



Stuck with
MY GRUMPY
BILLIONAIRE
Race Car Driver

J. J. LOVEJOY

Stuck With My Grumpy Billionaire Race Car Driver

**An Age Gap Second Chance at Love
Romance**

J. J. Lovejoy



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Dedication

I wish to thank each family member who has put up with my writing time and frustrations. To my son, Tucker: thank you for being you, supporting my efforts and being a good kid I love to spend time with. To my son, Ryan: thank you for listening to my banter and growing into a man that I am proud to call my firstborn. To my husband: I know you don't always support my writing and think it's silly, but thank you for affording me the time to chase my passion.

To my sister: I am so glad we found each other though writing again. It's been fun to do this journey with you along the way.

A huge thank you goes out to Jane, my beta reader all the way in England, who makes sure things make sense and finds all of my typos.

A heartfelt thank you to you, dear reader, for giving me the opportunity to tell you a story. I hope you like it as much as I do.

CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIE

“**W**atch out!” A cry comes from the hallway as the elevator doors open, and I step out.

My eyes widen, and I take a step back in fright, but I soon realize there is no need for fear. A puppy barks and jumps on me, licking my face. It’s just Poodles, my neighbor’s Siberian Husky puppy.

I chuckle lightly as Poodles slobbers all over my cheeks before detaching him from my body. Amanda pants as she gets to us and rests her hands on her knees to catch her breath.

“Did you run a marathon, or is he that troublesome?” I ask.

“You have no idea.” She straightens, and I hand the puppy back to her. She got the puppy from her uncle in Gainesville and has only had it for a week, but she looks like she’s about ready to go give it back to the owner.

“I did tell you raising an animal wasn’t your thing.”

“Well, I was lonely, and I needed a companion.” Poodles is hyper in her arms, alternating between licking her face and

struggling to get out of her arms.

Amanda works at one of the high-end restaurants around the city as a waitress. She has long hours even though she takes shifts. She isn't exactly equipped for a pet, and most of the time, her next-door neighbor Shawn gets to keep the puppy on days she's at work, but Shawn is off surfing with his buddies in Hawaii and won't be back for the next couple of weeks. Amanda, Shawn, me, and Mrs. Radcliffe are on this floor.

Mrs. Radcliffe is older, spends most of her time in her apartment, and almost never comes out to interact with any of us. She hates animals and is allergic to fur, so she's unavailable to dog sit, leaving me as Amanda's only choice.

"Can he stay with you tonight? I have another shift, and there's no one to leave him with." She gives me those big brown puppy eyes of hers, reminding me of the squirming little fluff of fur in her arms. I know she's in her late twenties, but I swear she's still a teenager because she has girlish tendencies.

"I'd love to help, but I had a hectic day at work today, and I don't think I have the energy to run after him. I'm going to hit the bed once I get in. I hope you understand."

Her shoulders slump. She was probably relying on me as the only one to help her. "It's fine. I get it."

"Maybe you can ask Mrs—" I don't get to finish talking before Mrs. Radcliffe comes out of her apartment in a flimsy pink satin robe with fur at the edges and a purple leopard print bonnet on her head.

“Don’t even think about it,” she croaks out as she walks past us to the elevator.

“I wasn’t even going to ask you,” Amanda mutters.

“I’m old, not deaf, Amanda,” says Mrs. Radcliffe before the doors close.

“Bitter woman,” Amanda mumbles under her breath.

“I can still hear you.” Mrs. Radcliffe’s voice comes out muffled by the elevator doors.

Amanda and I stare at each other in shock. I try not to laugh, but it is pretty funny. The elevator has a little issue, and the car doesn’t move immediately. It shudders first when the buttons are pressed before it carries you to your desired destination.

“I’ll see you later, Amanda. I have to go take a shower.”

“See you later,” she says tiredly, heading to her apartment.

I take out my keys from my bag and unlock the door. The minute I close it behind me, my face falls. My room still looks the same as it did six months ago. The white walls, mismatched couches, fur rug by the coffee table, and the fake mini antique chandelier hanging from the ceiling remind me of him.

We bought everything together at various consignment shops, though most of the décor was his idea. After I threw him out of the apartment, I couldn’t get rid of his stuff without having to buy new ones, and Lord knows I’m more broke than a church mouse. I send the majority of my money home to my dad. My brother lost his job a few months ago, and he’s still

unable to get a stable enough position to take care of them both, so I have to fill the void while he's still job hunting.

I sigh as I fall on the couch and begin the tedious task of taking off my heels. My whole body feels encased in lead, and every movement is a struggle.

Lightning flashes outside my window. I'm so glad I made it home before the storm intensified. Getting drenched in the rain would only lead to a cold, and I don't need that on top of everything else in my life. After five minutes of rest on the couch, I pick up my things and move to my bedroom.

Looking at the bed, I remember some of the good times we made love on it. I can see in my mind's eye how he brought me to such pleasurable heights right here. I take off my glasses and put them on my bedside table, stand up, and get ready for bed.

I thought recovering from this relationship would be easier due to the circumstances around our breakup, but it's been a bumpy ride since, and I'm still reeling from the pain of my broken heart. I had lots of plans, now gone. I expected he would propose someday, we'd get married, and have many kids running around our house. We even named a few of our unborn babies.

The first sign should've been his insistence on using a condom with me in the last several months so I'd never accidentally get pregnant. Taking birth control pills became a ritual I never missed, so he didn't need to worry. I gave him all

my time and devotion, and despite how stressful work could get at Heritage Publishing, I still made sure I had time for us.

When people love you, they're never too busy for you, right?

I step into the tiny shower and turn on the water. The cold water splashes down full blast onto my skin, giving me instant goosebumps. Every time I close my eyes, I see that day replay in my head, and it's so cringeworthy and humiliating. I feel like burying my head in a hole, osterich-like.

For the first couple of weeks, I had been in denial. I blatantly denied everything that happened, as if my life depended on it. I just wanted him back. I wanted him to run his hand down my back and kiss my neck softly till I fell asleep like he always did. I take a cold shower after work every time, and his breath is always so warm on my neck that it feels like being wrapped in a warm sweater.

I place my palms on the shower wall and let the water wash my hair down my face. The first time I suspected he was cheating on me was when a sonogram fell out of his work bag while I cleaned his stuff. Being the caring boyfriend he was, he never did laundry, cooked, bought me presents. There were so many red flags.

When I confronted him about it, he told me a stupid lie about it belonging to one of his colleagues at work who brought it to the office to show it around. I wasn't stupid. There was no way a colleague would forget something precious to him in his work bag. He wasn't even friends with any of his colleagues because he hated his job as a sales clerk in a chain store that

bad, so, of course, I didn't believe him, but, like I said, denial—such a powerful tool to deceive oneself.

A week passed, and I was home on a weekend. He wasn't for some reason. There was a radio show I was listening to because the power went out and I was bored—Cheater Trap. I found the idea of them catching cheating partners by sending flowers to them refreshing and funny. It was an odd way to catch a cheater, but proved effective.

My boyfriend never bought me flowers, so I thought of using Cheater Trap to get him to do it. The caller, the disc jockey, would offer him a free flower delivery, and I would hope that he would send the flowers to me, his girlfriend, right?

Wrong.

But that was the idea in my head when I called Cheater Trap and gave them his details. I'd prove to myself once and for all that he wasn't cheating on me and also get him to show affection towards me by sending me flowers.

However, he didn't send me the flowers. He didn't turn down the offer, either. He sent it to his baby mama with a note about his excitement over the baby and how he couldn't wait to be with her that night.

I almost went crazy.

He'd been cheating on me for two years out of the three years we spent together. What hurt the most was that he was unremorseful about it all and told me I was too big for him. He needed a fit, intelligent lady who wasn't overweight. I'm only

size 14. That's not a crime, and I was born a big baby, so I disagree that it's my fault I don't fit the body type he wanted.

Despite all the mean things he said to me, I was desperate to get him back at first. I am such a glutton for punishment. I called and pleaded, but it all fell on deaf ears. I turn off the water and dry my hair with a towel.

The bedroom still looks the same way it did moments ago when I entered the shower. Somehow, I hoped it would magically change, and I wouldn't have to live like I was the only one stuck in our shared memories.

Sometimes, I wonder if he thinks about me at all. But just as the thought occurs to me, I realize he wouldn't. He has a baby now and doesn't even remember the idea of me. I want to ask him why he did it. Why didn't he end it if he wasn't happy with me? Why cheat on me and deceive me all these years if he wasn't happy?

Maybe one day, when I dare to face him without crumbling apart, I'll find out why he did it, but till then, I can only stew in my misery. I am not ready to face it all. I must pretend I am okay in front of the world, then come to my room and lick my wounds.

I know I need a change. Staying in this apartment aggravates my depression, but I don't have the money to move away. Moving to forget about him would mean leaving everything in this apartment behind and starting afresh somewhere else with newly bought furniture and kitchen utensils, all of which would cost me a lot of money. I currently lack the funds for

such an endeavor. So, all I can do is stay here, pretend with the outside world every day, and keep complaining about how shitty my life has become.

I throw on my silk nightwear and walk to my tiny art corner. On days like this, getting lost in one of my paintings always makes me feel better. That's the only thing that helps me forget, and when I dive into it, I go all the way. I take out a plain canvas and place it on my easel. With my paintbrush and color palette in front of me, I sketch out the image swirling in my head.

I need one big break—just one thing to make a positive change in my life.

CHAPTER 2: JERICHO

The sound of a car speeding down the racetrack fills the room. It was the last race in my career before I retired. My car had overheated and caught on fire. The crew had been quick to react and extinguish the fire, but if they hadn't, my fire-retardant suit would've protected me for a while.

My fingers caress my beard. The hairs have grown a bit longer than necessary. Perhaps it's time for a haircut and trim. I've watched this video repeatedly, yet I can't find anything special about it. What am I missing? Why did it happen?

Someone knocks on my door, and a second later, Rebecca enters in her preppy school uniform.

“Good morning, Dad. Why is the study so dark?”

She moves to the curtains and throws them open before I can protest. Light fills the room, and I hiss at the onslaught.

“Did it occur to you that there was a reason I didn't open the curtains?” I lift a brow.

She giggles and comes to sit on my lap. She wraps her arms around my neck, slaps a sloppy kiss on my cheek, and then grins.

“Good morning. Aren’t you supposed to be on your way to school now? What are you still doing at home?” I ask.

The navy blue jacket and pink skirt look good on her. I remember how I used to comb that pin-straight black hair of hers every morning before going to school. Now, she thinks she’s all grown up and no longer needs my help. Her green eyes twinkle as she smiles. I’ve always thought she had her mother’s smile, even if she looks exactly like me.

“You didn’t have breakfast with me today, so I came to see what you were doing. Are you hiding here from Grandma?”

“Why would I need to hide from her? She’s my mother.”

She brings her lips close to my ear and whispers. “Because she scares you.”

She isn’t wrong, and she knows it.

“All right, time to go.” I push her gently off my lap and drag her by the arm to the door. She laughs as I throw her out. “Go to school. I don’t want to see you here when I come out.” Then, I slam the door in her face.

I return to my desk perch and think about what I just did—slamming the door in my ten-year-old daughter’s face. I chuckle softly. She can sometimes be naughty, but I shouldn’t let her distract me from what I was trying to do.

I take out my journal and a ballpoint pen. Maybe when I start writing, the words will come to me. This is not the first book I've written, but it is the first memoir. What about my life is so interesting to put down on paper?

My pen pauses on the paper, marking the spot with a black dot from the ink. I stare at the spot and try to think of the first word to write. I grew up poor, but I always had a passion for driving. I started driving race cars when I was fifteen. I worked in an auto shop for race car drivers, which gave me a peek into the racing world. I knew then that racing was my thing, and I strove for it until it was a reality.

Even while I was racing, I started different businesses to maximize my profit, including a winery and ad agency, which are doing well in my retirement. My climb from a dirt-poor boy to one of the highest-paid athletes in the world is what they want me to write. The details are a bit fuzzy. It was a long time ago. I got married at 33 and had a child by 38. A few years ago, my wife died, and I had to raise my daughter with my mom and aunt's help.

None of that is so remarkable to be written down. Writing all of that will be like blowing my own trumpet. I don't need to do that.

I turn off the TV. Now that the room is silent, I can hear the clock ticking. I move my pen from the stagnant spot to another spot, create another dot, and then keep staring at it.

Ugh! This is frustrating.

Seeing the blank page and the two dots on it isn't very pleasant. I tear out the page, ball it up, and throw it in the trash. Then I cover my pen and drop it on the table. I don't need it until I have something to write about.

Let's see, where do I start from? My life as a boy raised by a single parent, my journey as a race car driver, and my married life. There are too many details and holes in my memory to remember everything to write down.

The clock keeps ticking. Tick tock. Tick tock. I sag against my chair and blow out a breath.

“Can someone shut off that infernal thing?”

Why do I have a clock in my study anyway when I always have a watch on my wrist? I get up and drag my chair toward the wall to remove it from the wall. To ensure that I wouldn't hear the tick-tocking anymore, I remove the batteries. A dead clock can't make any noise.

My mom finds me in that position when she enters my study. I turn to her.

“Has everybody forgotten their manners in this house? You're supposed to knock and wait for me to answer before coming in.”

“Good morning to you, too, Jericho.” Her gaze strays to my desk and the open journal on it. “I see you're trying to write again.” Then, her eyes fall on the trash can beside it, full of discarded pages I've torn out of my journal. “And failing, it seems.”

I sigh and get down from the chair, but not before taking the batteries from the clock. I place the clock in a space on my bookshelf and drag the chair back to my desk. Opening one of the cabinets in the desk, I throw in the batteries I took out.

“It’s hard to do. I have so many things I could be doing right now, yet I am stuck here trying to write. I’m just wallowing away my time. I could be in Bangkok right now checking on the new shipment of wine that was supposed to have gotten there this week. There’s been a delay in the shipment, and I don’t know why. Instead, I’m here painting pages.”

“You’re not painting pages, don’t be so dramatic.” She gently touches my shoulder but presses firmly, so I sit on my chair as she takes a seat on the corner of my desk. “You are one of the most creative men I know, so I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

I snort, and her brows crease. “My creativity starts and ends on the racetrack. It’s not writing books.”

“But you have written books before.” She points out.

“Those were different. They were little glimpses of my life put into a fiction narrative. This is my life on pages. No hiding behind characters.” I can’t quite put a finger on it, but something is just different about this book. I don’t know what to write, and I’m not sure I even want to write the book. My publisher specifically requested that I write an autobiography. They’d created a poll and asked my fans if they’d be interested in my autobiography. A biography has already been written for me, and it made a lot of sales, but like all biographies, it didn’t

have my essence and wasn't as personal as an autobiography—their words, not mine.

“I don't know what madness drove me to accept this foolhardy task,” I mutter. I don't want to write this book, but I have a deadline to meet for it, which is fast approaching, and I made a promise on live TV to write it. I must've been delusional when I did that. Now, I can't take it all back and say I don't want to report this anymore.

My mom grimaces. She's always had an expressive face. Her blond hair has so many white hairs that it's almost silver. Her yellow summer dress makes her look much younger than her age. I frown at her attire.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, I have a brunch date with the girls.” She smooths out the skirt of her dress and stands from my desk.

Brunch? My automatic reaction is to look towards the clock on the wall, but I realize I took it down—okay, I see why there's a clock in my study now. I glance at my wristwatch. How did time fly by so fast? I must've been staring at those blank pages longer than I thought.

“So, you're leaving me here?”

“Jericho, you're 48, not 10. I have my own house, too. Remember I just came to visit you. I have to go back to my house eventually.”

“Yes, but—”

She places her index finger on her lips. “No buts. I’ll be leaving now. As for your writing, I think you need an assistant to help you with it.”

I scoff. I’ve had a ton of those, and they’re always nincompoops and a complete waste of my time and energy. It’s always one mistake or the other with them. “I don’t know, Mom. I’ve had assistants, and it didn’t work out well.”

“Don’t worry, I know a good company. I can get one for you. No regular assistant will do, but I need one who knows writing and publishing. She’ll make this easy for you.”

I hesitate. I don’t want to write this book. At least I can still hold on to the excuse of not having help to cancel it. A few people will be disappointed, but... My mom gives me a questioning look. I yield.

“Alright, you have a point, but I have to talk to the publisher first. They probably have a team dedicated to helping.”

“Good boy,” she says and pats my shoulder. I frown.

Good boy? Like a dog or what?

She chuckles as she walks out, shaking her head. “Don’t make that face, Jericho. You look like a constipated chicken.”

Constipated chicken, my ass. I check my reflection in the glass door separating my study from the library. Perhaps my thick brows make me look a bit rugged. My dark hair and brows give me the impression of a villain or a brute. Rebecca often makes fun of me and tells me I look like one of the villainous characters in her cartoon shows. I smooth out my

brows and head out of the study. All I had for breakfast was a cup of coffee before going into the study to write. The idea was that a fresh mind would get me a better result than if I'd eaten beforehand. That was useless, I just succeeded in starving myself.

“Get me my breakfast,” I instruct the house manager as I sit at the dining table. I suppose breakfast is now brunch, and my lunch would probably be my supper.

“Yes, sir,” she says and hurries into the kitchen to get me food.

As I wait for my dish to be served, I look outside the glass double doors at the lush garden. The dining area directly overlooks the garden. Everywhere is so silent, not even birds are chirping. I'm the only one here save for the servants. I just wasted hours of my time doing absolutely nothing. Maybe I should go to work today after all.

The house manager brings my food on a tray and sets the dishes before me.

“Will that be all, sir?”

“Yes, that'll be all. Thank you.”

She leaves me to eat alone, and I sigh. Perhaps I should've told her to wait.

At least I'll have someone to interact with in this house once more if I get an assistant from the publisher. I hope it's not another dumb one. I seem to have had my fill of those lately.

CHAPTER 3: CHRISTIE

Thursday is a busy day.
Not.

The day trickles by slowly like drops of water from a tap dripping into a sieve. Sometimes, there's a lot of heat, and work is slow. You stare at the computer or the ceiling, wondering when it'll all end, so you can go home, soak up in a tub with a glass of wine, and cool down.

My imagination of how my Thursday would end includes a Jacuzzi after having had a massage at the spa and a glass of expensive red wine, followed by a seafood dish for dinner, which the finest chef in Boston made— it's my imagination, so why not? I'll pile it on. I'll go to bed happy and wake up on Friday with renewed energy, ready to work and dance my way into the weekend.

My weekend is usually occupied with visits to art galleries to get content for my social media pages. I dabble in influencing about art on video.

I scoff. Ironically, I'm famous online yet broke in real life. Maybe I should start selling merch or something. Since I have an audience willing to listen, I'll get people to buy stuff, right?

A phone rings in the distance, and I'm brought back to the present, staring at the ceiling and having a dull day. I check my wristwatch and suck my teeth. Is it just 1 in the afternoon? What sorcery is this?

Why are Thursdays so slow?

For most people, Monday is their least favorite day of the week because it always comes with a pile of work no one is ever ready for. Mondays are hard for me, too, but Thursdays? Those are the worst. At least I have work on Mondays, but there's nothing to do today and no one to talk to.

I wish Maya would call to tell me about her exciting life in New York. Then again, maybe not. I don't want to hear her talk about her love story with Brady. A few months back, they got married in a small ceremony with just a handful of people in attendance. Totally Maya's style.

I was still with my boyfriend then, and Maya's wedding brought on the wedding fever in me, and I started to wonder when he'd pop the question. Instead, I got served a cold breakup. It's probably one of the most embarrassing ever.

I cringe just remembering it. I'm only glad the radio show didn't require me to be present to make a video and have everyone see the woman who was cheated on so spectacularly.

And now I'm thinking about it again when I said I wouldn't.

When does it end? Sometimes, I think about when I'll eventually get over this. If it'll be months from now or years, or if I'll be one of those people who never get over their ex.

My fingers tap on my desk, and I chew on my bottom lip. I need to find something to do ASAP. I push back my chair and cross the distance between mine and my boss's office. My knuckles rap lightly on the door, and I wait for him to hear him tell me to come in before opening the door.

"Yes, Christie?" he looks up from his computer.

"Do you need my help with anything, Richard?"

His lips crack in a small smile, just enough to let the gap between his teeth peek through. "Thank you, Christie, but I don't need any help now."

I sigh. "Okay."

I slump back in my seat and resume staring at the ceiling. Richard White is the most self-sufficient man I've ever worked with. He's married with two kids and in his late forties, yet he still has a firm hold on his work and family life. The balance he creates between the two is enviable. He's so self-sufficient I wonder why he even has me as an admin. I barely do any work around here.

I know I have it easy when other bosses have their admins running around for one errand or the other. Sabrina, in marketing, certainly takes the elevator to each department up to ten times a day, and I don't need to get started on the number of times she visits restaurants and cafés. There's

something called a phone. Almost all restaurants have a website to order food nowadays, but her boss is so lazy he makes her get the food herself instead of using the multitude of delivery services we have in the city.

So, yeah, I have it good, but I wish I'd get more tasks to do. I feel like I'm wasting my life away at this desk.

The telephone rings suddenly. The sound rattles me, and I almost fall out of my seat—finally, some work.

“Heritage Publishing. How may I—”

“You can save me the spiel, Christie. It's me.”

“Maya? Why are you calling on the company phone?”

I tap my phone screen to see if it's somehow switched off due to inactivity. The screen lights up, displaying the wallpaper of my most recent painting.

“Because this is an official call. There's a job offer. It's a bit unconventional, but I sent you the details. You were the first person I thought of when the job came in.”

“What is it?” I ask, but I'm already logging into my computer to open my mailbox.

“I've already sent the full details of the contract to you, but the client needs an assistant to help write a book. He needs someone to help jot down notes, organize his thoughts, and digitize his journal.”

I pause. I wonder why he can't write it himself. I mean, it's not that hard to write a book. You pick a pen and write your

thoughts. Or better yet, a computer.

“Does he have a disability that prevents him from writing?” I can’t help but ask.

She chuckles. “No, he hasn’t. He’s just stuck and needs help. Will you take the assignment? It’s a live-in job, so you’ll live with him till he finishes the book, meaning you’ll have to move in with him. With everything that’s happened with you and you know who, I thought this would be nice for you, and you’ll get paid too.”

“Meaning I can finally move from my apartment.”

“Exactly! At least in the short term. When the assignments done, you can move wherever.”

This assignment might be the best news I’ve heard all month.

“I’ll check the file you sent and get back to you, but just know I’m accepting the job.”

“Good.”

This is more than good. It’s great. This news means my fantasy about the Jacuzzi bath might not be so farfetched. If the man is rich enough to hire a live-in assistant to help him write, he might afford other luxuries. But just so I don’t build castles in the sky, I go through the attachment she sent me.

It’s the contract details. It says I’ll live with him for 5-6 months and help him with his autobiography. He’ll be responsible for my housing and food and still pay for my services. I can’t end the contract; he alone can.

That's fair.

All he needs from me is to write the book and to make sure he finishes the book by the publisher's deadline at all costs. He must be terrible at writing. Perhaps he's a person with dyslexia or an older man with tremors who can't steady his pen. That must be it. I don't know.

I can imagine a bald, wrinkled older man who needs a walking stick and has a nurse to help him with his daily activities. He would need an assistant to help write an autobiography so his memory lives on after his death.

Quite the imagination, Christie.

The phone rings again, and I assume it's Maya calling once more, so I don't bother with the company's automatic response to a phone call.

"See me in my office right now," Richard says.

Oops!

I drag myself out of my chair again and go to his office, knocking as usual. His laptop is closed, and his hands are folded on his desk. He points to the chair in front of him.

"Sit, please," he instructs.

Such formality.

I'm beginning to feel the pinpricks of panic. He's never spoken this way before, and I've never sat in his office chair in this manner. I feel like I'm in the principal's office for an offense I know nothing about. I search my memory for

anything I might've said or done wrong, but I can't think of anything.

"I hear you'll be leaving us soon," he says.

I informally accepted the offer over the phone just minutes ago. I've not signed the contract yet. He couldn't have known about it unless...Maya, that blabbermouth.

"Maya thought to inform me in case it slipped your mind from the excitement."

Maya called him? I'm not forgetful. She had no reason to think that. Wait a minute.

"We both know I'm not forgetful. You were eavesdropping on our conversation, weren't you?"

He doesn't deny it and doesn't confirm it, either. All he does is smile calmly.

"I suppose congratulations are in order."

"I haven't officially accepted it yet. I still have to go through the contract."

"You should accept it. It'll be good for you to see new places and work under a different person. It's all an experience."

Not to seem like I don't value him as my boss. "I'm just concerned if you'll be able to get another assistant on such short notice."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'll be fine without you." He waves off my concern like it's not needed.

Did he tell me he wouldn't miss me because I was useless to him either way in a polite manner? I think my left eye just twitched. Ouch! That is soul-crushing.

“All right then.”

“Good talk.” He sighs and opens his laptop to resume work.

I take that as my cue to leave and get out of the seat. I think I'll take back every compliment I've ever given him. I'll get more work to do with that older man than I've ever gotten with him.

That's a good thing. At least someone will find me helpful and resourceful.

I'll have a chance to grow, and my boss wouldn't keep all the work to himself while using me as a decorative piece to show he has an administrative assistant.

What kind of growth will I get from helping to write an autobiography?

Well...I don't know yet, but I'm sure there'll be a lot of autobiography stuff to learn.

The day goes by faster now that I have something to look forward to, and before long, I'm in a cab heading back to my apartment. There's no one in the hallway when I get to the building. There's usually someone or the other in the hallways. I unlock my door and drop my bag on the couch. I take off my shoes and take them to the shoe rack before stripping out of my attire and dumping the clothes in the tiny washing machine stack.

After showering, I turn on my laptop and open my work mail. I read through the contract again for anything I might've missed at work, but there's nothing I haven't read before.

Jericho Myers. This name sounds vaguely familiar.

If he's as rich as I think he is, I should be able to find him on Google. I type in his name and wait for the search results to load.

“What the...”

A thousand results? How will I know who he is from this? I suppose he should be the most famous one?

I can't find anything definitive. I click on images and see things about racecars and tracks.

And a giant ball of fire.

CHAPTER 4: JERICHO

I slide my wristwatch on and latch it. I still have a few minutes before I have to leave. I can have breakfast with Rebecca before she goes to school. My gaze catches the reflection in the mirror. My journal is on my bed where I'd fallen asleep trying to write it last night, and I'd tried to get a few words in for the first chapter. I managed to write something, but it's useless. I will be tearing it out later.

The assistant my publisher hired should arrive today, perhaps later in the afternoon or evening. I heard good things about her, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed. I walk out of my room and check on Rebecca in her room, but she's not there. The room is tidy, almost like she didn't sleep there. The housekeeper must've stopped by early and tidied up after her.

I check for her in the dining area, but she's not there.

"Where's my daughter?" I ask as I take a seat to eat my breakfast.

“She’s on a field trip, sir.” Ramona, the housekeeper, frowns like I was supposed to know that. “She told you before leaving. She’ll return in the next two days.”

“She did?” It must’ve slipped my mind. My head has been all over the place lately. I’ve been forgetting too many things, so I need more assistance. Once this book is out of the way, I can focus on other aspects of my life and spend more time with my daughter. I’ve been neglecting her lately, and I know it.

I can’t believe she’s not been in this house for two days, and I didn’t notice.

Ramona serves me breakfast. Another breakfast alone. My appetite isn’t here today. I push the plate away after moving the food around on the plate, barely eating much. I don’t doubt Ramona will be displeased, but she’ll have to understand I’m too busy to finish my food lately.

“There’s a lady here for you at the gate. She says she’s the new assistant. Should I let her in?” asks Ramona.

“Yes, please.” I wipe my lips with a napkin.

Good, she’s here. I’ll be able to properly assess her before leaving for work.

When I exit the dining area, she’s already in the foyer. I watch her keenly as I make my way down the hallway. She looks around the foyer in awe. I must say she’s not what I was expecting. She’s a bit plain and a little on the heavy side. She

wears glasses, too. I'm unsure about the glasses, but don't mind the curves.

Well, it doesn't matter how she looks if she can do the job the publisher hired her to do.

I watch her as she turns around, surveying the art pieces on the walls. I fold my arms on my chest. Her brown hair flows down to her waist in soft curls. She had the time to curl her hair before getting on a flight. The flight from Boston to Dallas is almost 5 hours, yet she went through that with curly hair and isn't looking disheveled. I know she's here early for someone coming from Boston. She must've taken a red-eye flight, or maybe she arrived late last night.

A voice inside me tells me to call her attention to my presence instead of watching and waiting for her to notice me. I'm running late already, which is something I never do, and it's because I'm staring at her, yet I can't look away. Finally, she turns and looks up the stairs. Her gaze lands on me, and her mouth falls open.

What in the world?

Great! And here I thought she would be one of the smart ones. I'm good-looking, but she's here to help me write, not gawk at me. I'm just wasting my time staring at her—my brows furrow. I'm not in a good mood suddenly.

"I suggest you close your mouth if you don't want to get flies in it," I tell her. Not that there are any flies in here, but she got the point, and her mouth snapped shut only for it to open again.

“J-J-Jericho Myers?” she stutters a question.

I’m tempted to hiss at her stutter. Another point falls from her grade. I can’t hire a stuttering buffoon. Her chest rises and falls, and the veins on her neck pop out as she takes a deep breath. I almost hike a brow.

“A-Are you Jericho Myers?”

Another stutter. That’s it. She’s leaving by tomorrow. I have no use for her.

“You are?” I ask instead of answering her.

She frowns and holds her bag tighter. “Christina Stewart, your writing assistant. But everyone calls me Christie.” She holds out a hand to shake.

I ignore her outstretched hand and she blushes.

This is the only interview she’ll be getting from me, and she just botched her chance at a good first impression. I’m the kind of man who judges a person based on my first impression of them. I don’t give second chances, and she will find that out tomorrow when I tell her she can go back to Boston and continue her merry life gawking at unsuspecting men.

“Ramona will take you to your room. Ramona?” I call out.

“Yes, sir.” She’s at my side in an instant.

I love having efficient staff members working for me and not bumbling nincompoops. “Show her to her room.” I point to Christina.

I continue down the stairs and walk past her. Christina scoffs. I catch a whiff of her perfume. Peaches. And vanilla.

“Come with me, please,” I hear Ramona say as I exit from the front door.

Maybe I shouldn't have told her to show her a room since she'll be leaving tomorrow. Perhaps I should've just told her to go back today, and her services are no longer required, but I don't have time to deal with that right now. I will when I get back from the winery.

One of my bodyguards opens the door for me and gets in next to me.

“Where to, sir?” asks my driver.

“The winery,” I reply.

I take out my phone and check the messages and emails my secretary sent me. I'm booked at a charity ball, followed by a conference, where I'm supposed to speak. I thought I had declined all of them, but my new secretary needs to be reminded that I don't go to parties. I'll send some money to the charities. That's what they wanted anyway. Everyone knows I don't socialize unless I have to. I haven't attended someone else's event in years, and I hope it will stay that way.

Since my wife died, my life has lost its flavor and color. I couldn't care less about frivolous things like parties and galas where the only thing that happened there was networking with others, gossiping and sharing condescending comments for those not dressed to standard.

I used to enjoy such events, but now I don't care.

I lock my phone and look out the window. The glass is tinted. The car is quiet, just as I like it. No disturbances.

It's been a while since I've gone out of my estate. It feels like months, even though in reality it's been a week or two. The book writing has kept me busy. And now that I've gotten an assistant, she's not worthy enough to work for me. Maybe I'll just let her try. I'll tell her to leave if she's no good at it. I need the help, but not like this.

My phone dings with a message, and I unlock it again. My secretary has sent back the events I just declined. I frown. There's a wine tasting coming up for my competitor. He's about to unveil another white wine. That bastard is always looking for ways to one-up me. I like a little healthy competition, but it's not competition when you copy everything I do.

I guess I can't decline that event. I must attend this to do recon on what he is up to. If he is still stealing my ideas and product lines, I will act this time. It's ridiculous that he'd copy my campaign and still invite me to his wine tasting. Almost like he's mocking me, telling me I can't do anything to stop him.

I will slap him with a lawsuit so hard he'll go out of business this time.

The car stops in front of my winery. My bodyguard gets out and opens my door. I adjust my suit jacket and button it up. The rest of the bodyguards in the second vehicle are already

waiting by the entrance. One of them opens the door for me, and I enter.

“Good morning, Mr. Myers,” the receptionist stands as she spots me.

“Good morning,” I mumble in reply.

I hear a jingling sound as I walk past the chandelier and look up. It’s a bit shaky. The décor in the lobby is of refined wood. Everything is wooden to give off an allusion to nature. Even the chandelier is made of wood.

“Get that fixed,” I say to no one in particular, but I know it’ll be fixed as instructed.

The customers in the lobby part way for me as I walk past them. One of them takes out a phone to take a picture of me, and my chief bodyguard holds up a hand in warning.

“No pictures,” he says in a gruff voice.

I don’t know anyone that his voice wouldn’t intimidate into submission. The lady’s eyes widen, and she slips the phone back into her bag.

This is one of the reasons why I don’t go out. And this is exactly why I have a security detail when I do. Everyone thinks it’s okay to take pictures of you without your permission and post them on the internet. For that reason, I’ve stayed clear of the internet for so many years.

Frank, the winery manager, sidles up to me with a broad smile.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Frank. How’s the harvest coming along?”

“Everything is on schedule, sir. And the new batch of signature red will be in stores in 3 months.”

“I want to see the vineyard.”

“Yes, sir,” he nods and moves in front of me, leading the way.

My bodyguards stop by the vineyard entrance, and I get into a golf cart with Frank. When I was a child, I used to love the garden. I was so fascinated with the greenery and the beautiful flowers that I told myself I’d have a garden one day. A huge one that I’d visit every day. That dream was what prompted the idea of opening a winery.

As I drive through the lush green plants, I feel like a little boy again staring at his mother’s garden with wonder and admiration.

