



Tapped Out

SINGLE MOM


OVER THE TOP POSSESSIVE ALPHA HAREM

KAI LESY

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TAPPED OUT SINGLE MOM

A CONTEMPORARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

KAI LESY

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DESCRIPTION

“No single mom left behind, not on our watch.”

“Huh?” I stammer, caught off-guard.

“Pack your bags. Our home is your sanctuary, for as long as you need.”

First day as a maid, and I’m a floundering mess...

My Mom and babysitter ditches my kids for a date.

Could it get any worse? A resounding **YES!**

Enter my enigmatic twin billionaire bosses in the middle of my meltdown.

They step up and offer my kids and I a refuge.

And their two charming best friends are also ready to chip away at my defenses.

Four dreamy men rallying around a single mom, asking nothing in return? ***Yah right!***

Maybe I can keep up this act long enough to save up and move out on my own.

But it’s hard to ignore the smoldering heat in their eyes when we’re alone...

Or how they turn into adorable piles of mush for my toddlers, completely stealing my heart.

Are happily ever afters even a thing?

Or is this tapped out single mom facing yet another serious letdown?

PROLOGUE

“**Y**ou taste like summer,” Beau whispers, then kisses me hard.

His hunger unravels as I receive him. His other hand finds my shoulder first, nonchalantly exploring that bit of bare skin before it goes wandering over my breasts. He holds one firmly, squeezing and massaging until he hears me moan. He licks my upper lips and gazes deep into my eyes as he fondles me, as he touches and claims every inch of me.

“Beau...” I manage, my eyes damn near rolling in my head when his fingers lift the bottom of my dress and his fingers trail invisible lines up my thigh. His touch is electric, thousands of jolts running through my body and gathering in my belly.

“I know you’re ready for me,” he says.

Instinctively, I part my legs as his hand moves between them. I suck in a breath when his fingertips glide over the cotton fabric of my panties and he feels the wetness seeping through.

His smile dissolves into a hungry glare as he kisses me. It’s a hard and possessive kiss, his breath intensifying as he pulls the fabric aside so he can slide his fingers between my wet folds.

“Oh... yes...” I hiss when he finds my swollen nub ready for him. “I’m ready for you.”

“Good.”

The sound of doors opening freezes me in the chaise lounge, but his smile befuddles me. “Who’s there?” I ask, my voice but a whisper.

Isaac is joined by Noah and Levi.

“All of you?” I ask.

“You’re safe,” Isaac says. “We just wanted to join the fun.”

Levi smiles broadly, the first to come closer. His gray shirt is tight and stretched over his chest, a few curls of reddish hair poking out from the base of the V-neck collar. His jeans are even tighter, a bold erection catching my attention.

“We’re all crazy about you Stella,” he says, his voice low and dripping with desire.

“What do you mean?” I mumble and moan at the same time as Beau adds his thumb into the process, pressing my clit as more tension gathers in my core.

Isaac kneels on the other side of my chaise lounge and kisses me softly on the lips. “Do you want us to leave?”

“No, no, I don’t...”

“Then why stop?” Noah replies, slipping out of his jeans and shirt. He stands next to his brother, and I’m dumbfounded and horny.

I stare at them, my pussy tightening and pulsating hungrily as Beau’s fingers curl inward in an intensifying rhythm.

“We all want you,” Levi adds, his fingers trailing up my calf as he bites his lower lip.

I want them, all of them, and they’re actually here, hard as fuck and eager to be a part of this.

It’s crazy. It’s like something out of a movie, but it’s not a movie, it’s not fiction, it’s actually happening.

I have two choices now. If I say no, they will respect my decision, but Beau slips a third finger into the conversation, stretching my pussy, and all I can do is spread my legs wider as Isaac pulls the top of my dress down, revealing my lace bra.

“Don’t stop,” is pretty much what’s left for me to say.

This. Is. Happening.

I want it to happen.

Screw everything I knew before. Screw tomorrow and whatever comes next.

This is happening, and I am a more than willing participant.

As if unleashed, the four men exchange shadowy glances before they proceed to tease me to the brink of madness.

“We won’t stop for as long as you’ll have us,” Noah says.

Within seconds, I’m stripped bare.

My dress is on the ground, along with my panties and my bra. It’s amazing how quickly and smoothly eight hands can move when I’m the grand prize.

I lay on the chaise lounge, and I am theirs for the taking.

I can only watch and try not to faint from this overdose of unexpected pleasure.

Levi slowly massages my calves, watching me closely and following my reactions as he tightens his hold and adds more pressure with his thumbs. I’m jelly in his hands at this point, while Noah and Isaac take care of my breasts, the two of them flanking me as they take my nipples in their mouths and suckle hungrily.

I whimper and push my chest forward, damn near passing out when Beau puts his hand between my legs again.

The fire burns brighter in my eyes as he strokes me into a swelling madness.

My hands react, and I take Noah and Isaac’s massive cocks, squeezing and getting a proper feel of the double, generous girth. I feel the droplets of pre-cum smearing over my thumbs when I reach the tips, and I listen to their ragged breaths when I move back down to the base.

Their clothes have joined mine on the ground, and the five of us languish under the awning while the toothy December sun rises higher above us.

“What do you want?” Beau asks me.

Noah suckles my left nipple and playfully bites into it. I gasp as Isaac holds my right breast in his hand, his tongue flicking over the nipple. It causes a myriad of wildfires to spread across my skin, while Levi trails kisses up my leg.

“I want you to fuck me until I scream,” I tell him, abandoning all sense of self as he nods and pulls his hand away.

My pussy feels empty, but the sensation is only temporary.

Levi steps aside, standing and stroking himself, watching as Beau climbs on the chaise lounge and settles between my legs.

Noah and Isaac stay right where they are, showering my mouth and breasts with wet kisses.

The entire world instantly disappears as I brace myself for what’s about to come.

STELLA

A Few Days Earlier

“Stella, can you handle the breakfast room?” Connie’s voice filters through from somewhere in the lobby, likely balanced on a stool like a Cirque du Soleil hopeful.

“Already on it. I’ll be done before you can say ‘supercalifragilisticexpialidocious’!”

“Funny and efficient, the dream team,” Connie chuckles, her voice dancing from above.

“I aim to please,” I quip.

Connie and I are the dynamic duo in charge of the Elizabeth Bed & Breakfast. A beautiful building with solid oak paneling and huge French-style windows, a river-rock base, and plenty of natural light coming in from pretty much every angle. I love it.

On my inaugural day, I find myself practically salivating at the opulence that envelops me. Sixteen sumptuous rooms. Each is as spacious as a penthouse suite, with many featuring terraces that command breathtaking views: to the north, a verdant expanse of Port Elizabeth’s forests; to the east, the serene shoreline, where dawn paints the water with strokes of golden light. Turn to the south and west, and you’re greeted by gardens meticulously sculpted to perfection—whispering to every guest that they’ve stepped into a realm of refined luxury.

It's a retreat for the discerning—where political dignitaries and corporate titans from around the globe find solace and luxury. Even presidents and vice-presidents have laid their heads to rest within these walls. Now, as winter cloaks the landscape, the property transforms into a snow-kissed wonderland. With the holiday season on the doorstep, the air is alive with the enchanting aroma of cinnamon and the nostalgic crackle of wood burning in heirloom fireplaces, crafting an atmosphere of warmth and timeless celebration.

Much like the lobby and the reception area, the breakfast room I'm in charge of for the next couple of hours is brightly lit and features cherry wood paneling over the walls. The furniture is also cherry wood, which makes the bar and the cabinets seem more like an extension of the walls. It's easy to clean, too, so dusting only takes about twenty minutes before I move on to the tables. Each needs a new white linen tablecloth from one of the cabinets, along with the appropriate cutlery and decorative plates.

The Christmas tree needs a bit more care, but the feather duster does an excellent job without disturbing the fine red and gold glass baubles, the seemingly endless gold and emerald-green ribbons, and the many other decorations gathered over the years to match its traditional and timeless festive design. It's the only tree I'll get to enjoy this year, so I take great care to make sure it's gorgeous and spotless every day.

My phone rings and damn near startles me.

Setting the cloth and spray aside for a moment, I reach into the front pocket of my pale green maid's uniform and instantly wince at the caller ID.

"Crap," I mutter to myself, fully aware that my day is about to get worse. "Hey, Mom."

"Ah, glad I caught you," she says, and I can hear my kiddos giggling somewhere in the background. "I need you to get home within the hour, Stella. I can't look after your children anymore."

The blood freezes in my veins. "Whoa, whoa, hold on," I manage. "I'm at work. I just started this job. What are you

talking about?”

“I have a lunch date,” my mother replies.

“Mom, you can’t do this to me,” I say, my voice trembling. “I need to finish my shift and make sure I still have a job tomorrow. You know how important this is. How the hell am I gonna move out of your place otherwise?”

“Stella, it’s not my fault you threw your life away on a man like Elijah. Look at you now. Two kids and your hospitality career in the gutter while you slave away for a living. Your husband is gone. I am done paying for your mistakes. Rodney wants to take me out to lunch, so I’m letting him take me out to lunch today. I’m not your nanny.”

I could kill her. The sheer amount of hypocrisy coming out of her mouth right now makes my blood boil.

The dread is quickly overlapped by blind fury as I take deep breaths and try to figure out a way to get her to stick around until I get back to Scarborough.

“Mom, for the love of everything that’s holy, you said you’d look after Ava and Lucas while I work this job, at least for a couple of weeks until I can afford a babysitter again,” I whisper. “You can’t just change your mind when it’s convenient. Today is my first day, dammit. I can’t afford to lose this job, especially not with Christmas just a couple of weeks away.”

“And I can’t afford to lose this man. Rodney’s a good man.”

“So was Michael before him. And Sam. And John. And the many others who preceded them. You keep going through them, Mom, just like you did with Dad.”

Crap. I shouldn’t have said that.

Regret immediately pierces me.

I hear her inhaling sharply and wait for the devastating blow that is sure to follow. “I’m not gonna let you ruin this for me. Be home within the hour, or I’ll leave the kids in their

bedroom with the door locked since their own mother can't be here.”

“Mom, you can't—” I try to reason, but she hangs up. Dammit!

Hot tears sting my eyes as I struggle to remain upright.

I collapse into the chair by the window, surrendering to a torrent of tears, the weight of my world pressing down on me.

It's all too much.

My mother. This life.

My children, my sweet innocents, unwittingly paying for my mistakes.

This isn't the first time I've had to drop something and rush back to Scarborough to take care of my kids after she promised she'd cover for me. Yet I never learn my lesson. I'm still foolish enough to rely on her. I keep placing bets on a horse that disappoints.

It's not supposed to be this way. My life isn't supposed to be a series of plan B's. Elijah and I—we were supposed to be a duet, growing together and nurturing our family tree. But here I am, juggling jobs, all to keep this ship afloat while my children's father is hardly in the picture. He left me and our children behind. I was an idiot for believing we could make it work.

But my mother can't keep throwing rocks at my wheels when I'm about to make some kind of headway. She can't keep sabotaging me when I need her the most. Dammit, she promised she'd look after them until I can afford a babysitter.

“I can't believe this,” I sob like a little girl, my whole body shaking as I crumble under the pressure of it all.

At least nobody is around. The Elizabeth's guests are either up in their rooms or out and about since they have plenty to see around town. I'm helpless once again, at wit's end and struggling to make ends meet.

Dammit, it wasn't supposed to be like this.

I had dreams and aspirations. I wanted simple things for myself and for my children. Yet I sit in a chair in the empty breakfast room. Almost certain I'll be fired if I leave. I could catch a bus back to Scarborough since it's not even noon, but I'll lose this job which I so desperately need. I can't feed my kids with scraps anymore. We need proper food. A proper place to call home.

“What the hell am I going to do?”

“Are you okay?”

The man's voice scares me, and I shoot up out of my chair and quickly wipe my tears. I didn't hear him come in.

“I'm so sorry, I—” I whirl around and see Isaac Kendrick.

One of two gorgeous twin brothers, and a fifty percent owner of the Elizabeth.

Isaac is tall, with short, dark blonde hair and the kind of deep blue eyes that make my heart skip beats. He's a tad more rugged than his brother, sporting a short beard and with a preference for shades of blue where his tailored suits are concerned.

His musky cologne travels across the room and fills my head with nothing but wrong ideas as I struggle to pull myself together.

I liked him from the moment I walked in for an interview. I liked his brother, Noah, for similar reasons. And don't even get me started on Beau and Levi, their business partners. Good Lord, I could barely breathe as I sat across the table from them, as I watched them peruse my resume and as I answered their questions. The worst part is, I think I'm about to let the four of them down.

“I... Oh, God, I'm so sorry,” I manage, another wave of tears working their way up.

“Hold on, Stella, there's no need to apologize,” Isaac quickly replies, the shadow of concern etched across his handsome features. “Talk to me,” he says, taking a step closer. “What's going on that's got you so upset?”

I might as well give him the truth. He's going to fire me, anyway. What other choice do I have? He should at least know why I have to leave in the middle of my very first shift.

"Where do I start?" I shrug, my hands trembling at my sides.

"Wherever you need to," he says.

"Okay. I have two children and I'm currently staying at my mother's place, except my mother has a hot date and needs to go out and has threatened to leave my one- and two-year-old alone if I don't get back to Scarborough within the hour." I take a deep breath and let everything out, since I clearly can't hold it in anymore. "She promised she'd look after them, but she changed her mind. She does this. So, while I really like working here, even if it is my first day, I can't leave my kids alone, so I have to go. I'm so, so sorry to be so unprofessional and leave you in a lurch."

I exhale after giving my boss a very short version of my shitty life story, and the tears threaten to spill again. Isaac just stares at me, surely unable to think of a single thing to say to my hot mess of an admission.

"I'm sorry. I guess I have to go. And I'm sorry for the oversharing, too," I mumble, lowering my gaze. I glance around and let a heavy sigh roll out of my chest. "I'll get my bag and be out of your way. I'm sorry again."

"Wait," Isaac says.

I'm already headed for the lobby, but he quickly catches up and takes me in his arms. I freeze, suddenly wrapped in a warm and ridiculously firm embrace. His scent makes me drunk with new and strange sensations. My body reacts in ways I didn't think were possible anymore. Yet my heart is thumping, my pulse is racing maniacally, and my panties are getting a tad slick. I can't move. I don't want to move.

Soft against his muscular chest, with my cheek pressed into his pale blue shirt, all I can do is breathe in and out as I try to register and understand the moment. It feels good. Way too good.

Isaac feels me relaxing, but he takes his sweet time before he lets me go.

I look up at him as he takes a step back and smiles softly. “Feel better?” he asks, his voice so low that the bass line has my stomach vibrating.

“Yeah, I do. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, Stella,” he replies sternly. “You’re clearly dealing with some pretty serious issues, and it’s no wonder you’re overwhelmed. I can’t even begin to imagine what life must be like for you right now.”

“Still, this is a professional setting. I’m supposed to be a professional.”

“You’re a human being, firstly,” Isaac says. “There is nothing wrong with you having to go back to Scarborough to take care of your children. I certainly wouldn’t fire you for what is obviously a family emergency. My partners wouldn’t fire you, either. So get that idea out of your head.”

I sniffle as I stare at him, surprised. “But I’m in the middle of my shift.”

“Yeah, but family comes first.” He pauses, narrowing his eyes for a moment as he looks at me. “Besides, I may have a solution for your current situation that would allow you to keep your job here and also keep your kids safe and fed and looked after.”

I’m frowning now. “What do you mean, Mr. Kendrick?”

“First of all, call me Isaac. Mr. Kendrick is my father.”

“Okay, Isaac,” I say softly, still wondering what the hell he’s talking about.

“Listen, Stella, here’s what I’m thinking. And you can correct me if I’m wrong. But based on everything you just told me, you’re a single mom who’s going through a rough patch.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Pack your bags. You and your children could stay here, in one of Elizabeth’s rooms.”

“Excuse me?” I blurt, my eyebrows arched upward.

“You could stay in one of our rooms,” Isaac states matter-of-factly. “They’re big and comfortable and with a bathroom of your own. You’d have access to the kitchen like all the other staff. And we wouldn’t charge you any rent. It’s a temporary solution until you find a place of your own, but you don’t have to rush into anything, either. We offer lodging for seasonal workers, anyway, so it’s not like I’m breaking any company policies here.”

“Oh, Isaac, that’s too much—”

“You need a place to stay since your mother’s place is obviously not a viable option. And winter is already here, so it’s harder to find a good rental this time of the year. Besides, we hire a babysitter for our guest’s children who could look after yours while you’re working. I’d deduct her pay from yours, if you’re concerned about the financial aspect. Bella lives just down the road, and she’s a good kid. Responsible, trustworthy. I can vouch for her.”

“Isaac, I can’t possibly accept that.”

“Why not? You need it.”

My shoulders drop. “You’re actually serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? You need help and we’re in a position to offer that help. Take it.”

Isaac is absolutely right in every single aspect, and I cannot let my pride destroy me. I let a man do that once, a man

I thought was the love of my life. Where did that get me? Working as a maid instead of pursuing my own career in hotel management. And failing miserably at even holding down a job as simple as this. I can't not recognize the truth when it's staring me so blatantly in the face.

"Think about it," Isaac adds, softening the tone of his voice. "You don't have to answer right away. I'll give you a minute or two. I'd give you more, but it sounds to me like you're at a crossroads of sorts and you need a nudge in the right direction."

I nod slowly as I walk over to one of the windows and look outside. It's so peaceful and quiet in the front gardens. The evergreens are thick and bushy, lining the stony path leading up to the front steps of the bed and breakfast. Roses are still in bloom. The snow blanketing most of it sparkles under a bright blue sky, and I can almost smell the Atlantic breeze despite the windows being closed. The salty scent isn't as powerful as the pine trees in winter, though, but it's a pleasant mixture for each breath.

To my surprise, Noah comes in, accompanied by Beau and Levi. Good grief, that's the last thing I needed. All four of my stupidly hot bosses in the same room.

"What's up?" Noah asks, surprised by what I assume is a rather distraught expression on my face. Meanwhile, I'm once again impressed by how much alike Noah and his brother are.

Noah wears his blonde hair longer and his sharp jaw shaved clean. He prefers salmon pinks and off-whites to his twin's blues and grays, but they are like two drops of water. Equally sparkling and perfect, luminescent and clear, handsome and dashing. Isaac handles the administrative side of the bed and breakfast business, while Noah manages the bar and the social events that take place here every week.

"Hi," I mumble.

Beau gives me a broad smile. He's a former celebrity soccer player turned hotel entrepreneur. He owns a twenty-five percent stake in the Elizabeth along with three other hotels farther up the East Coast. Born and raised in France, he came

to the States after he retired from his soccer career. With his broad, athletic frame, black hair, and lively brown eyes, he gave David Beckham a run for his money in the object of female affection department. He's also smart and kind.

"Hey, Stella, how's your first day on the job?" he asks.

I can only snort a dry chuckle as I blink back another round of tears. "I'm loving it," I say, though my voice falters and I'm sure my emotions are written all over my face.

"What's wrong?" Levi chimes in, equally curious and confused.

Levi Smith is a bit like the odd guy out. He's equally gorgeous with his dark red hair and green eyes. He keeps his ginger stubble neatly trimmed and spends most of his days writing thriller bestsellers, but he has recently chosen to invest in the Elizabeth, as well, partnering with his best friends in this endeavor. Isaac mentioned that Levi isn't exactly a hotel business aficionado, but he wants to put his royalties somewhere where they can grow. He adds a nice balance to the group.

"Stella is dealing with a rather delicate situation," Isaac says, his eyes never leaving mine. "Do you mind if I tell them?"

I shake my head.

Isaac proceeds to briefly share the current disaster in which I find myself, along with his offer of help, which I'm still considering.

Once they're brought up to speed, the guys turn to look at me with a mixture of surprise and empathy. Soft eyes, half-smiles, and enough testosterone bubbling underneath the surface to make my blood simmer.

I feel squirmy under their gazes, so I hike my purse up onto my shoulder and say, "I'm sorry to trouble you all, but I really need to catch the bus."

"Bus?" Isaac asks.

I nod, my eyes downcast. “Yeah, forgot to mention my car broke down the other day too.”

“I could have your car towed to my mechanic,” Noah offers with a casual shrug.

My skin feels hot and cold at the same time. I don’t know what it is about them, about each of them specifically, but I find it harder and harder to resist. They mean well. I know that much. “I can’t afford to fix my car at the moment.”

“I’m not asking you to pay for anything. Consider it a welcome bonus,” he replies with a charming smile.

Levi clears his throat. “Stella, let us help you. Stay here for a while. Bring your kids. They’ll be better off here, closer to you. You won’t have to spend any money on gas and car maintenance, either, since you’ll be living and working here. Like Isaac suggested, it’s a temporary arrangement until you can get back on your feet again.”

“You and your children need balance and peace,” Beau adds, his French accent thinned and melting into a sweet American vibe. “We can provide that here, with little expense. It’s pennies to us, and you don’t have to worry about putting food on their table or a roof over their heads. And if Bella is fine with caring for them while you’re working, why deny yourself the opportunity?”

They each have a point. It’s time for me to stop lying to myself. I do need help. I need every bit of help I can get. “I intend to pay you back for everything,” I declare firmly and with my chin up high. My daddy may have walked out on us—much like Elijah walked out on our kids—but at least I held on to the pride he inspired in me ever since I was a child. “I won’t take any pity or charity from anybody.”

“Fine,” Isaac replies. “You can pay us back whenever you can.”

“Alright,” I finally say, turning away from the window. “I’ll accept your offer. And I cannot thank you enough for taking a chance on me like this.”

Noah's lips curl into a playful grin. "Good. I'll get your car fixed, then."

"And I'll drive you back to Scarborough so you can pack your bags and bring your kids up here," Isaac adds, leaving no room for me to wiggle or object.

I almost pinch myself.

There's quite a lot of traffic between Port Elizabeth and Scarborough around noon. I thought we wouldn't need more than twenty minutes, but we've been in Isaac's Lexus for almost an hour now, and we're still not in the city yet. Not that I mind sinking into a fine leather seat with a hot guy behind the wheel sitting right next to me. I could admire his profile for the rest of my life and never get tired of it. This man is nature's perfect design—and nature was kind enough to make two of them at once.

“How are you feeling?” Isaac asks.

“Better than an hour ago,” I reply, half-smiling. My phone keeps chirping. Messages from my mother telling me to hurry. She's being deliberately obnoxious solely for the purpose of aggravating me, but I refuse to let her get to me anymore. “And I have you and your partners to thank.”

“Don't worry about it,” he says. “I may not know what it's like to be in your shoes, Stella, but I do understand hardship, albeit in a different sense. We're all subject to struggle of one kind or the other, and if I can do something to make it easier on you, I'm basically doing something to make it easier on myself and my partners. We don't have the time nor the energy to keep interviewing other people for a maid's position. We had a great working relationship with your friend, Theo, and she recommended you for the job. I'm fine with helping you out if it keeps you around.”

“That's the sweetest thing anybody has ever said to me,” I say with a little laugh.

“It’s the truth. I don’t know what kind of employers you’ve had to deal with before, but Noah, Beau, Levi, and me... We’re different.”

“Oh, I can tell.” How did I get so comfortable and laid back all of a sudden? My mouth is moving without my permission, and I’m not sure I can control the words that insist on coming out of it. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I like that about you. You’re all so... cool.”

Isaac laughs. “I’ll tell you a secret. We weren’t always so cool.”

“I can’t believe that.”

There isn’t a single cloud up above. Just an endless mass of pure blue, and his eyes mirror its beauty to perfection. I have a hard time imagining Isaac or Noah as anything less than the kind of heartthrobs who left a string of swooning girls behind them wherever they went. I’m sure Levi has had his share of admirers—and still does, being the successful and annoyingly handsome author he is. And Beau used to play soccer in the big leagues. I know for a fact there were always gorgeous supermodels hanging from his arms at any moment of the day.

“I had my nose in the books for as long as I can remember. Mostly math and physics,” Isaac says. “You might see the four of us the way we are today, but we were scrawny little turds back in high school. Noah and I didn’t really benefit from that much anticipated growth spurt, if you catch my drift.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You went from scrawny to lanky overnight, huh?”

“Basically, yeah. We got tall, so some of the bigger kids couldn’t really pick on us anymore. But we were still awkward as hell. I mean, I don’t know about Beau since he grew up in France. He was always into sports, though. Nothing else mattered. Not girls, not hanging out with the guys, nothing like that. It was just him and the wide-open field, a soccer ball at his feet and glory.”

“So, you, Noah, and Levi grew up together?”

He nods slightly. “Yeah. Like I said, I was the ultimate nerd. Noah was in the AV club, so that didn’t get him much action, either. It wasn’t until he started working as a bartender that he discovered his... let’s call it charm. And Levi was always writing. Terrible stuff, mind you. Cliches galore. When he got into college, however, he realized he needed a bit more life experience in order to fully convey the human condition. Once he started going outside our tight circle, met other people and listened to their stories, his writing changed. But trust me, Stella, we all had to start somewhere before we got to where we are today.”

“I’m sensing a lesson here,” I mumble.

“It’s not coming from a higher place of sorts. We were lucky, more or less. Levi, not so much. He was in the foster system. His only fortune was that the Pattons kept him for all four years of high school, which gave him enough stability to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. Noah and I were definitely the most fortunate. Trust fund babies and whatnot. We’ve always had a safety net.”

I give him a curious look. “You don’t strike me as trust fund babies.”

“That’s because our father taught us the value of a strong work ethic from a young age, just like our grandfather before him,” Isaac says.

“Ah, so the silver spoon had a bit of vinegar in it.”

He laughs again, but his gaze lingers on me for longer. It makes my skin tingle everywhere, yet I can’t look away, either. His eyes search my face, and for the briefest of moments, I have the audacity to imagine him leaning in for a kiss. What would that be like? How insane would it be? It certainly sounds insane. But his lips part, and I lick mine without a hint of self-control.

“You’re a very intelligent woman,” Isaac says. “Don’t think I didn’t read your resume properly. I know the college you went to. It may not be Ivy League, but those are brilliant folks you studied under, Stella. And I can tell just from the

way you talk and carry yourself that you're not meant to be a maid for much longer."

"My ambitions and my life choices haven't always been in sync," I admit with a deep sigh.

"That's alright. You got your share of lemons, but it's time for you to learn how to make a wicked lemonade."

I'm not sure what it means coming from him. However, the words empower me in ways I'd forgotten I could be empowered. The road ahead may seem crowded, but it's riddled with opportunities, not just boots aiming for my teeth. Life may have been hard on me, but it's far from over. Right now, I've been given a chance to do better, to provide just enough comfort and peace for myself and my children so that I can actually see those opportunities ahead.

"Are you okay?" Isaac asks.

"Yeah, just a lot of thoughts swirling in my head. It's been a long day."

"And it's barely noon," he chuckles.

By the time we reach the apartment building in Scarborough, Isaac and I are surprisingly more comfortable with one another. He is generally warm and relaxed, making it easier for those around him to loosen up and mirror his demeanor, but his effect on me feels somewhat more amplified. He calms and soothes me just by being close to me, by listening without cutting in, and by offering his viewpoints without expectations or a particular design.

"How long have you been staying here?" he asks, turning the car engine off.

"Couple of months. I couldn't afford our old place anymore after my divorce, and my mom said she could use the company. Obviously, that was just a fad, a momentary void she needed to fill. She's dating again, so, you know, the kids and I are a nuisance."

"I'm sorry to hear you're not getting the support you need."

“It’s not like I asked her, you know? She offered to help. Theo could’ve handed her lease over to me before she moved to Los Angeles. She was even willing to cover my rent for a couple of months until I pulled myself together. But I trusted my mother. Plus, I didn’t need to pay for a babysitter here, so it made sense at the time.”

Isaac shakes his head slowly. “It’s fine, Stella. You didn’t do anything wrong. Honestly, the more I learn about you, the more intrigued I become.”

“Huh?” I give him a curious look, which makes him smile.

“Despite the baggage you’ve got, you still laugh, you still fight, you keep your head up high, and you wade through the muddy waters. The strength you carry yourself with... it’s inspiring.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s also remarkably appealing,” Isaac adds, looking at me.

The air between us shifts into something loaded with the kind of energy that causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. It’s so thick, I can barely breathe. The blue pools of his eyes darken as I hold his gaze and refuse to look away. I don’t know what’s giving me this kind of courage, but I can’t hold back, either. It’s just the two of us in his car. The rest of the world has basically disappeared. There’s nothing and no one that can break this moment. I don’t want it to end.

“Isaac, I...” My words dissolve as he leans in and kisses me.

A whirlwind of colors explodes in the back of my head, the heat spreading through my body as my core is instantly ignited. It’s short but devastating as every muscle I have tautens with delicious tension. I moan softly against his lips.

“I’m sorry.” Isaac pulls back, his breathing ragged.

“No apology needed,” I hear myself say as I pull him back so we can continue what he started.

His tongue slips through, and the kiss deepens into something spicy and ravenous. His hand finds my hip, fingers digging into my flesh. I melt and fuse with this man. My heart is tumbling all over the place. My panties are soaking wet, and I need more, so much more. Isaac reads my reaction and brings his hand up my side until his thumb moves over my breast. The bra cup is soft but not thick enough to deprive me of the sensation of his touch.

We devour one another in a second of sheer madness, and neither wishes to stop.

Whatever this is, we both want it.

But the honk of a passing pick-up truck has us both drawing back into our seats and trying to catch our breath. A minute flows in pressing silence, though it's not the awkward kind, but rather the moment we need in order to gather our thoughts and senses. Mine are scattered everywhere, so I need a tad longer to recover.

"I shouldn't have done that," Isaac says.

"But you did, and I responded," I tell him. "It takes two."

His eyes find mine again. I can't read what's in there, not right now, but I do know he makes my whole being expand like a developing star. It's scary to realize that a man can have such an effect on me. It's even scarier to observe myself relinquishing all forms of self-control when he touches me. Whatever Isaac wants to do next, I'm game. I shouldn't be. Then again, I have deprived myself of what I've truly desired for far too long. Whatever this is, I'll see it all the way through to the end.

"Just know that it has nothing to do with your job at the Elizabeth," Isaac says. "Don't ever think your future there is any kind of danger."

I nod slightly, wishing I could muster a reassuring smile for him. The thought did cross my mind, but Isaac's sincerity is crystal clear. I believe him. "I should go upstairs."

"I'll wait."

STELLA

By the time I reach my mother's apartment, she's gone. Lucas is asleep on my bed, and Ava is taking a nap in her playpen. At least they're safe and the heat is on, so the room feels nice and snug. But my mother did exactly what she told me she would. She locked the bedroom door and left. The tea in the mug she left in the kitchen is still warm, though, so I know she didn't leave that long ago. I shake the anger out of my head and proceed to carefully pack everything of ours—clothes, shoes, a few crayons and coloring books, a box full of toys, diapers and other essential stuff. Whatever else we need, I can get it later. Right now, I need to get the three of us out of this place.

Once I'm done, Isaac is kind enough to help me with the luggage, loading it into the trunk. Looking at our things now, I'm surprised to see we have so little. On one hand, it's a relief since we can all ride in the car back to Port Elizabeth without getting crammed between bags and boxes. On the other hand, it's sad that this is everything I have.

I go back upstairs to fetch my children, waking Lucas in the process.

"Mama?" his eyes peel open and he lights up like a firebug when he recognizes me.

There are specks of Elijah in his features. His hair is rich and curly, brown and bouncy. His eyes are a warm blend of blue and green, and his smile fills my heart with joy and endless love. I get him dressed and ready for the road, then

gently scoop Ava from her pack-n-play and strap her into her infant carrier. Isaac's voice startles me.

"Ready?" he asks.

I turn around to find him standing in the doorway. "Yes, we're ready."

"I'll take the car seats from your car, and we'll get you a new crib from the Elizabeth for the little one. We have a few available for our guests."

"Oh, no, Isaac, I wouldn't want to use any more resources."

