



NAUGHTY FESTIVITIES

A CHRISTMAS NOVEL



THE DUFORT DYNASTY

JULIETTE N. BANKS

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FESTIVITIES**
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THE DUFORT DYNASTY
BOOK SEVEN
JULIETTE N. BANKS

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NAUGHTY
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CHAPTER ONE

Jack looked up from his papers and took in the woman standing in the doorway of his office on Capitol Hill.

“Do you need me for anything else this evening, senator?” Cindy asked provocatively.

Or maybe it was his imagination.

The two of them had been working closely for years. She was a great assistant, and while he didn't know much about her personally, since he liked to keep professional boundaries, Jack noticed Cindy had been dressing differently for the past few weeks. He was sure he wasn't imagining it. An extra button on her blouse was always undone now, and her skirts had been shorter.

Not only that, but when they were sitting on the sofa in his office, she sat a little closer.

Too close.

And leaning over his desk with that extra button open left little to the imagination.

He'd ignored it as nothing more than a young woman in her mid-twenties growing into her sexuality. It wasn't blatantly obvious; it was subtle, and nothing he considered an HR concern.

But tonight, as he took in her short black business skirt and red blouse, Jack narrowed his eyes.

He had to be careful. Cindy was a beautiful girl, and it had been nearly two years since he'd had sex. Two fucking years.

His decision, of course.

Jack was more of a one-woman man. Even if the media called him one of Washington's most eligible bachelors and constantly tried to figure out who he was dating.

Read: banging.

Newsflash: no one.

Since his divorce two years ago and his father dying last year, he had only slept with one woman. It had gone nowhere and felt wrong.

Being a senator meant his life was highly visible, and no one had tempted him in any way.

Right now, though, he couldn't ignore that his cock was reacting to Cindy. More from the lack of action than her personally. He knew it was inappropriate and had no intention of acting on it.

What he wanted to do was get this year over with and visit his mom in Philadelphia for the holidays. He was going to miss Thanksgiving next month but would make sure he was there for Christmas.

Jack was tired after working on a piece of legislation that was taking months and getting nowhere. He dropped the pen and stretched out his Tom Ford clad legs, then his arms reached over his head.

"No, I'm good. I've got a few hours ahead of me, so you head off," Jack answered her.

"Would you like me to order you dinner?" Cindy asked, stepping further into the office.

Did he?

God, he could barely think he was so tired.

"No." He ran a hand over his face. "Yes. Maybe. Shit, I don't know."

"I can stay and run through it again with you if you want. Chinese?" Cindy leaned against the arm of the sofa he was sitting on and grinned playfully at their private joke.

No matter how many times they tried to order another type of food, they always ended up with Chinese.

"I should go home. I've stayed here the past two nights." Jack stood, walked over to the cabinet, and poured himself two fingers of whisky. Taking a sip, he turned to Cindy. "Don't you have a boyfriend to get home to?"

He recalled she had at one time, but because he didn't venture into his employee's private life, he only picked things up when others talked around him.

"Ex. He cheated on me," Cindy said, shrugging.

"Asshole," Jack said, taking another sip, and he couldn't help lowering his eyes to her legs as she hopped up on the arm of the sofa and crossed them.

She was looking for attention, he realized that, but Cindy wasn't getting it from him. Fucking hell, though, he was a starved man, and she was a pretty girl.

"Thanks," Cindy replied, reaching in front of her to pick up the permanent menu on the table. Whether on purpose or not, and he was getting the feeling it was, she flashed him her breasts.

Say something.

Instead, he took in her petite frame, long dark hair, toned calves, and full lips.

Jack took another big sip.

Nope. He had to send her home.

She slid down the leather and sat on the sofa. "So, Chinese?"

Fuck.

He would eat and then send her home.

"Do it," he said, and lifted his glass with a raised brow.

"Yes, please," Cindy replied, and he poured her a Macallan to match his own. Then, he joined her on the sofa and rolled his sleeves up, exposing the tattoo on the inside of his forearm.

"Why have I never seen this before?" she asked, running her finger over it.

Shit.

"Because I'm your boss," he said, meeting her direct stare.

"Right." Cindy nodded and went back to ordering while he ignored the swelling of his cock.

Must get laid.

For the next hour, they went through the documentation of the bill he was working on as they sat eating their takeout.

Finally, Cindy flopped back and rested her head on the sofa. Jack turned and smiled at her. She had been an immense help, as she was every day, but he needed to send her home. She looked exhausted.

And sexy, which was a problem.

“Do you really sleep here?” she asked, turning her head to look at him.

Jack wanted to groan.

With a sigh, he dropped his pen and leaned back, mirroring her. “Yes. I have a big comfortable bed at home, and I’ve been sleeping on this damn thing.”

“Hmmm,” she moaned, and the sensual sound slid right along his cock.

He was in dangerous waters here.

“You should go home. You’re tired,” Jack said and went to sit up, but a hand landed on his chest, and he froze.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his eyes flying to hers as she climbed on top of him.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want this, senator,” she purred, and, fuck, his powerful title on her lips made him hard as hell as she then ran her hand over his cock.

Fucking hell.

He gripped her hips and readied to lift her off, but he didn’t. He closed his eyes and pushed back the groan rising in his throat at the feel of a woman stroking his hard member.

Jesus, it felt so good.

“No,” he said, opening his eyes and moving to sit up. Except she had opened her shirt, and two perky pink nipples were presented to him.

His mouth watered.

“Touch me, please,” she begged, cupping one as if to offer it to him.

Then, she began to roll her nipple between her fingers.

Shit. I can't do this.

“Cindy,”

“Let me suck you off,” she purred, rubbing him harder.

My fucking God.

Before he could answer, she was on her hands and knees on the sofa, undoing his pants and pulling his cock out.

“Cindy—”

“This is just between us. I've wanted you in my mouth for months.” She licked her lips.

Fuck me.

As she lowered her head, his hand gripped her hair and guided her as she wrapped her wet lips around him.

“Oh, Christ.”

It. Had. Been. Years.

Cindy worked him up and down with her mouth, and Jack fought to stop her, but if he was honest, he didn't want to. This felt too fucking good.

He'd deal with the repercussions tomorrow.

He had never put a step wrong in his damn life. Except right now... God, this felt good.

Then, as she took him down her throat and he was just about to spill, she ripped her mouth off of him.

Don't stop!

“What are you doing?”

Cindy climbed back over him, tugging up her skirt, and he felt the head of his cock hit her flesh.

Jesus, no fucking panties.

She'd been wearing no panties the entire time they were working together.

Wrongly or not, his cock hardened even more.

But he had limits.

"I don't have a rubber," Jack said, gripping her hips to halt her. His balls aching to come, his cock throbbing.

"I'm clean and on birth control," she said as she rubbed her clit. "Fuck me, senator."

Mother fucker, he had to come.

Jack groaned as she suddenly pressed down over him, taking his cock inside her snug, hot, and wet pussy.

This is wrong.

He had to stop this.

But it felt so goddamn good.

Cindy rode his dick, panting, moaning, and holding onto his shoulders as Jack let himself go for this one moment.

Just one.

All his life, he'd done everything by the book. Top student. Married his college sweetheart. Become the first lawyer in his family and then the youngest senator in his state at age thirty-one. And his mom would say, a great son.

Just once.

Then he'd kick his own ass and get his life back on track.

Cindy fell against his chest as they both came down from their joint climax. Jack lifted her chin. "That never happened. And we're never doing it again. Understand?"

"Yes, senator." Cindy smiled and lay back down on his chest.

A cold foreboding ran through him.

Please don't let me fucking regret this.



THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN Cindy arrived with his coffee and bagel, Jack pointed at the chair in front of his desk and stood, closing his office door.

He'd stayed the night and changed into a black Armani suit and shirt, ready for the day ahead.

"About last night. As I said, it never happened and won't happen again," Jack said firmly.

"Of course," Cindy said, doing the zipped lips action across her mouth. "Anything else?"

"No."

"Okay." Then she simply got up and walked out of the office like it was no big deal. Jack stared at the doorway she'd walked through, wondering if it could be that easy.

From that day onwards, leading up to the holidays, he nervously waited for a call from human resources, but it never came.

Cindy had gone back to her usual professional behavior and never once seduced him again. Jack shrugged it off as one of those things both of them had needed to get off their chests.

Something no one needed to know about.

He certainly wasn't going to do it again.

After Christmas, he planned to start dating. First, he wanted to get home and see his family.

By the time he'd booked his flights home for the week before Christmas, he'd all but forgotten the moment with Cindy back in October had ever occurred.



CHAPTER TWO

Amelia climbed out of the limousine and tugged her red Mui Mui coat around her. It was probably a little bright for the occasion, but she didn't care. She was feeling the festive spirit, given it was only a week before Christmas.

Anyway, she had a proper little black dress underneath—Dior, of course—and a pair of Prada pumps. She wasn't going to stand in a pair of anything uncomfortable for hours this evening. Even for her best friend and fellow artist, Stella Freeman.

Tonight was a special showing for Stella at the iconic art studio, Studio XOXO, and Amelia couldn't wait to see her beautiful paintings hanging on the walls.

She nodded politely to her driver as he closed her door and headed towards the entrance.

"Ms. Dufort," the doorman said, opening it for her with a respectful drop of his head.

He recognized her.

Everyone in the art world did. She was a very well-known sculptor—or someone who makes funny-looking statues, as her brother Aidan called it.

Rude.

Just because he didn't appreciate abstract art.

She was chalk and cheese with her big brothers. They both had business brains where she spent most of her life daydreaming and imagining beautiful things in her mind.

Now, she brought them to life and got paid an insane amount of money for them.

Thank God.

She couldn't imagine what her father or brothers would have dragged her into if she'd been a struggling artist. A term Aidan used *affectionately* to describe her.

Just because he was a bazillionaire inventor. Her multi-seven-figure income each year meant she would never starve, nor would her other brother, Logan, who was just as annoying and wealthy as Aidan.

Amelia could handle them. It was the comments from her father that had hit deeper over the years. Being told no man would like someone covered in paint who did all that *weird* stuff wasn't nice.

Her mom just smiled and shook her head, telling Amelia to ignore her father. "Find yourself a man who also dabbles in the arts, darling. He will understand you."

That had made sense and paved the path for her rollercoaster of a love life. Artists were renowned for being untidy and moody. Worse, they seemed to lack a sense of commitment.

At least the men she chose.

Stella had told her to broaden her search, but there was no way she was dating anyone in a suit that even resembled her brother or father in their Tom Ford or Armani's.

Because they'd think she was weird.

If she couldn't trust the creative men in the world to commit to her, it was highly unlikely a suit would. Her heart had been burned, and she was beginning to think she was destined to be alone.

Not even her father believed she could snag herself a great guy.

Guess she was proving him right, one guy at a time.

Amelia stepped into the studio and smiled. The lighting was perfect. The music soft, yet pleasant. Stella would be happy, if not terribly nervous. Something Amelia understood well. It never got easier showing others your creative work, no matter how many times you did it, or how much money you made on your last piece.

Plus, there was always someone who loved it. And someone who didn't. The latter usually much louder than the

first.

Someone at the door took her coat as she slid her phone out of the pocket, slipped it into her tiny black Chanel purse, and popped it over her shoulder.

She turned and smiled when she saw Stella across the room. They locked eyes and gave each other a quick, friendly wave, but Amelia left her to chat with the small group of potential buyers.

She'd promised Stella she wouldn't buy anything tonight. Amelia understood her reasoning. She didn't want charity; she wanted genuine buyers who loved her work.

Except there was no way Chang from Studio XOXO would hang her art if he didn't think it was commercially viable. Amelia knew that.

He was tough. Hence, his vast and very notable success. Tonight, he'd pulled some of the harshest critics and the city's wealthiest clients to attend Stella's event.

Amelia loved her friend's work, even if she was biased. Kind of. She was an artist, so she knew great art when she saw it.

Stella was good.

"Ma'am?" A server slowed and offered her a glass of champagne.

"Thank you," Amelia said, taking a flute. One sip, and she recognized it as her favorite, Cristal.

"We're here, we're here!" Emma, her soon-to-be sister-in-law, cried behind her as the door flew open.

Amelia smiled and turned, almost laughing at the painful look on Aidan's face as he followed Logan into the studio.

"One hour, and you can go home," Amelia said to him as he removed his coat and dropped a kiss on her forehead. It was their thing, and he'd done it for as long as she could remember.

Aidan fake groaned.

“Ame’s,” Logan said, kissing her cheek next.

“Come on, let’s do this,” Aidan said, smirking at her. “The clock starts now.”

“You didn’t have to come,” Emma chastised him.

“Are you kidding me? This one would never let me hear the end of it. Anyway, I’m here to ensure Logan doesn’t *invest* in a poor piece of art.”

“First, I’m the one who collects art, not you, so what makes you think you’re qualified to advise? Secondly, no.”

Aidan shrugged. “I’ll tell you if it sucks.”

Amelia crossed her arms. “None of them suck. They are Stella’s best work.”

Logan grinned at their brother.

“Fucker. I walked straight into that,” Aidan moaned as Logan nodded, then burst out laughing.

“Jesus, they’re like children when they’re together,” Emma said, shaking her head and looping her arm through Amelia’s.

“Welcome to my life. To your new life.” Amelia laughed.

“Save me,” Emma muttered as the two of them wandered further into the room, leaving the men behind.

Around them, dozens of prints hung on the walls. Each one has a plaque beside it naming and describing the piece. All of them POA.

Price on application.

Talking dollar amounts were very uncouth at an art collection, and so only those with deep pockets tended to attend.

Amelia recognized most of the pieces and was surprised to see some new pieces in the mix. She loved them.

“These are absolutely gorgeous.” Emma, who was also an author, gasped.

“Told you.” Amelia smiled, proud of her friend.

“Mele!” Chang said, sidling up to her, using the nickname she hated. But it was Chang, so she smiled. As an art dealer, he was very influential and often sent clients her way, so she sucked it up.

“Hi,” she said, accepting his air kisses on both cheeks as Emma released her arm. “Everything looks amazing, Chang.”

“So amazing. All the top buyers are here. Including you, I hope.” He smirked.

“Not tonight. I promised Stella I wouldn’t open my wallet,” Amelia stated.

Chang stared at her, then leaned in and winked at Emma as he said. “Okay, but which piece do you want me to put aside?”

“The Apple.” Amelia nodded across the room at the bright green painting she had loved for a while.

“Done.” He smiled, flipping his long, dark bangs off his face. “And...”

“Full price,” she said. “Put the sale under a pseudonym, though.”

“Of course, darling.” Chang nodded. “You’ll have to tell her unless you plan to keep it in a cupboard.”

Amelia laughed. “I’ll tell her. It’s a little big to hide and I love it too much to put it away.”

“What do you love?” she heard Stella behind her.

“You, darling. Congratulations. Everything looks incredible.” Amelia turned and hugged her best friend.

They’d been friends since they were seventeen, meeting in art school. They’d almost grown up together, and while their home lives were very different—Stella came from a middle-class family—they had clicked.

She’d had a crush on Logan, as most of her friends did, but now she was married to a wonderful man called Luke.

He was a banker, and while Stella had argued that men in suits could accept a creative woman in their world, Amelia

kept her thoughts to herself. Stella's art was way more mainstream than her abstract pieces.

It was different.

At least in her head.

Also, Stella painted during the day and usually spent a few weeks on her pieces.

Amelia took months.

Different.

"It really does, but I still want to puke," Stella replied, her free hand going to her belly. The other gripping her champagne.

"Do not puke," Chang said seriously, and all three girls laughed. "Ladies, I need to circulate, and so do you," he added pointedly to Stella.

"I want two minutes with my friends." She waved him away. He faux huffed off, and they all smiled at each other.

"Emma, I'm so glad you could make it," Stella said.

"It's amazing. I'm going to look around and keep my eye on the Dufort men so they don't get into trouble."

"Good idea," Amelia said, glancing across the room to where Aidan was nudging Logan's shoulder. Bad move on her behalf, insisting they attend. Next time, she'd just invite Emma.

"Luke is running late but will be here soon, so I'm glad you are here. Can you believe this?" Stella said, shaking her head and glancing around.

"I told you." Amelia rubbed her arm. "For years. Though it was up to you to believe in yourself and pitch your work."

"I know. God. I know," Stella said, taking a big sip of her bubbles. "All the rejections were worth it."

Amelia smiled.

Despite her influential family, Amelia hadn't used a single one of them to achieve her success. Honestly, apart from

Daniel Dufort, the CEO of Dufort Hotels, who was well-known across the nation, no one in the art world knew who the rest of her powerful and wealthy relatives were.

Thankfully.

Like most artists, she knew she had to do it on her own. Of course, it helped that she had her trust fund to help pay the bills while she found her way. She was grateful for that, and it was probably why she never told her dad to shut his big mouth when he continued telling her she was weird.

Instead, she set her mind on promoting herself and selling her work. Now, some of them were situated in spots around Philly and other states around the country.

She was proud of herself.

Now, her father had started on at her to get married, but she knew it wasn't just her. He had been harassing Aidan, too. Perhaps it was because Logan was about to say *I do*.

For the second time.

Neither she nor Aidan were close to that milestone in life. They weren't dating anyone, and, as far as she knew, Aidan wasn't keen on settling down.

She wanted to. Very much.

But she kept choosing the wrong men and ending up with her hopes crushed.

"You need to consider a real career, Amelia. No man worthy of you will be happy with all this art business. Try law. You would enjoy that. God knows you like arguing with me," Andrew Dufort had said.

The fact she never had to work again because of the money she had personally accumulated seemed to have been overlooked, but Amelia wasn't focused on that. It was the rejection she constantly felt when things fell apart in her relationships.

In some ways, he was right. Artists lived different lives than those sitting in rush hour traffic to work in an office nine to five. She kept strange hours, sometimes staying awake until

three a.m., and not wanting to talk to people for days as she held a vision in her head.

How would that work with someone *normal*?

Plus, whoever it was needed to be strong enough to deal with her overprotective big brothers. And they *were* big. Logan and Aidan were older than her and towered over her five-foot-five slim frame by a good seven inches.

Both of them had attracted a lot of female attention all of their lives. She'd had to put up with that, but when the tables turned, and men showed an interest in her, they were quickly scared away.

Amelia fell in love quickly, then crashed when it ended. She inevitably turned to her brothers, who she was very close to, and they picked up her broken pieces.

And threatened to kill the guy.

She was at a point now where she was giving up.

Perhaps she'd get a cat.

What Amelia truly wanted was someone she could sit up with all night talking, discuss the philosophies of life, walk along the Parkway while eating Philly steaks, and kiss them under the moonlight.

She wanted a spark so explosive and a soul-deep love so beautiful it threatened to rip her heart out.

Which was why she ended up so disappointed and heartbroken. It was unrealistic.

Unlike other women, she wasn't impressed by flash things. She'd dined at all the fancy restaurants, flown in private jets, and stayed at the best hotels in the world. What she wanted was to be loved, seen, and accepted for all she was.

With someone who was committed and trustworthy.

But she hadn't found him among the architects, artists, designers, authors, and other creatives she'd dated.

Maybe she *was* looking in the wrong place.

Her last relationship with interior decorator Mathias had lasted three months. They'd attended many social events and knew some of the same people. It had felt like an excellent fit.

Her father even seemed to like him.

Then, when Amelia had sold her last piece and traveled to Chicago to oversee the installation, he'd shared photographs of him at his birthday party in amicable situations with a local artist.

A woman.

When she returned to Philly, she mentioned it, and his response had been surprising.

"Maybe if you had been there, I wouldn't have wanted another woman," Mathias had said.

"I'm sorry, what?" Amelia had cried. "Did you fuck her?"

"Look, Amelia. You work long hours, and I barely see you. Then you take off the weekend of my birthday—"

"Did. You. Fuck. Her?"

"She sucked my cock. I got her off with my mouth," he confessed.

So basically, yes.

"I didn't want to penetrate her because of us."

"Wow. You are quite the hero," she had snapped, shaking her head.

"Don't be a bitch," Mathias had replied as if it was all her fault they were arguing. "How about prioritizing our relationship?"

She had cracked.

"Listen, Mathias, when you sell a piece of art for \$750,000.00, and they ask you to fly to Chicago overnight, you do it."

It wasn't a milestone birthday; they'd known each other for three months.

Three.

“Are you kidding me? You got 700k for that wooden thing you were making?” he had asked as his brows shot up his forehead.

Wooden thing.

Also known as her art.

If he couldn't keep it in his pants for one weekend, then there was no future.

Just like every other man before her. They might not have cheated. Some felt inferior and jealous of her success; others were competitive with her, which was just awkward, and then there were the insecure men needing more of her time than she had to give.

In the end, it was just a turn-off.

And hurt.

Amelia wasn't sure she'd meet anyone strong enough and confident enough to be the man in her life.

For now, she was happy for her friend.

“Rejections are just part of the success journey, Stella. Now look at you. Your own showing. I'm so proud of you,” Amelia said, and the two women clinked their glasses and grinned like little girls.

“Thanks, honey.” Stella's eyes were glossy as they shared this brief moment together.

Amelia lifted the flute to her lips and stilled as a tall, handsome blond man entered the studio. He removed his thick coat and handed it to the coat check, politely but barely acknowledging them, and something inside her fluttered.

Goodness, who is he?

From where she stood, she took in his big blue eyes as they scanned the room, then he ran a hand over his thick, wavy hair and slowed when he saw her looking.

Amelia slowly swallowed, her flutters turning to fire.

With a confidence that could rival any of the Dufort men in her family, his eyes ran down the length of her body, then back up again, heating her to the very core.

Jesus H. Christ, who is this gorgeous man?

Tall and dressed in an expensive navy suit that draped his wide frame beautifully, Amelia found herself imagining being tucked under his muscular arms.

She might not be able to see them, but she knew they were there. Shoulders like that didn't come without the rest of the package. Not in her experience.

When her eyes met his again, she found a sparkle within them that screamed trouble and promised the kind of pleasure no woman could say no to.

Holly hell.

“Excuse me, Stella,” someone said, snapping Amelia out of her delicious daydream.

“Yes,” her friend replied, then shot her an apologetic look. “Sorry,” she mouthed.

“Go, I'll find you later,” Amelia said as Stella was hauled away.

A server appeared next, offering her a top-up—which she accepted—although by the time he'd moved away, and she went in search of her hot stranger, he was nowhere to be seen.

Damn.

She rubbed her arm as a shiver caressed her body. She'd never had such a visceral reaction to a man's interest like that before. And there had been many. Just like her brothers, Amelia had inherited good genes. Her body was toned, her skin kissed with a natural tan thanks to some Italian ancestors, and her hair was long, dark, thick, and glossy.

She had full lips and crystal blue eyes.

Did she always feel sexy? Hell no. Most of the time, her hair was twisted up in a messy bun, along with her standard uniform of no make-up, torn jeans, and an old university

sweater rolled up her sleeves, which was covered in plaster and paint.

In contrast, she had a designer wardrobe any woman would envy for events such as these.

The man had to be here somewhere, so Amelia wandered further around the studio and stepped slowly from painting to painting, hoping to spot him again.

Who was he?

There had been a vibe about him, a confidence that had pulled her in. The kind of man who would fuck her senseless and take control. A man who wouldn't envy her success or make promises he couldn't keep.

A man who might only want one night and, for the first time in her life, she was starting to think that might be nice.

No strings attached.

Just hot, sticky sex.

When she felt a presence behind her, she realized she'd been staring at the same piece for way too long.

"Stunning," a husky, masculine voice said.

Turning, Amelia came face-to-face with those mysterious blue eyes. On her.

Not the art.

Oh, boy.



CHAPTER THREE

Jack stared down at the woman and forced back his growl as crystal blue eyes met his.

Then he got a closeup at those plush, sexy lips and he hoped she didn't look down.

Correction, he hoped she did.

His cock was swelling, and Jack briefly wondered what the chances were of having his personal security man, Abe, clear the studio so he could slam her into the wall, tug up her dress and fuck her blind.

As a senator, she posed a national threat to his cock.

Surely, that was a good enough reason.

His cock had been hard since he'd walked in and laid eyes on the dark-haired siren. Because she *was* a siren and, clearly, he'd been bewitched.

Jesus, he'd only popped in for something to do after flying into Philadelphia a few hours ago from Washington, DC. He should be having dinner and then doing some work before heading to bed, but he wasn't hungry.

As the state senator, Jack had been invited by Chang, so he'd decided to drop in for an hour. Abe, his personal security, stood several feet away, doing his thing. He'd already greeted a few people and shaken hands, but now he had this beauty to himself.

For a moment, at least.

The last thing he wanted was any media attention, so this would be a harmless flirt before heading home.

Jack kept an apartment in Philly, even though he only spent a few weeks a year here since it was a requirement of being a U.S. Senator. All you needed was a legitimate address, and then off to Capitol Hill you went.

He'd also purchased a home thirty minutes outside of Washington, DC, but still found himself spending two or three

nights a week sleeping in his office.

Alone.

The Cindy Event, as he was calling it, had been a one-off.

Tomorrow, Jack would visit his mom and make plans for the two weeks he planned to be in town. Right now, he was enjoying the arousing energy this beautiful woman was creating in his world.

It was rare for him to take such a powerful interest in someone. Yes, he appreciated beauty, but he could keep his eyes off her.

Or stay away.

As his eyes roamed over her petite frame, he studied her tilted chin and expensive clothing and had a feeling she was both confident and successful. She wouldn't be standing in Studio XOXO if she wasn't the latter.

Or married to money.

He'd soon work out which.

"Jack Rutherford," he said, reaching out his hand.

"Amelia Dufort."

An erotic charge shot up his arm as their flesh connected. Her mouth parted and if he wasn't mistaken, she'd felt the same arousal he had.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Dufort."

Her sexy red lips lifted on one side, smiling at his blatant attempt to find out if she was single.

When she didn't respond immediately, he found himself smiling back as she brushed her hair over one shoulder, exposing her bare neck.

His mouth literally watered with the desire to put his lips on her olive skin.

Jesus.

"Are you here shopping for your wife for Christmas?" Amelia asked, and he couldn't help the smirk.

“*If* I had a wife, it would be a very generous gift,” Jack replied.

Amelia slid her eyes back to his playfully, then to the painting in front of them. “I get the feeling you would be a generous...husband.”

Lover.

She meant lover.

I want to fuck this woman.

And God, if he got the chance, he would spend hours proving just how generous he could be.

“Yes,” he replied, letting that hang in the air for a long moment. “Generous *and* attentive.”

Christ, what was he doing flirting openly with a woman in public like this? Anyone could hear them, and if the media were around, they’d love to catch him.

“What about you?” Jack asked.

Amelia turned and grinned. “I’d be a terrible husband.”

“Beautiful and funny.” He shook his head. “Lethal.”

Amelia wandered over to another painting and he found himself following her. Not like a puppy, more like a wolf stalking his prey.

“Are you buying tonight?” he asked when he stood beside her, glancing down and deliberating how heavy she’d be to lift and wrap around his waist.

“Don’t tell the artist, but I’ve already made my purchase,” she whispered, and it was in such contrast to the sexy siren she was seconds ago he found himself wanting to know more.

Who was she?

If she could afford to purchase from Chang’s studio, she was a genuinely wealthy woman. Aside from the designer dress and shoes, she also wore a diamond bangle. But it wasn’t just that that gave him an idea of where Amelia sat on the social scale in their society. It was her surname.

Dufort.

If she was related to Daniel Dufort and his brothers, then she came from money. He didn't know the man well, although they were acquaintances. The name was also a household brand in the United States because of their global hotel chain.

"Because...?" he asked, letting it linger.

"She's my best friend, and I promised I wouldn't buy anything."

"And you broke your promise," Jack said.

"It's best friend code. You wouldn't understand," Amelia said, using her glass of champagne as she talked with her hands.

"I have friends." He laughed.

He did. He had two wonderful friends who lived in Washington. Steve and Kellan had both gone to Harvard with him and had married about the same time he and Becky had. Except they were both still married.

"It's different for women." Amelia shrugged.

"And you know this how?"

"I have brothers. Men say what they mean, and there's no need to decode it," Amelia said matter-of-factly.

She was right.

"With women, you must learn an unspoken language and read between the lines." She added.

"I'm not commenting on that, seeing as I'm smart," Jack said, sliding his hands into his pockets and then smiling at her.

Amelia's cheeks heated, and he had the sudden desire to kiss her.

A woman he had just met, and he wanted to clasp her cheeks and kiss her slowly, telling her how adorable she was. Not just because she was beautiful, but because he loved this conversation.

"So, *are* you here buying?" she asked.

“Maybe. However, if I am, I won’t be asking you for a recommendation.”

“Why not?” she asked, turning and holding her champagne flute up, highly offended.

“You’re biased.”

“I am... okay, fine, yes, I might be. But I’m also an artist. I can—”

“Do you paint?” Jack asked, his eyes widening with interest. God, he wanted to watch her paint.

In the nude.

After he’d fucked her brainless.

“No. Sometimes. Not really,” she answered, seemingly uncomfortable.

“A digital artist, then,” he probed, frowning.

“No.”

A server arrived with a glass of whisky, and he thanked him, lifting the dark liquid to his lips. “Is this the coded language? Because I’m not sure I have a vast repertoire of artist’s roles I can run through without whipping out my phone, which will completely kill my game.”

Amelia smiled and tried to cover it as she lifted her flute to her lips. Then she emptied it while holding his eyes with hers.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous.

“You’re trying to decide whether to tell me I have no game, while also deciding on answering my question.”

Amelia smiled.

She then walked to another painting.

And he didn’t follow this time. He wanted to observe her from a distance and decide how he was going to fuck her tonight.

Because he would.

She was absolutely worth the chase, and, in fact, this was the most fun he'd had in ages.

Jack hoped she played hard to get for much, much longer.



CHAPTER FOUR

First. *Fucking hell, he's hot.*
Second, *where the fuck are my brothers?*

Because if they had seen her talking with Jack, they were probably planning their attack right now. Amelia did not want them to mess this up.

She could feel Jack's eyes on her, and they were heating her up from the inside out and making her seriously wet.

Amelia had a feeling Jack could follow through on his promise of being a generous lover—because they both knew that's what they were talking about—and she very much wanted him to prove it.

With her.

Tonight.

Too bad he was a suit, but hadn't she just been saying she might need to try something, or rather someone, new?

Talk about being served *someone* on a silver platter.

Amelia knew an expensive, well-tailored, custom-made suit when she saw one. But it was the man who wore the suit. Not the suit that wore the man, as they say.

Jack held himself with complete confidence. His shoulders back, his chin level indicating he didn't believe himself greater or lesser than anyone. It was likely he was a man of power. In her experience, those who made no effort to force their influence did so because they already had it.

She'd been surrounded by powerful men and women all her life, so she knew what she was talking about.

Money didn't make someone powerful. Most people didn't realize that. Influential people made money.

Power came from inside.

When you truly believed in yourself, you made choices that created different experiences. And said no to those that no

longer aligned with your worth.

It had been a journey she'd gone through herself as an artist and saw many others still struggling. Perhaps it was why she refused to accept any of the men who didn't deserve her.

Jack was oozing confidence in such a self-assured way she felt like purring.

How refreshing compared to Mathias.

Still, he would work in some office and no doubt think she was a weird artist, so if he was open to a one-night casual thing, she was one hundred percent on board.

As Amelia walked through the studio, stopping at each spot, she found herself smiling at the dance they were playing. She liked that Jack was keeping a distance and shooting her heated glances when she snuck a look.

But if she wanted this to go any further, she had to get rid of Aidan and Logan.

They had no qualms in interrogating a man—or intimidating them—making them lose interest in her as fast as it had arrived.

Jack looked like he couldn't be intimidated easily, but he might not think she was worth the trouble when those two brats got started.

Amelia walked around a corner and saw Emma, Logan, and Aidan standing around a painting, debating.

Lord.

"I'm just saying you can't hang this next to your master's paintings," Aidan said, shaking his head.

"Why the hell not?" Logan asked.

"I don't think there are rules with these things," Emma said. "Plus, it's nice. I like this one."

"Then we're getting it," Logan said and spun around, finding her standing behind him. "Oh. Ame's. I'm getting this one."

“So, I heard.”

“Not you too,” Logan groaned.

“You don’t have to buy anything. It was just about showing up for Stella tonight,” Amelia said. “Also, you can leave now.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Aidan said, tossing back his drink and turning around, looking for the server.

“Not every piece of art I buy has to be a million-dollar investment. I like what I like. Plus, Emma likes it, so it’s a win-win,” Logan replied, and Amelia smiled.

“Thanks, big brother,” she said, giving him a hug. “Stella will love that you bought something.”

“Where’s Chang?” he asked.

