



Takedown

EVELYN SOLA

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Mellie

I was not a gambler. No way. I've built an existence free of risk and adventure. From my career to a small life with my closest family. I was not going to do anything to jeopardize my heart. But when my neighbor and number one menace to my safe plans showed up in Vegas, I did what every adventurous (not!) woman would do. I got drunk and married the man.

Adam

What happens in Vegas is supposed to stay in Vegas. Then, I went and married Mellie Dupree. That woman I've been chasing for two years is now my wife. She claims she doesn't remember our wedding, but I was there, and I know she's not telling the truth. Then again, neither am I.

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This one is for The Entourage.



The down pillow contours my head, shielding me from the cool air coming from above. The temperature in the room is not only due to the ceiling fan, but to the extremely efficient central air. I sigh happily and cover myself with the white, down comforter, basking between sleep and reality. I don't remember ever being in a bed so comfortable.

I smile and reach for another pillow to hug, but my hand hits something else. Skin. I think I'm touching a stomach. A very hard and toned stomach, which I think belongs to a man. I touch it again, and whoever the stomach belongs to moans softly. I quickly pull my hand away and wait for things to come into focus.

I might not know where I am, but I know where I'm not. I don't have a ceiling fan in my room, and the air conditioning in my bedroom at home works well, but not as efficiently as this one. Besides, I live in Boston, and if there's one thing I don't need in Boston in January, it's air conditioning. I'm not in my bedroom at my brother's two family house, in the first floor apartment where we live. The one I share with him and his family.

I'm in Sin City celebrating my friend's wedding.

One of my best friends got married yesterday. It was a big group, full of her family and friends. It wasn't the typical Vegas wedding with Elvis

officiating the vows. It was a beautiful formal affair held in the ballroom of the Bellagio hotel. I cried when I watched her father walk her down the aisle, the epitome of happiness with her wide smile and inner glow. I'd wiped my wet cheeks with a tissue I had in my purse, and when I had looked up, it was to find familiar, piercing blue eyes watching me from across the aisle. I normally look away from his stares, but that time, I held it, and even in the big room, the electricity between us sizzled.

My phone buzzes from across the room. Despite not having a headache, I know I must have had some drinks if the dryness in my mouth is any indication. It's so bad it feels like something died in there days ago. My bedmate moans again, turns over in the bed, and wraps an arm around me, forcing a loud gasp out of me by his sudden movement. He takes it a step further and puts a heavy leg across my thighs, keeping me securely in place. He nuzzles the back of my neck and sighs in contentment.

I stop breathing and my body goes completely still. I close my eyes and squeeze, hoping that when I open them again, I'll be at home in my bed, and this will have been nothing but a dream.

But that doesn't happen, and a dooming feeling hits. My stomach drops, and I feel my heart start to accelerate. I don't want to do this, but I take a deep breath, and I turn my head, refusing to look at him, hoping and praying that it's not who I think it is. But his scent is a dead giveaway. No one else smells like that, and in this instant, I know I did something I can't take back. Images of last night start to surface, but I push them back down, refusing to acknowledge the reality of this situation.

It's been a long time since I've been intimate with a man, and I squeeze between my legs. When I feel no soreness, I expel a breath of relief. I know whatever happened in this room does not extend beyond sleeping. Unless whoever that is has a small package. I shouldn't have doubted it. He never would have done something like that. Besides, he's wanted me for such a long time that I know he'd want me to remember.

Or maybe it's not him. The altitude is not the same in Vegas as it is in Boston, and I'm sure more than one man uses this cologne. Maybe I went out and decided to let loose. Leaving behind the January northeastern weather will do that to any girl. I remember telling my sister-in-law about my plans to find a man for a night.

"Whatever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." I had winked at her and nudged her shoulder with mine. She laughed and told me to have fun.

My bedmate lets out a snore, and I push his leg off. Making as little noise as possible, I take a deep breath and turn to face him. The cover is now askew, leaving exposed a long, muscular leg filled with dark hair. I close my eyes and say a short prayer.

Yeah, now you pray, Mellie, you heathen. God ain't about to listen to you now.

He's in black boxer briefs, and his morning wood is saluting the ceiling. I swallow involuntarily and do everything in my power to stop myself from wrapping my hand around the steel pipe of a dick that's just inches away, but I chase the thought out of my dirty mind. Yeah, no way was that thing inside me. It would have ripped me in half. It's not this particular dick that's got my mouth watering. It's the lack of dick in my life that's making me yearn for this one.

His ribbed white t-shirt has ridden up, and a perfect six pack is on full display just inches away from my greedy hand. I let out a whimper, knowing for sure that the Lord did not in fact hear my prayers. Or maybe he did and decided to ignore me. It would serve my heathen ass right.

I exhale and continue to look past the broad chest. I see the familiar gold chain around his neck with the signature cross, and I know that God has indeed forsaken me. Again.

My hand itches to touch the chiseled chin with about three days worth of stubble. Just like it does every time I see him, but I can't confirm my worst nightmare. He has a pillow covering his face. I've come too far to stop now

though. I gently pull the pillow and close my eyes in resignation. I count to ten, and like I'm pulling off a band aid, I open my eyes and learn my fate.

The bottom falls out from under me. It's my worst nightmare. It's him.

Adam Flynn. Lying in bed next to me in nothing but a t-shirt and boxer briefs with his eyes closed, looking like a Greek God.

But he's Irish, Mellie, not Greek.

He's gorgeous. Always has been. There is no denying it. Perfect skin with just a tinge of pink. He has full lips, and I yearn to run my tongue along them. His thick, dark hair is a mess and sticking out from all sides, and that only makes him look sexier.

I jump off the bed as if I'm on fire and look down at my bare legs. I'm in nothing but my underwear and a white tank top. The one I had on underneath my sheer kimono top. I look around the room like a cornered animal, relieved only when I see my clothes perfectly folded next to the big screen TV. I quickly put on my jeans. Adam moans again, and when I look at him, he shivers and goosebumps spread over his body. I tiptoe to the bed, careful enough not to wake him, gently lift the comforter, and cover that perfect body of his.

This room is much more extravagant than mine. A suite with a couch and minibar. There are two bottles of champagne on the table, one of them still sitting in an ice bucket. I walk over there and pick one up. Some French name I can't pronounce. I find my phone and do a quick search of that champagne. The price ranges from three to five hundred dollars, and I can only imagine the up charge the Bellagio adds. And he got two. What an idiot. I know he can't afford this on a middle school vice principal's salary.

I refuse to give in to my guilt since I didn't make him buy it. I'm pretty sure I tried to talk him out of it. I don't even remember any of it.

Liar.

Needing to make my escape before he wakes up, I look around the room for my shoes. I see the black peep-toe wedges underneath the bed, and I get

on my knees to reach for them. When I do, something catches the light, a sliver of sun coming through the blinds. I follow the flash, and I blink twice to erase what I'm seeing.

I hold up my hand, and right there, on my left ring finger is a fat, round, and crystal-clear diamond ring. It's so clear that it must be fake. It's bigger than the one my brother gave his wife. I could be mistaken, but I think it's even bigger than the pink diamond ring one of my friends have. And right next to it is a platinum wedding band with small diamonds all around it.

"It can't be real," I whisper. I pull the ring off my finger and examine it, unsure of what to look for. A memory from last night hits. Drinks at a bar. Grabbing him and pulling him out of that bar and away from a tall, skinny bitch. There was a dare, but I chase the memory away. He would do this. He would put a wedding ring on my finger as a joke. I put both rings on the nightstand, but there's an official looking form already there.

Curious, I pick it up. My stomach drops to the floor and the food I ate last night threatens to come up.

Party 1 – Flynn, Adam Finnegan

Party 2 – Dupree, Melanie Elyse

Another memory hits, but I refuse to dwell on it. I do something much worse instead. I look back at the document in my hand. My mouth has gotten drier, and my heart is beating so fast, I'm afraid it's going to wake my sleeping—I can't even think of the word to describe him.

My eyes finally land at the top of the form, but I close them before they can focus on the words. I inhale, say another prayer, convinced this time that I will be delivered. And once again, I'm forsaken. Right there in bold, black letters.

Clark County, Nevada. Certificate of Marriage.

A hand flies to my mouth and a sound of despair escapes. The piece of paper slips from my hand, floating in the air conditioned breeze until it lands on the floor. Without a second thought, I grab my shoes and purse and run

out of the room, not even sure where I am, but when I step outside the door, I know I'm still in my same hotel, so I sprint to the elevator in my bare feet.

When I get to my room on the twelfth floor, I run to the bathroom, drop to my knees and empty the contents of my stomach. My eyes water and my throat burns. There's no bitter taste of rancid alcohol or the putrid smell of last night's dinner. Hardly anything comes up, and I end up gagging for what seems like forever. My body is like a ragdoll's, hunched over the toilet as if I have no spine to support me. A loud sound escapes, and I realize I'm crying. I don't remember the last time I cried, but in my Vegas hotel room, with no one there to witness it, I give in and weep.

What the hell have you done now, Melanie?

I finally lift my head and run a shaky hand through my hair. Yesterday was our fourth day in Vegas. Most of the wedding guests had already flown back home, leaving behind only me, Ananda, her new husband, her sister and two of his friends. One of them being Adam.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I lay my head on the toilet, past the point of caring about germs, and think about how once again, I've fucked up. Classic Melanie Elyse Dupree. One fuck up after another. So much for starting a new life when I left New Jersey and moved in with my brother. Oh, well. I went two years without nearly ruining my life. I think that's a record for me.

I finally get up, strip myself bare, and run back to the closet. Like a woman possessed, I pick up the clothes and shoes I had on and put them in a plastic bag, having no intention of taking them home with me. If I get rid of them, maybe that will somehow undo what I did last night. I return to the bathroom, turn the water to scalding and do my best to wash away the last twelve hours. I stick my head under the spray, knowing my hair will pay the price for using the cheap hotel shampoo, but I don't care. I need to wash it all off. Erase and purge everything that's happened.

I stay in the shower so long, my skin wrinkles. My stomach growls, but I know there is no way I can tolerate any food right now. Just the thought

makes me want to gag all over again.

The water starts to cool, and I step out, wrapping myself in a large white towel. Once I wrap my hair in another, I leave the bathroom and grab my phone. It only takes a few minutes for me to change my flight to this morning instead of this afternoon. For once, I don't care about the extra cost.

Me – Hey, girl. Changed to an earlier flight. Jason and Alex need me.

Ananda doesn't reply. I know she'll probably sleep until noon, which is around the time my plane takes off, and by the time she sees my text, I will be in the air, headed east. I find a comfortable pair of skinny jeans and a long-sleeved cotton tee. Flip flops will do for now, but I put a pair of boots in my carry-on for when I arrive in Boston.

By the time I do a half ass job of blow drying my hair and putting it in a tight bun, it's time to leave. I don't know why I do it, but I stick my head out of the room and look down to each end of the hallway. Once I've determined it's clear, I practically run to the elevator. When I arrive in the lobby, I sprint out of the front door and into a waiting cab. I don't think I breathe until the wheels of the plane leave the ground and we're soaring through the air, away from the biggest fuck up of my life, but as I look out of my window, I know I'm only delaying the inevitable.

He'll come. He'll find me. There's no way he'll keep this a secret. I shake my head and tell myself I don't care. It's not up to him. He'll realize he's made a mistake too. We'll talk to Tina, she's the sister of my brother's wife, a former lawyer turned restaurant owner. She'll walk us through the annulment process. It will happen quickly, and things will return to normal.

Yes, that's exactly what will happen, but when I close my eyes all I see are blue eyes looking down at me while a man dressed as Elvis tells us to repeat after him. I have no desire to remember my vows, but I remember his. I can practically hear him now. His voice, deep and sincere, as he promised to love, honor, and cherish until death do us part.

The wheels of the aircraft hit the ground just before his lips touch mine.

At least in my memory. The bouncing of the plane on the runway jolts me out of my daydream, and I shake my head clear of all things related to Adam Flynn.

Things will be fine. I'm being dramatic as usual. My mind is playing tricks on me. Maybe I went to one of those shows and got hypnotized. There's no way that gigantic diamond is real. I bet it's as fake as that marriage license. Everyone was probably in on it. Just pulling a prank on me because that's what my friends do, especially when it comes to me and Adam. Ananda's been telling me for two years that I'm going to end up with him.

"You'll have a bunch of his giant babies," she always jokes.

I lay a hand on my beating heart and laugh out loud, relieved for the first time in hours. It's pitch-black outside, and I know the harsh January weather awaits.

Exhausted from the long flight and my lack of food, I eagerly wait to exit the plane, desperate to eat and find my comfortable bed. At least I feel a sense of relief at having talked myself off the ledge.

Me. Melanie Elyse Dupree married. That is something that will not happen for a long time, if ever. By the time I walk off the plane and get my bags, it's well past nine in the evening, and despite the pep talk I gave myself, I'm so tense I feel like I'm going to snap.

My phone starts to ding with text messages and waiting voicemails the instant I take it off airplane mode, but I'm not eager to check any of them. I find the Uber app and request a car home. The harsh wind bites when I finally step outside. I grab my knit hat and scarf out of my purse, but they have little effect against the cold weather. Luckily, the car pulls up.

Once again, I pray to a higher power that the driver doesn't feel the need to talk the entire ride. All I want now is quiet, and for the first time ever, my prayer is answered. The driver barely grunts at me when I get in, and the late Saturday evening traffic is light for a change. I93 is missing the usual cluster

of cars, so it only takes twenty minutes for the Uber to turn down our quiet street.

The apartment is dark, which is not surprising since Jason needs to be at the hospital early in the morning. I run to the front door, eager to get away from the bitter cold. Normally, I hate being alone. I hate quiet. I love the sounds of my two-year-old niece and the chatter of my brother and his wife. I especially love when they have friends or Alex's family here, which is often, but tonight, I'm grateful to be alone.

I sit on my bed, and when I start to take off my boots, my eyes land on my left hand. I rub my ring finger and shake the thought away. It was a joke, Mellie. A horrible, horrible joke. Ananda, her husband, and Adam are probably having a good laugh at my expense right at this very moment.

Girl, why do you keep lying to yourself?

My phone vibrates and the sudden sensation almost causes me to slide off the bed. I don't pick it up, but as soon as the vibration stops, it starts again.

I slide under the covers without bothering to remove my clothes and close my eyes, but the phone continues to vibrate.

I've never been a coward, and I'm not going to start now, but by the time I reach for the phone, it stops.

The first thing I see is a missed call from Ananda.

My phone slips from my hand when I see the name of the next missed call.

My Husband.

The contact says My Husband, and there's a picture of me and Adam in the background. I close my eyes and shake my head as if that would erase what I just saw. I'm in the clothes I was wearing last night. I'm on my tippy toes and my lips are on his cheek. He's smiling happily while he takes the picture.

I open my text messages and there are about a dozen messages from My Husband and a few from Ananda. I text her back, letting her know I'm home

safe. As soon as I hit send, he calls again.



Just as I expected. I toss the phone on the other side of the bed, more irritated now than when I first woke up and realized I was alone in the king-sized bed. I've always been able to fall asleep quickly and stay asleep under any circumstances. My mother always jokes that I could sleep standing up if I had to. She said I was the best baby and slept through the night from the time I was two months old. Getting me down for a nap was never a battle, but now, I wish I suffered from insomnia.

I should have known she'd run. She's a runner. She has no idea, but I've studied her these past two years since we've been neighbors. She runs whenever I get too close. She ran from me after what happened between us on New Year's Eve. She runs whenever her mother comes to visit, and as much as I nose around, I can never get any details about the rift between them.

Now, instead of waking up with my new wife in my arms, I woke up holding a pillow and sporting a hard on so stiff, it was painful. I've never been considered naïve, but I wouldn't let myself believe she just left, especially after she promised she wouldn't. A quick search around the room proved otherwise, and when I saw her rings on the nightstand and the marriage certificate on the floor, I knew I had been abandoned.

I punch the pillow and call her phone again. Just like before, it goes right to voicemail. As much as I want to smash my phone against the wall, I make another phone call.

“Hey, man,” Dennis mumbles. Dennis is a math teacher at my school, and while he was visiting me one day, he met Ananda. That was less than a year ago, and now they’re married. And since I’m responsible for introducing them, I was part of the wedding party.

“Has Ananda heard from Mellie?” I ask. I hear a loud yawn, followed by talking in the background.

“She got a text from her earlier. She took an early flight home. I guess her brother and sister-in-law need her. Let’s meet in the lobby in one hour. I want to hit one more buffet since today’s our last day.” He ends the call, and I lie back on the bed, still cursing my ability to sleep like the dead.

As happy as I am for my friend, I was even happier for myself. My friend being involved with one of Melanie’s best friends meant we got to spend lots of time together, and I soon learned that my new wife has no idea how beautiful and captivating she is. Her beautiful face and body are the least of it. I almost lost my ability to think when I first saw her. At only two inches short of six feet, she’s taller than most women. That was the first thing I noticed. I envisioned those long legs wrapped around me. Her smile was the second. It can light up the darkest room. When she lets herself go and smiles, it’s wide and shows off perfectly straight teeth. Sometimes she blushes and bats her long eyelashes. She could grace the cover of any magazine with her perfect cheekbones and straight little nose.

She must be the only one who doesn’t realize how beautiful she is. I’ve had to threaten half the men in Boston, but it’s a good thing I’m taller and broader than most men. All I have to do is stand up, and they go running. Unfortunately, Melanie doesn’t appreciate my penchant for scaring men away. Too fucking bad.

And she might be a runner. She might have left New Jersey for Boston to

run away from something. She might leave whenever her mother comes for a visit. She can flee from this hotel room and hop the next flight back home, but she can't run from me. I'll be home tomorrow, in my apartment right above hers, and she's going to have to deal with me. There is nowhere she can go where I won't find her and put these rings back where they belong.

I hold my left hand up and admire the platinum band around my own ring finger, and for the first time since I woke up this morning and realized I was abandoned, I smile.

Yeah, Mellie's days of running are about to come to an abrupt end. I call her phone again, and since I know she's on a plane right now flying across the country, I decide to leave a message.

"Mel, it's your husband. I was hoping to wake up next to my wife on our first full day together as a married couple, but you ran. I should have expected it and planned better. That's on me. Know this. This is the absolute last time you run from me. See you soon, Mrs. Flynn." I press end, satisfied with my message.

Having a sudden burst of energy, I hop out of bed and head to the shower.



The harsh northeastern wind smacks me around as hard as Mel's abandonment. The streets are as dark as they are bare when I finally drive my car back home. Due to a flight delay, it's past eleven by the time I turn the key into the front door.

I know what I need to do. I need to walk up the stairs to my second-floor apartment and deal with my errant wife tomorrow, but I've never been good at waiting. And I sure as fuck am not known for doing what I need to do instead of what I want to do.

I give my wife the courtesy of one more phone call. Like it's been doing all day, it rings, but she doesn't pick up, and I don't bother leaving another

message. I shove the phone in my pocket and let out a string of curses. I count to five before I rap my knuckles on the door to the first-floor apartment.

I knock when I want to bang the door down, but they have a toddler, and I'm not a complete Neanderthal. When I don't hear footsteps, I knock again, only harder this time. I've reached the end of my patience, and I didn't have much to begin with.

Finally, I hear laughter, but it's not Mel's, and my nerves are still on high alert. The door swings open, and Jason stands on the other side. I know I've interrupted something. He's shirtless with a sheen of sweat on his chest. He doesn't offer any pleasantries when he answers the door. He waits for me to speak.

So, I get right to the point. "Is Mel home?" I crane my neck around him to look.

He steps aside and ushers me inside, but his usually friendly demeanor is absent today. He takes a step closer, and because I'm not in the mood for whatever he's about to dish out, I step back. He's a tall guy, but I'm taller. And broader. And the fact that he's a surgeon pretty much guarantees that he won't hit me. I can take him easily, but I'm not about to fight my new brother or my landlord.

"What the hell went on in Vegas?" I don't miss the accusation in his voice or the way he takes a threatening step toward me. "Mellie's been skittish as a cat since she got back." He doesn't say anymore, but I know an accusation when I hear one. This isn't the first time he's confronted me about his sister, and I admire that in a man. He's warned me to leave her alone after I chased away a few dates, but other than that, we've always been on good terms. I'm a model tenant who pays on time and can do my own repairs. I do repairs in his apartment too since the man is clueless when it comes to fixing things.

I even shovel their driveway and clear his wife's car when it snows. Of

course, I only do that while I'm clearing Mel's.

I don't have time to answer his question, though, because the front door opens and the woman who's dominated my mind since I first heard her voice walks through the door. I lean against the wall and watch her. She doesn't notice me right away as evidenced by the smile on her face.

I smile too when I see her, but that doesn't last long because a man follows her inside. She greets Jason, and my wife has the fucking audacity to hold out her hand for this guy.

"Damien," she says, smiling from ear to ear as she looks at this fucker's face. "This is my brother Jason. Jason, this is Damien. The date I told you about." Jason shakes his hand but turns and looks at me. Mel follows his line of vision and visibly gasps when she sees me leaning against the wall.

The color drains from her face and she takes a step closer to this Damien asshole. My wife actually takes a step closer to another man. As if it's his right to protect her and not mine.

"Your date, Mel?" I ask. Her eyes dart from me to Jason, as if she's silently asking him for help. Jason answers. He steps between us and turns to me.

"Don't start any shit, Flynn. Goodnight." He points towards the door, but I don't move.

"Forgive me, but I have a bit of a problem with my wife going out on a date with another man." For the first time, I noticed Mel's holding a single red rose, and it drops to the floor at my announcement.

"What?" Jason says, confused.

"Cutie," the asshole says. He has the nerve to give my wife a nickname. That's strike one. "You're married? Your profile said single." He raises both hands and takes a step back. Then, he looks at me again, perusing my body. He bites his bottom lip and looks me directly in the eyes. "Are you into getting cuckolded?" He takes a step closer to me, clearly liking what he sees. "Do you do more than watch? I hope so." He lowers his voice to a husky

whisper. Mel's mouth opens in shock, and she takes a step back.

That's strike two.

"I knew you didn't invite me in here just to meet your brother." He drops his voice and inches closer to Mel. The sly grin on his too thin lips make it clear what he's thinking.

That's it. That's strike three.

I push off the wall and come to my full height. Damian steps back when I slowly approach him. "Damian, is it? That's a no to your first question." I smile when I see the fear in his eyes as I get closer to him. He steps away until his back hits the wall. Idiot. Now he has nowhere to run. I step closer, lift him off his feet by his neck and pin him to the wall.

Jason rushes over. "Let him go, Flynn."

I ignore him. In fact, I squeeze the fucker's neck just a little bit.

"Adam, stop!" It doesn't help to calm my anger when I see my wife wringing her hands over this useless piece of shit.

"If you ever so much as breathe the same air as my wife again, I will rip your fucking heart out of your chest. Got that?" When he doesn't answer, I squeeze his neck again, lower my voice and say, "I asked you a question."

"Yes," he croaks out.

He starts to kick at me, but I look into his eyes and arch an eyebrow. He stops immediately.

"Does that make me sound like a man who will watch as another man fucks his wife?" My voice is so low that only he can hear me. He swallows and shakes his head, unable to form a single syllable. "Good. I guess that answers your second question." I lower my voice further. "Now, get the fuck out of here before I snap your neck." His eyes bulge right before I let him go. He starts to cough, but before Jason can reach for him, he runs to the door. I follow and shove him out.

After I close and lock the door, I turn back to Jason and my wayward wife. She stands there, mouth and eyes wide open. I make sure to squash the

rose given to her by that other man. I hear a shriek before she runs across the room. I grab her wrist before her hand connects with my face, but she pushes out of my hold and starts to pummel my chest with punches. I grab both wrists, turn her around and hold her back against my chest.

“Let her go,” Jason orders, coming closer. “Right now, Flynn.” So, I do, and as soon as she’s able, she turns and attacks me again.

“You bastard,” she yells. “You fucking bastard. I’m going to chop you up into pieces and throw your worthless body parts into the Charles.” She punches and kicks until Jason grabs her and stands between the two of us.

Jason holds a hand towards Mel, a silent gesture to ask her to shut up. She stops talking, but she’s like a cornered animal, ready to strike again at any moment.

“Why do you keep calling Mellie your wife?” His brown eyes are shrewd as he looks at me and waits for my answer. I pull the marriage certificate out of my pocket and hand it to him.

His eyes widen as he looks at it. When he’s done, he hands the piece of paper to his sister, not saying a word. He crosses his arms and waits for her to talk.

The instant she gets her hands on the marriage certificate, she rips it to pieces, walks over, and throws the pieces of paper in my face.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about. That’s a fake,” she says to Jason. “Please do what I asked you to do this morning and evict him. He’s turned into a full on stalker.” She glares at me before turning back to him. “He scares me.”

I snort so loud, it turns into a laugh.

“You attacked me twice, and you’re scared of *me*? Since when?”

“You think a few punches was an attack? Just wait. I’m going to slice your face when you sleep tonight, just like I should have done the other night.” She lunges for me again, but Jason wraps an arm around her waist, lifts her off her feet, and pulls her away.

“What the hell is going on in here? Jason, are you coming back to bed?” Jason’s wife, Alex, stops short when she sees me. She looks around the room, sighs, and walks towards Mel.

“Did he chase your date away again?” She shakes her head and says, “This has got to stop. She is not your property, Adam.”

“Never said that, but she *is* my wife. I’m sure you’d have stopped it too if Jason brought home another woman.”

Alex stands still and looks around the room. She turns to Mellie, runs a hand through her curly, dark hair. “What the hell did he just say?”

“I’m waiting to hear Mellie’s take on that,” Jason says.

“I already told you he’s lying.” My wife crosses her arms. I’m not sure if she’s defiant or deep in denial.

“I’m lying?” I ask her. “Out of the two of us, you’re saying *I’m* the liar?”

“As if I would ever marry you.” Mel scoffs and like a petulant child, she turns her head away from me.

“I’m disappointed in you, *wife*,” I say to Mel. “You’ve always been a pathological liar, but this is low even for you.”

“So, just so we’re clear, you did not marry Adam in Vegas?” Jason asks his sister.

“As if I would ever,” she scoffs. “I’m not attracted to him.”

She doesn’t disappoint. I knew she’d fight me, but the outright denial is unexpected. It hurts that someone who promised to love, honor and cherish is now denying those sacred vows.

“Well, this marriage certificate says otherwise. And that kiss we shared on New Year’s Eve? That wasn’t a kiss from someone who isn’t attracted to me.” I pull out another marriage certificate and hand it to Alex. She puts a hand to her mouth in shock as she reads it. “And you put this on my finger.” I hold up my left hand and show them the platinum wedding band. She tries to reach for that certificate too, probably to rip it, but Jason holds her back.

“Go ahead, rip it. I have more. But you can rip them all, and it won’t

erase one fact. We're married." I pull out my phone and hand it to Jason. "Press play," I tell him. Mel lunges for the phone, so Jason hands it to Alex. She touches the screen, and my wife's voice fills the room.

"I, Melanie Elyse Dupree, take you, Adam Finnegan Flynn, to be my lawfully wedded husband." Mel lets out a loud scream, and she breaks free of Jason's hold. He tries to grab her arm, but she runs across the room, jumps on me, and goes for my neck. Jason grabs her waist, but she manages to wrap her hands around my throat and squeeze. It takes no effort for me to pull her hands off. Jason lifts her away, but she's like a crazed animal, doing her best to get away from him and come after me again.

Her hair is wild, fallen out of her ponytail as she curses. Soon, she tires herself out and Jason puts her down, but I don't miss the tears running down her face before she walks away and sits at the kitchen table.



Ten tears fall for each one I swipe. The dam really breaks when Alex takes me into her arms, and I feel a hand on my shoulder.

“It’s okay, Smellie,” Jason says. I let out a choked laugh at the childhood nickname. The name he used to call me before our relationship turned to shit. Before I decided I hated my brother and everything he stood for.

I cry until there’s nothing left, and my head starts to hurt. My shoulders shrug in despair, and I say, “I don’t remember it.” Even as the words leave my mouth, I know they’re another lie. Every memory, every word, and every promise we made is right there in the forefront of my mind, but there’s no way in hell I will ever admit to that. “But I guess it’s true. What he said.” I point a finger toward Adam without looking at him. “It’s true.”

Jason sits down across from me and puts both hands to his face. He rubs the back of his neck before he looks at me again.

“I’ll call Tina and see what can be done. I’m sure you can get it annulled,” Alex reassures me, then she gasps and looks over my shoulder to Adam. “Did you already sleep with him?” she whispers.

“Jesus,” Jason says.

“No, she didn’t,” Adam says from behind me. “But I’m not agreeing to an annulment or a divorce. I’m Catholic.”

“Well, it’s not only up to you!” Having had enough of him, I scream those words, shocking both Alex and Jason. “And your religion has absolutely nothing to do with me, so shove it.”

“Flynn, I’ll deal with you tomorrow, but you need to leave right now.” Jason’s chair scrapes against the hardwood, and he walks across the room. I turn in time to see him grab Adam’s elbow and lead him away. Adam holds my stare until he turns the corner, and I can no longer see him.

I hear the drone of their voices, but they’re too far away for me to hear the words. Jason talks first, then Adam. I visibly relax when I hear the front door open and close.

Jason returns and stands in front of me, offering me his hand. I take it, and he pulls me into a hug. Alex joins us for a group hug in the kitchen.

“It’s going to be okay. I’m going to evict him. You’ll talk to Tina tomorrow, and everything will be fine.” Jason pulls back and cups my face.

I hug him again, relieved and comforted by his words, even though I know deep down, things won’t be that simple.

“You can’t evict him, babe. He pays on time, he hasn’t violated the lease, and he’s not doing anything illegal in the apartment.” Alex shrugs. “I looked all of that up before renting my old condo.”

I sag against Jason, and he holds me tighter. A hiccup escapes, and the tears start to fall all over again. “What am I gonna do, Jason?” I whisper. “Just another Mellie fuck up.”

“You were never a fuck up, Mellie. Everything will work out.” I let out a sniffle and nod, unsure of what else to say or do.

“I’m gonna go to bed. I already interrupted your night enough.” I look at Alex, who’s wearing a long silk robe, barely covering her belly. I rub my hand over her and the baby kicks. “My niece is active tonight,” I say. She kicks again, and I relax for the first time since I woke up in that hotel room in Vegas.

“Yeah. She’s the reason I couldn’t go to Vegas,” Alex says. “Go to bed,

and we'll go see Tina together tomorrow, okay? It will be fine." I hug my brother and sister-in-law one more time, walk to the back of the apartment and step inside my bedroom.

I moved here with Jason only a few months after he bought this house. He met his wife soon after, and even though I've offered to move out, they asked me to stay. And since I love living with them and my niece, I've stayed. Now I realized I should have left. I can afford it, but I love being part of a family, and staying allowed me to save money for my own house .

Adam has always been in the background, though he's never been more than a nuisance, asking me out and scaring my dates away by intimidating them. I'm not blind or immune to his looks or that body of his. I've spent enough days watching him work out shirtless in the backyard to be completely familiar with his six pack, but he's not what I'm looking for in a boyfriend.

I never missed the lustful glances or the possessive attitude, but what I said to my brother tonight wasn't true; I never felt unsafe or afraid. Not until I woke up yesterday morning and was faced with the consequences of our actions.



It took me twice as long to fall asleep last night. I couldn't calm down after the ugly confrontation downstairs. It was a foregone conclusion that she'd fight, but I was not expecting outright denial and blatant lies. Even now I feel the sting of her betrayal for going behind my back to have me evicted. As if that would erase the fact that we're bound together for life now. It was impulsive, but I take marriage seriously. Despite being raised by a single mother, I've always respected the sanctity of marriage. It doesn't matter that I never had my parents as an example.

Not even my morning workout can relax me like it normally does. Instead of working out for one hour, I've been going at it for two in the hopes that some of the stress would leave my body. But I'm more wound up now than I was when I woke up two days ago to find her gone. Now she thinks she can hide from me one floor below behind her brother. Yeah, he's her brother, but I'm her husband.

My legs feel like lead on the stationary bike, but I pedal fast enough to make this feeling of despair evaporate, but it doesn't work. I stop abruptly, suddenly too overwhelmed to continue. My breath comes out in short pants as I reach for my gallon of water. The loud knock on my door finally forces me off the bike. My chest and back are coated with sweat and my shorts are

so damp, I pull them up while I jog to the front door. It's not six in the morning yet, which means there could only be one person outside my door.

Jason doesn't bother with any pleasantries when he barges inside my apartment. I move out of the way, lean against the wall, and cross my arms.

"I need to get ready for work, Dupree." I rub a tired hand over my face. I'm not in the mood for a confrontation this early. At least not with him.

"You think I don't?" His tone is sharp today. He's been irritated with me before, but never angry.

"Get on with it, but just so you know, you can't evict me. I pay rent on time, and I haven't done anything to violate the lease."

"I can ask you politely to move out," he counters.

"And I politely refuse."

"What's your game here, man? Did you get my sister drunk so you could trick her into marrying you?"

I walk away from him before I do anything I'll regret. I remind myself that Jason and I are family now, but his words are like a slap to my face.

"I don't have to trick a woman into marrying me," I retort.

"No, you don't, but I also know my sister has turned you down many times, yet the second you both end up in Las Vegas, she comes back married to you. I knew something was off the minute I saw her yesterday morning." He walks over to where I am and points a finger to my face. I have about two inches on him, so I take a little pleasure in having to look down at him right before I swipe his finger away.

"Here's what's going to happen. You're not going to stick your finger in my face or give me orders. I would never take advantage of your sister or anyone else. That's not who I am, and you're not going to come in here and tell me about me and my wife." My voice is sharper than I intend, but I'm tired of being the bad guy in this situation.

"Then explain how this happened." He's not backing away. In fact, he comes closer. He shoves me against the wall and gets in my face. I wouldn't

have to hit him hard to get him to back away, but that's probably what he wants. It's what he would need to evict me and it would piss off my wife and push her further away from me.

"I could do that, but I need to speak with your sister first. In fact, scratch that. She's the only one I need to talk to, but I can't do that because she's always hiding behind you." I manage to slide away from him, walk to my coffee maker and pour each of us a cup. I take out the cream, and Jason helps himself.

"Has it ever occurred to you that she's the one who wanted to marry me?" I ask.

"Is that what happened?" Jason asks. He shakes his head and says, "No, that never occurred to me because it's a load of shit. You planned this, didn't you? Why?"

"Has your sister ever done anything she didn't want to do?" He doesn't answer so I take that as a victory. "Exactly."

"You want me to believe that somehow Mellie got to Vegas and decided to marry you? The same guy she's rejected over and over again the last two years. I'm sorry," he says, shaking his head, "I just don't see it."

"You should ask her about that then. I've said all I'm going to say to you about it." I put my cup down. "I need to get ready for work."

Jason stands and puts both hands up. "Me too. I came up here for one reason. Whatever happened in Vegas, Mellie doesn't want to stay married. Make it easy and end the marriage."

We stare at each other. Me not responding to his request, and him not saying another word. After what seems like forever, he nods once and leaves my apartment.



I stare at the door, my hand up, and ready to knock. Before I can, it swings

open and Alex stands in front of me, ushering me inside. “I heard you coming down the stairs. It’s like a herd of elephants. Mellie already left for work,” she says.

She puts a hand on her protruding belly and gestures for me to follow her into the kitchen. I hear tiny little footsteps. Addison, Alex and Jason’s two-year-old daughter, comes running into the kitchen.

She’s a tiny thing with a head full of curly, black hair. She smiles and runs to me, wrapping her arms around my legs.

“Ada!” she says after she lets me go. She stands back, puts both fists up, and hits me in the thigh. I take a step back, clutching onto where she just punched. She shuffles to the other side and hits me again.

“Ooh!” I take several exaggerated steps back until I stumble and fall. She moves fast and jumps on top of me, using her tiny little fists to rain punches on my chest and chin. She jumps off and starts counting to ten. I pretend to try to get up, but I fall back down. When she finally reaches ten, she cheers.

“I win, Mama!” I hop up and she laughs.

“Yeah, you kicked Adam’s butt, but you need to eat your breakfast.” She giggles but runs to the table. I follow behind her, lift her into the highchair, and place her bowl of oatmeal in front of her.

“I’m sorry if I upset you last night,” I say to Alex.

She waves a dismissive hand. “You didn’t upset me as much as surprise me, but that’s on you *and* Mellie. She wouldn’t talk about it last night, so I don’t have much to tell you. She pretty much shut down soon after you left.”

I still remember the day I first heard Mellie’s voice. I never laid eyes on her that day, but her voice called to me even then. It was when I was moving into my apartment. I didn’t bother with movers. I didn’t have much furniture and I didn’t want to pay for the added expense. It was me, Dennis, and his younger brother Marlo. Dennis is rather nerdy, with glasses as thick as his waist and a mind for numbers, but his younger brother is the opposite. He’s tall and spends hours at the gym. In fact, when I first heard Mellie, she was

flirting with him.

“Make sure you stay hydrated.” Those were the first words I heard, and I stopped on the stairs, eager to hear more.

Dennis is helping me bring my couch to the second floor. There’s a curve in the middle of the stairwell, and we have the couch leaning against the wall so we can figure out the best way to get it inside my apartment. It’s blocking my view of Marlo and the sweet voice downstairs.

“Yeah, I could use a little something,” Marlo says. The flirty lilt of his voice grates on my nerves. “Something sweet. Know where I can find that?”

I try to stick my neck out and look down the stairs, but there’s not enough room between the wall and the couch. All I can see is a piece of her hair in what looks like a side ponytail. She must be leaning against the wall with one of her feet propped against it, and I get a glimpse of her pink Nike sneakers.

“Maybe you can ask your fiancée about that, Marlo,” I interject. Their interaction is annoying me, and I want to let her know that he isn’t available.

“You’re engaged?” the sexy voice asks. I hear some shuffling and Marlo’s loud groan. Yeah, there’s bro code, and there’s being a serial cheater when you’re engaged. Not going to happen on my watch.

“What the fuck, Flynn?” Marlo says, annoyed with me.

Yeah, I cock blocked him last week when he hit on a waitress. His brother can’t understand why he’s engaged, but I think it’s because his fiancée has her own place, and he needs a roof over his head.

“It’s not serious, baby,” Marlo says, and I roll my eyes.

“Does she know that, asshole?”

I let out a loud laugh. Unlike Marlo, she has a moral compass. I hear a door open and another set of footsteps.

“Let’s go pick up the pizza. Alex needs to do some emotional eating,” Another female voice says.

I didn’t hear Mellie’s voice again that day, but the loud slam of the door told me she was through with Marlo. That was good enough for me.

“I didn’t force her, and I didn’t get her drunk,” I say to Alex, who has put a hand on my arm to get my attention.

“Pfft. I know that. Who can force Mellie to do anything? I believe you, but like I said, she went to bed last night and left before Jason this morning.” In other words, she wanted to make sure she left before I could come find her.

“Can you text me when she gets home tonight?”

“Okay,” she says, lowering her voice as if the only other person present isn’t a toddler, “but you better make sure nobody finds out. Jason is on full big brother protective mode. It’s kinda sexy,” she says as she bites her bottom lip.

I roll my eyes and look toward the ceiling.

“What?” she asks. “It *is* sexy, but I’m still going to help you.” She lowers her voice again and says, “You should know that we’re seeing Tina today.”

“I’ll never agree to an annulment or divorce,” I say, adamant. If I wasn’t in front of my friend and her toddler daughter, I’d punch a wall at the very idea.

We’re interrupted by a loud knock, and when I open the door, Addison’s nanny, Sylvie walks in. She’s a stout woman, probably in her fifties, with skin the color of midnight, a long face and bushy eyebrows.

“I have to get ready for work. I’ll text you tonight.” Alex says. I thank her and walk out of her apartment.



Alex is breathing heavy and holding her belly by the time we get to the Bean Town Café, which is owned by her half-sister, Tina. A former family attorney turned restaurant owner, but she's still licensed to practice law in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

It's the lunch rush, and when Tina sees us, she points to a nearby booth. After a few minutes, she slides in next to Alex.

"Hey, baby," she says to Alex's belly. "Your Auntie Tina can't wait to spoil you." She lowers her head and kisses Alex's stomach three times. "So, what is going on? Your text sounded really ominous, Alex."

I clear my throat, and when Tina finally looks at me, her smile drops. "Oh, God. What happened?" She immediately reaches across the table and grabs my hand.

"Mellie got herself into a bit of a situation in Vegas," Alex says on my behalf.

"You didn't get married, did you?" Tina throws her head back and starts to laugh. She sobers up when she realizes she's the only one at the table laughing. "No!" she says, gasping loudly. "Melanie Dupree!"

"I don't remember it. He must have drugged me." Alex looks at me, narrows her eyes, and purses her lips. I cut my eyes at her and turn back to

Tina.

“Oh my God! Please say you didn’t marry Adam. He went to Vegas too, right?”

Neither of us responds, and Tina puts both hands to her mouth and looks from me to Alex. I finally nod slowly, acknowledging the fact that I’m married for the first time today.

“Okay,” Tina says, taking a deep breath. She rubs her temples before looking back up at me. “You want my help getting a divorce.”

“An annulment,” I clarify. “I want to erase the fact that we were ever married.” I can picture the hurt look on his face when I tell him I’m not going to continue with this farce. A memory from the other night tries to rise to the surface. I see his face. He’s smiling and his blue eyes are locked on my brown. I remember the soft skin of his cheek under my hand when I reached to stroke his face. Someone at the table clears their throat, and I force the memory away.

A waitress comes by and places food in front of us. We come here so much, she already knows our lunch order. A chef’s salad for me and grilled chicken and veggies for Alex.

“You can get an annulment for several reasons in Massachusetts. If the person you married had a living spouse at the time of your marriage, if one party was defrauded, impotency, coercion, if he hid a fatal disease from you or if one of you is underage. Or you can file a no-fault divorce. There are two options there. One where you both agree that the marriage is not salvageable.” She takes a deep breath and says, “But I have a feeling Adam won’t agree to that so easily. You can still file it even if the spouse doesn’t cooperate, but it’s a little bit more complicated. You’ll have to file a written complaint with the court and then serve Adam with it. He’ll have to file a response.”

I lay my head in my hands, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. I refuse to succumb to tears again, though. I did that all last night

and the only thing it got me was a splitting headache. No, tears won't fix this. Only action will.

Tina reaches across the table and holds one of my hands. "How did this happen? I mean, we all know he's crazy about you. The first thing he does when he walks into a room is find you. I've watched him. He doesn't take a breath until he knows you're there. It's kind of sweet."

I pull my hands away, unwilling to hear this. "He is not sweet," I hiss. "He's just not used to being told no. He's only been interested this long because I keep turning him down. If he knew the real me, he would have run by now."

"Mellie, what the hell are you talking about?" Alex says. "You are fucking amazing, and everybody knows it. Stop with that shit."

Tears fill my eyes and I reach out and grab my sister-in-law's hand.

"That's because we're besties. You have to say that."

"No, I don't, but seriously, stop talking shit about one of my best friends. Listen," she says, looking around the place. "Why don't you just talk to Adam? Have a conversation before you decide on what to do. Tina's not going anywhere."

"She's right. I'm not. I'm here or you can always call me or stop by my house, but Mellie," she reaches for my hand again, her tone now turning serious, "are you sure you were drunk? They wouldn't have married you if you were too drunk to know what was going on."

I take a deep breath, but another scene from that night flashes through my mind. This time I'm leaning closer to him. His scent fills me when I rub my nose against his strong jaw. I push the thought away, deep, deep into the recesses of my mind. And because I'm surrounded by friends, I do manage to keep those memories at bay. Unlike last night.

"Of course, I was drunk," I insist. "The alcohol hits differently on the west coast." I widen my eyes and look around the table to show my outrage, to prove my point. "You think I would choose this?" I break eye contact with

Tina, but in my peripheral vision, I watch as she looks at Alex and they have a conversation with just their eyes.

“Okay,” Tina says, holding both hands up in surrender, “talk to your husband...” I groan at the mention of that title. “...and let’s talk afterwards. Lunch is on me today,” she says before getting up.

My stomach grumbles, and I immediately regret my salad. I look longingly at the cheeseburger and fries a couple is having at the next table over. I pick at my food, but I can feel Alex’s eyes on me.

“What?” I ask. I look up, and Alex hasn’t so much as touched her food. “Please eat before I text Jason.” She rolls her eyes and picks up her fork. We both laugh at my threat, and some of the tension in my shoulders lessens.

“Right on time,” Alex says, holding up her phone. Jason’s name flashes across the screen. My mind goes back to seeing *My Husband* on my phone a few days ago.

“Hey, Jay,” Alex says. I listen to their one-sided conversation, and as usual, Alex is listing everything she’s eaten today. “Is that good enough for you, Jason?” She laughs at whatever he says, then she puts the phone to her belly. “Okay. The baby loves you.” She laughs again and says, “Yeah, I guess I do too.” She blows him a kiss and ends the call.

We eat in silence, but I don’t miss Alex’s wayward glances. Once we’re done, I push my plate back and lean in my chair. I barely tasted the food while I ate, and despite the food in my stomach, I feel empty.

“You know how Adam’s eyes follow you wherever you go whenever you’re in the same room?” Alex asks. Tina returns with a warm chocolate chip cookie for each of us and slides back into the booth. “Well, I’ve noticed that your eyes follow him too,” she says softly. She turns to me and brushes a wayward piece of hair off my cheek.

“That’s only because I need to make sure he’s not going to attack me,” I grumble.

“And remember that time we saw him going to his apartment with a

woman?”

“Not really,” I lie.

“You were pissed about it for days until he introduced her to us. As soon as you learned she was his cousin visiting from Dublin, your attitude vanished,” Alex says, and Tina nods.

I reach for my cookie and take a small bite. Normally, I’d devour this, but I’m too stressed to eat today.

“I don’t remember it that way. I had a stressful week at work, so that’s probably why I was in a bad mood. It had nothing to do with his cousin.” I take another bite of the cookie and add, “We had that audit.”

Alex and Tina look at each other again, and neither one of them seem convinced by my answer.

“So, you weren’t jealous of the thought of him dating someone?” I roll my eyes at Alex’s question, but inside I want to scream. The very idea of Adam and another woman makes my blood boil, but only because he’s ruined so many of my dates, not because I want him for myself.

“Hell no, I wasn’t jealous. Maybe if he had someone, he’d leave me alone.” I shove the other half of the cookie in my mouth and pray they change the subject, but once again, my prayer goes unanswered.

“Then why do you look out the window whenever you hear him going out or coming in? And what about that time you thought you heard high heels on the stairs?”

“What about it? I don’t remember that.” I clear my throat loudly and look away.

“You ran up there and barged into his apartment. You had egg on your face when it was his mother.” Alex and Tina both stare at me. The look in Alex’s eye tells me she’s not going to let me get away with pretending not to remember.

“Oh, that. Yeah.” An uncomfortable throat clearing later, I say, “I was only trying to get back at him.” I can feel the color creeping up my neck and

face.

I barged into his apartment without the courtesy of a knock, ready to confront the woman. When I saw his mother, I turned on my heels and walked out, but not before I saw Adam's eyes light up at my sudden appearance.

Alex and Tina exchange looks again, but I clear my throat and cross my arms, almost daring them to say another word.

“Mellie, is there any part of you that wanted to marry him? You guys have this gravitational pull. I don't know why you've turned him down so many times.” Alex holds a hand up before I can deny it. “Don't answer now. I already know what you're going to say. Listen, talk to Adam tonight, okay? Stop running from him. You two did a grownup thing, so sit down and talk about it like adults.”



NEW YEAR'S EVE

Only ten minutes until the New Year. I knock loud enough to be heard over the loud music on the other side of the door. A smiling face opens the door, but it's not the one I've been obsessed with for the past two years. No, this is a friend of her brother's, and her very protective husband comes and stands right behind her. His eyes narrow at me, and he puts an arm across her shoulders. He pulls her closer and kisses her temple.

"Jake and Sandy, right?" I ask, and she smiles warmly but he only stares at me. Jake is Jason's best friend since college, and Sandy is his wife. They step away, and I walk inside.

"Hey, Adam," Jake says. "Everyone's in the kitchen."

I follow them, holding the bottle of champagne I've been saving. My eyes find her immediately. She's at the kitchen island pouring drinks. I go and stand next to her and she freezes. She knows who it is. Just like I always know when she's nearby.

"Happy New Year, love," I whisper.

She nods curtly but won't look at me.

"Alex, your mocktail," Mel says. She hands Alex a pink drink. "And

something else for the rest of us.” She gives everyone else a glass. Then she pours another and hands it to me. I take a sip. Whatever it is, it’s much too sweet for my taste, but I manage to finish it. Everyone else files out of the kitchen to go wait for the ball to drop.

“What are you doing here?” Her words slur, and for the first time tonight, she looks at me. She’s beautiful like always. Unlike every other time, she’s not wearing makeup tonight. Her hair is down, framing her long face. She licks her plump lips, and I will myself not to moan.

“Didn’t want to ring in the New Year alone.” I move closer, reach around her, and grab the corkscrew. Once I open my bottle of champagne, I pour each of us a glass.

“Five more minutes until the ball drops!” someone shouts from the other room. Music is turned on, and I can no longer hear what they are saying.

“Where’s your family? I know you spent Christmas with your mother,” she says. I look down and notice she’s in a black jumpsuit with a sheer long top. If she were mine, I’d pull her close and never let her go.

“Ma went to a neighbor’s house.” She nods and slowly sips her champagne. I lift my glass and we clink. I stand next to her, my body touching hers. I don’t know if it’s the lulling effects of the alcohol, but she puts her head on my shoulder. When we finish, I pour each of us another glass.

When everyone starts to countdown, I face her. Our eyes remain locked while we count down to one. Before she can say happy New Year, I lean down and capture her lips in a kiss. She doesn’t fight me or pull away like I thought she would. She slides a hand into my hair and kisses me as if she’s been craving me for years. She tastes better than I thought, and her warm lips are pliant under mine. I put my hands on her waist and lift her on the island. She wraps her long legs around me and deepens the kiss.

Her hands slide underneath my shirt, and she strokes the muscles in my back, moaning into my mouth, and I pull close enough to grind my erection

on her. She moans again and grabs my ass, pressing me closer.

“I’ve been waiting forever to do that. It’s better than I ever imagined. Come upstairs with me,” I whisper against her mouth.

She pulls away, and the haunted look in her eyes guts me.

“I’m not the one-night-stand type.” She lets out a humorless laugh.

“You should know better than that. I want all the nights with you, not just one.”

“Right. Of course, you do.” She rolls her eyes heavenward and lets out a strained laugh. “Until I give you what you want, right?” I look into her brown eyes and push a piece of hair off her forehead. She doesn’t look away like she always does. When I lay my forehead against hers, she wraps an arm around me. “If only, Adam. If only I could believe this would last.”

I pull away and note the empty look in her eyes. It almost breaks me. Someone in the other room laughs, and Mel sighs. “I’m surrounded by people in love all the time.”

“What can I do to prove to you that I want you, and not just for one night.”

“I can’t get hurt.”

“I would never hurt you.”

“You would unless I come up with a way to keep you. How can you want me when—”

“When what, love?” I caress her cheeks and wait for her to speak, but all she does is breathe. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Don’t put ideas in my head, Adam.”

“Bend your knees, Dunbar!” Chad Brown, owner of Combat, a small gym on the south side of Boston yells, pulling me out of my daydream. We’re in the middle of the boxing ring, and Dunbar is doing his best to knock me out. The problem is, I can anticipate all his moves. He jabs, I move a fraction, and he misses.

We’ve been doing this song and dance for way too long, but the sparring

is the only thing keeping me from losing my mind. All the calls to my wife today have gone to voicemail and my texts have been ignored, even though I can see she's read them.

I've been a tight coil of emotion all day. The teachers at the school didn't know what to do with me. I've never been so short tempered with them before. Hell, I haven't lost my temper since the lawyer's visit after my father's death, but here I am, so angry that I'm about to erupt.

Mel's denial of our marriage last night comes to mind, and I lose focus. Dunbar manages to land a jab to my ribs. Having had enough of him, I take a few steps back, then I walk forward, jab him in the same spot three times and surprise the fuck out of him with a left hook. He lands flat on his back, and I don't bother to check on him. I yank off the gloves and climb out of the ring.

"What the fuck, Flynn?" Chad asks, but I walk away without so much as a backwards glance.

I've had enough of this fucking day. The instant I get in the locker room, I check my phone.

Alex – Come downstairs now!!!

I let out a string of curses when I see the text Alex sent over thirty minutes ago. The time got away from me, and instead of going home two hours ago like I intended, I stayed at the gym, hoping the physical activity would take my mind off my personal problems. It didn't.

Boxing has always been my escape. It's what saved me as a troubled teenager, until a fractured elbow ended my hopes of going professional. Well, that and my mother crying and begging me to stop the madness. If there's one thing I can't take, it's a crying woman. Especially one I love.

Now, I'm across town, sweating and still frustrated over my runaway bride. My phone vibrates and for some reason, I get a sense of hope. Maybe Alex told me to come downstairs for a reason. Maybe that reason is calling my phone right now, ready to talk, but my hopes are dashed when I see the familiar New York phone number flash across my screen.

I hit decline and slide the phone back into my pocket. As soon as I do, it starts to vibrate again, but all I can focus on now is getting inside my truck and driving home. Traffic is light for a Monday evening, and I get to our quiet street in under fifteen minutes.

The gray skies threaten snow, and a few flurries start to fall by the time I pull into my parking spot behind the detached garage. There's a strange car with New Jersey license plates parked behind Mellie's Honda Civic, but I don't give it any more thought than noticing it's there. Mel and Jason are from New Jersey, and they get visitors often.

I grab my gym bag and nearly trip out of the truck. I cross the backyard and unlock the backdoor. I check my phone again, and there are no missed calls from my wife, but three from the New York number.

"Get a fucking clue," I say under my breath right before I rap my knuckles against the backdoor. Alex opens, her eyes wide and cheeks pink. Little Addison walks behind her and wraps her arms around her mother's legs.

"Hi, Ada," she says, smiling up at me. I hold my hands out to her, and she practically jumps into my arms. I tickle her ribs, and she giggles.

"What took you so long?" Alex asks, her voice hushed. She gestures for me to come in.

"Look who stopped by." Alex's voice is high when she addresses the room. Mel's back is to me while she looks through the fridge, but her body stiffens at Alex's announcement. Jason's smile drops, and he automatically takes a step closer to me, putting himself between me and Mel.

"I don't think we can take anymore surprise visitors," Mel says, but she turns and for the first time since we said our vows, she looks at me, and not with murderous intent. She looks tired, and part of me feels responsible for that, but there's something there too. She's on guard more than usual. Even now, she's standing behind the open fridge door, almost as if it would provide her with some sort of shield.

“Do you want to join us for dinner, Adam?” Jason turns to his wife, and I can feel the irritation oozing out of him by her invitation, but she doesn’t back down. “We’re all family now,” she whispers.

The smell of home cooking makes my stomach grumble. Jason looks at Mel, as if to confirm Alex’s invitation is fine with her, but a door opens and footsteps approach. Mel’s body goes completely rigid when her mother walks into the kitchen, and she instinctively steps as far away from the woman as possible while remaining in the same room.

“Gamma!” Addison announces, pointing at the woman. I’ve met her briefly before. Diana Dupree resembles both of her children. From their light brown skin to their high cheekbones. The only differences are a few crows’ feet around her eyes and mouth, and her salt and pepper hair, which she keeps in a stylish bob. The only thing they inherited from their father is his height. Their mom barely reaches Jason’s shoulder.

“Flynn, you remember my mother,” Jason says. “Mom, this is Adam Flynn. He lives upstairs.” She smiles at me and shakes my hand. Even the smile is the same as Mel’s.

“What brings you over tonight, Adam?” she asks, but she turns and opens the oven door without giving me time to respond.

Mel lets out a sound, and when I turn to look at her, she gives me a firm head shake while mouthing for me to shut up.

“Just here to get my wife,” I announce.

The room goes deathly silent for about a split second, right before Mel gasps and Alex covers her shock with a series of coughs. Jason runs over to his wife to make sure she’s okay, and Mel turns her glare on me. “Shut up,” she hisses. “Just shut the hell up for once in your life. Please.”

I’d do anything for her but keeping quiet about our marriage is not one of them.

“Who is your wife, dear?” Mrs. Dupree asks. She puts down her oven mitts, turns, and smiles at me again.

“Your daughter.”

Her smile vanishes so fast, it was as if it was never there. She turns her shocked eyes on Mel, who walks around her mother, comes to stand by me, and grabs my hand. The minute she intertwines our fingers, I feel a twinge inside my chest. This is what she did the night we got married. She fell asleep in my arms with our fingers linked.

“What? What are you up to now, Melanie?” Mrs. Dupree says. “You never told me you were dating anyone.” Then, instead of turning to Mel for confirmation, she turns to Jason. “Jason, is this true?”

“Mel is right here,” I say. “Why are you looking at Jason?”

“Jason, is this true?” she asks again, her voice rising this time.

“I’m right here, Mother,” Mel informs her. Jason doesn’t give their mother an answer, so she turns her gaze on my wife. She looks down at our joined hands and back to her daughter’s face. “And yes, I got married. Is that a crime? Millions of people get married every day. What’s really the issue? You’ll miss out on your chance to call me a spinster?”

She puts her hands on her hips and waits for Jason to answer, but when Addison starts to fuss in my arms, Jason comes and takes her from me.

“It’s Mellie’s announcement, Mom. It wasn’t my place to tell you.”

“Surprise! I’m married. It just happened over the weekend, and I was only down here to get my clothes, but I’ll just come back down later. Preferably after you go to sleep or go back to Jersey or wherever.” Mel waves a dismissive hand in her mother’s direction, turns to me, lays a hand on my chest, and says, “Let’s go home...honey.” She coughs after calling me honey. Then, she gets on her tippy toes and drops the quickest kiss on my lips. “I’ve missed you,” she whispers.

So, I do the only thing I can do. I grab the back of her head and give her a kiss too indecent for company. By the time I pull away, she can’t meet anyone’s gaze, Alex is smiling, and Jason is looking at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

Mrs. Dupree looks around the room, her mouth hanging open while looking for confirmation of the information she just learned. When no one answers her, she throws her hands in the air before turning back to Mel. She crosses the room and grabs her left hand.

“Very funny, Melanie. Did he marry you without a ring?” She drops her daughter’s hand, scoffs, and goes back to the oven.

“It was a little too big, so we got it resized. It’s upstairs, Mel.”

“No one calls her Mel,” her mother says.

“Her husband does,” I announce.

“As stimulating as this conversation is, we’re going to go.” Mel walks out of the kitchen, but instead of going to the front door, she goes to the back of the apartment and into her bedroom. I follow, and when I get there, she’s shoving clothes inside a suitcase. I walk to her closet and grab a handful of clothes still on the hangers.

“Let’s go.” I turn and nearly collide with Jason. He steps into the room and closes the door behind him.

“Mellie, you don’t have to leave.”

My wife walks to Jason and points a finger in his chest. “If you think I’m staying under the same roof as our mother, you’re nuts. Feel free to give yourself brain surgery. And did you know she was coming?” she asks, lowering her voice. “This is what I get!” she yells. “I knew I should have moved out last month, but you and Alex convinced me to stay, and now look. My entire life has gone to hell!” She runs a hand over her face and walks to the door, but the door opens and her mother walks in, with Alex waddling behind her, holding Addison’s hand.

“Hi, Ada!” she runs to me, holding up both hands.

I drop the pile of clothes and pick her up. She kisses my cheek before she lays her head on my shoulder.

“Why don’t we all have dinner?” Mrs. Dupree says. She looks at me and smiles, but the smile never reaches her eyes. “I want to talk to all my kids,”

she says, looking at Jason, Alex, and Mel, but when she looks at me, her fake smile slips. “I was thinking that with the baby coming soon, maybe I can stay for a few months.” The suitcase falls from Mel’s hand, landing with a loud thud against the hardwood floor.

“What about the house? Aren’t you due to close on it in two weeks?” Jason asks.

His mother shrugs and says, “That fell through. I’ll tell you all about it over dinner. Come on.” She starts to walk away, but looks at Mel before saying, “I’d like to get to know your uh, your Adam,” she says. “Although, Melanie, I’m surprised by the news. Not just this so-called marriage, but the groom. He’s not exactly the kind of man you’ve always talked about. Couldn’t you find your type in this city or did you scare them all away? You’ve always been so headstrong.” She laughs and turns to me. “And she has expensive taste, so be warned. Champagne taste on a beer budget. What is it that you do again? Whatever it is, you’d better get a second job.”

“Mom, enough!” Jason yells.

Melanie steels her spine and walks to her mother. Jason goes to stand right next to her, and I stand on her other side and throw my free hand across her shoulders. For the first time ever, she doesn’t shrug away.

“And what would you know about my type, Mother? When was the last time we had a heart to heart? Worry about your own type since daddy left you.” Alex gasps loudly, and Addison mimics her mother’s actions and giggles at her own cleverness. “For that much younger woman, too. I wonder why?” All color leaves her mother’s face. Jason closes his eyes and rubs his forehead. “Let’s go, Adam.”

“Some things never change, Melanie.” Diane Dupree closes her eyes as if she’s pained.

“Wrong. A lot has changed. For instance, if you want to dish it out now, you better be ready to take it.”

Jason takes Addison from me, and I grab the stack of clothes on Mel’s

bed. Without another word, I follow my wife out of the bedroom and out of the apartment.



She tosses the suitcase in the middle of my living room, and it crashes into my coffee table. The mug of coffee I left there this morning falls over and spills. She starts to pace, cursing like a sailor with each angry step.

After hanging her clothes in my closet, I wipe down the spilled coffee all while Mel's pacing continues. For the first time tonight, I look at what she's wearing. She's in purple and gray yoga pants and a matching hoodie. The hoodie hugs her narrow waist, showing off her hips and thick ass. All I can think about is walking over there, putting my hands on her hips, and kissing her until she calms down.

"Okay." She takes several deep breaths before coming to stand in front of me. "I'm going to need a little time to find my own place, but in the meantime, I need a small favor from you." I arch my eyebrows at her declaration. "I need you to let me stay here. At least until Alex has that baby." I sit on the couch and put my hands behind my head. I school my features so she won't see how happy I am by her announcement.

"Is that right?" I ask.

"Yes. Do you know why, Adam? Because it's the least you can do after what you did to me in Vegas. Besides, Jason always folds where our mother is concerned. She drops this bombshell, and he's too much of a nice guy to

tell her to G-T-F-O. So,” she says, sighing deeply, “I guess I can sleep on the couch, but it would be nice if you would let me have the bed.”

“The bed is yours.” I quickly agree to her demand. She stops her pacing, turns to me, and narrows her eyes. “But let’s get one thing straight. I didn’t do anything to you in Vegas, so you can stop that lie right the hell now.”

“I’ll pay rent of course,” she says, ignoring my last comment. “Name your price.” I stand and approach her. She backs away and ends up stuck between my body and the wall. “I’d go stay with Ananda, but she just got married and I don’t want to be a nuisance to her right now, and a hotel would cost too much money and would set me back. Dammit.”

“And you hate being alone, so I’m your next best choice.”

“How do you know I hate being alone?” She crosses her arms and stares.

“You live with your brother and his family.” I shrug. “I bet you never had any intentions of moving out. You only offered to move knowing they would ask you to stay.”

She scoffs and moves away from me. I watch her tight ass pace across my living room, and I will my body not to have its natural reaction. I reach out, touch her arm, and she stops walking. When she looks at me again, I see the uncertainty in her eyes. The fire from minutes ago is gone, and the only things left are the vulnerability and unease emanating from her. It’s the same look she had on New Year’s Eve. I’ve noticed it before, and I’ve always wondered why. Why someone so beautiful, smart, and loved by so many people would always have this air of loneliness, but I think I finally got my answer tonight.

“Don’t act like I don’t see you, Mel. Since the first time I laid eyes on you, I saw you. Not just the beautiful face but what’s underneath. The stuff you try to hide from the rest of the world. I see it all, and I want it all.”

She clears her throat, grabbing the strings of her hoodie. She looks away without responding to me.

“You can stay here. You can stay forever, but nothing in life is free.”

She sighs, but she straightens her spine and I watch, transfixed as her fire returns. “Of course,” she says, almost as if she’s disappointed by my words. “How much? And remember, I know how much your rent is so don’t try and take advantage of me.”

A laugh escapes, but my wife doesn’t laugh along with me. “No amount of money can buy it.”

Her eyes narrow. “Can’t buy what exactly? Everyone has their price, Adam. Name yours.”

“I want you to be my wife.” She opens her mouth to argue, but I put my fingers to her soft lips. “And I don’t mean only when your mother is around. I want you to give being married to me a real chance, because let’s face it. Despite what you told your brother and Alex, the two of us know the truth about what really happened in Las Vegas.”

She puts a palm in my face and gives me her back, but she doesn’t deny my words.

“Here’s what I want,” I tell her. “I want you to wear your ring. You will move in here fully. You will contact the post office and have your address changed, and yes, Mel. I know the only change is the apartment number, but I don’t care. And last, but not least, you will take my last name.”

She stops breathing when I finish talking. She turns around slowly, shoves at my chest, and when I don’t budge, she does it again and again.

“Of course, you’d take advantage. No way.” She grabs her suitcase and starts to walk away. “I’ll go stay in a hotel until I get a place.”

“Fine.” I take a dramatic seat on my sofa. She eyes me warily. “When are you going to tell your mother you got drunk, married me, and flew back to Boston before I woke up? You were drunk, right? Isn’t that the story you’re telling everyone?” That stops her in her tracks. She drops the suitcase again, and I expel a breath of relief. “Or you can piss her off by being married to the guy she obviously dislikes. The guy that’s not your type according to her. One year, Mel. I’m asking you to be my wife for one year.”

