would be a conflict of interest because they already knew too much about him and his position. The only lawyer that had any real reputation and skill was Alvin and that was because Adam couldn't speak with him because Liam already put him on my case. I wouldn't be able to afford Alvin though on my own, and it put me in a really difficult position to try and figure out.

“Growing up my parents were a nightmare. They still are. The house looked a lot like this. Well, when it isn't messy,” he said with a playful smirk, and I was taking that as a good sign. “Everything had to be clean. I hated it growing up, because I couldn't do anything the other kids could do. The house never felt lived in. It felt like a museum, and it looked like one.

Everything had its place, and it was never allowed to be out of it. Even if it was one inch off, my parents would lose it.”

“Why? I mean, a house is designed to be lived in. Why live in a house that you can’t even knock a frame off center?”

That blew my mind to me. And I knew it happened, especially within the higher society. Everything was about your appearance, and everything had to be perfect. You were constantly competing against others within that society to look better than them. It was exhausting and exactly why I refused to play that game. I didn’t want to live my life for someone else, especially a stranger. My parents were just like that, though not to that level. The house did get dirty at times, but it was more from a party they threw. Still, you could pick up the TV remote and put it down on the coffee table in any place that you wanted.

“That was how they were. I don’t know why. I know my grandparents on both sides were strict. I have to assume it’s a cycle that no one has been able to break. They got really bad though. I remember one time I was just young, and I was helping to put the dishes away and I dropped one. They made me scrub the entire house on my hands and knees with a toothbrush. I was up all night, and then had to go to school.”

Oh my god. I couldn’t even imagine ever doing that to someone, much less my own child. The way he said it though, I could tell he was trying to be strong, like it wasn’t that big of a deal to him, but I could hear the hurt. It bothered him what his parents had done to him. And I was willing to bet it was bothering him that he was still clinging on to their ridiculous standards.

I went over and took his hand in mine to try and offer him some sort of comfort. “I’m so sorry. No one should have to go through something like that. No child should have to live with the fear of making a mess, especially

by accident. That's part of growing up. Being in your home is supposed to be your safe place. The one place where you can make mistakes and have accidents and it'll be okay."

"You mean like here," he said, and I could hear the sadness that flooded his voice.

I never even realized it, but this had to be extremely difficult for him. To go from living in a home where you couldn't make a small mess to now living in the exact same home. Yes, I knew he wasn't giving out punishments to Christian if he did make a mess by accident, but the fear was there all the same. And he knew better than anyone what that fear could do to a child. He never wanted this.

"I didn't mean it like that, but yeah. Do you know what we did today?"

"Paint," he said with a nod to the table.

"We built a massive blanket fort in the living room. Then before dinner, we made all of these paintings. But we also finger painted, and the smile on Christian's face when he felt that paint squishing through his fingers. He had so much fun, and the only thing that would have made it better was if you were there doing it with him."

Christian was never going to tell him this. But I could see how badly he wished Liam could have been there for today. That he could have been around the next time. That was only going to be possible if Liam faced whatever pain and trauma that was preventing him from healing.

"I don't know if I can do that," he softly admitted, and I hated how vulnerable he was. I could tell that admitting to not being able to do something wasn't easy for him. None of this was easy for him, but that didn't mean he had to do it alone.

"I'm not suggesting that you take a mud bath, but you could start slow. I

can't imagine you want to live like this. You said no one had broken the cycle in your family. This is your chance to break that cycle. Christian is still young. He won't remember any of this in five years. All he will remember is how much fun his dad was."

"I want that. I do. But even at my age, it's not simple to get the voices to stop. I grew up in a very strict home, and that doesn't go away easily."

"I know. It took me a long time to accept that I didn't have to be what my parents wanted. It's why I went pretty wild, even before I was legally allowed to. I used to sneak out at night when I was sixteen to go to college parties and get drunk. Like messy drunk. I gave my virginity away to spite them. I did any job that I knew would piss them off, hence the strip club. I had no idea if I wanted to be a mom or not. What I did know was that I couldn't allow their actions and their way of life to dictate how I was going to live mine."

It wasn't easy. There were plenty of times where I felt at war with myself. The part of me that wanted to be what my parents wanted, and the other part that wanted to be true to myself. The end result was a lot of reckless decisions that I wasn't too proud of. However, all of those reckless decisions led me to who I was today, and I wasn't going to change anything about myself. It also might not have given me Jeremy, and there was absolutely nothing that I would give in return for him.

"I know I can't keep doing this. I know I don't want to be like my parents. I want Christian to be able to have friends over and not be afraid that one of them is going to make a mess. I want him to be free to express himself and have his room match who he is. I want him to express his creativeness without limitations. The problem is, even though I want all of this, I don't know how to get over the anxiety."

"Well, I'm not a doctor. I don't even play one on TV," I said with a warm

smile, and he gave me a very small huff of a laugh. “But, I know anxiety can be broken; it just takes time, and you have to make small steps. Let me ask you this, have you ever finger painted before?”

I had no idea if he would go for it, but it would be a baby step. Even if he just put one finger in paint and put that to paper it would be a massive step in the right direction. The trick was going to be to get him to that point where he would actually do it. I also had no idea how he would react by doing it. There was a chance that he could have a full-on anxiety attack, something I wasn't really equipped to handle.

I could see the hesitation all throughout his face. He knew where I was going with this, and he wasn't certain it was the best idea. The thing was, he either had to fight to break the cycle or choose to continue to live within the cycle and pass it on to Christian, something I knew deep down he didn't want to do.

“No, I haven't. Not even in school. I went to a private school, and they focused more on learning languages and math over art.”

“How would you feel about trying it out? Even if you just touch the paint, that would be progress. We can go at your own speed.”

I was leaving the ball in his court, and I had no idea if he was going to pick it up and play or chuck it out of the playing field. I was really hoping he would pick option one.

Liam

I never expected to be standing here debating on if I want to finger paint. I was a grown ass middle aged man, and I didn't need to finger paint. And yet, part of me wanted to say yes. That young boy that lived within my soul wanted to play. He wanted the chance to get his hands dirty and see what it felt like. The grown ass adult in me was all too aware of the consequences of getting dirty. The voices of my parents, specifically my father, were still going off in my head telling me what would happen if I did this.

Jasmine was correct. If I didn't break the cycle, then I was most likely condemning Christian to the same fate. To a life where he has to be terrified of making a mess. Or worse, he would rebel in any way that he could, and there was no telling what that would lead to. For Jasmine, it was underage drinking at parties, but for Christian it could be drugs, drunk driving, or fights. It could be anything illegal and negative. That was far worse than me getting my finger covered in paint.

I had to do this for him. I had to do this for me, because I did have a lot of years left to live, and I shouldn't have to live them like this. After taking a

deep breath in, I spoke.

“Okay, but just one finger.” That was a reasonable place to start right?

She willingly gave me that freedom, and we went over to where everything was still scattered around on the table. I had no idea how I was going to do this, but it was just a finger. How hard could it really be?

Apparently, my mind felt otherwise, because I could already feel my anxiety picking up. This was ridiculous. It was just paint. Washable paint. I could get it on my skin and then go and wash it off. It was simple. I had no problem speaking with powerful attorneys or multi-billionaire CEOs. I could handle some child’s paint.

“Just breathe. Don’t think about it too much. It’s just like putting your hand in water.” She was trying to make me feel better, to help calm my nerves, and I appreciated it. The thing was, it was embarrassing that I needed someone to help me through finger painting. Children do this.

As badly as I wanted to change my mind, to go upstairs and hide away from the mess, I knew I couldn’t do that. I had to do this for my son. I had to make sure he got to live in a house that was polar opposite from the one I grew up in. From the one I hated being in. He deserved that much. He deserved to have the freedom to express himself and to get dirty. It was on me to ensure that could happen, and it started right here, right now.

With a deep breath in, I went and took my right index finger and slowly pressed it down into the light blue paint. The feeling was hard to describe. It was unlike anything I had felt before. I wasn’t sure what to connect the feeling to, but I did find I wasn’t screaming and running for the sink to get it off. Not that I had ever done that before, but the concept was all the same.

“See, it’s not so bad. And no one is going to yell at you or punish you. This isn’t your parents’ home. It’s your home. You’re in charge of what happens

within it.”

The warmth and pride within her voice made my heart skip a beat. I had never really had anyone in my life to truly support me. Ellis had always been happy to go along because it meant she was getting to live the life she had always dreamt of. In a lot of ways, she was the perfect woman for the right type of man.

What was surprising was I didn't feel an influx in anxiety. I thought for sure I would be panicking right now, but instead, I felt eerily calm. Almost as if I was reclaiming a piece of myself that I had lost a long time ago. It was hard to explain, but even something as simple as this felt empowering.

I lifted my finger up and went and pressed it down on the blank piece of paper. I could be creative, but it was mostly on a computer for different graphics for my higher paying clients. I swirled my finger around for a moment before the paint was gone. I looked up to see Jasmine giving me a warm smile as she dipped her finger in the red and made her own marks on the paper.

This time around, I went to pick black and together we made this weird abstract looking picture. It was oddly satisfying to see the end result. This was my first finger painting and at my age, that was extremely sad and pathetic, but so fucking what.

“What did you think?” Jasmine asked as I went over to the sink to wash my hands.

“It was different. Not what I had expected for it to feel like. But it was a good different.”

“See, you’ll be rolling around in mud in no time,” she teased.

“I highly doubt I will ever do that. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to be covered in mud. Ellis used to love going to spas and getting a mud

treatment. You go to a spa to relax and cleanse your body. Mud kinda does the opposite,” I said as I dried my hands, and Jasmine went over to the sink to wash hers.

“The mud in spas is high quality. It’s not the type you would find in your backyard after a storm. And it’s apparently great for your skin. I’ve never done it though. I don’t see much of an appeal to it or to a spa for that matter.”

“Not the spa and get your nails done type?” She definitely didn’t come across as one.

“Hardly. I can paint my own nails. And I’m not overly fond of the spa. I’m not one for gossip, and that seems to be a requirement,” she answered as she got water in the sink to finish washing up the dishes.

I made my way over to the table and got started on cleaning up all of the art supplies and wiping it down. Once it was all cleaned up, I crossed the room and wrapped my arms around her waist. What we had done tonight was something I never expected to be doing. Feeling her hand within mine, even with the paint squishing between us, sent a shock of pleasure down my spine. Jasmine put her head back as I kissed my way up her neck and took her earlobe between my teeth for a second, making Jasmine moan softly.

“I’m trying to finish the dishes.”

“So do the dishes. I’m not stopping you,” I said as I moved my hands up to her breasts.

“You are distracting me.”

“That’s my plan,” I told her as I went and slowly ran my hands up underneath her shirt to cup her breasts.

“Stop, we’re in the kitchen,” she said as she playfully hit me on the shoulder.

“I distinctly remember having sex right on that table behind us.”

“And that was very reckless. We got lucky that one of the boys didn’t come down and see us.”

She was right about that, but what I had planned for her didn’t involve a table. I slipped my hand down to take hers within mine, and I started to walk us towards the stairs.

“The dishes,” she began to protest, but I cut her off before she could get any further.

“Will be there in the morning.”

“Whoa, look at you. One round of finger painting and you become a wild man,” she teased as we quickly made our way up the stairs.

“I’ll show you wild,” I promised.

The second we arrived in my bedroom, I was closing the door and pressing her back up against it. A second later, my lips were on hers. She happily accepted the kiss and allowed me to deepen it. A soft moan escaped her mouth just before she pushed against my chest slightly, forcing us to break apart.

“We need to be careful. The boys are right next door,” she said as she was already breathing heavily.

“Then you better make sure you’re quiet,” I told her right before I scooped her up by her ass and brought her over to the bed. I tossed her down on it, and she gave a soft giggle at my antics.

She wouldn’t be laughing for very long though, not with what I had in store for her. I turned my attention to her clothes; she was wearing far too much of them. I made quick work of removing her shirt and bra. Freeing her glorious breasts, I began to kiss my way down her neck, between her breasts and over to her right, taking her nipple into my mouth. She arched up at the contact with a faint groan.

I didn't linger too long. I had other areas that I was much more interested in. Releasing her nipple, I spoke as I kissed my way down her stomach.

"So perfect. So beautiful."

"I need you," she pleaded.

"I know, but some things should not be rushed."

"We've rushed plenty of times as I recall," she said back as she moaned.

I undid her pants and pulled them down along with her panties. I kissed my way up her left leg, and once I made it up to her hip, I began to suck and give her a hickey. She gasped as her hands clenched the comforter.

"Liam," she whined, and I knew exactly what she wanted.

"Yes Baby?" I asked as I kissed her inner thighs and avoided the one spot I knew she was dying to have touched.

"Please," she begged.

"Please, eh?" I gave her a long lick between her folds and she gave a deep, rich moan. "Is this what you want, Baby?"

"Yes, fuck yes," she whined as the pleasure began to consume her.

I gave another lick, and I couldn't help but moan at her taste. Like liquid honey. She arched back and wiggled her hips as I licked my way up to her clit.

"Don't stop. Oh please don't stop," she withered.

"I love the sounds that you make."

I continued to lick at Jasmine's divine pussy and slowly inserted a finger and began to rub that sweet spot inside of her. I could feel how tight she was and my cock was begging to be set free. To be deep inside of her again. I wasn't going to just yet. I wanted to enjoy every second of this. I could feel her getting closer, and I ran my tongue up to her clit, sucking on it.

"That's it Baby. Cum for me; let me taste that sweet nectar," I said in a

husky voice as my pleasure was becoming unbearable.

I felt her walls tighten around my fingers as she gave with a muffled scream. I looked up and saw that she had covered her mouth with a pillow to keep the noise from escaping. I began to lick her pussy with vigor. Her sweet taste flooded my mouth. I was never going to get tired of this. Hiring Jasmine to be my nanny was the best decision I had made in a very long time.

I moved back once I felt she was growing too sensitive. “One day when the boys are in school, we are going to spend all day in bed.”

“I need you inside of me. I need to feel you,” she moaned with a heavy breath.

“As you wish.”

I got off the bed and stripped down before reaching over to my bedside table and pulled out a condom from the top drawer. As I went back over to Jasmine, she opened her legs to accommodate me. I lined the tip of my cock up with her entrance, and slowly, I worked its way inside of her. We both moaned as I slowly inch by inch descended inside her glorious pussy. Once I had bottomed out, I paused to allow her to adjust to my size.

“I’m good,” she was instantly saying. Apparently, she wasn’t looking for slow and sweet tonight, and that worked out perfectly for me.

I slowly started to pull out, and then once I was almost completely all the way out, I pushed back in. Not too slow, but I wasn’t gonna go all out just yet. I kept my pace slow until I felt her loosening up, and I knew she was ready for me to unleash my full desire.

Her legs wrapped around my hips, pulling me closer to her. I no longer held back. Slamming into her with each thrust, I angled my hips, and I knew I had hit her sweet spot dead on when she bit her bottom lip and tried to contain her deep moan.

We were both panting from the pleasure and exertion. Jasmine was constantly fighting with keeping quiet, and sometimes she failed at it. Our movements became erratic, and it wasn't long before I felt her walls squeezing my cock as she pulsed. The sensation was all too much for me. I snapped my hips forward with a sharp thrust, and I came hard deep inside of her with a grunt.

Her legs collapsed down onto the bed as we both fought for breath. I couldn't help but lean forward, resting my forehead against hers. The sex between us never failed to be amazing. To leave me feeling weak and exhausted, but in all the best ways. I had no idea what the future was going to hold for either one of us, but I was praying she would be in my future.

Jasmine

“Okay, you guys all set to decorate?” I asked as I got some small bowls out and put in different sprinkles. It was already nearing nine in the morning and I knew we needed to get going if we were going to arrive at our special destination at a good hour.

“What are we decorating?” Liam asked as he came into the kitchen.

“Cupcakes. We baked them yesterday, and now we can decorate them,” I answered as I grabbed the icing tubes that I had filled with vanilla and chocolate icing.

“It’s a birthday,” Jeremy said with a big smile.

“It’s your birthday?” Liam asked as he went and grabbed a cup of coffee.

“No, it’s Anthony’s birthday,” I said as I brought the cupcakes over. We had quite a bit of them, sixty to be exact. It was going to take a bit of work to decorate, but I couldn’t do it last night because they needed to be cooled properly so the icing wouldn’t melt.

“Anthony?” Liam asked.

“It’s this boy that is turning eight today. It’s who we were making those

pictures for yesterday. He's in the hospital fighting cancer. He's been there for about ten months now. He's a ward of the state so the only family he has are the hospital staff. We thought we would go and decorate his room. Bring some cupcakes for everyone," I explained.

One of the things I had wanted to do more in my life was getting involved with charities. I didn't really get to do much of that in the past four years. I wanted to reclaim that part of myself, so I had reached out to a few local charities to see what was going on in town. I discovered that there was a list of children in the hospital and when their birthdays were. It also included a bit of information about each child. It stated what they were in for, how long, and any family that they had.