“I’ll let him know. You head off,” Amelia said, waving her hand out all casual-like. “I know you have a lot of wedding stuff to organize.”

They were all heading to Hawaii in early January for Logan and Emma’s wedding, so the two of them were knee-deep in plans.

“I could do with an early night. I’ve got a book deadline next week,” Emma said.

“Must be exhausting writing smut all day long,” Aidan said, winking at Amelia.

“Dude, you are getting on my last patience tonight,” Logan snapped.

“So, nothing new.” Aidan grinned, then walked around Logan and placed his usual kiss on her head. “Want me to wait and see you home?”

“No,” she answered way too fast.

No.

Definitely not.

Go.

Leave.

Get out of here.

“See you next week then,” Aidan said, finally finding a server to take his empty glass.

“What’s next week?” she asked, frowning.

“Little day called Christmas. You know, your favorite day of the year,” Logan chimed in, frowning at her.

Oh. Yeah.

Fuck, Santa. Amelia was far more interested in Jack and the future orgasm she was about to have.

“Right. Ho, ho, ho,” she said. “See you then.”

Emma hugged her farewell, and they began to walk off when she heard Logan say to Aidan. “Did you see Senator Rutherford was here?”

Amelia was glad she had her back to Jack as her mouth fell open.

Senator? Senator Jack Rutherford.

Goddamn it.

She really should pay more attention to politics.



“LOGAN WOULD LIKE THE Boatshed painting,” Amelia said, leaning into Chang’s ear. “He’ll pop by to settle the bill tomorrow.”

“Oh! I knew he’d buy something.” Chang pressed his palms together, delighted. “And did I see you speaking with our senator?”

She inwardly groaned.

“Well, someone has to do the selling around here, Chang,” she teased and took a sip of her Cristal. She’d had quite enough already and should change to water, but then again, it was giving her a warm buzz and some extra confidence.

“Okay, tell me. Tell me,” Stella said, joining them. “Hit me with it.”

Chang frowned at her. “No. I will tell you tomorrow. We still have hours left.”

“Ugh. I’m dying here,” she cried.

Amelia smiled. “Babe, just count the little green dots on the wall next to them.”

“Don’t tell her that!” Chang cried softly, ducking his head.

Stella sprinted off.

Amelia laughed while Chang glared back at her.

“Don’t be mean. These things are stressful enough,” Amelia softly chastised.

“Talk to me when you’ve dealt with dozens of dramatically insecure artists every year for twenty-five years.” Chang sighed. “Even if she’s sold out, which she hasn’t. Yet. It won’t be enough.”

Sure enough, they looked over, and Stella was chewing her bottom lip.

“Exhibit A.” Chang swept his hand out.

“Oops,” Amelia said and began to walk over to her friend. Before she could reach her, Jack held out his hand and introduced himself to Stella.

“Jack Rutherford,” he said. She was too close now to turn around and when his eyes swept to hers, he added. “Friend of Amelia’s.”

Oh no.

“Stella Freeman,” Stella replied, shaking his hand, shooting her a confused look. “You know the senator?”

Amelia wanted to shoot Jack a *you dumbass* look, but it was probably too soon.

“Yes. Not well. I was showing him around earlier,” she replied, her body reacting to Jack’s close presence once again.

“Congratulations on a great evening. Your pieces are impressive,” Jack said.

“Thank you,” Stella beamed.

“I’d like to acquire the piece behind us,” Jack said. “If it’s still available.”

Stella peered around him and announced. “No sticker. It’s all yours.”

Amelia hid her smile behind her hand and glanced up at the senator. If he was trying to impress her, it was working.

“Stella!” Chang waved. “Senator, nice to see you.”

“Chang.” Jack smiled and gave him a curt nod.

“Excuse me.” Stella danced off.

“I hope you didn’t do that for me,” Amelia said, dipping her eyes.

“Buy a forty-thousand-dollar painting? You must think my ability to get a date very poor.”

She felt her cheeks heat.

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“I know, but it was so worth seeing you blush.” He leaned in. “You blush all the way down to your breasts.”

Amelia’s core clenched as a delicious arousal shot through her.

“Do you always say such inappropriate things to ladies?” Amelia lifted her eyes to his, challenging him.

“Never,” he replied firmly, and she was unsure of what to say when he just let that hang in the space between them.

Her panties were soaked, and Jack was right. She could feel the heat on her chest, which gave away exactly how attracted she was to him. If he kissed her right now, she would have absolutely no willpower to stop him.

Nor would she want to.

“Walk with me,” he said, eyes darting across the room. Amelia followed his line of sight, looking confused. “Outside.”

“It’s going to snow,” she replied.

“I hope so.”



CHAPTER FIVE

Jack loved Philadelphia in December. He'd grown up here, but as an adult he'd spent little time in The Quaker City. So when he came home, he liked going to as many events as he could to soak up the festivities.

The city really came alive during the holidays. The lights, the snow—when it finally fell, and it was going to soon, he was sure of it—and the vibrant energy was addictive, as locals and tourists enjoyed all that Philly had to offer.

From the Macy's Light Show, the Miracle on South 13th Street lights run by the locals, to the Winterfest Skate Park, there was something for everyone.

And he had no intention of walking out of Studio XOXO without Amelia, or with her phone number at the very least.

“Have you eaten’?” Jack asked.

“No, well, I had a few hor d’oeuvre’s,” Amelia replied.

“Okay, well, unless you’re a rabbit, that is not enough with all the champagne you drank.”

“Were you monitoring my consumption?” She frowned at him.

Yes, he was.

He had every intention of spreading her gorgeous legs tonight and didn't want to be propositioning a drunk woman. She'd had plenty.

“I think you know I haven't taken my eyes off you all night,” Jack said. “Let me buy you dinner and go see the lights on the way.”

If they were lucky, there would be no media around.

“I am hungry.” He watched her bite her sexy damn lips and glance outside.

“I have my car and security, so you can tell yours to take the rest of the night off,” Jack offered.

“I shouldn’t. I don’t really know you...” she trailed off, but he could see she wanted to but not look too eager.

Fine. He’d play along.

“I’m a U.S. Senator, sweetheart. Shall I reintroduce myself? Jack Rutherford. Senator for the state of Philadelphia. Lawyer, son, and annoying brother.”

“I know annoying brothers. Why would I want to have dinner with you?” she challenged.

God, he loved how much she was making him work for it. Most guys liked an easy woman. Not him. He loved a woman who had enough self-worth to make him sweat.

But once he got her across the line, they’d both be sweating. All night long.

“I’m only annoying to my sister. It’s law. Ask me, I studied it.”

That got a little smile out of her.

“Fine. But I want a Philly Cheesesteak,” Amelia said and began to walk to the entrance. “No silverware or crystal.”

“Woman after my own heart,” Jack said, grinning.



TEN MINUTES LATER, they were standing on the sidewalk with their coats wrapped around them and hands dug into their pockets.

“We’re going to stroll down to the Dilworth Park to the Christmas village,” he told Abe, his security guy.

“Yes, sir.”

He took Amelia’s hand and looped it through his arm. She lifted her face to his and God, she looked adorable.

“Guess if the media are out tonight, they won’t miss us.” He grinned down at her, then lifted his face and led them towards a great Philly Cheesesteak stand he hoped was around again this year.

“Because?” she asked.

“Your coat can probably be seen from space,” he replied, pressing the button on the crosswalk.

“It’s red, not neon,” Amelia replied.

“Neon red,” he said, shooting her a smile, and she snorted.

“Who knew senators could be so funny?” she muttered.

“It’s a well-kept secret. We don’t want people liking us.” He chuckled some more and led them across the street.

The park was busy, as expected, during the week before Christmas. They weaved their way through the crowds, taking in the delicious aromas from the food stalls and people swinging their Christmas shopping bags.

An enormous Christmas tree stood nearby with a million twinkling lights while people whirled around the skating rink, holding hands and laughing.

Well, some weren’t vertical.

“Do you skate?” Amelia asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Not for a long time,” Jack replied. “Here. This place has the best Cheesesteaks.” He tugged her away from the ice rink and bought them one each.

Amelia ordered a hot chocolate from the stand next to them. “Oh God, so good.” She moaned as she took a bite and there was no way his cock wasn’t going to be able to ignore that.

She knew, because when her eyes met his, he could see the moment she realized her mistake.

“Keep going.” His voice husky. “I love hearing a beautiful woman moan in appreciation.”

Amelia choked, and he slapped her back.

“Of her food,” he added, and she nudged him in his arm.

“Sorry, that was going a little too far.”

“I have brothers. It’s nothing I haven’t heard. But they’d castrate you if they heard you speaking to me like that, so

word of warning, watch your back.”

“Noted.” He smirked and kept eating.

Jack would do the same to any man speaking to his sister Lucy like that, but she was married now, so the point is moot.

But he was glad Amelia had two passionate protectors. And even more glad they weren't here so he could enjoy a night with her.

“They're not here, are they?” he asked just to make sure.

“No,” Amelia laughed. “I doubt either of them has ever been here since we were kids.”

“Have you?”

She shrugged. “Once or twice. You?”

“Every year,” Jack replied, and they wandered back over to watch the skaters. “I only spend a few weeks here a year, so when I do, it's usually Christmas, and this is one of my first stops. I just never skate.”

Amelia was quiet, so he glanced down at her. She was staring at the skaters, but he could see her mind whirling.

“I live in Washington DC,” he clarified.

She nodded.

He wanted to say more, but what was there to say? Nothing more than one night was going to happen between them, so if she thought there was, he needed to make it clear.

Sure, it was bold of him to assume Amelia was the type of woman who would accept that. In fact, he didn't think she was.

But she would make her own mind up at the end of the night.

Christmas carolers appeared in front of them in skates and burst into song, singing *Silent Night*. Without thinking, he moved closer to her and lay his hand on the small of her back and her face lifted to his.

Damn, that smile of hers is going to undo me.

Jack turned his attention back to the carolers but barely saw them. All he felt was Amelia leaning in gently against the side of his body.

Yes, he wanted to fuck her, but the sudden joy that rushed through him as he moved his arm further around her was dangerous.

Over the next hour or so, they wandered around the park, chatting and playfully flirting. Amelia bought a pair of Christmas mittens and a decoration for her tree. Jack purchased one or two trinkets for his mom and realized he needed to do a lot more shopping for his family this week.

He mentioned it out loud.

Silly mistake.

“How? It’s not like someone sprung the holiday on you. Same date every year,” Amelia teased. “Plus, online shopping.”

“I’ve been busy doing senator stuff.” He laughed, taking the paper bag from the seller and thanking him.

“What do you even do?” Amelia asked.

“Really?” he asked, taking her hand. Abe was a few steps behind them and briefly, Jack wondered if his security guy thought it was odd he suddenly had this woman on his arm.

And hopefully in his bed.

Although, despite still wanting to fuck her, he was enjoying himself far more than he thought he would be just talking and bantering.

It really was turning out to be an incredible night.

“Am I supposed to know?” Amelia asked.

Jack didn’t know how to answer that. He wasn’t ignorant enough to think all Americans knew what senators did or how the government worked. It was complex, and the truth was, most didn’t care. People here and in countries all over the world spent most of their time just getting by.

Something he wished he could change.

He'd gone into politics, not with blinkers on, but with a drive to fix all the wrongs in the United States, and it had slowly been chipped away at by reality.

People hated change.

Governments, even more so.

He couldn't change the world, but he could make sure the small part he played in it was honest and focused on contributing to the well-being of people, animals, and the planet.

As holy as that, all sounded.

Except for that Cindy moment he'd had in his office a few months ago. That had put a small dent in his supposed halo.

Jack knew he wasn't perfect and regretted it immensely.

Feeling Amelia on his arm, he wondered if this was the start of dating again.

He could never let what happened before Thanksgiving happen again. Nor would he.

"No, I guess not," Jack said. "But the bigger mystery is what you do. Artist of some kind. Let me see. A musician."

They rounded the corner and walked past the gigantic Christmas tree where soft carols were playing. The crowds had begun to thin out, and it was time to head home.

Hopefully, with Amelia.

"Nope. You'll never work it out," she said, swinging her bags in her other hand.

"Pole dancer," he teased.

She began to giggle, and his face broke out into another big smile. When was the last time he'd smiled and laughed this much?

Jack couldn't remember.

"Correct," Amelia said. "I spend most of my days in little nipple stars and a thong."

“God, I’d pay to see that. Take me to your workplace immediately,” Jack ordered, tugging on her arm. Amelia landed on his chest mid-laugh and then let out a sexy little gasp. He ran his hand down her back, stopping at her hip, and pressed her closer.

Then, snowflakes began to fall around them.

“You have two seconds to run if you don’t want me to kiss you,” Jack said, counting to one before his mouth crushed down on hers.

At last.



CHAPTER SIX

Amelia felt like she was in a fairytale. Obviously not, but she was in the arms of a tall, gorgeous man who had swept her off her feet, made her laugh and was now kissing her as the snow fell around them.

Romantic much?

Swoon.

And boy, could he kiss.

Her body pressed against Jack's as his tongue swept inside, taking complete ownership of not just her mouth but her entire body. How she was still standing, Amelia had no idea.

The world had all but disappeared except for the tiny spot where they stood as Jack's muscular arms held her tight against him.

And lord, he tasted like malt and Christmas spice.

"Let me take you home," he rasped against her lips.

"I shouldn't."

"Perhaps, but say yes, anyway. I'll make you feel so good, sweetheart. You'll be praying for me to do it a second time."

"I don't pray."

"You will tonight." Jack's lips twitched, and for the love of God, he had dimples.

Jesus.

Tall, blond, blue-eyed, and dimples.

She wasn't that strong.

"Abe, can you send the car around?" Jack said, casting a quick look over his shoulder.

"You bet," his private security guy replied.



IT DIDN'T TAKE THEM long to drive to Jack's apartment, given it was just a few blocks away. Amelia stepped out of the elevator and into a space she would describe as modern, tidy, with good minimalistic design.

In other words, it was unlived in.

"I had them open the place up and stock it, but I haven't been here since last New Year's Eve," Jack confessed, reading her reaction.

"So, you never come home. Ever?" she asked, surprised.

"No. Except Christmas," Jack replied, taking their coats.

"But you have family here," she said, spotting a few photos on a table. Amelia walked over and picked one up. Jack was standing with his parents, and she suspected his sister. They both had cheeky grins, and she imagined them being told to stop playing the fool for the photo.

Then giggling.

He was close to his sister, obviously, and that made her like him even more. But she had to remind herself he wasn't someone she would be having a relationship with.

"They visit me in D.C. occasionally," Jack said, walking over. She felt the heat of his body from behind. "My father died a few years ago."

"I'm so sorry," Amelia turned as he took the frame out of her hand and leaned into her hair as he placed it back on the table.

Amelia held her breath as he straightened, his hand running down the length of her arm. Then he took her hand and placed it over his cock.

"I've been hard all night," Jack softly growled, making her wetter than she already was.

She wasn't quite as bold as he was, so she kept that to herself, but Jack's eyes glistened knowingly. The little hitch in her breath made those lips of his twitch almost arrogantly.

But she liked it. She liked his confidence and well-controlled arrogance. It was incredibly sexy to be in the arms of a man who knew what he wanted and wasn't afraid to go after it.

She wanted him to take complete control while she dropped all her barriers, letting him own her.

Every inch of her.

"I'm not a gentle lover. I'm going to fuck you completely, Amelia, but I'll make sure you are thoroughly *pleasured*."

Holy hell.

"Define gentle," she whispered, her hand still on his cock, as his lips stretched into a devastating smile, sending a powerful shudder through her.

"My teeth will dig into your nipples," he said as he released her hand and ran his fingers down the front of her dress, barely missing her tight buds. "I will suck on your wet flesh, swallowing your juices until you scream."

She swallowed audibly, needing him to touch her and do all of that as Jack continued to run his hand down her body. Missing all the fun parts.

Damn him.

"You're wet, aren't you, Amelia?"

"Yes."

"Soaking." He held her eyes, the air around them sizzling. "Then when I have you on your hands and knees, my cock inside you, I'll slap your ass, demanding another orgasm from you."

Her body began to tremble when his fingers brushed over her bikini line.

"Jack," she cried out.

"Yes, sweetheart?" he rasped. "Tell me what you want."

"Touch me," she begged without hesitation. This felt like life or death. The need to have him do all those promised

things drove her insane as his masculine scent enveloped her.

Did she need to rip her clothes off? Because she would.

One night.

Who cared if he thought she was easy?

She was.

Take me now.

“Good girl,” he said, reaching down and tugging her dress up. “Widen your legs for me.”

With pleasure.

Grateful she'd left her stilettos at home, she took a step to the side, and as Jack slid his hand inside her panties, Amelia almost orgasmed on the spot.

“Jesus, you are soaked,” Jack growled deeply as she let out a moan in some foreign language she'd never spoken in her life.

Those dimples returned as Jack plunged two fingers inside her.

“Oh God,” she cried out, gripping his arms.

“Didn't I say you'd be praying?” Jack growled as his mouth crashed down on hers.

Holy fucking hell.

Fire slashed at her veins as this man finger fucked her and sucked her mouth like he was starving, getting every single desirous spot. Jack knew what he was doing. Her body was alight with arousal, almost out of control, needing him to be everywhere and also not stopping what he was doing.

And she was well aware he still hadn't touched her clit, yet she was so close to coming.

“You are so goddamn tight.” Jack moaned, pulling his fingers out. Then he lifted her into his arms and Amelia wrapped her legs around his waist.

“You can show me your pole dancing moves later, sweetheart. Right now, I want you sliding down mine.” He

winked.

“Smooth.” She shook with a laugh.

“I’m here every night.” Jack smirked and carried her down the hall to his bedroom.

Like the rest of his home, it was clear he didn’t live in it. It had little personality or warmth, but it was a luxury home with high-quality furnishings and, wow, one enormous bed.

He lowered her onto it, placing his knee on the edge, and began to kiss her softly. Surprising her. When he released her lips, their eyes connected, and something crossed between them.

“You’re fucking gorgeous, Amelia.”

His gravelly voice had her quivering. Suddenly, the next moment, he was between her legs, tugging down her panties and instructing her to remove her dress.

Amelia’s shoes had dropped off somewhere, but she didn’t care.

After removing her bra, she sat watching Jack undress. Mother of mercy, the man was ripped. His arms were muscular and large, and he had those nice plump pecs that made you want to... lick them. She planned to.

Jack caught her looking and held her gaze as he dropped his boxers on the floor.

Amelia wasn’t missing this bit. She dropped her eyes and took in the thick, long cock which he gripped and began to stroke.

Honestly, a cock was a cock, but sometimes she came across a nice one. Jack had a *very* nice one. Not that she’d slept with hundreds of men, but at twenty-eight she had a few notches on her bedpost.

“Keep looking at me like that, and I’ll forget all the foreplay,” he growled and climbed back over her, nudging her back down.

“Maybe I don’t want it,” Amelia said honestly. If he wanted to thrust inside her, she wouldn’t say no. Her mouth was watering as she took in his engorged head.

Jack circled her clit, and Amelia arched with a loud groan. Change of plan.

“No?”

“Hmm, mmm,” she said, shaking her head.

“Liar,” Jack said, nipping at her lips, then sliding down her body.

Then his mouth was on her flesh, making her eyes roll back. Jesus, he’d been right about the hard sucking, and it was fucking incredible.

Never stop.



JACK’S TONGUE STROKED Amelia’s flesh. Who knew this wealthy woman would taste like champagne and diamonds?

With a hint of caviar.

But he was glad he’d found out. She was fucking gorgeous from head to toe.

The temptation to slam inside her and shoot out every single drop of the desire he had boiling inside was overtaking him. But the sounds coming from her were so fucking arousing he wasn’t sure he wanted to stop.

She teased all his senses with her beautiful eyes, naughty smile, and luscious curves. Petite as they were. Her long dark hair was going to look insanely sexy wrapped around his fist as she sucked his cock before the night was over.

Even now, as he lifted his eyes and watched her writhe while he lapped at her pussy, that silky dark hair spread around her, he felt himself lost to her seduction.

Of course, Jack knew she wasn’t a pole dancer, but he was curious why she was being vague about her art.

A conversation for after.

If either of them could talk.

Surprising himself, Jack hoped she'd be there in the morning so he could fuck her one last time before heading off to his mother's.

Dude, don't think about your mother when you are sucking a woman's pussy.

"Oh my god," Amelia cried, lifting her hips.

He gripped them, lifting her so he could run his tongue from her ass to her clit and back down again.

"Yes, yes, yes, oh god!"

"Come for me, Amelia, that's a good girl," growled, circling back over her clit. "I want you nice and wet for my cock."

He licked her once more, doing the circuit, and then shoved his face hard into her pussy, sucking her clit as he pressed in two fat fingers.

Then he felt her tighten around his digits as she convulsed and jolted.

"Ohohohoh," she cried. "Jack, I'm coming, I'm coming."

Lowering her to the bed, Jack lapped at her glistening nectar one last time, snaking his tongue over her abdomen and up over her breasts. As promised, he grabbed a nipple between his teeth and tugged. She reared up in surprise.

"Jack."

"Amelia," he murmured, smiling, taking the other one and doing the same.

"Oh, Jesus," she moaned.

A moment later, he was above her, wiping the sweat off her forehead, kissing the corner of her mouth and her eyebrows, then tucking his hips tight between her legs.

"Wrap them around me," Jack breathed against her lips as his cock naturally found her moist entrance.

“I need you inside me,” she panted. “Now, fuck me.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” Jack kissed her as the head of his cock slid inside her pussy. “Christ, Amelia, you feel incredible.”

“More,” she demanded as he pushed in a few more inches and, fucking hell, he hadn’t been lying. Her body sheathed him in a channel of hot silk sucking him in.

Wanting to savor it, Jack pulled out and then pressed back inside deeper. Amelia cried out her frustration, her nails digging into his muscular flesh.

Fucking hell, his cock was in heaven.

He’d never had such a tight woman, nor one who was such a sultry little thing as Amelia. Jack drove himself home, and she screamed.

“Jack!”

“Fuck,” he cried with her as pleasure rushed up his spine and, like a spiderweb, spread through his body with such erotic intensity he felt like he was going to pass out.

Nearly.

There was no way he was missing this.

With one hand, he lifted her ass and began to thrust. In and out, in and out. He used her body to stroke his erection as she clung to him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, she felt so incredible.

He wanted to go even deeper. Pulling out and ignoring her complaint, Jack pulled her up and flipped her over.

“On your knees, sweetheart.” Jack slapped her ass cheek as she pushed it into the air and took no time entering her once more.

Oh shit. Yes. She took all of him.

After a few powerful thrusts, as she kissed the pillow, Jack reached around and slapped her pussy.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

“Fuck,” Amelia cried, clenching the linen with both her hands.

“Come for me again, sweetheart,” he ordered, squeezing the flesh of her ass, then slapping the other cheek.

Her body was entirely under his command. Just as he’d wanted from the moment he’d laid eyes on her. His to pleasure all night long.

It would be all night.

Suddenly, he had a ton of energy.

Watching his cock slide in and out as her pretty cunt clenched his cock, Jack felt molten heat speed down his spine.

He was so fucking close.

“Oh God, I’m coming,” Amelia cried as he twisted his fist around her long hair, tugging her head up and exposing her neck.

Complete control.

This woman was his.

Jack let out a long growl, her pussy sucking every last drop of his seed from him, and he knew in that moment as he reached for her mouth that he was never letting her go.



CHAPTER SEVEN

In the low light of his bedroom, Amelia lay in his arms, and they played with each other's fingers. Like long-time lovers.

"Did you always want to go into politics?" she asked.

Jack drew in a breath, searching for the right answer. He had, but he hadn't. When he was younger, it seemed like a silly dream.

"I always wanted to be a lawyer, which I eventually did. Then, once I began to understand the real issues in our country, I thought I could make more of a difference on Capitol Hill."

"Do you?" Amelia asked him.

Jack let out a small laugh. "Some days, the answer is yes. Other days I really don't fucking know."

"You can't fix the world on your own," she said, lifting her face to his. He lowered his mouth and kissed her slowly for the hundredth time.

Jack had the feeling he could kiss her for eternity and still never get tired of it. After all, he was a fan of caviar and champagne.

Especially when it came in a petite and sexy little package called Amelia Dufort.

But he wanted to know more about her.

"So sexy, what about you? Did you always want to be a pole dancer?" Jack asked.

"Mostly. I never thought I could, though. You know, too short, too wide." She grinned.

He loved that she could give the sass back to him, but that didn't stop him slapping her cheek bare ass.

"Nothing wide about you, sweetheart. Now, enough joking around. Tell me what you do, or I'll get my friends at the FBI

to do a check on you.”

She gasped.

“You cannot do that.”

“No, I can’t. But I’ll hunt you down myself and follow you to whatever strip club you work at.” Jack threatened.

Suddenly, Amelia sighed. “It’s not that glamorous.”

Jack laughed. “What? As a strip club? I’m sure it is.”

She slapped his chest.

“It’s weird. That’s all.”

Weird?

What the hell did she do?

Jack lifted his head, nudged Amelia onto her back and leaned over her. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. You’re smart and funny. Unless you dress up like a clown and, I dunno, actually pole dance, then I doubt it’s weird.”

Amelia sighed again. “I’m a sculptor.”

Jack blinked.

A sculptor - that was the big secret.

“See. Weird,” she said and tried to hide her face.

What in the hell?

Jack tugged at her hands and gazed directly into her eyes. “Am I missing something? You make sculptors of what? Cocks?”

He smiled, but it faded quickly.

“Things. Abstract things out of my head. From materials. All kinds of things. The earth. Metal. Cloth. Stuff.”

“Do you like them?” Jack asked.

Now, it was her time to do all the blinking. When her eyes darted away, his own eyes followed briefly, then back at her. She smiled, even though he could tell she didn’t want to.

“Answer the question.” He demanded.

“You are such a lawyer.” Amelia huffed. “Yes, I like them.”

He laid back down and tugged her up against him again.

She was being silly.

“Then it doesn’t matter if they’re weird. You like them, and I’m guessing you enjoy what you do.”

She stayed quiet, lying her head on his chest for a long time, then finally glanced up at him. “Do you think it’s weird?”

The vulnerability in her eyes nearly undid him, but he wasn’t going to say a word. He did, however, want to kick the ass of the person responsible for making her second guess herself and her talents.

“No. I think you’re an artist. I don’t have a creative bone in my body, so anyone willing to put themselves out there and show the world their creations is brave in my opinion.”

He meant every single word, too.

Amelia’s eyes lit up like diamonds, and it tugged at his heart to think she’d been made to feel like her art was nothing short of incredible.

Not that he’d seen it.

“Who told you it was weird?” Jack asked. “Out of curiosity. Just humor me. Was it your dad?”

She nodded.

“Yes. Good guess.”

“Dads are good like that,” he said, remembering his own father making a few digs at him when he was younger. Jack had been born with thick skin, though—a trait he needed to be successful in politics.

Still, he wouldn’t put a brush to paper and let critics at him, so everyone had their limits.

Jack scanned his memory, trying to remember if he knew who her father might be. Jonathan Dufort was the founder of the hotel chain, but he didn't recall Daniel having a sister.

Or she was kept out of the media.

"Wait until you sell some big pieces, then, he'll realize how wrong he is," Jack said, running his hand over her hip.

Amelia bit the side of her cheek, and he knew he'd missed something.

Wait a minute. Chang seemed to know her well, but he'd assumed it was because of Stella and the Dufort name. It went without saying her family would own pricey art.

He flipped her on the bed one more and, this time, tickled her.

Amelia giggled.

"If I google you, what will I find?" he frowned.

"Nothing," she laughed.

"Let me reword it. If I ask Chang what your pseudo name is, *then* Google it. What will I find, Amelia Dufort?"

She pressed her lips together, but the giggle broke through.

"Fine. I've sold a few pieces." She confessed.

"And?" his hand ran down her side, tickling.

"Welp!" she jumped. "And they paid nice money for them."

This time, he spread her legs and pressed his erection against her.

"How nice?" Jack asked, nudging inside her.

"Not as nice as your cock," she purred, arching into him.

"Good answer." He groaned as he thrust deep inside and drove them to their next orgasm.

Later, he was going to find out more about this complex woman.



AMELIA OPENED HER EYES and found herself surrounded by a most delicious warmth.

His name was Jack.

They had made love all night and woken during the early hours when he'd entered her from behind sleepily.

She'd never had so many orgasms in one day.

In between all the pleasure, they talked, laughed, teased each other, and solved all the world's problems.

Or at least it felt like it.

Amelia loved a man who could hold a conversation and make her smile. Jack had as many talents in that area as he did with his gorgeous cock.

And mouth.

And fingers.

She smiled privately, feeling Jack stir beside her.

"Good morning, my little pole dancer." He purred into her neck and then placed a kiss on the arch of her neck.

Amelia shivered and twisted around in his arms.

"Good morning, senator."

He let out a little moan and tugged her against his erection.

"I think my body needs some recovery time. Oh. Yes. You can do that—"

"Yes, sweetheart. We are doing all of that again before I leave." He growled against her lips.

"Is that right?"

"Yes," Jack said, kissing her. "Today, I have to visit my mom and sister, but I'd love to see you tomorrow."

Amelia almost purred.

She had never planned to stay the night, let alone see him again after this, but she very much wanted to. For all the reasons she'd woken up thinking of.

Jack was returning to Washington D.C. after the holidays, so she knew this wouldn't lead to anything serious. Still, she very much enjoyed being with him and the thought of never seeing him again after this morning felt... wrong.

Life was short, after all.

And perhaps at the end of the year she could tell her brothers she'd successfully enjoyed a two-week fling with a man and not fallen in love.

Actually, scrap that. She wasn't going to tell them anything. In fact, she was keeping Jack all to herself.

But it would be a good exercise, with no expectations, to date a *suit* and see what it was like. His words last night surprised her.

Delighted her.

But then again, he didn't know her or her life, so at the end of two weeks Amelia could gauge whether someone outside the art world might be someone she could consider dating.

Or, more importantly, end up in a serious relationship.

It just wouldn't be Jack.

"I think I could free up my pole dancing schedule for you." Amelia smiled.

Jack pressed his lips to hers once more and stayed there as he said, "Cheeky girl. Lucky you're sore, or I'd have your arms tied up to the bars of my headboard and thrust inside you."

Amelia flushed and felt her hips press into his erection.

"Sweetheart," he moaned.

Jack was right. Waiting twenty-four hours to enjoy the pleasure they had overnight seemed like a very long time. She reached between them and wrapped her hand around his

erection, smiling in what she hoped was a sultry way, then slid down his body.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jack said, surprising her.

All of a sudden, she found herself laying along his body as he spread her legs around his neck and his tongue spearing her pussy.

Oh, my God.

“Mouth on my cock, sweetheart.” He ordered as it twitched in her hand.

She swirled her tongue around it before taking his swollen head into her mouth as Jack started suckling her flesh.

Then, her brain lost all cognition as the two of them pleased one another simultaneously.

What a man.

She was definitely voting for him next time.

Plus, two amazing weeks of stimulating conversation and sex? She must have been good this year.

Thank you, Santa.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Jack,” Debbie Rutherford said as she opened the door.
“Hey, Mom.” He wrapped his arm around her and held her for a really long time.

He’d promised himself he would come home more after his dad died, but life kept getting in the way. When Amelia asked him about not spending time in Philly last night, he’d been a little ashamed.

What kind of son did that make him?

If it wasn’t for Lucy, his sister, he’d feel a stronger obligation, but she had a husband and kids, so his mom wasn’t lonely.

Not that it was about that.

One day, she wouldn’t be here, and Jack knew he’d regret it. He hadn’t been close to his dad but had been a momma’s boy growing up. Then he’d head to Harvard and ended up doing long hours as a junior lawyer in Washington before returning to Philadelphia and running a campaign to win the honor of becoming their senator.

Then his divorce.

Life had just disappeared.

“Come in. Lucy will be here with the kids later,” she said.

“You want me to look at the ladder you said was wobbly?” Jack asked.

“Oh, would you? It’s the one to the loft and I don’t want to fall. Not with your dad gone.”

Shit.

“Of course.” Jack dropped his bag at the door.

While she made him a cup of cocoa—because apparently he still drank that—and pulled out some fresh muffins from the oven, Jack sat at the kitchen table and listened to her update him on all the neighborhood gossip.

“The boys are so big now, Jack. Wait until you see them,” she said, referring to Lucy’s twin boys.

They were nearly five.

“Mom, I see them every week on Zoom.” Jack stuffed a mouthful of blueberry muffin into his mouth.

“You do not zoom them every week.” She chastised him.

“Fine, monthly.” He spoke with his mouthful and got a pointed look. Brushing off the crumbs—and getting another mom look—Jack stood and took his plate to the sink.