She assesses me, but she doesn't make any more attempts to leave. In fact, she unzips the hoodie, revealing a body-hugging crop top that shows just a sliver of brown, smooth skin. I hold my breath while I wait for her next move. "Or," she says, "we can fight for it. Trial by combat." She raises both hands and starts to stretch. Her top rides up and I get a view of her bare stomach.

"Trial by combat? Like in Game of Thrones?" I ask, just a little bit confused by the rapid change of subject.

"Just like that, except not to the death. We fight it out. When I win, you let me stay here. You get the couch and play the doting husband *only* when my mother is around. Until I move out of here and annul this sham of a marriage."

"What about if I win?" I cross my arms over my chest, amused by the very idea.

"You won't."

"You know I was training to be a professional boxer a few years ago, right?"

She shrugs and waves me off as if my years in the boxing ring mean absolutely nothing.

"Yeah, yeah. Boxing is fake, and you probably weren't that good since you're obviously not a professional boxer." Before I can remind her that she must be thinking about wrestling, she speaks again. "That crap is all choreographed. I'm talking about more of a cage match where anything goes. And Adam, I hope you agree, because I really want to kick your ass for the hell you put me through in Vegas. I'm gonna gouge out your eyes and scratch your face. You won't be so pretty when I leave a few scars on that mug of yours." She cracks her knuckles and starts to squat before doing a series of high knee jumps.

"Okay, then. Tell you what? If you can land a single hit, you win. But you have to land that hit before I can grab you." She starts to do some high kicks.

When she does the boxer's shuffle, I arch my eyebrows and hold my tongue. No need to tell her that her form is wrong or that she's locking her elbows when she punches.

"Not necessary, but I want to add one more thing. You don't have to wait for the year to be up when you decide you want out. Just give me enough time to find a place."

"Done," I tell her as soon as the words are out of her mouth.

"Come on," she says. "I've been in a lot of fights in my life. I bet you've only ever fought in the ring. This boy groped me in the tenth grade, and I kicked his ass. I know I can take you."

"Yeah, of course you can. Tenth graders and professional boxers are virtually the same." She snorts, takes a fighting stance, and starts to throw punches, locking her elbows again. "Aren't you going to stretch?"

Now. it's my turn to snort. "I think I'll be okay. So, do you agree to my terms? I agree to yours. You land just one hit, and you can run this apartment. I'll even make you breakfast every morning."

"And my laundry. I hate doing it."

"Deal, but remember what I want."

"Whatever. I'm not worried about it."



I throw a few more air punches before I start to do my boxer shuffle. He's standing there, smugly smirking at me. I knew all along he'd make a ridiculous offer. And no way would he ever hurt me. I know that for a fact, but if I can hide out here while my mother's in town, that won't be too bad. All I have to do is land one kick or punch. Hell, all I need is to touch him before he can grab me.

To distract him, I start to do a series of fake coughs and wait for him to approach and play hero. Right on cue, he walk towards me, probably to make sure I'm not choking. I lunge at him, but before my fist can make contact, he snatches my arm and twists me around. In just the blink of an eye, I'm being cradled in his arms, my back to his broad chest. He's holding both of my arms, and as much as I try, I can't seem to move an inch.

I take a deep breath, and with all the strength I have, I try to break his hold, but Adam manages to restrain me with hardly any effort. I try to kick behind me, but he presses himself closer, rendering me completely immobile. I'd have to be dead not to feel his hard expanse of a chest on my back, or what feels like a semi hard dick pressed on my ass.

"Fight's over, Mel." The feel of his breath so close to my ear is like a switch. I stop all attempts of freeing myself. "I win," he says. He pulls me

further into his broad body.

“Two out of three,” I pant.

“That wasn’t the agreement. Negotiations are over. You had to hit me before I could grab you, and despite your very blatant attempt at cheating, I still won, and you are going to be my wife in every way.” He finally releases my hands, and I stumble before turning around to face him. We both stand there, chests heaving, and my feet rooted to my spot. His hands return, but they travel down my sides until he reaches my hips and grabs them, spins me around, and pushes me back into him. Right on his very hard dick.

“For two years, Melanie. Two fucking years I’ve been walking around with a hard on for you.” The words are low, husky. Goosebumps spread throughout my body, and I feel the flushing of my skin. My nipples pebble, and when he grinds into me just a tiny bit, I let out a soft moan at the warm sensation that spreads across my entire body.

Those same large hands finally leave my hips, but they find their way underneath the hem of my crop top and slowly caress my skin. His hands are rough, a complete contrast to my soft skin.

“Is that why you took advantage of me when you did? Because of your hard on?” I ask him in an attempt to break the spell he’s just cast on me. My plan backfires. He moves closer. He lowers his head and traces his lips against my neck. My body betrays me, and I move my head, giving him more access.

“You drive me fucking crazy, do you know that? Despite your delusions, I still want you. You want to be my victim, Mel? If being my victim is the only way I can have you, I’ll gladly let you play the part.” He wraps an arm around my waist, keeping me in place, but his other hand continues its journey north. When he reaches my bra, he traces a finger underneath it, but makes no move to cup my breast. “Tell me to stop, and I will.” His mouth lands on my ear, and I shudder. I tell myself that it’s because my ears are sensitive, not because of anything else, but the dampness between my legs

says otherwise. “Tell me to stop.” His words are like a challenge. It’s as if he knows I don’t want him to stop.

No words leave my mouth, and that hand finds its way underneath my bra, cupping my small breast. He kisses the side of my neck, sucking on the skin right above my shoulder blade.

I throw my head back, losing myself completely to the sweet sensations.

The hand leaves my breast and I let out a groan in protest, but it travels south this time, cupping my pussy over my yoga pants. He rubs me, and I open my legs wider for him, screaming in my mind for him to really touch me there, with no barrier.

“Turn around,” he roughly commands right as he removes his hand from my greedy pussy. He also drops the possessive arm he had around my waist. I turn and look right into his blue eyes. His chest is heaving, and his nostrils are flared. Even his hair is sticking up on all sides. My eyes travel down his body, and I let out a loud moan at the sight of the bulge in his sweatpants.

“Your move,” he says, his voice strained. He lifts a hand, and my heart rate picks up in anticipation of him touching me, but all he does is run a hand through his hair. “Your move,” he says again. The words come out croaked, almost as if he has to dig deep to find some kind of control.

His breathing is still erratic, and the bulge has gotten bigger. I lick my lips at the thought of touching it. Or doing more to it. I can feel my own pulse and I know if I touch myself right now, I will be slick with need. My nipples are like two little rocks inside my bra, and my heart rate is nowhere near calm.

He’s your husband, Mellie, the little devil on my shoulder says.

It’s not as if I haven’t been thinking about him since the day I laid eyes on him. I was obsessed with him the second I heard his voice that day in the stairwell. That hint of an Irish brogue was so damn sexy, and when I finally saw him working out in the backyard for the first time, I couldn’t look away even if I wanted to. Tall, broad, and imposing. I was drawn to him

immediately, but there was no way I was going to get involved with my brother's tenant, especially when he only lives one floor up. Besides, I'm positive this won't last. He'll lose interest and move on. That's for another day, though.

Tonight, it's just me and him. Me and my husband. My very handsome husband. With a big package. My body is eager for it. For him. It's been too long since I've been with a man, and the last time was so unimpressive that I've regretted it since. He's still standing before me. Chest heaving. Breath coming in pants. Dick still hard.

The night of our quick wedding flashes through my mind. We're holding hands and running through the Vegas streets, laughing like a real couple in love.

"This is real, Mel. I'm never letting you go." The memory from a few nights ago flashes through my mind. I remember not believing him when he said it.

So, I do the only thing I can do. I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him. He catches me and doesn't so much as waver in surprise at my sudden assault. I look down into his eyes, both of us now panting as if we just ran a marathon. Before I can talk myself out of it, I crash my mouth on his and sigh in relief. He kisses me back just as desperately, just as greedily. His hands cup my ass, and he walks backwards to the rear of the apartment. He kicks a door open so hard, it hits the wall, and I know there will be damage there, but neither one of us cares about that right now.

His mouth never leaves mine. In fact, he devours me, drinking me in as if he can never get enough. He ends the kiss abruptly, and I bounce on his messy bed. I don't give myself time to think. I don't try to talk myself out of this and run out the front door, downstairs, and away from this apartment and my new husband. No, instead, I peel off my shirt while he takes off my shoes and throws them to the far corners of the room. My yoga pants and underwear are off in one swoop. By the time he tosses them somewhere, I've

removed my bra.

He looms over me, his eyes darker than I've ever seen. He lets out a sound like a growl and a moan. Whatever it is, it makes me feel wanted. Powerful. Like a goddess who's about to be worshipped. I reach for his shirt and pull it over his head. I've seen him shirtless many times. Every time he works out in the backyard before work, I make it a point to look. From beginning to end, I watch him work this body but there is nothing like seeing it up close. His skin isn't flawless. He has scars. One ugly one right by his shoulder. Unable to stop myself, I reach for it and run my fingers over the roughened skin. He closes his eyes and exhales as if my touch means more to him than the air he breathes. But I don't stop there. I glide that same hand down his body, across his torso, and marvel at his rock-hard stomach. Looking at it is nothing like the glory of touching it. I reach his waist, and my hands hang right above the elastic waist of his sweatpants. Too far gone, I push them down and he kicks them off.

"Holy fuck," I say when I get a look at what he was hiding in those pants. It's longer and thicker than any dick I've ever been acquainted with. The head is thick, and when I stroke the smooth tip, pre-cum coats my fingertips. He's usually unflappable, but the touch of my hand on his dick makes his entire body shudder.

I look into his eyes and something feral flashes. He pulls me down on the bed, crashes on top of me, and kisses me savagely. He sucks on my lower lip right before he sticks his tongue in my mouth again. I lay back, legs spread, and he covers my body with his.

I touch him everywhere. His broad back. His taut ass. His hard, tapered waist. Thoughts of turning us over so I can bite his ass flood my mind. While my hands explore his body, his mouth explores my neck, collar bone, and the top of my breasts. Like a cheap slut, I spread my legs wider, wanting and needing more of him. I can feel the dampness between my legs, and all I want now is to feel his hands or his dick in my pussy.

“Adam,” I whisper, unsure of what I’m asking for.

He doesn’t answer. Maybe he can’t. When his hot mouth finally closes around a nipple, I close my eyes and sink further into the bed. I grind underneath him, needing more, but he’s not ready to give me what I want. He laves my nipples, biting, sucking, and pulling them into his mouth. He kisses his way down, past my stomach to my neediest part. He spreads my lips apart, and I hear another groan from him. His hot tongue runs across my clit, and the surprise movement almost makes me jump off the bed.

“I always knew you would taste this good,” he says. He kneels in front of me and I look down to catch him looking at my spread pussy. “But if I do what I’ve been fantasizing about for two years and eat your pussy before I sink into you, I won’t last.” He offers me his hand. I reach for it, and he roughly lifts me and turns me around to face the headboard.

He grabs my hips, those rough hands holding me in place, not giving me the ability to move. Not that I would. Not that I want to. He’s gentle when he positions me on all fours.

“You taste like my downfall.” His tongue trails the side of my neck while he glides his big cock along my folds. I can feel how slick we are together. I reach behind me and feel the top of his dick, coated with my wetness. When I move my hand, I turn around and catch his eye before I put my fingers in my mouth, tasting our mixture. He smirks at me, as if he can read my mind and knows all my secrets. He’s right. This does taste like my downfall. Like my point of no return. He swirls his dick around my entrance, but he doesn’t give me what I want. At least not yet.

“I should keep this from you, Mel.” He puts the tip inside, and I let out a groan of frustration. I arch my back and try to push back and take him all in, but he anticipates my move. His large hand lands on my lower back and keeps me in place, preventing me from getting what I want. “I don’t think you deserve this.” He lowers his chest to my back. I can feel his dick. It’s so close. Just a little bit lower and one push, he’d be home, but he refuses to

cooperate. “Beg me for it.” His warm breath caresses my sensitive ear. “Beg me,” he commands in a husky whisper.

I bite my bottom lip to stop myself from screaming. I reach behind me and grab his cock, preventing him from moving it away, but I only have a chance to jerk it twice before he moves away from me. He slaps my ass hard, surprising me. “You’re a greedy little thing, aren’t you, Mel? My greedy little wife.” He takes that dick and swirls it at my entrance again. I let out a squeal. He gives me another inch and abruptly pulls out.

“Please.” The one word comes out like a croak, and he slams into me so fast and hard that I almost fall over, but he grabs my hips and pulls me back just in time.

He slaps my ass hard again, but he doesn’t move his hand after the hit. He holds on to my ass cheek, squeezing it so hard I know I’ll have his handprint on me, but I don’t have much time to think about that. He pulls out and pushes himself into me again, stretching me. His hand finally leaves my ass and snakes its way to my pussy. I groan like a greedy whore when he strokes my clit with his thick fingers.

He plays with my clit and fucks me from behind. I turn to look at his face, and his eyes are closed tight, his teeth bared and his breathing erratic. I throw my head back and give in to the sensation of having my husband inside of me for the first time. His grunts make him sound feral, and the way he’s driving into me, makes me feel wanted like never before. I close my eyes and softly whisper his name while he fucks me. He slaps my pussy, and the sudden assault pushes me over the edge. I freefall and feel myself floating above, leaving me with zero control of my body or the erotic sounds coming out of my mouth.

But Adam isn’t done. At least not yet. He wraps his arm around my ponytail, pulling my head back, and drives into me harder, with deeper strokes. He pulls me into his chest, lets go of my ponytail and wraps a muscled arm around me, cupping a breast. The thrusts continue until he fucks

me into another mind-blowing orgasm. Sweat coats both our bodies. I can feel his corded muscles on my back. He's so tense, I know he's ready to snap.

And it doesn't take long. He growls in my ear. It's a deep rumble in his chest, and I can tell he's baring his teeth. He stills and pumps into me one last time, releasing everything he has inside of me. I take it all, my head thrown back, like a greedy, needy slut, eager for everything he gives. I fall on my stomach, and my face lands on a pillow that smells like him. My legs spread and the evidence of what we just did slides out of me. He lays right next to me and pulls me into his arms, and I let him.

While we both do our best to catch our breath, he kisses my temple. I lay on my side, and he spoons me. His big body covering all of mine. I'll deal with the consequences of our actions tomorrow. Tonight, I'll push everything aside and enjoy having the warm body of a man next to me. Lord knows it's been a while, but he turns me around and looks into my eyes.

"I can practically hear your thoughts racing," he says.

"No, you can't. I'm not dealing with this until tomorrow."

My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten since lunch.

"If by dealing with this you mean moving the rest of your things up here, I agree. We can both deal with it tomorrow."

I freeze at his words. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll find a place to go stay and figure out the fastest way to get out of this marriage. Even if Adam fights it, he can't force me to stay married to him. It might take longer, but the marriage will eventually end.

My stomach rumbles again, and I do my best to extricate myself from Adam's hold, but that gets me nowhere. "Um, I'm going to order myself some dinner." The afterglow of what we've just done starts to wane, and all I want now is space.

Instead, he moves closer, kisses my cheek, and strokes my ponytail. The movements are slow and tender, and for some unknown reason, tears fill my eyes.

“I’ll get us something.” He makes no moves to get up, but he must hear my stomach again because he finally moves away, and the bed creaks under his weight. He stands tall and glorious. His presence in the large room makes the room feel small, but it’s his naked body I can’t get enough of. His large dick is already semi hard again, and I can’t help but lick my lips at the sight of it.

His washboard abs are so close that I will myself not to reach out and touch them. When he bends down to grab his pants, I get a clear view of his tight ass. His entire backside is a wall of muscle. He’s perfectly shaped, like a Greek statue, but with a huge dick.

The phone vibrates in his hand, and he curses and says something under his breath that I don’t hear. He opens a food delivery app, and while he places our order, I spend the time staring at his face and wonder how a man so handsome, and with the perfect body, could possibly think he wants someone like me.

“Food will be here soon.”

I look up at the ceiling and shake my head. He didn’t even bother to ask me what I want. Great, Melanie. Just great. It’s like a bucket of ice water was dropped on me. I get out of the bed, walk out of the room and grab my suitcase. I don’t bother to drag it into the room. I open it and find a comfortable pair of sweatpants and matching t-shirt and throw them on.

As soon as I’m clothed, there’s a loud knock on the door. I tiptoe and look through the peephole, relieved when I see my brother, not my mother, on the other side of the door.

Jason stands there, holding two Tupperware bowls full of food. He steps inside, and hands me the bowls.

“You don’t have to stay here, Mellie. Come back home,” he says.

“She is home.” Adam walks out of the room, still shirtless, but thankfully has put his pants back on. He walks to the laundry room on the other side of the house, and I watch as he rummages through a laundry basket and finds a

new shirt. All too soon, his delicious body is covered.

“Flynn, stay out of this,” Jason warns Adam. “This is between me and my sister.”

“Your sister happens to be my wife,” he reminds us.

“Except she doesn’t want to be,” Jason reminds him.

“Jason, stop,” I say to him. “I’m not going back downstairs as long as our mother is there. That would not be healthy for me, and I’m all about my mental health. You of all people should understand that.”

He holds both hands up in surrender and says, “I get that. You know I support that, but I don’t want you to feel like I’m putting you out of your home. I meant it when I asked you to come and live with me.”

Adam stands to the side, listening to every word, but thankfully doesn’t comment. I grab Jason’s hands and we both sit at the table

“I know, Jason. You don’t ever have to explain. You let me live with you and your wife, for goodness sakes. I know you meant it, okay. But I cannot share the same space as her. Listen, it’s time I move out anyway, but just not before Alex has the baby. I can afford it, and I won’t go far. I might even be able to afford a small house before this neighborhood gentrifies completely. I’ve saved a bunch of money in the past two years since I’ve lived here.”

He nods, but there’s no joy on his face. My brother is usually playful and always extremely loud. I’m not used to the somber person sitting in front of me right now.

“I have some things to tell you.” He lets out a deep breath and runs a hand over his face. Suddenly, he looks tired.

“What is it?” I ask, panicked. “Are Alex and the baby okay?”

For the first time since he got here, he smiles, and I slump in relief. “They’re fine. The news isn’t about them. It’s about Mom.”

“What about her?” I ask, waving a hand in dismissal.

Jason looks around the room and finds Adam leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “Can we have some privacy, Flynn?”

“My apartment and my wife,” Adam says.

I flare my nostrils and look at him. Our eyes lock, and I tilt my head to the side, signaling for him to leave, but he maintains his position against the wall.

“It’s fine, Jason. Just say it,” I say, not wanting another confrontation between my brother and Adam right now.

Jason takes a resigned breath. “So, you know how she asked to stay?” I nod. “Well, it’s more of a need than a want.” I raise my eyebrows, totally confused. “She’s broke, Mellie. She needs help.”

Taken aback by his words, I stand up and look down at him. I can feel my brows furrowing as I try to make sense of what he just said.

“What do you mean she’s broke? She has a pension.” Our mother worked as a librarian for the Paramus New Jersey public schools for over thirty years until she was forced to retire due to budget cuts. “And Dad let her have the house in the divorce. She’ll be fine again when she sells it.”

“That’s the thing. The pension is all she has to live on. I don’t have all the details yet, but she lost the house. It’s gone. She has nowhere to go,” Jason says.

I shake my head at him, his words not making any sense. Our mother. The most judgmental human being ever when it comes to me has screwed up her life and is here now asking her son for a handout. I can’t help the chuckle that escapes, but I stop at just one. I’d wish her all the financial success if it meant she’d pack her bags and go back to New Jersey or where the fuck ever.

“Wow. So, she’s totally fucked. The irony isn’t lost on me here,” I say to Jason. “She can always get herself a job. She’s only fifty-eight.”

“She is. I’m going to help her. Jake’s mother knows a lot of people and serves on a lot of boards.” Jake is my brother’s best friend from college. He and his wife spend a lot of time with Jason and Alex.

“I guess that means she’s moving here for good.” I’m not blind to how selfish that sounds. I know she’s in trouble, but I still remember her reaction

when I was in trouble three years ago. She made it a point to bring it up every time I saw her until I had enough and told her to shut up. Jason and my father are the ones who were there for me. I don't believe my mother wanted anything bad to happen to me, but when the events took place, her words and reaction still hurt. Now she's here desperate for her son's help. I chuckle again.

Jason doesn't answer. The exhausted look in his eyes say everything. I nod and say, "I'll come and get the rest of my stuff tomorrow. In the meantime, I don't want her sleeping in my room."

He nods, and to show him I have no hard feelings, I lean in and hug him. He hugs me back, and I can feel his relief when he sags against me.

"I would never, ever put you out. I'm giving her a unit in my new building. It's close by and it's being renovated."

"Yeah, but it won't be ready until spring, possibly summer." He sighs sadly again. "Don't worry about me. I'm a big girl. She's the one who needs you now."

A sudden knock brings me to my feet. I stare at the door, and back at Adam. He nods at me and answers it.

"She went to bed early. Don't worry about her coming up here tonight," Jason says. "But I brought you food." He points to the Tupperware. "Alex packed some for you too, Flynn. Told her not to bother, but she did it anyway." Jason doesn't look at Adam when he makes that dig.

"Yeah, thanks," Adam says after taking a bag of food from the deliveryman. "I got it from here." He holds the door open and gestures for Jason to get out. Jason walks over, but not through the door. He stands in front of Adam, sizing him up. Adam doesn't flinch. In fact, I think he takes pleasure in looking down at my brother.

"I own this fucking house, Flynn, and I can't wait to kick you out when your lease is up. Step out of line once and you're gone."

"Too bad I have another ten months on my lease. If you will excuse us,

Dupree. I want to be alone with my *wife*.”

“Will you stop with that wife bullshit, Flynn? She doesn’t want to be married to you. You get that, right? Mellie,” Jason says, turning to me, “get a lawyer and I’ll pay for it.”

“You don’t have to worry about paying anything for my wife. I’ve got it from here. Worry about your own wife, and I guess your mommy now.”

Jason bristles at Adam’s retort. On his way out the door, he intentionally bumps into him. Any other man would have taken a step back from the impact, but Adam doesn’t budge. Once Jason is gone, he slams the door shut.



I'd never hit him, but it would be nice to do it just once and knock him on his ass. I close the door and walk to the kitchen. Mellie stands there, her arms wrapped around herself. I've imagined spreading her legs and sinking into her hundreds of times, but my imagination failed in comparison to the reality. I could have never imagined how it felt to be inside of her. Or to hold her in my arms, but I have a year to do that and to make sure she doesn't want to ever leave.

But the way she grabs the Tupperware bowls and walks to the microwave tells me I have my work cut out for me.

"I told you I bought you dinner. We can eat that tomorrow." She ignores me, opens the bowl, and smells whatever is inside. She immediately closes it, opens the fridge, and puts it away. She slams the fridge door shut, sits at the table, and reaches inside the plastic bag.

"I'm only eating whatever this is because I'm hungry. You didn't even have the courtesy to ask me what I wanted. Let me know how much you spent on my meal so I can pay you back."

I look to the ceiling and ask God for the patience to deal with my wife. I grab a chair, albeit a little too forcefully, and join her at the table.

I see the surprise on her face when she opens the Styrofoam box. The

food is from a local place I know she loves. I got her favorite meal. Lamb kabobs, rice, and a side salad. She eyeballs my plate and looks into my eyes. I shove a forkful of food in my mouth, but I hold her stare.

“Thank you,” she says almost as if the words hurt. As soon as they’re out of her mouth, she stuffs her own mouth with food.

I smile, and we eat in complete silence. She eats everything and eyes my plate, which unfortunately for her, is empty.

I get up and clear the table, shoving the empty food containers down the full trash can. When I look up, Mel’s looking around my apartment. In all the time I’ve lived here, she’s only been in here once. Even though the place has high end appliances, cabinets, and granite countertops, I’m suddenly self-conscious of my furniture and décor. I mentally kick myself for not taking my mother up on her offer to help me make the place decent.

The brown couch has seen better days, and so has the scratched and dented coffee table. The only decent furniture I have outside of my bedroom is the kitchen table and chairs, and that’s only because my mother forced me to buy it.

“Your place is an eyesore,” she says. She stands up, walks down the hall, and opens all the doors. I made the second bedroom a gym, and the third is filled with boxes of things I never bothered to unpack.

There’s only one bathroom in this unit, and thankfully, I keep that pretty clean.

“Can I keep some of my clothes in the room you turned into a gym? The closet is empty. And can I use the gym to work out in?”

“You can do whatever the hell you want. Paint. Redecorate. Workout. What the fuck ever. As long as you stay.”

“I will. Your taste is horrible. Everything you own is ugly.”

“Except you,” I say. Her head snaps up and her eyes immediately darken. She takes slow steps and points a finger at my chest.

“You don’t own me.” My only response is a slow smile. She rolls her

eyes and mutters something under her breath. “Whatever, Adam,” she says. “It’s been a long day, and I’m exhausted. I’m going to brush my teeth and go to bed, and I’ll deal with this place tomorrow. Thanks again for dinner.” She grabs her suitcase and takes it to my bedroom. Seconds later, she goes into the bathroom across the hall.

It’s barely nine o’clock, but knowing Mel will be alone in my bedroom has me running behind her. The room is still empty when I get there, but she walks in soon after. She looks a little defeated, but she shrugs and makes the bed before getting in. She must find the sheets acceptable because she doesn’t say anything after running her hands over them. Once she’s situated on the bed, she faces the wall, giving me her back.

I remove every stitch of clothing from my body and walk around the room to shut off the light. When I turn back around, she’s looking at my dick, which is now pointing directly at her. I climb over her, and when I slide my naked body between the cool sheets, I pull her over.

I kiss her into submission before she can offer any protest, and she kisses me right back and throws a leg around me. Soon, I have her naked, her cool skin touching mine. I took her like an animal before. I just couldn’t wait to have her. Now, I can take my time, eat her pussy, and search every part of her body while I make sweet love to her.



Like clockwork, my phone goes off at exactly six-fifteen. Just like it has every morning for the past few months. And that's not because of an alarm. I don't need an alarm, but that New York number serves as one just the same. They must know I'm not going to answer the phone or reply to their messages. Get a fucking clue. I'm not interested. In fact, I don't answer any strange numbers anymore. That's how she got to me the first time. It was a New York number I didn't recognize, but for some reason, I answered that day. I'm not going to make that mistake again.

I silence the phone just as Mellie starts to stir. She ended up collapsing on top of me after making love two more times. She's as insatiable as I am. Even now her nipples are pebbling in the open air, and I ache to reach over and touch them. So, I do. She moans, her eyes flutter open, and she stares directly into mine. I reach for her, but she swats my hand away, hops out of bed, and runs out of the room.

I groan. Of course, I worried with the harsh light of day, she'd regret what happened between us. The shower turns on, signaling she's not coming back to bed. I haul myself from under the covers just as my phone starts to vibrate again.

Of course, it's the other New York phone number. It's like they take turns

calling me. I hit ignore and look at the weather on my phone instead. Afterwards, I put on a pair of sweatpants and walk to the bathroom. The room is white with steam, and the sound of Mel's offkey humming makes me smile.

My hair is sticking out on all sides, and I'm exhausted from our night together, but I wouldn't change a single thing about last night or how she got here. The water turns off, and I hear the scraping of the shower curtain against the metal rod.

When she sees me, she lets out a little scream and puts a hand to her chest.

"What the hell, Adam?"

I point to the toothbrush in my mouth with one hand and hand her a towel with the other. She wraps herself fully, as if I didn't spend hours exploring her naked body last night. She steps out of the tub and out of the bathroom without another word.

I guess I know how today is going to go. I give her a few minutes alone and hop in the shower. By the time I get out, she's dressed in gray dress pants and a purple button-down shirt.

"What are you doing?" I intentionally remove the towel from around my waist, and just as I expected, her eyes immediately find my dick. She visibly swallows at the sight of it getting bigger, then clears her throat and looks away.

As she starts to put on the matching gray jacket, she says, "Getting ready for work." She runs a hand through her hair, and her rings gets caught in the strands. I slid them back on her finger last night after she fell asleep.

"Is this real?" she asks as she inspects the engagement ring. She holds it up to the light before taking it off her finger. She rubs it on her shirt as if that would tell her anything.

"I'd never give you a fake diamond. And have you checked outside? We got twelve inches of snow last night, and they're predicting another twelve.

School's canceled. I think you'll be working from home today." She stares at me as if my words don't make sense. I take her hand and slide the ring back on her finger, just like I did last night. She snatches her hand from mine and stomps to the window.

Just like I told her, it's whiteout conditions outside as the snow continues to fall. A gust of wind hits, pushing flurries against the window. She closes the blinds and lets out a string of curse words.

"Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck. My work laptop is downstairs." She pulls out a pair of purple, fuzzy slippers from her suitcase and slides them on her feet.

"I can get it for you," I offer.

"So you and Jason can get into a fight? No, thanks. I'll go." Before I can argue or put on clothes, she's out of the bedroom and out of the apartment. While she's gone, I dress and go to the kitchen to start breakfast.

While the bacon is frying, she comes back up with a computer bag slung over her shoulder and a duffel bag stuffed to the brim. She drops the duffel on the floor and arranges her laptop on the table.

"How can you afford this?" I turn to her, unsure of what she's talking about, but she holds up her left hand and points at the ring.

"I do have a job, Mel."

"Yeah, but you're a vice principal at a junior high school. I'm pretty sure I make more money than you, and there's no way I can afford this."

Her eyes bore into mine, and it's as if she's trying to read my mind. I sigh. This is just another wall. She's been putting them up since she got out of bed this morning.

"You think you make more than me as a claims adjuster?" I ask.

"Claims manager," she clarifies. "I got a promotion and a big raise two months ago."

I smile at her. "Yeah, you sure did, but I'm more than capable of getting my wife a ring." She mumbles something under her breath while she types on her computer. After asking for my WiFi password, she holds up her hand.

“So, it’s fake then,” she mumbles.

“Have it appraised.”

“I’m going to need keys,” she tells me. “Unless you’ve changed your mind. I told you I’m not holding you to this for a year. You’re free to say enough at any time.” I turn off the fire under the bacon and walk out of the kitchen. When I return, I put the key to the apartment in her hand.

I pour her a cup of coffee and bring her cream, just as she likes it. I set the cup down with a thud and she jumps in surprise, her big eyes locking with mine. I lean down and kiss her and I’m slightly surprised when she doesn’t pull away. She opens her mouth to me and slides her hands in my still damp hair, moaning into my mouth, and I deepen the kiss. When my phone rings, though, she practically jumps away from me.

I pull it out, ready to decline the New York call, but a smile spreads across my face when I see Ma flash across my screen.

“Hey, Ma,” I say, smiling into the phone.

“My son.” Her Irish brogue, though not as thick as it once was is still thick enough. “I missed you last Sunday. How was Vegas?”

“Las Vegas was great. It was better than I ever could have expected.” I stare at my wife when I utter those words, but she’s doing everything she can to avoid looking at me. I know she hears me though because her body goes still. “I have a big surprise for you when I see you on Sunday. You’ll love it.”

“I hope you didn’t spend too much money on your old ma,” she says. She starts to say something else, but she quickly ends the call when her older brother, my Uncle Finn, starts yelling her name.

Once I put the phone down, Mellie walks to the bedroom without a word and slams the door. I shake my head and decide to give her five minutes to come back out. In the meantime, I cook her eggs the way she prefers them, over hard.

She returns, dressed in black yoga pants and a gray hoodie.

“So, we should get a few things straight.” I arch an eyebrow at her serious

tone. I put a plate of bacon and eggs in front of her and take a seat. I start eating while I wait for her to begin.

“I will pay you rent. Tell me how much. And you’ll only need to be the doting mate when my mother is around.”

“I can easily afford this place, and I *am* the doting husband. Whether your mother’s around or not.”

“And I’ll take you up on your offer to redecorate this place because it’s hideous. Your taste sucks.” She looks around with a pinched expression. “And I’ll buy my own groceries.”

“Sure, my taste in decorations can be better, but my taste in wives? Perfect. Another thing, you’re treating me like a roommate.” I can already feel the color creeping up my face. “We’re married.”

“And by the way, I’m on birth control. Thanks for making sure before you jizzed inside of me three times last night.”

“Like I said, we’re married.” I give her a dismissive shrug.

“Only for a year,” she reminds me. “At the absolute most, so don’t try to trap me with a baby.”

“Any other decrees, Mel?”

“Yeah, your WiFi is down. Fix it.” She slams the laptop shut, runs out of the kitchen and into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her for the second time today. She didn’t touch her breakfast, so I finish her food and my coffee before going to find her.

She’s lying in the middle of the bed with her face buried in a pillow.

“Leave me alone,” she says, her voice muffled.

I sit down and put a hand in the middle of her back. Her body goes rigid at my touch, but she doesn’t push me away.

“Mel.” I slowly rub her back.

“I said leave me alone.”

“I can’t leave you alone. I live here.”

“Fine.” She roughly shoves my hand away and gets up. “I’ll leave.” She

grabs her opened suitcase, and all her clothes fall to the floor. She drags the damn thing out of the room while her clothes spill out along the way.

“Where are you going?” I follow behind her. “We’re in the middle of a blizzard.”

“Great! Just another thing I’ve fucked up!” She drops the suitcase and kicks it across the room with so much force, it slams against the wall. “I can’t do this, Adam. I can’t! You got what you wanted out of me last night. You finally got to fuck me. Three times, I might add. That should be enough for you.” When she starts to pull the ring off, I hold both her wrists.

“Mel, you don’t control the weather. And where are you going? You said you can’t live with your mother, and we’re in the middle of a snowstorm.”

The tears start, and that’s my undoing. I can never stand a crying woman. Especially not one I care about, and one who looks so defeated right now. I pull her close and wrap my arms around her.

She buries her face in my chest and cries. Something inside me breaks at the sound of her sobs, but I don’t let her go or offer any words of comfort. She doesn’t need words right now. She needs me. I keep her wrapped in my arms and rub her back until the sobbing stops. When no more sounds come out of her, I pull back and cradle her face.

“Why do you say stuff like that about yourself? How can you accuse me of only wanting one night with you? I said until death do us part. And this woman standing before me is not a fuck up. Not in a million years. Maybe you’ve made mistakes, Mel, but we all have.” I pull her into my arms again. “Give this a year. I’ll be a good husband. If you want, we can move. I’ll break the damn lease, and we can go somewhere else, but let me be your husband. I’ll be the one you can always count on without any judgment.”

“I don’t want to become your problem. This was supposed to be my year, Adam. I had it all planned. I was going to start looking for a house in the spring and hopefully move out by the end of summer. But I’ve fucked everything up like I usually do, and now you’re involved in my mess.” She

lets out a choked sob and buries her face in my chest again.

“I promise you didn’t screw anything up. I want to be married to you.” That gets her to sob louder. She pulls away, and I look into her face. Tears are streaming down her cheeks and her eyes are red and puffy. It breaks me to see her this way. It breaks me that she can’t see what I see when I look at her.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” she says between sniffles.

“Come on.” I scoop her in my arms and walk back to the bedroom. I gently put her down and lie down next to her. She already has her body turned, giving me her back.

I cover us with a comforter and wrap my arms around her waist. She turns, and I wait for her to pull away and get off the bed, but she surprises me when she rests her head on my chest.

“I’m sorry,” she finally says. “I’m usually not a blubbering mess.” I caress her cheek and rub my thumbs along her bottom lip. She licks where my fingers just touched.

“Why don’t you see yourself the way I do?” I ask. She looks down, seemingly embarrassed by my probing eyes. “You don’t see how beautiful you are. And how smart and resilient. And everyone who knows you loves you. Your brother and his wife. Your little niece. The people you work with. Hell, they promoted you. Yet, you let whatever mistakes you’ve made in your past define you. Why? Whatever you’ve done, it doesn’t matter now. All that matters is that you’re here with me.” A fat tear rolls out of her eyes, and I reach over and kiss her. She still tastes of coffee and sugar. I let out a satisfied groan when she deepens the kiss.

One of her soft hands finds its way up my t-shirt, and she strokes my lower abs. I make them flex and she moans in my mouth. Her hand finds the waistband of my shorts, and without any shyness, she reaches in and touches me. This time, it’s me who moans, but this isn’t about me. This is for my wife. I move her hand and straddle her. When I reach for the hem of her shirt,

she lifts her arms, and I take it off. Her breasts are bare, and I kiss down to her belly button. While I explore and bite the soft skin on her stomach, I remove the rest of her clothes.

She's beautiful with perfect brown skin. Even the mole on the side of her stomach is sexy. Her pussy has hair, but it's perfectly trimmed. I was so hungry for her last night I didn't get a chance to admire and worship her body the way she needs. I kiss her hipbone and lick my way to the apex of her thighs.

Her body goes completely still while I look at her. I spread her legs apart, and my heart beats faster at the sight of her glistening pussy. I run a finger through her wet folds, and she sighs loudly in the room. I position myself between her legs, and her scent beckons me. It's a combination of soap and musk. It's a siren's call, and it's been saying my name since I first laid eyes on her. Hell, since I first heard her voice.

I've always known it would be like this between us. From the moment our eyes locked while she was watching me workout in the backyard, I knew she belonged to me. She belongs here. In my bed.

"Eyes on me, Mel." Her eyes are sealed shut while her chest heaves. "Look at me, brown eyes." I kiss the inside of her thigh and she practically jumps off the bed. "Come on," I coax again while I swirl my tongue on her smooth, creamy skin. Her eyes pop the second my tongue hits her clit.

"Adam," she practically swoons. One of her hands finds its way into my hair. I brace myself, waiting for her to tug on it like she did last night, but she surprises me when she caresses my scalp. Goosebumps spread throughout my body, and my dick hardens more. I slide a finger inside her wet pussy and suck her clit. I look up quickly, and just like I ordered her to, her eyes are on me.

With each moan or change of breath, my dick wants her more. It's just begging to slide inside her warm, hot sheath, but this is for Mel, not me. It doesn't take long for her. Her hands grasp my skull, holding my face to her

pussy while she convulses on the bed.

The moans stop and her breathing returns to normal. I kiss between her thighs and crawl up the bed. I lay on my back, and before I can pull her into my arms, she reaches into my shorts and grabs my dick. I pull her hand away and wrap her in my arms.

“That was for you. I wanted to take care of you for a few minutes. Just relax. The WiFi’s out. We’re in a blizzard, and you just freaked out. Close your eyes and relax. I’ve got you.”

She doesn’t fight me. She turns on her side, and I slide an arm around her waist and spoon her back. She fits me just right. Just like I always knew she would.



“Mel,” he groans. I can hear the sleep in his voice. His hand lands on my head and he gently caresses my hair. “Oh, shit, Mel.” My tongue swirls on the top of his dick. It’s big, round and the most perfect shade of pink.

“Eyes on me.” I repeat the same words he used on me hours ago. I woke up from our nap in the same position. My back to his front, and I felt the long, hard rod between my naked ass cheeks. Despite his shorts, there was no mistaking how much he needed relief.

When my eyes lock with his, I take his long, hard dick and slide it into my waiting mouth. Adam lets out a noise, but the way he grabs and pulls my hair tells me he barely has any control left.

I hold his stare as long as I can, but his dick needs all my attention. I bob my head up and down, reveling in the taste and smell of him. Like an uninhibited whore, I take his dick to the back of my throat and gag on it. He moans again and practically falls off the bed. Feeling a sudden power, I take his dick to the back of my throat again, but when I pull out, I bob slowly on his dick while I hold his shaft and pump with one hand.

I slurp on the crown, licking and sucking while I stroke his shaft. His hands tighten on my hair, and he starts to talk nonsense. I get no warning before the thick, hot ropes of cum squirt out. I swallow twice to get it all

down. I plop his dick out, and it rests on his thigh, flaccid, but still big. He strokes my hair while I lay my head on his hip.

The clock on the nightstand says it's just shy of noon. My stomach growls while I hear a vibrating phone. The gravity of my situation hits again, and I jump off the bed, run out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. I lean my naked body against the door and cover my face with my hands.

I push the panic attack down and take a series of breaths before walking away from the door and splashing cold water on my face. While I pat it dry with a towel, I sit on the toilet and wait for my heart rate to return to normal.

I look around the bathroom, take in the ugly brown shower curtain and green floor mats, and I let out a cry of despair. Of all the men in the world, I end up with the one who has the worst taste. Well, at least he's not a pig. The place might be poorly decorated, but it's clean.

I wrap the towel around my body and go back to the bedroom. I'm relieved to find it empty. The furniture in this room is the only decent thing he has other than the kitchen table and chairs. The black wooden furniture looks to be high quality and new. My stomach growls, and his phone vibrates again.

Curiosity gets the better of me and I pick it up. No name shows on the screen, just a number from New York City. I toss the phone down, but while I pull my clothes from this morning back on, it vibrates again, and the same number flashes.

I pick up his phone and walk out of the bedroom. I find him in the kitchen, rummaging through the fridge.

"Did you steal it?" I ask him. He stands in front of the open fridge and stares at me. He scratches his messy head of hair and furrows his brows. When I hand him the phone, he puts it in his pocket.

"Did I steal my phone?" He gives me that crooked smile. "I bought this phone last week. I think I still have the receipt if you want to see it." He pulls out the two Tupperware bowls Jason brought over last night and puts them on

the counter.

“I meant this ring.” I hold it up and it catches the light. “But since you brought up your phone, someone from New York is trying to reach you.” A flash of something crosses his face. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was annoyance, but in all the years I’ve known him, I’ve only seen him angry a few times. The night he arrived home from Vegas and realized I was on a date, and yesterday when Jason stopped by. “Who is it?” I ask. I put my hands on my hips and take a step closer. “If you have some crazy bitch of an ex-girlfriend, you better tell me now.”

He smiles then. A real genuine smile that makes him look younger and his blue eyes sparkle. I feel something in the pit of my stomach.

“Are you jealous, love? No need to be. I take my vows very seriously. I’m property of Melanie Flynn.” He winks at me, and I roll my eyes at him.

“The name is still Dupree.”

“Speaking of, I need you to start on that name change.”

“No WiFi,” I remind him. “So, how can you afford this?” I hold the ring to his face and crane my neck up to look at him.

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response,” he tells me.

“Are you part of the Irish mafia?”

He opens one of the Tupperware containers, smells it, and puts it in the microwave.

“I’m a vice principal at a junior high. You already know this.”

“Exactly, which means there’s no way in hell you can afford this. If it’s real, it’s more than three carats, and you live like this.” I wave my hands around the apartment.

“Redecorate the damn place, Mel. Get rid of this shit and get new things. I don’t care.”

I scoff, cross my arms and say, “Am I supposed to pay to decorate your place for you? I can deal with this for a year.” I look around again, unsure if what I just said is true. He sighs loudly, walks to the bedroom, and returns

with his wallet. He grabs my hand and drops an American Express card in it.

“Get whatever you want.” The microwave beeps, and he pulls out the container. When he grabs two plates, I hold up my hand.

“I don’t want that, and how is it you can afford this ring?” I put afford in air quotes. “And you don’t have decent furniture. And now you just handed me an American Express. You do know you have to pay the entire balance at once, right?” I lay the card down on the table.

“I’m aware of how to pay my own damn credit card. You hate my furniture, so buy new shit. Do we have to fight about every damn thing? I didn’t steal the ring. I bought it for you. And my apartment looks like this because I’m a guy who lived alone until yesterday. I don’t care, but you do, so get whatever you want. And if you don’t want this food, I’ll make you something else.”

I get up from the table and walk to Adam. He has his back turned to me. He goes completely still when I stand close to him. I can practically see the hairs standing on the back of his neck. Slowly, he turns around, and I hate the fact that he gets to look down at me.

“Did you just raise your voice at me?” I ask, taking a small step closer. I point a finger in his face.

He looks down at me, and his eyes darken. He grabs both of my hands and holds them together behind my back. He doesn’t exert himself, but the simple gesture is meant to show me how easily he can overpower me. “You don’t want to do that, Mel.” The words aren’t angry, but it’s a warning. “No fingers in my face, love. Not ever. I’m giving you what you want, and you still want to fight me.”

“You think this is what I want?” I ask, aghast.

He lets me go and grabs a plate from the cabinet above the sink. A quick look reveals none of his plates match. I close my eyes in search of patience. After plating his food, the smell reaches my nose, and my stomach growls loudly. He smirks and grabs another plate, this brown one uglier than the

purple one he's using.

"You said I do, didn't you? And you're here. Just sit down and eat, for fuck's sake." My stomach rumbles again, but instead of sitting down to eat the plate of food he's prepared for me, I open the fridge and look through its contents. It's bare. The only thing other than vegetables and bottled water is a pack of boneless skinless chicken breast.

"You don't have any deli meat?"

"Nothing processed goes in this body." He has the nerve to smile at me before he points to my plate of food again. "I can order you something, but it might take a while." One quick look outside shows that the snow has not waned.

"Are you in debt?" I ask while pulling out the chair. Reluctantly, I eat the chicken my mother made. "I can help you with your finances. Help you set up a budget and figure out the best time to pay your bills. We can call the creditors and arrange payment plans for you."

"All of my bills are paid on time. No debt." When I raise my brows in disbelief, he says, "You can run my credit report when the WiFi comes back if you want, Mel." Instead of sitting across from me, he sits right next to me. With no effort at all, he lifts me from my chair and places me on his lap, kissing me deeply before I can move away. The kiss is tender but rough enough to make me remember the passion we shared yesterday and today. I kiss him back just as intensely.

When he pulls away, he rests his forehead on mine while he catches his breath. "I didn't steal your ring. I'm not in debt. You can redecorate this place however you want. Paint the walls purple or whatever girly color you want, just as long as you come back every day." He kisses my temple, and for a moment, I forget myself and lay my head on his hard chest.

For the next ten minutes, we eat our first lunch together as husband and wife. He finishes his, and when I push my plate in front of him, he finishes that too.



“By the way, who keeps calling you from that New York number? They called twice.” She says it casually, but I can tell she’s fishing for information, and I can’t give her any.

“Must have been a wrong number,” I tell her.

She eyes me, but she doesn’t pursue it, and I let out a relieved breath. She leaves my lap and grabs our dishes. While she washes them, I do what I should have done months ago when they started calling. I block both numbers fully knowing that this is only a temporary solution, but I don’t want Mel asking questions.

While she cleans the kitchen, I straighten the living room, but with the sparse furniture, it doesn’t take long. I look around my home and see it for the first time. Mel’s right. It’s awful with the mismatched furniture and bare walls.

Once she’s done with the dishes, she digs around her laptop bag, pulls out a legal pad and pen, and walks around the apartment taking notes. I lie on the couch, doing my best to pay attention to the TV, but she’s distracting. She scribbles on the legal pad as if it’s something important. She even opens all the kitchen cabinets and drawers, all the while taking notes. When she disappears to the back of the apartment, I have the impulse to follow her and

study everything she does. Every mannerism and expression of her face. I want to know it all, but I remind myself that she's my wife now, and despite the one year limit we talked about, there is no way I'm going to let her go without one hell of a fight.

Just as I relax on the couch, there's a knock on the door. A few seconds later, Alex and Addison walk in.

"Hi, Ada!" Addy, who is always happy to see me, wraps her arms around one of my legs. I pick her up and put her on my back.

"Can you say Uncle Adam, Addy?" I ask.

"Unco Ada!"

"How's it going?" Alex whispers the words. While she looks around the place, I help her to the couch and she slowly sits down, placing a hand on her round stomach.

"Good. She's only freaked out twice," I tell Alex.

"Ada! Fight!" Addy says. I put her down and she holds up her tiny fists like I trained her to do. When I start to shuffle, she does the same and she mirrors my movements. When she sees an opening, she does the one two punch combination I taught her. I dramatically fall on the floor, and she starts to count. Once she gets to ten, she runs around the room, cheering in victory

"Kick his butt again, Addy," Mel says, coming into the room. She runs to Alex and puts both hands on her stomach.

"Kick your butt," Addy says to me when I stand up. I pick her up and put her on my shoulder this time.

"How are things downstairs?" Mellie asks Alex.

"Fine. She's been great with Addy today. I think she's a bit hurt about the way she found out about you two. She went to her room right after dinner last night and didn't come back out."

I pretend to be preoccupied with Addy, but I move us closer to Alex and Mel so I can hear every word.

"*She* was hurt? She's playing victim now, is she? As if she has feelings.

And we're not exactly close. I don't remember the last time we had a conversation. Even the Christmas gift she sent was an insult." I look to Alex for an explanation. Based on what she says next, I know she understood my look.

"Jason called her out on that last night. She said she hadn't seen you and didn't realize you lost so much weight."

"Right. Sure. It doesn't matter because—" The knock on the door interrupts whatever Mel was going to say next. With Addy still on my shoulder, I walk to the door and find Mrs. Dupree on the other side.

She puts a hand to her chest as if she's surprised to see me at my own front door. She looks around me, but she doesn't ask to come in, and I don't offer.

"Gamma!" Addy yells.

"May I come in, please?" she finally asks.

"Mel, it's your mom. Do you want her to come in?" Mrs. Dupree takes a step back when she hears my question. Her brows shoot up, and her nostrils flare in irritation. She tries to step around me, but I block the door.

"This is my son's house." Her eyes narrow at me, and she scrunches her mouth like she just tasted something sour.

"But the lease I signed says this is my apartment." She tries to slide by me again, but I stand there and stare down at her.

"Come, Gamma." Addy waves her grandma inside.

Mel walks to the door, and I step aside so she can see her mother. She surprises me when she slides her hand in mine and plasters a smile on her face.

"Are you going to let me in, Melanie? I've barely seen you since I got here." Mel steps aside, and her mother walks over the threshold.

"This is..." She lets the words hang before she says, "cozy." She looks around the place, her nose in the air, probably judging my furniture.

For Mel's sake, I wish I had something better. Alex stands up and slowly

walks to Mel.

“I’d offer you something, but Adam’s fridge is bare. Unless you want to drink tomato juice.”

“Adam’s fridge?” Her mother raises one judgmental eyebrow. “I know you’re not too keen on the healthy stuff, Mellie, but why haven’t you stocked it with what you like?”

“No time yet, Mother. We just got back from Vegas two days ago,” Mel says. “Alex, I’ll have you, Jason, and Addy over soon.”

Mrs. Dupree purses her lips at her daughter’s rejection.

“Enough of this nonsense, Melanie. This pretend marriage all so you can get away from me because I’m such a horrible mother to you. Don’t drag your brother into another one of your messes after everything he’s done for you.”

Melanie stiffens. “Everything he’s done for me?” she says, her voice low. Alex reaches for Mel, but Mel puts her hand up.

“Yes. He took you in. Got you a job and helped you get your life together after you managed to lose your job. He did all of that after the way you’ve treated him, and you want to pay him back like this.”

“Like what?” I ask.

Mrs. Dupree looks at me, but she must not think my question is worthy of an answer because she turns back to Mel and says, “This is between me and my daughter. Stay out of it.”

“Your daughter is my wife. I will not stay out of it, especially when you berate her.”

“Diane, why don’t we go back downstairs?” Alex wrings her hands and approaches her mother-in-law. “You said earlier you were tired and needed a nap.”

“What messes, Mother? Jason and I have a great relationship now but thank you for bringing up the past. You love that, don’t you? Especially when I look bad.”

“Melanie, that’s not true.” Diane raises both hands. “I don’t know what’s wrong with us, but I’m hoping since I’m here now, we can work on things.”

“Right,” Mel scoffs. “Any opportunity for you to remind me what a screw up I am. No, thank you, Mother.” Mel lets go of my hand and walks away, through the living room and into the bedroom, closing the door with a loud slam.

“I think you need to go,” I say to my unwanted guest. “And for the record, Jason didn’t get Mel a job. Her resume got her an interview, and she got herself the job. Her hard work earned her that promotion.”

Her eyebrows shoot to her forehead in surprise. She looks and asks, “Mellie got promoted?”

Alex nods, but I speak first. “She did, but I’m sure you’ll find a way to give Jason the credit for that too. Call first before you come up here.” She closes her eyes as if my words hurt, but when she opens them, all I see is anger.

“Like I said to you before, when it comes to me and my family, stay out of it. I’ll see you downstairs, Alex. I have a sudden headache. Be careful walking down the stairs with Addy.” She looks at me again, but only briefly before walking out. She slowly closes the door behind her.

There’s a lot I want to say, but Addy wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me, so I swallow my words for now. Alex puts a hand on her stomach, and she closes her eyes.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “I’d give anything to have my mother back, even for a day, but those two are like oil and water.”

“Is it always like that with them?” I ask, and Alex nods.

“Unfortunately, yes. And I can’t say I blame Mellie for the state of their relationship, but it’s exhausting.”

“Why don’t you go home and rest? You can leave Addy here with me and Mel. Come back and get her whenever you want. I need to start clearing the snow anyway. Give me her snowsuit and I’ll take her outside with me. I’ll

see if Mel wants to go.” Alex looks up, and I can tell she’s considering my offer.

“You don’t mind?”

“I’m her Uncle Adam,” I say. I help her to the door and let her hold onto my arm until we get to her apartment. I wait in the living room while she gathers some of Addy’s things. She comes back with a bag, snowsuit, and boots. When she kisses her daughter goodbye, I leave to go find my wife.

She’s in the middle of our bed, scrolling through her phone.

“Auntie!” Addison says. I drop her on the bed, and she climbs on top of Mel.

“Play! Snow!” she says, bouncing up and down. I toss Addy’s things on the bed and sit on the end.

“You okay?” I reach over and massage her shoulder.



I ignore Adam's question and focus on Addison instead. She squeals when I lift her above me. She kicks her little legs, and her dark curls hang from her head. Adam reaches over and runs a hand through her hair, making her laugh louder.

I bundle her up before putting on my own snow pants and jacket, and we follow Adam outside. He goes right to the detached garage and returns with the snowblower. As long as he's lived here, he's cleared the snow, and I know Jason never asked. I can always count on my car being clear of any snow. He also takes care of the yard in the summer, and whenever Jason's father-in-law is not available, Adam will come down to our apartment and do any quick repairs.

I've secretly admired him while he fixed a leaky pipe. I still remember the black t-shirt he was wearing that day and how it rode up on him while he was reaching overhead. Now I get to explore that body whenever I want, and since we're going to be married for a year, I'm going to enjoy every second of it. I just need to make sure to keep my feelings separate.

I chase Addy around the front lawn while Adam gets to work. The snow hasn't let up at all, and the entire city has turned white. He'll have to come back in a few hours and clear more snow, but he's never minded before. I

pick up Addy, spin her around before we both fall to the ground, our laughter barely heard above the whir of the snowblower.

While Adam clears the driveway, I build a weird looking snowman for Addison, and when she demands carrots for the nose, I tell her to follow me inside.

“I stay with Ada,” she yells. She runs to him and wraps an arm around his leg. He stops the snowblower and approaches the snowman. It’s lopsided and the sticks we found for arms are grossly uneven. Adam yanks them out and throws them aside.

“Your uncle’s here now, Addy. I’m going to teach you how to build a real snowman because Aunt Mel’s snowman making skills suck.” Addy jumps up and down right before she kicks the snowman, knocking it to the ground.

Adam gives her a high-five.

“Whatever. That was perfect.” When they start stomping on the snowman, I stick my tongue out at them and step inside, leaving the freezing temperatures behind for a few minutes.

I know for a fact Adam doesn’t have any carrots in his fridge. It’s filled with brussel sprouts and broccoli. He’s definitely fond of the green veggies. I dip inside the first-floor apartment, right through the back door. The living room is dark, quiet, and most importantly, without my mother. Before I grab the carrots, I slowly walk to my room to get buttons for the eyes.

I leave water on the hardwood floor, and my boots squeak along the way. My room looks almost the same as it did yesterday. The bed’s made, but the opened closet looks almost empty. I open the top drawer to my nightstand. It’s where I have my keepsakes. There’s a family picture from my high school graduation. It was two weeks after Jason graduated college. We’re on opposite sides with our parents in the middle. Everyone but me is smiling.

It’s been years, but it might as well have been yesterday. I’d fought with him that morning. I told my brother I didn’t want him at my graduation, and I’m as ashamed of myself now as I was then. I blew up after breakfast, and to

this day I don't think Jason knows why I said that to him, but I do.

Jealousy can make you do and say things you can't take back. I struggled through high school while Jason was valedictorian, and that morning when I was walking to the kitchen, I overheard my mother on the phone with her sister.

Ten Years ago

“We got extra tickets, Bren,” she tells Aunt Brenda. “The graduation starts at eleven thirty, so try to be there at eleven. I know how you are.” Something tells me to stay out of sight and listen. I lean against the wall, careful not to make a sound. “Yeah, Jason will be there. I’m so happy I get my baby home for the summer. I’ve missed him so much.” She listens some more. By then I decide I’m being silly for trying to eavesdrop. This is my graduation day, and the entire family is going to be there for me, but my mother’s next words stop my approach. “Girl, please. When I did this four years ago, I was the mother of the school valedictorian. I’m actually surprised Mellie’s graduating on time, but at least we can still celebrate Jason’s graduation and Mellie finally leaving home. Do you know he graduated with a four-point-o? It’s so embarrassing telling everyone that my other kid is going to some low rank state college. Can you believe it?” She tells Aunt Brenda to hold on and puts the phone on speaker.

“Mellie will be fine,” Aunt Brenda says. “She doesn’t have to be a carbon copy of Jason. She’s her own person, Di. Don’t worry about my niece.” I smile against the wall. Aunt Brenda’s always got my back, but the forced smile on my face doesn’t stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks.

“From your lips to God’s ears, but we’re still going to have a good time. At least I have one kid I can be proud of.”

“Diane, don’t say something you can’t take back. Melanie is as much your child as Jason is. You should have tried to find something she’s good at and helped her develop it instead of comparing her to Jason,” Aunt Brenda admonishes. “You’re being unfair.”

“What she’s good at is screwing up. Do you want a list?” Aunt Brenda says no, but my mother says, “Well, I’ll give you one anyway. She crashed the car. I had to shell out hundreds of dollars for a math tutor even though Jason told her he’d tutor her via video. She refused. And she still barely passed math. Jason was the calculus and the organic chemistry tutor at Boston College, did you know that? Meanwhile, my daughter is always fighting and almost got herself expelled, and the girl has so much attitude she’s hard to be around. I can’t say a word to her without her sassing me. Jason never did that. Why can’t she be more like her brother? My Jason—”

“Maybe you’re not so great to be around either, Diane, do you ever think of that? Do you think Mellie enjoys being compared to someone else every time you open your damn mouth to talk to her? Stop comparing your kids. She’s her own damn person, and Jason got in plenty of trouble. I don’t remember him listening to you when you told him to leave that Natalie alone,” my aunt Brenda says.

“Natalie is out of the picture. I don’t have to worry about her anymore, but I can’t stand the person Mellie is sometimes.” My mother ignores what Aunt Brenda said about her precious Jason. “Remember after I had Jason, I said I didn’t want any more kids, but my husband wanted one more. I should have stood my ground and told him no.” Like a punch in the stomach, my mouth opens, and I let out a rushed breath. I clench my stomach to absorb the blow, but I can’t escape the pain. My eyes fill with tears that fall down my face, and I’m too frozen in place to wipe them away.

“I’m going to say this once more. Shut your damn mouth right now and don’t ever utter those words again. I’m ashamed of you. I don’t know how you look yourself in the mirror.” Aunt Brenda’s voice is laced with anger.

“I’ll see you in a few hours.” I hear my mother putting the cordless phone down. By then, the tears are flowing freely, and my vision has blurred.

I’ve always suspected, but hearing the words come out of her mouth so easily is like a knife in the gut. I hear footsteps, and I know I should flee so she doesn’t see my moment of weakness, but my feet are rooted to the spot. I couldn’t move now if my life depended on it. She turns the corner and finds me still leaning against the wall.

I can’t bother to wipe my tears. She stops short when she sees me. She lets out a noise of surprise and rests a hand to her chest.

“Melanie,” she says, “why are you skulking around?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. She walks right past me, but after taking several steps, she stops. She doesn’t turn around right away. She freezes, and even with her back turned to me, I can see her raise a hand to her forehead. She runs a hand through her hair and slowly turns around.

“You want me to make you some breakfast?” she asks with a fake smile plastered on her face. She never smiles like that. At least not for me. I don’t answer. All the words I want to say get stuck in my throat. She walks closer and stands directly in front of me. “I was just talking to Aunt Brenda,” she explains quickly. She steps closer, eyeing me. It’s almost as if she’s trying to read my mind. Something flashes in her eyes. She swallows and gives me a high, fake laugh. “How about some eggs and French toast? It’s your big day, Mellie.” She reaches for my cheek, but I flinch and finally find the strength to step away from her.

“I’m your biggest regret, aren’t I, Mother? If only I were brilliant like your Jason. If only you had stopped having kids after you had him.” I say Jason’s name with so much contempt, her eyes widen. “It breaks your heart to have a daughter like me, but I bet it doesn’t hurt as much as it does for me. To have a mother who despises her for committing the awful sin of being inferior to her son. At least that’s what I thought until this morning, but maybe you just hate the fact that I exist.”

She takes a step back at my words. She frantically looks around the room as if someone is going to come out to help her.

“Mellie, that’s not true. Whatever you think you heard—”

“You think I’m so stupid that I don’t know what I heard? My ears work fine. You know what else works fine? My eyes. The disappointment in yours every time you look at me. It’s crystal clear, but hearing the words come out of your mouth...” Tears fall freely and trickle to my lips. I lick them away. “Wow. I’ve always suspected, but now I know. Thank you for that, Mother.”

I brush past her, but she grabs my wrist and pulls me back. My mom isn’t a tall woman, but she’s always been strong. I pull my wrist but can’t break her hold. “It was just a silly conversation with my sister. It didn’t mean anything.”

“Except it did. It means everything.” I yank my wrist hard enough to make her stumble several steps back. She calls my name, but I walk to the front door and out of the house.

The sound of a door opening pulls me out of my daydream. I grab what I came for and shove them in my coat pocket.

“Alex, don’t go into the kitchen until I mop the water I dragged in here.” I step out of my old bedroom, and instead of looking into Alex’s smiling face, I’m looking into the eyes of my mother.



I take a deep breath, but I don't turn away from her. She smiles at me, but I don't smile back.

"I'm going to mop the water now. Be careful if you need to go into the kitchen." I turn around and walk away. I pull the mop from the small closet behind the pantry and start to mop the water.

"Melanie," my mother says from behind me. "I was hoping we could talk." I mop the floor with more effort than necessary. I can't remember the last time I was alone with my mother, and even now, I feel uneven, like I'm floating above my body, but not in a good way.

After her conversation with my aunt, our relationship has gone only two ways. Either we argue or I ignore her. The latter being the case more so since I moved to Boston. I ignore her calls, and only do the bare minimum. Sending a card on her birthday or signing my name to whatever gift Jason sends for Mother's Day.

For years she doubled down, and any mistakes I made, she'd highlight, almost as if I was proving her point. It used to hurt, but now it's like a stab wound that's healed. The pain is gone, but it's scarred and numb to the touch.

"I can't talk right now," I say. "Addy and Adam are waiting for me." She walks over and opens the blinds. I smile when I see Addy on Adam's

shoulders while he runs around the yard in the falling snow.

“Right. Your husband. Listen, whatever this is,” she points at Adam. I brace myself and wait for the insult. “It’s obviously an act. Did you two get drunk and get married? I wouldn’t put it past you to put on this act just to get away from me. I’m not buying whatever you’re selling.” I pause halfway through pushing the mop around on the now dry floor.

There’s no way Jason told her that, and I know Alex didn’t, so I school my features before looking at her again. “Why? Because no sober man would want to be with me? And why would I need to pretend to be married to get away from you? That makes no sense.”

She exhales and breaks eye contact, but she steels her spine and looks at me again. “I didn’t mean it like that, Melanie.” She puts a hand to her forehead as if she’s doing her best to calm down. “Why do you twist everything I say and make it into an insult?”

I let out a snort and say, “I think you know why.” I walk past her, put the mop away, and walk to the door.

“That was a private conversation that I never meant for you to hear. I was venting to my sister. Don’t you vent to Jason or Alex? People talk. They say things. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“The problem is that I did hear it, and you can’t erase it. It’s fine. Let’s not try to be something we’re not. I’m fine with who I am, and if you’re not fine with me, that’s not my problem. I accept that. It’s not my goal in life to become someone you like.” I reach for the doorknob, so ready to leave this conversation behind, but she walks fast and grabs my free hand.

Other than a few awkward hugs when we’re together, I don’t remember the last time she touched me. I pull my hand away as if burned.

“I’ve made mistakes, Mellie. I admit that. I know I’ve hurt you, and part of the reason why I’m here is to try and fix things between us.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “We both know that’s not true. Jason told me why you’re really here, and it has absolutely nothing to do with me.” She

looks away as if ashamed, and for a split second, I feel bad for her. I know what it's like to make mistakes.

“Before things took a turn with the house, I was planning on coming here. I want to be close to my children and grandchildren. There's really nothing for me in New Jersey.”

I can hear the hopefulness in her voice, but then my mind goes back to the morning of my high school graduation, and I don't know how I can ever recover from that. I don't know why she wants us to recover now. There was never an apology beyond not meaning for me to hear her private conversation, but when your worst fears are confirmed, you can't turn back time. I always suspected that was how she felt about me, but to hear her so callously say those words to her sister is a hole that can never be filled.

“I'm sure Jason and his family will love having you here. As for you and me, don't bother.” There's nothing but silence after my statement. I don't look back. I open the door and walk out.



“Again!” Addison orders, so I do what any good uncle would do. I run around the yard with her on my shoulders while she sticks out her tongue to taste the snowflakes.

I’m distracted because Mellie’s been inside longer than I thought she would. I run to the back steps, ready to check on her, but she comes out. She has a smile on her face, but I can tell it’s fake. She pulls her hand out of her pocket and reveals a handful of buttons.