"Well, what can I do to help?" Liam offered, and I couldn't help but be surprised by it.

"You ever ice a cupcake?" If Liam was willing to help, I wasn't going to be turning that down.

It was actually really good to see him offering. I knew his anxiety with messes was going to take a long time still for him to fully overcome it. But he had taken a massive step in the right direction, and for that, I was really proud of him.

"I have not. But how hard could it be right?" he asked as he looked at the boys who gave confident nods.

"Do you want chocolate or vanilla?" I asked as I held up the two piping tubes.

"I'll take chocolate," he said, and I handed it over to him.

"Alright, we are going to ice, and you boys are going to decorate with the sprinkles. You can make any combination that you want. Afterwards, we can

head out and go see Anthony,” I explained to the boys, and they both went and sat on their knees so they were higher up in the chair.

“You think he like?” Christian asked.

“I think he’s going to be really surprised and happy to share his birthday with someone,” Liam answered.

“He get better?” Jeremy asked this time.

That was going to be the hard part. I didn’t know if Anthony would get better. He was fighting an aggressive leukemia; he had been for three years now. This very possibly could be his last birthday, but that wasn’t something I could tell the boys. They were too young to understand most of this. I’m sure some would say taking them was a poor decision. That because they were too young to understand death that it would be hard on them to see someone so sick.

However, I believed that giving back started at a young age. That even if they couldn’t fully understand the depth of the situation, they could understand how much it meant to Anthony to have this surprise. They could understand the joy that comes from it, and it was that understanding that would stick with them as they grew up.

“I’m not too sure Baby. He’s fighting very hard, and he has amazing doctors and nurses there to help him,” I answered.

“Sometimes people are sick with something that takes a lot of work and time to get better from. They can be stuck in a hospital for a long time, and it’s important to try and make their time a bit more enjoyable,” Liam added.

“Where Mommy and Daddy?” Christian asked as he sprinkled a cupcake.

That was going to be a hard one. I wasn’t too certain what Liam would want Christian to know or how he would put it. I had always told Jeremy that when someone dies, they go to Heaven, up in the clouds. He was so young,

he didn't fully understand what the concept of death meant. He just knew that someone was there one day, and he never saw them again. Thankfully, we had only one person in our family pass away since he had been born.

I looked over at Liam and spoke, "D-i-e-d, c-a-r, c-r-a-s-h." I spelt out so he would understand the basics, and it would be up to him how he wanted to handle it.

An understanding filled his eyes, and he gave a nod before he turned his attention back to the boys, "They were in an accident and are now up in the clouds."

"Heaven?" Jeremy asked.

"That's right Little Man," Liam said with a warm smile and hearing the nickname for my son sent a wave of heat throughout my chest.

Adam never gave Jeremy a nickname. He said that nicknames were stupid, and it didn't help a child's development. He actually told me once that by me giving Jeremy a nickname, he was going to grow up not knowing his own name which was ludacris.

"He no mommy or daddy?" Christian asked, and I could hear the hurt and sadness in his voice. I couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking about his own mother after going so long without her.

"He doesn't. Some kids don't have parents because they are in Heaven, or they weren't good people. It's sad, but that is why good people need to be there for them to help them. Like doing something like this. Anthony is going to be so surprised and happy to get to celebrate his birthday with someone," Liam explained.

It was a hard concept, and they were really too young to fully understand. When I had offered to throw a little party for Anthony, I did so because he deserved it. At the same time though, I didn't think completely on how the

boys would handle it. I didn't anticipate them having all of these questions, and that was my fault.

"We could play Hungry Hippos," Jeremy suggested.

"That is a great idea. We could bring some games that you guys could play," I easily agreed.

"Is he in Portland?" Liam asked me.

"Yeah."

"You know what we could do after the hospital? We could go to Playdate," Liam suggested, and Christian's whole face lit up.

"Please, please, please," Christian begged as he bounced up and down in the chair.

"What is Playdate?" I asked because clearly it was something very fun.

"A massive indoor playground that Christian loves to go to. It's a lot of fun," Liam answered.

"Well, who wouldn't have fun in a big indoor playground? What do you think Baby? Do you want to check it out afterwards?"

I was surprised that Liam had suggested it. I was even more surprised though because he said we, which meant he was going to be coming with us to the hospital. I would have figured he had to work today.

"Yes please!" The boys were very excited now, and I knew that meant we were going to be spending one hell of a day in Portland. That was perfectly fine with me though. It was only an hour away, and the boys could always nap on the way home.

We spent the next hour getting all of the cupcakes decorated and back into their containers. It was a lot of cupcakes, but I knew they would go quick with being in a hospital. The boys ran up to look through the different games

to see which ones they wanted to bring with them. I began to gather all of the decorations that we had made last night as I spoke.

“I’m surprised you aren’t working today. Had I known you would have been off today, I wouldn’t have made plans for Christian,” I said apologetically. I didn’t want to ever take time away from Liam and Christian. I knew how special it was to get that one-on-one time with your father, especially for a boy.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind going to do this. And the boys are very excited to go and meet with Anthony. I think it’s good that they are getting to do this. For Christian to be exposed to different lifestyles. Even though he is young, it’s important that he knows that not everyone lives like we do. I don’t want him to grow up feeling entitled.”

“I can understand that. I do have to admit I am surprised that you live in a small town like this. I would have expected a private jet and a multi-million-dollar condo, private schools, all of that.”

It was odd that he was in a small town. You didn’t tend to find billionaires in small towns. They tended to have estates and empires that they lived in with chefs and maids. Maybe even a butler. Definitely not a beach house in a small tourist town. Not to mention, Ellis didn’t scream small town material. She seemed like the type of woman that wanted to spend her days shopping and getting her nails done. Not getting sand between her toes.

He gave me a smile with a small nod, and I knew he had been through this already. “Growing up, it was all about wealth and your image. Everyone I was around was entitled, and I just couldn’t stand them. Outside of your father anyways. I didn’t want that life for Christian. We used to live in a condo in downtown Portland, and Ellis loved it. But when she got pregnant, I

told her that our son deserved a better life. She wasn't happy about moving, but eventually gave in."

"Do you regret it?" It was a pretty drastic difference, and not everyone was made for the small-town life.

"Not for a single second."

He meant every word, and I was glad to hear it. He wasn't like any of the rich people that I had known and grown up with. He was more down to earth. He knew how important the simple things in life were, and he didn't try to avoid them from his life. More than that, he wanted Christian to have them. They had every reason to be in a fancy condo living with their heads in the clouds, but they weren't. It spoke so strongly about the type of man that he was, and I was really liking what I was seeing.

Liam

We were finally on the road to Portland. It was only an hour away, so I wasn't too worried about the drive. The boys were both wide awake with it being morning still. We had packed up the car with all of their homemade decorations, that looked great, and the cupcakes for everyone. This wasn't what I had been expecting to do today. I had planned on getting some paperwork done at home and hanging out with Christian. Maybe take him to the beach. However, this was better than doing either of those things.

I was a firm believer that those that have money have a responsibility to help others that were struggling. If everyone followed that belief, then there would be a lot less starving children in the world. Charity was something I cared deeply about, and it was really nice to see that Jasmine appeared to care about it as well. That she was passing it on down to Jeremy and now Christian. I had never even thought to do something like this. I didn't know a charity like this existed, and I would be doing my own research into them to see what I could help donate to them. Giving a child a birthday party might seem simple and pointless, but it would be everything to the child that was

stuck in the hospital. Especially if they didn't have any parents to do it for them.

“Do you do a lot of charity work?” I asked Jasmine as the boys were busy playing on their tablets.

“I used to do a lot of it. I've had to slow down over the past four years, but I want to get back into it. I used to work at soup kitchens and animal shelters. I would make food and bring it to the homeless in various areas. There aren't many charities in town, so I looked online in Portland, and I found a good number of them that I would like to volunteer for. Is that a problem?” she asked, and I could hear the concern in her voice. She was most likely thinking I was going to have a problem with the time commitment that she would be giving.

“Not at all. I've done some charity work over the years, but nowhere near the amount I have wanted to be able to dedicate. Most of the charities that I have donated to revolve around feeding children. Are there any that you are more passionate about?”

I had always believed that you could tell a lot about a person based on the charities that they donated to. That they supported. I cared a lot about children and focused mostly on that. I knew others that focused on charities that catered to small business owners or first-time business owners where they could get grant money to help them within that first year of business. Others donated to animal shelters or mental health services. It all depended on that person and their own background.

“Women, children, and animals. They are my top three. I've donated to battered women's shelters, especially the hidden ones. Human trafficking, child sex trafficking, child abuse, animal abuse, and abandoned pets. Those

that are the most vulnerable in this world. There is actually one charity that I would love to get back into.”

“And what would that be?”

It made perfect sense to me that the charities she supported were all about women, children, and animals. She seemed like the type that cared greatly for those demographics.

“I was volunteering for a not-for-profit organization that focuses on cybercrimes against children. I would pretend to be a fourteen-or fifteen-year-old girl and communicate with grown ass men that were interested in illegal activities with them. We would gather the evidence and send it to the right authorities for them to be arrested.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty intense.”

I had never heard of an organization like that before. I knew that there was a massive risk to teenagers online. That even kid only chat rooms weren’t safe. I didn’t know what there were adults out there that were posing as children to trap predators and try to put them in jail where they belonged. It was a noble cause, but one I had to imagine took a toll on everyone involved.

“It was. It was hard plenty of times, but whenever a target would do something abusive or revolting, I would remind myself that it could have been a real fourteen-year-old on the other side seeing it. If it was hard for me to see, I couldn’t have imagined what it would have been like for a real teenager.”

“There’s a lot of darkness within this world. It’s hard to remember how much of it is really out there. And what is even more disturbing is that a great deal more happens online with people all over the world. Part of me was relieved that I wasn’t having a girl. I wouldn’t have to worry about men

staring at her, or getting pregnant, sexting. All of that. I don't think I would have survived."

The world was a scary place; there was no denying that. Especially as technology evolved. We had created a platform that could hold and do remarkable things. Could help us accomplish remarkable things. At the same time though, it could destroy people in so many ways. At least with having a boy, some of those risks were minimized.

"I didn't care either way. Adam was very much against the idea of having a daughter. To him, she wouldn't be an heir to his growing empire. You are right there; a lot more dangers come with a girl. It's why I would like to get back into that organization. To help whenever I can for them. It's on adults to stop the monsters from reaching a child."

"Couldn't agree more. And you said it was all not-for-profit?" It sounded like a charity I needed to look into.

"It is. All of the workers are volunteers, even the creator of the organization doesn't take any money for herself. They do take donations. You know, fifty dollars for one month of decoy phone services. Twenty-five dollars for an abuse survivor's care package. A thousand for ten therapy sessions or five hundred for a virtual school session to teach parents and teachers about warning signs. Three hundred for decorations for a decoy's room. Every donation they get goes back into the organization. They've helped to put away over a thousand online predators."

"Decoys have rooms?"

It sounded like the organization was in need of steady cash flow. They were doing great work, and if they had more resources, they would be able to help more kids.

"Everyone who plays a decoy has a room set up designed for that decoy.

Childhood photos created, art work, bedding. If you walked into the room, you would have no idea a teenager didn't live in it. We would take photos of ourselves and a photographer and graphic designer would de-age us, and then whenever we had to do a video call, we would get creative. We had purple neon lights to help us look younger."

"Okay, you get the guys on the line. Then what? How do you get them arrested? Or find out who they were. I have to imagine they don't give you their real names."

"They don't. Sometimes they will give us their first name. We have to investigate them. We take whatever information they give us and start looking. We can normally find their social media pages and get their real names. Once we have that, we inform the local police with everything we have. We record every video call that we have with the target, so there's no way to talk himself out of it."

"It sounds like a great organization. One this world needs." I was definitely going to have to look into it and see what I could do to help.

We switched to a lighter topic for the rest of the drive. Once we arrived in Portland, I made my way towards one of the toy stores. I parked in the first spot I found once we arrived and Christian spoke.

"Why we here Daddy?"

I turned the car off and turned to face the boys, "Well, it's not a birthday without a present, right?"

"Right!" they both cheered.

"Let's go see what we can find," I said. Jasmine and I got out, and we both got the boys out of the car as we headed inside the shop.

We each took one boy's hand and went around to the boy section in the store. Being trapped in the hospital for the past eight months, and maybe

another eight months to go or longer, had to be boring as hell. The gaming systems caught my eye, particularly the Nintendo Switch. I wasn't all up to date on gaming consoles, but I did know it could be played in your hands or on the TV. It reminded me a lot of the Gameboy that I had when I was ten. It was a great way for me to escape from the world.

I picked one up and grabbed a couple of games that looked age appropriate and placed them in the cart. The boys each grabbed a couple of items, and we headed up to the cashier to get checked out and to get them wrapped. With them done, we were on our way to the hospital where hopefully, we were going to make a little boy very happy.

Jasmine

I collapsed down onto the outdoor lounge. Today had been a very long day, but it was a good day. Anthony had loved the surprise, and everyone on the floor enjoyed the cupcakes. The boys had a good time, and it was great to see them interact with someone older, but not an adult. And Anthony had loved his presents, especially the Switch. I thought he was going to explode with pure joy at seeing it.

Afterwards, we had gone to Playdate, and I knew I was going to be sore for the next few days. I had never seen a place like that before, and I would need to take Jeremy to it again. An hour wasn't all that far, but it also wasn't that close either. Still, once a month was doable. Maybe I would go away for the weekend, and Jeremy and I can do more tourist attractions. There was a zoo and an amusement park. Jeremy was a bit young, but he could enjoy the children's section in the park. There was plenty to see during a weekend trip.

By the time we had arrived back home, we had just enough time to feed the boys, get them bathed, and into bed. They were in their own beds, and I was

set to be joining Jeremy, only in my own bed. I just wanted a bit of peace first to unwind before I called it a night.

A glass suddenly appeared in my face, and I turned to see Liam standing next to me holding two glasses of whiskey. I didn't even hear him coming outside.

"I took a guess that you were more of a whiskey girl than wine."

"You would be correct," I said as I took the offered glass.

"I would have figured you would be soaking in a tub," he said as he went and sat down on the bottom of the other lounge right next to me.

"It was a toss up. But the sky is so beautiful here. What about yourself?" I asked as I turned my gaze away from the sky and looked back towards him.

"I'm not really a bath person," he said with a smirk before he continued. "I saw you out here, and I wanted to talk to you about something."

My heart started to beat harder in my chest. I had thought everything went well today. I had no idea what he wanted to speak to me about. I couldn't help but worry that maybe he figured out the boys were too much alike. That he would piece it all together.

"Okay," I managed to get out, just barely being able to keep the fear from my voice.

"I know eight months from now is a good distance away. I know anything could change between now and then. However, if you are still in town when school starts I would like to offer you a different job. I would like for you to be my charity director."

Okay ... this was so not the direction I thought this conversation was going to be taking. I had been a bartender and a waitress. I hadn't done anything that would require me to have a director title.

"I don't know what that is, but I can already tell you that I am not qualified

for it.”

He gave me a warm smile as he spoke, “You would be in charge of which charities get donations throughout the year. You would have to handle the paperwork and keep track of the funds, work with the accountant, and meet with various charity CEOs, but your job would be to give money away to legal charities.”

“I don’t have the skills for any of that. I can’t even use Excel outside of putting numbers on a line. You must already have someone that does all of that.”

There was no way that I would be able to do this job. Sure, it might sound easy, but I knew there would be a lot of backend things that would need to be done. Legal things that would have to be done to ensure their taxes were done right. If I screwed up Liam could get fined or arrested for tax fraud. There was no way.

“I have someone that handles it along with other jobs. I would like a dedicated person. It will take roughly eight months to set everything up. I will need to create a charity foundation and work with lawyers to get all of the paperwork in order. You can always learn Excel before you start working. You would only have to do basic bookkeeping. All of the accounting would be done by the accountants.”

“Why me? You already have someone that handles that part of the job. So why make the switch when it is obviously working?”

“It’s functioning. I wouldn’t call it working. Right now we donate to maybe fifteen charities a year. Sometimes less; it all depends on the amounts that are given. My company is public, and we do have a Board of Directions. Because of that, there are only certain amounts that can be donated a year. In order to change that, I would have to create a charity foundation where a percentage

of company profits would automatically go into it. It's something that I have entertained doing in the past a few times, but I have never done it."

"Why not?"

"I hadn't found the right person to run it. When a company reaches the level that mine has, charities tend to switch. They go from helping homeless shelters to creating grants for small business owners and first-time business owners. The hope is that they will become successful, they employ people, and that will put money back into the economy."

"Which it will," I agreed. "It seems like a reasonable charity circuit for a large company like yourself."