"I said don't worry about it," he chuckles, his gaze lingering on Ava. "She's gorgeous. And who's the big guy?"

Lucas hides behind my leg, shyly sucking his thumb as he stares at Isaac. "This is Lucas," I say, smiling. "And this is Ava."

"Handsome young man," Isaac replies. "Hey, Lucas, do you wanna go for a ride?"

My boy looks at me, his big eyes searching for my approval. I giggle softly. "We're going on an adventure," I tell him.

"Yay!" he exclaims and rushes over to Isaac, who gives him a high five.

Isaac gives the room one last look before he heads out. "Are you sure you've got everything you need, Stella?" he asks as we leave the apartment behind.

I lock the front door and slip the key under the doormat. "I made sure to pack everything essential. We're good to go."

"Then let's get you three out of here."

He's so good to Lucas. Every time they look at each other, Isaac makes sure to smile as if to reassure my boy that the world isn't all bitter and dark. Ava barely moves in her carrier as we go downstairs and leave the building behind. She continues in deep sleep even after she's strapped in her seat

next to Lucas. I give Lucas one of his sensory toys to play with before I get in the front seat.

Once we're all loaded and ready, Isaac gives me a confident wink and starts the car.

An hour later, we're at the Elizabeth, just about settled in. The road back wasn't as congested.

It takes me a while to get accustomed to our new room. Isaac is in his office downstairs, going over the finances as usual, while I put the clothes and shoes away in the sturdy mahogany dresser and gigantic wardrobe. Each of the guest rooms is equipped with luxury wood furniture and the kind of lighting fixtures that are probably worth more than what I make in a year. But it's beautiful and cozy, which is precisely what we need.

The crib Isaac had brought up to the room is carved from cherry-wood and is a lovely place for Ava to sleep, though she's more interested in discovering everything around her at the moment—her eyes are bulging with wonder and curiosity as I leave her in the crib for a while. I keep an eye on Lucas as he rummages through his big-boy suitcase. He doesn't really know what he's doing, but he's trying to mimic me as I pick clothes out of the bags, then fold and put them on the appropriate shelves.

Eventually, we manage to unpack everything. By evening, the kids are both fed thanks to Isaac, who makes sure dinner is sent up to the room by one of the other maids on the night shift. It's been a while since we've had such a feast, too, complete with hot chocolate drowning in mini-marshmallows and cinnamon cookies—some of the inn's signature winter delights.

"Alright, I think we're set," I whisper to myself as I leave Lucas on his cot, sound asleep, and Ava in a small crib next to him. In less than twenty-four hours, Isaac and his partners have done more for us than my ex-husband and mother combined, and the thought alone is enough to make me feel blessed and overwhelmed and excited all at the same time.

I'm restless. How could I sleep? I should, since I have an early start tomorrow. There are plenty of customers to clean up after in the breakfast room. There will be a big lunch with some outside guests, as well. It'll be a full day, and it's been a long time since I've had a full, eight-hour sleep. Yet I pace around my room, ignoring calls from my mother and switching my phone to silent mode before I leave it on the dresser and go downstairs, baby monitor in hand.

The bar is still open, and the glass-covered terrace overlooking the forest draws my eye. The outdoor heaters keep the place warm and comfortable despite the nocturnal temperatures of December, giving guests the pleasure of admiring the snowy woods without freezing their hind ends off. It's beautiful at this time of night. Hanging paper lights adorn the wooden balustrade between colorful ceramic pots overflowing with blossoming night-queens-lily-of-the-valley shrubs.

Their scent is downright inebriating as I grab myself a beer and have a seat at one of the tables. The outdoor chairs are woven from rattan, with tartan-style cushions and fluffy blankets for lower temperatures. I take it all in with deep breaths and lazy gulps, admiring the old oak trees that open up before me. I can't wait to see them in spring, when their bare branches explode with crude green buds.

"How are you settling in?" Isaac asks as he joins me on the terrace with a beer of his own.

He's changed out of his suit into slacks with a pale blue shirt, the top loose and unbuttoned to reveal a patch of curly blonde chest hairs. I'm secretly thankful it's warm enough out here for him to sport this mischievously relaxed style. My lips feel dry. I lick them and smile.

"Oh, we're settling in just fine, thank you," I tell him. "The kids are off in dreamland, but I couldn't fall asleep just yet. I figured I could stay out here for a while."

"You're welcome to go anywhere you like," he says, taking a seat next to me. "The Elizabeth is your home now."

The local winter birds chirp everywhere in the night, a symphony rippling out through the pitch-black darkness ahead. Were it not for the paper lamps and the inn's interior lights, I probably would've let myself be swallowed by that wonderful, mysterious nothingness that's currently staring back at us.

"I'm definitely taking the kids out into the woods tomorrow," I reply, almost laughing as I imagine their wonder and befuddlement. Neither Ava nor Lucas have ever been this close to nature before, especially with so much snow. "We're lucky to be here, Isaac. And I will repay you for this kindness and privilege."

"Please, Stella, don't worry about it in the least. You've got enough on your plate. It's the least we could do, and frankly, it's a pleasure to be able to support you through this situation," he says. "I spoke to Bella, by the way. She'll be in at seven tomorrow morning to take care of the kids while you work your shift. We agreed to a reasonable rate, and we'll deduct that amount from your pay."

"That's great news, Isaac. Thank you again." I was genuinely grateful but couldn't help wondering how much less I'd get paid now that I was paying a babysitter.

"We upped your pay," Isaac said as if reading my mind.

I almost drop my beer. "Wait, what?"

"Well, the budget allowed us to give everybody a raise. We figured you could use it, too, regardless of your experience here."

"Isaac, seriously..."

"What? Would you like me to cut your salary so you can feel like a martyr again?" he shoots back with a coy grin. Apparently, this man knows how to push my buttons in every possible way, and we've only known each other for one full day. Granted, we had a lightning round earlier in his car, but still, I am in awe of his confidence and ironclad character. "It'll be okay."

"It already is," I exhale sharply.

We sink into our seats as the night continues to unfold with cricket chirps and nightingale bird songs, with a soft but cool, crisp midnight breeze and the smell of the ocean sneaking in from the beach. I can almost hear its foamy waves lapping at the shore. I can imagine the golden sands clad in patches of white snow as the water laps at them.

“I could stay out here forever,” I say after a long but surprisingly comfortable silence. There’s something about this man that soothes my senses. “It’s so beautiful, so peaceful.”

“It’s why Noah and I bought the place.”

I give him a surprised look. “Wait, I thought the Elizabeth has been in your family for ages.”

“We only came here once a year maybe. A winter, a summer, a couple of springs, a Halloween, a wine festival... and that’s pretty much it. Noah and I spent most of our time in Portland, where we went to school, where we grew up. This was the only place we ever felt like we could just be kids.”

“You and Noah had a pretty strict upbringing, huh?”

He nods once. “We carry the family honor. The legacy of the Kendricks. That always came with certain expectations. I don’t mind it, to be honest. I never fought against it because I grew into it from a young age. Noah tried to rebel a couple of times. He’s had his share of uncomfortable brushes with the local tabloids, but he got over that. Eventually, he found something he loved and stuck to it. We partnered up and bought this place because we both wanted to help preserve it and help it grow.”

“You’ve done a marvelous job with the upkeep, I’ll give you that,” I reply, my gaze wandering around with admiration before it returns to his masculine, back-lit profile. Those lips of his make my blood simmer, so I take another gulp of my beer and pray to the stars that I may taste them again. It’s a terrible thought to have, considering the fact that he is still my boss. I’m supposed to be a professional, dammit, but whatever is bubbling between us, it’s undeniable chemistry. “How long ago did you renovate? I remember you mentioned something during the interview.”

“About two years ago, shortly after we took over,” he says. “Levi and Beau contributed with outside funds for parts of the overall project, of course. I guess it’s safe to say that we did manage to breathe new life into the place. While it does carry the architecture and the general design of the past, we had a couple of brilliant Portland-based designers come in and assist us with a more modern shift in the aesthetic.”

“I can definitely see why the guests love it and keep snapping selfies everywhere.”

Isaac laughs, his voice echoing across the empty terrace. I briefly glance back through the wide-open terrace doors and notice the bar lights going off. There’s not a soul left down here, except for the two of us, and my heart skips a couple beats again.

“Yeah, we made sure there isn’t a corner in this place that isn’t Instagrammable.” He finishes his beer and glances my way, the blue of his eyes twinkling like sapphires under the moonlight. “You could build wonderful memories of your own here, too, Stella. If you’d only open yourself up to it.”

“I’m beginning to feel the same way,” I tell him. “I’m already in love with this place, to be honest. The work itself is easy. More volume than complexity, but I like that. It helps clear my mind.”

“I have to ask, why didn’t you apply for another position here? We had a few openings in the administrative and management areas, as well.”

I shrug, my cheeks burning. “I didn’t consider myself experienced enough to aim that high up the totem pole. Because I had my children earlier than I had originally anticipated, I had a hard time holding down any executive position and not enough time to build enough experience to directly apply for one here. So, I figured I’d start at the bottom and maybe prove myself first.”

“That’s a wise strategy,” he says. “Once again, I have to point out the obvious. You’re an extremely intelligent woman.”

“Thank you.”

“I need another beer. Would you like one?”

“Yes, please.”

And so, midnight approaches and finds us still on the closed terrace, laughing and talking and sharing stories. It’s amazing how much one can learn about a person—and how many similarities one can find in another person, despite our differences and histories. Isaac is a brilliant man with a mathematical mind, yet he is also courteous and has a good heart.

The more we talk, the closer we get, the more comfortable we become with one another. I can’t even feel embarrassed by our earlier kiss because it felt so natural. Like it was supposed to happen. Like it was meant to be. And the subtle tingling in my lips as I look at him tells me we may do it again. We both want it. It’s written all over our faces. The lust burns my throat as I finish my second beer and get up.

“I think it’s time for me to head back to my room and get some shut eye. Long day tomorrow,” I say.

“The night is young, and so are we,” he replies as he rises.

His movements are smooth and swift, akin to a panther prowling, preparing to pounce on its prey. I’m doe-eyed and with enough alcohol-fueled courage to meet his gaze and let my lips curl into a playful smile. “What are you thinking?”

He snakes an arm around my waist. Oh, God, this is wrong on so many levels, but it feels too right to reject. I don’t want to say no. I want him. Badly. My core burns like a furious sun, aching for release.

“I’m thinking we could pick up where we left off earlier,” Isaac says.

“It’s not the worst idea I’ve heard today.”

I had something wittier in mind, but the words fizzle away as his mouth captures mine in a hungry, decadent kiss. He pulls me close, nearly crushing me against his muscular chest. I feel him, hard as a rock against my belly. He’s been thinking

about this for a while, just like me. We're just giving into a maddening desire, a craving that demands satisfaction. It won't affect our working relationship. He promised, and he has given me no reason not to trust him.

Besides, the beers have already gone to my head. My inhibitions are gone. I'm so tired of not being myself, tired of always holding back, of being prim and proper for other people. Tonight, I'm his, and he is mine. Screw everything else until the sun comes up.

Our tongues clash, our lips melt onto one another. I run my fingers through his short hair and listen to his subtle moan as he tightens his hold on me. His hands work their way up my back. They sneak underneath my shirt, fingertips igniting fires on my skin as I tilt my head back and let him trail wet kisses down the side of my neck. The reaction is instant. Liquid heat pools between my legs. My pussy aches to be filled and stretched. I'm in desperate need of a complete surrender, and this man is more than willing and clearly equipped to give it to me.

Isaac grabs me by the back of the neck, his grip firm as I lose myself in his gaze. "I don't know what it is about you, Stella, but you set me on fire," he whispers.

"The feeling is mutual," I manage between ragged breaths.

"I want you."

I lean forward, my breasts pressing against his chest, and plant a kiss on his neck just above the shirt collar. "I want you too."

I'm brain dead and aroused beyond any semblance of self-control. Isaac's left hand comes around and cups my breast gently at first. The shirt I'm wearing and the lacy bra underneath are slim layers of fabric. They don't matter. I feel his touch, fingers gradually digging into the soft flesh until a whimper leaves my throat.

He licks my bottom lip, then playfully suckles on it until I'm trembling in his arms.

“We should take move this upstairs,” he says, his voice raspy and dripping with arousal.

I take his hand and smile. “Lead the way.”

We go inside and sneak through the dimly lit hallways until we reach the bottom of the stairs. Having eluded the night porter currently dozing off behind the reception desk, Isaac stops to kiss me again. He’s getting hungrier. Downright ravenous as his hands slip under my tee to give my breasts a proper squeeze. He pinches my nipples between his thumb and index fingers, and I tenderly bite into his shoulder to stop myself from moaning loudly and thus giving away our presence. I think the fooling around excites him.

He grabs my ass and pulls me into another dizzying kiss. “I’ve been wanting to do this all day, Stella.”

“You smell amazing,” I whisper in his ear.

The sound of the front door opening mere feet away from us has us jumping back like teenagers caught by their parents. I’m panting and trying to rearrange my shirt while Isaac straightens his. We’re both staring at the door as Noah comes in with a victorious smile on his face.

“Ah, glad I caught you both,” he says. “Good news about your car, Stella. My mechanic said he can fix it. He just needs to order a couple of parts, but you should have it back in about a week.”

“Thank you, Noah,” I mumble, barely able to look at him. My whole face feels red, my skin sizzling like lava as I come down from the cloud where Isaac had me briefly mounted. “Thank you.”

“What’s going on here?” he asks, narrowing his eyes at us.

I give Isaac a worried look, but he smiles softly. “It’s okay,” he says.

“What do you mean?” I reply.

“Stella and I were getting to know each other tonight,” Isaac tells his brother. My jaw drops. “You interrupted us.”

I glance at the reception. I can't see the night porter, but I can definitely hear him snoring. What the hell is Isaac playing at here? Noah nods and comes closer. He looks particularly handsome under the amber lobby light, his fiery gaze scanning me from head to toe. I feel naked under his eyes. The scary part is that I love the tension, the tingling sensation in the back of my throat.

"I see. Well, allow me to apologize, then," Noah says, closing the distance between us.

"It's not what you think," I try to explain, but Noah cups my cheek and pulls me into a kiss.

It's not a feeling of déjà vu that's got my senses tangled and crackling. It's the meaning behind his gesture and the desire—now amplified by the idea of being taken by both Kendricks. Isaac and Noah, together. They exchange amused glances before they look at me, while I struggle to breathe and wonder whether I'm ready for whatever the two of them seem willing to do with me. Or to me. Or both. Please, dear universe, let it be both.

"Isaac and I share everything," Noah says. "We've been like this since we were kids. Toys. Books."

"Gorgeous and intelligent women," Isaac adds. "Does that put you off?"

I shake my head slowly. "I've never..."

"Would you like to?" Isaac asks.

I nod faintly. "Yes."

Maybe I should've said no, but my conscience is passed out in the backseat. My heart has taken the wheel, and my body is about to speed off a cliff and plummet into what I can only hope is a never-ending sea of bliss. Noah and Isaac flank me, their dominant frames sandwiching me between them, their hands shamelessly roaming up and down my body as they plant kisses on my temples, my cheeks, and my neck.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Isaac asks.

I don't even register the moment we reach Isaac's room. It's a sprawling penthouse with a lounge area, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a private terrace overlooking the forest.

Noah helps me out of my jeans and shirt as Isaac loses his clothes. Then Noah strips down. The three of us gaze upon one another, our eyes round and glimmering, our lips parted and our hearts thumping as the air thickens and the electricity crackles between us. I still can't believe this is happening. But it is. My skin prickles against the cool of the night as I stand before them.

Two gorgeous men, so much alike, yet so wonderfully different but equally appealing. I'm done resisting my own thoughts when every thread in my body beckons to be pulled, when my very core is begging to be unraveled. I take my bra off, revealing my full breasts. The nipples harden from their sharp attention.

Isaac comes closer, cupping one gently. His thumb brushes over, prompting a gasp from the back of my throat. Noah bends and kisses the other. He takes the nipple in his mouth and suckles—softly at first, then harder, teeth grazing until I'm gushing wet. Isaac runs a hand through my long, black hair, grabbing a handful so he can yank my head back and kiss me deeply.

“You're impressive, Stella,” Noah groans as he kneels before me. He hooks his fingers into my panties and pulls them down, then brings a hand up and slides his fingers between my outrageously wet folds. “And quite ready, I see.”

“So ready,” I manage between Isaac's kisses. He teases my breasts, fondling the flesh and sucking the nipples while my gaze bounces from one glorious cock to the other. They're hung like giants, and I cannot wait to feel them inside me.

Isaac guides my hand down and presses it against his erection firmly. “I'm ready too, Stella.”

“Oh... Wow...” I whisper, aroused by the thickness, the feel of throbbing veins snaking along the shaft. I stroke him gently, delighted by the sight of his lips parting and his gaze darkening to a definitive black that sends my heart racing.

“Let me taste you,” Noah growls.

A split-second later, his mouth closes over my pussy, his tongue exploring until it finds my clit, a taut and swollen nub that holds all my nerve endings tonight. I moan harshly as my knees soften, but I cannot let myself fall. What he’s doing to me is way too good for me to miss. The woman within me awakens with the fire of a thousand suns, my core tightening as I feel an orgasm tumbling through me.

The explosion is damn near immediate and long overdue. I crumble, and Isaac comes up from behind me, taking me in his arms and holding me upright as Noah eats my pussy, as he devours me and licks me and drinks my climax down to the last drop. The heat ripples through me and I surrender, desperate for more, so much more.

“You’ve had that in you for a while, huh?” Noah chuckles softly as he stands up.

I’m melting like butter in a hot pan, smiling as Isaac gently pushes me down. I’m on my knees and taking Noah’s cock in my mouth. My juices trickle along the insides of my thighs as I practically unhinge my jaw to fit all of him. I relax the back of my throat and suck him whole. He caresses my hair, our eyes meeting while my lips wrap around his tip. I taste the pre-cum on my tongue and moan hungrily as I deep-throat him faster and faster.

Noah holds me by the head and thrusts himself into me. I watch the lights in his eyes flicker as his cock twitches down my throat.

Isaac gets on his knees behind me and whispers in my ear. “Spread your legs for me, Stella.”

I hold on to Noah’s hips as Isaac positions himself closer behind me. I know what’s coming, yet nothing prepares me for the feeling itself. His giant cock slips right inside and all the way up, and I still for the briefest of moments.

Noah watches me intently, the muscle in his jaw twitching while his cock pulsates in my mouth. I service him, using one hand to keep a tight grip on the base while I suck and lick the

hell out of the rest. Isaac thrusts himself deeper inside me, his fingers digging into my hips. I'm stretched beyond belief and taken both ways. My pussy reacts, arousal gushing as Isaac pounds into me.

Harder, faster. Deeper. I can feel him in the pit of my stomach.

My breasts bounce gleefully as he fucks me out of my mind. Noah holds my head still as he thrusts into my mouth. "Oh fuck," he gasps, then spills his seed down my throat.

I swallow every drop, welcoming every push while Isaac spreads me wider and hammers into me like there's no tomorrow. Neither lets me go. They hold me in my position as Isaac's left hand slips around and finds my aching clit. He flicks it frenetically as I cry out, one hand still closed around Noah's cock. I'm dismantled and reassembled into a second orgasm—this second wave destroys my senses altogether. Isaac comes inside me, pounding, thrusting, spearing me with the full length of his manhood until I'm drained and filled at the same time.

Sweat drips down my skin. The universe expands as I tilt my head back, letting it rest on Isaac's shoulder while Noah watches us, a devilish grin stretching across his lips. I can feel him hardening in my hand, already. He's down for round two. Isaac's ragged breath tickles my ear, and I find myself smiling, sated yet hungry for more.

The night is young, indeed. And we've already crossed this threshold. There's no point in going back to what was before this moment.

I didn't expect any of it to happen. I don't usually follow my gut instinct like that. There's always a studying and planning stage involved. A careful observation of the woman, of her habits and nature, of her character and personality. Stella isn't the first woman my brother and I have shared. I've shared women with Noah, Beau, and Levi, too, though usually professionals who could handle our strong bond and dominant demands. Yet something about Stella is enticing and downright impossible to resist. Something that makes the blood leave my upper parts and flood into my nether regions with lightning speed when we're close.

She is beautiful. The kind of beautiful poets would've written interminable sonnets about. That long black hair, those curious, hazel green eyes, those full, delicious lips. Each curve of her body was designed to bring a man to his knees, and I knelt gladly the other night. My pants get tighter solely from the memory of our encounter, of her wetness and moans of pleasure. Of her rich and creamy thighs, her generous breasts, her insatiable hunger. And she took us both bravely and ravenously. She loved every second of it. She wanted more.

"I take it she's got you both hooked," Beau chuckles as he takes a long sip of his coffee.

We're in the breakfast room of the bed and breakfast. It's a late morning and most of our guests have checked out before the new arrivals come in the afternoon. We're in the peak of the winter season, so this place will be packed for at least another month. For now, however, the guys and I don't mind

hanging out here with freshly brewed coffees and a stack of still warm croissants resting on a plate between us. Some of our best business meetings usually involve good coffee and French pastries.

Except this isn't really a business meeting but rather a gathering of dirty minds.

"All I did was jump in," Noah says, the corner of his mouth ticking. He leans back into his seat, letting the timid morning sun bathe him in its golden light. "Isaac already had the fire burning."

"I'm telling you, it was mutual," I cut in, holding back a smile of my own. "She's something else, man. Some other species, some kind of goddess stuck on this earth."

Levi gives me a surprised look. "A goddess? My friend, I didn't know a woman could awaken the literary side of you."

"You'll see for yourself as you get to know her," I reply.

He glances around the breakfast room, catching a glimpse of Stella in her pale blue uniform as she pushes a dish cart into the kitchen across the circular hall. She is a professional through and through, giving everyone a polite nod and a muttered "Hello" before she resumes her duties. I try to steal her attention, but she won't have it. While she's on her shift, Stella is the maid, and that's it. I understand, though. It's her job, and she needs it way more than she needs a man or two screwing her out of her mind every other night. She's got two mouths to feed along with her own and a heart-breaking history. Stella can't afford to lose her job. I'm going to make sure she never leaves this place unless she chooses to do so.

"How are the kids?" Beau asks. "I saw them earlier with Bella, playing in the snow."

"Ah, yes, the morning walk," I say, half-smiling. "They're fine. I think they're definitely going to enjoy being here. They're too young to realize what's going on, though. Bella uses all those sensory toys Stella made or bought for them. They're fed and cared for and safe."

"I'm glad she let us help her," Beau says.

“Me too. She shouldn’t be a maid for much longer, though,” Noah replies. “That resume of hers is way more impressive than most other applicants for her position. She should be in middle management at this point in her career.”

I nod in agreement. “Let’s give her time to settle in and get a feel for the place and our team. I’m sure we’ll be able to bump her up in the ranks when she’s ready.”

“So, how was it?” Levi asks, eyeing me intently as he steers the subject away from business.

The grin that inadvertently slits my face speaks volumes. Beau’s eyebrows pop up. He is understandably intrigued and in need of more information. “Well, go on, Isaac, tell us.”

“You know a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Noah laughs. “Let’s just say she is an incredible experience and leave it at that.”

“Do you think she’d be willing to try the four of us one night?” Levi inquires.

It’s not the craziest idea, given our history. And something tells me she’d be into it. Stella may be a young, divorced mother of two who’s currently struggling to get a grip on her life, but she is also one hell of a woman. There is an active volcano bubbling beneath the surface, and Noah and I got a whiff of it.

“I think we should definitely approach the idea carefully,” I say. “I think she’s got it in her to handle us, but we wouldn’t want to scare her away. It’s early yet.”

“She’s not indifferent to any of us,” Beau says. “I see the fire in her eyes, even when she thinks we’re not watching. She’s hungry, Isaac. Really hungry.”

“Which works to our advantage,” I reply. “We do need to be careful about her from a professional angle. Under no circumstances should she feel her position here is threatened. We’ve never interacted intimately with a woman from our staff. It could lead to a sticky situation.”

Levi thinks about it for a moment. “We’ll keep it completely separate. The intimate part will be solely for carnal pleasures. No strings attached. No emotional involvement. If she’s got what it takes to handle the four of us, I don’t think it would be an issue.”

“Besides, with two kids to raise, I doubt Stella has the energy or the drive to handle an actual relationship at this point in time. Let alone a relationship with four men,” Noah says.

“Her kids are sweet.” A warm smile draws upon Levi’s lips. “Lucas is a chatterbox. He can barely string enough words together to form a sentence, but he tries so hard to be a part of the conversation. I had a chat with Bella earlier while they were out in the garden, and he was so eager to tell me about the trees and the bees.”

“Ava’s barely a year old, and I’m pretty sure she’ll talk his head off when it’s her turn,” I laugh. “They’re both innocent little angels. How could anybody leave them behind like this?” I shake my head. “Stella mentioned their father hasn’t seen them in almost seven months. The bastard just walked out on them. He signed the divorce papers remotely, and that was it.”

Noah shakes his head, visibly disgusted. “I just hope he doesn’t think of coming back.”

“Don’t play the caveman card,” I warn. “Stella’s a grown woman. Independent. Strong on her own. She won’t take kindly if we treat her like some kind of damsel in distress.”

“Yeah, I know. It doesn’t mean I want that prick around. I like her, Isaac. A lot. From the moment she walked into this place, I liked her. Call me crazy, whatever, but there’s something about her. Something beautiful and painful at the same time, strong and sensitive...” He laughs. “Listen to me, I sound like world-renowned bestselling author Levi Smith here.”

We all laugh, but we can each tell Noah isn’t the only one who has taken such a deep liking to Stella. It may not have been on the books for things to get that far the other night, but

we cannot deny the magnetism currently unfolding between us, either.

“We’ll go easy on her,” I say. “I think she’s special. I think she could make the four of us very happy, and I’m positive we could do the same for her.”

STELLA

Slowly but surely, life is starting to make more sense again. I have a routine to adhere to. A rhythm my kids are getting used to, and that easily translates into better sleep and happier faces. The Elizabeth is clearly one of the best places for us to be, and the bump in the pay has been a godsend, as well.

I do eight-hour shifts from morning until afternoon while Bella looks after Lucas and Ava. Lucas definitely likes her, and Ava isn't too fussy around her either, so that's a double blessing and much needed peace of mind. Isaac was right. She's a good girl, conscientious and careful yet impressively skilled in managing a toddler and an infant at the same time. Granted, Ava is still learning the scooting and crawling side of things, which gives Bella more room to focus on Lucas—my boy is one hell of a sprinter if she's not careful. Thankfully, there's no real danger in these parts since the property is surrounded by a tall fence, and there aren't any wild animals lurking around, either. Plus, the snow does help to slow him down.

We have three meals a day and all the coffee and refreshments we need. There's a TV in our room, and we have access to the Elizabeth's cleaning services, as well. Free of charge. I can't thank Isaac, Noah, Beau, and Levi enough for helping us out. I'm sleeping better, thanks to them. And that whole thing with Noah and Isaac... damn, I'm still thinking about it a week later. How could I not? They turned me inside out, they made me cry tears of climactic joy, they resuscitated the woman within me, and I gave myself to them, wholly,

unequivocally. It was incredible, and I would very much like a do-over. The twins have kept a polite distance, though, giving me room to breathe and really settle in. I'm grateful and relieved. I do need to wrap my head around everything that's been happening, especially since Beau and Levi have been eyeing me more intensely over the past couple of days.

I've not been indifferent to their smiles and moments of attention, either. They're irresistible, and it makes me feel a little guilty, but what's the harm? I mean, we're just looking, right?

"Momma!" Lucas gasps as he brings over a puffy dandelion he just plucked from the garden. We've been out here for about half an hour, warming under the surprisingly generous afternoon sun before we settled under the ancient maple tree that dominates the eastern corner of the property. Even with its leaves gone for the winter, it still reigns supreme. "Momma, flower! I got you flower!"

"Oh, yes, yes, you did, you got me a flower. It's beautiful, thank you!" I giggle and kiss his forehead with all the love in my soul for him. "My little gentleman. Can you find me another one?"

He nods excitedly and waddles back to the patch underneath one of the secular pines of wildflowers that has captured his attention the past fifteen minutes or so. I absolutely adore watching him frown as he carefully checks every flower and inch of hard dirt and snow before plucking the right one with his chubby little fingers. He's a happy kid. He likes it here. There's enough fresh air and sunlight to give his pale skin a warmer color. It brings out the green in his eyes, and it makes his smile brighter.

I never want to see him upset again. We've had a rough few months, especially since Elijah has been late with those child support payments. I can't afford a better lawyer yet, and our current one is the least enthusiastic attorney I've ever come across. At least we're safe here. It's better.

My phone buzzes for the umpteenth time—yet another call from my mother. The almighty Miranda Snow thought I'd

actually stick around with my children to suffer more of her abuse. She did enough damage to me growing up, and I'll be damned if I'll ever let her come near Ava or Lucas again.

Ignoring the call, I drop her a quick text. *We're fine. Out of your hair. Leave us alone.*

Naturally, a slew of replies starts pouring in, but the phone's already languishing at the bottom of my bag, vibrating senselessly while I accept another dandelion from my sweet, darling boy.

"Want red one?" Lucas asks.

"I'd love a red flower, yes. There's loads of them over there, huh?"

"Yup, yup, yup!"

He rushes back to the patch and proceeds to find the prettiest red wildflower for me. Sometimes, I feel like I don't deserve such good kids. I would've loved to be able to raise them in a place like this. To actually spend entire summers and winters here on holiday. I would've loved to be able to afford overseas trips and the occasional drive south to Disneyland. For the time being, I'm thankful we've got food and a roof over our heads. Bella's birthday is coming up in January. I'll need to save up and buy her something nice for all of her help. She's a remarkable girl, about to be nineteen and working hard to put herself through night classes at the local college.

I'm so deep in my thoughts, astonished by the tranquility I've been carrying myself with, that I barely notice Beau walking toward us from across the garden. The winter sun dances in his black hair, making his subtly oiled curls shine. The darkness of his eyes seems to absorb the light as he looks at me and smiles. All I can do is mirror his expression and straighten my back when he reaches us.

"Bonjour, Stella. How are you and the children on this fine afternoon?"

"We're wonderful, thank you. How's your day going, Beau?"

We engage in such polite pleasantries on a daily basis now, but the tension between us has thickened, the air sizzling with the slightest of movements. I think we both know we're just throwing words around so we don't tear the clothes off each other. Maybe there's something in the water here that gives me these decadent, indecent thoughts.

Beau looks particularly good today. His dark green pants are tailored to perfectly hug his muscular thighs, matched with a leather belt around his narrow waist. The white shirt is tucked in, the fabric stretching over his broad shoulders and rippling pectorals, and the gold wristwatch captures specks of sunlight whenever he moves his hand. The woolen coat he's wearing on top is a darker shade of emerald with gold-brushed buttons. He smells of citrus notes and smoked oak—a fragrance that causes my senses to scream in the back of my head. The presence of my children adequately restrains me as I muster a warm smile.

“Better now that I'm able to get out here in the garden,” he says, then nods at the bench I'm sitting on. “Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.”

He takes a seat and gradually shifts closer to me. As soon as Lucas comes back with a small red flower, Beau lights up, completely enthralled with my boy. “Hello, young man! I see you have some flowers for your mother, huh?”

“Hello,” Lucas mumbles shyly, then gives me the flower and runs back to his patch, frequently stealing glances at us while I try not to laugh too hard.

“You'll have to forgive him. He's like that around people he doesn't know,” I tell Beau. “He'll warm up to you, though, and then you'll have a hard time shaking him off.”

“Don't worry about it. This is all new to Lucas; he needs time to adjust. Speaking of, how are you coming along with everything?” he asks.

“Oh, it's all good. We have a good home here, the work is fantastic, the pay is more than generous. I'm just so grateful,

Beau.”

“Please, don’t worry about it. If you’re happy, we’re happy. But I wanted to know how you’re getting along on a more personal level,” he says, his voice softening slightly as he leans closer. “How are you doing, Stella? Is there anything I can do to help?”