“Snowman!” Addison yells again, and I put her down. She runs to the middle of the yard and starts to make snowballs.

“You okay?” I ask my wife, taking a step closer to her.

She nods but won’t meet my eyes. “Yeah,” she says while trying to step around me, but I step closer to her. I hold onto her chin. I can see sadness in her eyes, but she blinks as if that would remove her sorrow.

“Did you see your mom in there?” I ask, ready to go inside and undo whatever her mother might have said.

“Yeah. It’s fine. It’s bound to happen since she lives here now.” She starts to walk away, but I hold her wrist. “God, I hate that she’s here.”

“Let’s move.” I repeat the same words I said last night and hope she’ll agree. “That way, you won’t have to worry about seeing her every time you

step out of here. We can get a house, or get another apartment. Whatever you want.”

Her eyes widen at my words, and her mouth opens. I can practically hear her mind spinning. I shouldn't have come on so strong about getting a house so soon.

“I don't want to involve you in my family drama, Adam,” she says.

“You're my wife, Mel,” I remind her. “I'm already involved.”

“Temporary wife, and—”

“Wife,” I say a little bit more forcefully.

“And I don't quite have enough saved for a down payment, so I don't want to spend money on a move. Besides, I want to be close by in case Alex needs me. Jason works long hours, and I promised him I would be around to look after her. Your place is about as far as I'm willing to go right now.”

I nod and mentally kick myself for not realizing that on my own. Of course, she'd want to be here for her brother and Alex.

“It's our place now. I respect that you want to stay close, but Mel, I'm not going to stand around and let her make you feel bad about yourself. That's not happening on my watch.” She seems surprised by my words. “I mean it.” She opens her mouth to respond, but I feel a snowball hit the back of my leg. When I turn around, Addy throws another one at my knee. She tries to run away, but I grab her, and her screams fill the yard.



While Addy watches a cartoon in the living room, I clean the kitchen after making us a quick dinner of sauteed chicken breast and vegetables. Addison ate plenty, but Mellie just pushed her dinner around on her plate.

Since the WiFi is back on, she's been glued to her computer screen. Even now she's oblivious to Addison's singing along with a cartoon on the TV. She's so oblivious to her surroundings, she doesn't realize that I can't get

enough of watching her. She has her hair in a high ponytail. Her nose is long and thin from this angle, and she absentmindedly rubs the tip, which has turned red. I curse myself for not having her favorite tea on hand. Or any tea for that matter.

“Tomorrow, I’ll go grocery shopping,” I say while she types something on her computer. She doesn’t respond, so I repeat myself. She finally turns to face me, her brows furrowed.

“I’ll buy my own groceries. You only keep healthy stuff around, and I—” Whatever she was going to say is forgotten when we hear a loud knock on the door. She jumps out of her chair, practically runs to the door and opens it.

Jason walks in without being invited.

“Daddy!” Addison runs to her father. She raises both arms, and he picks her up. “Made snowman,” she says proudly.

“I saw. You did a great job.” Jason kisses Addy on the forehead. She kicks her legs, and he puts her down so she can run back to the living room.

“Thanks for watching her,” he says to the room. “Alex told me she’s been with you guys most of the day. She was going to get her earlier, but the pregnancy is putting a lot of strain on her lower back.”

“We had a lot of fun, didn’t we, Addy?” Addy is so entertained by whatever is on the TV, she doesn’t bother to answer her aunt. “You want some dinner, Jason?” Mel asks.

“Thanks, but no. I picked up Chinese on the way home. I’m going to give Addy a bath, put her to bed, and spend the rest of the night eating and watching a movie with my wife. And since I’m off tomorrow, I can sleep in come morning.” Suddenly, I’m jealous of Jason’s relationship with his wife. I’d give anything to have Mel be that easy with me.

“Sit down. I have some of Addy’s pajamas here. I’ll give her a bath. I’m sure you’re tired too.” Jason rubs a hand over his face and nods while he mutters a thank you to his sister. He sits down and Mel runs to Addison, who protests when her aunt carries her away from the television.

“Thanks for plowing the snow,” he grumbles.

I nod. I love the outdoors and any physical activity.

“You want something to drink?” I open my fridge and curse at the lack of contents. “I don’t have alcohol here. Damn.”

Jason rubs his eyes and shakes his head. “I guess you have no more use for alcohol since you’ve already trapped my sister. I’m fine, Flynn.” He rubs his face again, and for a second I imagine slamming his head against the table to knock some sense into him. But that would only upset my wife and Alex, so I slam the fridge shut instead. I slam it so hard the fridge shakes and bounces against the wall.

Jason’s head snaps up at the sudden crash, and I walk to the table and stand over him.

“I thought doctors were supposed to be smart. There goes that theory.” I lean down and say, “You think I got her drunk and trapped her?” I shrug. “Do something about it then. What are you going to do, Dupree? Nothing. Your sister is up here. With me.”

He stands abruptly and gets in my face. We’re like two animals in the wild, facing off. I stand there, taking great joy in looking down at him. I intentionally goad him by smirking, hoping he’ll throw a punch. He shoves me, and I don’t budge, but that’s exactly what I was hoping he’d do. I shove him against the wall, easily restraining him with both hands.

“Yeah, she’s here and I have you to thank for that. A mama’s boy who tosses his sister aside because mommy comes crying. You do realize she’s here because you practically kicked her out, right?” I don’t believe that, but I’m so sick of his dismissive attitude, I throw it in because I know it will hurt. He tries to push me away again, but I only push him harder into the wall.

“You don’t know shit about me and my family, so fuck you.”

I shake my head sadly at him. “Is that all you got, mama’s boy? Some four letter words?” I let him go and he stumbles before he catches his balance. I eye him up and down and turn away from him. Barely restraining

my temper, I walk away and grab a bottle of water from the fridge, but I'm not done with him yet. "Your mother upset my wife, and I'm not going to stand by and continue to let it happen. I bet you probably like that, don't you? You, the perfect doctor son, and Mel the daughter who can never measure up?"

He lets out a humorless laugh. "Yeah, you don't know shit. You and your sham marriage. How desperate must you be, trying to hold onto a marriage with a woman who was too drunk to remember?"

"Don't worry about my marriage. You should worry about why your mother upsets my wife every time they are near each other."

He stares at me, and his mouth is a firm line, but then he looks away and lets out a deep breath. "Why? Did something happen?" He starts to pace around the small kitchen table.

"She came up here earlier and upset Mel. Told her after everything you've done for her, she thanks you by pretending to be married to me. Later, while we were outside with Addy, Mel went to get buttons for the snowman, but she was gone a long time and agitated when she came out."

"It's a family matter. Don't worry about it."

I go and stand in front of him. "I'm family now. Whether you want to admit it or not, I'm your brother."

He stops pacing, looks at me, and opens his mouth to say something, but then shakes his head, probably thinking better of it. He takes a seat at the table again. "I don't like your tactics, Flynn," Jason says. "And if you have questions, ask Mellie. All I'll say is that they don't get along, and part of that is because of me." He runs a hand over his head.

I take a step closer to him and say, "What the fuck did you do?" He abruptly stands up, and we're like two lions ready to fight to the death. He takes a step closer, and I arch an eyebrow, daring him to do something. Little footsteps come running into the room, and I take a big step back.

"Hi, Daddy." Addison runs to her dad, and he scoops her up in his arms.

“I want Mama.”

Mel comes out, and I wrap a possessive arm around her waist. Jason’s eyes narrow, so I lean down and plant a lingering kiss on her lips. When I lift my head, she’s blushing. She walks over and gives Addy a kiss goodbye.

“Bye, Unco Ada.” Addy waves at me on her way out the door. “Play tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here,” I tell her while looking directly at her father. “Uncle Adam’s not going anywhere.”

Jason slams the door behind him.

As soon as they are gone, Mel walks away and opens the fridge.

“Do you have any wine?” she asks without bothering to look at me. When I tell her that I don’t, she grabs her laptop and sits on the couch. I take a seat next to her, sitting closer than necessary since I haven’t touched her in hours.

“Not a drop of booze in here. I eat a really clean diet. Not much room in it for alcohol.”

“Except when in Vegas and you want to trap me in a marriage I don’t want.”

I lean close and gently grasp her ponytail. She freezes.

“Do you really believe that, or does that story make you feel better?” I say close to her ear. She turns her head, and I meet her stare. I lean closer to her and whisper, “How long are you going to pretend you don’t remember?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I let out a sigh and close my eyes. I rub the bridge of my nose in search of patience, but I find none. The only thing I feel is anger and irritation. Both at my wife and her brother.

“You know what, Mel? There’s the door.” Having had enough I point in the direction of the front door. Her eyes widen in shock and she jumps off the couch. “I’m really fucking tired of being your punching bag. Not only that, I’m sick of your idiot brother too. If you’re so unhappy, the exit is right there. You’re the one who asked me if you could stay here. I’m not holding you

hostage. And if you want out of this marriage, fine. I don't have to beg a woman to stay married to me. I get plenty of offers. You of all people should know that."

I turn on the evening news and put the volume on full blast. She grabs the remote from me and mutes the TV.

"You're being an asshole," she has the nerve to tell me.

"Someone's being an asshole, but it's not me. I've given you everything you've asked for, and you're still making me the villain. I'm done taking shit from you and Jason." I snatch the remote and unmute the TV, dismissing her in the process. It's a gamble. She could walk out of here and never return, but that's highly unlikely. There's a snowstorm, and I know she's not going downstairs under any circumstances. She stands off to the side of the couch and says nothing. Part of me wants to go to her, but she also needs to know that I won't be her punching bag.

From my peripheral vision, I can see her pursed lips. She flares her nostrils, grabs the laptop, and sits next to me. She opens it up, points to the screen, and says, "Can you please take a look, Adam?" The indignation in her voice earlier is gone. She sounds calm, almost contrite.

"Does that mean you're staying?" I ask without looking at her while I flip through the channels.

"Yes."

"Of your own free will?" She stares blankly. "I need you to say it, Mel. You're not going to play the part of helpless victim. We both know that's not who you are. I don't force or manipulate you to do things."

She looks away from me and sighs. "You're not forcing me to stay here, Adam. I'm sorry. There's just been a lot of change in the last few days."

"You're not going to take it out on me anymore." She nods and inches a little bit closer. I hold out my hand and she hands me the laptop. I pretend to look. "These tabs are of things I'm considering for this place." She looks around my apartment again, and I resist the urge not to laugh at her disgusted

look.

“Okay. I told you to get what you want. The only thing I ask is that you don’t touch my chair.” I point to my recliner. I hand her back the laptop.

“Fine, even though that thing is hideous. It’s really, truly ugly and it looks like it smells.” I don’t argue with her there. It’s faded and the color of shit brown, but it’s comfortable, and I refuse to let it go.

“You’ll hurt its feelings, and it doesn’t smell. I take offense at that.” I smile, and when she doesn’t so much as smirk back, a laugh escapes, and the tension from earlier disappears.

“You didn’t even look. It’s thousands of dollars worth of stuff because you need everything. I got new living room furniture, and—”

“I don’t need to look at it. If you want it, get it. That’s why I gave you the credit card.” She puts the laptop on my lap and moves closer to me. The smell of her body spray hits, and all I want to do is stick my nose between her breasts and inhale. She points to the screen in front of us.

“This spreadsheet has the cost of everything. I found some good sales since neither one of us is a millionaire.” I glance at the spreadsheet, barely paying attention to the amount.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” she says, mimicking my voice. “How do you plan on paying for all of this?”

“Um, one of two ways, I guess. I can write a check, but I’ll probably pay it online.”

She closes the laptop shut and stands up. “Fine. This is for you. I won’t be taking any of it with me when I move out. I’m exhausted, so I’m going to shower. I’m happy to sleep on the couch if you prefer.”

“I don’t prefer. You will sleep in our bed.” She nods and walks away, and I’m relieved that she didn’t put up more of a fight.

I used the snowblower for the second time about an hour ago. When I returned, I was sweaty, so I’ve already showered. While she’s gone, I walk to

the bedroom, remove all my clothes and slide under the sheets. My mother gave these to me as a housewarming gift, and they are good quality. For the first time since I received these, I'm grateful to have them.

My mom comes from a big Irish family, the youngest of nine. She came to the United States at the age of eighteen on a student visa. She is from a working-class family, and due to her residency status, she had to rely on jobs that paid under the table. She met my father one summer when she was working for a rich family in Montauk. He was a friend of the family, and even though he was much older, she fell in love with him. She had me two years later, and she learned the hard way he was not interested in raising a family with her.

She eventually ended things with him, but she says she never regrets having me. And my father was a lying philanderer, but he did pay for a fancy immigration lawyer who got her permanent residency status. And he always took care of me financially. That's the extent of it. I can count on two hands how many times I've seen him in my life, but all of that is moot now since he died a few years ago.

Mel comes into the room wearing a long cotton t-shirt. I turn on my side to admire her, and she does her best to avoid eye contact with me. She sits on the edge of the bed, and I watch, mesmerized while she slowly rubs lotion on her legs. The t-shirt hikes up and I visibly swallow at the sight of plain cotton panties.

Once she's done, she turns off the light and slides into bed.

"Do you know what you need in here?" she asks before I have a chance to reach over and touch her.

"What?"

"A TV. I like to watch television in bed. I'll bring the one I have in my bedroom downstairs up here."

I put an arm around her and pull her into my naked body. She gasps when she realizes I'm not wearing any clothes, but she doesn't move away. In fact,

she relaxes and sighs softly.

“Just buy a new one, and I’ll hang it on the wall. Buy whatever the hell you want.” My hand slides up her t-shirt, and when my fingers graze across her stomach, she trembles.

“What are you doing?” I don’t miss the huskiness in her voice.

“I’m about to fuck my wife.” My mouth covers hers and no more words are exchanged between us.



We were stuck together for three days. School didn't open again until Friday, but I worked from home the rest of the week. We got into a rhythm. He gets out of bed way before I do to workout. By the time I get up, he's already showered. While I use his home gym, he cooks breakfast for us. I don't know what he does to the eggs, but they are always delicious. When I clean the kitchen, he will do a load of laundry. Every day, like clockwork, he does a load of laundry after breakfast.

While I work, he'll read, but the first day after the storm we went grocery shopping together. It's a mundane task I've done a million times, either by myself or with Alex, but it was different with Adam. It was like we've been doing this our entire lives. He filled the cart with all the healthy, organic stuff he eats, and I filled it with the stuff that tastes good. When I pulled out my credit card to pay, he gave his to the cashier first.

I'm learning a lot of things about him. He must love to cook because whatever goes into his body is prepared by him. And other than his bland chicken breast, everything else is delicious.

We do our own thing during the day, especially since I have to work, but the evenings are ours. From cuddling on the couch watching movies to hours of lovemaking at night. That's my favorite part. I always knew it would be

good. Too good. Too explosive. Leaving me devastated and broken once he realizes I'm not worth it, but since we said we'd give this a year, I'm going to enjoy it as much as possible.

Even now, he's sitting on that hideous couch waiting for me to join him. I grab the ice cream and drown it in whipped cream. He pats the spot next to him, and when I sit, he grabs one of my legs and throws it across his muscular thighs.

"When was the last time you had ice cream?" I ask just as I take a spoonful.

"It's been years." He looks longingly at my bowl. I put a little on a spoon and offer it to him. He eyes it, and just when I think he's going to say no, he shrugs and puts the spoon in his mouth.

"Strawberry?" he asks. "Who eats strawberry ice cream?" I offer him more, and he greedily eats it.

"You, obviously."

He dims the light and puts an arm around me, pulling me closer. I lay my head on his shoulder, and we take turns eating spoons of ice cream.

"How would you feel about meeting my mother?" he asks.

"I've already met your mother." I saw her a few months after the time I barged in on them. It was last summer, and he brought her over while Alex's father grilled in the backyard. He quickly introduced her to us. Alex even invited them to dinner, but they had plans. I remember Adam's eyes on me that evening. It was a hot day, and I was wearing short shorts and a crop top. I've never seen a man devour me with his eyes like that.

"You mean the time you almost broke down my door? Or the time you had on those tiny shorts."

"Shut up, Adam," I say and shove another big spoonful in his mouth.

"You haven't met her as my wife. She's going to want to know you."

I pull away from him. My stomach drops and I no longer want the ice cream. I put the bowl down on the eyesore of a coffee table. I nod but don't

look at him. He reaches for me, but I stand up and busy myself with bringing the uneaten ice cream to the kitchen sink.

I've made it a point never to meet the parents of anyone I'm dating. That was my rule, but when I moved here, I decided I was going to do everything differently. I never met anyone I wanted to get serious with, but now, drunk wedding or not, I can't avoid this.

"What just happened?" He's standing so close his chest rubs against my back, and one of his hands lands on my shoulder.

"Nothing. Just washing the bowl so you won't have to do it."

He stays quiet, but he doesn't move away. He remains behind me, hands on my shoulders while I wash the bowl. It's almost as if he's trying to absorb whatever is troubling me. Once I dry the bowl and put it in the cabinet, he turns me around and looks into my eyes.

"My mom will love you. That's a fact." I look away from the intense blue of his eyes. He grabs my chin, and when I look into his eyes again, I can't look away. "Molly Flynn is the nicest woman in the world, and she's going to take one look at you and see the same thing that I do." He leans down and gently brushes his lips against mine.

Despite the lump in my throat, I ask, "What do you see?"

"I see *you*. I always have." He pulls away from my lips and runs a hand down my high ponytail.

I can't help but smile sadly at him. "But what if—" I stop talking and shake my head.

"What if what?" he asks.

"What if she disapproves of me? What if she wanted you to marry a nice Irish girl or something? What if she takes one look at me and decides I'm not worthy of her only son?" He opens his mouth to speak, but I talk over him. "And that's fine if that's what she thinks, so maybe you shouldn't tell her. This is just for one year and—"

A long finger is pressed against my lips. "Shh. I'm not going to keep the

fact that I'm married from her, and I'm not going to hide you like you're a shameful secret. This is the best thing I've ever done, and she is going to lose her mind, but in the best way. You'll see." He pulls me into his incredibly hard body and hugs me tight. My arms hang limply at my side, but I gather my wits and hug him back. He pulls away, kisses my forehead, and scoops me into his arms.

That evening, we watch a movie on the couch. It's a cold January night, and the wind whips around angrily outside, causing the branches to beat against the windows. He pulls me closer, and I pull an ugly blanket over us.

The movie's on, but I have no idea what's happening. My heart is beating too fast at the prospect of meeting his mother. At the consequences of what I've done on that trip to Las Vegas. A trip that was supposed to be about my friend but ended up being the most life altering event of my life.

I don't know what will become of us when the year is over, but I do know that I will never be the same, and even as I lay in his arms being lulled calm by the steady beat of his heart, I know that I was only fooling myself when I agreed to just one year.

He's slowly rubbing his hands on my back, and I sigh softly at the sensation. If only this could last. If only he wouldn't wake up one day and realize that I'm not worth it. If only I were more, someone worthy and deserving of unconditional love.

My eyes become heavy, and I long to fall asleep in his arms, but I think my husband has other ideas.. The couch might be ugly and old, but it's comfortable and big enough for both of us. One of his hands dips past my lower back and cups a butt cheek. I feel his dick swell underneath me, and seconds later, he's standing up and carrying me into the bedroom.

Once we're both under the covers, I reach for him. His hard dick pulsates in my hand. I move closer and kiss my husband.



“I should have brought something,” I say as Adam pulls into the driveway of his mother’s house. I’m surprised when he stops in front of the beautiful two-level home with a brick front. It’s not the beauty of the house that surprises me, it’s the size. And the location. I’ll have to double check, but I’m pretty sure this is one of the more expensive Boston suburbs. It’s much bigger than the home I grew up in. I look at Adam, but he’s looking down at his vibrating phone. He seems irritated when he puts it in the glove compartment and slams it shut.

I don’t know much about Adam’s mother other than she’s a massage therapist, raised him on her own, and lives with her oldest brother, Adam’s Uncle Finn.

“Did your mom move into your uncle’s house with him?” I ask, fishing for information. “It’s nice.” I hope he doesn’t pick up on the nervous tenor of my voice. When he doesn’t answer right away, I poke his thigh with my index finger.

“Hm?” He seems jolted by my touch.

“Who was that?” I ask, pointing at the glove compartment. “The New York number again?”

His lips thin out as if he just tasted something sour, then he shakes his

head and smiles at me. “My mom has lived here since we came back from Ireland. We lived there for a few years when I was a kid. Uncle Finn moved in with her after moving to the US about three years ago. His wife passed away suddenly, and they never had kids. He and my mom have always been very close, so she was happy to have him. I moved out because it was time and Uncle Finn is a little nutty. You’ll see.” He kills the engine, and when he reaches for his car door, I put my gloved hand on his thigh, stopping him.

“You lived with your mom until you moved into your apartment?” My eyes nearly pop out of my head by the admission. I can’t help the small laugh that escapes.

“This country is the only one where kids are encouraged to move out at eighteen. Yes, I lived here with her.” He shrugs as if it’s no big deal. He opens the door, hops out, walks around to my side, and helps me out. His truck is huge, and he practically has to lift me out.

“I should have brought something. I should have baked a pie.”

“Do you know how to bake a pie, Mel?” He holds on to my arm as we maneuver over the icy driveway and walkway.

“It’s just bad manners to show up empty handed.” I slow my steps and so does Adam. The closer we get to the front door, the slower I walk until I eventually come to a complete stop. I look at the house and then turn my head towards Adam’s truck. He drops his hand from my elbow and cups my face.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“I’ve never gone this far before, Adam.” I bite down on my lower lip just as a cold, angry gust of wind hits, pushing my hair into my face. I curse myself for not putting on a hat. Adam’s big hands brush my hair back in place, but his eyes never leave mine. He doesn’t need to speak, but I know what he’s asking. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I never let myself get close enough to a man where he would want me to meet his mother, and what if—” The words die on my tongue before I can force myself to finish

the thought.

“Well, I’m not some man. I’m your husband, and my mom and I are very close.” That’s what I’m afraid of. I lower my eyes from his, and he surprises me by pulling me into his arms and shielding me from the harsh January winds. “Relax.” He tightens his arms around me, and despite the frigid temperature, I feel safe and warm. “My ma is about the nicest woman you will ever meet. She’s never met someone she didn’t like.” He pulls back and strokes my face again. “I promise you I would never willingly bring you around anyone who wouldn’t love you. Trust me?” His blue eyes are hypnotizing, and I nod. He drops my face, grabs my hand and we walk up the steps.

He doesn’t knock or ring the bell. The second he opens the door, I’m greeted with the smell of home cooking and the blasting sound of Sunday football on the TV.

“Ma!” he yells as he helps me with my coat. I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling self-conscious about the outfit I picked. It’s plain black pants and a matching black v-neck sweater. Now I wish I didn’t dress like I was going to a funeral.

The entryway to the house is huge, with a long hallway leading into a formal living room. The walls are filled with pictures of Adam from baby to adult. There’s even one of him at around the age of six, smiling wide with his two front teeth missing. I can’t help my laugh as I trace my finger on his cute little chubby face. The next one is when he’s about thirteen, and he has a mouth full of braces and an unruly mop of brown hair.

“I wouldn’t let her cut it,” he says, surprising me by wrapping his long arms around me. As if I have no choice, I lean into his massive frame. “I was going to be a long-haired drummer in a rock band,” he whispers against my ear, sending chills down my body.

“Did you?”

“Nope.” He plants a soft kiss on my jawline.

“Why not?”

“Two reasons. I suck at playing the drums and there was a lice outbreak in my school.”

“Ew!” I pull out of his arms and turn to face him. We both burst into laughter and some of the tension leaves my body. The sound of the TV gets louder, but I still hear someone’s loud laughter.

I turn in time to see Adam’s mother running down the hall. She’s a tall, slender woman, and as soon as Adam sees her, he lets me go. She runs into his arms, and he lifts her off her feet as she peppers his face with kisses.

“My wee boy,” she says once he finally puts her down. As soon as her feet touch the ground, she turns to me. Unlike Adam’s piercing blue eyes, hers are a warm brown framed by strawberry blonde hair.

She leaves her son’s side and walks to me. Like a deer in headlights, I stand there, unable to speak. Adam puts an arm around my waist.

“And who do we have here?” She reaches for my face, and her warm hands touch my skin. Her eyes are welcoming and the smile on her face is like a hug from a good friend. “Is this the surprise?” Her smile widens when she looks from me to her son.

“Molly!” someone yells. “Molly, when is Adam getting here? I need him to explain this American football to me. I don’t get it.”

Molly sighs, turns, and says, “He’s already here and he has a pretty girl with him. If you’d put on your hearing aid you would have heard him.” I practically stumble back at the sound of her loud voice. Adam just laughs.

“Finn is practically deaf but refuses to admit it,” he whispers in my ear. Molly touches my cheek again before she pulls me into a hug.

“Ma, this is Melanie. Mel, this is my ma, Molly Flynn.”

“What a pretty name.” She hugs me again and squeezes me tight this time.

“And...she’s my wife.” All the air leaves the room when Adam makes that announcement. I hold my breath, waiting for her to ask him if he lost his

damn mind and to warn him that he's made a terrible mistake, but to my surprise, she doesn't do any of that.

She puts both hands to her mouth, and her brown eyes pool with unshed tears. She lets out an excited gasp and pulls us both into her arms. When she lets us go, she starts to scream. Finn, I assume, runs down the hall. He's a portly man with a round gut, and from several feet away, I can tell he's at least a couple of inches shorter than his sister.

"What the hell is going on?" he practically screams from down the hall.

"Adam got married." Molly's tears are now streaming down her face.

"Adam got carried? Who in the hell can carry this giant around?" He chuckles and hugs Adam, then he turns to me and hugs me. Just like Adam did to his mother, he lifts me off the ground.

"And who is this pretty lady?" he asks.

"This is Melanie, Adam's wife," Molly says.

"Why does Adam need a knife?"

"Married!" Molly yells at her brother.

"Buried? Are you crazy, Mol? He's not buried. He's right here."

Molly sighs in frustration, and when I look at Adam, his shoulders are shaking from laughter. I can't help myself. I laugh too, and so does Molly.

"Married!" She takes my left hand and Adam's, and she shows them to her brother.

"Married!" He widens his eyes and puts both hands to his head. "Adam! Mazel tov. Let's have a drink." He practically yells the last sentence. "Am I getting a little nephew to play ball with, Adam?" He puts a hand on my stomach then shakes his head. "Nope."

"Go put on your hearing aid. I don't plan on spending the first day with my new daughter shouting. I don't want her to think we're crazy," she screams.

He shoos her away, but he runs down the hall and out of our sight.

"Too late on the crazy part," Adam says. Molly swats his shoulder, but

she hooks her arm through mine, and we finally leave the hallway. The rest of the house is like a shrine to Adam. There are candid shots of him, his mother, and various other people. Adam looks nothing like his mother, but a lot of the people in the pictures resemble her, so I assume they are family.

There's a picture of a young Adam in a tuxedo with a woman.

"Prom photo?" I ask, lifting it. The female is small and dressed in a pale blue dress, the same color as his bowtie. She has dark brown skin, much darker than mine and she has a wide smile on her face.

"My mother can't let go." He takes the picture from me and puts it down.

"Kids! Drinks," Finn says, less loud this time. I hear the loud pop, and by the time we make it to the kitchen, he's pouring glasses of champagne.

"Adam, you didn't tell me you were dating anyone. How did this happen?" She bypasses the glass of champagne her brother is holding out to her and hugs me again.

Adam tells them an abridged version of what happened in Vegas. "We got caught up in the moment, Ma. We realized our feelings and didn't want to wait anymore. I wanted to tell you face to face, and the snowstorm this week was like our honeymoon."

Molly swoons at her son's words, grabs her glass of champagne, clinks it with us, and downs it in one large gulp. Finn immediately refills it.

"What did he say?" Finn yells. "He got caught in a typhoon? I thought he went to Vegas. How the hell did he get caught in a typhoon in Vegas? Adam, what the hell are you talking about?"

Molly rolls her eyes, and I laugh.

"Honeymoon!" I say, close to his ear.

"Oh! Now, that's what I'm talking about. Hubba hubba." He winks at me, and Molly excuses herself. She returns about a minute later and shoves something in Finn's hands.

"I don't need this. My ears work fine."

She sighs and says, "How about some appetizers? Get the platter from the

fridge, Son. I'm so happy about my daughter." She hugs me again, and this time, she lowers her arms and pinches my hips. "She has a good figure for bairns. You're very tall." Unsure of how to respond, I look at Adam, who is putting a tray of food on the kitchen island. His mom inches closer and asks, "Are you pregnant?" I almost choke on my champagne at the question, but she steps back and pats my thighs this time.

"Ma," Adam warns.

"What? I want grandbabies, Adam." She turns those brown eyes to me and says, "Granddaughters to be more specific. And soon." His mom is beautiful when she smiles, with sparkling brown eyes and perfect cheekbones. Her complexion is fair, without a single blemish.

She grabs a small plate and fills it with crackers, cheese, and grapes for me. "Eat, darling," she orders. She fills her own plate and stands next to me. I take a bite of a cracker. She smiles again, and her smile is so infectious, I find myself mimicking her.

"Let the girl eat, Molly. She can catch a baby faster with some meat on her bones," Finn yells. I start to choke on my cracker, and Adam runs a hand over his face in embarrassment.

"Let me put dinner on the table. Adam, make sure she eats." She points a finger in her son's face to make her point, but she puts it down, grabs his face, and kisses it. She does the same to me and runs to the oven.

"She's meshugana, that one," Finn yells.

"Catch a baby?" I whisper to Adam. "What the hell does that mean?"

"That I can knock you up fast. Duh," he says with a shrug.

"I feel bad, Adam," I whisper. "Your mom thinks this is real and that we're—"

"We're what? Married? Most married people have babies, and I'm my mother's only child." He grabs a piece of my hair and wraps it around his finger. "I told you she'd like you," he says with a sexy smile.

"Yeah, but you said she likes everyone."

“Don’t do that, Mel. Don’t dismiss yourself. For the record, that’s not exactly true. She’s met a lot of people she doesn’t like, but she likes you because of who you are.” He puts a piece of cheddar cheese to my mouth. “Eat up so you can catch that baby.”



“You two will make beautiful babies. Don’t you agree, Finn?” my mother says. Mel is sitting between me and Ma, and poor Finn is by himself on the other side of the table. Every time Mel takes a bite of her pot roast, my mother wipes her mouth. Then she faces me and wipes mine.

“Rabies? Who has rabies?” Finn asks.

Mel lets out a loud laugh, which she tries to hide behind a series of fake coughs.

“Babies!” my mother yells.

“Jesus, Ma! Enough. Let’s just eat.”

“Adam!” Uncle Finn yells. “Don’t take our savior’s name in vain. You’re gonna burn in eternal damnation if you do.”

“*That* he hears,” I whisper to Mel.

We eat in silence. Well, as much silence as possible with Finn yelling out some nonsense every few minutes, but I don’t miss the look on my mother’s face, especially the way she looks from me to Mel. I know that look well. She wants something, and she is going to do her best to get it.

“He’s my only boy, Melanie,” she says sweetly. I meet her eyes and slowly shake my head at her, warning her to drop it. She smirks at me but quickly looks away. “My only child. He weighed almost eleven pounds when

he was born. My vag was a wreck after I had him.”

“Ma!” I say. This is extreme even for her. “Come on.” Mel coughs and my mom absentmindedly rubs her back.

“What? I taught you about the human body when you were five. Remember your little friend from down the street. His mother didn’t like it when you told him the names of the female body parts. She was such a prude.”

“Rude?” Finn yells. “Adam, I’ll box your damn ears if you’re rude to your mother, even if I have to get on a stepladder to do it.”

My mom waves Finn off and turns back to Mel. “We’ve been through everything together, me and my boy. I raised him to treat a woman with respect. He’s good to you, right? Adam, you better be good to her.” She reaches over and slaps me upside the head. The sudden movement catches me off guard, and I drop my fork on my plate.

“Yes, he’s very good to me,” Mel says.

I look over at her and wink before blowing her a kiss. She giggles.

“He’d better be because that’s how I raised him. Like I was saying, we’ve been through a lot together, and he only moved out when Finn moved in. I guess all the yelling finally got to him. He’s so considerate, my Adam. It’s always been my dream to see my baby get married. In a church by our priest. As beautiful as you are, I’m sure your dad wants to walk you down the aisle. If your mom is anything like me, she’d want to see you in a beautiful wedding gown. You’d be stunning with that perfect figure. I can picture it now.”

Oh, boy. Mel starts to stammer, and she looks at me, like a deer in headlights. She subtly shakes her head, signaling for me to put a stop to this, but my mother planted the seed and all I can see is my wife walking to me in a beautiful, white wedding dress. A form fitting lace gown, showing off her perfect hourglass figure. So, as my mother is looking at her, pleading with her eyes for the chance to see her only son get married, I don’t rein her in.

She grabs Mellie's hands and holds them in hers. "We can go wedding dress shopping. I'll help you plan, and I promise I'm not one of those overbearing mothers. I'll just be there to take orders. I prayed for a girl when I was pregnant just so I could plan my daughter's wedding. The good Lord gave me a son instead, but he still heard my prayers because I have you now. Please." She puts Mellie's hands to her face, and I know my wife doesn't stand a chance. Well done, Ma. Well done.

"Well, uh, I'm sure Adam wouldn't want to go through the trouble and expense of a wedding when we're already married. Tell her, Adam." She sits back and waits for me to agree with her.

"I'd love to have the church's blessing on our marriage," I say to my wife. Her eyes shoot fire, and I know with each breath, she's plotting my death, but I could not let this opportunity pass.

Ma's grip tightens on Mel's hands, and her mouth hangs open. She stares at me, and I stare right back, giving her my most innocent smile.

"The church?" Mel asks, aghast.

"Oh, Mel. I would hate to leave this earth without seeing my baby married with my own eyes. It will give me great comfort in my last days."

Mel lets out a soft gasp. "Your last days? Are you sick, Molly?"

"We're all born with an expiration date, darling. I would just hate for my date to come up and not see my baby marry his beautiful bride. I have no other children."

Mel clears her throat and looks around the room. It's so quiet you could hear a pin drop. My heart thumps loudly in my chest, and I hold my breath until she speaks. Mel closes her mouth and exhales loudly. Her shoulders sag, and I know that's the exact moment she resigns herself to a church wedding.

"Something small," she says after a strained silence. "And I'd want my sister-in-law and best friend Ananda to help us." My mother whoops in victory.

She claps her hands together right before she takes Mellie in a hug.

“Finn!! We’re having a wedding!”

“Bedding? Are they spending the night? Adam!”



She doesn't say a word the entire ride home. When dinner was over, Ma grabbed Mel and pulled her out of the kitchen. Once I finished cleaning, I found them in the living room looking at wedding dresses online. My mom had an iPad, and she was taking notes. Before we left, they made plans to go to the nail salon next weekend. To make sure it happens, my mother volunteered to pick Mel up Saturday afternoon.

"You okay, Mel? You haven't said a word in ages." I pull my car into my spot in the back of the house and rest a hand on hers.

She doesn't pull her hand away, but when she finally looks into my eyes, I can see the uncertainty and worry on her face. I lift my hand from hers and run a finger along her jawline.

"What are we doing, Adam? We only agreed to be together for a year, and now your mother is planning a wedding. A goddamn wedding. In a church. I can't do this." She throws her hands up, opens the door to the truck, and jumps out.

With my heart in my throat, I open my own door and catch up with her before she can get too far.

"We've got to tell her the truth. She's a wonderful woman who doesn't deserve to be lied to. And why would we spend money on a wedding

anyway? I'm saving to buy a house and you just spent a bunch on furniture." I wrap my arm around her, and neither one of us speaks again until we get inside.

We spent most of yesterday getting rid of things that Mel wants replaced, including the couch and coffee table. The only thing left in the living room is my recliner.

I help her with her coat, and while she pulls off her boots, I hang everything in the closet.

"Hold on to the credit card to pay for the wedding." A boot drops from her hand, and her head snaps up.

"You really want to do this?"

"We promised my mother." She hangs her head down and her hair falls and covers her face. I run a hand through her silky mane. "Don't worry about the cost, okay," I say, trying to put her at ease.

"I don't want you to be in debt. We don't have to do this. Let's tell her we had a fight and I left. You can blame the entire thing on me. Tell her I'm a flake, but I can't do this to you or her." She stands up and walks to the bedroom. I find her in the closet grabbing her suitcase. I close and lock the door behind me.

I put an arm around her waist and lift her with one hand. She protests, but I drop her on the bed and jump in beside her.

"Mel, relax."

"I feel bad, Adam. We picked a date for our wedding. And we're supposed to have this wedding and get a divorce four months later? That's insane."

"We don't have to get a divorce next year, Melanie," I all but snap at her. That takes the wind out of her sails. "There's no law that says we have to end things in a year or a hundred years."

"It was a drunken mistake," she says.

I turn on my side, and she does the same. "Listen to me carefully when I

say this. I wasn't drunk."

I can tell she's stopped breathing while she stares at me. "Remember what you said to me that night?"

She opens and closes her mouth several times. "You know I don't remember." She can't hold my stare as she utters those words. Words that I know are lies, but maybe she's just not ready to face the truth yet, so I simply nod.

"Well, one day, you'll remember how we ended up at the wedding chapel. Let me ask you something else, but before I do, promise you'll tell me the truth."

She nods.

"Do you want a wedding? Is it something you've thought about ever?" I hold on to her chin, not willing to let her look away from me. She bites her bottom lip, and that simple gesture is enough to make me want to forget this conversation and make love to her instead.

"It's not something I thought about as a young girl or teenager, to be honest, Adam. But when I stood up for Jason as the best person for his wedding, I had some moments and wondered what it would be like to find the one, but I put those thoughts away. I'm just a disaster. I was a challenge to you, and soon you'll realize I'm not worth it."

I pull her closer, and she throws a leg over me and lays her head on my chest. I stroke her back and lean down to kiss her forehead.

"Let's give this a chance, and I don't know who lied to you and told you that you're a disaster. You want to know what you are?" She doesn't say anything. I can tell she's waiting for me to tell her. She lifts her head from my shoulder and looks into my eyes. "You're my wife. My beautiful, sexy, smart wife. The one who has driven me crazy since I first laid eyes on her. But that's not all that you are. You're the same girl who came here and started over. You made a new life. You're resilient, and beautiful, and strong. I don't care what your mother says about Jason being the one doing for you.

He's a good brother, but you're a good sister too. You've given a lot of yourself to his family. That's what I see when I look at you."

Tears well in her eyes and a fat one slides down her cheek. I kiss it away and pull her on top of me.

"Thanks for saying that," she says.

"It's the truth." I kiss her forehead, and she covers us with a soft blanket.

"And you have really good pussy. And your mouth on my dick is—"

She laughs and elbows me in the ribs. "Aadaaam!" she yells and elongates the vowels in my name just like my Uncle Finn.

That gets a laugh out of me.

"We'll need to sit down and come up with a budget for this wedding. I'm not taking money from my family for it, but I can take some money from my emergency savings, so you won't have to pay for this yourself. We can talk about it tomorrow."

I sigh in relief and make a mental note to send my mother some thank you flowers for the unexpected gift she just gave me.

"Okay, Mel. We'll do a spreadsheet or whatever you want, but I can afford it."

"I have a question for you," she says.

"Lay it on me."

"Is your uncle Jewish? Did he convert?"

I let out a loud laugh and roll my eyes. "Finnegan Patrick Flynn is as Catholic as the Pope. He's also a few cards short of a full deck."

"And why does he yell your name every few seconds? Adam! Adam!" she yells, doing a pretty good job of mimicking his voice. "Aaaaadam!"

"Now you see why I finally moved out."



After a good laugh at Uncle Finn's expense, my wife falls asleep in my arms.

Unlike our first night together, she's sleeping peacefully. I kiss her lips and admire her face as she lies on my pillow. Her long eyelashes cast a shadow on her cheeks, and I resist the urge to wake her up and make love to her, but the vibrating phone in my pocket distracts me from my plans.

Assuming it's my mother, I grab the phone and rush out the bedroom, but it's not her. I curse in frustration.

This is new. They've never called at this time before. I usually get a break from the calls on Sundays, but I guess not today. The vibrations stop only to start again a few seconds later. I hit decline, but it starts to vibrate again almost immediately. The urge to slam the phone against the wall is strong, but I can't give them that satisfaction.

"What?" I whisper shout so I don't wake Mel.

The first call was about six months ago, and I told her then not to call again. Then *he* started calling and leaving messages. I've never spoken to him. The line is quiet after I answer, and I'm seconds away from either ending the call or breaking my phone.

"He answers," the voice says. He sounds smug, and even though it's been almost five years since I heard the voice of my father, he sounds just like him. That immediately puts me in a bad mood.

"And you can't take a fucking hint," I hiss. I push myself off the wall and walk to the bathroom and close the door behind me to ensure complete privacy.

"You're right about that. We didn't know about you. If we had—" I stop him before he can finish that sentence.

"Well, I've always known about you. I know all that I need to know. I told your sister I don't want anything from you. I'm not coming after your fortune, if that's what you're worried about."

There's a long pause, and I can picture his smug face now. He's probably seething at my tone, but I don't care.

"She's your sister too, and her name is Elizabeth. All she wants is to get

to know you.”

For some reason, the entitled tone of his voice irritates me. As if it’s their right to bulldoze their way into my life. It’s always been about what they want and screw everyone else.

“What about what the fuck I want? Do you people ever think of anyone but yourselves? I’ve already told *your* sister I’m not interested in getting to know her. And for the record, I don’t want anything to do with you either. You’re all the fucking same.”

He’s silent, but since I’m only going to have this conversation once, I refuse to hang up like I did the first time I took a call from one of them. I wait for his tirade of entitlement, and I hope I get one because I’m suddenly itching for a fight.

“Are you done?” he asks, his tone even.

“I think the better question is, are *you* done?”

“We’re just getting started, Adam.” The hint of amusement in his voice fuels my anger. It’s like throwing a match on a puddle of gasoline.

“I’ve already told you where I stand, but because you seem to be learning impaired, let me say it again.” This time, I don’t miss the laugh coming from him, but I take a deep breath and continue. “I don’t care who you are. I don’t want anything to do with you, your sister, or anyone else in your family. I don’t want anything, and since I’m pretty sure you dug around in my life, let me tell you that I didn’t even want the money that lying, cheating piece of shit left for me. I would have donated it all to charity if my mother hadn’t begged me not to. I don’t have nor have I ever had any interest in being a part of your family. You people are—”

“We’re your family,” he finishes for me. He drops his voice and says, “I’m your brother. Elizabeth is your sister. I have a son, and that makes him your nephew. I’m getting married in a few months. I want you to come to my wedding.”

“You’re forgetting something. I don’t want any of that. Don’t I get a

choice?”

“Only if you make the right one.” I pull the phone away from my ear, suddenly enraged at this controlling asshole and his very existence.

“I’m not interested.” I try to sound dismissive, but the few times I allowed myself to research him, I fell down a rabbit hole of family pictures and articles. From pictures of our father and his legitimate family to recent ones of my so-called brother, his fiancée, and son.

“You can come here,” he continues as if he didn’t hear what I just said. “I can send the jet for you and your wife.” He pauses, but I don’t bother to ask how he knows I’ve gotten married. I always suspected that they’re watching me. Even before I got that phone call all those months ago, I had a feeling that someone was following me, but I could never prove it.

“No. You’re not about to summon me as if you’re royalty and I’m your subject. And don’t you ever talk about my wife again.”

“Or I can come to you.”

“I’m not issuing any invitations.”

He laughs again. “I thought you said you knew me.”

“You’re just like him,” I hiss. I’m not sure if that’s true, but I figure I’d go for a low blow.

“In some ways, I am, and so are you, it seems.” I bristle at his words.

“Don’t ever compare me to him and don’t call me again.”

“This is your chance to control the situation, Adam. You can pick when and where.”

The balls on this guy. “I already told you I’m not interested.”

“Fine.”

I expel a relieved breath, but my relief is short lived. “You just forfeited control. I’ll come to you.” And the bastard ends the call. I wish he’d come now so I could pound his face with my fist.

I shove the phone back in my pocket and yank the door open with a little bit too much force. I practically collide with Mel.

“Are you okay?” She lays a hand on my chest, and the tension starts to ebb. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Who were you talking to?” She pokes her head inside the bathroom as if she’s going to find another person. I step out and close the door behind me.

“No one important. Just one of the teachers at school calling in sick already.” I put my arm around her and tuck her to my side. “I was just coming back to bed, but since you’re up, let’s discuss our wedding.” I surprise her when I pull away and pick her up bridal style.



It's not until midday that the managers' meeting ends, and I return to my office. It's been almost three years since I started in the risk management department at Massachusetts General Hospital. This is where my brother completed his residency and where he now works as an attending physician. This is where he met Alex, who works in the same department as me. The only difference now is I'm a manager.

When the position opened, I had no plans to apply for it until Alex encouraged me to do so. I did it as a joke, never expecting to get past the first interview, but I did. Three interviews later, I was offered the position of claims manager. The job comes with a lot more responsibilities but also a hefty raise and extra vacation time.

"Look at this ho," Ananda whisper shouts when I walk by her cubicle. Everyone chuckles.

"Why am I a ho?" I ask.

"Because you're walking like you just rode a horse. And don't get me started on you getting married and leaving Vegas before telling anyone. And then you hid all last week," Ananda says.

I look at Alex and she giggles at me.

"Let's go to lunch. I'm starving," I say to shut her up.

Alex and Ananda get their coats, and I run to my small office in the back. Ananda applied for the manager's job too, and I worried things would get awkward once I got the job, especially since she's worked here longer, but like the true friend she is, she was happy for me. She went so far as to throw me a surprise party to celebrate my promotion.

Once we're bundled, the two of us each take one of Alex's arms and walk to Bean Town Café. Tina has a table in the back ready for us, and as soon as someone takes our order, she slides into the booth next to Alex.

"How's my baby?" She rubs Alex's protruding belly.

"Kicking," Alex says. "There's definitely a soccer player in there."

"And how's our new bride?" Tina's smile widens and she shares a look with her sister. "Do you need me to put on my lawyer hat?"

This time Alex and Ananda share a look, and I don't miss Ananda's smug smile.

"Um, not yet. Since my mom's around, we decided to stay married for a year to throw her off the scent. I don't need her thinking I screwed up again." I take a long sip of my ice water, hoping and praying they change the subject once I'm done drinking.

"Girl, bye," Ananda says. "A year my big ass. If you haven't filed papers by now, and you're going to play house for a year, you ain't getting no damn divorce. I know Adam sure as hell isn't going to give you one without a fight. And you can't even walk straight."

Alex tries to mask her laugh with a cough but can't. I cut my eyes to her, and she refuses to meet my stare. I can feel myself blush. Ananda is right about the walking part. I got so turned on after creating a spreadsheet listing all possible expenses for the wedding. When I was done, I slammed the laptop shut and climbed on top of Adam. He offered zero resistance, and I rode him through two orgasms until he flipped me over and I ended up on my back. He threw one of my legs over my head and penetrated me so deep, I lost all thought. Another orgasm later, he erupted inside of me. The second he

climbed off my body, I fell asleep, and woke up from my deep slumber this morning wrapped in his arms.

“I see from that blush on your face that Ananda is right,” Tina says. The three of them exchange looks again.

“Why do you three keep looking at each other like that?” I ask.

“Because you’re fooling yourself again like you always do when it comes to your *husband*,” Ananda says. “You should have seen them in Vegas. He was like a possessive crazy boyfriend. If a man even so much as looked at her, he stood to his full height until they walked away. Then Mellie had a few drinks and started flirting with him, saying—”

I elbow Ananda in the ribs, hard enough to cut off her words. She starts to cough, but I catch her eye and give her the death glare.

“What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” Ananda says. She chuckles and does the motion of zipping her lips.

“How was meeting his mom and uncle?” Alex asks.

Ananda arches her eyebrows, crosses her arms, and waits for me to speak.

“She’s amazing. Really sweet and funny. And Uncle Finn is a riot.” I tell them about Adam’s mom, and Uncle Finn’s refusal to wear his hearing aids even though he needs them desperately. I slide in the fact about the wedding, and the entire table goes quiet. My three tablemates all stare at each other, then at me without saying a word. After what seems like an eternity of silence, they start to talk at once.

“You’re having a wedding?” Tina asks. “A summer wedding?”

“His mom has the guilt thing down. She pulled the ‘he’s my only child’ card.”

They stare at each other again after my statement. Luckily, the waitress brings our food and I take a big bite of my turkey club. After the first bite, I realize how famished I am, and I take another bite and shovel several fries in my mouth.

“Does this mean you’re going wedding dress shopping?” Alex asks. Her

eyebrows are practically to her hairline.

I don't miss Ananda's snicker or Tina's shocked look. After putting more fries in my mouth, all I can do is nod. Everyone waits. They all watch me, and when I reach for more fries, Ananda pushes my plate away. Resigned, I take another sip of water.

I nod slowly and say, "With his mom, and you guys too." The table goes deathly quiet again, and when Tina catches my eyes and smirks, I look away and clear my throat. I grab my plate and fill my mouth with more of my sandwich.

"Divorce my ass," Ananda says. "And before you start lying to us *and* yourself, just remember these facts. You're already married, planning a wedding, and going shopping with your mother-in-law. Just get pregnant tonight and call it a day because we all know you're fucking him by now. Have two of his giant babies and live happily ever after."

Instead of reaching for my water, I look around the table while I think of a believable response to what Ananda just said.

"Well, we *are* married, Ananda. And do you have to be so crass all the time?" I grab my water and finish it, letting the slurping sound fill the small space. "So," I say as I do everything to avoid looking at my friends, "everyone free the Saturday after next. Molly texted me—"

"Who the hell is Molly?" Ananda asks, interrupting me.

"Adam's mom. Anyway, she made an appointment at a bridal shop, and I want you guys to come."

"What about your mother?" Alex asks.

I make a face and let out a groan.

"No. I want this to be a positive experience. I don't want to talk about Diane Dupree, okay? And I'll tell Jason about the wedding myself, Alex." I reach over the table and tap her belly.

"I wouldn't even know where to start," Alex says. "So, you've been texting with your mother-in-law, huh?"

“Yeah, she’s been texting all morning. Sent me a bunch of baby pictures of Adam.” My phone buzzes in my purse, and I reach for it. Sure enough, it’s a text from Molly confirming our mani/pedis for Saturday. I text her back and slide the phone back in my purse. When I look up, everyone is looking at me.

“Who was that?” Ananda asks.

“Molly. We’re getting manicures on Saturday.”

Everyone throws their hands up in the air. Tina throws her head back and laughs.

“You were right, Alex. I owe you drinks once you pop this baby out,” Tina says.

A large crowd walks in and she leaves us to go greet the new customers.

“Mellie, don’t waste our time with that bullshit divorce talk again. We’ll be planning your baby shower before you know it. You are in so deep.”

“I think Adam’s the one who’s been in deep,” Alex says, which causes Ananda to snort so loud food flies out of her mouth.

I can feel a flush creep up my neck, but I ignore my friends and return to my food.

“Is this going to be in a Catholic church?” Ananda asks. When I nod yes, she says, “Does this mean you’re converting?”

“I don’t have to. I looked it up. As long as we get permission from the bishop, I can marry in a Catholic church without converting.”

“Don’t forget we still have Alex’s baby shower to finish planning, so don’t go spending all your free time researching the Catholic church and hanging out with your new mommy,” Ananda says.

I give her the finger with one hand while I hold my turkey club with another.

The lunch conversation returns to normal, and I tune out my friends while I think about how I keep digging a deeper hole for myself. First with the drunken marriage and now an actual church wedding.

“So, when is the wedding happening? As long as it’s a few months after I

pop out this baby. I am not going to look like a whale in my bridesmaid dress,” Alex says.

I stare at her and then I turn to Ananda. They aren’t only the first two friends I made when I moved here, but they are the best friends I’ve ever had in my life. True friends who I can confide in and who have my back no matter what. I was a bridesmaid for them both. If I’m having a wedding, there is no way I won’t have the two most important women in my life not be a part of it.

“We’re thinking August, about a month before school starts so we can have time for our honeymoon.”

They both chuckle.

“So, where are you two going on this honeymoon?” Alex asks. She looks at Ananda and they both do a bad job of trying to hide their amusement.

I slurp the rest of my water, but I feel their eyes on me while they wait for my answer.

“We haven’t decided yet,” I tell them.

“But you must have some ideas,” Ananda, the pushy bitch, says. “You know you can’t keep shit from us, so you might as well confess now.”

“We are considering Paris.” They look at each other and burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“The most romantic city in the world,” Ananda says between chuckles.

“I know. I know,” I say to my two best friends. “When this first happened, I saw a way out, but now I can’t. Each time I try to get out, I just get pulled in deeper and deeper.”

My friends stare at each other, and it’s as if they are having a silent conversation, and I know it’s about me.

“Stop doing that. Just say what you want to say,” I tell them.

“Just how deep does he go?” Alex asks again with a loud giggle.

I sigh and roll my eyes to the ceiling.

“You’re like a twelve-year-old boy,” I tell her.

“That’s how this one ended up pregnant. You’re so damn filthy,” Ananda says to Alex. “Anyway, Melanie, you’re married, fucking, and living together while you plan a wedding. You’re besties with his mama. So much so that you’ve been texting each other all day. Why don’t you stop the bullshit about divorcing him in a year and give it an honest try? You married the man for a reason, right? I don’t understand why you’d never give him a chance to begin with. It’s always been obvious he’s crazy about you, and he’s fine as fuck. And I don’t buy that load of crap about finding a man your parents would like. I know you, and I know you don’t give a shit about what anybody else thinks, especially your mother.”

Alex’s fork stops halfway to her mouth while she waits for me to answer. Out of the three of us, Ananda is the most outspoken. You never have to guess what she’s thinking or how she feels because she will tell you. Alex is more subtle. She’s gentler and will eventually lead you to the right conclusion.

“I told you guys I always wanted a black boyfriend.” I know they are going to call me out on my bullshit. “It makes life easier,” I say in my defense.

“Yeah, if we were living in nineteen-forty; funny how you say that but end up married to the Irish guy,” Ananda reminds me.

“I was drunk.”

“Girl, stop with that shit. I was there! You had some drinks, but you weren’t drunk. And honestly, who cares about his color? We want love, and it shouldn’t matter if our person is black, white, orange, or green? As long as he’s a good person and fine. He’s definitely gotta be fine.”

“Then he must have drugged me.” My response is a little bit too loud for the restaurant. An older lady from the next table looks at us, her brows marred in disapproval.

“Mellie, come on.” Alex reaches over and touches my hand.

“Nobody drugged your ass. Stop lying!” Ananda yells at the table. “And

you are too hardheaded to do anything you don't want to do.”

“Whatever,” I huff. “Are you both going to be my bridesmaids or what?”

They both start to clap at the table right before Ananda takes me in a suffocating hug.



It's after six by the time I make it home. I stayed late to catch up on work from last week. We're allowed to work remotely, but the storm caught me by surprise, and I had some matters I had to resolve before coming home tonight.

I close the front door to the house just as a strong gust of wind hits. It's well below freezing today and the short walk from the train station has chilled me to the bone. As soon as I close the door behind me, the door to the first-floor apartment opens, and my mother's head pokes out.

I give her a tight-lipped smile and try to walk up the stairs, but she steps in front of me. I stop short to avoid bumping into her. Addison comes running out and wraps her arms around one of my mother's legs.

“Hi, Auntie.” She waves her little pudgy hands at me. I lean down and kiss the top of her soft curls. “Where Ada?”

As if he heard his name, the door to the second floor opens and Adam's heavy footsteps hit the stairs. It's like a herd of elephants, and I don't miss the jolt of excitement coursing through my body at the thought of seeing him. He left so early this morning. He slid out of bed right at five to head to the gym before work. He gave me a kiss on the forehead minutes later, and I haven't seen him since.

When he reaches the bottom step, he grabs my face and kisses me. It's almost as if he's oblivious to our audience, and after not seeing him for over twelve hours, I'm eager to kiss him back. My bag lands on the floor, and I wrap my arms around his neck and open my mouth. He presses my body into

his, and I curse at wearing my bulky winter coat.

“Ada!” I hear Addy’s voice before I feel her little body by my legs. She wraps an arm around mine and one around Adam’s leg. “Pick up.” She starts to jump, and Adam breaks the kiss, picks her up, and puts her on his shoulder.

“It’s Uncle Adam,” he reminds her.

“Unco Ada!” She pulls on his hair, and he makes a face.

A laugh escapes, and my mother finally clears her throat. Jason opens the door and steps out when he sees us. “You guys coming in for dinner? Mom cooked all this food.” He gestures towards his apartment and waves us in.

“I hadn’t gotten a chance to tell them yet. I made your favorite, Melanie. We haven’t had a chance to spend any time together since I arrived.”

I stare at Jason, and he holds my stare. He subtly shrugs and mouths ‘sorry.’ I’m not sure what the hell he’s sorry for, though.

“Um, thanks, but I promised Adam I’d cook him dinner tonight.” I offer him my hand, and he intertwines our fingers. His skin is warm, and I suddenly realize how much I’ve missed him today. It was the first day we were away from each other in almost a week, and I didn’t realize how much I’ve gotten used to being around my new husband.

“Since when do you cook, Melanie? Is your specialty still Pop Tarts?” She laughs, and I bristle.

Whenever I spend time with Ananda and her family, her mom constantly makes fun of her. It’s their thing, and Ananda gives as good as she gets, but it’s always in fun. It works for Ananda and her mother, but not for me and mine.

As if he can sense I’m about to erupt, Jason chimes in. “Mellie cooks dinner for us all the time.” He walks out and puts an arm around me. “She was a life saver during Alex’s first trimester. Come on inside. Alex is hungry and she gets sick if she eats too late. Come on, Flynn.” He grabs Addison from Adam’s shoulders and gestures for us to follow him inside.

“Adam,” my mother says. “I would like for us to get to know each other. Alex told me you’re a bit of a health nut, so I made lots of vegetables.”

Adam doesn’t offer my mother a smile, but he stares into my eyes. “Your call, Mel. We can go inside, or we can go upstairs.” He moves closer and puts an arm around me.

“Mellie! Adam! Come on. I’m starving, and there’s enough food here to feed an army,” Alex yells.

I nod at Adam, and he takes my hand before ushering us inside. By the time he helps me with my coat, my mother has walked back into the kitchen. Addison runs back and punches Adam in the leg. That’s his cue to face her so they can start their boxing shuffle.

“Get him, Addy. Knock him out,” Jason says. Addy hits Adam right below the knee, and he goes down. She jumps on top of him and kisses his cheek before she jumps off and counts to ten.



I finally lift myself off the ground only to find Jason smirking at me. He rolls his eyes and leans against the wall with his arms crossed. He walks over, offers me his hand, and helps me to my feet.

“Everything okay upstairs?” he asks, pointing a finger at the ceiling.

“Things are great,” I tell him. And they are. Better than I could have hoped for in such a short time. The bumpiest day was the first day we were stuck together, but Mellie’s adjusted quickly. We’ve formed a routine. I cook our meals and she’s busied herself making the apartment fit for human life.

I’m still learning her habits. Like how she makes the bed in the morning. I’ve never cared about that. I don’t know if she’s aware, but the food on her plate never touches. She keeps everything spaced apart. Her favorite flavor of ice cream is strawberry, and she takes off her shoes and socks the minute she steps inside. She changes her nail polish every couple of days, and her fingers and toes always match.

Her favorite television shows are legal dramas, and she’s a cheapskate who keeps track of every penny she spends. That was the most surprising thing about my bride. That and her attempts to make me fiscally responsible. It’s always a struggle to keep a serious face whenever she updates one of her spreadsheets. She also has three different savings accounts, including an

emergency and secret account, which isn't so secret since she mentions it whenever she feels the need to lecture me about my spending.

"Let's eat," Alex says. "Jason, stop frowning at Adam."

The dining room table is set, and I admit the food does smell good. My stomach growls loudly. I haven't eaten since lunch, and I worked out this morning and after school. There's roasted chicken, rice, and several green vegetables.

"I made sweet potatoes too," Mrs. Dupree says. She runs to the kitchen and returns with a platter of baked sweet potatoes. Jason and Alex sit while I help Addy into her highchair. I finish in enough time to pull Mel's chair out for her. When we sit, her hand lands on my lap. It's as if she's holding onto me for comfort.

Everyone is quiet while we serve ourselves. Alex has a fake smile plastered on her face, Jason frowns at me, and Addy shoves fistfuls of food in her mouth. Mel pushes her food around her plate, so I lean in and kiss her temple. She smiles, relaxes, and starts to eat. When I look up, Jason is still scowling at me, but Alex's plastic smile is replaced with a genuine one.

"So, Melanie," her mother begins, "how's work treating you? Is everything going well with the promotion?" Mel's fork stops halfway to her mouth. She looks around the room as if to confirm her mother is speaking to her.

"It's going well, thanks." It's as if she's speaking to a stranger, and that saddens me. When I became the vice principal at my school, my mother not only bragged about me to all her friends and siblings, but she spent the entire night before the first day of school baking brownies and cookies for all the teachers.

Mrs. Dupree looks a little deflated by the dismissive answer, but she puts a smile on her face and continues. "And how did you two become a couple? You guys weren't together when I visited six months ago, and now you're married."

“What’s your point, Mother?” Mellie asks.

I can sense the tension in Jason’s body. He’s so rigid he could snap.

“My point is my daughter got married and I didn’t know she was dating anyone. That’s my point, Melanie.” She lays her fork down on her plate and looks at Melanie, demanding an answer.

“When was the last time I called you and volunteered anything about my life? Why would this be any different?”

Jason’s fork hits his plate, and he puts his head in his hands.

“Well, you know, Diane,” Alex says. “It was just one of those things. Everyone saw the chemistry between Mellie and Adam since day one. They were always inevitable.”

“Have you told your father?” Mrs. Dupree ignores Alex.

“He’s on a cruise ship with his girlfriend. I’ll tell him when he comes home in a few days.” The room goes deathly quiet at the mention of the girlfriend.

“And Adam.” She puts those calculating eyes back on me. “Have you told your parents about this unexpected—” she waves her hand around until she finds the right word, “union?”

“We told my mother yesterday, and she’s thrilled. She loves Mel.”

“Oh, yes. She’s been texting Mellie all day,” Alex says with a high-pitched laugh. “Show everyone that naked baby picture of Adam she texted you, Mellie.”

“Please don’t,” Jason says.

“Oh.” If I didn’t know any better, I’d think Mrs. Dupree was hurt at the prospect of Mel and my mother getting close. “It would have been nice if I was given the same courtesy as Adam’s mother, but here we are.”

“Mom,” Jason says, “they eloped. I’m sure Flynn’s mother was as surprised as you were.”

“Yeah, same, but with the tiny exception of being happy for us,” Mellie throws out. “You know what it’s like to be happy for your child, right,

Mother? Oh, wait. That rule only applies to one of your children.”

I squeeze Mel’s thigh, but she’s so tense her shoulders are practically to her ears.

“That’s not true.” Her mother’s words are whispered, but I hear the tortured pain. “That’s never been true.”

Melanie stands, and I stand too. “I heard it with my own ears, so you don’t get to walk that back.”

“Let’s just leave, Mel,” I say to her. I’d love to hear more but not in front of Addy.

“No one is leaving,” Jason says, standing up abruptly. “Flynn, you want to be a part of this family, sit down. Mellie, come on. Please, stay.”

“Not if she’s going to continue to upset my wife,” I say to Jason.

“I’m only trying to have a conversation. I’m not trying to upset you, Melanie. I’m not trying to upset anyone.” Mrs. Dupree shakes her head. She looks up and her eyes have pooled with tears. “I just want to talk.”

“Talk, Auntie,” Addison says.

Mel looks at me, nods and we sit back down. The only person still eating now is Addy, who’s chewing on a drumstick.

“Mellie, are you going into the office tomorrow?” Alex asks. “I’m officially working remote until the baby comes.”

Mel exhales loudly through her nose and nods at Alex. She picks up her fork, and I do the same.

“I’m going in for the first half of the day. I’m interviewing two people tomorrow, but we have a furniture delivery, so I’ll be home for that.” Warmth spreads through me when she refers to the apartment upstairs as home. Most of the furniture is gone. Mel even had the place painted a few days ago.

“Oh, that sounds exciting,” her mother says with false enthusiasm. “And you’ll be choosing who to hire?”

“I *am* the hiring manager,” Mel says.

“And what about you, Adam? You’re a teacher, right? I worked in the

public schools back in New Jersey. I was a librarian.”

“I’m a vice principal, Mrs. Dupree, but I taught math before that.”

“Tell me about your parents.”

“It’s always been just me and my ma,” I tell her. “She’s wonderful, but a little nutty. Right, Mel?”

“Not to me. I kinda love her,” Mel says, and I can’t help the feeling in my chest about my wife loving my mother.

“And she was okay with this?” she asks, gesturing to me and Mel.

“He’s already answered that,” Mel says.

“Right, but I meant the entire—” She pretends to search for the word. She looks to Jason for help, but he shakes his head at her. “The interracial aspect. Your mother is fine with that?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?” I put my hand on Mel’s shoulder and gently massage the stress away.

“It’s just that some people object to that kind of thing, right?”

“The only thing my mother cares about is that I’m happy. What kind of mother would object to their child finding love and getting married?” I stare right into her eyes, daring her to say anything else.

“And what happened to your father?” Diane asks, quickly changing the subject about my mother. The entire table goes silent while they wait for my response.

“He’s dead,” is all I say.

“I didn’t know that,” Mel says. “I thought you guys were only estranged.” She rubs my thigh underneath the table, puts her chin on my shoulder, and whispers, “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know your husband’s father is dead?” The accusatory tone in Diane’s voice isn’t lost on anyone. She tosses her fork on her plate as if she’s disgusted.