"It is; it's a natural fit. The problem is it creates a circuit that leaves out a huge chunk of people in need. In a perfect world, the successful business owners will then give back to their communities. Only when poor people become wealthy, they tend to hoard their money. They save it away because they fear being poor again. If their business goes ass up, then they have funds to keep going. All too often it becomes an endless loop with those in need being left out of it."

"That makes sense. But it's your company. Why not say which charities you only want to support?"

I could see what he was getting at. When you are relying on others to donate, it becomes more difficult to predict.

"Charities have to be approved by the Board. If I had my own foundation, I have complete control over which charities I donate to. Charities that matter and can do remarkable things with the money. Like that charity that helps stop online sex abuse. How many more children could they help with a hundred grand a year given to them? I want to make an impact in this world, and it's time I got started."

“There still has to be a thousand other people better suited to be your director.” All of this was sounding good, but that didn’t mean I was the right person to handle all of this.

“Are there a thousand other people that have the skills for the job, the experience, absolutely. But what they don’t have is that deep drive and desire to help people. To help the ones that people overlook or look away from. You simply care. That’s what makes you perfect for the job.”

I doubted I was perfect for it. I could understand his point though. He wanted someone that would care about the people they were helping versus someone that was more focused on changing the direction the foundation went in. Still, I didn’t know if I would be any good at the backend of things. And all of that was before you factored in the bombshell I was keeping from him.

“I’ll think about it,” I offered. That was really all I could offer him at this moment.

“I’ll take it,” he said with a satisfied smile.

Cocky bastard. I had no idea about working for him, but it was a nice thought. Only now we were sitting here, and he looked way too good in the moonlight. Suddenly, I wasn’t so tired.

“You should come sit over here,” I said with a flirty smirk, and he gave me a deadly smile.

He got up and was instantly pulling me in for a deep kiss. I moved my hands down to his shirt, and he followed my lead. We broke apart long enough for him to pull my shirt off, exposing my chest, before he pulled me in for another heated kiss. I instantly melted against him and moved closer to me until my back was laying flat on the cushions of the lounge. I opened my legs so he could easily fit between them.

My hands went to his belt, and we both quickly worked on removing the other of their pants. The second we were fully naked, I felt one of Liam's fingers entering me, and I moaned against his mouth. He moved back from the kiss and started to trail down my neck to my chest. He took my right nipple in his mouth, and I arched back as a moan erupted from me at the pleasure waves that washed through me.

He released my nipple and kissed his way down my body until he reached my wet core. He slipped in a second finger as he sucked at my clit and black dots danced across my eyes.

"You taste like honey," he said as he nibbled on my inner left thigh.

"Hurry up and fuck me," I pleaded.

"You want it slow and sweet?" he teased as he reached over to his pants. This man had an endless supply of condoms in his wallet.

"Hard and fast. We have to be up early," I said with a soft giggle.

"That is so romantic," he teased as he grabbed a condom and slipped it on.

"Practicalness is sexy," I agreed with a laugh.

He slipped his fingers out of me, and I couldn't help but whine at the loss of his fingers. The loss didn't last long as I felt the tip of his cock breaching my core, and I gave a soft moan as he started to push inside of me. Every glorious inch went deeper inside of me until he bottomed out. He didn't wait though before he was pulling out again and slowly pushing inside of me.

He was giving me exactly what I needed to make this the perfect ending to an already perfect day. I couldn't stop moaning as he slammed into me as deep as humanly possible. He kept his pace hard and fast, making sure he was buried deep inside of me with each thrust. He angled his hips slightly,

and on the next thrust, he hit my sweet spot dead on, and I saw stars floating into my vision.

“Oh god, don’t stop,” I begged.

“That’s it Baby. I want to feel you cum. I want to watch as you fall apart around my cock,” he groaned as he picked up his pace even more, and I knew there was only so long he would be able to last.

I couldn’t stop moaning. My whole body felt like it was being electrified from the pleasure that was soaring through me. It wasn’t long before the heat in my stomach erupted, and black dots danced all across my eyes as I came hard around his cock.

“Fuck,” he growled, and I knew the added heat and tightness was enough to throw him right over the cliff.

He gave a hard thrust and buried himself fully inside of me just as he started to pulse. The sensation of him pulsing was enough to make me continue to cum right along with him. I felt the muscles in my legs twitch, and my lips had a slight tingle to them from panting so hard. I didn’t care though. I felt too good to care. Too good to even move right now. I never wanted to get up and honestly, I didn’t think it would even be possible at the moment. Tonight had been perfect. The perfect ending to the perfect day, and I could only hope tomorrow felt this good.

Liam

I scrubbed a hand over my face at seeing the news article that had come out online. It was a reputable reporting website. It was also a national one, and I knew the news of my custody battle was all over the country. It wasn't that big of a surprise to me. I had expected for it to come out. The divorce had come out and gotten a lot of press coverage, and I had hoped that it would take longer for the family court shit to be leaked. Though with Ellis, that would have been a miracle. She most likely was the one to contact the press to try and gather sympathy with the public and the judge. A judge we hadn't even met yet.

I was set to go to court today for the first hearing, and I had no idea what to expect. Alvin had said it was going to be pretty standard. That we were both going to state what we wanted, and the judge was going to postpone the hearing until we all went through mediation and then had the lawyers try and settle. If all of that failed, then the judge would look through all of the evidence that we submitted and make his decision. It was going to be a long process, one I was not looking forward to.

I walked out into the backyard and saw the boys running around with Jasmine sitting on the back porch.

“I have to get going,” I told her.

“Okay. Is there anything you need me to do?” she asked, looking to help in any way she could, and I appreciated it. But the only thing I needed was for her to keep taking care of the boys, so I didn’t have to worry about Christian.

“Just keep looking after Christian. News has broken about the custody battle, and I don’t want him to know about any of this. He’s too young to understand, and I don’t want someone saying something to him that hurts him.” What someone would say to a little boy, I had no idea. But I didn’t want to find out.

“I will keep them busy. I was thinking about taking them to the park and then going on a hike.”

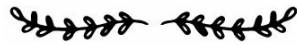
“Sounds good. I have to get going. Let me know if there is a problem.”

I had no idea how hiking was going to go over with Christian, but I was happy to let him try it out. If there was one really good thing about having Jasmine here it was that she loved doing all of these dirty things. I had never been hiking, and it would be good for Christian to try new things. Jasmine was willing to show him all of these new experiences, and I was truly grateful for it.

“Everything will be fine. Good luck,” she offered me a warm smile, and I hated that it made me feel a bit better.

I gave one last look to the boys, and the sight of Christian running around playing with a smile and laughing filled me with so much love. I was doing all of this for him, and I knew it would be worth it. I turned and headed through the house to get to my car. I was hoping this court hearing would be drama free and simple. I had a lot of paperwork I had to get through, and I

was hoping to bang it out today so I could have dinner with Christian and not have to worry over it. I turned my car on and started to make the journey to the courthouse in Portland.



I was struggling not to fidget as I sat in the courtroom next to Alvin waiting for the judge to arrive. Ellis was sitting over on her side with her own lawyer. She didn't look pleased, but she was also making sure to not make eye contact with me. I was fighting to keep my eyes forward. I didn't want her to see that I was nervous. In the divorce, I was confident. I could handle it. She wasn't really around to begin with so it was simpler. This though, the stakes were way too high. This was Christian's life I was fighting for, and I had no idea how this was going to play out. It was all up to the judge, and he could side with Ellis because she was the mother.

The back door opened, and the judge walked out. We all stood up and waited until he sat down before we all could.

“My name is Judge Allen, and I will be the judge that presides over this custody hearing. I have received both of your answers. Is there anything either side would like to bring up that was not disclosed within the responses?”

That was going to be an easy no. We had just submitted our full responses about a week ago. There shouldn't be anything to be added.

“No Your Honor,” Alvin answered.

“We would like to bring something to your attention, Judge. A police report in regards to Mr. Mitchell and a sexual assault that he was interrogated for.”

What the fuck! This asshole was trying to bring this up, right here? Fucking Francis. I told him not to get involved, and now he threw a fucking nuke in

the middle of my custody battle with my son.

“Your Honor, this has nothing to do with a custody battle,” Alvin instantly said, standing up.

“It goes towards character, Your Honor. He was accused of taking advantage of an underage girl at a party. He is now raising a young boy. He is not a male figure that should be around a small child,” Ellis’ lawyer countered.

“Your Honor, if I may,” I said as I stood. Alvin didn’t know about this so he wouldn’t be able to defend me properly.

“If you could clear this up, that would be helpful,” Judge Allen said as he held his hand up to indicate for me to continue.

“The incident that Mr. Jackson is referring to happened when I was twenty-two. I was at a client’s house party in the afternoon, and his sixteen-year-old daughter was there. She had been sneaking drinks and was flirting with everyone there. She had flirted with me, but I turned her down each time and kept my distance from her. Cut to the next day, and the police arrive at my home. They bring me down to the station and question me. According to the police, her father had caught a man slipping out her bedroom window that morning. She claimed it was me. I had an alibi via my home security footage. The girl did admit later on who the real man was.”

It was a complete shitshow, and I had vented to Francis about it all. He knew it was complete bullshit, and now he was trying to use it against me. He had started this war, and he was not going to like where it ended.

“As you know, Your Honor, the police have to file a report for every single person they speak to. My client was cleared and never charged with anything. It has nothing to do with this case at all,” Alvin added.

“I agree. I have seen in your client’s response that you would like to have a

drug test done for Miss. Hemming. I will submit the request based on your answer, and I expect Miss. Hemming to have the hair follicle test done before the next court hearing. If there is nothing else, then we will adjourn until a later date is set,” Judge Allen said, and he looked at us both to see if we had anything else to say.

Thankfully, we didn't, and we were free to leave. Alvin and I headed out, and he didn't speak until we were out of the courthouse and away from Ellis and her lawyer's listening ears.

“What happens now?”

I was pissed, and I wasn't going to allow Francis to get away with this. I would be striking back. I wasn't certain how yet, but it was going to be bloody.

“We wait for the drug test and the appointment with the mediator. Once mediation is completed, if there isn't a resolution, then we will go back to Judge Allen for him to make a ruling. I will continue to dig into her and see if there is anything that we could use to try and strong arm her into relinquishing her suit.”

“Okay. I will do everything I can to keep my cool and focus on what needs to be done.”

That was really the best thing I could do. I had to keep my head in the game and my nose clean. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes. That didn't mean I was going to let Francis get away with this shit. I would get my revenge and justice one day. Francis was going to get what he deserved. But first, I had a son to protect.

Jasmine

These past two weeks had been great. Things between Liam and I were going really well. We had gotten into a pretty set routine. Liam had been trying to keep his schedule pretty consistent, but it was hard at times with his clients that were overseas. They were in completely different time zones, but we were making it work. On more than one occasion, it felt like we were a family. A real family. It got far too easy to pretend like we were raising our sons together. It was a very dangerous game that I was playing, and I needed to keep reminding myself that all of this could be temporary. That eventually the truth will come to light.

Today, the boys were with a babysitter. I wasn't too comfortable with having Jeremy at a stranger's place. However, with Liam being in court this morning, and I had to come and meet with my lawyer, we didn't really have much of a choice. We were using Jillian, a babysitter that Liam had used in the past since living in Newport. He trusted her with Christian, so I was going to trust her with Jeremy. That still didn't change that I was nervous about it. I've never used a babysitter before, and I didn't plan on using one very often,

but with my custody battle coming up, I might need to accept Jillian's help more often.

I couldn't help the nervous bouncing of my right leg. Meeting with my lawyer should have been less nerve wrecking. The problem was I had to go with Liam's lawyer because I couldn't get any other one in Portland thanks to Adam and his dirty tricks. Something Liam was not happy about. It was a shady thing to do, and Liam had warned me about the antics that Henry might try to pull. All of it was making me even more anxious and terrified.

I still wasn't comfortable with Liam paying for my legal fees. I was going to be paying him back every last cent. I didn't care how long it took. The trick was going to be to get Liam to take the payments, but as long as he didn't know the truth about Jeremy, then he should eventually accept it. I had zero idea how I was ever going to be able to get through a custody battle without having Liam discovering the truth.

I was torn in two between wanting Liam to know the truth and not wanting him to ever find out. I knew what I was doing wasn't fair to anyone involved. Knowing that though didn't make the paralyzing fear any better. I was terrified that by revealing the truth, I would eliminate one threat only to be confronted with another one on a whole different level. It was hard to think logically and rationally where Jeremy was involved.

"Miss. Garcia, Mr. McCormick will see you now," the receptionist said, and I looked up to see her standing at the entrance of the hallway waiting for me.

I stood and followed her down the hallway and reached Alvin's office. I walked inside to see him sitting at his desk. He was an older man, just a bit older than Liam I would say. He was very well dressed, and it was intimidating; that was for sure. He had kind brown eyes though that reminded

me of a basset hound. The receptionist closed the door on her way out, and suddenly, it was just me and this man alone in this office.

“Miss. Garcia, please have a seat,” Alvin said with a soft smile as he held his hand out towards the two empty chairs across from him.

I went over and sat down, but it did nothing at all to ease my nerves. I couldn't tell by his emotions either how it went for Liam this morning. I knew he couldn't tell me anything so I didn't bother with asking. I would have to wait to speak with Liam about it later on today. Assuming he felt like sharing.

“I have been going over your court documents,” he started, but I cut him off.

“I'm sorry. I just need to get some clarification first. I am aware that Liam is covering my court costs. What happens with my court case, whatever is said, will that stay between us, or is he your client and has the right to know about it?”

If he wasn't going to be just my lawyer and not also going back to Liam with the juicy details, then this was never going to work. I would have to find a lawyer in another city willing to travel. If and when I told Liam the truth would be up to me, and I was not going to tolerate having to deal with an outsider on the payroll spilling his guts.

“I can understand your concerns. However, my client is the one on the court documents. In this case, that is you. Mr. Mitchell is not the first person to cover someone's legal fees. I get spouses, parents, friends, and anonymous donors that will pay for someone's legal fees. They only get the bill, and the bill is even just the hours that I have put in. They don't even know what the hours were used for. Everything you say is between us and classified as confidential. Even if I wanted to, which I would never, I am bound legally by

client/attorney privilege. If I break that, I risk being disbarred. Something I am never going to risk. You can speak openly and freely here without any worry.”

I couldn't help the deep sigh of relief that escaped my mouth. It was a massive relief to hear him say this. To have that confirmation, even if part of my mind suspected that he wouldn't be able to say anything. I could at least now speak freely and not have to worry about Liam getting any information that I wasn't ready to give.

“I've never told anyone this. I never expected I would have to,” I started. I couldn't believe I was actually going to say this out loud.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me. You need to tell me if it relates back to your case. I can't properly help you if I am in the dark,” he advised.

I took in a shaky breath. I couldn't believe I was actually going to say this out loud. I had been holding in this secret for so long. And now the first time I let it out will be to a complete stranger that doesn't even know me and might not understand why I had done this.

“I made a decision out of fear and stupidity. Adam he um... he's not Jeremy's biological father.”

“I am assuming he doesn't know. Did you do a paternity test?” Alvin asked without any judgement. I suspect he had probably heard it all before and nothing really surprised him.

“Two years ago I did it without Adam knowing. I took his DNA from a glass he drank out of before he went to work. It's not like I was trying to trap him or anything. The timing lined up with Jeremy being his. We weren't exclusive, but I always used protection. Even with Adam, we used a condom. I figured one of the condoms must have been defective, and the odds were

even more in Adam's favor versus some one-night stand. Everything pointed to Adam," I quickly explained.

"Okay. Did Adam sign the birth certificate?" he asked, and again, there was no judgement, and it was really helping me to feel more comfortable with him.

"He did."

"And please don't take offense to this next question, but do you know who Jeremy's biological father is?"

"I do. There was only one other man that I was with within that time frame. He has no idea that Jeremy is his or that there was even a possibility. Like I said, I've always used protection. The odds were all pointing in Adam's direction."

"Alright," he started as he sat back in his chair. "Adam not being the biological father, though, it complicates things, doesn't take away his rights. He signed Jeremy's birth certificate. He has been raising him for his whole life. Providing financial help, emotional support, etc. He does still have rights to Jeremy."

"Okay, so what are my options?" I was gonna need to make a decision, but there was no way I could do that without all of the information. Hopefully, one of those options wouldn't be too bad.

"There are a few ways we can handle this. The first being we can not reveal the paternity results. We can proceed as normal, and Adam is none the wiser. The next option is a bit more complicated. We can release to the court that there is a question of paternity and demand a DNA test. Once the test is complete and the results come back, that is when things could grow to be complicated. Adam could either wish to wash his hands of Jeremy and have

his name removed from his birth certificate, and you would receive full custody.”

Well that sounded great, but I had no idea if Adam would do that. He might be willing to wash his hands compared to wanting to continue to fight and raise Jeremy. At the same time, he might choose to keep fighting because he wants to save face. It was hard to know just how he would react.