I shake my head slowly. “I’m okay, I promise.”

“Listen, I’m not a single mother of two, so I can’t even begin to imagine what it must’ve been like for you to have to move here in order to survive, but I want you to know that you and Lucas and Ava will always have a home at the Elizabeth.”

I quickly blink the tears away. “Thank you, Beau. It means a lot. I’m doing my professional best, and if there’s anything you guys need from me, please, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I will. Eventually.” He pauses and briefly glances at Ava bundled warmly in her stroller, who’s far away in dreamland, her tiny hands balled into little fists over her ears. “My God, she is perfect, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is. And she’s so gentle and sweet. I got lucky, Beau, I swear. The only time my kids get fussy is when they’re hungry, but they’ll eat anything you give them, no questions asked.”

He laughs lightly. “You definitely got lucky. I put my mother through hell growing up.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I was very active. A miniature devil, to be honest. I ate a lot. I think I ate more than my father, but then high school came around, I fell in love for the first time, I dropped a few pounds. Nearly gave my parents a heart attack. I got dumped.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “Who’d be dumb enough to dump you?”

“Oh, don’t think she didn’t regret her decision. Especially after I got drafted into Paris Saint Germain. I wasn’t that interesting as a lanky teen with acne and messy hair. I liked

football too much. But then I became a world-famous player, and suddenly my parents' landline wouldn't stop ringing."

"You don't know what you've got until it's gone, huh?"

"Tale as old as time. Where's the children's father?" Beau asks, nearly out of the blue.

I stare at him in mild confusion before I can offer an answer. "I don't really know. Last time I heard from him, he and his new chick had moved to Portland again."

"He hasn't paid child support, has he?"

I shake my head again, this time with a frown pulling my brows together. "No. He will, eventually. I think he's between jobs or something. I already know I cannot and should not rely on him."

"Good. You don't have to worry about him anymore," Beau replies, then takes a business card out of his wallet. "Maybe give this guy a call. He might be able to help out with getting your ex-husband to pay."

"Oh, I don't think I can afford the retainer," I mumble, noticing the embossed letters on one side of the card. It looks expensive. These are probably five-hundred-bucks-an-hour lawyers. Way out of my price range, though I'm sure they would efficiently get us the payments delivered sooner rather than later. "But thank you, Beau."

"You don't need to worry about paying them. They bill me on a monthly basis for a variety of services, and I've already informed their paralegal that you'll be in touch," Beau says. "Listen, Stella, you may be fine on your own for the time being, but that man needs to pay what he owes. His children need the financial support, and it is literally the least he could do after the way he did the three of you dirty."

I stare at the card for a long moment. Beau is right. I should be hounding Elijah with everything I've got. He shouldn't be allowed to go on living his life without a care in the world while his children and I struggle. "I'll give them a call."

"Light his ass on fire," Beau replies.

Our eyes meet, and for the love of all that's holy in this world, I lose my breath and wonder what it would be like if we could just go back to his room right now. My blood boils, my skin tingles everywhere. I clench my knees tighter together, fully aware that my short, candy-pink black wool dress and skin-colored tights are showing more of my curves than usual—not that I was expecting him to pop by.

“Why are you helping me?” I ask, unable to pull myself away from his intense focus.

Isaac and Noah rumble through my head. Their hands, their lips, their darkened gazes, their magnificent cocks and the way I unraveled between them. I shouldn't be doing this. I should resist, blink all of this away and keep a reasonable distance, but Beau keeps drawing me in. I'm like a moth flying straight toward the flame.

“Because you need a break, and because you strike me as the kind of woman who has spent one too many years gracing the wrong man with your love,” Beau says. “Perhaps it's time for you to just sit back and smell the roses.”

“I'm just not used to people being so kind,” I admit.

“Well, it's time for you to get used to this,” Beau says. “Forget the past and focus on the present. We're not all bad, Stella. And you deserve better than what you've had up to this point.”

Lucas sits on a rock, his tiny boots sinking in the snow, carefully watching a beetle lazily work its way up the stem of a hibernating hibiscus bush in front of him. He is downright fascinated, still and nearly breathless as his eyes follow the tiny creature with its extended eyes and brownish, shimmering shell and hairy little legs. I can't help but smile, and Beau exhales sharply.

“You're right,” I tell him, slowly turning my head. “I'm not used to having good people in my life. Frankly, I think Lucas and Ava and Theo are the only ones.”

“I don't claim to be a good man,” he says, gently clasping my chin with his thumb and index finger. The touch is soft, yet

it still lights a spark within me. “But I do know that the four of us are determined to take good care of you, Stella. You’re a part of the Elizabeth, now, and while we do not extend everyone the same courtesies as we have with you, you will always be looked after here.”

“You barely know me,” I manage.

“I don’t need to know you to know that you’re an incredible woman. It’s written all over you. It’s written all over your children. And in the week you’ve been here, I can see it from the way you work, as well,” Beau replies. “I’d like to know you better, though.”

Again, my mind gets jammed like paper in a faulty printer. “What?”

“I’d like to get to know you better,” he says, inching closer. “Would you like to have drinks with me one of these evenings? We could hang out here, or I could drive us down the coast. I know a couple of great seafood restaurants in the Hamptons that are open in the winter, too.”

My first thought is to say yes. But my inner demons crawl back to the surface as I remember that Isaac and Noah are good and close friends with Beau and Levi. And while the Kendrick twins have assured me that our intimate encounter has no bearing on my position at the bed and breakfast, it doesn’t exactly stop them from talking about it with one another. It hits me, now, what this is about.

Anger is quick to grip me by the throat as I pull my head back and inch away from Beau until I can feel the bench’s wrought iron armrest against my hip. “I think you’re mistaking me for a different kind of woman,” I say, my voice trembling slightly.

“What do you mean?” Beau pauses. “Oh, if you’re referring to the thing with Isaac and Noah—”

“Oh, my God, they told you!”

“Wait, Stella, don’t be mad. Let me explain.”

I have a mind to smack him, but he’s still my boss. All I can do is sit and simmer as I try to find a more appropriate

response. “It was supposed to be private,” I mutter between gritting teeth.

“It is private,” he assures me. “You need to understand something, Stella. Something I don’t think either Isaac or Noah managed to convey properly. The four of us, we’re not just longtime business partners and best friends. We’re extremely close. Our bond is unlike most you might’ve come across, and we share the most intimate aspects of our lives with one another because we trust each other deeply.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever, but what does that have to do with me? I’m not some floozy you all get to bang.”

“Nor did I make such a suggestion. Forgive me, Stella, it’s not what I meant. I actually like you. And Isaac and Noah’s intimate experience with you has only made my desire for you grow even deeper,” he says, and dammit, I actually believe him.

The look in his eyes melts my heart. My defenses shatter as he comes closer, refusing to let me flee this strange and tantalizing moment. He cups my cheek, and I should slap his hand away, but I cannot. His cologne invades my lungs, his body beckons mine. Heat gathers between my legs as I lose myself in the shadows of his smoldering gaze.

“I want you, Stella,” Beau says. “And you cannot lie to me. I feel you, even now. You want me. I can almost smell it on you...”

“But I—”

“Go out with me, cherie,” he whispers, our mouths so close I can practically inhale him. “Let me spoil you.”

My nipples harden against the lace of my bra. He glances down and spots the subtle signs of my arousal—visible even through the black wool of my dress. Dammit, his lips are curling into a devious smile. “Let’s have dinner tomorrow night, Stella. A few drinks, a conversation, a walk along the boardwalk. Aren’t you done surviving?”

“I am.”

He plants a soft kiss on my cheek, his eyes drilling holes into mine. “Don’t you think it’s time for you to start living?”

“It is.”

He nods and gets up. His absence is quickly filled by a current of cool cold air, the ocean breeze coming in from afar with sharp hints of salt and algae. He stands before me, the sun dancing in his black hair, hands in his pockets as he appears quite satisfied with my response.

“Wonderful. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at eight? I’ll make sure Bella stays with the little ones for the evening,” Beau says.

“Okay.”

It’s time to give myself what I truly desire. And right now, I desire four gorgeous and powerful men who have been nothing but good and kind and courteous to me. I desire four gentlemen who have dark sides and dirty minds. Four knights to set my body ablaze and soothe my soul at the same time. Just because I’m a divorced single mom doesn’t mean I should let myself be defined by my past choices.

“Okay, then,” Beau nods politely and walks away.

Lucas is still hypnotized by the beetle, but Ava stirs awake, cooing and bubbling for my attention.

STELLA

Little Plains Beach in Southampton is one of the most beautiful stretches of golden sand I've ever seen, and it seems even more beautiful when dressed in pristine white snow. The Atlantic Ocean opens up ahead, a seemingly infinite mass of tourmaline waters that tremble under a clear, blue sky. There's barely a fluff of clouds above, and winter is in the crisp, chilly air that makes my cheeks burn pink and my lips quiver. But I love it. It makes me feel alive. I stand before this tranquil beauty with wide eyes and a bright smile as I'm reminded of how easy it is when you just go with the flow.

For too long, I have put myself last. With Elijah, with my mother, even with my own children. Not once did I stop to wonder if what I was doing was in my best interest. This place brings out a part of me I thought I'd lost. The vibrant girl who loved going places, who loved the idea of exploring the world and discovering new pleasures.

"What do you think?" Beau asks as he joins me. We made the drive down the coast to Southampton for the day.

"It's beautiful," I tell him. "I've never been to this part of the coast before."

"Well, then, I'm glad I'm able to offer this experience," he replies with a broad smile.

His natural tan skin has a caramel glow when he wears white, and I have to say, I'm loving this look on him. White slacks and a white sweater, pristine tall Timberland boots, a camel-hair jacket and a brilliant Rolex on his wrist—a simple

yet effective combination to get my pulse rushing from zero to a thousand in the blink of an eye. Add his debonair smile on top, and my panties are soaking wet. The previously under-experienced woman in me keeps asking what the hell we're doing here, but she's outnumbered and outgunned by my desire to discover him, to be with him, to find out what he's like on every level. Beau is light years away from the dumb jock's archetype.

"I got this house a couple of years ago, but I only come down maybe a couple of times during the summer. This is the first time I've come in the middle of winter, which is a shame. The pool has a heated glass and steel structure that allows me to use it in the cold months, too," Beau says as he escorts me through the front gates of a sprawling beach property. "The maid service keeps the place spotless at all times, though, just in case I decide to come. They made sure to stock the fridge, the freezer, and the pantries, mind you." He takes my hand. "Come, I'll give you a tour of the house."

I follow him into the foyer first, and I'm instantly breathless by the simplistic beauty of this space. We walk past the round table set in the middle, where the maids made sure to leave a rich bouquet of lilies to fill the entire room with their dizzying fragrance. The kitchen is remarkably simple but fully equipped.

"This is sheer luxury," I mumble as he takes me through the living room next. "I assume it was quite a hefty investment."

"Mostly for the labor, to be honest," Beau replies. "The materials weren't as costly as you might imagine. Given how many hotels we've bought or built or refurbished over the years, I've learned there's a balance between cost, quality, and distance of delivery. Except the marble. I paid a ton to have that brought in straight from Italy. Everything else was sourced from northern New York producers, and the furniture was designed and built in Boston before it was brought down and assembled here."

While the living room was designed around an earthy and warm theme, the bedrooms continue with the property's

overall nautical vibe. Navy blue wallpaper with hand sewn motifs. Hardwood flooring in dark and sturdy oak shades. White skirting along the walls. And white fabrics everywhere, while the furniture is mostly teak and walnut.

An hour later, we're downstairs by the pool, having a couple of drinks. The glass and steel structure surrounds the entire swimming area and stretches above the ground floor, seamlessly fusing into the first floor through straight beams. The heating system makes it feel like early summer in here, and I can see so much of the sky I'm about to forget this whole place is enclosed. I lay on the white-wood chaise lounge like a queen, unable to wipe the smile from my face as I glimpse the ocean beyond the tall, trimmed garden hedges. It's so peaceful.

"You look like a completely different person," Beau says at one point throughout what feels like a never-ending conversation. "The change of scenery does wonders for you, Stella."

"I've been living in the same rusty old cage for too long," I reply with a heavy sigh. "Portland, Scarborough... they're all just exhausting after a while."

"Any place can be exhausting if you don't get out of there, at least occasionally."

"I'm not cut out for constant traveling, either. Just the idea of losing my luggage at the airport while changing flights fills me with anxiety. Imagine having that happen with two kids in tow."

Beau laughs wholeheartedly, then refills my glass with bubbly prosecco. The alcohol is getting to my head, but I'm loving the delicate buzz. It unties my tongue and relaxes my muscles. I've been on edge for as long as I can remember, constantly worrying about what my kids are going to eat or how I'm going to pay my rent.

"You know, when Lucas was born, I thought Elijah would come through for us. I thought he'd settle into a better paying job, that he'd be more responsible," I say after a while.

"But he didn't."

I shake my head slowly. “He kept drifting from one gig to another. I don’t know, maybe I romanticized him a little too much. Maybe I fell in love with his potential, not with the man standing right in front of me. And when I realized he would never evolve beyond that point, I was pregnant with Ava.” I pause and take a deep breath. “I’m sorry. This isn’t exactly a topic befitting a relaxing day in the Hamptons.”

“Nonsense. We can talk about whatever you want. Life is messy and complicated. People let us down. We hit rock bottom. But then we find our way back to the surface. Nobody is meant to stay down for too long. You’re a fighter, ma chérie. You’re just tired and in desperate need of a recharge before you can pick up your shield and sword and fight your way back to the top.”

“No wonder Theo was so fond of you, guys,” I giggle. “She was right. You’re way more down to earth than most guys in your position.”

“Don’t you dare say rich guys.”

“Rich guys.” I watch him cringe and laugh my ass off. “But you are rich, though.”

“It doesn’t define me. It doesn’t define us,” Beau chuckles. “Money is just a means to an end. I never sought to hoard it like Scrooge McDuck. It’s useful to have more of it than less, but it shouldn’t be the core of the human experience. Do you think I cared about money when I was kicking a ball across the pitch?”

I shake my head again. “No.”

“It was all about the game. I loved playing. I never cared about ticket sales or endorsements. Sure, I loved the sponsorships because they provided me with better gear, but that was it. I enjoyed the parties and the social events, but everything, absolutely everything that most saw as the ultimate perks were really just a means to an end for me. I just wanted to play.”

I give him a long look, nearly drowning in the dark pools of his eyes. His chaise lounge is close enough to mine for me

to reach out and touch him, but I'm not bold enough yet. Maybe a couple more glasses of prosecco will loosen me up some more. "What do you want to do now? I mean, you've been out of the game for how long?"

"Almost five years. I retired early. The knee injury didn't end my career, but I wasn't performing like before, either. It took some of the fun out of it, and to be honest, I needed a change."

"Do you miss it?"

"I do. I play with friends now. Once a month, I coach some kids down in Portland. I'd love to open a school there, something big with a giant field and housing opportunities for the less advantaged. Lots of kids don't get to play sports because their parents can barely afford to put a roof over their heads."

"That would be amazing," I reply. "There are so many at-risk kids in Portland right now."

"All they need is a little bit of support," he says. "I'd like to be able to provide them with that. Who knows? Maybe the next Maradona will come out of Portland."

"You're a good man, and I mean it from the bottom of my heart."

Beau sits up and faces me, watching me for a while. I'm still dressed, but I feel naked under his eyes. The corners of his mouth stretch into a lazy smile, and the plumpness of his lips makes my skin tingle. I can feel my nipples hardening, poking through the fabric, and I can see his gaze briefly wandering downward just in time to spot them. He licks his lips, then leans closer.

I hold my breath. He kisses me. It is a deep, dark, and sensual kind of kiss. It rattles me to the core as I abandon myself against his lips. A split-second later, he's down on one knee, one hand cupping my cheek. Our tongues play, licking and tasting what each of us has to offer. I enjoy the hints of prosecco and the rugged smell of him, the roughness of his stubble tickling my chin.

“You taste like summer in a bottle,” Beau whispers, then kisses me again.

His hunger unravels as I receive him. His other hand finds my shoulder first, nonchalantly exploring that bit of bare skin before it goes wandering over my breasts. He holds one firmly, squeezing and massaging until he hears me moan. He licks my upper lips and gazes deep into my eyes as he fondles me, as he touches and claims every inch of me.

“Beau...” I manage, my eyes damn near rolling in my head when his fingers lift the bottom of my dress and his fingers trail invisible lines up my thigh. His touch is electric, thousands of jolts running through my body and gathering in my belly.

“I know you’re ready for me,” he says.

Instinctively, I part my legs as his hand moves between them. I suck in a breath when his fingertips glide over the cotton fabric of my panties and he feels the wetness seeping through. His smile dissolves into a hungry glare as he kisses me. It’s a hard and possessive kiss, his breath intensifying as he pulls the fabric aside so he can slide his fingers between my wet folds.

“Oh... yes...” I hiss when he finds my swollen nub ready for him. “Yes, I’m ready for you.”

“Good,” Beau says.

The sound of doors opening freezes me in the chaise lounge, but his smile befuddles me. “Who’s there?” I ask, my voice but a whisper.

“I don’t want you to be alarmed, it’s okay. I just figured you’d be more at ease with all of us together.”

“Huh?” I manage and try to get up, but Beau glides two fingers inside me, and I clench around them, panting as the wave of arousal burns through me. “Beau, what’s going on?”

To my astonishment, Isaac walks in. I want to jump out of the chaise lounge, but I can’t bring myself to leave this incredible sensation behind. Isaac is joined by Noah and Levi. My heart jumps and swells and screams at the same time,

horror washing over me in waves of hot and cold. But Beau keeps finger-fucking me, slowly and surely as my eyes dart from one man to the other.

“You’re safe,” Isaac says. “We just wanted to join the fun.”

“All of you?” I squeak.

Levi smiles broadly, the first to come closer. His gray shirt is tight and stretched over his chest, a few curls of reddish hair poking out from the base of the V-neck collar. His jeans are even tighter, a bold erection catching my attention. “We’re all crazy about you Stella,” he says, his voice low and dripping with desire.

“What do you mean?” I mumble and moan at the same time as Beau adds his thumb into the process, pressing my clit as more tension gathers in my core.

Isaac kneels on the other side of my chaise lounge and kisses me softly on the lips. “Do you want us to leave?”

“No, no, I don’t...”

“Then why stop?” Noah replies, slipping out of his jeans and shirt. He stands next to his brother, and I’m dumbfounded and horny. I stare at them, my pussy tightening and pulsating hungrily as Beau’s fingers curl inward in an intensifying rhythm.

“We all want you,” Levi adds, his fingers trailing up my calf as he bites his lower lip.

Oh, wow. He wants me as badly as I want him. I want them, all of them, and they’re actually here, hard as fuck and eager to be a part of this. It’s crazy. It’s like something out of a movie, but it’s not a movie, it’s not fiction, it’s actually happening. I have two choices now. If I say no, they will respect my decision, but Beau slips a third finger into the conversation, stretching my pussy, and all I can do is spread my legs wider as Isaac pulls the top of my dress down, revealing my lace bra.

“Don’t stop,” is pretty much what’s left for me to say. This is happening.

I want it to happen. Screw everything I knew before. Screw tomorrow and whatever comes next. This is happening, and I am a more than willing participant. As if unleashed, the four men exchange shadowy glances before they proceed to tease me to the brink of madness.

“We won’t stop for as long as you’ll have us,” Noah says.

Within seconds, I’m stripped bare. My dress is on the ground, along with my panties and my bra. It’s amazing how quickly and smoothly eight hands can move when I’m the grand prize. I lay on the chaise lounge, and I am theirs for the taking. I can only watch and try not to faint from this overdose of unexpected pleasure.

Levi slowly massages my calves, watching me closely and following my reactions as he tightens his hold and adds more pressure with his thumbs. I’m jelly in his hands at this point, while Noah and Isaac take care of my breasts, the two of them flanking me as they take my nipples in their mouths and suckle hungrily. I whimper and push my chest forward, damn near passing out when Beau puts his hand between my legs again.

The fire burns brighter in my eyes as he strokes me into a swelling madness.

My hands react, and I take Noah and Isaac’s massive cocks, squeezing and getting a proper feel of the double, generous girth. I feel the droplets of pre-cum smearing over my thumbs when I reach the tips, and I listen to their ragged breaths when I move back down to the base. Their clothes have joined mine on the ground, and the five of us languish under the awning while the toothy December sun rises higher above us.

“What do you want?” Beau asks me.

Noah suckles my left nipple and playfully bites into it. I gasp as Isaac holds my right breast in his hand, his tongue flicking over the nipple. It causes a myriad of wildfires to spread across my skin, while Levi trails kisses up my leg.

“I want you to fuck me until I scream,” I tell him, abandoning all sense of self as he nods and pulls his hand

away. My pussy feels empty, but the sensation is only temporary.

Levi steps aside, standing and stroking himself, watching as Beau climbs on the chaise lounge and settles between my legs. Noah and Isaac stay right where they are, showering my mouth and breasts with wet kisses. But the entire world instantly disappears as I catch a glimpse of Beau's long, thick cock before he buries it inside me.

"Oh, wow!" I gasp as he spears me with the whole thing.

I can almost feel the veins running up the shaft while I keep stroking the twins. My hips tilt upward so I can better welcome Beau. I'm stretched out of my mind and filled to the brim. He digs his fingers into my thighs, draping my legs over his shoulders as he starts to move. Slowly, at first, just so I can get used to his size. But then his rhythm intensifies, and Beau starts pounding into me like there's no tomorrow. His thumb finds my clit again, and he rubs it, causing the tension to finally spark. I'm about to explode, crying out in sheer ecstasy as Isaac kisses me and Noah laps at my breast.

Levi groans as Beau fucks me harder and deeper. "You're a goddess, Stella."

"Oh, God, don't stop!" I almost scream when Isaac pulls away so he can look at me.

"Make her come," he tells Beau.

"Would you like to come all over my cock, Stella?" Beau asks.

"Yes, please... YES!" I manage. "Don't stop... Just like that!"

He thrusts himself deeper and deeper, taking me to the next level. Everything turns white as his thumb flicks and applies the last bit of pressure needed to push me over the edge. I writhe in a crumbling orgasm, gushing my juices all over Beau, just like he ordered. My pussy ripples outward like an exploding galaxy as he fucks me harder. And he doesn't stop. He can't stop. I'm taken and dismantled, riding the wave

of bliss and carnal liberation as I look into his eyes and he looks into mine.

I need more, though. I need more while he's inside me.

"Levi, I want you in my mouth," I hear myself say.

"Thought you'd never ask," he replies.

I'm panting as he moves closer. I admire his cock for a sweet moment, delighted by its thickness. I doubt I can wrap my mouth around it, but he gently guides it closer. My lips part, and I lick the reddened, bulging tip.

"Mhm, I like the taste," I moan and let him slide in.

He's cautious but determined to fill my mouth with his rock-hard shaft. My lips stretch, my jaw unhinges, and I relax the back of my throat while Beau fucks me hard and fast. I listen to his grunts of pleasure and brace myself for a second orgasm as he applies new pressure over my tender nub. I'm slick as hell, my pussy and inner thighs glistening in the shade.

"How does it feel?" Noah asks, taking a short break from teasing my nipple.

I give him a sideways glance just as Levi deep-throats me, and I lose my breath altogether. He holds my head in place, thrusting slowly until I feel the veins pulsating against my tongue. Isaac groans as I tighten my grip on his cock.

"She's a fucking natural," Beau exclaims delightedly.

This is crazy, yes, but I don't want it to stop. I revel in their moans and gasps of maniacal pleasure. I wrap my legs around Beau's hips and beckon him to go deeper. I want to be filled and taken every which way right now. I want everything.

"I'm gonna come," Levi warns me.

I look up. Our eyes meet as I lick and suck his bulging tip relentlessly. We keep eye contact as he strokes the base until I feel him unravel, until he spills his seed in my mouth with a guttural moan and I drink all of it in one greedy gulp. I keep my lips closed around the tip, welcoming the saltiness and the heat of every single drop.

“My turn,” Noah says.

He switches places with Levi. Levi takes my breast in his mouth, sweat glistening on his broad shoulders, while I take Noah’s cock in my mouth. Just as he goes deep down my throat, I feel Beau’s thrusts intensifying. I can’t say anything, but my voice reverberates in uneven moans and gasps as he fucks me harder, deeper.

I am shattered by a second orgasm just as Beau comes deep inside me, every push making my pussy clench tighter and tighter. Noah fucks my mouth, my tongue welcoming the taste of him, my whole body bucking under a tidal wave of ecstasy as both Levi and Isaac synchronize their tender bites. I come undone, filled with Beau’s seed and writhing in his hold.

Noah grips me by the back of the neck, his blue gaze locked on mine, his blonde hair slick with sweat as it curls over his temples. He’s got me wound and eager just as he shoves his cock deep down my throat and shoots a warm jet of absolute release. I feel the heat, the seed trickling downward as he pulls back. The last few drops land on my lips, and I lick them off as he grins like the devil himself.

“Isaac... I want you,” I hear myself say, dissolving in a daze.

Beau pulls out and Isaac comes up, his cock engorged and ready for me. Noah steps aside and watches. Levi is now in charge of both my breasts, each of my nerve endings turned to brimstone under his capable tongue.

“Let me taste you,” I tell Isaac.

He moans deeply as I hold the base of his cock tightly with one hand. He caresses my face as his hips push forward, and I welcome him deeper.

Beau’s fingers slide between my slick and tender folds and go in, curling upward. Everything down there is a bundle of sparking electrical wires. He thumbs my clit, and the third orgasm is quick to follow, rocking me to the very core of my existence.

“That’s it, baby, come for me. Come for us,” Beau says, watching me as I suck Isaac off.

“Jesus, you’re good at that,” Isaac whispers, each thrust bringing him closer to a desperately needed conclusion.

“Look at her, so fucking beautiful,” Levi says.

Noah smiles broadly. “She’s perfect for us.”

And as I fall apart yet again, as the universe explodes through me, as Beau’s thumb flicks me into a puddle of incandescent rapture, and as Isaac comes in my mouth, his salty elixir glazing my tongue and throat, I realize they are also perfect for me. Each of them has the power to bend me and break me and claim me. Each of them stokes the fire burning inside of me.

The four of them put together are pure bliss. This moment is everything I never imagined nor dreamed I’d ever have, yet I welcome it. Every fucking drop. Every thrust. Every touch and kiss. Every squeeze and gasp of air. I’ve never felt this way before. So shameless and hungry...

I love it.

We've been at it all day.

It's a good thing Beau's beach house features tall hedges and fences to keep the neighbors' curious eyes away, otherwise they'd all be treated to one hell of a show. I never imagined Stella would be so open, so fiery and hungry for the four of us. Her appetite is insatiable. Her body sings.

Sitting on the edge of the pool, I dip my feet in the heated water as I watch the evening unfold before me. The pool lights give the water a cool white glow. The garden lights are warm, though, casting a golden shimmer across the greenery and the polished stone slabs serving as a path. Behind me, the house is dimly lit—at least, the ground floor is. Isaac is watching something on TV in the living room. I'm pretty sure Levi and Beau are both asleep. They had the last session with Stella, and I know they were spent by the time she was done with them.

I can't stop thinking about her. Even when I'm near her. I've never met someone like her. The strength of her heart, the dignity with which she carries herself, yet she still finds the courage to let herself be claimed by four men. She was shocked to see us come in earlier, but she was just as quick to adjust to the situation. Hell, she didn't even blink when we surrounded her on the chaise lounge. I stare at the water, memories of her curves and creamy thighs flooding my mind.

We don't even know where this is going to lead, to be honest. It was a fluke from the beginning. A simple "let's see what happens" kind of thing. We hit it off right away. Stella is

so welcoming and intense, it would be madness not to play along, not to push her further and discover her limits. The five of us together... that's a match made in heaven. It's rare. Damn near impossible. Yet I'm pretty sure I'm falling for her. I've tried so hard to keep my heart out of these matters, but I care about her. I like her kids, too. Sweet and innocent little things. How could anybody leave them like that no-good ex-husband of hers did? What kind of idiot walks away from a woman like her?

I look back at the house again and catch a glimpse of Stella in the kitchen. She's getting a bottle of water from the fridge. Naked. Damn, my cock twitches again. The blood is already rushing downward, and there's an even bigger storm brewing inside me. Compelled by her mere presence, I get up and go inside. I need more of her. Now.

Closing the patio door, I pad across the back hallway and cut Stella off as she exits the kitchen. "Hey, you," I say, my voice low so as not to disturb anyone. I think I can hear Isaac quietly snoring in the living room. "What are you up to?"

"Thirsty," she replies with a half-smile, her eyelids drooping.

"Tired?"

"No, just thirsty."

I'd laugh, but I don't want anybody to hear us. I want her all to myself. None of us have been completely alone with her, not without at least a third one watching. But Stella's body is calling out to mine. Her heart's got a string connected to mine, and it's currently tugging. So I move closer and breathe her in.

"I'm hungry," I tell her.

"There's food in the fridge."

"That's not what I'm hungry for," I reply bluntly and take her upstairs.

By the time we reach a bedroom, I've already got my arms around her, heart pumping and lips crushing hers. "Aren't you tired?" Stella asks between wet, lazy kisses.

I run my fingers through her long black hair while she peels my swimming shorts off. “I would never get tired of you, baby,” I reply, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

“I am honestly stunned by your stamina,” she says, eyebrows arched in genuine wonder.

“It’s what you do to me,” I quip, pulling her closer. I love the feel of her curvy, naked body against mine. My cock’s ready, hard and bulging and perfectly nested in the smooth triangle between her thick thighs. “I don’t know who made you, but you were a gift for us...”

“Do you believe that? In that kind of serendipity?” she asks, watching me intently.

My hand moves down, knuckles brushing over a hardened nipple. I pinch it between my index and middle fingers, prompting her lips to part slowly. An unstoppable heatwave pours through me, setting my senses on fire as her gaze darkens, as the hazel green of her eyes deepens into a mist of desire and curiosity.

“I believe the universe is organized chaos,” I say. “That one way or another, regardless of where life has taken you so far, you were always meant to get here. You were meant to find us. And I was meant to find you.”

“It is strange the way we resonate with one another.”

“You can’t deny the connection.”

Stella shakes her head. “I’ve never done something like this before... One man had my heart for so long, I never imagined I’d open myself up to the four of you.”

“Does it scare you?”

“It terrifies me.”

“We’re having fun, though, aren’t we?” I don’t want her to be scared. I want her to feel safe and at ease, protected and comfortable. The safer she feels, the more she gives herself to us, to me. Her breasts are soft against my chest. I move my hand down and let it sneak between us.

She inhales deeply when my fingers find her wet and ready for me. “We’re having so much fun, Noah. I don’t want it to stop.”

“Then we won’t stop until you tell us,” I reply. “Until you end it.”

“I don’t want it to end.”

“Good. Then it won’t. Now, stand still for me, baby.”

“What are you... Oh.”

I give her a cool smile as I get down on my knees before her. The view is spectacular. Her full breasts perked up with arousal as the moon backlights her like a Greek statue. Her long black hair flows down her back. And my mouth closing over her clit, my tongue sliding between her pink folds as I feel her unwinding.

It is crazy, yes. Insane. Worthy of an asylum, perhaps. But it works. For as long as fate allows it, it works. Stella needs the release. She’s spent too many years wasting away next to a man who clearly didn’t know how to please her, how to truly make her happy. She gave him two children, two wonderful human beings who only need love and protection. And he couldn’t even provide for them. What a loser. A joke of a man. Not a man, actually.

It’s time for me and my brother, for Beau and Levi, for the four of us to show Stella what it’s like to be a real woman in the care of real men. Look at her blossoming, look at her lighting up from the inside as I lick her pussy and suckle on her clit.

“Oh, just like that,” she whispers, tilting her head back.