“The grapes in this section are not ready for harvest yet.” Frank points to the right side of the golf cart. “They should be by next week.”

“I think it’s better we continue the rest of the walk on foot.”

“Oh!” he looks down at his thick lap. Frank is not a small man by any means. He has a big body and a potbelly, which he undoubtedly got from drinking wine all these years.

Some of my executive staff get free wine delivered to their houses every month, and from what I can see, Frank enjoys

that privilege way too much. But it's not my place to make any comment about his body, even if it is more out of concern for his health.

"Is there a problem?" I ask. I raise a brow in question, and he shakes his head.

"Not at all, sir."

He stops the cart, and I get off.

I move in front of him and fold my hands behind me. My intense gaze makes him cower, and he swallows.

"My competitor, Three Steps Winery, will have a wine tasting this month. His advertising campaign sounds like mine, and I think the white wine will taste similar to ours. You don't happen to know anything about that, do you?"

"No, sir. I'd never betray you like that."

I stare at him momentarily, checking to see if he'll budge. He's so easily intimidated; he might blurt out his deepest, darkest secrets if I stare at him long enough. He doesn't break the stare even though he looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"Good then." I brush off his shoulder pads and pat him. "Someone might be giving out my secrets to the competitor. Find the person, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

I turn around and continue down the path. "Come along now. We have much to discuss."

CHAPTER 5: CHRISTIE

He's not an old geriatric man. He's a virile man who's not only physically fit but hot. I blink as I watch him walk out of the house. His suit sits perfectly on his frame, like it was custom-made for him. I bet it *was* customized to his exact specifications.

He might be hot, but he's also rude. The scowl he had on his face throughout our encounter told me to stay far away from him, but how would that be possible when I have to be in close quarters with him for the next few months? I might've bitten off more than I can chew here. Is it too late to cancel?

Close your mouth so flies don't enter. Sheesh! Who does he think he is? I was only surprised because he wasn't what I was expecting, and maybe my jaw might've gone slack in shock, but that's not any reason for him to talk to me like that. I'm a person with feelings, after all.

He better watch his commentary. I'm not going to let him talk to me like that again. If he's used to talking down to people, he'd better not try it with me one more time. I'll slap

his face with his money and stomp on it before walking out on him.

Easy there, Tigress.

I need this job. Not only because I'm in a new environment but because it's exactly what I need to move out of my apartment permanently when this job is over. Maybe I should cool it on the temper. I can't afford to annoy the bastard.

The housekeeper leads me up the stairs where the real wonder is. His house is half a glass house and half wood like a cabin in the woods, except this is much fancier than any old cabin. My mouth opens as I stare at the vast living room and the chandelier on the ceiling. An air conditioner built into the ceiling makes the room cool.

The furniture is made of chocolate leather with gold trimmings on the arms and legs. A plush white rug lies in the middle of the furniture setup, with small glass stools beside every sofa and couch to serve as a coffee table. What is impressive is the enormous flat-screen TV installed on the wall. It's so big, watching a movie in it will be like being in a cinema.

There are so many expensive works of art and sculptures in the room. The art geek in me is jumping for joy, knowing he appreciates art even though he's grumpy. I spot a No. 6 by Mark Rothko on the wall on my left and a Number 17A by Jackson Pollock.

“Is that a Amedeo Modigliani? This is so cool.”

“Ahem!” the housekeeper says, and I remember she was supposed to show me my room.

“I’m Ramona, the housekeeper around here,” she says in a much kinder but still austere voice. At least she’s not scowling at me like he was. Ramona has salt and pepper hair, just like Mr. Myers, but she’s a bit busty like me. Her black and white uniform goes to the floor, practically covering her shoes. She almost looks like an old-fashioned nun without the headwear.

“Christina Stewart, but everyone calls me Christie.” I hold a hand for a shake and smile up at her, but she stares at it haughtily before looking away.

Do they all have a thing against handshakes here, or is it just me?

“Mr. Myers doesn’t like people who dilly-dally. He can’t tolerate them, and neither can I. So, come with me. I have better things to do than watch you admire the house.”

My cheeks redden, and I nod. Geez! She didn’t have to say it like that. I’m sure she thinks I’m some unrefined girl who’s never seen so many riches in one place. I haven’t, but she still didn’t need to know that. I bet this house is worth millions.

She leads me up another flight of stairs to a brightly lit hallway. Much of the house's ceiling is made of glass, but it appears to be tempered glass. The heat from the sun's glare is not coming in through the glass.

“That’s Mr. Myers’s bedroom.” She points to a door further down the hall.

He's putting me in the same hall with him. That's odd. Most rich folks like to keep their assistants in a special part of the house, or somewhere they can't see them constantly. I guess he's different.

She points to the door in front of me. "This is your room. I'll take my leave now. You can come to the kitchen when you're ready for a snack, then I'll show you around the house."

She hands me a key and walks away. I watch her stiff back disappear down the hallway. I unlock the door and enter my room. It looks like the rest of the house, painted white with chocolate-colored furniture, but it's the size of my whole apartment. I pull my bag into the room and place it beside the bed.

The first door I open is my walk-in closet.

I have a walk-in closet?

For the umpteenth time today, my mouth falls open. I move to the next door, which is an en suite bathroom. The bathroom has an oversized shower, and the showerheads look jet-powered and would have quite the force in them.

I almost swoon when I see the bathtub. It's the size of a Jacuzzi. My fantasy was not so farfetched after all.

All of this should make up for the man's terrible attitude. I close the bathroom door and walk to the bed to unpack and call Maya. The bed is so soft. I'm starting to think Ramona got the rooms wrong, and I'm supposed to be downstairs in a tiny closet of a room. I won't relish unpacking and settling in, only

to do it again to a much smaller space. I'd be irritated as I don't like that particular task. One of the reasons I hardly ever go shopping. Trying on different outfits is just annoying. I wonder how anyone ever does it.

Maya finally picks up her phone after it rings several times.

"How do you like your new place?" she asks.

"My room is huge, and don't get me started on the house. It's like I just entered ninth heaven. The only problem is Jericho Myers is such an ass."

I relay my recent experience with him to her and how he'd insulted me. The insult was partly my fault because I gave him an opening. He shouldn't have taken it. It still annoys me when I think about it.

"Just be careful with him. He's hired other assistants from here before, and it all ended in tears for them. Everyone says he's a big asshole and has a bad temper."

Well, that was quite obvious today. He gave me a taste of it without waiting to welcome me. I'm so lucky.

Not.

"You could have given me a heads up on that, cousin. But don't worry, I've got everything under control. He won't have a reason to complain about me. I know how to deal with assholes like him."

Nonetheless, he's not going to get a chance to insult me again or think I'm a buffoon like I showed today by stuttering.

I've never stuttered when talking to a man, but who wouldn't stutter with him?

Those green eyes of his are enough to make anyone turn to mush. Then add his thick brows, plump lips, salt and pepper hair, that goatee of his, and his muscular body, and I'm gone, blown away like dust in the wind. He looks like a villain. He's a sexy villain.

And I guess this is the same reaction he brings up in every woman who meets him, which is why I have to be the exact opposite if I want to do my job here. From now on, I won't be fazed by him. My body will not react as it did when I saw him earlier.

I take my laptop out of my bag and do a little research on him. Now that I know what he looks like, I can narrow down the search. The result pops up, and I check the images.

“Ha! Would you look at that? You were here all along.”

His biography is one of the first that pops up in the search result, but I hadn't paid attention because I was expecting an older man—stupid me.

I click on Wikipedia. It turns out he's a famous race car driver who's retired. He owns a winery and an ad agency. Looks like the big wolf has his hand in every pie.

“Well, Jericho Myers, get ready to be impressed with my incredible organizational and typing skills. It'll blow your mind.” I say to myself.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me that I've not eaten anything other than the latte I had at the airport before coming over this morning. There was an issue with my flight, which was initially scheduled for today, so I had to board another flight last night. That reminds me, Ramona told me to settle in and come down for snacks.

I pop in the shower quickly and try out the showerheads. After showering, I wear a simple dress, pack my hair into a bun, and go to the kitchen. My hair is naturally curly. I don't have to do much to arrange it into curls. Just a twirl of my brush, and it stays that way throughout the day, but now it's out of my face, and the cool air on my neck is much appreciated.

I go back online, find the audiobook version of his biography and plug in my headphones. I drift to sleep to the sounds of the narrator, telling me all about Jericho Myers and his rise into racecar stardom.

The next day, I wake up feeling good. Who wouldn't after sleeping in such a comfortable bed? I quickly take a shower and get dressed. With my notepad and pen firmly attached to the top of my shirt, I knock on Jericho's door.

For a man who's supposed to be a businessman, it takes quite a lot of knocking to get him to open his door. When the door finally opens, I thought he'd be happy to see me up bright and early to start the day, but what greets me is a scowl much worse than yesterday's. His thick brows are slashed across his forehead like an angry bird.

“Who in the world wakes up before seven?” he yells in my face.

Huh? Everybody?

“Did you check the time before you came knocking on my door? Who permitted you to wake me up? Now that you’ve ruined my sleep, ruined my morning, and, in so doing, ruined my schedule for today, what do you have to say for yourself?”

I open my mouth to counter his points but shut it. I take a deep breath in. “I wanted us to get started on the book and—”

He doesn’t let me finish before slamming the door in my face.

Well, this is going well!

CHAPTER 6: JERICHO

I twist and turn in bed, trying to find the perfect spot to go back to sleep. Stupid woman waking me up before seven in the morning. She was banging on the door like she was the owner of the damn house, too. I should've sent her back home yesterday instead of waiting until today. Now, I'm suffering for it.

I fluff my pillow and place my head back on it. Sleep doesn't come quickly. That pillow is just useless. I pick another one and still get the same result. I sigh, and my eyes open. I can't go back to sleep. I stare at my ceiling. The sky looks beautiful so early in the morning. The sun is not hot yet, and I can still see the moon's silhouette in the sky.

The clock is ticking. Ha! What's the use anyway? She already woke me up. I might as well go and write the book. I throw aside my comforter and get out of bed. I press the button beside my bed frame, and a blind covers the glass, darkening the room. I step inside the bathroom, brush my teeth, and

shower quickly. When I come out of the bathroom, I feel much better.

I make my way down to the dining room for breakfast. It's the weekend, and I have nowhere to go. I pause at the dining room entrance. There's nothing on the table. Breakfast is usually available by now. What the hell are these cooks doing this morning?

I march to the kitchen to give them a scolding. They've never made me a late breakfast, but they decided to sleep extra early today. I don't find anyone working at the stove when I get to the kitchen. There's only Ramona having a cup of tea.

"What's going on here?" I ask her.

"I don't understand, sir."

"What do you mean you don't understand? Where is everyone? Where's breakfast?" I motion to the empty workstation. She hasn't gone blind overnight, has she?

"Miss Stewart said you requested a late breakfast and gave everyone the morning off to sleep in." she looks confused as she says the words. Even she knows that sounds ludicrous.

"Who in the world is Miss Stewart, and why is she suddenly telling you what to do?"

"Your new assistant, sir."

My new...My eyes narrow at her. Christina Stewart did this.

"Where's Miss Stewart, Ramona?"

"In the study waiting for you."

I turn around and walk out of the kitchen. “I want my breakfast in the next fifteen minutes,” I tell her as I walk away.

What gives this woman the right to arrange my schedule according to her wishes? First, she wakes me up before I’m ready, and now I’ll have a late breakfast, which will lead to a late lunch and then dinner, and I’ll probably not be able to go to bed on time. All of which completely throw off my entire day.

I throw open the doors of my study, ready to yell at her, but I find her sitting on my chair and rolling around on it. The image strikes me speechless. I’ve never done that on the chair before. She grins as she spins herself around.

I fold my arms, waiting for her to notice me at the entrance. She finally does a couple of seconds later and jumps out of the chair.

“You’re awake now. I was entertaining myself while waiting for you to arrive.” She doesn’t stutter this time. She steps out from behind the desk. My brows furrow at the look of her. She’s wearing an odd brown blouse that makes her look like an old-school teacher. The pleated skirt she paired with it isn’t any better. Add her glasses and the hair piled on her head, she really dresses to look way beyond her years..

“Why did you tell the cooks I’ll have a late breakfast? I don’t remember telling you to do that.”

“You went back to sleep. With all your complaints about me waking you up too early, I thought you’d go back to sleep and

not wake up until later. I told them you'd be having a late breakfast."

I don't know what to say to that. It sounds reasonable. I close the door behind me and enter the room.

"Now that you're here, shall we start?" she looks down at the tablet on the desk.

"Yes." I move behind the desk and take my seat. Perhaps she's not as dumb as I thought, but I'll still remember my first impression of her. First impressions always matter.

"So, have you written anything yet? Perhaps we can either continue from there, or we can plan and organize what you want to write."

I scratch the back of my head and run my hand through my hair.

"I've not written anything yet. Or I should say, I've started several times, but didn't like it. Lots of pages have landed in the trashbin."

She pauses. "Okay, do you have an outline or an idea of what you want to write?"

"I don't have that either."

I see her trying to stop the crease in her brows, but she's unsuccessful. It creases a bit.

"I don't have an outline or any idea of what I want to write. That's why you're here, so tell me how should I start it?" I

fold my hands on my chest and give her my full attention. She's the one under scrutiny this time.

She sits on the chair before mine and draws the tablet close to her. She types on it for a few seconds before looking up. "According to my research, you're a retired racer who owns a winery and ad agency, among other businesses. You were quite famous in the racing world before retirement. You lost your wife and had to raise your daughter alone. I listened to the biography that was written about you a couple of years ago. It was lackluster, at best."

"What are you getting at with all this?" I'm surprised she was able to find all this about me. I've been meticulous in keeping my life private for years.

"With your personality, people will be interested in knowing something they can't find online. So, we should start with your childhood and then go up to your current life."

"I was dirt-poor in my childhood. Many people write biographies about their grass to grace, and it's always the same. Poor guy gets a big break and then gets rich and famous." She starts to type again, and I pause. I wonder what she's jotting down when I've not started dictating yet. "What will make my story different from others?"

"It'll be different because it's about you and the struggles you went through in your life. There must be something you were passionate about growing up. That's the side of you people want to see. If you're uncomfortable writing a grass-to-grace story, you can start from the beginning of your racing

career and how you got this far or from your teenage years when your passion for driving cars started.” She doesn’t look up from the tablet as she speaks. Most of the time, my assistants can’t stop staring at my face, but after yesterday, Miss Stewart hasn’t gawked at me, which I find surprising.

“How did you know my passion for racing started in my teenage years?”

She looks up and adjusts her glasses. “Just a lucky guess. Which one will you be going with?”

Thinking about my teenage years is easy for me. I got into a lot of trouble then trying to be a man too young, as most boys did. I wanted to replace the man in my mother’s life. After my father died, things were harder for both of us.

“My passion for racing didn’t start as a kid. I didn’t get a race car as a birthday gift or a Christmas present that ignited my spark.” I pause to see if she realizes I’ve started dictating. She’s already typing. “I didn’t sit in front of the TV as a five-year-old boy and watch a racer do a crazy stunt that caught my attention. My passion for racing started when I got hit by a car at fourteen.”

At that, she looks up. “That’s an odd reason to want something that bad.”

“It’s unconventional, but that was my reason.”

“So, why was it that reaction the accident created in you?”

“I was riding my skateboard when I got hit. I found a very old skateboard in my neighbor’s backyard while helping her

clean her yard. She'd gotten it from a garage sale. I remember seeing the car coming into my periphery and thought I could outrun it instead of waiting for the car to pass. I was hit and thrown to the ground like a sack of potatoes. I got a concussion and a sprained arm from it, but I learned my lesson, and it wasn't that I shouldn't try to outrun a car on a skateboard. It was to outrun a car on any vehicle."

I continue to dictate to her, and she types without complaint, often inputting her opinion. She completes my sentences before I finish them, and I feel she can genuinely help me write this book, but my first impression of her and this recent upgrade is clashing in my head and confusing me.

She wore a shirt and jeans when she arrived, and her hair flowed freely. She looked beautiful, and her figure was slightly enticing, even though I found her stuttering annoying. But I can't wrap my head around this new style she's got going this morning. Why the dull colors? They're unflattering.

"I can't get my head around this outfit of yours. It's hideous. I don't like my employees dressing like this. You're almost matching the furniture in this room. Like you could disappear right into it."

She hikes a brow and her lips purse. I think I just struck a nerve.

"I don't think how I dress should be any of your concern, Mr. Myers. My only quality that should interest you is my writing skills, not my fashion sense."

“It interests me, Miss Stewart, because I like my employees to dress a certain way. Your outfit bores me. From now on, you’ll not wear such bland things again. I think it’ll be better if you change it before we continue.”

Her mouth opens, but no words come out of it. Then, she scoffs in disbelief.

“You are really something else. What makes you think you can tell me what to wear?”

“You work for me, that’s why.”

Why is she arguing with me? Does she not know that I can fire her for this reaction?

“You might be my boss, but most men are usually happy to see an assistant who doesn’t dress to seduce them. I’m comfortable in my attire and won’t be changing, Mr. Myers. It doesn’t go against any code of dressing I know of. If there is nothing more you need me for, I’ll be in my room.”

She takes her tablet and walks out of the room. This is the first time anyone would ever shock me speechless.

CHAPTER 7: CHRISTIE

“I’m your boss, that’s why.” I try to mimic his voice as I walk away from the study, but I don’t understand.

That guy is freaking unbelievable. I’ve never met a more pigheaded person than him. How did all the assistants he worked with in the past manage to put up with him? He’s so annoying.

What gives him the right to tell me what to wear? From now on, you’ll wear something else, my ass. I hiss.

I hold on tightly to my tablet as I pace the hallway. He makes me so mad with that stupidly handsome face of his and those hideously fascinating lips he uttered those hateful words with.

He reminds me too much of my ex. He used to decide what I’d wear too, like I was a pet of his or a doll. He’d go into my closet and pick out my outfit for the day and even went as far as to tell me what to eat.

‘Don’t eat this, Christie. You’ll only gain more weight.’

‘Wear this dress, Christie. It doesn’t make your stomach look so bloated.’

‘This pair of pants makes your legs look flabby.’

‘The shirt is a boring color. It clashes with your skin tone and makes you look washed out.’

The list was endless. The funny part that makes me laugh is that I thought he was friendly and only said those words out of love. I thought it was caring how he’d always order food for me every time we went out, even though the food he usually ordered wasn’t the kind I eat.

Why would I eat kale? Or a salad without meat? I love meat, I’m not a vegetable person. He turned me into a half-vegetarian, and I laughed and smiled through it all.

Now I feel so stupid every time I think about it, and I wish I could go back in time, give him a piece of my mind, and tell him never to do that to me again. I have never been ashamed of my body, until I met him.

Yes, I’m a plus size, which is not a crime. I won’t let any man make me feel bad about how I look or how I like to dress, and Jericho Myers can take a hike if he thinks I’ll let him choose my clothes for me, too, just because he’s my boss. It will start with me letting him pick my outfits, and then slowly, it’ll move to him telling me what to eat, when to eat, and how to eat like I’m a freaking puppet.

I stare at the decorative mirror in the hall. There’s nothing wrong with my outfit. I have big breasts and a curvy, ample

butt. I thought I was doing him a favor by wearing an oversized shirt that didn't highlight my chest, and the skirt was big enough that the outline of my hip is not visible through it at all.

Maybe he wants me to show my body's curves. That's the only reason he'll complain about my outfit. Ramona wears long black dresses, even though it is her uniform. The dress is too long, and it covers every part of her. Why is he not complaining about that? That's because he's not interested in staring at Ramona's butt, but maybe he is interested in seeing mine.

I'm going to my room to sleep and cool off. I should've just gone back to sleep when he slammed the door in my face instead of going to his study to wait for him. My steps echo on the marble floor as I head down the hall and pause in front of the first door. It looks different from the type where my room is. This door is brown with symmetrical gold lines drawn on it. My door is plain.

I look around the hall. There isn't a mirror in the hallway where my room is. My stomach sinks as I realize I got lost. It didn't occur to me this house was big enough to get lost in. I move down the hall to the glass installed on the wall at the end. I can see the garage from here and the array of cars in it. This looks like the west wing of the house. Mr. Myers must be more affluent than I thought. He not only has an expensive art collection, but he has an expensive car collection, too. I can spot a Bugatti T57 Atlantic and a 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO from here. I don't know much about cars, but those are worth

millions. I squint my eyes to try and get the total count of the vehicles in the garage, but it's impossible from this angle.

Ironically, he has so many cars but never goes anywhere with them. What a waste of money. He's wealthy, but he's got a bad attitude. I scoff and walk away from the glass. I don't feel any better than when I left his study earlier. I'll go to my room and drop my tablet, then check if Ramona has any snacks for me today. Some cookies, a glass of juice, or a bowl of ice cream should sweeten my tongue enough for me to find it in me to apologize to Mr. Myers so he doesn't fire me for walking out on him. And the snack will improve my mood.

He might be infuriating, but I need the money, and I signed a contract only he can cancel, so I can't leave till the contract is over and his book is done.

Finding my room isn't hard. It's in the east wing. I grab the door handle but pause when I notice an open door opposite mine. It shouldn't be any of my business, and I should go into my room instead of snooping around, but curiosity gets the better of me, and I step away from my door. If it happens to be Mr. Myers in there doing something personal, and I walk in on him, there's no doubt I'll get yelled at, but that doesn't stop me from pushing the door open slightly so I can get a better view.

The room is done in pink, violet, and white décor. It has soft pink and lilac walls, a white Persian rug, a lilac bedspread, and a pink vanity. The closet doors and the entrance to the en suite restroom are pink. A light bulb on the ceiling looks like a lava lamp with purple and pink polka dots, except it emits white

light instead of the design. Above the bed is an oil painting of a little girl who resembles Jericho. My gaze finally falls on the girl on the balcony painting on an easel.

Transfixed by the colors she's using and that I just found someone with a passion for art like me, I move closer to her. Contrary to her room's cute and cuddly décor, the girl is painting with black, red, and yellow. Vivid colors jump out from the canvas and scream at you to get your attention. Upon closer inspection, I see she's painting the red maple tree in the yard. The tree is beautiful and stands out amid all the green in the yard, but her painting brings it to life.

I'm so mesmerized by her work I don't realize when I speak.

“Wow!”

She turns back suddenly and shrieks. Her brush flies out of her hand and hits me on the chest, staining my shirt with a big yellow stain. She takes a step away from me.

I shouldn't have spoken so suddenly. I know just how absorbed into the work I can become when working on my art projects, and to be pulled out of that universe so abruptly is jarring.

“You scared me.”

“I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to startle you.”

She looks at me suspiciously as she bends and picks up her brush beside my foot. She shakes the brush off in case it has some sand and wipes it on her apron before dipping it in the palette she's holding.

“I’m Christina Stewart, Mr. Myers’s new assistant. Everyone that knows me calls me Christie.” I hold out a hand for a shake, and surprisingly, she takes it. Looks like she’s the only one that knows how to shake a hand in this house.

“Rebecca Myers. Mr. Myers is my father,” she says, then lets go of my hand and goes back to painting.

The wind rustles her black hair, and she moves it behind her ear. She has pin-straight black hair and green eyes, just like Jericho Myers. If I thought his features were handsome, seeing them on a female is even more breathtaking. She’s beautiful.

“You know, the painting would look even better if you add a touch of green,” I tell her.

“You think? I was going for more of an elevated natural style. It’s supposed to resemble the original image but look better than it closely.”

“Yeah, I see that, but it won’t look natural without green. Green is the color of nature. The tree looks lonely this way, but it’s not the only entity in this yard, is it?... Here, let me...” I take another paintbrush from the cup on a stool next to her.

I pick up the green acrylic tube on the stool and squeeze a little into her palette. With the brush, I dab at the color a little and spread it evenly on the brush, making sure it’s not too much before going in and adding some tufts of green grass in the painting. She watches me curiously as I work on it.

I’ve never had an audience when I’m painting before. It’s weird, even though technically, I’m the audience watching her

paint. When I'm done, I step away from the canvas and let her continue.

"This looks..." she can't complete the rest of her sentence, and I grin.

"I told you it'll look better." I drop the brush back into the cup set I took it from.

"Thanks." She smiles. "The painting is for an art project in school. I was scared they wouldn't like it, and I would fail." A blush creeps up on her cheek, and she casts her gaze down.

"What? I was blown away when I saw your painting. There's no way your teacher won't give you an A+ for this. How old are you?"

Her smile widens, and I notice that one of her incisors overlaps her canine on the left. "I'm 10."

"Wow! That's young. You're like a mini Georgia O'Keeffe."

She frowns. "Who's that?"

"She's a female artist. Don't worry; you'll know her as you grow older."

"I suppose now that you helped me a little with my painting, I can't call it mine. I was supposed to do it solo."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize that." There you go, Christie, you just jumped the gun again. The poor girl didn't even ask for your help.

She shrugs and goes back to painting. "It doesn't matter. We can keep it a secret between us. No one has to know if none of

us say anything.”

“I can clean it if you want. I’m sure there’s a rag here that can wipe it off with.” I pretend to check through the paintbrushes and the box of acrylic paints, and she chuckles.

“You know you can’t do that.”

“What makes you so sure? I’m sure a rag can clean it. I’ll dab at the canvas a little, and it’ll be gone.”

She snorts as she laughs. “You’re funny.” Her laughter dies down after a while, but she still has a slight smile and a warm glint in her eyes. “You’re not like any of the other assistants my dad has had in the past. None of them understood art, and they weren’t as funny.”

“Well, I’m a special breed. There’s no other assistant like me.” I wink at her, and she chuckles softly, then shakes her head before adding the finishing touches to her painting.

I might’ve just found myself an ally in case Jericho Myers decides to fire me.

CHAPTER 8: JERICHO

I slap my Rolex on my wrist and fix the cufflinks of my suit afterward. I check to see if I should comb my hair back. I've been running my hand through my hair all afternoon. The strands are in spikes flying in different directions. I look more like a rogue than a gentleman. I wasn't trying to look like a gentleman in the first place, anyway.

I'd rather be anywhere else than this event, but if I'm forced to be there, I don't need to try that hard to look good.

A movement at my doorway draws my attention from the mirror. Rebecca is standing by the door, holding a canvas to her chest. She hesitates as her gaze runs down my outfit.

"What's that you got there?" I ask.

She smiles and approaches me. "It's a school project that I made." She turns it around to show me. It's a painting of the maple tree her mother had planted in the backyard. I can swear the tree didn't look this good the last time I saw it. Iris would be proud of her if she could see this now. She'd planted the

tree so Rebecca could build a treehouse when she got older, but now that our little girl is older, she doesn't want a treehouse. So, the tree is just there as a decoration in the yard—something for her to stare at and remember her mother.

“It looks beautiful, sweetheart. I'm certain it'll be the best painting in class.”

She grins, and her eyes twinkle. The only characteristic of her mother that she has is the misaligned teeth on the left side of her mouth. Iris also had her last incisor overlapping her canine.

“Christie also helped me a little. Did you know she's an artist AND she's very famous online? I've been watching some of her reels; her paintings are brilliant and colorful.”

My brows furrow as I watch her speak. I've never seen her so animated, especially not about a person. Miss Stewart must've made quite an impression on her.

“I didn't know all that.”

“Well, now you know. I'm trying to see if she can teach me to make a black-and-white painting.”

“I'm sure she'll be very keen to teach you. No one can resist your charm. Not even boring old Miss Stewart.”

She blushes but hits my arm with her free hand. “She's not boring or old. She's stunning.”

She is very pretty; I won't deny that, but she's a bit old-fashioned for my taste. Or perhaps she's just lacking in fashion sense.

“Whatever you say.”

She stares at my outfit once more and gives me a thumbs-up.

“Where are you going?”

“I have a wine tasting to attend. It’s sort of a big event, and many people will be there. Influential people.”

“Oh!” she grimaces. “The snotty rich kind.”

I snicker. “We’re also one of those rich people, right?”

“We are not snobby rich. We are friendly and rich. I thought you hated those kinds of events. You hate every event.”

“Not hate, precisely, but I’m not keen on going either. However, I must see what the bastard is up to if he’s trying to steal my wine-making secrets.”

“Dad! Language,” she says in a warning tone and stares at me sternly but doesn’t manage to get the expression right and ends up laughing.

“He is a bastard.”

“I’ll tell Grandma. She’ll straighten you out.”

“What’s with your notion that I’m scared of my mother? She’s not going to do anything to me—”

“Other than yelling at you loud, you do what she says. By the way, aren’t you supposed to go to this wine tasting with someone? You know, like a plus one. Everyone always brings a plus one to these things.”

Oh, really, now. I fold my arms on my chest and hike a brow.

“How many of these events have you been to, young lady?”

Her cheeks tinge pink, and she turns around, heading to the door. She pauses and faces me. “You should take Christie with you as your plus one. She’s in the kitchen. You two would look handsome together.” She giggles as she runs out.

“Just be careful you don’t ruin your painting,” I shout as she runs down the hall.

Go with Christie, indeed. I’d rather go alone than go with that loudmouthed woman. Yet, I don’t head straight for the front door when I get down the stairs. I find myself going to the kitchen, where Christie is having tea and eating gingerbread cookies.

This time, she’s dressed in an even more hideous black dress. It’s made of wool and looks more like a sweater, but it’s an A-line dress. The weather is not cold enough for that outfit. My jaw clenches.

“I see you didn’t heed my warning. I’m starting to wonder if you need this job.”

Her face turns complicated, and she drops the teacup on the counter. “I thought I made it clear that I will only dress as I please and not to your preference?”

Her audacity to talk back to me in that manner is still astounding. Clearly, she’s not concerned about getting fired. I can’t fire her because I need her, and she’s the only one who’s been able to give me the kind of writing help I need. I scoff and slip my hands into my pockets. I move close to her.

Her eyes widen, and she sucks in a deep breath when I stop before her. Her eyes are like candies behind her glasses. Shiny and enticing like freshly made chocolate candy. An idea occurs to me, and the side of my lips quirks up in amusement. Rebecca did say she'd make a good plus one.

“I have a wine tasting to attend. You'll be coming with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I need a plus one, and you're available.”

“What makes you think I'm availa—”

“You're coming with me, Miss Stewart, and you're not coming dressed like that, so you'll have to change your outfit whether you like it or not. I don't trust any of the outfits you brought with you, so ask Ramona to open the first door in the east wing and get some dresses that'll be proper for the event. They belong to my mother. I don't like to repeat myself, so get on to it.”

She glares at me. If she were a dragon, she'd ooze smoke from her nostrils. However, she has no choice but to follow my orders. She is my assistant, and she's required to follow me out when I ask. She storms out of the kitchen in search of Ramona.

Jericho 1. Christina 0.

I pick up the teacup she'd abandoned and sip her tea.

“Hmm! Honey and lemon tea. Nice.” Then, I shove a gingerbread cookie in my mouth.

It's exhilarating to one-up her. She's the one who's speechless now. After drinking all the tea, I wait for her in the living room. I check my watch. The event has started already, and I'm sure Miss Stewart will take her time finding a dress to spite me and make me run late. What she doesn't know is I'd rather be late and make an entrance to this wine tasting than arrive early so I have all the time in the world. The best part about today won't be the wine tasting anyway. It'll be that I got her to change her clothes to something I like. I rest on the couch, cross my legs in front of me, and spread out my arms on the top of the sofa.

Ten minutes later, she comes down the stairs dressed in a wine-colored dinner dress. It has one shoulder and a yoke, hinting at her breast's upper part. The dress hugs all her curves and flows down to the floor from the knee.

"Is this to your liking, Mr. Myers?" she asks.

I swallow.

"As a matter of fact, it is, Miss Stewart. The dress belonged to my late wife."

"Oh...I'm..." Speechless again.

I won this round, but it doesn't feel like I did. I haven't seen that dress on anyone in years. It was Iris's favorite dress, but it looks much sexier on Christie.

"It looks beautiful on you."

My voice has gone soft. She tries to look tough and hide the blush on her cheeks, but it doesn't work. She's packed her hair

up in a messy bun, leaving nothing to shield her face in a moment like this. She adjusts her glasses and crosses the distance between us.

“Shall we leave?”

I clear my throat. “Yes, we shall.”

The driver is already parked out on the driveway, waiting for us. When we get in the car, he drives off. The partition between the driver and the backseat goes up because I always keep it up when I am in the car. Except for this time, keeping it up makes the space back here awkward, and telling the driver to let down the partition still makes things uncomfortable.

I can't stop looking at Christie's neck, the slope of her shoulders, the gentle rise and fall of her chest that makes her breasts even more enticing, or how she's sitting with her back stiff, licking her lips, and trying to hide, checking me out.

The car stops in front of the hall where the wine-tasting occurs. August has gone through the trouble of setting up a red carpet. Just how good is this wine? With a red carpet comes paparazzi, and with paparazzi, there are always pictures.

I'm not getting my picture taken tonight, not if I have anything to say about it.

“Wait in the car,” I tell Christina and get out of the car, then go around to open her door and help her out. “Just follow my lead and do as I say.”

I take her hand in mine. The feeling is weird. The spaces between my fingers fit perfectly with hers, and it's like her

hand was made to be held by mine. It's ridiculous. I shake the thought off.

I tentatively approach the red carpet to see if they'll recognize me. If they don't, we won't need to walk fast. Unfortunately, they recognize me.

"Jericho Myers." They all shout one after the other, and the cameras start clicking.

"Who's the lady with you?"

Christina keeps her head down as I lead her away from them. Our feet eat up the ground in long strides, and before long, we're past the security guards at the entrance and inside the building.

"Whoa! That was intense," she says, looking back at the red carpet. "Why didn't you stay for a picture?"

"I'm not a picture person, but you can go back out there if you want your picture taken."

She rolls her eyes before she can stop herself, and a small smile creeps up on me.

"Are we going in or not?" she looks down at our joined hands, and I realize I'm still holding on to her. I let go of her hand. It feels like I just lost something important.