“On the other side of the coin, he could continue to pursue full custody. The court will ask that the biological father is made aware of the child. The biological father could either sign his rights away, he could join you in your fight for sole custody, or he could file for his own custody, and it becomes a three-way fight for sole custody. Which does happen more so than you think. It all depends on who the father is and what type of man that he is.”

And that was the question. I had no idea how Liam would react to all of this. I would hope he would join me and not fight against me. At the same time, I didn’t know how I felt about having joint custody with Liam. I had gone into this with the hope that I would fight for sole custody. Joint would be a massive difference, especially with a man that I barely knew.

“No matter what I tell you, it stays between us?” I asked, needing to hear that confirmation one last time.

“Completely. I give you my word.”

I took a deep breath in before I finally said the words out loud, “Jeremy’s biological father is Liam.”

Alvin’s calm and neutral face morphed into instant shock. He didn’t stand a chance at even schooling his features. It was definitely not a statement he had been expecting to hear.

“I’m sorry. Liam Mitchell is Jeremy’s father?” he asked, and I could tell he was hoping that I was referring to someone else.

“It was one night four years ago. We met at a conference, and neither one of us ever expected to see the other again. Cut to four years later, and he is sitting in the pew at my wedding that never happened. Turns out Liam is my father’s best friend, like from childhood best friend.”

“Which you knew?”

“Nope. Neither one of us knew the connection. My father doesn’t believe in hanging family photos. He only displays accomplishments. I knew he had a best friend from growing up that he was still in contact with, but I didn’t know his name. And he had no idea who I was.”

“Alright,” he said, before he paused, and I knew he was trying to get his mind wrapped around all of this. “You discover you are pregnant and you assume it’s Adam’s. But once you discovered the truth, why didn’t you reach out to Liam? Surely, he would have been easy to locate. Or even now? You are working as a nanny for him. You and Jeremy are around him and living in his property. He is paying for your legal fees.”

Now there was a hint of judgment in his voice, but I couldn’t fault him for that. This was a terrible position that I was putting him in. Liam was also his client, and he would have to go and meet with him and not be able to tell him about this other child that he has.

“I know. I am well aware of what a terrible person that makes me. I was young when I discovered the truth, and I panicked. I didn’t know if Liam would try and take Jeremy from me. I put my head in the sand and pretended like nothing was different. Now, I am spending time with him, and each day that goes by, I feel like shit because I haven’t told him. Again though, I don’t know how he will react, and I am not going to lose my son to anyone.”

“I can understand how he would look and feel intimidating to you. And I can’t discuss any private details. However, I can tell you that Liam wouldn’t

try and take Jeremy from you. He firmly believes that every child deserves to have two parents in their lives. That as long as both parents are good and stable people, then there is no reason to keep a child from them. I think deep down, you know that.”

I did know that, but it didn't take the fear away. “What do you think I should do? What do you feel is the best course of action to ensure Jeremy stays with me?”

At the end of the day, I was here for Jeremy. I had to make sure he stayed with me, and I would do whatever it took to make that happen.

“My professional opinion would be to tell Liam the truth. He is a huge asset for you to have on your side. And knowing he is the father might be enough to push Adam to drop his suit. Afterwards, you and Liam could work out your own custody agreement. Either through the courts or outside of it. I would highly recommend telling Liam the truth and fighting this together.”

I suspected he was going to say that. Fuck. Now I really had no idea what I was going to do.

Liam

I pulled up to Jillian's home where the boys were. I had plans of going back to the office to get some work done, but after that mess of a court hearing, I just needed a mental break. I wasn't going to be able to focus on work anyways, so I might as well enjoy the beautiful day with Christian. I knew Jeremy was going to be here as well. Jasmine had her own meeting with Alvin that she needed to handle, and I had said to drop him off at Jillian's. The last thing she needed was for Jeremy to overhear anything a three-year-old little boy didn't need to hear.

I got out of the car and headed for the front door. I knocked and a minute later, it was opening to a smiling Jillian.

"Hey, back already?" she asked as she moved aside to allow me to enter.

"Yeah, I decided to play hooky today. How are the boys?"

"They are good. We just finished with lunch and trying to figure out what they would like to do. Are you picking up just Christian?"

"No, I'll grab them both. I figured we would spend some time at the beach," I was going to need to text Jasmine to let her know. I was assuming

she would be okay with me taking Jeremy for a little bit.

“Sounds fun. I’ll go grab ‘em for you,” she said with a kind smile as she headed off to grab the boys.

It took no time at all before I heard their little feet running on the hardwood floors. Christian opened his arms and practically jumped into my arms.

“Hey Buddy. How are you?”

“Good.”

“I thought we would all go to the beach. What do you guys think?”

“Yay!” Christian cheered, and I placed him down so he could get his shoes on.

“Mommy?” Jeremy asked as he got his shoes on.

“I texted her to let her know where we are going, and she will meet us there.” I didn’t know she was going to meet us yet; she hadn’t messaged me back. I didn’t expect her to. She should be in her meeting right now, and when she was done, she would see it.

“What do we say to Ms. Jillian?” I said to the boys.

“Thank-you Ms. Jillian,” they both said in unison.

“You both are so very much welcome. I will see you boys later.”

“Bye,” they boys said as we headed out, and I got them both in the car before I hopped in.

I would need to make a quick stop at the house for us to get changed and get everything we needed. But then we would be headed for the beach, and hopefully, a lot of fun.

The second our feet touched the sand the boys were running off with each other. I had multiple bags and an umbrella that I was carrying. We had brought lots of sand toys because Jeremy had gotten some new ones, and they

were very excited to try them out. He really was a sweet little boy, and it was great that they were both getting along so well. It had been a massive fear of mine that they would spend the whole time fighting.

I was looking forward to spending the time with the boys and on the beach. I had been trying to let go of some of my anxiety where cleanliness was concerned. We had been doing more things together, and I was trying to embrace the creativeness that Jasmine had and was joining in when I was there. Today, we were going to try and build mud castles, and I had no idea how well that was going to go over, but I was going to try.

We were at the beach; it was a perfect place for the boys to get filthy if they wanted, because they could just go right in the water to get cleaned up. Today was all about fun, and I wanted to be able to let go and just enjoy the moment.

I got the umbrella all set up with our chairs and towels. Everything was looking great, and we were the only ones around. That's what was great about being in Newport; there was plenty of beachfront so everyone could be spread out. It was also during a weekday, so most people were at work. the tourists were either not in town yet, or they were still sleeping off their hangover.

“Okay guys, what would you like to do first?” I asked the boys.

“Play in the water Daddy,” Christian said.

“Is that okay with you Jeremy?”

This was the first time I was taking him to the beach so I wasn't too certain what he liked to do. He had lived in Florida, so I knew he had been to a beach at some point in his life.

“Water!” Jeremy cheered, and I gave them both a big smile.

Fuck, these two knew how to make you feel better.

“Let’s go have some fun then.”

I took each of their little hands, and we walked down to the water. I never saw myself wanting another child, but with Jeremy, he just fit in so well with Christian. They could have easily been twins. It was nice having another child around for Christian to play with, but also to just watch him grow up. With offering Jasmine a position with my company, I was hoping that she would take it, and the boys could continue to grow up together. Jeremy was a special little boy, and I was really hoping I would get to spend more time with him and get to watch as he grew into being a great man.

I was also hoping that the four of us could be a family one day. I didn’t know how Jasmine felt about me. If she wanted something deeper or not. She just got out of a long-term relationship that resulted in a child, and she had the custody battle going on right now. I would completely understand if she needed more time before getting into anything serious. Time I was happy to give her. Still, I was hoping that we could develop something deeper and real.

Only time would tell on that. For now, I was going to embrace all of the time I was able to get with my three favorite people. Hopefully, Jasmine would be here soon, and she could join us in having all of this fun and building mud castles. I had a feeling that would be something she was really good at doing. Today was all about fun and family, and that was all I wanted it to be.

Jasmine

I made it back to my car to see that Liam had sent me a text letting me know that he had picked up the boys and had taken them to the beach. I didn't expect for him to pick up Jeremy along with Christian. I was torn between feeling happy that he was getting some one-on-one time with him, but also guilty because he was getting that time with his own son, and he didn't even know it.

Fuck, I had to figure this out. I turned my car on and started to make the drive over to the beach. I hit the hand free call button as I spoke.

“Call Kenny.”

“Calling Kenny,” the female British automated voice said back.

Ringling filled the car, and I was really hoping he would answer. I needed someone to talk this out with. He was going to be very shocked, but I had to talk to someone about this that knew me. That could talk openly and tell me exactly what I needed to hear. Kenny was the only person that has ever been able to do that with me.

“Well hello Sweet Girl,” Kenny greeted me.

“I’m not sure how sweet you will think of me in a minute,” I warned. I knew he was still going to love me, but that didn’t change that it was going to be a shock to him. And he was going to feel a sense of betrayal that I hadn’t confided in him with this.

“Oooh, tell me all of the dirty details,” he practically purred, and it was so not what he was thinking.

“Liam is actually Jeremy’s biological father and not Adam. But neither men know that,” I blurted out. I hadn’t been planning on telling him this way, but it kinda just happened.

“Bitch, what?” Kenny said, and I knew if I could see him right now, the blood would be draining out of his face.

I let out a deep breath before I went into the whole story. He didn’t ask any questions, but I knew he was trying to digest everything I was unloading onto him. When I finally finished the story, he spoke.

“Wow. Just ... wow.”

“I know. It’s pretty big and pretty terrible. I am a terrible person.”

“You’re not a terrible person. You made a terrible decision out of fear. I can’t hold that against you. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. My lawyer thinks I need to tell Liam so we can both fight against Adam. That maybe once the truth is out, Adam will back off not wanting to go up against someone like Liam. I have no idea what I am going to do or what the right call is to make.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. You know what the right decision is here. You didn’t call me because you needed advice. You called me because you know I’m not going to let you lie to yourself or tell you what you want to hear. You know you have to tell him. Fuck, you have to tell them.”

I knew he was right. It's why I called him, why I always called him whenever I needed someone to tell me exactly what I needed to hear. The fact that he was right didn't change that it was going to be incredibly difficult to actually have this conversation with Liam. I was worried about his reaction more than anything. It was one thing to say that he was level headed and a good man, but another for that to be tested with information of this caliber.

"I know ... I know. Really I do, but I just don't know how to tell him. And not just Liam, but Adam as well. How do you tell someone that the child they have believed to be theirs for the past four years, truly isn't? How do you tell a man that he missed out on the past four years to be with his son? Liam already has a son; he will know exactly what he missed out on. There's no way I can make it up to either of them or to Jeremy."

I had to own up to my actions. I knew that I did. But for the past two years, I had grown at peace with keeping my head buried in the sand, and I wasn't in any hurry to pull it out. Now I had to, and I didn't know how I was ever going to manage to get the words out.

"You can't, but you are also costing them more time by delaying telling them. It's not going to be easy. It's probably going to be the hardest conversation you will ever have to have, but you need to have it. And you need to have it today. You can't put it off any longer, or you will only cause more pain."

"I know. I just wish I hadn't done any of this. That I could go back in time and either never do the DNA test or be honest from the start. I didn't think this far ahead. I acted out of fear, and now everyone is paying for my mistake."

It was hard to explain to someone how you were a good person, but you made this horrible mistake. Most people only see a person for their mistakes,

and they judge you based on them. Based on a single moment of fear and regret. Every ounce of trust that I had managed to build with Liam was going to be destroyed after this. We might never be able to be the same ever again and it hurt. I had come to care for him. To care for Christian, and the last thing I wanted to do was cause either of them pain. To lose what we had started to form.

“Everyone makes mistakes. Sure, yours is a pretty big one, but everyone does. It’ll take time, but I am sure Liam will come around to see that. To understand that you acted out of fear and not rationality. Plus, from an outsider’s point of view, he shares about one percent of the blame. He slept with you a handful of times in one night and then four years later you have a three-year-old. He could have done the math and asked you if Jeremy was his. He’s seen both boys next to each other for a few weeks now. Has he really not noticed any similarities?”

“It’s my fault, not his.”

Yes, you could argue that Liam should have at least asked or have noticed something by now. However, it wasn’t on him to ask. I could have told him when I saw him on the side of the road after my dash from the altar. He was in the right to assume that I would have said something had there been anything to tell.

“Oh Honey, I’m not saying you are off the hook. Just that when he thinks about it, it will all add up.”

“How do I do this? Do I make him dinner first? Do I do this right away or wait for a better time?”

“You can’t wait any longer. Your best bet is to wait until you are both alone. Maybe tonight when the boys are asleep. He’s going to be pissed and hurt. Be prepared for an epic argument. But eventually, the anger will resend,

and then you can both speak calmly. You can't reach that point though until you actually get through the pissed off part."

Fuck, this was going to be terrible. I pulled into the parking lot for the beach and parked along the front row. It wasn't very busy today, at least not in this area, so I had a clear view of where Liam and the boys were. They were all sitting in the sand building sand castles, and it melted my heart and broke it at the same time. He was so good with them. Even though Jeremy wasn't his, at least that he knew, he never acted or treated him like he was less than Christian. He treated them both equally, and I knew he cared about his welfare. He was a great father, and he would be a great one to Jeremy as well.

"I have to take that jump. I'll do it tonight after the boys are in bed. Like you said, I just need to get over the furious stage. Then we should be able to talk calmly about it and what we need to do moving forward."

It was going to be a massive shock either way. At least this way it would finally be out, and we could move forward and plan properly so Adam didn't end up with Jeremy.

"It'll be okay. Eventually, it will be okay."

"I hope you're right." It was only a matter of hours now. I might as well enjoy what little time of peace that I have left.

Liam

I silently closed Christian's bedroom door. Him and Jeremy were asleep once again in the bed. I still wasn't too happy about them getting so close, but at this point, it was unavoidable. They still had little squabbles, but every kid did. I wasn't too worried about it. And it seemed like Jasmine was looking to stay in New Port, so my fear of Christian losing a close friend was no longer an issue.

It was odd to think that a woman I had met at a conference four years ago had grown so close to not only myself, but Christian as well. I certainly never saw this coming, but it didn't bother me. It felt like they had been in my life this whole time. I couldn't imagine not having them around me. I had no idea if Jasmine felt the same, but I was hoping she did.

I headed down the stairs, and I easily found her in the kitchen. What I didn't expect to see was her scrubbing the hell out of the stove. She had been a bit off today. When she arrived at the beach, I could tell that something was bothering her. I assumed it had everything to do with her meeting with Alvin. I knew we wouldn't be able to talk about it in front of the boys. However, I

had been hoping she would ease up a bit as the night went on. Only the opposite seemed to be happening. She had to have gotten bad news with Alvin.

“I thought I was the clean freak,” I joked, hoping to try and get even a small chuckle out of her.

Only she didn’t chuckle. She stopped scrubbing and stood stock still. A bad feeling was starting to build in my stomach, and I had no idea what was going to come of this conversation. Was she running? Did the meeting with Alvin go that badly that she was going to take Jeremy and run?

I crossed the distance between us and took her hand in mine as I spoke softly to her, “Hey, whatever is going on, it’ll be okay. We can handle it.”

I saw the tears building in her eyes, and it broke my heart to see them. I couldn’t help but pull her into my arms. She buried her face in my chest, and I could feel a slight tremble within her. I held her close as she whispered.

“I did a terrible thing.”

Well, that could be anything. It did make my own nerves pick up at what she could have done. I was really hoping she didn’t agree to settle before she even made it in the courtroom. If that was the case though, we could fix that. Alvin would need a couple of days to draw up the paperwork. There was still time to undo it.

“Whatever you did, we can fix it. All you have to do is tell me what happened, and it’ll be okay.”

I knew I couldn’t promise her that, but I highly doubted there was anything she could have done that I couldn’t fix. Almost everything could be fixed with the right amount of money and connections. Something I had both of. She sniffed, and I knew she had lost the battle against her tears. I turned my

head slightly so I could press a kiss to the side of her head. She took a shaky breath in before she finally spoke.

“Jeremy is your son.”

Ice flooded my veins. I couldn't have heard her right. I had to have heard her wrong, because there was no way that she just said that Jeremy was my son. That couldn't be possible. I mean, yeah I guess it could be possible. We did have sex a lot that night. And it was four years ago. But it couldn't be possible, because we used a condom every time, and they didn't break. Not to mention, she would have told me by now. She could have easily found my contact information with one Google search. I never hid what my name was. Even if she couldn't find me, which was complete bullshit, she would have told me after arriving here. She had plenty of time to drop this bomb on me.

I moved back as I spoke, “What did you just say?”

The pure fear in her eyes told me that I hadn't heard her wrong. That she had been keeping this massive secret from me for not only four years, but for the past three weeks. The fearfulness in her eyes should have had my anger dimming, but it didn't. My brain couldn't fully register what she was feeling because it was too busy being flooded with my own pain and emotions.