I devour her wholly, fingering her slowly at first. Her flesh reacts. Her skin reacts. Every inch of Stella speaks for her, and I am compelled to listen to every word, to every plea, to every hint. Right now, she is mine.

And as soon as I feel her come, juices glistening as I lick her relentlessly, I understand this will never just be a simple affair. We’ve gone too far already, and there is no turning

back. It will likely end in disaster. At least one of us will get our hearts broken. It will blow up in our faces, eventually.

It's one thing to share a woman in bed. How in the hell will we be able to share a woman in our lives, too? How can four of us love and share Stella? How can she love and share us, for that matter? I force those thoughts out of my head for now and enjoy what's right in front of me at the moment.

STELLA

Coming back to the Elizabeth after a full day and evening of exquisite debauchery feels like waking up from a dream and putting my feet back down on the cold floor of reality. But I'm doing so with a big smile on my face and plenty of hope in my heart. Things are getting better for me. For us.

My children are well looked after in Bella's care, and I love coming back to them in the late afternoon. Ava is happy, and Lucas has plenty to do around the estate. There really is no better place for them to grow up. It's a bittersweet thought because we're only temporary guests here, but I am determined to find a good place for us to stay in the area.

That way, I can drive up with the kids every morning. Bella can keep an eye on them here, and I can go about my work without worrying about them. This job could work in the long run. How would it work between me, Noah, Isaac, Levi, and Beau, though? We're keeping it fun and casual for the time being, but it feels way more intense than that. I see it in their eyes, and I feel it deep within myself, too.

Where do we go from here? How much longer will we be able to keep it up before one of us catches one too many feelings? I smell a serious heartbreak in this arrangement, yet I cannot stop myself. I don't really want to stop myself. It's been so long since I've actually felt safe and protected, cherished and genuinely wanted. Looking at these four wonderful and generous men, I realize that I settled in so many ways with Elijah. I've always deserved better.

Maybe it's time for me to actually *want* something better for myself.

"Morning, Stella," Connie says from behind the breakfast room bar. She's busy wiping the whole thing down with a cotton cloth and a special oil for that ridiculously expensive wood. "How was your day off, darling?"

"It was wonderful," I tell her as I get busy clearing the tables. "I actually made it down to the Hamptons."

"Oh, my! That's some uppity place to find yourself in! How'd you end up there?"

I load the cart with dirty plates, glasses and bowls, making sure to empty any leftovers and food into the appropriate waste baskets attached to the side. Holding back a smile, I focus on the task at hand, wiping the tabletops with disinfectant and a similar essential oil that gives them an elegant, smooth sheen.

"Well, I was invited," I tell my colleague. She's a plump, funny woman in her mid-fifties, worn out by life but still energized enough to work this kind of job. I don't think she has better options lined up, and every time I'm around her, I make a mental note to end up in a better situation when I reach her age.

"Then you couldn't say no, could you?"

"Hell, no."

We both laugh. Once the tables are cleared and cleaned and the bar is polished to perfection, I do a quick dusting of the Christmas tree and turn its festive lights on before we head back into the kitchen to unload the cart for the dishwasher. The chefs are out for another couple of hours, but the sous-chefs are already hard at work preparing some of the ingredients for today's lunch. We've had plenty of check-outs, so we've got our share of rooms to clean after this, but there will also be new arrivals today. We're looking at a full house again. I don't mind it. Keeping busy makes the day go faster.

"Who invited you?" Connie asks.

“Oh, just some friends,” I say, remembering I’m a terrible liar. The less I say, the better. “How about you? How was your weekend? You said you were taking your grandchildren to that winter fair outside Scarborough, didn’t you?”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “It wasn’t as much fun as I hoped it’d be.”

“It wasn’t a good time?”

“Not once my husband discovered the buy-one-get-one-free at the beer tent,” she grumbles. “From that point onward, I was on my own with three toddlers and my two bickering daughters. Their husbands were nowhere to be found until we got back to the car.”

“Smart fellas,” I laugh.

“Yeah, I thought that was a good thing when they first married my daughters.”

With the dishes unloaded and the carts disinfected and ready for the next round, Connie and I head back to the maids’ corner, where the girls from last night’s shift have already prepared the cleaning carts—fresh laundry all dry and ironed, fluffy towels and welcome baskets with tiny bottles of shampoo, small, handcrafted soaps from a local producer, and little sprigs of lavender for the pillows.

I think about Lucas and Ava a lot while we clean the rooms and prepare them for the next folks coming in after lunch. Lucas will need a good preschool in autumn. I can’t home-school him, and Bella goes back to school in September, as well. I doubt her parents will let her take on as many babysitting duties then. And even if Lucas is in a preschool, I’ll still need someone to look after Ava. Maybe a local daycare would be an option.

My thoughts quickly overwhelm me by the third room. I’ve got too much on my plate, even now. My mom hasn’t called, so at least I’ve got some peace in that sense. She understood where we stand, or so I hope. Theo is doing wonderfully in Hollywood. I’ve already seen some stills of her from the new TV show she’s currently shooting. It seems as

though life is moving forward. I, too, am moving forward, even if it sometimes feels like I'm not going anywhere.

I remind myself I am better today than I was two weeks ago. Or a month ago.

“Ugh, watch out. The first arrivals are coming,” Connie warns me as we bring the carts down from the upper levels of the bed and breakfast, just in time to watch a tall, vapid blonde walk in, accompanied by Sammy, our concierge. The poor guy is struggling with two giant Louis Vuitton suitcases as the woman saunters over to the reception desk with her nose up high in the clouds. “This one’s gonna be doozy...”

“She sure looks like it,” I mutter.

We’re both watching her from the bottom of the stairs. Neither of us is moving, as if we’re afraid she’ll see us. I feel like a mouse waiting for the cat to walk by.

The blonde looks loaded and then some. Huge boobs, clearly fake. There’s at least one nose job involved. A fake tan. Long, gelled nails. Shimmering gold bangle bracelets that jingle furiously with every exaggerated gesture she makes at the receptionist. That tight peach-colored cashmere dress hugs her slim figure in all the right places, but it’s way too short and the cleavage is way too deep for my taste.

“Give her a second,” Connie whispers. “Marie is about to tell her dinner is at seven.”

“How is that a problem?” I ask.

“What do you mean dinner is at seven?” the blonde croaks, downright outraged. “What about lunch?”

“It’s four o’clock, Miss O’Shaughnessy,” Marie politely tells her. “And the restaurant is closed until dinner.”

“That is unacceptable!” the woman exclaims. “I’m hungry, and I need to eat. I need to speak to your manager right away!”

“Ah, there it is,” I sigh, rolling my eyes.

“She’s gonna be a handful.”

“Do you know her?”

My colleague nods slightly. “She comes around twice a year, at least. She always calls ahead and asks when Mr. Kendrick is gonna be in.”

“Which Mr. Kendrick?” I can’t ignore the knot forming in the back of my throat.

As if summoned, Noah comes out of his office, though he’s busy looking over some papers as he heads toward the breakfast room bar—likely to get himself another coffee. The blonde immediately spots him and lights up like the sun, putting on a lascivious smile and dipping one hip to the side.

“Noah, darling! It’s been ages!”

I think I’m going to be sick. But I keep quiet behind my linen cart as I watch the entire scene unfold. Connie sticks by my side, curious and not at all interested in catching the woman’s attention at this point. That would be like getting between the hungry cat and its food.

Noah glances up from his pages, and his eyebrows arch with surprise when he sees the blonde. “Samantha. Glad to have you back,” he replies politely. He even puts on a smile, though it doesn’t seem as genuine as any smile he throws my way.

“Always a pleasure, dear!” Samantha says, moving closer while the receptionist handles the check-in process and Sammy carries her luggage to the service elevator. “How’ve you been? You look more handsome every time I see you!”

“Thank you,” Noah says. “I’m good, just busy organizing some events here this week. How are you?”

“Oh, ready to mingle and spend some time with you,” she replies, patting his shoulder in a manner that makes my blood boil. I’ve got to keep my head screwed on, though. Right here, right now, I’m just the maid. Nothing more, nothing less. “You escaped my clutches the last time I was here, honey, but you’re not getting away from me this time.”

Noah laughs. “I’m sure we’ll see each other around, Samantha. You’ll be staying the whole week, right?”

“No, the whole month.”

“Lord have mercy,” Connie mutters beside me.

“Don’t you have your charity events in New York?” Noah asks Samantha.

She grins delightedly. “Daddy said I could let my assistant do it if I need some time to myself. Besides, they don’t really need me there. All I ever do is sign checks and approve which paintings go up in the gallery. Oh, I also pick out the hors d’oeuvres, but being out here with you sounded infinitely more appealing.”

“You’re too kind,” Noah replies, slowly inching away from her.

I shouldn’t feel jealous. But who am I kidding? I’m a nobody. The maid. Noah would never consider me for something serious. Neither would his brother or his partners. We’re just fooling around, screwing each other’s brains out and that’s pretty much it. Samantha is more of a total package. Rich, pretty, childless...

“She’s an heiress,” Connie whispers. “Never did an honest day’s work in her life. Her daddy owns part of the state’s railroad network, among other things. Grandparents had oil businesses across Texas. An obnoxious creature, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, that much I can tell.”

“You be careful around her,” she warns me. “She’s got a mouth on her, and she’s never happy. And may the Lord have mercy on Noah, too. He’s gonna have to put up with her for a whole month.”

“Why, though?” I ask, watching Samantha as she continues with a meaningless conversation in order to keep Noah around, even though he is just trying to be polite while constantly eyeing the coffee bar. “Why can’t he just get himself busy and out of her way?”

“She’s hell bent on marrying him. And her father has enough juice in him to cause trouble for the Elizabeth if Noah gets on her bad side,” Connie says. “I heard the twins talking about her the last time she came around. The Kendricks may

be loaded and whatnot, but O'Shaughnessy is farther up the totem pole and with enough friends in the local government to make it harder on us. You know, a regulation here, an inspection there... it's easy to poke holes in a hotel if you look hard enough."

My stomach churns as I understand the complexity of this situation. Noah doesn't look excited, but he's still smiling and talking to her. Maybe he does like Samantha, just not enough to—what the hell am I doing, thinking such things? I have no claim over this man, nor his brother nor his partners. Who am I to crinkle my nose at the women they surround themselves with? Ah, this is the moment I've been dreading since I first let them take me. The awakening. The sharp bite of reality.

It gets worse when Noah's gaze wanders across the room while Samantha keeps talking about organizing a trip down to the beach for the weekend. "Just the two of us," she says. "I'll have the concierge prepare us a nice picnic basket. Caviar, champagne, some cheese and grapes, strawberries and cream."

"Sounds nice," Noah mumbles, his eyes finding mine. "Except it's winter. Who goes on a picnic in winter?"

Instantly, I look away and push the linen cart out of sight. I leave him talking to Samantha, though I feel him watching me until I disappear into the maids' section with Connie right behind me. I'm shaking like a leaf as I hide in a corner and take deep breaths.

"Are you okay, Stella? You look a little pale," Connie asks.

I give her a reassuring nod. "Yeah, I think I'm just hungry. Come on, what else do we have to do before our shift ends? I want to take my kids down to the beach when we're done."

"The lounge room, the cigar room, and the evening terrace. And that's it for the day," Connie replies, watching me closely. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm hangry, Connie. I've been hangry for the past hour," I lie through my teeth.

She shrugs and helps me load the cleaning carts with other stuff we'll need for the leisure rooms. I can almost imagine

Samantha still hanging around Noah even as I try to get on with the rest of my shift. But I might as well face it. Reality has a way of coming back to bite me in the ass, to remind me of my place in this world. Yeah, sure, I spent a day in the Hamptons with these wonderful guys.

They're not going to marry me. They're not going to spend the rest of their lives with me. This is just a fling, a raunchy little thing that is supposed to take my mind off the hot mess that is my current existence. I was naive to allow myself to think otherwise.

STELLA

Half an hour later, I'm in the cigar room. Corinne is covering the terrace, with only a few minutes left on the clock for our shift. I'm done, anyway, merely dusting the cigar boxes as I contemplate the future ahead. Soft jazz music plays in the background, pouring through the wall-mounted speakers.

I run my fingers along the back of a wingback chair, one of twenty in the room. It's supposed to be a relaxation area for the gentlemen, with thick doors and a separate opening to the back terrace. There used to be more smoking in previous decades, though lately the trend has dwindled even here. They still stock the cigar boxes on a monthly basis, but the guests usually just come over to chill with a glass of brandy while their wives and kids explore the beaches.

Would I have been happier if I'd grown up in a place like this? Samantha strikes me as a nightmarish creature, entitled and hypocritical, doing charity just for the headlines and spending daddy's money on expensive getaways. Would I have turned out like her? Does it even matter? I didn't have her upbringing, nor her parents, so why does it bother me?

I know why it bothers me. It's because her privilege makes her an adequate match for Noah, the kind of man I'd gladly fall in love with. For Isaac, too. Beau. Levi. What would they do with me, anyway? What, a five-way marriage? That's ludicrous. I need to get that out of my head. It's stupid and unrealistic. Not to mention I have two kids to raise. Two

beautiful kids who deserve the attention I'm currently wasting on this situation.

The door opens, and I almost drop the dust cloth when I see Noah come in.

"Hey," I mumble, lowering my gaze.

"Hey, yourself. What's up with you?" Noah asks, closing the door before walking closer.

"Nothing, just working," I reply.

He catches up before I can move away with the cleaning cart. "No, there is definitely something up with you, Stella. Talk to me."

"There's nothing up with me," I snap and yank myself out of his grip. "Isn't your new guest waiting for you? I'm trying to finish up so I can spend the rest of the day with my children."

I can feel him watching me even with my back turned. I hear him chuckling softly, and it only irritates me as I shake my head and try to leave the cigar room again. Noah slips around and towers above me. I have no choice but to look up, tilting my head back. His blue eyes are slightly hooded. He smiles as he analyzes my expression carefully.

"You're jealous," he says.

"That's ridiculous."

"You don't have to worry about Samantha."

"I'm just the help here," I shoot back, anger coursing through my veins. "I don't have any reason to be jealous."

He grabs me by the arm and pulls me into a kiss. It's a furious and possessive kiss, the kind that knocks the air out of my lungs, sending my senses down in an endless spiral. His tongue wrestles mine, and I taste a hint of coffee as he deepens the kiss. His arm comes around, locking around my waist. He nearly crushes me in his embrace, his cock twitching against my loins.

I moan and try to object. I try to back away, but I can't.

He winds his fingers through my hair and pulls my head back, breathing heavily as his eyes search my face. “I don’t think you understand, Stella.”

“No, I totally understand. And it’s fine. We did say it was strictly physical, anyway.”

“Clearly, I have to draw you a picture.”

Without hesitation, he takes me by the hand and out of the cigar room. “Hold on, Noah. My cart!”

“Somebody else will take care of it,” he replies bluntly, briefly looking left and right as he almost drags me up the stairs. I can barely keep up, confusion and arousal turning my brain into a hazy mush.

“What are you doing?”

“Teaching you an important lesson,” Noah says.

Careful no one sees us, he takes me up to his room and locks the door. I stand in the middle, panting and shaking like a reed in the wind, trying to understand what’s going on. Noah turns around and narrows his eyes at me. His gaze burns hot and intensely enough to make beads of sweat bloom along my temples.

“Undress for me,” he says.

“What?”

“Take your clothes off.”

I blink a few times. “I don’t understand.”

“Fuck Samantha and any other woman you think may ever come between us,” he replies sternly. “No one ever will.” The words hit me like bricks shot straight out of a cannon, instantly disarming me.

A deep sigh rolls from my chest. With trembling hands, I manage to unbutton the front of my uniform while he takes his shirt off. His gaze never leaves me, and I feel heavy under it. His pants drop to the floor. He is gorgeously naked and hard, every inch of ripped muscle delighting my gaze to the point where I know I’m wet and ready.

“All of it,” he commands me. “I want you naked.”

He saw me in the lobby downstairs and realized I wasn't okay with what was happening, and he couldn't let it slide. Noah has my body on strings, but I'm beginning to think he and his friends have my heart, too. It's a terrible thought to have in this moment. A dangerous idea. Yet I manage to push it aside and let the present engulf me as the air thickens between us. The sexual tension is simply too much to bear.

I take my panties and bra off. I'm barefoot and naked before him.

“Look at me,” he says.

“I'm looking at you,” I reply, my eyes locked on his. I lick my lips, the fire spreading through my womb as I anticipate his next command.

“Touch your breasts,” he says.

I take both in my hands, gently massaging them as he strokes himself, one hand firmly wrapped around his throbbing cock. My goodness, I crave that monster in my mouth and so deep inside me.

“Good girl,” Noah sighs deeply. “Pinch your nipples the way you like it when I do it.”

My index and thumb finger lock around the tender flesh. I squeeze. Tighter. Tighter. I suck in a deep breath, a delicious ache extending downward between my legs. “Just the way I like it,” I whisper softly.

“Who's my girl?” he asks.

“I am.”

“And don't you fucking forget it,” he orders and comes over to take my hand.

He turns me away from him and bends me over the bed, dropping to his knees behind me and dragging his tongue between my folds over and over again.

His tongue spears my pussy while one thumb moves over to handle my clit, adding just enough pressure to send me over

the edge. I can feel the electrical storm gathering between my legs, the tightness intensifying, the hunger growing while Noah fucks me with his tongue. I listen to his rapid breathing, the slick sound of his mouth making love to my pussy like there's no tomorrow. His thumb flicks my button, pressing harder and harder each time.

I hold on tight to the bedspread, hands balled into fists as I struggle to breathe.

"Come for me," Noah says. "I want you to come all over my face, Stella."

"I'm coming Noah! I... OH!" I cry out.

The orgasm shatters me. My core explodes, and I unravel against his mouth, gushing like a fountain. He takes everything, licking and constantly teasing my clit until he drains my very being of everything. He then rises to his feet and plunges into me with his cock.

He's got one hand on my shoulder, his grip firm and strong. The other is on my hip, making sure I don't move an inch from where he's got me as he rams into me, pounding and thrusting and giving me all and more than I've ever imagined. The surrender is absolute. The madness is inebriating. The lust consumes me, body and soul.

"You're mine," he grunts with a harder push.

"I'm yours... Yes, I'm yours."

"Make yourself come."

I bring one hand down, my fingers sliding between glazed folds, first forming a V around my hole so I can feel his cock slide in and out of me before I focus on my swollen clit. Damn, it's so wet and tender, bulging and in desperate need of another release.

"I want to feel you let go," Noah says.

"Yes, sir."

Gradually, I work myself into the next level while he constantly screws me out of this plane of existence. He fills

me, then leaves me, he thrusts and pulls back, he spreads me wide with each thrust.

I whimper as I feel the ball of tension tightening, as I clench my pussy tightly around his perfect cock. “Right there, right there,” Noah groans as his grip on my shoulder tightens.

“Don’t stop!”

I’m so close. The orgasm comes with a vengeance as myriads of colors swirl through my head. My pussy clenches as Noah spills deep inside me. I feel him pulsating, shooting his seed. I’m breathless and dismantled as he fucks me deeper. I hold him close, my core locked and draining him of everything he’s got. He is mine, and I am his. Sweat drips down my back.

“You’re mine,” Noah whispers. “You’re ours.”

“I’m yours.”

STELLA

It takes a while, but I finally manage to get Theo to come down to Scarborough the following weekend. I got lucky, though, because she's actually getting some time off for Christmas and New Year's Eve; otherwise, she wouldn't have made it.

While that heiress's presence in the bed and breakfast still irks me to hell and back, Noah did a fine job of dispelling some of my doubts on the matter. The idea of where this will end still lingers, though. I know it's not meant to last. I know it's supposed to be fun and not much else, despite what Noah said to me that afternoon. I want to believe I'm his. Theirs. I really do.

But reality has a tendency of biting me in the ass.

For the time being, I simply go with the flow and enjoy every moment I get with these men. It makes me feel like the woman I've always been, the woman I damn near forgot about during my marriage to Elijah, and even Theo notices.

"Girl, there is something different about you," she says, grinning as she swirls a teaspoon in her cup. "I can't put my finger on it, but there is definitely something different."

"Whatever do you mean?" I reply, trying not to laugh.

We're seated in one of our favorite spots in Scarborough, a café that has been around for as long as I can remember. It smells of pumpkin spice and mince pies during this time of the year.

Outside, the sun shines brightly, and the sun hides behind thick clouds, and there's a snowstorm coming later after lunch. I expect to be back in Cape Elizabeth by then. The woods and the heating at the inn and a glass of brandy will take the edge off.

"You're perky," Theo says, eyeing me closely. "Did you meet someone?"

"Wow, straight to the point, huh? Although, I gotta say, if anyone is looking amazing, it's you, Theo. Hollywood definitely suits you."

"Aww, babe, you're too kind."

"No, I'm serious. You're glowing," I tell her. "I guess that's what happens when you get your big break and finally get to do what you've always wanted, career-wise. It's true happiness, isn't it?"

Theo thinks about it for a moment, her gaze softening as she stares at her teacup. "I almost gave up, you know? I figured I'd be working as a maid at the Elizabeth for the rest of my life."

"Oh, come on, you're only twenty-five. You're not married, didn't have kids, you've always had more opportunities to get to where you wanted to be," I reply. "It was only a matter of time, Theo. A question of when, not if."

"Your faith in me is extraordinary," she sighs deeply. "I think I'm dealing with a mild case of imposter syndrome. I mean, I know I'm good at what I do. It's good, Stella, I have to admit. I'm loving every second of it. But there are still moments when I worry it'll all go away. That I'll lose everything, and I'll have to go back to working as a maid or bartender or whatever."

I lean forward, briefly hypnotized by the vanilla-scented pastries resting on a pretty porcelain plate between us. "Theo, it's normal for you to feel this way. It's a healthy kind of fear, actually, that'll keep you on your toes. It means you're serious about what you're doing. It means you know what you've got

to lose in this game. It also means you'll do whatever it takes to never go back again."

"Be like water, huh?" she replies with a vague smile.

"Our good ol' friend, Mr. Bruce Lee said it. Be like water. Be a river. Flow forward, ever forward, and make your way across the land. If something blocks you, trickle through, shatter it completely, or eat away at it until the whole thing gives. But never stop. The river doesn't flow backwards, does it?"

"No, the river doesn't flow backwards," she says, focusing back on me. "You, on the other hand. You still haven't told me what's going on with you. And you've been particularly squirrely with your texts when I ask you about your love life. Come on, talk to me. What is up?"

"Nothing's up. I'm just working my ass off."

"Bull crap," she laughs. "You seem to forget that Isaac has made a habit of updating me about your situation. He's glad to have you on board, by the way. All four are happy you're here. You've made quite the impression, it seems."

"Yeah, tell me about it," I mutter, feeling the heat rising and filling my cheeks as I look away.

Theo cocks her head to the side. She giving me an inquisitive stare—the kind that will make me spill the beans if I'm not careful. "I'm gonna start worrying about you unless you tell me what's going on," she says, her tone losing a couple degrees Fahrenheit. "You're being evasive, Stella. Don't think I didn't notice."

She's my best friend. She knows everything about me. I do need to talk to somebody about this, and who better to talk to than the only person who truly understands me? It's just too crazy, unprecedented, and completely out of character for me, hence my hesitation. But I have to let it out, or else I'll blow a fuse.

"Okay, fine, you caught me," I mutter, sounding downright defeated. "I'm seeing someone."

“Ha! Knew it!” she exclaims, but the joy on her face soothes my very soul. “I’m glad, babe, I really am. It was about damn time, too, after that loser up and left you the way he did. You deserve some love and peace in your life.”

“I’m not sure it’s love and peace I’m getting.”

“What do you mean?”

My whole face is burning. “It’s not supposed to be serious. Strictly physical, or so we agreed.”

“Okay. Well, it’s better than nothing, right?”

I shrug. “I guess.”

“Oh, damn, you’re catching feelings, huh?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to.”

Theo exhales sharply and pours herself more tea. “Who’s the guy? Wait, you’re staying at the Elizabeth. Did you meet him there?”

“Yeah.”

“So, who is it?”

“More like... Who are *they*?”

Theo stills and sets the teapot down, her brown eyes never leaving mine. “What do you mean by they?”

“I’m not hooking up with just one guy.”

“Oh?”

“More like four of them.”

Her jaw nearly hits the floor. Her breath is gone. I’m pretty sure her heart has stopped. “Whoa. How do you? I mean, good on you, girl, for catching up like that. But with a full time job and two kids to raise, how the hell do you manage to juggle four guys at once? I’m genuinely impressed!”

“Well, sometimes, it’s the four of them at once. Sometimes, it’s just two of them. Three. We have some solo dates, too. They’re busy, but they always make time for me.”

“Who are they?” she manages, her voice almost a whisper.

“Theo, what I’m about to tell you stays between us,” I say. “I trust you. You’re my best friend, and I love you to the moon and back. I wouldn’t tell you, otherwise.”

“Okay.”

“Isaac, Noah, Beau, and Levi.”

Again, she stares, her words gone and her eyes growing wider. I’d laugh if I weren’t so nervous. It is crazy, now that I say it aloud. It was crazy before, too, but acknowledging this to somebody else sort of amplifies the folly.

“Stella. What are you talking about?”

“The four guys I’m hooking up with. It’s Isaac, Noah, Beau, and Levi.”

“Oh. My. God.”

“I know. Please, don’t judge me. I don’t know how it happened, but we hit it off, Theo. We hit it off so fast and so hard, it took everybody by surprise,” I say. “I’ve only ever been with Elijah, as you know. I’m not the floozy type to—”

“Whoa, pump the brakes, babe, I would never think you’re a floozy. You could be doing the whole football team at once for all I care. It’s your life, your body, your heart,” Theo replies softly. “I’m just stunned that you’ve gone from zero to a hundred so frickin’ fast.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of scary.”

“I need a moment to just take it all in.”

“Sure.”

I give her all the time she needs as I pour myself a cup of tea and get busy with some of the freshly baked pastries.

Theo nods slowly, a smile creeping across her lips. “I knew they had some exotic tastes, to be honest. I did overhear them talking about the same woman and the night they had together, but I’m pretty sure she was a professional, if you know what I mean.” She gasps. “Wait, Stella, don’t tell me they’re paying you to—”

“Good grief, no,” I politely cut her off. “No. It’s consensual. It’s hard to describe actually, but it’s like each of them has something I like, something the other doesn’t have, or something I can’t get enough of to the point where I’m super happy with being shared by the four of them.” I know the smile on my face is giddy. “It’s as if I can lose myself completely when I’m with them, Theo. I’ve never felt this way before.”

“Honestly? I’m glad.”

“You are?”

“It’s weird as hell, yeah, and I don’t know if I could do it. But you know what? I’m not you, Stella. If it makes you happy, and I can tell it does because, girl, you are practically shining like the sun right now.” She laughs lightly. “If it makes you happy, if it’s not hurting anybody, if it’s adding color to your life, well, then go ahead and do it. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Somebody finds out?”

Theo shakes her head. “The guys are super discreet. The only reason I overheard them that one time is because I had a key to Isaac’s office, and he didn’t know I’d be in that night. And the only reason I was in that night was because I’d had a fight with Mike. I’m the only one they trusted with a key to their offices,” she says. “They’re very cautious and respectful, in general.”

“Yeah. And funny and kind. Courteous, cavalier. Absolute gentlemen. They look after me and the kids, too. Bella babysits for me, and they take her fees out of my salary, which they boosted as soon as they took me in, mind you.”

“They’re good men, Stella. You couldn’t have stumbled upon a better situation.”

“What if I fall in love?”

“Can you fall in love with more than one man at the same time? I get maybe two, but four?”

I shrug slightly. “I don’t know. They’re quite addictive. I’m the happiest when it’s the five of us together. We’re so

comfortable around each other, and I'm in heaven when they take turns, when they share me, Theo. It's like I'm shedding everything that is my life and I am truly myself in those moments."

"It sounds nuts, but I think I kind of get it," Theo says. "Listen, as long as it's good, keep doing what you're doing. Is your job there safe?"

"Oh, yeah. My lodging, too. We were clear from the very beginning. They're very protective of me."

"Do you not like it?"

I shake my head. "Absolutely. I like it."

"Damn, Stella, I have so many questions," Theo chuckles. "You continue to amaze me. You really do. If I thought you were resilient in the aftermath of Elijah dumping you and leaving you to raise his kids on your own, I'll say you just one-upped yourself with this arrangement."

"I'm good, Theo, I am. I promise. It's strange, yeah, it's a little scary, my heart's beating too fast when I'm with them, but you're right, as long as we're having fun and that's it, it's fine, right?"

"Just protect your heart."

I lower my gaze, doubt returning to taunt me. "I'm trying. This really obnoxious woman recently checked in. Samantha."

Theo throws her head back in hearty laughter. "Oh, God, she's back, huh? The nightmare is what I call her. She's a frickin' nightmare." She gazes at me. "Stella, try not to let her get to you. I recommend popping a tranquilizer before you go in to clean her room."

"Connie does her room," I reply. "So, you know her."

"Yeah, she's been trying to get her hands on Noah for as long as I can remember." She pauses and gives me a stern look. "Don't fall for them, Stella. I mean it. They're good guys and whatnot, but it's not a good place to fall in love, babe."

"I know."

“I’m not trying to be a downer. I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“You always do,” I say with a smile.

We’re silent for a moment, each of us thinking about the conversation.

“Not to change the subject, but have you heard from that asshole lately?”

“Nope.”

“Isn’t he late with his child support payments?”

A heavy sigh rolls out of my chest. “He is. But I can’t exactly afford a good attorney at this point, either. Frankly, I’m not sure I even care anymore. I make enough to keep Ava and Lucas well fed and safe and taken care of. I don’t have any energy left to waste on that man. I gave him some of my best years, entire chunks of my life, my body and my soul, and he tossed everything to the side.”

“Yeah...” Theo hesitates. I think she’s trying to tell me something.

“Why do you ask?”

“He called me last week,” she says.

Nausea tickles the back of my throat, though it’s easy to wash down with some hibiscus tea.

“What did he want?” I ask. The discomfort lingers, but it’s manageable. I am definitely on my way to a full recovery. Someday, the mere mention of his name won’t rattle me anymore.

“He was calling to congratulate me about my move to Los Angeles, my career, whatever. He saw the social media updates I posted, I guess,” Theo says. “But we never kept in touch, so I know he wasn’t calling to just be friendly and whatever. He did ask me about you.”

“Figures. He does have my number.”

“I know. Listen, Stella, Elijah is a prick. I don’t know if he was always a prick or if he became one along the way.

Personally, I think he was always a prick, but you always saw the best in him. But just to give a clue as to what a massive prick he actually is... he mentioned he broke up with Amanda. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's the name of the waitress he dumped you for. Right?"

"And moved to Portland for, yeah," I reply with a raised eyebrow. Disgust persists within me, tying my stomach into tight knots. Even the pastries don't appeal to me anymore as I remember the sleepless nights, the heartache, the misery, the shame I felt when he left me. "She probably dumped his sorry ass. I'll give the girl credit, she wised up faster than me."

"I think he's trying to circle back to you, Stella."

"May he have the life he deserves," I mutter. "There's no room for him in mine. And as long as he's not paying child support, I have nothing to say to him."

Theo smiles broadly. "Attagirl. I'm proud of you."

"I'm healing, Theo."

"You've got four hunks by your side, honey. I'd be healing, too."

We laugh and enjoy the rest of our teapot. The Japanese rose fragrance fills my nostrils, and eventually I recover enough of an appetite to finish the rest of the pastries. I'm determined not to let Elijah ruin a single experience for me, and today is supposed to be about Theo and me. About my wellbeing, about my emotional health. About the changes currently unraveling in my life and the strength I seem to be drawing from each of the events. Elijah had the center stage for so long, yet he failed miserably. He doesn't deserve a single sliver of my attention, no matter how much it hurts.