“Well, at least you still know how to clean up after yourself.” She nudged him.

He glanced down at her and smirked. “Doing dishes is a novelty. I eat out ninety-nine percent of the time.”

“That isn’t healthy,” his mom said. “You need a woman in your life. Are you dating?”

No.

And Jack wasn’t going to tell her about the Cindy Event either. But he did want to talk to her about the amazing woman he’d met last night.

God, she was divine.

He could sit and listen to her talking for hours. Watching her beautiful smile and playful eyes as he teased her.

As he had last night.

In between making her scream out his name.

“Well, that looks like a yes,”

“Huh?” Jack blinked and found his mom grinning at him. Then she poked him in the side.

“Who is she? I haven’t seen a smile on your lips like that for... hell, maybe ever.”

What?

He cleared his throat and kissed her on the cheek. “Settle down. I was just thinking about your pumpkin pie that I can

smell in the oven.”

She frowned at him. “Fine, don’t tell me. But you should invite her to Christmas dinner.”

Ah, no.

He liked Amelia a lot, but he wasn’t ready to invite her to meet his family.

It had been one night.

One incredible night.

“I’m going to take a look at that ladder now,” Jack said instead of replying, ignoring her mom’s insistence as he left the kitchen.



A FEW HOURS LATER, the house was full of chaos. Lucy, her husband Greg, along with their twin boys, Lucifer and Damien, had arrived.

Okay, fine, that wasn’t their names, but Jack was sure they were the devil’s spawn.

Benjamin and Ethan were identical twins and almost five, which meant that Jack couldn’t tell them apart—he was pretty sure Greg couldn’t either—and they were old enough to know how to mess with people.

Screaming laughter filled the walls as Benjamin and Ethan raced through the house.

“Christ, how do you relax?” he asked Greg, shaking his head.

“Do I look relaxed?” Greg replied, looking manic now he was paying attention.

Jack cringed.

“Oh, please. You see them for two hours a night before they go to bed,” Lucy said, flopping onto the sofa beside her husband.

“Mom! Look at Ben’s hair,” Ethan called out from down the hall.

“Oh, Jesus,” Greg groaned, going tense.

“Come here!” Lucy yelled and then frowned at the two of them as they walked into the living room with satanic grins on their faces.

Jack knew this wasn’t going to go well.

“What is—what the hell is it?” she asked, sitting up and putting her fingers reluctantly into Ben’s hair.

“This!” Ethan announced, revealing a tube of mayonnaise from behind his back.

Jack laughed as his sister shot him a look. Then she stood and nudged them both out the door.

“Shower. Now.” Lucy growled, snatching the mayonnaise. “Mom, I need towels.”

Jack felt exhausted just watching. He’d take the Senate any day over those two maniacs.

“Don’t know how you do it, man,” he said to his brother-in-law. “I need a tropical island holiday already.”

“I’m actually asleep, but my eyes are open,” Greg said, and they both laughed. “I love the little brats. They’ll grow out of it.”

Jack wasn’t sure.

He’d grown up with Greg and his brothers. All the antics they got up to as a kid came rushing back. One of them always had a body part in a cast, and then there were the fires that kept being mysteriously set.

He took note to remind Lucy about those.

“Think you might find it’s in the DNA, my friend. But good luck.” Jack laughed.

He wondered if Amelia wanted children.

He wondered if she’d been married before. Or if she wanted to have a family and to settle down.

She'd agreed to see him again, but that didn't mean she had felt the same connection he had between them.

Or perhaps it was his cock talking.

Jack hadn't thought much deeper than knowing he should start dating again after the Cindy Event, and he certainly had never expected to meet a woman like Amelia.

Her comments about being weird, instilled by her father, kept eating away at him. Why would a man say something like that to his daughter? She wasn't even an alternative arty type. There was not one piercing on her body.

He smirked at his private joke.

He'd told her a clit piercing would heighten her pleasure. To which she had said it wasn't possible; she was going to die from happiness tonight.

And yes, his chest had swollen to the size of Texas.

So no, Amelia wasn't weird, but she was funny and incredibly beautiful. And amazing with her mouth.

Christ, was she amazing.

But was she the kind of woman he'd want to spend his life with? He didn't know her well enough to answer that. Tomorrow? Yes. Next week? Still yes.

But jumping ahead and wondering if she wanted babies or to wear his ring was not wise. Anyway, what kind of father would he be if he spent half the week sleeping on the sofa in his office sofa?

Jack lifted his glass of whisky from the small table beside him, trying to push the image of Amelia, swollen with his child, from his mind.

God, she'd look gorgeous.

Regardless, he needed to calm the hell down. Yes, he liked this woman, but they lived miles apart in different states. Well, Washington was in the Columbia District, a territory, not a state, but semantics.

The point was, he'd met her last night.

One damn night and he was imagining her as his pregnant wife, like he had a teenage crush.

Enough.

You might lose interest in another few days. Stop it, douchebag.

When they sat down for dinner an hour later, Jack's little self-pep talk had achieved nothing. He checked his phone to see if Amelia had responded to his earlier message, asking if she was having a good day. And that he couldn't wait to see her again.

She hadn't.

Jack sighed and slid it back into his pocket.

"Everything okay?" Lucy asked, scooping some roast vegetables onto her plate.

"Yeah, why?" Jack asked.

"You keep checking your phone."

"He has a girl," his mom said, smirking.

"No, I do not. I have an important job," Jack replied defensively, knowing his tone was a sure giveaway and that his sister would never let it go now.

But it wasn't a complete lie. He didn't have a girl. Amelia was a woman from head to toe.

And not his.

But he was starting to think he wanted to make her his. He could remember feeling this way about Becky. Or anyone before her.

"Yeah, yeah, senator, blah, blah," Lucy replied.

Jack laughed.

To her, he was just her big brother and nothing more. Which he loved. The two were close, and he appreciated that she kept him grounded. When life got to him, Lucy was the person he called.

She always gave him her honest opinion while pulling no punches.

“So, who’s the girl?” Lucy continues prodding.

Jack glanced at Greg. “Help.”

“You’re on your own, my friend,” Greg replied, watching Ethan as he began flicking peas at his brother. “Boys!”

Useless brother-in-law.

Men should stick together.

“Spill, Jack,” Lucy said as his mom smiled down at her food.

She had known exactly what she was doing by dropping the bomb in front of his sister. Everyone knew Lucy was like a bloodhound.

“I don’t date girls, for starters. Amelia is just someone I met recently. We’re... dating,” he replied.

“Sure. Dating.” Greg smirked.

Goddammit, who were all these traitors sitting around him?

“Jack,” his mom admonished him as Lucy laughed.

He rolled his eyes. “We’re adults, mom. It’s what we do.”

“I’m an adult too. I know what goes on,” she said, and he shared a look with Traitor Greg that said *no, she did not*. “I’m not just your mom. I hope you’re treating her with respect. You should invite her to Christmas.”

Lucy continued chuckling, and he kicked her under the table.

“I’m not bringing her for Christmas. We’re just—”

Fuck.

“What?” Lucy asked, then burst out laughing some more.

Jesus, he was a lawyer. A U.S. Senator.

Get it together, man.

“Hanging out.” He turned to his mom. “Sorry, but it’s too new and not serious enough to warrant bringing her home, mom. I promise to be a gentleman.”

“Bullshit,” Greg sneezed into his hand.

Even Jack had to laugh this time while his mom told Benjamin and Ethan to block their ears and glared at them both.

Jack had a feeling it was too late for those two monsters.

Just as the meal was ending, his phone beeped. Ignoring Lucy’s stupid smirk, he tugged the phone out of his pocket, expecting to see Amelia’s name.

Cindy.

What was she doing messaging him? She was on vacation as far as he knew. Lifting his napkin and patting his mouth, he pushed the chair back and stood. “I need to take this. It’s work.”

“That’s his work face. It is.” Lucy announced like it was of national importance.

Dork.

Jack rolled his eyes, walked down the hall to his father’s old office, and closed the door. When he swiped the screen and saw the text, his blood turned cold.

We need to talk.

I thought you were on vacation. Jack replied as a heavy dread threaded through him.

A minute later, Cindy replied. ***We need to meet.***

I’m in Philadelphia. What is this about?

....

....

His heart began to pound. Every message on their phones could be audited, as they were government issues, so he hoped she had enough sense not to say something stupid.

He dialed her number.

“Jack,” Cindy answered.

Jack? She never called him that. It was either Senator Rutherford or sir. And it irked him that she thought she could get that personal with him. Which, yes, he realized, was ironic.

“What’s so urgent that you need to speak to me during the holidays?” he asked, keeping it professional.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, and his brain froze.

What the fuck?

All the blood rushed from his face to his thundering heart.

“Bullshit!” he snapped.

“Are you kidding me!?” Cindy cried. “You fucked me with no rubber.”

“You said you were on birth control. And it’s been well over a month,” Jack replied firmly.

Not to mention the fact she lowered herself down on him faster than Black Friday shoppers in a bridal store.

“I was. Well, I thought I was,” she said, tripping over her words.

Fucking hell.

“Were you? Or weren’t you?” he growled.

“No.”

That bitch.

“So, you lied to me? For fucks sake, Cindy,” Jack cried, running his hand through his hair as he paced the office. “Did you plan this? And who else have you been fucking? You can’t know it’s mine.”

“Asshole.”

“Watch your mouth. I’m still your boss and a senator,” he ground out.

“And I’m still pregnant,” she snapped. “Call me when you are ready to acknowledge that.”

Then she fucking hung up.

Jack dropped the phone on the table near him and, covering his face with his hands, let out a low cry.

What the fuck was he going to do? This was the worst possible outcome.

She fucking lied about birth control.

Jesus fucking Christ.

This was bad. Really bad.

Both of them had breached the rules of their employment. And the law.

Was the baby his?

Jack shook his head slowly for a long moment. Something smelled fishy. Or maybe he just didn't want to admit his world could come crashing down around him over one moment of weakness.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Cindy was right about one thing; he wasn't ready to acknowledge this, and he still thought it was bullshit.

He messaged Abe to say he was ready to leave and then said his farewells, claiming a work situation, and headed back to his apartment.

Where he planned to drink at least two glasses of whisky.

Make that four.



CHAPTER NINE

“Why are you here?” Amelia asked, rinsing her hands in the sink of her studio. She’d had two bedrooms renovated and built into a large studio when she bought the five-bedroom Fidler Square luxury home.

She’d considered renting a different space, but because she worked at all hours of the night and day when creative inspiration struck, she decided being at home would be more convenient and safer.

Plus, being single had its perks.

She could work when she liked and have no interruptions. Although she wouldn’t mind being interrupted if it came in the form of Jack and the incredible things he did to her.

Right now, her body was aching deliciously.

Moments ago, Amelia had been daydreaming about her night—and morning—while plastering her latest sculpture. Then she’d heard a throat clear behind her.

Giving her brothers access might have been a good idea once. Now, she was rethinking it.

“I’ve brought you dinner because I know you won’t have eaten,” Aidan said, leaning his massive frame against her doorway and lifting two bags of Thai takeout.

Damn, now she couldn’t be mad at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut in.

“Yes, lemongrass chicken. Come eat. Now.” Aidan pushed away from the door and walked away, knowing she’d follow because the delicious aroma was now reaching her.

Yum.

It wasn’t like she couldn’t cook. She could. Heck, she even had a La Cornue stove and Meneghini refrigerator. If that wasn’t tempting enough, then her Mugnaini Wood-Fired Pizza Oven would do it. But the novelty had worn off after a year or

two, and very little could drag her from her art when she was in the zone.

Amelia grabbed her mobile, noticing all the missed calls and taking note that it was well after eight in the evening.

Wow!

Time disappeared when she was working, and apparently, so did her hearing.

She flicked through the messages and found one from Jack. Her heart pounding, she quickly swiped to open it.

How's your day sexy? I can't wait to spend the day with you tomorrow.

Her heart fluttered as she lifted her head, staring into space with a stupid smile on her face.

“Amelia!” Aidan yelled.

Ugh.

Annoying.

She marched out, pulling down her sleeves, and plopped into a chair as he pushed the carton in front of her.

“Hire a chef,” he said. “Or someone to deliver regular meals.”

“Why? You're here at least three times a week, so I'm not going to starve,” Amelia said, shoveling a mouthful of aromatic chicken into her mouth and loudly moaning.

Aidan shook his head slowly as he watched her. “First, it's more like five. And second, I have a job.”

She snorted.

He had invented something.

Once.

Now, he was a gazillionaire.

Work for Aidan differed from what most people defined it as.

She wasn't really sure how he spent his time...when he wasn't feeding her.

"Fucking hell. Then I'll hire someone," he said, throwing up his arms.

She froze. "Do not."

"Then you need to start looking after yourself better."

"I am fine."

"Because I feed you."

"Because I'm an adult, and if you and Logan would just butt out, then maybe I could prove it."

He sat back with a huff and laid a heavy arm on the table.

"Aren't you eating?" she asked.

"I ate. At normal time. Like normal people," Aidan said and nodded at the other bag. "Freeze the rest or reheat it tomorrow."

It was hard to be angry at him. She'd never say it out loud, but Aidan was a protector. A carer. If anyone dared tell him, he'd probably lose his mind.

But he was.

"Thanks, big brother."

"Also, FYI, we are never butting out." Aidan lifted the glass of wine he'd poured for himself to his lips.

She glared at the Screaming Eagle Sauvignon Blanc bottle in front of him. Nice of him to choose such a valuable drop.

To prove a point, she assumed.

"Where's mine?" she asked, eyeing the Napa Valley vintage.

"You're having a night off drinking." He smirked.

"Good try, alcoholics anonymous. Get me a wineglass, or I'll kick you out." Amelia pointed at him with her chopsticks.

Suddenly, he pulled a glass out from under the table and slid it over to her.

“You live to make my life miserable, don’t you?”

Aidan shrugged as he poured the wine. “Mostly just the nights there’s nothing on Netflix.”

She kicked him under the table, but he was too fast.

“Behave, baby sister. Now tell me. Was Stella happy with the sales last night?” he asked.

Shit. Stella was one of her missed calls.

“Hmm, mmm,” she said around a mouthful of rice and chicken.

Aidan narrowed his eyes at her as he leaned his elbow on the table and kicked his legs out. “You haven’t talked to her?”

Tempted to lie, Amelia shoveled another mouthful in, then pointed her chopsticks down the hall and mumbled. “I whaz smacking schmuptlers.”

More shaking of his head.

“Bullshit. Who did you shag? And who do we need to kill now?” Aidan growled.

She pushed her empty carton away and wiped her mouth. “No one and no one. I was just creatively motivated today.”

Two out of her three statements were at least true. Calling what she and Jack had done, shagging, didn’t feel right in any case.

Passionate fucking, yes.

But it had been so much more seductive and erotic. There had been nothing fast and soulless about it.

“I’ll call her after I’ve showered,” Amelia added.

And reply to Jack’s text.

She took a moment to study her brother. “Why aren’t you at your creepy club?”

Amelia never asked many details about it, because, *ew*, Aidan liked the darker side of sex and frequented a private sex club. Amelia had a feeling he owned it.

She also knew Logan had gone there a few times before meeting Emma. Now, the two were getting married in January and, as far as she knew, it was in his past.

For Aidan, though, it seemed like a lifestyle.

She wasn't sure he would settle down and marry like their eldest brother. Perhaps it wasn't for either of them.

"Not in the mood. I'd rather hang with my sister," he said as Amelia stood, taking her trash and dropping a kiss on his cheek on her way.

"Fine. Go turn on the TV while I shower. But I'm choosing the movie," she said, cleaning up in the kitchen before heading down the hall to her bedroom. "And do not watch another episode of The Witcher as it messes up my viewing history."

"Henry is short, by the way!" Aidan called out.

She laughed.

"He is not. I've met him," Amelia mumbled privately to herself.

She turned on the shower and stripped off her clothes, then before she stepped under the water, she lifted her phone and replied to Jack.

I'm covered in paint and plaster. Turns out you might be my muse. Looking forward to tomorrow.

Amelia pinned her hair up and then, just as she was about to step into the shower, her phone beeped.

Great. Now I'm picturing you naked and dirty.

Accurate. I'm just about to shower.

Sweetheart, you can't say things like that to a man over text.

She replied with a kiss emoji and almost danced into the shower.

Jack was sexy and fun. He was just what she needed in her life. She had every intention of keeping her brothers out of the

loop. Seriously, if they got a sniff of anything, they'd be like a dog with a bone. Especially if they learned who he was.

When she finished her shower and dried off, she sent Stella a message apologizing for not calling and promising to follow up with her in the morning. Then, pulling on a pair of sweatpants and a sweater, Amelia sat down on her vast four-poster bed and re-read Jack's messages.

He had replied.

I will be dreaming of those lips tonight.

Tucking her feet under her, Amelia wished she was in his bed so she could feel his lovely, big arms wrapped around her. His nose nestled into her neck as he had been this morning.

This was insane.

She'd known him one day.

Blowing out a breath and reminding herself this was a quick, passionate affair and nothing more, she flopped back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Where are you taking me? Amelia texted back, not because she wanted to know but because she wanted to keep talking to him.

Her phone rang.

Facetime.

"Crazy man. Are you a boomer?" she teased, giving him a cheeky smile, aware she had zero makeup on and a messy bun.

"No, I'm a horny thirty-something man who wanted to hear your voice," Jack smirked. "God, you look fuckable."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that." Amelia let out a laugh, thinking he, too, looked fuckable. "But you look pretty hot yourself."

He did.

Jack was lying on his side, his blond hair mussed and those beautiful big blue eyes which mirrored hers. His cheeks had a

little stubble slightly darker than his hair, making her fingers twitch to reach out and touch.

“We could have phone sex,” Jack offered.

“No. My brother is down the hall.” She coughed out her awkward laugh.

“Why? Is everything okay?” His voice turned concerned as his head lifted and damn her heart fluttered at his concern.

Amelia turned to her side. “Yeah, he just brings me dinner. Annoying like I said.”

“I think that’s called love.” Jack let out a laugh.

She shrugged and sent him a soft smile. The tiredness from the past twenty-four hours kicking in. They hadn’t slept much last night, nor had she stopped working all day.

“I’m glad you called.”

“Me too. Is it inappropriate to say I missed you today?” Jack asked, tucking a hand under his face.

“No. I thought about you a lot, too.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jack grinned as Amelia felt her cheeks warming. “Does that mean you won’t mind coming shopping with me tomorrow?”

“Sure. As long as it’s not for your wife and kids that you forgot to tell me about last night.”

Jack was silent for a moment and her body froze, waiting for him to drop a truth bomb that would make her hate men forever. But he didn’t. Instead, he blinked and said, “You still haven’t Googled me?”

Thank God.

Amelia hitched her shoulder. “I figure you were being honest. Were you?”

“I was.”

“Then anything I need to know I will ask you and not Google,” she said, yawning. “Plus, you are leaving in two weeks, so...”

For some reason she couldn't find the words to finish that sentence.

“So...” Jack mirrored.

They both lay there staring at each other, heat in their eyes and a swirl of emotions mixing together like whipped cream. He was dangerous. The more time she spent with Jack Rutherford, the more she liked him.

Another yawn hit her, and her eyelids fluttered.

“Sweetheart, you're fading.” His husky, masculine voice was like a smooth massage over her senses.

“Hmm,” she replied.

“Sleep. I'll be dreaming of you,” she heard Jack say as she nodded sleepily. Then she was holding his hand as they twirled around the skating rink, laughing. Amelia knew it was a dream and that she should get up, but couldn't remember why.

Then Jack spun her into his arms and dropped his warm lips to hers.

So soft, warm and delicious tasting of Christmas spice.

“Useless,” she heard Aidan say above as she felt the covers being pulled over her. “I'm going to watch the entire Witcher series before I leave. On double speed.”

Amelia snuggled into the pillow, smiling, then fell into a deep sleep.

Dreaming more of Jack.



CHAPTER TEN

Jack was about twenty minutes early to pick Amelia up, and he wasn't sorry. He was expected to have been let in through the gates and smiled as his driver pulled up outside the front entrance. Then he walked to the door and pushed the doorbell.

"You're early," Amelia said with one hand on her hip, the other holding her silk robe closed.

Perfect.

"Correct," Jack said, stepping inside the house, taking her in his arms and kicking the door shut. She squealed seconds before his mouth slammed down on hers and swept his tongue inside.

Even more perfect.

Amelia softened against him as he picked her up, spun them around, and pressed her into the door. Kissing her like a hungry man, although he liked to think he did it with finesse, Jack slid his hand down her back and over her ass, tucking her hard against his cock.

She let out a moan as his lips released hers.

"Tonight, you're falling asleep with my cock inside you." He growled.

"I'm sure it won't be *that* boring," Amelia replied dryly, her eyes glistening mischievously.

"Cheeky," he said, as his mouth covered hers once more. Then he patted her ass and said, "Now show me this art of yours."

"No,"

"Yes,"

"Let me get dressed and I'll contemplate it," Amelia said. "The coffee is fresh if you want a cup."

He watched her ass as she walked down the hall, waving him into the living area. Jack knew Amelia was from a wealthy family, and the address she'd given itself spoke volumes, but as he looked around at the exquisite home, he was impressed.

And he was a regular visitor to the White House.

The stately house had high ceilings, plush carpets, and was richly decorated with a mix of bold colors and neutrals.

Somehow, it worked.

She had less artwork than he'd been expecting, and the vast number of family photographs spoke to how important they were to her.

In the corner of the room stood a giant Christmas tree with piles of gifts under it. At least a dozen Christmas cards already lined her mantelpiece.

The vibe was warm, inviting, and luxurious.

As he continued walking through the room, Jack eyed the large woolen mat in front of the fireplace and wondered if she'd ever made love there. And if the man, or men, knew how lucky he'd been.

Because Amelia was special. There was something about her Jack couldn't put a finger on, but he knew he wasn't going to forget her easily.

Or if he wanted to.

The kitchen was as impressive as the rest of the house. He quickly found a mug and poured himself a coffee, walking over to the windows and looking out across the landscaped yard. In the summer, it would be a great place to socialize. Right now, it was a winter wonderland with large snow-covered trees under a crystal blue sky. The early sun was shining, creating a warm orange glow on the horizon. A little like the glow in his heart every time he'd thought of Amelia yesterday.

Only dulled by Cindy Event and the dark cloud that had brought to his life.

While he'd slept well, he woke, rehashing his dreams. One minute he had Amelia in his arms, the next, Cindy was on his cock while he tried to rip her off it.

Not fun.

Jack had gone over and over it when he returned home from his mom's last night. Cindy had worked for him for years, and while she was a good assistant, he didn't know her well personally. Not enough to ascertain if she would take advantage of this situation. She wouldn't be the first woman to try to extort a powerful, wealthy man for money.

Or trap him into something more permanent.

Jack had fucked up. He knew that. He'd known it the moment he'd finished spilling his seed. But he'd trusted she was telling the truth when she said she was on birth control.

Now, he was going to pay for it.

Whether it was denial or instinct, Jack just didn't believe the child was his. Why had it taken her so long to say something?

After a few Macallan's, he'd rung his lawyer and updated him.

"So you *did* fuck her?" Darren asked.

"Unfortunately," Jack replied, rubbing his face. "I don't believe her. I see her every day. There's been no sign of morning sickness, no bump, nothing."

Darren had gone silent.

"She finished up for Christmas without a word, then messages me a day later. Why not talk to me last week?"

"Maybe she wanted to wait," Darren offered. "To deal with it outside the office."

Jack shook his head even though the man couldn't see him and tossed back the last of his whisky. "Something just feels off."

"Yeah, you knocked-up your secretary," Darren said. "Sorry, man, but this doesn't look good. What did she ask

for?”

Jack let out a long, loud breath. “Just for me to acknowledge it.”

“Is she in love with you?”

Fuck, was she?

The lust that had been there literally vanished overnight after they’d fucked. Cindy had continued to work hard, but their relationship had been nothing but professional.

“No. It was a one-time thing. I’ve never sensed anything from her.”

“That’s good,” Darren replied.

No, it fucking isn’t.

“How is this good?” Jack rubbed his forehead with his thumb and forefinger, feeling a headache coming on.

“Fine, it’s not good, but it means she’s less likely to be a psychopath who dreams of marrying a senator.”

Jesus.

“But in my experience, she’ll want something. Money. Security. Your surname for the kid,” Darren added.

Jack felt ill.

His mother was going to be so disappointed in him. He knew she was dying for him to get married and produce his own little satanic rugrats, but this wasn’t the way she would have envisaged it happening.

Neither had he.

Until he had proof, Jack refused to believe this pregnancy was real. Or his.

“First, we need to find out if what she is saying is true. Get confirmation from her physician. Then we can ask for an in-vitro paternity test to determine if you are the father.”

“When?” Jack asked.

“As early as twelve weeks.”

He did a quick calculation. They'd fucked in the middle of October. Therefore, the earliest the test could be done was early January.

It wasn't fast enough, but the more Darren talked, the more Jack was starting to breathe easier. There were things they could do. If Cindy thought he would roll over and take her word for it, she was wrong.

If the baby were his, then he'd...do something. He'd accept responsibility for his actions as a minimum. But he wasn't marrying her.

"But because of who you are, I think we need to be proactive," Darren said. "I recommend we look into her life and background."

"I'm listening," Jack said, but he knew she'd undergone a lot of checks to get her job.

"You need a private detective. It's going to cost, but I have a contact you can reach out to. They'll dig into her life, her activities, and who she's been in contact with, so we're armed in case she is looking for something more than you acknowledging the baby."

He wondered if that was really necessary.

"First, let's get proof of pregnancy and advise her we want the test done in about four weeks," Jack said, passing on Cindy's details to him.

"I'll send you Black Hawke Security details. It's over to you if you contact them, but with your profile, Jack, I highly recommend you do. Information is power."

Wasn't that the truth.

When he'd got off the phone, Amelia had messaged him, and, like her, he'd dropped off to sleep not long after ending their call.

Now, he just wanted to forget all of that and spend the day with her in Philly, soaking up the Christmas buzz in the air.

"Ready?" Amelia said, and he turned.

Wow!

She was breathtaking in a pair of figure-hugging blue jeans, a white cashmere cowl neck sweater, and black boots. She slipped on a black leather jacket and lifted a white handbag off the table, sliding it onto her forearm.

She smiled at him, those bright red lips—her signature look—making his cock thicken.

“Are you just going to stare at me?”

“Yes. You’re fucking beautiful,” Jack said, taking slow, predatory steps towards her, dropping his mug on a table as he went. “We’re going to get spotted by the media if we aren’t careful.”

“I’m one step ahead of you, senator.” Amelia pulled an animal print scarf out of her bag and, in seconds, had it twisted around her head, looking all kinds of Jacqui Onassis as she added a pair of oversized sunglasses.

He laughed and tugged a black ball cap out of his jeans pocket and pulled it on. “I see you’ve done this before.”

“You know who my cousins are, right?”

“I do,” He grinned, guiding her to the door and noting that Daniel was her cousin, not a brother. Just as he’d assumed. “They have quite the reputation.”

“Did. They are good boys now.”

Jack shot her a smirk.

“What?” she said, jutting out her hip.

“I love how your mind went straight into the gutter, Ms. Dufort. How did you know I wasn’t talking about business?”

“Shut up.” She snapped playfully.

Jack laughed as they climbed into his car; Abe shot him a smile.

“Where to, Senator Rutherford?” his driver asked as Abe got in the front.

“Macy’s. The home of Christmas,” Jack replied, moving Amelia along the seat so she got closer to him.

She grinned up at him.

“Excellent. I love spending other people’s money,” Amelia said. “What are we buying?”

“Toys for Satan’s littlest helpers.”

“You mean Santa.”

“Nope. I mean Satan.” Jack grinned and pulled her into his arms. “And let’s make it something that will annoy their mom. I’m after some payback.”

“You sound mean.”

“I’ll show you just how mean when we get home, sweetheart. For now, let’s go have some fun,” Jack growled as he nibbled on her ear.

She shivered in his arms, and he almost told the driver to turn the fuck around.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, they stepped out of Jack’s car and onto the pavement in front of Macy’s, where their world was transformed.

If you weren’t a fan of the festive season, the best way to describe what they were looking at was that Christmas had thrown up everywhere. From the enormous banner on the outside of the building, to the exquisite window displays, to the unequalled vast entrance with the enormous Christmas tree, it was the happiest place on earth.

If you loved Christmas.

Amelia did.

Even if you didn’t, the free Christmas Light Show in the Wanamaker building was a Philadelphia tradition since the mid-fifties, and it boasted almost one hundred thousand lights.

“I love the sound of this organ. It gives me warm, happy home vibes,” Jack said, tucking her arm into his as they looked up at the three-story-high Christmas tree.

“Every year, they outdo themselves, and yet it still feels traditional,” Amelia said, liking how it felt to be walking next to this handsome man way too much.

Do not fall for him.

Two weeks. That’s it.

“Toy department.” Jack hummed, and she smiled up at him.

“Stop looking at me like that, or I’ll drag you into a changing room and find out what color panties you’re wearing.”

“Bold of you to assume I’m wearing any.” Jack froze, and she found herself giggling once more as he pulled her hard up against him. “Superman, that cap isn’t hiding your face as much as you think. I’d be careful if I were you.”

With a quick groan, Jack released her, then tugged her further into the crowds.

With arms full of bags two hours later, Amelia waited while Jack paid for his last gifts. One by one, he placed them on the counter.

“So that’s two Pump Action Fart Machines and a World’s Worst Jokes book. Oh, and a Science Lab Pro kit. Is that all, sir?” the Macy’s employee asked.

Amelia shook her head.

“Correct,” Jack said, pulling out his wallet. “Wait, give me the stickiest candy you have?”

“Your sister is going to be furious.” Amelia pressed her lips together as she fought her smile.

“I hope so,” Jack replied as two giant candy canes were added to his bag. “Abe, can you have the car brought around to the front?”

“You got it,” Abe said.

She barely noticed Jack's private security. Not that she wasn't used to her own at times, but knowing Jack was a government official had a different feel to the need for protection.

So far, nobody had recognized them.

She doubted Jack wanted any attention or questions about their holiday affair. Amelia was also keen to keep things under the radar. The last thing she wanted was for her family to learn she'd been seeing a senator.

They'd think he was perfect for her.

Amelia was clear this attraction between them was just that. An attraction. Having family pressure was not what she wanted. Or media.

"So," Jack said after they'd found their way out of the store and put their shopping in the trunk of the car. "Help me solve a puzzle."

Amelia looped her arm through his and let him lead her wherever they were going next. "Sure. I'm very smart."

Jack shot her an amused look. "Smart and very good at distracting me. I wanted to see your art before we left this morning. Is this an artist thing, or do you honestly believe your father's inappropriate comments?"

She let out a sigh, regretting what she had shared with him.

"Maybe," Amelia said as they merged with the crowd on the sidewalk. "But he's not wrong. An artist's life and work are hard for most people to understand, so it's better to just keep it separate when dating. Even for two weeks."

"Because?"

Of course, Jack would probe further. Damn lawyer brain.

"I don't work nine to five. Our brains think differently. Our bodies move to a different tune," she said, hoping that was vague and yet enough that he would drop it.

"I like the tune it was playing the other night." Jack wrapped his arm around her lower back and led them into a

restaurant.

“Stop it,” she blushed, glancing around.

“Senator, welcome.” The front of the house greeted them as Jack dropped her a smirk. They were led to a table near the rear of the restaurant and Amelia assumed he’d organized this in advance.

Not just that, he’d pulled some strings to get a table at Sotto. It was usually booked well in advance.

Warm bread rolls with a bowl of fresh butter were placed between them, and crisp white linen napkins flicked open and placed on their laps.

“The bottle of Ata Rangi Pinot Noir 2020, sir.”

“Thank you,” Jack said as the server poured the white wine into his glass. “Fill them both. I’ve had this New Zealand vintage many times. Amelia will enjoy it.”

She watched him across the table, highly aroused by his confidence. He was a man who knew what he liked, and what he didn’t and wasn’t afraid to go after it.

Like he had her.

His eyes connected with hers, the flames from the nearby fireplace flickering within them. Neither of them looked away for a long moment.

Her thighs pressed together, and she drew in a little breath, her chest heaving.

“Jesus, Amelia. I’m tempted to carry you out of here like a caveman, so I can fuck your brains out. But we should eat,” Jack growled, his eyes darkening. “I want you fueled up before we get home.”

Holly hell.

She swallowed, heat spreading through her body.

When their meals arrived, Jack picked up the conversation again from earlier. “I appreciate the artist’s mindset, but I’m not sure our lives are so different.”

“How so?” she asked, aware he had no idea like most people.

“I work long hours.”