"It's this way." I turn in the direction of the hall. Penhaust Hotel has the biggest hall in Dallas. I've had a few events here myself.

Christina's heels click on the floor as she runs after me. I didn't realize she didn't follow me immediately.

"Slow down, sir. It's so hard to run in these heels. They are a bit tight."

"We're here." I point to the pull-up banner near the door advertising the wine tasting.

From where I'm standing, I can see the number of people in the room. Old August managed to pull quite a crowd today. I guess Christina can see the crowd as well because she takes my hand in hers, and I feel I'm supposed to hold her hand again. It just fits perfectly. I stare at her with a question on my face, and she swallows.

"I'm not a crowd person," is her reply to my silent question.

"We make quite the pair, don't we? Don't worry; I won't let go of your hand."

CHAPTER 9: CHRISTIE

Don't worry, I won't let go of your hand, he said. But where is he now? He's across the room chatting with a few socialites despite his insistence on not socializing with people, and where am I? I'm by the drinks fountain, having a taste of the wine that's being released today. Alone, might I add.

He's probably over there trying to close a client, which makes me wonder why he brought me here in the first place. Most of the men in the room are staring at me lustily. This is why I don't wear fancy dresses. I don't even have makeup on, yet I still get these looks. It's uncomfortable.

Mr. Myers glances at me and then looks away again. He smiles at something one of his companions said. That's how it's been since he got dragged away when we stepped into the room. He'll glance at me appreciatively and make me all bothered, then look away again only to look back at me and do the same thing.

I didn't expect the reaction I got from him when I came down the stairs. I'd only worn the dress because it was of a dark color to spite him for making me change my outfit, but it was his wife's dress. It felt awkward to have him admire me in it. It still does. Now, whenever he looks at me tonight, he'll imagine his wife wearing it, not me. Then, there's me, feeling all this sexual tension between us.

I move to the snack table and pick one of the finger snacks. The party is boring. The wine tastes okay, but the snacks are delicious. Those are the only two things remarkable about this party. The music is dull, and the people are even more tedious despite the bling on their attires. They're just standing around chitchatting. No one is dancing; everyone is just drinking the white wine.

My feet are killing me. I didn't pack for these kinds of events. I don't get invited to these things, and I didn't pack any fancy shoes. So, I had to wear these uncomfortable pumps I found in the closet, which I'm guessing also belonged to his wife. It's half of a size too small, and it's cramping my toes. I wish I could take these off now, but I can't.

Attending an event with Jericho Myers automatically puts you in the spotlight. The ladies stare at you with jealousy over his bank account, and the men watch you with adoration and lust over his cars. This was a bad idea. I should've just feigned a headache and told him to come with Rebecca as his plus one.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself," someone says from behind me, and I almost jump out of my skin. My hand goes to

my chest like it will grab my heart that practically burst out of my ribcage.

“You scared me.”

“My apologies.” He grins. “Scaring a beautiful lady such as yourself is not what I intended. I’m August Somerfield, and you are?”

“Christina Stewart, Mr. Myers’s assistant.” My hand automatically juts out for a handshake.

“Assistant, eh!” he takes my hand and places a slimy kiss on it. It makes my skin crawl. “You’re too beautiful for that brute.”

August Somerfield is one of those good-looking men with all the features of a bad boy. He has long black hair that falls in soft waves past his shoulders, a well-structured face, dark eyes, and a goatee. He looks like he stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine with the all-white suit he has on. Still, unlike Jericho Myers, who looks like the typical bad guy that makes your panties wet, August Somerfield is more like the one who makes you feel like you should run far away from him because he’s going to do wicked things to you that you’ll never recover from.

A sixth sense tells me nothing about him is good, and I should stay away from him. I plaster on the fakest smile I can muster because I feel anything but comfortable around him and try to sidestep him.

“I think I’m going to have another glass of wine from that table.” I point to the wine fountain a few feet from where I stand.

“I see you love the wine. Everyone has been commenting on the quality.” He moves right with me and follows me to the table.

Geez Louise! What does he want from me?

“It tastes really nice,” I say.

“It was made from the juiciest grapes in the vineyard. Top-notch quality. The process it went through is too complicated to explain, but I only ever give my customers the best, unlike other wineries.”

I don't care about that. I'm not a fan of any wine.

I almost say to him, but if he’s one of the clients Mr. Myers is trying to bag, I’ll be in serious trouble because I’d have succeeded in chasing him off.

“That’s lovely. I don’t know anything about wine or the process of making it.”

I force a laugh, and the man laughs along with me. Can’t he take a hint? I don’t get what’s so funny.

“You are beautiful, Christina. The color looks great on you. When you stepped in, I couldn’t help admiring you from across the room.”

You already said that before. Just go already.

“Thank you.” Another tight-lipped smile. This should be his cue to leave, but he’s so clueless he’s still smiling at me.

I turn my attention to the décor. At least if he gets into a boring conversation, he’ll leave me alone. The gold and purple curtains decorating the hall's walls are the same on the label of the wine they’re unveiling. I guess those are the brand colors. The glass chandelier hanging from the ceiling sparkles like diamonds. There’s nothing to discuss here.

My attention turns to the bottle of wine on the podium. The bottle is more circular than cylindrical, unlike most wine bottles. It has a round bottom and a tubular head.

“That’s an unconventional shape,” I say, pointing to the bottle. “Is there a reason behind the shape and the color of the décor?”

“For the shape, I wanted to do something different. Your boss, Jericho, is on the verge of suing me for copying his campaign.” He chuckles. “The man is delusional. Spending all that time indoors must be affecting him. Did that wine taste anything like his?”

My mouth opens to tell him that I’ve never had any of Mr. Myers’s wine before, so I don’t know the difference, but he continues speaking, and I shut it.

“He likes to make a mountain out of a molehill. I don’t know the kind of stuff he’s been eating. He gets more paranoid as the days go by.”

I glance at the spot where I'd seen Mr. Myers last. He's no longer with his companions but heading towards us and looks unhappy. He seems mad for some reason.

"Speak of the devil, and he shall appear," August Somerfield mumbles as Mr. Myers stops in front of us.

He spares Mr. Somerfield a scornful glance before grabbing my arm and pulling me with him. All heads turn in our direction as he pulls me out of the room, and my cheeks get hot. This is so embarrassing. Why does he insist on treating me like a child? First, I changed my clothes for him, he manipulated me to come with him to this event, and now he's dragging me away by my arm. I don't even know what's wrong this time.

I try to get my arm out of his hold, but it's futile. His fingers dig into my skin almost painfully.

"Let go of me. What is wrong with you?"

"No, what is wrong with *you*? What did you think you were doing in there? I brought you here to be my plus one, not flirt with my competitor." He lets go of my arm and turns around to face me squarely.

Mr. Somerfield was right. Mr. Myers is going crazier by the day. I look around the hallway to see if there's anyone nearby to notice the scene he's creating.

"I wasn't flirting with him. I wasn't comfortable talking to him and trying to get him to leave me alone, but he wouldn't

go away. Escape was my intention, and flirting was not in my thoughts.”

“That didn’t appear to be the case from where I stood. You were laughing and smiling with him. He kissed your hand. I brought you here to help me, not to find you a rich husband.”

“I have no interest in husbands or judge people by the size of their bank accounts. Why do rich people assume this? All this wouldn’t have happened in the first place if you hadn’t left me by myself and disappeared after forcing me to come here with you.”

His eyes darken, and fear strikes my heart. I might’ve spoken too much. He takes a menacing step closer so he’s only inches from my face. His jaw clenches, and he balls his fists at his sides.

“Do I look like your guardian? Did I come here to babysit you? You’re a grown woman, and I’m not your bodyguard. Know your place, Miss Stewart. I didn’t bring you here so you can embarrass me by flirting with August like a wanton woman, and don’t you ever speak to me in such a tone. I give you way more freedom than I ought to. You are my assistant. Never forget that.”

This is nonsense. I didn’t sign up for this. Working with Richard was boring, but at least he respected me and never insulted me like this. Jericho Myers is in another league of assholery. He’s a complete control freak, and I won’t let another man make me feel like crap.

“Duly noted. You can enjoy your party alone. Goodbye.”

He looks surprised to hear that. Was he expecting me to tell him, yes, sir, I'm the help, I'll know my place from now on, and obey your every word like your puppet?

I think not.

I walk away from him and go out the front door. Heavy rain pelts me the moment I step out of the hotel, and I get soaked through in an instant. It's nighttime already, and it's raining heavily.

How wonderful! It had been raining, and I didn't notice it because of the music indoors. I glance back at the doors to go back in, but Mr. Myers is headed towards me. What does he want now? I ignore him and dash out into the rain. I'm already soaked anyway, and I might as well get wetter.

I'm sure by the time I walk down the street more, I'll get a cab that'll take me back to Myers' house. I don't know what I'll do when I get there since I can't leave, but I won't stay here another second.

"What do you think you're doing, Miss Stewart?"

I turn back sharply. Mr. Myers is out in the rain, soaked through and through. Has he gone mad?

"Why are you following me?"

"Are your thinking faculties not functioning properly? Just look how you're dressed. You'll catch a cold."

Unbelievable.

“What does it matter to you? You told me to know my place, right? My place isn’t in there with all those fancily dressed people sipping white wine and eating hors d’oeuvres. It’s out here in the rain where many of their helpers probably are. So, why don’t you return inside, Mr. Myers, and leave me alone.”

His face is unreadable as he moves closer to me and removes his suit jacket. He drapes it around me. It doesn’t do much since it’s already wet, but how he stares at me while draping it around my shoulders makes my breath seize. His lashes are dripping wet, and they look so long. His lips have become pinker under the water. The glare from the hotel lights cast a halo around his figure, making him appear ethereal like my guardian angel when he’s the devil sent to torment me.

“You’ll catch a cold if you stay out here too long. I already called the driver, and he’ll be here soon.”

Not long after he says the words, the Jeep parks next to us. Mr. Myers opens the door for me, and I get in. He doesn’t say anything else to me throughout the ride back to his house, and I don’t utter a word either.

CHAPTER 10: JERICHO

The first thing that happens when I open my eyes is that I let out a loud sneeze. I sit up in bed and regret it immediately. My head is spinning. My nose is clogged, and I feel like shit. I sniff as I throw aside the comforter and pad to the restroom.

When I turn the faucet, water bubbles out of the tap in a foamy stream. I place both hands under the stream, catch water, and wash my face. When I stare in the mirror, I look like I was run over by a car. My nose is red, and so is the skin under my eyes. I let out another loud sneeze and turn off the water.

This is all Miss Stewart's fault. If she hadn't gone out in the rain like a crazy person, I wouldn't have had to go after her, and I wouldn't have caught a cold. I snuggle under the covers and hug one of my pillows. I want to go back to sleep and wake up when I feel better. But that is a luxury I can't afford.

Someone knocks on the door.

Bloody hell! Can't I get some peace around here? I wonder who it is this time.

"Don't come in. I'm still asleep," I say, but it must've fallen on deaf ears because the door opens a few seconds later.

What part of I'm still asleep does this person not understand?

I scowl at the door. Miss Stewart walks into the room looking fresh from a shower. No red eyes and no red nose. She didn't catch a cold. I suck on my teeth. Now, I'm mad. How is it fair that I'm the one who catches a cold when I only went to get her from the rain? She's the one who ran out in the rain in the first place, and she gets nothing?

"It's nice to see you're awake," she says as she carries a tray over to my bed. "I thought you wouldn't wake up from how clogged your nose sounded. It didn't seem like you were breathing well." She places the tray on my bedside table and sits on my bed.

"But you managed to wriggle through without a problem, didn't you?"

"I have strong genes," is her reply.

She reaches for my forehead, or at least tries to because I move away from her hand each time she tries to touch me.

"Will you hold still? I'm checking your temperature to see how sick you are."

"With your palm? What a certified nurse you are. Could you not touch me? I don't know what other germs you might be

carrying to infect me with.”

She sighs and drops her hand. “Fine, I won’t touch you.” She lifts the bowl on the tray and scoops some of the content in the bowl with a spoon. “I made some soup. It’s my grandma’s secret recipe for curing a cold. You’ll feel better once you have it.”

I crane my neck to get a better look at the concoction in the bowl without having to sit up. It’s dark green. Anything dark green never tastes good. I can’t smell it because my nose is blocked, but I know it wouldn’t smell nice if I could.

“What is that made of? Mud, vomit, and every disgusting thing on earth? I’m not eating that. Get it out of my room.” I wave to shoo her away, but she doesn’t budge. She stares at me as if I’ve gone crazy.

“I said get out of my room. If you don’t leave here in the next two seconds, I’ll fire you, and security will drag you out on your heels. I promise you that. Get up.” I tap the bed. “Get up and go. Leave.”

“I heard you the first time,” she says before standing from the bed. She begins to leave the room without carrying the concoction she left on my bed and the tray on the bedside table.

“Where are you going? Come and take your stuff.”

She doesn’t turn around, and when she gets to the door, she latches it instead of leaving. I frown. She’s not going anywhere? What is this nonsense? I told her to leave my room.

She wants me to scream for security before she leaves. If that's what she wants, that's what she'll get.

I reach for the phone on the bedside table, but she rushes forward and takes it out before my hands can touch it.

“You're acting like a child. I came here earlier, saw you were feeling sick, and decided to make you something to help you feel better, but here you are throwing a tantrum instead of thanking me. Call whomever you want. I'm not leaving here until you eat that soup and feel better.”

My eyes narrow at her. If that's how she wants to play it, we'll play. I turn away from her and close my eyes. She can't feed me that garbage if I don't open my mouth. She sighs as she sits on the bed again. I hear the sound of slushing and peek at her. She's moving the spoon around in the soup.

“I just want to say I'm sorry for last night. I might've overreacted a bit.”

Overreacted is an understatement, but she's not the one who's supposed to be apologizing. I am. However, I don't feel like it right now. Silence ensues between us for a while, and I think she's given up and will leave my room, but she speaks instead.

“I did so many things wrong today.” She chuckles. “First, I didn't close the windows when I went to sleep last night, and it was chilly, but by some miracle, I didn't wake up with a cold. Then I came here and found that you didn't lock your door. I know you have high security outside the house, but you should always lock your door.”

You shouldn't be peeking at unsuspecting men in their beds in the first place.

“I went to the kitchen to make you this soup and made a bit of a mess. It's been a while since I've made this recipe, and I'm a little out of practice with it. I'm sure Ramona would flip when she sees the state I left her kitchen.”

I wasn't planning on talking to her before, but she's such a nincompoop.

“Didn't your grandma teach you to clean up as you cook when she taught you that recipe, or did you steal it?”

“Ha! He speaks.”

I face her fully with a scowl on my face. “Of course, I speak, you dingle—”

She shoves a spoonful of soup in my mouth with such force that it immediately goes down my throat with the piece of chicken. I sit up instantly to stop myself from choking on the chicken piece, but she shoves another spoon in my mouth.

The broth is not as disgusting as I thought it would be. It's delicious.

I chew on a juicy piece of chicken and swallow. She keeps feeding me, and I keep chewing till the soup is all gone.

“That wasn't so hard, was it? It didn't taste as bad as you thought, either.”

She stands and drops the empty bowl on the tray she brought in. She picks it up and turns to leave, but I grab her wrist.

“Stay with me. Don’t go just yet.”

She hikes a brow. “I didn’t know you enjoyed my company like that, Mr. Myers.”

“You just force-fed me and tricked me into talking. The least you can do for such ill-treatment is sit with me till I fall asleep.”

She mulls it over and probably realizes this is all her fault. She places the tray back on the bedside table and sits on my bed. It should feel intrusive that she’s invading my personal space like this, but just like when I held her hand yesterday, it feels right.

“You should move closer,” I tell her. For a second, her eyes narrow, and I think she’s going to call me out on my bullshit, but she lays next to me and looks up at the glass ceiling. The sun is out, and I think it’s noon already, but the glass is a little tinted, so the sun's glare isn’t so bright. It looks like we’ve got sunshades on and staring at the sun. I feel sleepy. It must be because of the soup she just gave me.

“I don’t mean to get so grumpy all the time. Ever since my wife died, I’ve been so lonely. It’s hard to be happy without her.” My eyes are gently closing, and my speech is becoming soft.

“I haven’t been through what you have, but I can imagine how painful that must be. I’ve had some minor loss recently. My ex-boyfriend of three years was cheating on me. I thought we would get married, but he got someone else pregnant and

married her. The painful part was that I had to learn about it in a very public way.”

“That’s harsh.” At least for me, my wife didn’t cheat or leave me for another man. She got sick, and she died. She’d been battling lupus from a young age, and I thought we could beat it, but she only got worse, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

“I’m sorry you went through that. Yeah. It’s been hard getting over him. I was in denial for the first few months and ready to beg him to come back.”

“That’s pathetic.”

She sighs. “I know, but when you’re in love, you don’t realize how pathetic you are.”

I turn to her and open my arms wide. My eyes are starting to close, but I fight the sleep.

“Looks like you need a hug.”

It doesn’t take much convincing for her to move into my arms, and I envelop her in a hug. Her head on my chest feels just right. I love the smell of her hair. It reminds me of my trip to China and the peach tree I saw in the garden of my friend’s house. As my eyes close, I wonder if she feels the same way I’m feeling.

CHAPTER 11: CHRISTIE

I've always found the sound of a man's steady heartbeat soothing. I remember nights cuddled in my ex's arms, listening to him fall asleep. He never went to sleep naked. He always wore these scratchy woolen pajamas because it got cold late at night, and he didn't like the cold. His pajamas made my skin red when I woke up in the mornings, but I loved sleeping with my head on his chest even though it was uncomfortable the next day.

Jericho Myers, on the other hand, is nothing like my ex. Listening to the thumping of his heart against my ear makes me think of a trapped bird in a cage fighting to burst out. His shirt is threadbare and soft, almost silky. It smells faintly of his scent. An oaky smell that's mixed with something else that's overpowering. Cinnamon or Sandalwood, maybe.

I can't tell what it is exactly, but I love his smell. I can imagine falling asleep on his chest every night and cuddling him after a long day at work. Or him spooning me after a heated lovemaking.

I stiffen.

Lovemaking? Why am I thinking of having sex with my boss?

He's odious, and nothing is remotely attractive about him besides his body and scent. He's got a temper, and his arrogance is on another level. Not to mention, I'm still recovering from having my heart dashed. I'm not the kind of girl that fantasizes about such things.

Get your head straight, Christie.

I need this job, and I can't afford such thoughts of him. I can't afford these feelings he's inciting in me. I don't even know what I'm doing in here. I should be out helping some of the maids around the house or painting with Rebecca. I could even be shooting a video for my social media right now, yet here I am in the early morning, sleeping on my boss's chest.

I should go.

I attempt to get up, but his arms tighten around me. Even unconscious, he's still trying to control me. My fingers grip his arm, and I pull it away from me. Thinking that I've successfully freed myself from his vice-like grip, I try to stand, but he shifts, and his hand hits my back, sending me crashing to his chest.

"Oof!" flies out of my mouth as his arms encircle me and his legs entwine mine.

Now he's got me in a tight hold. Does he think I'm his pillow? His face is close to mine now, and his breath fans my

cheeks. I swallow. I can see his long lashes. In repose, he looks so peaceful. I stare at his lips. They look soft. I could lean in close and kiss him just lightly.

His smell is intoxicating, and I'm enveloped in it with him being so close to me. My heart is pounding, and I'm acutely aware of the tingling on my skin, especially my nipples hardening in my bra. In a last attempt to free myself, I push at his chest, but all I get from him is a groan. His brows furrow slightly and then go smooth again.

I give up. Since he won't let go, I might as well rest in his embrace. I place my head on his chest and wrap my arms around his waist. My eyes close, and I let the silence in the room lull me. Someone will come to his room eventually and free me from his hold. For now, I need to stay still and wait.

Being in his embrace is so comfortable I don't realize when I fall asleep only to be woken up by moaning. Mr. Myers has released me and is facing the doorway with his back turned to me. I sit up and yawn. I've never slept during the day before. It left my body feeling tired and out of sorts. My bones feel like jelly, and my head is groggy.

He groans again and turns around. His eyes are shut tightly, and his brows are furrowed in a deep frown. He's whispering something incoherently under his breath.

"Mr. Myers?" I shift close to him and shake his shoulders.

He's having a nightmare.

"Mr. Myers?"

His body is too hot. He's got a fever. I shake him again, but his hand juts out, and he sends me flying off the bed. I moan in pain as my body hits the floor.

Note to self: never go near a man having a nightmare.

But I can't just leave him like this. He's burning up and needs to be cooled immediately. I get off the floor and keep my distance from him.

"Mr. Myers," I yell.

That does it. His eyes fly open, and he sits up immediately. He looks around the room in confusion before his gaze lands on me.

"You were having a nightmare," I explain.

"A nightmare," he repeats.

The frown still hasn't left his face. Oh, boy. He must be so out of it to repeat after me like this.

"Wait right here. I'll run you a cold bath."

I dash into his bathroom. If I thought my bathroom screamed luxury, his is on another level. It's the size of my bedroom. The floors of his bathroom were made with black, white, and gold marble that spanned to his Jacuzzi, which is so big, that it's almost the size of a small lap pool. You can fit five people in there, and there'd still be wiggle room.

His shower walls are covered in the same marble as the floor, and the doors are made of see-through glass. He has a svelte rain waterfall shower head mounted on the wall. It's big

and slim. I feel it'll be like standing under the rain when bathing there. There's a smaller showerhead with a metallic hose on the wall. I'd use that as my microphone when singing in the shower.

I'm not here to gape at the expensive things in his bathroom. I'm supposed to run him a bath. I move to the Jacuzzi and turn on all three attached taps so the tub fills quickly. While waiting, my eyes survey the rest of the bathroom. His toilet is separated from the rest of the bathroom by the same glass as the shower, and I can see his toilet seat and the water closet. It has one of the automatic flush sensors at the top.

Just how rich is this guy? How much must one make to afford all this in the bathroom? I'm guessing a lot more than I make. Probably more than I will ever make in my lifetime.

The tub gets filled up quickly, and I turn off the water. Mr. Myers is under the covers and shivering when I leave the bathroom. I grab the comforter and pull it off him. He hisses in irritation.

"What is wrong with you?" he growls, but it's less scary when he looks as sick as he does.

"You have to take a bath. Come on." I grab his arm; surprisingly, he doesn't fight me. He gets off the bed, and I throw his arm over my shoulder. Most of his body weight is resting on me; I tell you, this man is made of solid muscle. My legs quiver beneath me as I drag him to the bathroom.

Only when we get to the Jacuzzi do I realize he's wearing sweatpants, and he'll have to go naked to get in the tub. My

cheeks redden as I let go of him. A part of me is interested in seeing what he'll look like without his clothes on. I've just spent the past few hours asleep next to him, feeling his rock-hard body, and yes, it created fantasies in my head.

But the more sane part of me knows that's wrong. I've gotten him this far. He can get in the tub himself. I turn around to leave, but his voice stops me.

“Where are you going? Aren't you my self-appointed nurse for the day? You said it yourself that you'll take care of me.”

I grit my teeth and ball my hands into fists. I shouldn't have said that. Does he want me to watch him get naked? I can't believe he's sick and still has so much sass. Most barely speak when they have a cold, but he's taking advantage of it to bring out his inner terrorist.

Turning, I face him. He's sitting at the edge of the tub and staring at me. I gulp. He looks sick, yet it hasn't taken away from his attractiveness. If anything, the vulnerability his illness gives him makes me more attracted to him.

“You'll have to get naked to get in the Jacuzzi. I don't want to see you naked.”

There's a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and his lips tremble a little. He's trying to look strong, but the fever is taking its toll on his body—shame on me. I should be more concerned about his health instead of his body. So what if I see him naked? Every caregiver eventually sees their patients naked, and they don't react this way.

“Then turn around,” he says, coughing a little before getting up. I frown. Is he going to take his clothes off right now? His hands move to the top of his sweatpants. I don’t need to get told twice before I turn around.

I hear shuffling as his clothes come off, and I clench my fist tightly. My mouth goes dry. I want to look back at him and sneak a peek, but that’s wrong. I wouldn’t like him to do that to me. A soft thud sounds as his sweatpants hit the ground, and he kicks them in front of me. Next goes his shirt. Then, water sloshing fills my ears as he enters the Jacuzzi.

He hisses, and his teeth chatter from the temperature of the water. I let out a relieved breath and turned to him. He’s submerged himself in the tub; all I can see is the top of his head. I move closer to the Jacuzzi and crane my head to look into the depths of the water to see if he’s naked. If he is, I’m hightailing it out of there and abandoning my nurse duties. It’s already hard enough fighting this attraction without having the image of his naked body in my mind.

Fortunately, a black band around his waist tells me he’s wearing boxer briefs. I can breathe easily. I step back, but he raises his hand and sits up so only his lower body is still in the water. His teeth are chattering so much I’m afraid he might have convulsions.

I run to the hanger installed in the wall and take off one of the towels there.

“Here, wrap it around yourself and get out of the water.”

I hold the towel out, but he doesn't take it. His head falls back, and he looks up at the ceiling. The chattering has stopped, but he's so still, he's scaring me.

"Mr. Myers?"

His eyes are closed. Did he fall asleep? I move closer to the tub. Something must be wrong with him. I reach to touch his temple to see if he's cooled down some, but his eyes snap open, and fear strikes my heart. He reaches out suddenly and grabs my hand, pulling me into the tub.

My mouth falls open as I scream, but it becomes muffled as water enters my mouth. My head breaks out of the water, and I stumble.

"You're crazy," I scream at him, adjusting my glasses simultaneously.

He's holding me close to his chest. I look up at his square jaw, and his nostrils flare. His long lashes are wet, and the hairs are clustered together, creating spaces between them. His temperature has reduced considerably, but mine has just gone up. The way he's staring down at me makes my heart go into overdrive. His expression is open, and I can see the desire in his eyes. I swallow.

"Mr. Myers?" I whisper.

His head dips suddenly, and our lips meet. It doesn't go further than our lips touching, but the significance of what he just did makes my eyes widen. Jericho Myers just kissed me. He angles his head and deepens the kiss. My shock wears off,

and my eyes close. I let him kiss me, and worse, I kiss him back.

CHAPTER 12: JERICHO

My fever had gone down when I woke up the next day. My nose isn't as clogged, either. That awful-looking broth Miss Stewart made must've been as good as she claimed it was. It's perfect timing, too, because I have to be at work today for the promotional campaign for my wine. The marketing team has been working on the campaign for a month, and today is the day they show it to me. A cold can't hinder me.

I press a dollop of toothpaste on my brush, then brush my teeth. As I scrub my tongue, I spot the Jacuzzi in my periphery. I remember taking a bath yesterday. I was out of it, and my head was half stuck in the nightmare I'd been having- which details I don't even remember now- and I was a bit disoriented, but I remember pulling my self-appointed nurse into the tub with me. I kissed her, too.

I spit out the foam in my mouth and stare at my reflection in the mirror. The blurry image in my head is more apparent now.

I kissed her, and she kissed me back. There'd been tongue, too. I can't remember the last time I kissed a woman.

Miss Stewart's lips had been pliant and ready. I remember thinking her eyes looked like stars behind those glasses. They were bright and sparkling, and the water droplets on her lashes made them more enticing. I wanted to get lost in those brown orbs of hers. I remember thinking if I kissed her, I'd meld into one with her, and I'd be able to swim in those brown pools and dance around the stars in her eyes.

Her petite body fitted so close to mine felt good, and that logic made more sense. We were so close. She was almost an extension of my body.

The things a delirious mind can conjure up.

I turn on the tap and rinse out my mouth. Then, I take a shower. I get dressed and go down to the dining room for breakfast. Miss Stewart's already in the dining room having a cup of coffee. She's the only one in there.

She looks up at my arrival and adjusts her glasses. I thought I was delirious, but her eyes looked glossy, like she had a big round star in them. My brows furrow. She's in a white dress this time, and it has a turtle neck made of lace. The sleeves of the dress are long. If she stands, I'm sure the dress will be long too. She's pulled her hair into a ponytail, but I can't stop staring at those eyes of hers. My gaze goes down to her lips. She's got no lipstick on or gloss, but her lips stand out from her face, and I feel the urge to grab her again and kiss her to see if she'd taste the way she did yesterday.

“Good morning, Mr. Myers,” she says.

I don't know what I expected, but her tone is too formal for someone I kissed yesterday.

“Good morning, Miss Stewart.”

“Are you going to work? I thought we'd write the next chapter in your book today. I have everything set up in the study.”

I'm sure you do.

She's that efficient. I watch her closely to see if she'll react to our shared kiss. It wasn't just a brief kiss. It was intimate, and if I wasn't so feverish, it might have led to something else. There's not a twitch in her eyes or a blush on her cheeks, indicating she's thinking about naughty things with me like I am thinking about her. She's dry-eyed and clear-faced.

Did the kiss happen, or was I only dreaming and not kissing her?

I remember her little sigh and how her lips clung to mine. She'd ravished my mouth just as much as I had taken hers. Her glasses had been a bit of an obstacle, but we were so caught up in the moment I overlooked it. It feels too real to be a dream. Her soft skin is making my dick stir in my pants.

“We won't be writing anything today. I'm going to work.”

“Okay.” She goes back to eating her toast and drinking her coffee.

Is she going to act like we didn't kiss? Well, two can play that game. If she ignores it, then it never happened to me.

A maid walks in with my breakfast and sets it on the table.

"How's your body now, sir?" Miss Stewart asks after the maid leaves.

I grip my fork tightly. The formality she's using is becoming annoying. I don't know if she's using it to remind herself or me that our relationship is professional and should stay that way. I've never kissed any of my assistants before. A few of them might've tried to seduce me, but I never fell for it. She's an exception. I'm attracted to and want her despite not mingling with my employees. This is becoming complicated.

"I'm all better now. Your chicken broth did wonders. What did you put in it?"

"It's a family recipe. I can't tell you the secret."

"I won't broadcast it to the world if you do. I don't work in the health sector. I was asking for future purposes in case my daughter catches a cold. You won't be here to make it for her."

Just then, Rebecca walks in and sits next to me. Her entrance kills the conversation.

"Good morning, Dad. Morning, Christie," she says.

Miss Stewart replies to her greeting. Rebecca looks between us with a raised brow. A teasing smile dances on her lips. I choose to ignore her. Whatever she has to say might not be good.

“How was school yesterday?” I ask her to distract her, and it works. She gushes about her time in music class and how physical education was the most demanding class because they had to run ten laps around the gym, and her legs had turned to rubber by the time they were done with the class.

Her story was distracting enough that I didn't think about the kiss or Christina Stewart's curvy body throughout breakfast, but now that I'm at work. The thoughts have burst free from their cage and are doing a merry-go-round in my head.

The promotional video my marketing team has come up with is playing in front of me, but I can only focus on how the model in the video has Christina's hair color, and my thoughts go back to the dress she'd been wearing this morning. She'd represented the image of purity in that dress.

I think about kissing her in the shower with her dress still on. The dress is made of a soft material that will become transparent underwater. Her clothes will get soaked, revealing the hot pink bra she wore underneath, and I'd be able to see her tight nipples. I'd pull the dress up, revealing her thick thighs. She'd sigh softly as my hand traveled up to her panties. I'd shift it aside, and my fingers would caress her, smearing her juices on her. She would moan as I slipped my fingers inside her, and her hands would grab my wet shirt. Her glossy eyes would be wide, and her lips parted as my fingers glide in and out of her. Her face would contort as I twisted and bent my fingers in her and caressed her G-spot. I want to see those faces she'd make at my touch. She might look innocent, but I

bet she's got an expressive face when she's being made love to.

"Mr. Myers?" someone calls.

Christina's face disappears, and I'm back in the board room, where everyone is staring at me expectantly. The video has ended. I shift in my seat. My dick is so hard. I sneak a glance down at my crotch. There's a bulge that's too obvious. If I get up now, everyone will know why I wasn't watching the video.

"Play it again," I say.

Clarke plays the video again. The model in it is dressed in white, and her brown hair billows in the breeze as her lover drives her off in his black Camaro.

Why did she pretend like nothing happened between us yesterday? More importantly, why did I also pretend with her?

It might be unorthodox, but I'm attracted to her. I have been since I set eyes on her. There are so many variables in this equation for this to work. I'm her boss, and I'm older than her. The age gap between us is enough to make one disinterested, but I still want her.

We should've talked about it this morning, so I'd know if she feels this attraction, too. If she felt the same way, she wouldn't have to pretend. She didn't want to talk about it. That's why she didn't say anything. She doesn't feel that way. I wonder if she was grossed out but only kissed me because I was unwell.

I remember how she'd clung to my lips, and her tongue had danced with mine. The little moans that had escaped her as we

kissed. My pants get tighter. It feels like they're about to tear open. I need to stop thinking about Christina.

“Sir, the video has ended,” says Clarke.

Damn it!

“I’m a bit distracted today. I apologize. You can all leave. I’ll check it out when my head is clearer.”

They all stare at each other in confusion.

“Sir, the launch is—”

“I know when the launch is,” I snap. “I said I’ll check it later. Leave.”

My voice must’ve been louder than I intended because they scramble to their feet and practically dash out of the room like their tails are on fire. This drama was not how I envisioned my day turning out. Clarke is the last one to leave, and as the doors close behind him, I picture Christina entering the room to scold me for snapping at them.

My lips twitch in amusement. She would probably say something about employees' right to be spoken to politely and treated with respect. But if she were here right now, the only way that conversation is going to end is with her on her knees in front of me, sucking my cock because I’m not going to let her leave until I prove to her that she wants this as much as I like her. Thinking about her wide eyes behind her glasses as she sucks me only makes matters worse for me. I’ve never been this horny for a woman before. I either need to get out

more and hook up with other women or face the object of my attraction and make her just as crazy as she's driving me.

I need a distraction. I replay the ad again. This time, I force myself not to think about anything, not even when the model in the white dress comes on.