Being with four guys while also working a full-time job and raising two children on my own does take a toll on my perception of time. I lose track of certain details. The calendar is a constant blur to me. But every day is loaded and bright and beautiful. I'm constantly moving, constantly entertained to the point where even the maid's gig ends up being fun. With the exception of a couple of rougher mornings where the physical exhaustion caught up with me, I can say with a growing degree of certainty that my life is flowing in a better direction.

Christmas came and went, but it was nice and pleasant, peaceful and shimmery. My babies and I got presents from Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau. Mine were the naughty and racy kind—fine silk and lace lingerie, some exquisite niche perfumes and body lotions, and a pair of sapphire earrings I've not had the courage to wear yet. I wouldn't know what occasion would best work for them at this point in my life. But I rewarded my men wholly and happily for each of their gestures. My children got sacks filled with all kinds of toys and picture books, so that'll keep them busy for at least a couple of weeks. It's making Bella's work easier, too.

As the days go by, Ava and Lucas fall into a pleasant and healthy rhythm. I spend the afternoons and evenings with them. I put them to sleep and wake them up in the morning. Bella looks after them until I'm back from my shift, and she also takes them to her place when I've got a night planned with the men—not that Bella is privy to the private details of

my personal life. Nor does she care, truth be told; she loves my kids as much as they have come to love her.

I'm not accustomed to this kind of peace, which is why I'm still on edge, waiting for something to inevitably go wrong. Yet as long as things are running smoothly, all I can do is work, rest, spend time with my children and with four men who definitely enjoy my company. All I can do is enjoy every day and set money aside so I can move my precious family somewhere safe and close enough to the bed and breakfast to make the commute easy.

Ugh, I shouldn't have had coffee first thing this morning.

I'm slightly nauseous and more tired than usual. I forgot to make a note of my last period, too, so I'm pretty sure I should start soon. New Year's Eve is coming up fast. I just hope it doesn't strike then. Maybe that's why I'm so out of it today. Nevertheless, I persist through my shift with a smile on my face. Beau and Levi want to have a private dinner tonight, just the three of us. It's bound to get my kind of dirty, so I might as well focus on work and let the day slip by faster. Maybe I'll wear those earrings then. They'll certainly appreciate it.

"Mommy loves you both," I tell Lucas as I kiss him and leave him with Ava in Bella's care.

"And they love you," Bella says, her tone of voice gentle as always.

"Ava's formula is in the fridge, as always," I tell her, smiling. Isaac had our room fitted with a fridge and a freezer as well as a microwave oven for the kids, especially for the colder days when tea and hot meals are part of our daily routine. A thoughtful, kind man. "And Lucas should take a nap after lunch with his sister. He stayed up late last night."

"Oh, really?" Bella replies, giving my son a curious look. "What were you doing up late, little man?"

"I think it's the sugar rush from all those Christmas sweets he got this year," I reply with a laugh.

"Yeah, I can't blame him," Bella sighs. "We stuffed our faces, too. Mince pies, candy canes, hot chocolate with

marshmallows, cinnamon buns, you name it. It's only once a year, though, so it's not like it's a problem, right?" She glances out the window. "There's a storm coming this weekend."

"That's life by the ocean, huh? And I do portion what they get on a daily basis just to keep their blood sugar in check. But even so, Lucas has a low tolerance, and the sugar rush is a given."

"At least it's always followed by the sugar crash, which is when he finally falls asleep," she shrugs, smiling at him. "Have a good day, Stella. I'll keep an eye on the tiny devils until you get back."

"Thank you, Bella. As always, you're a star."

I give her one last smile, then make my way downstairs to the maid's locker room, where I quickly change into my pale blue uniform and put on a white apron. We're supposed to serve a family breakfast for Isaac and Noah in the tearoom, which is across the hallway from the breakfast room usually reserved for the Elizabeth's guests.

Not being a fan of waiting tables in general, I am somewhat nervous, especially since this is Isaac and Noah's family. The Kendricks are political royalty, and they're here for a late Christmas breakfast since they spend the actual holidays at their Aspen chalet. Entire generations have either served in Congress or have built up the family fortune over the years. Real estate and hotel businesses, finance and tech conglomerates, even some beverage brands have recently come under their umbrella. Whenever a Kendrick decides to run for office, the entire business portfolio is passed down to the next in line.

I'm pretty sure Isaac's parents are currently grooming him for a political career of his own, something he also wants, though the thought does make me nervous. He'd leave the Elizabeth. We wouldn't be able to continue this affair. And I know I'd miss him terribly. *Gah, there goes that emptiness in the pit of my stomach again.* Theo was right. I need to be careful about catching feelings, but who am I kidding? I'm in too deep already, dammit.

Connie waits for me outside the tearoom with the service carts already loaded and ready.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she says with half the enthusiasm I’d expected.

“Good morning to you, too. What’s up?” I ask, hearing voices from beyond the tearoom’s closed doors. Laughter and perhaps one too many people.

My colleague rolls her tired eyes and sighs deeply. “I was hoping only the old Kendricks were coming in today, but they brought a cousin and two Ivy League babes they likely want to shove down Isaac’s and Noah’s throats.”

“What do you mean?” My blood runs cold. It’s hard to focus. This isn’t how I’d imagined the breakfast service to begin. Suddenly, I’m feeling rather self-conscious, wishing I’d let my hair down instead of pulling it up in a tight, glossy bun.

“We’ve got eight people in there instead of four,” Connie says. “Barbara and Matthew Kendrick, Isaac and Noah’s parents and former owners of the Elizabeth. Raylan Kendrick, their nephew from Matthew’s side. Sophie Anthony, from Barbara’s side. And the two potential matches, a certain Tori Ashton and a particularly annoying Alexandra Fenwick, both New York elite from what I overheard at the reception desk when they first came in.”

“It’s a good thing I’ve got you to help me out on who’s who at these tables, huh?” I chuckle nervously, though I can tell it’s not my laughter at all. I’m queasy. I’d like nothing more than to weasel out of this breakfast thing, but it’s my job. “Okay, duly noted on the guests. Is there anything else I need to be wary of?”

“Mr. Kendrick has a nut allergy, so we have to be careful with who gets which plate,” Connie says. “The kitchen has labeled everything that’s safe for him, though.”

I glance down at the service carts and see the labels on the bottles and bowls. It’s a feast for kings, not just a breakfast. I could feed myself and my kids for a whole week with the amount of food we’re about to take into the tearoom.

A stark reminder of who I am and where I belong, whether I like it or not.

“Come on, let’s go, then,” I say, determined to get this whole thing over with sooner rather than later.

Yet once I enter the tearoom, I instantly regret my decision.

Noah and Isaac glance my way and smile softly. They nod politely, as well, but I can tell they’re strained and looking rather awkward in their seats at the table. The two young women sit between them, both pretty and prissy enough to have fallen out of a Hamptons fashion catalog. Both platinum blondes with bold blue eyes and a soft tan, leftover from the summer. Both wearing white or delicate, earthy tones in slim layers of fine silk, cashmere, and smooth denim. Likely Harvard or Yale girls. Former class presidents.

A charming and charismatic politician needs the kind of wife that looks good by his side but doesn’t eclipse him in any way. She needs to be pretty and effortless in her perfect appearance.

I think I’m going to be sick.

“Good morning,” Connie greets the room with a neutral tone of voice.

“And, as I was saying,” Raylan says to Sophie and the Ivy League chicks, “stock prices are going to go down fast if Pacific North-Shore buys up the entirety Sofitel chains. There’s plenty of speculation on the matter, and my broker has been ringing the alarm for days now.”

Isaac shrugs, constantly stealing glances at me as I start moving items from my cart to the center of the massive oak table. “I don’t really care. I’ve already covered my investments on that end.”

“You sold early, didn’t you?” Raylan narrows his beady eyes at his cousin.

“I have a better broker, what can I say?” Isaac chuckles dryly.

Noah pours himself a cup of coffee and mutters a subtle “Thank you,” when I leave an extra milk jug next to the carafe.

“You’re welcome,” I whisper.

This whole breakfast routine is a good opportunity to observe the twins’ family. I do so with a bitter taste in my mouth, however. Barbara and Matthew are a handsome couple, silver-haired foxes with bright eyes and deep lines of age and wisdom. They’re neat and coiffured to perfection, careful with each gesture as they load their plates with some of the food Connie and I are currently adding to the table.

“We were hoping the four of you might enjoy a walk down to the winter fair later. I hear it’ll stay open until mid-January this time because of tourist activity. Our shoreline has become quite popular lately,” Barbara says, her inquisitive gaze focused strictly on Noah, Isaac, and the two ladies. “Your father and I will keep Raylan and Sophie busy in the meantime. Your cousins are interested in a venue by the pier, so we’ll take them there.”

“That sounds nice,” Isaac sighs, though he doesn’t sound very enthusiastic.

“What venue? The Calypso?” Noah asks. “It’s for sale. Isaac and I were eyeing it ourselves.”

“I’m not going to step in on your turf, Cuz. If you want to buy it, by all means, Sophie and I can find something else,” Raylan offers.

Noah shakes his head. “No, it’s fine. If you like it, please go ahead. There are plenty of other hospitality properties for us to focus on. Besides, we’re not really rushing into any new acquisitions these days.”

As the conversation drones on, I realize Barbara is determined to see both her sons married in the next two years, tops. Isaac will certainly follow in his father’s footsteps. Matthew is in the middle of a second term as a Senator representing Maine in the US Congress. Before that, he worked his way up through the political system shortly after

he married Barbara. Before that, he ran the Elizabeth and a few other businesses, which he later passed on to his sons.

There is a natural order in this place, and I am not a part of it. I can tell from how simply invisible I am, waiting on their table and clearing their plates and refilling their drinks. The Ivy League princesses don't even look at me. They can't even acknowledge my existence. Raylan leers at me off and on—he'd absolutely try pinching my ass if he weren't sitting so close to Isaac and Noah's mother. Barbara is polite but quick to dismiss me, while Matthew focuses more on his sons, having little to no attention left for the service staff with the exception of an occasional, perfunctory smile.

Noah and Isaac are kind and often watching me, while I grow increasingly nervous and worried I might mess something up. Connie buzzes around like a busy little bee, constantly smiling and adding food to the table, while I handle the clearance and the drinks. We've got a nice system going, but my stomach is starting to bother me to the point where a persistent burn lingers in my throat.

“All I'm saying, Isaac, is that you are more than ready for a relationship and eventual marriage,” Barbara reiterates at the end of a long-winded conversation about why it's better to go into politics with a ring on your finger and no reason to have the tabloids following you around on a night out with the boys. “It'll open all kinds of doors for you.”

“My father has invited us to a card game in Southampton Aspen next weekend,” Tori replies, giving Isaac a warm smile. “I'd love it if I could tell him you'll be joining me.”

“I'll have to check my schedule, but it shouldn't be a problem,” he says.

Noah catches my gaze. Almost at the same time, Alexandra leans in to whisper something in his ear, prompting him to laugh lightly. It makes me sick as I turn away and try to keep my attention on the task at hand. It's getting harder to stay upright at this point, though. Connie is starting to notice.

“Are you okay?” she mumbles as she passes me.

I nod once. “I’m good.”

“And Alexandra recently inherited a gorgeous vineyard in Napa Valley,” Barbara adds. “Tell us more about it, darling? Noah is an aficionado of anything wine related.”

Not really. He’s into spirits, hard liquors. Isaac’s the one who can actually pass as a wine connoisseur, while Noah is more focused on mixology and the magic of cocktails. Barbara would know all that if she bothered to spend more time with her sons instead of trying to hustle them into convenient marriages. The anger bubbles up to the surface as I realize this isn’t about Barbara. As Alexandra tells the others about the vineyard and the business she plans to take over.

I understand it’s not about any of them, personally.

It’s about me.

It’s about me never being anywhere close to being enough for either Noah or Isaac. Not to mention the two of them. Or Levi or Beau. Or any or all of them put together. I’m just the entertainment. A woman they enjoy sharing and turning inside out. A woman who enjoys being shared and turned inside out. A single mother of two who cleans their rooms and serves their breakfast.

“You’re mine,” Noah once said to me. But who are we lying to, other than ourselves?

I may be his. I may be theirs. But they will never be mine. This will never be more than just raunchy, sweaty sport.

The nausea becomes too much to bear. I break into a cold sweat as a hot ball unfurls in my throat. I’m definitely going to be sick. Beads of sweat blossom on my temples as I mutter an “Excuse me,” and slip out of the tearoom, fully aware that Connie can tell I’m not okay.

Every single thought goes right into the toilet as I puke my heart out in the service bathroom. The idea of time tracking, of not remembering my last period, of heightened taste and smell—it’s all starting to come together in a way I am not ready nor willing to fathom. But I have been through this before. Twice.

Oh, God, no. It can’t be.

How did I miss this? The signs have been right under my nose.

Half an hour later, I'm staring at the plus sign on a pregnancy test. I had one left over at the bottom of my luggage. It was the last of a handful I'd bought after Elijah left me. I remember I was so terrified I might be pregnant again when I already had two children with him—my period had been late, I'd been sick and miserable. But back then, it had only been the stress of his departure.

This, however... shit. This is real.

Santa Claus decided to gift me with a baby. That rat bastard.

Jesus, help me, this can't be happening.

I've already got Ava and Lucas. I love my children with everything inside me, but I can't imagine bringing another one into this mess.

It was just supposed to be fun, but feelings have blossomed. Feelings I'm not supposed to experience toward these men and certainly not in these circumstances. The plus sign glares at me. It's as if the universe itself is reprimanding me in the worst possible manner for overreaching.

I can't go to any of the guys with this. I can't even be sure which one is the father. And what would I even expect out of them? Four rich and powerful men sleeping with the maid. I'm a fucking cliché. Isaac's burgeoning political career demands he be miles away from any type of scandal like this. He can't be connected to me in any way if he intends to run for office. Noah has a whole future ahead of him with the family's business portfolio. Levi is a successful author who's currently discussing TV series options for some of his books. And Beau travels a lot. He'd barely be around. All four men will end up breaking my heart. I know it. I feel it deep in my bones.

And I don't know what the hell I'm going to do about it.

Isaac and Noah won't tell me much about it, but I know something happened when their parents came to visit two weeks ago. They brought some cousins and a couple of ladies they were hoping to match with the twins, but I doubt that worked out the way Barbara and Matthew had planned it. They brought the ladies over again for the New Year's Eve party, too, though it still didn't click. The twins were nice and respectful, ever the life of the party, as usual, but they didn't spend too much of the evening around them. Granted, the inn's guests were also present and guzzling from the champagne fountain, so we were all busy.

Of course, the old folks don't know their precious sons are irreversibly smitten with Stella—much like Beau and me. We can try and deny it as much as we want, but the heart doesn't lie.

There's a bad vibe in the air, though. I've been across the country with book signings and literary events, yet as soon as I returned to the Elizabeth, I could tell something was off.

Stella has been actively avoiding us. She says she wants to spend more time with her children, which is fine. Lucas and Ava were never an issue. Hell, we even included them on our outings at the beach or through the neighboring towns. We had picnics in the forest north of the bed and breakfast more than once with the little ones. We even took the little ones out to the Magic Shell, a lovely bed and breakfast with a kids' theme that's fun for the whole family—Lucas and Ava had dedicated staff and entertainment, an onsite babysitter and all the hot

chocolate Lucas could possibly drink while we attempted to get their mother alone and failed. Repeatedly. I tried seeing her the other night, but she blamed a headache before she shut the door in my face. I can't help but feel a tad rejected, and I'm not sure what I did.

A couple more days have passed since, and I'm determined to get to the bottom of this. The fear of losing this little haven of peace and passion with Stella and the guys has me on edge. My nerves are stretched thin, and I'm not sure how well I'm able to function under this kind of pressure.

"Tori and Alexandra want to visit the Elizabeth next weekend," Isaac says. He doesn't sound happy about it as he sits behind his desk.

We're in his office—the four of us, drinking coffee and going over the bed and breakfast's regular business. The figures look good on paper, and all of our rooms are currently occupied. We've got a busy spring ahead, as well, thanks to the seasonal festivals. February will be a slow month, but we raked in more than we expected throughout the Christmas holidays. We'll come out with a hefty profit this last quarter. From a financial perspective, we make one hell of a team. Yet with Stella, we seem to be missing something.

"Is that your parents' doing?" Beau asks from one of the guest seats.

Noah scoffs. "They're determined to see us married off sooner rather than later. Golden boy here, in particular," he nods to his brother.

"We all knew this day would come," Isaac mutters. "I just wasn't ready for it."

"It doesn't have to come this early," I say.

Noah agrees. "Are we really in a rush? We have it good with Stella. Too good for us and not good enough for her, mind you. That whole breakfast with our family thing did not sit well with her. She says she's okay and whatnot, but I think we can all agree something shifted that day."

“You should’ve told her about the breakfast guests,” Beau replies bluntly.

“We didn’t know,” Isaac says. “I thought it would just be Mom and Dad. They ganged up on us, that’s the truth.” He looks at Noah. “You know how Mom gets when she sets her sights on something. Right now, she’s determined to shove Tori and Alexandra down our throats.”

“Well, whether you knew or not, Stella has been avoiding us,” I bring focus back to my issue. “We can’t let that happen.”

Isaac frowns slightly. “We can’t force her to see us, Levi. If she needs some time to herself, we have to respect that.”

“No, something doesn’t feel right,” I insist, shaking my head. “She’s quieter than usual. Withdrawn. She could barely look me in the eyes when I saw her the other night.”

Beau takes a deep breath followed by a sip of his coffee. “The truth is, we don’t know where this will end,” he says. “I think we all want more from our relationship with her, but how would we make it work? Your political future is an instant disqualifier, Isaac. And you, Noah, you’d be collateral damage for his political opponents. Opposition research will likely seep into this place. Someone, somewhere... they’ll find out about Stella. It’ll destroy us all in the end. Including her.”

“I don’t think I want to talk about this just yet,” Isaac replies. “I haven’t seen Stella in private for over two weeks, and she barely glances at me otherwise. I don’t know what to do, either. We’re all stuck at this sort of crossroads with no idea where we’re going, yet none of us want to let go of her.”

“Then keep Tori and Alexandra away next weekend,” I suggest. “Postpone for another month or whatever. It’s not like Barbara can literally force you to spend time with them.”

Isaac and Noah shake their heads at the same time. They’re like two drops of water in perfect sync, and I know our hearts are all singing a similar tormented song. “Our mother has a way of persisting at the worst of times,” Noah ultimately says. “But I agree. Neither of us is ready to move forward. We’re not even sure what forward means anymore.”

I'm not truly satisfied with this conclusion, but I do know I don't want us to leave Stella behind. She will always have a job here. She will always have a home here if she and her children need it. We will never abandon her, not after what she's been through. Few are the people in this world that I have felt an authentic connection with, and Stella is one of them. What troubles me is the growing and undeniable truth that what we have is far greater than the "strictly physical" we originally agreed upon.

It runs deeper. And it makes the future murkier than I'm comfortable with.

I spend the rest of my day taking calls and writing a few pages of my next novel. This one is set in a cabin up in the Appalachian Mountains, and it's a lot darker than my previous works. The heroine is a single mother of two whose psychopathic husband has made her doubt herself to the point where she no longer knows what is real and what isn't. To be fair, I've subconsciously drawn some inspiration from Stella's personal experiences here, but I like how the story is shaping up.

The problem is that by evening, I can no longer sit still. I find myself wandering through the Elizabeth and working up the courage to knock on Stella's door. She must be with the kids. I've grown dangerously fond of Ava and Lucas, too. The boy hangs on to me for dear life when I'm around, asking me to tell him scary stories, much to his mother's dismay, while Ava has made a habit of instantly falling asleep in my arms. It tugs at my heart in ways nothing else ever has.

Finally, I'm at her door. My palms are sweaty. My knees are weak. It's always like this when I'm close to her. Stella has a way of demolishing my defenses and pushing me to leave my comfort zone. The reward is made to measure, though. Every moment I spend with her makes me stronger, makes me a better man. My mind works differently. She inspires me.

I can feel her in there without having to see or hear anything. My heart senses her before my ears pick up on the sound of her footsteps. I knock, and she opens the door, her grayish-blue eyes widening with surprise.

“Hey,” I say. “I just wanted to come by and make sure you’re okay.”

“Hey,” Stella replies, her tone low and empty. I don’t like it. It’s as if she is deliberately withholding the warmth that draws me to her. “I’m okay, thanks.”

“How was your day?” I ask, determined not to let her push me away again.

“Busy as usual,” Stella says with a placid smile. “I just put the kids to bed. I’ going to bed soon, too.”

Smiling, I reach out and tuck a lock of black hair behind her ear. My touch electrifies her. I see the goosebumps pricking along the side of her neck. Damn, her body instantly reacts to me, which makes mine light up from the inside, the engines quick to fire and work at full throttle as I take a step forward.

“Why don’t we go out for a walk? It’s not that cold,” I ask. Only a few inches of air are left between us, and the tension is enough to make my blood boil through my veins. “It’s going to be a full moon tonight. The forest path looks beautiful at this hour. Nowhere as beautiful as you, Stella, but it’s something to see.”

Her gaze softens. Her lips part slowly and I can no longer help myself. I kiss her, letting my tongue slide through and play with hers. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close, her body perfectly matching mine. She’s plump and sweet like a summer peach, the taste of her making my heart drunk.

She moans against my lips as I deepen the kiss, one hand moving up her side. The closer I get to her breast, the clearer the heartbeat pulsating against my fingers. She smells of lemon blossoms and mint tea, of a late summer evening, of burning desire and forgotten dreams. I’d give anything for this moment to never end. The way Stella gives in, the way she surrenders to me has my cock twitching, momentarily nestled in the warm triangle of her lower belly and thighs. A perfect match, a meeting of two puzzle pieces that clearly belong together.

I tighten my hold and let my hand move between us to firmly cup her breast. It feels fuller. Or maybe it's been a while since I've last touched her. Absence does make the heart grow fonder. I trail kisses along her neck, disappointed when I reach the t-shirt collar and realize I'd have to undress her in order to get more—this isn't exactly the time nor the place for that, regardless of my own body's protests.

“Come out tonight. Let's walk and talk, just the two of us.”

The heavy sigh that slips past her lips as she rests her head on my shoulder fills me with dismay. She won't let go of me, either, which further confuses me.

“I'm sorry, Levi. There's nothing I'd like more, but I have a splitting headache and need to go to bed early. Another time,” Stella says.

“A headache again? Are you okay? Are you really okay?” I ask, lifting her chin with my thumb and index so I can peer deep into the hazy blue pools of her eyes. “What's going on with you, Stella?”

“Just the headache. It's nothing, really,” she replies. “I'm tired, Levi. I work my ass off every day, saving every penny so I can move on with my life and keep my kids safe, happy, and well fed. You wouldn't understand.”

“I want to understand.”

“Another time,” Stella repeats. “Right now, I just need to sleep.”

It's hard for her, too, but she manages to pull away and give me a weak smile. All I can do is let go. I can't force her. I can't make her do something she doesn't want to do. Whatever is holding her back, it's serious enough to affect the dynamic in our relationship. And I am nowhere near ready nor willing to let go of this extraordinary woman.

“You can always talk to me about anything, you know that, right?” I ask.

She nods softly. “I know. And thank you, Levi. I mean it.”

“Good night, then.”

“Good night,” she says and goes back into her room.

I stare at the closed door for maybe another minute before I decide to enjoy that evening stroll on my own. My heart feels heavy. My stomach tightens with every step. The anxiety of her intentional absence has my senses spinning out of control, but a walk through the woods is always a good way to pull myself back together, to regain some balance and move forward with my life and my thoughts.

She knows I’m here for her. It’s all I can do.

An hour later, I’m still walking. The forest behind the Elizabeth is a sprawling emerald winter paradise with gargantuan oaks and pines that predate the town itself. Ancient giants with gnarly, twisting roots that jut out from the mossy ground, magnificent crowns that create a thick canopy blocking most of the night sky. Their crowns are replaced by thick coats of snow, and countless leaves and patches of ice crunch under my boots—the overall effect is soothing for an agitated mind. I reach a clearing with tall grass and an untouched blanket of snow and young, naked maple trees jutting out and reaching for the night, where the full moon pours all of its milky light and bathes everything in a lovely glow.

I sit on the edge of a thick stump and try to gather my thoughts. It’s been a wild ride with the bed and breakfast. I was nervous about it at first—about investing in a business I knew little to nothing about. I trusted my best friends, however. I still trust them. My life wouldn’t be the same without Isaac, Noah, and Beau in it. We’ve learned plenty together. We grew up together in more than one way. Sharing a woman like Stella feels like a natural progression of our close bond and timeless friendship.

But she’s slipping through our fingers. I can tell. And I’m certain they’re aware of it, too. Yet no one dares to do anything about it. Will we just let it fizzle out on its own? Are we really that scared of what life could evolve into if we stay with her? Is it truly madness if we try to make it work in the

long run? What's the harm in trying? We're a perfect match in the bedroom. We never run out of topics of conversation. Stella finds joy and wonder in each of us equally. I never thought I would feel this way, but it's real, it's happening.

My phone rings. Judging by the hour and the caller ID, I'm guessing my agent forgot about the time zone differences. I was hoping I'd be left to my own devices out here, but when my agent calls, it's important, otherwise he'd just text me.

"What's up, Joe?" I answer with a heavy groan.

"Well, Levi, it happened," Joe says. "They want you involved."

"Who are we talking about here? Because we've had multiple meetings about me getting involved in one thing or another over the past couple of weeks."

"I'm talking about your Dinah Steele series. The studio wants to make you a solid offer. Creator credits, based on a story by Levi Smith... plus an executive producer credit. But they want you to head the writers' team, too."

I've always wanted to sell the TV and movie rights to that particular series of thriller novels. Dinah Steele gave me the notoriety and stardom I needed to fully finance myself as an author, to be able to write my stories in peace without picking up a second job in order to support myself. Dinah Steele made me a ton of money, and it's still one of my readers' favorites to this day. It was only a matter of time before a studio picked it up. I'm just shocked they want me involved on a creative level.

"Don't they usually have the director work with the author on these things? Why do they want me in the writers' room?" I ask.

Joe scoffs. "It's full creative control, any author's wet dream! Remember how many times people wanted the movies to be more like the books because the author had no say in the creative process whatsoever?"

"I also remember the time Stephen King went on to make his own version of *The Shining* and it fell flat after Kubrick."

“You wanted this, remember? You specified it in every email you sent me... that you wanted some creative control in how they develop Dinah Steele for the small screen.”

“I just didn’t think I’d actually get it,” I mutter mostly to myself.

“You should be happy about this. I’m confused.”

Yeah, I’m equally confused. It’s what I’ve always wanted. The crowning achievement of a successful author is for them to produce their literary works for the screen. To be an actual part of the screenwriting process and to make sure the most valuable parts of the book are beautifully translated into the audio-visual experience. My heart should be racing, yet it’s sinking. I should be dancing and hyping myself up right about now.

Yet I can’t even get up from this old stump to really take the moment in.

“I am happy. Don’t get me wrong, Joe, I’m thankful for the work you’ve put in to make this happen. I mean it. Thank you.”

“That’s the spirit!” he crows.

“What does it mean, though?”

“It means you need to fly out to Los Angeles before the end of the month and sit down with the studio execs. If you accept their offer, they’ll have to draft a contract. Make sure you have Maury with you, though. You’ll need a good lawyer. Them Hollywood types can be shifty motherf—”

“Cool, cool,” I cut him off. “I’ll be waiting for a draft of the contract, then.”

Once I hang up and find myself surrounded by the frosted, moonlit tranquility of this clearing and listen to the ocean’s whispers trickling in from beyond the woods, I realize exactly why I’m so torn about this. Why can’t I simply be glad it’s happening, even though it’s a natural and much needed evolution for my career?

Taking a Hollywood offer to co-create and co-write the Dinah Steele series for television means I will have to significantly cut back on my presence in Cape Elizabeth. It means I'll be away for longer periods of time, months clumped together, even. I won't be able to sustain this complex relationship with Stella and the guys anymore. I'll have to leave her behind. I won't be able to see the kids anymore, either.

Most of my life will focus in the Los Angeles area, away from the salty breeze of Maine. It's supposed to be a small price to pay for the accolades that will accompany this endeavor, but the sharp ache in my chest tells me it's anything but small. I don't want to leave Stella, yet her recent distancing isn't making it any easier, either.

If anything, she's only giving me reasons to pull away.

STELLA

It isn't easy keeping my distance from them. They've been so kind, so sweet to me. They took me in and gave me a chance when I needed it the most. I gave my body and my soul to these men, over and over. I can't get enough of any of them, and I know they're feeling my absence, too. But what else can I do in these wretched circumstances? I'm terrified of what they'll say when they find out I'm pregnant.

I'm horrified by the idea they might try to pay me off or worse.

I don't yet know what to do with myself, but I'm almost three months along, and I'm doing my damndest to hide the symptoms. My bump isn't showing just yet, but I won't be able to hide it for much longer.

"Connie, I'm gonna dust the breakfast room," I tell my colleague just as she's about to wrap up the tearoom after a business meeting.

"That's fine, honey, but don't forget to sign off and take the rest of the day off like you were supposed to," Connie replies. "You've been pale and queasy since you came in, and I don't want you passing out when you could be resting and recovering. Alright?"

"Don't worry about me," I say, smiling gently. "It's just a crappy day. I probably ate something bad. I'll be okay."

"Whatever you say, just take the rest of the day off."

“I’ll just do another swipe of the breakfast room and then I’ll go upstairs. I promise.”

She nods once and proceeds to push the service cart back into the kitchen while I retire to the breakfast room and start working on the precious wood furniture with a dry cotton cloth and essential oils. The Christmas tree is gone, no longer reigning supreme with its red and gold ribbons, its artisanal baubles and twinkling lights. Proof that everything passes. Maybe the ache in my heart will pass, too.

Inch by inch, every piece of wood in this place regains its luster as I work my way through the room while simultaneously ruminating on my options and frazzled thoughts. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to keep this up.

I need to take a break from them. I have to leave. Or tell them. I shake the thought away. It’s been like this for weeks now. This constant battle between my instincts and my conscience. I don’t know what to do.

“Noah, darling, this is the third time you’ve said no to a day out with me,” Samantha’s nasally voice comes through as she approaches the breakfast room. I can hear her heels clicking louder. “It’s getting warmer outside. It hasn’t snowed in a week. The weather is perfect for a picnic around noon!”

“I’m sorry, Samantha, I am exceptionally busy with plans for the spring festival,” Noah replies.

Noah and Samantha walk into the room. To my astonishment, neither of them notice me, and it feels like a punch in the gut. Cloth and essential oil bottle in hand, I go about my work in silence, listening as the obnoxious heiress keeps hounding Noah for his time and affection. I steal glances at them as they cross the breakfast room.

“Come on, darling, you and I both know we’d make one hell of a team,” Samantha says, her white cashmere dress billowing below her thin waist with every step.

Noah laughs lightly, blue eyes on his phone as he texts someone. “I’ve said it before, Samantha. I like you, you’re fun

and cool to be around, but I'm not interested in a relationship with you."

"Ah, so it's true, then. They're grooming you for that Tori chick, aren't they? Or was it the other one?"

He looks up at her, his brow furrowed in surprise and confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"The entire East Coast is buzzing with rumors that you and your brother are dating. I didn't want to believe it, but now... Damn, I guess I missed my shot, huh?"

I feel so stupid right now. So invisible and worthless. I'm standing behind the bar, and they're maybe thirty feet away from me. They don't see me. They don't even register my presence. They just look at each other, sucked into the most awkward conversation while I languish here, praying for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

I'm planning my escape. I'm getting ready to run away because I don't have the courage to face him or Isaac. Or Levi or Beau, for that matter. I'm terrified and lonelier than I've ever been. How did I get here?

"How long have you been standing there?" Samantha's sharp tone breaks through.

Suddenly, I'm self-aware again. She and Noah are staring at me. She looks utterly displeased, but her feelings don't really matter at this point. Noah's blank gaze makes me all kinds of sick to my stomach.

"Are you okay, Stella?" he asks.