Amelia sighed. “Jack, I can go into my studio and not come out for twelve hours. That could be midnight, two in the morning, or hell, even five. It’s why my brothers show up with food.”

He wiped his mouth with his napkin and placed it back on his lap, then took a sip of wine, and it somewhat irritated her that he wasn’t acknowledging the difference.

“Some nights, I sleep on Capitol Hill,” Jack said. “On my sofa.”

Oh.

“Why?”

“Because, like you, I lose myself in my work,” he replied. “Or it’s necessary, and I can’t leave because of senator stuff.” He winked. “I have a bathroom with a shower and a wardrobe with multiple changes of clothes.”

“Wow, that’s... kind of horrible.”

Jack laughed. “Why? “How is it different?”

Amelia lifted her glass, and Jack was right. The Ata Rangi was an incredible drop. She was drinking way too much of it.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “I have my studio at home, but that’s semantics. What about when you are married with a family, and they never see you?”

He took another sip and studied her over the glass. “But not married to a brilliant artist with beautiful blue eyes.”

He didn’t pose it as a question, but Amelia knew it was. She had to shut this down right now. Misleading him into thinking she was looking for a big diamond and wedding vows was not fair.

He might be right. They both worked hard and long hours, but it still didn’t mean a man who worked in an office, as opposed to a creative, was suitable for her.

She didn't know who was.

But this was meant to be fun and non-committal, so she was sticking to that.

"I'm not the girl for you, Jack. This is just sex. Great sex. Let's just enjoy this until you leave, then go back to our lives."

"That easy, huh?" he asked, watching her closely.

Amelia couldn't read his expression, but the conversation was turning intense, and she was starting to get uncomfortable.

This isn't what she wanted.

She had been looking for a no-strings-attached fling because while he might think their lives would be compatible, Amelia wasn't willing to let someone else into her world or heart. Especially someone so different from her.

She didn't have a lot of resilience after Mathias.

But she liked Jack.

She liked him a lot.

Every time he made her laugh, heck even giggle, it wound its way inside her and posed the question, what if...

What if he was someone she could be with?

"Yes," Amelia nodded, playing with her fork. However, even she heard the doubt in her voice.

Damn him.

Yesterday, she'd been sated, exhausted, and a little hungover. The desire and excitement of seeing Jack again felt like a schoolgirl crush. Having spent most of the day with him, she was coming to see how much she liked his company.

She'd known the attraction would still be there, but there was a little more now—something she couldn't place.

It felt like the little intimate flicker she'd sensed as she was drifting off to sleep, hearing his voice as the last thing she heard last night.

Amelia blinked.

Shit. No. She wasn't falling for him.

Couldn't.

"Yes," she repeated more firmly.

Keeping her art from him was just a safeguard to not let him fully into her heart. Plus, if he did think her creations were odd, it would upset her, so she considered it a line in the sand she wouldn't cross.

No matter how much she liked him.

"Then I think I should take you home," Jack said, placing his napkin on his plate as her eyes widened.

That was it?

He didn't want to see her again?

Her heart pounded as Jack stood and held out his hand. Amelia grabbed her handbag and climbed to her feet.

Oh, God.

She didn't want to *never* see him again.

Had she been too rash?

Then Jack added. "So that I can enjoy every inch of you while I am still in town."

She forced a smile on her face, shocked at how much that brief moment of confusion had affected her.

Jack leaned down, pressing his nose into her hair. "Every inch, Amelia."

Yes, please.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

After dropping them back at Amelia's, Jack had Abe deliver his shopping back to his house, then gave him the night off. It was an assumption on his part, but he had no intention of leaving Amelia...or her bed.

With her in it.

He had to admit, their conversation over lunch still bothered him, but he wasn't sure he had any grounds to disagree with her.

They both lived in different states and had gone into this almost with an unspoken agreement that it wasn't heading anywhere serious.

Hadn't they?

He wasn't sure.

Did Amelia not see him as a worthy partner in life? He tried to ignore his pride, his ego, but it wasn't pleasant.

Still, he wasn't that easy to scare off.

Not when it came to a woman of her worth.

He liked her. He liked the way she fit under his arm when they walked. He liked how she pressed her fingers into his arm as a way of communicating and smiled up at him when they were out.

He liked the way she arched her mouth and formed an oval as she came.

He liked her quick, smart mind and annoyingly clever sense of humor.

He liked that she didn't need him, but still, he had this crazy urge to protect her and... fuck.

Make her his.

Jack had been married before, but it hadn't felt like this. His first wife had been his college sweetheart. It had been assumed that after they'd been together a number of years, he

and Becky would marry. Especially as he was planning to run for senator.

He hadn't disagreed, so he'd proposed, and everyone had been excited and happy.

Not for long.

With Amelia, Jack felt this urgency only addicts could understand. He needed more. The idea of not seeing her every day made him a little angsty.

Yeah, he was definitely addicted.

Finding out she didn't feel the same...yeah, he was calling bullshit on that. Like everyone, Jack figured she'd had her heart broken, but Jack wanted to prove her theories wrong.

Wait. What was he doing?

Did he honestly think Amelia was the woman for him? Was he ready to get married again? Have a wife? A family?

Shit.

Cindy and all the issues surrounding her came flooding back like a nasty rash. The last thing he wanted was for Amelia to know about this. Jack wasn't sure where things were headed between them, but if he had his way, they would keep seeing each other. Amelia already felt like she was an important part of his future.

Their future.

God, please let this baby not be mine.

He had to ring that security company and get a defense in order if it got out of hand. Darren had been right.

Jack sat on the sofa as Amelia mixed them a drink. A surprise, she said. The electric fire had warmed the room up nicely, so he removed his sweater and kicked off his shoes, rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"Here we go," Amelia said, handing him a hot mug.

"Eggnog?" he laughed.

"Try it before you judge." She pouted.

Jack took a sip, enjoying the festive flavors, and then it hit him. “Holy hell, this is more whisky-nog than eggnog.”

“Macallan, of course,” she grinned, sinking into the cushions.

God, she looked adorable in her jeans and woolen sweater, those bare feet and painted red toes. Jack tugged her feet up onto his lap and glanced around. “This is a beautiful home. Large for one person. Are you planning to have a family at some point?”

When she didn’t answer, he glanced down at her.

“I don’t know if I want kids.” Amelia chewed her lips. “Unpopular opinion, I know, but I just don’t have that maternal pull.”

Jack was surprised but respected her choice. Not every woman had to have children. That was an outdated point of view.

“Just another reason to tick me off your list.” She smiled.

“Why?” he frowned.

“Surely someone in your position is expected to marry and have a family. Tick all the public profile boxes,” Amelia explained. “I’m sure the media would hound you.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong about that last part. But the media would find anything to interrogate someone like him over, so that was no reason to do anything. Sure, there were certain rules he had to follow. Going out on a blinder was off the table unless he wanted to end up in the tabloids, but he’d grown out of that pretty quickly in law school.

“You make a lot of assumptions, Ms. Dufort,” he said, leaning forward and placing his mug on the glass designer coffee table. “Maybe I don’t want children?”

“Do you?”

“I don’t know. If it happened, I’d be the best father I could,” Jack replied.

“If your shopping selections are anything to go on, I’m not sure.” Amelia sipped her eggnog and smirked.

Jack laughed and undid the top button of her jeans. “Keep a hold of that drink.”

“Wait, no stop. I’ll drop it.”

“Nope, I want your hands busy,” he said, tugging the denim past her bare feet and kneeling on the floor, throwing one of her legs over his shoulder. “Wide apart, gorgeous.”

“I need to put this down. Jack!”

“Nope.” He moved her lacy black panties to the side and slid his tongue across her pink flesh.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Amelia moaned.

His fingers joined the party as he parted her, more loving how trapped she was balancing the hot drink. Glancing up at her body as his tongue flicked at her clit, Jack watched the frustration on her face.

“This feel good, sweetheart?”

“Yes, shit, Let me—”

“No,” he sucked on the hard nub, and she cried out, pressing her hips into his face. “Patience, beautiful.”

Moving the lace more, Jack slid two fingers inside her pussy and continued sucking, watching as she came apart around him.

“Ohgodohgod, Jack, I’m going to drop this.”

“Control, Amelia.” He smirked, speeding up his tongue and fingers as they sucked, licked, and fucked her. Pressing against the sofa, his cock was hard and ready. It wanted inside her silky channel to claim her, own her, and fill her.

Him.

Only him.

The idea of some other man having his mouth on her swollen flesh was not acceptable.

Not today.

Not when he left.

Minute by minute, he was choosing this woman as his own.

“Jack, oh, Jack, please,” she cried, trembling with need, and he knew if she came, that drink was going to spill everywhere.

Removing the hand holding her thighs apart, Jack took the mug and placed it on the table.

“Now, come on my mouth, sweetheart. Come hard.” He slid his hand under her top and found her nipple pinching it as she began to writhe and toss her head back.

“Shit,” she cried.

“That’s it, what a good pussy,” he growled, lapping at her eagerly.

Then she fell apart.

He swirled his tongue around, tasting her full pleasure, then tugged her panties off.

Next, he removed his jeans. Fuck the rest of it. Jack needed his cock inside her right damn now. Dropping over her, his hand landing on the sofa, he fisted his cock and lined it up.

“Thirty hours. That’s how long it’s been since I was last inside you. Way too fucking long.” He moaned, his eyes closing as he slid inside her hot, wet pussy. “Too long.”

“Oh, Jack, my god.” Amelia gripped his arms, then slid her own around his neck. “How does this feel so good?”

“No idea, but I’m fucking you every day before I leave. That I’m not negotiating on,” he said as he pulled back and then thrust back in again.

“Deal.”

He grabbed her ass and tugged her further down the sofa, getting a better angle, and began a rhythmic movement which had them both moaning their pleasure.

Jack wasn’t sure he’d ever get enough of her.

“Feel my cock,” he rasped. “Feel me filling you with my thick, hard cock.”

“Yes,” she moaned. “Fuck me, Jack.”

Jesus.

He sat up, tugging her to him, then pulled her onto his knee as he sat.

“Ride me, Amelia,” Jack ordered as she lowered onto his dick like a pro. “Fuck, that’s deep. Fuck.”

“Yes, oh Christ,” she said, digging her nails into his shoulders and lifting up and down.

His hands went to her waist, then ripped off her top. Her lace-covered breasts began to bounce, and he leaned, sucking over the material as she clenched his cock tightly.

Fuck, he was close.

He gripped her hips and ground her into him.

“Tighter, faster. I’m going to blow, sweetheart.”

“It’s too much. Oh, God. Jack,” she cried.

His cock thrust up into her, slamming harder as that golden feeling wound its way through his body to his cock and finally exploded.

“Yes, fuck, Amelia.”

His sperm burst from him, filling her as she threw her head back, her hips still stroking his cock in her warm core.

She collapsed on his chest moments later, and Jack kissed the top of her head. “Direct me to your bedroom, sweetheart. We’re just getting started.”



AMELIA PRESSED HER hand against the headboard as Jack slammed into her from behind. She was on her side, her leg lifted over his as he held her vibrator to her clit.

“Oh, oh, oh, oh, god,” she said for the hundredth time this afternoon.

She wasn't sure if four orgasms were normal, but it was safe to say it wasn't for her.

Four.

And her body now seemed to be in this permanently aroused state where she couldn't get enough of Jack and his cock and never wanted him to stop.

“Keep going. I want to hear one more scream.” He said, circling the sex toy slowly, painfully teasing.

“Jack, fuck!”

“Come on, sweetheart, my cock can feel you gripping it. Oh yes, fuck like that. Shit, I'm going to come again.”

And he did.

Hot jets filled her, sending her over the edge. Her brain short-circuited once more as she clenched, her eyes closed and pleasure flowed through her. Then he pulled out and pushed her to her back and began sucking on her nipples. One and then the other, and back again.

“You taste like Christmas. Spicy and sweet,” he said, drifting down her body. “Especially this bit.”

His mouth was back on her clit, lazily teasing his tongue over it as he stared up at her with those big, sexy eyes of his.

Then he grabbed the toy and slid it back inside her.

“Let me watch as you fuck it,” Jack rasped, moving it in and out of her as he switched it to vibrate.

She was a bunch of jellied limbs, his to command and do with as he pleased.

“Play with your nipples,” he ordered.

“I can't move my arms,” Amelia said, and he laughed.

“Shall I stop?”

“Yes. No,” she quickly amended as he removed the toy. Then he replaced it with his cock. “How are you hard again?”

“Have you seen you?” he asked, kissing her in five different places on her face.

Then, he took her mouth, and they lazily lapped at one another as he moved in and out of her.

“I’m not going to come again. I just want as much as I can get,” Jack added, his hand palming the headboard above them.

Amelia took in his beautiful chest, his skin a golden hue with well-formed solid muscles and a dusting of hair. She ran her fingers over it and across his shoulders, then down to his biceps.

She loved how dominant Jack was in the bedroom, but also a lover who took care of how much pleasure he gave. It was the perfect balance, and it was safe to say she had never been so stimulated or aroused.

Four orgasms.

Jesus.

“We have two weeks,” she smiled. “Pace yourself.”

Although she was starting to feel like those two weeks were going to fly and she’d be holding on to the time as much as he was.

She just wasn’t going to voice it.



CHAPTER TWELVE

For the next five days, Jack went between Amelia's house and his mom's. Most of it, if he was honest with Amelia.

The day after they'd been shopping, he had called Josh Black from Black Hawke Security and told him his dilemma.

"I need this to remain highly confidential," he'd said to the man.

"Don't offend me, senator. We have more high-profile clients than you on our books. We will get the job done. If she has fucked someone else, we'll know. If she's lying, we'll find out. If she's planning to blackmail you, I'll ring you with all the details," Black had said.

He hadn't been expecting that response, but if they were as good as Darren said, then it made sense.

And it had put his mind at ease.

The guy wasn't a kiss-ass, which was good. He wasn't looking for that. He wanted someone to get the job done, and it sounded like he'd found the right people.

"Good. I'll send her details," Jack responded.

"No need. I have them up already," Josh said.

Jesus.

Jack didn't ask how. However, it did hint at the guy having access to government information. Cindy was a U. S government employee.

Fuck it.

He needed answers.

"We'll get back to you ASAP. Likely before Christmas, but it takes as long as it takes."

"Got it," Jack replied.

Now, it was Christmas Eve, and he was pulling on skates and ignoring Amelia's taunts that he was going to ass over and

make a fool of himself.

It was possible, but he was pretty good at this the last time he tried.

Years ago.

He sat up and glanced at her.

“You look ridiculous.” He shook his head.

“Thank you for the compliment, senator.” She poked her tongue out. “But the media has already taken two photos of you, and you’ve done three selfies.”

News that he was in town was out, and he’d had one crew do a live broadcast before he met her at the rink. But still, the blonde wig she was wearing was ridiculous, yet sort of sexy.

“Where did you get that, anyway?”

“Amazon.” She shrugged. “Look, if my family finds out we’re dating, you will consider the media child’s play.”

“I can handle them,” he said, standing and wishing he could kiss her.

“You might. I cannot,” she said. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Jack skated onto the ice behind Amelia, who took off spinning and showing off. After a few wobbles, he found his feet, and then they were gliding smoothly around the rink together.

“I’m impressed,” she said.

“I told you I loved this place.” Jack winked, relieved he hadn’t fallen yet.

They dodged a few kids being idiots, and as the sun began to fall lower in the sky and the lights around them began to flicker, Jack grabbed Amelia’s mitten-clad hand and squeezed it.

She gave him a little smile.

“Take those glasses off.” He teased.

“No,”

“Can you actually see anything?”

“Ah...no,” Amelia said and then laughed. “So please don’t let go.”

Jack chuckled and steered them towards the gate. A couple of yards from the exit, two teens came flying in front of them, and the momentum created a series of events he’d look back on one day and be thankful for.

But not today.

It happened so fast.

Jack arched back and began to topple. Except he didn’t let go of Amelia and she began to cry out as she tugged his hand. He reached for her as she reached for him, and the two crashed to the ground together.

Jack on top of Amelia.

“You, okay?” he asked, knowing his knee was going to be bruised as it hurt like a motherfucker.

Big eyes stared back at him as she nodded. “Winded, I think.”

He smiled. “I really want to kiss you.”

“Do. Not.”

Jack glanced over his shoulder.

Abe was standing near the gate looking concerned, and then when he saw his face and realized they were okay, he took a step back.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Jack, I’m warning you.”

“How did your glasses stay on? Do you have them super-glued to your face?” He laughed.

“Get up. Get off me. If someone takes a photo of—”

He didn’t care. Amelia was so fucking adorable there was no way he wasn’t kissing her right now. Jack slammed his mouth down on hers and kissed the life out of her.

This had been one of the best weeks of his life. He'd made love, laughed, talked until dawn, watched Amelia sleeping, and helped her cook while playing, running his hands over her. Apparently, that wasn't helping.

She still wouldn't show him her artwork, but the barriers around her heart were melting. Little by little.

When he was at his mom's, they were texting each other. When they were together watching a show, they stared at each other, ignoring the TV.

Jack was pretty sure this was called falling in love, even if neither of them had planned it.

"Senator," Abe called out.

Shit.

Jack released her mouth, knowing what that warning meant. Abe had been his private security for years. He knew his tone.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"I'm not sorry," he said as Amelia caught her breath. "I will kiss you every day for the rest of my life if you let me. But right now, we need to get out of here."

"Damn you, Jack Rutherford. You are insane," Amelia said as Jack pulled off his jacket and covered her face.

Helping her stand, they skated to the gate, where a couple of mainstream media cameras were clicking away. Abe stood in their way as he opened the gate and lifted his arm to guide Jack and Amelia through.

"Senator, who is the lucky lady?" one journalist called out.

"Can we get your name?" another asked.

"How long has this romance been going on for?"

"Is it serious?"

"Will there be a proposal?"

Jesus.

Then they crunched their way out of the park and out to his waiting car. When Amelia pulled her glasses off and glared at him, he rubbed his jaw and smiled.

“Still not sorry,” he said, leaning forward and kissing her again.

“You should. You’re going to have to deal with that.” Amelia slapped his arm.

“I have people.”

“I have big, and I mean big, brothers.”

“Sweetheart, you might have noticed I’m not a small guy, and I’m a senator.” Jack laughed.

Abe let out a snigger from the front seat.

“And you are just as arrogant as them.” She flopped into the leather and pulled off her wig.

His phone beeped.

Help. The ladder just fell and gave me a heart attack.

The hell?

“Excuse me,” Jack said, pushing send. His mom answered. “First, tell me you are joking about the heart attack.”

“What? Oh, yes, of course I am. I’m not that old,” she replied. “But it fell down suddenly with a crash, and I nearly... well, not nearly, but it gave me a big fright. It’s Christmas Day tomorrow. Everyone is coming over. Can you come by and fix it, darling?”

Jack glanced at Amelia.

He didn’t want to lose a minute with her, but tomorrow they would be spending it with their families. Separately.

“I’ll be over in twenty minutes,” he said, then leaned forward, speaking to the driver. “We need to head over to my mom’s.”

As he rerouted, Amelia sat upright. “What?”

“It’s fine. She’ll make you a hot cocoa while I fix her ladder.” Jack smiled, taking her hand.

“Hire a handyman. Hell, I’ll pay for it. I’m not meeting your mom.” Amelia looked panicked.

He laughed, wrapping an arm around her. “No, and no. It’s Christmas Eve, and it will take me ten minutes. Don’t worry, she won’t try to marry us.”

“That’s not...”

“It is.”

“No. I just look a mess and I’m sure she doesn’t want me there.”

“You’re important to me. She wants you there,” Jack said. Then his voice lowered. “Just do this for me, please.”

Her eyes softened, and he watched her melt, relaxing into him. “Fine. For you.”

Jack took her lips and kissed her for a really long time as the car rushed through the traffic.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

S *hit.*

Meeting Jack's mom was not part of the deal. Amelia was pretty sure meeting the family was not how holiday flings usually went.

Then again, nor did getting photographed by the media while on a romantic date. She was crossing her fingers that nobody recognized her. The wig was bad; she knew that, but it might save her.

Still, she was more worried about meeting Jack's mom right now. The last thing she wanted was to get more involved in his life.

He was amazing. Too amazing, in fact.

She tried every day to find fault with him so when he returned to Washington, she could recite a list of annoying attributes.

So far, she had: he didn't like mushrooms—*can't fall for him*. He wears a suit—*utterly wrong for me*. Prefers horrors to chick flicks—*no way I could fall in love with him*.

And that was it.

Useless.

Amelia had a feeling she was falling, and fast. It had gotten so bad she was even dreaming about him while asleep in his arms.

Ugh.

So annoying.

The truth was, she had no desire to push him away, and when they were apart, she was counting the hours and minutes until they were together again.

Aidan had shown up mid-week, minutes after Jack had left that morning, and asked what she'd been up to.

“Not much. Stuff,” she’d replied, looking as guilty as she felt for lying.

He’d narrowed his eyes. “Either you’ve bought me the worst Christmas present ever this year—outdoing all your other years—or you are seeing someone.”

She huffed at him and walked away. “Well, after that comment, I’m not getting you anything ever again.”

“So it’s a man,” Aidan declared, following her.

Damn, usually Aidan was distracted by gifts. He loved them. He was that kid around the tree who counted the presents to make sure nobody had more than him.

Their mom had worked this out early and always ensured there was one extra, which he delighted in, but it was always a prank gift. Like washing, he’d left lying on the floor. Or a gift voucher for a kiss from their mom. Or their dog.

Every year.

“It’s not a man. I’m just working on my art. The usual.”

Fortunately, Aidan hadn’t stayed long. He and Logan were getting fitted for their wedding outfits, so he’d stolen half the cookies she’d baked the day before with Jack and then left.

Typical.

So she’d kept Jack hidden from her family. Now she was about to meet the Rutherford’s.

“Hey, Mom,” Jack said as they walked inside the house.

“Through here,” his mom called.

Jack smiled at Amelia, tugging her through the house to the kitchen. A woman in her early sixties turned, drying her hands on a tea towel and froze when she saw them.

Or rather her.

Amelia smiled.

“Mom, this is Amelia,” Jack said. “We were skating when you rang, so I figured it was a good time to meet.”

“Oh,”

“Amelia, this is my mom.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Rutherford.” Amelia smiled. “I’m sorry about this. I told Jack it was completely inappropriate to just turn up—.”

“No,” she said, tossing the tea towel and glancing around the room. “It’s so nice to meet you. Call me Debbie. Will you have a cup of coffee or cocoa?”

Amelia smiled and nodded. “Thank you.”

“I’ll go fix the ladder,” Jack said, caressing her back. “Mom, don’t show her any baby photos.”

She inwardly moaned.

This was not a meet the girlfriend, and she didn’t want his mom thinking that it was. But she would and there was nothing Amelia could do about it.

She shot Jack a smile which promised retribution later and he...

Fucking.

Kissed.

Her.

On.

The.

Lips.

“Jack!” she said, pushing at his chest.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I might be old, but I’m not dead. And you should see his sister with her husband. Outright inappropriate sometimes,” Debbie said. “Now they have twins.”

“Two devil spawns.” Jack nodded.

“Stop that. Go fix the ladder,” Debbie said.

“It’s not—” Amelia began.

“Back soon.” Jack smiled, winking at her as she glowered at him.

“Coffee or cocoa?” Debbie asked.

Amelia planted on a smile and turned. “Cocoa, please.”



AN HOUR LATER, AMELIA was sitting in the living room, genuinely smiling as Jack’s mom told her the romantic story of how she met her late husband. Amelia wasn’t for a second going to interrupt the spell the woman was under as she relived the happy time, especially with the love shining in her eyes as she spoke.

Especially as the man had now passed on.

Jack’s dad.

“He wouldn’t take no for an answer,” Debbie said.

Sounds familiar.

“I honestly didn’t think he was my type at all. Too pushy. Too tall. Too loud,” Debbie said. “Nevertheless, two dates later, I found myself daydreaming about him, hoping he would call and ask me out again. Back then, we didn’t have mobile phones. Boys either rang or showed up at your house.”

“Sounds annoying,” Amelia smirked, sipping her drink.

“It could be. But if it was someone you really liked, when you saw their car your heart started pounding and you’d leap up to answer the door.”

Damn.

That sounded very familiar. Her silly, traitorous heart did that every time she opened the door and Jack was on her doorstep. Only he never gave her too long to count her heartbeats before taking her in his beautiful, powerful arms.

“So, you’re dating my son,” Debbie then said, and Amelia nearly choked on her hot drink.

“No. Nothing like that. We are just friends,” Amelia said, wiping her mouth.

“Jack doesn’t bring friends home.”

Crap.

“It was just circumstantial. We were out skating when you messaged,” she explained, taking the napkin she handed her.

“Ahh, I see.” Amelia could tell she didn’t see by the glint in her eyes. “What do you do, Amelia?”

“I’m an artist,” she said, then added. “Not a struggling one.”

Jack’s mother laughed. “I didn’t think you were in those beautiful Louboutin boots.”

Oh.

The woman knows her shoes.

“I would recognize those red soles anywhere.” She laughed.

“Guilty,” Amelia said, wiggling her foot. “These are my favorites.”

“What did I miss?” Jack said, walking in and rolling down his sleeves.

Unfortunately.

He had the sexiest forearms. Coupled with the shine of sweat on his forehead, which he wiped with his arm, Amelia couldn’t take her eyes off him.

Jack glanced at his mom.

Amelia drifted her gaze to the woman and found her grinning at them. Damn. Talk about busted.

Then again, Amelia never said Jack wasn’t pretty to look at. She had said they weren’t dating.

Technically.

Or they wouldn’t be for much longer if she was forced to put a label on it. But that was not a conversation she was having with the man’s mother.

He’s gorgeous and fantastic in bed, but aside from fucking, it’s not going anywhere.

Yup, that wasn't happening.

They stayed for another hour chatting, and Amelia couldn't deny how nice his mother was and how comfortable she made her feel. They had a piece of her homemade Christmas cake before Jack promised to be around early the next morning.

Then they head back towards Amelia's house, knowing the media would slink around his apartment, waiting for a glimpse of the girl he'd been photographed kissing.

"Thanks for coming with me. Mom appreciated meeting you," Jack said.

"Jack, she thinks we're dating."

"We are, sweetheart." He kissed the side of her head.

"For a limited time," Amelia said, leaning into him as the car made its way through the streets.

"When I fly home on the first of January, are you telling me you never want to hear from me again? That you will just forget me and move on?" he asked, grabbing her chin and tilting her face to his.

No. I won't, and I don't know what this means.

"We agreed," she said weakly.

"I'm changing the rules." He gently kissed her lips.

"Jack," she protested weakly, her heart thumping.

"Amelia," he breathed. "Just fucking kiss me."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I can’t eat another thing,” Logan said, leaning back in his chair.

“You should have had your fitting after Christmas Day,” Emma said, kissing his cheek.

Amelia chuckled.

“I’ll have more Turkey,” Aidan said, leaning across the table. “Ames?”

“No thanks. I’m full too,” she replied. “Let me help you clear the table.”

Even though her parents usually had staff to help, they gave them the day off to be with their families on Christmas.

Which meant Amelia, Logan, and Aidan ended up tidying up.

“Leave it,” Christine Dufort said. “There’s no hurry. Now, you two, where will this wedding be held in Hawaii?”

“Not on the damn beach, I hope.” Andrew, their father, groaned.

Emma shot him a look.

Logan draped an arm around her and shot the same dark look at his father. “Thanks for reminding me, Mom. I promised to call our cousins in New York.”

Amelia frowned. “How is that related?”

“Daniel has a venue on Maui. He thinks they’ll like it.” Aidan explained.

“It sounds amazing.” Emma sighed.

“Don’t go owing them any favors,” Andrew warned. The rift between him and his brother, Daniel’s father, was well known.

All of them—as in the cousins - had just reunited when their grandmother died, and they had promised each other they

wouldn't let Jonathan or Andrew Dufort divide them again.

"Enough, Dad," Logan said firmly.

Out of all of them, Logan was the one best able to stop their dominant father when he got out of hand. Aidan was no wallflower, but the two always seemed to butt heads, whereas, with Logan, their father seemed to pull back.

She had no idea why.

"Leave the room if you like," Logan added, pulling out his phone. "But I'm calling them now so we can all wish them Merry Christmas."

"Video call them so we can put it on the big screen and get everyone in view," Aidan said, standing to turn the TV on.

"We'll leave you kids to chat with each other," Christine said. "Take some of those plates, Andrew."

"Why the hell did we give the staff a day off?" He grumbled, and Amelia shared an eye-roll with Aidan.

The screen lit up, and their cousins came into view on the eighty-inch screen.

"Daniel Dufort."

"Merry Christmas!" Harper waved behind him. "You knew who it was. Just say Merry Christmas."

Amelia, Emma, Aidan, and Logan all grinned as Daniel shook his head and said, "Jesus. Merry Fucking Christmas."

"What's up?" Fletcher said, walking into view.

"Ahh, hi, guys!" Kristen waved and plonked down onto the sofa. Olivia, Hunter, Jackson, and Addison joined her.

Amelia waved. "Oh my god, it's so good to see you all. Merry Christmas."

Amelia loved seeing them all and knowing their family was expanding.

"Next year, we should all be together," Olivia said, holding Baxter, her newborn, against her chest and patting his back.

“Let’s do it. Christmas in the Hamptons,” Aidan said. “What do you think, Fletch?”

“Done. Book it in,” Fletcher replied.

Amelia watched Emma lean against Logan and smile. The two had fallen in love there, so Fletcher’s Hamptons mansion was a special place for them.

“Maybe there will be another wedding.” Hunter smiled and glanced down at Addison.

“Oh, would you stop taunting us!” Harper cried and Amelia laughed.

“Give it up, Harp. He will only ask me when you stop pushing.” Addison laughed. “I’m pretty sure you care more than me.”

“I do,” Harper moped. “Just ask Hunt, come on.”

“Nope,” Hunter said with a pop and lifted a glass of what could only be Macallan to his lips.

Addison giggled.

“Speaking of weddings,” Logan said. “How did you go speaking to your buddy in Maui?”

Daniel reached for his phone. “Sending the details now. He said it’s all yours.”

Logan’s phone beeped, and both Emma and Amelia clambered to look over his shoulder. He lifted his head.

“Ladies, space.”

“Holy shit,” Emma said, grabbing the phone out of his hand and holding it so Amelia could see. “We’ll take it.”

Daniel smirked. “I thought you’d say that, so I told him to send me the bill. Consider it my wedding gift.”

“Dan. You serious?” Logan asked, surprised.

Amelia glanced between them and then back down at the screen as Emma flicked from photo to photo. The Maui beachfront mansion was gorgeous—the views uninterrupted and perfect for a Dufort wedding.

“Thank you so much,” Emma said with a tear in her eye. “It’s beautiful.”

Harper squealed and clapped her hands.

“Thank you, Daniel. Honestly.” Logan’s voice was thick with emotion.

She felt her own throat tighten. Not just in happiness for her brother, but because it was so incredible to have her cousins back in their life. She had been a toddler when the fight between their fathers happened, but to know they’d missed out on knowing each other as kids was devastating.

They were making up for it now.

But something else had triggered her. Would she ever get married? Would she ever fall in love and know the happiness that almost all her siblings and cousins now did?

As if on cue, the two missing - Blake and Jacob—walked into the room. They’d been at their moms and maternal grandmothers for lunch. Now it was time for their annual post-Christmas lunch movie-thon. Then they’d have leftovers for dinner.

“Hey!” Blake said, looking at the screen. “Holy shit, it’s all of you.”

Fletcher laughed. “Hey, Blake. Jacob.”

“What’s up?” Jacob said, leaning against the sofa.

They all chatted for another forty minutes before saying farewell. They’d all be together in Hawaii soon for Logan and Emma’s wedding.

She couldn’t wait.

“Right. What are we watching?” Aidan asked, clicking the screen off.

“Christmas movies!” Emma cried.

Blake said, “Something with some action.”

Oh boy.

Amelia slipped out of the room, knowing it was a losing battle and trying to choose a movie all of them would like, and she sent Jack a text.

Merry Christmas. Again. xx

*I plan to show you just how merry you make me. Again.
xx*

Amelia's thighs clenched as she anticipated his talented mouth on her again, knowing she wouldn't be disappointed.

She was falling hard.

Jack was right. Saying goodbye felt like it was going to be impossible.

And maybe she didn't want to.

Amelia headed back into the living room to find Independence Day playing.

"Hey, did you see Senator Rutherford was caught kissing the pants off some girl in LOVE PARK?" Jacob laughed, kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

Shit.

"Good on him." Aidan snorted and Amelia nearly choked on her own saliva. Fucking hell. He wouldn't be saying that if he knew whose pants they were talking about.