CHAPTER 13: CHRISTIE

He didn't say anything about the kiss. He'd just sat there and ate his breakfast when I couldn't sleep well because he got me all worked up from that kiss. I should never have stayed in the bathroom since he didn't need my help. I shouldn't have played the nurse in the first place.

When I went to his room and found the door ajar with him in bed having difficulty breathing, I should've called Ramona or any of the other staff in the house to attend to him, but I'd gotten in front of the stove and made my grandma's soup for him instead. Having a fully stocked kitchen with all the spices and condiments worked in his favor.

However, where did all of that get me? I'm wet and achy for my boss, and he doesn't care.

I sigh as I fall on my bed. I bounce a little from how soft it is. I should be happy he did me a favor by not saying anything. This should curb the feelings he's creating in me. He's my boss, and our relationship should be strictly professional. I shouldn't feel like jumping his bones whenever I see him or

fantasize about him touching me. When I sit in front of his desk, and he dictates his book to me, it takes all the effort to concentrate on his words, not the shape of his lips as he forms them. I usually have my legs clenched to kill the tingling I feel when I stare at his lips and imagine the magic that tongue could do to my body.

A shudder runs through me. Oh, goodness. I'm at it again. I never learn. My ex shattered my heart into a million pieces, yet I am lusting for another man who will only do the same to me, if not worse. I grab one of my pillows and hug it to my chest. I sniff it. It smells nothing like Jericho Myers. I want his smell on my bed, all over my clothes, and my body.

Geez! This isn't good. It was just one kiss. I need to get over myself.

But it was a heavenly kiss.

It was the kind of kiss that you never want to stop doing. The way his lips moved over mine was different. If there was an Olympic sport for kissing, I was sure Jericho Myers had participated and won first place every time.

I've never been kissed like that. He wanted to swallow me whole and become one with me. I was so lost in the kiss that I was still in a daze when he released me and pulled away from me. My head hadn't felt the same even when I helped him out of the tub and tucked him back in bed.

I touch my lips. They aren't tingling anymore like they'd been yesterday. What do I do about this? The kiss didn't mean anything to him, and it meant everything to me. I hug my

pillow tightly to kill my disappointment whenever I remember that he'd ignored the kiss this morning.

I need to ignore it, too. Completely forget that it even happened.

That's the only thing that'll help my sanity. I came here to help him write his book, and when it's over, I'll leave. I shouldn't be falling for or getting attached to anyone. Leaving is inevitable. My contract is through the end of writing this book with him. Everything ends once it is done. I should focus on why I was hired in the first place.

My phone rings from the bedside table. I groan as I turn around and pick it up. I don't feel like talking to anyone right now. I want to wallow in my disappointment till I can forget the feel of Jericho Myers's lips on mine. However, when I check the caller ID, I sit straighter. It's my dad calling, and it's a video call. I didn't tell him about my new job.

"Hey, Dad."

"My little Christmas tree," he says.

Oh, gosh! A blush creeps up on my cheeks. That nickname is old, and I'm not so little anymore.

"Come on, Dad. Don't let anyone hear you calling me that."

He got the name when I was five and reading a book. Christina and her Christmas tree. It was my favorite book because the main character had the same name as me. I'd brought my father's notice to the rhyme between Christina and

Christmas, and since then, he's been calling me his little Christmas tree.

“What's wrong with the name? Have you gotten so old that you find your nickname silly now?” he asks jokingly.

If anyone has gotten old here, it's him. His salt and pepper hair has more white than brown strands now. His brown eyes are paler, and his face has more wrinkles. He's gotten thinner too.

“Are you feeling okay, Dad? You look pale. Has Brian been taking proper care of you? Do you need me to come back home?”

“I take care of him just fine. Stay your ass where you are. He's my dad, too. Not just yours.” Brian's voice comes from somewhere in the house but doesn't appear in the video.

My dad chuckles, and I laugh. I care about my dad a lot, and if I weren't here helping Mr. Myers, I'd be on the next flight to Minnesota back to Redwood Falls.

“I'm an old man, Christie. I'll look older to you the more time you spend away from me. How's your cousin, Maya? I haven't spoken to her since the wedding.”

“She's fine. She's living her happily ever after with her husband.”

I hate how my voice dips at the end of that sentence, making it seem like I'm unhappy that my cousin is married and found love again after so long. I'm happy for her. I wish I could find

love like her, too. As expected, my father frowns. Nothing gets past that man.

“You shouldn’t sound so unhappy about it. You’ll find a man who will love you soon enough, and he’ll love you like you deserve to be loved,” he says.

Now, why does my mind picture Jericho Myers as that man? I must be going bonkers. I’m not his type. I don’t know what his type is, but it’s probably not going to be a shy, overweight girl in glasses who antagonizes him every time he spends more than five minutes in her company. It’ll be someone with long, shapely legs, a slim figure, a beautiful face, and a bank account that matches all those features, like the ladies at that wine tasting.

“Thanks, Dad. I know.”

He’s only saying that because he’s my father and trying to make me feel better. No one is going to come for me. I will grow old, and be forever single, with many dogs surrounding me instead of cats. I’ll be called the dog lady.

I hear the sound of a car in the driveway in the distance. Mr. Myers must be home. My heart skips. He’s home early. It’s barely noon. The last time he went to work, he returned late at night. I only know that because I couldn’t sleep and was awake to see his car drive in. I wonder if he’ll talk about that kiss now that he’s back.

Stop thinking about it, Christie. Remember, it never happened.

My older brother, Brian, appears behind my dad. He rests his arms on my dad's favorite couch, and a big grin spreads across his face. He's gotten more muscles than the last time I saw him, and his skin has gotten darker, too. It must be all the time working on the farm in the sun. His hair has grown longer, too, and so has his beard. He's sporting long hair flowing down to his shoulder in curls. He's the one who got our mother's hazel eyes and perfect features, while I look like our dad.

"How..." his grin turns into a confused frown. "Where are you? You're not in your bedroom."

His question finally brings my dad's notice to the change in the usual background.

I'm about to tell them about the job I got when my door bursts open, and Rebecca enters. She's still in her school uniform.

"You will not believe what happened in school today," she gushes and runs to my bed, jumping on it. She peeks at my phone and notices I'm on a video call. "Oh, hello." She waves at my Dad and Brian.

My dad and brother look confused to see anyone in the room. Brian has never kept his mouth shut when he's confused about something or shut about anything...

"Who is she?"

"This is Rebecca. She's my boss's daughter."

"Your boss? What are you doing in your boss's house?" my dad asks.

“She’s living here,” Rebecca blurts out before I can say anything.

I give her a side glance and glare at her. She realizes her mistake, and her cheeks redden.

“Oops! Sorry,” she mouths and moves away from the camera.

I turn back to my phone to explain. “I got a job to work with another client for a few months. I’m in Dallas to help him write his autobiography.”

“So, you have to live in his house to help him do that?” asks Brian.

“Yes,” I answer.

Suddenly, Rebecca grabs my hand and turns my phone to her so her face is the only one showing in the video call.

“Your daughter is amazing, Mr. Stewart. Should I call you Mr. Stewart or Grandpa?” she doesn’t wait to get an answer before she continues speaking. “She’s an art connoisseur. She’s incredibly talented; she helped me with my art homework, and I got an A+. I am delighted to have her in our house, and I’m sure my dad is too. Even if it is only for a short time.”

Someone knocks on my door. I first thought it’s Ramona, and she’s come to get Rebecca. I’ll be glad if she’s come to take her out of here. She’s such a chatterbox today.

“Come in,” I say.

The door opens slowly, and Mr. Myers pokes his head in. He blinks in surprise when he sees Rebecca on my bed. My breath catches when his gaze falls on me. There's something about the way he looks at my white dress that makes me feel exposed. It feels like he's just undressed me with his eyes and can see every inch of my naked body. I gulp.

Rebecca turns the camera over to his face. "This is my dad. Dad, stop looking at Christie and look over here."

My cheeks are inflamed. This girl has no filter. Did she have to say that and let everyone know that he was staring at me?

"Look, this is Christie's dad. I don't know who the other man is," she says, making my dad chuckle.

"Hello," greets Mr. Myers. "Come, Rebecca, I want to talk to you. Why don't you leave Miss Stewart alone to talk to her family in peace?"

She pouts but gives me back the phone and gets down from the bed. Mr. Myers places his hands on her shoulder and leads her out of the room. He spares me a glance and nods before closing the door behind him. The moment he's gone, it's like a high current just left the air, and I can finally breathe easily.

"Is that your boss?" Brian asks, and I nod. "You two seem cozy. How he looked at you did not look like a boss-and-his-employee kind of look to me."

"Brian," I whine. He loves teasing me too much.

"Leave your sister alone, Brian. I imagine the animals need your attention more than your sister."

Rather than listen to our father, my brother grabs the phone from his hand and moves out of his earshot. “I wasn’t teasing you or joking about it. Is there something going on between the two of you?”

“There’s nothing, Brian. You’re just seeing things.”

“I hope so. Besides being much older than you, he seems like one of those rich assholes. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt by another man. Just be careful with him.”

“Yes, boss.”

He shakes his head at me. “Be careful, Chris, and remember that I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Will you give me my phone now so I can continue talking to my only child?” my dad says in the background.

“Sorry, Dad. Your only child just cut the call.” He ends the call.

I drop the phone on my bed and sigh. Was my brother right when he said Mr. Myers was giving me a look that wasn’t appropriate between a boss and his employee, or was that his paranoia talking? Either way, it doesn’t matter because I don’t plan on giving in to my emotions again.

CHAPTER 14: JERICHO

My steps stop in front of Rebecca's door. I raise my hand to knock, but it hovers above the door, and I crane my neck to listen to her conversation. There's someone in the room with her. The door muffles their voices; I can't hear what they're saying precisely, but hear Christina's laughter.

I'd been looking for her in the house to continue our writing sessions. I only came to see Rebecca because I was looking for Christina. I knock lightly at the door, and their conversation stops. I take that as my cue to open the door and turn the handle.

"Hello, ladies. Miss Stewart, I believe it's time for our writing session."

"Come on, Dad. She's helping me with my painting. Can't she stay a while?" Rebecca grumbles.

My gaze turns to the easel they're facing. There's a half-finished painting hanging on it. I can't make out what it is. It

looks like splashes of paint to me.

“I didn’t hire her to help you with your painting. She’s here to help with my book.”

She scoffs and looks away. She can pout all she wants. I never got to talk to Christina about our kiss the other day because she was in the room with her. We’re going to have that conversation today, and my daughter will not be an obstacle to that conversation.

Christina smiles and covers the painting. “I’ll be right with you, sir.”

I turn around and walk out the door. I’ll wait in the study. My nerves have taken over by the time I get there as I start to formulate what I want to say in this conversation. There are so many things I want to say, but I don’t know how she feels about the kiss, or if she’s even attracted to me, so I need to approach the conversation with caution.

I know I need to get this out of the way, so I must bring it up before we start to our task. We can’t keep ignoring it forever. It happened, and we must face it. I must know if she was only kissing me back because she felt guilty about my cold or if she feels this attraction between us. I haven’t figured out what will happen next if she answers yes. I’m still stuck at no, but I’ll work it out when we get there.

I pace around the room, waiting to hear her footsteps come down the hall. Five minutes passed, and there was still no sign of her. I sit in my chair and play with a lock of hair at the back of my head while I wait for her to arrive.

Footsteps echo down the hall, and I sit straighter. They pause at the study door, and a knock follows. I clear my throat.

“Come in.”

The door opens, but it’s not Christina who enters. It’s Ramona. My stomach plummets, and my lips turn down in disappointment.

“What is it, Ramona?”

“Your aunt just arrived. She’s waiting in the living room to see you,” she says.

“My aunt, Maggie?”

I only have one aunt, my mom’s younger sister, but she’s supposed to be on vacation in Spain. It’s always a pleasure to see my aunt, but her timing is poor. I need to have this conversation with Christina.

“Tell her I’ll be with her in a few minutes.”

She walks away. I wait a few more minutes to see if Christina will come to the study, but I leave when she still hasn’t shown up.

Aunt Maggie has a tan now and looks younger even though she’s older than me. It’s probably the Caribbean dress she has on. It’s got all the bright colors there are in the world. She’s also dyed her hair blond now. The only evidence of her age left on her body are the fine lines around her lips and the slight wrinkle on her forehead.

“Jericho, my boy. You look so much younger than the last time I saw you.”

She’s got that in reverse. I’m pretty sure I look like *her* uncle. “You’re teasing me, Auntie.”

I chuckle and pull her into a hug. She smells like tropical fruit. She must’ve come here straight from the airport.

“Of course, I’m teasing you. You have more grey hairs than me, even though I am fifteen years older than you . Who’s going to see you now and say I’m your aunt? It’s all that time you’re spending indoors. You need to go out more and feel the sun on your skin, like you used to. Maybe meet some ladies you’d like to date, and who knows, you might find yourself another wife.”

Aunt Maggie is the opposite of my mother, but they still have similar traits. Their eyes' shape is the same as their determination to marry me. I’m not running from marriage or commitment-phobic; I just haven’t found the right person to get into a relationship with. If love finds me, I’ll take it; if it doesn’t, I’ll be okay with that, too.

“How was your trip? Where are your bags?” I glance around the floor, noticing the lack of luggage. She’s normally surrounded by luggage since she is a traveling nomad, and she usually stays for a long time when she visits.

“They’re in the car, but I’m not staying this time. I just came to see my only nephew because I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“Hmm. Did you miss me that much, or have you run out of your vacation allowance?”

She giggles. “There’s that too. For some reason, my allowance wasn’t sent to me. I thought to come to sort it out with you, but I did want to check on you, too.”

She sits back down, and I sit on the chair opposite her.

“It must be an error with my accountant. I’ll speak to him today and clear everything up in the next few hours.”

“Good. Thank you. How’s your book coming along? Your mother told me you’ve hired a new assistant to help you with it.”

“Yes. Her name is Christina.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s up in Rebecca’s room helping her paint. You know how much she loves painting.”

Her nose wrinkles at that. “You give that girl too much freedom. She’s becoming spoiled because you don’t stop pampering her. How’s the assistant? Is she efficient? If she isn’t, I can get someone else over right away. You just say the word.”

“She’s efficient.” I can’t stop the smile that comes up when I think about Christina’s work ethic, and it doesn’t go unnoticed by my aunt. “She’s great at her job. She gets along really well with Rebecca, too. Those two are inseparable. It’s good because Rebecca needs a woman’s influence in her life, and

Christina might be that person for her. At least for a short time, while we work on my book.”

I know my feelings about her are seeping into my words as I speak, and my aunt is soaking it all up to divulge it all to my mom later, but I can't help it. Sometimes, I wonder what would've happened if I'd turned her out the door the day she arrived because she was gaping at me or if I'd fired her the next day because she woke me up too early. I'd probably still be interviewing applicants for the position right now.

I am so glad I kept an open mind.

Speak of the devil, and she shall appear. Christina walks into the living room with a tray. She smiles politely at Aunt Maggie and offers her the teacup on the tray. Aunt Maggie takes it from her but doesn't take her eyes off her.

“Would you like anything else?” she asks.

“No, thank you.”

Christina nods and walks away. She doesn't give me a glance. That isn't very reassuring.

“Is that a new maid?” asks Aunt Maggie.

“No, that's Christina, my writing assistant.”

“Oh!” she frowns. “She's a bit plain, almost naïve looking.”

Christina can be shy, but I don't think she's naïve. Especially when she's tearing into me for thinking lowly of her, she's a tigress.

“I think you've got the wrong impression of her.”

“I haven’t. I’ve been on this earth longer than you, Jericho, and I’m a woman. I know the tactics young girls use in ensnaring older men like you. I can see you’re interested in her, but I’ll warn you to be careful.” She sips her tea before continuing. “You’re much older than her. Young girls these days play coy and pretend to get along with their child to trap you. They’ll seduce you with their pretty eyes and fan their lashes to make you think they’re gentle, but they’re not. Don’t let her appearance deceive you.”

I don’t want to argue with her because she’s right. She knows more than me because she’s older than me and a woman.

“Okay,” I say.

Satisfied by my reply, she smiles. “I’ll introduce you to a few women who are your age. You’ll love them. They’re beautiful and smart, and they don’t play coy. They also have their own businesses, so there’s no worry of them trying to rip you off.”

She sets her teacup on the glass center table and stands. “I’ll be leaving now. Make sure to speak with your accountant. I need the money urgently. A few friends are going on a trip to Africa, and I’d like to join them, but I can’t do that if I have no money.”

“You could’ve just called me to tell me about the money issue instead of driving down here.”

“And miss seeing your handsome face? Not a chance.” She plays with my beard before giving me a half hug and kissing

my cheek.

“Do you want to see Rebecca before you go? I can have her down here in an instant.”

She makes a face. “No, don’t worry. We both know she’s not my biggest fan. Walk me out, will you?”

I follow her out to the driveway, where her car is parked. I’m surprised to see a white Lamborghini instead of the black Porsche she was driving before. She’s changed her vehicle. No wonder she was complaining about a lack of money. She didn’t tell me she was going to change her car. Sometimes, I think she’s hypocritical, complaining about spoiling my daughter when she goes on these adventures and shopping trips, all paid for by me. She’d been driving a Cadillac before changing to the Porsche, and now this. All in a couple of years.

What’s the money for if your family can’t spend it?

I watch the car peel out of my driveway, not knowing when I will see her again, or what car she’ll be driving.

CHAPTER 15: CHRISTIE

A moan escapes my lips, and I turn around. The windows are open, and a cool breeze blows in, but my body feels like it's been set on fire. I'm sweating even though the fan is on. My panties are soaked, and my nipples are hard.

I sit up in bed and fluff my pillow. This is hopeless. I've been having these tormenting dreams every night that leave me aching and unable to sleep. Jericho is the star actor in these dreams, and sometimes the scenes are acted in his bedroom, sometimes in his bathroom, and other times in my room, but all of them have one thing in common.

Sex. A lot of hot, steamy sex.

These dreams leave me wet and sweaty, and I can't go back to sleep when I wake up from them.

Like right now.

I throw off the duvet and get out of bed. I'll make herbal tea to calm myself and then take a warm bath. That should get me sleepy in no time. I might wake up late, but it's better than not

sleeping and dozing off while typing for Jericho. I'd never hear the end of it from him.

The house is quiet and dark. What was I expecting? It's past midnight. My hand glides down the rail as I go down the stairs.

The kitchen door is open. That only means someone had been there before me and didn't close the door upon leaving. Entering the kitchen, I turn on the light, and my heart almost jumps out of my chest when I see him resting against the kitchen island. He's shirtless, and as he straightens, I notice his sweatpants are riding low on his hips, revealing his V-line.

My ears are hot. I swallow. This feels too much like one of my fantasies. I can't stop staring at his chest. I've always known he had abs, but I didn't realize they were this tight. There's a smattering of hair on his chest, and some disappear into the band of his sweatpants. A bulge in his pants shows his obvious arousal.

Sweet Lord! I think my water tank just broke because my panties are soaked.

My throat is dry, and I would have returned to my room if I didn't need water to quench my thirst.

"You can't sleep either?" he asks as I walk to the fridge.

"Yeah. No." My voice is quiet and a bit scratchy.

"Me, either. There must be something in the air tonight." He chuckles softly.

"Probably," I reply.

He's successfully robbed me of any sleep tonight because I know I won't get any sleep once I go back to my room. My hand trembles as I reach for a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

Jericho moves away from the island and comes close to me. Why is he behind me? That too when I'm only dressed in my silk nightgown. It's short, and he can see my legs. It makes me feel self-conscious.

"Christina, can we talk? There's something I've been meaning to speak to you about."

The way he says my name makes me quiver. No one else calls me Christina. Absolutely no one. Not even my parents. Everyone calls me Christie. He makes my name sound exotic and sexy.

I turn around slowly. I don't know why I thought he'd suddenly have a shirt on, but I did, and seeing his shirtless body makes my mouth water. His nipples have pebbled just like mine. I hope he doesn't look down at my chest because if he does, he'll see the effect he has on me.

"Sure," I squeak. I sound like a trapped mouse even though I'm not trapped. The fridge is behind me, but there's enough space between us to walk out of the kitchen if I want to. I uncap the bottle in my hand and lift it shakily to my lips.

"It's about the kiss we shared in the Jacuzzi."

I splutter, and the water splashes on my chest. He's immediately at my side, rubbing my back as I wheeze and

cough. The only problem with this situation is his hand on my back is dredging up the desire I've been fighting so hard to tamp down.

You can fight this, Christie. Come on.

The door is open. I just have to leave. I straighten.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

“I'm fine. The water just went down the wrong way.” I move away from him, but that's a massive mistake as I just realized my nightdress is clinging tightly to my chest, and the shape of my breast is outlined in the material now, and that's what has caught his attention.

The lust in his eyes makes my stomach warm, and wetness drips down my inner thigh. I glance down at his sweatpants. The bulge in his pants is now erect and has formed a tent. I'm still standing too close to him.

I attempt to leave, but he seizes my hand, and now I'm trapped between him and the island.

“We kissed, Christina, and you acted like it meant nothing to you.”

What? He was the one acting like it didn't mean anything.

“I wasn't acting like it meant nothing to me. You said nothing about it, so I thought you didn't want to discuss it.”

He mulls my words over in his head and nods. I wait for the following words that'll leave his mouth. Will he say it meant nothing and he'd just been delirious with fever, or will he tell

me he meant to kiss me because he couldn't stop thinking about kissing me, too?

“Tell me, does it?” he asks. He clenches his jaw.

I get the feeling a lot is riding on my answer right now. This is my chance to end all this madness of attraction. If I tell him it didn't mean anything that I kissed him back, he'll leave me alone, and he might never speak of the kiss or this night again.

My lips part to tell him it didn't mean anything to me, but I'm surprised when they form the word.

“Yes.”

He drags in a shaky breath. I think I unleashed a beast because his head dips, and he seizes my lips in a hot kiss. His tongue ravages my mouth before he sucks on my tongue. I moan shamelessly. Common sense has flown out the window, and desire has taken control of every part of me.

He pulls me up and drops me gently on the counter. He opens my knees to get between them and doesn't stop kissing me.

“Christina,” he whispers as he pulls away from the kiss, and that only drives me all the more crazy. His lips are hot against my neck. My body is feverish. He nibbles my skin as he moves down my neck to my chest.

His hand goes under my dress. At first, I think he will touch me to see how wet I am for him, but his hand goes up to my chest to cup my breast and tease my nipples.

“Oh, my God.” My head falls back, and I moan. He goes back to nibbling my neck as he plays with my nipple. He pinches it just slightly, but he’s already made them so sensitive the action nearly brings me to an orgasm.

Now, I can’t wait to feel him inside me. My legs move his sweatpants down his waist to unveil his aching arousal. It’s an angry red color, one of those curved monsters you only read about in books and see in adult movies.

I swallow.

His hand moves aside my panties, and he plays with me. For a minute, I forget how big he is as he stokes the fire in me, and I’m salivating for him as I continue the climb up to fulfilled desire.

This is the evidence of days of pent-up desire bursting out in one night. He hisses in my ear.

“You’re so wet.”

All I can reply with is a moan as his fingers probe my insides, spreading my wetness all over me. Somehow, some of me still thinks I’m dreaming, and I will wake up soon with a wet bed because there’s no way all of this isn’t leaking on my sheets.

He pulls me down from the counter by my arms and raises one of my legs, exposing all of me to him. I can feel his tip right at my entrance, and I brace myself for the pain from him, but he pauses.

His voice is strained as he speaks. “Do you want this? Tell me right now if you don’t want this, and I’ll stop.”

Is he kidding me? Stop now after he’s touched me all over and sent all my senses haywire. Not a chance.

“Yes, I want this. I want you to fuck me.”

That’s all he needed from me. He hisses as he pushes into me gently, and my mouth falls open. I can’t tell if any words come out of my mouth because my brain is currently twisted around that meat of his, and all I care about is that he keeps moving inside me, and he never stops for any reason.

“Oh.” He groans. “You don’t know how long I’ve dreamed of this.”

I bet it’s about the same time as my sleepless nights started. He bends to whisper dirty words in my ears about how he’s going to take me in different positions when the house isn’t so quiet, and he’ll make me scream my lungs out and call his name till my throat goes raw and all I can feel is him inside me every time I clench my thighs shut.

I clench around him as another orgasmic wave rocks through me. He pins me back down on the counter as he bucks and releases inside me. A few seconds pass with him still in me. He goes soft and pulls out of me. That’s when I become aware of how wet my legs are. My racing heart is coming down from its high, and my senses are returning to me. My back is still on the cold slab, my nightdress pulled up past my chest, and my body bare before him.

With my sense returned, chagrin follows. I just let him take me on the kitchen counter. What on earth was I thinking? My back is sweaty, as if he is still inside, like he said. How will I look him in the eye after knowing he's just been inside me? He's just heard me moan and call out his name, and lord knows what else I was screaming while my brain twisted around his length. He lifts me off the counter, and my dress falls down my back, covering my nakedness.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks.

I don't give him a reply. I can't.

I gave in so quickly.

I release my arm from his hold easily with the slightest movement and don't spare him a glance, not once, as I run up the step and dash into the bathroom to wash away my shame.

CHAPTER 16: JERICHO

A loud yawn escapes me as I stretch. My muscles are lax, and the bed feels so soft. I don't want to leave, but it's morning. The sun is out, and I think Christina will be waiting for me in the study to start the next chapter of my book. I force myself out of bed and enter the bathroom to brush my teeth. There's a grin on my face that I don't think will leave anytime soon.

I think about last night and get a warm feeling all over my body. I've not had a reason to smile so much in a long time. Having sex with Christina was not how I'd imagined it.

It was better. She was so different from her usual self, and she definitely wasn't shy. I want more of that. Now that I've seen what's behind those glasses, I know there's more to discover, and I want to know all of her. I want to get acquainted with every inch of her body, and every part of her personality.

I take out my toothpaste and squirt some gel on my brush. I'm humming as I brush my teeth. Excitement courses through

me. I can't wait to see her today. I can still picture her face glowing under the kitchen light, contorted in pleasure. She looked right at me as I slid into her, and that look stole a part of me.

My soul, maybe.

My body instantly responds to the memories of having sex with her. Damn it. Not right now. I should stop thinking about last night if I don't want it to repeat early this morning. What we need to do is talk about it, not for me to keep acting like a sex-starved man. We cannot return to working like we're not attracted to each other after this.

After brushing my teeth, I pop into the shower to take a quick cold shower and calm down the heat building in me. Then, I get dressed and head down for breakfast.

Rebecca is the only one in the dining room. Christina is nowhere to be found. Perhaps she's had breakfast and is already waiting in the study. I sit at the head of the table and pour myself a cup of coffee from the decanter in front of me.

"Good morning, Dad," says Rebecca.

"Morning." I spread some avocado onto my toast and take a bite.

"I wonder if you had a good dream last night," Rebecca says in a sly tone, and I pause. She has a slight smirk on her lips as she licks yogurt from a spoon.

Did she see us last night? The house was quiet, and Christina's moans might've been loud enough for Rebecca to

hear. I gulp my coffee to wash down my toast.

I clear my throat. “What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “You were humming when you came into the dining room, and you have this silly grin on your face. You must’ve woken up on the good side of the bed today because you don’t normally walk around the house humming, and you’re hardly ever in a good mood until I make you laugh.”

I let out a mock gasp. “Rebecca Ashlyn Myers, are you saying I’m a grouch?”

She giggles. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Wait till I finish my breakfast. I’ll tickle you so hard you won’t be able to breathe without laughing.”

I haven’t touched her yet, but she’s so ticklish that just hearing about getting tickled has made her laugh. The last time I saw her laugh this much was during her painting sessions with Christina.

Her laughter subsides, but a warm smile still graces her lips. “I’m glad you’re smiling, Dad. I wish you could always be in such a happy mood.”

“Oh, yeah? You might get your wish. Have you seen Christina by any chance?” she frowns. “I mean Miss Stewart.”

“She hasn’t come down for breakfast yet. She’s always early. Maybe she slept in late today, which is odd because she never sleeps late.”

Hmm. She's probably tired from last night, so she's still in her room.

"What do you plan on doing today?" I ask.

"I'm going to hang out with a few friends from school."

"You didn't tell me that."

"Well, I'm telling you now. Besides, we're using the game room. We aren't going anywhere. So, can they come over?"

"Will it change the outcome if I say no?"

"Well..." she drags the word. "We've been planning this for weeks, so it'll be a bummer if they can't come. You'll be shattering the hearts of four kids, mine included. Surely, you can't be that callous." She blinks cutely at me. She was blessed with my long lashes, and she knows how to use them to manipulate me into getting what she wants.

I fight a smile. "Fine, they can come."

"Ha!" she sighs blissfully. "Have I told you you're the best dad in the world?"

"Maybe once or twice. It wouldn't hurt if you said it more."

I've been waiting in the study for the past hour, blankly going through my email, and Christina still hasn't arrived. I squeeze the stress ball next to my keyboard and listen to the clock tick. The sound is starting to become annoying. Maybe I shouldn't have set it back on the wall after taking it down before. I drop the green ball on my desk, and it bounces a little before stopping.

If she doesn't want to come down by herself, I'll go and get her.

As I climb the stairs to her room, I wonder if she's avoiding me because of last night. She'd run out of the kitchen suddenly, so I don't know what she might be thinking. I know she's not the type of woman to sleep with her boss. I don't mess around with my employees, either. This is new to both of us.

Ramona's voice is the first thing I hear in the hallway.

"Are you sure you don't want to eat anything?" she asks through Christina's door.

I don't hear Christina's reply, but Ramona turns away with a concerned frown. She spots me coming towards her, and her frown fades away.

"What's going on here?" I ask her.

"Miss Stewart refuses to come out of her room. She hasn't had breakfast yet."

It's almost noon, and she hasn't had breakfast?

"Go, I'll speak to her."

Ramona nods and walks away. I raise my hand to knock on the door but hesitate. She might not want to talk to me because of last night. That's why she doesn't want to leave her room. If I were a better man, I'd respect her wishes and let her be until she's ready to talk about it. But that's just the thing. I'm not a better man, and I'm not patient.

I knock on the door.

“Open up, Christina. We need to talk.”

She doesn't give me a reply, but a few seconds later, the door opens. She leaves it open and goes back to her bed. I enter her room and close the door behind me. I stop at the entrance. She gets under the covers and pulls the duvet up to her chest. She refuses to look at me.

Her hair flows down her shoulders in messy curls. She's still dressed in the silk night dress from last night. It brings memories of us having sex, but I shut those thoughts down. I don't think she'd appreciate finding out that I'm thinking about what's making her upset. Still, I feel my arousal already.

“I was going to come down to the study later,” she mumbles.

“Are you okay?” she doesn't give me an answer. I sigh. I wouldn't say I like the awkward atmosphere in the room. This was not what I envisioned this morning. I slip my hands in my pockets to create a tent so my arousal won't be so obvious and move closer to her bed. “Did I hurt you last night?”

She stiffens, and her fingers grip the duvet tighter.

“Christina, I need you to talk to me. You know we have to talk about it.”

That makes things worse. Her breathing increases, and her shoulders tremble as she grips her chest. I can hear how fast she's breathing. My first instinct is to rush to her. I climb on the bed and try to pull her close to me to help her calm down, but she pushes me away.

“You have to let me help, Christina. Rebecca gets anxiety attacks sometimes.” I grab her arm and pull her close to rub her back. I bring my lips close enough to whisper assuring words in her ear as I do for Rebecca whenever she has anxiety episodes.

Slowly, she starts to calm down and breathe easily again. I move her hair away from her neck, exposing the baby hairs at her nape. She shivers from the contact, and I feel a jolt in me.

After a while, she’s calm enough to speak.

“Last night...I don’t sleep with my bosses,” she explains.

“Did I make you that nervous that you got scared when you saw me this morning?” I ask.

She swallows. Her head turns slightly towards me, but she doesn’t look at me. I feel she’s trying to stop herself from looking at me.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen. I’m so sorry.”

Her voice is barely above a whisper. She’s so different from the woman who’s been bugging me for the past few days.

“You shouldn’t be sorry. It wasn’t just you. We both wanted it to happen.” I still want it to happen again. I swallow. Being so close to her, I can see the vein pulsing at her neck. She’s not wearing her glasses today, and seeing her without them is a bit weird, but I can see her face without an obstruction, and it feels like I’m seeing her for the first time.

My hand goes to her face, and I turn her to face me. Her eyes go wide, and she gasps.

“You’re so beautiful without those glasses,” I say.

She blinks, and her lips part. Her minty breath blows on my face, and I breathe in deeply. I grit my teeth. There’s no hiding the bulge in my pants now. Her gaze flickers down to my lips, and she takes a shaky breath.

My heart is beating wildly, but it’s not just my heart. Every part of me throbs and struggles to be one with her. My fingers move to the back of her head, sinking into her warm locks. I bend a little, teasing the tip of her nose with mine. I want to kiss her so badly, but I want her to be the first person to make the move so she doesn’t feel bad about it.

“I want us to be together—to see where this can go between us, Christina,” I whisper. “But please understand that whatever will happen is all in your hands. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable around me.”

Her brown eyes hold me in her golden stare, swallowing me deeply. I don’t know if I can give this up if she wants our relationship to be strictly professional.

But I needn’t worry about that. Her hands grip my shirt, and she closes the distance between our lips. Her lips take mine slowly, testing the waters and gauging my reaction. I let go of her head and sink my fingers into the bed. Holding back when I want to do so much is hard, but letting her control this moment has its gratification.

She moans a bit as she deepens the kiss. My hands itch to touch the soft mounds of her breast, taste her pebbled nipples, paint my tongue down her belly, and bask in her sweet glory.

She bites my bottom lip a bit before pulling away. Her eyes have gone from a light brown to a deep brown. They're almost dark.

She bites her bottom lip shyly as her fingers peel my shirt off my skin and pull it over my head. She places a warm palm on my chest, feeling my heartbeat before pushing me back on the bed. I watch as she straddles my legs, unbuttons my pants, and pulls them down. Her cheeks turn pink as she stares down at me. She wraps both hands around it and strokes it a bit.