I nod slowly and avert my gaze. "My apologies, I was just polishing the bar. Excuse me."

"Wait, Stella," he calls out, but I won't let him catch up.

Rushing out of my room, I blink back the tears as I make my way through the lobby and over to the outdoor terrace. The bed and breakfast isn't too crowded at this hour since most of our guests are out and about.

I'm invisible. I really am invisible.

This pale blue uniform makes me disappear. I'm part of the staff. Lost in the furniture. A detail that evades the eyes and ears of most. I look behind and see Noah coming out of the breakfast room, his gaze searching for me. I slip through the cocktail lounge but hide just behind the other side of the massive mahogany bar, since Beau and Levi are close by. Frozen in my corner, all I can do is watch and listen, surprised they didn't notice me as I walked right past them.

"So, what will you do?" I overhear Beau asking Levi.

It's only noon, but they're already sipping prosecco and eating club sandwiches. I've never seen either of them drinking this early in the day. Naturally, I'm intrigued. I don't even make an effort to hide as I eavesdrop on their conversation, though. And they don't notice me. It borders on infuriating at this point.

"I'm not sure yet," Levi says. He leans back in his chair, his white shirt unbuttoned halfway down and revealing a patch of curly red chest hair. "Joe wants me to fly to Los Angeles before the end of the month so I can have a proper sit-down with the studio execs. But I know they will want me on set for the entire shooting duration."

"And that's for a whole season, right?" Beau asks.

"It takes about eight months to shoot one season, and they're ready to sign for five of them. There are nine books in the series, though, so I'm guessing there's a possibility for a total of nine seasons, one for each book."

"That's amazing, Levi. That's pretty much what you've always wanted."

"Yeah, but it means moving. I'd be living in Los Angeles for most of the year," Levi replies. Yet another blow to my very soul as I put two and two together.

We did talk about this, not that long ago. Levi mentioned having to fly back to Los Angeles for a meeting regarding one of his book series. This is it. The breaking point. The moment where everything begins to unravel, where the truth starts

staring me hard in the face and reminding me yet again of precisely how insignificant I've always been to these men.

The paradise I thought I'd built here is beginning to crumble, and it starts with my disappearance from their focus. From existence itself. "Look at me," I whisper, wishing they could hear me. "I'm standing right here. You could see me if you wanted to."

But they don't see me. They all have dreams and ambitions, careers and fortunes to build. Why should they bother with the likes of me when they have the world at their feet? My insecurities have crawled back to the surface, and there is no way I'm able to beat them back. It's too late. My heart is heavy. My soul is fragile. And I've endured enough pain and uncertainty to know this isn't the place for me.

I don't belong with them. Not with Isaac or Noah. Not with Beau or Levi. And certainly not with the four of them at once. It was fun while it lasted, but it's time for me to cut the cord and get out of their way.

Making my way up the stairs, I work hard to keep the tears from gushing. There's a river waiting to flow freely, yet I cannot show any emotion. Not out here. Not in public. Not when so many people might notice.

Therein lies the irony of my situation. As long as I am quiet, nobody can see me. But if I show the slightest sign of suffering, the sharks will immediately catch the scent of blood in the water.

"Stella!" Noah's voice freezes me at the top of the stairs.

"Dammit," I whisper, having hoped I'd get away. Alas, I can only turn around to see him rushing to catch up with me. "Hey, boss."

"Boss?" he frowns, looking downright insulted.

"I'm still in uniform," I reply with a shrug.

Noah stares at me for a moment, then gently takes me by the elbow and around the corner for a smidge of privacy as guests roam up and down the steps. "What's going on with

you?” he asks, watching me closely. “You’ve been out of it for a while now.”

“I’m fine, just tired.”

I’m not fine. I’m losing myself in the blue pools of his eyes. A man I can never have, much like I can never have his brother or his best friends. He looks so handsome in his salmon pink shirt and smart jeans, a snazzy gold watch glinting on his wrist. He looks like a veritable Greek god, and I love the smooth texture of his freshly shaved skin. He comes closer, and my heart starts beating faster. It’s too much for me to bear.

“Stella, please, talk to me.”

“I promise, Noah, it’s nothing. I’m just tired. Physically tired and worn out, that’s all.” I hate lying to him, but what other choice do I have?

“Have dinner with us tomorrow night,” he says.

I blink several times. “Us?”

“The five of us,” he reminds me with a raised eyebrow. “We haven’t had an evening together in quite a while, don’t you agree?”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea,” I reply with a heavy sigh.

He glances around, his brow furrowed as he tries to figure me out. “Stella, there’s nothing I’d like more than to spend an evening with you, with Isaac, with Levi and Beau. Don’t you miss us?”

“I do...” Though I shouldn’t have said it. I couldn’t help myself. Noah has this effect on me. My tongue simply loosens up.

Inching closer, he plants a soft kiss on the tip of my nose. It’s enough to start a devastating fire in my core. “Dinner. Tomorrow at nine, in my room. I’ll have everything set up privately. All you have to do is show up.”

“Okay.”

Dammit, I'm supposed to say no. I'm supposed to be busy and unavailable. Too tired to engage. I promised myself I'd start pulling away before they figure out I'm pregnant. Noah cups my cheek and kisses my lips. It's a subtle, fleeting moment, yet I melt and fizzle against him, my senses dissolving as I breathe him in.

Liquid heat pours from my core, pooling between my legs as I nod slowly. He smiles and pulls away, satisfied with the result of this encounter. He can certainly see me when he's interested in getting me naked. Hell, who am I kidding? I'm deliberately falling for it. It takes two, doesn't it? Well, in this case, it takes five. I might as well own the disaster I'm about to participate in.

STELLA

The hours before the dinner are the hardest for me. I battle anxiety and excitement in equal measure, pacing around my room while waiting for Bella to come watch the kids for the evening. I'm wearing the black lace, crotchless panties that Noah bought me a while back, along with a matching bra that reveals my nipples with a single tug. Over this ensemble, which I've completed with thigh-high stockings and a black lace garter belt, I opted for a simple, pale green, wrap-around dress that's tight around the waist and loosely pours over my hips. It's the most I can do to cover some of the growing curves on my body.

A knock on the door has me up and ready. Lucas is playing with his big Lego toys, while Ava fiddles with the colorful blocks set out on the floor before her.

"Hey, Bella, thanks for coming over on such short notice," I say as she walks in with a wide smile. "I didn't know I'd be going out tonight."

"It's okay. I'm always happy to spend time with these two," she replies.

"Bella, last time I checked, people your age were using fake ID's to try and get into a club. Not babysit."

"Ha. I'm not your typical nineteen-year-old, if you haven't noticed."

"I certainly have. You're a godsend."

She laughs lightly. “Well, not quite. Just a girl paying my way through college.”

Oh, how I wish I’d been more like her at her age. “Smart girl. Thank you again. I might be back late.”

“Don’t worry. I’m a night owl.”

I kiss the kiddos and thank Bella again before heading down the hall.

“Ready?” Noah asks.

I didn’t even see him until he stopped beside me, having come in from the cigar room. There’s a hint of whiskey on his breath, but he looks absolutely dashing in his black suit and silver-gray tie.

“I’m always ready,” I reply with a subtle smirk.

I put the sad thoughts away for the rest of this evening. I’ll sulk and whimper about everything in the morning. Until then, I allow myself to unwind and relax in the company of my four men. Walking away from them is unfathomable yet unavoidable, and I don’t want this feeling to spoil my dinner and what I assume will be a mind-boggling dessert in their arms, so I let Noah guide me up the stairs and into his room, where Isaac, Levi, and Beau are already seated around the dining table.

A bottle of champagne is open and chilling in a chrome-plated ice bucket with the Elizabeth’s logo emblazoned on the side, along with a generous platter of food on the table. As I look around, I realize it’s been nearly a month since I’ve been with them.

I’ve been trying to manage this situation. Trying to figure out what I’m going to do. My bruised ego keeps clouding my judgment, though. My wounded heart keeps toying with my resolve. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I do know I can’t stick around for much longer. Until then, however, I will enjoy this evening and these last few moments I have with them.

“Gosh, you look stunning,” Isaac says as I join them at the dinner table.

They all get up and take turns planting sweet kisses on my lips before I'm seated between Isaac and Noah. "Thank you," I mumble, watching as Levi pours me a glass of champagne. "You're all especially handsome tonight, as well."

"I hate that it's been so long since we've been together like this," Isaac says.

"It's okay," I mutter, barely able to look them in the eyes. "Life gets in the way."

"Especially when your parents have unrealistic expectations," Isaac sighs. "I'm sure you've heard about how they're trying to manage our love lives."

Levi chuckles nervously. "Way to rip the band-aid off."

"We all know it's been weighing on our shoulders," Noah defends his brother but keeps his gaze fixed on me. "Stella, we're here together tonight, okay? And we're going to be together after tonight, too."

I shrug. "I'm aware it'll end, eventually. And that's fine. We agreed to something fun, didn't we?"

Beau scoffs, shaking his head slowly. "Ah, I see we're all going to keep lying to ourselves, then."

"The point is," Isaac politely cuts in, "that we're here tonight. Can we just focus on that for the time being? Can we just enjoy each other's company and this wine and this great food?"

I nod at the cheese platter with a wry smile. "Cheese is great."

We laugh, awkward in our demeanor but definitely turned on. My own blood simmers, bubbling up to my brain as I squirm in my seat, overwhelmed by the heady scents of four men who are hungrier for me than they are for the delicacies currently on display between us. One look around me, and I can tell where tonight is going to end.

The conversation feels clumpy and tense. The answers are rushed and shorter than usual. None of us really want to talk about much—Beau's new hotel venture is making waves up

and down the West Coast since he acquired it from a failing businessman. Levi's television gig has the internet roaring gleefully about his involvement in the serialization of his notorious novel series. Isaac's political career is becoming the main subject in almost every Kendrick-related conversation, while the rest of Cape Elizabeth keeps yammering on about Samantha following Noah around like a lost puppy.

I have nothing interesting to talk about, so I just listen to their account of recent events. Granted, I'd have quite the bombshell to drop tonight if I wanted to ruin everything, but despite the tension and my wrecked nerves, I don't wish to disturb this moment. It's too rare and precious to easily throw away when I think I actually need it the most. Maybe it's a sweet farewell of sorts, judging by the hint of finality currently embedded in my soul.

"Samantha is persistent, I'll give her that," Noah laughs lightly, then glances my way. "Rest assured, Stella, I have zero interest in her."

"It's okay," I reply. "You're a free man, and I'm a grown woman. You don't have to worry about exclusivity and all that."

Well, that came out wrong, because now all four of them are glowering at me as though I've literally just cursed them out. The silence that follows has me shifting in my seat with considerable knots in my throat. All I can do is offer a faint smile.

"It's the truth, isn't it?" I double down for some reason.

Noah cocks his head to the side. "Do you really think you're that insignificant to us? Have we made you feel that way?"

"It's about facing the truth. I'm just letting you know it's okay. We're all consenting adults here, and we agreed to keep things light and breezy and fun. It doesn't mean you guys can't open yourselves up to other people if the chance arises," I explain.

Beau thinks about it for a moment, then nods once and gets up. “In that case, if that’s how you feel, perhaps it’s time we remind you what we are.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you think we’re capable of even acknowledging other women while we’re sharing you, Stella, well, we need to correct that. Quickly,” Isaac says. “Stand up.”

“Huh?”

“Stand up, Stella,” Levi says.

I look at each of them, instantly subdued by the embers burning in their eyes as they behold me. My skin tingles all over as I have no choice but to comply with their commands. It is also my desire, but submission is definitely key here tonight. So I get up, my knees feeling soft as I straighten my back and step away from the table.

Beau is the first to reach me with a hungry grin as he dips his thumb into a small glass jar filled with honey, then smears some over my lower lip. “Take your dress off.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply, tempted to lick the honey off, but he shakes his head at me.

“Leave it.”

I nod once and proceed to slip out of my dress, letting it drop to the floor with a heavy sigh. I feel more like myself when I’m with them than when I’m on my own, a sensation I know I’ll have a hard time letting go. While I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to keep this up, enjoying every moment I get with Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau is imperative in the moment—despite the frustration of understanding I will never be more to any of them, let alone all of them. I can feel sorry for myself about it in the morning.

I’m about to submit to four ravenous gentlemen who watch me like I’m the perfect woman.

Isaac comes closer and takes his sweet time touching my breasts. His deft fingers spread out to explore the soft flesh beneath the black lace before they tighten into a squeeze that

elicits a fully aroused gasp. Noah slips out of his clothes and comes up behind me, his hard cock nestling between my buttocks as he brushes my hair to the side. He kisses my nape slowly and deliberately, his tongue gliding warm and wet along the spine.

Whimpering, I push my ass back into him, and his hands settle on my hips as he grinds against me.

“Don’t move,” Levi orders me, his muscular chest bare as he removes the belt from around his narrow waist. I quietly obey as he licks the honey from my lower lip. It sends heat waves through my body as he finishes off with a deep and decadent kiss, our tongues swirling and playing hungrily. “Even without the honey, you taste spectacular, Stella.”

“I’d like to taste you better,” I reply with a coy smile.

Beau is naked and standing beside me. “Get on your knees, then.”

“Yes, sir,” I whisper and do as I’m told.

As soon as I’m kneeling on the floor, Levi and Beau move in, offering their throbbing cocks for me to feast on. I grip both in my hands, squeezing gently as I take turns sucking and licking their thick, veiny shafts. I taste the pre-cum from their swollen tips before I let each of them glide down my throat.

Levi runs his fingers through my hair. “You’re fucking perfect.”

“A natural at this,” Beau adds, his eyes half-closed. “I will never get tired of your lips, ma chérie.”

Noah kneels behind me and slips a hand between my legs. I moan loudly when two of his fingers go deep inside me. He strokes me with sudden and repetitive motions, starting something I’m not sure I can handle. The pressure gathers in my core with lightning speed as he nibbles on my earlobe.

I catch a glimpse of Isaac standing beside me, stroking his monstrous cock, watching us with dark eyes as Noah whispers: “Come for me, baby, come hard.”

“Oh, Noah,” I manage, my pussy dripping wet and tightening around his fingers.

Levi and Beau make sure I don't get enough breathing time in-between, so all I can do I let go as I fill my mouth with two gorgeous men while a third watches and the fourth finger-fucks me into a gushing, shattering orgasm. The release is quick and almost violent, my whole body shuddering as the ripples of pleasure expand outward and seep through me.

I let it all out.

“That's it, baby, that's it. Ah, there she is,” Noah growls as I come and cry out in sheer ecstasy before I wrap my lips around Levi's cock once more. My hips sway back and forth as Noah's fingers stretch and probe me, as I feel the warm juices of my climax pouring down my thighs and onto the plush carpet. “Yes, baby. Perfect...”

It seems like an eternity passes before I can see again. Before I can register my men gathered around me, naked and horny as hell, ready to take us to the next level. Given my own abandonment to this moment, I let go of the last of my inhibitions and claim what is rightfully mine just as Isaac pinches my bare nipples through the bra's tailored openings, and just as Noah rips the crotchless panties off me with little effort.

“I want you all inside me,” I say.

The men exchange glances of wonder and excitement before a quick plan is hatched. My heart is fluttering, my core once again ignited as Isaac lays down on the floor beside me.

“Good girl,” he groans as I climb on top of him, his gargantuan cock filling me to the brim.

“Oh, Isaac. Oh, this feels so fucking good,” I murmur, closing my eyes for a moment. They pop wide open a split-second later when Noah straddles his legs and settles behind me again, sliding his own cock next to Isaac's. I cry out in pure bliss as I'm stretched beyond belief. My pussy devours them both.

“Our turn,” Levi says as he and Beau move closer.

I lick and suck first one of them, then the other, establishing a rhythm that takes us all to new heights. Isaac's fingers dig deep into my hips. He plants his heels into the floor and starts fucking my brains out, while Noah thrusts from behind. He brings a hand around to cup my pussy and rub my clit into a frenzy. It's too much, yet I can't get enough.

My screams of raw pleasure are muffled, my core tightening as I feel another orgasm coming through. Noah flicks my swollen nub and fucks me hard from behind, sharing a tight space with his brother. I'm filled both ways, and the passion is simply overwhelming. Their gasps and moans are music to my ears, and I can feel the veins twitching as they prepare for their explosive release.

I look into Levi and Beau's almost black eyes, taking everything they have to give me. It's the sweetest feeling, to be consumed in such a manner by four men at once. Their hands touch me. Their cocks stretch and fill me until I can't take it anymore. And Noah's fingers apply the perfect pressure until I come again.

"OH GOD YES!" I wail in agony and rapture as I take a deep breath, my entire body dismantled as the orgasm shatters me in my entirety.

Beau and Levi take turns spilling down my throat as Noah and Isaac both release deep inside me. I am so overwhelmed by the sensation it causes me to climax again, harder than I ever have before.

Little do they know about the truth growing inside me as I ride them and let them take me, over and over and over again into the late night. Afterward, we're spent, glistening under a layer of sweat and honey-like afterglow. Our muscles are sore. Our bodies limp. Our limbs tangled.

This is as good as it's ever going to get.

I don't want it to end.

But I know it has to.

STELLA

I wake up in the middle of the night in Noah's room. Our bodies are still tangled from the debauchery. I'm sore all over and loving every single sensation.

But the bitterness is quick to find me as I remember I have to work in the morning. The clock on the wall above the bed says it's time to get a shower and relieve Bella so she isn't out too late since she, too, has to work in the morning.

Our clothes are scattered all over the floor. Slowly but surely, I find my lingerie, my dress, my shoes and my purse. Watching them closely, I put my clothes back on and rake my fingers through my hair to make myself presentable enough to get back to my room in case anyone is up and about at this hour.

I'm going to miss this.

Quietly, I leave my men in the giant bed with a heavy heart and return to my room. After saying goodbye to Bella and checking on my babies, I take a quick shower and climb into bed.

"Hang in there, little one," I whisper to the speck of life currently developing in my womb. "We'll figure something out, I promise."

While I'm not sure what that something is, I can only trust myself and the universe to guide us through the months ahead. I know how rich people deal with issues like this, and I don't think I want to be here when Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau inadvertently prove to me they're just like the others. They've

been wonderful so far, yet I know how the world works. People have their limits. A relationship like ours isn't fated to last.

* * *

CONNIE and I go about our daily routine, clearing and cleaning the breakfast room first. There are fewer guests at the Elizabeth this week, mainly because school is starting now that the Christmas break is over. But others will soon come for the early spring festivals, of which there are plenty in Cape Elizabeth and the nearby shoreline towns. Until then, I welcome having less to deal with as I trudge through my shift, already eager to rest for the day.

“How was your evening?” Connie asks as we fill our carts with empty plates and coffee cups. “You look like you haven't slept at all.”

“Dammit, I'd hoped I'd put enough makeup on to fool you,” I mutter, half-smiling.

She chuckles dryly. “Ain't nothing gettin' past these two eyes, honey. So, dish. Hot date?”

“I guess you could call it that.”

“Did you at least have fun?”

I give her a long look. “The most I've ever had, actually.”

“Well, then, that's a good thing. Why are you so down about it, then?”

Shrugging, I move on to the next table to repeat the same operation, putting cups and plates in large plastic containers while the trash goes into separate bins. “Because I know it's not going to last.”

“Nothing ever lasts,” Connie says. “That's life for ya'. You're born, you're alive, then you're dead. Everything that happens in between is fleeting and precious, no matter how good or bad it is.”

“Girl, I am not ready for this kind of profound wisdom. Not at this hour, anyway.”

She laughs lightly. “I’m just saying. Stella, you’ve got so much to deal with. You could at least enjoy yourself when you get the chance. You’re allowed to have fun.”

True. Except my kind of fun resulted in an unexpected pregnancy. I don’t even know who the father is. If anybody heard me say these things out loud, they would probably think the worst of me. But I know the truth. It’s my truth, and it’s all that matters.

I catch a glimpse of Levi in the lobby when Connie and I come out. He doesn’t say anything when our eyes meet, but he gives me the softest smile. For a moment, I’m tempted to think it’s love I see glinting in his green eyes, just before he walks out of the Elizabeth. I’m pretty sure he’s got a meeting with his agent somewhere in town today.

“Hey, Mr. Fontaine,” Connie salutes Beau as he comes down the stairs.

“Good morning, Miss Connie,” he replies with a broad smile. “You are looking magnifique today. Both of you, actually. Good morning, Miss Stella.”

It’s our dirty little secret, and I like that about us. I offer a subtle nod and a shy smile in return.

“Why, thank you, Mr. Fontaine. I look magnifique every darn day, but I’m glad you finally noticed,” Connie quips, prompting both Beau and me to laugh. “Oh, you’re leaving us already?” She adds as she notices the suitcase he’s carrying at the same time as me. My heart sinks.

“I’m afraid so, but I’ll be back in a few days. I hope the two of you will keep this place spic and span while I’m gone,” he says. “I’ll be in California, finishing a purchase.”

“Best of luck,” I reply.

He gives me a wink and walks out, much like Levi before him. Connie giggles—she does that whenever he’s around. I think she would’ve totally made a move on him if she were closer to his age and still single. I doubt she’d be able to

handle the four of them, but she'd definitely give Beau a run for his money. Laughing inwardly, I help her push the carts into the kitchen, then follow her back into the lobby so we can decide which room to clean next.

Samantha comes down the stairs wearing a tight, brown, velvet dress with knee-high deerskin boots, her platinum hair combed over one shoulder and golden bangle bracelets loaded around her bony wrists. I don't like the smug look on her face. From what I remember, she's supposed to be checking out today.

"What is she still doing here?" Connie mutters.

"I have no idea," I whisper back.

We stay still and quiet, close enough to the reception desk to overhear the conversation as Samantha speaks to Callie, our morning receptionist. "I'd like to extend my stay."

"Ugh," I hear myself groan.

"Right there with you, sister," Connie mumbles.

Callie gives Samantha a pleasant smile. "Good morning, ma'am. You'd like to extend your stay?"

"That's right," Samantha says.

"I'm afraid we can't offer the same room," Callie tells her. "It's already been booked, and we're expecting new guests for it after noon today."

Samantha scoffs. "That's unacceptable. I should be able to stay in the same room."

"I'm afraid that's not how it works. The room has been pre-booked since before you checked in. I could move you to another room on the top floor, if you'd like. But you will have to check out of this one before midday today. We will gladly have you for another week, of course."

"Fine. What other rooms do you have available? I need a penthouse."

Just as Callie checks through the booking software, and just as I remain hopeful none of the fancier rooms are

available for this harpy, Noah comes out of his office with a coffee mug, looking in dire need of a refill. As soon as he spots Samantha, however, he attempts a 180, but she sees him and brightens up like the frickin' sun.

“Noah, honey! Good news! I’m staying for another week!” she announces.

“Hey, Samantha,” he says, clearly hesitant and likely hoping for a short conversation. “I’m happy to hear that.”

“But I can’t keep my room, apparently. Can’t you do something? I don’t want to move my things around like a homeless person.”

I would’ve taken that personally if I didn’t know how completely disconnected from reality this woman really is. Noah, on the other hand, retains a pleasant but dull smile as he looks at her. “Sorry, Samantha. If the room has already been booked, you’ll have to move. It’s not like I can tell our incoming guests the room they asked and paid for is no longer available.”

“Why not?” she asks with the greatest entitlement.

“Are you hearing this?” Connie mutters beside me. We’re flies on the wall again, partially hidden by the massive floral arrangement on the lobby table. “My girl thinks she owns the place.”

“Yeah, I’m hearing this.”

And it is getting to me, even though it shouldn’t. It’s not the threat of another woman that’s bothering me; it’s the plethora of constant reminders of who I am and who I can be in the lives of four men who take up way too much space in my heart.

“I’m sorry, Samantha, I can’t do that,” Noah says, prompting the heiress to put on a rather dramatic pout. I think it’s supposed to tug at his heart strings, but judging by his heavy sigh, all it does is frustrate and annoy him.

“It’s so unfair.”

“You can either move to another room, or you can leave. We don’t have any other options,” he firmly replies.

I’d stick around and listen to the rest of the conversation, having just stolen a warm glance from him, but Connie and I have plenty of work left to do. We push the cleaning carts across the lobby, and we are about to split up when the front doors open wide. In comes the one man I never imagined I’d ever see here, and the sight of him is an instant punch to my stomach.

“Elijah,” I whisper, breathless as I watch my ex-husband walk in.

Tall and handsome with curly blonde hair and piercing green eyes, I’m briefly reminded of what drew me to him in the beginning. He was charming and chatty, and our conversations about life and the tourism industry in particular could go on for hours. We used to sit up all night and talk about the fancy hotel we’d someday own and run together. I can remember the details, too—of how I wanted the lobby and reception area to look, of which designers we’d call in for our premium suites, of what kind of food we’d serve at the ground-floor restaurant. We even had mood-boards on a wall in the living room where we’d add cutouts from interior design and hospitality magazines, adding something to them every week.

My heart bleeds when he sees and recognizes me. Wearing jeans and a faded plaid shirt in shades of gray and green, he is no longer the dashing man who once had me for what was supposed to be a lifetime. His stubble is growing into a full, unkempt beard, and his eyes look tired, shadows arching beneath them.

“Oh, wow, I didn’t think I’d find you so quickly,” Elijah says.

He’s mere feet away, and I cannot, for the life of me, muster a reaction. Connie stands nearby, watching us both with confusion and curiosity. I can still hear Samantha talking Noah’s ear off close to the reception desk, but I don’t know if Noah can see us. What would he say if he knew who this man

was? What would his reaction be? Would it even matter? I glance back and see Isaac standing next to Noah. Both of them can see me. And they can definitely see Elijah.

I feel like I'm alone in the eye of a dangerous storm. The present and the past have decided to join forces and throw me for a loop while I struggle to look forward into an increasingly uncertain future.

“Who’s that?” I ask my brother.

We’re eyeing the dude with sharp interest. I barely notice Samantha still moaning about not getting what she wants—then again, I’m used to her as background noise. Once she realizes it’s not going to work out the way she wanted, she’ll either take what we have or piss off. Right now, I need her to piss off because I can’t focus on her or anybody else’s whims.

“I don’t know,” Noah says.

But I think we do know. I think we can tell from how Stella has frozen before him. The shock and pain I see in her eyes is something I never wish to see again. It’s making my heart twist itself into an agonizing knot, my stomach churn, and my nerves ignite all over. And he has some familiar features I’ve seen before. The eyes, the curls, the lines of his face. I’ve seen bits of him in Lucas and Ava. His children.

“Elijah,” I hear Stella say. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” he replies.

Noah is about to walk over to them, but I pull him away and back into his office.

“Excuse me, we were talking!” Samantha scoffs. But I can’t even be bothered at this point. My blood is boiling as I close the office door behind us, leaving Stella to deal with her ex-husband.

“What the hell?” Noah asks, downright outraged.

“Hold your horses,” I tell him. “Think about it for a moment.”

Noah scoffs, his eyes wide with fury. It’s always been strange to see myself like this—because we’re twins, I know each of his expressions is identical to mine. It’s as if I grew up with my own reflection, and Noah grew up with his through me. The familiarity we share, our blood bond, they’re powerful and transcending. We’re able to read ourselves by reading each other, and I’m well aware we’re both angry right now.

Our first instinct is to go out there and kick the bastard out.

“What could he possibly want from her?” Noah asks. He’s been giving it a moment’s thought, as well. “How could he have found her? Stella said she didn’t want anybody to know where she’s staying. Only Theo knew.”

Then it hits me. “Theo.”

“She wouldn’t have told him,” Noah says.

I shake my head and take my phone out. As soon as I find her number in my contacts, I call her. Fortunately, she picks up right away. “Hey, Theo, it’s Isaac.”

“Hey, you! I know it’s you, though. I have your number saved,” she laughs. “What’s up? Is everything okay?”

“Not sure,” I reply, putting her on speaker so Noah can hear. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“How did Elijah find out Stella is staying here?”

A sudden and heavy silence follows. Then a sharp sigh. “Oh, God. He found her.”

“He did, yes. Should we be concerned?” I ask.

“I don’t know what to tell you. Stella wanted nothing to do with that man, but he’s still Lucas and Ava’s father. Parental rights and whatnot,” she says. “He’s been calling me, trying to reach her, but I only reminded him to call her attorney. I doubt

her attorney would breach professional ethics in such an egregious manner, though.”

“Did you post anything from your last visit here?” Noah asks. “On social media, I mean.”

“Shit,” she hisses. I assume she’s checking her own social media profile now. “Oh, no. Shit, shit, shit. Yeah. The last weekend I was down there with you guys. We had Sunday brunch, I snapped some group photos of us, and... ah, man, Stella is in most of these shots.”

“Let me guess, Elijah follows your social media,” I say.

“Yeah. I didn’t even think about it.”

Noah gives me a sour look. “At least we know Stella’s crummy lawyer didn’t divulge her location.”

“It wouldn’t be in his interest,” Theo says. “The guy is supposed to get Elijah to send those outstanding child support payments, so Elijah definitely wouldn’t be hounding him. No, it had to be from my social media profile. Oh, man, I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about,” I tell her. “Your social life is your social life. It was only a matter of time before he’d find her, though. He still has parental rights, so one way or another, he would’ve made it down here. It’s okay, Theo, don’t worry about it.”

“How is Stella?” she asks.

“I’ll have her call you later.”

“Please.”

Once I hang up, I look at my brother. Again, I see the same concern I feel deeply etched into his features. “What does this mean?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he’s here to see the kids. Or to try to win her back.”

“Levi and Beau need to know about this,” Noah replies.

I nod in agreement. “I don’t know what we can do, though.”

“What do you mean? We’re with her. She’s with us. There’s four of us and only one asshole bothering her. It seems pretty easy to me.”

“We both know it’s not really that easy,” I tell Noah. “Let’s not forget who we are and what we’re doing here. Stella is well aware of it, too.”

“Isaac, her ex-husband is out there with her, right now, and we’re in here, twiddling our thumbs.”

“She can handle herself,” I reply. “The minute we step in and start treating her like a damsel in distress, she’ll push back. Think about it, Noah. Stella is an independent woman. It’s difficult enough as it is for her to accept the help we’ve offered. Imagine us trying to be knights in shining armor in front of her ex-husband. Imagine what that asshole will think. There are children involved here. Custody issues. We can’t risk any of that for Stella.”

Noah exhales sharply, the truth finally knocking him back. He takes a seat behind his desk and runs a hand through his hair. “Dammit.”

“I will go out there and keep an eye on her, for what it’s worth. Just in case Elijah gets anything but polite,” I say. “For our peace of mind.”

“Yeah.”

He sounds disappointed, and I get it. I’m equally dismayed by our inability to come through for Stella. I want to. Dammit, I want to be there for her. I want the four of us to be there for her, and not just today. For the rest of our lives. But how would that work? The sacrifices are too many, too great, too taxing to even be considered, and I feel like a piece of shit for thinking this way. In fact, the guilt of these thoughts immediately becomes too much to bear as I brace myself for what awaits beyond this door.

STELLA

Not wanting a scene, I ask Connie to cover for me while I take Elijah out to the back of the bed and breakfast in the same park where I usually hang out with my kids. Our kids. No, they're *my* kids. He hasn't been in their lives for almost a year now. My blood boils as I struggle to keep myself together, my jaw locked as I get us as far away from the back terrace as possible. I have no idea what's going to happen next, but I do know I'm standing my ground this time.

"You look beautiful," Elijah says as we stop under one of the ancestral oaks. "You look amazing, actually. It's good to see you, Stella."

"I can't say the same thing," I reply bluntly, keeping my arms crossed and a healthy distance between us. "Let me ask you again. What the hell are you doing here, Elijah?"

"It's a long story," he says, hands in his pockets. He won't break eye contact, though. "I've been through some things, and I'm ready to talk to you about everything. But I do need us to put the past behind us first."

"I put you along with the past behind me a while ago."

Elijah's gaze is filled with pain and longing, but I'm not sure how much of it is genuine. He was well versed in the art of manipulation when we were together. More than once, I fell for it while he was banging another woman and making plans for a new life with her.