"Some blonde. She looked hot," Blake said, turning up the volume.

Kill me now.

She sat down on the sofa and slunk into the cushions, counting the hours until she could leave.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jack carried the last dish into his mom's kitchen and then turned, resting his hip against the sink.

"I'm really upping my revenge game now," Lucy said as she followed him. "Those were cruel gifts. Cruel."

Jack grinned. "Just remember, if you send it to Capitol Hill, it could be considered a terrorist attack."

Lucy snorted.

"I'll make sure it's clear who it's attention to. They'll let it through."

"I'll visit you in prison," he countered.

Lucy crossed her arms and tried not to laugh.

"Who's going to prison?" His mom asked as she joined them.

"Lucy just threatened a United States Senator," Jack said and couldn't help the laugh that escaped.

"Look how happy he is. Amelia is such a lovely girl."

Oh crap.

"Wait. Who is Amelia?" Lucy's face lit up. "Is she the blonde from the photo? I thought it was staged."

Jack's brows dipped. "Why would I stage something like that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. PR. Isn't that what celebs do?"

Oh, my god. "I'm not a celebrity. I'm a...never mind. No, it wasn't staged, and that visit was supposed to be a secret."

"Was it?" his mom asked, surprised, as Lucy ran out of the room looking for her phone, yelling she was going to work out who the mystery girl was.

"Well, only from Lucy. I swear she will sell me out to the media."

“Maybe you should stop taunting your sister.”

He considered it for a moment.

“Nope. Can’t do that,” Jack said, “It’s my life’s work.”

His mom laughed as she opened the dishwasher and began stacking the plates. “You are happier, though, Jack. And Amelia is just lovely.”

She was more than lovely.

She was stunning. Funny. Sexy as fuck. And he was falling madly in love with her. Jack was fairly sure Amelia felt the same way.

But he also knew she was fighting it.

“She’s incredible,” he admitted. “Her life is here though, mom. I’m not sure she will move.”

While she had kept him away from her family, it was clear they were important to her, so he’d have to be the love of her life to detach her from Philadelphia.

Until he heard her say the three words he was dying to say to her, Jack wasn’t confident he would leave the Birthplace of America next week with a commitment from her.

But he was going to try.

“Love always finds a way, darling. Blood is thick, but true love is thicker.”

“She’s a Dufort, Mom,” Jack said. “Wealthy, successful, and you know how loyal that family is to one another.”

His mom walked over to him and laid a hand on his arm. “You’ve never questioned yourself before. Don’t start now. You have much to offer a woman. I know things didn’t work out with Becky, but I didn’t think she was the one for you.”

His eyes flew wide open.

“You are kidding, right?” Jack gasped. “I thought you loved her, and it was expected.”

“Maybe Becky and her family did. Your father and I never thought she was your soul mate.”

Jesus

Jack rubbed his jaw and thought about why he'd never had this conversation ten fucking years ago.

Not that he regretted marrying her. It felt right enough at the time. He cared deeply for her, and they had been happy for a while.

Although Becky had never got his heart racing as Amelia did.

She had been an amazing support when he ran his campaign, being more like a best friend than the sparks he had with the woman he was dying to race home to now.

Was that all it was, though? A spark that would eventually die out.

It was tempting to write it off as just that, but when they were cuddled up on the sofa or, after physically exhausting one another, they softly chatted and teased one another. No man would ever admit it out loud, but those moments were even more intimate between them.

He felt closer to her even despite the walls she kept up.

They were pretty pathetic walls right now. Jack had a feeling he could step right over them, but he respected her.

She would drop them when she was ready.

He was still coming to grips with how he felt, anyway.

And in the background, hoping this pregnancy threat with Cindy would disappear.

"Seeing you with Amelia, now that was something," his mom said. "That girl had heart eyes for you."

A smile crept onto his lips.

He knew exactly what she meant. Jack had caught Amelia watching him on occasion and, of course, he knew she was highly attracted to him, but these moments were different. It was as if she was trying to imagine her life with him.

God, he wanted the opportunity to show her how it could be.

He had ideas but was too weary yet to voice them. Especially as he stood by what he'd just told his mom. As a Dufort, pulling her from the family fold might be a challenge.

But Jack loved a challenge.

And he was starting to think he was in love with Amelia.

Every single inch of her. Her sexy body, big heart, dry sense of humor and creative spirit.

He glanced down and saw his mom watching him as he got lost in his thoughts.

“Oh, darling. My boy is in love.” She shrugged her shoulders up, all excited.

“I think I am,” Jack confessed. “Except it’s so fast, Mom. She’s not ready.”

Plus, he still hadn’t heard anything from Josh Black. He was keen to hear what they had learned about her. Darren replied that Cindy was not answering his messages requesting proof of the pregnancy, which left him wondering what that meant.

Was she lying then when he hadn’t immediately folded and decided to give up the act?

Or did she have something else planned? That was his greatest worry. The Cindy he knew was professional and reasonably intelligent. Then again, she had surprised him that night.

Jack had written it off to an attraction between two adults after a few late-night drinks while working. Never to be repeated.

Both of them were as dumb for doing it.

But he didn’t think she was cunning enough to blackmail him, even though he felt backed into a corner. Something didn’t add up.

While Amelia was worried about the media and her family recognizing her in the photo, he was concerned Cindy would react.

Something he'd stupidly not thought about in the moment.

But fuck it. That moment would have been lost to them if he'd not taken it, so he wasn't going to regret it. Amelia was his priority.

If he could just understand what she truly wanted and get confirmation the pregnancy was real, then prove it wasn't his—hopefully—then he could put this away and never expose Amelia to a side of him he wasn't proud of.

One poor decision.

"Give her time," his mom said, walking back to the dishwasher. "If it's meant to be, it will be."

He hoped she was right.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Jack got his answer. In the form of a text message.

How dare you go public with another woman when you have an unborn child back home waiting to be acknowledged?

Jack stared at the message, his blood turning cold. Who the hell did she think she was dictating his life to him?

Something felt so off about this, and the dread he was carrying around just got heavier.

What do you want, Cindy?

Meet with me and acknowledge the baby.

It was like he could feel the lie while reading the message on his screen. Why did he need to meet with her? Why couldn't they have a normal and calm discussion about this? She had been sharp and defensive the last time they spoke.

Then give my lawyers your physician details and get ready to do the test in January. Then, if it is, we'll talk.

Until then, he wouldn't be spoken to like this or manipulated.

Jack, just admit what happened. Do I need to go to the media?

Fury tore through him.

Is that a threat?

When she didn't reply, he texted again.

Who's child is it, Cindy?

Fuck you, Jack. If you don't acknowledge it as yours, you will regret it.

Woah. He screenshot the messages and sent them to both Darren and Josh.

Seeing him with Amelia had triggered something, but he knew Cindy wasn't in love with him, and how could she expect him to accept the baby was his without proof?

It was insane.

She was being insane.

Jack cursed and wished they didn't have to wait so long for this test. He was confident the baby wasn't his—if it even existed.

Why the hell would she be doing this?

The timing was terrible. He was falling in love with Amelia and wanted to bring her into his world. But not with this hanging over his head.

She needs to be contained. He added in another text to Darren.

I'll contact her again and tell her all communications must come through me. Darren responded.

Jack wasn't sure it was going to be enough.

Cindy was acting unhinged. Pregnancy hormones, maybe, but his instincts said it was more than just that.



TWO HOURS LATER, WHEN Amelia opened her front door, Jack kicked it shut, and they both fell into each other's arms.

"I missed you," she said into his chest.

"Me too," Jack said, breathing in all of her.

Then he tugged something out of his pocket and held it up.

"Jack," Amelia gasped, taking in the two-carat teardrop diamond charm hanging from the gold chain. "It's beautiful."

"For a beautiful woman. Turn around," Jack said.

Amelia lifted her hair, pulling it over her shoulder as she spun.

Clasping it, Jack kissed her neck and down her shoulder. Then nibbled her ear before giving her very clear instructions.

"I want all these clothes off, and you spread out on your bed with just the diamond lying between your gorgeous breasts."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next few days went by in a flash. They made love and hid away from the world now that the media was trying to catch Jack with his mystery woman.

AKA her.

It was two days before New Year's Eve, and Amelia thought Jack seemed restless as if something was bothering him.

She wondered if it was the same thing she had on her mind. That she was madly and deeply in love with him.

She'd tried to fight it, coming up with a million excuses—she'd even rung Stella and told her she was Ice-skate Girl as the media had penned her. Stella was happy for her.

“I think I'm falling in love with him,” Amelia confessed.

“Okay, hold the bus. This isn't the first time I've heard you say this,” Stella replied.

Which was a fair thing to say. But given he was exactly the sort of man she swore she would never date, let alone fall for, Amelia was a little bewildered and thought maybe this time it was different.

Then she began to sabotage and wonder if he was entirely wrong for her.

Maybe Jack was too perfect. Maybe the Christmas festivities and all the carol singing were getting to her, and they were just living in this fake bubble of romance that would burst at any minute.

But she really felt like this time it could be different.

Maybe it could even last forever.

“This feels different. I can't explain how. Jack makes me feel like I'm the only woman in his universe. Like I'm a precious diamond. Like I'm...”

The one.

The one for him, just as he is for me.

Was there just one person for everyone?

Before she'd met Jack, she had started to think the whole happy-ever-after loving, unconditional thing was total rubbish.

Even though her family was filled with happy couples, she had cynically wondered if they had fast-forwarded ten years, how many of them would still be together?

No one could ever accuse her of being Cupid.

Now, after spending nearly two weeks with Jack, Amelia never dreamed she could be this happy.

The sex was amazing, but it was the times in between when they were doing mundane things like brushing their teeth side by side in her bathroom or just lying beside one another, gazing into each other's eyes. She felt stupidly happy and never wanted to be apart from him.

He never ran from her.

He never shut down.

He never disconnected.

Jack wasn't shy about letting her know how he felt, and she was pretty sure he was feeling as deeply about her as she was about him. But he hadn't said the three little words. They hung in the air like led balloons and she was dying for him to say them.

And yet, she was scared as hell.

What did it mean if he did? Or if she did?

Would she move to Washington? Would he want her to? Could she leave her family?

The truth was, with Jack, Amelia felt like she could do anything.

And she knew her friends and brothers would say he was just another guy she'd rushed into things with, and he wasn't good enough.

Stella had told her to take it slow in the end.

Perhaps she was right, but every cell in her body wanted to keep this man forever.

Now, as she lay on the Moroccan Wool rug in front of her fireplace and Jack lazily lifted her sweater and wrapped his mouth around her nipple, Amelia moaned and wished time would stop.

“Let’s get these off,” Jack said, tugging down her leggings. Then taking his own clothes off.

As the fire flickered, casting a reflection on his beautiful, wide chest, she lay there playing with her diamond.

“Fuck, you are stunning,” Jack said, lifting her arms overhead and tying them with her leggings.

Her Lululemon leggings.

Eh, she’d buy some more if they got damaged. He was worth it.

“What are you doing?” she asked, following his hands with her eyes.

“Taking full control.” Jack kissed her mouth, then moved further up her body as he fisted his cock. “Open this sexy mouth for me, sweetheart.”

Oh, God.

Fire shot to her core as she flattened her tongue while he guided himself into her mouth. The bareness of her untouched and exposed lower half was almost seductive in itself.

She needed him to touch her and yet his cock inside her mouth while her arms remained bound had her body thrumming.

“Yes, fuck,” Jack moaned as she closed her mouth around him. Then he lifted her head and began to move. She was tied, unable to do anything but fuck his cock with her mouth as she sucked and circled him with her tongue.

It was hot as hell.

Still, pussy was crying out for touch.

“Yes, yes, yes, fuck you, make me hot,” Jack growled as he sped up. “Take me down your throat.”

Fuck.

His hand landed on the rug beside her face as he thrust deeper. Amelia was sure she was going to blank out as she moaned and gagged around his thick cock.

“That’s it, baby, holy shit. Yes,”

After a few more thrusts, Jack pulled out and, maneuvering, he shifted while he stroked his cock, then came over her tits.

“Mine,” He rasped, their eyes connecting. “You are mine, Amelia. Understand?”

Panting, she watched Jack mark her, staking his claim, and she wanted to tell him yes. But the words wouldn’t come.

Then he moved again, lifting her legs over his broad shoulders, and consumed her pussy in one hungry mouthful.

“Yes, eat me, Jack.” She begged.

“Mine,” he growled, swirling his tongue around her clit, then through her wet folds. “Tell me I’m yours, Amelia,”

Demanding eyes lifted to hers from between her legs, making her gasp.

“Jack,” her voice quivered.

“Say it.” He lifted his mouth, leaving her desperate for his touch once more.

Amelia felt fear rush through her as she confessed what they both knew. But it was time to take the next small step.

“Yes,” she cried and, with a predatory growl, he moved fast as lightning and had his mouth over hers, slamming with complete possession.

Untying her wrists, Jack lifted her up into his arms. Amelia wrapped her own arms around his neck while he remained kneeling on the floor.

“Do you mean that?” he asked.

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Really mean it?” he repeated, gripping her hips.

“Yes, Jack. I do.”

“Fuck, I need to be inside you.” He grunted, then lifted her and slid her seamlessly down onto his cock. They both groaned as she sunk deep, taking him in completely.

“Oh, God,” she cried.

“Say it again,” Jack demanded.

“I’m yours,” Amelia cried once more.

Jack worked her over his cock, and she tried to match his speed, but he was in full control of their lovemaking. She clung to his shoulders and tossed her head back and her breasts bounced in complete and utter abandon.

Then, they were both crying out as pleasure roared through them.

“Jesus,” Jack said as they both sat there panting and grinning at each other.

“That was incredible.” She clung to his shoulders and tried to push up on her knees, but he was too big, so Jack lifted her off his cock and lay her on his jeans as his seed leaked out of her.

“Thank you.” She smiled as his lips found hers.

Then he wrapped his arms around her and ran his hand along the side of her face.

“Amelia Dufort, I love you.”

Her breath hitched.

Oh god, he’d finally said it. Her heart swelled and while she was terrified once more of saying those three powerful and magical words, Amelia knew she had to be honest.

And brave.

He might hurt her. He might not.

But she had already fallen.

“I love you too,” she said, tears pooling in her eyes. “I do. I love you.

Jack’s smile reached from ear to ear as he pulled her hard against his body and kissed her deeply and madly.



SHE LOVES ME. AMELIA Dufort fucking loves me. I’m the luckiest man in the world.

Jack watched Amelia sleep as the fire flickered, casting shadows around the large open-plan room.

How did he get so lucky?

If it weren’t for the situation with Cindy, he’d think he was a blessed man.

He wanted Amelia, but he had to wait to truly claim her until he’d cleared up this dirty business. If he could wait.

Jack wasn’t a patient man when it came to Amelia.

Cindy had sent several more messages threatening to expose what he’d done to the media. As someone who worked closely with him, she knew the implications and its seriousness.

He’d countered by saying he had records of his lawyer attempting to get proof of the pregnancy and that the respected Washington attorney would happily stand up in front of cameras and state that.

Since then, she’d gone quiet.

Josh had finally phoned him yesterday.

“What have you got for me?” Jack asked.

“Her boyfriend is back living with her,” Josh replied. “They got back together, as far as we can ascertain, a week after you fucked her.”

Jack cringed at his words.

“Were they even separated?” His legal mind looking for a loophole.

Or rather, the motivation behind this. It would make sense if it was the boyfriend rather than Cindy. Part of him wanted to think she was being manipulated, but she was still just as guilty.

Unless there was a baby. And it was his.

“Hard to know. What we were looking for is other members of the senate she might have been philandering with. So far, there’s no evidence. My next guess is the boyfriend. If he found out Cindy slept with you, he might just want to take advantage of it.”

Jack nodded slowly, even though the man couldn’t see him. “So she could be pregnant?”

“Not sure. If she went to a physician, she must have paid cash. We can’t find any records.”

“Or she did a home test.”

“Possibly,” Josh replied.

“And the boyfriend?”

“Bit of a loser, honestly. David lost his job a few months ago, just before their fight. Then was kicked out of his apartment for not paying rent. He’s got a minimum wage job at a local hardware store but is living off Cindy.”

“So the baby could be his?” Jack surmised.

“If the pregnancy is legit,” Josh said. “Listen, my gut says you need to confront her. Find out what she really wants.”

She wouldn’t answer his fucking questions.

“I’ve tried. She keeps demanding I acknowledge being the father.” Jack groaned, running his hand through his blond hair.

Josh hummed over the line. Then, “This means only one thing. Cindy wants audio proof so she can extort you for money. We’ve ruled out another senate member trying to blackmail you, so it has to be the boyfriend. Do you think she is someone who can be easily coerced?”

Fuck.

Yes. No. Maybe. If so, how the hell did Cindy let this happen? She'd worked for him for years and knew this would destroy her career.

And his.

Had she purposely fucked him so she could do this? Set it up? Or had David discovered she was pregnant and then coerced her into blackmailing him for money?

If so, why hadn't she asked for it yet?

He wanted to fire her damn ass, but that would look bad if this blew up in his face.

Fuck!

"If they go public, you have a much bigger mess."

Exactly.

He knew that.

"So, what are you saying?" Jack asked, hearing a hint of an idea in the man's voice.

"I'm saying you need to make a decision about how you want to deal with this. Time is running out." Josh explained. "I can send in a team to scare them, but it could backfire. Or you could toss some money their way as we say *boo* and show them the *Your Leaving Washington* sign."

Ouch. That was still risky.

"They'd sign a legal document saying they had no grounds to any other claim. And if they go public, we'll show the payout and agreement. It will show her as a money grabber. We'll tell her all this."

But Jack couldn't just ignore the fact she might be telling the truth and one day give birth to his child.

"Give me a couple of days to think about it," Jack had replied.

Now Amelia had said those magical three words.

It changed everything.

If Jack was going to marry Amelia, and he was, then he needed to tie up all his loose ends. Well, he only had one, and that was fucking Cindy. The last thing he wanted was Cindy coming back in a year or a child showing up in fifteen years, breaking her heart.

He loved Amelia so damn much and intended to build a life with her. Right now, it felt like he was walking on a tightrope, and his life was about to topple over.

Turns out, Jack was right.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Amelia was walking on air for the next two days.
I'm in love!

Life with Jack was perfect. They'd said I love you to each other approximately seven hundred times, and she never got sick of hearing it.

Or saying it.

What it meant for their future, she didn't know, but Jack hadn't pushed, and she hadn't asked. It was as if they were both just luxuriating in the blissful love bubble they had created.

Until she woke up on the morning of New Year's Eve and had a sudden epiphany that Jack might propose to her tonight.

Oh, my God.

By the time he left her to spend the day with - and these were his words—his sister and her little satanic maniacs, Amelia was going around in circles.

What if he did?

What if he didn't?

She rang her best friend.

"I think he might, Stella. Just imagine how incredibly romantic it would be," Amelia said into the speaker of her phone as she sketched on her notepad.

"Um. It would." Stella replied cautiously.

"But?"

"Just don't get your hopes up. It's been two weeks," Stella said. "Jack seems like the kind of man who has his feet on the ground. He might want to slow things down now."

"True," Amelia said, chewing the end of her pencil and staring off across the room. "But you should see the necklace

he bought me. It's not practical. Maybe he's a romantic. He *is* romantic."

"That's a gift, babe. Not a commitment for life," Stella said gently.

Amelia sighed. "I know. I guess I'm just in love and getting overly excited."

"Just let it unfold and expect it to happen next New Year when you are living together and have settled into a pattern, knowing you are compatible."

"You're right," Amelia lied. She had a feeling, and it wouldn't budge.

Jack was going to propose.

She knew it in her bones.



JACK SAT IN THE BACK of his car with the blacked-out windows and waited.

It didn't take long for Abe to open the door and the manager of Harry Winston Jewelers to slip in beside him.

"Senator," Donald said.

"Thank you for doing this," Jack said, taking the box from him. "The media are following me everywhere right now."

"Well, that was some kiss," Donald said.

Jack smiled and opened the lid, taking in the four-carat diamond.

Perfect.

"I'll have the documentation emailed to you if you're happy with it, sir," Donald said.

"I am." He pulled out his phone and made the money transfer, tilting his screen to show it was done.

"Let me be the first to say congratulations," Donald said, shaking his hand.

“I appreciate it,” Jack said and waited for the man to hop out.

“Where to next?” Abe said, leaning into the car.

“Home to pack, then we are picking Amelia up at seven,” Jack said, staring at the diamond.

He was flying back to Washington tomorrow but wanted his ring on her finger before he left. Then, they would make plans for their future.

As Abe climbed into the front and directed the driver, Jack messaged Cindy.

I'll be back in town tomorrow. Let's meet and talk.

Five minutes later, she replied.

No, Jack. Just acknowledge the child, and we can discuss the arrangements.

God, she was terrible at this.

Now he knew what she was up to, or as sure as he could be, he had gone back through his messages and seen right through it all. She wanted an admittance, and then she was going to extort money out of him by threatening to go to the media.

Was he worried?

Jesus, yes.

Did he think she would?

Not really. Jack had a feeling the boyfriend was behind this, and taking the steps to face the media was a much bigger move.

Send me proof of the pregnancy, Cindy. Otherwise, I'm calling bullshit. When you return to the office next week, we will go to HR.

If she wanted to make threats, he could throw a few her way. If they spoke to human resources—which he'd never do, but she didn't know that - she'd lose her job and fail to extract *any* money from him.

Jack needed this to be over.

It was starting to take its toll. He'd been having nightmare after nightmare of Amelia seeing Cindy pregnant and it breaking her heart. In one dream, she'd stabbed Cindy, and the media had stood around taking photos. The next one, Cindy was giving birth and shouting at Amelia for stealing her baby daddy.

This had to end.

When she didn't reply, Jack's temper got the better of him and he dialed her number.

"What?" Cindy answered.

"Have you actually been to the doctor to do a test?"

"I did it at home. I know my body."

"Jesus Christ. My lawyer has asked for a proper test result. Then, in January, we will do the paternity test," Jack said. "Go to the goddamn doctor's and send my lawyer the information. Otherwise, I have nothing to say about this."

"Or," Cindy said, and he swore her voice was shaking, "you can just pay me to be quiet."

And there it was.

"Be quiet about what?" Jack challenged.

"The child."

"Right now, I have no proof there is a child. For fuck's sake. Is this coming from your boyfriend? Tell him he needs to research being a better blackmailer." Jack chuckled, feeling anything but amused. "Because if there is, and it's mine, I want to know."

"No!" she cried, and he heard the panic.

Every part of him knew this was bullshit. He'd always known.

"Nonetheless, if you are lying, don't come in to work next week, Cindy."

"Are you firing me?" she asked, aghast.

He almost laughed at the insanity of her shock. Did she really think she could return to work on Monday as if nothing had happened?

“If you are lying, you bet your ass I am,” Jack growled.

“You can’t threaten her job, asshole,” a man’s voice said. “Hang up, babe. Fuck him.”

Jack’s brow shot up.

“Hello, David. I know all about you. You are using Cindy to make some money, aren’t you? Well, asshole, it’s not going to work. Blackmailing a U. S. Senator is a serious offense.”

There was silence for a long moment, and then the line went dead.

Jack rubbed his hand over his face.

At least they were showing their true colors. Unfortunately, he hadn’t recorded the conversation, and he most certainly wouldn’t be asking the office to pull the audio file.

He let out a long sigh.

When he returned to Washington, he was driving over to her house and dragging her to a doctor. Only then would he know the truth.

And soon after that, if there *was* a pregnancy, he would know if it was his. He’d put money on it being David’s.

Then he could put this behind him and carry on with his life.

And marry Amelia.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Amelia ran her hand down the side of her black cocktail dress as Jack guided her through Salut, one of Philadelphia's finest restaurants.

Yes, she had been here before.

No, she had never dined here while the entire restaurant was empty.

Empty wasn't the right word. It was filled with thousands of candles while soft French music played as the lights of Philadelphia shone brightly below them.

"Madam," the server said, pulling out her chair.

Amelia and Jack sat simultaneously smiling at one another as their napkins were placed on their laps.

"The wine list," the man spoke with a French accent and held the list out perfectly center so as not to show favor to either one of them.

"Thank you," Amelia said, taking it and shooting Jack a grin.

"At least I know I'm in expert hands," Jack said, sipping his water.

Warm rolls with lashings of butter arrived as she ordered a bottle of Armand de Brignac Ace of Spade's Gold Champagne NV.

"Perfect. And can I recommend the scallops to start?" the server asked, and Jack nodded in agreement as her eyes lit up.

She loved scallops.

The server smiled and then disappeared.

"Are you sure they will be discreet?" Amelia asked, playing with her diamond necklace.

"Trust me, I made it worth it," Jack said. "No cameras are getting in here; we'll just have to go out the back again when we leave."

Thank goodness.

Amelia knew she had to introduce Jack to her family at some point. Especially now that they were so deeply involved. Except she wanted just a bit more time with him all to herself.

Then she would introduce her brothers and *groan* her father.

If he proposed, they could decide how quickly they would talk to their families together.

“Well, this is divine. An incredible way to end the year,” she said, taking in how gorgeous Jack looked tonight. He wore a crisp black Armani shirt with silver cufflinks and a large watch, which appeared to be a Patek Philippe. She knew men’s watches. Between Aidan and Logan, they both had valuable collections.

Jack watched her with his piercing blue eyes, a hint of a smile left on his lips as he took another sip of water. Love shone from him, and she shivered with happiness. Their feelings had only grown more potent in the past few days, and Amelia was trying not to think about him leaving tomorrow.

She knew it was crazy, but somehow, she couldn’t imagine her life without him now.

It was scary and wonderful.

But there was an edge to Jack tonight that she couldn’t place. Amelia had calmed her expectations to the point where she would be delighted if he proposed but wouldn’t be disappointed if he didn’t.

Stella was right—it was fast.

She’d been living with rose-colored glasses on for two weeks, romanced by this incredible man and happier than she’d ever been.

He made love to her passionately and with the dominance of a man who knew what he wanted, yet always with her pleasure in mind.

Jack was thoughtful, generous, witty, and playful. He was more than she’d ever dreamed was possible in a relationship.

As their starters and champagne arrived, they chatted easily as she pictured what her life would be like in Washington. She'd asked about his house and life there, so she knew a little, but not too much.

"Tomorrow," Jack started, and she nodded far too eagerly.

He smiled.

"If I could stay longer, I would."

"I know." She shrugged.

"Don't do that." Jack frowned. "Leaving you is not going to be easy. I hope you feel the same way."

Amelia took a big sip of her champagne. "Of course I do. The man I have fallen in love with lives one hundred and forty miles away."

He grinned. "You Google that?"

"Google Maps." She dug her fork into a scallop, suddenly feeling less of an appetite. Her eyes lifted. "I don't want you to leave."

His smile faded. "Come with me. Or at least in a week. I have some things to take care of when I get home. However, next weekend, I'll book you a flight."

Or she could fly on Aidan's or Logan's jet.

But she had a deadline to meet for her customer and her brother's wedding in two weeks.

"I can't. Logan is getting married in Hawaii in a few weeks, and I've already lost too many days on this last piece," Amelia said, as the reality of being in a relationship with Jack after tonight began to sink in.

She wasn't going to freak out. They would make this work.

He reached out his hand. "Then, when you get back. I want you with me."

His phone beeped.

“Ignore it,” Jack said, squeezing her fingers. “I can fly back next weekend for two nights, although I’ll have work to do.”

“Okay,” Amelia smiled softly, knowing she’d probably be spending it in her studio. Even so, they’d be together, and it felt like that was important.

Beep.

“We will find a way around this. I promise,” Jack said.

Beep, beep, beep.

“Fuck,” he growled and pulled his phone out, silencing it and turning it upside down on the table.

Amelia let out a little laugh.

“I love you, sweetheart,” Jack said.

“I love you too.” She smiled. “God, it’s going to be horrible without you.”

“One week. I’ve decided. I’ll fly in Friday and out on Sunday,” Jack said firmly.

“Okay.” She felt her eyes tear up.

“Amelia, sweetheart,” Jack started, and her heart began to pound as she took in his serious expression.

Oh, God.

He’s going to ask me.

Yes, my answer is yes.

“Yes, Jack,” she whispered.

“I never dreamed I could feel like this about someone. You make me laugh every day. You make me want to be a better m ___”

Brrrr, brrrr, brrrr. His phone vibrated on the table.

She frowned down at it.

“Dammit. Give me a second. This sounds urgent,” Jack said, giving her a loving smile as he lifted it. “Stay right there.”

“Okay,” she grinned. Amelia was happy to wait two more minutes. It was apparent he was asking her to marry him.

Oh, my God.

Jack Rutherford is going to be my husband.

He’s the one.

The. One.

Jack stared at the screen, and she watched his face drop.

Then pale.

He kept staring at it. For nearly a minute, he sat there as an icy dread filled her.

Something was wrong.

Amelia watched his Adam’s Apple bounce as he swallowed hard. Then his eyes met hers.

“Jack?”

They stared at one another over the table for so long she began to feel physically ill.

“What’s happened? Is it your mom?” she rasped.

“Amelia...” he started, and her heart slammed inside her chest.

“Tell me.”

Was it her brothers? No. She knew it wasn’t her family. She just knew. Nevertheless, she also *knew* it was something she didn’t want to hear.

Amelia pushed her chair back and shook her head.

“No.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jack said, standing and reaching for her.

“Tell me,” she said, stepping away.

“None of it is true. At least... well, I did sleep with her.”

Blood drained from her face as she could feel the scallops coming back up.

“Who?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

“Before us. It was... she was my PA.”

Oh, God.

“She’s claiming to be pregnant with my child but won’t send any proof, and we can’t do the DNA test for another few weeks. She’s gone public. It’s all over the media.”

Amelia’s mouth fell open.

He knew?

This wasn’t a surprise to him?

“You let me fall in love with you knowing you impregnated your secretary? That you might be having a child with another woman? Jesus, Jack!” she cried. Angry tears slid down her cheeks.

“Amelia, I don’t know if the baby is mine. Fuck. Let me explain. Stop backing away from me,” he demanded.

Panting from the shock when only moments ago she thought the man of her dreams was going to get down on one knee, she let out a shriek and put her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, God.”

“Sweetheart.” He pulled her into his arms and Amelia let him, only because she needed to feel him hold her one last time.

“You knew,” she cried into his chest, gripping his shirt.

“This doesn’t change anything.”

Jack was wrong. He’d lied. Withheld vital information about his life that she should have been told. He let her fall in love with him.

She pulled back. “Did you just think this was going to go away?”

He nodded. “Honestly, yes. It was months ago. I never believed her, so I never wanted you to know about this.”

“That’s dishonest, Jack. What if the child *is* yours?”

Jack cursed and ran a hand through his hair. As angry as she was, she couldn't deny how handsome he was. Only that was irrelevant now.

"Please, sit down. Let me explain everything," he said.

No.

She couldn't. She couldn't look at him.

He'd lied to her and, at the same time, it seemed he wasn't taking responsibility for his actions in getting this woman pregnant.

Potentially.

Was he really who she thought he was all this time?

Amelia walked past him, and Jack obviously thought she was staying, so he sat. Instead, she grabbed her purse and called out for her coat.

"Amelia—" Jack yelled, standing.

She turned, glaring at him. "Stay there. I am leaving. You are not the man I fell in love with. You lied and probably would never have told me about this. Then what? What else would you lie about because you decide I don't need to know?"

He stared at her blankly. A mixture of anger, regret and surprise all rolled into one.

"Exactly. So, no, this is over. Do not follow me." She whipped back around and spoke to one of the Salut employees. "Order me an executive Uber, please."

"Amelia," Jack said more softly, half out of his chair still.

She glared at him as she slid her coat on and only felt contempt for him. It didn't matter whether a man wore a suit or a uniform. They *all* lied.

"Goodbye, Jack," Amelia said.

Then walked away.

It wasn't until she closed the front door behind her thirty minutes later that she collapsed onto the floor and sobbed for

hours as the clock ticked over into the new year.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jack walked through the airport surrounded by security as the media shoved phones and cameras in his face.

“Senator, do you have any comments?”

“Senator Rutherford, is Cindy the woman you were seen in Philadelphia with?”

“Does your girlfriend know you slept with your assistant?”

“Are you going to acknowledge the baby?”

As frustrating as it was, both in Washington and in Philadelphia, when he flew out, all Jack cared about was Amelia.

She'd left him.

Jack had sat in the restaurant for over an hour staring out the window, going through a string of emotions. The ring he had in his pocket had sat on the table in front of him, reminding him of what he'd just lost.

Eventually the manager had come over and asked him if he wanted to order anything more and he'd shook his head. Then sorted the bill and head downstairs.

“I followed her home as you asked,” Abe said.