I hiss and grind down on my teeth. She's determined to torture me today.

"You might not want to do that," I tell her, and she releases me immediately. I kick off my pants and boxer briefs.

"Last night was..." she trails off.

"Amazing?"

She smiles shyly and looks down at my stomach, making her hair fall down her face again. I rest on my elbows and move the strands away from her face. I want to see that beautiful round face of hers always.

"Who knew you were this shy."

"I'm not shy," she protests.

"You are."

"Would a shy person do this?" she pushes me back on the bed, and before I can react, her lips close around the tip of me.

“Fuck.” I hiss. She doesn’t give me breathing space as she sucks and teases, stroking the base with both hands. It’s wet and sloppy, and the sounds she makes as she gobbles me up is driving me crazy. She’s not shy about this, like she isn’t about certain things.

She grazes the tip of me with her teeth, sending a shiver down my back. I can’t stop the orgasm that rocks me, and I release it in her mouth. She takes every last drop before popping her lips off. She makes sure she teases the tip with her tongue. I still try to catch my breath when she sucks on it again. She tickled me deep in my core this time, and I’m hard again.

“Stop.” I pull her off me, push her to the bed, and straddle her. She has a grin on her face as she licks her lips. I scoff in disbelief and shake my head at her. How she went from scared to this temptress in minutes is astounding.

I’m done being nice. I bend and take her lips, tasting myself on her tongue. I push into her moist heat, and she gasps, almost shooting off the bed.

Her eyes widen, and her lips fall open as I pull out and slam into her again.

“I told you I was going to make you scream my name,” I remind her.

“They’re going to hear us.”

“I don’t care about that.” I lower my body so our faces are only inches away, and I can look into her eyes. She can see I

mean every word I'm about to say. "I want them to hear us. I want everyone to know how I make you feel."

She swallows.

Her breath fans my face. I make good on my promise by rocking her world, and she screams out my name as she orgasms.

CHAPTER 17: CHRISTIE

A smile graces my lips as I scoop up soapy water from the tub and pour it down my shoulder and arm. I scoop up some water again and repeat the action. The water drips down the space between my fingers onto my skin. I'm delighted. I know I have to be in the dining room to have breakfast soon and start work, but I'm unbothered this morning. I feel free for the first time in so long, and time will have to accommodate me lounging around today.

Yesterday was the best day of my life, and I've had a lot of good days in the past. Jericho- I suppose I can call him by his first name now since he's been in me more than once- had stayed in my room till late in the evening, and we'd just laid on my bed enjoying each other's company and having sex. Time went by so fast that we didn't realize it was getting late until it was dark.

Why does time move faster when you're having a good time but drag on endlessly when bored?

I kick my legs out of the water, creating a splash that sloshes over the rim of the Jacuzzi and wets the tiles. My chest reddens as I remember how Jericho stroked me with his fingers. He made me feel so good about my body I started to feel sexy and free, I still do.

Alright. The fun's over. Just because I had sex with my boss doesn't mean I have to start slacking at my job. I leave the tub and step into the shower to wash off the suds on my body and hair. I shut off the water once I'm squeaky clean, wrap my body with my towel, and mop up the droplets of water on my skin.

I walk out of the bathroom and open my closet. First, I dry my hair, and brush out the curls. Instead of pulling it up into a bun or a ponytail like I normally do, I let it flow down my back. It's been a while since I let myself look as free as I feel. My eyes rove around the row of clothes in the closet. I don't have many clothes, but there are some that I took from the cabinet when Jericho told me to escort him to the wine tasting as his plus one, and one of them is the yellow dress hiding behind a hideous mustard-colored dress I wear primarily to interviews. I imagine Jericho's reaction to the mustard dress, and I snicker. He's going to flip. If he thought the other dresses I used to wear were ugly, this one would make him realize they were prettier. I take out the yellow dress behind it and hold it against my body in front of the mirror. The color makes my skin look less pale but bright, and my eyes glow. Their golden flecks are more vibrant now, or it could just be because I'm happy.

Whatever the reason, I love the yellow dress, and I'm wearing it today. It's a milkmaid dress with a band at the bust line instead of a ribbon and a slit that exposes my thighs.

I leave the closet and pick up my glasses on the bedside table. I raise it to my face but pause.

You look beautiful without your glasses.

Maybe I shouldn't wear the glasses. I have prescribed contact lenses in my bag that I always carry in case if I lose my glasses. I might as well start wearing those from now on. I go back into the closet, pull out my suitcase, and take the lens pack from the inner compartment where I stored it.

"Good morning," I greet when I enter the dining room. Ramona pauses while serving coffee to Jericho, and Rebecca's mouth opens. One of the maids, Lydia, serving breakfast at the table, freezes in shock. But the most gratifying reaction is that of Jericho. His brows knit in confusion. However, the actual response I wanted was the desire in his eyes.

Mission accomplished.

It sends butterflies fluttering in my belly. I look down at the slit on the dress and blush. I've never worn something like this. It feels like I just unlocked a part of me I never knew existed, and I'm stepping out into the world for the first time. Everyone is still shocked to see me. I take a deep breath in and sit at my usual seat. I just realized I have a seat at the dining table, one no one ever sits at because it's reserved for me. It's the seat right next to Jericho and opposite Rebecca.

“You can close your mouths now. You don’t want a fly to get in there, do you,” I reference the exact words Jericho had said to me when I first arrived at his house. He understands the statement and shakes his head while trying to hide a smile, realizing he did the same thing he’d been gawking at me like I’d done that day.

“What is going on with everyone this week?” Rebecca cries out, bringing everyone else out of their shock. “First, it was Dad yesterday, and today, it’s you. Why is everyone acting so weird? Something is fishy here.” She narrows her eyes at me.

“You find something fishy about me trying to look less like an old lady and more like the young person I am?” I raise a brow.

She thinks about the image for a bit and bursts into laughter. “You did look like an old dowager.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say, Rebecca. Apologize to her right now,” Jericho scolds, and she sobers up quickly.

“It’s okay. I did call myself an old lady first.” I wink at Rebecca, and she looks down at her plate of strawberry waffles to hide her smile.

“You shouldn’t let her get away with saying those kinds of comments,” Jericho says as we retreat to the study after breakfast.

“She’s just a kid, and it was funny. It was nothing.”

I take my position in the seat in front of his desk and open my writing app. Jericho sits and strokes his goatee. He stares

at a spot over my head.

“What chapter are we at?” he asks.

“We’re about to start the 9th chapter.”

“We’ve gotten that far?” he sounds surprised.

I frown. We haven’t gotten anywhere. We’ve spent the past few weeks writing just nine chapters because he’s been reluctant to write the book. I can sense he doesn’t want to finish it. But I know Liam will get very angry if I take too long assisting on this book.

Jericho would rather keep toying around the details of his life instead of getting to the nitty-gritty everyone wants to learn about, and when we reach the deadline, he’ll say he wasn’t able to make it.

“What’s this chapter about?”

“The part where you win your first major race,” I reply.

He frowns. His gaze strays down to my bust, and he averts his eyes, casting them at another spot in the room.

“The part where I win my first major race,” he repeats my words.

He looks off into the distance for a while, and I think he’s starting to remember the events so I can work them, but then he groans and squeezes his eyes shut.

“Damn it,” he whispers.

“What’s wrong?”

He gets up suddenly and walks around the table to pull me out of my seat.

“What’s happening?” I set my tablet on the desk.

He sits at the edge of the desk and begins kissing my neck. “I can’t concentrate on anything.” He kisses my collarbone, and I shiver. He found that spot while his lips were rummaging through my body yesterday, and he knows how sensitive I am there.

“We have to write your book,” I attempt to protest and push him away from me, but my arms have turned to spaghetti, and my voice comes out weak.

“We can do that later. I want you right now.” He grabs my hand and moves it down to his crotch, where his hard length pushes against his pants' zipper. I clench my thighs together, but that doesn't stop the tingling in my core.

You want this. Don't fight it.

Fine. I do want him and will not pretend I don't anymore. I run my hand down his bulge, and he hums in his throat. He seizes my lips and pushes me on the desk. His hand reaches out and sends everything on his desk crashing to the floor, including my tablet.

“Jericho!” I scream and push him away from me. My tablet screen is cracked, but it's still on. The cursor is still blinking beside the last word I typed.

“I'll get you another one.” He resumes kissing me senselessly, leaving my lips pink and tingling. All thoughts of

my tablet melt away.

Jericho separates my legs . The dress falls apart, exposing my thighs to him. The skirt slit makes it all so easy for him. He kisses my inner thigh before moving down to my crotch. His fingers stroke me through the sheer material, and I pleasurefully close my eyes.

Suddenly, a rip tears through the air, and my eyes flash open. I look down at the damage he's done to my panties.

“Oh my goodness! What else are you going to destroy?” I exclaim.

He gives me a cheeky smile as he pulls the ruined material away from my body and throws it somewhere in the room. “I'll buy you more.”

He's going to have to buy me a lot of things by the time this is over.

He blows hot air on me, and I gasp. His tongue swirls around the tip, and his finger slips into me. He's meticulous, sucking and licking every inch like eating a bowl of dripping ice cream. The way he stares at me through his lashes doesn't help either. It's devilish and all things sinful. It doesn't belong on my boss's face, but it hits all the right chords in me. Thank goodness the door is thick and soundproof, or I'm sure everyone will be able to hear the incoherent words he makes me spew in delirium.

My orgasm smashes through me, making me almost convulse on the desk, and he has a sweet smile on his face

through it all. He licks his lips as I calm down from my high and chuckles lightly. That was payback for yesterday.

“You’re devious,” I manage to whisper.

“Good, you know, because I’m about to be even more devious.”

He unzips his pants and pulls them down. He pushes into me slowly, making my eyes roll to the back of my head. I haven’t recovered from my previous orgasm, and he’s about to send me spiraling into another one. He bites down on his bottom lip as he groans, and I grip the edge of the desk. Tears leak out the side of my eyes, and I chuckle. He feels so amazing. I can’t stop laughing and don’t know why I’m laughing.

My eyes close, and a loud moan chokes my laughter as another orgasm slams me into a shuddering mess. He follows afterward, releasing in me.

CHAPTER 18: JERICHO

I take a deep breath in and close my eyes. My room is quiet, and the house is peaceful. I remember the last time I felt so relaxed, but nothing came up. Christina runs her hand on my chest, playing with the tiny hairs on my chest. I look up at the glass ceiling. The blinds cover the screen and block the sun's rays, allowing me to see the sunlight without squinting up at the sky or almost blinding myself.

As a kid, I always wanted to look up at the sun and admire its beauty without burning out my eyes or getting sunburned. The day I installed the glass ceilings in this house, I was as happy as a little kid because I could achieve another of my silly, childish dreams. I'd made my first dream of building my mother a big fancy garden come true. I made a garden on every property I owned so my mother would never miss her garden anytime she came to visit, or we went on a vacation in any of the houses.

Christina changes position and moves up my chest, resting her head under my nose. The scent of her shampoo wafts up to

my nose, and I kiss her temple. I've gotten so used to her smell it feels natural in my space, which is weird. We've only known each other a couple of months and just been intimate for two weeks, yet it feels like I've known her my whole life, and she's always lived here.

A part of me wonders if it's too sudden and we're moving too fast. I know my traitorous heart is rolling down the hill quickly, and it's only a matter of time before I'm hopelessly in love with her.

She stares at the black curtains covering the floor-to-ceiling windows halfway. Most of the time, the curtains are down because I like to keep my room dark. The only sunlight I let in is the one from the ceiling. The décor in my room is different from the rest of the house. I prefer dark colors. Hence, I have more dark colors in my room than light.

The curtains were pulled aside today because Christina opened them when she entered my room. That's always the first thing she does when she comes into my room lately, and it's a bit bothersome. I never like my room being bright. She pulls the comforter to her chest, covering her breast. I pull it down, but she slaps my hand away.

"You don't have to hide your body from me." I try again, but she slaps my hand.

"I want to talk about something serious. We can't do that if you stare at my breast every two seconds."

"But I want to stare at your breasts every second." I pull down the comforter and throw it off the bed so we're both

naked. Her eyes narrow, but I pull her to me, and she straddles my lap. Her body so close to me is stirring up my arousal again, and my hands reach up to her chest to cup her breasts. This time, she doesn't resist. She moans as I play with the tips.

“We need to talk,” she moans.

“I'm listening.”

“It's about your schedule and your room.”

“What about them?” I raise myself on my elbows and take one of her nipples into my mouth.

“You always wake up late. It's not helping with the book we're writing. I keep trying to wake you up early, too, but you always come to the study when you're ready, which is pretty late in the morning.”

“Are you saying I'm lazy? Do I need to remind you that I sometimes come down for breakfast before you?”

“That was just once, and you know what I'm talking about. I'm not calling you a sloth. You're far from that. You need to change your schedule.”

The word change rings in my head like a foreboding bell, making my mouth bitter. I wouldn't say I like change. Everything in my life has been the way it has been for years, and nothing has changed. The only difference is my daughter growing up every day. I've only known Christina for a short time, and she's already talking about changing me. My hands move to her waist before I can stop myself from showing any reaction, and I move her off me.

Suddenly, being naked in front of her makes me uncomfortable. I throw my legs off the bed and pull on my shorts. She doesn't notice my irritation and continues speaking.

“I sense that you don't want to write your book, either. I don't know if it's because you don't want to finish it early. After all, I'll have to leave when it's over, or you have reasons for not wanting to finish the book but wasting time. You distract me too much and don't want to talk about yourself. You give me crumbs of your life, and I can't write a story with that. You have to show your pain and your vulnerabilities. That's what people want to read about in your memoir. The things that made you the legend you are today, not the petty struggles you went through.”

Petty struggles?

“Are you done?” I snap.

She frowns. “Well...not really. There's the issue with your room, too.”

Now, I don't hide my irritation. My brows furrow as I get off the bed and pick up my shirt. “What about my room? Does that need to change too?”

I slip my shirt on and place my hands on my hips. She looks small on the bed, and she realizes it too. She starts to feel uncomfortable and covers her breasts with her hand as she gets off the bed, but they're too big to be covered by her tiny hands. I pick her dress off the floor and throw it to her. She catches it, but her frown deepens.

“Your room is too dark,” she says after slipping on her dress. “It’ll be better if you change the theme to light. Perhaps you should throw in more white like you have in your living room.”

“Wow! That’s a great idea. I didn’t realize I could change the décor in the thirteen years I’ve lived in this house,” I say sarcastically, and she glares at me.

“Stop it, I’m serious,” she warns. I look down at her chest, where her nipples have pebbled. My arousal stirs, and I grit my teeth. Even in my anger, she still has control over my libido. She folds her arms on her chest, covering her nipples.

That’s relieving.

“What makes you think I’m joking? You can’t just come here and tell me to change my room and schedule like I don’t know what I’m doing. I have that schedule for a reason, which hasn’t changed in years. Everyone in this house adjusts to my schedule. I don’t change my schedule for anyone, so if you don’t like that, no need to hang around.”

“What?”

She’s stunned, but I’m too annoyed to care about her reaction to my words. Change is a big thing for me. If she were as bright as I thought she was, she’d have noticed it in the weeks she’s been here. Every assistant I know is observant.

“Just because I told you to change your schedule and décor, you’re telling me to leave? It’s just a room, Jericho.”

“No, it’s not. You just came in here, and you’re demanding all these changes. You’re trying to make me into this image in your head. Even my mother doesn’t change anything about me. Don’t think I don’t notice how you always open the curtains when you enter my room.”

She stares at me incredulously. “What does that have to do with anything? Your room was dark, and I opened the curtains...you know what? I’m not doing this with you. You can stay in your dark room and argue with yourself.”

She makes a bee-line for the door.

“Don’t you dare walk out on me, Christina.”

She shakes her head sadly and walks out of the room. The door slams behind her. I clench my fists. No one has ever walked out on me. To think I was feeling peaceful only a few minutes ago. Now, my emotions are topsy-turvy.

If she wants to walk off angrily, she can do that. She’s not the only one with legs. I’m capable of walking off, too. I hate feeling this way. Everything is heated, and I don’t like confrontations, but I don’t like being told to change my lifestyle either. Everything in my life fits perfectly where it is.

I take off my clothes and enter the bathroom to cool off. I take a cold shower. It not only cools down my budding arousal but also douses my anger. I change into khaki shorts and a light black shirt. Holding the shirt in my hands reminds me of Christina’s comment. I look up at the row of shirts in front of me. Most of the shirts are dark in color. The only time I ever

wear a white shirt is when I wear a tux, which is rare because I hardly ever go out in a tuxedo.

I slip the shirt on and walk out of the closet. Giggling outside my window filters into the room. I move to the window to see what the fuss is all about. I draw the curtains aside. Christina is out in the garden playing with Rebecca. She's changed from the nightdress she was wearing earlier to blue shorts and a white shirt. Her hair flows freely behind her as she runs around the garden chasing Rebecca. She looks different from the pissed-off woman who had walked out of my room mere minutes ago.

I take note of her attire. She's been wearing many light colors that make her glow. She doesn't wear her glasses anymore. It was so easy for her to change from her dreary clothes. I think back to the plain clothes in my closet. Perhaps I overreacted, and she wasn't asking me to change my life for her. But then, doesn't change start in bits till you've lost yourself trying to be someone you're not?

CHAPTER 19: CHRISTIE

My brows are knitted as I stare at the blank canvas. Despite running around the garden with Rebecca, I still feel some tension in me, blocking my inspiration. I chew on the inside of my lips and tap my chin. Nothing comes forth. The open-air was supposed to bring me some sense of tranquility. It's been a month since I posted on my socials. I checked my accounts today, and there are a lot of messages from concerned fans asking about my whereabouts.

I've been busy trying to help Jericho write his book, and he dares to tell me to leave his house if I can't adjust to his schedule. All I've been doing since I got here is adjusting to him, yet the one time I suggest a change to him, he flares up like a rocket.

Argh! Now I'm getting mad again just thinking about it. I try to smooth my brows with my thumb and index finger to release tension.

"I still sense some tension in you. Is this how you usually shoot your videos? You stare at a blank canvas for hours and

glare at it? I don't think glaring will do you much good. It's not going to paint for you," Rebecca says. Ever the wisecrack, her comments shed my annoyance, and I smile.

Well, your father is the one responsible for my bad mood. Maybe you should talk to him.

"Just stop recording," I tell her.

She moves away from the tripod my phone is attached to and tilts her lips to the side as she stares at me. "I think I know what might help you," she says eventually. She walks over to me and stands on tiptoes to touch my shoulders. I'm short, but not so short that a 10-year-old girl can touch my shoulders easily.

"Bend down so I can touch you."

"Why?" I ask.

"Bend first, ask questions later."

"Okay." I'm a bit skeptical. She might be asking me to bend so she can stain my shirt, but I bend all the same, and she pushes my shoulders till I'm seated on the floor. She sits in front of me and crosses her legs.

"What are we doing?" I ask.

"We're going to make you attune with your natural elements. I learned this in art class. It helps me calm down and focus. I don't know why you're angry, but it always works for me whether I'm sad or mad."

"Do you get mad a lot?"

She looks down at her leg for a bit before staring at me. “I don’t get mad often, but I get anxious a lot. Sometimes, I just want to scream and break things like my dad does when he’s mad, but violence is not always the right way to release pent-up emotions.”

There’s something off about her statement. I don’t know why I get the feeling she’s telling me something. The way Jericho switched up on me today also hints at something.

“Are you saying your father is violent?” I ask.

She doesn’t think twice before speaking. “He’s not, but everyone has different ways of expressing themselves.”

Your father’s way is using me as a verbal punching bag for whatever he’s dealing with. He snapped at me for waking him up earlier than usual, snapped at me for talking to his rival even though he took me to the wine tasting first, and accused me of flirting with the man. Then he snapped at me today for suggesting he wake up earlier and lighten up his décor.

“Close your eyes,” Rebecca instructs. “Place your palms on the floor and feel the grass between your fingers. Breathe in and out. Listen to the sounds around you.”

The garden has no animals, but I hear the wind as it whooshes past me and whistles in my ears. It’s soft on my face and cool. The grass beneath my fingers reminds me of the mountain back home. My brother and I hiked there once.

I’m sitting atop that mountain again, but it’s not sunny. It’s slightly windy, and I’m the only one there. Everything else

fades into the background. I'm still aware of the sounds in the garden, but it's become one with the mountain. My anger is gone; all I feel is the breeze on my face and the grass beneath me.

“Did it work?” Rebecca asks.

I open my eyes. She's staring at me eagerly. Her eyes are just like Jericho's. Green with long lashes fanning them. My chest twists. She doesn't realize seeing her face is adding to my misery.

“I feel much better.”

My anger is gone. Jericho's words just hurt me.

“Great! Let's paint.” She gets up and dusts off her butt. Then, she sets off to work. I chuckle. She's like a little firecracker. It would be nice to have a child as energetic as her as my daughter, but she isn't mine. She belongs to Jericho.

I dip a brush from the set in my cup in paint—this time, I want to express my emotions differently. Instead of painting in straight lines, I paint with no definition. I just splash the paint on the canvas until it creates an image expressing my thoughts.

“What are you doing?” Rebecca asks with a confused frown as she stares at the mess on my canvas.

“Painting.” I splash paint on the canvas once more, but the brush flips out of my hand and strikes through the air, splashing Rebecca's face. The brush lands in front of me, and I pick it up to resume painting, but Rebecca turns to me and sees the paintbrush in my hand, thinking I splashed her on purpose.

She touches the side of her face, and red comes off her fingers. The red paint had stained her canvas a bit too.

“I knew you had that in mind,” she growls.

“Had what?”

She flicks paint at me in retaliation, staining my white shirt. I gasp. My eyes narrow at her. “You didn’t.”

“I did,” she says smugly.

I pick up my tube of red paint and squeeze it at her face. Her eyes widen, and she gasps as she gets a fine coat of red all over her face like string cheese. She grabs her tube of green and does the same to me. It becomes a full-on war, and we spray each other with different colors.

“Take that,” she screams as she bathes me in blue.

“What’s going on here?” Jericho’s voice booms from behind us. I turn around sharply. My hand is still on the paint tube, and some of my yellow paint squirts on Jericho’s shirt.

Rebecca gasps. I freeze. Jericho looks down at the stain on his shirt. He already yelled at me earlier. Who knows what he’ll do to me now? He looks up at me and scowls before approaching me. My heart is beating fast in my chest as his hand reaches out. I flinch, but the only thing that touches me is his hand as he smears paint down my face.

Rebecca laughs, but Jericho and I stare at each other. Is this his way of apologizing for what he said earlier? I haven’t heard him utter the words ‘I’m sorry’ since he got here. He

doesn't apologize as he moves away and sprays Rebecca. Disappointment washes over me.

Our paint fight continues until we've exhausted our arsenal and are covered in paint. Eventually, I forget about the silly battle I had with Jericho earlier today and retreat to my room to wash off the color on my body.

When I step out of the bathroom, I check my phone to find that Rebecca never stopped recording, and I have over an hour's worth of recording of us attuning to nature and our paint fight. I might not have painted anything today, but I have enough content to post today to tell my followers I'm fine. I skip dinner and focus on editing the videos and deleting the scenes I don't need. I create a voiceover, add a catchy tune, and upload it. When I check the time, it's almost midnight.

I don't feel hungry, so I change into a nightdress and get ready for bed, but just as I climb into bed and cover myself with my duvet, someone knocks on my door. I sigh as I get out of bed. I'm tired already. Who could be at the door so late at night?

I throw the door open, and my slight irritation when I see it's Jericho at the door. He's shirtless, just like he'd been in the kitchen that night, and like then, I can't stop the lust I feel when I see his sweatpants riding low on his hips. He must've just gotten out of bed. Seeing his face again makes me realize how much I've missed him. I don't like fights.

"Hey, I didn't see you at dinner. I came to see how you are doing."

“I’m fine, except a bit tired. I was just caught up in some work.”

The hallway lighting makes his face's contours prominent, and he looks harsher, but his eyes are soft as he leans close to me slowly.

“I missed you,” he says. “I don’t want us to argue again.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, either.”

He pushes me slightly, and I fall back into the room. He shuts the door and pulls me flush against his body, seizing my lips. Everything in my body turns to mush at his touch, and I moan as he leads me to the bed and kisses me all over my body. His movements are hurried like he’s been waiting to touch me for too long, and now he can’t control himself.

“Jericho, slow down.” I’m breathless as I speak. He doesn’t listen to me and takes off my clothes. His head moves down to my chest, where he plays with my nipples and makes me mad with desire. I don’t want him to stop touching me, but I want him to slow down to discuss our argument this morning. He still hasn’t apologized for what he said to me, and we can’t just sweep it under the rug like it never happened.

But when he removes his pants and stands before me in all his naked glory, I forget about his words and their meaning. I want to feel him in me again, where he belongs. He sighs as he pushes into me, and that thought occurs again. It feels like he just slid into where he belongs. My body has adjusted to him, and he’s like an extension of me now.

I don't know how that happened or how I feel about it either. I know I like him, I find him attractive, and I like having sex with him. He makes me feel so good. I don't remember anyone who has ever made me so happy, yet a thought at the back of my mind shifts closer to the front as he pushes into me, and I moan.

The more I feel good, the louder the voice gets, and when our orgasm rocks through us, the voice has become so loud I can't ignore it anymore. He rolls off me and falls to my side. He turns me around and spoons me, planting a soft kiss on my shoulder, sending my heart racing. I might be falling in love with Jericho, and I might be making another mistake. My ex never apologized when he hurt me, either, and he'd hide behind good sex and sweet words. Sometimes, he got me flowers but never faced our main problem until things got worse.

Jericho plants another kiss, this time on my neck, and I shiver, but the thought at the forefront of my mind is not sweet. I don't want to get hurt again.

CHAPTER 20: JERICHO

“**W**hat do you think about going to see Grandma today?” I ask Rebecca. She gulps the smoothie in her mouth. A foam mustache at the top of her lips makes Christina smile. “Wipe that off,” I point to her face.

“Why, Dad? You scared my mustache is whiter than yours?” she wiggles her brows, making Christina snicker. Sometimes, I feel like they gang up on me to tease me.

“I’ve never met your mother,” says Christina.

“All the more reason why we should meet her today, don’t you think?” It’s the weekend, and I’ve called to let my mom know we’d be coming. I told her I’d be bringing someone I’m interested in, too. That made her excited for our visit.

Christina and I are getting stronger, and I want to see how well she fits into my world before we take things further. I don’t want to end up falling for her and then finding out she can’t take my family's pressures or the lifestyle I live. She’s already demanding I change some things she doesn’t find

comfortable. What other change would she be demanding when things go deeper between us?

“I’d love to go see grandma. She hasn’t been here in a while, and Christie will be coming along, too. We’re going to have a blast,” Rebecca finally replies.

“That’s right. We can go after breakfast and return on Sunday so you can make it in time for school on Monday.”

At that, Christina frowns. “Why the rush?” she asks.

“No reason.” I shrug.

“Dad is a big mommy’s boy. He probably misses her. That’s why he wants us to go see her even though she only left a week before Christie arrived, and she stayed with us for two months before leaving,” Rebecca says in a teasing voice.

One of these days, I’ll sew her lips shut so she won’t be able to tease me anymore. There’s nothing wrong with loving your mother. If Rebecca had been lucky to have known her mother, Iris, before she died, she’d also be a mommy’s girl.

I stare at Rebecca and Christina. Their closeness makes me think Rebecca might already see her as a mother figure, and finding out we’re together will affect her, too, so I have to get this right before I end up hurting us if Christina and I don’t work out.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a mommy’s boy. I was a mommy’s girl too before my mother died,” says Christina.

“Oh my goodness! I’m so sorry,” Rebecca exclaims.

“Your words have consequences sometimes, so you can’t just say anything you want and call it a joke.”

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago,” Christina says, but I can tell remembering her mother hurt her.

“We should go pack our bags after eating,” I say to change the subject.

“Yes. Will you help me pack, Christie?”

“Of course.”

After breakfast, they both go off to pack their clothes. Rebecca will pack more than needed for a two-day trip to Glen Rose. She consistently overpacks every time we go on a trip.

As expected, an hour later, she and Christina joined me in the car. Rebecca drags a medium-sized suitcase behind her. I raise a brow at Christina, and she shrugs. My daughter can drive a saint mad if one is not careful. I don’t bother to say anything about it, collect it from her, place it in the trunk, and get in the car.

Rebecca pauses in the middle of entering the car when she sees me in the driver’s seat. “Why are you driving? What happened to the driver?”

“This is a family trip, so I’ll drive,” I reply.

“And no bodyguards either?” Rebecca asks with a raised brow.

“Yes, no bodyguards.”

“You have bodyguards?” Christina asks.

“Yes, but I don’t go around with them often, contrary to anything my parrot of a daughter will tell you.” I glance at Rebecca in the back seat through the rearview mirror, and she sticks her tongue out at me. She fixes her seatbelt, and I look away.

“Tell me about your mother,” asks Christina.

She entwines our hands and places the tray between our seats. I remove my hand from hers and glance in the rearview mirror to see if Rebecca saw that, but she’s already focused on her iPad. Christina frowns at me, and I point at Rebecca. She doesn’t say anything and looks out the window throughout the ride. At one point, she falls asleep.

The breeze from the window beside her blows her hair all over her face, but she doesn’t feel it since she’s asleep. I press a button on the dashboard, and the windows go up. Then I turn on the AC. My hands itch to fix her hair for her and feel that soft skin of hers under my fingers, but they tighten around the steering wheel. She’s sleeping, and Rebecca is behind us, I tell myself throughout the ride, which lasted almost two hours.

My mother’s house in Glen Rose is not a mansion but a bungalow with a farm. She loves plants, so I got her a house with lots of space for her plants and trees.

She’s already waiting for us on the porch and runs over to us as we get down from the car. She hugs Rebecca and wraps her in a tight hug, lifting her off the floor. Rebecca squeals and chuckles.

“I’ve missed you, my little pumpkin.”

“I’ve missed you too, Grandma.”

My mother sets her down, and her gaze lands on Christina standing beside me. So Rebecca would not be privy to our conversation, she raises a brow, inquiring if Christina is the love interest I told her about, and I offer a slight nod.

“Christina Stewart, ma’am. I’m Jericho’s assistant.” She holds out a hand for a shake.

Christina and her handshakes. She never offers a hug. My mom slaps her hand away and pulls her into a big hug. She huffs at the sudden change but laughs when my mother pulls away.

“I’m Angela, but you can call me Angie. Lovely to meet you, young lady.” She leads them to the house while I take our bags from the trunk.

They’ve only climbed the porch when my aunt, Maggie, comes out of the house with a glass of juice. Her lips stretch into a wide grin as she sees me. It dims a little when she sees Rebecca’s scowl. I didn’t know my aunt was going to be here. Rebecca and my aunt are not exactly best friends. I can never figure out the problem, but Rebecca can’t stand my aunt, and she’s not scared to say it to her face, either.

Rebecca glares at me before storming off into the house. I doubt she will be joining us till she’s much calmer. This is all my mother’s fault. She knew we’d be coming, and didn’t prepare us for Auntie Maggie. I only hope she won’t be staying throughout the weekend.

“What just happened?” Christina asks my mom.

“Oh, don’t mind Rebecca. She’s just being overdramatic, as usual. She and I never see eye to eye. I’m Maggie, by the way,” my aunt introduces herself and holds out her hand.

Christina smiles as she shakes it, and my mom leads her inside. The moment she’s gone from sight, my aunt takes out her handkerchief from her pocket and wipes off the hand Christina shook. My aunt and her eccentric ways. This trip will be eventful and dramatic if I don’t find a way to get her to leave.

“You didn’t tell me you’d be bringing the help,” she says as she hooks her arm through my free arm but doesn’t move to collect any of the bags I’m carrying with my other hand.

“She’s no longer the help, Auntie. She’s my girlfriend now.”

She tuts at me before taking a sip of her juice. “You still got together with her even after I told you not to. Just look at the way she’s dressed. You haven’t been together that long, and she’s no longer wearing her glasses or that baggy hideous cloth I saw her wearing when I came to your house. I told you I’d get some women your age to date.”

“You didn’t, and I found one for myself.” I wince. I realize it sounds like I’m only with Christina because she’s available for sex, but our relationship is much deeper than that, and it’s starting to have more meaning than sex.

My aunt shakes her head in disappointment. She’s wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat to protect her from the sun, but she

doesn't take it off when she gets inside and joins Christina in the living room. I drop the bags next to my seat and crash into the sofa. I haven't driven a car anywhere for that long in a while, and it's sapped all my energy. Being interrogated by my family about Christina will sap it all the more.

My mother returns with a tray containing two glasses of juice and sets it on the coffee table. I pick one to quench my thirst, and Christina takes the other glass.

"Tell me, Christina, where do you come from?" my aunt asks as my mother sits beside her.

"Minnesota. Redwood Falls, to be precise. My dad owns a small farm there," she answers with a smile.

"Is your dad's farm as big as the one here?"

"I haven't seen how big the farm here is, but the farm in my house is more like a garden. My dad is just as passionate about nature as I am."

"So your Dad owns a garden, not a farm, and he probably makes little to no profit." Aunt Maggie chuckles a bit, which makes Christina frown. She glances at me, but I gulp my juice. "Now I understand why you're dating Jericho. You're only interested in his money, right?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You don't have to play coy with me, Christina. I'm a very straightforward person and don't like to mix things. I only asked you a simple question. Are you dating him for his money or not? Because you didn't look this way when I saw

you last. You were a shy girl with glasses and hideous clothing. Now, you're this, and where did your glasses go suddenly?"

Christina glances at me again. I think this is my cue to leave. I have to take the bags to my room anyway.

"I'm not dating him for his money."

I excuse myself and walk away, dragging Rebecca's suitcase behind me. I sling mine and Christina's bags on my shoulders and dump them in my room.