“I can explain,” she started, but I wasn't hearing any of it.

“Oh, you can explain,” I began as I took a few steps away from her. “You can explain to me how I have another three-year-old son? You can explain to me how you have not once opened your mouth and told me since you discovered you were pregnant with my child. You couldn't tell me during the past three fucking weeks you have been living in my home?” I roared.

I was barely able to keep my voice at a decent level. I wanted to scream, to keep screaming until my throat felt like it was on fire. Only there were two little boys trying to sleep upstairs. Two little boys that happened to be my

sons. Both of them. I had two three-year-old sons. And now I was in the middle of a custody battle for one and a whole other fucked up custody battle for the other. Because now I had to fight some fucking asshole who couldn't be bothered to give my son the time of day. Who believes that my son is actually his.

God, this couldn't get more fucked up.

"Were you ever going to tell me? Or were you going to keep allowing me to pay for your legal bills until you go running off with my son, and I'll be none the wiser."

"I never asked you to pay for my legal bills. I never asked you to get involved in any of this. You don't get to stand there and make it seem like I tried to trap you or something. You weren't exactly warm and fuzzy when we arrived. I might not have told you right away, but were you ever going to ask? Or do you really expect me to believe that you didn't do the math and wonder if Jeremy could have been yours? That you don't look at him and Christian and see the same fucking eyes staring back at you? Some of the same interests. Same mannerisms," she snapped, and I could see the fire building in her eyes.

"Oh, this is my fault? Because I didn't assume that a one-night stand with protection produced a child? Lots of children their age look similar. Lots of them hold interests in dinosaurs and the deep ocean. You don't get to put the blame on me because I didn't ask a question that I never thought needed to be asked."

She was seriously going to try and put this shit on me. I had noticed a couple of things, but never did I think for a single second that Jeremy could have been mine. Even when we were discussing Adam, she never once opened her mouth and told me that he wasn't the father. Even if she wasn't

ready to tell me the truth, she didn't have to keep going with this lie that Adam was his father. What type of person lies about something like this?

"I'm so disgusted with you. I can't even look at you," I said before I turned and headed straight out of the kitchen and out my front door.

I went over and got into my car and quickly turned it on before speeding out of the driveway. I had to get away. I had to get away from her and all of this anger within me. I felt like I could explode, and that was the one thing I couldn't do at the house. Not with the boys there. It was bad enough I thought I had to deal with an unstable baby mama, and now it was looking like I was going to have to deal with another one.

Jasmine

It had been two hours since my horrific fight with Liam. I couldn't get the tears to stop no matter how hard I tried. It felt like my heart had been shattered into a million pieces. I knew the fight was going to be bad. I thought I had prepared myself for it, but it was worse than I had anticipated. It wasn't necessarily his words that cut me so deep. It was the emotions behind it. The raw pain that flooded his voice and his eyes. It tore me apart, and I wasn't prepared for that.

I had no idea what was going to happen now. Where we went from here. Was I supposed to pack up and leave? Was he going to try and fight me and Adam for custody? Were we going to do it together? Or maybe he was going to kick us out and stop paying for my legal bills and make me figure it out on my own. Anything at this point could happen, and I had no idea how I was going to handle any of this.

It's my fault though. I had done this to myself. I never should have lied about the paternity test. I should have told him right away the very second I saw him on that dirt road. So much of this could have been avoided if I

hadn't acted out of fear, and now Jeremy was potentially going to pay for my mistakes, and he didn't deserve that.

It wasn't even just about the legal aspect of my life. We had started to develop something real between us. There was a trust, and now that trust was worthless. It was hard to gain someone's trust, but it takes a millisecond to lose it. And I had thrown a fucking grenade at ours. Things were never going to be the same between us. No amount of sorry or time was going to change that I had hurt him on a deeper level. The deepest level possible, and we might never recover from it.

When I agreed to come here to work for him, I never expected for any of this to be happening. I never expected to come to care for him or for Christian. If I had known this was going to be the result, I never would have agreed to any of this.

There was a knock at the door, and I didn't need to open it to know that it would be Liam on the other side. At least I was hoping it would be and not the police coming to tell me to leave. I wiped at my cheeks and stood from the couch. I had never walked so slowly towards a door before in my life. I reached out and took a shaky breath in before I turned the knob and opened the door. There standing on the other side was indeed Liam.

He didn't look any better than when he had left, but I guess that was to be expected. I knew he had gone for a drive, but that was almost two hours ago. I was hoping the drive might have calmed him down, but I wouldn't know until he started to speak.

"Can I come in?" he asked. His voice was tight, but he was calm at least, so I was taking that as an improvement.

I gave a nod and stepped back, allowing him to enter. Whether I wanted to talk about this or not didn't change the fact that we needed to. He made his

way over to the couch, and he sat down stiffly. I went and took a seat in the chair. I didn't really want to be that close to him right now.

"First, I am sorry for getting so angry and for anything I might have said that hurt your feelings," he began.

"You had a right to be angry."

"Regardless, we need to talk about this. I need to know why you didn't tell me."

He obviously had every right to an explanation. I wished it was a better one than I had, but all I could do was give him the truth and hope he understood my point of view in all of this. If nothing else, hopefully, he will come to forgive me one day.

"When I first discovered I was pregnant, the dates lined up with Adam. I've always used protection, always. So when it came back that I was pregnant, it made more logical sense to me that an accident had to have come from Adam. The dates the doctor gave me even lined up to match Adam. Admittedly, there wasn't much time between the both of you. Adam and I had this on-again, off-again friends with benefits type of deal. We were free to see whoever we wanted and when we felt like it, we would hook up. It was simple."

"All of that changed when you discovered you were pregnant," he simply stated.

I gave a nod and continued, "He was excited at first and came to doctor visits and whatnot. Even after Jeremy was born, he looked a lot like me. There was never any reason to doubt that Adam was his father. As he started to grow older though, I noticed little things. He didn't have any of Adam's genetic markers. Like his dimple chin, the same chin every male on his side

of the family had. It was Jeremy's eyes that got me finally. One day he looked at me, and all I could see was you."

"I should have noticed. Him and Christian have the same eyes. I just blew it off as a coincidence amongst children. I'm assuming you did a test."

"I did when he was a year, just over it. I didn't tell Adam. I stole a glass that he drank from and sent it off with mine and Jeremy's samples. It came back negative, zero percent chance, and I knew he was yours. I hadn't been with anyone but you two and anyone else was months prior. You were the only option."

"But you didn't tell him, and you didn't tell me. Why?"

And that right there was the million-dollar question that I didn't know if he would understand. All I could do was try though. "I was scared, and maybe that sounds ridiculous to you, but I was terrified. You have to remember, I was twenty-one, and I panicked. My mind kept thinking about all the ways this could go wrong. Adam wasn't the best father, but he was the only one Jeremy knew. I didn't want Jeremy to lose that father figure in his life. I didn't want to hurt Adam. And I had no idea what you would be like. You could have tried to take him from me. You could have done anything. It wasn't like I had a family that would help me and support me through something like that."

"Your father," he started, but I cut him off.

"All my dad has ever cared about since he became partners with Henry was getting me and Adam married to solidify the company's future. He might be your best friend, but he was a pretty shitty father growing up, and he still is. If I had told him the truth he would have told me to bury it. To put a smile on my face and do as I was told. He would have used it to blackmail me any

time I stepped out of whatever ridiculous line he felt I had crossed. I didn't have anyone to tell.”

At twenty-one, I shouldn't have been afraid of my parents, but I had been. Part of me still was, but I was doing this because of Jeremy. He needed me to fight to protect him, and that was exactly what I was going to be doing. My father was going to lose his shit when the truth came out, because it had to. I needed it to in order to fight Adam. Hopefully, he would back off, and all of this could be over and done with.

“You're not wrong. Francis isn't exactly the man that the world views. He most likely would have used this knowledge to his advantage. I am sorry that you felt like you couldn't tell me when you first discovered the truth. Why not when you arrived here though? You've been here for three weeks. Did you truly think that little of me?” he asked, hurt that his character had been under attack.

“I didn't think of it like that at all. I hadn't planned on running out of that church. I was going to say I do up at that altar. It wasn't until I saw you in the crowd that I couldn't do it. Afterwards, I was overwhelmed and scared by everything. I didn't know what you would be like, and then we were arguing and fighting over everything and that made me nervous. I didn't think, foolishly, that Adam would file for full custody. Like I said, he was never really involved with Jeremy. I figured he would have licked his wounds and then pretended like everything was okay. That doesn't change that I should have told you, and I'm sorry that I didn't.”

I meant it too. I should have manned up and told him. I should have faced my fears and told them to fuck off and had just been honest with him and Adam. If I had, I would be in a completely different situation than I was in now. Better? Who knows. It didn't change that I couldn't reverse time and

have a second shot at it. All I could do was face the consequences of my actions and hope that it didn't destroy me.

Liam

I was doing my best to try and see things from her perspective. It wasn't easy because I was still upset by all of this. Mostly by the fact that I had missed out on three years of my son's life. I would have been there for all of it. I would have made sure Jasmine was out here with me. It would have made everything complicated with Ellis. I had no idea how she would have handled sharing that spotlight, but I would have dealt with the headache. I would have done anything that I needed to in order for all of us to be around each other. Christian and Jeremy were half-brothers; they deserved to grow up in the other's life.

As hard as it was, I had to try and see things from her perspective. Yes, it was a one-night stand, an epic one, but we were strangers. It wasn't uncommon for a woman who got pregnant from a one-night stand to not inform the father. Was it the right thing to do? That was debatable, but it happened all the time. I was more bothered by the fact that she didn't tell me once she arrived. Sure, maybe not right when she walked through the front door, but she could have spoken up and said Jeremy was mine.

I would have handled that better than finding out after three weeks of having him in my home. And I suspected the only reason she was telling me was because of something Alvin said to her.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” I asked her as calmly as I could manage. I was doing my best to prepare myself for the sounding no that was going to come out of her mouth.

“Yes. I know it might not seem like it. But yes, I was planning on telling you. I don’t know when, but I was.”

I believed her, or I wanted to, I guess I should say. “Am I to assume that the only reason you told me tonight was because Alvin said something?”

She gave a nod before she spoke, “I told him everything, and he gave me the options that are basically we either don’t inform the courts of Jeremy’s true paternity and fight it out between Adam and I. Or we do tell the courts, and Adam will either relinquish his request and remove his name from Jeremy’s birth certificate, or he will keep fighting for full custody.”

“Why would he continue to fight? He’s not the father.” That was a little odd to me. Especially given how he had been treating Jeremy his whole life practically. Why fight for a child that wasn’t yours and one you didn’t seem to care for to begin with?

“Adam is all about appearances. It would be a massive blow to him and his image if it got out that he didn’t fight for a child he had been a father to for three years. It really depends on what Adam, and Henry, I guess want him to do. Alvin said that Adam is on Jeremy’s birth certificate, and he has been financially supporting him his entire life so he does have rights to Jeremy.”

Fucking bullshit. I knew it was the court’s way of protecting good parents and children should something come out of the shadows. If the father that had been there and was raising the child their whole life, if it came back that he

wasn't biologically their father he still had a chance to raise his child. It was a safety net in case the biological mother was a nightmare. However, it was really going to fuck with us now.

"What did Alvin recommend?" I was going to guess option two, but sometimes he comes out of left field.

"To inform the courts and Adam. He then said it would be better for you to fight on my side for us to have joint custody, even something informal between us. And in full disclosure, which I am sure he will tell you, you would also have the right to file for full custody, and it becomes a three-way fight should Adam not drop out."

There's a shitshow if I ever saw one. I couldn't imagine having to fight two other people for full custody. I couldn't imagine the poor judge and lawyers trying to work all of that out. Not to mention the poor child in the middle of it all. Fuck. I suspected she was terrified that I was going to do just that. That I would use my connections and get her out of the running and then take down Jeremy. I would be a complete asshole to do it, and that wasn't something I would ever be able to live with myself over.

"I'm not going to do that. We'll fight him together, and I am sure we can figure out some type of agreement between us. I know you are not Ellis. I know you are a great mother, and Jeremy and Christian are safe with you. I'm not worried about it, and I have no problem doing something informal with you. We can work all of that out afterwards."

I had no reason to keep Jeremy from her. The only reason I was doing any of this with Ellis was because of her drinking. She was a danger to Christian and once she stopped being one, then she could be back in his life. Keeping a child away from their parent should be a last resort and only done when it

was in the child's best interests. That was my situation with Ellis and not with Jasmine.

"Really?" she asked, completely taken aback, and it bothered me that she was so surprised by it. She genuinely believed that I was going to try and keep Jeremy from her. I thought she knew me better than that, but it appeared that I had some work cut out for me.

"Of course. What is going on with Ellis is a safety issue; you know that. Once she is sober, then she can be in Christian's life, and he can spend the weekends with her or go on vacations together. I just need to know that he is safe with her and not going to be around drugs and alcohol. For Jeremy, it is best that we fight it out together."

It was going to be a massive blow out when the truth came out. No one was going to take it well, especially not Francis. I had enough problems with him trying to interfere with Ellis' case. Once word got out about Jeremy, it was going to be an all-out war, one he was not going to win. I meant what I said. I knew where his skeletons were buried, and if I had to drag them out into the light, then I would. Now I had two sons that needed me to protect them, and I was not going to fail them.

"My father is going to lose his mind," I could hear the fear in her voice, and I hated it. No child should have to fear their parents.

"I will deal with him. You don't have to worry about it."

"Easier said than done," she said with a minute smile.

I reached over and took her hand within mine. "I know."

It was going to be a nightmare, but I was going to do everything within my power to protect her as best as I could.

"I truly am sorry about all of this."

I could hear how sincere she was. Part of me wished I could hate her. All of

this would be easier and less painful if I could. But I could remember being her age and terrified of everything I couldn't control. I have no idea what I would have done in her position, but there was a chance I would have done the exact same thing.

“I know you are. I forgive you. I just want to move forward and focus on what matters and not the past.” Forgiving someone was not easy, but I meant every word. It was better for us to focus on what truly mattered and not whatever shit happened in the past. We had a son together, and we needed to be a united front in order to win against Adam and his asshole of a father.

She gave me a genuine smile, and I couldn't stop myself from leaning forward and pressing my lips against hers. She tensed for a second, and I could tell she was surprised that I had kissed her. After a moment of surprise, she was kissing me back, and it took no time at all before things got heated. It took no time at all before our clothes were tossed on the floor. She pushed me down onto the couch as she quickly climbed on top of me. I knew what she wanted, and I fumbled around for my pants to find my wallet and grab the condom that I knew was in it.

I managed to grab it and slip it on as I felt her hot core starting to descend down onto my cock. Fuck, she felt so good. By the time she was fully seated on my cock, we were both breathing heavily as the pleasure was scorching through us. With this position, I knew it was going to feel amazing for her and with each movement, my cock would hit her sweet spot dead on.

She sat up straight and rocked her hips back and forth. I slid my hands down to her ass and gave it a small love tap. She mewled at the added pleasure as she slowly began to bounce up and down on my cock, making sure I was fully inside of her with each bounce.

“That's it Baby, ride me. I want to feel you cum all over my cock,” I

groaned as her inner muscles squeezed my cock.

She picked up her pace, and I knew she was getting closer. I snarled my hand over to her clit and started to rub it in fast circles. She bit her lips as she groaned, and I knew she was trying not to make that loud of a sound with Jeremy asleep down the hallway.

“Oh fuck,” she gasped as I felt this heat washing over my cock as she came.

She wasn't able to keep moving as the pleasure overtook her. I quickly moved and flipped us around, only turning her at the same time so she was on her knees with her forearms against the arm of the couch. I slipped back inside of her with a sharp thrust of my hips, and she gave a weak moan as she was still pulsing around me. I pulled out all of the way and slammed right back in, making sure to hit her sweet spot with each thrust. She collapsed down further onto her arms, and she turned her head so she could moan louder into the arm of the couch.

“Oh yes ...don't stop,” she begged, and I knew she was getting closer to cumming again. I was right along with her, and I knew I wasn't going to last much longer.

After a few more sharp thrusts, I felt her pulsing around me again with a soft scream into the back of the couch. The added tightness was enough to throw me off the cliff, and with a sharp deep thrust, I came hard inside of her with a groan. Our breathing filled the room as we both tried to get our bodies back under control. I had no fucking clue what tomorrow was going to bring, but for right now, I was going to enjoy this peace before whatever storm was about to hit us.

Jasmine

Waking up in the morning had me feeling a bit weird. Not because of the sex last night, but because I had no idea what was going to happen between Liam and me. I was expecting for things to be awkward, especially because we would need to tell Jeremy that Liam was his father. I knew we could wait, but I didn't think it was best to wait. I had waited long enough for the truth to come out, and I also didn't want Liam to feel like he had to hold back from being a father to him.