“Thank you,” Jack answered. “Why don't you drop me home, then head out and enjoy the rest of the evening?”

Abe had clapped him on the back and nodded.

Back home he'd finished packing, almost robotically, then stood under the shower for another hour until it turned cold.

He hadn't bothered to message Amelia.

She wouldn't reply, and they both needed space. Yes, he was hoping she would give him time to explain everything, but right now, she was hurting.

Because of him.

He knew what he'd done was wrong. He'd completely fucked up. Jack saw that now.

He'd underestimated Cindy, never thinking the young woman he'd worked with for years would do this. Whether David has pressured her or not, it was irrelevant now.

Amelia didn't deserve this.

But he wasn't giving up. He was going to figure out a way to sort this entire mess out, and then he would get her back.

Or at least, he was going to try his very best.

"Through here." Abe guided him through a side door to his waiting car and the usual driver.

"Senator," Terry said, opening the door for him. "Welcome home,"

"Hey, Terry." He gave a half smile and climbed in the back. Darren was in there waiting for him.

"Well, what a fuckup," Darren said.

Jack let out a dry laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Yeah."

No one knew about Amelia. That was one positive to the situation. Her identity had remained a mystery still, so at least he knew she had privacy while she was hurting.

Something else he'd nearly fucked up by being a selfish asshole.

His fingers were itching to message her, but he wasn't sure what he could say.

Forgive me? Did he even deserve it?

He wanted to say I love you, only he wasn't sure he deserved her love back after keeping this from her.

Fuck, why couldn't he have told her about it two weeks ago? *Because you knew she would've kept her barriers up and never fallen in love with you.*

He hated himself for it, but it was true.

Amelia was right. He'd been a selfish bastard.

“Let’s get you home and we can work out a plan,” Darren said.

“I’m not playing around this time. We act aggressively and silence her,” Jack seethed. If she was carrying his baby, then he’d deal with it, but right now there was no proof and he had nothing to say to the media.

More importantly the Chief of Staff had been messaging him while on the flight demanding answers and asking him to report to POTUS first thing in the morning.

This was not good.

“We need to buy a week before we can get the test done. If she will have it,” Darren said.

“She’ll fucking do it,” Jack snarled. “I’ll get a court to demand it.”

His phone rang. Stupidly hoping it was Amelia, he pulled it out and saw Lucy on the screen.

“I need to take this,” Jack said, swiping. “Hey, Luce.”

“Jack,” she said, and he heard the disappointment in her voice.

“Luce,” he sighed. “Before you say anything—”

“Is Amelia okay?”

Oh.

He wasn’t expecting that question. At least not as the first thing she asked.

“Yes. No. No she’s not,” Jack said. “If the media asks questions, I need you to keep her name out of this. Tell Mom and Gary.

“Of course. You know we’d never say a word. So, did you sleep with that girl?”

Jack cursed.

“Yeah. I did. I fucked up. But it was consensual, and she’s blackmailing me. It’s complicated. Hopefully, in a few weeks, I’ll prove it’s not mine.”

“I’m confused.”

“We don’t have proof of pregnancy or a test to say it’s mine. If it even exists.” Jack explained.

“If it is, you need to do the right thing by her,” Lucy said. “Mom is so upset.”

Fuck.

“I’m not marrying her Lucy! I’ll ring Mom.”

“No. But you need to support her, and that child is part of our family if it has Rutherford blood.”

His stomach turned sour as he ran a hand over his face.

Today Jack had planned to tell his family Amelia had said yes to being his wife. He wanted to marry the woman he loved, to be moving her to Washington with him, and planning what their family looked like.

Not dealing with this mess.

“I know. Fuck. Just please don’t believe anything you hear in the press,” Jack said. “I need to speak to the president in the morning, then I will ring Mom. Tell her I will sort this.”

“Okay. Jack,” Lucy said, and he heard the heaviness in her voice, “we all love you.”

“Thanks, sis.”

The rest of the drive back to his house was quiet as he juggled his phone in his hand and resisted phoning Amelia.

God, he hoped she was okay and could one day forgive him. Ultimately, his heart won, and he typed out a message.

Please don’t give up on me. I am going to fix this. I love you. xx

She never replied.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Amelia must have read Jack's text over a dozen times. Okay, fine, more like fifty. She couldn't reply, though.

What would she say?

It wasn't okay.

He couldn't fix this.

She was heartbroken and mad at herself for opening up so quickly to a man she didn't know. Without knowing much about him at all, she had fallen head over heels and given him her heart.

Worse, he'd let her.

Amelia had gone over every scenario in her head. She might have understood if Jack hadn't known about the pregnancy, although sleeping with this Cindy girl was wrong. Except he did know, and he had kept it from her.

Sure, the first day they met she wouldn't have expected him to tell her something so private. But at some point, as they were falling in love, he should have.

Certainly, before he started his proposal.

Of all the times to find out the man you loved and had decided to spend the rest of your life with had knocked up some other woman. Wow!

Good one, Amelia.

She just had to move on and forget him. The media made that hard. For nearly seven days, they'd been covering the story. Sure, it wasn't front-page news, but it was big enough to be in her face consistently.

Just when she thought she'd get through a day without crying, the cameras would show photos of him exiting his car or entering a building with his face averted.

Nonetheless, she saw the strain.

She saw the tension in his square jaw.

She felt the urge to call him and ask if he was okay. Because she might be hurting and angry, but Amelia still loved him. She cared deeply.

He had lost her as much as she had lost him.

She pushed down the tears that threatened and stole the remote from Aidan. She couldn't watch another clip of Jack.

"What a fucking loser. You don't fuck the help. Everyone knows that," Aidan said.

"Yeah. What a dick, right," she mumbled as she sipped her Green Tea. "Aren't you flying to New York tonight?"

"In an hour. I'm packed. I just wanted to hang out before I go," Aidan said. "You, okay? You seem kind of low lately."

Logan had been over the day before, asking the same thing. She knew they were tag-teaming her. This time, she hadn't told them about Jack. He was her dirty secret, and, aside from Stella, she was not sharing their love affair with anyone.

It was over now anyway, so what did it matter?

"Just struggling to finish my latest piece," Amelia replied, and it wasn't a lie. Being creative with a broken heart was a challenge at best, though she was determined not to let this break her.

Because fuck him.

If Jack hadn't respected her enough to tell him about this horrible situation, then he evidently didn't trust her. Or care about how it would've impacted her. What if she had been recognized? The media would be hounding her and her family right now.

Jack was selfish.

I still love him.

Ugh.

This was the rollercoaster she was on. One minute, she wanted to hug him and tell him this would work out. The next, she wanted to slap his gorgeous face and scream at him.

She still loved him, but that didn't mean she could be with him. Amelia knew she'd move on, eventually. It was just taking a lot longer than she wanted.

After all, she'd only known him for two weeks.

It wasn't like he was the love of her life.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jack walked through the White House towards the Chief of Staff's office.

"He'll be out in a moment," the man's secretary said.

"Thank you." Jack took a seat and undid his jacket.

He'd got a message earlier saying POTUS had been pulled into a high-level important meeting, so Jack needed to meet with Roger instead. Depending on how pissed he was on behalf of the president, this could be a long wait.

Twenty minutes later, which wasn't bad, considering, the door opened. Roger stared at him. "Jack. Come in."

As soon as the door closed behind them, he leaned his ass on his desk and, with his hands on his hips, said, "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Jack blew out a long breath and nodded. "I wasn't. I'm not going to give you a bunch of bullshit, Roger. I fucked her. But you need to know it was consensual."

"Well, she's not claiming otherwise. She just wants you to acknowledge the baby is yours."

"She won't do a test to prove there is a pregnancy. I've been trying to deal with this in the background since I strongly suspect she's trying to blackmail me."

"You should have told me," Roger said firmly.

"Oh, come on, you would have done the same thing."

"I wouldn't have fucked my secretary," Roger said, shaking his head.

"Mary is pushing eighty," Jack cried, glancing at the closed door.

Roger's lips twitched. "My point is the president is *not* happy. He needs this to go away."

"He's not the only one." Jack groaned and sat down on the sofa. "It's likely the baby, if it exists, is her boyfriend's."

They've asked for money."

"Do you have proof?"

"Not yet. But I will," Jack replied.

"Clean it up."

Jack nodded, then left the office, knowing he had one chance here. If it escalated, he knew Roger, on behalf of the president, wouldn't be so kind next time.

It was a warning.

'*Clean it up*' meaning, make it go away.

Or he would have to.

America didn't take kindly to this type of thing and the media had not painted him kindly so far. There was a good reason for that. He hadn't spoken to them, and Cindy had made him out to be a monster.

Jack wasn't going to lie down and let the two of them get away with it.

He'd lost Amelia already. He wasn't losing his career, too. In fact, he had every intention of getting the woman he loved back.



JACK WENT HOME THAT night and sat in his living room with the fire blazing, wishing Amelia was with him. She'd like this house. While much smaller than hers, he could see her lying on the sofa with him, her feet on his knees, as he massaged her feet.

He had space for her to set up her studio; they could buy a bigger place if she wanted more.

There was still hope, as far as he was concerned. He wasn't a man to just accept failure. If he was that easy to knock over, he wouldn't have become a senator nor deserve to be one.

To get her back and keep his job, Jack needed to play as dirty as Cindy and David were.

Making a decision, Jack picked up the phone and rang Josh Black.

“Wondered when I’d hear from you again,” Josh said, and he could hear the smile in his voice. “Ready to up the stakes?”

“Yes. Do what you need to,” Jack said.

“Got it.”

Then the line went dead.



TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, Cindy rang.

“Have you done the test?” Jack said instead of answering.

“Jack, just pay the damn money, and I’ll disappear. For God’s sake.”

“Is there a baby?” he probed.

“Yes, I’m pregnant,” she snapped. “God, Jack, just send the money, would you?”

“No. If that child is mine, I want it in my life.”

“It’s no—” Cindy started, and then Jack heard some yelling and scuffling. “Stop. Send the money, senator. Or I will tell them you raped me.”

Rage flared through him.

Was she fucking kidding right now?

“It’s more like you forced yourself on me, and you know it! Was this the plan all along? To blackmail me? Well, you just failed.”

Stupid bitch.

Did she not think he would be recording this now she had gone public?

Black Hawke Security had come over the night before, surprising him—then again, he heard Josh worked fast—and set up the recording capability, showing him what to do. As a government phone, they couldn't monitor his calls. Although he had a feeling they could if they wanted to, it wouldn't be admissible in court if he had to go down that path.

So they'd decided on him recording it.

"Goodbye, Cindy." Jack punched the screen to end the call, wishing he had an old phone to slam down.

Then he rang Josh.

"I've got the recording," he said. "She asked for the money and threatened to say I raped her. Which I did not, for the record."

"No need, but thanks for that," Josh replied. "We've also got something for you which will make you happy. We've got a recording of the boyfriend from an undercover guy I inserted in his life, bragging they were going to get a payout from a senator."

Jesus.

"It gets better," Josh said. "He's not the smartest crayon in the book, so he ended up admitting he was the father."

Thank fucking Christ.

A tension he'd been holding for weeks left his body. Jack had known deep in his gut the baby wasn't his, but hearing it being said by someone else, knowing they now had proof, was such a relief.

He knew his family, Amelia, and even his lawyer had been unimpressed by his dismissive attitude. It had come across like that, he knew, but the truth was Jack had a third sense that the kid wasn't his.

From the start, the entire thing reeked of coercion.

"Thank fuck," Jack said.

"I'll send over the recording shortly. Then you can do with them as you please. I'll attach some photos to give some

context so you can make your case.”

“That will be helpful, thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. Pay me. Your bill is on the way,” Josh said in his dark, broody voice Jack was becoming familiar with.

He let out a laugh.

“I’ll be happy to,” Jack replied, and he was. Best bill he’d paid in his life.

An hour later, he sent the photos and files to Roger and got a reply that made his night even happier.

Jack,

Files received. I’ll arrange for human resources to remove Cindy from her position on the grounds of attempting to blackmail a U.S. Senator.

Leave the media to me.

As far as the president is concerned, this matter is closed. You’re a good senator. Keep your nose clean, and I’ll make this go away.

Roger

White House, Chief of Staff.

Jack closed his laptop and leaned his head back against the sofa cushions.

He knew he’d fucked up letting Cindy have her way with him. He was fifty percent complicit, and he owned that.

For two years, he’d held on to the disappointment of his marriage ending and buried himself in work. He should have been dating and sexually active. If he had been—with the right women—he wouldn’t have succumbed to Cindy’s seduction.

It sounded like an excuse, but men could also be victims of these things.

Still, he took ownership of his actions but now hoped the woman he’d fallen in love with would give him a second chance.

Amelia was heading to Hawaii today.

Something he'd only learned because he saw her Instagram posts. Which he looked at daily.

Fine, more than once a day.

Jack had a feeling it would take more than a few messages and phone calls to get Amelia's attention, so he advised his offices he'd be working in the Aloha state for a few days.

He pulled out his Louis Vuitton suitcase and chucked in shorts and t-shirts as he booked a private flight.

Tomorrow, he would be in Honolulu and getting his girl back.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Honolulu, Hawaii



AMELIA STARED AT HER phone as she lay on her sun lounger under the mid-afternoon Hawaiian skies.

Cindy had revoked her statement and confessed that the baby was her boyfriend's. The president's press secretary stated that she had lost her job after attempting to blackmail a senator, and the matter had been swiftly shut down. A refusal to answer any more questions on the matter.

Wow.

She dropped the phone and gazed out across the pool as Logan dived in and swam over to Emma.

Ugh, she wished they'd stop kissing.

All the loved-up couples around her were just a reminder of her yet again failed attempt at a relationship.

The fact Jack hadn't messaged her now that his situation was resolved spoke volumes. Had he lost interest? Met someone else? Was he angry with her for pushing him away?

Whatever he was thinking, it was clear he didn't care enough to want to mend things.

Or explain what had actually happened.

Not that she had given him a chance.

Aside from that one message, she hadn't heard from him since that fateful night.

And if he did reach out? Then what? Could she forgive him and move on? Could she trust him?

Amelia had cried enough to form a small river in her home state and was exhausted.

Now she was in Hawaii, where she'd plastered on a smile and was playing happy Amelia for her brother's wedding, yet deep down, she was still healing her broken heart.

Except after reading that Cindy had lied, a spring of hope was clawing its way inside her chest, and she was terrified it would hurt her when she didn't hear from Jack as he'd promised.

He was undoubtedly moving on, so she needed to as well.

Starting now.

She had the people she loved around her, was going to see her brother marry the woman he loved, and all the sunshine and cocktails a girl could ask for.



LATER THAT NIGHT, AMELIA dressed up in her favorite Karen Walker dress for a cocktail pool party on the rooftop and almost all her cousins were there. Then they headed out to a Honolulu bar and danced the night away until the early hours.

By the time she got home, her feet were aching, and she fell deep asleep until morning.

Waking the next day, Amelia regretted every single glass of champagne and stumbled into the bathroom to get some Tylenol for her headache. Then climbed back into bed.

All the girls were going SUP boarding on the other side of the island, except she absolutely did not feel up to it.

Grabbing her phone and pulling the sheet over her head to block out the sunlight, she typed out a quick text to Emma, apologizing. Just as she was about to send it, another message came through.

Jack.

Her breath hitched.

Oh, my God.

Amelia flung the sheets back and sat up, gaping at the phone. She dropped it and then stared at it some more. Finally, she picked it up again and swiped his name.

As she read the message, tears filled her eyes, and she bit her lip to stop the sob from escaping.

The right thing to do would be to ignore him. Say no and carry on with her life.

But she didn't.

Instead, Amelia amended her message to Emma.

Sorry, Em, I can't join you today. I'm catching up with a friend. See you tomorrow. A x

No problem! Have fun. E x

Amelia flicked back to Jack's message and gave it a teary smile. Wrongly or rightly, she had to see him. A whirlwind of emotions was sweeping through her right now, but as he had from the very beginning, Jack was a magnet she couldn't resist.

But whether she could trust him again, she didn't know. Not just as a man she was dating, because they were past that, but as a man to spend the rest of her life with.

She glanced at the text one more time.

Hi sweetheart, I'm in Hawaii and want to see you. Please give me the chance to tell you my side of the story and then decide if you can forgive me. I still love you very much. Jack x.

She read it four more times. Then she sent a reply: ***I'm in room 4011 of the Dufort Waikiki. See you at 10am. Amelia x.***

Despite her hangover, she scrambled out of bed, ordered room service, and stood under the multi-showerheads for at least twenty minutes, willing her headache away.

It took her three changes of clothes to decide on a yellow backless Chanel sundress and a pair of white Prada flip-flops. Lastly, she added the tear-drop diamond necklace Jack had given her.

Then, with a big sigh, she walked out onto her lanai and gazed out across Waikiki Beach, waiting for the knock on her door.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jack slid his sunglasses into the front of his Tom Ford polo as he walked out of the elevator onto the top floor of the Dufort Hotel in Waikiki.

In just a few more steps, he'd be standing outside Amelia's hotel room and be giving what felt like the most important speech of his life.

She would've heard by now that Cindy had confessed the baby was not his and that POTUS was taking no action for his indiscretions.

Thankfully.

However the conversation they were about to have was nothing to do with any of that. In essence. It was about him keeping all of this from her. About breaking her trust.

Jack understood why Amelia was mad and hurt. He hated that she'd suffered so much over the past few weeks, but he planned to make it up to her for the rest of their lives. If she would let him.

Would she?

That was the question he'd been asking himself while flying across the country, across the ocean, and for all the hours that followed while he traveled from Washington to Hawaii.

Amelia had agreed to see him. That was a good start. Now, it felt like his fate was in the hands of the gods.

He glanced down at his Louis Vuitton watch and saw it was just a few minutes after ten. He didn't want to appear too eager.

Who was he kidding?

Jack lifted his hand and knocked.

His heart pounded as the door opened. Then, before his eyes, there she was. Stunning in a beautiful yellow sundress

with her long dark hair flowing over her shoulders and her soft blue eyes filled with emotion.

It felt like his chest was going to crack open as he closed the distance, pulling her into his arms as she let out an anguished cry.

“Amelia, baby. Fuck.” He groaned into her hair.

“Jack.”

The door clicked shut behind him and they stood there for a long moment, holding each other. His eyes were closed, taking in the warmth of her body and her familiar scent.

When he loosened his grip on her, Amelia lifted her head and his mouth dropped to hers. His first taste of her in weeks. Champagne and caviar.

Their kiss was soft at first. Then a need so hot overcame them, and they deepened it, their hands clawing at their clothes. Jack knew he should stop them, but he wasn't fucking going to.

He needed this.

They needed this.

They needed to feel the familiarity and intimacy of their bodies, their connection, and become one again.

“Jack, I...please.” Amelia's eyes pleaded at him.

“I've got you, sweetheart,” he said and scooped her up, looking around for the doorway to her bedroom.

When he found it, he was across the hotel room in seconds, then lying her on the mattress. Jack planted his mouth back over hers as he kneeled between her legs.

“Touch me,” Amelia begged, arching her back.

“Oh, I'm going to.” Jack lifted her dress out of the way and tugged down her panties, placing kisses on every inch of her skin. “Jesus, I need to fuck you.”

He spread her legs with little finesse and took what he wanted, his tongue slicing through her pink folds.

“Shitttt,” she cried, gripping his hair painfully.

Except it felt good, like he deserved it.

Jack sucked her clit once, twice, three times, plucking it as she writhed on the white linen.

“Pull your tits out.” Jack ordered her, and she eagerly tugged her straps down and began rolling her nipples between her fingers.

Fuck, she was hot.

He had missed her body, their chemistry.

He reached and sucked one of them as his fingers plunged inside her. “I’m going to fuck your pussy, Amelia. Tell me right now if you don’t want this.”

“I do. Yes. Fuck me. I want your cock inside me. Jack, I need this.” She moaned. “Please.

“You’ve been craving my thick cock, haven’t you?” he said, fucking her with his digits.

“Yes!”

“Your wet pussy is begging for it, sweetheart. So wet and you’re clinging to my fingers,” he growled, running his tongue over her gaping mouth.

Then he pulled his fingers out, quickly removed his clothes, and tossed them across the room. Fisting his cock, he moved up towards her head and lifted it. “Lick my precum, Amelia.”

She eagerly opened and took his dick inside her mouth, moaning and trying to take more. His eyes drifted down her body, the yellow dress bunched at her waist, her breasts and pussy bare to him.

Fuck, she was so sexy he could spill on her swollen lips right now.

He wasn’t going to. He needed to fuck her pussy.

To claim her back.

Sliding out, he leaned down and kissed her with force, then climbed back between her legs, wrapping them around his waist.

“Look at me,” Jack ordered, those eyes of her locking with his. Pure lust flowed between them as he lined up his cock and thrust inside in one powerful effort, going balls deep.

“Jack!” she cried.

“Holy fuck,” he growled out. Both of them stilling as the feeling of their connection sent shockwaves through them.

“Oh, God,” she cried. “You feel so big.”

He was.

It had been weeks since he’d been inside her, and Jack was sure she was tighter than he remembered. Moving slowly, he built up momentum and Amelia held his shoulders as together they panted, moaned and shook while their pleasure rose to a fever level.

He was sure his brain was malfunctioning because all the blood was in his thick, swollen cock. And didn’t care.

He had no need for brain cells to do this. Making love to Amelia was completely natural, and his body took control.

Hopefully, he would get the chance to do it for the rest of his life.

“I’m going to come,” Jack cried, reaching to rub his thumb around her clit. “I want you to come with me, Amelia.”

“Yes, harder, faster. Jack, I’m close.”

“Come, sweetheart. Suck me dry with your pussy.”

“Oh fuck, oh fuck.”

Then he felt her do exactly that. Clenching and milking him as she trembled, her own climax exploding while Jack let go and his seed poured inside the woman he loved.

Staking his claim once more.

Now they needed to talk.

Jack lay over Amelia for way too long, but he knew the moment he moved, their lives would shift and their seductive escape would be over.

He'd happily stay here all day long, making love to her. But, yeah, they needed to talk.

Jack lifted up on one elbow.

"You okay down there?" he asked, his cock still deep within her, softening.

She nodded. "Yes. Nice to see you."

He let out a laugh. It was so Jack and Amelia. Together, they always laughed.

Jack pulled out and reached for the tissues beside the bed. They tidied up the bathroom with polite conversation, and then he leaned against the doorjamb.

"We should talk."

"We do." Amelia walked up to him and, like magic, his arms wound around her, and his mouth dropped to hers in a kiss.

Reluctantly, he released her and, with a hand in the small of her back, guided her back inside the living room.

"Thank you for seeing me," Jack said. It felt like a formal thing to say after what they'd done, but he wanted Amelia to know he wasn't taking liberties or assuming anything after their very sexy and affectionate greeting.

"Would you like a drink?" Amelia asked.

"Iced water. It's hot here."

She smiled. "Hawaii."

"It's taking some adjusting. How long have you been on the island?" Jack asked, taking in her tanned shoulders.

"A few days. I'm starting to acclimate." She handed him a bottle of water and they sat on the designer cane sofa, a few inches from one another. But it felt like a mile when he'd been inside her just a few minutes ago.

As her eyes lifted to his, she gave him a small smile and Jack saw the lingering pain within them. His guilt roared to the surface.

“I’m so fucking sorry, sweetheart.” He shook his head.

She nodded. “I know.”

“It’s over. The entire thing is done with,” Jack said. “I’m not going to beat around the bush, Amelia. I meant what I said. I love you. I’m here to get you back. You know what I want.”

I want to marry you. Spend the rest of my life with you.

“Please,” she held up her hand, “Small steps.”

In other words, don’t propose.

Got it.

Jack nodded.

“I saw the news. I’m happy it’s all smoothed over,” she said as he took her hand and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles.

Jack couldn’t stand the stupidly small distance between them. He’d been gritting his teeth for two weeks, hating they were apart. Now, as he took her small hand inside his large one, he was praying he wouldn’t lose her again.

“Amelia,” he cupped her face, his thumb rubbing over her cheeks. “Can we start again?”

She shook her head, and he felt his stomach drop.

“No.”

“Don’t—”

“We can’t. What’s done is done,” she said, her eyes lifting to his. “You can’t erase history. You know that.”

He nodded and let out a breath. “Please don’t give up on us. What we had was too good to just walk away. Please, spend the day with me. Just give us a chance.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and he brushed them away before they could fall.

“I love you, Amelia. I love you so fucking much. I never expected to feel like this about someone. Ever. Every day we were together in Philly, I couldn’t believe how much I wanted to see you again the next. And the next. Even when I closed my eyes to sleep, I couldn’t wait until morning to see you again.”

“Oh, Jack,” she sighed.

“I wanted to tell you about Cindy, but the entire situation was so fucking insane I was hoping I could deal with it and you’d never have to know. I suppose, I was ashamed.”

“We were never meant to be anything more than a holiday romance.” Amelia shrugged.

Jack nodded.

“At first. Sharing any of those details with you when we first met was not something I could risk. You were a stranger.” Jack explained. “Although, at the same time, I was falling in love with you. You were right. At some point when we were together, I should have told you.”

He watched Amelia as she began processing what he was saying. Hope began to bloom, but he wouldn’t get ahead of himself.

“Don’t decide anything right now. Spend the day with me. Let’s be us. Then we can talk more later.”

Jack wanted to imprint himself on her again. He wanted her to remember how happy they could be. That he was a good man and would spend forever showing her and proving it.

Amelia was his. He knew it in every cell of his body, but they needed time.

He would stay for as long as necessary.

“Okay,” she nodded.

Thank fuck.



FOR THE REST OF THE day, they hung out in Waikiki. After heading downstairs, they walked along the beach and then made their way into one of the well-known hotel restaurants for a long, lazy lunch.

Three cocktails later, both of them were feeling more relaxed and talking about what they'd been up to over the past few weeks.

But both of them had suffered being apart, so it just served to remind them of their pain and her anger. Jack needed to distract her so they could focus on being who they had been. Who they still could be.

“Have you ever been to the aquarium?” Jack asked.

“No,” Amelia smiled.

“Let's go.” He grabbed her hand and dropped a handful of big notes on the table.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Amelia stood in front of the tank of Seahorses and stared. They were incredible.

“When I was a kid, I thought these were make-believe,” she confessed.

“Same,” Jack said, his hand on her hip.

“Really?” Amelia spun and glanced up into Jack’s handsome face, grinning.

He dropped a kiss on her lips. “Yup. I mean, look at them. It’s like science fiction.”

“Right?” She turned back and fought the tightness in her chest.

She loved this man so much.

Perfect seemed like such a stupid word to use considering what had happened between them, and yet when they were together, it was like they were peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, bacon and eggs.

A perfect match.

Yet, she couldn’t fight the fear lingering like an unpleasant smell of letting down her guard and risk being hurt again.

She didn’t know if she could trust Jack.

Amelia knew him intimately, but she didn’t *know* the man. How did she know he wasn’t someone who slept with his assistants often? How could she be sure he was telling the truth?

What she did know was that he hadn’t been in the media before. After Googling him when they were apart, she learned he’d been married and was now divorced. There had been no scandals. No media about him with any women.

He seemed to have a clean record.

Well, until now.

And it did sound like he'd been set up. Not that what he'd done was excusable and the nice thing about listening to him explain the complicated situation was that he seemed to have taken responsibility for his actions.

Amelia was doing the same thing. She had overreacted to learning about Cindy because she didn't trust. The situation had triggered her, and she'd immediately accused him of keeping the truth from her.

But at what point should Jack have told her?

Not the first night? She was the one who had insisted in those early days that their relationship wasn't going anywhere. So then, after they confessed their love?

It was tough, as she could see why he was hoping it would all go away; even so, she would need to have been told at some point.

That was the bit that kept sticking her.

Did he truly realize that honesty was an essential part of a marriage? What else would he keep from her because *he* deemed it not important? Or tried to clean up his misdemeanors?

Could she risk getting hurt again?

He made her so damn happy, but was it enough?

Amelia had trust issues after so many relationship failures; she knew that, but this wasn't just a fear. She believed it was grounded in genuine concern.

After leaving the aquarium, they grabbed some cold drinks from Starbucks and sat on the beach under palm trees.

Behind them, the Waikiki Festival was underway, with thousands of people wandering around and local bands playing. There were stalls with gifts and food, their aromas wafting their way. It was a tropical version of the Christmas Village they'd first visited when they met in Philly.

"Hungry?" Jack asked as the sun began to fall in the sky.

"I'm still full from our lunch," Amelia confessed.

“Me too,” Jack said, stretching out his legs and leaning to kiss her shoulder.

She leaned her head on his arm and watched the tourists as they took photos of the sunset. The sun looked like it was floating in the ocean with a bright orange haze.

“So beautiful.” She sighed.

“I agree,” Jack said, gazing down at her.

“Stop. Look at it.” Amelia grinned. “Can you imagine living here and seeing this every day?”

“I can imagine you in my life and loving you every day. If you will let me.”

Amelia froze. “Don’t propose.”

“Why not?”

“We’re not there yet.” Amelia frowned.

Jack turned his body to hers. “What will it take? Because I want to get past this.”

Frustration began to chip away at her patience and still fragile emotions. “Jack.”

“I mean it. You can’t tell me you don’t love me anymore, Amelia. I can see it every time you look at me.”

“Of course not. I do. I know what we have is amazing, and that’s why I’m so mad. I just don’t understand any of it.” She huffed.

Jack sighed, irritating her further. Like she was the nuisance here.

“Sweetheart, I know I fucked up. I’ve explained it over and over. I couldn’t tell you, or anyone. For legal reasons to begin with.”

“Jack, you were going to ask me to marry you. Back in Philly.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

God, he really didn’t get it.

“Do you not think I deserved to know maybe a day or two before you did that? So I had all the information before saying vows to spend my life with you?”

He glared at her.

“Answer me,” she insisted.

“I don’t know,” Jack replied.

Her eyes flew open. “You don’t know? What the hell kind of answer is that?”

“If I could have made it go away—”

“You fucked your secretary,” she ground out quietly so no one could hear, but it was laced with immense frustration.

Jack stiffened. “Yes. And I fucking regret it, okay? How long are you going to make me suffer, Amelia?”

Their breathing was labored as they sat staring at her.

“Why? Tell me why you did it,” she demanded, and he glanced away angrily.

“Because I’m a man. I don’t fucking know. My wife and I had divorced and... fuck, Amelia. I hadn’t slept with anyone for over two years. Well, that’s not true. I slept with one woman. But after that, being a senator and taking the risk was just too difficult.”

For two years? That was interesting, but it didn’t answer her question.

“But fucking Cindy wasn’t taking a risk?”

He turned and glared at her. “She came on to *me*. As hard as that might be to believe, we were working late, the attraction was there, and I’d had far too many drinks.”

Amelia raised her brows. That was his excuse? He was drunk. Jesus Christ. She had been wrong about him. Jack was not the man she thought he was.

This defensive reaction was sending out major red flags.

“So, if I married you and some girl—”

“Stop. Don’t do that. I didn’t cheat on you, Amelia. You are making this into a much bigger thing. I breached the rules of the office, and my reputation has been tarnished for it,” Jack snapped. “The only thing I did to you was not tell you. I’ve said I’m sorry.”

Clenching her teeth, she held back all the things she wanted to say. But her anger was bubbling up, and it was time to admit what she already knew.

She could never trust him.

He didn’t seem to be sorry, nor was he trying to understand her point of view.

She rustled around behind her for bag and climbed to her feet.

“Where are you going?” Jack asked, glancing up at her in surprise and then standing with her.

“Home. For a walk. I don’t care,” she snapped. “I can’t do this, Jack.”

He went to take her arm, and she stepped away.

“No. Don’t. This isn’t going to work. I can’t trust you,” Amelia said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

“Amelia, stop.”

“No, you stop. Stop pushing this when it’s already over. You lied. You deceived me. That’s not love. And you are making out that I’m the one being unreasonable.” She ground out, trying to keep their altercation private. “Don’t follow me. It’s over.”

She took a step away as his beautiful, angry face cracked, and she saw pain fill his eyes as he realized this was the end.

“Amelia,” he begged softly.

She shook her head and then, with one last glance, turned and walked away.



TWO HOURS LATER, AMELIA strode back into the hotel. She'd walked back down past the aquarium at the far end of Waikiki and around the park, then down past the Ala Wai Canal.

She hadn't shed one tear. It was like her feelings had shut down and all she wanted to do was walk.

Like Forest fucking Gump.

It wasn't smart of her, given she had no security. Except right now, she didn't care.

It was over.

Completely over.

Jack's words had cut to the heart of her, pushing up against her fears. She couldn't agree to marry him, knowing he couldn't grasp the understanding that what he'd done was dishonest.