CHAPTER 21: CHRISTIE

I'm shocked when Jericho gets up and drags the bags out of the living room. I expected him to caution his aunt, but he acted like he didn't hear her call me a gold digger. I've not been here for ten minutes, and she's already insulted me. I should've known she'd be this way when she'd been so lovely at the front door. She hadn't been that friendly when I first met her in Jericho's house.

“So why are you dating him then? He's much older than you, and he has a grown daughter. Most women your age don't go for older men with kids. You were just in his house to help him write his book. It's only been a few months since you arrived, and you've moved from the hired help to the lady of the house. I must say you're quite fast.” She chuckles and picks up the glass Jericho had abandoned. The way she sips the juice irritates me. She's one of those opinionated people who think they know everything and everyone else is a fool for thinking differently from them. Jericho's mother is watching the interaction between us with keen interest, but I can tell she's

on her sister's side from the slight lift of her nose and her haughty posture. I'm just the gold digger who wants to scam her son.

I take a deep breath to calm my temper before speaking.

"I'm not interested in your nephew's money. I might not be as rich as he is, but I'm not a gold digger."

Maggie scoffs and drops an empty glass on the tray. She adjusts her hat and crosses her legs. "That's what they all say," she says in a bored tone. Then she faces Angela. "You'd best tell your son to be careful with this one. She's a sly one. I can smell it on her."

What the actual heck?

Angela stands and picks up the tray. "Are you finished with that?" she asks, pointing to the glass in my hand. Gone is the warm smile she'd offered me earlier. Now, her face is cold towards me, and she stares at the half-finished juice in my hand with impatience.

Words fail me, so I drop the glass on the tray and allow her to carry it away even though I'm still parched from the little nap I took on the drive over. I feel like I've just been cast into a stormy sea without a safety net or swimming skills, and the sharks have gathered around me, waiting for me to make the slightest mistake before they pounce. A part of me is still shocked. Jericho left me sitting there without attempting to defend me against his aunt's accusations, and now his mother shows her distaste for me.

What woman wouldn't hate me if she heard I was only interested in her son's money?

Angela comes back into the living room and sits next to Maggie. They ignored me and started conversing about the latest trip Maggie took.

"Excuse me," I say, but I might have spoken to a wall for the response I got out of them.

I get off my seat and walk off in Jericho's direction. Despite the hostility I received upon entering the place, Angela's house is warm and less decorative than Jericho's house in Dallas. The cream-colored walls remind me of my house in Redwood Falls. I can easily imagine smelling the aroma of my dad's cooking here, and it wouldn't seem like a juxtaposition. One of Rebecca's paintings of a garden hangs on the wall in the hallway.

The room next to the painting has its door open, and I can see out the window into the garden. It's the same garden in the image I just saw. Drawn to it, I walk into the room, forgetting it might have an occupant. I look out the window and close my eyes. I breathe in the scented air, let the smell calm me down, and soothe the ache in my chest.

It doesn't work, and my hands only tighten on the window sill. But the view is lovely. The garden is filled with lush greens and every color of the rainbow. I'm not that knowledgeable about flowers, but the garden is colorful and pleasing to the eyes.

Hands wrap around my waist from behind, and I'm hit with Jericho's strong scent. He kisses my neck. I stiffen. "It's such a beautiful sight, isn't it?" he asks.

I scoff, annoyed that he's trying to shove this under the rug like he did the last time he was rude. He sat there and kept drinking his juice while his aunt insulted me and questioned our relationship. He didn't utter a single word. I push away from him, and he frowns. Just staring at him right now is bringing back my anger.

"How could you sit there and let her insult me like that? You couldn't even defend me. She insulted me and you left me there in the den of lions."

"She didn't insult you. She was asking you a few questions. That's her way of fishing for information about you. Trust me, my little tigress. I know you can stand your ground. You don't need me to defend you."

Is he kidding me right now?

"She called me a gold digger to your face, Jericho. She called my dad poor and said my family wasn't up to your standards. Who says those things to a guest that's not even spent up to ten minutes in the house? Did you bring me here so I can get insulted? Is that it?"

"Of course not. You're making a mountain out of a molehill."

An involuntary gasp escapes me. I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. The words resonate in my head, and their

volume amplifies even more.

“You think I’m making something out of nothing? Alright then. Where’s my room?” I ask.

“You don’t have a room. You’re going to sleep in my room.”

Not today, I’m not.

I’d rather sleep on the porch or the car. I won’t let him seduce me into forgetting about this with sex. He can’t brush this under the rug. I turn around to leave the room, but he grabs my arm.

“Where are you going?”

I jerk my arm away from him. “I’m going for a walk.”

My chest is heavy. I haven’t fully recovered from the shock of his words the other day, and he’s landed another blow my way.

This is becoming more and more like my relationship with my ex. He never valued me either, and I didn’t see it at the time, but my eyes are wide open to the signs now, and it hurts to think that I let myself become enamored with the same kind of person again.

Jericho doesn’t stop me from walking out of the room. I don’t know what I’d do if he did. I head down the hall. There’s another door at the end of the hall. I open it and find the entrance to the magnificent garden I’d been staring at earlier. I close the door behind me.

My fingers caress the tall yellow flowers reaching up to my knee as I walk through the garden. I don't know if I'll find a semblance of peace out here, but it's better than staying there with Jericho and having him rationalize everything his aunt said to me. She doesn't even know me and has made her opinion about me without giving me a chance to show her who I am. Not that I should be interested in explaining myself to such a person.

My hand moves to the next flower, and a prick of pain makes me look down at the plant. It's a rose bush. Like the drop of blood from the cut on my finger, vibrant red roses stick proudly out of the ground. They're like Jericho. Pleasing to the eye and soft to the touch, but when you delve deeper, the thorns come out and make you bleed.

I sit on the iron bench in the middle of the garden and suck on my index finger to stop the blood. In the near distance, I can see the small wrought iron gate that opens into the field behind the house. I can see the farm now. It's a vast land stretching out far into the horizon. Not all of it is a farm, but the small part planted is triple the size of my father's farm back home.

The garden door opens, and Jericho steps out. Seeing him, my heart skips. His salt and pepper hair is sharper in this environment. The neutral colors of his hair are stark against the background of colorful plants. He sits next to me and removes my finger from my mouth. I didn't realize I was still sucking on it. He instantly notices the tiny pink bruise and his brows knit in concern.

“What happened?”

“I got pricked by one of those thorns.” I point to the rosebush.

“You should be more careful.”

“Why, thank you, Doctor. I saw the thorns and decided to see how sharp they were.”

He shakes his head at the sarcasm in my tone. “Look, I get you’re mad at me, but I couldn’t say anything to my aunt because I’m not good at confrontations with my family. They’re all I have, and I don’t want to risk this easygoing bond we share over some petty arguments.”

But you can risk our relationship by letting your aunt disrespect me and pick fights with me over little things.

“Try and understand. I get that my Aunt might’ve sounded a little harsh—”

I cut him short. “She didn’t sound a little harsh. She was downright mean and disrespectful. I understand why she and Rebecca do not get a long and why your daughter called you a mommy’s boy. If you don’t stand up to them when they do something wrong, you give them permission to walk all over you.”

“Let me guess, that’s another thing you want me to change about myself?” His eyes have become stormy with anger, and his voice is getting louder. The way he switches up on me is just astounding. He was so quiet when his aunt called me a

gold digger and threw jabs at my family, but the slightest hint of change for himself to make, sets him off like a firecracker.

“You are a piece of work, Christina.” He shoots off the bench. “You haven’t been in my life long enough, yet you keep demanding these changes. It would be best if you didn’t forget your place. You’re my assistant; after all this, you’ll get your final pay and return to where you came from. Don’t forget it.”

He storms off, and I’m left to stare at him with a gaping hole in my chest where he just shot me with his words and my mouth hanging open. To him, I’m his assistant. I guess I shouldn’t forget that, as he suggested.

CHAPTER 22: JERICHO

*Y*ou're just an assistant. You'll go back to where you came from.

Oh, hell!

Why did I say all of that? She riles me up, and I can't keep my mouth shut. I didn't even mean any of it. I slam the door behind me. It makes a resounding echo that shakes the house a bit. No doubt everyone knows we fought now.

"Damn it!"

I pull my hair and kick the bedpost. It's not a satisfying outlet for the anger coursing through me. This fiasco was not how I planned for today to turn out. We've not been here that long and shit has already hit the fan. Rebecca has locked herself in her room, Christina is mad at me, and I'm angry at everyone, including myself.

I sigh and move to the window. She's still sitting on the bench and looking morosely in front of her. My hands rest on the windowsill. I don't know why she's mad at me. I only told

her the truth. She hasn't been in my life long enough to start demanding all these changes.

I can't always pick fights with my family because of her. My aunt isn't the kind of person accustomed to taming her tongue. She says whatever she wants, speaking without fear; sometimes, it might be without tact, but that's how she is.

I turn away from the window. Christina is just so unpredictable. One minute, she's happy with me, and everything is going smoothly, then she switches up on me and keeps trying to make me into someone I'm not. I'm not the kind of guy that likes confrontations with my family. They were there for me when I had nothing and were there when Iris died and left me broken.

A knock sounds on my door. My mom doesn't wait for me to tell her to come in before she opens the door and enters.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

"No, I'm not. Today turned out to be a big mess. I wanted everyone to be happy."

"We are happy, Jericho. Rebecca is in the living room eating cookies and trying to be civil with Maggie." She chuckles a bit. "The only person who isn't happy here is your assistant, and I think that's because Maggie called her out."

"Mom! Not you, too."

"What? You can't deny that your aunt is right. You're older than her. It doesn't sit right with me that you two have such a big age gap. That makes her motive questionable."

She goes to sit on the bed and pats the space beside her. I move away from the window and sit next to her.

“You brought her here to see what I thought of her, right? Here’s what I think. She’s young and could easily be with any man her age. She’s from a low-income family and is suddenly thrust into all this wealth. You show interest in her, and she knows it’ll change her financial status if she can keep you interested. If you think about it, you’ll see she doesn’t care about you much and only wants your money, like Maggie said. When have I ever been wrong before?”

But you’re mistaken this time, Ma.

I know Christina isn’t a gold digger. An example is how she’d argued with me and refused to let me talk her into changing her clothes. The first time we had sex, she’d been so torn up over it she’d had a panic attack. If she’d been pretending about everything else, she couldn’t have pretended about that. I know the symptoms of hyperventilation. Rebecca often has it, and I’ve been managing it since it started.

Christina is not an actress and not that great that she’d scare herself so perfectly.

When I don’t reply to my mom, she sighs and takes my hand in hers, patting it softly. “I just want you to be careful with her and kick her out of your life when you notice the tiniest hint of deception in her. You deserve better than that. It’s almost dinnertime. I’m making pasta.”

She gets up and leaves the room. I ponder on her words. Christina’s dress sense has changed from when she came to

my house. She doesn't wear her glasses anymore, and gone are the boring dresses she used to wear. I'm not complaining about the changes; I quite like them, but it does seem weird that she'd change herself so easily.

Uhhh!! So many thoughts are swimming in my head, and I'm doubting everything. I need to take a shower. Preferably a long one to shut off my thoughts. I enter the shower and turn on the water. The showerhead is not as big or fancy as the one in my house. My mom likes simpler things.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I look out the window for Christina. She's no longer in the garden. Perhaps she's joined my family for dinner. I get dressed and head out of the room.

"This is quite delicious, Angela. You've outdone yourself," Maggie's voice echoes from the dining room.

"Well, I wanted to make a lovely dinner for my son and my darling Rebecca, seeing they'd be leaving soon."

The dining room door is open, and everyone is seated at the table. All except Christina. I frown.

Maggie looks up from her plate of pasta and smiles. "Oh, Jericho. Come sit next to me." She pats the chair beside her.

Rebecca stares at her plate sorely, picking at her food with her fork. She casts a disinterested gaze at me before looking away.

"Where's Christina?" I ask as I sit next to Maggie.

"I don't know," my mom replies. "I think she's still scowling. She must be somewhere around the house. I'm sure

she'll turn up once she's hungry."

Maggie passes me a plate of spaghetti and fish. I turn to Rebecca.

"Have you seen Christina?"

She doesn't look at me and shrugs. She's ignoring everyone else at the table, too.

"Don't worry about her, Jericho. I'm sure she's fine. Like your mother said, she'll join us when hungry."

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. Christina should be more welcome. She's my guest, and they're both acting so rude to her.

"I'm going to go look for her." I stand from my seat, but my aunt reaches out and blocks me.

"Where are you going? Sit. She'll be fine. It's not like she'll leave. Your mom prepared a delicious meal for you. Try it."

Rebecca stares at me expectantly. The cheerful atmosphere that had been present in the room has vanished, and everyone is waiting for my next move. I don't like this. It makes me feel on edge, and I don't like this uneasy feeling. Why does everything have to be so complicated?

I sit back down. "You're probably right."

My aunt smiles. Rebecca scoffs and rolls her eyes. She pushes her chair backwards.

"I'm done. I'm going to bed."

“Your daughter is such a picky eater,” my Aunt says as Rebecca walks out of the room.

I glance at my mom to find her staring at her plate with worry. The only person who appears to be enjoying dinner is my aunt. She eats her fish with reckless abandon, chattering away about her travels. My mom offers a smile and a few inputs, but is not interested in listening to her. I can only eat a few forkfuls of pasta before losing my appetite, and I return to my room.

The door creaks open. It’s dark, and the only light source in the room is the moon through the open window. The pale light highlights the body under the covers. Christina has arranged the pillows on my bed into a fort separating us.

She doesn’t look at me as I get into bed, but I can hear her uneven breathing and know she’s still awake. I fight the urge to throw the pillows away and pull her close. I want the smell of her hair to surround me and feel her soft, warm body pressed against me.

It's not that I don't want to be with her. There's nothing I'd love more than for her never to leave. I want this to work, but everything is just so confusing suddenly. She's changing, becoming more unpredictable as the days pass, which scares me. She might decide to leave me eventually after I've invested time and emotions into our relationship.

It nearly destroyed me when my wife died. I became a shell of myself. I've never been able to handle loss very well. My greatest fear isn't in loving but losing after love.

I turn around to see if she's still awake.

“Goodnight, Christina.”

She takes in a sharp breath. A second passes, and then more, but she doesn't say goodnight. I grit my teeth and turn away. So be it if she doesn't want to talk to me. Perhaps she'll speak to me by morning when we cool off.

Sleep doesn't come quickly. I can only stare out the window and hear the curtains rustle in the breeze. Christina falls asleep, and I'm left to stare at her sleeping figure, wishing I could tell her how scared I am to fall for her. How scared I am to change for her only to be left alone. I don't think she'd ever understand how it feels to lose someone you thought you'd never lose. You live every day loving and trusting for the person to be there to catch you every time you fall, and then suddenly, you're dealt a killing blow that breaks everything inside you. Your lover is gone, leaving you to face the world's uncertainties. Alone.

The pale moonlight gives way to the sun. Christina stirs next to me, gets up, and goes into the bathroom without saying anything. My eyes are tired, but I still don't feel sleepy. I get out of bed. She's coming out of the bathroom as I try to go in. We both collide at the doorway, but she glares at me and steps aside, letting me pass.

I see she hasn't cooled down after all. This is becoming insufferable. I splash water on my face and quickly shower before changing my clothes. We'll be heading back to Dallas earlier than I planned today.

“We’ll be leaving soon. Get ready,” I say after getting dressed.

Christina nods but doesn’t say anything. I sigh.

“Are you not going to talk to me?”

She answered that question by moving to the corner of the room where I kept our bags and grabbing hers, then leaving. Rebecca leaves her room just as I step out with her bag.

“Good morning, Dad,” she mumbles as she walks past me.

I guess we’ll be leaving without having breakfast then. I return to the room, take my bag, and follow them. My mom and Maggie are in the kitchen preparing breakfast already, and they peek out the door when they spot us.

“Where are you all going? I’m just making breakfast.” My mom walks out of the kitchen... She frowns when neither Christina nor Rebecca answer her.

They’re both like two soldiers on a mission, marching out the door to get to the car.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Something came up, so we have to leave early.” I kiss her cheek.

My aunt is resting against the kitchen doorway, staring at the both of us with narrowed eyes.

“Bye, Auntie Maggie.”

My mom tries to say something else, but I walk outside before she can get the words out. Things are already bad

enough as it is. I don't want to wait another second in case everything implodes.

CHAPTER 23: CHRISTIE

We're working on the final draft of Jericho's memoir, or at least we're trying to. It's been hard working around Jericho with all this tension between us. We've barely said a word to each other since we got back from his mother's.

I miss him and us, but I'm unwilling to make the same mistakes twice. They say doing the same thing every time and expecting a different result is insanity. I won't give my all to a man who doesn't value or respect me. If he wants to listen to his aunt and mother call me a gold digger, he can continue doing that. I'm not going to pretend that their actions don't hurt me or ignore his indifference to it all.

He's standing by the window staring out into the garden. My pen taps on the highlighted word I've been stuck at for the past few minutes. Misdemeanor. When Jericho was a teenager, he'd gotten caught up with a few bad kids when he first started racing and got charged with a misdemeanor. He'd have spent a few months in jail if the judge hadn't been lenient. He had a hard life growing up. I can see the evidence of all that when I

look at him now. If I went through everything he did, I'd be distrustful and guarded, but none of that excuses his behavior.

He's arrogant and unapologetic even when he's in the wrong, and he knows he's wrong. At least he hasn't tried gaslighting me. That was my ex's specialty. He'd do something wrong and manipulate me into believing I was wrong to feel offended by it, and I'd even apologize for his mistake.

"I think I'll finish this in my room," I tell him.

He nods but doesn't look back at me. Not that I want to stare at his face anyway. It hurts too much to see him look at me without any emotion on his face. I'm used to the desire, the smirks and grins, the laughter, and even the anger. The way he glares when he's pissed and his scowl. Jericho can scowl at you till you die.

But now there's nothing on his face. No emotion.

I'm about to leave my seat when the door opens, and Rebecca enters the study. She's got a frown of determination as she stops in front of Jericho's desk. Jericho finally turns away from the window. His gaze lands on me briefly before he looks at Rebecca. She places her hands on her hips, and her eyes narrow at the both of us. She purses her lips.

She looks like she is about to warn us or make a complaint. She points a finger at Jericho, and he frowns. Then she points the finger at me. My brow goes up.

"Both of you...Come with me. I've been making cookies and tea in the kitchen, and you have to taste it. I'm inviting

you to my tea party.” She finishes with a bright smile.

That was not what I was expecting her to say. I glance at Jericho to find him also staring at me.

“Come on then, before it gets cold.” She pulls me out of my chair.

I huff as she drags me over to Jericho and takes his hand. We both stare at each other. This is the closest we’ve been and probably the longest time we’ve stared at each other since we returned from his mother’s. I’ve avoided looking into his eyes for fear of seeing their coldness.

“Where are we going?” he asks Rebecca.

“No questions. Just follow me.”

She drags us to her room, where a tea party is set up. She’s arranged three pillows around a small table with a plate of cookies in the middle, a purple teapot, and three tiny tea cups. It looks like a toy set. She closes the door and points to the first pillow.

“Christie can sit there, and you’ll take the one opposite her, Dad.”

I’m still surprised by the setting. How does she expect us to sit so low on the floor? The cups are also too small to be held.

She slaps her hands together, creating a loud boom that jolts the both of us. “Now!”

Jericho and I rush to take our seats. She sits on the last pillow between us, picks up the teapot, and pours a dollop of

tea into our cups. It's so tiny it won't be even a mouthful.

“I've noticed some tension between the both of you of late. Like a negative energy that won't go away,” she says, staring back and forth between us, like a disappointed principal reprimanding her students. “This tea party is me volunteering to be the go-between for the both of you. So, Dad, what would you like to say to Christie?”

Jericho's frown deepens. I try to pick up the teacup, but my index finger can't go through the tiny hole in the handle. The cup is made of ceramic, and I know not to lift it by touching the sides from the steam that came out of the teapot when she poured the tea.

With no other option, I hook my pinky through the hole since it's the only finger that can go through it. Unfortunately, when I lift the cup to my lips, it slips out of my finger and falls on the pillow. The cup doesn't break, but the pillow soaks up the tea.

“You're so clumsy,” Jericho hisses in irritation.

I snap.

“Can you not see how small the cup is? How was I supposed to take tea from that properly?”

“The cup is not too small. It's just the perfect size for a teacup toy set for a child her age.”

“Why don't you try picking your cup then, since it's such an easy task?”

“I’ll show you.” He lifts the cup by pinching his thumb and index finger around the small handle and drinks all the tea. “You can see it’s not too small. You’re just making excuses for your clumsiness.”

I gasp. This shouldn’t bother me as much as it does, but I’m not letting him one-up me. I pick up my teacup and shove it in his face.

“Just look at that size. Does it look like the size any toy set should be made in? It’s not for a baby because babies can’t lift a teacup. Yet you sit there and tell me this is the normal size for any teacup set. I was a kid, too, and my teacup set was much bigger than this.”

His lips purse. There’s a hint of amusement in his green eyes. I’m suddenly aware that I’m leaning over the table, and my right hand is on the plate of cookies, which have all been crushed under my weight. Jericho looks down at the cookies, too.

This is ridiculous.

His lips twitch. I sit back on my pillow, drop the teacup, and dust off the cookie crumbs from my palm. He can’t hold his laughter anymore, and it bursts out. The sound is deep and melodic. I’ll admit that was unnecessary. It starts as a chuckle, and then I laugh like he is.

“We were arguing over the size of a teacup,” he says through laughter.

“That was all your fault.”

Our laughter dies down, and we stare at each other. My chest heaves. His hand clenches on the table. Desire swirls in his green pools. My throat has gone dry—my body tingles. I fight to pull him across the table and press my lips against his.

We both stare at Rebecca simultaneously and find her staring at us in shock.

“We’ll be leaving now,” we say at the same time and get up.

“You ruined my cookies,” Rebecca shouts as we leave her room.

I chuckle. Jericho pulls me into his room and shuts the door. He smashes his lips against mine, and I grab his shirt. There’s a hollow in my stomach that can never be satisfied. I want more of him until he’s filled every crevice in me, and all I can feel is him.

He pushes me backward to the bed. He grips my chin, holding my head as his tongue tangles with mine, caressing and sucking. I’m running out of breath but don’t want to stop kissing him. I grab his shirt and kiss him back just as fiercely.

“I’m sorry. I’ve missed you so much,” he whispers.

It’s hard, and it hurts more to miss someone right in front of you all the time. These past two days were hell for me.

“I’ve missed you too.”

His hands roam down my body. Once he touches the hem of my dress, he’s swift in pulling it off and the rest of my underwear with it. His clothes fly off afterward, and he pushes me on the bed, getting in between my thighs.

He pushes into me, sliding down. It feels like returning to a warm home after a long journey through the cold. Jericho hisses and places his palms on both sides of my head. Having him loom over me like this while still in me is all I've wanted. I can feel his breath on my face.

I stare into his green orbs. The emotions swirling in them send a shiver down my back, and I grip his back. He kisses me softly as he begins to move in me. His lips swallow my moans.

I thought sex with him was great before, but makeup sex with Jericho Myers is out of this world. My nails dig into his skin as his pace increases slowly. He peels my hands off his back and holds them up above my head with one of his hands. His other hand holds my chin to kiss me senselessly.

It's a lethal combination that sends me into an orgasmic bliss. My legs wrap around his waist as he releases in me.

We're both panting as he falls beside me and pulls me on his chest. I can hear how fast his heart is beating. It drums against my ear, threatening to burst out of his ribcage. His voice rumbles in his chest when he starts to speak.

"I've been such a dick lately, and I'm sorry. I've just been scared." He chuckles a bit. "You're so beautiful and amazing, Christina. I not only respect you, but I value you. You mean so much to me, and I know I don't show it much, but I promise no more stupid fights. I'll be anything you want me to be. It doesn't matter what anyone says about you or us. I want to be with you. I couldn't tell you this because I was scared of losing you. It all seems so foolish now." He chuckles again.

“It was torture seeing you and being unable to touch you because you were mad at me. Listening to your voice, I couldn’t say anything to you.”

Tears slid down my face. I don’t know what to say to him, so I pretend to be asleep when he raises his head to stare at my face. I don’t think I’m any of the things he says I am. I don’t think I mean that much to him, either. He kisses my temples when he sees my eyes closed, and his arms tighten around me. He sighs deeply.

I know how he feels. I am relieved that we’re finally back to how we used to be before going to his mother’s house because that’s how I feel, too. Or is it?

I don’t think about the myriad of emotions roiling through me, but I listen to his heartbeat slow down to a steady pace, and I let the sound lull me to sleep.

However, I wake up throughout the night and find myself sleeping next to him with his arms wrapped around me. He doesn’t intend on letting me go, not even in his sleep. It’s dark outside, and there’s a full moon out. We must’ve slept for hours. I feel like we have a fresh slate.

I pull away from Jericho and get off the bed. He stirs, and his hand reaches out for me in the bed. His brows furrow when he doesn’t feel me next to him. It’s by far the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. I quickly pick up a pillow and hand it to him before he opens his eyes. He sighs as he cuddles the pillow.

I pick up my clothes and get dressed. There’s an uneasy feeling in my stomach as I head down to the kitchen to get

some water. I remove a chilled water bottle from the fridge and gulp it down. Once done, I cover the bottle and drop it on the counter. The same counter where Jericho and I had sex for the first time. I ran my hand on the spot where I'd sat. There's a chill in the air and goosebumps on my skin.

It feels like it happened yesterday, but it's been a month already. I think back to the day he'd rubbed my back and helped me calm down after I'd driven myself into a panic with thoughts of the consequences of our lovemaking the previous night.

The realization is more like slowly rolling down a hill before hitting the rock at the bottom. Hitting the proverbial rock is brutal and sudden, but I'd seen the signs and fought it but it happened.

I'm in love with Jericho Myers.

I run a hand through my hair. This is the worst time to fall in love with anyone. His memoir is done, and it's been edited. The launch is coming soon, and I'll be out of here. Not to mention, his family hates me. Jericho might've apologized for everything, but I fear it doesn't mean anything because his aunt or mother will repeat something disrespectful, and he again won't say anything to support me.

I remember my brother warning me about Jericho. Everything he'd warned me about has happened, and now I'm in love with Jericho. I can only hope I don't get hurt like the last time.

CHAPTER 24: JERICHO

Christina's lips are parted, and she lets out soft snores. Her hair scattered on my pillow. She's been sleeping in my room lately, and waking up next to her sleeping form has been fantastic. I want to wake up next to her every day for the rest of my life.

I move strands of hair away from her face and turn her on her side. I love this woman so much. I press a light kiss on her cheek.

"I love you," I whisper in her ear.

I know she can't hear me, but I've been whispering it to her every time I wake up next to her since we made up. Telling her when she's awake to hear it is the best thing to do, but I'm waiting for a special occasion to say it. She's special to me and deserves all the best things in the world.

Today is the launch of my book and my wine. It's coming months after Somerfield launched his. I delayed the launch till this day purposely so it wouldn't be so close to his. I get out of

bed and hop into the shower. I have to get ready in time. I have a lot planned today and tomorrow. I'm finally going to tell Christina I love her. I'm not half as excited about the book launch as I am about this.

Despite how excited I am, I take a long shower. The water feels good, and I'm in such a good mood I don't want to step out. However, when my skin starts to prune, I know it's time to leave. I snatch my towel off the rack and mop up the water left on my skin. Christina is still sleeping when I come out of the bathroom.

She's been sleeping a lot lately. She gets tired quickly, too. I check the clock on the wall. It's past nine already. She should be awake by now. She looks so calm. I don't have the heart to wake her up. I'll give her a few minutes more and get dressed instead. The dual launch isn't until this afternoon, but getting ready early doesn't hurt. I still have to visit my stylist to finish my hair before going to the venue.

I get dressed in a tee shirt and sweatpants, grab the garment bag housing my tuxedo, and walk out of the closet. Christina still hasn't woken up. I'm afraid I'll have to wake her up myself.

"Baby, wake up. Wake up, Christina." I hang the bag on the headboard, pull her to my chest, and tap her cheek lightly. She frowns and blinks at me before her eyes clear.

"Hey." She stretches and yawns loudly.

"How do you feel?"

“Tired, but I feel great.” She gives me a sleepy smile.

“Good. It’s time to wake up. We need to get ready for the launch.”

She yawns and stretches again as she moves away from me. The tiny strap of her nightdress slips down her shoulder. I stare at her breasts. They’ve become softer and fuller lately. Her hips have gotten a little bigger too, but I’m not complaining. I stand and pull her off the bed. She groans as she stands to her feet, and I kiss her cheek because she’s that beautiful.

“Do you want me to bathe you?” I ask as I kiss her neck. She chuckles and pushes me away.

“Go away.” She goes into the bathroom.

The door closes behind her, and she turns on the showerhead a few seconds later. I pick up the bag, walk out of my room, and head to the dining room for breakfast. I hand the garment bag to Ramona and tell her to put it in the car for me.

“You’re excited this morning,” Rebecca points out as she bites into her toast.

“Shouldn’t I be?” I ask.

I’m too excited to eat anything, so I smear some garlic butter on a piece of toast and pour myself a coffee.

“Tomorrow is the day you tell her, not today. I can’t imagine any other reason you’ll be so happy today.” She grins. I think Rebecca might be more excited about this than I am, if that’s possible.

I'm ashamed to say I'd asked my ten-year-old daughter for advice on telling my assistant I'm in love with her. I figured she'd know a part of Christina that I didn't since they were so close, and she did. She'd suggested I paint her a portrait expressing my emotions. The only problem was that I didn't know how to paint, but I hired someone to do the picture, and it came out better than I expected. I can't wait to show her.

I rush through breakfast. I must be out of here before Christina comes down, or I will be late. I can never get to work on time when I see her. I kiss Rebecca on the forehead before dashing out.

The driver takes me straight to the hairstylist on the outskirts of town. He wasn't my regular stylist, but he came highly recommended, and I want to look my best today. The past few days have assuaged my fears. She might not tell me she loves me, but it doesn't matter. I'll be patient with her till she does. I have a feeling she loves me already. Everything is so perfect between us. There's no way she doesn't feel the same way.

I've seen how she stares at me when she thinks I'm not looking. So many signs point to it, but I still feel nervous. I thought of telling her today in front of the hundreds of guests attending my book launch, but it's too daunting. She doesn't like a crowd anyway, and I don't want her to feel uncomfortable when I tell her, so tomorrow is the day.

After getting my hair cut and styled, I head to the hotel where the launch is being held and get changed in my dressing room. I take out my phone from my inner pocket to see if

Christina and Rebecca have arrived yet. The event is about to start, and I must be outside greeting the guests. It'll be nice to see both of them before heading inside for good luck. Also, I miss Christina. It's only been a few hours since we've been separated, but it feels like weeks. There's no message from her. I put the phone back in my pocket and continue pacing the room.

What if she fell asleep again after I left and hasn't woken up yet?

It's not impossible. She's so sleepy lately. Sometimes, I fear she might be coming down with something. She can sleep through the day if she isn't woken up.

There's a knock at my door. I throw it open, and my breath catches. Christina is standing in front of me in a red silk dress. It has a halter neck and outlines her curves perfectly. Her hair is pulled into a half ponytail and curls flow down her neck to her back. When I bought the dress, I didn't think it would look this perfect on her, but she is absolutely stunning.

Too gorgeous.

I'm worried about the looks she'd get from the men waiting in the hall. I'm tempted to lock her away here till the event is over. I'll do it too if I think I'd get away with it, but she wouldn't let me live it down.

I pull her into the room and check the hallway to see if anyone is coming toward my room. There's no one, so I shut the door.

“Where’s Rebecca?” I ask.

“She’s at our table with Ramona. You look great, Jericho. I like the haircut.”

“I knew you would.” I’d gotten a little trim and a fade. My hair was starting to grow longer than necessary.

I wrap my arms around her waist and flush her against my chest. She gasps.

“Jericho!” she chuckles. I attempt to kiss her lips, but she turns her cheek to me at the last moment.

“What was that for? That’s not cool.”

“You ruining my makeup is not cool either.”

“Really? Not even if I tell you I got a new haircut just for you?”

“That’s sweet, but no.”

I lift a brow. My hands slide down her hips, and I grip her ass. I kiss her cheek and move down to her neck. She sighs softly as she melts in my arms. I slide her dress up her curves slowly, and she shivers. Another thing I’ve noticed about her is she’s become extra sensitive, too. The slightest touch has her shivering, and she’s so horny lately.

“Not even when I do this?” One of my hands moves to her inner thigh, and she moves towards me. What did I say about her being horny?

“Jericho. Stop.” She moans.

“I think that means yes.”

I rub her through the fabric of her panties, and she jerks. She's wet, just as I predicted. A finger slips into her panties. When I'm about to dip it in her inviting heat, she pushes away from me.

"I have to go. Bye." She kisses my cheek and runs out of the room like her dress caught fire.

Damn it! And she left me with a boner, too. This isn't fair. I have to be out in a few minutes, and I know there's no way my arousal will go down before then. I'm going to get her for this. It seems like she came in here to tease me.

I take deep breaths before walking out of the room. I'll take a walk outside in the cold air. That should calm me down. I will get her back for this when we get home tonight. I'll make her beg for it. I'm so lost in my thoughts I ignore my surroundings till I bump into someone. Her purse falls to the ground.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't see you." I bend to pick up her purse.

"It's okay."

I recognize the voice. It's been a while since I heard it. I hand her the purse, and her eyes widen.

"Jericho?"

"Claire. What are you doing here?"

"I heard about your memoir, and I came to see the book myself and see you too, of course." She moves her blonde hair behind her ear.

Claire Michaels is the last woman I dated before meeting Christina. It didn't work out so well, and I hurt her.

CHAPTER 25: CHRISTIE

Jericho keeps staring at a blonde-haired woman across the room. I shouldn't be bothered about it since it's not like his eyes are glued on her, but I can tell he's worried about something, and his eyes stray to her every few minutes.