“So, Adam,” Alex says quickly, “I have a favor to ask you. Will you help get me back in shape after the baby is born?”

“Just knock on my door when you’re ready to get started. I’ll design a workout routine for you,” I tell her. She smiles at me, and Jason mouths thank you. I’m not sure if it’s because I’ve agreed to help his wife or if it’s because I ignored his mother’s last bitchy comment.

“You’ll look gorgeous in your bridesmaid dress,” Mel says after taking a deep breath. You could hear a pin drop after that statement. Jason looks at me and arches his eyebrow.

“Oh? Who is getting married? A friend from work?” her mother asks.

“No, Mother. I am. Well, we’re already married, but we are having a small wedding in August. Jason, I want you to be my best person. Even though I rocked that tuxedo when I was best person at your wedding, I won’t make you wear a dress for mine.”

“That would be fun to see,” I snicker.

“You can borrow one of mine,” Alex says, laughing loudly.

Jason opens his mouth to speak, but his mother talks first. “You’re having an actual wedding?” She drops her fork again, and it clangs loudly against her plate. “This farce has gone far enough, don’t you think, Melanie? Nobody here buys this marriage of convenience. So convenient that you only announced it when I come to town. You’re acting out like a child. Didn’t I pay enough attention to you when you were growing up? Why do you have to do this?”

“Mom, enough,” Jason warns.

“My marriage is not about you, Mother.” Melanie throws her napkin on her plate. Addy must think it’s a game because she tosses hers on the floor.

“Yes, I believe it is.” Her mother juts out her chin at her statement.

“For the record, you paid plenty of attention to me as a child, all of which was negative. Do you think I enjoyed being belittled or made to feel like an afterthought or unwanted?”

“I never—”

“You did! But whatever. I spent years being angry and hurtful towards

Jason because of the way you treated us. You treated him like a prince, but I was the stupid, red-headed stepchild. Always. That's your perception of me, so fine. I know who I am, and I don't live my life for your approval. I left New Jersey to get away from you, yet here you are!" Mellie yells while gesturing towards her mother with both hands. "Yes, I married Adam. Is it so crazy that a man would want to marry me? And yes, we're having a wedding. That is all you need to know. Your presence is not required." She leaves the table, and I get up and follow, but not before giving her mother a scathing look.

"You guys, please don't leave," Alex says, but Mellie is already yanking the door open. I run behind her as she takes the steps two at a time. She opens the door and throws her purse on the floor. There's no couch anymore, so she runs to the bedroom, and I follow behind her. She starts to pace, and when she turns to face me, I stand in front of her and open my arms. She walks right in, and I tighten my arms around her. She puts her face in my chest and lets out a muffled scream. I rub her back and tell her everything is going to be okay.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," I tell her. "Has it always been like that between the two of you?"

"Since I was about thirteen. We were never very close. She's always preferred Jason, but things really went bad between us when I didn't score high enough to get into the same high school as him. It was really competitive and—"

"You don't ever have to explain that, Mel. It's okay," I say, finally understanding the reason for the rift between my wife and her mother. Mellie committed the horrible sin of not being as academically gifted as her brother, and her mother has never forgiven her for it. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. We wouldn't have gotten as far into the meal as we did if you hadn't been there. She was on her best behavior. I'm over it, Adam. Why did she have to come here? To the one place I ran to get away

from her. And why does she have to tear down everything that I do? Yeah, our relationship is unconventional, but she doesn't know that. She just has to dig and dig until she finds something to beat me over the head with. The thing is, if Jason had flown to Vegas and gotten married, there would be no third degree, but I can't so much as sneeze without her accusing me of doing it on purpose to get attention. As if I would *ever* want any kind of attention from her. Her of all people. Are you fucking kidding me?" She pushes out of my arms and walks out of the bedroom. She paces around the empty apartment before she walks to the kitchen and kicks the cabinet underneath the sink.

I grab her hand and bring her to the table, where I place her on my lap with my arm wrapped tightly around her.

"Hurting your foot won't help anything."

"Nothing will," she says. I can feel the strain in her voice. The anger's gone now, but the sadness and resignation are much, much worse. "I need a shower." She tries to jump off my lap, but my arm is wrapped too tight around her.

There's a loud knock on the door, and it bursts open before either one of us can say come in.



Jason walks into the house, his eyes darting back and forth until he finds us sitting in the kitchen. He stands there, hands on his hips. I hold my breath and wait for him to take our mother's side, just like he used to before we mended our relationship. Looking back, I don't blame him for that. I was as hostile to him as I was to her.

"Flynn, I need to talk to my sister." I don't miss his dismissive tone, and that irritates me.

"He stays," I tell him. Adam kisses my shoulder and I relax against him. If this is what I think it is, I'll need someone on my side for a change.

"I'm sorry for that ambush. We had words. She wanted to come up here, but I told her to back off. I'm sorry for the whole situation, Mellie. I had no idea she was on the verge of losing the house, or I would have helped. I didn't know she was coming here until she showed up. And I feel like I've failed you because you had to leave your home." He grabs a chair and sits. His broad shoulders look smaller today. I reach over and touch his hand.

"I don't blame you for any of this." I don't. It's not his fault our mother puts him on a pedestal and treats me like a second-class citizen. It's taken me years to come to that realization, and I don't want to go back. "Don't even put that in your head. She needs you, and you're a good son."

He seems relieved by my words and lets out a breath as he runs a hand over his head.

“Don’t worry. She’ll only be here a few months at the most, then her apartment will be ready. Jake says his dad’s personal assistant is retiring in April, and if Mom’s a good fit, she can have the job. In the meantime, she’s going to watch Addison.” I nod at him and tell myself that I can deal with this situation for another three or four months.

“Sounds good, Jase,” I say, hoping to put his mind at ease.

Adam’s arms tighten around me, and I lay my head on his shoulder. The tension from earlier starts to dissipate. I’m not sure if it’s because of the talk I just had with Jason or if it’s because of Adam’s comforting embrace. Then he kisses my temple, and everything is right.

Jason watches, and I bristle while I wait for him to say something to Adam, but he doesn’t. He stands and looks around the place. “What the hell happened to Flynn’s ugly couch?”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Adam says.

“Yes, it was,” Jason and I say at once.

“And you painted,” he notices while he admires the freshly painted beige walls.

“This place is getting a complete makeover,” I tell him. “We’ll have you, Alex, and Addy over for dinner this weekend. We’ll have your mom and uncle too, Adam.” He squeezes me tighter and kisses my temple again. “And Ananda and Dennis. We’ll have a little party.”

I jump from Adam’s lap, run to the bedroom and return with my laptop. I don’t have time to kick myself for thinking of throwing a party after all the money I spent on new furniture, but the idea of sharing our home with our friends excites me.

“Are we doing another spreadsheet?” Adam asks. He pats his lap and I sit back down, excited about the weekend.

“I’m the one who did Jason’s housewarming party for him, and I tricked

Alex into coming. Remember that, Jase?” Jason offers me a fist bump and I hit it with mine.

“I’ll leave you guys alone. Let me know if you need help when the new furniture gets here.” He says goodbye and walks out.

We sit there in silence until Adam bites the top of my ear, and I let out a surprised yelp.

“Give it to me, Mel,” his husky voice whispers in my ear. It goes right through my belly and straight down to my pussy. It throbs and when he bites my ear again, I let out a moan this time.

“You want it, huh?” I’m not usually one for flirting. I say what I mean and get to the point, but when you’re sitting on the lap of a sexy beast who can’t get enough of you, it’s hard not to.

“Yeah, spread it. Give me that spreadsheet.” He laughs in my ear, and I laugh along with him. I try to punch his chest, but he moves out of the way and ducks. “My superior boxing moves.” I jump off his lap and attempt to punch him again, but he stands up and starts to shuffle. I mirror his movements and lean in for a jab. He moves a fraction, and I miss. A piece of his hair falls across his forehead, and it’s about the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I jab again. He moves, and I miss. I lean in for a right hook to the body, and he ducks. He lunges and wraps his arms around me. My back is to his broad chest, and his arms are wrapped around me like a vise, not leaving an inch of space between our bodies. I feel his hard dick on my ass, and to tease him, I stick my butt out further.

He moans in my ear, and when I lean back, he licks the side of my neck. The throbbing between my legs doubles. I don’t know when it happens, but we start to sway right there in the middle of the empty living room. We’re in perfect rhythm. His muscled chest and hard cock pressed behind me, and my ass rests on his dick as if that’s its home.

A hand slides down my body and cups my pussy over my gray dress pants. I moan wantonly and grind into him. Warm lips press on the side of

my neck while a hand undoes the top button to my pants. He slides inside my silk panties and glides between my lips. I can feel the slickness between my legs. His fingers slip lower and two find their way inside.

He fucks me with his fingers, but all too soon he withdraws. I groan in protest, but he ignores me. That hand glides up my body, up my neck, and to my mouth.

“See how good you taste,” he whispers, so close to my ear that I get goosebumps. I open my mouth to take in a breath of air, and he puts the fingers that were inside of me in my mouth. “Suck, Mel.” He fucks my mouth with his fingers.

“Good?” he asks. He sucks the base of my neck so hard, I know there will be a mark there tomorrow.

“So good,” I whimper. We’re still swaying, but his free arm is no longer wrapped around me. He’s too busy unbuttoning my blouse. In no time at all, it’s completely open and I’m shrugging it off. His shirt is pulled over his head and tossed to the floor while I rid myself of my shoes and pants. He takes off my bra, and I pull down my panties. When we’re naked and standing in front of each other, I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him. He catches me without so much as a flinch.

He sprints to the bedroom and tosses me on the bed. Before I can get comfortable, he grabs one of my legs and pulls me to the edge of the bed, spreading me apart, leaving me completely exposed and at his mercy. His knuckles rub against my clit, and I whisper, “Adam.”

He spreads my legs further apart and lays his big body on top of mine. “Say it again,” he commands. “Say your husband’s name.”

He grinds into me, and I can feel his heavy, thick cock between my legs. It’s so close. If I can just adjust my body a bit, he could slip right in, but he presses me to the bed. “Say your husband’s name, love,” he whispers again. I almost combust at the endearment. I touch his chest and run my hands over the scarred skin. “Say it.’

“Adam.” I lower my voice and say his name. “Kiss me, Adam.”

His blue eyes darken, and he crashes his mouth to mine. He’s hungry, kissing me so hard and deep that I know he’ll bruise my lips. Strong hands hold on to my hips while he continues to grind. Without breaking the kiss, he flips us over.

“Oh!” I say, shocked by the sudden movement.

“Ride me.” He slaps my ass and sits against the headboard. He lifts me. It’s so effortless. He aligns his dick with my slit, and I’m so wet that I slide down his throbbing manhood.

He thrusts hard, piercing me and filling me to the hilt. I grind down, and he goes up. I lean down and kiss his neck. He groans so loudly, it fills the room. I bite his earlobe, and he shudders. Goosebumps spread over his body, and I bite the taut skin on his collarbone.

We fuck so hard, the headboard slams against the wall, but neither one of us cares. I can’t get enough of him, and when he reaches over and takes one of my stiff nipples into his hot mouth, I throw my head back and call his name again.

He sucks and pulls my nipple before turning his attention to the next one. The entire time, he never lets go of my hips. With this position, you’d think I’d be the one in control, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. He’s controlling all of my moves, how deep he goes, and how much pleasure he gives me. He owns my body, and for the moment, I let him have all of me. He holds me tight as I grind and ride him until the feeling of euphoria overtakes me and I come loudly on his cock.

He’s not far behind. He grunts and pumps a few more times before he slams his eyes shut and moans my name. I collapse on top of him. He’s still in a sitting position and I lay my head on the side of his sweaty neck.

I roll off and lie naked on top of the bedspread. He comes close to me and pulls me to his side. I wrap a leg around him, and I know my dripping pussy is leaking on his skin, but neither one of us cares. He reaches over and tweaks

one of my nipples and I bite my lip at the sensation.

“You’re so beautiful.”

I blush. It’s been years since I’ve had a boyfriend, and even then, I don’t remember anyone ever calling me beautiful before.

“You don’t have to say those things. We’re already married.”

“I think maybe you need to hear it.”

I try to pull away, but he holds me to him. As much as I love his body and how strong he is, I hate how he can easily subdue me. There aren’t many people who can.

“Don’t,” I warn.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t feel bad or sorry for me about my relationship with my mother. I learned a long time ago to accept it for what it is.” His fingertips glide along my nipples again, calming me.

I wait for him to lie and say he doesn’t feel bad or sorry. Underneath the anger I felt radiating from him, I saw the look in his eyes. It’s the same one Alex gives me whenever she’s around me and my mother. But neither Alex nor Adam would ever understand. Adam’s mother adores him, and I know Alex’s mother did too before she passed away.

“Has it been like that all your life?” he asks.

“Pretty much. At least as long as I can remember, but things really went south with us on the day of my high school graduation. Jason had graduated college that year, and I overheard her talking to my aunt. In a nutshell, she was proud of Jason for graduating top of his class and getting into medical school, whereas I barely made it out of high school. At least that’s what she said, but that wasn’t true. I just didn’t get into any of the colleges she was hoping for. She told my aunt that at least she had one kid she could be proud of.”

I don’t see pity in his eyes, but they become angry. A muscle in his jaw ticks, but he pulls me closer and I lay my head on his chest. The sound of his

heart calms me, and I tell Adam everything I overheard that morning. “I’ve never told anyone that before,” I whisper afterwards. “Not Jason. Not my dad. Not anyone. How do you tell anyone that you heard your mother say she regrets having you? I always thought it would hurt too much to speak those words, but telling you is freeing, Adam.”

“I’m glad you’re telling me, love,” he whispers.

So, I take a deep breath and tell him more. “Our relationship never recovered. I went to college, but it took me five years to finish. I hardly went home. I would stay with my aunt. The part I regret the most is that I took my hurt and anger out on Jason. I picked a fight with him that day and told him I hated him. I can still see the hurt in his eyes. He’s been nothing but good to me. Always. Even when I was horrible to him.”

My eyes fill with tears at the thought of wasting all those years being angry towards him.

“He’s a smart guy. Sort of.” I playfully punch him, and he laughs. “Even if he doesn’t know the specifics, I’m sure he knows your mother played a part in everything that happened. He couldn’t have been too mad because he asked you to come live with him.”

“That was only after I was in trouble again. I lost my job and found myself in some legal trouble. Jason hired a lawyer who got the charges dismissed. My mother pounced when that happened. It’s like it proved her point about me always being a screw up and a troublemaker. She brought it up her first night here.”

He kisses my forehead and says, “We all do dumb things when we’re young, Mel. We do dumb things when we’re older too. We’re all human. What’s important is that we learn from them. I’ve made my share of mistakes,” he says.

“Tell me one of them.” I lay a hand on his flat belly. He lifts it and intertwines our fingers. He kisses the back of my hand and rests our joined hands on his chest.

“I was an angry teenager. My father was never around. I have no memory of my parents together as a couple. I can count on two hands how many times I’ve seen him in my life. I didn’t understand why I was so angry until I became an adult. Back then, I didn’t know how to channel it, so I got into fights. I kicked a lot of ass. My mother didn’t know what to do or how to handle me. I started skipping school and was on a very dark path. She knew I liked to fight, so she took me down to this gym and paid for boxing lessons. I loved it. She didn’t intend for it to go as far as it did, but I was good. She begged me to stop when I got older, but I wouldn’t. It became a kind of therapy for me. It wasn’t until I broke my elbow and strained my rotator cuff that things changed. She cried and stayed at my bedside the entire time. I was told it was best for me not to pursue fighting as a career, and seeing how upset my mother was, I decided to give it up, but the anger came back; I was nineteen by then, and I was out one night, and someone started mouthing off. I tried to ignore it at first, but they said the wrong thing and I beat them to a pulp. I got arrested. He pressed charges.”

I sit up in surprise at the story. The Adam I’ve always known annoyed me, but he would never hurt a fly. The way he is with Addison is proof of his gentle nature. In the years since he’s lived here, I’ve noticed how much of a giver he is. He’s the guy who cleans the yard in the fall, shovels snow in the winter and never asks for anything back.

“I have a hard time picturing you hurting anybody,” I tell him.

“I’m not proud of it, but I was a nineteen-year-old kid with Daddy issues who didn’t know he had issues.”

“So, what happened?”

“My father sent a lawyer and made everything disappear,” he says simply.

“What happened between him and your mother?” I ask.

“I guess he wasn’t relationship material. Like I said, I don’t remember them ever being together. I think maybe a kid might have been too much for

a selfish prick like him.” My heart hurts for him at the admission. “The most he could do was support me financially, but out of sight out of mind I guess.”

“Well, not only was he an asshole, but he was stupid too. He missed out on having an amazing son.” He smiles shyly at me, and I run a hand through his hair. “If he wasn’t already dead, I’d find him and beat his ass.”

He rolls his eyes but pulls me closer. “I’ll have to teach you some of the basics before you try and kick anybody’s ass.”

“The few times you did see him, how was he? Was he happy to see you?”

He shrugs and says, “I think he was excited to see my mom more than me. She’d agree to let him visit because he would say he wanted to see me, but it was his way of seeing her. He took me out for ice cream once, I think. But what about your relationship with your dad? You don’t leave when he visits.” I look into his eyes, and he smiles at me. “Whenever your mom would visit, you’d leave after a day, but that’s not the case with your dad.”

“He’s okay. We’ve gotten better. He never made me feel bad when I was growing up, but he admitted that he could have done more as a father and that he could have told Mom to fuck off. His words,” I say to him. “So, me and my dad are good.”

“Have you told him about us yet?”

“I’m going to tell him tomorrow. He’s not judgmental like my mom, so he’ll be fine.”



Mel talks some more about her dad and asks me more about mine, but I manage to change the subject before she can delve further about my father. He's not someone I ever talk about, and the people who are close to me know never to bring him up.

I avoid thinking about him at all costs, but these daily phone calls keep him in my thoughts. Lately, every time I look in the mirror, I think of him and wish I inherited my looks from my mom's side, but I didn't. From my dark hair to the blue eyes to my height. There's no denying that I'm his son. The one he didn't want and hid. The one he never bothered to get to know.

I shake my head and do my best to clear it of things I can't change. I decide to focus on my wife instead because our relationship is something I'm hoping to change. That bullshit I told her about giving our marriage a year was just that. Bullshit. There's no way I'm letting her go after a year. Not even after a thousand years.

"What do you think?" She shoves the laptop in my face. "It won't be too expensive. Just some food, drinks, and a few friends. That amount," she says, pointing her index finger at the bottom of the screen, "is just an estimate, but I'm pretty sure I can keep it close. And I won't use the credit card. I can pay for this."

“From the emergency or secret savings?” I do my best to hide my smile but fail.

“Neither,” she huffs. “I would never dip into my savings for a party,” she says, aghast at the very thought. “And you shouldn’t either. Please tell me—”

I slam the laptop shut and put it on the nightstand, cutting off whatever she was going to say. I lay flat on my back and pull her on top of my hardening dick.

“You have the credit card. Use it. I mean it. I promise I’m not going to be in financial ruin if you buy stuff.” She opens her mouth to argue with me, but I kiss her until she’s breathless. “Just kiss your husband, Mrs. Flynn.” I kiss her again and all thoughts about money must leave her mind because she kisses me back.



I skipped my afternoon session at the gym and rushed home as soon as school let out. Tomorrow might be a late day. I need to finalize the spring sports and need to figure out what I’m going to coach, but all of that can wait because I promised Mel I’d come home to help with the new furniture.

When I open the front door to the house, I can hear voices and movement upstairs. Just as I take the stairs, I hear laughter. Hers mixed with a male. I barge through the door, but I don’t see my wife. What I do find is a tall black man standing in the middle of my living room. He’s so engrossed in what he’s looking at that he doesn’t see me. I walk closer and follow his line of vision.

I drop my bag on the floor with a loud thud, but he still hasn’t noticed me. Mel has the fridge door open, and she’s bending down. She’s in black yoga pants and an orange sweatshirt, but the shirt rides up, revealing the smooth skin of her lower back.

When she straightens, she comes back with two bottles of water and a

smile on her face. That's when I hear a door down the hall open and another man comes out. This one is short with a belly the shape of a basketball.

"Here you go," Mel says, handing each of them a bottle of water. She sees me and smiles, but I don't smile back. I walk over and kiss her so deep, so indecent, I know she'll be blushing when I pull away.

And I'm right. Color creeps up her neck and she swats my chest.

"What do you think?" She waves around the apartment, and for the first time, I notice the new furniture.

"You two all set here?" I lock eyes with the tall one, and he smirks at me. I leave Mel's side and step to him, ready to beat him through the floor. "You check out my wife's ass one more time and you and I will have problems. The kind of problem where you'll need a gurney to get out of here," I whisper, and he wisely steps back.

"All set," he says. "Just sign here and we'll get out of your hair." He hands Mel an iPad, and she signs. I stare at them until they practically run out of the front door..

Her top might be a sweatshirt, but it's a crop top. It shows off her tapered waist and her smooth skin. She has matching high top sneakers, and when my eyes travel back up her body, her hair is in a high ponytail.

She smiles and spins around the room. Her ass jiggles and my pants tighten. "Doesn't it look great?" She hooks her arms through mine, and we walk to the couch. It's a large sectional and the end has a seat that leans back like a lazy boy. It's gray and when I run my hand over it, it's smooth.

There's a tall plant in the corner. There are plants everywhere.

"Come on." She takes my hand, and we walk to the kitchen. She opens a cabinet and pulls out a plate. "They all match. Even the mugs and glasses." The plate is white and is decorated with a green leaf in the middle. There's a vase of fresh flowers on the kitchen table. She grabs it and puts it to my nose, and I inhale.

"Nice, but not as nice as when I have my face between your legs." I hold

her elbow and sniff her neck. She shakes her head at me and takes my hand in hers.

“I got some artwork for the walls. I hope you like them. This rug looked nice online, but now I’m not so sure.” I look at the walls and the floor. They both look fine to me.

“It’s beautiful, Mel,” I reassure her. She takes me to the bathroom next. The rugs are different, as is the shower curtain. The colors are definitely more feminine. No way I would buy a shower curtain with pink flowers, but whatever. It does give me a certain feeling of possessiveness to see her things all over my bathroom sink. Right in the middle is a wicker basket full of nothing but nail polish. Every color of the rainbow. All with strange names like Mint Candy Apple, Hi Maintenance, and Muchi Muchi. Whatever the fuck Muchi Muchi means.

“And I got new bedding for the bedroom.” I follow her into our room, and again, a bunch of girly shit, but I don’t care. There’s a vase of pink roses on the dresser, a floral comforter, and matching sheets and pillowcases.

“I can’t wait to fuck you on that bed tonight,” I whisper in her ear. She puts a hand on my chest and moans loudly. I grab her ass and squeeze.

“You’re going to have to wait. I hope you don’t mind, but I invited Alex and Jason for dinner, so I have to start cooking. Oh, and you see all the plants we have?”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling at the fact that she said we. “Even the two in the windowless bathroom,” I tease.

“Well, I have the opposite of a green thumb, but I love plants. So, you’re responsible for keeping them alive.”

“What? Me? Mel, I don’t know anything about plants. You saw how I lived before you moved in.” I leave the bedroom, and she follows me. There are plants all along the hallway. There are three in the kitchen alone.

“They all have instructions.” She plants both hands on my chest and says, “Please.” I sigh, roll my eyes, and nod.

“Yes!” she exclaims and hugs me.

I lean down and kiss her lips. “Anything for you, even this damn rainforest we call a home.”

She wraps an arm around mine and we walk back to the living room. “What do you think about Lola?” she asks.

“Who the hell is Lola?”

“That’s what I named your ugly chair. I was going to have her reupholstered but decided not to since I promised not to touch it. And did you know that reupholstering costs almost as much as getting a new chair? Got this blanket instead.” She leaves my side, runs to the coat closet, and comes back holding something pink. I groan when I see it. She runs a piece across my cheek, and I admit it’s soft. She drapes it over my chair and gestures to it.

“First off, that chair is a man’s chair. He should have a manly name like Gus or Chuck, not Lola. And you couldn’t find a more masculine blanket?” She smiles smugly at me and sits in my chair. “Whoa! No one sits on Lola but me.” I grab her feet and pull her off. She does her best to hold onto the chair, but I’m too strong. As soon as I have her on the floor, I jump over her and take my place in my favorite chair. I drape the blanket over me and sigh. I’ll never admit it to her, but the blanket is comfortable and long enough for my body. She stands, and I grab her hand and pull her into my lap.

“Everything is beautiful, Mel. Everything but this girly blanket.” She surprises me when she kisses my cheek.

“The blanket stays, Flynn.”

“Okay, Flynn,” I say back to her. All too soon she jumps off my lap.

“I have to make dinner. Do you want a snack?” She starts to walk away, but I grab her wrist.

“You’d bring me a snack?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I? Relax a little until dinner since you wake up so early.” I drop her wrist, and she leaves. She comes back a few minutes later with a tray. There’s Greek yogurt, fruit, and a few slices of salami and

cheese. She gives it to me, hands me the remote, and leaves.

I inhale it in under two minutes and wish she had brought more. I lean back on Lola, spread my blanket over my body, and relax to the sounds of my wife cooking in our kitchen. I look around the place again, amazed at how a fresh coat of paint, new furniture, and a few plants can give the apartment new life.

“Mel, I invited a few colleagues over on Saturday,” I yell.

“Sounds great. I talked to my dad, and he’s coming,” she says back. I grab the remote and put on ESPN. The only thing missing is a dog, but maybe that’s something we can talk about later. I close my eyes for a few minutes.

It’s two hours later when she wakes me up from my slumber. She takes my empty snack tray and orders me to shower before our guests come over.

Twenty minutes later, I’m freshly showered and dressed. Mel changed into blue jeans and a light blue sweater. Just as I reach for plates to set the table, there’s a knock on the door.

I fling the door open, and Addy runs straight to Mel. Jason and Alex follow behind her, and before I can close the door, her mother walks in. There are awkward glances exchanged between Jason and Mel. He approaches her in the kitchen, and they have a quiet conversation. Alex follows them, giving me a fake smile along the way. I didn’t ask Mel if she invited her mother to dinner. I just assumed she didn’t.

“The place looks nice,” Diane says to me. “A big improvement since I was here the last time, but I guess it was a bachelor pad before you and Melanie got married.” I stare at her unsure of how to respond. For once, there’s nothing snarky in what she said, and when I look deeper into her eyes, I can sense her nervousness.

“Yeah, she worked her magic.” I don’t smile at her because that would be a betrayal to Mel, but I can’t find it in me to kick her out either. At least not yet. Mel looks at me, and I wait for her to give me the sign to show her

mother the door, but Addy comes and wraps her arms around one of my legs, and I pick her up.

“Adam,” Mel says. “Why don’t you show Alex and Jason the place.” She doesn’t mention her mother, but when I tell Alex and Jason to follow me, Diane does too. I put Addison on my shoulder and give them the quick tour of the apartment.

“Lots of plants in here,” Alex says.

“Which I’m responsible for, I was told.”



My mood is too upbeat to deal with my mother crashing our impromptu dinner party. She was supposed to stay downstairs and watch Addison while the four of us have dinner. I never expected her to show up, and judging from the strained look on Alex's face, she either didn't know or couldn't talk her out of it. But it doesn't matter. Today's been a great day. I interviewed three strong candidates for the position at work, and the apartment turned out better than I could have hoped for.

I can't help the smile on my face while I pull a roast out of the oven. When I lift the lid off my Dutch oven, a cloud of smoke hits me in the face and the delicious aroma of the roast makes my stomach grumble.

Luckily it doesn't come apart when I put it on a new serving platter. As I reach the cabinets to grab the dishes, I feel someone walking behind me. I grab four plates, but when I notice my mother standing there me, the smile slips from my face.

Not wanting a fight or a confrontation, I walk away and place the dishes on the new placemats.

"Can I do anything to help?" Her voice is tentative and doesn't hold the usual tinge of judgment or disappointment.

"I got it, but thanks." I walk around her and get glasses. Since Alex can't

drink, I don't bother with the new wine glasses. Adam's not much of a drinker, and I know Jason's on call tonight.

"It smells good." This time she offers a smile, which I don't return.

"Were you expecting Pop Tarts?" I immediately regret my words. I shake my head and say, "Whatever this is, Mother, I don't have the time for it right now. I've had a really good day, and I don't need you to trample on my self-esteem tonight, okay? I thought you were going to watch the baby."

She takes a step closer and reaches for my hand, but I flinch as if she burned me. She sighs sadly at my rejection, and for a split second, I feel bad, but I shove that feeling down.

"It was never my intention to—" She doesn't get a chance to finish her statement. Everyone returns to the kitchen. Alex is laughing at something Adam said, and Jason is shaking his head.

"You ready to go downstairs with Grandma, Addy?" Jason takes Addy from Adam's shoulder and tosses her in the air. Her giggles fill the room, and I can't help but laugh too. Adam walks over, throws an arm across my shoulder, and kisses my cheek.

"What can I do to help? And that smells great, love," he whispers in my ear.

"I stay!" Addy yells. She wraps her arms around Jason, and I know there's no way he can send her away. I don't want him to.

"Everyone stays," I concede. "Sit down," I tell my guests. "Adam and I will bring the food."

I grab two extra placemats and plates.



We rinse the dishes side by side. It's a total team effort. I rinse and he puts them in the dishwasher. Every so often, he'll lean over and kiss my temple for no reason at all. He did that all throughout dinner too, and each time I'd

catch Alex's eye and she'd smile at me. Dinner was great because I did not allow my mother to ruin it. For the most part, she stayed quiet and helped with Addy. Alex and Jason did most of the talking. I went on with the meal as if she wasn't there. In fact, I avoided looking at her and focused on the people I invited.

"Dinner was good, right?" I finally say.

Adam bumps his shoulder with mine. "It was great. You throw a mean dinner party, Mrs. Flynn."

"We'll have to invite your mom and uncle for dinner one day. Maybe in a couple of weeks since they'll be here for the party this weekend."

"My mom would love that."

"You think Uncle Finn will wear his hearing aid?"

"Not a chance in hell." We both laugh, and once the dishes are done, I wipe down the counter and start the dishwasher. Adam goes to the bedroom, and I take a quick shower. By the time I return, he's under the covers, and just like the previous nights, I can tell he's naked.

I pull the sash of my robe and slide underneath the sheets. Adam pulls me close. His hand goes up my t-shirt, and he cups my bare pussy.



Adam's mom shows up half an hour early for our nail appointment. Her jaw nearly falls to the ground when she walks in and sees how the place has transformed. It's only been a few days, but I love our little apartment more each second. Adam's taking his plant duties seriously. He even rearranged some to ensure they are getting the correct amount of light needed. He went so far as to order fertilizer sticks online.

"I'm so glad my son has you," Molly says to me. She pushes a piece of hair behind my ear and pinches my cheek. A giggle escapes at the unexpected gesture. She's very touchy, which I'm not used to from a mother figure. She must have hugged us at least three times already. "You finally live in a grown-up place, and all you had to do was get married." She playfully slaps Adam upside the head, and he pretends to be hurt.

"So, there's nothing you need to do while we're gone," I tell my husband. "I picked up the alcohol yesterday and the food won't be delivered until four." I reach up and he leans down to kiss my lips.

"Yes, dear. I'll go get a workout in while you two are gone." He helps me with my coat and opens the door for me and his mother.

We walk down the stairs, and when we get to Jason's door, it opens and my mother steps out.

“Melanie.” She pretends to be surprised to see me. I imagine she’s been standing behind the door waiting for us to come down. I’m kicking myself for not going out the back.

“Mother.” She stares at us. My mother raises both eyebrows when she notices Molly’s arm hooked through mine. She crosses her arms and waits. “This is my mother-in-law, Molly Flynn. Molls,” I say, using the nickname I’ve given her, “this is my mother, Diane Dupree.”

Molly hugs my mother. Mom doesn’t pull away, but she remains stiff.

“I see the resemblance,” Molly says. “I’m looking forward to the party tonight and meeting some of Mel’s family. And I can’t wait for all of us to go wedding dress shopping.”

My mother clears her throat and nods. She looks at me, probably waiting for an invitation to the bridal boutique, but I don’t offer one. I know she’s heard about the housewarming, but I didn’t invite her to that either. There’s a part of me that feels a twinge of guilt, but there’s the part who’s worked so hard on not focusing on the damage my mother’s done to me. The part that wants me to be at peace.

“And where are you two headed now?” My mother’s eyes never leave our joined arms.

“Just some girl time. I finally have a daughter.” Molly puts her head on my shoulder. “Manis and pedis. You should join us.”

I visibly cringe at the sudden invitation. My mother looks at me, and I can tell she’s holding her breath. She’s probably waiting for me to invite her, but I can’t think of a single time where we did anything like that together. Not even when I was a pre-teen. The sad thing is, I don’t remember ever wanting to do this with her, and that includes today.

“Maybe another time,” I say quickly. “You’re not dressed, and we don’t want to be late. I still have a lot to do to get ready for the party.”

My mother casts her eyes down, but she looks back up, puts a smile on her face, and says, “Of course. I’ll see you upstairs later.” She looks me

directly in the eyes then, almost daring me to tell her she's not invited. The apartment will be full of people. I don't give a hoot if she's there or not, so I nod and pull Molly towards the door.

The ride to the salon isn't a long one, and I sink into the leather seats of Molly's Nissan Rogue while she chats. Her voice is cheery, and I find myself liking her Irish brogue.

The salon is practically empty, which is not unexpected on a very cold January day. We're served quickly, and both of us decide on French manicures and pedicures.

When we're done, we pick up lunch from my favorite Greek place and take it home. Thankfully, my mother is not waiting for us when we get back.

While I grab plates, Molly walks around again. She smiles when she runs a hand over the blanket draped across Lola.

While we eat, she tells me stories about young Adam and the years they spent in Ireland.

"My mother was sick. I went back to help take care of her," she says.

"Were you two close?"

She wipes her mouth and tosses the napkin on the table. "Hardly, darling. I could barely wait to get away from her. As soon as I could, I put an entire ocean between us. She was controlling with a mean streak. She wanted me to be a nun." She rolls her eyes at that declaration, and I laugh at the irritated look on her face.

"A nun? Wow."

"Yes, and I'm her youngest child and none of my sisters wanted it, so I was her last chance. She was sorely disappointed, but I had my own life to live. Then, I have a baby out of wedlock, and she was not happy about that. At least not until I took Adam to meet her when he was about one. It's funny how grandparents can treat their grandkids so much better than they did their own children. She fell in love with Adam the second she saw him. She doted on him, and he worshipped her. She was completely different with him than

she was with me.”

I reach over and put a hand on top of hers.

“I was so in love with Adam’s father, but he didn’t feel the same toward me. I guess his feelings were more carnal, and once I realized that, I left. I wanted so much more in a relationship than he could have given me. Leaving him was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but I did it. To his credit, he took care of Adam financially, but he was never interested in him. He stopped coming around when he realized he wouldn’t be getting in my pants anymore.” She opens her mouth to say something else, but she stops suddenly and gives her head a small shake. It’s almost as if she wants to say more but can’t.

“You were young, Molls. And you aren’t the first woman to love a man and not have those feelings returned. But the fact that you walked away shows how strong you are. You knew you deserved better, and he was a fool.”

Her eyes pool with tears, and she nods. “It took me years to come to that realization. I felt an incredible amount of guilt about not giving Adam a traditional family. He’s so full of love, and he deserves the best of everything. I tried to be a good mother to him, but I couldn’t be his father, you know. He was such a good boy, so I was lucky. Other than that boxing nonsense where he got himself hurt, he’s been a mother’s dream.” She smiles wistfully.

“You didn’t seem surprised or upset that we got married suddenly.”

“No.” She waves a hand as if the very idea of being upset at Adam is ridiculous. “I trust my son, and I saw the way he looked at you those two times I saw you. I always told myself that I would love the woman he ended up with. I didn’t want to be anything like my mother, a judgmental shrew who found no joy in anything. I asked him about it. Remember that time you barged in and left? He winked at me and said, ‘Just wait, Ma.’ And you’re so wonderful for him, Mel. And you’re going to give me grandbabies.”

I blush at the thought. The notion that our marriage is temporary comes to mind, but I shove it away, refusing to think about that now.

“Not right away, Molly,” I warn her, but that only makes her smile wider.

“As long as you’re not telling me never. And I want us to have girly time. When I was pregnant with Adam, I prayed every night he would be a girl. I bought a pink dress. Don’t tell him, but I put him in it once. I might have a picture somewhere.” She winks at me, and we both burst into laughter while I think of my very masculine husband in a pink dress.

We finish our food, and while I clear the table and wash the dishes, Molly reaches into her purse and pulls something out. When I’m wiping down the counter, she approaches.

“I didn’t get a chance to do this when you and Adam were over at the house, but I want you to have this.” She opens a square jewelry box and pulls out a gold chain with a cross. It’s the same one Adam wears, and I’ve noticed that Molly has one too.

“I gave Adam his when he was going through his rebellious teenage phase. I told him it would protect him, and since you’re my daughter now, I want you to have one.” I fan my face to dry my sudden tears. Molly stands behind me and puts the chain around my neck.

“I’m not religious,” I say, so choked I can hardly speak.

“You don’t have to be, darling. This isn’t about religion. This is because you’re my daughter now, and I want our savior’s protection around my kids.” I walk away and look at the mirror hanging on the wall behind the living room. It was one of the things that was delivered with the furniture. I run my hand over it, and this time, I can’t stop the tears from falling.

“Thank you, Molly. This means so much to me.” My words come out hoarse, and I clear my throat twice. She smiles and opens her arms. She’s a slender woman, but she holds me tight.

Adam walks in while we’re in the middle of our hug. He smiles when he sees us, shrugs off his coat, and wraps us in his arms.

“You’re sweaty and gross.” He doesn’t care because he grabs my face and kisses me deeply right in front of his mother. When he finally ends the kiss, he doesn’t move away or drop his hands. He peppers my lips with feather soft kisses.

“Go shower,” I say between kisses. “You have to help me set up for the party.” He finally steps away from me, but he kisses his mother’s cheek before running to our bedroom.

“Why don’t you stick around until the party, Molly? I can fix us some drinks.”

She smiles and walks to the coat closet. “I’d love to, but I have to get Finn. He’s not only deaf, but he’s blind as a bat at night.”



The talking is drowned by the loud whirring of the blender. Jason yells something, and a few ladies circle around him, holding their margarita glasses so he can pour. The blender and margarita glasses are another thing I got two days ago, courtesy of Amazon and their next day delivery. I catch Adam's eye from across the room, and he winks at me. I wink back, and when I look up, Ananda is giving me a smug look.

“Lying ass.” Even from across the room, I can read her lips.

She leaves her husband's side, walks over to me, and fingers the small gold chain around my neck. My new jewelry is on full display tonight since I decided on a red v-neck sweater to go with my short, black denim skirt. My outfit is complete with black ankle boots.

“This is new,” Ananda says. The shrewd look in her eyes tells me she knows exactly where the necklace came from. I decide to ignore her and sip my margarita, but she waves Alex over.

“Have you seen your sister-in-law's new jewelry, Alexandra?” Ananda asks.

“Ugh, you know I hate being called that, and yes. It's sparkling from across the room.” Alex reaches over and runs a finger along the cross. “I'm feeling pious just being near you, Mellie.”

“Whatever,” I say, waving them off.

“Maybe I’ve had too many drinks, so forgive me if I’m wrong, but that looks just like the one Adam wears. And it would also appear that his mother has one too. Hmmm. I wonder what the connection could be.”

They both tap their temple with a finger before they look at each other and burst into laughter.

“Fine! His mother gave it to me. Are you bitches happy now?”

They laugh harder. “Was it before or after you got matching mani pedis?”

“After, ho,” I say to Ananda, throwing her favorite word back at her. I look around the room and spot my mother in a deep conversation with Molly, and I narrow my eyes.

“Alex, go get your mother-in-law. And why isn’t she downstairs watching Addy? I didn’t invite her.”

“Addy has a sitter, and I think Jason tried to talk her out of it.”

My mother is smiling at whatever Molly is saying. I look away, suddenly not caring that she’s here. Her issues with me have always stayed within the immediate family.

“Whatever. I’m going to enjoy my party.” Just as the words leave my mouth, Adam comes over and takes my hand.

“Come meet some of my colleagues, love,” he whispers in my ear right before he kisses my temple.

“Oh, Adam.” Ananda gives me a sly look once she has Adam’s attention, “Mellie told us you two are considering Paris for your honeymoon.”

“Considering? I thought you had your heart set on Paris, love. I’ve already booked us a hotel.”

“I do,” I tell him quickly. “Ananda doesn’t know what the hell she’s talking about.” I turn to my friend and narrow my eyes at her.

“Sorry, love,” Ananda says. “I must have misunderstood.” She cackles and twists her lips. Then, she smirks as if she just proved a point. Alex’s cheeks pinken and she sips her water. Adam pulls me away and introduces

me to a couple of teachers at his school, along with the office administrator.

We chat for a while, but then my father walks in holding hands with a tall and very beautiful woman. Jason and I both get our height from our father. In fact, Dad is about an inch taller than Jason, and his date's shoulders practically reach his. Her hair is short but perfectly styled. She's holding on to his hand while she nervously looks around.

"It's my smelly Mellie," Dad says as he approaches. Just like my brother, he's extremely loud. He drops his date's hand, pulls me away from Adam, and lifts me off my feet.

"Hey, Dad." By the time he spins me around and puts me down, I'm breathless.

"Look at you, looking so pretty. And where's my new son-in-law?" He puts a hand over his eyes and makes a show of looking around the room. I grab Adam's hand, intertwine our fingers and raise our joined hands in front of my dad. I even point at our wedding bands with my free hand.

"Dad, this is Adam Flynn, my husband. Adam, this is my dad, William Dupree."

"Get the hell out of here," my dad teases. He playfully punches my shoulder as he starts to sing *Ebony and Ivory*. I feel the color creep up my neck in embarrassment, but all Adam does is laugh at my dad's lame joke. "Come here, Son." Dad hugs him, and when he pulls away, he introduces us to his date. "This is Jennifer. Jennifer, meet my daughter Melanie. She's a boss lady at her job now." For the past two years, my dad makes it a point to tell me how proud he is of me in every conversation. I smile and shake Jennifer's hand. She has a deep dimple in each cheek, and her brown eyes look extremely kind.

Jason and Alex approach, and are introduced to her as well.

"We're only here until tomorrow afternoon, so I want to take all of you out to breakfast in the morning. I want to spend time with my granddaughter too," he says. Then he lowers his voice and whispers, "Your mother ain't

invited,” right before he lets out a loud laugh. “In fact, I’m surprised she’s up here, but I guess she needs to sink her talons in Jason every chance she gets.”

“Dad, come on,” Jason says.

“Sorry. I’m sure she’s here to spread her goodness and light, like always.” He does an exaggerated eyeroll. “I want to spend some time with Adam and Alex. Make sure you two are treating them right.” He points at me and Jason and offers Alex his arm. “I want you to get to know Jennifer,” he whispers in my ear.

“Let’s go get a drink, Jennifer,” I tell her.

“I’d love to. And this is a beautiful apartment.” I hook my arm through hers as Jason follows us to the kitchen.

“You should have seen it before I moved in.”

Jason makes us fresh margaritas while I chat with Jennifer. She’s only forty-two but has a twenty-year-old daughter who goes to Boston University. She’s a hairdresser by trade, but she owns three beauty salons in New Jersey.

“Your father tells me you’re having a wedding. He’s really excited about walking you down the aisle. No pressure, but I’d love to do your hair for your big day. If you already have someone else—”

“I’d love it,” I tell her before she can finish her thought. She lets out a relieved breath. I look past her shoulders and catch my mother looking at us.

“Let me show you some pictures of the last few weddings I did. I can do makeup too.” She pulls out her phone and starts to swipe.



“Adam!” Uncle Finn yells while he walks across the room. “What is this? A funeral? I thought you invited me here for a party. You need some music.” Alex puts a hand to her chest at my uncle’s loud voice, and my mother shakes her head from across the room.

“It’s fine, Uncle Finn,” I say.

“Wine? I can’t mix wine with the whiskey I’ve been drinking. I’m Irish, Adam! I don’t do wimpy drinks like wine.”

Mellie giggles, and I wrap my arm tighter around her.

“Oh, and Adam, before I leave, I want you to help with that dating profile we talked about. I’m sick of being single.”

“I can help you, Uncle Finn,” Ananda volunteers.

“Kelp? What kelp? She’s meshugana, that one,” he says, jerking his thumb in her direction.

“She said she’ll help,” I yell loud enough so he can hear. I hope he takes her up on it because I don’t want to bother.

“Thank you, lovely. I’m gonna take your offer. Adam,” he says. Like always, he says my name louder than necessary. “He’s been putting me off for months. I think he likes having Uncle Finn at his beck and call. No more, Adam. I’m getting a lady friend, so you’ll have to learn to share.” He turns

back to Ananda and asks, “Do you dance because these hips don’t lie?” He starts to gyrate in the middle of the living room. She nods slowly, eyes wide almost as if she’s afraid of what Uncle Finn is going to do next. He pulls out his phone and walks away. Ananda exhales, but seconds later, loud salsa music fills the room. Uncle Finn walks back, takes Ananda’s hand and leads her to the middle of the living room, and spins her around. I pray that Ananda can keep up with him. He’s like a savant when it comes to dancing.

“Whoa.” Mel’s jaw almost hits the floor at the sight of Uncle Finn dancing around the apartment. Luckily for Ananda, she can keep up.

“Yeah.”

Uncle Finn dances away from Ananda, holding rhythm the entire time. He grabs Jennifer’s hand and pulls her away from William.

“Two ladies at once,” Uncle Finn yells, and everyone laughs. I wrap my arm around Mel and pull her back into my chest.

“How about you, love? You feel like dancing with your husband?” I put my hands on her hips and move them to the beat of the music. She pushes her hips from side to side, and each time she moves, her ample ass hits my dick.

“If you’re anything like Uncle Finn, I don’t know if I can keep up.”

I lean down and kiss the top of her ear. She shudders and tries to pull away, but I nip her ear lobe.

“I know for a fact you can keep up.” The music changes and a song with a slower tempo comes on. I spin her around, pull her body flush with mine and we move our hips to the sound of the music.



“Adam!” Uncle Finn yells from two feet away. It’s about the hundredth time he’s yelled my name tonight. “My friend here set up a dating profile for me. She says I’m a silver fox!” Everyone laughs at my uncle, and I shake my head.

“Just like Kevin Costner,” Ananda practically yells in his ear.

“She’s meshugana, that one. And Kevin Costner wishes!”

I ignore my uncle and look across the room. My mom is laughing with Mel while her mom looks on. I can’t read her expression, but Jason walks over there, and a smile lights up her face.

I turn away and put out more chips for our guests. They ate the tacos we got for dinner, and I ended up ordering pizza. So far, no one has left and the simple housewarming has turned into a party.

“Mellie seems happy,” William says, walking up to me. “I almost fell over when she called and told me she got married.”

“Yeah, it was sudden,” is all I say.

My wife is across the room talking to my mom and Jennifer, gesturing wildly with her hands. She’s oblivious to the stares coming from Diane.

“How do you like your mother-in-law?” William asks.

“I don’t.”

Almost as if she knows she’s the subject of our conversation, she walks over to us. Jason sees and follows quickly behind her.

“William,” she says, her lips pursed. “You look well. Maybe a little ridiculous chasing around that young woman. I’d appreciate it if you would not besmirch my name to Adam.”

I hold in my snort. As if she hasn’t besmirched her own name.

“I’m sure you did that all by yourself, sweetheart. And you also look well. Nice hairdo. Too bad it doesn’t hide your horns. By the way, how’s the house?” He pops a chip in his mouth, but that does nothing to hide his satisfied smile. It widens when Diane takes a defensive step back.

“I see you’re as big of a jerk as ever.”

“And I see that you’re as miserable as ever.”

“Can we not do this now?” Jason asks.

I lean against the table, cross my arms and watch the dynamics of the family I married into.

“All your father has to do is behave, and we won’t.”

“All your mother has to do is leave. Why are you here anyway, Diane? I know you’ve always had your hooks deep in Jason, but Mellie can’t stand you on your best day.”

I eat a disgusting chip and wait for Diane’s response. Jason runs a hand over his face and sighs loudly.

“You’ll say anything to hurt me.”

“I’d have to care about you to hurt you, Diane. Just leave Mellie alone. She was already dealt a bad hand in the mother department. She’s in a good place now, so don’t come over here and shit all over it.”

“I don’t need you to tell me how to be a parent.”

“When it comes to our daughter, you do. I don’t think Adam will put up with your bullshit.”

Diane’s head pops up at the mention of my name. She purses her lips and turns her attention back to William. “Look at you, William. Father of the year. It must be great to swoop in and be a father now. Where the hell were you when I was raising our two children?”

“I was there, working two jobs. Never said I was father of the year. I made plenty of mistakes, so go ahead and judge me. I own my mistakes, Diane. Do you?” The last comment from Williams seems to have left her speechless.

She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. She closes her mouth, spins on her heels, and walks to the opposite end of the room. I wish she’d leave but being far away from me works too. William looks, winks and says, “You’re welcome.”

“Did you have to say all of that to her, Dad?” Jason asks. “She’s had a rough time lately.”

“That’s just karma giving her a kick in her judgmental rear end. Enough about her. Come make me another one of those drinks. Come on, Adam. I think you and I will get along great.”

While Jason makes a fresh batch of frozen margaritas, I lean against the kitchen counter and stare at Mel. She's oblivious to my stare and points at something on Uncle Finn's phone. Then she looks up, and our eyes lock. She blushes, but she blows me a kiss and looks away.

The phone in my pocket vibrates, and I say a silent curse before reluctantly pulling my eyes away from my wife in that short skirt. They've started reaching out again.

He's been leaving texts this time.

Unknown number – I'll be in Boston next month. I want to meet.

The fucking audacity of these people.

Me – No.

Since everyone I care about is here, I shut off my phone and put it in my pocket.

"You okay?" Mel asks, sliding beside me. "You looked at your phone and frowned."

"Spam," is all I say. "Junk texts. I unsubscribed." My voice sounds high to my own ears, but she seems to buy my lie. She nods and reaches around me for a slice of pizza.

"Our party's a hit," she says.

"Our first of many."



It's many hours later when our last guests leave. It was fun to see the usually put together Dr. Jason Dupree get drunk off the martinis Mel made. I had to help him down the stairs, and it made me happy to see his wife irritated with him. He couldn't even take off his shoes when I practically carried him into his bedroom. After making sure he was in bed, I left him to his angry spouse.

Mel finishes wiping down the counter and I take the trash bags outside. When I return, it's back to our clean and pristine apartment. The place looks

and smells great. Even though we didn't ask for gifts, our guests brought everything from kitchen gadgets to scented candles.

"So, love," I say putting my hands on either side of her, boxing her in. "I've been watching your luscious ass in this tiny skirt all night." I slide my hand down her back and cup her butt. "Now that everyone's gone, I think it's time you pay up for all the teasing you did." Because I know her ears are sensitive, I put her earlobe between my teeth.

She moans and arches her back into me.

"Tell me, Mel, how did I end up with the sexiest wife in the history of the world, hmm?" I drop her earlobe and lick the side of her neck. While she moans at the sensation, I reach underneath the short skirt and grab her panty covered pussy with my large palm. "This is mine. From now until eternity. Fuck walking away in a year. Fuck walking away at all." I rub her clit over her panties. She whines and grinds on my dick, and she throws her head back and puts a palm on my cheek. I know what she wants, but I'm not ready to give it to her yet.

"Adam," she says so softly I can barely hear.

"Adam what?" I whisper in her ear. I drop my hand from her pussy, and she moans in protest, but before she can get a word out, I spin her around to face me. "Adam what, Mel? What do you want?"

She smiles coyly and puts a hand on my chest, biting her bottom lip as soon as her hand makes contact. She's spent so much time watching me exercise in the backyard, and her eyes have always been drawn to my chest. I noticed her watching me the very first day.

"You make me feel beautiful." She drops her gaze, but I grab her chin and force her eyes back on me.

"That's because you are."

"And wanted. No one's ever wanted me like this."

"That's because you were only meant for me, love. No one else can make you feel the way I do. Do you know why?" Her brown eyes lock with mine

and no words come out of her mouth. All she can do is shake her head. “Because you don’t belong to them. You belong to me.” I run my hands down her sides, caressing her curves along the way.

She grabs my hands and leads me to the living room. She points to Lola and when I sit, she dims the lights. Music is still playing from earlier, and Ed Sheeran’s Shape of you comes on.

“I’ve always been self-conscious about everything. Until you came along and started looking at me as if you could see my soul.” I glide my hand along her bare leg, but she steps back and starts to sway to the music.

I sit up straight, entranced as she swings her hips. Just like the woman in the video, she starts to box, and my dick stands at attention. I sit back, unable to blink or breathe as I watch the most beautiful sight.

She turns and gives me a nice view of her ass. The ass I’ve been obsessed with since I first saw it. She bends at the waist and looks at me through her legs. She runs her tongue over her bottom lip and slowly stands up. While the song continues to play, she rolls down her silk panties and throws them at me. I catch them with one hand, put them to my nose before I put them in my pocket. I have no plans on giving them back anytime soon.

The skirt comes off next, leaving her naked from the waist down. Her body is firm and shaped like an hourglass. My hands ache to touch her, but this is her show, and I’m her audience. She walks over, spreads her legs, showing her perfectly trimmed pussy. I see the tip of her pink little clit, and my tongue yearns for it.

“You put that pussy in my face, things can only end one way, love,” I say. When she pulls the sweater over her head and removes her bra, I can’t take it anymore. I stand, remove my shirt and t-shirt, and like a predatory animal, I approach and lift her off the ground. She wraps her legs around me, her hot, wet pussy coating my stomach.

I look up into her eyes, and for the first time, she doesn’t look away. She looks as if she’s trying to read my mind. Fingers slide in my hair. There’s a

soft sigh before warm lips touch mine.

I don't know how, but I manage to get us into the bedroom without hitting a wall. I lay her on her back and feast on her body. First her lips. Then I give her breasts my full attention. Her nipples are sensitive. I remember that from our night in my hotel room in Vegas. That's as far as I allowed things to get despite my hard dick and my unquenching need to have her. But I didn't want her to have any regrets the next morning.

While I suck on a nipple, she reaches for my belt. Knowing exactly what she wants, my shoes and jeans come off, both thrown into some dark corner of the bedroom.

I bend her legs and dive into her pussy. She tastes like warm honey, and I can't get enough, but I stop before she comes on my mouth.

"Adam," she complains. I slide on top of her body and slide my dick into her in one hard thrust. "Fuck, Adam," she says.

"No fucking. Tonight's for loving." I give it to her slow, filling her body as much as her mind. "Eyes on me." Her eyes fly open. She sighs when our eyes lock. My thrusts are slow, reaching the deepest parts of her body and soul.

"You're so beautiful. So damn beautiful." I kiss the side of her mouth. I thrust into her again, and she comes apart underneath me, calling my name. Hearing my wife call out my name while she comes on my dick pushes me over the edge and I release inside of her.

I stay inside until I soften and slip out. She cuddles to my side, and I pull her closer, putting a hand on her stomach, wishing that our lovemaking could create a life, but I know she's on birth control and no amount of wishing will grant me that gift. At least not yet.

"That was amazing," she whispers.

"You're amazing," I say, kissing her temple.



“Tell me something nobody on earth knows about you. Not even your mom,” I say to Adam hours after getting into bed. We fell asleep after making love, but when he got up to pee, he woke me up, and neither one of us were able to fall back asleep.

He groans and says, “Okay, let me think.” He stays quiet for a few minutes before speaking again. “Okay, I got it. We moved to Dublin when I was ten. I broke a vase that belonged to some dead relative. My grandma found the broken vase the next morning and blamed Uncle Finn. He came home drunk the night before, so he assumed he did it and took the blame. I never told a soul until now.” He plays with my cross and laughs at the memory.

“Oh, poor Uncle Finn.” I can’t help my own laugh.

“He apologized and everything. He was in the doghouse with my grandmother for a long time. Your turn. Tell me something,” he says.

“I’m scared of the dark.” I speak the words quickly, then I sit up and peek at his face.

“Get out,” he says.

“Nope. I have a nightlight in my bedroom downstairs. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I put one in here. If I come to bed before you, I turn it

on. The second you leave for the gym on those early mornings, that light goes on.”

“Oh, love, I had no idea. I’ll be sure to turn it on for you on those mornings, okay?” Like he always does, he kisses my temple.

“Besides the dark, tell me what you’re most afraid of in this world?” he asks.

“Not being seen. Going through life and not doing anything important. I’m afraid of letting my insecurities keep me from the life I want. Your turn. Tell me something you’re afraid of?”

“Needles.” His cheeks turn red in embarrassment, but that doesn’t stop me from laughing.

“Needles? Big, strong Adam Flynn is afraid of needles? Get out of here.” I shove his chest.

“Mel, big strong Adam would put up such a fight at the doctor’s office. It would take four or five people to hold me down to get a vaccine.” I picture that in my head, and I laugh so hard, I fall off the bed.

“Hey, I didn’t laugh at your night light thing.” That only makes me laugh harder. I laugh so hard and long that my stomach starts to hurt.

“Are you done?” He stands over me and offers me his hand. When I take it, he yanks me to my feet.

“I’m sorry, Adam.” I know I don’t look the least bit contrite. “Your secret is safe with me.” He slides into the bed beside me and pulls me into his arms. “Tell me something else that you’re afraid of. I won’t laugh this time. I promise.” I put my hand to my mouth to hide my smile.

“I’m afraid of losing you, Mel.” He speaks softly, earnestly. I can see it in his blue eyes, but I can’t hold his stare. I look away and focus on his hard chest. I run a fingertip down his sternum, but I look up at him again and our eyes lock.

“Honestly, Adam, I don’t understand why you want to keep me.” My voice trembles, and I want to look away but can’t.

He closes his eyes and flares his nostrils. His cheek twitches. When he opens his eyes again, the way he looks at me almost makes my heart stop.

“I never could figure out why you don’t see yourself the way that I do, but I get it now. I understand. I’m not going to tell you why I want to keep you. I’m going to show you.” He runs the back of his knuckles on my cheek. “Tell me you’ll give me a chance to show you.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Feeling a sudden bout of shyness, I bite my bottom lip and pull the blanket to cover my breasts, but he pulls them down.

“Don’t hide from me. Let me see the parts of you that you don’t let anyone else see.”

“But what if you see them and decide I’m not worth it?” I whisper. My heart rate speeds up while I wait for him to answer. I hold my breath and bite my bottom lip so hard, I’m afraid it will bleed.

“The only thing that will happen is that I’ll want more and more of you. I want every side of Melanie Flynn. Even the bad. I want to be the one who makes it better.” He runs a hand over my messy hair and looks into my eyes. He’s nervous. I can tell from his shallow breathing and the twitching of his eye.

“Why, Adam? Why would you want that?”

“Because you’re my wife. Because I’ve felt a connection to you before I ever laid eyes on your face. When all I knew was your voice. That’s why.” I can tell he wants to say more, but he doesn’t. He holds his breath while he waits for me to speak. Almost overcome with emotions, tears flow freely from my eyes. I move over and climb on top of his naked body. His arms automatically wrap around my waist, and I bury my face on the side of his neck.

“I would love that, Adam. I’ll try but it will take time. Just be patient with me, okay?”

“Can we not put an expiration date on our marriage? I know I said a year, but—”

“Done. No expiration date.” He relaxes underneath me, letting out a loud rush of breath. “Unless you want out,” I quickly add.

“Never,” he growls. His large hands caress my lower back and I sink deeper onto his body. As hard as it is, he’s very comfortable to lay on.

“Tell me something else that nobody knows,” he says.

I kiss his neck and roll off him, but I cuddle to his side and sigh when he pulls me close. “Before I left New Jersey, I started law school. Nobody knows this. The company I worked for offered tuition reimbursement, and I managed to get into CUNY School of Law. I only got through one semester before I lost my job. I just submitted my application to Northeastern School of Law before I went to Vegas.” I bite my lip and hold my breath. I’ve never told that to anyone before.

“Wow, Mel. That’s amazing.”

“I probably won’t get in. It’s really competitive, and I don’t want to ever work at a law firm, but a law degree can open lots of doors in my field.”

He leans over and kisses my nose. It’s a gesture so small, so tender that something inside of me melts. “You’ll get in. You’ll finish and go on to do great things. I’ll be that proud husband at your law school graduation. I’ll also be the one bringing you snacks when you study for the bar.”

A smile so wide spreads across my face. I can picture him doing just that. Being my cheerleader, encouraging me when I want to give up, and supporting me through it all.

“Your turn. Tell me something else no one knows,” I tell him.

“When I was in the second grade, the school arranged something call doughnuts with Dad. I begged my mom to make Dad come, and he promised he would. Of course, he called the night before and told her he couldn’t. I pretended I was okay, but I spent that entire night crying in my room. I was never quite the same after that.”

That’s how we spent the next few hours. The two of us exchanging secrets that no one else knows about us. It was almost sunrise by the time I

fell asleep with his arms wrapped around my naked body.

When I wake up hours later, we're still in the same position, only he has thrown a leg across my thighs keeping me securely in place. His phone starts to vibrate on his nightstand, and my bladder is begging to be relieved.

"Adam," I whisper when I have no luck pushing his leg off. "Adam!" He finally stirs and lifts his leg. "Your phone." I stumble out of the room, uncaring about my naked body. Despite only getting a few hours of sleep, I feel great even though my hair's a mess and I have bags under my eyes; but none of that matters this morning.

The smile doesn't leave my face. Even while I brush my teeth. Not even when I jump in the shower to wash the sweat away. When I step out of the shower to find him standing at the sink brushing his teeth, I walk over and plant a kiss on his cheek. He spans my wet behind while I reach for my towel.

"Let's go out for breakfast. It's going to snow again later, and I want to cuddle on the sofa."

He grabs my wrist, pulls me to him, and kisses my lips. "What about your dad? I thought we were meeting him for breakfast." He looks adorable with his messy hair and flushed face.

"He texted. They left a few hours ago to avoid the storm."

"Breakfast with my wife sounds perfect." He smiles at me, and I kiss him one more time before I leave the bathroom.

Half an hour later, we close our front door and walk down the stairs hand in hand. We were so close to making our exit when the downstairs apartment door opens and my mother steps out. Adam automatically puts an arm across my shoulder, and neither one of us offers a greeting. In fact, I think he growls.

"I made pancakes," she says, looking from me to Adam.

"Thanks, but Adam doesn't eat pancakes," I tell her.

"Well, I can make him whatever he wants," she offers.

Before I can tell her no, Adam speaks and says, “I appreciate it, but we want to get out and get some air before the snow starts. We’ll see you later.” He leads me through the front door, when we step outside, we intertwine our hands and walk to a neighborhood breakfast place.



“If you’re not going to sit on her, you have to keep her covered at all times because she’s just plain ol’ ugly.” I fold the blanket and drape it across Lola, covering most of her hideousness from sight. “Do you know how long it took me to find a blanket this size?”

He snorts, grabs my wrist, and pulls me onto his lap. Today has been amazing. From our talk last night to breakfast at the diner this morning. It’s been magical. We know things about each other that nobody else does, and after that confession he made about his dad, I held his hand and told him that I understood.

Maybe he always knew from the beginning that we’re kindred spirits who have dealt with rejection from the very people who are supposed to love us unconditionally.

“Don’t talk about Lola like that. You’ll hurt her feelings.” When he bites the top of my ear, I let out a loud shriek. I reach for my bowl of popcorn, but he yanks me back and grabs the bowl before I can. He tucks me into his side and feeds me popcorn while he searches for a movie.

The blinds are open, and even though the sun hasn’t set yet, it’s gray as light snow starts to fall. We’re not getting a storm like we did weeks ago, but half a foot is still a lot. I never cared much for snow, but it’s not so bad when you’re cuddling with your husband.

“No!” I say for the tenth time since he started scrolling. “No science fiction. Your taste in movies is as bad as your taste in furniture.”

“I don’t want to watch any of that girly shit, Mel. And no goofy comedies

either.”

He flips some more, and when I get exasperated, I try and take the remote from him. He lifts his hand straight up into the air and blocks me with his other hand. It’s as if it takes no effort to stop me.

“You want to do trial by combat again?” he asks with a smug smile.

“You only won because you cheated.”

“No, that was you who cheated. And I still won.” Something starts to vibrate in his pocket. A look of irritation crosses his face, but he smiles when he sees Ma flashing across the screen.

He puts the phone to his ear, stands up, and mouths that he’ll be right back. Just as I grab the remote and get comfortable on the couch, the knock on the door interrupts me. In too much of a good mood to be irritated, I run to the door and open it without asking who it is.

That was my first mistake. My mother stands on the other side of the threshold holding two large Tupperware bowls. My second mistake was letting her inside the apartment after she asked if she could come in.

“Since you two didn’t want breakfast, I brought you dinner.” Instead of handing me the bowls, she walks to the kitchen and puts them down on the table.

“Thanks,” is all I say. I stick my hands in the back pockets of my jeans and wait for her to leave.

“Where’s Adam?”

“He’s in the back talking to his mother.” I take a few steps out of the kitchen, hoping she’ll follow me to the door, but she stays rooted to her spot.

“You seem to be pretty chummy with his mother.” I don’t respond but arch my eyebrows. “The manicures and matching necklaces. Our family isn’t even Catholic.”

“No, but Adam’s family is, and she gave me something symbolic to her. Is that a problem for you?” I do my best to keep my temper in check, but that’s no easy feat.

“Are you planning on converting?”

“Converting? I’m not religious. Other than going to church with Grandma a few times when we were kids, we never went. And why do you care?” Just as I get my hand on the doorknob, she speaks again.