"I hurt you. I know that. And words can't express how sorry I am for everything I did," he says. "But I'm here now."

I've finally found you, and I'm ready to work toward fixing everything." Pausing for a moment, he glances around. "Where are the kids?"

I can't help but scoff. "You've got to be kidding me. You walked out of our lives. You haven't even been paying child support. You haven't seen Lucas and Ava in almost a year. And now, you have the audacity to just waltz back in like it's no big deal? Elijah, I knew you were foolish and selfish, but I didn't imagine you were an idiot, too."

"I miss them."

"You've got a funny way of showing it," I mutter. "Cut the shit, Elijah, I'm not buying any of it. What do you want?"

"I told you, I wanna make it up to you."

I shake my head. "Do you really think I'm that stupid? Where's your precious Amanda?"

"We broke up," he sighs, his shoulders dropping in what I assume is shame. "You were right all along, Stella. I was wrong. I was impulsive. I was frustrated with my own inadequacy, and I took it out on you. Worst of all, I thought another woman might get me out of the rut I thought I was stuck in. I did you and the kids wrong, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to fix that."

"You can pay your child support, for starters."

"Yeah, I'll get to that, as well. I'm sort of between jobs right now."

"You've always been between jobs," I roll my eyes at him, realizing that absolutely nothing has changed. He hasn't learned anything. He hasn't grown in any way. He's just trying to see if he still has access to me. To us. I'm too angry to think straight, but at least my protective instincts are still sharp and ready to cut through flesh and soul with equal wrath.

Elijah takes a step forward. I take one back. This man used to have my heart, my body, and my soul. I'm amazed by how repulsed I am by his mere presence. When did my brain switch to the point where the sight of him makes me feel queasy? I finally see him for what he truly is, for what he always was.

And I am disappointed because I convinced myself to believe him, even when I knew he was lying.

“Stella, I just want to talk. I wanna see Lucas and Ava. Where are they? Where are you staying?”

“That is none of your goddamn business,” I hiss. “You have my lawyer’s number. Call him. And how in the hell did you know where to find me?”

“Theo’s social media posts. You weren’t that hard to track down,” he says with a light smirk.

“I wasn’t trying to make myself hard to find,” I inform him. “Listen, Elijah. I don’t want to talk to you. And you certainly have no business seeing the kids until you start upholding your end of the divorce agreement. You walked out on us, remember? You can’t just walk back in and expect us to welcome you with arms wide open.”

“I know the kids miss me, Stella.”

Lucas hasn’t asked about Daddy in a while. He’s too young to actually remember Elijah, and Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau have been excellent substitutes with barely any effort. My son is well taken care of and loved by people who have shown us more kindness than this man ever has.

“They don’t even remember you,” I say. “Ava was three months old when you abandoned us. And Lucas stopped looking for you a long time ago. You did this, Elijah. Own it.”

“I love them,” he claims.

“Don’t be ridiculous. If you loved them, you would’ve at least made sure we had enough to get by. I’ve been working my ass off to keep us safe and fed while you were out in Portland banging your little whore. Screw you, Elijah.”

He tries getting close again. “I’m going to get you and the kids back, Stella. I promise you.”

“Keep your promises to yourself. You have no room in our lives. And if you don’t stay away, I swear I’ll get the lawyer involved and revisit your parental rights. Because you don’t deserve any!”

“You can’t hide them from me,” he says.

“Excuse me. Is there a problem here?” Isaac approaches us, and I lose my breath for a moment.

I’m frozen again, trying to come up with a reasonable answer, but nothing comes to mind. I’m scared out of my mind and embarrassed because the father of my children decided to show up at my place of work. The last thing I need right now is a scene.

Elijah turns to him, and I see the tension tightening in his shoulders. “Who are you?”

“I’m Isaac Kendrick, one of the owners of this establishment,” Isaac replies coldly. The look in his blue eyes tells me he’s not playing around. He reminds me of a tiger about to pounce on his prey, slow and cautious in his movements but relentless and determined to kill. “I also happen to be Stella’s employer, and I think you’re causing her distress.”

“Listen, buddy, I’m not here to cause any distress. I’m just trying to talk to my wife.”

“Ex-wife,” I quickly correct him.

Elijah narrows his eyes at me. He doesn’t like being corrected in public, especially in front of other men. What worries me is the curious way in which his inquisitive gaze bounces back and forth between Isaac and me. Can he tell there’s something between us? I worry I’m way more transparent than I thought, and anything that puts me in a vulnerable position with Elijah may not work to my advantage at the next custody hearing. Because there will absolutely be one in the near future. I don’t want this bastard anywhere near my children ever again.

“Like I said, I don’t want to make a scene, but Stella isn’t helping, either,” Elijah says, softening the tone of his voice when Isaac gets close enough for him to realize he’s taller and physically stronger—definitely threatening enough. “I just want to see my kids, and she’s not letting me.”

Isaac never takes his eyes off him. “Have you paid your child support? If I’m not mistaken, you owe Stella quite a lot. And you haven’t seen your children in a year or so.”

“What I did or didn’t do isn’t your business,” Elijah snaps.

“But it is. Because you’re on my property, unannounced and uninvited while also harassing one of my employees. We take good care of our people here. Better care than you, for sure,” he replies, half-smiling and intriguingly calm. I’d be turned on if it weren’t for my ex-husband presently lingering between us with a sour look on his face.

“I don’t think you understand—”

“No, I don’t think *you* understand the situation here,” Isaac cuts him off. “I need you to leave these premises immediately, and should you have something to discuss with Ms. Snow, by all means, do so through your lawyers. You are not welcome nor allowed to be here for one more second.”

Elijah gasps, unable to contain his shock. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

“I could prove it and escort you out myself, or you could leave of your own accord.”

“I guess you’ve done well for yourself,” Elijah snorts a dry chuckle as he glances my way. “Fuck your boss and get yourself a personal bodyguard. Smart move, Stella.”

“Leave!” I say, tears of rage stinging my eyes.

“I’ll leave. But it’s not over. And don’t think for a second that your man here scared me off,” Elijah shoots back, then storms right past Isaac and trudges back into the Elizabeth. He’ll be gone soon enough, but I can’t even breathe anymore.

I can’t breathe until I feel his presence out of this place. A minute passes in the heaviest silence while I wait for that sense of relief—a sense that never comes, much to my despair. Isaac comes closer, and I can no longer hold myself together.

“Stella, I’m sorry, I should’ve come sooner...” His voice trails off when I start crying.

Everything comes out of me at once. The anger, the sadness, the fear, and the insecurity. Tears flow down my hot cheeks like salty rivers, gushing and seeping into the soft white collar of my maid's uniform. I let it all go as he wraps his arms around me and holds me close. Closer and closer, until I can almost feel my spine cracking, but I welcome his embrace, I feed on this sliver of comfort, I cling to him with everything I've got.

I hide my face in his shirt to muffle the sobs and the wails of a year's worth of misery. I shudder against him, soft as butter melting in a sizzling pan. It feels good, like home. A dangerous thing to experience when I'm trying to separate myself emotionally from this man, from the four of them, for that matter. Yet I cannot deny how much I need it. How much I need him. Them.

"He'll never set foot in this place again," Isaac says, his voice low while his hands rest on the small of my back. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that. I should've come out sooner."

"It's okay. I needed to say those things to him. He had to hear it. I just didn't expect to see him. Not here, not now."

"You're going to be alright," he says, planting a kiss on my temple.

I look up, briefly losing myself in the pools of his beautiful eyes. "Will I be alright, Isaac? Where is this headed? Will we ever really be together?" I'm not sure where the courage came from, but it's a question that needed to reach the surface. We've been tiptoeing around this issue for too long.

"What do you mean?" he asks, clearly hesitant.

It's enough to send a fresh wave of anger coursing through my veins. "What do I mean? The five of us have been doing this for months. Where does it end? Are we together? Or am I just a willing body you enjoy visiting once or twice a week?"

"Stella, I've... None of us have ever treated you like an object."

"Yet that's how I feel right now. How much longer are we going to keep this up? I have a life to rebuild. A career to

recover. Two children to raise,” I choke up, having almost mentioned the third that’s on the way. “Are we together, Isaac?”

“I have a career, too,” he finally says. “A prospect in politics I need to be careful with. It’s not that simple nor that easy for me. For any of us. We should talk about this another time, when you’re not—”

“When I’m not what, exactly? Emotional?” I shoot back and yank myself from his arms, shaking with unkempt rage. “And I just got my answer, so don’t waste your fucking breath, Isaac. I know exactly where I stand now.”

“Stella, wait—”

“I need to get back to work. I’m just the maid here, remember?” I snarl and leave him standing in the garden with his thoughts and a look of shame on his face.

I’m furious. My heart is bleeding. This is too much to deal with. Elijah was the drop that filled the glass for me, because I just want to get today done and over with so I can hide in my room. So I can curl up in my bed with my kids and forget about everyone, about everything. I’ll start fresh tomorrow. I will have to call my lawyer, too, and see what I can do about keeping Elijah away. Hell, I may have to move us out of here sooner than I’d hoped, because I doubt Elijah will simply give up. I saw the determination in his eyes.

“I don’t know him anymore,” I tell myself as I go back inside, my feet heavy. “I don’t know anybody anymore...”

It’s a strange feeling to experience. This solitude against a current of incidents meant to chip away at my resolve, at my hopes and dreams for a better future. No, I need to pull myself together. I need to work the rest of my shift, eat something, and then spend some time with Ava and Lucas. And once I put them to bed, I’ll take a hot bath and cry my heart out until I’m tired enough to go to sleep without tossing and turning. That’s all I can do today.

Tomorrow is a new day.

STELLA

Today still has at least one more challenge in store for me as I find Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick by the reception desk with their weekend bags about an hour later. Noah and Isaac are out on business, and since the concierge is busy escorting other guests to their rooms, I'm tasked with escorting the Kendricks up to the top floor, where they have booked a penthouse.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick," I say, struggling to smile. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Good morning..." Mrs. Kendrick pauses to read my name tag. "Stella. What a pretty name."

"Thank you, ma'am," I reply. "Can I take your bags?"

They're not big but they are heavy enough to have me short of breath by the time we reach the bottom of the steps. I've been feeling more and more fatigued, and I know I cannot keep it up for much longer. Soon enough, even the maid's regular duties will become burdensome and increasingly difficult to perform. It'll cost me my job. No matter how I look at it, what lies ahead will change my life, and as much as I try to convince myself it's for the better, I'm not so sure. The guilt of such thoughts makes it harder for me to push through.

"You're too kind," Mrs. Kendrick says when we stop outside their room. "This should've been the concierge's responsibility."

"It usually is, ma'am, but we have so many new arrivals coming in at once that he is simply overwhelmed," I reply.

She shrugs slightly. “Nevertheless, the maid has enough on her plate as it is. My sons should get another concierge for the busier times of the week.”

“Now, darling, remember what we discussed. You don’t want to get involved in their business. The boys need to figure certain things out on their own,” Mr. Kendrick lovingly reminds her.

“Even so, I’m still going to make a suggestion. Look at the poor girl,” Mrs. Kendrick replies.

I laugh nervously. “Please, don’t worry about me, I’m okay. It’s my pleasure to help you.”

“How long have you been at the Elizabeth?” Mr. Kendrick asks me, the room key lost somewhere in the deep pockets of his khaki slacks. “You’re relatively new, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes. Almost three months, sir,” I reply.

“And how do you like it?”

“Oh, I love it. It’s a great place with good people on the team. The management are all wonderful,” I say with a warm smile. “I’m grateful for the opportunity.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mr. Kendrick says.

“Is this what you want to do for the rest of your life?” Mrs. Kendrick asks, and I know she doesn’t mean it in a derogatory manner, but I still feel the sting somewhere deep in my stomach.

I shake my head slowly. “It’s a stepping stone, more or less. A good place to start.”

“You have children, right? Noah mentioned something,” she says.

“Yes. Lucas and Ava. They’re my world.”

“That I can relate to,” she chuckles. “Must be hard for you. A single mother of two, cleaning hotel rooms. I was getting my master’s degree when I was your age. I hadn’t even met the man of my dreams yet,” she adds, fawning at her husband.

Mr. Kendrick scoffs. “Honey, not everyone has the same opportunities as you and me. We were lucky and privileged.”

“That’s true. I’m glad my boys are equally lucky and privileged, otherwise, I shudder to think what kind of lives they would’ve had.”

“If that will be all?” I cut in politely, holding back tears as I leave the luggage by the door.

Mr. Kendrick slips a fifty-dollar bill in my pocket. “Thank you very much, Stella.”

“You are most welcome. Enjoy your stay,” I say and quickly walk away just as the first of a deluge of tears make their way out. Sniffling, I rush along the hallway and hide in the first empty room I can find.

The pain of staring my own past right in the face, the bitterness of a reality I can no longer ignore, washes through me. I’ve got two kids from a failed marriage and zero prospects for my future. I believed in fairy tales while the crushing reality fragmented me, piece by piece, over the years.

Though it was said with a benevolent tone, I understood what the Kendricks were saying. They were privileged, I was not. They would never welcome someone like me into their prestigious family. They’re rich and prominent, successful members of the elite. Why would they ever accept me when they have those prissy socialites lined up to marry their sons and produce future generations of American royalty? It was a silly idea, a stupid dream I never should’ve considered.

I can't be too mad about how Isaac handled Stella the other day. She asked him something point blank, and he hesitated. She sought reassurance, and he didn't have any to give her. Our futures are somewhat pre-written. They have been since we were born. We have dreams and ambitions, we have plans and prerogatives to follow. Traditions to uphold. Reputations to protect and further grow. Our parents raised us well in that sense, and regardless of our feelings for Stella, Isaac and I agree that it wouldn't work out in the end.

Levi knows it, too. Beau is fully aware though anything but happy about it. We've talked about this more than once, and there is only one thing we've managed to agree upon—we care about Stella. We've fallen for her, each of us in our own way, and what we've got going together is beautiful and unlike any other past relationship. It's complicated and weird, it's rare and precious, but it's also dangerous and not really meant to last. We could go on for the rest of our lives sharing this marvelous woman, looking after her and her children. We're fond of Ava and Lucas, too. But the truth is... it was never going to be sustainable.

"I was talking to Mitch the other day," Dad says at one point during dinner, looking at Isaac. "He said he's ready to put you on his staff as soon as next year if you're ready. He's considering a second run for state senate, and you could be on his team from the beginning of the campaign. You've already got everything you need to make your mark there."

“Thanks, Dad, but I think I’ll wait another year or two. I’m not really finished with the Elizabeth or any of our other businesses, for that matter,” Isaac says.

“The sooner you get started, the easier it’ll be when you make your own bid, son. Remember the five-year plan we discussed?”

Isaac exhales sharply, unable to hide his frustration. “Yes, I remember the plan. It doesn’t mean I have to follow it to the letter. Considering this economy and the hurdles we’re having to deal with in order to grow our business portfolio, I can’t exactly drop everything right now. It’s too soon. Noah needs me on board.”

“Truth be told, Mr. Kendrick, we all need him,” Levi says.

We’re rarely together like this—me, my brother, our parents, Levi, and Beau gathered around the same table. The awkward part about tonight is that one of the waitresses came down with a bad case of food poisoning, so Stella is filling in for her, quietly clearing the plates and bowls before another waitress brings in the main course. I’d enjoy the beef roast a lot more if she could join us.

The conversation is loaded with tension, though. The four of us are still mulling over how much longer we can keep it going with Stella, while my parents keep pressing us about speeding everything up so Isaac can make the shift into his predestined political career. We’ve spent our whole lives preparing for this moment, yet everything has changed between then and now. It changed because of Stella, and we know it. Mom and Dad don’t know the root of it, but they can tell there’s some resistance here, some reason keeping my brother and me from moving along the way we originally agreed.

Mom starts cutting through her steak with firm hands, gold rings clinking with every move. “The three of you are perfectly capable of running the Elizabeth without Isaac,” she says. “And I think the boys would be happy to sell you shares in our other hotels, as well, if you’re interested. The move would benefit everyone, particularly Isaac.”

“Mom, Levi has a TV deal he’s working on as well as a successful writing career beyond the hospitality business,” Isaac cuts in. “And Beau just purchased a chain of hotels on the West Coast. They’re swamped, and it wouldn’t be fair nor reasonable to toss more into their laps just so I can go rub elbows with every scourge in the Maine senate.”

“These scourges will help you build your political career,” Mom insists. “Honey, you’re going to be President someday. Hopefully before your father and I leave this world. It’s too important for you to waste any more time on this hotel nonsense.”

Dad clears his throat and takes a long sip of his wine while Stella refills his glass with water, constantly stealing wary glances at us. “Honey, again with this angle. You know damn well they need their own space, they need to make their own mistakes along the way. All I did was suggest a starting point with Mitch for Isaac, but we can’t force him to do something he clearly isn’t ready to do.”

“I know, I know, I just don’t want them to waste too much time on this when they could be making real progress,” Mom replies.

The conversation continues as we tell our parents about the recent acquisitions and the future changes we’ll be making to all of our properties. I do appreciate Mom and Dad for the way they sit and listen to everything we have to say—Mom is often tempted to intervene with unsolicited advice, but she’s always been like that. Isaac and I have learned to not take any of it personally.

I watch Stella as she comes in and out of the dining room, carrying various plates and other accessories, her eyes always scanning the room and stopping on the four of us. There’s sadness in her gaze, and it’s making me feel uneasy. I hate that it’s come to this. We were happy and carefree, having our fun in private and exploring one another, consuming one another until we’d pass out from physical exhaustion. Our hearts were full of joy and sweetness, yet I can taste the bitterness on the tip of my tongue now.

She's in a lot of pain, and I'm well aware that our inability to give her more is what's causing this. We're failing to come through for her on a deeper level, and it's showing. Levi can barely look at her. Beau gives her the longest looks, each followed by a deep sigh as he then pretends to listen to our parents' conversation with Isaac regarding his plans.

And Isaac... Isaac, much like me, is helpless, watching her and wishing we hadn't been born with our last name. The responsibilities of our dynasty used to be something we looked forward to taking on, but it has become an unpleasant chore. It no longer sparks the old passion that used to have the both of us gleefully jumping out of bed every morning.

"Levi, tell us about the TV show. How is the project coming along?" Dad asks just as Stella clears the main course plates from the table. "Will you be producing it yourself?"

"I've been offered an executive producer credit," Levi says. "We're supposed to sign a contract soon, and we'll start shooting midwinter."

"You know, I've read those books," Mom replies with a bright smile. "Dinah Steele is definitely one of my favorite heroines. I do love how you mix the thriller and horror aspects into something actually palatable. I tried reading those Stephen King novels, but by the stars, I was sick to my stomach."

Levi laughs. "To be honest, Mrs. Kendrick, I drew a lot of my inspiration from his style. I'm but a humble apprentice, one might say."

"Oh, no, honey, you're way better," Mom quips. "I could actually sit down and finish yours. I'm just glad to hear you're taking it to the next level. You'll be moving to Hollywood, then?"

A fork slips from one of the plates in Stella's hands. It hits the floor with an unbearable clang, drawing all the focus onto her, which is clearly the last thing she wanted. "Sorry," she whispers.

"Don't worry about it," Dad replies, ready to continue the conversation. "Beau, how long before you reopen those West

Coast hotels?”

The color drains from Stella’s face. I freeze in my seat as I realize something is wrong here. She’s so pale, shaking like a leaf and wobbling back and forth. My heart starts racing.

“I’m not sure,” Beau says, not noticing her sudden change. “I’m supposed to discuss a few things with the interior designer for the—”

“Hold on,” I cut him off. “Stella, are you okay?”

“Yes, sir, just a little...” Her voice fades.

Her eyes roll into her head, and she falls flat on her back. The plates fly and crash across the hardwood floor. In an instant, the four of us are up and racing to her side. I break into a cold sweat as I kneel beside her.

“Oh, my God!” Mom cries out. “What’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know, Mom. Call an ambulance,” Isaac replies, quick to join me.

Stella can barely keep her eyes open. I don’t like the white tone of her skin, nor the sweat covering her brow. Her pulse is erratic, and she’s struggling to remain awake.

“Stella,” I say quietly, hoping she’ll regain consciousness. “Stella, what’s going on?”

“Stay with me,” Isaac mutters, unable to take his eyes off her.

Levi is on the phone with the dispatcher from 911, passing all the details to them. Beau is speechless, one hand resting on Stella’s shoulder. Mom and Dad are up and looking down at us, a mixture of concern and surprise swirling in their eyes. I’m pretty sure it’s written all over our faces at this point. We’re more than four worried business owners huddled around the half-conscious maid.

We’re four men who clearly have something to do with her—more than what professional ethics would ever allow. I don’t care about any of that, though. I only care about Stella. I need her to be okay, and the mere thought of losing her tonight or

on any other occasion cuts deeply through me. The pain that follows is atrocious. I don't want to feel this way ever again.

“Stella,” I whisper.

She can't answer. She's sliding back into the darkness.

STELLA

I'm drifting in and out of a strange, warm place.

My mind is a blur. The faces of my children flutter before my eyes. Ava's sweet smile. Lucas's giggles as he offers me a dandelion. The day he was born. The day I had to hold them both, crying my heart out when Elijah mailed me the divorce papers. The plus sign on that pregnancy test. The baby. Oh, God, the baby. Is there something wrong with my baby?

I need to wake up, but how? I'm as soft as butter and tired, spread too thin. My skin feels cold, yet my heart burns red. I can feel the sweat dripping down my temples. The sting of a needle. A flurry of agitated voices echoing in my head.

Loneliness. It's all I've ever felt, for as long as I can remember. Fractured memories of a hard childhood return to haunt me. I've always had to toil for every breadcrumb of love and affection I ever got. Even with Elijah. It was never easy. It was never free. I'm exhausted.

"Stella, come back to me," Isaac says. I can hear him. I can feel his breath tickling my ear.

Someone touches me.

Noah.

"Can you do something?!" Levi shouts. He sounds angry. He's probably worried.

"I can, if you'll give us some room," a man replies.

The smell of roast beef lingers in my nostrils. I was carrying dinner plates away from the table. I fainted. Where

am I?

My baby.

“My baby,” I whisper.

“Did she say something?” Beau asks in his soft French accent. It’s like music to my soul.

“She’s coming to,” Levi says.

My eyes peel open. There are so many faces. Most of them familiar. Handsome men who claimed my body and my heart, my very soul. I remember the moments we shared. The delight of their lips. The strength of their arms. The soft feel of skin on skin. I was happy and forever sated. I was theirs, and they were mine.

Yet now I lay feeble on the floor, limp and breathing raggedly as I try to understand what’s going on with me. My own flesh has betrayed me. I fell. In the middle of dinner with the Kendricks, I collapsed. Exhaustion, stress, the pregnancy—all three played a part in this. *Oh, no*. Mrs. and Mr. Kendrick are still here. Watching me. And two paramedics are working to bring me around.

“Shit,” I mumble, the severity of my situation coming into full focus as one of the emergency responders comes closer with a syringe.

I glance down and notice the IV needle inserted into my arm, kept in place with a piece of medical tape. My eyes widen with horror as he prepares to transfer the clear fluid from the syringe right into that IV.

“It’s just glucose,” the paramedic says. “How are you feeling, Stella?”

“Queasy. Weak. Tired. I don’t know what happened,” I tell him, head resting in Noah’s lap.

“You fainted,” Isaac says. “Out of the blue.”

“Oh, gosh, I think I’m gonna get sick,” I manage, but the glucose fluid is already working its way through my system and soothing my senses, if only slightly.

“You’re gonna be okay,” the first paramedic says. “Your vitals are fine. Your pulse is a tad uneven, and your blood sugar levels are very low. I think that’s the root cause of your current state.”

“What happened?” Noah asks him. “What would make her pass out like this?”

“Low blood sugar levels will do it for sure,” the paramedic answers.

“Why is your sugar so low, Stella? Have you not eaten today?” Noah asks.

I shake my head, but it makes me dizzy. “I guess not enough,” I state. “I’m so sorry for all this fuss. I’m sure if I can just get a little bit of food in me, I’ll be fine.”

One of the paramedics shakes his head. “Boosting your sugar levels will help, but we would like to take you to the hospital just in case there’s more going on.”

“More like what?” Beau asks.

“It could be diabetes or something like that,” he answers.

“It’s not diabetes,” I say.

“Are you sure?” Isaac asks.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m not diabetic. I never have been. It doesn’t even run in my family.”

“Well, I still think she should go and get looked at,” Levi pipes up and the others agree.

These men talking about me like I can’t make my own decisions is making me mad.

“Stella, you should really go to the hospital. There’s obviously something wrong with you,” Noah says.

Now I’m just pissed. “There’s nothing *wrong* with me. I’m pregnant,” I blurt out before I can think about it.

The silence that follows carries the weight of a gargantuan boulder suddenly dropped on top of me. The guys are shocked and speechless, eyes bulging and lips parting as their breaths

leave their bodies. Mrs. Kendrick gasps and covers her mouth, while Mr. Kendrick frowns in confusion. The paramedics help me onto the gurney and begin to strap me in for the walk to the waiting ambulance.

“Stella, hold on!” Isaac tries to catch up, but I raise a hand to silence him, my face literally burning with shame.

“Please, just make sure Lucas and Ava are looked after,” I say, then look to the first responders. “Please, get me out of here.”

“Say no more,” one of them replies.

Noah comes over, but I wave him away, too. “Not now. Please just make sure my kids are okay.”

I watch them stay behind in the dining room, utterly helpless and befuddled as I’m wheeled out. Some of the guests have joined the group, drawn by the commotion.

Isaac, Noah, Beau, and Levi know I’m pregnant. Obviously, one of them is the father. It happened suddenly and unexpectedly, and my own reaction was not my proudest moment. But I need to keep myself sane and calm for the time being. I need to get checked out at the hospital. A full set of tests so I can make sure my baby is okay.

Everything else can wait.

STELLA

By morning, I am ready to leave the hospital on my own two feet. They've given me enough fluids and vitamins to get me back to my full capacity. In fact, I have more energy now than before I found out I'm pregnant.

My phone has been buzzing constantly, but I asked Isaac and the guys to respect my privacy and let me rest. They want to come pick me up from the hospital in about an hour. That is the last thing I need—an awkward ride in the car back to the bed and breakfast while they ask questions I'm not ready to answer. I'm betting Isaac and Noah are already preparing their checkbooks. Cursing under my breath, I put my uniform and shoes back on, leaving the hospital gown on one of the chairs in my room. The nurse hands me my discharge papers and wheels me to the exit.

I texted Bella, and she was kind enough to wait for me in my room with the kids. I've had the entire night of barely any sleep to actually think about what I'm going to do next and how I'm going to do it. I don't have an entire plan drawn out, but I do know that I need to get ahead of this and exit with my head held high.

My eyes are red and puffy from all the crying. I doubt I have any tears left.

"Is someone coming to pick you up?" one of the nurses asks. "You should really take it easy for another day or two."

"Yes, the father is on his way as we speak," I lie through my teeth.

I take comfort in knowing my blood work came out alright. Aside from a few vitamin and mineral deficiencies, I'm okay. My heart is strong, my body healthy and ready to bring another life into this world.

The ultrasound showed a healthy, well-developing baby with a strong heartbeat I can still hear when I close my eyes.

When I get back to the inn, I will pack the few belongings we have, load up my children, and leave.

I'm not going back to my mother's place. There are some opportunities for me in Portland, which is far enough away from Cape Elizabeth and Scarborough to give me some peace of mind, if only for a while. I've got enough saved up at this point to put down a deposit on an apartment, and I can work until the pregnancy sidelines me.

I will make it on my own. I have to. After what Elijah did to us, I will never again rely on a man to save me. I will save myself and my children. I will make a good life for them and teach them to be independent.

* * *

THE RIDE to Cape Elizabeth is quiet as I gaze out the taxi window and watch the surly pine trees dash past us. It'll be cold and rainy soon enough as the capricious spring sets in, but today I'm thankful to catch a glimpse of the late winter sun peeking through the puffy gray clouds. The view sort of matches my feelings. The cat is out of the bag now, and I have no idea what comes next. I only know that I need to protect myself, my children, all three of them, and my wounded heart. This whole mess is simply too heavy for my shoulders, and I can no longer afford to burn so much of my energy on uncertain things—including a relationship with four otherwise magnificent men.

The driver drops me off a couple of yards down the road from the Elizabeth. I pay with my phone since my wallet is still in my purse, all the way up in my room. Which I have to clear today, ideally without anybody seeing me. I want to

avoid every single possible uncomfortable conversation. I've already found a nice little motel in Portland for us to stay in until I find a new apartment. I've got enough money saved to get us through the next few months, at least.

"Thank you," I tell the driver and hurry through a side entrance into the bed and breakfast.

It's early morning, so the breakfast room is full. The waiters are too busy to notice me coming in, and the maids haven't started their shifts yet. I was supposed to have the day off, anyway, given that I worked the Kendricks' dinner last night—parts of it, until I landed in the back of an ambulance. I don't see Noah nor Isaac anywhere, and I didn't spot their cars in the parking lot, either. Something tells me they're on their way to the hospital to pick me up.

So my time is limited.

Sneaking up the stairs with a heart the size of a terrified flea, I go into my room and breathe a sigh of relief when I find Bella sitting with Lucas and Ava. I put on the brightest, most reassuring smile as she bounces to her feet and comes over to hug me.

"Oh, you're okay! I was so worried!" she says, holding me tightly.

I reciprocate, fully aware this might be the last time we see each other. I've gotten used to this place and my life here. "I'm fine. But I am sorry I gave you such a scare. I'm guessing Noah or Isaac called you last night."

"Yeah, they said they were picking you up from the hospital this morning."

I simply smile and hug her again. "Thank you so much for taking care of my babies," I say, unable to lie to her, so if I can avoid telling the truth for as long as it's humanly possible, I will do precisely that. "You can go home and rest now. I've got Lucas and Ava covered."

"Sure, Stella, no problem. I'll come back tomorrow morning," Bella replies, visibly still worried about me,

measuring me from head to toe as if she might be able to detect what's wrong with me.

"I'm gonna be okay," I say with a forced laugh, swallowing back tears. "Seriously, go home. Don't worry about me. It was just stress and exhaustion. I'm okay, I promise."

"Okay. Call me if you need me to take the kids off your hands, though," she replies, halfway out the door already. "I'll come over in a jiffy."

"I'll call you if I need you. Bye, Bella. Be good."

She gives me one last look, then leaves. Once the door is closed behind her, I lock it and give Lucas a toy to play with while Ava rolls over in her crib. We have maybe an hour tops before the guys get back and come right upstairs, so I need us out of here by then. Since this isn't the first time I've had to simply pack up and leave, I'm accustomed to efficiently packing against a running clock. I'm just grateful my car is fixed, yet another wonderful way the guys helped me.

First, I fill the suitcases with clothes and toiletries. Second, I fill two boxes with toys and shoes. Careful not to draw anybody's attention, I sneak my stuff downstairs, one bag and box at a time until we're loaded up. I bring Lucas down next, strapping him into his car seat before I get his sister to join him. I do everything with bated breath, my pulse racing and my mind darting through every possible scenario as I give the room one last glance before I leave my key and a note on the dresser for the guys.

It's tearing me apart to do this, but I simply cannot see a better option. Not for myself, and certainly not for my emotional health. The relationship I had with them was supposed to be a lot simpler, yet we still managed to fumble it. I fumbled it the moment I caught feelings. I should've remembered my place in this world with each step I took in their direction. Then maybe my soul wouldn't be broken like this.

"Mama, we go bye-bye?" Lucas asks once I strap his baby sister into her seat. I can't take the crib or any of the kids'

furniture that Isaac helped me buy, but I'll definitely find something cheap in Portland once I settle in somewhere.

"Yes, honey, we're going bye-bye," I say, my throat knotted up. "But we're gonna be okay, I promise."

"Bye-bye!" he cheers, as if we're about to go on a road trip.