Either way, I was not going to be getting anything done laying in bed. I tossed the covers off and made quick work in the bathroom and got dressed. I headed down the hallway to check in on Jeremy. After our sexy time together, Jeremy had a nightmare and I went and brought him back to my house to help calm him down and get him back to sleep. I opened the door softly just in case he was asleep, but he was wide awake sitting on his floor playing with some of his toy cars and dinosaurs.

“Morning Baby,” I told him with a big smile.

He gave me a toothy smile as he spoke, “Morning Mommy. We have

pancakes?”

“Of course. Let’s go over to the house and see if Liam and Christian are awake.”

I suspected that Christian would be awake, but I wasn’t too certain if Liam would be up yet. It was just after eight, so there was a chance that Liam was already awake. Jeremy got up and we made our way across the backyard to the main house. We walked into the back door and saw that Christian was sitting at the table and Liam was already in the kitchen. I couldn’t smell anything cooking so I had hope we could still make pancakes.

“Morning,” I said with a warm smile to them both.

“Good morning. How did you both sleep?” Liam asked.

“Good. Yourself?” I asked next as Jeremy ran over to the table to sit down next to Christian.

“Good. I was just about to make breakfast.”

“Pancakes?” Jeremy asked.

“I could. I didn’t really have anything planned for it. We just got down here. What do you think Christian?” Liam asked.

“Pancakes are good.”

“Pancakes it is then,” I said as I went and grabbed a bowl from the cupboard as he went to grab the same thing.

“Oh sorry,” I said slightly awkwardly.

“It’s fine,” he said with a tight smile, and I knew he was feeling the awkwardness just as much as I was.

It was kinda stupid that we were awkward around each other right now. It wasn’t like we hadn’t already been having sex. The only difference was the truth, and now it was making things very weird. We had to address it, because I didn’t want the boys to pick up on it.

“What were you boys thinking about doing today?” I asked as I went and grabbed the pancake mix as Liam worked on getting the pan warmed up.

They both shrugged their shoulders, and I could tell they didn’t know what they wanted to do. I wasn't too certain either. We had already done the beach a few times. We’ve done the park. Gone to Portland, we’ve done into the village. I didn’t know what else there really was to do.

“Why don’t we go to the aquarium?” Liam suggested.

“Oh, I forgot about that. That sounds like a great idea,” I agreed.

I forgot about the aquarium and wanting to take Jeremy there. It was perfect. A way that the boys could interact with each other, but also so Liam could be there as well. I knew he was going to try and get to know Jeremy more. That would go over better in a more casual scenario.

“Fishies!” the boys both cheered, and I knew we had made the right choice.

“We can go after breakfast. It’ll be a lot of fun. There are even sharks there Jer,” Liam said as he turned to face the boys.

It was really nice to see Liam interacting more with Jeremy, even if it was just a conversation. It was a start, and I knew he was going to keep going with it and build a relationship with Jeremy like he had done with Christian. I focused on getting the pancakes ready as the boys all interacted.

“You like sharks?” Jeremy asked.

“I do. I really like whales too. We’ll have to take a day to go whale watching,” Liam answered.

“That sounds like fun,” I commented.

“I like whales too. I can show Jeremy the best tank,” Christian offered.

“I think that would be a great idea. There are a lot of amazing things to see at the aquarium. You can even pet stingrays,” Liam said with a warm smile.

I focused on making breakfast while the boys talked. Once the pancakes

were done and eaten, the boys headed off to get dressed, and I took advantage of the few minutes we would have alone.

“How do you want to handle Jeremy?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he asked as he brought the dirty dishes over to the sink.

“I know a lot got dropped onto you last night, but when were you thinking of telling him the truth?”

He was shocked and that made me confused and concerned. Did he not want for Jeremy to know the truth? Maybe he was having second thoughts since last night.

“You want to tell him?” he asked completely taken aback, and it was doing nothing to ease my own concerns.

“I figured we would. Is that not something you want?”

“No, of course I want him to know. I just know we didn’t discuss it last night, and I wasn’t too certain when you would want to do that. If you didn’t want to do it. I know he’s three, and it’s a difficult age for him to understand something like this.”

He would have a hard time understanding that Liam was his father and not Adam. It was going to take some time, and it was going to have to be a delicate process that we handled together. We definitely needed a plan for it.

“I do want him to know the truth. I think it would be for us to figure out how we want to tell him and what we are going to say. He is young so it’s going to be hard for him to actually understand what we are telling him. But I think if we both agree to the way we are going to tell him and stick with it as he asks and gets confused along the way, then it will be easier for him to adapt to it.”

Consistency was going to be key. Jeremy was going to be confused for a

while, and he was going to be making mistakes and asking about Adam. We needed to stick together and to the plan in order to ensure he is getting the same information each time.

“We can figure that out. We can talk about it later and get the dialogue laid out. For today, I think we should all go to the aquarium and have some fun. We can grab some lunch afterwards before coming back home.” He moved over to me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Let’s just be a family today. We can worry about everything that comes tomorrow.”

“Sounds perfect.”

We had a lot we needed to deal with, but for today, I was more than happy to relax and have a good time with him and the boys.

Liam

It had been two days since our first family outing to the aquarium. The past couple of days had been nice, but now I was being forced back into the harsh reality that was my life. I was not looking forward to this at all. Today, I was going back to court to try mediation between Ellis and I. I highly doubted this was going to work, but I understood where Judge Allen was coming from. He was hoping that we would be able to work this out ourselves without him having to make an official ruling to one of us. It was typical with family court judges. They would prefer the parents of the child to be adults and to act in the best interest of the child. That was easier said than done. I had a feeling today was not going to go over well at all, but it was a step that had to be taken whether we wanted it to or not.

“Are you ready?” Alvin asked as I approached him inside of the courthouse where we were set to meet.

“As I can be. How bad is this going to be?”

“It’s a toss up. The best thing you can do is be calm and don’t get angry or be unreasonable. There will be a court appointed mediator, and their job is to

try and keep everyone on task. They will be taking notes though for Judge Allen. If he records anything that the Judge isn't going to like, that can hurt you in the case," he warned.

"I will stay calm," I promised. I wasn't going to jeopardize Christian at all.

"How are you feeling about the news you have recently learnt?" he cautiously asked. He knew I discovered the truth about Jeremy. I had informed him of it yesterday, but we didn't get much time to speak on it with his busy court schedule.

"I am processing still. But the news is out between us, and now we can move forward and do what we need to ensure Jeremy is with us."

It was a lot I was still trying to digest, but I was getting there. It was nice to be spending time together as a family.

"Good. Let's focus on Christian today, and I would keep that tidbit to yourself. It is not going to help anything in there if Ellis discovers that you have another three-year-old son."

"I would like to keep it as quiet as possible right now. I know eventually it will get out, but in court for Christian is not the place that I would like for it to happen."

Ellis would be all too happy to use Jeremy against me. It was bad enough I was still having to deal with Francis. I did not need to give Ellis more ammunition. It was going to come out, obviously, in a couple of days when it was Jasmine's turn in court, but that was later and not something I wanted to stress over today.

"Perfect, I wanted to make sure we were on the same page. They are already in there, so we need to go and join them."

I gave a nod, and I followed Alvin into the room and saw that it was similar to a conference room. Ellis and her lawyer were sitting on the right side of the

table with the mediator sitting at the head. Alvin and I walked over to the left side and took our seats. I could see the annoyance and anger written all over her face. She was sitting with her arms crossed over her chest. She didn't want to be here any more than I did, but I was at least going into this with zero expectations or attitude. She apparently was going at this completely differently.

“Thank you both for coming here today. My name is Richard Holland, and I will be your Mediator today. I would like to inform you all that this is being recorded and even an unofficial agreement is not legal until the Judge signs off on it. Do any of you have any questions?”

I simply shook my head and when no one said anything, Richard indicated for Ellis' lawyer to start the mediation.

“Given the nature of Mr. Mitchell's career and how often he is away for business, it only makes sense for Christian to reside with my client. She works from home and is able to give Christian the attention that a child like him needs without him being with babysitters or nannies.”

“My client runs a multi-billion-dollar company that supports your client. Mr. Mitchell has a live-in nanny to be there when he is unable to due to work. He also has a babysitter that he uses on rare occasions when his nanny needs a couple hours off. Nannies and babysitters are not the area of concern. It is your client's behavior,” Alvin started. We had decided it would be best if he spoke, and I allowed him to do what he does best.

“I don't have any behavior that is of any concern,” Ellis immediately said, and her lawyer gave her a pointed look.

“The behavior in question is the excessive amount of alcohol that is being consumed by your client weekly. Having empty and full liquor bottles all over the house. Getting intoxicated when she was supposed to be watching

Christian, and that is just recently. She has been gone for over a year. No contact the whole time. Before your client left, she was disappearing for weeks at a time to get drunk, do drugs, and cheat on her husband. When she left Christian, she did so while she was the only one home and left him in his crib for hours until my client returned home from work.”

“That is all in the past, and there is no proof that my client has done any drugs in her life,” her lawyer jumped in.

It was taking everything in me to not call bullshit, but I knew I had to stay quiet.

“The drug test has already been approved by Judge Allen. By the next hearing we will know that she has been taking illegal drugs for years now. I see no reason to try and hide it. Your client should be honest and then we could work something out, but we can’t if she is going to continue to lie and have destructive behavior.”

“I’ve never done drugs. And you want to talk about my behavior? What about his?” Ellis snapped.

“My client hasn’t done anything wrong. He has been more than willing to work with you, but you refuse to admit that you have a problem.”

“Nothing wrong? Just neglected me and his son. Just went off without any notice to travel all over the world and cheat on me. Why isn’t he being subjected to the humiliation of a drug test? Why isn’t his actions being called into question? He’s mentally and emotionally abusive to me and my son,” Ellis seethed, and I couldn’t keep quiet any longer.

“Really? You want to sit there and claim that I am the one with a problem? You cheated on me, not the other way around. I caught you in our bed having sex with some random guy you brought home from the club. You were both drunk, and there was white powder on the bedside table with a straw. All of

which was during a time when you were alone with Christian and were supposed to be watching him. I told you to go to rehab, and the next week you left for over a year. You don't get to claim that I'm abusive when you have done nothing but abuse that beautiful boy."

She didn't get to play the victim, fuck that. Christian was the victim, not her. I didn't care what she had to say; she was never going to get to see him until she straightened up her life and proved to me that I could start to trust her again. Until then, she was never going to be a mother to my son.

She scoffed before she spoke, "You think your OCD doesn't affect him? Or your anxiety towards a mess. What child should have to live in a house that they can't even get a speck of dirt on anything because Daddy's losing his shit?"

"Unlike you Ellis, I've been working on bettering myself. Is my house clean? Yes. But I can go to bed knowing there's some dirty dishes in the sink and not feel like my skin is crawling. Christian made sugar cookies from scratch and got flour all over the place. We decorated cupcakes and finger painted together. We made a fort in the living room and built mud castles on the beach. All of this is something you would know if you had been around."

Some of that was done with Jasmine, but I had gotten a lot better on messes. Me and the boys had enjoyed playing in the mud on the beach, and they got cleaned up before getting back in my car. But they loved it, and I loved seeing the infectious smile that Christian had on the whole time. The other day, the boys showed me how to build a fort, my very first one, and we spent the day in it watching movies and playing games. It was all cleaned up afterwards, but that was okay, because I had done it in the first place. There was a balance, and I was finding it.

"My client doesn't want to keep your client out of Christian's life. He

merely wants to make sure that his son is safe whenever he is around her. All we are asking is for your client to admit that she has a problem and seek treatment. Once she can prove she is sober for three months, then she can start to see Christian and work up to overnight visits,” Alvin said, trying to get this back on track before I said something that could hinder us.

“I’m not some criminal that needs to be watched,” Ellis snapped.

“My client does not have a problem, nor does she need treatment. She is not looking for visitation. She wants full custody and all rights to determine when your client can see the child in question. We will not settle for anything less,” her lawyer said, and Alvin closed his notebook as he spoke.

“Then this is wasting everyone’s time. The drug test will speak for itself.”

“It would appear that you both are not going to be able to resolve this today. We can adjourn and try again at a later date,” Richard said, but he knew we were way too far apart to ever come to some sort of middle ground.

It was disappointing, but I had expected as much. All we could do was wait for her to do the drug test, and then maybe once she had hard evidence in front of her, Ellis would do the right thing.

Jasmine

“It’s going to be okay,” Liam said as he took my hand in his for a moment as we walked up the steps to the courthouse.

He had just been here a couple of days ago, and now it was my turn to go through the first court hearing with Adam. Today was the day we were going to announce that Liam was Jeremy’s father, and the inevitable blowout from it had my nerves wound up tight. I wished I had been able to convince myself that everything was going to be okay, but I knew it wasn’t going to be. At this point, all I could do was hold on for the ride and just hope I didn’t get thrown off. The only thing that was making this bearable was knowing that I had Liam here with me today.

“After the mediation you had with Ellis a couple of days ago, we really need a win.”

Liam had told me all about it when he got back, but I wasn’t surprised that it hadn’t gone well. Him and Ellis were too far apart in their realities for them to ever stand a chance to come to a reasonable compromise.

“It’ll be okay. No matter what happens we will deal with it. He’s going to

learn about the truth eventually. It is better for him to learn it while he was in a courtroom and can't lose his shit," he said as he walked into the courthouse.

We went through the process of going through security and making our way towards our courtroom. Alvin was standing outside waiting for us, and I didn't see Adam anywhere. I was hoping he was already in the courtroom, because I wanted to get this started so it can be over and done with.

"Alvin, it's good to see you again," Liam said as he shook Alvin's hand.

"It's good to see you both. Adam and his lawyer are already in there. Your parents Jasmine, are in there as well."

"My parents?"

There was no way my parents were here. I hadn't heard anything about them coming down, and I was nowhere near prepared for them to be here for this. Obviously, they were going to find out the truth, but I wanted to be able to tell them myself and not for them to find out in the middle of a courtroom.

"Correct. I wanted to see how you would like to proceed?" he asked with complete understanding to his voice.

He was asking if I wanted the truth to come out even with them here, but I didn't see any other option really. We couldn't delay the hearings. And I wasn't going to keep allowing my mistake to affect other people's lives. It wasn't fair to Adam to keep going believing he was fighting for his son. The truth had to come out; it was just that simple.

"Yes, we proceed," I said with confidence that I wasn't truly feeling.

"You sure?" Liam asked.

"It's going to come out regardless. Might as well do it all in one day."

They were all going to lose it. At least this way, I only had to deal with the fallout once and not spread out one really horrible day compared to a series of bad ones.

“Alright, it’s your decision. If that is what you would like, then we will proceed as expected. I want to stress that no matter what is said that you keep your composure, the both of you. The courtroom is not a place for emotions,” Alvin advised with a stern look that reminded me of being lectured by a principal.

“We will,” Liam assured him.

Alvin gave us one last look to be certain before he turned and headed for the doors. We both followed him and walked inside to see that my parents were in fact here, but they were sitting behind Adam. They clearly knew it was his side of the room, because they sat right behind him. Adam was whispering to my father. It was foolish of me to believe that they had come to offer me support. That for the first time in practically my whole life that they were here to be my support system and tell me it would be okay. I really should have expected it though.

We went over to our side of the room and I did my best to keep my eyes over on my side and not look over at Adam or my parents. Thankfully, Judge Allen came into the room and everyone’s attention was on him. At the same time though it made my stomach claw its way up to my throat because now the moment of truth was coming.

“Good morning everyone. I have been advised that Mr. McCormick you would like to get things started,” Judge Allen said as he looked right at Alvin.

“Thank you, Your Honor. My client would like to inform the court and Mr. Miller that the paternity of the child in question, Jeremy, does not match Mr. Miller’s DNA,” Alvin stated.

“What does that mean?” Adam said, and I could see his lawyer shushing him.

“Your Honor, am I to understand that my client is not the father of

Jeremy?” Adam’s lawyer said.

“Is that correct Mr. McCormick?” Judge Allen asked.

“That is correct Your Honor. The biological father of Jeremy is Liam Mitchell. A DNA test had been performed two years ago.”

The courtroom went nuts. That was really the only way I could think of to describe it. My father was shouting, all out shouting, not at me, but at Liam. I couldn’t really make out what he was saying, because it mixed all into my mother crying and asking why. Plus, Adam was yelling calling me a lying whore. I didn’t really know who I was supposed to address first, but thankfully, Judge Allen pounded his gavel down so hard I thought the thing was going to snap and go flying back at him.

“Enough!” he roared, and everyone started to calm down.

There was no fixing the tension in the room. I could feel it pulsing all around me, and I knew the explosion was far from over.

“A paternity test will be ordered by the court. Until then, this case is adjourned,” Judge Allen ordered as he banged his gavel down on last time.

I turned to see my parents, my father got up and stormed right out of the room. My mother looked at me, and I could see the hurt, anger, and disappointment swirling in her eyes. She looked away and started to make her way out. I didn’t even wait to see what Alvin would have said, I started to chase after her. I was hoping I could make her understand.