“Why does every interaction between us have to be a fight? I’m trying, Melanie.”

I keep my back turned and count to ten. Once I’ve calmed down, I turn to face her. “Trying what exactly?”

“To have a relationship with my daughter.”

“Why? You’ve never wanted one before. Listen, you have a great relationship with Jason and Alex. Focus on that, and don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

She takes a step closer to me and I take a sidestep out of the way.

“I’ve always wanted one. Listen.” She runs a hand through her salt and pepper hair. My mom always swore she would never dye her hair. She spent too much time watching our grandmother use cheap hair dye to bother. “I know I’ve made some mistakes with you, and I was hoping that since I’m here now, we can try to heal.”

I let out a deep breath and drop my hands to my sides. I look around her, hoping and praying that Adam will come out and save me, but I know his phone calls with his mom never take less than half an hour.

“I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, Mother. I’m really not. No part in me wants to be mean to you or to treat you like you’ve always treated me. But I think it’s best if we leave things between us alone. I’m in a great place in my life, and I know you’ve gotten into some issues recently. Maybe you should focus on fixing your problems and not me.” I do my best to keep my voice calm, but just having her here is making my entire body itch. I want to grab the blanket and cover my entire body just so she won’t see me and tear me down.

“There it is. Say it. Let it out, Melanie. Judge me the same way you think

I've judged you."

"The way I *think*? As if I'm making the entire thing up?"

"I've played a part, but you exaggerate things."

"You've played a part? Like your constant favoritism? Did you only just play a part in that, Mother? Or the belittling of me? Was that just a part too?"

Her head rolls back, but she takes a deep breath and says, "You never gave me a chance to explain. It's so much better for you to hold this thing between us over my head, isn't it?" I wait for the blind rage, but it doesn't come. The only thing I feel is resignation, but because I want this to be the last time we have this conversation, I don't ask her to leave.

"None of what I just said has anything to do with what I overheard that morning. None of it. But as usual, you refuse to take any responsibility. You want to go back to that morning as if it's the only explanation for the state of our relationship. But if you want to go back there, fine. So, I'm partly to blame because I overheard you telling my aunt that you regret having me, and I've done nothing but cause strife in your life? That's my fault?"

"I didn't say that. I—"

"You did say it!" I yell, stunning her. "I remember every word you said, so own it! Do you know how many times I've replayed that conversation in my head? Hundreds! What I don't need is you being around here and reminding me of this shit. You're entitled to your feelings about me, just like I'm entitled to mine about you." This time, I open the door and gesture for her to leave.

"So, that's it? You married Adam and found yourself a new mother?"

"Yes, because my marriage is about you. Of course, it is. That was my diabolical plan all along. I married Adam for his mother. Are you happy now? You've figured it out." I gesture for her to leave again, but when she makes no moves to go, I slam the door shut to keep out the draft.

"I love my children, Melanie. Both of them."

"I don't doubt that, but you only like one of us."

“Maybe my actions showed that, but I’d really like to change that.” She takes a small step closer to me, slowly closing the distance.

“Here’s the thing. You can’t change it. Like I said, I’m not trying to hurt you. I did that for years to you and Jason and that only made me feel worse. And let’s be honest. It’s been ten years, Mother, and you’ve never once shown any interest in fixing things between us. I don’t buy your sudden interest in having a relationship with me. You’re not here for me. You’ve never been there for me because you never wanted me.”

She looks down, but I don’t miss the unshed tears in her eyes.

“That’s unfair. All I’ve ever wanted was the best for you both. I’m sorry about the way I went about it. I’d really like—”

Whatever she was going to say gets interrupted by the sounds of Adam’s heavy footsteps..

“Mel! Ma wants to talk to you about wedding dress shopping next Saturday.” He comes to a full stop when he sees my mother standing there. The phone dangles in his hand.

I open the front door again and walk away, take the phone from Adam’s hand, sit on the couch, and say hello.

Realizing she’s been dismissed, my mom walks out and quietly closes the door behind her.



“What about mermaid?” Ananda asks Adam while she shoves a chip in her mouth.

“I’m picturing a Halloween costume, and I hope it’s slutty. Is it slutty, Mel? Maybe you can get along, blue wig to go with it. And your torso’s gotta be exposed.”

Everyone erupts in laughter. Even Molly, but she walks over and gently whacks him in the back of the head.

“A-line?” I ask.

“Modified A-line?” Molly says.

“What about sheath?” Ananda throws in.

“No idea what any of that means, but if it—”

“If you say slutty one more time, I’m gonna whack you in the mouth.” Molly makes a fist to prove her point.

Adam closes his mouth and pretends to zip his lips.

“Leave Adam alone.” Alex waddles over and puts a hand on his arm. “He is way too manly to know about dress styles. Just know that Mellie is going to look gorgeous.”

“Alex is right. I’m too much man for this conversation. Look at this.” He shows us his bicep and all the women pretend to swoon. All the women

except Molly who only rolls her eyes at her son.

“Wedding dress and bridesmaid dresses are done. I still need to coordinate with Mel’s mom about our colors, but I think we should match the bridesmaid dresses. Maybe a darker shade of blue. Too bad she was sick and couldn’t come with us.” Molly wrings her hands. All laughter and humor cease. Alex looks down and lays a hand on her lower back. I walk over to her and help her to Lola.

All week there was talk about whether I was going to invite my mother with us. All week I thought about it. Hell, I had a couple of sleepless nights over it.

Jason hinted several times about asking her, but my need to have a stress-free day without any tinge of judgment or disapproval won out in the end, and my mother was left out. Besides, the last conversation with her left me completely drained. But today didn’t go as planned. My heart felt heavy despite having the best group of women with me. And as much fun as we had, the feeling of guilt lingered.

Almost as if Ananda can sense my change of mood, she comes over and rests her chin on my shoulder while Adam intertwines my fingers with his.

“I’ll ask her about that when she’s feeling better, Molly,” I say quickly. “We have flowers on Wednesday, but Alex, we’ll FaceTime you. Jason only let you go today because you wouldn’t be on your feet.”

“Let me?” Alex snorts. “Oh, please. Your brother can take several seats.” Ananda walks over and gives her a high five. “But I agree to do flowers remotely. This baby is wreaking havoc on my back.”

“Are you coming with us?” Ananda asks Adam.

“Do you need me there, Mel?” I can tell from his tone that he’d rather be anywhere else.

“I’ll call you if I do. At this point, I’ll just tell you when and where to show up. I can’t even trust you to pick out your own tux.”

“Thanks, love.” He smiles at me without an ounce of shame. “I’ll give

you my measurements.”

“Oh, wow. You’re terrible, Adam,” Alex chuckles.

“It’s fine. Don’t complain if you don’t like something,” I warn him.

“He’d better not complain,” Molly says making a fist at Adam.

“As long as you’re there and you say I do, it will be perfect.” The women swoon at his words, and a smile spreads across my face.

The food we ordered arrives, and when Adam goes downstairs to get it, I text Jason and tell him to come upstairs with Addy. He shows up a few minutes later, and Addison goes directly to her mother. She sits on her lap and lays her head on Alex’s boobs while Jason gets food for them.

“A salad, love?” Adam asks over his grilled chicken a few minutes later.

“I have a wedding dress to fit, but as soon as we land in Paris, I’m going to eat no less than six croissants per day. We’ll need to buy two seats for me for the trip back home.” He wiggles his eyebrows and offers me some of his food. “And,” I say, lowering my voice, “I have to update the wedding spreadsheet later. I’ve run into some unexpected expenses.”

“Later,” he whispers back. Jason takes a seat next to me. He smiles, but the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. On closer inspection, he looks tired. More so than usual.

“Adam,” Molly says, “at some point, you’re going to have to take your uncle shopping. Not just for the wedding, but all his shirts are too tight. And you know he won’t order clothes online.”

Adam sighs, but he kisses me on the cheek before he joins his mother on the couch.

“You okay, Jase?” I ask my brother.

He takes a bite of his taco and smiles, but the smile never fully forms. He drops the taco, exhales, and meets my eyes. “Mom’s upset.” My stomach drops, not just at his words but at the accusatory tone. So, I don’t say a word. I hold his stare and wait for him to either say more or to shut up. “Mellie, did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you.” I turn back to my salad and stuff lettuce in my mouth. It gets stuck in my throat and I nearly finish my water to get it down.

“That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say? I don’t want her to be upset, believe it or not,” I tell him.

“You have a funny way of showing it.” I drop my fork in my plate and look around the room for Adam. He must sense my distress. He gets up while in mid conversation with his mother.

“You okay, Mel?” He sits next to me and starts to rub the back of my neck.

“I’m having a conversation with my sister, Flynn. You don’t need to be involved in this.” I flinch at not just my brother’s words, but his dismissive tone.

“Don’t dismiss my husband,” I hiss at him. “I would never do that to your wife, so show us the same respect.”

“Oh, really? Because a few weeks ago you came home from Vegas married after a drunken night.”

I stand up so fast, my chair topples over. Adam stands right along with me and takes a step to Jason. I quickly stand between them.

“I’m talking to my sister about our mother and about the fact that she was excluded today. Maybe you had something to do with that?”

I turn to face my brother, stunned by his accusation. “Are you serious right now, Jason? You think Adam cares who goes with me to buy dresses? It was my decision, so stand down.”

I look around the room. Molly and Ananda are doing their best to make it look like they’re not paying attention, but Alex is glaring at her husband.

“We need to talk.” Jason takes my hand and pulls me down the hall and into Adam’s home gym. Adam shuts the door behind us.

“You could have just taken her with you,” Jason says, sighing and running a hand over his head.

“She didn’t want to,” Adam says before I can respond.

“I told you to stay out of it,” Jason growls. “How does it look that you took Flynn’s mother and not your own?” Jason asks me.

“I’m not going to stay out of it, Dupree,” Adam says. “Don’t you come up here and try to bully my wife with a guilt trip.”

“Bully? I should have kicked your ass out of here last year when I had the chance, you sneaky fuck.”

“Oh my God, will you stop? Jason, I thought you of all people would understand that I wanted today to be a peaceful and happy experience. I’m not going out of my way to hurt our mother.”

“But you did, and I was left downstairs trying to clean up the mess you left behind. You didn’t see—”

“You need to shut the hell up right now, Dupree,” Adam warns. “But if this is how it’s always been between the three of you, I can see why Mel keeps her distance from that woman downstairs.”

“That woman is our mother, so show some damn respect. On second thought, just shut the hell up and mind your own damn business.”

Adam takes a step to Jason. I step between them and put a hand to Adam’s chest. “My wife is my business. Which part of that don’t you get, Dr. Genius? And I know she upsets my wife every single time they see each other. And now I know you always side with mommy,” Adam taunts.

“Enough!” I yell, turning to Jason. “Don’t you say another rude word to Adam. Just stop. And for the record, you left for college, and I was left with her for four years, dealing with her disappointment and criticism every time I fell short of measuring up to her perfect son. Everything I did was met with Jason did it better. It was always Jason, Jason, Jason. You are her perfect child, and you have no idea what it’s like for me. You’re not going to come up here and make me feel bad because I chose my peace of mind.”

Jason stands there, hands on his hips while he takes shallow breaths. I reach for Adam and let him wrap me in his strong arms. I bury my face in his

chest and breathe him in, each breath bringing me closer and closer to peace.

Adam rubs my back and murmurs soothing words, and the entire time, I can feel him scowling at Jason, who now remains quiet. The door bursts open and Alex waddles in.

“Jason Dupree, I warned you. Let’s go home. Addison needs a fresh diaper.” She grabs Jason’s hand. Adam and I follow them out and watch as they pack up the rest of their food, say a quick goodbye, and leave. Ananda soon follows, mouthing sorry to me while she runs out the door, leaving us alone with Molly.

“That looked tense.” Molly pulls me from Adam and takes me in her arms. “I don’t know how I didn’t pick up on it before. Your mom’s not sick, darling.” I shake my head at her, confirming her theory.

“It’s a complicated relationship,” I tell her.

“My mother and I wrote the book on that. I’ve only scratched the surface with what I told you, so I understand. The thing you must remember, darling, is that it’s your relationship and you have to navigate it however is best for you. Whatever you’re comfortable with, but please make sure you don’t do anything you’ll regret when she’s gone.” She hugs both of us before leaving.

When it’s just me and Adam, he cradles my face and searches my eyes. He only relaxes when I smile at him. Wanting his comfort, I wrap my arms around him and stick my face in the middle of his chest. He lifts me off the ground and takes me to Lola. Once I’m comfortable on his lap, I soak up his warmth.

“I’m sorry Jason treats you that way. He only does it because of the things I said in the beginning. That’s on me. I’ll fix it.”

“Mel, I don’t care about how Jason treats me. As long as you don’t treat me like that.”

“Never.” A sudden wave of emotion hits. I let out a choked sob and hide my face in the crook of Adam’s neck and sob.

His hands pause on my back, and I sense the confusion rolling off him.

“I’m sorry, love. I can go downstairs and beat your brother’s face in. Just say the word.”

“This isn’t about Jason.” An involuntary sob catches me off guard and more tears fall. I pull myself together enough to look into his eyes. His brows are furrowed, and I think he’s stopped breathing.

“No, Mel. Don’t you tell me you’ve changed your mind about us. You promised—”

“Shh.” I put a finger to his lips. “I haven’t.” His relief is immediate. He lets out a rushed breath and it caresses my cheek. “And I won’t.” I take a deep breath while I ponder my next words. “But I’m so afraid, Adam. I’m so afraid that you’ll be the one who changes your mind about us.” Unable to take the look in his eyes, I lower my gaze and focus on his chest.

“Mel, how can you believe that after I’ve chased you for two years? I’m exactly where I want to be.” His words are reassuring, but my heart won’t stop thumping.

“I like this. I like what we have, and I don’t want to lose that. I’ve always felt less than. Not good enough. It’s hard when your own mother treats you as if you’re unimportant. I’ve always been so afraid that when people get to know me, they’ll see what she sees, but I don’t want to be that scared person anymore. I’m all in, Adam. I’m going to rock this marriage thing.”

He leans down and graces me with soft kisses. He presses his forehead on mine, and when he closes his eyes, his eyelashes tickle my forehead, and I giggle at the sensation.

“Promise me you’ll never take it back,” Adam says. “Promise me that you’ll honor our vows. That we’re in this until death do us part.”

I open my eyes, look deep into his blue orbs and say, “Didn’t you hear me? I’m going to grab marriage by the balls.”

“I don’t know what that means, but it sounds kind of painful, love,” he says with a laugh.

“It means I’m going to be the world’s best wife. So, I promise.”

“Maybe this thing we have, this obsession, deep down I’ve always recognized your feelings about not being good enough. Your issues with your mom and mine with my father. He never bothered with me, and it hurt. It still hurts, Mel. Even now as an adult, I still struggle with it. In my head, I know it’s not my fault, and that he was a selfish man, but my heart is another story. We share the same pain, love.”

“We do. And your father missed out, Adam. It was his loss, and now he’s gone and will never know the amazing son he created.”

He rests his forehead on mine. “Thank you for saying that. You don’t know how much that helps.”

“Molly raised a great man.” His soft lips land on my forehead. “I’m sorry about before—”

“Shh. I don’t care about before. I only care about now and tomorrow. Tomorrow looks bright,” he tells me.

“Let me say this, please.” When he nods, I continue. “I’m sorry for leaving you in Vegas and for freaking out those first few days when we got back. You didn’t deserve that, and I was a scared fool. And yes, tomorrow does look bright even though we might be living in a cardboard box because this wedding is so expensive,” I sigh.

“Ooh, I feel another spreadsheet in our near future.” I hop off his lap, and he slaps my ass. I let out a yelp and run to the bedroom for my laptop. When I return, I pull out several receipts from my purse and update the document. “So, apparently, seven months is not a long time to plan a wedding, and we’re paying extra to have things expedited. Do you know it can take up to nine to twelve months to get a wedding dress?”

He does a fake gasp and puts both hands to his cheeks and says, “Really? The wedding industry is shameful.”

I playfully slap him upside his head the same way his mother does. “So, I had to pay extra to get my dress in time for alterations if needed. I hope the flowers won’t cost too much, and—”

“Love, don’t worry about it. Just use the credit card. Don’t stress out about the cost.”

“Yes, but I really want to be a homeowner. I guess I can dip into my emergency savings, and since we have both incomes, we can still buy something. But now we’ll need something bigger than just the starter house I was going to get on my own. Oh, I need to know exactly how much you make. And maybe we can get joint accounts.”



She wasn't kidding about being all in. That's everything I want to hear and my worst nightmare rolled into one, but I clear my throat and put a smile on my face, and hope she can't smell my fear.

"We can merge checking accounts. I can transfer to yours or you to mine." I've never been so happy to have accounts at two different banks before then I am right at this moment. She smiles at my suggestion and nods.

"Okay. We can figure that out later, but we need to figure out how we're going to budget these added expenses. We can't have any late credit card payments." She talks some more, and I do my best to pay attention while I move money around on my banking app. She asks me how much I make, and I tell her without meeting her eyes.

"Okay." She smiles, showing off all her teeth. "That makes us equal." She claps her hands together as if she just discovered some great secret. I close the banking app and put my phone away.

"I thought you said you made more than me?"

"I do, but we're in the same bracket." I look at her and raise my eyebrows. She tells me her salary and says, "You know the box you check for your salary range? We're in the same box. So, yes, I do make more, but we're in the same income bracket, which makes us equals." She reaches over and

runs her fingers through my hair and kisses my cheek.

“And that’s important to you?”

“Very. I want to be on equal footing. I know things can happen, but I want us to at least start at the same level.”

I sigh and lean back in my chair.

“I don’t see why that matters. It wouldn’t bother me if you made twice as much as me.” She looks at me and smiles, while she shakes her head as if I just missed the point.

“It’s different for me,” she says. “Jason makes about nine times as much as Alex. I’d hate that.”

“You don’t think they’re equal, Mel? You’re right. They’re not. She runs the man,” I chuckle. “If anyone is beneath anyone, it’s him. And,” I tell her, grabbing her chin, “unless you’re getting another husband, you don’t have to worry about that. I’d never treat you that way.”

She looks down, and I wait for her to speak again. I know she’s considering her next words.

“You don’t understand. It’s about me, not anyone else. I was always the unimportant one growing up, and I don’t want to be that person anymore. I want to be capable. I want to be a true partner to you and that means contributing financially. It’s important to me. If we’re going to build an empire, we’re going to do it together.”

“So, if you found out I was a secret millionaire, you’d bolt?” I do my best to sound playful, but my heart is beating so fast, I’m worried she’ll hear it.

“Oh, really?” She gives me the most exaggerated eye roll. “How many millions are we talking about?”

“Fifty, give or take.” I give her a non-committal shrug. She throws her head back and her laughter fills the kitchen. She’s unguarded and beautiful, and I can’t help but reach over, pick her up, and put her on my lap.

“It’s freaky how strong you are, but I’d be worried if you had fifty million dollars and chose to rent this place from my brother. And you lived like a

broke frat boy before I came up here and rescued you.”

“Mmhmm.” I nibble the side of her neck. She leans away, giving me better access. I brush her hair aside and bite her skin. I suck right at the base of her neck, uncaring about leaving any marks. “Think about it, Mel. No more spreadsheets. No more stress about what we spend for the wedding, or what house we can afford. You can quit your job and go to law school full time.”

I leave wet kisses on her neck, but my wife has stopped reacting to me. I pull my lips away and she slowly turns to face me.

“I like it this way better with both of us contributing. It’s moot, stud. You probably don’t even have fifty dollars in your wallet right now, never mind fifty million.”

I reach into my back pocket, pull out, and open my wallet. She looks in it, only to give me a smug smile when I pull out two five-dollar bills.

“Damn. I guess you’re right, love.”

Then she straddles me and kisses me deep. She starts to grind and pull my shirt over my head, and I break the kiss long enough for her to take the shirt off.

“All that talk about equality has made me horny,” she whispers against my mouth. I stand, and she wraps her legs around me.

“I’m going to give you fifty million orgasms.”

“Oh, my poor, broke, and delusional husband. I’ll settle for two.”

The instant we get in the bedroom, and I slam the door shut with my foot, I toss her on the bed, and dive on top of her. She screams and laughs at the same time until I silence her with my mouth.



“Don’t let Addy see that or she’ll never leave you alone about it,” Alex says.

I take the bridal magazine from her and admire the miniature dress. “It’s similar to mine, so she’ll match her auntie.”

“I hope she doesn’t experience a bout of shyness. She gets like that sometimes.”

“Yeah, but it will be a small wedding. Eighty people at the absolute most.”

“I hate to break it to you, Mellie, but eighty people at a wedding is not exactly small.” Alex’s smile drops. She lifts her heavy bulk and inches closer to me. “Are you planning on inviting your mother?” she whispers. She looks around, likely ensuring that my mother’s not hovering.

“Of course, I am,” I tell her. “Don’t start with me, Alex, okay? Things got ugly enough with Jason a few days ago.” I lean back on the couch and drop the magazine on the coffee table. “It’s not fair that she gets to come here and cause all this drama.” I sigh loudly and close my eyes.

“You know I’m always team Mellie.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just don’t need another guilt trip from your husband.”

“He’s stuck in the middle. He loves both of you.”

“I’m not asking him to choose. I’m not asking him to take sides. I am going to tell him off if he tries to pull some shit like he did the other day again. I want to focus on the wedding. Too bad you can’t come test the food with us. Ananda’s meeting us there Saturday afternoon. Thank goodness for Molly,” I say with a sigh just as my mother walks into the living room. The pinched look on her face must mean she heard what I said about Adam’s mother. She comes over, sits on the end of the couch, and picks up my bridal magazine. She reaches for the reading glasses sitting on top of her head and puts them on.

“Oh, Alex, I got Addy to sleep. She put up a hard fight.” She flips the pages and says, “Is your dress in here, Melanie?”

This is the first time I’ve seen her since last week. She looks thinner, and her crows feet are more pronounced, but I keep my mouth shut. Maybe she’s tired from running after a two-year-old all day. I lift my hand and gesture for the magazine back.

I flip through until I come to the marked page. “Something like this,” I tell her. “It’s the same designer. That’s not the exact dress, but it’s very similar.” She lifts the magazine and studies the dress. I wait for her to say something negative like she always does. I look at Alex, and it looks like she’s holding her breath.

“It’s pretty,” she says, surprising me. “I knew you wouldn’t care for the frilly stuff. This will look good on you.” My mother’s face spreads into a genuine smile.

“Thank you.” I take the magazine and flip to the back. “This is what Addison is going to wear. She has a poufy version of my dress. Molly wants to know if you want to get dark blue dresses to offset the light blue that Alex and Ananda are wearing.”

Her smile dips as soon as she hears the name Molly. She purses her lips and takes her reading glasses off her face. Alex stands up, her stomach protruding. She places a hand on it and wobbles away, telling us that the baby

is sitting on her bladder.

“I suppose that means I’m invited to my daughter’s wedding then. I honestly wasn’t sure until just now. I guess I should be grateful.”

Deciding not to take the bait, I say, “I was always going to invite you.” I stand and take the magazine. “Let’s not do this.”

“Running away again.” That stops me in my tracks. Adam telling me that I’m a runner comes to mind. So, I stand my ground and turn to face her. “Every time I come near you, you flee.” I stand there in stony silence and wait for her to say more. “I’m your mother. We should be able to have a conversation, Melanie. I’m not perfect, but I never laid a hand on you. I’ve always loved you and wanted the best for you. I still do.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

“Why? Because I pushed you? Because I had high expectations.”

“Because you spent my entire life making me feel less than when I couldn’t meet the expectations that you set. Because on one of the most important days of my life, I heard you tell my aunt that you wish you had stopped having kids after you had Jason. And that I was nothing but trouble and difficult to be around. I thought you’d appreciate my absence.”

“Anyway,” she says as if she didn’t hear a word I just said, “I wish I could have been there with you last Saturday just like I was when you went prom dress shopping.”

“Yeah, I remember that. I was so excited about junior prom, but you hated the dress I wanted. So much so that you walked out of the store and refused to pay for it. I think you said that I had already wasted your time, but I was not going to waste your money. Remember *that*? Once was enough for me. I learned a lesson that day, so I should thank you.”

“What? That you can go around me to your father to get what you want.” She stands too, all attempts of making nice gone.

“He told me he loved the dress, but that’s not the lesson I’m talking about. But it did help because he kind of resented you, even then. No, I

learned that I'd have to make my own money and make my own decisions. I had a job and bought my own dress for senior prom."

When I see the hurt look in her eyes, I regret my words about Dad resenting her. I meant what I said. It's not my intention to hurt her, but every time she pulls at an old scab, my instinct is to strike back.

"Yes, I'm the terrible mother who ruined all your moments and doomed to pay for it for all eternity."

I throw my hands up in defeat. "This is why I leave when you're around. You push all my buttons. You want me to take half the blame because you were a shitty mother to me, and I refuse to do that. You're doing it again. You're pitting me against Jason, but I won't let you do it this time."

"I'm his mother, just like I'm yours. Manicures, shopping, and wedding planning with Molly won't change that."

"This is absurd, even for you, Mother." I walk around her and stand on the opposite side of the room. I visibly exhale in relief when Alex returns. "I'm going upstairs, Alex. Do you need anything before I go?"

"Already? Is Adam back?" I shake my head and remind her that Adam is helping Uncle Finn with something. "Well, then." A smile lights up her face, and she hooks an arm through mine. "We're going to eat strawberry ice cream and watch reruns of *The Golden Girls*. Please." She bats her eyelashes, and I relent.

"Go sit down. I'll get the ice cream." She waddles away, grabs the TV remote, and sits on the couch.

"Are you going to have some, Diane?" Alex asks my mother. "We have vanilla almond Swiss and butter pecan if you prefer."

I grab bowls and pull out the unopen pint of strawberry and silently pray that Mother will decide to go to her room early, but once again, I'm forsaken.

"Strawberry for me, Melanie." Our love for strawberry flavored desserts is the one thing that we all have in common. We always had strawberry ice cream at home growing up. After bringing three bowls, topped with whipped

cream, Alex turns on our favorite old sitcom. She had never watched the show before she met me. In fact, my mother would watch reruns of it when I was a child and I'd watch too. Most of the jokes went over my head, but now it's one of my favorite shows.

Two episodes later, Adam knocks on the door, and Alex asks him to come in. He pulls me on his lap and kisses me senseless in front of everybody. He finally pulls away when my mother loudly clears her throat. It turns out, Molly loves this show too, and Adam has seen every episode. So, for the next hour, the three of us sit together and laugh. He even shares my second bowl of ice cream with me.

"Everything okay?" he asks me when we get upstairs to our apartment. "Did she do something to upset you?" I get on my toes and wrap my arms around his neck.

"Aaaadam," I say, doing my best Uncle Finn impersonation, "I missed you. Is Uncle Finn okay?"

"He's fine. I'm the one who's meshugana for dealing with his ass all night. He tricked me. He said he had some paperwork he wanted me to look at, but he really asked me over there to help look through a bunch of dating profiles. He's been swiping right all night."



February brought crazy weather that included two blizzards and an ice storm, but the crazier the weather got, the calmer the drama became. There was no more bickering between Mel and her mom and zero confrontations between me and Jason.

Even the phone calls have waned. I wish they would stop completely, but at least they are limited to only the mornings now. According to Mel and my mom, they've taken care of all the big items for the wedding. Mel's got her dress, we have a church, food, and flowers. The only big detail left is the cake, but since Mel knows the owner of the bakery and the type of cake she wants, she's not stressing about it. In fact, she has an appointment to go cake tasting next month.

We even got the joint bank accounts so Mel can track every penny we spend. Unfortunately for Mel, she has no idea about my other accounts, but that's okay for now. I'll just need to find the right time to tell her. Maybe when we get back from our honeymoon.

February not only brought crazy weather but fun times too. Alex's baby shower is being hosted by Jason's best friend and his wife. Melanie and Ananda helped Sandy plan, and on the morning of the shower, we were met with dry but bitter cold temperatures and biting winds. It reminded me that

my wife will need a new car before next winter.

It is also the first time, other than when her mother blew into town, that she's needed me.

"Hey, wife," I say a couple of hours after she left to go set up. "Don't worry, I won't forget to bring your clothes." She was in such a hurry, she forgot to bring her change of clothes. "Or the gift you left here," I snicker.

"Thanks, stud." I smile at my nickname. "What are you doing?"

"Laying in the middle of our bed. All alone, I might add."

"You'd better be alone." I can hear a hard edge to her voice, and I smile at her sudden bout of jealousy.

"Yes, dear. Put those claws away."

"Can you come now, Adam? We need help." Alex is one of my best friends, so I only complained a little about going to a baby shower. Going there hours early doesn't exactly sound great, but Mel does sound a little stressed. "We just need help with setting up the decorations and stuff. Please."

Before she said please, I was already out of bed and digging through our closet for clothes. "Sure, love. Text me the address and I'll be there soon."

Five minutes later, I'm downstairs and just about to make my exit out the back door when Diane pokes her head out.

"Are you leaving for the shower now?" Her voice is tentative and small. Jason pokes his head out too.

"Mel needs help," is all I say. Jason and I haven't talked since I got in his face almost a month ago.

"Would you mind if I ride with you? I'm a nervous driver in the snow, and I'd like to help too."

I stare at her, unsure of how to respond. "Let me call Mel and see how much help she needs."

She purses her lips, crosses her arms, and waits. Mel must be inundated because she doesn't balk at her mother coming, so I spend the next fifteen

minutes in my car with my passenger. Neither one of us said a word the entire time.

The instant we arrive, Ananda grabs Diane and takes her into the kitchen to set up the food. It's like a pink explosion when I get there. I'm not sure if it's because Alex is having a girl or because Jake's wife is obsessed with the color, but I've never seen so much pink in my life, including the pink shirt my wife said I had to wear.

It took everyone three hours to get the house decorated and set up for the shower. It didn't help that Jake and Sandy's seven-month-old son was attempting to crawl all over the place. I ended up strapping him to my chest while we worked. By the time the guests start to arrive, I'm no longer needed to do manual labor and am left to enjoy the party.

"If those two spent less time kissing, we would have been done hours ago," Mel whispers to me. Our hosts are in a corner of the kitchen and Jake has his wife pinned to the wall while he grazes her neck. She lets out a shaky laugh and pushes him away.

Their son, Jackson, smiles at me. He's a curly haired, tanned version of his father. Even though he's only seven months old, he has a head full of dark curls. He laughs, and drool runs down his chin. I wipe it with his bib, and he sticks a chubby hand in my hair and pulls.

I put an arm around my wife and pull her close. "You having fun?" I ask her. "Are you going to take a turn doing that?" I jerk my chin toward Ananda who is wrapping a long piece of toilet paper around Alex's stomach. "Whatever the hell that is."

The baby in my arms grabs my nose and starts to bounce, laughing and gurgling.

"He likes you." Mel tries to reach for him, but he pushes her hand away and lays his head on my shoulder.

"Back in Dublin, I was the bairn whisperer." I embellish my brogue, and I don't miss how my wife licks her lips and looks at my mouth. We lean

against the wall and look in the living room as everyone laughs and talks at once.

“You know, love, I’d like nothing more than for us to find an empty room upstairs and bend you over.” I lower my head close to her ear, letting my mouth tickle her earlobe. “I didn’t get a chance to give that pussy a pounding this morning.” I lick her earlobe, and she jumps in shock. Jackson claps and drools a big glob of spit on my hand.

She hooks her free arm with mine and rests her chin on my bicep. I lean down and kiss the top of her head.

“I got a tour of the house before you got here.” She lets out a loud whistle. “It’s gorgeous. The master bedroom is almost as big as our apartment. They have a pool too. That’s so impractical here, isn’t it? We only get a couple of months of summer, but I would love a pool. Honestly, their old house is like my dream house. Life’s unfair sometimes, isn’t it?” She sighs wistfully. A tinge of guilt hits, and I open my mouth to tell her everything, but someone in the other room laughs, and I realize this is not the time or the place.

“You want to buy their old house?” I ask her instead.

She lets out an undignified snort. “It’s not for sale, but we couldn’t afford it even if it were. Besides, I like the city. We might have to find a fixer upper. That wouldn’t be so bad since you’re good with your hands.” She puts her face on my bicep and kisses it. Jackson reaches for Mel’s hair and gives it a good tug. I remove his little hand and he whacks me on the nose and laughs.

Our little bubble is interrupted when Addy comes running to us with her grandma behind her. She seems irritated when she sees me holding another baby. She raises both her hands and tries to climb my legs.

“My Unco Ada,” she says. Diane picks her up and when Mel drops my arm, she puts Addison in my free arm. She kisses my cheek and rests her head on my shoulder.

“Told you, Mel.” I wink at my wife, and she rolls her eyes. I bounce both

kids.

“So,” Diane says, making no moves to walk away, “I see you’re comfortable with kids, Adam. You’re an only child, right?”

Mel goes completely rigid.

“The only child of a single mother,” I tell her, weighing my words carefully. “But my ma comes from a large family, and I have cousins back in Dublin. Maybe I can take you for a visit next year, love,” I say to Mel.

She gives me a doubtful look. For once, I’m happy to have her mother nearby. There’s no way she’ll go on a tirade about how we can’t afford European vacations with her mother around. I can practically hear her doing the calculations in her head.

“Maybe,” she says, but I know she’s only saying that for the sake of our audience. When Diane turns away, Mel shakes her head no.

“Ireland,” her mother says. “Mellie’s never been out of the country.”

“Well, we’re going to Paris this summer,” I tell her.

“I remember when Mellie’s idea of a vacation was going to the Jersey Shore for the weekend. You always had big dreams. Much bigger than your pocketbook. You should have found yourself a doctor at the hospital where you work.”

Mel bristles, and so do I, but before I can put her in her place, my wife speaks. “Did you give Jason this same speech? Last time I checked, his wife and I do the exact same thing.”

Her mother waves her off and looks over at her son and daughter-in-law. Her face lights up when she sees them, which is something that never happens when she looks at her daughter.

“It’s different. Men take care of us. I’m just saying that a teacher can’t afford to give you that champagne lifestyle. Maybe beer, but I guess you made your choice.” She smiles then almost as if she just said something nice.

“I take care of my wife just fine, and she takes care of me.”

“Don’t worry about us, Mother. Aren’t you the one living with your son

now? You can't afford Adam's apartment. And I'm sure Jason will give you quite the discount when you finally move. Adam and I will be fine. Don't spend a single minute worrying about us."

"Jesus, why are you two so thin skinned. We can't even have a conversation without one of you taking it the wrong way."



Not even my mother's toxicity could bring me down today. After cleaning up and putting the bulk of the presents in Adam's truck, we finally make it back home. My mother rode with Jason, and by the time we drop the gifts off, she's already in her room.

The second we close the door behind us, Adam pins me to the wall and kisses the breath out of me. We leave a trail of discarded clothes on the way to the bedroom and by the time we burst through the door, we're both naked and hungry for each other. I drop to my knees in front of him and take his hard dick in my mouth.

I take him deep enough to make him stumble and mutter a curse. His brogue is thick with lust. He tastes so good in my mouth that I moan like a horny slut. He holds my head and fucks my mouth. "I've dreamed of your lips wrapped around my dick for years, Mel. Take it, love. Take all of it." All of it is a lot, way too much for my mouth and I gag. After catching my breath, he shoves his cock in my mouth again, and this time, I'm ready for him. I relax and take him almost to the base. "Yeah, just like that. With you on your knees pleasing your husband. You love that, don't you, Mel?"

I mumble a yes and nod my head, but he pulls himself out.

"No," I whine. "Put it back." I open my mouth and reach for him, but he

steps back. “Adam!” I whine again.

He grabs my wrist and lifts me to my feet as if I weigh nothing more than a feather. He spins me around and slaps me hard on the ass. Once he’s pinned me to the wall, his broad hard chest on my back, he grinds that big cock on my ass.

“Tell me you love it.” He puts my earlobe in his mouth and sucks. “Tell me how much you love fucking me.”

“I love it. I always knew I would.” He kisses the side of my neck and runs his tongue along my hot skin at the exact moment he spreads my legs apart. He grabs my hips and pulls my ass closer to his body. His hot, wet mouth leaves kisses down my neck and along my spine, all the way to my ass. He slaps me again. Harder this time, catching me off guard, and I bite my lip at the deliciousness of it.

“Do it again,” I order.

“I call the shots in here.” He puts both of his large hands on mine and raises them above my head, practically pinning me to the wall. “You want to count every penny we spend? I don’t care. You fill my apartment with girly shit and plants? Fine, but in here, I own you.”

I whimper again, and the woman inside of me, the one who would never let a man speak to her like this is gone. At least for now. This is my husband. My Adam, and I’ll give him this.

“I’m talking to you,” he growls right before he roughly bites my shoulder. I know there’ll be a mark there, but I don’t care.

“You own this pussy,” I tell him.

“I already know that. I want to own you. Say it.” He grinds into me. His arousal triggers mine, and some of my moisture runs down my thighs. I moan like a whore and spread my legs further apart. Far enough apart that he could slip right in, only he doesn’t. He slaps me again.

“You own me.” I surrender, and I don’t care. “I wave the white flag. I capitulate and gladly wave goodbye to feminist Mellie. Slutty Mellie is here

now.”

Instead of giving me his hard cock, he gets on his knees, kisses both ass cheeks, spreads my lips apart, and eats my pussy from the back. Two thick fingers find their way inside of me while his hot tongue caresses my clit. I throw my head back, relishing the feel of him and the sounds he makes while he pleasures me. He teases, sucks, and bites my inner thighs. He finds the right spot. It's the perfect friction with his tongue and fingers, but just as I start to fall over the edge, he abruptly stops and steps away. I stumble to the side, nearly falling, but he catches me.

He lifts me as if I'm no more than a paper doll and tosses me on the bed. The breath comes out of me, and I try to move on the bed, but he dives on top of me, bends my legs, and spreads them open.

“Where are you going, love? I told you I'm in charge in here.” He positions his big body between my thighs, and with no warning, he fills me.

“Adam,” I moan. I grind underneath him, waiting for him to give me more. “Adam,” I reach behind him and slap his ass. Something changes in his eyes. They go from blue to almost black, and he grabs my hands again. He lifts them above my head, pulls his dick almost all the way out, and slams back into me.

“I told you, I'm in charge. You're going to learn, Melanie Flynn, that this body is mine.”



Gentle kisses tickle my collar bone, and I giggle at my husband. The same bossy growly bear from an hour ago has turned into a kitten. He kisses the love bites while his hand caresses my hip, but I don't complain. I love it.

I snuggle closer to him. After two rounds of lovemaking, we're underneath the bedspread and my hands can't stop touching his chiseled body.

“Your body is just insane.” My hands travel up his taut stomach to his wall of a chest.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it, but if we woke up tomorrow and you were fat, I’d love that too. I’ll take any version of you.” He pulls me closer and kisses my temple. “As long as this and this are still the same.” I put my hand above his beating heart, then I touch his temple.

“That’s the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me, love. Tell me something no one else knows,” he says. This has become our nightly tradition. At night when we’re alone and naked, we share our secrets.

“I’m deathly afraid of frogs. If I see one, I’ll freak out. I was about nine when a boy put a frog down my shirt. I can still feel how slimy it was.” I make a face and start to scratch my body. He stares at me before he bursts into laughter. I swat his chest. “It’s not funny. Jason had one when we were kids. I could barely sleep that first night. Your turn.”

“I had a frog too. My snake ate it. I put them in the same tank. I was only about ten and thought they could be friends. I asked Uncle Finn to help me look for it. His name was Jumper. When I told him I’d put them in the same tank, he whacked me upside the head and told me my snake ate my frog. I felt so guilty.”

I put a hand to my mouth and feel the bile rising in the back of my throat. After making a few gagging sounds, he rolls his eyes and says, “You’re such a girl.”

“At least I’m not a frog murderer. And the idea that your mother let you have a frog *and* a snake. Disgusting.”

“She’s not a wimp like you.”

“I’m going to need ice cream to help me recover from your snake and frog drama.” I extricate myself from his side, but he pulls my wrist and I fall on his chest. He gently tilts my face to his and kisses my lips. He reaches for my ass and caresses it while I walk away. I grab my short, silk robe on the

way out of the room. After filling a bowl with ice cream, I return to my husband.

Adam is sitting up in the bed with his back leaning against the headboard. I straddle him and sit on his lap. He pulls me closer, and I wrap my legs around him. He unties my robe, leaving my body completely exposed.

“Where did you go to college?” I ask him, suddenly eager to learn everything about my husband.

“Brown University,” he says without meeting my eyes. The spoon of ice cream freezes halfway to my mouth, and I let out a loud whistle.

“The Ivy League. I’m impressed.” I suddenly understand why he’s not too worried about debt. He got a scholarship. “You majored in education?”

“And economics,” he says. “I have a master’s degree in economics, too. What about you? Where did you go?”

“Rutgers University. Confession time. Tell me something. It can be anything.” I try to eat a spoon of ice cream, but he steals it and puts it in his own mouth.

“Um.” He looks at the ceiling while he thinks. “I don’t like bananas.” I shove more ice cream in his mouth and roll my eyes.

“That’s lame, Adam.”

“You said anything.”

“Something profound. Something life altering. I’m building up to something here.” He slides his hands under my robe and cups my ass, pushing me closer to him.

“I have something you can sit on, wife. My sexy as fuck wife.” He sucks on the base of my neck, and I sigh at the sensation. He lifts and places me on top of his hard cock, and I sink down in it. “Okay. Life altering events, here we go.” I slowly start to grind on top of him. I’m already sore, and he’s stretching me fully. “My grandma asked me to join the priesthood. She was on her deathbed, so I told her I would do it as soon as I was old enough. I lied to a dying woman, Mel. I had zero intentions of ever becoming a priest.”

I put my bowl of ice cream down and focus on the man in front of me. I put both hands behind his head and take him in a deep kiss. I ride his cock while his rough hands grab my ass.

“You’re a bad boy, Adam Flynn. I should get out my ruler and spank that deliciously tight ass of yours.”

“If anyone is doing the spanking in our bedroom, it’s going to be me, Mrs. Flynn.” And he smacks my ass to prove his point. “Your turn, love. Tell me something profound.”

His hands maneuver my hips. He lowers his head and sucks a nipple into his mouth. His lips are cold from the ice cream, and the sensation causes me to shiver. “Eyes on me,” I tell him. He lets go of my nipple and his eyes clash with mine. I hold my breath and say, “This moment right here is the most profound of my life.”

“Why? Because you’re making love to your husband?” He kisses me again, his soft lips driving me so crazy I almost forgot what he asked.

“Eyes on me, Adam.” He complies. He holds his breath and waits for me to speak. “Because I’m in love with my husband.” His breathing stops. I lean in for a kiss, and he moves his head back. Large hands cradle my face, and blue eyes lock with my brown.

“Say that again.” His voice is soft, barely just a whisper.

“I’m in love with my husband. I love you, Adam.” No words come out of him. He stares into my eyes, then I feel him convulse underneath me. His cock pulses inside of me, and I know he’s just found his release.

“Tell me you mean it.” He closes his eyes and rests his forehead on mine. “You can’t take this back, Mel. It will kill me if you wake up tomorrow and pretend you don’t remember. Promise me you won’t take this back.”

I glide my hands in his hair and caress his skull. I kiss his lips before I look into his eyes again. “I’ll never take it back. When I’m old and on my deathbed, I’ll think of this moment as I take my last breath. I love you, Adam Finnegan Flynn, my husband.”

“And I love you, Melanie Elyse Flynn, my wife. I think I always have. We were made for each other, love.”



“Do you have any siblings on your father’s side?” We made love again after my confession. Hours later, we’re still in bed. This is my favorite part. This is when I learn things about my husband that few people know. I can tell he’s stopped breathing. I look into his face, but he looks away.

“I’m happy being my mother’s only child,” he says. “I don’t like talking about him, Mel.” He leans back and closes his eyes. “I’ve talked about him more with you these past few weeks than I have in years.”

“Did you want any growing up?” I ask him, changing the subject away from his father.

“I have cousins. I never really thought of it. My mom’s family is big, and I’ve never been lonely. Tell me something you want. Something money could buy if we had the funds. But it has to be a want, not a need.”

I lean on his body and think. I’ve never been rich, and I’ve been practically on my own since I was eighteen, so money has always been an issue for me. “I think I’d like to travel. Buy first class plane tickets and fly off to Bali or Tahiti on a whim. I’d love to own a vacation home some place like Myrtle Beach. Stuff like that. What about you?”

He reaches over and pushes a piece of hair off my forehead. “I’d like to give you everything you want.”

“Do I have you?”

“Til my last breath.”

“Then I have everything I want *and* need.”

“So do I, love.”



My legs feel like lead by the time I hop off my bike Monday morning. I'm drenched with sweat and tiptoe into the bathroom to shower. I meant to go to the gym this morning, but I didn't want to be away from Mel any earlier than I had to.

We spent Sunday alone in our apartment talking and making plans for our future. Truth be told, I never wanted to go to Las Vegas. I was worried she would meet someone there, but that trip was the best thing that could have happened.

She married me, and despite a rocky start, she's still here. Not only that, she's in love with me. Eager to kiss her one more time before I leave for work, I rush through my shower, but she's no longer in bed when I get to the bedroom.

"Mel!" I leave the room with only the towel wrapped around my waist. "Mel!" I stop short when I find her in the kitchen wearing nothing but her short robe. "Why are you up so early?" The smell of fresh coffee hits my nose, but she's also pulled out several containers of food from the fridge.

"Do you know that you spent seventy-nine dollars on lunches last week? And that doesn't include the extra twenty-three dollars you spent at Starbucks." She grabs a Tupperware bowl from the cabinet and starts filling it

with leftovers from last night's dinner.

I sigh loudly and run a hand through my damp hair. "I like my coffee, and I'm a growing boy. I gotta eat lunch." I turn my back and roll my eye to the ceiling. I love this about her, but it's fucking annoying.

"I'm making you coffee, and I bought you a to-go mug the other day. I'm also going to be packing your lunch from now on." She crosses the room and stands in front of me. I smile when I see the appreciative gleam in her eyes. "But don't worry. You can get coffee and buy lunch on Fridays."

I huff and twist my mouth. "That's not necessary, Mel. We're fine."

"I know, but you'll thank me when we own our own home. It's just a small sacrifice, Adam." She moves closer and wraps her arms around my damp body. "And I'll make sure you have enough coffee and lunch, just from home."

"Does this mean you'll stop spending money on nail polish? Every time you go out, you buy more." She purses her lips and I smile in victory. "At least food and coffee are necessities." I add that just to twist the knife. She pinches my side in retaliation but nods.

"Fine!" She looks less happy than I do.

"Thanks, love, for looking out for our future." I bend down and kiss her cheek, and she smiles happily. "Who knew I married such a cheapskate."

"Cheapskate Mellie is very responsible. Right now, nineteen-fifties Mellie is going to pack your lunch. Tonight, slutty Mellie will rock your world." She walks away and pours coffee in a black to-go mug.

"Who knew there were so many of you in there? Maybe I should have you committed."

"Very funny. If you do that, you'll miss out on slutty Mellie."

"I wouldn't want to do that."

"I love you," she yells to my retreating back.

"Love you too, cheapskate. And do you think nineteen fifties Mellie can make me breakfast?"



“I have something to show you, love,” Adam says. His facial expression gives nothing away. His blue eyes are clear as always, but my husband does not offer me a smile. He doesn’t give me his trademark playful smirk either.

I minimize my spreadsheet and close my laptop. My eyes follow Adam while he walks to the bedroom. I get up to follow him, but only make it halfway down the hall until he comes out carrying my old tote bag. My eyes widen in shock when I see it, and I reach for it, but Adam pulls it away.

“Uh-uh, love,” he says. “Your days with this bag of dicks are over.”

A laugh escapes, and I cover my mouth with my hand, but Adam doesn’t laugh back. In fact, he looks irritated. Something flashes in his eyes, and his jaw ticks. He opens the bag, but I lunge for it. He takes one step back and holds the bag over his head, making it impossible for me to get it.

He pulls out an unopened box and peels off a sticky note from it. “Let’s hope this one does a better job of getting out the cobwebs than what’s his name did the other night. Ananda.” He crumples the note in his hand and tosses it on the floor before he slowly pulls the long, purple dildo out of the box.

“Care to explain, wife?” His voice is low, almost deadly, and I inadvertently take a step back.

I cross my arms and meet his hard stare. “Care to explain why you’re going through my stuff, husband?”

He smiles, showing off his perfect, white teeth. “I like it when you call me husband, and no, I don’t care to explain. Not beyond finding this bag shoved in the back of the closet.”

“Neither do I.” I cross my arms and stare in his face.

He waves the dildo around and says, “Explain.”

“I think a dildo is pretty self-explanatory.”

“Oh, so you’re going to be a smart ass. I meant the note, dammit.” He grinds his teeth and his jaw ticks again. I don’t answer, and he speaks. “My imagination is running wild, Mel. If I’m reading between the lines, Ananda got you a dildo because you fucked some guy who didn’t know how to satisfy you. Is that right?”

I leave his question unanswered and walk to the fridge. I pull out a cold bottle of water and pray that he drops the subject. It won’t matter to him that this happened way before we got married. Before we were anything. I curse myself for not hiding the bag better. I finally close the fridge door and turn around, only to practically collide with his chest.

I walk around him and sit on the couch. As soon as I do, he approaches and sits so close to me, our thighs touch. He rummages through the bag and pulls everything out.

“Look at this one.” He turns it on, and the pink vibrator starts to shake. “And this one.” He turns on the switch and the vibrating tongue starts to dart in and out. “And this is my personal favorite.” He holds the dildo Ananda gave me in the air. “This is the one that came with the note.”

I shrug and put the bottle of water to my lips. He inches closer, throws an arm across my shoulders, and kisses my cheek. “It’s kind of funny, love. I’m not mad. I mean, if you needed to get off, all you had to do was knock on my door.” He smiles at me and I relax, laying my head on his shoulder.

“I haven’t used that stuff in months.”

“I do a good job of keeping you satisfied.”

I laugh at his arrogance. He bends down and kisses my temple, and I sigh.

“You do. You’re the best at that.”

“I guess whoever forced Ananda to get you this purple beauty couldn’t get the job done.” He laughs out loud, and so do I.

I’m so relieved that he’s not being irrational about it, I say, “Not even close.” I let out another laugh. Adam doesn’t say anything back, but I sigh at the feel of his fingertips on my arm. “It was over in record time. It was all a big nothing. Not memorable at all.”

“When?” One word, but that single word makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The gentle touch on my arm stops, and he’s gone completely rigid. “When?” he repeats again when I don’t answer.

“Over two years ago. It was maybe a month after you moved in here. We weren’t anything. I’d only seen you maybe twice at that point.” You could hear a pin drop in the living room. He stands abruptly, grabs the bag, and starts to walk away.

“Adam? Come on—” I start to follow him, but I jump in surprise when he punches a wall.

“You went out and fucked a guy, Mel? I’ve wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you, and you go out and do this?” He runs a hand through his hair and starts to pace.

“Adam, we weren’t together. We weren’t anything! And don’t yell at me.” I lunge for the bag, but he sidesteps me and holds the bag over his head.

My argument does nothing to calm him down. He closes the space between us and looms in front of me. I put my hands on my hips and stare in his face. His blue eyes are like a storm. His nostrils flare, he takes an abrupt step back and yanks the door open.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get rid of this shit.” He points to the bag.

“What? Why? A lot of couples use sex toys together. What’s the big

deal?”

“You think I’m going to fuck you with a plastic dick?” He storms out and slams the door behind him.

I stand there, stunned, and rest my head in my hand. I didn’t even remember that time. Damn Ananda and her stupid fucking note. A rational person wouldn’t be upset, but Adam’s not rational. At least not when it comes to me and another man.

It takes him twenty minutes to come back. I’m still standing in the middle of the living room when he bursts through the front door and says, “I drove it somewhere and dumped it. You’ll never see that tote bag again.”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling and turn away from him, not sure how to handle the raving madman in front of me right now. I only make it two steps before I feel his hand on my elbow. He spins me around and lifts me off my feet.

“Let’s get a few things straight, wife.” He carries me to the bedroom and closes the door behind us. “Was that the last time you were with a man who isn’t me?”

“Yes, Adam.” I cross my arms and wait.

“No more plastic dicks or vibrating wands. I get you off. Me. These hands.” He raises both huge hands up. “This mouth and tongue.” He comes close and runs his tongue along my bottom lip. He bites it and sucks. My panties instantly moisten. “And this dick.” He places both my hands on his hard cock. He picks me up again and tosses me on the bed. “I’m going to make you come with each of them right now.”

He lands on top of me and his mouth crashes on mine. He’s hungry for me. His kiss is deep. He’s kissing me as if this is our first and our last kiss. He leaves my mouth long enough to suck the base of my neck. I curse at the sensation, and I mentally prepare myself to wear a scarf around my neck for the next few days.

“Off.” He mutters that word right before his hand lands on the elastic

waist of my yoga pants. I kick the offending pants and underwear off. He jumps off the bed long enough to undress. By the time he's naked, so am I, and I'm spread eagle on the bed eagerly waiting for him.

His lips land on mine again, and his hands slide between my legs. Two fingers find their way inside my warm slit. I moan his name and wrap a leg around him. He fucks me with two fingers and rubs my clit with his thumb. He roughly sucks a nipple into his mouth and I come on his fingers. He traces his tongue up my sternum to my mouth. "That's one." He kisses my mouth gently.

I get no chance to come down from my high. He licks his way south this time, tracing his tongue all the way to my spread thighs. He teases my pussy until I cry out his name, but he has no mercy on me. He licks and sucks until I come on his tongue.

"That's two." He rolls me on my side and slides in behind me.

"Adam," I say, breathless. "I don't know if I can come again." My heart rate hasn't calmed down, and I'm still riding the high of the second orgasm.

He lifts my leg and enters me from behind. "You can, love. And you will. Now, tell me who rules this body."

He gives me the long, slow, and deep strokes that I love. My eyes roll to the back of my head at the feel of him inside of me. "Tell me who owns this pussy. Who?" he asks again.

"You, Adam. Only you."



The balloons bounce along the wall, and my heart thumps so loud, I'm afraid the nurses can hear it. It's been a hell of a day. Alex called me at ten o'clock in the morning, claiming she was having contractions. Jason was already at work and in the operating room. When I got downstairs, she was leaning over the kitchen table while my mother rubbed her back. Addy was in the middle of the kitchen crying. Her water broke in my car on the way to the hospital. I remember the look on her face and the liquid seeping into my cloth seats and dripping down Alex's leggings. She reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it as tears streamed down her reddened cheeks.

Things only worsened when we arrived at the hospital. The doctors rushed Alex into the operating room for an emergency c-section when they discovered the baby was breach and her heart rate had dropped. Jason walked in right as they were wheeling Alex away, and I've never seen my brother so afraid before. His knees almost buckled. It was only when I grabbed his hand, pulled him into a hug, and told him everything would be okay that he relaxed. It didn't last long though. He changed into fresh scrubs and went into the operating room, only this time he wasn't the surgeon. He was the worried husband and father.

Even now, knowing that she's out of surgery and in a private room, my

heart won't stop thumping. My knees turn to jelly in the middle of the hallway, and my husband stops right along with me.

"You want me to carry you, love?" I look into his blue eyes and wrap my arms around him. The balloons hit him in the face, but he shoves them away and squeezes me in his arms, saying soothing words.

"I was so scared, Adam. And you weren't there." My eyes fill with tears, but he swipes them away. He cups my face, and I bite my bottom lip and will the tears to stay at bay.

"I got here as fast as I could, Mel."

And he did. He was here thirty minutes after I sent him the text. I don't think I would have made it without him. Despite having Tina, Ananda, and Alex's father here, I was only slightly relaxed when Adam got here and took me into his arms.

"You did. It's just been an emotional day." I exhale and brush my bangs off my forehead. "Let's go meet our niece."

He takes my hand in his and leads me this time. He's my pillar of strength. The minute he found me in the waiting room, he pulled me into his arms as if I was the one in distress. We knock on the door, and he slowly pushes it open. He stops walking when I do. I stick my head inside, and when I see Alex in the bed, dressed in her own nightgown, glowing while holding a pink bundle, I sag in relief before walking into the room.

Jason hugs me tight, and I feel tears again. They fall freely this time.

"Thanks for being there, Mellie." He kisses my head.

Jason's best friend and his wife walk in. He's holding a huge bouquet of pink flowers and she has a big brown paper bag in her hand. My mother and Addison walk in right behind them.

"Mommy!" Addison screams. She pulls her hand from my mother's and starts to run to Alex, but Jason catches her before she can get a chance to jump on the bed.

"You have to be careful and not jump on Mommy," Jason says to her. He

walks to the bed and gently lays Addison next to Alex.

“So, I’m glad everyone is here. We had a bit of a scare today, but my sister saved the day.”

“All I did was drive her here Jason,” I say.

“You did more than that. You stayed calm. You had a clear head and Alex told me you made sure she didn’t freak out.”

Adam puts a hand on my shoulder and gently massages it.

“So, now that we have everyone here, we want to introduce you to baby Dupree.”

“Please tell us you finally gave this baby a name,” Jake says.

“She’s always had a name. We just wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Well, tell us, Son,” my mother orders. “What’s my new granddaughter’s name?”

“Everyone, meet Melanie Christina Dupree.” I let go of the balloons and they hit the ceiling. Both hands cover my mouth as I look around the room. I look at Alex, and she smiles and nods her head.

“If this is because I drove—”

“We picked this name as soon as we knew she was a girl,” Alex says. “Melanie after Jason’s sister and Christina after mine.”

“It’s beautiful,” Sandy says.

“Yes, beautiful,” Tina agrees.

“Mellie and Adam, we want you to be the godparents,” Jason says.

“Can I hold her?” Alex nods, and I walk to the hospital bed. Adam drags a chair close to the bed, and Alex places the tiny bundle in my arms.



My wife: I'm picking up groceries so I can make dinner.

Me: Just hurry up and get here. We can order dinner.

My wife: Almost done. Already in line. And we need to cut back on ordering out.

I toss my phone and sigh in frustration, but I pick it back up when it vibrates against the table. It's a picture of the long line at the grocery store. Of course, the line is long. We're bracing for another snowstorm in late March, and my wife has completely lost her mind. True to her word, she's packed me a lunch every day except Fridays. Between our wedding, honeymoon, and saving for a house, she makes sure every penny is accounted for.

The good news is, we're due for a warmup in a few days, so the snow won't last long, but all I want now is for my wife to come home so we can cuddle on the couch and ride out the storm together.

It's barely three in the afternoon, but the skies have turned gray, and flurries are already falling.

Instead of looking outside and waiting for my wife, I decide to take care of the rainforest she's brought into this apartment. I water the string of pearls hanging above the kitchen window and check the soil of the English Ivy and

the aloe. I watered the ones in the bathroom earlier, so I know they're okay. I sit on the couch and cross my arms, desperately missing Mel.

We spent almost the entire night downstairs. Jason had to go into work due to a car accident, and Little Mel spent the entire night crying. We all took turns rocking her to sleep. Now, I'm sleepy but can't fall asleep without my wife in my arms.

Who knew being married could be so amazing? Even the nights that we spend on the couch watching TV or talking are better than anything I've ever experienced. To kill some time, I leave the couch and busy myself straightening our bedroom and bathroom. I've never been a slob, but Mel likes everything to be extremely neat.

Fifteen minutes later, I cheer in excitement when I hear a knock on the door. Expecting to find my wife on the other side holding several grocery bags, I yank the door open without bothering to look through the peephole. The smile on my face slips as soon as I look into the familiar blue eyes. I see those eyes every time I look in the mirror and every time I see a picture of my father. And now here they are. In the flesh. I push the door closed, but he grabs it and steps inside.

"I didn't invite you in," I say through clenched teeth. I take a step closer and enjoy the fact that even though we look so much alike, I still have about an inch of height on him. It's barely an inch, but I'm still taller. And broader, though I can tell he keeps in good shape.

"And yet here I am." The voice makes me cringe. He sounds just like our dead father.

"Leave my apartment." I step back, not wanting to get any closer to him. "I've told you that I'm not interested in whatever it is you're after. And if you think I'm after money—" He holds a hand up indicating for me to stop talking, and I seethe. "Don't silence me," I warn.

"Why would I think you're after money? You've made it clear that you're not, and Dad left you plenty. He did a good job of hiding it, but the money

trail led us straight to you.”

“Is this what this is about? You want the money? The joke’s on you, asshole, because I never wanted it, but I’ll give it all to charity or burn it before I’d—”

His brows furrow and he takes an angry step closer. I can feel the rage radiating from his body, and at this moment, I don’t care. In fact, I want him to throw a punch so I can take all my anger out on him. But it’s not his fist that he uses, it’s his eyes.

He stands still and examines my face. I feel like a specimen under his gaze. I turn my back to him, unable to stand his stares any longer. He even smells like our father.

“I told you I’d be here.” His voice sounds less smug than it did over the phone, but there’s still a hint of arrogance. “You’re taller than I thought you would be.” The tinge of amusement in his voice surprises me.

Not willing to be cowed in my own home, I turn to him. “You’re exactly like I thought you’d be.”

“So, you’ve thought of me then?”

“I don’t know if you’re aware, but there’s going to be a snowstorm tonight. You should just go to wherever the hell you came from before traffic in this city comes to a standstill.” I walk past him and open the door. “You’ve seen me. You want to take a picture for your sister?”

“She’s your sister too. She’s the one who found you.”

“Found me? I wasn’t lost.”

He makes no move to leave. In fact, he walks around the place, running his hands over the furniture. He even arches an eyebrow when he sees Lola.

“Why are you so hostile?”

“Why can’t you take a hint?” I ask.

“Your voice is just like his,” he says.

“No. That’s you.”

“There’s a picture we have at the house in Montauk of Father when he

was around your age. You're his spitting image."

"Can you be more offensive?" I ask him. "You think I want to be like that asshole? You think I want to be some rich prick who takes advantage of and lie to women much younger than he is? You think I'm the type of guy who would cheat on his wife and stash another family out of sight? Hide us like we're some dirty little secret? But it's okay, right, because he has all the cash in the world and can write any check."

I can feel the color creeping up my neck. The last time I got this angry was when I woke up to find my wife had abandoned me the morning after our wedding. I punched the wall then, and right now I'd really like to punch him in the face.

"No, I don't imagine you would." That's all he says. Nothing more, and I find his lacking response has mollified my anger. At least for the time being. "You're stubborn like him too." And that gets me to take a step closer to him, ready to push him against the wall and unleash all my anger. "You don't intimidate me. I'm the same size as you."

"I'm taller," I hiss. "Now, get the fuck out of my apartment before I throw you out the damn window."

"I just got here, and I'm not leaving until we have a conversation. I told you I'd come to you. I gave you every opportunity to control the situation."

"You gave me? I don't need you to give me shit. You might run that damn company. You might be the mighty fucking Ethan Henry Bradford the Third, but you're not shit to me."

"I'm your brother," he says, as if that should resolve everything. "We share a father. We share DNA. We share a sister who has been losing sleep for months over you. You were never our dirty little secret, only the little brother we never had a chance to know. I'm going to say it again. We just want a chance to get to know you. You can make that as easy or as difficult as you want, but we're not going away." The asshole finally steps away from me, walks into my kitchen, and opens my fridge. The balls on this guy. He

very audaciously pulls out the half-finished bottle of that disgustingly sweet wine that Mel drinks.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask him.

“Well, you didn’t offer me anything to drink. That’s probably not a bad thing considering your terrible taste in wine. Don’t worry. Big brother to the rescue. I’ll send you a case of the best stuff.” He puts the wine back and pulls out a bottle of water. After drinking half of it, he puts it down and starts to unbutton his coat. I’m half a second away from grabbing him by the collar and throwing him out when I hear the keys jingling in the front door.

My stomach drops at the prospect of Mel walking in on this. Of all the ways I imagined her finding out, this didn’t make the list. The plan was to sit her down and tell her, but after we returned from our honeymoon. I look around and consider throwing him in the closet, but it’s too late. The door opens and then shuts.

“Aadam!” She does that thing where she mimics the way Uncle Finn says my name. “The grocery store was a disaster, but nineteen fifties Mellie’s going to make a delicious dinner. Slutty Mellie will take over for the dessert portion of the evening and let you have your way with her. Remember that thing you did the other night when you threw my leg over—” I know exactly what she’s talking about, and my mouth goes completely dry at the exact moment she sees our guest. She gasps and stops short at the sight of him. I run to her and take the bags out of her hands.

“I didn’t know we had company.” She looks from me to him, likely waiting for me to make an introduction, but I have no idea what to say. Then something clicks on her face. Her brows furrow and she takes a step closer to him. She looks from him to me, and her mouth opens in shock.

“Adam, who is this and why is he a clone of you?” I stare at her and do my best to come up with a reasonable explanation. “Why the hell is there a clone of you in our kitchen?” she asks again.

“Well, I’m older, so he would be a clone of *me*,” the jerk says. “I’m Ethan

Bradford, and your husband is my little brother.” He offers Mel his hand, and she takes it. Her hand goes limp, and she continues to look back and forth at us.

“Ethan Bradford? The BradCo CEO? The CEO of the world’s biggest discount chain? *That* Ethan Bradford?” The bag in my hand drops to the floor.

“You know who Ethan Bradford is?” I ask when I finally regain my ability to speak.

“Yeah, I used to—” Whatever she was going to say got lost, and she shakes her head as if trying to make sense of something. “Did Ethan Bradford just say that you and he are brothers? But you’re an only child.”

“I’m my mother’s only child.” I stubbornly maintain my position.

“Well, unfortunately for your husband, we share a father. You do understand you have two sides to your family, right?”

“Can you shut up and get the hell out of here?”

He has the nerve to smirk at me, but when I take two small steps in his direction, Mel grabs my wrist and stops my advance. She pulls me into the corner opposite Ethan.