She can't stop staring at him, either. She's got a small smile as she sips her champagne. I'm beginning to get annoyed.

"Who's that?" I ask him.

"Huh?" he blinks.

The bastard. He's holding my hand, yet he can't stop looking at another woman.

"Her. The blonde woman. You keep staring at her. Who is she?"

Please don't say she's an ex.

"She's my ex. We broke up a few months before I met you."

Crap!

Why are my instincts never wrong? Now, I'm going to start thinking all sorts of ridiculous thoughts. Sometimes, I wish I'd be wrong about these things so I could tell myself I'm just being paranoid.

Look on the bright side, Christie. He might be worried she will cause a scene because their breakup is still relatively recent. I know how long it took me to get over my ex. If I hadn't met Jericho, I have no doubt I'd still be heartbroken over that guy. I need to think happy thoughts right now.

My emotions are everywhere, and it's not the best time to have such thoughts. Besides, I have other things to worry about, like not telling Jericho how I feel about him. He hasn't asked me to stay either. His book launches in a few minutes, and he will go up to that stage to say a few words about his inspiration to write the book.

Technically, my time at his place ended the minute the final draft of his memoir was sent back to the editor, but it's been a couple of weeks since then, and he hasn't said anything about it yet. There's also the other issue of my missing period. I've noticed the tender breasts and fatigue. Drowsiness and sleepiness, too. The only thing left to complete the symptoms is morning sickness, but I'm hoping it's not what I think it is.

I bought some pregnancy tests on my way here, and they're sitting pretty in my purse. I'll use them when I get back home...I mean to Jericho's house. I got six of them. Getting six negatives is going to be great for me right now. I don't

know what to do if the tests come out positive. I don't have any idea how to care for a baby.

A baby is not ideal for the situation in life I'm in right now. I don't have an apartment since my rent expired, and I never made another payment. All my stuff is packed and stored in Maya's house in Boston, but I know I can't stay there. It's the house she shared with her late husband. It would feel weird being there without her and the girls.

Jericho snaps his fingers in my face, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Are you okay? You seem lost in thoughts.”

That's because I'm freaking out here.

I'm just trying to keep my cool. We're at one of the most critical events in Jericho's life right now, and I don't want to be the one to ruin it for him because I can't keep my cool.

“Why is your ex here? Did you invite her?”

A waiter walks past us with a tray of champagne glasses. I sniff the air and catch the smell of the bubbly liquid. It causes a stir in my stomach, and I hold back a gag. Oh, goodness! I don't want to throw up here.

“I didn't. I didn't know she would come here today or that I'd ever see her again. We didn't exactly end on good terms.” He scratches the back of his neck.

Hmm. Was it a bad breakup for them, I wonder?

“I have to go give my speech now. Bye.” He kisses my cheek and walks away. The moment his hand leaves mine, I feel bereft. Lost.

I cross my hands behind me. He’s going to be back soon. He’ll only be gone for a few minutes and be in front of me the whole time.

“First of all, I want to thank everyone who attended this launch today. It means a lot to me,” he begins his speech.

Trays of Jericho’s new white wine are served by dressed up waiters spattered throughout the crowd. He’s decided to launch the wine with the book. I think it’s an intelligent decision. He gets to show it to the hundreds of guests present, which saves cost. I wish I could drink, I may not be pregnant. I’m just trying to be on the safe side.

That nauseous feeling comes again; I can tell I will throw up this time. I don’t wait to hear the rest of Jericho’s speech and run out of the hall to search the ladies' room. I clamp a hand over my mouth in case I can’t control it, and it comes flying out.

I find the ladies’ room and rush into a stall to puke my guts out. I couldn’t eat much or drink anything other than water. I find most foods irritating, and they smell awful to me. The only thing I could stomach without feeling like I swallowed a can of worms was toast. Dried toast with nothing except water. But they all are swirling in the toilet as they flush down the drain.

I exit the stall and wash my mouth to get the taste of vomit out. When I return to the hall, Jericho is already done with his speech and no longer on stage.

“Where’s your father?” I ask Rebecca, who has decided to keep herself entertained with a game of collecting finger snacks. She stacked them on her plate and played a game of letters with them instead of eating them.

“I don’t know. He went out. I think he went to look for you.”

I must be more paranoid than I thought because my eyes search the room for his blonde ex before I realize what I’m doing.

Stop it, Christie. Don’t be crazy.

He said they broke up long before we met. I shouldn’t feel threatened by her, yet I do. She’s slim and pretty. She has long, silky hair that looks heat-pressed and bright blue eyes. She practically looked like a doll, and she’d been staring at him even when she could see he was holding my hand.

I feel she came here with just one purpose: to get him back. My foot taps restlessly against the floor. I should look for him. I will only think up different scenarios the longer he’s away.

“I’m going to look for him. I’ll be right back.”

Rebecca doesn’t look up from her snacks.

“I think he went that way.” Ramona points to the door leading backstage to where the dressing rooms are.

“Thanks.”

I march out of the hall. My legs eat up the floor swiftly, and despite how tired I've been lately, I'm pumping with energy right now. I need to see him, so all of my fears will vanish.

I screech to a halt when I reach the dressing rooms. I can see Jericho, alright. He has his arms wrapped around his ex. It doesn't look like an innocent hug. They wouldn't be hugging in a secluded hallway with dim lighting where no one would disturb them if it were harmless.

My heart is thumping in my ears. Why are my instincts never wrong? This kind of thing keeps happening to me. My eyes prick with tears, and I turn around. They don't notice me watching them. They're so engrossed in each other that they don't even hear my heels clacking as I walk away.

I take deep breaths to keep the tears at bay as I head back to the hall. I was foolish. I saw all the signs that Jericho was just like my ex, but I was so dependent on love, wanting someone to love me so badly, I was willing to push it aside and get lost in him every time he touched me.

"Did you see him?" Ramona asks as I return to the table.

"No." I clear my throat.

I wish I could take that drink right now. At least I'd be able to distract myself with some fizzy drink. Maybe I'd even get drunk and forget all about seeing him.

That's just the problem. I'm trying to forget again so he can keep deceiving me that he cares about me. If he's hugging his ex, he will kiss her like he kisses me. He's going to touch her

like he touches me. They're probably fucking against the wall in one of the dressing rooms right about...

"Hey guys." Jericho resumes his seat next to me. He kisses my cheek before sitting, and I stiffen.

My heart cracks. I stare at him, trying to see if he'll look guilty, but he's all smiles like he's been all morning. He was probably smiling because he knew he was going to see her today, and they'd share a hug.

I clench my fist.

"I don't feel so well. I want to go home."

"Right now?" he asks.

"You don't have to come with me. I'll go by myself."

"But I can't leave you alone like that. I'll come with you."

"Don't be silly, Jericho. It would be best if you stayed here till the event ends. You still have to sign the books they buy." You still have to be with your ex. They can finish where they left off.

"Alright." He takes his phone out and calls the driver.

I keep my tears in when the driver arrives and hold them together until I return home...to his house. I've gotten so used to him that I'm considering his house my home. I can't do this anymore. It feels like he just put a grinder to my heart and turned it into minced meat.

This has to stop. If he won't let go, I'll leave for the both of us.

The first thing I do when I get to my room is to take the pregnancy tests. I use all six strips and line them up in the sink. If it comes out negative, I'll leave here with closure. If they are positive, I will tell him about the baby when it doesn't feel like my heart is being ripped to shreds.

But I keep my fingers crossed and hope for negative. I mean, they can't all be positive, right? I look down at the strips in the sink.

Wrong.

They can.

CHAPTER 26: JERICHO

S unlight glints off the diamond in my hand. It's a small diamond, and it'll fit her hand perfectly. I know because I've tried it on her before. She wore it on her finger while she was asleep. Seeing it on her hand, I didn't want to remove it, but I still had to ask before giving it to her.

I figure, why tell her I love her with just a portrait? Why not go all the way and ask her to marry me? I know she's the one I want to be with forever, so there's no reason to wait any longer.

"Dad?" Rebecca calls behind me, and I snap the ring box shut, slipping it into my pocket. She's already bursting with excitement and can barely keep her mouth shut. I don't need her to tell Christina about the ring before I get a chance to give it to her.

"Yeah?" I turn around.

"She's coming," she squeals.

What did I say?

She moves to the portrait hanging on the easel and slightly lifts the cover. Her grin is vast, and her eyes bright. I don't know which of us is most excited about this.

The crunching of feet on grass grabs my attention, and I turn towards the garden entrance. Christina has her glasses back on, but she lets down her hair. Her white shirt and blue jeans make her skin look brighter, but her face is dull.

Her door was locked when I got back home last night. I figured she was asleep, so I didn't bother her, but she didn't come for breakfast this morning.

“Hey.” I cup her cheek and kiss her softly. Am I imagining it, or did she become stiff in my arms? She doesn't kiss me back, either.

I pull away. “Is something the matter?”

“What's that?” She frowns at the covered portrait on the easel.

“It's er...one of Rebecca's paintings.”

“Oh! Why is it covered?”

“Because I wanted it to be a surprise for you. Do you want to see it?” asks Rebecca. She folds her hands behind her and rocks on the back of her feet.

That wasn't the plan. I knew she was going to ruin this.

“Rebecca, why don't you check what Ramona and the maids are doing?”

“Huh?” her brows furrow. I look pointedly at her and motion to the garden exit. “Oh, yeah. The biscuits.” Christina frowns. “I’ll go check on the biscuits.” She chuckles nervously and then runs for the exit like her legs are on fire.

“What’s wrong with her?” asks Christina.

“I think she’s just excited about the biscuits.”

Why not just go with an amateur lie?

“Right, biscuits.”

She doesn’t believe that. It’s time to change the topic.

I take her hand in mine and entwine our fingers. I imagine her wearing my ring, this time when she’s awake to know what it means, and my stomach flutters. It’s weird getting flutters in your belly like a teenager, but it flutters, and I can’t help my smile.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come home with you last night. You were asleep when I got back. I guess you slept in today. That’s why you missed breakfast.”

“I didn’t miss breakfast because I slept in. I was packing up my stuff.”

The wind picks up as she says that and rustles her hair. The strands scatter on her face, and I help her tuck them behind her ears, but the moment my hand touches her skin, she stiffens. Now, I didn’t imagine that.

“You were packing for what?”

“To go back home. My contract with you ended when you submitted the final draft of your book.”

I’m a bit confused. Her contract was over, but I never asked her to leave. Or did someone say something to her? My aunt and mom couldn’t come to the book launch yesterday, and I made sure Claire went before she could speak to Christina and tell her how our relationship ended.

“I’m not telling you to leave. You don’t have to go.”

“I know.” She removes her hand from mine. “But you didn’t tell me to stay either.”

“Okay, I’m telling you to stay now.”

I’m starting to get agitated. Something isn’t right here. I can feel it. The way her face is expressionless, and her eyes are shifty. She can barely look at me. Christina doesn’t make blank faces. She can barely hide it when she’s mad, and it pours off her in waves. You can see clearly on her face and in her demeanor that she’s mad at you, but now she’s just blank, which means she’s going to extra lengths to make sure I don’t see how she’s truly feeling.

I dread asking the question, but I have to know.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

She takes in a deep breath and slips her hands in her pocket. “I wasn’t aware we were in a relationship.”

Is she kidding me right now?

“We were...we are, and you know that.” I grab her face and make sure her gaze stays on me. “Christina, I love—”

“I guess it wasn’t obvious since you refused to acknowledge it. All we ever did was have sex, and it was fun while it lasted, but now I have to go and continue with my life.”

Her words shock me enough that I take a step back from her. I refused to acknowledge it, yet I opened up and told her all my fears and secrets. If I wanted sex, I could get it from anyone, but I wanted love, and I thought she could give it to me.

“Is that what this was all about to you? Fun?”

You don't love me like I love you?

I could’ve sworn she did, but perhaps she’s a better actress than I thought.

“Wasn’t it fun for you, too?”

I’m not too fond of that word. Can she stop saying it? She’s trivializing everything we were to each other, and it hurts too much.

“It wasn’t *fun*. I was never into it for fun with you.” I take a step closer to her, and she swallows. Her eyes widen, and I think they’re a bit watery for a second, but she grits her teeth, and her impenetrable mask is back on. I guess it was just a trick of the light on her glasses. She wasn’t holding back tears.

“Tell me you don’t feel anything for me.”

Tell me you’re not in love with me.

Please don't say that. I'm not sure how much of this I can take.

“I don't feel anything, Jericho. Like I said, it was fun while it lasted. I have to get my bag. My flight back home leaves in three hours, and I must be at the airport before then.” She turns around and walks away. Then, like an afterthought, she turns back. “Bye, Jericho. I'll talk to you...soon,” she says quietly.

What's that supposed to mean?

I should go after her. I should tell her I love her and want us to get married; it doesn't matter if she doesn't love me right now. If she stays, I'll show her more reasons to fall in love with me, and we can make this work. The ring box in my pocket has suddenly become heavier.

I don't say anything. I watch her walk away. What is there to say? She doesn't feel anything for me; nothing I tell her will make her feel it. If I get her to stay here longer, I only prolong my pain.

Was I that desperate for love that I didn't see she wasn't into me like I thought she was? It was all about sex for her.

Sometime later, I finally move and head straight for the mini bar in my living room. My head feels like it's going to explode right along with my chest. I'll need the strongest whiskey in the world right now if I want to forget that I was just about to propose to her and tell her I love her, and she was going to say our whole relationship was her having fun. There are worse things than no, which would've been the worst had I said it.

Crouching, I open the cabinet at the bottom of the counter and remove a bottle of whiskey from the back. Aberlour A'bunadh. It's the strongest I have, but I never opened it after buying it all these years. I open it and take a long gulp. It burns as it slides down my throat, but that pain soon lets me forget a more pressing one quickly pushing down my chest.

"Dad?" Rebecca is standing in front of the counter, staring at me with confusion. "I saw Christie leaving with her bag. Why did she leave? I thought you were—"

"Go to your room, Rebecca. I'm not ready to talk about it."

I walk out from behind the counter and move past her. She's stubborn, so of course, she doesn't drop it.

"What did she say? Did you tell her?"

I look back at her. Those green eyes of hers are wide and fearful. She knows the answer to her question but is hoping for a different one. Like I was moments ago. My shoulders sag. I can't tell my daughter the person she thought would be her new mother was just having fun with me. The more I think about that word, the more annoyed I get.

"Go to your room," I say in a low tone. She knows better than not to listen this time.

"This is all your fault," she mutters as she walks away.

Of course, it's my fault. I'm the reason for everything. It's always me.

I climb the stairs slowly, not paying attention to where I'm going. Anger simmers beneath my pain, and I want to let it

out. I stop in front of a door. My hand reaches for the handle, turn, and the door opens. It's Christina's room. It still smells like her. Peaches.

A scent I used to find peaceful. Intoxicating. Now, it feels like I'm breathing shards of glass whenever I take a breath of that scent. I want it gone.

She's already taken everything of hers from the room, but I want every tiny detail that shows she was ever in my life gone, so I strip off the sheets. I pull down the curtains from their hinges and shatter the dresser mirror. Then I move into the restroom to ruin everything left in there.

When I'm done, the room is a mess, and it'll probably need renovations to look anything remotely like a room. Yet, I can still smell her. Her scent clings to my clothes, nostrils, and every part of me. I guess I'm just going to have to wash that off. I grab my whiskey bottle and exit her room.

Ramona is standing in the hallway when the door opens. She sees the state the room is in but says nothing.

“Get someone to clean that up, will you?”

I'm panting when I make it to my room. I peel off my clothes and step into the bathroom. The cold water rains on me with a vengeance, but the biting pain it created initially fades away, and I welcome the cold.

CHAPTER 27: CHRISTIE

Holding back tears has never been more challenging. My chest is caving in, and so is my belly. Every part of me feels like it is crumbling, and I want to curl in a corner and cry my eyes out. I did the best I could've done for all of us in this situation, yet it feels like I took a knife to my own heart and stabbed it into a million pieces, and now all the blood has left my body, and I'm so cold.

I shudder and raise my hand to knock on the door. I've got to keep it together. My dad mustn't see how heartbroken I am. My hand tightens on the handle of my suitcase.

I knock on the door and sniff back my tears. The foliage around the house has grown more since the last time I was here. There are so many plants out here now. I don't want to know what the garden will look like. The door finally opens, and my father's face comes into view. I plaster a smile on my face. It feels like a grimace.

“Christie? What are you doing here?”

“What a lovely welcome, Dad. Thank you.”

He chuckles and pulls me into a tight hug. “I’m just confused. I thought you were still working in Dallas. Come in.”

“My contract is over, so I’m back here. Nothing was holding me in Boston, so I decided to come stay with you and give Brian a break.”

To figure out what to do with my life and this growing baby in me.

The house looks different inside than it does outside. Brian must’ve repainted. The house is now brown, no longer cream. The furniture has been rearranged, and instead of having the chairs crowd the TV, they’re placed against the walls so the middle is a passage.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“More of your brother practicing his non-existent interior decorating skills.” He shrugs.

I stifle a laugh. I knew coming back home would be good for me. If there’s anyone who can help me get through this mess I’ve made of myself, it’s my dad.

“Do you want to drink something? Tea or coffee?”

I usually drink coffee, but given the situation...

“Water will be fine.”

He frowns. I rarely ever drink water unless I’m parched.

“The flight was tiring, so I’ll go to my room.”

Where I can hopefully shed a few of my tears before I can continue pretending to be okay, my dad stares at me suspiciously.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Your eyes seem a little dull and slightly pink.”

“It’s probably the tiredness. I’ll go to my room now and rest.”

I don’t wait for him to make another comment before pulling my bag to my room. The door squeaks a little as I push it open. They don’t open it as often. I’m glad to see my room stayed the same. The bed is still next to my round window. The peach-colored wallpaper on the wall is still there even though it's faded over the years.

My rock band posters still line the wall opposite my bed. The dresser is in the same spot. I take in a deep breath. The room smells musty, but I’m sure it’ll air out soon. At least dust didn’t settle on any of my stuff, and there are no cobwebs.

I pull my suitcase to the closet and leave it there. Then, I move to the window to open the curtains. The room becomes brighter but smaller than my room at Jericho’s, where I spent the last six months.

Wow! That’s a long time.

I face my bed. The room feels a bit cramped and girly. Too girly. It doesn’t feel like home anymore. It just feels like I

walked into a memory of my childhood.

Home is where the heart is.

Whoever said that doesn't know what he said. Home is where your family is. My family certainly isn't at Jericho's house. I think about Rebecca's smile and Jericho's laughter. They were starting to feel like family to me. I thought they'd could become my family, but it wasn't going to work out, even if I tried to force it by staying. Jericho would toy with my heart while he strung along his ex. She's probably the one he's in love with, and I was just the plaything.

It was fun while it lasted. I should get over it and move on, but this would be harder than my previous relationship. Moving on from people is not exactly my strong suit, which is why I never should've fallen for Jericho so quickly, but that grumpy man found a way to burrow under my skin and into my heart.

He's not so grumpy anymore. Maybe I shouldn't have left so abruptly. I should've waited and seen Rebecca's painting. I miss her terribly.

I move away from the window and sit on my bed. I did the right thing. I shouldn't feel so wretched about it. I have to keep it together. I need to think about my baby.

My baby.

I look down at my belly. I don't know how to feel about this. I'm not sure Jericho would be happy about this baby. Of all the ways I could've screwed up, it had to be this. I'm single,

without a job, alone, and I'm pregnant. I should add heartbroken to that list, too. The payments for the work on the book would eventually run out, and then what?

Perhaps it's pregnancy hormones kicking in or because I feel shitty, but the tears start, and I can't stop them. I grab my pillow and hug it to my chest. It's not as fluffy as the one in Jericho's house, making me cry even more.

"Why am I crying so hard?" I sob.

I cover my face with my hands and look down at my lap. My vision is blurry with tears, and my jeans look brighter.

"Keep it together, Christie."

I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hands and sniff. I still have more tears to shed, and I guess I'll have them throughout my pregnancy. Hormones do not mix well with a broken heart. I need to stop crying before my dad sees me and...

"Christie?"

I stiffen. "Yeah?" I wipe the remnants of tears on my face, but I guess I wasn't that good at it.

"Yeah, Dad?" I look at him. He's standing at the doorway, staring at me in confusion and a glass of water in his hand.

"Are you crying?" he closes the door and comes to sit next to me. He places the glass of water on the floor next to my foot.

"No, it was the wind. I think something got in my eyes." I point to the window.

He doesn't believe me. I've never been a good liar, and can't hold back my tears. He sighs as I burst into a fresh rush of sobs and pulls me into a hug.

“What's wrong, my little Christmas tree?”

The name is still weird, but I'm too hurt to comment.

“I screwed up, Dad. I know you warned me, but I did it again, and now my heart won't stop aching.”

He pulls away from me and wipes my face. “Don't cry anymore. Tell me what happened that's made you so miserable. I could sense it when I saw you at the door with your bag.”

I straighten and sniff back the rest of my tears. I hate crying. My eyes always get red and swollen every time I do. The skin on my face becomes pink, and it almost looks like I'm having an allergic reaction. I lick my chapped lips. That drink sounds good now. I pick up the glass on the floor and take long gulps of the water till it's all gone.

“I had an affair with my boss.”

“Christ!” my dad hisses.

“I love him, Dad.”

“And he doesn't love you. He just played with your feelings and your body. Is that why he fired you?”

“No, Dad. He didn't play with my feelings, and he didn't fire me either. My contract with him was over, and I left.”

“So, why are you crying? You ended it. You should be happy it didn’t escalate further than it did.”

Except it did. I’m pregnant and madly in love with him. How bad can it get?

“I didn’t leave because I wanted to. His family would never allow us to be together. They called me a gold digger, and everything is all so complicated—”

“You slept with him after I told you not to?” Brian bursts into the room, huffing and puffing. His suit sits perfectly on his frame. He’s gotten more muscles. For a second there, I thought it was Jericho.

“How could you, Christina? You never listen, and now you’ve gotten hurt. I warned you, and you let him play with your feelings.”

“He didn’t...Brian, listen—”

He doesn’t listen.

“I’m going to make him pay for hurting you. Those rich people have no decency. He thinks he can mess with my sister’s heart and play around with her because he’s got a lot of money. I’m going to sue him for sexual harassment. I knew the moment I saw him that he was bad news.”

“Perhaps you should calm down, and let’s try to settle this quietly,” my dad suggests.

“No, Dad. If we don’t do something about it, he will do the same thing to another woman and get away with it again. My

sister is not a toy he can play with and throw away when he's had his fill."

They keep talking, and no one is listening to me. I didn't return home so my brother could fight Jericho for me. There's nothing more humiliating than that. The man doesn't love me. It's not an offense he should be sued for.

"No one is suing anyone. It would help if you didn't fight him, Brian. I want everything to die down so I can forget everything happened. You're not helping."

He frowns and stares at me like I've gone crazy. He can't fathom why I wouldn't want to get back at a man who toyed with my emotions and dumped me.

"Why? Do you want him to get away with what he did to you?"

"He didn't do anything to me. He's not the villain you see him as, Brian. I walked into this with my eyes open. He didn't promise me love."

You mean the world to me.

Words he'd whispered to me after we made love. I shake it off. He didn't mean any of it. He was overwhelmed by sex, just as I was. I sigh, suddenly feeling tired from the journey and all the yelling.

"I'm pregnant."

Shocking news for both of them. They turn to me with raised brows. My father looks like he just swallowed a bug, and my

brother doesn't know what expression to make, so he sits on the bed.

"I'm pregnant, and I don't want any conflict. I want to clear my head and figure out the next thing for me...and this baby."

That's still going to take some getting used to.

"How far along are you?" my dad asks.

"I don't know, Dad. I will have to visit a doctor to that find out. The drugstore test strips I took didn't tell me how far along I am."

"Are you sure you're pregnant? I mean, those test strips can be wrong sometimes," asks Brian.

"I took six of them, and they were all positive."

"Damn," he whispers.

Yeah, that's what I thought, too. I need to figure out how far along I am and then think of how to tell Jericho.

No pressure.

CHAPTER 28: JERICHO

The night is young, and I'm getting into my convertible for a drive. Being behind the wheel feels weird after so long spent not driving. The last time I drove a car was when we visited my mom. It had been a total disaster and made me realize a few things about myself, changing how I see things. All for what?

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. This drive was supposed to help me stop thinking about Christina, but I'm doing that again. I've been stuck in my house thinking about her for a week. It feels like I will lose my little bit of sanity. I glance up at Christina's window. The lights are on. I can see Rebecca's silhouette as she stares out at the garden. That's where she's spent most of her free time now. She was displeased that I tore the room apart. I guess having the reminder of her was a balm for her loss. I didn't think about that. I just got angry and lashed out.

No wonder Christina left. I wouldn't want to be with someone like that, either.

I sigh. I want her to return, and I can show her that she's all I need to be happy. I can change everything about me if it'll make her happy.

I grit my teeth.

Drive. Now.

The car starts, and I peel out of the garage. The gravel on the driveway makes the sudden drive rocky, and the sound irritates. As I approach it, the front gate slides open, and I drive out of the compound. Feeling the cool wind on my face after so long lessens the ache in my chest a tiny bit.

I look down at my phone on the dashboard, waiting for the screen to light up with a message or call from Christina. She still hasn't called me to see how everything is with everyone. She didn't say she would call, but courtesy demands it. She lived in my house for six months, and we dated for three months. She's got my daughter crying and missing her every day. The least she can do is call to see how Rebecca is, even if she doesn't care about me.

"Fuck this." I swipe the phone off the dashboard, which falls under the seat.

At least that way, I'll stop anticipating a phone call that'll never come. I've spent the past week with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a phone in the other, staring at the screen with blurry vision and hopelessly waiting for her call like a love-struck fool who's got nothing better to do. Tonight is the first time I'm sober in a week.

Perhaps it's time I start going on one of those adventures men go on during a midlife crisis. Being stuck in my house is only adding to my problem. I need to get out more. But if I do that, no one will watch over Rebecca or oversee any of my businesses. I can't leave Rebecca with my mother. She's not on speaking terms with her or my aunt now, and she will only hate me more if I do that.

The only option is to stay home and keep going out for one of these drives when I get tired of staying indoors.

I stop at a red light. The roads are empty, but who knows if a traffic cop is hiding in one of the blind spots around here, just waiting for someone to cut through a red light so he can give me a ticket. The light changes from red to green, but my phone lights up under the seat just then.

My heart rate spikes as I pull off to the side of the road. The first thought that comes to mind is that it's Christina calling, and I rush to pick it up, but when I stare at the screen, it's an unknown number.

"Who's this?" I bark into my phone.

"Wow! You are grumpy," she mutters.

I scoff. I'm not in the mood for this.

"Are you going to tell me who you are, or should I cut the call?"

"Wait, don't." There's some shuffling, a door closes, and finally, she sounds clearer. "I'm Maya, Christie's cousin. You don't know me, but I got your number from our files at

Heritage. My cousin is very stubborn and probably won't tell you this, but you deserve to know."

"Know what?"

"She's pregnant with your baby, Mr. Myers."

"What?"

"I get that it's shocking. It's a bit shocking for all of us, too. I didn't expect she'd get involved with you when I sent her over, but the deed is done. I'm just telling you because I don't think she'll ever summon the courage to tell you herself."

I take a long pause. "Is she thinking of terminating it?"

"Goodness, no."

Thank God for that. I might have gone crazy if that answer had been yes.

"She's at her father's place in Redwood Falls. I'll send you the address after this call... Wait, do you want her to terminate the pregnancy?"

"Of course not. I only asked because she didn't tell me anything."

She said our relationship was just fun to her.

I keep that part to myself. I still can't wrap my head around the fact that she's pregnant. She's got some explaining to do when I see her. She knew she was carrying my child and left me with that crap about our relationship being just fun for her. It's been a week since then, and she still hasn't called. Was she planning on keeping the child from me?

“I don’t know your issues, but you need to sort it out. You’re bringing a child into the world and need to work together.”

“Thanks.”

I’m going to need to ask her that, too. Everything was fine between us, and then suddenly, she packed her bags and left with my baby in her.

Maya ends the call, and a minute later, I get a text from the same number containing Christina’s address in Minnesota. I start the car and turn at the next U-turn. I don’t know if I should go home first or call for my jet to be ready and drive straight to the airport. I should first call to see if the plane can be prepared for flight in a short time.

I stop at an intersection, dial the pilot’s number, and raise the phone to my ear, but then, I hear the sound of a truck speeding towards me. The headlights are blinding. I try to move out of the way, but the truck slams into my side the next thing I know, sending my car flying.

I grit my teeth against the pain as the windshield cracks from the impact and glass shatters inward. The car crashes and rolls on the asphalt before stopping upside down. I groan as I push the door open, but pain shoots up my arm. I can’t move my legs either. Blood trickles down the side of my face.

“Fuck.”

The dashboard has caved in on my legs. “Shit.” I push down with my good arm to try and free my legs, but pain ravages my body instead. “Uhh.”

The truck stops a few meters from my car, and the driver gets out sluggishly. He's drunk. I wonder if he's going to call an ambulance. My head is banging. Blood drips from my forehead into my left eye. The driver gets back in the truck and drives away.

I can see my phone only a few inches away. I attempt to grab it, but the only hand that can get to it is pinned down. My vision is fast becoming blurry. The smell of gasoline wafts in the air, masking the scent of blood. It engulfs my senses, choking me.

"Call an ambulance," I mutter, and then it's lights out.

The first thing I see when my eyes open are blinding lights. The earth is rotating. There's muted chatter coming from somewhere in the room. I still can't feel my limbs, and my headache worsens. My skin feels wet with blood. I think my shirt is soaked with it.

"Jericho! Oh my God," my mom screams as she rushes out from nowhere and grabs my hand.

How did she get here?

I can feel her tight grip slightly. Tears mar her vision. A few of them drip down on my face as she sobs.

"He looks so bad. Is he going to be okay?" she asks one of the paramedics pushing my trolley.

"He'll be fine."

"He's bleeding so much," she cries.

It fucking hurts too. I'm sure a few bones are broken. My mother looks down at me and rubs the side of my face. Suddenly, she's gone, and I can see blinding lights and white ceilings.

"Christina. I need to get to her," I mutter.

I'm surprised the words make it past my lips. I've been trying to speak since, but nothing comes out. Black dots line my vision, and the last thing I sense before I'm out again is the smell of antiseptics.

I hate hospitals.

My eyes blink open a second later. There's a machine beeping somewhere beside me. I can't feel a thing. I try to look down at my legs, but my gaze doesn't move past my chest. Someone dressed me in a hideous blue material, and it's scratchy.

"Where am I?"

The last thing I remember is trying to get to Christina, and then there was a truck. The driver didn't stop.

"Jericho." My mother gasps.

A chair scrapes, and she's gazing down at me. Her eyes are red, and her nose pink. Her lashes are wet, too.

"Why are you crying?"

"Oh, my boy. I thought you weren't going to wake up. I'm so glad you're awake." She hugs me, and I groan in pain.

Okay, I felt that. It still fucking hurts. My right arm is in a cast, strapped to my chest. My legs are in casts, hanging from a traction above my bed. How bad do they have to be for them to be raised like that?

“Where’s Christina?” I ask.

She frowned at first, like she didn’t understand what I said. Then, she wipes her tears and smiles. “She went to the cafeteria to get something to eat. She’ll be back soon, don’t worry.”

“Okay.”

There’s so much we need to talk about. She needs to know I love her, and I want our baby. But I’ll tell her once I wake up and feel much better. I feel so sleepy.

The machine in the room won’t stop beeping. Someone should silence that thing so I can get some sleep. My mother looks down at me in alarm.

“Jericho. Jericho, look at me. Stay with me.” She presses a button at the top of my bed.

The beeping has gotten louder. She’s so far away now. Almost as if I’m slipping away into a dark void.

Wait.

The door bursts open, and two nurses rush into the room. One stares at something next to me in alarm and shouts at the other.

“Get the doctor, quick. He’s going into a coma.”

Coma. I've never been in a coma before. I feel really sleepy.

“No, Jericho! Christina is coming, okay, stay with me,” my mom screams at me, and then everywhere becomes silent.

CHAPTER 29: CHRISTIE

I lift the spoon of soggy cereal and watch the scoop fall back into the bowl. Fruity loops have never looked so bad or tasted just as bad. It seems more like vomit than cereal, but it's the only thing I can eat without throwing up. Brian joins me at the dining table with his bowl of cereal.

“Want a trade?” I ask.

He takes one look at my bowl, and his face scrunches up. “No, thanks.”

The black and white suit looks good on him. He almost looks handsome. I've always thought he looked more like a lumberjack with his broad shoulders and not a lawyer.

“How's your new job at that law firm?”

He shrugs. “It's a small firm, but it's the only one close enough for me to watch over Dad.”

My dad drops a cup of lemon balm tea in front of me. He's been making me drink it since we returned from the hospital after finding out that I'm eight weeks pregnant. I should've

noticed when I started nodding off at the slightest amount of stress and began sleeping in super late before I saw my period was missing and the morning sickness started. He also says my mom loved the tea, and she drank it for most of my pregnancy. I hate the tea. Lemon makes me want to gag, but a few sips won't kill me, and it also shows I appreciate his care.

“Your dad doesn't need watching over. I'm not a kid,” my dad says as he sits between us.

I take a few sips of the lemon tea and fight back my gag. I'm good as long as it doesn't trigger my morning sickness. My dad frowns at the face I make, and I slurp down a spoonful of cereal.

God, that's disgusting.

“Says the man who forgets to turn off the TV before nodding off every night,” Brian teases, and my dad shakes his head.

Brian points to the TV that's still on.

“I'm listening to the news,” my father defends himself, making Brian chuckle.

“And you're going to forget to turn it off afterward.”

“Well, if I do, my only child is here to help me turn it off.” He pats my shoulder.

“He means me if you didn't get it. I'm his only child.” I stick my tongue out at him, and he rolls his eyes. Brian looks so much like my dad. Having both of them next to each other in front of me makes me feel like I'm staring at their past and future versions.