Sure, he might not have had sex for two years. However, what if the next time he had too many drinks, then, oops, he slipped his dick into another assistant?

While married to her.

No way. It was too risky. It was better to run away now. Because she was running away.

She recalled the hurt in Jack's eyes and shook it off.

This was for the best.

It was over.

Oh, God. She'd never see him again, and now her heart was tearing apart all over again.

When the elevator opened on her floor, Amelia found herself turning right instead of left and knocking on Logan and Emma's door.

No answer.

She tried one more time and felt the tears building. How was she going to survive a life without him? Two weeks were terrible enough.

A tear fell down her cheek.

Amelia gulped down a rough swallow and turned back towards her room.

She didn't want to be alone.

As she reached the elevators, they pinged open.

Like a miracle, her brothers walked out and stopped when they saw her.

“The fuck, Amelia?” Aidan cried, crossing the space between them. He gripped her shoulders, leaning down and staring into her red eyes.

“Who did this?”

Logan was right behind him, demanding, “Amelia.”

“Give her space, for goodness sake,” Emma said, trying to nudge them away. “Sweetie, are you okay?”

“No,” Amelia cried and launched her face into Aidan's chest. His arms tightened around her, and the world started to right itself.

But not completely. Not like it usually did.

“Who is he, Amelia?” Logan demanded.

“I'm not telling you.” Her voice was muffled. Then she lifted her head. “Stay out of it, please.”

“I mean it,” she cried. “I love him...but. It doesn't matter anymore.”

“The fuck it doesn't,” Logan growled.

“Come on. Let's get you to bed,” Emma said, tugging her out of Aidan's arms. “Some Tylenol will fix this.”

“And champagne,” Amelia said. “I need some champagne.”

“Anyone know who this asshole is?” she heard Logan ask behind them.

“No, but I'm going to find out.”

No, Amelia thought. No, they never ever would.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next day, Jack tossed his napkin on his plate and only just stopped himself from cursing out loud.

Or throwing it across the room of the restaurant he was eating lunch at.

Amelia had checked out of her hotel.

An hour ago, the local Hawaiian news had reported the Dufort's had flown to Maui. He thought Logan and Emma were marrying on Oahu, but he'd been wrong.

Following Amelia to Maui felt like a step too far. The family had opted for a private ceremony, and Jack wasn't going to interrupt.

Nor did he think it would do him any good. Amelia had been clear she never wanted to see him again. Never had he seen her so shut down. It was like she'd zipped her emotions into a bag and tucked them away right before his eyes.

Unlike Jack.

He was mad.

He was upset.

He was confused.

Last night, he'd returned to his hotel, drank too many whiskies, and lain awake staring at the ceiling until he'd fallen into a fitful sleep.

This morning, he'd woken up in a bad mood.

Jack wanted to yell at Amelia that she was being unreasonable, but that wasn't fair. Her feelings were what they were. He had no right to tell her they were wrong.

But he wasn't sure he'd communicated his situation very well.

Asking for another chance, even to his own ears, sounded like just an excuse.

How could he prove to her that he was a man worth trusting? Was trust earned? Or was it a given until destroyed?

It was an age-old question, but one Jack thought he knew the answer to. It depended on who you were and your life experiences.

Jack trusted.

He'd never had any reason not to trust people—not blindly.

His parents had been fair and kind. His wife was loyal until they realized they weren't right for each other. His friends were reliable and supportive.

Whereas Amelia had shared with him that her former partners had cheated. Even her father had broken a level of trust by not standing by her and being a kind and supportive father.

His actions, while they'd taken place before they'd met, had triggered her.

The problem was Jack's understanding changed nothing. Amelia may never be willing or capable of trusting him and putting her heart on the line to be with him.

Jack returned to his room, did a few hours' work, and then hit the beach. Swimming was an excellent way to clear away the lingering hangover and lack of sleep.

But he found no answers in the ocean. So he lay on the beach staring at the palm tree-filled sky and waiting for inspiration.

It didn't come.

Jack wondered if it would.

Or if Amelia would message.

Or if he should message her.

By the next afternoon, he found himself sitting on the beach again, his dark glasses over his eyes and a cap twisted backwards, wondering if he should become a surfer. Maybe throw in his job, move to Hawaii, and live the simple life.

It didn't matter what he chose to do. He still wanted Amelia beside him.

Her sexy smile.

Her joyful laugh.

Her warm body leaning into his as his arm draped around her.

The wedding was today, and he had no idea when she was returning or if she was flying home directly to Philadelphia. Had she thought about him, or was she moving on and forgetting about him right at this moment?

He thought about calling Steve or Kellen and getting some man advice, but both of them had already told him what he'd done was a poor decision.

Good friends did that, even if it was hard to hear.

They didn't know about Amelia, and he felt the best thing to do was keep it to himself.

His phone buzzed, and Jack pulled it out way too fast. By the time he held his hand over it to block the sun's glare, he knew he'd been stupid to expect it would be Amelia.

It was his mom.

"Hey, Mom," Jack answered. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. I was just checking up on you now that things have smoothed out."

"Sorry, I should have called," he said, feeling bad.

"Where are you? It sounds like, can I hear birds?" she asked.

Jack let out a laugh, and it sounded weird even to his own ears. He'd barely smiled in days, let alone laugh. "I'm in Hawaii."

"Oh. With Amelia?" her voice perked up.

No. Not anymore.

"I saw her, yes." He answered.

There was a long silence.

“It didn’t go well, I assume,” his mom said. Instinctual, as always. “Give her time, darling.”

He rubbed his forehead and adjusted his cap.

“I think that ship has sailed. We talked, and she just got madder.” Jack admitted.

Two couples walked past hand in hand, probably on their honeymoons, looking carefree and happy. Envy flashed through him. A feeling he wasn’t comfortable with. He’d never felt jealousy in his life.

Until he’d lost the woman he loved.

“Sitting back and watching it unfold can’t have been easy,” his mom replied. “She loves you.”

He knew that.

Jack had seen it in her eyes, felt it in her touch. Knew it in his soul.

Sometimes, love just wasn’t enough.

“Amelia doesn’t feel like she can trust me. Excuse my French, Mom, but it pissed me off. I didn’t cheat on her. I didn’t even know her then.” Jack shared, needing to get it off his chest.

“Oh,”

“That isn’t fair, is it?” he stated, not even posing it as a question.

She was quiet.

“Mom?”

“All I will say is you made some bad choices. We all do it from time to time. Amelia doesn’t know you. She doesn’t know the man you are. You spent two weeks together. Give it time.”

Jack kicked the sand.

If he gave her more time, he was concerned she’d spend it getting over him.

Maybe he should kidnap her.

He nearly smiled again, even though it was mostly a joke.

“I was going to propose. No, I *was* proposing the night the news broke.” Jack admitted. “I love her, mom. She’s the one. I know it. I can’t lose her.”

“Oh, Jack.” His mom’s voice soothed through the phone, almost making him tear up.

Fuck.

He knew that tone.

“Don’t say it.”

“You need to give her time. But if you have lost Amelia, you must let her go,” she said, and Jack dropped his head between his legs, holding the phone to his ear as he ran his hand over his hair.

No, he couldn’t accept that.

He was a fighter.

A winner.

Jack hadn’t achieved his status or goals in life by walking away from the hard stuff. But there was a chance his mom was right.

“Come home, darling. Take some time off to get your head back on track and then get focused on everything you’ve been through,” she said.

“Yeah,” Jack drawled in acknowledgment. Glancing around the beach, he drew in a deep breath. “Yeah, that is probably a good idea.”

After a long walk along the beach after ending their call, Jack headed back to his room and grabbed an ice-cold bottle of water out of the fridge. Sitting out on his lanai, he propped his Gucci sandals up on the table and stared out across Waikiki Beach.

He hadn’t spent much time on the islands, but there was something about the energies here. They cut to the heart of

who you were and forced you to face the truth.

Healing, yet painful.

Jack knew he had two decisions. Fight and push Amelia away even further. Or let her have space to decide if he was worth risking her heart for.

Resigned to the fact he had to walk away, Jack messaged his pilot to arrange the jet for tomorrow morning.

It was time to go home.

The ball was in Amelia's court.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Amelia slid into the white leather seat and handed Blake an energy drink.

“This one?” she asked.

“Any. I don’t care. I just need to replenish,” Blake replied, grabbing it from her and twisting the top off.

“Who goes running the day after a wedding in ninety-something-degree heat?”

“My idiot brother,” Jacob said, joining them.

“My body is a temple.” Blake grinned, chugging it down.

“Dude, have you read the ingredients in those fucking things?” Jacob asked, his brows lifting. “It’ll be a crumbling temple soon if you keep drinking them.”

Amelia sniggered.

“Don’t be jealous.” Blake stretched out his legs, running his hand under his T-shirt so it bunched up and showed his tanned six-pack.

“Put it away.” Jacob rolled his eyes.

They might be her cousins and years younger, but Amelia was well aware the two of them were very good-looking young men. Their entire trip, girls had been tripping over themselves to get their attention.

A little like the woman who cast their eyes over Jack’s tall, muscular body when she was with him.

They had no shame.

But she wasn’t innocent herself.

He was a beautiful, powerful, and wealthy man. It was hard to look away.

Arriving in Maui had been difficult initially. She had wanted to curl up in a ball and cry. But her family needed her.

Her big brother had been getting married, so she'd pulled herself together and planted a smile on her face.

There would be lots of grieving time when she got home.

Lily, Emma's best friend, had thrown them all a curve ball when she'd been called home to Chicago to her father's deathbed. Then surprising all of them. Last night, after the wedding reception, Aidan had gone after her.

Amelia had been aware of the attraction between Aidan and Lily, but she had no idea it had gotten so serious.

In just a few days.

She'd lain awake last night for hours, thinking about Jack and how quickly she had fallen in love with him. Much earlier than even admitting it to herself.

But she did love him, and how she was going to stop doing that was the question.

The jet lifted off the tarmac, taking them back to Oahu. Emma and Logan had remained on Maui for their honeymoon, so it was just her, Blake, and Jacob. The mid-morning flight was less than an hour and they would stay in Waikiki another few days before returning to Philadelphia.

Amelia had initially made plans to do some shopping and do a tour around the island. Maybe even Pearl Harbor. Now, she wasn't sure what she felt like doing.

Perhaps a new Chanel handbag would cheer her up.

Probably not.

Her mind was a kaleidoscope of thoughts, not letting her relax. She was right not to trust Jack, wasn't she?

The more she'd gone over and over it, the past few days, Amelia had come to understand one thing. Her trust issues were the real problem here.

Not that Jack wasn't at fault.

He was.

Harper had picked up on her mood last night at the wedding reception and pulled her aside. Daniel's wife was quite astute and never missed a thing.

“What's going on, honey? My Spidey senses are going off.”

Blame it on the many glasses of Cristal—Amelia's weakness—but she opened her mouth and didn't stop talking. The only thing she didn't give away was Jack's identity.

Or the details.

“You see, he slept with his secretary before we met. Then thought she was pregnant. Turns out she wasn't. And while he didn't cheat on me, he should have told me.”

“Uh, huh.” Harper nodded.

In hindsight, it sounded like a close match to a certain situation that had been all over the news.

She only hoped Harper was drunk enough not to piece it all together.

“And so, I just don't know if I can trust him,” Amelia explained. “You know.”

Harper kept nodding.

“Clearly, I can't,” Amelia added, expecting her agreement any moment.

But it didn't come. Instead, Harper took her hand.

“Babes. What he did was wrong. No doubt. A price he's paying for, by the sounds. You should get to know him more. Then you'll know who he is as a man. Writing him off after falling so deeply for him? That might be a little rash.”

“Or sensible.”

“Or that you have trust issues.”

Oh.

Well.

Yes.

She knew that. Amelia didn't trust people. But they weren't usually trustworthy, so...

"You trust Aidan and Logan," Harper said.

"Of course, they love me."

"So does Jack. You said he didn't cheat on you."

She barked out her laugh. "Two weeks. He'd already knocked up his secretary."

"But didn't."

No. That's true. He hadn't.

"Why are you so pragmatic?" Amelia said, flopping back into her chair.

Harper smiled and glanced over at her husband.

"I know how scary it is to open your heart and trust someone. Daniel was not a man who committed. He was a hard and dominant man who thought women existed for his pleasure," Harper explained. "I had to be smart but soften to let him in. Terri-fucking-fying. Trust me."

Amelia snorted her laugh. "I bet. My brothers are big tough guys, but Daniel is a whole other level."

Harper leaned in. "Yeah, but the sex is totally worth it."

They both grinned.

Still, as much as the conversation with her cousin's wife had taken the edge off, Amelia had woken up and the clench around her heart had returned.

It was too risky.

She couldn't trust him.

Or maybe anyone.

Which she realized was a problem she'd have to face one day if she wanted to be in a loving, happy relationship.

If not Jack, then who?

No. The heartache she'd endured had already been far too great. If Jack cheated on her, it would be unimaginable and

destroy her.

Once again, she brushed it off and decided it could never work between them.

The jet landed an hour later, and a car was parked on the tarmac waiting for them. She sat in the back with Blake and Jacob, who were busy on their phones most of the drive.

“What are we doing today?” Jacob asked, suddenly lifting his head.

“Surfing?” Blake recommended glancing between them both.

“I have a date with Prada and Chanel,” Amelia said. “I’ll walk down to the beach with you, then wander down Kalakaua Ave. Unless you want to come handbag shopping with me.”

“Pass.”

“Pass.”

She let out a chuckle.

Being back in Waikiki brought back all the memories and emotions of being with Jack. As they pulled up out front of the Dufort Hotel and waited as their bags were unloaded, Amelia stared out across the beautiful white sand beach.

“I’ll have these taken to your rooms,” the bellhop said.

Blake tipped the man and then rubbed her arm. “You alright, Ames?”

“Huh?” She blinked and turned to him. “Oh. Yes. Just planning my shopping.”

Jacob and Blake shared a glance, then got distracted when two tiny blondes walked past them wearing only bikinis.

Thong bikinis.

“God, I love Hawaii,” Blake said.

“Let’s get changed and get into the surf.” Jacob grinned.

Amelia shook her head.

They walked into the lobby, the cool air an immense relief from the mid-morning heat and humidity of the island and head towards the elevators.

Amelia slid her phone into the pocket of her short sundress and glanced to her right for reasons she could never explain. It was a powerful magnetic pull she could not ignore.

Jack.

Standing with his luggage at his feet.

He's leaving?

As their eyes locked and she saw the resigned pain on his face, Amelia felt him deep in her soul. He was hurting. They were lost without one another.

A love so great it was stupid to throw away without trying and giving him the chance to prove who he was.

She knew if she walked away now, they would never reunite.

It was now or never.

And as Jack stood there, his face lined in anguish, Amelia knew the choice was hers. He wasn't chasing her. He wasn't even waiting for her.

Fate had put them in the same place at the same time, and it was up to her.

Her feet started moving.

“Ame's?”

“Go. I'll see you later on,” she called over her shoulder to Black as she began to walk faster and faster across the lobby.

Then, as if she was in a stupid romantic movie, Amelia began to run. Jack dropped the other into his other bag and stepped away from his luggage, his arms opening.

Then she slammed into his chest.

“Thank fuck.” Jack groaned into his hair.

Tears leaked down her face onto his white shirt. Amelia had no idea how they were going to navigate this, but she

knew she belonged right here. In his arms.

“I hope you know I’m never fucking letting you go now. Never,” he said.

“Just don’t hurt me and then I won’t want you to,” Amelia replied.

“Deal,” Jack said, and when she lifted her face, the two of them gazed at one another. Both their pain was visible and raw. “Tell me you love me.”

“Oh, Jack. I love you so much,” she rasped out.

“Come home with me. To Philly. I am taking a few weeks off. Let’s use that time to work out our lives and what we want.”

“Now?”

“Right now, sweetheart.” He smiled, his blue eyes deep with emotion.

Amelia lifted on her tiptoes and kissed him.

An hour and a half later, she was back in the air, this time with the man she loved heading back to Philadelphia.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Amelia sat on his lap, his mouth lapping at hers. “Can’t this jet fly any faster?” He moaned, and she giggled, running her fingers through his hair.

“Patience.”

“Fuck patience. I want to be inside you right now,” Jack growled. Not enough to have sex with her in front of the flight staff.

Twelve hours later, they stepped inside his front door and the driver unloaded their bags.

“I’m heading off,” Abe said.

“Thanks, Abe,” Jack said, telling him to take a few days off. Then he shut the door and shivered. “Lord, it’s cold.”

He tugged off his jacket and hung it in the cupboard, taking Amelia’s. Then they stood there smirking at one another. He took one, then another step towards her.

“I love you, Jack, but I feel the opposite of sexy right now. I’m jetlagged and don’t know if I want to sleep, eat, run a marathon, or throw up.” Amelia moaned.

“If you choose marathon, can I interest you in the horizontal version?” he asked, taking her hips in his hands and pulling her against him.

“You’re impossible.”

“You’re beautiful.” He lowered his lips to hers and gently kissed her. “Come on. Let’s get something to eat and then lie down.”

“To sleep.”

“Sure. Let’s call it that.” He winked.

After they ate, they climbed into the shower to freshen up.

Jack pulled Amelia up against him and adjusted one of the four showerheads so the deliciously hot water hit them from every direction.

“Oh, that’s so nice.” She moaned as he soaped up a sponge and started to wash her.

“I want you to come home to Washington with me.” Jack ran the shower puff over her shoulders and down her arm. “For good. I can’t do long distance with you, sweetheart.”

He meant it.

Distance just wouldn’t work for him, or their relationship. Jack wanted Amelia in his life. Every day. Not as a woman he dated. He’d never done casual.

Maybe if he had, he would never have succumbed to Cindy’s seduction, and Amelia would have a fucking ring on her finger because his proposal on New Year’s Eve wouldn’t have been interrupted.

But she would one day.

“I want to be with you too, but moving my studio is a big deal,” Amelia said. “Big, big deal.”

Jack knew she needed a little more time, and he would give it to her. He’d taken a few weeks off to get his life back on track.

For now, Amelia was naked and in his arms, so that was all that mattered. When he was ready to leave, he hoped she’d feel different.

He wasn’t fucking this up again.

“Then I guess I better persuade you that I’m worth it,” Jack said, dropping to his knees. “Legs apart, gorgeous.”

“Oh,” she gasped, palming the shower wall.

With his hands on her thighs, Jack slid his tongue inside her folds and groaned. How did she still taste like champagne? Crisp and tangy and expensive.

He nipped at her clit as Amelia grabbed a handful of his hair and cried out his name. Over and over, he sucked and licked, then slid two of his fingers inside, feeling her creamy pleasure.

“Jack.”

“Yeah, sweetheart.”

“Jack, oh God. Fuck,” she cried, her legs trembling.

“Come, Amelia. Now.’ His mouth surrounded her pussy, sucking his clit vigorously and speeding up his fingers as he fucked her.

As she began to shudder, he stood, grabbed her thigh and thrust inside her while she was still coming.

“Oh fuck,” he growled. “I love your pussy.”

“Jack, deeper, harder,” Amelia cried as he lifted her onto the shower seat and slammed his palm on the wall above her.

“This. Is. What. I. Needed,” Jack grunted. “Fuck, you feel incredible.”

“More,” she cried.

Jack delivered. He fucked her with such determination and possession, he was surprised he wasn’t hurting her.

But he couldn’t stop.

She was his.

He wasn’t ever letting her go.

Mine.

Forever.



OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, Jack spent every waking minute he could with Amelia. They stayed at his place for a few days and spent time with his mom.

He loved watching the two of them get to know one another better.

It was inevitable, but his mom pulled out his baby photos. They proceeded to lie about how naughty he had been. All lies.

Lucy brought the boys over for lunch one day and by the end, Amelia turned to him and said. “You were right. They are

Satan's little soldiers in training.”

“I told you,” Jack laughed.

“No kids. If that evil is in your DNA, it's not being created inside my womb.”

“You love them, don't you?” he grinned.

“They're adorable.” She laughed. “Though a handful.”

Jack pulled her into his arms. “You really don't want kids?”

“I don't think so. But if it happened, then I'd be happy,” Amelia replied after thinking about it for a long moment. “Do you mind?”

“So, we leave it up to fate?” he asked, and when she nodded, he did too. “Okay.”

Then they heard Lucy yell out, “Benjamin, don't eat the cat litter!”

“We should start using condoms just to be safe.” Amelia shuddered.



A FEW DAYS LATER, JACK met Amelia's mom.

“This is Jack,” Amelia said, hugging his arm.

“Senator, it's lovely to meet you,” Christine Dufort said, shaking his hand outside the restaurant where they met. “It's nice to meet the man putting such a happy smile on my daughter's face.”

“As she is mine,” he replied.

They enjoyed a long lunch, and Amelia shared that she would introduce him to the dominant men in her family in time, but for now she wanted to make up her own mind on him.

“It's a smart move, sweetie. Those brothers of yours would have you wrapped in cotton wool if they had a choice,” her mom had said.

“Aidan is in Chicago right now, anyway,” Amelia shared. “And Logan is still in Hawaii with his new bride.”

“I’d like to meet your dad,” Jack had said.

Christine glanced at him knowingly, and when Amelia went to the restroom, she tapped his hand as it rested on the table.

“My husband would kill me for saying this, but if you want to ask his permission, don’t. Amelia is right about the men in our family. They are dominant and manipulative. If you love her, ask her to marry you. You do not need Andrew’s permission. Amelia is her own woman.”

Jack smiled. “Thank you.”

“Plus, you have mine. I can see the love you have for one another,” she said. “I assume all the drama with that woman is done with.”

“Yes, ma’am. That was well before I met Amelia, and none of it was true.” Jack said firmly.

Yes, he had slept with Cindy, but the official White House statement was that he hadn’t, so aside from Amelia, his lawyer, and Black Hawke Security, no one knew the whole truth.

“Good.”

“What are we talking about?” Amelia said as she sat down.

“Now you are going to finally show me your studio and art?” Jack said, sipping his coffee.

And she did.

Finally.

That night, after dinner at her place, she stood and reached out his hand.

“Already?” he teased, rubbing his stomach. “I may need to digest before I can perform, sweetheart.”

“Stop. Before I change my mind.” She shook her head at him humorously. Then Amelia led him down the hall and

opened the door he'd been eyeing for over a month.

Jack stood in the doorway and lifted his arm as she leaned into him.

“Holy shit,” he said, glancing around.

“It’s a mess.”

“You don’t say,” Jack walked in further, ignoring the playful slap on his chest. “Sweetheart, this is fucking incredible.”

On the walls were sketches, easels with paintings, and on every inch—and he truly meant every inch—there were paints and blocks of metal and wood and fabric lying around.

Color burst from surfaces, creating mayhem, but in some weird way he could see she had a system.

In one area, near a vast number of windows, she had a bare platform.

“That’s where I create the product. Then I usually have to get things made in workshops and have them shipped to where I’m assembling them,” she said, wrapping her arms around her middle.

Jack turned and walked to a wall.

“These are yours,” he said.

“Yes.” Amelia stepped up beside him as he took in the photo of large sculptures located in or outside different notable venues across the United States and... “Is that Japan?”

She nodded.

“Sweetheart, these are fucking incredible.” He glanced down at her, wrapped his arm around her, and kissed her forehead. “You are so damn talented.”

Amelia wrapped her arms around him and then they were holding each other as he continued to take everything in.

She was amazing.

Truly amazing.

“If this is weird, then I love your kind of weird,” Jack said, pulling her up against him and taking her lips.

“Jack—” He caught the tears that had snuck down her cheek with his lips and quickly kissed her again.

“We’re going to need to buy a new house. There’s not enough space for all this,” Jack said, waiting for her reaction. He hadn’t asked her since they first arrived back in Philly. “That is if—”

“Yes,” Amelia said. “I’m coming home with you, Jack. I don’t want to be apart. Never again. I love you.”

Thank God.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Come on,” Jack called out, as she hung up from her phone call with Blake.

“We’re flying out tomorrow, Jack. I’ve been to the museum a million times. Do we really need to go?” Amelia asked.

“I haven’t been in years, and one of your pieces is there. I really want to see it,” Jack insisted. “Two hours max.”

Amelia gave him a smile. She knew one of her sculptures was in the Philadelphia Museum of Art - she’d put it there. She liked how interested he was in her art and how proud he was of her. It blew her past fears to smithereens.

She also liked looking at her very handsome blond-haired, blue-eyed senator. Today, Jack wore a pair of black Prada jeans, which made his bottom look sexy as hell, and an Armani sweater over the top of a black shirt. The only contrast was the sizeable silver timepiece on his wrist.

Frankly, she’d rather tempt him into the bedroom, but alas, sometimes they had to do everyday life stuff.

“Alright. But my cousin thinks I’m a sad sack going to spend Friday night at the museum alone.”

She still hadn’t told them about Jack, but she would soon. Right now, they were in this happy little love bubble, and until she was officially moved to Washington—which she likely would be after this visit—she was keeping him to herself.

Her mom knew and loved him. That was enough for now. Although she felt a little bad keeping the secret from Logan and Aidan, Jack was too important to her.

“Why didn’t you say you were going to Stella’s instead?” Jack asked, running his hands along her own pair of designer jeans.

Amelia had introduced Jack to her best friend this week, and the two had got along great. He’d also met Stella’s

husband, Luke. The four of them had talked for hours over dinner, leaving Amelia feeling blessed to have such an incredible man in her life.

Finally.

Deciding to let down her barriers and trust him was the best choice she'd ever made. Harper was right. She needed to give him a chance because men like him didn't come along every day.

She'd just been scared.

Of course, there was always a risk he'd hurt her. Heck, they had a life ahead of them. They'd probably hurt each other a few times before they lay their heads to rest for the last time.

That was called life.

When Jack had shared how his marriage ending had impacted him and that he never wanted to become a man who dated widely—or rather slept with a lot of women—Amelia had begun to understand who he really was.

Jack didn't want to become the bachelor the media painted him to be. So, he'd remained celibate for the most part. For too long, they both agreed.

Until Cindy.

She wasn't making excuses for him because Jack repeatedly said he was responsible for his actions, but she could see how his celibacy had led to that one poor choice at the moment.

Little did he know she would betray him.

Bottom line, he'd been taken advantage of.

It wasn't who he was, and it certainly hadn't happened while they were together. Jack hadn't cheated. So Amelia had opened her arms and was now happier than she'd ever been.

She loved him.

“I hate lying,” Amelia replied. “So the truth just fell out. If I told Blake about you, he'd be on the phone with Aidan in two seconds flat.”

Jack laughed. "I'm not scared of your brothers, sweetheart. Just tell them."

"Nope. When I'm miles away, I'll text them."

"They're going to be upset."

Maybe.

But this was her life.

They pulled on their coats and walked the few blocks from Jack's apartment along Benjamin Franklin Parkway - Abe, a distance behind them - to the museum. It was snowing lightly, but Jack said he felt like walking off all the food they'd eaten over the past week.

They had dined out a lot.

Amelia glanced up at him as they neared the Philadelphia Museum of Art and saw his mind was elsewhere.

"Looking forward to getting back to Washington?" she asked, wondering if work was on his mind.

"Huh?" Jack glanced down, and she frowned.

"Washington. You ready to get back?"

"Yes," He kissed her, and they began walking up the stairs to the entrance.

Okay, he had something on his mind.

Perhaps he didn't want to leave Philly. She'd definitely seen a different side to him these past few weeks. More relaxed. Happy.

Today, not so much.

Amelia shrugged it off as Jack paid for their entrance and they began to walk around the vast museum.

"This is amazing," Jack said, taking in a five-hundred-year-old Japanese print. There was so much detail in them that they wandered around the exhibit, studying the ancient pieces.

Then they wandered to another hall, and Amelia did a double take. Across the other side of the vast room was her cousin.

“Blake!” she started to call out, then faltered as she saw him spin and crash into a woman, both landing on the floor. What on earth was he doing here? She turned to Jack. “It’s Blake.”

“He looks like he has his hands full,” Jack said. “Let’s go. Isn’t your piece nearby?”

Amelia glanced back, but Jack tugged her away. She went with him, feeling a little confused.

The exhibition area was a few halls away, so it didn’t take them long to walk there.

Then, before them stood the Amelia Dufort sculpture.

The round globe was made of glass and filled with various other materials, creating an ethereal type of experience. Basically, what you saw changed with every step you took. Inside appeared to be an ocean that moved like it was alive, like a living being.

Jack wrapped his arm around her lower back, and she smiled up at him. “God, it’s gorgeous. I knew it would look even more incredible in real life. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks. It was a special moment when they asked me to make something for them. A real honor.” Amelia remembered the hours she’d spent creating something all ages could enjoy that would inspire curiosity and be fun. It had taken months of work, but it was worth it.

Jack turned, cupping the side of her face. “I want you to know I’ll always support you in whatever you do. There’s nothing weird about this at all. You are a beautiful and talented woman. Creative, kind, loving.”

“Oh, Jack,” she blushed.

“And sexy,” he whispered, winking as he leaned in and kissed her.

She giggled as he suddenly dropped to his knees.

“Oh! Oh.”

“I surprised you this time, huh?” Jack grinned.

“Yes, very much.” She peered around nervously.

“Eyes on me, sweetheart,” Jack ordered, and she obeyed. Of course, she did.

Holy heck. Jack is proposing. In a museum. Beside my art. To me.

So this is why he had been acting weird. Fair enough. It was a big deal.

An enormous deal.

He took her hand, and she felt herself shaking.

“I love you, Amelia Dufort. I refuse to live a single day without you in my life. You are mine. You have always been mine,” Jack said, his blue eyes twinkling with emotion. “I want to marry you. Will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

He opened his hand, and an enormous diamond appeared between his fingers.

“Oh, my God.” She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. It was stunning. Perfect. Just like him.

“Say yes, sweetheart.” He smiled, emotion simmering in his eyes.

“Yes,” Amelia cried, and Jack stood, pulling her into his arms as their mouths smashed together.

Around them, people cheered and clapped, and cameras clicked as Jack took her hand and slid the ring on.

“Forever,” he said.

“Forever.” She smiled, melting into him as he kissed her for the entire world to see.



EPILOGUE

Blake lowered his phone and glanced across his office, thinking. Aidan had already given him shit for allowing Amelia to leave Hawaii with this mystery man, so he wasn't about to let her wander around Penn Museum on her own.

She sounded weird on the phone.

The relationship had probably ended again already. No offense to his pretty creative cousin, but she didn't have much luck in the romance department.

While all the men in the Dufort family ran away from commitment, Amelia chased it.

Some of them had succumbed to the institute of marriage, but Blake was decades from that himself. He thought forty seemed like a good age to finally settle down.

He had plans.

His success was just starting to take off and dealing with a woman, and all that entailed, sounded exhausting.

Fucking them?

That was different.

Seeing a pretty brunette on her knees as his cock slid in and out of her wet, hot mouth was worth his time. A sexy and talented lover deserved to be praised for making him come.

Blake might be a powerful man, but he was a gentle dominant, seductively making the women he fucked feel appreciated.

Even if only for a night or a weekend.

But as for Amelia, he needed to make sure she was okay. If only so Aidan didn't kick his ass if he learned Amelia spent an entire Friday afternoon sat staring at a fucking painting on her own.

Joking aside, they were a close family, and he wanted to do his part, so Blake pushed his executive leather chair back and

walked over to the coat rack.

Tugging on his woolen jacket, he said goodbye to his PA. “I’m off. See you on Monday.”

“Oh. Have a good weekend, Mr. Dufort,” she said, sounding a little surprised. It wasn’t like him to leave the office early.

By the time he stepped outside, his car was pulling up.

“Hey, boss,” Gerald, his driver, greeted him as he opened the door.

“You still working on the weather?” Blake asked.

Gerald laughed. “Yes sir, still working on the weather. Summer is just around the corner.”

It was their daily joke.

They pulled out into the traffic and made it to the Penn Museum in ten minutes. Not bad for a busy Friday afternoon while snowing. Blake sat in the car staring at the entrance for a long moment and formulated a plan.

He had dinner plans at eight, so could spend a bit of time with Amelia once he found her. Maybe take her for a cocktail, get her smiling again. Then be home in time to change and meet up with his friend Taylor and the two women he’d lined up for them.

Taylor was interested in Rhonda, but they worked together, so breaching that friend’s barrier had been hard for the guy.

After spotting a holiday snap on her desk, he’d messaged Blake a photo saying, “Double date this chick with me, and I’ll let you take the Ferrari for a weekend.”

Blake had laughed. He could buy his own if he wanted one, but he’d play along. Plus, he’d heard enough about this Rhonda the past few months. Who was he to cock block the guy? So he’d said yes.

The next minute, Rhonda thought she was double dating to hook him up with her friend, Bella.