“Did you just find out about him? That he’s your brother?” She lowers her voice and points a finger at my unwanted guest. He stands there, watching us and craning his neck. I can’t meet her gaze, and my silence is all the answer she needs.

“I see,” she whispers.

“He’s nothing to me.” I reach for her, but she takes a step back.

“But you knew? I asked you, Adam.” She looks at Ethan again, taking her time studying him. Part of me wants to turn her around so she can look at me, not him. When she finally turns to me again, I know she’s noting the similarities between us. I knew there was a resemblance from the few pictures I’ve seen, but I didn’t realize how many similarities there are until he knocked on the door. There’s no denying that we are closely related.

“I told you he doesn’t matter.”

“Well, that hurts considering we’ve been calling you for months,” he says.

“We? And I guess I know who that New York number belongs to.”

“We have a sister,” Ethan says. “Her name is Elizabeth,” he adds.

“Will you shut up?” I yell.

Mel steps between us, places a hand on my chest, and holds me in place. I feel a sense of comfort from her touch, but when I try and hold her hand, she drops it. “I need to speak to my husband alone for a minute,” she says to Ethan. She doesn’t hold my hand like she does each time we go to the bedroom. She’s ready for bed before me every night, but she never wants to go to bed alone. She always offers me her hand, and I’ll lead her to the bedroom. It’s become our nightly tradition, but right now, she’s avoiding my touch, and I don’t like it.



“This kind of explains a lot,” she says the minute she closes the door behind us. “Your lackadaisical attitude about money. The American Express,” she says, lowering her voice as if she’s telling me some secret. “This!” She holds up her left hand and points at her diamond ring. She starts to take it off, but I grab her hand in mine.

“Don’t you dare take that off, *wife*.” She stares at me, eyes wide, almost as if she’s taken aback by my audacity, but I don’t back down. I won’t ever back down when it comes to her wearing the ring I put on her finger.

“Don’t you dare pull that shit. Not when you’ve been lying to me the entire time.”

“I’ve lied about nothing,” I say with a derisive snort. “I don’t give a shit about that guy out there and want nothing to do with him. I’m Molly Flynn’s son. Her only child. That’s the goddamn truth.”

“So, you’re a billionaire now? The entire time you were living here like a frat boy as if it was some kind of rebellion! Is that what I am? Are you using me to make them mad?”

I picture ten different ways I’m going to make that guy pay as soon as we leave this bedroom, each one more painful than the last. “I’m not a Bradford. I’m a Flynn. And no, I’m not a billionaire. And honestly, Mel, I don’t know

what you mean when you accuse me of using you. This,” I say, pointing to the door, “that guy out there. It changes absolutely nothing.”

She wraps her arms around herself, and I’d give anything to have her in my arms right now, but she’s not making any move to walk closer to me.

“I don’t even know you.” She sits on the bed and puts her face in both hands.

“Don’t be so damn dramatic.” My tone comes out sharper than I intend. Yes, I should feel contrite because I can spin this any way I want, but the truth is, I lied. “I’m the same person I was before he showed up here.”

“Why is he here now?”

I sit next to her, but she moves so our bodies don’t touch.

I let out a loud breath, roll my eyes to the ceiling, and realize I have no choice but to tell her everything. “I’ve always known about them. For as long as I can remember, I’ve known.” She turns to me, her face shocked at my confession. “But they only found out about me last year. I guess one of them did some digging on our dead father and found a money trail to my mother. I told you he’s always taken care of me financially. He paid for expensive private schools and college. The calls started last May.”

“So, almost a year ago.”

I nod. “I answered the first call. It was a shock, really. I remember not knowing what to say. It wasn’t him that called. It was the girl.” I find myself unable to utter her name or our connection.

“You mean your sister, Elizabeth,” Mel clarifies.

“Whatever she is. She called. I told her I wasn’t interested and not to call again. Then he called and left a message. There were daily calls. Multiple calls per day. Letters, text messages, even a letter from their lawyer. A few months ago, he called. It was after we got married and you were in bed. I answered and told him to fuck off. That was the first time we ever talked. He texted a few days later saying he’d be in Boston this month and wanted to meet. I texted back no. The calls weren’t as frequent, but they continued right

up until he showed up here this afternoon.”

She nods but stays quiet. Needing to touch her, I run the back of my hand on her cheek. She doesn't move away, but I don't get the reaction I want.

“Why didn't you tell me?” She searches my face as if I'm a stranger she's trying to get to know. I take her hand and put it on my chest.

“I don't like to talk about my father, and they are a part of him.”

“You're a part of him too.”

“I said I don't like to talk about him!” She gasps at my loud tone and pulls away from me. I stand up abruptly and start to pace the room. “That topic is off limits. Always. I've told you as much as I'm willing to share.”

She stands too, but she doesn't cower. She closes the distance and points her index finger in my chest. “Well, the part of your life that's off limits is in our kitchen.” She turns her back to me then, and I imagine she's trying to gather her thoughts. I know her. I know this is far from over.

“Where did you get this?” she asks, pointing at the ring.

“Tiffany's in Las Vegas.”

“So, it's real?”

“You think I would put a fake diamond on your finger?”

“How much did it cost?”

“I'm not going to dignify that with a response.”

“I can look it up,” she threatens.

“Then look it up, but I'm not going to be the one who tells you.”

“That's obvious. You don't tell me a lot of things. If you're not part of the Bradford fortune, how did you pay for this ring? And don't tell me some bullshit about having a job.”

I take a deep breath and say, “He left me money when he died. I didn't want it. Still don't. I was going to give it all to charity, but Ma begged me not to. She said if I didn't use it for myself, then save it for my children. I used some of the money to buy your ring. It was the first time I ever spent a penny of it.”

The room is eerily quiet after my admission. I open my eyes and she's staring into my face as if she doesn't even know me.

"Let me guess," she finally says. "Fifty million dollars." When I nod, she walks around me, opens the door, and walks out. I run behind her, but she runs down the hall and opens the front door. "I'm getting out of here. Don't follow me. I don't want to hear another word out of your lying mouth." She grabs her purse from the floor, steps out, and slams the door so hard, the paintings on the wall shake.

"Mel!" I open the door, but she's already at the bottom of the stairwell. With the snow falling, I know she won't go any further than the apartment below. In fact, I'm convinced of it when I see her car keys on the floor. I slowly close the door and turn to face my unwanted houseguest.

He's no longer standing in the kitchen. He's sitting on the sectional, flipping through one of Mel's bridal magazines.

"You need to go. I need to go find my wife." I stand as far away from him as possible. I can feel the monster inside of me scratching to get out, and if I lay a hand on him, I might not be able to stop. He might be almost as tall, but I'm a trained fighter, and I'm sure he's probably never thrown a punch in his entire rich, pampered life. "You people are all the same, do you know that?" I don't hide the bitterness in my voice.

He stands, but luckily for him, he keeps his distance.

"You're my brother, so you do realize you're talking about yourself, right?"

"I don't force myself on people who have made it clear they don't want to be bothered with me. Have you ever considered that it's not always about you? Hell, it's not even about me. There are other people involved. People who have gotten hurt too much by your asshole father. Leave us alone."

For the first time since he barged in here, the smug arrogance slides off his face. I don't see contrition, but it does humanize him a little bit. He takes a step closer and pulls a card out of his pocket. He writes something on it and

puts it on the coffee table.

“Believe it or not, I didn’t come here to cause trouble. We really want to know our brother. That’s it. I’m here until Sunday.” He picks up the card and points to it. “The address is there. I really hope to see you.” He puts on his coat, but he doesn’t walk to the door. He stands in front of me, and I study his face. It’s unsettling how we can look so much like our father. He stands the same way I do. He even has the same black mole beneath his left eye like me. Unable to look anymore, I avert my gaze.

“We’re a small family. I have my sister, son, and a cousin on the west coast we have no relationship with. That’s basically all our blood relatives. Whether you like it or not, whether you accept it or not, we’re your family.” He has the nerve to tap me on the shoulder on his way out the front door.



It takes longer than usual for Alex to open the door. As soon as she does, I walk past her and go straight to her kitchen. The only alcohol in their fridge is that fancy German beer they like to drink and a bottle of champagne. Since I can't stand the taste of beer, I reach for the champagne. I don't ask if they're saving it for a special occasion before I pop it open and drink straight from the bottle.

"Where's your mother-in-law?" I ask, lowering my voice so no one else can hear.

"She's in her room."

"Where's Addy?"

"She's in the bedroom watching cartoons with Jason. What's wrong?" She signals for me to follow. I walk behind her until she reaches the laundry room. She pulls a bunch of tiny pink clothes out of the dryer and fills a laundry basket with them. I grab the basket from her, and we return to the living room.

"Adam is a big, fat liar," I hiss. "Turns out, I know absolutely nothing about the man I stupidly married. I bet I can get an annulment now. He's a fraud."

Alex holds a pink onesie in the air, seemingly frozen.

“Adam? Your Adam? What the hell are you talking about?” She raises her eyebrows to the middle of her forehead. And for a split second, I debate telling her. Her hair’s a mess and it looks like she has spitup on her shoulder. She’s in gray sweats that have clearly seen better days. There are also bags under her eyes. “Don’t stop now. What do you mean he’s a fraud?” she probes.

“He’s been keeping an entire part of his life from me. Honestly, Alex, I don’t know how I can ever believe a word he says. You’ll never guess what —”

My words die in my throat when the door opens and shuts. From the heavy footsteps, I know it can only be one person. They continue until they reach the kitchen. His eyes find me immediately, and even though I don’t look up and busy myself with folding tiny baby clothes, I can feel his eyes on me.

“Hey, Alex,” he says, as if this is just any other visit. “How’s little Mel?”

“Other than having her days and nights mixed up, she’s great.”

“Let’s go home, big Mel. You promised me dinner, and I’m hungry.” Before I can tell him to get lost, I hear a door open. I keep my mouth shut but breathe a sigh of relief when Jason, and not my mother, shows up.

“Hey, guys. You staying for dinner? I ordered Chinese and there’s going to be plenty.” He goes to the fridge and takes out a beer. He offers one to Adam, who surprises me by accepting it.

“Mel’s cooking,” Adam says.

“Don’t speak for me.” I don’t miss the look exchanged between Jason and Alex at my sharp retort.

“We need to talk, love, and I’d rather not do it here.” There’s an edge to his voice, one I’ve only ever heard today, and I don’t like it.

“I no longer believe a word that comes out your mouth,” I say back, my tone just as harsh.

“Mel, we’re not going to do this here in front of your brother and Alex.

Stop running to Jason every damn time there's something wrong. Your place is upstairs with me."

Jason looks at me, takes a seat at the table, and drains his beer. He looks tired, which isn't surprising since he was at work last night, and I know little Mel hasn't been an easy baby so far.

"What the hell is going on now?" Jason asks. "Can't we go five damn minutes without any drama in this family?"

"It's between me and my wife, Dupree. Stay out of it for once," Adam says. I can see the muscle in his cheek tic.

"I live here. If you want me to stay out of it, don't bring it to my house," Jason says.

"You're absolutely right. Let's go, big Mel."

"Since when do I take orders from you, Adam? Never. I don't know why you're putting on this caveman act now, but then again, maybe that's who you are. It's not like I ever really knew you anyway."

He slams the beer down so hard, some of it spills out.

"Are you still on that?" he asks, and I look up and meet his eyes. "That's bullshit and you know it. If you come upstairs, I'll explain, and we can move the hell on." He offers me his hand, but I scrape my chair back, further away from him.

"You're going to tell me more lies?"

"I never fucking lied." He doesn't yell, but the words are louder than they need to be. In fact, I blame him for the fact that my mother walks into the kitchen. She puts a hand on her chest as if she's surprised to see us here.

"Goodness, I had no idea everyone was here. What's all the fuss about?" Of course, she looks at me when she asks that question.

"Just here to get my wife," Adam says.

"You do that a lot, don't you? I remember you were looking for her my first night here."

His body goes rigid and his footsteps stall. He turns slowly and faces my

mother. His jaw ticks again, and I know he's holding back. I can feel his anger from here. Whether it's because I left, or because of his unwanted guest, or a combination of both, his simmering rage is close to eruption.

"What's your point, lady?" he asks quietly. Way too quietly for the anger oozing out of him.

"Don't get smart with my mom, Flynn," Jason says.

"As long as she minds her business, I won't," Adam says back.

"It's my business. This is my family. Melanie is my daughter."

"Oh, please," I say to my mother. I stand between her and my husband. "Your fake concern is giving me a cavity."

"It's not fake, Melanie. Something is off with the two of you. I'm not blind. It's time someone tells me what the hell is going on here, but I know you won't. Jason, what's the truth?" I cut my eyes at my brother, and he looks like a deer in headlights. He slowly sets his beer down and rubs the back of his head.

"If you want to ask Mellie about something, she's right there, Mom." Jason picks up the beer again and drains it.

My mom opens her mouth as if she's in shock by Jason's rebuke. She looks at me again, and her eyes narrow when she sees my smirk. "Proud that you've managed to turn your brother against me?"

"Really? How the hell did I do that? I didn't realize I had that much power." I stand up this time, ready to take my rage and frustration out on her.

Jason must sense it because he stands up too.

"He's going along with this farce of a marriage or wedding or whatever the hell you want to call what you two are doing."

"What we're doing is minding our own damn business, lady," Adam says. He stands next to me and wraps a protective arm around me. "Sounds to me like you have enough of your own problems to worry about. Don't worry about my wife. She's fine."

"Flynn, I told you to shut up." Jason walks over and stands in front of

Adam.

“Tell *her* to shut up,” Adam says back.

“Melanie, I’m not the least bit surprised that you would end up with someone as disrespectful as him.” She points to Adam as if saying his name is beneath her. “You two are a farce. When this all blows up, I won’t be around to pick up the pieces.”

Adam drops his hand and takes a step closer to her, but I stand between them.

“Mom, that’s enough,” Jason warns.

“When have you ever been around to pick up the pieces for me? To pick them apart? Sure. To criticize and lay blame? Yeah, all day every day, but to actually offer me a shoulder and understanding? That only extends to your son.” She gasps and steps back as if struck. “I don’t need or want anything from you, Mother, least of all your fake concern.”

“Mellie, enough. Don’t say something you’ll regret,” Jason warns.

“The only thing I regret is that she moved here. And she’s doing it again. She’s slowly coming between us just like she did when we were kids with the constant favoritism. I’m not doing it anymore. I can no longer live here, and I honestly don’t want anything to do with you,” I say, pointing at our mother. “You’ve always been and will always be toxic where I’m concerned.”

“Oh, where are you going to go? With this wedding nonsense and the new furniture, you can’t afford to go anywhere. He gave you a fake diamond ring. He couldn’t even afford to furnish his own damn apartment. You had to do it for him. And on your dime, I bet.” A few years ago, I would have unshed tears in my eyes at her dismissal, but not today. Today, I let out a laugh. I hold out my hand and admire my rings.

“How do you always manage to get everything wrong where I’m concerned?” The question throws my mother off, and she looks around the kitchen as if confused. “Don’t disparage my husband. He has a job and so do I. Jason and Alex asked me to be here, unlike you who just barged in. Thank

goodness for your son. The only child you ever wanted because if it were up to me, you'd be living in your car."

"Mellie, that's unfair," Jason says. "She never said I was the only kid she's ever wanted. I know you two have your issues, but—"

"Dupree, for a supposedly brilliant doctor, you're either dumb or blind. Maybe both," Adam says.

"Shut up, Melanie. Just shut your damn mouth," my mother hisses. She looks around the kitchen like a cornered animal.

"Make me shut up, Mother. I dare you." She takes a step back and looks to Jason for help. I walk to my brother, point to him and say, "We have our issues, Jason? You're giving me part of the blame for this fucked up relationship? Really? It's my fault I've never been good enough for her? It's my fault that all she ever does is hurt me?" My voice turns to venom when I look at Jason in the eye, and all those years of resentment that I thought I had buried resurface. "Some things never change! You've succeeded, Mother! Congratulations!" I practically yell. "I'm out of here as soon as we can find another place to live. I'll sleep in the goddamn train station before I live under the same roof as you."

"Don't you people ever stop!" Alex yells. "All you do is fight. Diane, do you have to take every opportunity to antagonize Mellie? It's such a waste. You have two amazing kids. If you took your head out of Jason's ass long enough, you'd realize it." She spins on her heels and walks out of the kitchen.

My mother is stunned silent by Alex's rant. She looks around the room, her chin jutted out in defiance.

"What are you talking about, Mother? What is it that you don't want Mellie to tell me?" Jason demands to know.

My mother visibly pales. She even stumbles a little bit and holds onto the table for support, but she's not down for long before she straightens up and says, "I don't know. She's just making trouble as per usual," she says.

I scoff and toss my hands in the air.

Adam is not so gracious. “You’re a goddamn liar, lady.” He takes a step closer to my mother. “But I think this time your precious Jason will finally see you for who you really are. Tell him, Mel.”

I grab Adam’s hand and say, “Adam, it doesn’t matter.”

“He needs to know, Mel, because if he defends her one more time, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself from ripping him apart.”

“Tell me what?” Jason says, moving closer to our mother. “Whatever it is, I want to hear it from you, Mom.” Jason takes her elbow to keep her in place when she tries to walk out of the kitchen. “Right now. You need to tell me right the hell now.”

“I don’t know what she’s talking about.” Her voice trembles, but she casts her eyes down, almost as if she is too ashamed to look at Jason.

The doorbell rings, and we all look around, stunned at the interruption. Alex returns and gets the food from the delivery man. Addy comes and starts to climb on her highchair. Adam picks her up and puts her in it.

“If you people don’t mind, I want to feed my daughter dinner.” Alex slams the bag on the table and grabs plates from the cabinet.

“I’ve lost my appetite,” I say.

“And I need to talk to my mother.” Jason takes hold of our mother’s elbow and marches her down the hall. We hear a door slam.

“I’m so damn sick of all of this,” Alex says. “So sick of all the fighting. Everything was great until she showed up.” Alex rubs a shaky hand to her forehead. She opens her mouth to say more, but the shouting from the back of the apartment shuts her up.

“How the hell could you say something like that? What is the matter with you?” Loud weeping follows Jason’s bellow. “No! Don’t touch me.” A door opens and slams, then heavy footsteps fill the hall. Jason’s eyes are red with rage, something I’ve never seen from him before. He pulls open the coat closet and grabs his jacket and says, “I need some air.” He walks out the front door and slams it behind him so hard, the walls shake.

My mother comes running down the hall, tears staining her face. She stops short when she sees us, but only long enough to wipe her tears and run to her room. Addy starts to cry, and Alex picks her up.

“It’s a total fucking shit show around here. I’m so damn sick of it.”



“I’m sorry, Alex.” She ignores me while she balances Addison in her arms. I walk out of the kitchen, through the living room, and out the front door. I barely make it halfway up the stairs before Adam catches up to me. He tries to grab my hand, but I pull away when I barge through the front door.

I take a quick look out the window while I walk to the bedroom. It’s completely dark now, but right by the streetlight, I can see the snow falling out of the sky. The cars below are covered, as is the sidewalk, but I don’t care.

I burst through the bedroom, the door hitting the wall so hard, I know it will leave a dent. I bend down and pull out the suitcase I keep under the bed. When I get to the dresser, I open a drawer, pull out all the clothes and toss them in the bag. Before I can do the same with another drawer, Adam snatches the bag from me and tosses it across the room. It bangs against the wall and lands on the hardwood floor with a hard crash.

“You’re not leaving me, Mel.” His voice is low, almost quiet, but I don’t miss the danger simmering underneath.

“I need to clear my head for the night. I don’t want to be under the same roof as you,” I tell him.

“Too bad. Your days of running away when things get hard or

uncomfortable are over. We're going to deal with this right now."

"What are you going to do? Hold me hostage in this bedroom?"

"No. I'm going to cook dinner, and when you're done acting like a child, you can come out so we can talk like adults." I open my mouth to respond to his condescending tone, but he opens the door, walks out, and closes it behind him. I don't stay in the room for long.

Just as he slams a skillet on the oven burner, I approach.

"Don't you dare turn this around on me when you're the one who lied." I stand next to him, suddenly itching for a fight.

"I didn't lie! I told you I'm my mother's only child. She's the only parent who loves me. She's the one who has taken care of me my entire life. I don't know those people, and I barely knew my father when he was alive. And I already told you, I don't like talking about it! Drop it!" For no reason at all, he picks up the skillet and slams it down again. He walks to the fridge and yanks it open so hard, I'm afraid he'll damage the hinges.

"I told you all the shit with my mother, Adam. I told you about the most hurtful thing she's ever done. You lied to me every time I asked you about the New York number and you told me that your father had no kids. And all this time you let me believe you were struggling financially. You never once —"

"Hold on there, Melanie. Hold one goddamn minute. I know you're having a pity party of one, but I never told you I had no siblings. I told you I was my mother's only child. That's the truth. And I never said I was struggling financially. Not once. You came to that conclusion on your own. And when the hell was I supposed to tell you? Before or after you did one of your spreadsheets? Before or after you told me you were looking for equality in this marriage? Before or after you figured out we're in the same bracket? Whatever the fuck that means. We're equal because we say we are, not because of how much money we bring in. You're the one with the ridiculous ideas in your head. And look in the mirror, sweetheart, if you want to talk

about liars.” My head rolls back as if slapped. I take a deep breath and slowly approach him. His back is still to me while he rummages through the fridge.

“Excuse me? Now I’m the liar?” Stunned by his accusation, I stand behind him and wait for an explanation.

“You’ve always been the liar.” He closes the fridge door, turns to me and says, “Look at me in the eye and tell me you were drunk the night we got married.” My mouth opens, but suddenly it feels like it’s filled with cotton. I lick my lips and stare into my husband’s eyes.

“I—” I take another deep breath. “I—” Nothing comes out.

“You what? You can’t say it, can you? The minute you woke up, you ran like a scared rabbit and lied to your family. Said that I got you drunk and tricked you into marriage, when the truth is, you’re the one who asked *me* to marry *you*. And newsflash, wife, you weren’t drunk.”

I refuse to acknowledge the truth of his words.

“You’re not going to turn this around on me. And for the record, Adam, the answer is before. You should have told me that you’re a millionaire before I did the spreadsheets, before I talked about being equal and before I started waking up at the butt ass crack of dawn to make your lunch so we can save for a house. You’ve made such a damn fool of me.”

“I’m done talking about it. Now you know. That asshole did me a favor because now I can stop tiptoeing around the money issue. And I love those things about you, Mel. I love cheapskate Mel because she’s willing to sacrifice for our future. I’m crazy about nineteen fifties Mel who always leaves a sweet little note in my lunch, and I can’t keep my hands off slutty Mel. I loved learning about you that way.”

I shake my head, too far gone in my anger to listen to his reasoning. “Whatever, Adam. What’s the real reason you kept this from me? Did you think I would be after your money?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Melanie Flynn.” He slams the skillet again. “I married you without a prenup. You want the damn money? Take it. I don’t

give a shit about it.” He opens the fridge again and looks inside. After a few minutes where the only sound is the rapid beating of my heart, he looks at me and asks, “Do you want chicken or beef for dinner?” His tone is back to normal, signaling that he’s done with this conversation.

I don’t respond. I turn on my heels, return to the bedroom and slam the door behind me, locking it this time.

Forty-five minutes later, while I’m lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, he turns the knob. When met with the lock, he pounds one of his massive fists on the door.

“Dinner’s ready. Open the fucking door.” I ignore him. In fact, I turn on the TV and turn the volume on full blast, but that does little to drown out the pounding. He stops a few seconds later, and just when I think he’s gone, he knocks the door off its hinges. He stands in the middle of the room looking like a man possessed. I try to scoot off the bed, but he reaches for me and grabs my hands. Once he’s pulled me up, he throws me over his shoulder as if I’m nothing more than a bag of dirty laundry and carries me to the kitchen.

He sits down, puts me on his lap, and wraps an arm around my waist to keep me in place. He reaches for my plate and puts it in front of me.

“I made steak since you don’t like the way I cook chicken,” is all he says. He eats his vegetables and sweet potatoes with one hand, but when it’s time to eat his steak, instead of letting me go so he can use a knife and fork, he picks up the steak with his free hand and eats it like a caveman.

My stomach growls. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Tonight was supposed to be a romantic night of being snowed in with my husband. I was supposed to make him dinner, and we were going to spend the night making love either on the couch or in the bedroom. Some nights he’ll spread a blanket out on the rug in front of the TV and we’ll make love on the floor, but today has turned into a complete shit show.

My stomach growls again. I sigh, reach for my fork and eat. He only lets me go after I take my last bite. I clear the table and clean up. He doesn’t try to

talk to me again. While I straighten the kitchen, he sits on the couch and turns on the news. While the weatherman talks about the storm, I walk away and take a shower, hoping it will clear my mind.

It doesn't. By the time I come out and put on pajamas, I'm more hurt and confused than when I went in. I'm supposed to meet with the baker on Saturday to sample the different cakes. Last weekend when I looked at flowers with Molly and Ananda, I cheapened out because I had to pay extra for my wedding dress. Now, I just feel like a damn fool with my budgeting and penny pinching.

I open one of the spreadsheets and look at what we've already spent compared to expected expenses. I slam the laptop shut just as he walks in. He's in nothing but a green towel wrapped around his waist. Water glistens on his bare chest and droplets fall out of his damp hair. When he drops the towel, I turn away from his semi hard cock.

"Still giving me the silent treatment, huh? Okay." When he goes to the drawer to look for his clothes, I grab an extra blanket and pillow from the top of the closet.

"You are sleeping in our bed," he orders.

"My bed. When I first moved in here, you said the bed was mine. You're the one who is sleeping on the couch. You can sleep on your weight bench for all I care." I slam the blanket and pillow on his chest, and he looks at me dumbfounded.

"Not happening." He tosses them across the room and gets on his side of the bed. Since there's no way I'm sleeping with him, I grab the pillow and blanket and leave. I'd slam the door, but it's already hanging off the hinges.

I barely have time to get situated on the couch before he comes stomping. "You're so damn immature," he says. "Come back to bed."

"I'm fine out here."

"Fine. Take the damn bed. I'll sleep out here." I hop off the couch and run to the bedroom before the words are fully out of his mouth. He doesn't

follow, and I miss having his big body to cuddle with. Most nights, I end up lying right on top of him before falling asleep. As hard as his body is, he's so comfortable to sleep on.

It's still relatively early, barely ten o'clock, and instead of being wrapped around my husband, I'm alone on the massive bed. I don't know how long it takes me to fall asleep, but I know I watch television until my eyes become heavy.

When I wake up hours later, my legs are spread open and I feel something between them. Warm lips and a hot tongue on my clit. I reach down and feel thick, soft hair beneath my fingertips. He spreads my legs wider and kisses the inside of my thighs. Hot, wet, opened mouthed kisses. He bites the sensitive flesh softly and I let out a moan. Two fingers slide inside my wet pussy, and I bite my lip at the sensation.

"Adam," I moan.

"That's right, love. Say your husband's name." I couldn't say his name again even if I wanted to. His tongue swirls around my entrance right before he bites softly on my clit, and I groan loudly. It doesn't take long for me to come on his mouth. I can feel my juices oozing out. His wet lips finally leave my pussy and kiss the inside of each thigh.

My heart is racing while I come down to earth. Adam's still between my legs, but when he starts to climb on top of me, I put a foot on his chest, stopping him. I purposely spread my legs wider, and he moans at the sight. He rubs the back of his knuckles along my pussy lips and pushes my leg off his chest. I can see how hard his dick is. It hits my thigh, and it's like a piece of steel.

"Uh-uh. I don't think so. Couch." He falls back on his naked ass and looks at me as if I'm speaking a foreign language.

"You're going to leave me like this?" He points at his hard cock, and I admit, it's huge and looking straight at me. It wouldn't take him long to explode, either inside of me or in my mouth. I do my best not to look like I'm

ready to pounce in the next five seconds. I start to bite my lip, but I stop and stare at the ceiling instead. “After you just came on my mouth?”

“Thanks for that. I’ll really be able to sleep now. And remember your rule, Adam. The only thing that makes that dick come is me.” I lean back on my elbows and look into his face. There’s a sheen of sweat on his forehead despite the cool temperatures. “These hands.” I raise both hands to make my point. “This mouth and tongue.” I slowly run my tongue over my lower lip, and he groans. “This pussy.” I open my legs just wide enough for him to see. “And this ass.” I lay on my side and run a hand down my hip and to the curve of my ass. “None of which you’re getting tonight.” I cover myself with the comforter, shielding my naked body from his greedy eyes. He stands, and his dick sticks straight out, just as hard as it was when he was trying to climb on top of me.

“You’re a jerk, do you know that, Mel?” He stomps to the broken-down door, and I can’t help but admire his tight ass. I use all my willpower not to beg him to come back to bed so I can grab that ass. He punches the wall by the door, shocking me so much, I let out a gasp.

“I’d rather be a jerk than a liar!” I yell after him.

“You’re the biggest damn liar I’ve ever met. You lie to yourself and everyone else.”

“Yeah! I’m the one who lied about having fifty million dollars! That’s all me, right? I’m the Bradford heir?” I hear another thud against the wall. He either punched it or kicked it. “Go ahead and break your hand! I’m sure the ER nurse will love to stick a big, fat needle in it!”

“The name’s Flynn, sweetheart. Same as yours!” he yells. “And fuck the Bradfords!”



He didn't bother to turn off the light. I was in a sound sleep when he barged into the bedroom, turned on the light, and made a commotion of rummaging through the closet. Since the door is off the hinges, he decided to punch the wall again. That punch took me by surprise, and I stuck my head out from under the covers only to see his naked backside walking out.

I exhale and lie on my back. I hear the shower come on and I run a hand over my messy head of hair. I didn't even bother wrapping it last night. I was too angry. I'm so not used to fighting with my husband that I've been completely off kilter since I walked into this apartment and found Ethan Bradford standing in the kitchen.

And then to find out my husband is sitting on millions and is connected to one of the wealthiest families in the country. The entire fucking time I was listing all our expenses on spreadsheets and twisting myself like a pretzel to keep this wedding under a certain amount, he was keeping this secret. Each night when we would bare our souls to each other, he kept this from me.

Now, he's trying to turn the tables on me and make me the liar in the situation. I scoff at the thought. He makes it sound as if I wanted to have a drunken wedding in Las Vegas.

Is he wrong, though, Melanie? For months I've done my best to suppress

the memory and not acknowledge it, but the truth is, I remember everything, and I always have. Every single detail leading up to our vows.

A few months earlier

“Let’s order another round!” I announce to Ananda, Dennis, and Ananda’s sister Leah. Leah reaches over and gives me a high five. I flag down the waiter and ask for another pitcher of whatever it was that we had. He gives me a friendly nod and walks away.

Dennis kisses the base of Ananda’s neck, and she giggles. She holds up her hand and her wedding ring sparkles in the light. Leah picks up her glass and makes a toast to the happy couple.

“I’m so happy for my little sister and Dennis,” she says, slurring her words. According to Ananda, Leah hardly gets a chance to go out. She married at twenty, and now at forty she’s recently divorced and co-parents two teenagers with her ex-husband. “Most men suck. Mine cheated on me with my co-worker, but I’m sure Dennis is different,” she hiccups.

Ananda rolls her eyes at her sister. “Leah,” she warns.

“But this isn’t about me.”

“Or your hatred for men,” Ananda mumbles.

“You made a beautiful bride, little sister,” she says. The waiter brings back our drinks, and Leah pours herself a tall glass.

“Speaking of men,” I say to Ananda and Dennis. “Check him out over there.” I take a sip of my fresh drink and turn and gaze at the fine man sitting at the bar. He raises his glass to me in a salute. I smile at him, the alcohol making me feel brave enough to flirt.

“You know Adam’s on his way down, right?” Dennis asks.

“Pfft. Adam is not my man,” I tell them.

“Girl, bye. If that guy gets within two feet of you, Adam’s going to beat his ass.” Ananda lets out a loud cackle and high fives her new husband.

“You think it’s funny that a man thinks he owns me?” I ask my friend.

“Ho, you think you own him too. You two are weird. Remember that girl who was flirting with him last night? You walked over there and told her to fuck off.”

“I only did that to get back at him.” The night before while I was talking to a very handsome man at the casino, Adam interrupted claiming I was his girlfriend. “I don’t know why you had to invite him.”

“I only met Ananda because of him,” Dennis says.

I wave him off. Ananda was over one Saturday for a backyard barbeque and Dennis was visiting Adam. Alex invited them to join us, and Ananda and Dennis have been inseparable since. That was less than a year ago.

As if he knows he’s the subject of our conversation, his shadow falls on our table. I know it’s him. I can smell him from across the room. And vacation Adam is sexier than at home Adam. He’s been in shorts the past few days. Shorts and t-shirts that drape across his strong chest and back just right. His biceps are practically too big for his shirts, and I must stop myself from reaching over and laying a hand on his skin. Just like I did last night when I pretended to trip so he could save me. He didn’t disappoint.

“You okay, Mel?” he had whispered in my ear while one of his muscled arms was wrapped around my waist. His Irish brogue always makes my skin tingle. It’s not so thick that I can’t understand him, but it’s enough to make me want to hear more.

Even now, he takes the empty seat next to me and inches closer, closing the space between us. His cologne hits and I involuntarily lick my lips. “What are you drinking, love?” He takes my glass and lifts it to his lips. “It’s strong. Do you think you can handle that?” His blue eyes sparkle, and his full lips turn into a playful smile.

“I’m a big girl. I can take it.” To prove my point, I take the glass from his hand. He lets it go, but he makes sure to run a finger along my hand. His eyes hold mine when I raise the glass to my lips. At the exact same spot where he

had put his. He bites his bottom lip while I drink, and the entire time, he never looks away.

“My goodness, it’s gotten hot in here.” I hear Ananda’s voice, but I don’t bother to look up and give her a scathing look. Footsteps approach, and the cute guy from the bar stands at our table. He doesn’t get a word in. Adam stands up and blocks him from my sight.

“Can I help you?” Adam asks the guy. His voice is gruff and the playfulness from just a few seconds ago is gone.

“Just thought I’d see if the pretty lady wants to join me at the bar for a drink.” The guy’s voice is deep, and in any other situation, I’d find it commanding, but next to Adam, he sounds like a child.

“I can get her all the drinks she wants,” Adam says.

Ananda cackles, and I stand up. “Excuse me?” I say to Adam. “Don’t speak for me.”

“I think there’s a misunderstanding,” the guy says. “I’m interested in this pretty lady.” He puts a hand on Leah’s shoulder. Adam instantly relaxes, and Leah and the man start conversing. He pulls my chair out for me and gestures for me to sit. When I do, I turn to face him.

“On that note, my husband and I are going to have dinner in our room and do what people do on their honeymoon.” Dennis and Ananda say goodnight, and Leah and the guy from the bar leave.

When we’re alone, Adam leans back in his chair and gives me that sexy smile again. He refills my glass, and I drain it. Once I’m done, he offers me a glass of water.

“I’m not your property, Flynn,” I tell him.

“Not yet.” He smiles at me, showing off his perfectly straight white teeth. My stomach does a somersault.

“Not ever.”

“We’ll see,” he says with a shrug. He leans closer and his scent invades my senses, driving me almost insane. It’s like every time I’m near him, the

feelings are more intense. He takes his index finger and slides it along my cheek. "You feel that, love?" My heart nearly flies out of my chest, and my greedy pussy is begging for that finger to leave my cheek and travel south.

"Feel what?" I lie.

"Don't do that, Mel. Don't lie."

"Why would I lie?"

He reaches for my face and strokes my cheek. I become so lost in his eyes that I stop breathing. Time stands still. Everything and everyone else ceases to exist. I can feel myself flush under his gaze, and I suddenly feel exposed. The feelings in the pit of my stomach become so much that I finally break our stare.

"Because you're afraid, but you want me. I know it. You know it. Everybody knows it." He leans over and runs his nose along my neck. He chuckles when he feels me tremble. "Let's get out of here," he whispers right in my ear.

"Let me guess. You want to take me back to your room." I push against his chest, but it's like a fly trying to push an elephant.

"You like to touch me, huh?" he teases. "I do want you to spend the night with me." He stands and offers me his hand. "Let me show you around Vegas." I stare at his hand, and I itch to take it, intertwine our fingers and walk out of this casino together. Images of us at a cozy restaurant feeding each other flash through my mind. I can practically feel him nuzzling the side of my neck while telling me how beautiful he thinks I am. Those big, strong hands holding my waist while we dance closely. And I lick my lips at the thought of his lips touching mine. Just like they did a few days ago on New Year's Eve.

But just like every other time I thought I had something good, it would end. He'd realize I wasn't worth it, and he'd walk away. Or worse, this entire thing between us would have been about the chase, and the minute I give in, he'd claim victory and disappear, leaving me a defeated mess.

“Let’s go, Mel.” His command takes me out of my own head, and I stare at his face again. “Last chance.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you giving me an ultimatum?” I stand. This I can do. I can fight. I can argue. But I don’t do vulnerability. I don’t like to be seen, and no one can look at me the way that Adam does with those incredible ocean blue eyes.

“It means if you don’t want me, someone else will. I’ve been chasing you for two years, Mel.” He looks into my eyes and down at his hand again.

“I don’t do well with ultimatums. What did you think? I’d want to jump into bed with you now that we’re in Vegas.” He drops his hand and sighs in disappointment.

“I’m asking you to spend time with me, not fuck me.” For the first time since we’ve met, he sounds agitated. That puts me off balance, and I don’t know how to react to it.

I purse my lips and stare into his eyes, not saying a word. I take the extra step of crossing my arms.

“Fine. Have a good night, Mel.” He walks away from the table and I take the seat Ananda vacated, giving me a clear view of the bar. I expect him to walk out. I imagine he’ll leave only to come on stronger tomorrow, but he only gets as far as the bar.

He turns away from me to order a drink. I can’t help but stare at his broad back standing there, taller than everyone else. I smile, knowing that he’s only getting a drink and will be back. No way will he leave me sitting here by myself.

But when he gets his drink he doesn’t return. He doesn’t turn around. He leans against the bar, and I must will myself not to go over there and put my hand on his ass. And what an ass it is. I remember grabbing it on New Year’s Eve just as the clock struck midnight and his mouth landed on mine.

A tall platinum blonde in a skin-tight leather dress squeezes between him and the bar. She pretends to trip and ends up pressing her fake boobs to his

chest. I can't hear them, but I can see her exaggerated smile from here. I hold my breath and wait for him to look at me and walk away from her. Walk right back here to our table, but he doesn't do any of that.

He flags down the bartender and the blonde bimbo orders something. A few seconds later, she's handed a glass of white wine. She holds her drink up, and Adam has the fucking nerve to clink his beer with her glass.

My nostrils flare and my stomach practically drops to the floor. She leans into him, and he bends down so she can whisper something in his ear. Whatever she says makes him smile, and like the predator she is, she moves closer and presses her body to his. Her hand lands on his chest, and he says something that makes her throw back her head and laugh. I pray her hair extensions fall out. She starts to feel his pecks and from my seat, I can see the bastard flexing for her. But that's not even the worst thing he does. He puts a free hand on one of her bony hips. That's when I've had enough.

I stand up so abruptly, my chair almost falls to the floor. Without thinking about it, I stomp across the restaurant to the bar. I know he knows I'm there, but he doesn't look at me.

"Excuse me," I say. He says something to the bimbo, and she giggles like a hyena on acid. She whispers something back to him, and he raises his hand and puts a piece of her bottled dyed hair behind her ear.

I imagine snatching her by her hair extensions, but I grab Adam's hand instead.

"I said excuse me." I try to pull him away from her, but of course, the giant won't move.

"Hey," the bimbo says, eyeing me up and down. She holds her empty wine glass and waves it in front of my face. "Can you get me another?" She dismisses me and turns back to Adam.

"Do I look like I work here?" I take a step closer. She pretends as if she's just now seeing me for the first time. No way did this bitch mistake me for a waitress. They're all dressed the same, and I'm in distressed jeans, heels, and

a kimono top. "And get your skanky whore hands off him."

"Who is this, Adam?" She pouts and pretends to wipe some nonexistent lint from his pristine white polo.

"That's just Melanie." He never calls me Melanie. It's always been Mel, even though I've told him a million times that nobody calls me that.

Bimbo eyes me again, chuckles, and turns back to Adam. "Why don't we get out of here?" She closes the sliver of space between them and whispers something in his ear. When she's done, she pulls away, looks him in the eye, and seductively bites her bottom lip.

"I said get your skanky hands off him!" I step between them, and she's forced to take a step back, bumping into the man behind her. Adam reacts and quickly grabs her to prevent her skinny ass from hitting the linoleum floor. As soon as his hands make contact, I pull them off.

"What the fuck is your problem?" bimbo asks. "Have some class." She crosses her arms and looks at me up and down again. "Of course, I wouldn't expect someone like you to know how to act in public." She puts a hand on my shoulder and digs her fake fingernails into my skin. I pull away and elbow her in the ribs. She stumbles and bumps her body on the bar.

"Bitch," she hisses. "Did you see what this whore did to me?" she asks Adam.

Adam starts to say something, but I hold a hand to his face silencing him. "Not another word out of you, Adam," I hiss before turning back to the unwanted guest. "And all you need to know about me is that I'm the one who's going to take him from you." This time, when I take Adam's hand and start to walk away, he follows. I don't stop until we walk through the lobby, out of the front door, and into the dry heat of Las Vegas.

When I stop and turn to him, he crosses his arms and arches an eyebrow.

"What the fuck was that? You and that casino cunt."

"Language, Mel," he says with a laugh. "Her name's Cassidy."

"I'm Mel again? And I don't give a damn what her name is." I turn to

catch my breath. He moves closer to me and the look he gives me reaches all the way inside my soul. Now that we're outside, I don't know what to do with him.

I start to pant as if I just ran a marathon. In all this time, I've only seen him with one woman. I wanted to hurt her too until I found out she was his cousin.

"What are we doing, Mel?" he asks.

"How does it feel, hm? How does it feel to have someone act like they own you?" I cross my arms and wait for him to answer.

"It feels great, but only because it's you." Just as I'm getting my thoughts together, another blonde walks up to him and smiles. He smiles back, but not for long because I step between them and say, "Back off." She huffs and eye fucks him one more time before she slithers away.

"I should have known you'd like blondes."

He shakes his head sadly and says, "You should know better than that, Mel. I want you. I've made that obvious. The difference is when I chase a man away from you, I've made it clear that I want to be your man. What are you going to do now? It's your move."

"Hey, handsome." This time it's a long-legged brunette who has the audacity to slide her arm across his torso.

"Hey, gorg—" before the word is out of his mouth, I tell her to move along. Adam's eyes light up in mischief, and that just fuels my irritation. I wrap my hand around his wrist and drag him under the awning of the casino and pin him to the wall. He stands there, staring into my eyes. He flashes me that crooked smile, and his blue eyes practically sparkle. I get a vision of him smiling like that for another woman, and a boiling rage like I've never felt before consumes me.

The day will come when he'll lose interest and move on to someone else. Someone who will willingly be with him. The very idea makes me want to stand in the middle of the sidewalk and scream like a raving lunatic. His

smile turns into a smirk, almost as if he's privy to these very thoughts.

"Shut up, Flynn." He arches his eyebrows and opens his mouth to speak, but I don't give him a chance. I step closer and press my body to his. His eyes widen in shock. Without giving it another thought, I get on my tippy toes and take those firm lips into a toe-curling kiss right there on the public street.

His massive arms wrap around me instantly, and he lifts me off my feet. This is just like our New Year's Eve kiss, and I ask myself why it's taken me this long to taste his lips again.

I slide my fingers into his thick hair and lose myself in the taste and smell of him. His scent invades my senses, nearly driving me wild with lust and something else. Possession. There is no way I would be able to handle it if he looked at someone else the way he looks at me. I forget where I am and start to wrap my legs around him, but he puts me down.

"Let's go to my room," he says, his voice hoarse. I look down and see the bulge in his pants and can't help but lick my lips. A night in his room won't stop him from kissing or touching another woman the way he just did with me.

"That won't be enough." I start to pant. I put both hands on my knees while I do my best to gather my thoughts, but that does nothing to calm the erratic beating of my heart.

"Wait until you see it, love. I promise it will be enough." He runs a hand down the curve of my body and cups my ass. The feel of his hands belongs to me. The kisses we shared are mine. I'd die if he gives what belongs to me to someone else.

"That's not what I mean. Fucking you won't be enough. I should drag your ass to a chapel and marry you. Maybe that's what it will take, because I swear to God, if you ever look at or touch another woman..." I leave the thought unfinished. Saying the words out loud would only make me angrier, and I need control right now.

"Is that what you've come up with? I don't think you have the guts to do

it.”

“I warned you on New Year’s Eve not to put ideas in my head, so don’t push me, Adam. Hush. I’m trying to figure out what to do with you.” I run a hand through my hair. And because there’s a group of girls walking toward us, I grab his hand and intertwine our fingers.

“I should marry you,” I threaten. “That way when these casino cunts come near you, you’ll have no choice but to tell them you’re taken.”

“I’m not taken, but all you have to do is ask me, love.”

“Ask you what?”

“Ask me to be your husband.”

“Why should I have to ask you?”

“Because I don’t want you to wake up tomorrow and say I tricked you.” I do a dramatic eye roll.

“I’m a liberated woman, Adam. A feminist. No one, man or woman, can trick me into doing anything. I do what I want. And I do it when I want. This ain’t the nineteen fifties, love.” I say love with the worst Irish brogue in the history of the world.

“Liberated women happen to be my favorite kind, love. As a liberated woman, ask me to marry you. Hell, tell me to do it. But you should know one thing, Mel. If we do this, I’m not going to let you go. There’s nowhere on this earth you can run. I’ll always find you and bring you back to me.”

“What makes you think I’d run?”

“Just a feeling.”

I put a hand on his broad chest and push, but he doesn’t budge. In fact, he flexes underneath my hand.

“Adam, you would let me go. You’ll finally get what you want, and you’d get bored. I’m not that special.”

“You have no idea how wrong you are, love. So, ask me and I’ll prove it to you by never letting you go.”

“You’ll marry me right here?”

“Tonight.”

“You’ll never do it.” I put a hand on his shoulder and smile into his face.

“It’s all fun and games until someone proposes.”

“No one’s proposed. Ask me. I dare you.”

“You’re not crazy enough to marry me.”

“Ask me.”

“Okay. Adam Flynn, will you marry me?” I give him a smug look, knowing he’ll never do it. This is it. This is when he runs away and calls me nuts.

But he doesn’t. He leans closer and whispers, “Yes.”

“Right,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You can have all the casino cunts you want. Why do you think you want me?” This is insane. I should run as fast and as far away from Adam and this crazy idea as I can, but I don’t make a single move to flee. I look into his eyes and almost drown in the look he’s giving me. It’s more addictive than drugs, and I’ll burn down the entire fucking world before another woman will get that look.

“I don’t think I want you, Mel. I’ve known it since I first heard your voice.” He offers me his hand this time, and I take it.

“Am I supposed to get you a ring?” A nervous giggle escapes.

“Look at me,” and I do. “Promise me you won’t regret this in the morning. And if you do, I’m still not going to let you go.” He picks up my left hand and places a kiss on my ring finger. “But first, you need a big, fat diamond ring on that finger.”

“You can’t afford a big, fat diamond.”

He barges into the room, jolting me out of my daydream. He’s fully dressed, but his hair is still damp.

“There’s only an hour delay for school, so I have to go.”

I stare at him and shrug.

“Still giving me the silent treatment, I see. Really mature. I thought I married a grown woman, but I guess not.” He stomps out of the room before I can respond. By the time I shower and dress, he’s still in the kitchen plating two dishes of food. He slams them on the table and says, “Eat it or not. I don’t care.” But I know that he cares. His cheeks turn red, and he doesn’t take a seat until I do.

We eat without either of us saying a word. I study my husband. His face is redder than I’ve ever seen, and he eats his omelet in stony silence. When he’s done, he just gets up, leaving his dirty plate on the table.

“No problem! I’ll clean up after you!” I yell to his retreating back.

He doesn’t dignify my tantrum with a response. He pulls on his coat, puts on his boots, and shuts the coat closet door. He comes back to the table and kisses my cheek. He walks out of the apartment and slams the door behind him without a word.



I open the door to my two best friends, and they burst in without an invitation. I had no idea they were coming here today. Alex is still on maternity leave, and Ananda is on vacation for the next week. She’s leaving for a trip to Barbados tomorrow.

“I was at home packing for my trip with my new husband when Alex called me over here. Hurry up. My flight leaves at seven tomorrow morning. I got shit to do.” Ananda takes a seat on Lola and crosses her arms.

“Yeah, what the hell were you about to tell me last night? And by the way, it’s Armageddon downstairs. Jason refuses to talk to your mom, and I can barely stand to be in the same room with her. She keeps crying and that upsets my daughter. I wish she never came here.” I sigh and sink on the couch next to Alex. For the next fifteen minutes, I tell my two best friends the new information I learned about my husband and the fight we’ve been having

since last night.

When I'm done, Alex and Ananda stare at each other. It's almost as if they are trying to gauge whether I'm telling the truth.

"I knew it," Ananda says.

Alex and I look at each other and we both roll our eyes.

"You knew Adam was sitting on fifty million dollars, Nand? Really?" Alex sighs in disbelief.

"No. Not the specifics, but I always knew he was different. He's good friends with my husband, so I've spent time with him without you two. He's just always carried himself differently, you know. He's not a snob, but he's always been above certain shit. I don't know how to explain it, but I'm not the least bit surprised," Ananda says.

"Well, I'm glad one of us isn't surprised. I was blindsided. I married a liar and a manipulator. He's been acting like the injured party. Like he hasn't lied to my face repeatedly. Had the nerve to yell at me and say he doesn't want to talk about it anymore. The fucking audacity of men!" I plop myself down on the sofa after my speech and cover my eyes with my hands.

"Rich men," Alex clarifies.

Ananda reaches over and high fives her. I sit up and stare at my best friends, not impressed at all by their reaction.

"Okay." Alex raises both hands in surrender. "Did you ask him why he didn't tell you?"

"Of course, I did. He played the caveman part and said he was done talking about it. He punched a wall, Alex." I lower my voice and whisper my outrage at his violent reaction.

Alex and Ananda look at each other and then at me, neither of them reacting the way I expected. Ananda goes so far as to laugh.

"You find this funny?" I ask.

"I find you funny, Mellie." I open my mouth to address her, but she cuts me off. "I only have one question to ask before we dive any further into this

discussion.”

“What?” I cross my arms and brace myself for whatever she’s going to say next.

“Are you still going to sample wedding cakes on Saturday with Molly?” She arches one perfectly shaped eyebrow. Alex holds her breath while she waits for my answer. “Yes or no. I don’t need a song and dance or another long speech.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Yes or no,” Ananda says.

I stare into Ananda’s eyes and finally say, “Yes.” Both of my friends smirk, but Alex reaches over and hugs me.

“So, you’re not leaving him over this?” Ananda asks.

My shoulders slump, but I answer my friend and say, “No, I’m not going to leave him. That thought never once crossed my mind. I love him.”

Alex lets out a loud shriek, wraps her arms around me and squeezes me close.

“It’s about time. I’ve known you loved his ass since your little housewarming party. I just wanted to get you to admit it. You’re married to him, and you love him. It’s obvious he adores you, so what’s the problem? And you better not say the money is a problem because if so, I’ll be happy to take all fifty million off your hands,” Ananda says.

As always, she’s taken the fight right out of me. Had it been just Alex, she’d hug me and tell me what I want to hear. Ananda’s too blunt for that.

“He lied to me, Nand.” She opens her mouth to argue, but I raise a hand to silence her. “Listen to me before you tell me I’m being dramatic. Things have been really good since the housewarming party. Really amazing. Just downright perfect. We have these late night chats where we tell each other things that nobody else knows. I’ve told him things I’ve never said out loud to another human being, and the entire time, he’s kept this from me. I asked him if he had any siblings on his father’s side, and you want to know what he

said?” Both of my friends nod, and I continue. “He said I’m my mother’s only child. Then he reminded me last night that’s not technically a lie.”

Alex holds one of my hands, squeezes it, and puts my palm to her cheek.

Even Ananda reaches over and rests a hand on my shoulder. “You’re one dramatic chick.” Ananda smiles when she says it. “You’re lucky we both love your ass. He messed up. Forgive him. See, I solved your problem. Give the guy a break.”

“Or some head,” Alex says with a high giggle.

“Anal if you’re really sorry,” Ananda adds while she reaches over and gives Alex a high five.

“Forget Ananda.” I focus on Alex, and Ananda gives us both the middle finger, but she keeps her mouth shut. “And I disagree. I don’t think Adam messed up.” I open my mouth to argue, but she talks over me and says, “Hear me out. I was in a similar situation, as you both know. I knew who my father was for years and never told a soul. Never told Ananda, and even after falling hard for your brother, I never breathed a word to him either. And he asked me if I knew my father. You know what I said? I said I’d never met him. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t exactly the truth either, but you know what? None of it was about Jason. None. My reasons were about me, my fears, and my insecurities. So, whatever Adam’s reasons are, Mellie, they have nothing to do with you. Don’t get offended by it. Calm down and talk to him without making it about your hurt feelings. He’s human. He has fears like all of us. Give him a chance to explain, and whatever his reasons are, be there for him.”

Alex smiles at me while nodding. Overcome with emotion, I nod back and swipe away at my falling tears. Alex grabs a tissue and dabs my face, saying soothing words to me the entire time.

“Jesus, this girl is crying now.” Ananda doesn’t bother with a napkin. She swipes the tears away with her finger. “Just tell him you’re sorry you overreacted and drop to your knees.” I push her hand away, but she reaches

over, messes my hair, and starts to laugh.

“I’m awful.” I put my face in my hands and let reality wash over me. “All I thought about was me. I went on the attack instead of seeing it from his perspective.” The tears fall again, and I’m unable to stop them this time. Both girls take me in their arms, and the three of us do a group hug. They hold me until the tears subside, and I’m able to catch my breath.

“First, this happened less than twenty-four hours ago. Second, you’re human. Third, he’ll forgive you. And yes, you’re a drama queen, but he should have told you. I’m sure he has his reasons though, Mellie. He loves you, so give him a break. Stop freaking out and be there for your husband.” Ananda squeezes me tight before she finally lets me go.

I nod at them, but I absentmindedly pick at the tablecloth. I stand and look out the window. The snowstorm never really developed. After only three inches fell, it turned to rain. The rain continues, turning the entire city gray and morose. Both of my friends come and stand on either side of me.

“Let’s hear it.” Ananda taps her shoulder with mine.

“It’s nothing.” I wave them off.

“Let’s hear it anyway,” Alex says.

“Okay.” I take a deep breath and continue. “Other than yesterday, things have been really great between us. I freaked out those first few days, but I love being married to him. There isn’t a single thing that I don’t love. But that’s when I thought we were equals. Both of us working together, joining our bank accounts, and making plans for the future. We’re by no means struggling, but I wanted us to share everything. Build together, you know what I mean?” They both nod in understanding. “Now that’s not the case anymore, and I don’t know where or if I fit in. His family is kind of out of my league. I’ve spent the entire morning googling them. Adam is way out of my league now.”

“Mellie, he’s still Adam. The guy who didn’t have matching dishes and ugly furniture. The guy with the nice mom and crazy uncle. He’s still the

same guy who's been waiting for you to fall in love with him. And girl, you're good enough. I know that's what this is really about. You *are* enough. You're smart enough. Successful enough. Beautiful enough." Ananda snakes an arm around my waist. "I don't make friends with basic bitches. You slay, Mellie." She grabs both my shoulders and gives me a shake. "And I understand about wanting to build something together. I get it. But you can still do that. Take that fifty million and help him turn it into five hundred million."

"Yeah," Alex says. "What she said." They hug me again, and I let my insecurities go. At least for now.

"Are you going to feed us? I came all the way over here, and we know you can afford it." Ananda opens my fridge and pulls out three bottles of water.

"Greedy ho," I say to her while I grab all the takeout menus out of a drawer.



Instead of going home to talk to Mel once school let out, I drive in the opposite direction. Straight down Commonwealth Avenue. I honk my horn at a guy wearing a Boston University hoodie who decides to run in front of my truck while I have the green light. Impatient little asshole.

The heavy rain slows traffic down, and it takes me twice as long before I turn down Botolph Street. Of course, this is where he would be. One of the most ostentatious neighborhoods in the city. I haphazardly park my car in front of the brownstone, the biggest one on this street. I take the stairs two at a time until I reach his door and pound my fist on the hardwood, ready to kick the fucking thing in if someone doesn't answer soon. I thought if I slept on it, I'd be less angry when I woke up this morning. I was wrong. The anger only festered overnight. It ate at me. Add in sexual frustration, and you have a perfect storm.

I check my phone, and there are no messages from Mel. She was there physically last night and this morning, but she's withdrawn completely. She barely ate the breakfast I made for her. And I can't read her mind, but I can read her expressions. She barely looked at me this morning, and despite how comfortable the couch is and how easily I can fall asleep, I spent the entire night awake, staring at the ceiling and missing my wife's warm body next to

mine.

I pound on the door again. I look around the quiet street and notice there isn't a single person outside. Not even a jogger or a nanny pushing the stroller of a trust fund baby. When no one answers the door, I kick it, and right before my foot strikes for the second time, it swings open. I push my way inside and slam the door so hard, the fucking townhouse rattles.

The asshole who wrecked my life stands in front of me. The temper I've barely held at bay boils over. I grab him by his collar and push him against the wall so hard, the pictures shake.

He stands there, making no moves to push me away from him. He arches his eyebrows as if he's waiting for me to either strike or talk. I plan on doing both.

"I fucking told you I didn't want anything to do with you," I hiss. I don't let him go, but I take a small step back to give him enough space to throw a punch. I can't find it in me to look into those familiar eyes, so I look past his shoulder and wait for him to hit me first. All he has to do is throw one punch to give me an excuse to unleash my rage.

"I told you I didn't accept that." I make a fist and he chuckles. The fucking asshole has the nerve to laugh at me.

"I don't care whether you accept it or not. It's not about what you want. I'm not a shiny new toy for you and your sister to play with. I'm a real person, and you don't walk into my life and blow it up. I've always known about you, and I've never reached out. What does that tell you?"

This time he shoves me away, and I stumble back. I don't stumble for long. I step closer and punch the wall so hard, I know I've either broken a knuckle or at the very least, bruised it.

"It tells me you thought we wouldn't want anything to do with you, so you decided to reject us first." His calm voice takes the wind out of my sails, but I still refuse to acknowledge the partial truth to his words.

"Stay away from me and my wife," I say. "Or I swear to God, I will

pound your fucking face through that wall.”

“Try it,” he taunts. I step back and he shoves my chest, almost daring me to hit him.

“You don’t get to walk into my life and blow it up. She kicked me out of the fucking bedroom after your impromptu visit. You think it’s been fun walking around with blue balls all fucking day?” I don’t know what prompted me to say that, and I wish I could take the words back. No part of me wants to give this guy even the tiniest glimpse into my personal life. A small laugh escapes him, and he does his best to wipe the smile off his face, but can’t.

“First, I don’t have anything to do with your balls. Second, I told you I was coming. But if you came here to fight, do it. Hit me. What are you waiting for?” He’s tall, but I have about an inch on him. He’s fit, but I’m younger and I’m trained. It wouldn’t take much. I doubt he could get a punch in, but his face and voice remind me so much of my father, I take a step back. I was completely unprepared for that. Our father’s been dead for five years, but I hadn’t seen him for three years before he passed away. Despite being in his seventies the last time I saw him, Ethan is his spitting image, only younger.

I step closer and push him against the wall again. He stands there much too calm for the situation.

“I came here looking for a fight,” I tell him.

“I know.”

“Give me one. You look so much like him I’m dying to rearrange your fucking face. Say something. Do something to make me hit you.”

“There’s no denying that we’re both his sons,” he says.

“I’m nothing like him.”

“Neither am I. Not in any way that matters.”

“Back away,” a feminine voice says from behind me. She’s a short black woman, the same one I saw photos of online, but she’s prettier in person.

Despite her smaller stature, something about her reminds me of Mel. I ignore her and focus on the prick in front of me instead. “I said back away,” she says again.

“Tara, it’s fine. Just having a chat with my brother,” he says. There’s a hint of a smile on his face and I wrap my hand around his jaw to shut him up. Tara pulls on my arm, and I let out a humorless laugh. I don’t think she weighs much more than one hundred pounds, but I drop my arm. She steps between us and puts a hand to my chest, as if she’s strong enough to push me away.

“Listen to me.” She points an index finger in my face. “First, we have a child in this house, and we don’t do this kind of thing around him. Second, if anyone is going to rearrange my fiancé’s face, it’s going to be me, not you or anybody else. No one lays a hand on him other than me. Got it? So, back all the way off before I rearrange *your* face. Believe me, I’d love nothing more just for the hell you’ve put Ethan and Elizabeth through for almost a year.” At the mention of a child, I take several steps back. My breathing comes out in short pants, and I lay both hands on my thighs to try and calm down. “By the way, that face that you want to rearrange looks just like yours. Deal with it. You have siblings and they want a relationship with you. There are worse things in life so grow the hell up,” she adds. She crosses her arms and stands next to Ethan, almost as if she’s daring me to talk back.

“I’m only here to tell him to his face to leave me alone.” I turn back to Ethan. “I’m serious. Whatever it is you’re after, I’m not interested. You’re causing problems in my marriage.”

Tara arches her eyebrows, and she looks at Ethan for confirmation. All he does is shrug.

“Right. The blue balls,” Ethan says with a playful grin. Of all the things I imagined on the drive over here, playfulness wasn’t one of them.

“The what?” Tara asks.

“I don’t know how I could have done that, but it was obvious yesterday

that you never told her about us. If that's the case, that's on you, not me," he says.

"I didn't tell her about you because you don't matter to me."

"Hey, don't say something you'll regret. You're here, so why don't we sit down and talk?" Tara suddenly smiles at me, throwing me off kilter by her sudden bout of friendliness. "I can get us some drinks."

"I've said all I'm going to say." I'm talking to her, but my eyes are locked on him, willing him to get my meaning. But I'm met with a smug look that suggests he's not ready to hear me yet. "I'm not going to say it again. Stop with the phone calls and the surprise visits."

"You almost break my door, push me against the wall, and threaten to rearrange my face. I'm sure you have plenty more to say, so sit down and say it."

I look around the room now, unwilling to look in anyone's face, but I can feel the woman's eyes boring into me. I turn my back to them and reach for the door, but just as I put my hand on the doorknob, I hear footsteps. More than one set. It sounds like several sets of little feet are running on the hardwood floors.

"Can we go now?" a little voice says. There's a loud bark that follows his question. For some reason, I can't just walk away. I turn around to find a little boy in wire rimmed glasses and a three-legged dog. The dog walks to me, sniffs my hand, and licks it. I can't help myself and rub behind the ears of the chocolate lab.

"That's Ralph," the little boy says. I've seen pictures of him. Vincent Bradford. My six year old nephew, I guess.

"Hey there, Ralph." I drop to my knees, and Ralph licks my face.

"I'm Vincent." He approaches and looks at me tentatively. He looks at his dad, who nods at him, and he walks closer.

"Hi, Vincent. I'm Adam." I offer him my hand. He takes it and gives me a firm handshake.

“I know. You’re my uncle, and my dad and Aunt Liz have been calling you, but you never answer.” Unsure of how to respond, I look at Ethan and narrow my eyes at him. “Are you coming with us to the aquarium? I want to see the snakes. Tara’s scared of them. We had animals at my last birthday party, and when the guy brought out the snakes, she screamed and ran out of the room. She wouldn’t come back out until Dad told her they were gone.”

Tara makes a face and moves closer to Ethan. He puts an arm around her and kisses her temple.

“If only I had a snake in my office that day you barged in,” Ethan whispers.

That gets a laugh out of Tara.

“I had a pet snake when I was a little bit older than you.” I don’t know what possesses me to keep talking. I should be walking out of this house and away from these people.

Vincent widens his eyes and smiles. That’s when I notice his two front teeth are missing. I can’t help myself. I put my hand on his head and make a mess of his dirty blonde hair. He must look more like his mother than his father, but his eyes are just like his. And like mine.

“Your mom let you have one?”

“No, she didn’t. But my Uncle Finn did. He’s the best. He acts like a big kid, which is great when you’re little.”

“Is he my uncle too? Maybe he’ll get me one.”

“He’d better not,” Tara says.

“No, he’s not your uncle, but I bet he’d get you one anyway.”

“Not going to happen,” Ethan says.

The kid grabs my hand, and I wrap mine around his.

“I’ll show you my room here. I think the house is haunted because the stairs are creaky. Evan thinks there’s a ghost.”

“Evan?” I ask.

“He’s my best friend. He’ll be here on Thursday so you can meet him.

Come on.” He tries to pull me to the stairs, but I don’t budge. “Get him, Ralph.”

Ralph growls, bites on my pant leg, and tries to pull me to the stairs. I look towards Ethan and Tara for help, and they both shrug. The alarm to the house beeps, indicating the back door has opened. Loud clacking of high heels hit the hardwood.

“I finally made it,” a female voice says. “Ethan? Tara?”

“In here, Elizabeth.” Ethan’s eyes lock with mine when he says her name.

“I was thinking about what you said. How he said there are other people involved. It just dawned on me that we’ve completely forgotten about his mother. I think she might be the problem and the cause for his—” The words die in her throat when she sees me. Her eyes widen, and the carry-on suitcase she was pulling falls on the floor. She gasps loudly and puts both hands to her mouth.

I’ve seen pictures of her. She looks more like her mother than our father, but she has the same nose as Ethan. And me.