“Between us, you look more like the adopted child.”

I gasp. “He just called your only child adopted, Dad. You can’t take that from him.”

My dad turns up his nose at Brian. “Yeah, he’s not coming into this house tonight. He’s going back to the orphanage I picked him up from.”

“You mean my mother’s womb?”

We burst into laughter. Brian’s shoulders shake as he laughs. I’m not sure why I turn to the TV, but I do, and there’s a picture of Jericho on the screen. I freeze.

“Last night, Jericho Myers, retired Formula 1 racer who launched his book in recent weeks, met with a ghastly accident and is currently at the hospital where he’s in a coma,” the news anchor says, and my world implodes.

The words accident and coma keep ringing in my head, turning into a racket. I imagine him fighting for his life on a hospital bed. I can feel my heart beating, but I can’t breathe.

“Christie?”

Brian touches my hand, bringing me out of my thoughts. He’s kneeling in front of me. I blink, and tears roll down my cheek.

“ I have to go...I have to go see him.” I stand, but Brian pushes my shoulders down, sending me back into my seat.

“No,” he says firmly.

“What? I have to, Brian.”

“You’ll never move on from him if you keep running off to see him at the slightest sign of trouble.”

“But that’s not just trouble. You heard the news, he’s in a coma. Not a lot of people wake up from comas, Brian. I need to see him. He needs me.”

Brian lets go of me, and I stand. “Listen to yourself. You are devastated over him. I saw you crying in your room just yesterday, and now you want to dash off to see him. Don’t you care about yourself? About your baby?”

“No, I don’t, Brian. I don’t care about myself because I’ll die if anything happens to him. I love him. He’s the father of my baby, and I’m not going to let him die on me without him knowing that he will be a father again.”

I love him, and he’s the father of my baby. What is wrong with me? I saw him hugging a woman and let my self-doubt take up residence in my head. So what if she was prettier than me. It was just a hug. I should’ve asked him and let him explain.

Brian stares at me like I’ve gone crazy. He always looks like I’ve gone crazy anyway, so it doesn’t mean anything to me.

“How do you plan to get there? It’ll take almost two days to get to Dallas by car. If you decide to fly, you’ll first have to book a flight, and that’s if any flights are available to Dallas today.”

My dad clears his throat, and we both stare at him.

“While you argued about whether she should go, I booked her a flight to Dallas.” He waves his phone. “He’s in a coma, Brian. I know how much you still hurt that you weren’t by your mother’s side when she took her last breath. Don’t deny your sister that because you’re mad at the man.”

Brian’s shoulders slump, and he sighs. “Fine, I’ll drive you to the airport.”

“Thank you.”

Brian didn’t just drive me to the airport but managed to book himself a flight on the same plane with me to Dallas.

Longest flight, ever.

My hands are shaking as the cab driver weaves us through the traffic. Of all the days for traffic in Dallas, it had to be today when I was trying to get to Jericho.

Brian closes his hand over mine on my lap and squeezes it gently. “Everything is going to be fine.”

I really hope so. I haven’t told Jericho I love him, or we’re having a baby, yet I’ve told practically everyone I know about it. I even told Maya that she didn’t think I was with Jericho. I can’t do this alone. I can’t take care of this baby without him.

My eyes smart with tears, and I bite inside my cheek to hold them at bay. I can’t lose it in a random cab when we’re not anywhere near the hospital. I squeeze Brian’s hand tightly, and he winces. That’s the only thing keeping my sanity in check right now; otherwise, I might lose it.

The cab stops in front of the hospital, and I dash out of the car, leaving Brian to deal with the fare. My eyes scan the hospital. I don't know what I'm looking for or if I'm in the right hospital. I should've called the house to ask Ramona which hospital he was in.

"Where are we going?" Brian asks.

"I don't know if we're in the right hospital. The nurses won't tell me if he's here. They'll think I'm a paparazzi. I don't know if we're even in the right hospital."

It doesn't matter because I'll visit every hospital in this city if I have to.

"Did you ask at the front desk before jumping to all those conclusions?" he hisses and goes to the front desk.

Someone brushes past me quickly, and a water bottle falls to the ground.

"Can't you see where you're going?" she snaps, but it turns out to be Angela when she picks up the bottle and looks at me.

I guess I'm at the right hospital after all.

"Christina," she gasps. Then, she does the unthinkable. She throws her arms around me. "I'm so glad you're here. Jericho won't stop asking for you."

My heart soars. "Is he awake?" She shakes her head sadly, and my chest caves in again.

"Can I see him?"

"Yes."

Brian returns to us with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face. “You’re right. Those nurses are tight-lipped.”

He frowns when he sees Angela. “This is Jericho’s mother. She’s taking me to see him. This is my brother, Brian.”

“Hello.” She waves lightly before walking away, and we follow her.

Maggie and Rebecca are seated on a bench outside Jericho’s room. He was given one of those private rooms. Rebecca jumps out of her seat when she sees me and hugs me. Maggie, on the other hand, looks away. I don’t expect her to be as friendly as Angela, so I ignore her and hug Rebecca’s shoulders to my chest.

“I’ve missed you,” she says.

The poor thing has red eyes from shedding so many tears already.

“I missed you too. I have to go see your father now.”

She lets go of me, and I enter Jericho’s room. I couldn’t see him on the bed from outside the room and wasn’t expecting what I saw. He looks so broken. One of his arms is in a cast and strapped to his chest, and both his legs are hanging from tractions at the top of his bed. There are tiny cuts and bruises on his face where he got a few bandages. The sight is so dreadful. The tears I’ve been holding at bay rush out with so much force I fall to my knees next to his bed.

“I’m so sorry, Jericho.”

I know it's not my fault, but it still feels like it. I grab his only good hand and entwine our fingers. The spaces in between his hand fits so perfectly with mine. It's just right. His skin is so pale. There are a few bruises on his hand as well. I don't want to imagine how bad the accident was to have left him in this condition.

He has a tube in his mouth to help him breathe. It looks like he's dead. The beeping machine next to me is the only thing showing signs of life. I rest my head on his bed and stare at his face. If he weren't attached to so many tubes, he'd look like he was sleeping peacefully.

“It wasn't fun for me, Jericho. I'm sorry I lied when you asked me if I felt anything for you. I was stupid and let my fear and self-doubt drive my words to you. I wasn't just in it for the fun with you, either. I love you so much it hurts. I love you more than anything, and I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you when you were awake. We're going to be parents, Jericho...”

My throat chokes with tears. I close my eyes and take deep breaths to calm myself before I continue.

“I promise if you wake up, I'll tell you how much I love you every day for the rest of my life. I promise to spend every waking moment with you, and I promise I'll never leave your side. Please, Jericho, look at me.”

Tears are starting to blind my vision. He does not respond, and I stare at the heart monitor. There's a spike in the lines, and the beeping has increased. Suddenly, his hand squeezes

mine a little. I thought it was just my imagination, but then he squeezes it again, more substantially this time.

“Jericho?”

He removes his hand from mine and removes the tube in his mouth. He starts coughing the minute the tube comes out, and I rush out of the room.

“I need that,” I say to Angela before snatching the water bottle in her hand and dashing back into the room. They rush to the door to watch us from the glass.

I uncap the bottle and place it on his lips while holding his head slightly so he doesn't choke on the water. He manages to take a few sips before he pushes the bottle away. His green eyes look tired, but their gold swirls are so vibrant.

“I want to tell you something,” he gasps.

“I think you should tell me later. You were coughing and—”

“I love you too. I never got a chance to say it before you left or give you the ring I wanted to .”

Was he going to give me a ring? I should've waited, after all. Perhaps waiting one more day would've cleared our misunderstanding, and none of this would've happened.

“I was going to ask you to marry me after telling you how I felt about you, but you left, and I was too proud to go after you. I'm sorry.”

“No, I'm sorry. I should've asked you about the hug instead of jumping to conclusions. When I saw you hugging your ex

in the hallway, it brought back memories of my ex and how I let him fool me because I was too blind to see that he was cheating on me. I didn't want to repeat the same mistake with you, so I left before I could get caught up in my feelings again. When you asked me if I felt anything for you, I lied, and I said it was fun because I didn't want to be the first person to confess my love and have you undermine it because you didn't feel the same."

"I was going to be the first to tell you. Claire doesn't mean anything to me, Christina." The way he says my name, even though it sounds weak, makes my skin tingle. "I was just trying to get her to leave, and when she hugged me, I went along with it. It was nothing more than that."

Well, that shows how stupid I am. All that hurt and all those tears, for nothing.

"Did you mean it when you promised to spend the rest of your life with me?" He asks.

"I did. I do."

"Then marry me. I don't have your ring, but I promise I'll give it to you once I can get out of this bed."

"There's nothing I'd love more."

CHAPTER 30: JERICHO

The few guests I invited are gathered in the garden, waiting for me to enter the aisle. Moving around with a crutch is not so easy. Even though my injuries have healed and my left leg is functioning perfectly, my right leg still needs a bit of rehabilitation, and I can't walk without a limp. It annoys me to no end every time I have to use this crutch, and I remember that I almost died, yet the driver was never found. It's been months since the accident, and they still haven't found him—so many incompetent people.

But that's not why I'm agitated.

Today is my wedding, and I haven't seen Christina in 24 hours. They say the groom seeing the bride before the wedding is bad luck, but I feel like I will go crazy if I don't see her. I know she said yes to my proposal, and we've been planning this little garden wedding for the past six months, but I'm still scared she might decide she doesn't want to marry a man who will walk down the aisle with a crutch and leave. Or decide

she's better off caring for our baby alone and no longer needs me.

I'm aware it sounds ridiculous, but it's still plausible. I mean, weddings have been called off for fewer reasons. I glance at my door. She's just a few doors from my room- the same room I thrashed.

I limp to the door, throw it open, and glance down the hall. There's a bodyguard in front of her door holding a Taser. No doubt that was my mom's idea. One of her preventive measures against me. Isn't that a bit excessive? She doesn't plan on using a Taser on me on my wedding day, does she?

Speak of the devil. My mom emerges from Christina's room and catches me staring down the hall. She chuckles and shakes her head as she approaches me.

"You know you're not getting into that room. I set up preventative measures because I know how stubborn you are."

"I'm not stubborn. I want to see my bride only for a few minutes. Why is that so hard?"

"She's not going to run away." She chuckles. "She's heavily pregnant, and I doubt she can move around so easily in her condition."

I sigh. I know, but I can't help the fear. Perhaps I won't be able to help it till after the wedding. I take a deep breath to calm myself. She offers me a small smile and then hooks her arm through mine. She pats my arm.

“Don’t worry. She’s just as excited about the wedding as you are. She can barely sit still. How about we go down to the garden and wait for her? The ceremony is about to start.”

Well, that’s a relief. I guess I was worried for no reason. She leads me out of my room, and we walk down the hall past Christina’s room. The guard at the door bows his head a little when I pass by him. It’s my security guard.

“Really?” I ask my mother, and she has the grace to look contrite.

“So that you know the Taser was just to scare you. He’s not going to use it on you.”

I hope not.

We get down to the garden, and I take my spot at the end of the aisle in front of the notary. It’s a court wedding. We should’ve gotten married months ago, as soon as I was discharged from the hospital, but Christina wanted me to be able to walk, as opposed to being rolled, into my wedding. It turns out it would take longer for my right leg to heal fully since it took most of the impact in the accident, but I couldn’t wait any longer, hence the crutch.

My mother joins the rest of my family in the front row, and Christina’s brother takes his seat beside me. He pretends to smooth out my tux as he whispers in my ear.

“This is a last warning. If you ever hurt my sister again, I’ll ensure it’s a wheelchair you end up on and not a crutch.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“Only a warning. As long as you keep my sister happy, we won’t have any problems. You look good, by the way.”

“Thank you, Brian. You look dashing as always.” I plaster a smile on my face, and he reciprocates with a fake one.

I think we’ll end up being best of friends. I can feel it.

He moves away and joins Maya on Christina’s side of the seat. Maya tilts her head lightly to me and smiles at something Brian whispers in her ear. Perhaps another one of his unique threats. I suppose I owe this day to Maya. If she hadn’t told me about the baby, I probably wouldn’t have gotten hit by a truck, and we wouldn’t be here right now.

The wedding march music signals Christina’s arrival, and I take a deep breath. She passes under the orchid arch at the entrance to the ceremony with her father holding her hand. The white lace dress she has on hugs her curves and her baby bump. I feel like it’s gotten more prominent in the 24 hours we’ve been apart.

I take in a shaky breath when my gaze lands on her face. Her smile is radiant. It’s like having the sun's glare on you on a cold winter morning. It warms you up to your core. She takes slow steps to the end of the aisle while I’m dying to hold her here.

“Take care of my daughter, Jericho,” Mr. Stewart says as he hands her over.

“With my life, sir.”

“I wouldn’t trust your life right now. You’re currently standing with the help of a crutch,” Christina teases.

I knew she was going to throw that barb.

I chuckle softly and take her other hand. Running my thumb over her engagement ring every time I hold her hand has become a habit. She’s going to have my wedding ring on her hand today.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the joining of Jericho Myers and Christina Stewart in matrimony...” says the notary.

“Hey,” I say to my bride-to-be.

“Hey,” she replies.

“You look beautiful.”

“And you look gorgeous. I melted when I saw you. I said to myself, my husband is hot.”

“Hmm. I think my wife is hotter.”

“Ahem!” the notary clears his throat, grabbing our attention. We both stare at him with questioning looks.

He sighs. “I’ve repeated the question twice already. I’m starting to think you both would rather conduct this ceremony yourselves,” he says, which cracks up the crowd.

I let go of Christina’s hand, and she hides a smile. This woman is going to be the death of me. “What was the question?”

“Do you, Jericho Myers, take Christina Stewart to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love and to hold, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer till death do you part?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And do you, Christina...”

“I do.”

The notary shakes his head at being cut short abruptly, making me chuckle. He motions for the ring bearers to step forward, and Rebecca gives me the wedding ring she’s been keeping safely in the purse strapped to her waist since I handed her the ring this morning and Maya brings Christina’s ring.

“You look beautiful, baby girl.”

“Thanks, Dad. I took after my mom,” Rebecca replies, pointing to Christina. She winks at me and goes back to her seat.

“She gets a mother and throws me under the bus,” I mutter.

“Are you jealous?” Christina asks as she offers me her hand.

Yes, I am, and I have every right to be. They’re both going to gang up against me now, and it will be worse than before. My mother and aunt are going to join them on occasion. Being the only male among four women will be challenging, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I love you,” I tell her as I slide the ring on her finger.

“I love you too.” She gives me my ring.

It's official.

“By the power vested in me by the county of Dallas, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

A cheer goes up in the crowd as Christina pulls me close, grabbing my collar. She places my hand on the side of her belly and kisses my lips. That's her way of telling me I don't need to be jealous because I'm about to have a son that'll make the girls' bullying bearable.

Two against four is much better odds than one against three.

Is this your first Love & Riches story?

Chapter One: an excerpt. *Positive.*

That little plus sign is still etched in my mind as if tattooed there. It's all I can see as I get dressed for dinner...all I can think of as I enter the cab and it drives off. Everything started weeks ago, of course, and even though it was the best sex I'd ever had, I can see now it was the worst mistake I could ever make.

My first night in Boston, apparently, I'd gone and screwed up my whole life. I am about as ready to have a baby as a one-armed man would be about getting his remaining arm chopped off.

Sure, being a mom is in my life plan. But having a baby has always been way further down my life's to-do list. Like at least ten-years-from-now further down. But I will check it off in a little over seven months, all because of good tequila and bad decisions.

“It’ll be fun,” Kenzie said. “It’s your first night in Boston. Live a little. Don’t be such a prude.”

And like a lamb being led to the slaughter, I followed along like a fool.

A groan escapes my lips. Or it must have since the cab driver glances at me from the rearview mirror with a raised brow.

“Sorry,” I apologize and then clear my throat. *Stay calm. Breathe in, breathe out. Everything is going to be fine.* I smooth the skirt of my dress and tap my lap absentmindedly as I look out the window. Cars driving by and the people on the sidewalk only remind me of just how big the city is, and my sizable hometown in Denver is nothing compared to this place. I’m all alone here with no money, barely a job, and now, pregnant.

Damn it! I find it hard to stay calm. I’m starting to freak out, and I think I’m about to have a panic attack. My heart is pounding so hard I feel it will burst out of my chest any minute now.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale again...I’ve got this!

The night in that penthouse has been blurry for the past few weeks, and I’d managed to block it out—or at least keep it at the back of my mind—but now it’s front and center.

That devilishly handsome face. His talented hot tongue.

Damn! His hot tongue. I can still remember the feel of it against my skin. The way he drove me crazy and the sounds that came out of my mouth that I didn’t know I even had in

me. How I clawed and clung to him like a sex-starved nympho mortifies me. But now that I start thinking about it, the images that were so blurry before won't stop playing in my head. The sounds won't stop. The sensations he pulled from every cell in my body with that hot tongue....

I remember the heat. I will never forget that. The sighs and moans of pleasure. His. Mine. His groans. I groan now and wave my hands above my head like that will send the images scurrying back to the blurry darkness they came from.

At least I have the cold comfort of knowing I'll never see him again.

The driver turns back to me, this time with a frown. "Are you all right, miss?"

"Yes." I force a smile. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm just...not quite feeling like myself."

I don't actually know what I am at the moment.

"Well, we're here," he says, and that's when I realize that the cab has stopped in front of a big wrought-iron gate with a massive "R" in the middle.

Huh? I get out of the cab and pay him. The minute the cash touches his palm, he peels away and hurtles down the street like his feet are on fire.

I bet he thinks I'm crazy. Hell, I feel crazy.

What am I going to tell Brady? Sweet, sweet Brady who invited me to have dinner with his family even though we've only gone on a couple of dates, which was also Kenzie's idea.

The truth. That's what I will tell him. That I am pregnant with another man's baby.

Note to self: never, ever follow any of Kenzie's crazy ideas again.

I move closer to the gate and peer through the gaps. The house behind the fence is a mansion that could easily be mistaken for a palace. Wow! I never knew Brady was this rich. Money and all the trappings that come with it have never attracted me. I know how evil the pursuit of the almighty dollar can become, and I am not interested. What attracted me to Brady was his kind, generous heart, and now I am about to break what I like most about him.

A CCTV camera above the gate points straight down at me. I press the intercom to announce my presence before whoever is behind that camera mistakes me for a trespasser or something more dangerous. That wouldn't be funny. I'm not going to spend the night in a jail cell.

"Who is it?" a gruff voice asks through the intercom.

"Chicago Miller." I gaze at the camera even though he probably doesn't know me. If Brady had told me his family was this rich, I'd have worn my best dress. Not like I have an amazingly stunning *haute couture* best dress, but I'd have tried harder than this, dammit!

Now that will be added to my list of worries. As if it wasn't big enough.

The man buzzes me in, and the gate slides open and closes after I walk in. I smooth my white dress and fluff my hair a little.

Stay calm.

I'm the face of perfect composure.

Yeah, right. I am a bundle of nerves.

To read the rest...[click here](#).

MacKenzie and Raphael's Love Story

Chapter One: an excerpt *Boston*

I look at the piles of clothes on my bed and wide-open moving boxes nearly filled to capacity scattered around my apartment. But the pitter-patter of raindrops falling on my living room window pulls me away from thinking about what to pack and where to put it. I should focus on my upcoming trip to my best friend's wedding and my move to San Francisco. My BFF, Chicago, means the world to me, and I wouldn't miss her wedding for anything or anyone.

But my heart isn't in it. My heart hurts.

I need a distraction and a bigger one in my life than rain.

As lightning streaks across the sky, inspiration flashes simultaneously.

What happens in Fiji...stays in Fiji.

Right?

It doesn't only apply to Las Vegas. Not that it matters. I need some distracting fun, and Fiji is the perfect place. And the perfect way to mend my broken heart. A little island fling halfway across the globe sounds like just what the doctor ordered. This is just what I need to get my mind off what Tristan did.

Tristan. That bastard.

Even the soothing sound of rain is not enough to save me from a trip down memory lane. Tristan and I had been dating for a few years and started living together six months ago. I thought we were on the right track to the white picket fence and all that, but little did I know that the familiarity of living together would lead me to the awful truth.

Tristan was cheating—lord only knows for how long or how many times.

He must have thought he was clever, sliding into DM mode with this Melody woman—whomever she was—while I wasn't paying attention. Lucky for me, he isn't as smart as he thinks. He forgot we not only shared a bed but also a computer as just one user. We both have Facespace accounts, and he forgot to log out one morning.

Memories of that exact moment come flooding back into my mind. No matter how many times I had tried to abolish them, they had taken up rent-free space there.

I had just come home to grab lunch and clicked on the laptop. He was still logged in to Facespace's messaging app,

and I heard the notifications ding several times in rapid succession. Someone was messaging at that moment.

Curiosity got the best of me, and I opened the message thread. It displayed someone's name I didn't recognize. But I saw those little dots that betrayed he was responding immediately. He was talking about his "mean roommate." Air escaped my lungs, and I found it hard to breathe. My eyes were glued to the screen; I could not look away.

What the actual fuck? Are you freaking kidding me?

My brain whirred in a million directions at once, not quite able to process what I was witnessing. He had to be on his phone right then. *What does he mean by roommate? He doesn't have a roommate; he has a girlfriend.*

Me.

Or so I thought.

What the absolute hell?

I continued to watch the horror unfold right in front of me.

He told her how beautiful she was and how he loved touching, kissing, and making love to her. He told her how mean I was and that I didn't understand him as *she* did. He didn't love me anymore—and didn't know if he ever had—and even said he couldn't stand to be around me.

She replied that we were just strangers living in the same apartment. She couldn't understand why he put up with *his roommate*.

What a bitch.

I wondered if he had told her we were still sleeping together and, knowing Tristan, probably not. He was a bastard, undoubtedly lying to both of us. He had probably played to both sides to get what he wanted from whoever was closest, whenever he wanted.

Such a bastard.

I continued reading. The tiny dots that flashed disappeared when he returned his next message. Tristan responded that he loved her.

I clamped my eyes shut and shook my head. My mind was on overload, and I could not process that thought at that moment. My chest felt tight, I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, and adrenaline surged through my body.

This. Was. Not. Happening.

But it was.

I finally looked away from the screen. I couldn't watch the dissolution of my dreams unfolding right in front of me any longer. The world seemed to contract around me. Angry tears fell.

But I wasn't just angry. I was hurt.

I flipped the laptop screen down—as if making the words go away would make it *all* go away—and walked into the bathroom to pull myself together. I had to go back to work and act like everything was normal. But how could I act normal when my whole world was crumbling around me?

To continue reading...[click here](#).

Maya and Brady's Love Story

Prologue One: Maya (an excerpt)

I drum my red manicured nails on the mahogany desk, hoping not to chip one, but unable to fight the urge to release the nervous energy thrumming through my veins.

It's 6:15 AM, and my boss Liam is returning to work almost full-time after being gone for six months. After their whirlwind wedding in Fiji, he spent time with his new wife and their son, Boston.

I want everything to be perfect for him upon his return. I ensured his office was tidy, just as he likes it, and that he has ready office supplies. I placed his schedule for today at the center of his desk.

The phone on my desk rings, which is unusual because of the hour. As soon as I pick it up, I hear my cousin and bestie Christie's voice on the other side. "Good morning, Maya. I thought you might want to hear a friendly voice this morning. I know Brady can be hard on you sometimes."

I let out a big sigh. “Good morning, Christie. It’s nice to hear your voice. And yes, he can. I don’t know what his problem is. But, hey, Liam’s coming back today. Back to normal, I hope.”

“Well, I cannot think of any reason it wouldn’t go back to business as usual with Liam upon his return,” she says. I can hear the smile in her voice without seeing it. “Hey, how are you doing? I know what today means to you beyond Liam’s return to the office. I know this is your anniversary today. Are you doing okay?”

I close my eyes briefly as I twist the gold band around my finger. I linger a little before I speak next. I don’t want to trouble Christie with my memories. “Of course, I am fine. I am good. The girls are good. They usually do something special for me because they know I can get sad today. If he was still here, we would have been married sixteen years today.”

“Wow, I didn’t do the math on that. I’m sorry, honey. Nothing can really make that better. But you know what can help now? Hanging out with your favorite cousin and best friend. Do you want to go to lunch today? Or maybe I can stop by after work?” she asks.

“Let me see how the morning goes, and lunch might be an option. Hey, I have to go. Lord knows when Brady will come in today. Or Liam, for that matter.”

“Okay, call me later. Love you,” and Christie disconnects the line.

I have one more thing I need to do in a few minutes. Liam prefers his coffee with a pastry from the cafe around the corner. But I know he likes his coffee piping hot, so I must wait. It's too early to head out the door.

I pick up my cell phone and open my photo app. I switch the album to my favorites. There's his shining face: Mark, my husband. The picture is older, but seeing it weighs heavy on my heart. I remember the day we found out we didn't have long to be together and the day we lost him. But nothing was worse than the day we buried him. I was never the same after.

We discovered he had stage four liver cancer just two months before. We hadn't even had enough time to get through more than two rounds of chemo and immunotherapy before we got the news that it had spread to his brain. He came home to be with Kylie and me and died a short time later.

The picture on my cell phone brings memories flooding into my brain. All of them: the good ones, the normal everyday ones, and the tough ones. In my mind's eye, I see that horrible day unfold: the day I buried my husband of six years. Saying goodbye to him was brutal.

When Mark was in hospice at home with us, it was all about tubes, wires, and medicines to keep him comfortable. It was like he was already gone, unaware of his surroundings, but I could still feel his presence. He was the love of my life and the first man who had brought butterflies to my tummy when he touched me.

Kylie was only three and really doesn't remember him much. And my little Ashlyn never knew him. I found out I was pregnant with her when Mark was getting his first round of chemotherapy. She was the last beautiful gift he gave me.

The ding of the elevator cuts the memories of my husband short. I am shocked to see Liam exit the mirrored doors. I peer down at my watch and notice that he is more than 30 minutes earlier than his former schedule. I don't have his breakfast snacks and coffee yet.

“Good day, Liam. Welcome back to the office.” I glance down at my shoes. “I apologize; I was not expecting you this early today. I haven't made your coffee and pastry run yet.”

“Good morning, Maya. No worries. Let's go to the cafe together and have a sit-down pre-day meeting. Consider it my welcome back to the office breakfast for us.”

I smile at him. I am so happy to have him back. I have missed him a lot. In his absence, I've been in the general administrative pool at Heritage House Publishing, filling in here and there for other executives but supporting his brother Brady for the last month. Now that Liam is back, I get my regular gig as his administrative support.

To continue Maya's journey...[click here](#).

Jenny and Stephan's Love Story

Prologue: Jenny (an excerpt)
Boston. Tuesday, 4 AM

“Thanks, Jenny,” Bianca slurs and lands a sloppy kiss on my cheek as I lower her onto her couch.

“Sleep tight, darling Bianca. You’ll be all right.”

Her eyes flutter closed, and she smiles slightly as she dips into dreamland. I straighten my back and feel my spine adjust itself. That’s a relief. The elevator in this building isn’t working, and it was quite a workout getting Bianca up the flight of stairs. My legs are killing me, and I could use a full-body massage.

I can’t wait to crash into my own bed and fall asleep. Tonight was fun but tiring. Or should I say last night since we’re already in the early morning hours? Dancing all night and playing designated driver for all my friends is exhausting, but I love it. It’s like payback for my past. I’d rather be the

designated driver every time we go out clubbing than stare at the walls of my bedroom at home alone.

I go to Bianca's room, throw open her closet, and take out her pink blanket. She's one of those girls who never grew out of their childhood fantasies and still loves ponies and unicorns. Her blanket has My Little Pony characters on it. It's cute.

I cover her up and head out after I hide her key in the designated spot as we agreed before she started drinking. I let out a sigh and take off my shoes. My body is tired, but my mind is still racing about one thing or another.

My next task is to sneak into my house without my brother hearing me. That's a tall order. But first, I need to hop on the highway and get there. From Downtown Boston, I head on the 90 to the 95 to Dover, where my brother has a family house.

Bianca's apartment is a long way from my house, and by the time I get to the big wrought iron gate of my brother's mansion, it's gotten way closer to the morning than it was before I left Bianca's place.

Stopping in front of the gate, I look out at the camera. A second later, it buzzes open.

"Morning, Eduard." I wave at the security guard as I drive past his station.

His expression never changes, no matter what. His face is always hard as stone at all times of the day. It must be so exhausting keeping up that facial expression.

Getting to the garage, I park my Jeep Rubicon next to Liam's Lamborghini, being extra careful not to scratch the Jeep or drive it into the wall. I'm not that good with big cars like the Jeep or parking them, but it was the only car in the garage that would accommodate my designated driver duties. I get out of the car, pick up my shoes, and grab my purse from the passenger seat. There's no way I'm putting those shoes back on to go inside. My feet have endured enough torture for tonight.

Entering the Russell mansion makes me feel like I'm doing the walk of shame with my shoes in my hands, the strap of my purse hanging halfway down my shoulder, and the purse tucked under my arm, my feet tiptoeing through the foyer. There is no one around. Everyone is still in bed, which is perfect because I can slip back into my room and act like I never went out dancing. The most fun part about tonight was that I met a guy, Sam, and we made out a little, even though it led nowhere. He was exactly what I usually like, but for some reason, he didn't ignite any fuzzy feelings of lust in my belly, so I let it go at that. I am not interested in going on dates with guys I know won't rock my world or body.

Feeling triumphant that I made it safely back to my room without running into a soul, I turn the lock and rest against the door, letting out a relieved breath. However, my relief is short-lived. The lava lamp beside my bed turns on, and Liam is sitting on my bed with his legs stretched out, staring at me with a reproachful look.

Damn it! I almost made it.

Now, he will give me another lecture about partying, being out all night, and being responsible....because I'm thirty, and my life should be boring just because I'm older.

"Where are you coming from dressed like that?" he asks, looking down at my outfit with distaste.

I roll my eyes at him and move away from the door. "It's just a little sheer pantsuit. Stop looking at me like I'm wearing a sleazy dress that leaves my bare ass out."

Though, I don't have much ass to expose, or much in the boob department, either.

He shakes his head and looks to the ceiling like he's asking for divine intervention. Or some grace. Then he moves closer to me and sniffs the air. "Are you drunk? God! Jenny, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"What?" I splutter. "I'm not drunk. I haven't had any alcohol. Or anything for that matter. What are you, a cop? Want to breathalyzer me? Or would you prefer a blood draw?" I stand on one foot, touch my nose with one pointer finger, and then the other. We've played this game before. Liam thinks he is so smart.

"You reek of alcohol. Did you dunk yourself in a pool full of it?"

That's preposterous. Why would I...Oh! I almost forgot that Sam spilled his drink on my pantsuit by mistake. That was the only reason we'd started talking.

“How many times will we have this conversation about your late-night shenanigans?”

I squeeze my lips into a thin line and take a deep breath. “It’s not my fault you like repeating it like a broken record.”

His mouth opens slightly for just a second before he snaps it shut, but for that brief moment, I managed to stun Liam Russell, the ice king himself.

Ha!

He grinds his jaw. “I sent you to college to get a degree; you wasted the time and money and left before finishing. I sent you on a trip to straighten you out; you returned worse than you were before. I didn’t think I would still have to parent you when you were in your thirties, little sister. Do you think life is all about partying and fun?”

My face falls, and I purse my lips again. I really do hate it when he lists out all my failures like I’m supposed to live in them instead of growing past them. I’m not the first person to not finish college. I am certainly not the only person to drop out of school to go on a world tour, and I wouldn’t be the last person to do it, either.

It’s not like school was that much fun. I got all the education I needed in high school. A college degree is just a way to imprison our minds and make us believe we need more boring books to be better people.

Besides, I didn’t even drink! Why can’t he see that instead of just blabbering on about things I used to do? I only went out

last night because I felt suffocated in here. It's been a long time since I set foot outside the house, yet he acts like I party every night.

“Can I go to bed now? I haven't slept a wink, and I'm tired.” I want to sleep and forget all about this discussion.

“No doubt you'd be after all the work you did last night.” His voice drips with sarcasm.

Ha-ha! Very funny.

“Who's the guy you went out with this time?” he asks.

Of course, he'd say that. He just doesn't get it. He has his eyes everywhere, and he's always poking his nose into others' affairs. The worst part is that most of the time, he's wrong about these assumptions he makes.

I'm sick of it and the control he attempts to laud over me. Instead of replying to him, I move past him to get on my bed. At least, I try to. He grabs my arm and pulls me back.

“I'm talking to you, Jenny. You don't get to walk away from me.”

Just what I want when I am physically exhausted. Getting manhandled by my brother.

“Let go of me!” I snap and jerk my hand away from him. “I don't owe you or anyone an explanation for anything I do. It's my life, not yours.” I poke him in his chest. “I don't give a shit what you think, especially when you're accusing me of things I didn't even do.”

About the Author

J.J. Lovejoy is a part-time contemporary romance writer and a full-time data analyst. She lives on coffee, protein shakes, and flavored water. She loves hanging out with her husband, carting her teenage boys to school, dancing Zumba with her buddies, and teaching yoga.

She is creative at heart, sharing the love of art with her mom, and found her way back to her sister with fiction writing. She lives in Northern California with her husband, boys, and a Jack Russell Terrier, Skip. She looks forward to adding more titles to her Kindle Unlimited catalog in the coming months.

Coming Next: A New Series

A new series will be available in December of 2023. This series is all about love, connection, and babies. Whether they are secret babies from a past together or surprise pregnancies, each of the five books in the series will tell an unconnected story of love.

Our first story, a shorter novella, follows Isabella and Caleb, who had met when younger but broke up because his family would never accept her into theirs. Shattered, she leaves town and vows to not come back. Seven years later, she finds herself in need of a job and comes back to town, now with a son in tow. Little did she know, she would be assigned to be the admin for Caleb, now the CEO of one of his family's companies.