“Mom, wait, please,” I said as I caught up to her and lightly grabbed her elbow to stop her from walking.

“How could you do this? How could you do this to us? Embarrass us like this.”

She was furious with me, but I could also tell she was upset that I had kept this from her. She couldn’t be all that surprised though given how close we

weren't.

“I didn't know Jeremy wasn't Adam's when I got pregnant. I found out a year into it. I didn't plan on any of this to happen.”

“Liam? Of all people. That is your father's childhood best friend.”

And that is what it came down to being the worst part in all of this. If it had been some random one-night stand that would have been better. It was Liam, my father's best friend, and that was on a whole different level.

“I didn't know who he was at the time. He didn't know who I was. Something that could have been avoided mind you if Dad was a normal human being and had a single photo up of him anywhere in the house growing up. But instead I grew up with photos of his accomplishments and not his childhood or his family. Dad didn't even talk about him. All he's ever cared about is his image and reputation, making as much money as he could. Anything personal or even remotely human was ignored. We didn't plan for this to happen, but it did. And I am done trying to please everyone, trying to please Dad. Adam, Liam, and Jeremy have the right to know the truth. It's just that simple.”

I was done apologizing, at least to my parents. They didn't like how I turned out. Well, they can look into a mirror. I am a product of their parenting. If they couldn't accept me and the mistakes that I had made, then I had to sever the relationship with them. It was the last thing I wanted to do. They were my parents. They were Jeremy's grandparents, and I wanted him to have some, but it was just looking like that wasn't going to happen. I hadn't met Liam's parents, but from what I had heard, they weren't positive and the last thing we needed in Jeremy's life.

“I don't know what to even say to you right now. I'm upset, shocked, and embarrassed. There were other ways you could have done to handle this. To

have the truth come out that didn't involve a court. I have to go find your father. He is going to have a heart attack from all of this."

More like an aneurysm. I wished she would have told me that she loved me and we would figure it out, but that wasn't the relationship that we had. I was hoping that maybe we could have one like that once the dust settled, but that really depended on what my father told her to do. I saw Liam making his way out the front door, and I had to assume he was going after my father. There was a conversation that I was thankful to not be a part of.

Liam

I caught Jasmine speaking with her mother as I made my way outside to chase after Francis. In the beginning of all of this I had been hoping to salvage some of our friendship. We had known each other far too long for it to dissolve. Now though, after everything he had done to try and take Christine from me, there was no saving anything. What I had foolishly mistaken for genuine friendship meant nothing to him.

“Francis,” I called out, and he stopped on the steps as he turned to look at me. I could see fire in his eyes. He was pissed before, but now he was ready for an all-out war.

“You have a lot of fucking nerve showing your face here. Am I really to believe this farce?”

“It’s not a farce. Jeremy is my son. I didn’t know that Jasmine was your daughter when I met her four years ago at a conference. It was one night, and we never saw each other again until her wedding. We had no idea who either of us was, and if I had known, I never would have slept with her.”

“Bullshit you didn't know who she was,” he growled.

“How the fuck would I know? You’ve never told me about her. I didn’t even know her name. I’ve never seen a picture. You didn’t even tell me you had a kid until she was eight, and it was in a very brief mention that you had to get a babysitter.” Oh he was not going to blame me for not knowing Jasmine was his daughter.

“So it’s my fault you fucked my daughter and got her pregnant?”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t tell me about her. Not once in her entire life. You don’t get to blame either of us for not knowing who the other was. It doesn’t matter that we didn’t know; it doesn’t change that Jeremy is my son, and I am going to be in his life. I would have to imagine you would want your grandson to have his father in his life.”

“He was raised by a father for four years, and it wasn’t you. He doesn’t need you coming into his life confusing him and screwing it all up. Jasmine and Adam could have worked it out. They could have ended this foolishness and came back home where they belong. Instead, she has only brought more shame to the family.”

“Shame? Your behavior is what is bringing shame to your family. How you are reacting to this news is bringing shame to your family. You should be in there supporting your daughter. Not sitting behind Adam. She needs your support. She deserves your support, and you are acting like a spoiled two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum. Where the hell did that good man go that I grew up with? The one that wanted to be the complete opposite of his parents. The one that cared about the world and swore he would appreciate and cherish a child if he was lucky enough to have one. Where did you go?”

I felt like I was standing here looking at a stranger. A stranger that I would have loved to punch in the face. How was it possible that we had grown up in the same environment, but we both became so different? He used to want

more. He used to be completely different, and now it was like his soul was sucked out of him.

“I grew up. You should try it. If you think this stunt is going to stop Henry or Adam, you are wrong. If anything it has only made it worse. Jeremy will be back in Miami where he belongs. Where I can raise him right and get him ready to take over the company when my time comes. You would be wise to back off and encourage Jasmine to make it happen. I will not warn you again.”

“We’ve already had this dance, Francis. Stop threatening me, or I will make sure your reputation is destroyed. That you spend the rest of your life rotting in a jail cell. Get the fuck out of my town.”

I turned and headed back towards the courthouse entrance. I was done with Francis and all of his bullshit. There was no saving our friendship. Being realistic, it was a friendship that ended decades ago, and I just failed to see it. Failed to admit it to myself. I walked in just as Jasmine’s mother walked out, and I could tell she wasn’t too happy either.

I beelined it for Jasmine and I immediately took her into my arms once she was within reach. She turned and pressed her head against my chest, and I knew she was upset. I wanted to make all of this better. To take it all away from her, but I couldn’t. All I could do was hold her and try to help her through this nightmare.

“It’s gonna be okay,” I told her.

She gave a small huff of a laugh, and I knew she didn't believe me. At least not yet. She moved back as she spoke, “I don’t think today could have gone any worse.”

I rubbed my hand along her back as I started to guide her out of the courthouse. “What did your mother say?”

“Mostly that she was disappointed. Honestly, I knew she was going to be shocked and upset. I think for her it would have been better for me to tell her one-on-one without an audience or in front of my father. She would have had more of a chance to process it and have feelings towards it.”

“Do you think she will come around?”

Honestly, I was truly hoping she would. Jeremy needed at least one grandparent, and it wasn't going to be mine. I hadn't even told them that Jeremy was my son, and that wasn't a conversation I was looking to have. They weren't going to be happy and that was not something I was looking to deal with currently. Eventually, I would have to tell them, but that day was not today.

“I hope so. My mom is a wild card and very hard to read. She normally does whatever my father wants, but I've noticed a few cracks over the years since I got pregnant. I hope she takes a bit of time and reaches out to me. Only time will really tell.”

I knew she wasn't happy about it, but I also could tell she was trying not to be hopeful. She didn't want to be disappointed when her mother didn't support her and continued to stand by her father. Again, all of this was a problem for another day, because we couldn't do anything to fix it right now. Everyone needed time to relax and process what they learnt and how they felt about it. The best thing we could do was eliminate ourselves from the situation temporarily and let the dust settle.

“Francis was not happy; the best thing we can do is focus on us and let the dust settle. They will do whatever they want, and there's no way we will be able to predict their actions,” I said as I opened the car door for her.

She waited until I got in before she continued our conversation, “He's going to do something, but you're right. We can't predict nor control them.”

She let out a deep sigh before she continued, “I just want to get home to the boys and have some fun.”

“Why don’t we pick them up, grab some pizza and go and head out to the beach? We can do some cave exploring, and there is a spot where we can see whales.”

Jasmine and Jeremy haven’t really have much of a chance to explore the city outside of the main village. It would be nice to get them out for a little while and show them the hidden beauties that Newport has to offer.

“That sounds amazing. I would love that,” she said with a warm smile, and I knew she was starting to feel better. A day out together was exactly what we all needed, and I was hoping it would rejuvenate her spark. Some time together as a family was what we all needed.

Jasmine

It had been a couple of days since the shitshow that was my court hearing. So much had happened, I didn't even know where to start by the end of it. I had needed the past couple of days to process it all and try to figure out the best course of action. Liam and I had spoken and he had given me advice, but he was also allowing me to make the decision on how to handle Jeremy, something I respected him for. Even though Jeremy was ours, he was still giving me control of my life. Adam was my ex, not his, and it was on me to deal with him. Just like it was his responsibility to handle Ellis.

I had decided to reach out to Adam and speak with him. I was hoping that Adam was in the mood to speak to me. He's had a couple of days to process all of the information that got dropped onto him in court. My hope was that he had calmed down and would be able to handle a civil conversation between two adults.

I headed inside the cafe to see Adam sitting at a table already. There was nothing in front of him, and I knew that wasn't a good sign. He loved coffee

and would drink it anytime day or night. If he wasn't drinking coffee, then he was worked up still and that didn't leave me feeling good.

I made my way over to the table and sat down. His whole body was tense, and it reminded me of a cobra just waiting to strike out. I needed to be careful. If I said the wrong thing at the wrong time, he was going to snap; the whole point of meeting him was to be able to have this conversation in a calm manner.

“Adam, thanks for meeting with me,” I started.

“It's not true right? You were lying about Liam being Jeremy's father.”

The deep hurt that flooded his entire body was a massive sucker punch to my gut. It hadn't even crossed my mind that he would have assumed I was lying about Liam being Jeremy's father. As if I would use that as a strategy to win.

“Adam, I would never lie about something like that. Liam is Jeremy's father. I've known since he was one years old when I did a DNA test from a glass of yours that I took. He's not yours Adam.”

I expected for Adam to be pissed off, but my mind never thought he would be so devastated by the news. Maybe that was petty or stupid of me, but he didn't seem to care very much about Jeremy to begin with. I guess I figured he saw him more as an annoyance. Someone he had to take care of and deal with to better his image. There had been plenty of times that I doubted his love for Jeremy. But it was real. Despite what happened between us, I never wanted to cause him pain, especially a pain like this.

“How could you keep this from me? I had the right to know. Did you think it would change things? That I wouldn't love him?”

“I honestly didn't think about that. I know this is hard, but you need to understand I was young when all of this got dropped onto my lap. I never

anticipated telling anyone. If Liam hadn't been in the crowd at the church, I would have married you. I would have continued to pretend like we were a happy family."

"And you can't do that now," he sadly stated.

"No, I can't. You can't unring a bell Adam. Honestly, I didn't think you would feel this way. I didn't know how you would treat Jeremy if you knew the truth. All I knew was how you treated him when you did believe he was your son. You weren't exactly loving Adam, even you have to admit that. You would go days without even speaking to him. He seemed more like an annoyance to you than anything."

Maybe that was harsh, but it was the truth, and I knew Jeremy had felt the same at times.

"I never saw him as an annoyance. He was my son and I loved him, love him. If you had talked to me we could have worked something out. I could have done better if I had known there was an issue. I didn't know I was doing anything wrong. My father was the same way growing up; it was normal to me."

Fuck, now I felt like an asshole. I knew Adam's father wasn't loving. I tended to avoid Henry whenever I could, because I just couldn't deal with him. He wasn't a good man, and there had been plenty of times during our relationship that I had excused his behavior because of being raised by Henry. I didn't where Jeremy was concerned because if you knew how it felt to be ignored by your father, why would you turn around and do the same to your own child?

I felt like he should have known better. That he should have been hypervigilant about his actions and emotions towards Jeremy. It has never sat right with me and hearing that he was hurt by all of this did show me that he

had what it took to be a good person. It wouldn't be with me and with a lot of luck; it wouldn't be with Jeremy. However, his next relationship, maybe he would be better at it.

“I know. It's why I didn't get on your case about other issues we had. But Jeremy, he's a person. You looked at him everyday, and you wouldn't even ask how he was. You can't tell me you don't remember what it felt like to be in Jeremy's position. I didn't see love, and at times, he didn't either.”

His jaw clenched, and I could see the start of tears building within his eyes. Fuck, this man has never cried. I've seen him furious, now right out for blood. But I had never seen him this deeply hurt, and I felt just horrible that I was the cause of this level of pain in another human being.

“I'm not saying this to hurt you. I don't want to hurt you, believe that or not. But I also don't want you to make the same mistakes going forward. One day you are going to find an amazing woman that you love and who loves you. Maybe you'll have kids, and you can make your own family.”

He was quiet for a moment. He stared outside the window, and I didn't know if he was ever going to say anything. I didn't speak either, allowing him this time to process what had been said and his feelings towards any of this. I wasn't really used to dealing with an emotional Adam. He had always been so in control and neutral the bulk of the time I had known him. The only time I had seen anything else was during sex or when his father would compliment him. Then, he would glow with pride as if he was an abused dog happy that his owner had shown him a scrap of love.

It was sad, and plenty of times, I felt pity for him. Not exactly the best emotion to have with someone you were supposed to be in love with. There was nothing wrong with feeling pity for someone; it made us human. But when it was towards the person you love, the person you were going to spend

the rest of your life with, it shouldn't be pity you feel. It should be sadness, hurt, anger towards the one causing the person you love to feel that way. Sympathy and empathy. Never pity.

When he finally spoke, he did so without turning his head to look at me, "I'll drop my custody suit."

And that was not what I had been expecting for him to say. I felt a tidal wave of hope flooding my chest. Was he being serious? Could I actually have Jeremy without having to worry about him coming for us. Even if we won the custody battle, I knew another suit could be filed. It could turn into an endless merry-go-round of court battles, and that was something I didn't want to have to deal with in my life. I would because it was for Jeremy, but that didn't mean I was going to be happy about it.

If Adam did drop the custody suit it would mean he would relinquish his parental rights to Jeremy. He would never be able to try and get custody again. We all could go our separate ways and try to find some semblance of peace and happiness. And I wanted that more than anything, but not just for myself, for Adam as well. He did deserve to find happiness and love. Despite everything we had been through, I had loved him at one point. I had wanted to build that family with him. And I truly hope he will find someone to do that with.

"You'll terminate your parental rights?" I asked, because I needed to hear him say it, and then I needed him to do it.

He flinched slightly at my wording, but he needed to hear it. He needed to understand that was what he would be doing. He took a shaky breath in before he turned to look at me.

“I do love him, but I don’t think I would be able to look at him and not see Liam. To look at him and not feel hurt and betrayed. To not resent him for all of this. And it’s not fair to any child to feel resentment from their father. I love him enough to not put him through that. So I will sign the paperwork to terminate my rights to him today and go back home.”

“Thank you,” I said with a teary-eyed smile.

“I’m not doing this for you. I can’t sit here and wish you well. I can’t sit here and tell you I want you to be happy. I am doing this for myself and for Jeremy. I love him enough to let him go and hopefully, find happiness in his life. I’m doing this so I don’t turn into my father. If I didn’t love him, I would throw everything I have at you and Liam just to watch you both get destroyed. Don’t think for a second that I am doing this for you,” he said with an edge that I could see he was just barely controlling his rage.

I didn’t call him out on it; he was entitled to his anger. And I truly didn’t care what his reasoning was. As long as he was going to give me my son, I was happy.

“I understand. And on behalf of Jeremy, I thank you. Once the papers are signed, we won’t have any reason to be in contact. I’m going to stay out here so you won’t have to worry about running into me or anything like that.”

There would be no reason for me to go back to Miami. I certainly wasn’t going to be visiting my parents any time soon. I had spoken with my mom, and she was trying to come around to the truth. I knew it was going to take some time though, and that was fine. My dad was not an easy man to live with, and I couldn’t fault her for that.

“I’ll have them signed today,” was all he said before he stood and gave me one last look before he walked out of the cafe.

This was not how I ever pictured our relationship or friendship ending. But

maybe it was for the best. We would both get a clean slate, and we wouldn't end up killing each other either in court or outside of it. We could both move on and find love and happiness. I was already on my way to having that with Liam. And he was going to be over the moon excited to not have one more custody battle on our hands. Now we just needed to deal with his fight for Christian, and the four of us could be a proper family.

Liam

I walked into the court house not really knowing what to expect. I had been watching the boys while Jasmine went and spoke with Adam alone. I wasn't too happy with the idea of her doing so on her own, but she made valid arguments that were hard to go against. If I had gone, it would be a show of alpha male dominance, and that wasn't going to be helpful at all. Still, I hated knowing that I wouldn't be able to be there to offer any support or negotiate.

Apparently, it was a good thing I hadn't gone, because Alvin had called to inform me that we were being requested by Judge Allen to meet within his chambers right away. I had no idea what this was going to be about, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't terrified. I had left the boys with the babysitter and promised to be back as soon as possible. Jillian was a sweet older woman, and she had no problem with the short notice.

After getting cleared through security, I made my way towards Judge Allen's chambers. Waiting for me outside of them was Alvin. He didn't look

too confident and certain himself as to what all of this was about, and it was doing nothing to ease my own fears.

“Do you know anything?” I asked, skipping all social pleasantries.

“No one has told me anything, just that it was urgent and to meet here. He’s ready for us.”