“Whose mother are you talking about?” I ask her. “For your sake, I hope you’re not talking about mine. She has never been nor will ever be a problem.” She drops her hands, but I don’t miss the tears pooled in her eyes. She flies across the room and wraps herself around me, burying her face in my chest while she sobs loudly. Vincent drops my hand, and Elizabeth hugs me. My arms hang at my side, and I stand there like a statue.

I look over her shoulder and lock eyes with Ethan and mouth help. Elizabeth finally pulls away, roughly grabs my face, and looks into my eyes. I look away, unable to meet her gaze. Her hands are warm on my face and not at all unpleasant. Her eyes are friendly, and when tears start to run down her face again, something inside of me starts to thaw. I can’t stand a crying woman. Not only can I not stand it, I can’t take it either. Her hands run through my hair again, and a sob escapes before she hugs me. My hands awkwardly pat her shoulders in a lame attempt to soothe her.

When she pulls away, she smiles and lays a hand on top of mine. I find myself smiling back.

“You look and sound just like Ethan and Dad. Oh my God, Ethan. I finally have a little brother.” The tears fall and she hugs me again. Ethan does nothing to help, but Vincent does.

“He was coming to see my room, Aunt Liz.” He sounds a little annoyed at her, and he pushes his way between us and takes my hand again.

“You’re staying?” she asks, her face still buried in my chest. “Stay, please.” She finally pulls her face away, but she doesn’t leave my space.

“Come on.” Vincent gives me another tug and he pushes his aunt out of the way. Ralph bites my pants again and starts to pull. “Tara helped me pick out bunk beds for when Evan gets here. I’ll show you my room, and then you can come to the aquarium with us.”

Elizabeth finally moves away, and I know I should pull my hand from the kid’s and walk out the door. Maybe go home, get Mel and fly somewhere far, far away, but I refuse to be the one who hurts this little boy’s feelings. And I’m pretty sure the dog would bite me if I tried to leave. So, I let him lead me further into the house, and when he runs up the stairs, I follow.

“This step is the creakiest one,” he says. He jumps on top of it and when I land there, he gestures for me to jump too, so I do. And the wood practically moans underneath my weight. “See? Told you. I think the ghost lives underneath there. Come on.” We arrive on the second floor. It has vaulted ceilings and skylights throughout. Unlike downstairs, the upstairs looks pretty empty, and I can’t escape the smell of fresh paint. I sneak a peek at a few of the rooms while I follow Vincent, and most of them are empty.

I step inside Vincent’s room, and the place is pristine. Much too clean for a five-year-old boy with a dog. The beds are perfectly made and there’s a vase of fresh flowers on his dresser. The room is a nautical theme and painted in various shades of blue.

“Hey, buddy,” I say as I look around the room. There are so many

questions I want to ask, but I won't use a child for information. "This is a nice room."

He smiles proudly at me, putting his missing two front teeth on display. "Daddy says we'll be spending time here with you from now on. He says whether you like it or not," he prattles on while he opens a chest and pulls out a bunch of toys. "You want to play?"

My favorite memories as a kid involve playing action figures with my Uncle Finn. He is the only father figure I've ever had, and I don't remember a single time when he didn't make time for me. I'm not here to play uncle, but when I look down at him, he smiles.

So, it's that smile that forces me to sit on the floor and reach for an action figure. The dog comes and lies next to me while we play.

^^^

My Wife – Where are you? We need to talk.

My heart starts to beat erratically at the text. We need to talk is never a good sign, but I meant what I said that night in Vegas. I'm not letting her go and there's nowhere on earth she can run and hide from me.

Me – I'll be home soon. I love you.

My Wife – I love you too. I miss you so hurry.

All the tension leaves after reading her last text, and I reach over and mess Vincent's hair.

"I have to go, Vincent, but I had fun playing with you." He jumps up, and I do the same. He takes my hand, and we walk downstairs. The three other adults in the house are in the exact same spot at the bottom of the stairs.

"Stay for dinner! Please," Elizabeth says. She comes over to me and runs her hands through my hair and strokes my face again. I step back, grab her hands, and put them down. "What are we having?" she asks, looking at Tara.

"I'll order something," Tara offers. "Or we can go out if you'd be more

comfortable at a restaurant.”

“I can’t. I need to get home to my wife.”

“I’ll send a car for her,” Ethan offers.

“I need to go,” I say to them again.

“We’ll be here until Sunday,” Ethan says. “The dinner invitation stands, or you can barge in any time.”

I nod, but before I can walk out, Vincent comes and wraps his arms around my legs.

“Bye, Uncle Adam. Will you come back so we can play with my Lego’s and meet Evan?” His big, blue eyes bore into mine while he waits for an answer. All I do is give him a firm nod before pulling away and walking out the door.

^^^

“Mel!” I yell out the minute I burst through the door. I open it with so much force that it crashes against the wall.

She comes running, still, in the same yoga pants she had on this morning, only with bare feet this time. I smile at her yellow toenails. She runs to me, and I open my arms just in time for me to wrap them around her. I lift her off the ground and kiss her temple. This is the first time today that I’ve been completely at ease.

“I’m sorry,” she says before I can offer my own apology. “I was a bad wife.” I lift her off her feet, walk over to Lola and sit down with her in my lap.

“What are you talking about, Mel? You can never be a bad wife.” I stick my face in the side of her neck and kiss her.

“I was. I made everything about me when it’s not. It’s about you. I mean, I do wish you had shared it with me, but I shouldn’t have made it about me, and I shouldn’t have kicked you out of the bedroom. Can you forgive me?”

I stroke the nape of her neck and kiss her temple. “Forgive you? For what? I *should* have told you, but honestly, I figured it would be another wall you’d put up between us. Another reason why we couldn’t be together. You moved in here and all you talked about were spreadsheets, brackets, and being equal with your partner. I was afraid of losing you, Mel.”

She closes her eyes almost as if pained by my words. A stray tear seeps out and I wipe it.

“And I’m sorry I ever made you feel that way, Adam. I’m sorry I made you feel like you had to walk on eggshells because you’re afraid of losing me. You’re not going to. Not ever. I love you, and I need you too much to ever walk away. I know I never say it, but I love being married to you. And yes, I was scared after I woke up in Vegas, but do you know how long it took for me to realize how much I love being Mrs. Flynn. About two days. Marrying you is the best thing I’ve ever done. And I lied too,” she says. She looks down, and I grab her chin and force her eyes back on me. “I’ve been lying for months about not remembering what happened in Vegas. I remember it all, and I always have. I wanted to marry you, and I had a little liquid courage, but I wasn’t drunk. I wasn’t anywhere close to being drunk. I’m the one who dragged you to the chapel. I got scared when I woke up the next morning. I convinced myself you’d realize you made a mistake so I took off. But that was because of my insecurities. It had nothing to do with you. I couldn’t face being rejected by you and ran, but Adam, I’m done running.”

I put my forehead to hers and close my eyes, so relieved at her words that I want to yell in happiness. She takes my hands, lifts them to her lips, kisses them, and then puts them on her warm face.

“It took you two whole days?” I deadpan. When she lets out a laugh, I say, “I’m happy to hear that, love. So damn happy.”

I nod and wait for her to continue. “It’s true. I’m really sorry, Adam, for all the lies and for—” I put a finger to her lips.

“It’s okay, Mel. We’re here now, and you’re not going to run again.

Right?”

“Right. But I have two questions. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“Of course, I was. Right after our honeymoon.” I kiss her knuckles and adjust her on my lap.

“And this ring? That’s the one thing I don’t remember. I remember getting your ring and a simple band for me, but when I woke up, I had this giant diamond on my finger.” She holds her left hand up and points at it.

“Money talks, love. I made a phone call after you fell asleep.”

She nods and playfully punches my chest. Once she’s situated on my lap, she asks, “Why are you avoiding your brother and sister?” I bristle at their titles. “They’ve been calling for months. Why not give them a chance and get to know them? At least have one conversation.”

I pull her closer and ponder my next words. “I don’t want anything to do with my father and that includes them.”

She runs a hand through my hair and asks, “But why? They’re not your father.”

I lay my head back on Lola and close my eyes. I can still feel Mel’s eyes on me, but I can’t look at her. Not right now. I feel her hand on my cheek as she softly strokes my face.

“That’s where I was when you texted me,” I say.

The gentle stroking stops.

“Where?”

“He left the address when he was here yesterday. I was so angry at him for showing up, and I blamed him for our fight. I drove over there in a blind rage and pushed him against the wall. Punched a hole through it too.”

Her mouth hangs open at my confession. She examines my hands for any damage.

“I’m fine,” I tell her. “I didn’t hit him. His fiancée came in.”

“That’s it? You went over there, threatened him, and left?”

“No. His kid and the three-legged dog came out, and the kid asked me to

go see his room. Then the sister came home. She saw me and hugged me. Kept touching my face and hair. Said I look and sound like their father and that Ethan guy, which is absolutely the worst thing anyone can say to me. I went and saw the kid's room, played with him for a bit, and left. But when the sister came in, before she saw me, she started talking shit about Ma."

Mel stiffens on top of me, but I don't miss the flash of anger in her eyes.

"What the hell did she say?"

"That maybe my mother is the reason I won't talk to them."

Mel looks into my face and lets out a deep breath.

"Is she right, Adam? I've been thinking about this all day, and I had that thought too."

I throw an arm over my eyes, but Mel pokes my stomach until I put my arm down.

"He hurt us both, but I don't think she ever recovered. She never got married. Hardly dated at all. I think she felt guilty about being with a married man, even though he lied to her and she had no idea he was married until after she had me. But through it all, she never said a cross word about him to me. I hate him for what he did to us, and I don't want to bring all that shit back. He's dead, and I'd rather he stayed buried."

I sigh when she strokes my hair. "But Adam," she says softly, "he made you. If you don't want anything to do with them because that's what you want, I'll support that. I'll always support you, but if there's any part of you that wants to get to know them, you owe it to yourself to do it. You are allowed to do something for you. And I've gotten to know your mom, and you're her favorite person on earth. She would not be upset with you for wanting to get to know your siblings and your nephew. And you're not the type of guy who shuts people out. You're the opposite of that. You're loving and welcoming and so amazing. The fact that you haven't punched Jason yet is testament to that."

I let out a laugh. "The kid is pretty cute. You should see him with his

little glasses and his three-legged dog.” I smile at the memory of Ralph biting my pants and pulling me toward the stairs.

Mel gets up from my lap, offers me her hand, and helps pull me up.

“Let’s have an early dinner, and then we’re going to see your mom. We’re going to clear the air because I have a feeling that you’ve never talked about it. You assume she feels one way when you’ve never broached the subject. Did she ever shy away from talking about your father with you?”

“Never. She’s never lied to me or tried to change the subject when I did ask things. But I stopped talking about him years ago. I told her once that I never wanted to hear his name again, so she never brings him up.”

She puts an arm around my waist and walks us into the kitchen. It’s then that I notice the table’s been set. A mouthwatering aroma hits my nose and I realize how hungry I am.

I start to walk to the stove, but she pulls my arm and points at the chair, ordering me to sit. So, I do.

“We need a do over from yesterday,” she tells me. “Sit down and let me take care of you.”

“I love nineteen-fifties Mel. There’s more, love.” She pulls something out of the oven, and while she has her back turned, I admire her ass.

“I’m listening.”

“So, about that inheritance.” I take a deep breath and run a hand over my face. She puts chicken pieces on a serving platter and places it on the table in front of me. She sits directly across and waits for me to talk. I pat my lap, and she sits on my thigh. When I have my arms wrapped securely around her, I say, “I don’t want to keep anything else from you. He didn’t only leave money. There’s property.” I clear my throat. “Several properties, in fact. The house my ma lives in is mine. There’s also commercial real estate, shares in companies, artwork. He invested in a few startups and left those shares to me.” I take a big, relieved breath after getting that off my chest.

Mel remains silent. She looks at the floor, and I wait for her to respond to

the new information.

“Okay.” She gets up and takes out a covered dish from the microwave.

“Okay? That’s it?” My stomach grumbles while my wife puts baked chicken and sweet potatoes on my plate.

“I don’t know what to say, Adam. But whether you’re rich or poor, you’re stuck with me.” I pull her back on my lap and rest my chin on her shoulder.

“Maybe it’s time I figure out how much all that other shit is worth.”

“Whatever you want to do, we’ll do it together. But do you really not know what any of it is worth?”

I shrug at her and say, “I never wanted money. I wanted a father’s love. The inheritance has been nothing but a slap in the face. It’s like he’s trying to buy his way out of being a father to me, and I’m not for sale.”

She kisses my temple and caresses my face. “I’m sorry you never had a father in your life. You deserved that.” She cups my face with her hands and looks in my eyes. “But you have a wife’s love. A wife who would burn down this entire world for you.” I close my eyes and pull her close. We don’t speak for several minutes. I simply hold onto her and absorb her warmth and her strength.

“Then that’s all I need, love,” I say minutes later.

While we eat the delicious dinner she prepared, she runs a hand soothingly down my thigh. “How about this?” she says between bites of food. “We go see your mom, and if she’s okay with this, which I’m positive she will be because she’s awesome, we’ll give them one dinner. We can have them here or go out. If I get even the whiff of assholery, we’re out.”

I reach over and kiss her greasy lips. I smile, touched that she thinks so highly of my mother.

“Because,” she continues, “I think it counts for something that they’ve tried for so long, Adam. I think family is important to them. If they’re jerks, we’ll know soon enough. I’ll know in the first five minutes, but you owe it to

yourself to find out. I think you want to.”

“I don’t want to if it’s going to upset Ma and make you pull away from me like you did last night. It’s not worth it if I end up losing the two most important people in my life.” She smiles at me, but her smile is sad. She puts a soft hand on my cheek and looks me in the eyes.

“You are allowed to do something for you. They are your family, and they want to get to know you so much that they are here even though you’ve been telling them to get lost for almost a year. Maybe they don’t want to be anything like your father either, and maybe he was a shitty father to them too.” She grabs both of my hands and says, “Your mom loves you more than anything on this earth, Adam. She’s a wonderful mother who always puts you first. She will want this for you. As for me, I’m not going anywhere. I love you too much. You’re my husband and my best friend. I don’t care what we fight about, I’ll always come back to you. I’m done putting up walls, and there’s nothing that can ever make me walk away. You make me happier than I’ve ever been. Let me help you through this. We’ll do it together.”

I smile at my wife, and she smiles back at me, holding my stare. I put a finger in the little dimple in her cheek. I run a hand over her head and tug at her ponytail. Something inside of me bursts. I love her. I’ve always loved her, but right now with her taking care of me, I realize I need her just as much.

“If you think so, Mel, that’s what we’ll do. I trust you.” She beams at my words and kisses my cheek. I make a face and wipe the greasy spot. She bunches her napkin and throws it at me.

“Let’s change the subject to a more important topic. How many more hours until I can strip you naked and climb between your legs? You are so going to pay for what you did to me last night? My balls still haven’t recovered.”



Just like I predicted, Molly was stunned when we told her about Adam's siblings tracking him down.

"See! I told you she'd be upset!" Adam shouts when she starts to cry in front of us. He runs to her and puts an arm around her. "I won't see them ever," he assures her.

"Oh, Adam, you big, sweet, lovable idiot." She reaches up and hits him upside his head. "I'm just relieved that they want to get to know you. I always wanted to give you siblings, but I never met anyone I loved enough to settle down with." She grabs his hand and points to the couch. She does the same to me, and when I take my place next to my husband and join our hands, she smiles.

"For years I felt so guilty about not just sleeping with another woman's husband but having a child. Not that I regret you, Adam. Not ever. Not for a second, but I couldn't give you the traditional family you deserved. And even though he came around sometimes, your father never really took an interest in you, but I'm grateful he took care of you financially. That's the one thing he did right. But, Son, listen to me. Part of being a good parent is wanting the best for your child, and that's what I want for you. If you want to get to know them, I would never try and stop you. I want that for you, and I hope they are

everything your father was not, everything you deserve.” She pulls him into a tight hug, and when she pulls away, tears are streaking down her cheeks.

The three of us hug on the couch until the front door opens and we hear footsteps.

“Adam! Is that you?”

“It’s my car, Uncle Finn. Who else would it be?” Adam yells so loud, I almost jump off the couch.

“Bar? How do you know I went to a bar?” Uncle Finn comes strolling into the living room wearing dark blue skinny jeans he has no business wearing and a button-down shirt that has the buttons straining over his considerable belly.

“What happened to your date?” Molly yells.

“My mate? Not gonna happen. She smells like cat piss. Got the hell out of there real quick. What do the kids say? I had to G-T-F-O. What’s going on here?” He leans down and kisses my cheek right before he messes Adam’s hair. “Am I getting a grand niece or nephew?” He surprises me when he reaches down and touches my stomach. “Nope. That womb is bare. Adam! Are you shooting blanks?” He cackles, runs to the kitchen, and comes back with a beer.

Adam tells him the news about his siblings, and Uncle Finn almost drops his beer. He lowers his hefty bulk onto the loveseat instead.

“Are you all meshugana? No! I don’t like this at all. Adam! No! You’re not to see them, do you hear me? I forbid it! I met your father once. An arrogant prick is what he was. I almost punched him in the nose.”

Adam drives slower than usual tonight. The traffic on Commonwealth Avenue is unusually light for a Thursday night. His hand squeezes my thigh so tight it’s almost painful, but when I lay a hand on top of his, he loosens his grip.

The calls continued the past two days. He answered this morning and agreed to come to dinner. I’ve never known Adam to be nervous. All these

years, he's been nothing but sure of himself whenever we interact, but he's been too quiet.

"Five minutes," I tell him. "If anyone says anything out of line in the first five minutes, we're gone. We'll bring Uncle Finn back and let him deal with them." I jerk my thumb backwards to prove my point, but I don't get a laugh out of him like I normally would. All I get is a nod.

He pulls onto a quiet side street lined with nothing but million-dollar brownstones. For the middle of the city, the street is like one you might find in the suburbs. Clear, quiet, and void of passing traffic.

He pulls over and parks in front of the largest brownstone on the street.

"This place?" I ask, and he nods. "Jesus. Are they renting it? It must be at least fifteen grand a month. At least." I let out a loud whistle at the sight of the house. It's all brick with a huge black door. The front looks newly done and there are big flowerpots on each of the front steps leading to the door.

"My guess is they bought it," Adam whispers like we're not the only two people in the car.

I whistle again. "At the very least, that's a ten-million-dollar brownstone. I've researched them. Well, I've researched your brother's fiancée. Do you know that she's black?" I ask.

"I saw her two days ago, Mel. And why are we whispering? We're the only ones in the car."

I playfully punch his shoulder. "She has an MBA from Columbia, and she met him when he bought her family's toy store chain. Rumor has it, they have no prenup and are planning a multi-million-dollar wedding."

This time, it's Adam who lets out a loud whistle. "Can you imagine how long their wedding spreadsheet is? They might even have more than one." He laughs when I pinch his side.

"Well, I'm not getting rid of my spreadsheets so don't get any ideas. We're still keeping track of every penny, and I'm still going to pack you a lunch because I like to do it. And if you tell anybody I like packing your

lunch, I'll deny it." He leans over and gives me a soft peck on the lips.

"I wouldn't change a thing about you, Melanie Elyse Flynn. Not a single thing. And nobody would believe you, my little liar."

"Jason will," I taunt.

"Probably. That's why I don't ever want to hear about how smart doctors are." He opens his door and hops out.

By the time I get my own door open, he's already at my side. Not sure how to dress for the occasion, I went with a pair of fitted black pants and a purple top. Adam intertwines our fingers and before we reach the first step of the house, the front door swings open.

"Ethan! They're here!" a young woman yells. As soon as we step over the threshold, she wraps herself around Adam in a tight hug. His arms hang to the side, and he looks straight ahead. She pulls away and grabs his face. She runs her hands on his skin almost as if she's trying to make sure that he's really here and not just a figment of her imagination.

"This is my wife, Mel," Adam says slowly while he extricates himself from his sister. They look alike, but not as much as Adam and Ethan. She looks away from Adam and offers me a genuine smile. I relax and smile back.

Ethan's frame fills the entryway. There's a little boy hiding behind his legs and poking his head out. The three-legged dog Adam told me about comes shuffling through and starts to sniff my hand.

"That's Ralph," the little boy says. I offer him a smile, but he ducks behind his father's legs. "Hi, Uncle Adam," I hear him say.

"Hey, buddy," Adam says back.

"Melanie, so nice to meet you. I'm Elizabeth." She takes me in a bone crushing hug while Adam offers Ethan his hand. Ethan shakes it but pulls Adam into a hug too.

"Come in the kitchen. Tara and Vincent have been cooking all day," Ethan says. That's when I notice the little boy is wearing an apron over his

clothes. We follow them down a long hallway. The house is beautifully decorated and inviting. The walls are lined with family pictures, and in the middle, there's a picture of Vincent, Ethan, and Tara. They're all wearing matching shirts and smiling happily.

"He's here," Tara says when we step into the kitchen. "I'm Tara, and you must be Melanie." She hugs me and turns to Adam. She puts her fists up and playfully punches his arms. "Keep your hands to yourself unless you're cruisin for a bruise," she jokes. A laugh escapes, and some of the tension leaves.

Adam raises both hands in surrender and smiles for the first time in hours. "You guys didn't have to go through all this trouble," Adam says, looking around. The island is covered in food, and the smells coming from the kitchen make my stomach growl.

"No trouble," Tara says. "I love to cook, and I have my little sous chef and a bonus chef. And we're really happy you two are here. We've been looking forward to getting to know you both." As soon as the words are out of Tara's mouth, another little boy wearing an apron comes running into the kitchen. He doesn't stop until he bumps into Vincent and they both start to giggle. "This is Evan. He's staying with us until we go back to New York on Sunday," she says.

Evan is Vincent's best friend and he and his father live in their building. Evan's dad is a basketball player for the Manhattan Mischiefs and is on a series of away games.

"Can we go watch my dad play?" When Tara tells them yes, both boys take off their aprons and run out of the kitchen. Loud silence follows once the kids are gone, and the five adults stand awkwardly in the kitchen. Adam throws an arm casually over my shoulders while everyone looks at us.

"How about some wine?" Tara asks. "Ethan! Wine!" She snaps her fingers at him while she laughs. Ethan takes a predatory step closer to her, but she stands to her full height. "I'm not scared of you," she says.

He leans down and gives her a loud kiss on the cheek before going to the fridge. He pulls out two bottles of white wine and grabs a bottle of red from the wine rack above the fridge.

After pouring white for me and Tara and red for everyone else, we all stand and look around the kitchen. Adam, who's never been much of a drinker, downs his wine in one large gulp and pours himself a second.

"Tara, do you need any help?" I ask to try and break the tension. "Whatever you're cooking smells amazing."

Tara sips her wine while she contemplates what to say. She puts the glass down and offers me a smile that lights up her face.

"You know what? Yes, I do. You're not a guest. You're family, so I'm going to put you to work." She walks to the pantry and comes back with an apron for me. "And Ethan is useless in the kitchen. And never ask Elizabeth to help. All she does is taste and drink wine."

"That's not the room I excel in, baby. Now, go make my dinner." To prove his point, Ethan slaps her ass before he pulls her close and kisses her lips. He then grabs the bottle of red and fills his own glass before refilling Adam's.

The similarities are undeniable. Adam's a little bit taller, but Ethan is still an incredibly tall man. Ethan might be a little leaner, but their body types are the same. They even stand the same. The only difference other than the height is a touch of gray at Ethan's temples. They're even dressed alike. Both are wearing a blue button-down shirt with gray pants.

"Has anyone else noticed that Ethan and Adam are dressed alike?" I ask, talking louder than usual. It's been a long day, and I skipped lunch. The second glass of wine has gone straight to my head.

Everyone laughs. Even Adam lets out a chuckle as he runs his hand over his shirt.

"I think I wear it best," Adam says.

I look at him, stunned at his joke. When he catches my eye, I blow him a

kiss, and he winks at me.

I turn to the feast Tara's prepared. There are several different dishes, from chicken to pot roast and pan seared salmon. My stomach growls, and Tara pulls out a platter of cheese and crackers from the fridge.

I listen in while Adam makes polite conversation with Ethan and Elizabeth. Despite his earlier joke, I can tell he feels ill at ease around his new family. His voice is lacking its usual playfulness and confidence.

Ethan leaves him alone long enough to grab the plates, but Tara shakes her head no and tells him she's got it. I don't miss his grateful smile and quick but heated kiss he gives her.

While she puts the food on the table, I set the dishes and silverware. The kids ask to eat in the living room so they can watch basketball, leaving the adults alone in the massive kitchen. I can see why she loves to cook in here. She has a dual range, pristine white cabinets, and stainless-steel appliances. The kitchen island alone can sit eight. The countertops are marble. It's beautiful enough to be in a magazine.

The table is quiet, but I'm too busy enjoying my salmon to think much about it, but then Adam puts one of his massive hands on my thigh. I lay a hand on top of his and squeeze it.

"This is a beautiful house." I do my best to erase some of the tension. "I love this kitchen."

"Thanks," Tara says. "We're still in the decorating phase. We had to move quickly when this became available."

"Oh?" I ask, fishing for information. Knowing exactly what I'm doing, Adam squeezes my thigh. "I assumed you were only renting this for the week."

"Nope. It's ours," Ethan says, but he doesn't offer any more information.

"So," I say, clearing my throat and changing the subject, "how did you two meet?" Tara looks at Ethan, and they both burst into laughter.

"It was the best day of her life," Ethan says. "Worst day of mine. She's

made my life hell from the moment I introduced myself.”

Elizabeth rolls her eyes. “Don’t listen to them. They can’t go five minutes without kissing. It’s sick.”

“My dad had a chain of toy stores. BradCo bought us out, putting me out of a job,” Tara says.

“False. She had a job at BradCo, but she turned it down. She was a brat from the moment I laid eyes on her. I had no choice but to make her fall in love with me,” Ethan says. “What about you two?”

“We were neighbors. He was a nuisance, but when we went to Vegas for a mutual friend’s wedding, I looked at him and I just knew.”

Elizabeth and Tara swoon.

“It was the opposite for us. He got me in trouble with my dad, and I wanted to end his life,” Tara tells us.

“You got yourself in trouble with your dad for acting like a brat.”

Tara makes a fist at Ethan, and he waves her off.

“What do you do for a living, Melanie?” Elizabeth takes the focus off Ethan and Tara and puts me on the spot.

“Everyone calls me Mellie, and do you really not know?” Part of me believes they did a background check on me as soon as they learned I had married their brother.

“We don’t,” Elizabeth assures me.

“I’m in risk management. In fact, I used to work for BradCo’s risk management department before I moved to Boston. I’d commute from Paramus to Manhattan twice per week and work remotely the rest of the time. I’ve seen Ethan’s picture on the company website, but I never put it together that you two look alike. I’m kicking myself now.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” Adam says.

“How did you like working there?” Ethan asks.

“I loved the company. You pay well and the benefits were amazing, but my department was dysfunctional. It was really an ugly time in my life, to be

honest. I can't say I miss it," I tell them.

"What happened?" Ethan asks.

"It was a lifetime ago. It doesn't matter." I let out a nervous laugh and curse myself for bringing this up.

"It matters, Mel. What happened? And why am I just now hearing about this dysfunctional department?" I arch an eyebrow at Adam, mentally calling him out on his hypocrisy, but he only stares at me right back and waits for my response. It's not often Adam is upset. The first was the night he came back from Vegas, and I denied we were married. The other was two nights ago when Ethan appeared on our doorstep.

"I've let it go. Besides, I'm sure everyone wants to hear about you, not me." I clear my throat, grab my drink and hope they change the subject.

"I'm really interested in hearing about it," Ethan persists. "If a department in my company is dysfunctional, I need to know."

"Me too." My husband puts down his fork and looks at me. I know from the look in his eyes, he won't drop the subject until I tell him everything.

I take a deep breath before I start talking. "The risk manager there sexually harassed me. We were working late one night, and he touched me, so I hit him. He came after me, and I grabbed a hole puncher and hit him in the face with it. He called the police and said I assaulted him. There was another person working with us, but she backed up his story. I was arrested and he pressed charges, but they were eventually dropped. I left New Jersey and moved to Boston with my brother and never looked back." Ethan's blue eyes darken at the table, and for a split second, I want to slap myself for telling that story. Of course, he won't believe me. This is his company, and I'm a stranger.

"What's his name?" Adam's voice is low, but I can hear the anger brewing. "I'm gonna find him and show him what getting assaulted is really like when I shove my foot up his arse." His brogue thickens with each angry word.

“Oh, Adam, leave it alone.” He ignores me and turns to Ethan.

“Get me his name,” he hisses to his brother. “And what the hell kind of people do you hire? He fucking put his hands on my *wife*.”

I run a hand down his thigh, but that doesn’t calm him down. In fact, his face has turned red, so I don’t bother reminding him that I wasn’t his wife when this happened.

“Go ruin his life, baby,” Tara says right before Ethan stands up from the table and excuses himself. I sit there, stunned at the turn of events.

“Guys, it’s okay. I’m over it.”

“It’s definitely not okay,” Elizabeth says. “That’s not allowed at BradCo, and you’re our family now, Mellie. We take care of each other.”



I see the sitting next to my wife. Now, I understand why she moved from New Jersey. Her bitch mother was only part of the reason. I lift her hand to my lips, excuse myself, and stand.

“Adam, sit down,” Mel says. “Come on.”

“His office is down the hall and to the left,” Tara says, knowing exactly where I’m going.

I get there just as he’s ending the call. The door is cracked open, and he waves me in.

“Did you find him?” I get straight to the point, and he points an index finger at his computer. I walk around and see a photo of the asshole who dared touch my wife.

“I need his address,” I tell Ethan. “Now.”

“I’ll take care of it. I’m going to find out as much about him as I can.”

“I’m still gonna fuck him up,” I say. He stands, but I lift my hands. “Imagine if it were Tara.” A flash of anger crosses his face, and his left cheek ticks.

“I get it. I’d want to rip his throat out, but it will be much more satisfying to ruin his life in other ways. Fire him and make it impossible for him to get another job.”

“I want to be there when you confront him.”

“You’ll have to come to New York.”

“Fine, but let’s keep that part between us.”

“You can’t hit him,” he warns.

I’m mollified by that, and I let him believe that I agree. I nod, walk out of his office, and return to my wife.

“Guys, I was just making conversation, not trying to start World War Three,” Mellie says.

“Mel, either Ethan handles it, or I’ll find this guy and kill him with my bare hands. Those are the only options on the table.” I lay my hand back on her thigh and give her a reassuring squeeze.

“Okay,” Mel says, raising both hands. She picks up her wine glass, drinks it, and returns to her fish. “Since I don’t want to have to visit you in prison, we’ll let Ethan handle it.”

Everyone exhales and returns to their food. Tara pats Ethan’s cheek and he puts his fork to her lips.

“You guys really didn’t have to go through all this trouble for us,” I tell them, suddenly feeling self-conscious, “but thank you.”

“It’s no trouble,” Tara says. “We have a chef at home, so I only get to cook on the weekends, and that’s only if we don’t go out. Oh,” she says. “Our wedding is Memorial Day weekend, so we want you two there. If you could try to come for a few days before the wedding, we’d love to have you. You’re welcome anytime, though, but try to come at least by the Wednesday before. And my shower is next month, and we’d love for you to come to that, Mellie. It’s girls only, so maybe Ethan, Vincent, and Adam can spend some time together.”

I stiffen. It’s one thing if Mel’s with me but being alone with him is another.

“It’s not girls only anymore, Tara. Your dad and brother got to Vickie, and we changed it. So, Mellie and Adam, you two can stay with me when

you come for the shower,” Elizabeth orders.

“Why do they have to stay with you? We have more room,” Ethan says.

“My place is not exactly small, Ethan.”

“You never ever have any food in your fridge. What are you going to feed them? Wilted kale?” Ethan rolls his eyes. Elizabeth picks up a dinner roll and throws it at him, but he catches it and takes a bite.

“Don’t listen to him. I have food,” Elizabeth assures us.

“I like kale,” I tell them. Elizabeth smiles smugly at Ethan.

“Ew. I don’t,” Mel says.

Tara catches my eye, and she smiles while Ethan and Elizabeth continue to bicker over me. Mel squeezes my thigh.

“Why?” I ask, interrupting their back and forth. “I don’t mean to be rude, but why do you care about me? Why go through all this effort for your bastard half-brother. A year ago, you had no idea I existed. I guess I just don’t understand why you care.”

“I don’t like that word. If anyone was a bastard, it was our father. You’re our brother and we want to get to know you. We know you’re reluctant but get to know us before you decide you’re not interested. You might like us,” Ethan says.

“I don’t even like you,” Tara snorts.

Mel looks at me, and even though she’s not talking, I know what she’s telling me with her eyes. She wants me to give them a chance.

“You better like me after all the drama you’ve brought to my life,” Ethan says to his fiancée.

“The drama *I*’ve brought to *your* life?” Tara asks, eyes wide while she turns to me and Mel. “Meanwhile I’ve talked to his ex-wife three times today.”

“Are you two friends?” I ask her.

“No,” Tara and Ethan say at once.

“The therapist is the one who suggested Lindsay contact you about

Vincent.” Ethan does his best to defend himself. “And thank goodness because I sure as hell don’t want to talk to her.”

“So, I’m in therapy with my fiancé and his ex-wife. Who do you think brought the drama to who?”

“Whom,” Ethan corrects.

“Well, thank you, professor.” He leans over and kisses her softly. “But at least your taste has improved in the wife department.”

He smiles tenderly down at her before kissing her cheek. “It has, hasn’t it?” He turns from her, looks at us, and says, “Just wait until you meet my third wife.”

He bends to kiss her again, but she moves away. Unable to stop myself, a loud laugh escapes, and I cover my mouth with my hand. Tara pretends to be upset, but she can’t stop smiling.

“Come on. You walked right into that one,” Ethan says.

“You did, Tara,” Elizabeth agrees.

The meal continues, and everyone, including me, relaxes. The kids return, begging for dessert, but Ethan tells them to go finish their dinner first.

“We’re planning a wedding too,” Mel says. “We’re already married, but Adam’s mom gave us a guilt trip about seeing her only son married in a church. Adam caved. Ours is the first Saturday of August.” I smile at the story, but my heart constricts at the mention of my mother. “You’ll have to come to ours too.”

Tara and Elizabeth both shriek with excitement at the mention of the wedding. Tara jumps up, runs out of the room, and returns with an iPad. They start talking about dresses and floral arrangements. Tara walks around and shoves the iPad in our faces.

“This is my bridal bouquet.” She swipes and shows several different pictures of floral arrangements, which all look the same to me. But I know better than to say that out loud.

“Ethan was absolutely no help when we looked at flowers,” Tara

complains. “He just sat there and said everything was nice.”

“He actually went with you? Adam hasn’t done a single thing, but I have his mom and she’s amazing,” Mel says.

“I don’t know anything about any damn flowers, Mel,” I say in my defense. “And you always say my taste is horrible.”

“No, I didn’t go to the florist,” Ethan says. “The florist came to us. And so did the baker, and the caterers, and the wedding planner, and everyone else. The wedding dress designer would have come too, but Tara didn’t want me around for that. What was his name again? He was interesting,” Ethan says with a laugh.

When Tara says the name of the designer, Mel drops her fork on the plate.

“Show off,” Tara says.

“He was willing to come to you?” Mel asks.

Ethan shrugs and says, “Isn’t that how it works?” Tara elbows him in the ribs.

“Yes, but I went to him instead. He’s designing my wedding dress.” Mel’s eyes and mouth open at the same time.

“Wow,” is all she says.

“It turns out, no one turns down Ethan Bradford or his fiancée. I told you I was powerful that night you begged me to be your man,” Ethan reminds Tara.

“Oh, please.” Tara waves a dismissive hand at Ethan. “Someone begged that night, but it wasn’t me.”

“Enough, kids,” Elizabeth says. “Mellie, do you have pictures of your dress?” Mellie jumps up and pulls her phone out of her purse. When I try to look over at it, she twists her body so I can’t see.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Tara says. “You’ll have to come to my bachelorette too.”

Mellie pauses and looks at me. She searches my face, probably

wondering if it's okay for her to leave me alone with my brother.

"I'll, uh, show you guys later." She sits down and puts her hand on my lap. "Adam needs me." The girls look deflated, and I feel like an ass. I lift her hand to my lips and kiss it.

"You're only going upstairs, Mel. I promise I'll be alright."

"I told you I'd be here for you the entire time," she whispers.

"I'll yell if I need you. Go talk girly stuff because you know I'm useless when it comes to that. I have too much testosterone."

She stands up, kisses me one last time, and runs out of the room with Tara and Elizabeth, leaving me alone with Ethan for the first time since he barged into my apartment two days ago.

But we're not alone for long. The boys come running back with their empty plates and beg for dessert. Ethan gets up and gives them some cookies and ice cream. When the boys take their dessert and run, Elizabeth returns, searching for her cell phone.

Instead of going back upstairs, she takes Mel's empty seat next to me.

"Do you want dessert?" Ethan asks, and I shake my head no. "So, Tara and Mellie seem to be getting along."

"It looks like it," is all I say, and then I add, "Mel loves all that girly shit."

"Does that mean you two will come to New York for our wedding and some of the stuff before?"

"Don't know why you'd want me there." I shrug and reach for my water glass.

"You're our brother, and now I know that I like you." I'm taken aback and look at him, brows furrowed and confused by his admission. "Your reaction to Mellie's confession. Any man who wants to protect his wife is okay with me. The way you were with Vincent and Ralph when you came here to kick my ass. And whether you like it or not, we're family. We share a father, and I want you in my life."

"Me too." Elizabeth wraps her arms around mine and lays her head on my

shoulder.

I ignore their confession, but I say, “Was he a good father to you two? He didn’t come around much, and when he did, he was never really interested in me. It wasn’t until I was older that I realized I was his dirty little secret.”

Ethan pours himself another glass of wine, drains it, and leans back in his chair. “You think that because we were his legitimate family, he was better to us?” When I nod, he continues. “He wasn’t. He was a philanderer, a gambler, and a liar. I will say that he had moments when he was a good businessman. He was a wizard with numbers and could smell a good investment from a mile away, but that’s it. In his personal life, he was selfish. The only person he was good to was himself. He viewed me as just an extension of him and not my own person. He never took Elizabeth seriously about her education or her career.”

Elizabeth lets out a sad laugh and says, “His advice to me was to find a rich husband. So, no. He wasn’t good to us either. Luckily, our mom was a good woman, but she couldn’t be mom and dad. He treated her horribly too.”

“I’m sorry.” Not knowing what else to say, I turn away from Ethan and look down at the table.

“Neither one of us grew up with a father, Adam, but I had my mother and sister. It sounds like you have a good mother too.”

“I do. And my ma has a big family, so I always had that, including my crazy Uncle Finn.”

“Yes. The procurer of snakes,” Ethan says.

“Of anything I wanted. Looking back, I think he tried to make up for me not having a father, but he went way overboard and spoiled me. I said I wanted a snake, so he went out and got me a snake. And Ma let me keep it because she felt guilty about me not having a father.” Ethan nods at me and seems to be pondering his next words, but I speak again. “When I was around nineteen, I got into some trouble. I got into a fight and was arrested. Ma called our father, and he sent a lawyer who made everything go away, but he

never showed up. All I wanted was for him to show up for me. Just once.”

Elizabeth’s arms tighten around mine.

“I’m not him. Not at all. Neither is Elizabeth. Don’t judge us because of something he did. And we don’t blame your mother for anything. She’s not the only woman he cheated on our mother with. I wish I had known about you twenty years ago. I would have found your mother and begged her to let us know our brother. And had we known about your troubles, we would have come. We would have shown up,” Ethan says.

I look to the stairs, willing Mel to come down because I don’t know what to say to that. I’ve done everything to forget I had siblings, and when they found out about me, I made it clear I wasn’t interested, but they persisted. And they are nothing like I thought they would be.

“I think I would have liked that.” I can see my nine-year-old self being obsessed with my twenty-one-year-old brother. I clear my throat and look up at the ceiling to avoid looking at his face. “I wasn’t allowed at the funeral. We found out he died when a lawyer showed up on our doorstep a week later. He had already been buried. That’s the way he wanted it.”

Ethan sighs and rubs his face. He nods sadly and says, “I’m sorry.”

I open my mouth to tell him it’s not his job to apologize for our father, but I shut up when I hear laughter and footsteps coming down the stairs. When Mel sees me, she stops and looks into my eyes. It’s as if she’s trying to gauge my mood. I wave her over to me and smile at her. I pat my lap, and she sits and presses her warm lips to my temple.

“You okay?” she asks.

“He’s fine,” Ethan tells her. “I didn’t beat him up.”

“As if you could,” I snort.

“But I can. Remember what I told you,” Tara says, putting up one of her tiny fists.

“Okay, maybe you can,” I concede.

She smiles at me and reaches over to take Ethan’s hand.

The boys come running back, begging for more dessert. Ralph follows them this time and he puts his one front paw on Mel's lap. When she scratches behind his ears, he puts his head on her knee.

"My dad already scored thirty points and it's only halftime," Evan says. Ethan grabs a remote and turns on a flat screen TV on the wall.

The announcers are talking, but the camera is on a young woman who is looking down at her phone texting.

"Did you know your sister was there?" Ethan asks Tara.

"I always know where my sister is." Tara's phone lights up as soon as the words leave her mouth. She picks it up and shakes it. "Guess who she's texting?"

"My dad says Vickie drives him crazy," Evan says.

"Yeah? Her sister drives me crazy too," Ethan replies.

"We made the cookies," Vincent says. He and his friend are both standing in front of me. "You look just like my dad." He stares at me.

"He wishes," Ethan says.

"He sure does, baby," Tara chuckles.

"Yeah, you would be so lucky to look like me," I say back. "I'm taller than he is. And younger. And more fit. Oh, and I box."

"Show off much?" Ethan says.

"Can you teach us to fight?" Evan asks.

"Yeah. Everyone should know how to defend themselves. Come on."

Mel gets up from my lap, and the boys follow me to the living room.



Between the dog barking, the boys talking and laughing, and Adam's grunting, the house is alive with activity. Tara and Elizabeth plate cookies and ice cream, and I smile in relief at how amazing tonight has gone. I want this for him, and when I look at Elizabeth, she's wiping tears from her eyes. She did that upstairs too.

"It's going great," she says to no one in particular.

Tara yells that dessert is ready, and Adam comes walking into the kitchen with a boy hanging off each of his biceps.

"A little resistance training before I put this sugar in my body." Both boys giggle when Adam uses them as weights. "Do you have strawberry for Mel? She's the only person I know who eats strawberry ice cream."

I stick my tongue out at him, and he wiggles his eyebrows at me.

"No, but I'll remember that for when you guys come to New York," Tara says. "We'll have a good time. I promise."

"And we'll be here until Sunday, and we want to see you guys every day until we leave. Adam, you can't avoid us anymore." Elizabeth hands him a plate of cookies and vanilla ice cream. She runs a hand through his hair and caresses his face. This time, he doesn't move away. "I would have put a dress on you and forced you to play barbies with me if we had known about you."

The announcement surprises everyone, and we all burst into laughter.

Adam blushes and says, “As if I would ever wear a dress.”

“You have.” I tell the table about how Adam’s mom prayed he would be a girl. When he denies ever wearing a dress, I show everyone the picture of a six-month old Adam in a pink, frilly dress, complete with a matching headband.

“I think the sparkly headband is my favorite part.” Tara giggles uncontrollably at the picture, and everyone else laughs, even Adam.

“Wait until I get my hands on her,” he says of his mother. “But I do look good in pink.”

While we enjoy dessert, I rest a hand on Adam’s lap.

“We’re having a Fourth of July party in Montauk. Not sure where we’ll celebrate Labor Day, but we’ll let you know. And Thanksgiving and Christmas, of course. Tara’s birthday is at the end of November. Ethan’s birthday is on New Year’s Eve, and Tara’s planning a party. Vincent’s birthday is—”

“When is *your* birthday?” Adam asks Elizabeth. She sits there, stunned by the question. Tears pool in her eyes and she croaks, “It’s September nineteenth. Will you come?”

“Elizabeth, Adam and Mel have families too,” Ethan reminds her.

“Yes, but we’ve never had him for any holidays. You can bring all your family. We’d love to meet your mother, Adam. But you’re not pushing us away anymore. You have to listen to me. I’m your big sister,” she says. She stares at him, almost daring him to contradict her.

“Is that how it works?” Adam asks.

“Yes.”

“Since when? You never listen to me, and I’m your big brother,” Ethan says.

“That’s different.” Elizabeth impatiently waves him off. “I’m not about to let a man tell me what to do, brother or not.”

“Oh, but you can tell Adam what to do?” Ethan puts his dessert down and waves Elizabeth off the same way she did to him.

“Yes, he’s the baby,” Elizabeth says.

While they argue about who has the most authority, I grab Adam’s face and search his eyes. I relax when he mouths that everything is good. Unable to help myself, I give him a light peck on the lips.

“I like them,” I whisper in his ear. “No assholery anywhere in this house, stud.”

“I trust you,” he says simply. “Thank you for doing this with me.”

“Where else would your wife be?” He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me to him.

“So,” Tara says, interrupting our moment. She looks around the room and clears her throat. “So, the wedding. You’ll come?”

Adam turns to me, and I nod.

“Mel says yes, so we’ll be there.” They all cheer and even Adam cracks a smile.

“And what we talked about upstairs, Mellie.” Tara lowers her voice and nervously looks at Adam. “I’ll send you the dress and shoes for you to try. Let me know what you want to do after that.” Tara grabs her phone and starts to text.

When she’s done texting, Adam asks, “What other stuff did you guys talk about? Do you mean your shower and bachelorette party?”

“Yes, but since my siblings and Elizabeth will be in the wedding, I thought I’d ask Mellie too.”

“I thought you wanted us there as guests.” Adam turns to Tara, likely for clarification but I put a piece of cookie to his mouth. I’m relieved when he opens wide, and I shove it in.

“Totally, but Mellie fell in love with the dress when I showed her a picture. She’d be doing me a favor because I need someone to escort my brother down the aisle.” His eyebrows shoot up to his forehead. I knew Tara

was up to something when she insisted on showing me the bridesmaid dress. I offer him a big spoonful of ice cream, but he pushes my spoon away.

“Let me get this straight. You want my wife to walk down the aisle on the arm of another man?” Adam asks.

“Not if you’re in the wedding too. I mean, I’ll just have to find someone else for Alan,” Tara says with a secret smile. Adam narrows his eyes at her, but he finally smiles back.

“I see what you’re doing.” When Tara feigns innocence by batting her eyelashes, he says, “I need to watch out for you.”

Tara smiles like she just won a contest.

“We’ll get back to you on the other stuff. We have to look at our schedules, and I don’t know if Mel wants to do all of that, or if she can get the time off.” He turns to me, and says, “It’s up to you, love. I told you I’d trust you with this.”

“I want to do it,” I tell him. “It will be fun, and I really like everybody here.” Our gazes lock, and I hold my breath, wishing and praying I haven’t push him too far.

“I guess we’ll be going to New York a lot in the next two months.” Elizabeth hugs him and kisses his cheek. I get off his lap to give her room. Adam stands too, and this time, he hugs her back. “And yes, we’ll come for your birthday,” Adam says to her. I’m not sure if that’s what causes it, but she starts to cry.

“What? Why Elizabeth’s birthday? Mine is New Year’s Eve. That’s way more fun,” Ethan whines.

“Jesus. Yours too, Ethan,” Adam says, pretending to be annoyed. He waves Ethan over, and the three share a group hug.

Tara looks on with tears in her eyes. She walks around the table and joins the hug, gesturing for me to join them.

“Group hug,” Elizabeth says through her tears.



“Love, the minute we step inside, I’m going to spread you open and slide between those thighs. Right inside that hot, wetness.” I put a hand between her legs and squeeze her pussy. She lets out a shameless moan, and I curse the fact that I’m still driving us home from dinner with my brother and sister.

Just thinking that feels surreal. I have cousins, all of them in Ireland, but I’ve never had that sibling bond. Not like the one Mel has with Jason, or Dennis has with Marlo. I’ll probably never have that kind of closeness with Ethan and Elizabeth, but tonight was a good start. Better than I ever would have thought.

“Drive faster,” Mel murmurs. She runs a hand through my hair and I shiver, right before I curse at stopping for a red light. This is only delaying me getting inside my wife.

Her hand in my hair is driving me insane. I take it and put it right on my very hard cock. It’s begging to be taken out and played with. Mel bites her lower lip while she strokes me over my pants.

“Bad idea,” I say as I remove her hand. “I’ll either jizz in my pants like a thirteen-year-old or crash this car. Neither of those is a good thing.” I lift her hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles.

The light turns green, and I pull through the intersection. It’s late. We

stayed longer than I intended. We stayed a few hours after the boys had gone to bed. We talked about nothing at all, but the conversation flowed, and we laughed. Once I agreed to come to the wedding and all the events leading to it, it was like a fog lifted and with it, all the awkwardness slipped away.

They aren't what I thought. I was expecting Ethan to be like our father, haughty and dismissive. Father always had the air of being better than everyone else, even me and my mom, but Ethan and Elizabeth aren't like that. They were funny and laid back. Ethan was a single father until he met Tara, and they tease each other mercilessly. I was wrong about them.

The rest of the ride home is quiet. It's as if the city knows how much I need to get home because we are not impeded by any more red lights. It takes us half the time to get home as it did to go to dinner.

By the time I help Mel out of the car, my pants are ready to burst from my need to have her. Without a word of warning, I lift her off her feet, and she wraps her legs around me at the same moment her warm lips meet mine.

I devour her, and on instinct, I walk from the detached garage, up the few steps, and through the back door. Thankfully, neither Jason, Alex, or my mother-in-law poke their heads out. I wouldn't stop if they did. I can't. My need to have her is greater than my manners.

By the time I open and close the front door, I no longer have any control. I break the kiss and put her on her feet only so I can rip her coat off and lift her sweater over her head. The red, lacy bra is next. I attack one of her perfect nipples right after, and I sigh in contentment when her fingers go through my hair and caress the nape of my neck.

"Adam," she whispers, so breathless I barely hear her, "you have on too many clothes." When I pull away to unbutton my coat, she reaches for my belt and zipper, and we leave a trail of clothes and shoes on the way to the bedroom.

The door is still off the hinges. We didn't tell the landlord I lost my temper, and I haven't had time to fix it, so the door remains wide open while

I push her down on the bed.

Her legs hang off the side, and I kneel between them and remove the matching red thong.

“Don’t you ever wear those panties without me around.” Once they’re off, I kiss her hipbone and trace my tongue to her pussy. I spread her open, and before my mouth reaches her, I can feel the heat coming from her core. I run my hand over her slit, and she moans my name. She’s wet. I could slide my dick inside her right now and make her scream in ecstasy, but I need to taste her on my tongue first.

I eat her like a starving man who hasn’t had a meal in weeks. She’s like a ripe peach, bursting with sweetness. So much of it that I could eat it for hours, if not days. She trembles underneath me, and with no warning at all, she comes in my mouth, giving me the sweetness that I’m always craving.

“Adam,” she moans. “Jesus.” I know she wants to say more but can’t.

“Move to the middle of the bed,” I order. And once she does, I remove my boxers and toss them to some far corner of the room. “Spread your legs for me, love. I want to see that pussy that just came on my tongue.”

I take a moment to admire her wet cunt. It’s pink, and it glistens with moisture. I ache to taste it again, but my dick will scream in protest if I make it wait any longer. So, I don’t. I climb on top of my wife and slide inside of her. I slide home.

I take her fast. I’m not gentle when I take hold of her hips and keep her in place. I know my handprints will be there in the morning, but I love leaving marks on her otherwise flawless skin.

I stick my head in the crook of her neck and suck at her skin. She widens her legs and starts to grind underneath me. I want to squeeze her to make her stay still, worried that any friction she gives me will push me over the edge, but I can’t. She feels too good. Her moans drive me crazy, and I pick up my pace, swirling my hips in slow circles while I go deep inside her wet pussy. It doesn’t take me long at all to erupt inside of her, washing her walls with my

release. I shudder on top, but she grabs my ass, pushing me deeper into her.

Once I'm spent and have caught my breath, I roll off her body, and she cuddles to my side.



“Remember the other night when you said it took you an entire two days to realize you love being married to me?” I ask my wife while I run my fingers through her hair. She throws a leg over my body and moves closer.

“Mmhmm,” she moans.

“What happened to make you love it?”

“Are you fishing for compliments, Mr. Flynn?” she asks with an eye roll.

“I sure am, Mrs. Flynn. Two years you made me chase you. I've earned every single compliment you give me.”

She runs a hand over my chest and down to my stomach. I let out a little yelp when she bites my shoulder.

“I liked being up here with you. I was freaking out and you were so sweet and patient with me. You took care of me and made me feel wanted. I never felt wanted before. And I knew I was the one who made you marry me. So, I chose to be in the marriage and to be your wife. I was so afraid. Afraid of letting go only to lose you in the end.”

“I didn't think you were going to do it. I just knew you'd freak out the instant we stepped inside that chapel, but you surprised me. And, love, you didn't make me marry you. I wanted to. I've always wanted you. I just wish it hadn't taken us all this time.” She sighs and lays her head on my chest.

“I don't think it would have worked any sooner, Adam. I wasn't ready. I had to learn to like myself first. Had we gotten together before that, we would have crashed and burned.”

“I wouldn't have let us, but I'm glad you're ready now because I don't think I can ever let you go, Mel. And thank you for helping me today. You

say that I take care of you, but you've been taking care of me too. Even more so since Ethan barged in. I meant what I said. I trust you, and if you believe they are sincere, then I'll give them a chance." She throws an arm across my torso and hugs me tight as she peppers my face with kisses.

"I'm happy for you, stud." She climbs on top of me, straddling me and letting that wet pussy coat my lower abdomen.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Now, ride your husband's dick."



“I might be home a little late tonight.” Mel leans in, and I kiss her hard on the lips. “I need a good workout.” I avoid looking at her, fearing she’ll know what I’m about to do, but she gifts me with a smile so beautiful, I forget everything else.

“Okay. I’ll make dinner unless you want to go out.” If everything goes as planned, I should be back around dinner time. If there’s any delay, I’m fucked.

“Does this mean cheapskate Mel is letting us spend money on eating out this weekend? You didn’t protest when I got us coffee. You even ordered a large.” I lift my Starbucks cup and shake it at her. “It must be some kind of miracle.” She lets out a laugh and a blush spreads across her cheeks. “Let’s stay in. We’ll go out tomorrow. Do you think there’s a chance that slutty Mel might come out and play tonight?”

She leans in close again, so close that our lips practically touch. “I think that’s pretty much a guarantee.” She gives me a feather soft kiss on the lips.

I want to deepen it, but I don’t have the time. So, I hop out of the car, walk to her side, and open her door for her. I’m double parked and don’t have time to walk her inside today. I’m on a tight, tight schedule. “I love you.” I do have time to pull her into my arms and give her one more kiss. She walks

to the revolving door, waves, and disappears inside the hospital.

The instant she's no longer in my line of vision, I jump inside my truck and drive through the busy Friday morning traffic. It takes me longer to merge onto I-93 towards Logan International Airport, but I make it and park my car in plenty of time to make my flight.

Ethan offered to send me a private plane for the forty-five-minute flight to New York, but I told him I'd get there on my own. I have no regrets until I squeeze into a middle coach seat between two very hefty older women. They both look at me as if my presence is an imposition, and the person in front of me pushes his seat all the way back, squishing my long legs.

The flight is quick, and less than one hour after taking off, the wheels hit the runway. The driver Ethan sent is standing at the luggage claim holding a sign with my name on it. Since I have no luggage, we walk out and into a warm and waiting Escalade.

So far, everything is right on schedule. I'll meet him at his office, do what I came to do, and be on a flight back to Boston in a few hours, leaving my wife none the wiser. I close my eyes while the driver takes me to his midtown office. I've only been to this city a few times. I've always disliked New York, probably because this was where my father lived with his other family. My eyes stay shut during the entire ride to the office. I know it's loud and congested. That's enough for me.

The traffic is heavy from LaGuardia to midtown. It takes over forty minutes for the driver to pull in front of the sleek building. I text him that I've arrived, careful to only text him and not the group text that Elizabeth started the Sunday after they left Boston. Where she, Mel, and Tara text constantly. Ethan does too. So much so that I wonder when he has time to run his conglomerate. That was the first message I sent, asking when the hell any of them do any work. I'm surprised they've gone this long without texting, in fact.

I follow Ethan's directions, take the elevator to the thirtieth floor and

walk through the double glass doors. Once I get through, a tall man approaches, but he doesn't get a word in before Ethan's office door opens and the man himself walks out. He's in complete contrast with last week's casual attire. He's in a bespoke suit today, and I notice he's gotten a haircut since I saw him five days ago.

He offers me his hand and ushers me inside his posh office where I find Elizabeth and Tara. Elizabeth flies into my arms before I can utter so much as a good morning. I hug her back, and when she pulls away, I kiss her cheek. Right on cue, the tears fall, and she walks away in time for Tara to hug me.

"Well, the prodigal Bradford has finally deigned to come to the Big Apple," the man I saw outside the door says. He offers me his hand and says, "I'm Hunter Franco, the man behind the boss. I run everything up here."

Ethan rolls his eyes, and gestures for Hunter to leave, but he doesn't. He turns to me and says, "You have no idea the amount of stress you caused me."

"Excuse me?" I ask.

Tara lets out a laugh and so does Elizabeth.

"The boss has been twisting himself like a pretzel to get to you. It's about time." He crosses his arms, and when I turn to Ethan, he smirks at me. "You're lucky I didn't come find you myself."

"Hunter has gotten too comfortable since he not only became friends with Tara, but with Tara's sister. I can't get away from him," Ethan says.

"I'll see you Sunday for the family brunch," Hunter says to Ethan. Then he points to me and says, "And you, play nice with your brother and sister." And with that, he walks out of the office and leaves us alone.

"I thought we were keeping this between us," I say to Ethan.

"I knew he was keeping something from me. I've been watching him like a hawk," Elizabeth says.

"I'm short on time," I announce to the room. "Let's do this so I can get back home before Mel finds out I've left the state."

“Okay, but we’re doing lunch,” Elizabeth insists. “I’ve already made a reservation, so no arguments.” I check my watch, and it’s barely ten. The man we came to see is only a few floors down. That will give us enough time for an early lunch. I’ll get home in plenty of time, especially since I told Mel I’d be going to the gym.

“Lunch would be nice,” I tell her, and she relaxes.

“Well, I can’t do lunch today, so I’ll see you in a couple of weeks when you and Mellie come for the shower.” Tara gives me a hug and grabs her coat. Ethan walks her to the door and kisses her goodbye.

“Come find me when you two are done,” Elizabeth says to Ethan. “Unless you want me to come down there.”

“No!” I say far too loudly. Ethan narrows his eyes at me, but he doesn’t say anything. “I mean, we’ll come find you when it’s time for lunch.” That pacifies her. She hugs me again and walks out of the room.

Ethan’s blue eyes turn to me. He approaches, but I stand my ground and look into his eyes. I force myself not to look away, he looks so much like our father.

“I’m going to do the talking.” I nod in agreement. “You can’t hit him, remember?” he adds.

“You’re the boss.” I don’t think he buys my quick acquiescence. His eyes narrow again, and he takes a step closer, but he nods and gestures for me to follow him to his private elevator.

We go down four floors, and the second we step into the suite, the receptionist lets out a loud gasp and drops the phone she had to her ear. She stands and stammers, “Mr. Bradford, is there, uh, how can I help you, sir? I had no idea you were stopping by today.”

She visibly swallows and starts to look at something on her computer screen.

“What’s your name?” Ethan asks.

“Mikayla Greene, sir.”

“Mikayla, I’m here to see Kent James.”

She looks at her computer screen and says, “I don’t see anything on his calendar.” She’s brave, this one, but the look Ethan gives her makes her take a step back. Her eyes dart from Ethan to me. She blinks twice when she sees my face.

“I don’t need to make an appointment,” he says.

“Yes, sir. He’s in his office.” She points to a door at the end of the long hallway. Ethan doesn’t bother to say thank you, and I follow him through the rows of cubicles until we get to his office.

He bursts through the door without knocking, and the noise startles the asshole so much that he drops his coffee cup in his lap.

“Fuck!” He jumps out of his chair, grabs a stack of napkins, and dabs at his crotch. The hot coffee is the least of his problems.

“James,” Ethan says. He drops the napkins and finally looks up. He swallows and takes an involuntary step back. I look at the fucker. He’s about six feet, and he looks like he works out. I picture him trying to intimidate my wife. I look down at his large hands and imagine them on her. He’s lucky that hole puncher was there because if it wasn’t, and he had succeeded in hurting Mel, he’d already be dead.

Mel is no coward. She won’t let anyone intimidate her, but this asshole is much bigger than she is. He could have easily subdued her, and I don’t doubt he would have done just that if she hadn’t hit him across the face.

“Mr. Bradford?” He poses it like a question, but I can sense his nervousness from across the room. He knows something is amiss. He smooths his tie and runs a hand over his face. “Is there something I can help you with?”

I crack my neck. That’s strike one. He’s already said too much.

“I’m here about an employee who worked here three years ago. Melanie Dupree. She was a claims specialist in this department. She only worked here two years and reported to you.”

He swallows again, and a sheen of sweat suddenly coats his large forehead. He walks behind his desk and takes a seat. I watch as he pretends to think about Ethan's question. He has the audacity and the balls to hold a finger up, signaling for us to wait while he searches his computer.

Strike two.

He looks from Ethan to me and loudly clears his throat. I can see he's trying to figure out who I am and why I'm here.

"Ah, yes. Ms. Dupree."

"Flynn," I tell him.

He looks up, confused by my statement. "Excuse me?" he says.

"Her last name is Flynn. She's a married woman now."

"And who are you?"

"I'm Adam Flynn."

He clears his throat and stares back at his computer. "Yes, she was a marginal employee with a temper to boot. After giving her a poor evaluation, she decided she would attack me with a hole puncher. To the face," he adds for emphasis.

Mel's a lot of things, but she's no marginal employee. I've seen her work. I've heard her on the phone. She gives that damn job her all. He looks at us and plasters an arrogant smile on his face. I grimace, and the idiot mistakes it for a smile. He visibly relaxes and sticks the final nail in his coffin. He turns the computer around and shows us a smiling picture of a young Mel with a copy of her last evaluation. "You know how those types are. They want everything handed to them without doing the work." He lets out a laugh, and when neither of us laughs back he starts to cough to mask his embarrassment.

"Those types?" Ethan asks.

"Yes, you know what I'm saying. Women. Everything is politically correct these days, but people like us," he says, gesturing between himself and Ethan, "give them a chance, and it's never enough."

Strike three.

“Enough of this bullshit,” I say to Ethan. In two quick steps, I cross the room and walk behind the asshole’s desk. I pull him out of his chair, lift him off his feet and slam him so hard against the wall that his diploma falls to the floor, and the glass shatters.

“Adam!” I ignore Ethan’s warning.

“You stupid, lying sack of shit.” I let go of his collar long enough to wrap my hand around his throat. He starts to kick, but I’m too close for any of his efforts to matter. His hands go to mine, doing his best to pull them from his neck. I give him just enough pressure to warn him to stop. Lucky for him, he’s smart enough to drop his hands. “She tells a very different story. One where you sexually harassed her and then put your dirty, filthy fucking hands on her. Who do you think I’m going to believe?” I ask him.

“Who are you?” he manages to squeak out.

“I’m her very pissed off husband.”

“And my brother. You sexually harassed my sister-in-law, James,” Ethan says. He’s standing in front of the desk. He crosses his arms, and from my peripheral vision, I can see him shaking his head. “Welcome to the consequences of your own actions.”

“She came on to me,” he lies. This time when I squeeze his neck, I add more than just a little pressure. I squeeze enough for his face to turn purple. When I ease off, he starts to cough, but I don’t let him go quite yet.

“Say one more lie about my wife.” I get closer to his face and say, “I fucking dare you.” I let go of his neck only long enough to grab his jaw and squeeze it with my hand. “Say one more thing,” I taunt. “Now you know what it feels like to be at the mercy of someone bigger and stronger than you.” I let him go and he falls to his knees, coughing and sputtering. I grab him and stand him up. I’m like a crazed madman. I can see Mel, afraid and doing her best to get away from this predator.

I push him against the wall and punch him hard in his stomach. He doubles over, but I stand him up and give him two more solid punches in his

ribcage. He cries out like a gutted animal and falls to the ground at my feet.

Ethan looks at me and shakes his head. He texts something on his phone and slides it back in his pocket. "Alright then. Security will be here to escort you out, James," he says almost as if he's bored with this conversation.

"My," James says before he starts to cough, "lawyer." He winces and starts to wheeze. He sounds like a wounded bear, and I smile, knowing I broke at least two of his ribs.

"Yeah, yeah have your lawyer call my lawyer, but you might want to think twice before you open that door. My sister-in-law isn't your only victim, but it all ends today. You're done," Ethan says. "And don't think that this ends here. I'm going to ruin you." He gestures for me to follow him. We walk out of the office together, shoulder to shoulder while everyone does their best to pretend they're not looking at us.

We don't speak until we get back to his office. Once he closes his door, he turns to me, but there's no anger in his eyes. He walks behind his desk, pulls out a bottle of whiskey, and pours each of us a glass.

"Remember the part about you not touching him?" he asks.

"Two things you should know about me. Nobody fucks with my wife or my mother. I didn't kill him, so I consider that a victory." I down my drink in one swallow.

"I respect that," he says.

I drop myself on the couch in the corner of his office and cover my eyes with my arm. "And I suppose I have a sister now, so nobody better mess with her either. Don't tell her I said that or she'll cry again."

"I'm definitely telling her," he says.



After eating lunch at a fancy Manhattan restaurant, with Elizabeth holding my arm for dear life as we walked in and out of the place, a place I never would have stepped foot in on my own or with Mel, we head back to the BradCo headquarters. I laughed when we sat down for lunch. I imagined Mel's eyes bulging out of her head at the prices listed on the menu.