Bella looked boring. Like she worked in a library and her idea of a good time was reorganizing her shelves and drinking hot chocolates.

She looked like she could do with a good fucking and, who knew, if she was hotter in real life, he might see if she sucks cock.

Blake tucked his coat around him, and exited the vehicle, walking with conviction toward the entrance.

Damn, I haven't thought this through, he realized as he paid some money and stepped into the vast museum.

For over forty minutes, Blake walked through the museum, going from room to room.

“Fucking hell,” he said when he saw his four hundredth Egyptian statue.

Someone cleared their throat.

Whatever.

He turned to go back the way he'd come, and then a flash of blonde hair caught his attention.

Amelia? Spinning, Blake went to head around the corner—*Smash.*

“Argh!” a female voice cried.

Blake felt the small body slam into his chest and before he could steady her, she fell on her ass, papers flying everywhere.

He glanced down at the mousy woman and forced back his curse. God damn, now he was going to lose Amelia.

Blake took a quick step and reached—*crunch.*

“Oh my God, stop. My glasses. You idiot,” the mousy girl yelled at him, her hand covering her face in distress.

Idiot?

Blake stood back and raised a brow.

“Just in case you're having trouble seeing, I am staring back at you like *you* are the idiot,” he helpfully shared.

“Me? Why am I the idiot?” The girl twisted around and started grabbing the paper around her.

Blake took in her ugly blue tights and pinafore dress that looked like it had been a school uniform once upon a time. He still hadn’t seen her face clearly as she was ass up—and actually it was quite a nice ass—gathering all her scattered belongings.

Help her, asshole.

Blake let out a sigh.

“You shouldn’t run in museums,” he scoffed, crouching to pick up a folder. “There are rules.”

She spun and faced him.

“I know the rules. I work here and I wasn’t running.”

Blake froze.

Not because he cared she was a Penn Museum employee, but because she was the woman he was supposed to be double dating tonight.

He smirked.

Well, this was going to be fun.

“Blake?” He spun his head around and right ahead of him stood Amelia with her arm threaded through a man who look very fucking familiar.

And she didn’t look miserable at all.

“Oh my God, you’re Blake,” Bella said with a gasp.

“Yes,” He winked at her, though it was unlikely she could see him. He stood and pulled out a bunch of hundred-dollar bills from his wallet and handed them to her when she climbed to her feet.

“For the glasses.”

“About tonight—”

Blake cut her off, leaning closer, and said, “Be a good girl, and wear something sexy.”

Then he walked away.

Taylor owed him big time. He wanted the Ferrari for a fucking month.



Read Blake and Bella's steamy billionaire romance in [Wicked Praise](#).

AUTHORS NOTE



THANK YOU FOR READING my first contemporary Christmas romance. I had so much fun having a white Christmas with the Dufort's.

A big thank you to April for helping me research **Naughty Festivities** and particularly who Jack was. You really are the research queen!

Blake and Bella's steamy praise kink romance, [Wicked Praise](#), is up next. You'll notice I added their meet cute into the end of this book, which, yes, was from [Ruthless Temptation](#). **Naughty Festivities** was never meant to exist, but Amelia demanded to have a book, and because the Dufort Dynasty is a set of standalone books, I wanted to make sure everyone who picked up this steamy Christmas book on its own didn't miss that spicy moment between Blake and Bella. It shows us a lot about who they are. So I slid it in as an epilogue. I'm sure you were happy to refresh your memory.

Being a successful author and publisher really does take a tribe and I am so grateful for my entire team, including Paige and Jessica, and my amazing beta team, Heather, Terri, Virginia, Kelly, April, and Taylor. And sometimes Julie! Last but not least, none of my stories would be released without my amazing editors. They polish them up and make me look impressive. You'll see their names at the front of each of my books.

Before you go, have you seen my new military romance series? [Black Hawke Security](#) is coming in 2024? That's right, the paramilitary hotties who have helped our Dufort men get out of curly situations are now getting their own set of books. Starting with Josh in [The SEAL](#) which you can preorder now!

Aren't the covers gorgeous!

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Blake Dufort is not new to immense wealth; his entire family are billionaires. His success is new and still stabilizing. Still, he's powerful, influential, and handsome. Therefore, beautiful naughty women are regularly on the menu.

Agreeing to go on a double date, so his best friend can hook up with his crush, Blake bumps into the mousy-looking girl hours before. Underneath Bella's glasses, worn tights, and nervous blush, is a woman ready to be broken and praised. Her plump lips and long lashes would look beautiful on her knees in front of him.

When he finds out who she really is, the power play between them in the bedroom blurs, and Blake must navigate a dangerous, corrupt world, and his heart.

Wicked Praise is book eight in the steamy Dufort Dynasty series. Part billionaire, part dark romance it will appeal to readers who like steamy books with spice, a strong storyline and characters with witty dialogue, heart-clenching moments, and a delicious happy ever after.



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I've been single-minded in my revenge until a woman with sinful curves pours a drink down the front of my Armani tux. When I learn her surname and discover she is a mafia princess, I have a decision to make. Use her or toss her.

But I'm not keeping her.

When I agree to become her fake fiancé to get close to her father – my enemy – the last thing I expected was to find myself saving Mia's life.

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THE Darkest KING



1

CONNOR



HERE WE FUCKING GO again.

Another gala event. Another speech. Another night spent with strangers who schmooze me for my money and power.

It's all part of the charade I'm playing, I remind myself, tugging on the sleeve of my Armani jacket and adjusting my cufflinks before leaning back into the soft leather seats of my limousine. Nothing to prepare. My finance manager arranged the transfer of funds this afternoon, and my scriptwriter emailed me the same cut-and-paste version of the speech I've already given at least five times this year.

Only the name changes, with a modified reason why the cause is so important to Barrett Enterprises.

Except this one *is* important to me...personally.

The We Are Family Foundation is committed to the care of orphans in the U.S. and around the world—a cause I deem important. No one should be alone because they don't have parents or a family.

There are eight fucking billion people on the planet. Few of them with the sort of money I have to contribute, to make a difference. Still, I'd rather have sent a check and sat at home, sipping on my Macallan Gold, watching porn, and jacking off.

Or rather, ordering in.

I don't mean Chinese food.

Truth is, I don't watch porn. I have no need for it. If I want a woman spread before me, I can have one at any time.

I'm Connor Barrett, one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in New York City.

Yet, I'm not who I say I am.

I'm both a ghost and, ironically, one of the most visible men in America. Why hide in the shadows when you can hide out in the open? The opposite of what they trained me to do in the marines.

Even more ironic—I have skilled security protecting me, which even they know is unnecessary. I'm six foot four, broad and muscular. And I've been trained to kill.

I *have* killed.

Still, I can't look over my shoulder while running a billion-dollar empire, doing deals with politicians and untrustworthy businessmen who would love nothing more than to see me fail.

That happens when people owe you favors. They know I'll come knocking, and when I do, they won't say no.

No one says no.

I'm the founder and CEO of Barrett Enterprises. Entrepreneur, philanthropist, investor, and prolific businessman.

Men want to destroy me.

Women want to fuck me.

I reach for the crystal cut glass filled with whisky in the console beside me and bring it to my lips, remembering the last woman who slid down my black silk sheets and wrapped her red-stained mouth around my cock.

God, I could do with round two.

It's been weeks since I've had a good release without using my fist. I should've booked someone for this evening, but I didn't think ahead.

Booked? Yes. They're not prostitutes—I'm paying for their discretion. I'm paying for control.

Something I never give away.

But I'm careful about the women I fuck. By the time they enter my penthouse, they've accepted payment and signed a confidentiality agreement—one no lawyer would ever let their client sign—which demands their silence and agreement to the terms of our time together.

One, should they break, that would destroy their lives.

So, not prostitutes, but they *are* escorts.

They're instructed to undress and blindfold themselves in my private elevator. I'm not fucking Batman—everyone in NYC knows my address—but it just sets the scene. One which makes it clear why they are here, and that intimacy is not welcome.

I'm not looking for a wife.

I need to stay a ghost.

If my enemies knew I was alive, I would be hunted.

The last words my father said to me...*Never tell anyone who you are, son. Run!*

The familiar grinding of my teeth, the pain slicing up the back of my neck from my fury, brings me back to the present, and I blink. I stretch one of my legs and check that the knife strapped just above my sock remains invisible. Just as all the other weapons on my body are.

I don't leave home without them.

"We're going to be a few minutes late, sir," Benson, my driver, says. I pulled him out of the military a few years ago. He knows how to scan for bombs, drive if we're attacked, and protect both of us if shit goes down. "The traffic was built up near Madison Square Gardens."

I'm silent, my body tensing, and my eyes slide over to Mack.

As if on cue, Mack Turner, my head of security, turns from the passenger seat and gives me a reassuring look. "It's an accident, Mr. Barrett. Turn up here, Benson. Then take 27th Street."

My body relaxes.

Mack is one of three men I trust with my life. He's by my side ninety percent of the time.

Not when I fuck.

That's not my kink.

While the We Are Family Foundation is important to me, I don't give a damn about being on time—I'm the VIP guest, and they'll wait for me. However, when you're hiding in broad daylight from the mafia—that's correct, *all* the mobsters and cartels—and are as powerful as I am, it would only take two minutes to go from being the *hunter* to the *hunted*.

Because I *am* hunting them.

They just don't fucking know it.

Glancing at my Rolex, I note I'm ten minutes late. I run my hand over my solid jaw, rubbing my dark scruff. I need to fuck. I've been agitated and impatient recently. As a dominant and controlling lover, the act helps me release built-up energy.

I nearly snort at the word *love*. There's no love in my life.

"Keep the car close when we arrive, Benson," I say darkly. "I'm only staying an hour."

"Yes, sir."

When the limo pulls up outside the Convention Center, I wait for Mack to open the door, then I climb out and stand, running my hands over my Armani tux and glancing around.

The red carpet is empty. Everyone inside is waiting for me.

In and out. That's the plan.

"Give Billy the night off tomorrow," I say to Mack without looking his way. When I take a few steps and he hasn't responded, I turn.

My dark eyes connect with his.

"You need a new location. It's not safe, Connor," Mack replies.

I nod.

He's not disagreeing with me. No one would. He'll have his reasons, and I trust him.

"Arrange it," I say, then step into the hotel lobby. The sign for the event points to the large conference rooms in the back.

To be honest, I'm surprised someone from the company organizing the event is not greeting me. I was told they would. But it's one less annoying person on this planet to deal with, so I couldn't care less.

I make my way through the space and find the room and the main door. As I reach for it, it flings open.

Ommph.

"Oh, shit!" the small body who just slammed into me whisper-yells, and the door closes behind her with a click.

Then I feel it...

Wet, cold, and seeping through the front of my tuxedo.

As I grip the petite brunette's arms and remove her from my chest, her eyes fly open wide, and I can't ignore the magnetic pull from the crystal blue globes.

Jesus, she's fucking gorgeous.

My cock wakes up and begins to swell. I imagine gripping all that long dark hair and wrapping it around my fist. Then, as panic fills her eyes, I'm tempted to smirk. But I never smile, and my hands, which have released her, want to touch her again, and that bothers me.

Who is this young woman?

"Connor Barrett," she gasps quietly, knowing who I am. Her eyes drift down over the dark liquid on my shirt, and she bites her lip, letting out a soft curse. Then those lids dip further down my body.

Don't look any lower, sweetheart, or...

Too late.

Her eyes shoot back to mine, and I say in a dark, thick voice, "You shouldn't have done that."

As she swallows, my lips curl up at the corners.

Tonight just got a whole lot more interesting.



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CHAPTER ONE

Daniel Dufort lifted his whisky to his lips and nodded at the blonde who was regaling him with an apparently *hilarious* story of her father at their recent New Year's party.

Daniel knew who the man was. The fact he'd actually spent time with his wife and family was a small Christmas miracle. He'd heard rumors—and his source was pretty reliable—that her father, Senator Johnson, had two girlfriends. Neither of which knew about the other. With Valentine's Day approaching, it would be an expensive one for the politician.

Three women. *Ugh.*

Daniel shivered at the thought. He preferred his women in and out in an evening, not sticking around for breakfast or a ring on their fingers.

He glanced around *Bar Hugo*, one of Manhattan's most exclusive bars, and saw most of his key connections had now left. The only reason he was still nursing his Macallan was, to put it bluntly, his cock. The blonde, who wouldn't stop talking, was going to have her mouth around it within the next hour.

Beep, beep.

Daniel, we need to speak. Meet me in your office in an hour.

After reading his father's message, he mentally rearranged his plans. Dropping his crystal glass onto the polished wooden bar, he replied to confirm he'd see him there, and then took the petite blonde's arm. "Shall we go?"

Her face lit up.

"Your place or mine?" she purred.

"I have a meeting in my office tonight, so let's head there," he replied, leading her to the private exit. The last thing he wanted was to be photographed with her and more gossip spread about his relationship status.

When would the media give up? He was never getting married.

She hesitated slightly as his offer sank in. There would be no breakfast in bed. Daniel held her gaze. The decision was hers—she could take it or leave it.

He knew she'd take it.

They all did.

A billionaire in a suit was an aphrodisiac to these types of women.

Like his brothers, he had inherited their father's good looks. At six foot three with a muscular frame—which he worked hard to maintain in his gym—and a square jaw, Daniel was confident and powerful.

Some of it learned. Some of it was natural.

In the United States, and other places around the world, Daniel Dufort was frequently quoted in business and economic media, and unfortunately in less respected publications for the women he took to events. Rarely, if ever, was it the same women, and yet they insisted on discussing his marital status.

The gossip columns had a few cringeworthy nicknames for him. Try as he may, Daniel struggled to keep his sex life private. He only had a few rules.

No promises.

Nothing overnight.

No, do overs.

Okay, fine—he occasionally slept with the same woman twice, but not in the same quarter or it gave the wrong impression.

Daniel Dufort wasn't interested in a relationship. Of any kind. He didn't believe in true love, nor was he going to settle for something vanilla. However, he did enjoy female company, and the activities at the end of the evening, so he took dates to the events he had to attend, or to meet some social obligation.

And he wasn't lacking in options.

But a relationship was not for him.

Settling down with a *best friend* and having missionary-style sex three times a week? No thanks.

As predicted, she'd walked through the door, so they head to Dufort Towers. Daniel hung his dark gray Tom Ford jacket on the hanger and turned.

Miss Johnson—*fuck, he'd forgotten her name*—lingered, taking in the valuable 57th Avenue view that overlooked Central Park. It was one of the best along Billionaire Row.

“Stunning,” she said, stepping up to the full-length glass.

Daniel removed his cufflinks, and they pinged as he dropped them on his custom-made oak wood desk. He rolled his shirt sleeves to his elbows and checked the time on his Piguët watch.

They had thirty-five minutes.

Daniel moved to stand beside Miss Johnson and dug his hands in his pockets. “I’m going to assume you give head.”

She turned, her mouth opening.

A good start.

Daniel leaned in and ran his finger through her hair. “Or I can bend you over my desk and fuck you. You decide.”

Her mouth closed and acceptance settled over her features. She was too proud to storm out, and he knew she was wet for him.

She reached for his fly and slid to her knees. “Both.” Her eyes lifted to his as she gripped his cock.

Daniel didn’t answer. He simply watched her tongue swirl around his swollen head and take him deeper, inch by inch.

Daniel let out a low moan. He gripped her hair and pressed in further while she moved skillfully over and around him. It wasn’t long before he was fucking her throat as she milked him dry. He groaned out his orgasm while she swallowed.

That was a bonus—he thought she’d be a spitter.

She sat back on her Manolo Blahnik heels and licked her lips. She was a beautiful woman, more natural than many in this town, but like all those before her, Daniel suddenly lost interest.

Most of them were here for his last name. They often had trust funds or money of their own, but he had power and they falsely believed by marrying him, they would also have power.

They were wrong. Power was something one either had or didn't have. It came from within, as much as a bank balance.

Dufort Hotels, which made up most of the Dufort Dynasty, had properties all over the world. It had been built by his father and went public five years ago. Two years ago, his father had stepped away—though remained the majority shareholder—and Daniel had taken on the position he'd been groomed for all his life.

CEO of Dufort Hotels.

“Thank you for being my date tonight,” he said, zipping his pants. God, why could he not remember her name?

Megan. Shit.

“Give your father my regards, Megan.”

She stood and smiled at him, all sultry. “I think you've forgotten about part two.”

No. He hadn't.

Fortunately, his father was always early and at any moment he'd be interrupted if things got tense. Occasionally, claws came out when they felt rejected.

“Looks like we are out of time. I need to prepare for my meeting,” he replied with no pretense of disappointment, then stepped away. “Please make use of the facilities before you leave if you need to.”

Daniel stepped behind his large desk and lifted his laptop open.

Megan cleared her throat and picked up her purse. “No, thank you. I will gargle the sperm from my throat with a glass

of *Cristal* champagne when I get home,” she replied, then spun and walked out of the office with her head held high.

Despite himself, Daniel smiled.

Good for her.

A moment later, his father stepped into his office, thumbing his finger over his shoulder. “Was that Senator Johnson’s daughter I saw leaving?”

“Yes. She accompanied me to the *Glass Towers* rebrand launch this evening,” Daniel said.

Glass Towers were a friendly competitor in New York City, but a competitor, nevertheless. He’d chosen the senator’s daughter as a political statement because of some government lobbying he was doing regarding the water system in Manhattan. The CEO, David Glass, disagreed with Dufort, which could cost *Glass Towers* a small fortune if it went ahead. But it was the right thing to do, and they both knew it.

Daniel smiled.

He loved the game, and he was good at it.

Johnathan Dufort walked over to the same spot Megan had *performed* in and rocked on his feet. It wasn’t unusual for them to meet in the evenings, but Daniel knew what this was about. It had been a hot topic for weeks and was his least favorite subject right now.

“I don’t have good news, son,” he said. “The agreement is still missing and now Senator Mackenzie is trying to extort us.”

He looked up.

“With what?” Daniel asked loudly. “He’s already doing that by claiming we owe him more interest on the initial loan than was originally agreed to.”

Nearly two decades ago his father had entered an agreement with his then friend, Bill Mackenzie. The amount had been substantial—in the high six figures—and was paramount in Dufort Hotels growing into what it was today.

The loan was to be repaid in twenty years with three percent interest.

It was no secret. Their finance team had been putting the money aside over the years and were preparing to pay it out in this financial year.

A few weeks ago, they'd received a letter from the *now* senator requesting payment for a much larger sum. Attached was a copy of the agreement.

Except it wasn't the original—it had been doctored.

The three percent interest had ballooned to *fifteen* percent. A rate no one in their right mind would agree to.

Very few people were aware of the situation, outside his father, his brothers Fletcher and Hunter, their financial advisor and lawyer. The latter had advised they hunt down a copy of the agreement before going to the authorities.

Johnathan Dufort had thought he had a copy at home in his own files, along with the one kept in the vault at Dufort Dynasty.

Apparently not.

His father ran a hand over his face.

Shit.

“Father. Tell me.”

Johnathan slammed his fist down onto the arm of the sofa next to him. “He has said we have thirty days to pay, or he wants his daughter married into the Dufort family. The prenup cannot exclude her from the Dynasty shares.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Daniel growled.

He knew what was coming next.

“She has asked for you.”



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CHAPTER ONE

Willow leaned on the counter and slowly counted to ten.

She'd been waiting for the sonographer for over thirty minutes. It was seven in the evening, and as the only person in the waiting room, it wasn't clear why she was having to wait so long.

Her patience was dwindling.

Tap, tap, tap.

Her subtle attempt at getting the absent receptionist's attention wasn't working. This was the last place she felt like being; however, she'd injured her ankle over a month ago, and regular treatments weren't working, so her osteopath had sent her for an ultrasound.

She didn't have a problem with ultrasounds; the problem was the time taken out of her day. With multiple deadlines due, Willow was still learning how to balance her own needs over her well-paying but demanding clients in her new media relations business.

When she'd discovered the clinic was open late, she'd booked a six-thirty appointment hoping to be home by seven where she could heat leftovers and dive back into work.

Yet here she stood thirty minutes later, still waiting. She'd browsed Facebook, put hearts on all the Instagram posts, and sent out a tweet.

"Excuse me," she called out as politely as she could. "Hello!"

The receptionist who had greeted her earlier popped her face around the corner. She held her phone in her hand and looked annoyed at the interruption.

Willow inwardly sighed. The girl was probably making a tick tock, or whatever the kids called it these days. Not that she was old, but yeah, it wasn't her thing.

“Can I help you?”

“Sorry to disturb you”—*no, I’m not*—“How much longer will the wait be?”

Chest heaving, the girl didn’t even attempt to hide her annoyance. She walked to her computer and began tapping away with some barely contained huffs. They both squinted as headlights from a large SUV pulled up onto the sidewalk. Willow covered her eyes and looked away.

“Let me see,” the girl said once whoever was driving had turned the headlights off. “He should be available soon. We had a delay earlier, which created a backlog.”

Willow ground her teeth.

“Oh.”

She forced a small smile to her lips, then returned to her seat where she imagined how the conversation could have gone.

Why in the hell didn’t you tell me, then I could have rescheduled?

Oh, he won’t be long. It’s only half an hour.

That’s my decision to make. You took that decision from me.

Lady, chill out.

Don’t tell me to chill, you tick-tocking—

“Oh, they’re back,” the receptionist said, interrupting her hypothetical argument—which she was winning, by the way.

She *was* winning.

Willow looked out at the big men who had exited the SUV.

“Who are they?”

The men were all dressed in black. Their attire should have made them look like thugs with all that leather and denim, but there was an air of wealth about them. Perhaps it was the big SUV, the quality of their clothes, or the chunky, shiny watches on their wrists.

One thing was for sure—they were all ridiculously good looking, as if they'd stepped off a movie set. Rough but polished.

“I don't know. For the past few weeks, they've shown up religiously every night before heading upstairs to the medical rooms.”

Then they did just that. All six of the men walked in a tight group, gathering around one dark-haired man as if they were secret service. Willow wondered if he was a celebrity or politician hoping for anonymity. Or perhaps she watched too much television.

“What kind of treatment do they do upstairs? Cosmetic?” It was a wild guess, but why else would you sneak in for treatment late at night so regularly.

The girl looked away from the testosterone-loaded view and shrugged.

“That's just the thing; no one really knows. Recently they've been working late into the night. It's weird.”

Willow stood to watch their progress, taking in their long, confident strides. Outside, the sky had grown dark, but streetlights poured golden light around the area, offering good visibility.

She'd been right—they were all extremely attractive, each of them taller than the average man, with broad shoulders, thick necks, and solid thighs.

“Perhaps they're security?”

“Hmm, who knows?” the girl mumbled as her finger swiped across her phone screen.

“Pretty hot security if they are,” she added with a small grin, despite losing her audience.

Suddenly, one man turned his head and looked directly at her. Her heart began pounding in her chest, racing as she stepped back, gasping.

Silver, ethereal-looking eyes seemed to hold her on the spot. His eyes narrowed, yet his gaze didn't feel threatening.

As they continued to stare, she felt her body and face heat unexpectedly.

“What?”

What?

The spell broken, Willow’s eyes flicked to the receptionist.

“What?” Willow asked back.

“Oh, sorry. I thought you said something.”

She looked back at the man whose eyes stayed on her a moment longer before he turned to the man standing next to him and laughed casually, totally carrying on with his life.

Which was fine. Except she was suddenly overcome with a strange and irrational feeling of loss.

“Willow Thompson-Davies?”

She turned abruptly and found the sonographer standing with an iPad in his hand, greeting her.

“Are you okay?”

Willow blinked. “Yes. Oh, yes, I was just...never mind. Hello.”

“I’m Mark. Sorry for the wait; it has been one of those crazy days,” he said with a grin that had the power to melt panties.

She grabbed her purse and followed him through to the treatment room, wondering if she was being pranked by a relaunch of *Candid Camera*.

She could just see it.

Now we see Willow being greeted by the male stripper posing as a medical practitioner. She does not know the men outside will join him in a moment and do a Magic Mike routine.

“Now, let’s get your pants off.”

Willow’s mouth fell open. Mark grinned again and nodded to the door on her left. “Pop right in there and change into the scrubs.”

Her face flamed as she began mumbling words which were not of the English language.

I really need to get laid.

Clearly her mind was in the gutter, and judging by the handsome man's grin, he was enjoying her discomfort.

Thirty minutes later, she followed him back to the reception. Her eyes immediately glanced outside and found her silver-eyed man and one other leaning against a power pole. She hadn't stopped thinking about him during her appointment. The absence of his eyes had left an icy shiver throughout her body that she'd been unable to shake.

He was beautiful, in a dark and dominant way. His hair was black with waves that fell just below his ears, and he had a strong, masculine jaw. Even from here, she could see he hadn't shaved recently, which gave him that sexy edge women loved. She was one of them.

The jacket he wore only emphasized his muscular upper body, and as he dug his hand into his jean pocket, his T-shirt and pants separated just enough to expose an inch of silky olive skin.

She licked her lips unconsciously. His head turned. She couldn't breathe. He held her stare for a moment, then glanced between her and Mark.

She whipped her head around as Mark spoke. He was leaning flirtatiously against the counter beside her, smirking.

"I will send the results to your osteopath tomorrow afternoon. They'll call you and talk through them."

"So, you can't tell me anything?" she asked again, trying her luck.

He shook his head. "My expertise is in taking the images. I leave the diagnosis up to your specialist."

"Not even a hint?" She smiled and lowered her eyelashes. It had been years since she'd flirted, so she must have looked like she had something stuck in her eye.

He laughed, confirming her suspicion, and shoved a piece of paper in her hand. “Not even a hint. Now be gone with you.”

“Fine.” She laughed, and with one last glance at the receptionist, she hoisted her handbag onto her shoulder and stepped out the door.

Like all street-smart women, Willow pretended not to look at the darkly clad men, but she couldn’t help herself. The second man was also large and muscular, but an inch or two shorter. He had a very predatory way in which he held himself, which gave off a dangerous vibe the silver-eyed man didn’t have. Or at least not as much. She was certain they were military or security of some kind.

The closer she got to them, unable to reach her vehicle any other way, the louder her heart thumped in her chest.

Around her, businesses were turning off their lights, closing for the evening, but the area was lit by nearby streetlights, so she felt safe enough.

The men may be supersized—and my God, they were, from their heads to their hands, legs, and arms—but that didn’t make them dangerous. Heck, she was a sucker for bulging biceps. Usually. Today, her inner voice told her to be wary.

A few steps away now, and she felt a zing rush through her. A ringtone broke the silent tension as “Who Let the Dogs Out” filled the night air.

Willow glanced at the man with the silver eyes, and her heart skipped a beat as the corner of his lips twitched. His friend answered his phone and took a few steps away. Silver Eyes stepped away from the pole and watched her. It wasn’t a threatening move, yet it made her tense.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said.

“No. You won’t,” she replied, deliberately looking directly into his eyes in warning.

His smile grew, softening his strong jawline and sending warm shivers through her body. Warmth that had no place being there.

“Good girl.”

God, he was gorgeous. He was just the right amount of bad boy with a spoonful of class. Now that she was closer, she could see just how well his jeans fit, and that his leather jacket was clearly designer. Before she could help herself, a blush hit her cheeks, and she gave him a shy smile.

Damn traitorous body.

Her blush spread its way down her face, across her chest, and descended to her core.

What is wrong with me?

She felt an unreasonable need for him to reach out and touch her. To touch him back.

If I could just run my fingers over those biceps and through his hair.

Willow scrunched her eyes closed at her desperation. She'd never reacted to a man like this so quickly. God, she needed to get laid.

Maybe if she hadn't been distracted, she would have seen them and been able to avoid the group of kids on skateboards that came flying around the corner. When she attempted to dodge them, she cursed in embarrassment as her ankle gave out. Arms flailing in the air, Willow began to fall, her head hitting the trash can and...

Am I flying?

Large hands caught her and placed her gently on her feet, holding her steady.

“You okay?”

They both looked around at the kids who were rapidly calling out apologies and wisely hightailing it out of there.

Shaking, Willow took a deep breath and ran her hands over her body to make sure her pants weren't ripped.

“Shit, thank you,” she said, rubbing the back of her head. There would be a nice lump there soon. “How did you catch me so fast?”

He shrugged. "I work out."

"No kidding," she replied without thinking.

He let out a little laugh as Willow wobbled on her ankle and stepped out of his hold.

"Seriously though, thank you. God, I'll probably need another stupid ultrasound." Willow glanced over at the clinic and cringed. The sonographer was still leaning over the counter, chatting. When she turned back, she found those silver eyes narrowed at her.

"Did that man harass you? I'll—"

"No. Nothing like that," she replied quickly, surprised by his response. "It was just a long wait, and I'm impatient."

He nodded, looking unconvinced.

She wobbled some more. "Hey, listen, I better put this on ice. Thanks for catching me." Willow gave him a grateful smile, straightened her handbag, and began limping away.

"Wait," he told her, barking out the order and surprising her again. "You can't drive like that."

He had a point. She could feel her ankle swelling and her head beginning to pound. Her house was only a few minutes' drive away, but it was still unsafe for her to be behind the wheel.

Willow looked around, considering how safe it would be to leave her car if she ordered an Uber.

"Sure, I'll..." She turned, swayed, and once again, the man steadied her.

"Let me give you a ride home."

What? Oh, hell no.

"No, that's not necessary."

Nor was it wise. Her body, despite the accident, felt like a volcano about to erupt in his presence. Every time he spoke, a vibration ran through her.

“I’ll book an Uber.” Willow pulled out her phone and wrapped an arm around her middle. Despite the inferno raging within her, she could feel the chill of shock setting in.

The other guy ended his phone call.

“You saving damsels in distress now?” He smirked, then raised an eyebrow as Silver Eyes removed his jacket and laid it over her shoulders.

“I’m giving this *damsel in distress* a ride home. Give me the keys.” He held out his hand and tipped his chin up toward the building in front of them. “I’ll be back by the time he’s done.”

He? Who was “he”?

The jacket was warm and had a deliciously masculine scent she wanted to melt into. She let out a little groan, and may have wiggled into it a little. Still, Willow considered herself street smart. She hadn’t survived living in Los Angeles all her life by getting in vehicles with strangers.

“I’m not in distress.” She shrugged off the jacket and began to hand it back, quietly mourning the loss of the delicious scent.

She would not be accepting his offer of a ride home nor getting in a vehicle with him. He looked like the strong, protective type, but that didn’t mean she could trust him. Or his pecs.

He pushed the jacket back in place. “You hit your head and can barely stand up. Let me help you, woman.”

Woman?

Oh, so it was like that, was it?

She knew exactly the type of man he was. Protective, yes. But also dominant and bossy. Probably incredible in bed, but a complete control freak outside of it. Unfortunately, she had a love-hate relationship with those kinds of men. They turned her on, but she hated being controlled.

Or have I just never met a man mentally stronger than me?

“Like I said, I’ll just book an Uber.”

“No, you won’t,” he growled. Like, an actual growl.

Startled, she looked up from her phone, a chill running through her. “What?”

Something felt wrong.

“It’s not safe,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes, glanced at his friend, then laughed to lighten the situation. “I don’t even know your name. You’re a stranger. I appreciate you catching my fall, but I am not getting into a car with a stranger late at night.”

Okay, so it wasn’t that late, but still. Did this man think she was stupid? This was Los Angeles, for goodness’ sake. Getting into a car with someone who looked like he had a gun stashed in those tight, hot pants was stupid and irresponsible.

I don’t think that’s a gun.

Willow began removing the jacket, but again, he stopped her.

“Frank. My name is Frank.”

His friend coughed. She glanced at them both with narrowed eyes. “Your name is *not* Frank.” She really hoped she hadn’t just offended him. But seriously, *Frank?*

“Okay, fine, it’s Brayden. Now you know my name, so let me drive you home.”

“So now you’re just making up names and expect me to jump in your car? No, nope, nada. Not happening.” She stepped away, removed his jacket, and looked around for a place to put it.

“Bray, what are you doing? Let the human go and let’s wait for Vincent.”

Human? And who was Vincent?

He took the jacket from her, gripping her hand while holding her gaze deeply for a moment. Willow felt mesmerized and frozen. Then he turned to his friend.

“No. Tell him I will see him tomorrow before the sun comes up. I won’t need the vehicle.”

“Oh, fuck.”

The presumptuous, sexy son of a—

“Come,” Brayden said, his silver eyes determined as they sparkled in the artificial light.

Her mouth fell open as he reached down and lifted her into his arms with such speed, she never saw it coming.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Close your eyes.” His voice was husky as he stared down at her.

“Wh—”

“Close your eyes. It’ll be easier.”

She couldn’t explain why she did, but she closed them, and felt her whole universe shake.



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