“Let’s get this over with then I guess,” I said as I took a deep breath in. Whatever was going to happen on the other side of these doors was going to change my life. I just wish I knew if it was for the better or not.

Alvin went and knocked on the thicken wooden door, and it seemed to echo all around us. After a moment a deep male voice spoke from the other side that I recognized as Judge Allen. Alvin reached and turned the knob and opened the door, holding it open for myself to enter first with him right behind me. For a second I felt like he was trying to sacrifice me to the lion’s den first.

The second the door was closed, the Judge spoke, “Gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice. Please take a seat, and we can begin.” He gestured to the two free chairs across from his massive desk, and we both moved to take our spot. I couldn’t figure out if this was going to be a good or a bad thing that we were sitting down for this conversation.

“A situation has come up that I was made aware of this morning that will affect your custody hearing. Miss. Hemming was arrested for driving under the influence last night.”

Holy shit. There had been a few close calls in the past with her, but she had never been arrested. There had been times where she was going to drive, but someone or myself had been able to get the keys from her. She had never driven drunk before. At least not to my knowledge. What she had done

during our time apart I didn't know. Apparently, she had grown more bold with her drinking.

"Do you know if she will get bail or was she released?" I asked. I didn't really know which I was rooting for.

"She was remanded and is waiting for her bail to be posted. She blew three times the legal limit. She crashed into a house. No one was hurt, but there was significant damage to the house," Judge Allen answered.

"Jesus. Everyone is okay?"

This was worse than I had expected. She hadn't been pulled over; she crashed into someone's house. She could have killed herself, or someone else in the house. She got extremely lucky tonight.

"Everyone is fine. No one was hurt in the home, and she only got a few bruises. She was taken to the hospital to get checked out and got a clean bill of health. Her criminal lawyer and family lawyer reached out to me this morning to speak about the cases. Her criminal lawyer is working with the DA to get Miss. Hemming into a plea deal for rehab and community service. I advised her lawyer that I would be requiring her to attend parenting courses and prove that she has six months of sobriety under her belt before I would entertain a custody hearing from her."

"Where does this leave our case?" Alvin asked.

"I will be awarding your client sole custody for the child in question and closing the hearing. If there comes a time when Miss. Hemming is able to provide proof of her sobriety, then she can petition the court for visitation rights or custody of your son. That is something that can be determined at a later date."

Massive relief flooded my body. It was over. Everything with Christian was over, at least for now. Maybe I would have to go through this again when

Ellis is sober, but by that point, there might be a chance that her and I can work something out outside of the court so we didn't have to go through all of this again. I was hoping this would be a massive eye-opening experience for Ellis, and she would take rehab seriously and focus on getting better. If she was getting healthy and sober, that meant Christian could see her, and I wanted that for him desperately.

"When will it be official?" Alvin asked.

"By tomorrow morning it will be filed with the courts. I will get the paperwork completed today and start the processing part. I do not know what is going to happen with her legal case; that will be up to the DA and judge assigned to her case. For now, this battle is at least over."

"Thank you so much. I truly appreciate everything you have done," I said with a kind smile. I knew he was just doing his job, but I still appreciated it. Other judges may have delayed the proceedings to see if the other party got their life together first. I was very grateful to not be left in limbo for an unknown number of months.

"It's my job. I wish you and your son all the best, and hopefully, I never have to see you again," he said with a kind smile.

"I hope so as well," I said as we all rose.

I shook the judge's hand before Alvin did, and we both made our way out of his chambers. We didn't speak until we were outside. The second I walked outside of the court house I took a deep breath in, and instantly, relief was washing over me.

"I can't believe that just happened," I said.

"It's a good thing. I know the circumstances around it aren't the best, but this is a great thing for you and Christian. And this just might be the wake-up call that Ellis needs to get her life back on track."

“I hope so. Now we just need to worry about Jeremy.”

“That one will be more complicated, but I am confident we can make it happen.”

“Jasmine went to speak with Adam one-on-one; she might have been successful.”

Alvin scoffed a little, and I knew he seriously doubted it. I didn't blame him. If Adam was anything like his father, he was going to be out for blood. I highly doubt anything Jasmine said was going to be able to change Adam's mind, but maybe we will pull out another miracle.

“It can't make anything worse,” I said with a small shrug. At this point, all of our nukes had been released. All we could do was try and prevent any of their nukes to hit us.

“Let me know. For now, I will await the official paperwork for the custody order and keep it on file. Hopefully, this will be the last time you have to go through custody for Christian.”

“I hope so,” I agreed. I held my hand out as I spoke, “Thanks for everything.”

He took it with an easy smile, “It's no problem. I'll talk to you soon.”

I gave a nod, and we both headed off in our own direction. I needed to go and pick up the boys and check in with Jasmine. Hopefully, she would be back soon, and we could discuss our days.



It was a couple of hours after I had returned home with the boys when the front door opened, and Jasmine walked through it. She looked drained, and I was taking that as a bad sign.

“Hey,” I said as I went over and gave her a quick kiss.

“Hey, where’s the boys?” she asked as she took her coat off.

“They are playing in Christian’s room. Come sit down; tell me what happened.”

I guided her over to the couch, and we both sat down. I placed my hand on her knee and allowed her to collect herself before she spoke.

“Well, that didn’t go how I expected it to. He was very hurt. He asked if I was telling the truth. I guess he figured it was some type of game that we were playing. I told him the truth, and it was hard for him to take. He did agree though to relinquish his parental rights.”

“He did?” I was shocked, completely blown away. I would have figured that was the last thing he would have done.

“We had a heart-to-heart moment, and he expressed that he did love Jeremy. But knowing the truth, he didn’t know if he could continue to love him the same. Or look at him without feeling angry and resentment towards him. He has agreed to walk away for Jeremy’s best interests.”

“And you believe he’ll follow through?”

“I do. He was sincere. He’s hurt, but he’s not going to cause pain to Jeremy to get back at me or you. He said he would do it today so he could be on his way back home come morning.”

“Wow. I guess today is full of miracles.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I just got back a couple of hours ago from the courthouse. Judge Allen called me and Alvin in. Last night, Ellis was arrested for a DUI. She was three times over the legal limit and drove into someone’s house.”

“What?” Her jaw almost hit the floor at the news.

“No one was hurt, but she was arrested. Her lawyer is trying to work out a deal with the DA. Judge Allen awarded me full custody of Christian.”

“Are you telling me that we won both cases?” she was completely shocked by this and so was I. It was like a dream.

“We won both. Ellis will have to go through rehab and prove to the courts that she is six months sober, but at that point, my hope is that when we reach that point, her and I can be in a better place and discuss her seeing Christian without the hassle of a courtroom. For now though, no more courts.”

“This is unbelievable. We don’t have to worry about court any longer. Our boys are ours,” she said with a massive smile.

“They’re ours.”

She let out the happiest squeal I had ever heard as she tossed her arms around my neck. I easily wrapped my arms around her as we celebrated this massive stress that had been taken off of our shoulders. We could now finally start to be a family. A real family. It was everything I had wanted, and I could not wait to put all of this behind us and finally get to live our lives together.

Epilogue

Jasmine

Six Months Later...

“Where are we going?” I asked as we walked over a few rocky cliffs.

Liam had asked Jillian to watch the boys over at the house while he whisked me away to somewhere. He wouldn't tell me where he was taking me, but I had trusted him. The past six months had been remarkable. Having both of the boys together and we had explained to them that they were brothers. It was an interesting conversation with a lot of questions, but I thought we handled it well.

Adam had indeed signed away his parental rights, and I removed his name from Jeremy's birth certificate and we added Liam's. Both of the boys were enrolled in the same school for September, and they were both excited and concerned about starting school. It was a huge help that they would be together, and I knew they were going to love it.

Ellis had gotten her legal issues under control. She took a plea deal and was set to do three months in rehab, which she completed and even requested to stay in. She was working her way towards her six-month stint. I was proud of

her, same as Liam. He had actually brought Christian to see her in rehab, and everything went really well. She was apologetic and had shown a great deal of remorse for her actions. It gave us both hope that she was turning her life around, and when she was ready, she could be in Christian's life.

"To one of my favorite places. You are going to love it," he said with a warm smile as he expertly guided me through the right path.

"I'm sure I will." I didn't doubt for a single second that wherever he was going to take me was going to be beautiful. The stars were already amazing. I couldn't get over how gorgeous they were. Even after the past six months.

"How was your mom?" he asked.

"She's doing well. She's all set to come down next month, and she is really looking forward to it."

My mom was the biggest improvement over the past six months. A massive improvement that I wasn't honestly certain would happen. After the whole circus in court, she had left with my father, and it took a good five weeks before she had reached out to me. I had done my best to not be hurt by it. I knew how my father was and how she was. I wasn't expecting her to inform me that she had been considering divorcing my father. I mean it was a nuclear size shock to me.

As it turned out, he had been cheating on her for the bulk of their marriage, but she looked the other way. Everything with Jeremy coming out and how he handled it truly showed her what type of man he was at his core. She could no longer put up with his shit, and I was proud of her. They had a prenup, but my mom was pretty much covered from her trust fund. She had finalized her divorce, and she even purchased a house in Newport so she could be closer to me and Jeremy.

It felt like we were finally going to be getting a chance to be a mother and

daughter. It was something I was really looking forward to, and it was going to be amazing for Jeremy to get a closer relationship with his grandmother. Everything was falling into place, and I couldn't have been happier.

"Oh my god, Liam. This is gorgeous," I said as we finally reached the top of the cliff.

All I could see was a blanket of stars in the sky and the black ocean. The only light was that from the lighthouse across the way a bit. He took the blanket from underneath his arm and tossed it down for us to sit on it.

"I know; it's why I love it up here so much. To be able to see all of the stars without any noise from the village. It's like a little slice of Heaven," he said as we both sat down.

We didn't really bring anything outside of the blanket, but that was perfectly fine with me. The view was worth the walk up here, and I was getting to spend some much-needed alone time with the man I was madly in love with.

"It's perfect," I said with a loving smile.

"It's almost perfect," he said as he typed something into his phone before he placed it back down. I had no idea what he had planned, but I couldn't imagine this would get any better.

I was in for one hell of a shock as the light from the lighthouse suddenly changed and across the dark sky five words glowed in the sky from the lighthouse.

Jasmine Will You Marry Me?

"What?" I softly said as I turned to look at Liam only to see him sitting next to me with a black velvet ring box open and a beautiful diamond ring sitting inside of it.

"You are the most remarkable woman I have ever met. You came into my

life, twice, both times when I never expected it. I swore I would never marry again. That I would never allow myself to fall in love, but here you are. You slipped past all of my walls, and I didn't even see you coming. You are the best mother to my sons. You are the best girlfriend anyone could ever ask for. You are truly down to earth and caring. You make me a better man and father. I can't imagine spending the rest of my life without you. Will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?"

Oh my god, this was actually happening. He was really proposing to me. I never thought he would. That we would get married. I didn't care either way, but I knew his first marriage was horrible, not to mention my stunt down the aisle. I had been perfectly happy to spend the rest of my life with him never officially getting married. It didn't matter to me as long as we were together, that our family was together. That didn't mean I wouldn't marry him. Fuck, of course I would marry him.

"Yes, a thousand times yes," I said with the biggest smile of my life.

He took the ring and slipped it on my finger, but that was all I allowed him to do before I was pulling him into my arms and pressing my lips against his. I had meant for the kiss to be passionate but not lead to anything. Only we couldn't seem to keep it simple as the kiss quickly turned heated. My hands roamed over to the hem of his shirt, and he followed my lead. We had no choice but to break apart long enough to remove the other of their shirt.

He placed his hand on the back of my neck, and he lowered me down to the blanket. He began to trail kisses down my neck. I couldn't contain the moan as he hit one of my sensitive spots. He was still wearing too much clothing. I made quick work of getting his pants and boxers off from him. He moved back from my neck and worked on removing my bra before his hands were moving down my body.

He easily worked my pants and thong off, leaving us both completely naked. He wasted no time in kissing his way back up my leg and licking at my pussy. My moan filled the night air as he moved his hands over to my thighs, spreading my legs further apart. He moaned, and it sent vibrations all the way up my spine.

“I am never going to get tired of your taste,” he moaned.

“That’s good, because you are never getting rid of me now.”

“I got no interest in letting you go anywhere, especially right now,” he said as he went and gave my pussy a long lick up to my clit.

I wiggled my hips slightly to get more friction from his tongue. He licked all the way up to my clit again before he sucked on it, sending a shock wave of pleasure throughout my body. He slipped a finger inside of me, and it didn’t take long before I was a moaning mess. Stars danced across my eyes when he hit my sweet spot. We were completely free out here, so I didn’t try and hold back any of my moans.

Liam’s tongue and fingers moved faster. He could feel that I was close, and he was determined to get a full taste of me. It was only a moment later when he hit my sweet spot once again head on.

“Liam!” I screamed out as I felt a deep heat work its way up my body.

Pulse after pulse tore through me, and he moaned as he licked every drop that I had for him. Even after my body had long finished pulsing, he continued to lick at my sensitive clit, but I needed to feel him inside of me and I needed it right now.

“I need to feel you inside of me,” I pleaded.

He moved back and kissed his way up my stomach before he moved over to my left breast, taking my nipple into his mouth. He only kept it in his mouth for a few moments before he kissed his way across my chest to give my right

nipple the same treatment. He was keeping me on fire, and it seemed like the flames were not going to be extinguished anytime soon. And that was more than fine with me.

His journey of kisses took him back up my neck before finally settling on my mouth. My hands were instantly going through his hair, completely messing it up. His hands were otherwise engaged with the condom that he pulled from his wallet.

I knew he had managed to get it on when his hands were on my inner thighs. I easily spread my legs wider to make room for him and his hips. The second I felt his tip at my entrance, I moaned as he started to breach my heat and slowly, inch by glorious inch, he pushed his way inside of me. Once he was fully bottomed out inside of me, we were both in need of a minute and breathing heavily.

He placed his forehead against mine, and I could see him fighting the urge to move. I understood it. He was in a tight, wet, and hot place, and all he wanted was to keep chasing that amazing sensation.

“Fuck, you always feel so good,” he said in a breathy voice.

“So do you. You can move, just go slow.”

Liam was instantly slowly pulling out of me all the way to his tip before he was pushing back in. I wrapped my legs around his hips as he started to build up a pace. No words were spoken between us. The only sounds around us were our heavy breathing, our moans, and the sound of skin slapping against skin. My legs were already trembling from the pleasure and my need once again rapidly building. My whole body was tingling from the sheer amount of panting I was doing.

We were both nearing our climax. I could feel him getting harder inside of me. His thrusts were becoming more erratic, and I was right there with him.

After another dead on hit to my sweet spot, I wasn't tumbling off the cliff; I was swan diving and landing in a sea of ecstasy. The tightening of my walls was enough to push Liam over the edge who came with a deep growl as he spoke.

“Jasmine.”

I couldn't suppress the moan of feeling him pulsing inside of me. It sent a shockwave of pleasure throughout my body and caused me to pulse right along with him. Liam bent forward and placed his forehead against my own once again. We both focused on our breathing and enjoyed the ride on the pleasure wave for a little bit longer. This had been one of the best nights of my life.

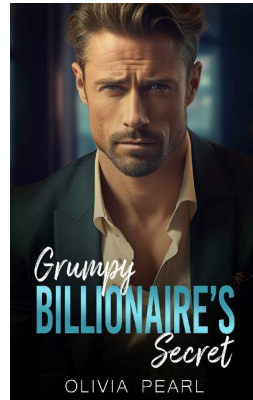
“I love you,” I softly said as I managed to get my breathing back under control.

He gave me a smile filled with so much love as he said, “I love you too.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. I had zero clue what the future was going to hold for us. We had two sons going into kindergarten. I would be working for his soon to be open charity foundation. We were going to get married and have a life together. And I knew that life was going to be filled with laughter, love, and joy. I couldn't wait for it to start.

The End.

**Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE Grumpy
Billionaire's Secret : An Enemies to Lovers Secret
Baby Boss Romance**



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**A game of truth or dare. No real names. No numbers
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One night of forbidden passion changed my life forever.

He doesn't remember, but I can't forget.

I allowed a complete stranger to take my V-card.

He left me with two things that night:

His masquerade mask. And his baby in my belly.

Never thought I'd see him again.

Until I started a new job and met the CEO.

Hot. Rich. Grumpy. Bossy. Arrogant.

It was Him.

He had no idea who I was.

He recognizes his own blue eyes the first time he sees

my son.

He knows something isn't right.

My son needs a bone marrow transplant.

I'm not a match.

If I tell him my long-kept secret, I could lose my job.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Olivia Pearl writes contemporary romance that begs to read from beginning to end. Billionaire bad boys filled with steam, angst, and swoon that lead to happy endings are her specialty.

Olivia lives in California. When she's not writing or reading, she enjoys spending time outdoors. Whether it's hiking, skydiving, going to the beach or giving back to her community.

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