"I can get a taxi." I'm eager to get out of this city and back home, but nobody seems to be listening to me.

"I have my driver downstairs and I can take him to the airport." Elizabeth and Ethan talk about me as if I'm not in the room. "I can get some more time with him."

"Well, I can't go. I have a meeting with the shareholders the rest of the afternoon," Ethan replies. He seems agitated, and he paces back and forth in his office.

"I don't need you to go," she insists. "And I know you have a meeting that you can't get out of." I'm not sure, but she sounds a little smug, as if she just bested him.

"Oh, why should you get more time with him than me?" Ethan asks.

"He was here with you all morning. Not to mention whatever went on with Kent James."

“Excuse me,” I say, finally having enough of this argument. When they ignore me and continue to argue, I go and lean against Ethan’s mahogany desk and cross my arms. They argue for a few more minutes before they finally notice me. “Are you two done?” I ask. “I’ll grab a taxi, but I need to go now.” I walk to the couch and grab my coat, but as soon as I put it on, Elizabeth wraps her arm around mine.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Let’s go,” she says. “I’ve already taken the rest of the afternoon off. Have fun in your meeting, Ethan.” She says the last part like a taunt as she sticks her nose up in the air.

“Whatever,” Ethan says. “You act like he’s seven. What are you going to do? Take him out for an ice cream cone and the arcade?” Elizabeth looks at me almost as if to gauge my reaction to Ethan’s suggestion.

“No to the ice cream, but yes to the arcade. Maybe next time.”

“And I won’t get you any ice cream, Ethan.” She sticks her tongue out at him as we leave his office, but Ethan follows us to the elevator and hugs me before I get on. Elizabeth wraps her arm around mine again. Neither one of us say a word all the way down or while we cross the lobby and get inside the waiting Maybach.

Mel sends a text to let me know that she just got home and will be working remote for the rest of the day. I text back and slide my phone in my pocket. Elizabeth talks for the next ten minutes straight without taking a breath. She tells me about her and Ethan’s childhood, but I notice she never mentions our father.

“It’s okay. You can talk about him,” I tell her. She nods but stays quiet. I breathe a sigh of relief at the sign saying that the airport is only two miles away. I miss Mel, and I feel guilty for keeping my whereabouts from her, but she wouldn’t have wanted me to come. There’s a part of me that believes she wanted me to do something, otherwise she never would have told us this story. And my Mel has had enough bad things happen to her.

My flight is scheduled to leave on time, and that will get me home in

enough time to get a good workout in. So, technically I didn't lie to my wife. But instead of exiting the highway, we drive past the exit. I look at Elizabeth, but she's looking straight ahead. She's suddenly much too quiet, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Elizabeth." She pretends to be engrossed in whatever she's looking at, but I say her name again.

"Hm?" she asks. She opens her eyes wide, faking a look of innocence.

"Why did your driver pass my exit?" She licks her lips and reaches out to grab my hands.

"Hear me out," she says, and I groan. "We have a house in Sands Point. It's right on the coast and a beautiful property. It's technically yours too since it's a Bradford property." When I start to protest, she puts both hands up. "We don't have to talk about that now. You're here. It's a Friday, and I want you to spend the weekend. Please, Adam."

"Elizabeth," I sigh. I put my head back on the headrest and close my eyes. "We'll be here in two weeks for the shower or whatever the hell it is."

"Yeah, but there will be a bunch of people. I'm hosting it with Tara's sister, so I won't get much time with you." She squeezes my hand, and when I look at her, her eyes fill with tears again. I let out a string of curse words in my head. I can't take a crying woman. "Please. You have to do it. I'm your big sister."

I close my eyes and search for patience. I should have gone with my instincts and taken a taxi. "I can't be away from my wife for an entire weekend. It's been hell being this far away from her today."

"I figured you'd say that. I can have her on the next flight to New York. I have a car on standby waiting to take her to the airport. She can be here in a few hours, and we can spend the weekend together. Please, Adam." She squeezes my hand again, and I cave.

"You're going to get me in so much trouble. She doesn't know I'm here."

"You want me to call her for you?" I smile, but I shake my head no.

“Let me call her.” I pull out my phone, press her name, and put the phone to my ear.

“Hey, stud,” she says. “Miss you. Can’t wait until you get home. Your mom sent me recipes for all your favorite meals. I’m going to surprise you tonight.”

“About that,” I begin. She goes quiet, and I can imagine her brows furrowing while she waits for me to say more. “I’m in New York.”

When she doesn’t speak right away, I pull the phone from my ear to make sure the call hasn’t dropped. “Adam.” Her voice comes out like a resigned statement. “I thought you were going to let Ethan handle it.”

“I like it better when you call me stud. And I did let him handle it. I only watched.”

“Uh-huh. So, you didn’t hit him?”

“Elizabeth is with me.” I think I do a pretty good job of changing the subject. “She was supposed to take me to the airport, but she wants me to stay for the weekend.”

“Oh, okay.” I can hear the disappointment in her voice. “I’ll miss you, but it would be good for you to spend some time with your brother and sister.”

“Not without you, love. Elizabeth is going to send a car to take you to the airport. If you don’t want to come, I’m on the next flight home.”

“I can think of worse ways to spend a weekend. Now I understand why Elizabeth texted asking me for a list of your favorite foods.”

“Thanks, Mel. Pack me a bag too. Don’t forget my sneakers and workout clothes. I’m going to hand the phone to Elizabeth now. I love you.” I have no shame when I blow her a loud kiss through the phone before I hand it to my sister.



Three long hours later the door to Elizabeth’s spacious Manhattan apartment finally opens. Our plans to go to Sands Point imploded. It started with Mel sending a message to the group text confirming the driver had picked her up, and she was on her way to the airport.

The instant Elizabeth noticed it was a group text, she started cursing. When Ethan called her phone not two minutes later, she ignored it, but when he kept calling, she answered, and they had another fight over me.

“Will you come back to Manhattan?” He sounds irritated by his sister. Elizabeth has put him on speakerphone by this point. “If he’s going to spend the weekend, then he should be with all of us. You can’t steal him away and go to Sands Point.”

“Well, it was my idea, Ethan. You didn’t ask him to stay.” She rolls her eyes to the ceiling and sticks her tongue out at the phone while making a face. That got a loud laugh out of me, which only prompted her to do it again.

“Elizabeth,” he says as if he’s doing his best to be patient, “Vincent is spending the night with his mother tonight for the first time in almost a year. I want to stay close in case something happens, and he wants to come home, otherwise, we’d all come there.”

“Fine, but they are staying with me.” She ends the call and tosses the

phone in her purse.

Now, finally, the light of my life has walked through the front door, and everything is right with my world. I couldn't give a fuck where we stay as long as she's here. I practically sprint to the door and lift her clear off her feet. Her hands automatically go into my hair and her legs wrap around me. She tastes of peppermint, and she feels like heaven.

"God, I've missed you," I say against her mouth. "I feel like we've been apart for a month, but it's barely been nine hours."

"I've missed you too, but you should know I'm going to kill you as soon as I get my fill of kissing you." She kisses me again, and I don't care if we have an audience. I kiss my wife and put both hands on her plump ass. Elizabeth clears her throat, and Mel jumps out of my arms. There's a knock on the door and Ethan and Tara walk in without being invited.

"You," Mel says to Ethan. "Come here." She hugs him and gives him a chaste peck on the cheek. "Thank you." He nods, and then Mel hugs Tara.

I don't let go of her hand while she hugs Elizabeth. I can't stop looking at her ass in her tight jeans. Hell, I reach over and put my palm on one of her ass cheeks.

"We're family," Ethan says. "And your husband did most of the work."

"Oh, really?" Mel turns those brown eyes back to me. "You didn't hit him, did you, Adam? What if he sues?"

"Let him," Ethan says. "I had him investigated. You're not the only one he did this to."

"He didn't have to be taken out on a gurney," I tell her. "I left him well enough to limp out."

Mel's eyes widen, but she bites her bottom lip. "Oh?" She subtly squeezes her thighs together and her nostrils flare.

"Yeah," I whisper. I hold my hand out to her, and when she gets close enough to me, she jumps back into my arms and wraps her legs around me. "I only punched him in the stomach."

“Mmhmm. What else did you do? I bet your muscles bulged.” She kisses me deeply, and I kiss her right back, completely oblivious to the other people in the room. A throat clears, but we ignore it

“I might have cracked a rib or two when I punched him again. He fell to my feet like a ragdoll.”

“Oh, Adam. I—” I kiss her, silencing her next words. She moans loudly in my mouth.

“I’m going to go show Mel our room,” I say to Elizabeth. Without waiting for a response, I walk to the bedroom Elizabeth had shown me earlier.

“Our dinner reservation is in two hours!” Someone yells just as I slam the door shut.



I didn't grow up around violence. I avoid violent movies, and until today, I thought I hated it. But hearing my husband tell me how he avenged me has me wound up tighter than a spring coil. I run my hand down his shoulders and upper back and moan at the feel of his hard body. God, this body. That's the first thing I noticed about him way back when I'd watch him workout in the backyard. I wanted to touch it even then. Now, he's my husband and I can touch him whenever I want.

"Show me how you did it," I whisper in his ear.

Without missing a beat, he pins me to the wall, not letting my feet touch the floor.

"I had him against the wall like this." He lowers his voice as he inches closer. "Then, I put my hand around his throat." A massive hand finds its way to my neck, and I let out a loud gasp of surprise. His rough hands are tender but seeing the feral look in his eyes makes my panties wetter than they were just seconds ago. "I squeezed like this." He slightly tightens his hand around me. "But much harder."

"I like it hard," I whisper.

"I'm going to give it to you hard," he promises. "And then I let him go." He drops his hand, and I immediately miss his touch. "He probably thought it

was over, but I caught him off guard and punched him in the stomach like this.” He makes a fist and gently rubs it on my stomach. “He doubled over, but then I pushed him against the wall and gave him two hard hits in the ribs.” He slides his hands against my ribcage and savagely sucks the base of my neck.

“Oh my,” I swoon. He lifts both of my hands over my head and ravishes my mouth while he presses his hard erection against me. “And then what happened?”

“He crumpled and fell to my feet like the bag of garbage he is.” He captures my mouth, and I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him. He spins us around the room and drops me on the bed, causing me to bounce.

“Adam, I’m going to climb you like a tree and ride you like the horniest, sluttiest cowgirl you’ve ever seen.”

He lands on top of me and kisses me senseless.

“Yeah, you will, but only because I say you can. Remember who is in charge in here, Mrs. Flynn.” His palm covers a breast and squeezes. I throw a leg around him and start to grind, but he moves off me and orders me to undress. I happily obey, and by the time I’m naked, so is he. I lick my lips at the sight of his hard dick sticking in front of my face. I reach for it, but he grabs my hands and roughly pulls me to my feet. “Not yet.”

He turns me around and pulls my butt on his dick, and I grind against him. I stop when he grabs an ass cheek and squeezes it for dear life. A hand snakes around my waist and thick fingers spread my pussy lips apart.

“What do we have here?” he whispers against my ear. “Mel’s hot, dripping wet pussy. Who is it wet for, love?” He takes my earlobe between his teeth and bites. “Who?”

“For you,” I say, nearly breathless.

He presses two fingers on my clit and swirls it around. “Who am I to you?”

“My husband,” I moan.

He slaps my ass and bends me down on the bed, leaving my ass in the air. “Yeah, I am. And you can ride this dick, but only after I see this ass bounce.” And he slides inside of me with one long thrust. He takes me roughly and without apology. His hands hold onto my hips as he grinds behind me, swirling his hips and giving me long, deep strokes, all while he rubs my clit. I grab a pillow and bury my face in it to muffle my moans.

Several thrusts later, a slap to the ass, added pressure to my clit and my orgasm shoots through me like a cannon. I scream my husband’s name into the pillow. He gives me no time to recover. He pulls out, slaps my ass again, and climbs on the bed.

He points to his hard dick, still glistening from the remnants of my orgasm. I lick my lips and eagerly slide on. We both moan at the sensation.

“Ride me, cowgirl,” he whispers, and I do.



I snuggle against Adam’s massive chest and sigh in contentment. Like always, he kisses the top of my head.

“Thank you, Adam,” I whisper.

“For what, love?”

“For coming here and righting a wrong that had been done to me. If you had told me, I would have told you no, but it means so much to me that you did this. It means everything.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that,” he says, “You’re my wife, and I love you. I’ll always right your wrongs.” I melt into him and kiss right above his heart. A sudden wave of emotion hits and I start to cry. His hands rub at the base of my neck, and I instantly calm down.

“What is it, love?”

“When it happened, I don’t think my mother really believed me. Not until Jason came and said he believed me. She thought I had screwed up again.

The lawyer Jason hired somehow got the charges dropped, and I moved on, but you never doubted me for a second.”

“You’re my little liar, but you would never lie about something like that.” He chuckles and I bite his chest. “And don’t act like this is one sided. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have you, Mel. I would have continued to push them away but having you by my side through this is the only reason I’m here now.”

I climb on top of his naked body and look into his eyes. “I don’t think so, stud. It might have taken you a little bit longer, but Ethan and Elizabeth were never going to give up. They are too much like you in that regard. I really like them, and I’m happy that you’re giving them a chance.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when I hear a loud pounding on the door, and Elizabeth yells, “Dinner in one hour! Get moving!” She pounds one more time, and then I hear her retreating footsteps.

“She’s bossy, too. But I’m glad you convinced me to give them a chance,” Adam says. I jump off him, and he pouts, but he climbs out of the bed too. “I’ll get our bags while you hop in the shower. And, Mel,” he grabs my hand and pulls me to his body, “that shower is big enough for the both of us.” He slaps my ass as I walk into the adjoining bathroom.



It's unseasonably warm for early April. I let out a big yawn and continue my walk home, so eager to get inside, shower, and climb into bed with my husband. I'll put up no resistance if he wants to order out tonight. I'll even agree to eating in bed.

We didn't leave New York until early this morning. Neither Elizabeth, Ethan, or Tara would let us leave. We spent the entire weekend either at Elizabeth's place or Ethan and Tara's. When Vincent got home from his mother's on Saturday afternoon, he didn't let his Uncle Adam out of his sight. When I told our hosts we needed to leave for a few hours to go see my dad, they sent a car to pick him up and bring him to Ethan's penthouse. Instead of leaving last night as planned, they put us on their private plane at six o'clock this morning. I went straight to the office, and Adam went directly to school.

Another yawn escapes at the same time I feel my phone vibrate. My heart rate picks up and my eyes bulge when I see the subject of an incoming email. I quickly open and read it.

"Adam!" I yell as soon as I get the downstairs front door open. "Adam!" I yell again.

The door to my right opens and Jason sticks his head out. "There she is,"

he says before he takes me in a hug. “Private plane Mellie is what I’m gonna call you.”

I haven’t had a conversation with my brother since he came to my office a few days ago. He tried to talk to me Friday afternoon, but I was already leaving for New York. He tries to put me in a headlock, but I dodge him and scream for Adam again. The door upstairs opens, and heavy footsteps come barreling down the stairs. Seconds later, he’s standing in front of me, shirtless and sweaty. I get away from Jason and wrap my arms around him. He lifts me off my feet and moves me away from my brother.

“What happened?” he asks.

I pull away and see the concern in his eyes.

“I got in,” I whisper.

Understanding dawns on him and he kisses me senseless. “I knew you would.” He spins me around, and I start to laugh.

“Got in what?” Jason asks.

“Law school,” I tell him. “I just got an email saying that I’m in. Northeastern University School of Law.”

“What? I didn’t know you were interested in law.” He tries to pry me out of Adam’s arms, but Adam’s grip tightens until I tell him it’s okay to let me go. Jason hugs me and kisses my cheek.

“I’ll run to the store and get us some champagne, love,” Adam says while he pulls me away from Jason and wraps his arm around my waist.

“I have some here.” Jason steps through his front door and waves for us to come in. Neither of us makes a move to go inside.

“No, Jason.” Understanding dawns, and he nods.

“I’ll bring it upstairs. I’ll bring Alex and the four of us will have dinner. I’ll order something.”



“You sure about this, Mel?” I ask my wife.

She nods at me but I shake my head. I have a bad feeling about this.

“It’s just going to be Jason and Alex. It will be fine.” She gets on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck.

“Okay, but I’m out of patience with your brother. I found some houses I want you to look at. It’s time for us to move out, and no cheapskate Mel. We’re getting your dream house, complete with a swimming pool and hot tub.”

She nods and buries her face in my bare chest. I kiss the top of her head and bask in the feel of my wife in my arms.

“I feel like you need cheapskate Mel now more than ever before.” I can’t help but laugh. She’s dead serious.

“Not when it comes to your dreamhouse, love. You’re going to get everything you want.” She wraps her arms around my waist and smiles.

“Go shower. You’re gross, and I’ll look as soon as they leave. We’ll curl up on Lola together. I’ll even let you feel me up, but what about all the properties your dad left you?”

“I’m going to do a lot more than feel you up. We can look at those too, but they’re not in the city. But if you feel like moving to Aspen Colorado, we

have a house there.” Her eyes widen in surprise, and I shrug my shoulders at her.

“Are you serious?” she asks.

“As a heart attack.”

“I’ve always wanted to learn to ski.”

She slaps my butt as I walk away to hop in the shower.

By the time I return to the living room fifteen minutes later, Alex and Jason are already there. The second I join them in the kitchen, Jason pops open the champagne, and we toast to Mel.

“Tell me about your weekend,” Alex says several minutes later over the Greek food that was delivered.

“It was great,” Mel answers before I can. “Adam’s brother and sister are really nice. We spent a lot of time together. They can’t get enough of their baby brother. Oh, we saw Dad.” She messes my hair the same way Elizabeth did all weekend. She tries to pinch my cheek but I block her hand. “We’re going back in two weeks for her bridal shower.” Mel pulls out her phone and shows our guests pictures of our weekend. Alex snatches the phone from Mel and starts scrolling through the pictures on her own.

“Yeah, your dad couldn’t wait to tell us about his time in the back of the Maybach or his time at the penthouse.” Alex finishes her champagne and refills her glass. “I had the phone on speaker and your mom overheard. I swear all her hair turned white when she found out about Adam.” She pauses as she looks at a picture of Mel in the bridesmaid dress. “Whoa.”

“I don’t know how she did it, but she had that dress waiting for me. Fits like a glove,” Mel says. Then she lowers her voice and tells the room, “It’s haute couture. I went from clearance rack chic to haute couture.” She and Alex both burst into laughter.

“You guys aren’t moving to New York, are you?” Jason asks. His fork stops midway to his mouth while he waits for an answer.

“No,” I tell him. “Our life is here.” Jason takes a breath and resumes

eating, but his eyes keep darting back to Mel. “But we are moving out,” I tell him.

He drops his fork, and it clangs on his plate. “You two don’t need to leave,” he says. “Mom’s apartment will be ready in about five more weeks.”

“Yeah, we do,” Mel tells him. “You know I’ve always wanted to be a homeowner. But don’t worry, big brother, we’re not going far. I want something in this neighborhood.”

“Good.” Jason appears relieved, and some of my irritation with him vanishes. “I like having you around. And Mellie, I’m so sorry. Everything that went wrong between us makes sense now. I feel—” Mel puts a hand up to silence him, but I speak before she does.

“We’re celebrating Mel.” I kiss my wife’s temple, pour more champagne in his glass, and hope he’ll take the hint and change the subject.

“It’s not your fault, Jason. I never intended for you to find out, but I don’t want to talk about it or her or that day anymore. I have too many good things happening right now,” Mel says.

Jason nods but he doesn’t shut up. “She’s agreed to go to therapy.”

Mel rolls her eyes, and so do I. “Okay, Jason.”

“Maybe we can all go,” he suggests.

“Enough,” Mel warns.

“It can’t hurt if—”

“Mel says enough,” I hiss at him. “Drop it. I thought you wanted to celebrate your sister’s good news, not plead your mother’s case.”

“Flynn, I told you before to stay out of it,” Jason says to me.

“Jason, drop it,” Alex says.

“All I’m saying is—”

“Oh my God, just shut up, Jason!” Mel stands up and looks down at her brother. “Some things never change. And don’t come in here and tell my husband to stay out of it. He’s the one person who has always been on my side. Always. Every single time. He listens. He cares and he rights my

wrongs. I love him more than anyone and anything, and if you can't accept that and give him the same respect I give your wife, then we have nothing more to say. You don't need to stand up for me at my wedding. I'm so sick of being the villain in this family. Our mother pits us against each other, but I can never win. I'm the perpetual underdog, and you're her savior."

"I'm not!"

"You are! Because after knowing this, you're still up here making a case for her. She's going to therapy only because of you, not me. Her precious Jason got a glimpse at the ugliness she's always saved for me, and she can't handle that, so she placates you by offering to see a shrink. Why didn't she go ten years ago? Or five years ago? Or last year? Give me a fucking break."

Mel grabs her glass and lifts it, but before she can slam it against the floor, I grab her wrist and take it out of her hand. I put my hand on the base of her neck and gently rub the tension away.

Jason stands and approaches us, but I stand in front of my wife and shake my head at him. "Enough," I warn. "I think dinner's over."

"You don't need to protect my sister from me."

"Obviously, I do."

"Let's go, Jason." Alex stands and grabs her husband's elbow. "You've even managed to make me angry tonight. I told you to leave it alone, but you always think you can fix everything."

She starts to drag him to the door, but he turns back, only to still find me shielding Mel with my body. She wraps an arm around me and puts her head between my shoulder blades.

They open the door only to find Diane standing on the other side holding Little Mel. Addison walks in and raises both arms, and I pick her up.

"The baby needs to nurse." Diane hands the fussy baby to Alex.

"Next time, just text Alex," I tell her.

She ignores me and looks around the place. She reaches the table and picks up the empty bottle of champagne.

“What’s going on here?” she asks. She puts the bottle down and rubs her hand on her thigh.

“Celebrating, Diane,” Alex tells her.

“Oh? What are we celebrating? You didn’t manage to get yourself pregnant, did you, Melanie?” It’s like someone putting a pin inside a balloon. The entire room goes quiet. Alex’s smile disappears and Jason rubs a hand over his face.

“Yeah, I’m celebrating my pregnancy by drinking alcohol, Mother,” Mel says from behind me.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I ask.

Diane looks around the room, and when she’s met with nothing but unsmiling faces, she takes a visible step back. “I just meant that you two are newlyweds. No need to rush anything.” I narrow my eyes at her, but I hold Mel in place when she tries to walk around me.

“When me and Adam decide to start a family is our business,” Mel practically growls at her. “Not that you ever need to worry about any kids I might have.” I catch her stare and nod, confirming what my wife just said, but I don’t miss the hurt look on her face. She doesn’t stay down for long, though.

“What the hell do you mean by that, Melanie? You’re going to punish me until the day I die, aren’t you? You’re going to keep my grandchildren from me?”

Mel manages to step aside and starts to approach Diane, but I reach out and hold onto her wrist. “If you think for a second that I will allow you to infect my kids—”

A hand slams on the table, causing Mel to jump in shock. “Can we have five goddamn minutes without a fight?” Jason says. “Mother, enough! Mellie got into law school and you’re going to be happy for her and not dump any more bullshit on her shoulders. In fact, go back downstairs.” When Diane doesn’t make a move to leave, Jason points at the door. “We’ll see you

downstairs.”

She purses her lips and leaves without another word.

“I’m sorry, Mel—”

I hold my hand up to him and shake my head. “You’re done here. Good night.”

“Flynn, I can talk to my sister,” he says, but his voice is missing the usual malice he keeps just for me.

“Not tonight you can’t. You’ve said enough.”

He nods and holds out his arms for Addison. As soon as he takes her, they leave and Mel breathes a sigh of relief. I pull her into my arms and press kisses on her forehead.

“I regret telling him about law school.”

“I’m so proud of you, Mel. So fucking proud.”

She pulls away and looks into my face. “You’re my person.”

“You’re *my* person,” I say back.

“We’ve never talked about it, but you do want kids, right?”

I give her my brightest smile and put a hand on her belly. “I’ll get you pregnant right now, love. Flood that womb with the potent Flynn sperm.”

She bites her bottom lip and takes a step closer to me. “I didn’t offend liberated Mel, did I?”

She kisses me softly after wrapping her arms around my neck. “Quite the opposite. Liberated Mel is very turned on. That actually sounds kind of sexy, but maybe we can practice for the next couple of years.” She jumps into my arms, and I spin her around.

“Whatever liberated Mel wants.”

“Liberated Mel is about to leave the building. Slutty Mel is on her way.”

“She’s my favorite.”

Her laugh follows us while I run to the bedroom.



“I’m going to fall.” My husband ignores my complaint. In fact, he snorts, and I can imagine his eye roll. He has his hand firmly on my elbow, and I know there is no way in hell he would let me fall. I reach up to adjust the blindfold, but he swats my hand away.

“Almost there. Stop trying to peek.” I can hear noise and talking while we walk through a room. The enticing aroma of food gives me at least one clue, but I don’t know why he would blindfold me just to take me to dinner. “And you’re killing me in that dress. If a man checks out your ass tonight, he’s going to lose an eye.” I bite my bottom lip at the thought of Adam losing his shit over someone checking me out. “You like the sound of that, don’t you, love.” His free hand reaches down and cradles an ass cheek. I knew he’d go crazy for this dress. It’s a form fitting black sheath that just touches my knees, with a long zipper in the back. It hugs all my curves, showcasing my ass and hips.

“Right this way, Mr. and Mrs. Flynn.” Being called Mrs. Flynn by the strange voice sends shivers down my spine. We’ve only been married a few months, and I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t Mrs. Flynn. I don’t want to remember.

Adam tells me to be careful while we cross a threshold, then he stands

behind me and starts to fiddle with the blindfold. “I’m using this on you tonight,” he whispers so that only I can hear. He removes the blindfold and orders me to open my eyes.

I blink twice before I focus on our family and friends. Everyone stands and shouts congratulations. The next few minutes are a blur of hugs and kisses.

“Smart ho,” Ananda whispers to me when it’s her turn to hug me. “I told you I didn’t make friends with basic bitches. Love you, girl.”

I hug her tighter, and tears stream down my face.

Once I’ve hugged everyone, two servers arrive with trays of champagne and platters of appetizers. Everyone laughs and talks at once.

“Presents!” I jump in excitement, and I point to the gift table. “We have presents.” I rub my hands together in anticipation.

“*You* have presents. I didn’t get into law school.”

“You look happy, Mellie,” Jason says, approaching us.

I wrap an arm around his and lay my head on his shoulder. The day after our last fight, Jason sent a bouquet of chrysanthemums and hydrangeas. Molly was there when they arrived, and she explained that those flowers represent a sibling bond. Chrysanthemums represent faithfulness and hydrangeas emotions for your siblings. He’s been busy working long hours, and we haven’t had a chance to talk, but the flowers meant a lot.

“I am,” I admit.

“So, was that you playing hard to get with Flynn all this time?”

“I wasn’t ready until we went to Vegas,” I tell him. “Stop giving him shit, Jason. I mean it.”

“If you’re happy, I’m happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. I’ll make things right with Flynn.” I can tell he wants to say more, but he closes his mouth once Molly approaches. He says a quick hello to her and leaves to join Alex.

“I’m so proud of you, Mel.” She wraps her arm around mine. “You and Adam make me so proud.” She adjusts the necklace she gave me. “But I still

want my grandbabies.”

“You’ll get them,” I promise her.

We talk for several more minutes, and we’re both on our second glass of champagne when the door to our private room opens and Ethan, Tara, and Elizabeth walk in like they own the place. I don’t know how they do that, but Ethan and Tara dominate whatever room they walk into. Everyone stops talking as they cross the room and approach. Molly turns, and when she looks in Ethan’s face, her mouth flies open, and her pale skin turns whiter. Her hands fly to her mouth, and I can only imagine she’s picturing Adam’s father when she looks at Ethan. Adam notices and quickly approach.

“Surprise,” Elizabeth says while she practically jumps into Adam’s arms.

Ethan shakes his head at his sister, but he and Tara congratulate me.

“Ma,” Adam says, “this is Ethan, Elizabeth, and Ethan’s fiancée, Tara.”

Molly’s face is still ashen, but she shakes everyone’s hand even though she never takes her eyes off Ethan. Ethan kisses the back of her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Flynn,” he says.

Molly swallows and nods, removes her hand from his, and walks away. Adam’s eyes follow his mom, and I gesture for him to follow her.

“Go talk to her,” I whisper to him.

He kisses my temple and leaves my side.

“You guys didn’t have to come,” I tell Ethan and Elizabeth. “We’re seeing you next weekend for the shower, and you sent me those beautiful flowers. I told Adam not to make a big deal about this.”

“We kinda like you guys,” Ethan says.

“And Ethan and Elizabeth are obsessed with Adam,” Tara jokes. “He’s all they talk about now. And you too.”

The surprises don’t stop. My dad walks in, and he wraps me in his arms. The room is alive with laughter and chatter. I look around for Molly, and she’s back to being relaxed. But it’s my turn to be alarmed when I see Molly and my mother engaged in conversation.

Adam returns and puts a hand on my waist. “Did you invite my mother?” I whisper to him.

“I didn’t, but she thanked me for inviting her. Do you think Jason lied and told her she was invited?”

“She didn’t come with them, so I don’t’ think so. He better not have. She’s just putting on an act, but I don’t care. I love my party so let her stay.” I wrap my arms around his neck. He bends down and rubs his nose against mine. “And I love my husband.” The last word leaves my mouth just as our lips touch.

The entire room erupts in cheers and catcalls. I pull away, embarrassed, but Adam doesn’t seem to care. He takes my hand and leads us to a table with our siblings and our mothers.

“Did you plan this party?”

“Ma and Alex helped. And by helped, they did everything, but it was my idea.”

“I love it.”

He grabs a tray from a passing server and puts a shrimp to my mouth.

“Hey!” a loud voice yells. “Adam!” Uncle Finn screams as he walks to our table. “Uncle Finn is here! Adam! There you are!” He comes in holding the hand of a woman who appears to be in her sixties. She’s thin and about three inches taller than he is, with long blonde hair that touches her waist. “Meet my lady friend, Helen. This one doesn’t smell like cat piss.” He tries to whisper the last sentence, but he talks loud enough for everyone to hear. Helen blushes, but she shakes hands with everyone at the table.

“This is my meshugana nephew Adam and his wife Mel.” He walks to Adam and messes his hair. “Mel is on her way to the Supreme Court.” Uncle Finn looks around the table. “And who are these pretty ladies?” he asks of Tara and Elizabeth before kissing both their hands. But when his eyes land on Ethan, his happy demeanor vanishes. To Ethan’s credit, he offers Uncle Finn his hand.

“I know who you are. Your father was a real son of a bitch, do you know that? You have some nerve after all the shit he did to my sister and nephew.” The entire room goes silent. Adam jumps out of the chair and grabs Uncle Finn’s elbow. “Adam, I told you not to talk to these people. I should punch him in the nose.”

“Finn, enough. He’s not his father,” Molly says.

“Fire? What fire?”

“Father! He’s not his father,” Molly yells. “Put on your damn hearing aid.” She turns to Ethan and says, “I’m sorry about my brother. I’m really happy Adam has a relationship with his siblings. You just look a lot like him, you know.” She pats Ethan’s hand.

“So does Adam,” Ethan says.

“Yeah, but half of him belongs to my sister, so we only focus on the good half, not the scumbag half like you people.” Uncle Finn scoffs the rest of his statement.

The entire room goes deathly quiet while they watch the scene. Ethan doesn’t appear phased, but Elizabeth’s pursed lips and flared nostrils tell me she’s not going to take this confrontation as well as Ethan.

I catch Ananda’s eye and tilt my head toward Uncle Finn. Like the true friend she is, she jumps out of her seat and runs over to us. “Uncle Finn, my favorite uncle.” She wraps an arm around Finn’s. His scowl drops and his face transforms into a smile.

“My meshugana friend.” Finn lets out a big belly laugh. “Come meet the new woman in my life. Those pictures you took of me worked. She can’t seem to get enough of me.” He claps his hands together once and pulls Ananda away from the table.

Molly’s shoulders visibly sag in relief when her brother leaves. She looks at Ethan and Elizabeth and smiles fondly. “I’m sorry about my brother, but he’s very protective of Adam. I’m really happy you two have reached out to him.”

“Look, we understand, but like you said, we’re not our father. We have a brother, and we want to get to know him. That’s it,” Ethan says.

“And we’re not going anywhere,” Elizabeth adds. Her eyes are still shooting fire in the direction of Finn. “So, some people are just going to have to suck it up.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam says to Ethan and Elizabeth. “He’s all bark, really. He’s probably already forgotten it.”

Uncle Finn is now laughing with Helen and Ananda, seemingly unbothered by the ugly scene he caused.

“He’s not wrong. Our father was a son of a bitch,” Ethan says.

“Enough about him. Come on. Let’s go to the bar and get a real drink.” Adam turns to me and says, “You going to be okay for a few minutes, Mel?”

I nod at him. He leans down and kisses my temple before he walks away with Ethan and Elizabeth. I watch Adam’s fine ass in those black pants until he walks out of the room and out of my sight. I bite my lip at the thought of getting him undressed tonight. In fact, we were late leaving the house because I couldn’t get enough of him earlier.

“Girl, you’ve got it bad.”

“Hm?” I say to Tara, who is looking at me, smiling coyly.

She wraps her arm around mine. “I know that look.”

“I’m sure you do,” I tell her, and we both burst out laughing. “I’m happy to see you guys, but you really didn’t have to come. We’re seeing you next weekend.”

“On a normal day, Ethan and Elizabeth are extremely family oriented, but now they have a brother and sister-in-law they are obsessed with. You could not keep them away if you tried.”

I gesture for her to sit, and I take the chair next to her. “Tell me about that. How did they find out about Adam?”

“Elizabeth hired someone to investigate their father. The girl must have a sixth sense. She was convinced he was hiding something. Ethan was at my

family's house last year when Elizabeth showed up and dropped the news on him, but Adam was so damn stubborn. He's just like his brother and sister that way. I'm happy it worked out."

"Me too. I'm happy for Adam, and between us, he loves the attention they give him."



"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Jason holds my elbow and pulls me to the other side of the room. Tara and Alex seem to be engrossed in conversation, so I let him take me away. As we're crossing the room, our mother laughs at something Molly says. As if she can sense my eyes on her, she looks up at me. To the unfamiliar person, she seems happy. She's in a red dress and has her hair in loose curls. She offers me a tentative smile.

"Did you invite her?" I ask Jason. My eyes don't leave my mother's, but I don't smile back. Her show of bravado slips, but in true Diane Dupree fashion, she juts out her chin and continues her conversation with Molly.

"I wouldn't do that."

"Really, Jason? Just a few days ago you tried to give me a guilt trip because she's suddenly interested in therapy."

He pulls me into an empty corner, and I cross my arms.

"It wasn't my intention to give you a guilt trip. I was trying to fix this. Fix our family."

"Our family isn't broken, Jason. My relationship with my mother is, but I don't need you to fix it. It is what it is. It hurts, but I've learned to deal with it."

He nods, but his eyes are sad. He opens his mouth, but he closes it and subtly shakes his head. He seems to ponder his next words. He takes a deep breath and says, "My impulse is to fix things, Mellie. That's how I'm wired, but I realize that this thing between you and Mom is not my mess to fix. It's

hers. She's the only one responsible, so as hard as it is, I'm going to leave it alone. I'm sorry for what I said last week, and I'll apologize to Adam too. If you ever want to talk about it, I'm here. But this is your night, and I don't want to dredge that shit up." He sighs and takes both of my hands. "I'm really proud of you. I had no idea you were interested in law school, but I'm so happy you're pursuing this. You are going to do amazing things." He pulls me close, puts an arm around my shoulder, and kisses my cheek. "Love you, sis. And just so you know, if you guys move out, we'll just follow you. Alex and I want one more baby, so we're thinking of finding a single-family home. We need more space."

"Love you, too, but you should know you probably won't be able to afford whatever neighborhood we move to."

He snorts, and we both burst into laughter. He wraps me in his arms and a wave of emotion hits. A few tears fall, and because I want to annoy him, I wipe my face with his shirt. He lets out an exaggerated gasp and puts me in a headlock like he used to when we were kids. Back then, I could never get out of it, and that hasn't changed. He tightens the hold, and each time I try to punch him in the stomach, he moves. "You still punch like a girl." He spins me around in a circle while messing my hair.

"You ass! Do you know how long it took me to do my hair?" He runs a hand through it, making a bigger mess of it. "Let go."

"You're still smellie." He laughs and reaches for a drink from a passing server, but he never lets me go. I start to laugh and throw more air punches. At least until Adam steps back into the room with Ethan. His eyes narrow when he spots us. He looks absolutely ridiculous walking into the room holding a glass with a pink cocktail.

"Dupree, hands off my wife or I'm going to put my hands on you."

"Your wife has been my sister for almost three decades." To prove his point, he messes my hair again before he finally lets me go. "Deal with it."

Adam scowls at Jason, who does an exaggerated scowl back. He even

growls at him, but he offers Adam his hand. Adam takes it, and Jason leans in and gives him a half hug before he walks away.

Adam hands me the pink drink. “I saw the bartender make this for someone else and thought you might like it. It looks like the type of girly stuff you drink.” Ethan lets out a snort at Adam’s words, but I take the drink from my husband and give him a quick kiss in gratitude.

“Thanks, stud.” I offer him a sip, but he makes a face of disgust after tasting it. “Did you three have a nice chat?” Elizabeth smiles and Ethan nods.

“We did.” Elizabeth steps between me and Adam and wraps an arm around mine. “We’re leaving around noon tomorrow but want you to come spend the night with us. Vincent’s there with the nanny and he would love to see you.”

“Sure. Sounds fun, and I want to talk to you and Tara about being in the wedding. Vincent can be a ring bearer with Addison, and we’ll find something for Ethan.”

Elizabeth gasps in surprise before all the words are fully out of my mouth. “We’d love to,” she says right before she hugs me tight. “Thank you,” she whispers in my ear.



While dinner is being served, Adam pulls me aside and says, “By the way, Elizabeth is like a pit bull with a bone about the damn holidays, but I told her we haven’t talked about them yet. I’ll let you decide which ones we spend with them, but I want us at home at Christmas. Ma goes to Ireland around every Thanksgiving, so we can go to New York, but only if you want to. The only thing I want is for us to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas with Ma at home, preferably in our new house.”

I quickly agree, but my eyes narrow when I see Elizabeth not only chatting with Molly but laughing. I nudge Adam in the ribs and point in their

direction.

“I’ll give your sister five minutes before she invites your mother for all the holidays for the next twenty years. I’ll placate her and agree to Thanksgiving, but she won’t be satisfied with just that. I love the idea of Christmas at home. I might even host.” I look around the room and lower my voice and say, “What the hell are we supposed to give them for Christmas? Oh my God! What about a wedding gift? They’re filthy rich. You couldn’t come from a regular family?”

He looks down at me and furrows his brows. When I shrug, he laughs and subtly slaps my ass. “Thank goodness I have a wife to worry about that stuff for me. Just make sure you leave cheapskate Mel behind when you shop for them.”

Tina arrives, holding a big gift bag.

“You call me any time to talk. I know a little something about law school.”

“Hey, aren’t you the one who gave my wife legal advice about ending our marriage?” Tina laughs and takes Adam into a hug. She kisses both of his cheeks. “I only invited you to rub our happiness in your face.”

“Well, the joke’s on you because I knew there would never be a divorce. Now, what’s this I hear about you being a secret gazillionaire? I should bill you for the legal advice I gave to your wife.”



Mel's body is pressed close to mine. Her head is on my shoulder and every few seconds, I reach over and feed her a spoonful of cake mixed with strawberry ice cream. Between bites of dessert, I squeeze her thigh. She knows my touch is a promise of what's to come.

Dinner was filled with laughs and the best Italian food in the city. My wife glowed all night. She laughed, fed me food from her plate, and kissed my cheek so often that Jason playfully told her to knock it off. Diane's presence at our table did not take an ounce of joy away from her. She barely talked to her mother at all, but Diane was so busy playing the proud mother for Ethan, Tara, and Elizabeth, she didn't have the chance to annoy Mel.

"You enjoying your party, love?"

"Best party ever."

"Just wait until you graduate." I lean down, kiss her forehead, and offer her another spoonful.

"Tell me something, please. Is my daughter no longer able to feed herself?" William's eyes light up at his own question.

"Adam kind of spoils me." I give Mel another spoonful and make a show of wiping her mouth.

"You deserve it," Tara says from across the table.

“Says the original spoiled rotten girl,” Ethan says to Tara.

“Oh, please. You don’t spoil me.”

“Honey, that diamond necklace you’re wearing says otherwise,” Tina says, and the entire table erupts in laughter.

“How do you know he gave it to me?” Tara challenges.

“Who else would put up with you? You’re awful.” Tara tries to push him away, but he wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her closer. When he kisses her temple, she leans into him and sighs at the contact. “I’m doing the world a favor. I keep her close so that no one else has to deal with her.”

“Oh, is that it?” Tina asks with a laugh.

“How about one more round of champagne?” I flag the waiter down and ask for champagne for the remaining guests. “I hope it’s to your liking, Diane. I think you mentioned something about a champagne lifestyle once. Or do you prefer beer? I can’t remember exactly.” Mel puts her face in my bicep and giggles. My eyes light up when I see a look of irritation cross Diane’s face, but she only offers a fake smile.

“I never knew I deserved to be spoiled,” Mel says. I offer her another spoonful, but she shakes her head. She smiles at me, but it’s a tentative one. She reaches over and runs a hand through my hair, and her eyes fill with tears.

“Happy tears,” she whispers.

“I have the feeling that Mellie and Adam have an epic story,” Tara says.

“She told us Adam was her neighbor.” After making that statement, Elizabeth looks at us and says, “But I know there’s more.”

“My daughter has been very tight-lipped about their courtship. All I know is, I came to town, and she announced she was married,” Diane says.

Mel’s lips purse, but she doesn’t give her mother her usual sharp retort.

“Oh, did Mellie tell you that herself, Diane?” William asks. Diane ignores William, so he says, “Did I tell you how nice you look tonight?” The entire table quiets down.

“Thank you.” Mel’s mother runs a shaky hand through her hair and smiles.

“Your stylist did a better job of hiding your horns this time.” I try to stifle my laugh but can’t. “And red is definitely your color. Yours and Satan’s.”

“Do we have to show everyone our dysfunction?” Jason asks.

“Where’s your much younger girlfriend, William? Did she leave you already?” Diane asks. “Every woman eventually leaves you, don’t they?”

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you? You’d love for me to be as miserable as you are. But, no, she’s working. You remember what it’s like to have a job, don’t you? But I’ll tell Jennifer you asked for her. You’ll see her soon, though. She’s doing Mellie’s hair for her wedding. And I left you, sweetheart. Let’s not rewrite history.”

“Dad’s on fire tonight,” Mel whispers in my ear.

“Remind me never to get on your dad’s bad side, Mellie,” Ananda says.

Tara looks around the table, her mouth hanging open in shock.

“I have a job now, thank you very much, William. Do you want to tell everyone how I supported you when—”

“It’s Mel’s night,” I announce, cutting off whatever Diane was going to say.

She exhales and sits back in her chair. The waiter returns with our champagne. I make sure to hand a glass to Diane. My eyes lock with hers, and when she smiles at me, I don’t return it.

“Don’t change the subject. We want to hear the story about you two,” Elizabeth insists.

“Oh, well, all everyone needs to know is—” Mel abruptly stands up, cutting me off in the process. She runs to the front of the room. I raise my eyebrows and catch her eye, and she winks at me. I lean back in my seat, eager to see what she does next. Mel does not like to be the center of attention.

“Speech!” Ananda yells.

We've been here for hours, and no one was shy about taking advantage of the open bar. Everyone quiets down and waits. A bout of shyness hits Mel, and she looks down at her feet, but she soon straightens up.

"So, hi." She lets out a nervous giggle.

"Hey, smellie," Jason yells.

"It's Melanie, loser. Melanie Flynn to be exact."

The entire room cheers, including me, who yells, "Tell them, Mel!"

"What did she say? Flint? Flint Michigan?" Uncle Finn asks the room.

"So, I want to say something. A few months ago, I married the most amazing man." My heart starts to thump, and the drink in my hand only makes it halfway to my mouth. "It was unconventional. We went to Vegas for my dear friend's wedding, and we got married ourselves."

All the hushed murmuring in the room stops. "So, what does a new bride do when she wakes up next to her new husband?"

"Oh, God. We don't want to know," Jason shouts.

"Well, this one freaked out, ran out of the room, and got on the next flight out of Vegas. I convinced myself he'd wake up and regret it. And I just couldn't face that. But he came for me and no matter how hard I fought back or pushed him away, he was there, fighting for me. Fighting for our marriage."

"That's probably because he begged you to marry him," Ananda yells.

I smile at that and wait for Mel to agree or to make a joke, but she surprises me. She catches my eye and smiles. "I'm going to make a confession, stud." She winks at me and turns back to the guests. "So, I'm going to tell everyone something that only Adam knows. He didn't ask me to marry him. *I* asked *him*. Actually, I threatened to marry him and tie him to me for life. It was a moment of complete madness. Do you ever want someone so badly, you think you'll go mad if you don't have that person? I did. He was mine. From the moment I first saw him working out in the backyard, he was mine. And I was his. I was done fighting it. I've never felt

so much acceptance. Never had someone who is on my side through everything. I could set this room on fire, and he'd support me."

"Let's not try that, darling," my mother says.

"My point is, I have the best husband. And yes, I asked him to marry me because I wanted him, so I got him. It wasn't conventional or planned, but it's still the best thing I've ever done." All the women in the room cheer. "That's just a small part of our story. The other parts are just for me and Adam. I love you, stud." She walks back to our table. I stand up and she runs into my arms.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love liberated Mel?" I kiss her until she's breathless.

EPILOGUE



“What do you think?” Jennifer stands behind me, and I smile at my reflection for the hundredth time today. I’ve been smiling since I woke up this morning in Adam’s old bedroom. All the women spent the night at Molly’s last night after leaving the rehearsal dinner. The men, including Uncle Finn, went to Ethan and Tara’s place in the city. “I can add a little baby’s breath.”

It’s an elegant, loose side braid. She weaves baby’s breath down the sides and pulls out a few loose tendrils.

“You look beautiful, darling.” Molly starts to cry again. She puts a hand on my bare shoulder. “I trust my son. Always have. And look at what he did. He found the perfect woman for him. Don’t make me wait too long for my grandbabies.” She manages to mention grandchildren in every conversation lately.

The door to the bedroom opens and my four bridesmaids walk in, wearing matching cornflower blue dresses. The dresses are strapless with a sweetheart neckline. They cinch at the waist and have a long slit on the side.

“Oh my God, you’re so beautiful, Mellie.” Alex touches my loose braid, and our eyes catch in the mirror. “Jennifer, you’re amazing,” Alex whispers, probably to ensure my mother doesn’t hear. Molly invited my mother here last night, and to my surprise, she agreed to spend the night despite knowing

that Jennifer would be here too.

“She is,” Tara agrees.

Ethan and Tara invited not only Molly and Finn to their wedding but Jason and Alex too. They extended invitations to my dad, Jennifer and my mom. No one turns down a wedding invitation from a billionaire. I was kept so busy as part of the wedding party that there was no time for me to worry about my mother’s presence.

I can’t say that our relationship has changed. I’ve been so busy these past few months with my wedding, work, and preparing for law school next month that I’ve had no time to dwell on our relationship or lack thereof.

“Everyone looks beautiful,” I say while looking at my reflection. Jennifer’s done an amazing job with everyone’s hair and makeup. My mother’s the only one who went to her own stylist.

As if she can hear my thoughts, she walks in holding Addy’s hand.

“Look, Auntie. I’m pretty.” Addy spins in her dress. Her crown of flowers falls off of her head and Alex runs to pick it up.

My mother walks over and stands behind me, and looks at me through the mirror. She looks sad. Her eyes suddenly fill with unshed tears and she dabs them with a tissue.

“You look beautiful, Melanie. You really do.” She put a hand on my shoulder, and for once, I don’t cringe at her touch.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say to her.

“Can I talk to you alone for a minute?”

My stomach drops. I’m minutes away from marrying Adam. The last thing I need is to fight with her. Everyone in the room freezes. I’m sure Tara and Elizabeth have their suspicions about me and my mother, but they’ve never asked.

“Now’s not the time, Diane. This is Mellie’s day. You’ve had years. You don’t need to talk to her today of all days.” Alex’s words have bite. My mother visibly cringes. Her relationship with Alex never recovered. Alex is

not shy about taking sides, and she's taken mine.

"It's almost time to go. The limos are here," Molly says.

"Please. I won't upset you. I promise." I nod once, and everyone else clears the room. I finally turn around and look at my mother. She smiles again, but it's marred by sadness. She takes a small tentative step closer and holds out a hand to me. I can tell she's holding her breath while she waits for me to take it. I reach out and take her hand. Once I do, she lets out a sob.

"Mom, let's not do this right now. I only want to be happy today."

"I know. I know." She dabs her eyes again. "You're such a beautiful bride. Such a beautiful young woman, and I know that's despite me. And it's your wedding day, so I don't want to make this about me. I just want you to know that I'm happy for you, and that I'm proud of you. I'm so proud to have you as my daughter. I know I haven't shown it, but I am. I'm working all of that out, and it's a lot to unpack, Mellie. I also want you to know that I tried before. Nine years ago, I saw a therapist. You were away at college and I realized the damage I had done. You never came home. You never called. I'm not blaming you for any of that. You didn't call or come home because of me, but I wasn't ready to hear it back then. I wasn't ready to face what I had done, but I am now."

She takes my hand and puts it to her lips. When my eyes fill with tears, she grabs another tissue and gently dabs them dry.

"Thank you for saying that. That means a lot. Especially today," I say. I grab the tissue and wipe the corner of my eye, careful not to disturb my makeup.

"And Adam loves you so much. I'm so happy that you have that in a partner. That's what you deserve. That's all a mother can want for her child." She smiles wide, and for the first time since she walked in, the sadness is gone. I smile back at her, and she lets out a laugh. She takes a step closer and takes me into a hug. It's quick, and when she pulls away, she kisses my cheek.

“Thank you, Mom,” I say to her. “I think we better go before Adam comes looking for me. I don’t want to miss making my grand entrance.”

There’s a knock on the door, and my father walks in. He stops mid-step when he sees me. He opens his arms. I walk into them, careful not to get too close and ruin my makeup.

“The most beautiful bride in the history of the world.” He tucks my arm in his and escorts me out of the room where everyone is waiting. Tara grabs my hand and walks with me.

“I like Adam and all, but I’m so glad you’re part of the package,” she tells me.

I must admit that I love being part of Adam’s family. I’ve gotten very close to Elizabeth and Tara. Their lavish lifestyle is something we are both getting used to. Ethan is sending us to Paris on his private plane. Instead of the hotel Adam booked for us, they are sending us to the Paris Four Seasons for one week and then to a private villa in Nice for another. And that was only the beginning.



A few weeks prior

“You can’t say no. It’s a wedding gift,” Tara says while she pours wine. We never go more than a few weeks without seeing each other in person. Either we will fly there for a weekend, or they will come to Boston. Not a day goes by that Adam doesn’t talk to his siblings, and they’re not the only ones making the calls these days. Adam FaceTimes them every night after dinner. He says it’s to talk to Vincent, but I know the truth. He loves his brother and sister.

“But we don’t need a private plane or the Four Seasons,” I say, but no one is paying attention to me. “And you already bought everything on our

wedding registries.” I look directly at Tara when I say that. All she does is laugh and wave me off. She won’t admit it, but I know it was her.

“And that’s not all,” Ethan says. He looks at a grinning Elizabeth. She pulls an envelope out of her purse and slides it along the table.

“You open it, love. I’m almost afraid to,” Adam says to me.

I’m not sure if it’s because they are extremely generous or because they are trying to make up for their father’s awful treatment of Adam, but they love to spoil their brother.

With shaking hands, I tear the envelope open. My eyes bug out when I see that it’s a deed to an apartment in their building in New York. Apartment is putting it mildly. It’s a five thousand square foot home overlooking Central Park. Adam is struck speechless when I hold the deed in front of him. He shakes his head and I know he’s going to tell them we can’t accept, but Elizabeth speaks first. “It’s a wedding gift.” She reaches over and grabs Adam’s hands. “I promise we aren’t trying to buy you off. We just love you guys, and we want to show you. We’ve missed out on so much time with you, Adam. We know we can’t erase or make up for dear old Dad but let us spoil our baby brother and his wife. Say yes, or I swear I will cry again.”

Adam kisses the back of Elizabeth’s hand. “You don’t have to give us things, and you two have nothing to make up for,” Adam reassures them. “I love you guys too. And maybe I shouldn’t have blown you two off for so long.”

“He finally admits it!” Ethan says.

“But who’s going to fight over us if we have our own place here?” Adam asks.

Tara and I both laugh. It’s a constant battle between Elizabeth and Ethan about where we’re going to stay whenever we visit.

“I’m sure they’ll find something else to fight about.” Tara hands each of us a glass of wine and we toast. “Let’s go see the new place. Ethan’s designer will be here to meet with you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, but no more gifts,” Adam says while we follow them out of the penthouse.

“Wait until you hear about the second part,” Ethan says, ignoring Adam. Jason walks down the hall, and Alex’s eyes light up when she sees him.

“I haven’t seen you in a tux since our own wedding.” She spreads her hands across his chest and smiles up at him. “Isn’t Mellie beautiful?” Alex asks when she finally drops her hands.

“She’s still Smellie,” Jason says, but he smiles when he sees me. “You look great, Sis. Beautiful. Flynn is going to lose his mind.”

I adjust his bow tie. Instead of black ties like the rest of the guys, Jason’s is the same shade of blue as the bridesmaids’ dresses. We’ve come a long way, but there’s no one else I’d rather have as my best person. I know his relationship with our mother has suffered, but true to his word, he’s left things alone. He’s made no other attempts to fix things.

Mom’s moved a few streets away to her new place, and Adam and I still live upstairs. At least for another few months until our house is ready. We never found a home we could agree on. We couldn’t find one in our neighborhood with the swimming pool he insists I have, so we bought two old houses that were next to each other, knocked them down, and are building our dream house. Jason bought a house down the same street.

“Speaking of your groom.” Jason pulls the phone out of his pocket, puts it to his ear and walks away.

A photographer starts taking snapshots. “The limos are here. It’s time to go,” Ananda says. She stands back and I run my hand down my fitted white wedding gown. It’s strapless and has a sweetheart neckline. Tara let me borrow the diamond earrings and necklace she wore to her wedding, but I feel naked without the cross Adam’s mom gave me. In fact, I can’t wait to put it back on tonight.



“You’ll see her in about an hour.” I hold up my phone and roll my eyes at Jason. He smiles and that only makes me more anxious. “You’re already married, so relax,” he says.

Frustrated, I give him the middle finger. This time he laughs at me.

“Hey, Flynn,” Jason says.

“Yeah?”

“I’m happy for you and my sister. You’re a good guy.”

We’ve come a long way in the last three months. He apologized for being an asshole, and we’ve actually formed a friendship. He and Ethan planned my bachelor party. The same party I told them I didn’t want, but they managed to whisk me away for a weekend in Bermuda.

“I guess you’re okay now that you’ve stopped being a mama’s boy,” I tell him.

“I’m the mama’s boy? Your mother was literally wiping your mouth at dinner last night. And her house is like a shrine to you.”

“Twine? Why do we need twine at a wedding? Adam! Come take a look at your Uncle Finn. Don’t be mad at your uncle for being the handsomest man at the wedding today.” I give Jason the finger one more time and end the call. Uncle Finn spins around and whistles at himself. “You two don’t stand a chance.” He playfully slaps my face and does the same to Ethan. “And you,” he says to Ethan. “Get your own face. This one already belongs to Adam.” He says that to him every time they see each other. I think the first time he said it was his way of apologizing after their first meeting. Now, he says it all the time.

“Except I had this face first.” Ethan gives him the usual response.

“Thirst? The only thing I’m thirsty for is that open bar.” Uncle Finn spins around one more time. “Come on, boys. Our ride is here,” he shouts before walking out of the room.

Ethan turns to me and adjusts my bowtie. We’re wearing matching tuxedos, and it’s still unnerving to look into his face and familiar eyes, but we’ve become very close very fast. A day doesn’t go by that the three of us don’t talk, and I’ve started calling them instead of the other way around. The similarities between me and Ethan are more than just skin deep. We like the same foods, we’re protective of the people we love, and we both carry the similar baggage left to us by the father we share.

“I’m still taller,” I say.

He smiles, and when he tries to mess my hair, I duck and he misses.

“Barely,” he says. “I’m still older, wiser, and I can still kick your ass.”

“But you can’t,” I remind him. “And how did I end up with three best men?” I had originally asked Uncle Finn, but Vincent asked if he could be my best man too. When I told him yes, he insisted his dad stand up there with him.

“You picked a good woman, Adam. I’m happy for you, and I owe Mel a lot.” My siblings love my wife, too. She’s gotten extremely close to Tara and Elizabeth, but when Ethan was in Boston on business a few weeks ago, she asked him to stay with us and threw a small dinner party in his honor. Ethan had fun gloating to Elizabeth about that. He even FaceTimed her during the dinner party.

It’s been nice having them. I never thought they would want anything to do with me. I assumed they would see me like our father did, like a dirty little secret. Even though I’ve always admired the sibling bond that Mel and Jason have, I never considered that I could have that too, but now I do.

“Dad! Uncle Adam, let’s go!” Vincent runs into the bedroom wearing a matching tuxedo, takes my hand, and starts to pull.

“Let’s go get your uncle married,” Ethan says.



Ethan puts a hand on my shoulder, but that doesn't stop my body from shaking. Uncle Finn chases Vincent around the altar, but Ethan takes Vincent's hand and tells him to stand still. Uncle Finn takes the hint and calms down, but not before he grumbles something about Ethan being a spoilsport.

The church is full. The small wedding Mel and my mother planned has more than doubled. Ethan's flown most of my relatives in from Dublin and has put them up in a hotel. He said it was a gift and I couldn't get mad about it.

I look toward the front door, eager for the wedding to begin. I miss Mel. We've been so busy this past week with the wedding and hosting out of town relatives, we've barely had a minute to just be together. The doors open and the wedding planner walks in. She takes Vincent outside so he can walk down the aisle with Addy.

I know my bride is outside that door.

"Any minute now. Relax," Ethan says.

"Says the guy who cried like a baby at his own wedding," I remind him.

"It was my allergies," he lies.

I straighten up when the music starts to play. Our priest takes his place at the altar, and even Uncle Finn stands straight. The hushed murmuring amongst our guests ceases. The doors to the church burst open, and I stop breathing. It's a perfect August day and the sunlight makes the room appear bright. There are white roses everywhere and their sweet scent fills the church. My only request for the wedding was that no expense was spared. Mel told me I was crazy as she updated her wedding spreadsheet, but she did agree to increase the flower budget.

Our mothers walk down the aisle together. My mother dabs her eyes the entire time. Diane smiles, but I can see some sadness in her eyes. Even

though Mel did not exclude her from the wedding, their relationship is as strained as it's always been.

Vincent and Addison follow, and they both pull little Mel in a white wagon decorated with flowers and filled with pink rose petals. The entire church swoons at the sight. Halfway there, Vincent and Addy give up and both run to the altar. Vincent stands next to his father, and Addy wraps her arms around one of my legs. Diane walks down the aisle, scoops the baby in her arms, and pulls the wagon out of the way. The bridesmaids are next, each wearing matching blue dresses and bouquets of white roses.

The music changes to the bridal march and my heart starts to hammer inside my chest. Ethan hands me a handkerchief and I wipe my forehead while I wait for my bride. When she finally makes her entrance, she's between her father and Jason, but all I see is her. She wouldn't give me any hints about her dress, and it's nothing like I imagined. I imagined something big and poufy, but she's in a form fitting lace dress. The bottom flares out and has a long train. My eyes slide up her body, drinking her in, doing my best to seal this vision in my mind. She's lost weight these past three months. Between her workouts, diet, and stress of the wedding, she's slimmed down. She's still perfect, though. Her veil covers her face, but I don't miss her smile. It's bright enough to light the entire world. I don't think I blink or breathe until she's standing in front of me. Finally, I lift her veil and I lock eyes with my bride.

My entire world stops. She's all I see, and I have to ask myself how a man like me is lucky enough to be marrying the most beautiful woman God ever created.

Her dad kisses her cheek, and Jason takes his place at her side of the altar. I cup her cheeks, so eager to kiss her sweet lips, but the priest clears his throat and Uncle Finn grabs my elbow and pulls me away.

"Not yet, lad," he practically yells inside the church, causing everyone to laugh.

“You’re so beautiful.” She blushes and tears up. “I love you,” I mouth.
“I love you,” she mouths back.



TWO MONTHS LATER



“I’ll get you some tea, love.” I kiss Adam’s hand and nod, so grateful for him. “I’ll set the table too, so relax. I think we should just stay in bed all weekend.”

“I agree,” I say. It’s been a crazy six weeks. From our wedding to our honeymoon, and now my first semester of law school. I’m only taking two classes, but between my husband, work, school, building our house, and our families, I’m exhausted. I have been for the past two weeks.

“What’s for dinner?” I ask. I should start reading for my torts class, but I lie on the couch and cover myself with Lola’s blanket. The very thought of eating makes me want to gag, but I won’t say that to my protective husband. He’s been hovering for the past week, especially since I haven’t been feeling well.

“Ma made us something. I’m not sure what, but she made chicken soup for you. I picked it up on my way home. She said she’ll stop by and check on us tomorrow.” I let out a breath of relief and say a silent thank you to the best mother-in-law in the history of the world. Soup I can handle.

Adam comes over and puts a steaming mug of mint tea on the coffee table. He leans down and kisses my forehead. “No fever,” he says.

“I think a weekend of sleep will cure whatever ails me. Would you mind if we eat on the couch tonight?”

He puts a hand to my forehead, and I can see the concern in his eyes. “No problem, wife.” He kisses me again and returns to the kitchen. There’s a knock on the door, and Jason and Alex come in.

“You look like hell,” Jason says to me. I frown at him, but he walks over and feels my forehead. Once he’s done with that, he checks my glands.

“Ew, you’re my brother, not my doctor. Shoo.” I playfully shove him away, but he ignores me. “And what’s that smell?” I pinch my nose shut. “Your cologne is horrible.”

He frowns at me and says, “I’m not wearing any cologne.”

“Well, you stink,” I tell him.

“Hmm,” is all Jason says.

“You guys want dinner?” Adam asks our guests, and they both say yes. “And where are my nieces?”

“They are spending the night with Mom,” Jason says.

“What the hell is that smell?” I ask again when Adam uncovers a dish and sticks it in the microwave.

“I think it’s chicken and dumplings.” I make a gagging sound and Jason narrows his eyes.

Alex comes and sits next to me on the couch. “Mellie, could you be pregnant?” she asks.

Adam freezes and then slowly turns around. He approaches and now all three of them are staring at me.

“Um, absolutely not. I’m worn out, that’s all. Between our wedding, honeymoon, work, and school I’m exhausted. I never miss a pill so I can’t be pregnant.”

Jason looks around again and says, “No birth control is one hundred percent effective, Mellie.”

“Well, I can’t be because we have too much going on. I’m in law school,

for heaven's sake."

"If ever there was a reason, law school would be it," Jason says back with a dramatic eyeroll.

"Why didn't I think of this before? It makes sense, Mel. No birth control can withstand what went down on our honeymoon." I feel my cheeks redden. Alex laughs and Jason makes a gagging sound.

"Adam!" I admonish.

"I have a pregnancy test downstairs." Alex runs out, and I refuse to acknowledge the possibility out loud, but all the symptoms make sense now that I think about it. I haven't had my period since the week before our wedding, but I blamed that on stress.

Alex returns a few minutes later. I take the test from her and run to the bathroom. Adam follows right behind me.

"I can pee alone, stud," I tell him.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight from now until that baby is born." He puts a palm on my belly.

When I look into his eyes, I can see the love. He wants this. I wrap my arms around him, and he rests his forehead on mine. "I don't want you to get your hopes up, Adam."

He kisses the side of my neck and pulls me closer. I know him. In his mind, I'm pregnant.

"Too late. I'm already thinking of names. We're having a baby."

I ask him to turn his back while I pee on the stick. It takes less than a minute for two pink lines to appear. The second it's confirmed, my husband lifts me off my feet and carries me bridal style out of the bathroom. He gently lays me on the couch, but instead of covering me, he kneels down, presses his face to my stomach, and kisses me.

"Does this mean what I think it means?" Alex asks.

"I have my love, and soon I'm going to have a little love," my husband says.

THE END.

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Acknowledgement



When I first created the character of Mellie way, way back in Crave, I had no idea who she was. All I knew was that she had a rough relationship with her brother. In fact, in Crave's first draft, Jason had a brother, not a sister, but there was so much Clark testosterone, I decided to add another female to the list of side characters. 12

Who knew that all these books later we would end up with the complex Melanie Elyse Dupree? Sorry. I meant to say Melanie Elyse Flynn. Out of all my heroines, she's had the longest and most dramatic journey. She's loyal, feisty, stubborn. She loves with her whole heart. And what better man to love her than Adam Flynn? The man who knew who she was the instant he 'saw' her. I think he's pretty much perfect.

The one thing I have in common with Mellie is my incredible girl squad.

To my good friends, Amy, KC, Sheree, Kiki, Erin, Suzan and Lanie. Thank you so much for reading, listening, and providing feedback. You're invaluable.

To all the readers who keep coming back for more, THANK YOU SO MUCH! Your support means everything. Stay tuned.

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