Lucas is always excited when a car ride is involved. The fact that they are both too young to understand what's happening makes the whole process easier for me, since I don't have to convince my children that we don't belong here. I know we don't belong here, and that's enough. We've got an open road ahead of us. We'll be in Portland soon.

Leaving the Elizabeth behind, I catch glimpses of it getting smaller in the rearview mirror.

I can't even cry about it yet. I need my eyes clear and focused on the road.

On the inside, however, I'm howling.

Stella wasn't at the hospital. The nurses said she'd already left.

The four of us are back at the Elizabeth, out of our minds with worry.

"She's gone," Isaac gasps as soon as we get to her room.

The closet is empty. The dresser drawers are all empty. She left the cot and the crib behind. I'm guessing she had nowhere to put them since she left with her car. This place looks so grim and colorless without Stella and the kids. All of a sudden, the whole of the place feels barren. My stomach drops, my heart collapses in on itself as I realize she literally walked out of our lives.

Noah checks the bathroom, while Levi sits on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees as he tries to process everything that has happened since last night. I'm still reeling from the news of her pregnancy, but it doesn't fill me with any kind of dread.

"Why would she leave like this?" Levi wonders aloud. "We could've talked about it."

"I may be to blame," Isaac sighs as he finds a note on the dresser. He frowns upon recognizing her handwriting. "Hold on. She left this." The more he reads, the deeper the shadow between his eyebrows and the tighter the line of his lips. "Fuck me sideways, she's really gone."

He passes the note around for each of us to read. By the time I'm done consuming her carefully written words and notice the smudge of a dried tear, I understand how short we've fallen where Stella is concerned. Noah curses under his breath, stopping by the window and gazing outside, though I'm not sure what he's hoping to see. Perhaps he's just searching for clarity.

"What do you mean you're to blame?" Levi asks Isaac, a muscle furiously twitching in his jaw.

"This whole talk about my future, my political career," Isaac says. "My parents' conversations while Stella was waiting our table, the conversation I had with her about it. The truth is, we all knew this wasn't going to last." He pauses. "She wanted to know if I would ever consider her for a long-term relationship."

"And you fucking flaked," Noah snaps. "We could've been there for her instead of letting her torment herself like this. We all know she was falling, and we've been falling for her since day one!"

"Stella is terrified," Levi says. "She's got two kids and a deadbeat ex-husband hounding her. She's pregnant with a third child, for which, by the way, we are absolutely responsible, and we couldn't even reassure her it's going to be okay. We didn't get to tell her that we're going to take care of her, one way or another."

"How?" Isaac asks. "You read her note. She doesn't want a baby daddy, she doesn't want a payoff, she doesn't want to live in some kind of anonymity while we go on with our lives and careers. If it's not the five of us together, Stella doesn't see the point. It's all or nothing, and we can't give her all."

Noah curses again, running a hand through his blond hair, his blue eyes twinkling with anger. "It's your stupid political prospects, Isaac. That's the only thing keeping us from giving this a real try. Because I would gladly make room for Stella in my life."

"Levi's going away for his TV show," Isaac reminds us with a sigh.

Levi shakes his head. “We all fucked up. It’s not just Isaac’s political career here. It’s both your parents, first and foremost. The Kendricks would never accept a polyamorous arrangement like ours, especially when the woman involved already has two children from a previous marriage.” He frowns before continuing. “Then there’s my career, yeah. Hollywood be damned. I thought I’d be happy to take this step and see my books made into a TV series, but I can’t enjoy that anymore. I dread moving to Los Angeles, even if it’s for a few months in the year. And Beau—”

“Leave me out of this,” I cut in sternly. “I bought hotels. That’s it. I can have someone manage the renovations. I love Lucas and Ava like they’re my own. And dammit, I love Stella. More than I have loved anyone ever before. But I flaked, too. I flaked because I didn’t think she’d... Fucking hell, we let her down. And now she’s out there, somewhere, with two kids in tow, alone and heartbroken.” I turn to look at my best friends and business partners. “Are we going to do something about it or what?”

“And what do you expect us to do?” Noah replies, pointing at his phone. “I’ve been calling her since we got to the hospital, and all I’m getting is her voicemail.”

Isaac takes a deep breath, checking his phone again. “Theo doesn’t know where she went, either. She also didn’t know about the pregnancy. I guess Stella has been keeping that to herself.”

“Can you blame her?” I scoff. “We need to find her.”

Levi gets up. “We’ve been too busy finding reasons not to be together instead of building something strong and durable,” he says. “We’ve been lying to ourselves the whole time, saying it’s just fun and strictly physical and whatever. Yet here we are, moping like idiots while the woman of our dreams is all alone and terrified and unsure what to do next. And she’s carrying our child!”

“Our child?” Isaac raises an eyebrow.

“Does it even matter who the father is?” Levi asks hotly. “The four of us are responsible. And if we want her in our

lives, we need to figure out a way to make it work. That means accepting her children as are ours, paternity notwithstanding. Lucas, Ava, the one she's carrying. Dammit, fellas, we have to do something. We can't operate on old parameters anymore, not when we're in clear agreement here that it was never just strictly physical between us."

I nod slowly as I try to think of a way forward. "Maybe she went back to Scarborough. Do you think she might've gone to her mother's place?"

"It would be a step backward for her," Isaac points out. "She's got enough saved up for a new rental, surely. I'm not sure Scarborough would be her first pick."

"She'll need a job, too," Noah adds. "Savings or not, she'll need to cover her rent and bills, the kids' food and babysitter, all that. Ugh, she shouldn't have left. We could've worked something out."

"I think she had to leave," I say. My friends look at me, confused and curious. "I think she was meant to leave in order for the four of us to understand where we stand and what we want. Isaac, Noah, do you want to be with her or not?"

"Of course!" Noah replies. "I couldn't give a single shit about my family's reputation."

"Speak for yourself," Isaac says. "I give a shit. But Levi and Beau are also right. It's a shameful thing for me to admit. Yeah, we could make it work. It would have to be our secret. One of us would have to be the public partner, while the rest of us would have to keep it in the privacy of her bedroom. Provided we find Stella. And provided she would even be willing to accept such a scenario. She's got the future of her children to consider, as well."

"People do love to talk," Levi lets a heavy sigh roll from his chest. "Let's cross that bridge when we get there. Let's find her, first. That prick Elijah will also be looking for her."

"She probably doesn't want to see us anymore than she wants to see him," Noah states.

Fair enough. I deserve that kick in the nuts. So do the rest of us. We all needed this shakeup, but it's painful to know it came at such a steep price. We've just lost the woman of our dreams. The only woman the four of us are able to love and share selflessly. I really do see us building a family together. It would be an unconventional family, yes, but it would be beautiful. We'd have peace and love, intimacy and room to grow. We just have to find her first.

STELLA

It takes me about a week to get us settled into a new apartment. It's a small place, but it's close to Downtown Portland and clean. It's cozy and actually surprisingly pretty for its monthly cost. I remember renting way worse in Scarborough for this kind of money. I even managed to get a cot and a crib for the kids from a thrift store down the road.

The job search is taking longer than I'd hoped, but at least my next-door neighbor's kid is open to babysitting for cash once I find one. Clint is nineteen and he's already helping his mom raise his little sister, Sadie, whom he brings over when he watches Ava and Lucas so I can job hunt. I'm shocked by how good he is at multitasking three children—in his defense, Sadie is ten and more than capable of looking after herself, but Clint is a good older brother and never lets her out of his sight.

Their mom, Maura, is a good woman. She works as a paralegal at a firm in the city center, so she's got her hands full. Her husband died a few years back, so it's been just the three of them for a while. I guess we have that in common and were able to bond over, and I have to admit it does give me a sense of comfort. In these trying times, I could use all the comfort I can get.

I spend my mornings going to interviews—diners, hotels, coffee shops, and restaurants for the most part. I've done a couple of temporary cleaning jobs at office buildings down the block from here, but I do need something less taxing and more stable in the months to come. There's a good OB-GYN two blocks east, so that gives me some peace of mind as I'm due

for another checkup soon. The nausea comes and goes while the cravings get more intense, but I feel good. As good as I can feel in this situation.

“Theo, I’m okay, I promise,” I try to reassure my best friend during a FaceTime call.

Lucas is sleeping in his cot, while Ava is close to dozing off in her crib. I can still hear her cooing from the living room. I had a couple of interesting interviews earlier, but now I’m exhausted. Some rest and relaxation would be great, if only I could get over this constant and crippling anxiety. Theo is still on set at this hour, wrapped in a fluffy white robe while she waits for the next scene she’s supposed to shoot. She’s in full makeup and her hair is safely nestled under a bright pink bonnet to keep her blonde curls bouncy when the cameras come back on. But there isn’t enough makeup in the world to hide the genuine concern in her eyes.

“Honey, Isaac and the guys keep hounding me for details,” she says. “They’re desperately looking for you. Why don’t you just talk to them?”

“Honestly, I’m not ready to deal with them,” I reply, trying to ignore the repetitive stabbing sensation in my heart when I hear their names. I’ve been so lonely without them. My nights are so empty and cold. “I left in a hurry, I dropped everything. And I have so much to figure out for myself, Theo, I don’t want them to influence my decisions.”

“But they should have a say in whatever you decide to do next,” she insists. “One of them is the father of your child and you need to accept that.”

“No. I’m not going to be paid off like some kind of mistress,” I reply bluntly, shaking my head. “Listen, Theo, please don’t tell them where I am. I will reach out when I’m ready, but that’s it. That’s all I can say on this subject.”

“You’re hurting, and I get it. They should’ve done more, I get that, too, but you have to admit, it was complicated from the very beginning with the five of you.”

“Yes, which is why I decided to make an early exit and spare them from further complications.”

“A baby isn’t a further complication.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I scoff, my face burning with shame. “I already have two from a failed marriage. I’m gonna have three soon enough, and none of them will have a stable father. I’m really batting a thousand here.”

Theo exhales sharply, summoning the patience to deal with me. I’ve not been easy to deal with, and there’s only so much I can blame purely on pregnancy hormones. “Okay, I won’t talk about them for a while, at least. But I need to know you’re good, Stella. How are Lucas and Ava doing?”

“We got lucky. Our next-door neighbor is an excellent babysitter,” I tell her with a warm and reassuring smile. “They’re both napping now. We’re gonna watch some cartoons after dinner. We’re having spaghetti and meatballs tonight, and I’m even gonna make us some Nutella crepes if I’ve got any energy left.”

“Don’t they miss the Elizabeth? Don’t you?”

“Ava wouldn’t remember it and Lucas will get over it soon enough. What I feel in these circumstances isn’t really relevant, given I’m the one who chose to leave,” I reply. “But we’re good here, Theo. We’re safe and comfortable. The landlady is super sweet and kind. She even said I can stay a month or two at a steep discount if I don’t find a job soon. I’m not going to rely on that, of course, because you never know... but it’s nice to know I found decent folks here in Portland.”

Theo nods slowly. “Okay. I’m glad to hear you found something good. How’s the job search going?”

“Not great. I didn’t get the best vibes from yesterday’s interviews. Today felt a tad better, but I’m not gonna hold my breath, and I’ll keep applying to new jobs as they pop up on that online portal you recommended,” I say. “I’ll find something for sure.”

“You’ve been there for what, six days? It’s amazing you’ve had interviews already,” Theo replies. “I’m confident you’ll

find something. Oh, by the way, your mom has been calling me a lot. She says you keep rejecting her calls.”

I roll my eyes and groan. “I guess she didn’t get my hint.”

“She’s still your mother. And she’s really getting on my nerves,” Theo says with a laugh.

“I’m sorry. I promise she’ll get bored eventually. Just block her number,” I reply with a dry chuckle.

It’s been so good without my mother around that I sometimes feel guilty for not wanting to see her again. But then I remember how toxic she is, how miserable she made me feel, and the guilt simply fizzles away. Maybe if I were still twenty years old and without children, I might’ve found it in my heart to give her yet another chance. But I need to take care of myself and my children, so there’s no room for someone like her in my life. We don’t get to choose the family we’re born into, but we can certainly choose who sticks around for the ride.

Theo’s gloomy expression doesn’t dissolve. Something else is weighing her down, and it’s making my stomach tight with uncomfortable knots.

“What else?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her. “You’re holding back on me, sister.”

“Oh, God, you’re not gonna like this,” she says. “Honestly, I didn’t even want to tell you at first, but I do think he’s serious...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Elijah. He called me the other day, trying to get a hold of you. He said he stopped by the Elizabeth again, but the receptionist called the cops on him. Then he found out you quit. So, now he’s concerned about his children’s welfare.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” My blood runs cold. He wouldn’t dare. Would he?

“I’m pretty sure he was recording the conversation just so he could use it later in court,” Theo says. “I told him I didn’t know where you moved, but that you assured me you’re okay,

as are the kids. But Stella, the man kept mentioning his lawyer. He said he's making child support payments this week."

"Frickin' finally."

"Yeah, but it does come with a caveat. He says he doesn't trust you with his children anymore."

My blood fucking boils. I can't even sit down anymore, so I start pacing the living room, phone still in my hand as I take deep breaths and keep my eyes fixed on the screen, watching Theo as she stirs uncomfortably in her seat.

"The audacity is mind blowing, I'll tell you that," I manage, my voice trembling with rage. "He left us, he didn't even bother to check in on us or make sure the kids are okay, and now he's concerned? My God, Theo, the man is fucking infuriating."

"I know, honey, I know," she says. "But the truth is, he could give you legal trouble. Have you spoken to your lawyer yet?"

"No. I think I need a new one, to be honest. I didn't really like the advice I got before," I reply.

"I can make a few calls if you want. I know a couple of good ones in Portland. They're not specialized in divorce and custody settlements, but surely they can point me in the right direction."

"I would be most grateful, Theo. And again, I'm sorry I quit my job. I know you vouched for me there, and I promise I will make it up to you someday, somehow."

"You don't need to worry about that," she says. "It's okay, Stella. I only care that you're safe and happy. Screw the Elizabeth for now. Let's focus on how to keep you and the kids together, because the last thing you need right now is a custody battle with a third child on the way."

I got lucky with a friend like her. I'm well aware. For as long as I can remember, she has been there for me. Through good and bad, through better and terrible decisions, through hunger and prosperity, she has never faltered nor judged me, nor made me feel like I was ever less. If anything, Theo was

my rock throughout the divorce. She reminded me that I deserved better and had everything I needed in order to get back to the surface before I drowned. Most importantly, she never hesitated to help me in any way I needed.

“Thank you for always being by my side,” I tell her with a trembling voice. “My life would’ve sucked without you in it.”

“Stella, you were always by my side, too. Remember? Acting school. The town plays. The horrible breakup from Jeff. Who showed up at my door six-months-pregnant with a tub of ice cream and a bag of spicy nachos, huh?” she replies, almost laughing. “Who bombarded me with motivational memes when I was tempted to go back to him, huh? Who let me copy from her English Lit exam, knowing full well I hadn’t even bothered to open a frickin’ book that whole semester? I never forgot anything you ever did for me, and you know we’re always gonna be tight. Us girls, we have to stick together.”

“I don’t think the troubles I’m dealing with now are something the two of us could handle on our own.”

“No, but I’ve got contacts I can reach out to, and that is precisely what I’m going to do,” Theo says. “We’re not helpless little girls anymore, Stella. If there’s something I can do to protect you from Elijah, I will absolutely do it. If you need me to show up with a disguise, a shovel, and an appropriately sized van, you know I’ll be there. No questions asked.”

We’re both laughing now, and it’s enough to help some of these tears dry on their own. I’ve never felt lonelier than I do at this moment, even while I’m on a video call with my best friend. Elijah was easier to handle as a ghost, as someone I knew I would rarely see again—if ever. This aggressive version of him has always lurked beneath the surface, but I was thankful I wasn’t on the receiving end of it. Truth be told, part of me breathed a sigh of relief when he just left me for another woman and didn’t bother to get in touch or ask about our children.

He's trying to force his way back into my life because he was rejected by someone he thought was better than me, and because I'm not rolling the red carpet out for him, he is bitter and vindictive and looking to cause as much damage as possible. He's not a good father, though. He doesn't deserve any form of custody of Lucas and Ava. And I will stop at nothing to keep him away from them—even if it means leaving the States altogether.

Hell, I'm ready to move to Mexico, if that's what it takes.

STELLA

The loneliness is getting worse. I fall asleep next to my children every night, crying my heart out before the nightmares settle in for the ride. It's the same thing every time. Elijah taking Lucas and Ava away. I scream after them, scratching at a window that refuses to open, pounding my fist against a thick layer of glass that won't break. I watch my son reaching his chubby little hands out, asking for me, calling out for his mommy, and I can't do a thing about it.

I am helpless as Elijah glances back at me and smiles. "They're mine, now."

And every morning I wake up, my eyes stinging with tears and my throat closed up as I look over and see my babies sound asleep beside me. Ava looks so peaceful with her plump cheeks and tiny fists flanking her chestnut curls, while Lucas rolls over and slowly opens his eyes. I'm the first thing he sees when he's up, and the smile blooming on his face is the most beautiful thing. Once they're both ready for their day, I wait for Clint to knock on my door while I brew myself a cup of decaf. I'm not a fan, but it does fool my taste buds into thinking I'm getting a healthy dose of coffee before I head out for work.

I've recently found a job at a local diner. It isn't ideal, but it helps pay the bills.

"Good morning, Stella," Clint says as I welcome him, his sister shyly standing behind him this Saturday morning.

“Good morning, sugar cookies!” I reply. “The kids have just had their breakfast, there’s food in the fridge for them, as usual. I’ve labeled each casserole.”

“And there’s diapers and pull ups in the blue dresser,” Clint finished with a soft smile. “Yes, ma’am, we know the drill. I might teach Sadie how to change a diaper today.”

I laugh as Sadie gives him a worried look with her big blue eyes. “Clint, that’s yucky,” she mumbles.

“He’s just kidding,” I say, then look at the teenage boy. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. Sadie got herself in trouble at school yesterday. One hour in detention,” he replies with a cool shrug. “I’m thinking she needs some punishment.”

“Oh, dear. I hope it wasn’t too bad.”

Sadie shakes her head. “No, ma’am. Mom always says if I see somebody bullying somebody else, I should say something.”

“So you said something,” I reply.

“Yeah. And then they said something back,” she lowers her gaze.

“And one thing led to another,” I conclude and grab my purse, checking to make sure I’ve got everything I need. Phone. Charger. Wallet. Keys. Car keys. “Okay, well, I’ll let you two decide who gets to change diapers today, then. I’ve gotta run.”

“We’ll be here,” Clint says.

I give him a warm smile and head out, content my children are safe. It does break my heart knowing Clint has to work weekends for this, but he welcomes the cash, and I need someone I can trust. On weekdays, he comes in at two in the afternoon, right after his classes at the community college, so I always make sure there are extra plates for him and Sadie while they’re here.

On weekends, I’ve picked up extra hours while I can still work in order to save more money for the harder months

ahead. It'll be a difficult winter unless I'm careful, particularly as the pregnancy advances. It's exhausting, but I manage, at least for the time being. It's better than Scarborough. Portland has more job opportunities, and I rarely have to use my car since the transit system is pretty good and cheap. I'm saving a fortune on gas.

Today is an exception. It's raining cats and dogs out there, and I can't afford to be late.

Once I'm at the diner, I slip into my work shoes and get to work. Saturdays are usually more crowded than what I'm seeing now, but the nasty weather is proficient at keeping people indoors. The tips will be lower, but given how tired I am, I could do with a smidge of peace and quiet. On the other hand, the peace and quiet give me time to miss the guys and my life at the Elizabeth. We had it good there.

There was peace and kindness. I was close to my kids all the time. I had four men aching to be with me, looking for excuses to get me into their bedrooms at night or in their private offices during the day. It was fun and breezy. I miss the trips we took outside of Cape Elizabeth. The laughter. The orgasms. The way they made me feel like I was the most beautiful woman in the whole world. But it was a dream. A beautiful dream that was never meant to last, and I need to come to terms with that particular truth.

"Table five just asked for their check," Melissa, my co-worker and fellow waitress says as she stops by the counter. I'm busy cleaning some soda glasses, but I set them aside so I can print the check for my only table this morning.

"Sure thing," I reply.

"Oh, and there's someone here to see you," she adds, then points me to booth number seven in the far corner of our quaint but sparkling clean diner.

My heart stops for a moment, though I'm not sure if it's out of dread or excitement. I don't even know who I'm expecting to see. Elijah? No, that would be a nightmare. I'd run away screaming. Isaac or Noah? Beau or Levi? That's just

wishful thinking. I ran away from them already. I'm not ready to face them. I don't think I'll ever be ready.

But Theo is standing by booth number seven, and I feel my chest suddenly decompressing as I breathe a deep sigh of relief. I light up like the sun and drop the check at table five, then rush over to hug Theo with all the love I've got in me.

"Oh, I almost forgot you were coming by today," I say.

"I'd never flake out on you, sis," she replies, holding me tightly.

We stay like this for the better part of a minute. Melissa is kind enough to pick up the paid check from table five for me while I take a ten-minute break to sit with Theo at this corner booth. I give her a menu, unable to contain my delighted grin.

"You've got to try the pancakes. I swear, Sammy, our chef makes the best pancakes in all of Portland," I tell her.

"Let's start with some coffee first," my best friend says.

Once Melissa brings over a cappuccino for Theo and a lemonade for me, we're able to unwind for a moment. I can't stop gazing out the window, though, a constant edge persisting in the back of my head.

"How was the drive here?" I ask.

"Surprisingly smooth," she replies. "Then again, I took a town car. I'm only here for a couple of days. I didn't see a point in renting a car of my own. But we're not here to talk about traffic, Stella."

"No, we're not," I exhale sharply.

She reaches across the table and takes my hands in hers, squeezing gently. "How are you?"

"Physically, I'm okay," I tell her. "The prenatal vitamins are helping. I get as much sleep as possible. My boss here knows about my situation, and he's been nothing but kind and supportive. Melissa and my other co-workers pitch in when there's heavier stuff to carry around. I don't know, Theo, I think the universe is looking after me in its own way."

“I’m glad. You need support from wherever you can get it. Have you heard from the guys yet?”

I shake my head. “They stopped calling and texting a while back. I’m hoping they just gave up.”

“I doubt it,” Theo says. “You’re pregnant with their child. One of them, anyway. I think they’re just trying to give you room to breathe or something.”

“Elijah hasn’t called, either. And he does have my number. It’s a legal requirement.”

Theo curses under her breath, unable to contain her disgust. “Screw that prick. He doesn’t have any good reason to call you. He’s probably plotting some kind of revenge with his lawyer. I’m not sure he’s got the legal standing to strip you of your custody rights, though. Historically, you have a better shot. I’ve been thinking about it.”

“I’m hopeful. I mean, he walked out when Ava was just three months old. The child support checks came in earlier this week, but it’s too little, too late. He hasn’t seen his children in over a year. He hasn’t called. Texted. Nothing. And the records can easily prove it.”

“I don’t know why he was so bold over the phone the last time we spoke,” she mutters, shaking her head slowly. “There’s something going on here, Stella, and I don’t know what it is. Not knowing makes me anxious because I don’t trust that fucker to save my life.”

“I just want him out of mine. It’s preposterous that he wants to come back after everything he did. He left us to fend for ourselves. He didn’t give a damn while he was with Amanda. We didn’t even matter anymore. We could’ve died, and he wouldn’t have cared. How dare he come up to the Elizabeth and have the audacity to ask me to take him back? Is he delusional? I still don’t get it.”

Theo takes a long sip from her coffee. Outside, cars line up before a red light. Water pours down the massive diner windows. Above, the sky is a dull and dark gray. I doubt the rain will stop anytime soon. It’s an apt metaphor for

everything I've been feeling lately, and I know I should try to be more upbeat for the little human growing inside me, but damn, I can't catch a break these days.

"He's not delusional. He's just revealing his true self for the first time," Theo says. "While you were together, you ignored so many red flags, Stella. You already had plenty of reasons to dump his sorry ass, but then you bought into his lies. You had two children together, and when he got bored, when he met that chick, he literally discarded the three of you like you were nothing but dead weight. The truth is, he was always like this. You're just starting to really see him, now."

"It's a scary thought, to have spent so many years with a man without allowing myself to see who he really is..."

"You kept hoping he'd change. You kept giving pieces of yourself, working your ass off, sacrificing your own wants and needs because you didn't want to go back to your old life, to your narcissistic mother, to that feeling of failure she saddled you with even though you were still growing up, you were still evolving," Theo muses. "It wasn't your fault you kept trying to see the best in people who had no intention of ever treating you the way you deserved to be treated."

I nod slightly. "I guess."

"And the truth is, when you met Noah, Isaac, Levi, and Beau, they showed you what a healthy relationship could be like. I know, I know, strictly physical and whatever. But they were good to you. They were kind and attentive. I remember all the stories you told me about them. You were describing a healthy relationship, Stella." I lift my eyebrows and she nods. "I'm well aware there were four men involved, but honestly I think that was always a weird but wonderful bonus. I'd give up a piece of shit like Elijah over four men like Noah, Isaac, Beau, and Levi any time. Any frickin' time."

It's hard not to cry as the truth stares me hard in the face. Theo softens her gaze when she notices the tears building up. I didn't know I had any left in me. "I'm sorry," I sob, trying to keep myself together. "It's just..."

“Oh, no, I’m the one who’s sorry, honey. I’m trying to lift your spirits and keep you strong, yet all I do is bring up stuff you’re trying to forget.”

“It’s not you. It’s just me, realizing how rash I was by leaving the Elizabeth in the first place.”

“No, I get it. I totally get it. The guys weren’t exactly helping you navigate that moment, either. You were all basically lying to yourselves,” Theo says. “It’s nothing serious,” she adds in mocking voices. “We’re only having fun. No one’s catching feelings. Of course, you all caught feelings, and then none of you could actually cope with that.”

I wipe my tears with a tissue. “I was happy. But it’s over. It wasn’t going to last.”

“It’s not like you didn’t try. You did ask them.”

“I asked Isaac, and he gave me the whole argument about his political career. I felt so ashamed. I was the one who wanted more, Theo, and I didn’t really know how it would even work in the long run.”

“You wanted the four of them.”

“And I got none. Plus a baby on the way.”

Theo can’t help but laugh. “Maybe next time settle for less?”

And now I’m laughing, too. Laughing and crying. Maybe I could’ve done things differently. Maybe I should’ve broached the subject in another way. Maybe I could’ve been more patient. But I was pregnant and scared out of my mind. I already have two children and a deadbeat ex-husband. My own history didn’t allow any room for more mistakes. Yet it’s precisely what I ended up doing, anyway.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I tell Theo. “But I’ll figure this out, one way or another. Right now, I’m focused on working and saving before the baby comes.”

“Good. And I’m going to meet with those lawyer friends of mine later today. Maybe they can help. I can’t promise you anything right now, but I’m trying my best.”

“What if I lose them?” I ask the hardest question for the first time.

Theo gives me a troubled look. “Ava and Lucas?”

“Yeah.”

“You won’t lose them.”

I find myself nodding again. My worst fears have already come true, and I’m terrified of even thinking it couldn’t get worse. It could always get worse, and every time I said that, it got way, way worse. The road ahead is murky and difficult, to say the least, but I’m not as alone as I used to be. I’ve got good people sticking by my side through thick and thin. I only wish Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau could be here for me. I wish we could be together again, and not just for the physical fun.

Though I miss that, too. I miss being theirs, body and soul. I miss it more than anything.

It's been almost three weeks since we've last seen Stella. I'd hoped I would get over it, that her absence would somehow make it easier to go through my days. For a while, it worked. I focused on the Elizabeth and our other business ventures, while the guys kept trying to track her down. They were relentless in their pursuit, even when she wouldn't take their calls and messages. I understood she needed time and room to breathe. The more we pushed, the farther away she would pull.

Yet the nights have been unbearable.

I'd gotten used to sharing her with my friends, to building this strange but beautiful connection between us. They say wartime is a life-changing experience for the men who survived in the same trenches together. I won't dare say the same thing applies to sharing a woman we equally love, but I can definitely say it has changed us and only for the better.

Stella was the glue to our unique dynamic.

We each had our own reason to want her for ourselves, but we were more than happy to huddle up around her whenever she asked us to. We could never say no to her. Why would we? And it was always about so much more than just the sexual pleasure. I'm done lying to myself about it. Lying has only brought me pain and misery. More pain and misery await unless I figure out a way to bring Stella back into our lives without sacrificing a political future I've always dreamed of. It may be insane to even think about it, but I have to try.

I owe it to myself, and I owe it to the guys, too.

“Alright, we’re here,” Levi says as he takes his seat at the breakfast table. It’s been two hours since the whole room was cleared, and most of the bed and breakfast’s guests are currently on their way to the Cherry Blossom. It’s a marvelous event, year after year. “What did you want to talk about?”

He’s still mad that we stopped searching for Stella earlier this week. I called them all off and asked them to give her some time. I understand the instinct and the desperation. I feel it, too. But we do need to be smart about this, and after my last conversation with Theo, I know we need a better strategy in place if we’re to get Stella and the kids back.

“It’s time we draw up a plan,” I say just as Noah and Beau join us.

I’ve made sure that we’re not disturbed while we have this meeting, so the maids have already brought the coffee and pastries in before they went about their business cleaning the rooms upstairs. Not that I’ve had much of an appetite lately. I can barely stomach any kind of food, but sustenance is necessary whether I feel like it or not.

Noah keeps checking his phone, new messages coming in every other minute. “She’s pulling up now,” he tells me.

“Who’s pulling up?” Beau asks. Both he and Levi are suddenly struck with excitement, straightening their backs as they look at Noah and me.

“Not Stella,” I reply bluntly.

Theo comes in, looking serious. I’ve always known her as the bubbly and cheery type, so seeing this gloomier side of hers, particularly given the subject we’re about to discuss, has my stomach turning itself inside out. A croissant won’t do much good, but I scarf one down anyway, following it with a hefty gulp of black coffee. The four of us stand up as she reaches the table, her stiletto heels clicking across the floor.

“Thank you for coming all the way out here,” I say.

“No, thank you for insisting,” Theo replies. Even her outfit tells me she means business. Dark blue jeans, a black sweater, and her platinum blonde hair pulled into a tight bun. “It took

me a while to figure out I wasn't doing Stella any favors at this point."

"What's going on?" Levi asks.

We take our seats, and Noah pours Theo a cup of coffee. She sighs deeply, and I can see she's still hesitating despite the wise decision she made yesterday to come here and meet with us.

"Thing is, Stella is okay, for the most part, but I don't think she'll be okay for much longer," she says.

"What do you mean?" Beau replies, his black brows furrowed into a deep frown.

"Man, I didn't want to tell on her," Theo mumbles. Her shoulders drop. It's so obvious she cares deeply about her friend, otherwise she wouldn't be here. "Elijah has been threatening legal action, but he's been quiet the past week. He hasn't been calling me incessantly like he did before, either. After Stella left here, he was constantly hounding me, looking for her."

"If he's quiet, it means he's either given up or he's preparing something from a legal standpoint with his lawyer," I say. "If the latter is the case, I don't think his odds are good."

"Stella hasn't been taking his calls," Theo says. "From a legal perspective, Elijah could use that against her. Up to the point where he came back and asked to see his children, Stella could be reached. She would've answered the phone. She even texted him a number of times over the months following their divorce. If she's cut off all contact, he could get the authorities involved. He could say she's denying him access to their children, especially now that he's paying child support."

Noah's jaw tightens. A moment later, he takes a deep breath. "Does Stella know Elijah has been radio silent?"

"Yes. And she's worried. I'm worried. I don't know what she'll do. I don't know what she *can* do," Theo replies. "I tried hooking her up with a new lawyer, but I haven't heard back from any of my contacts. They will reach out, eventually, but I fear the clock is ticking way faster."

“That’s why I wanted us gathered here, today,” I cut in. “I’ve already spoken to my family’s law firm, and they’ve been kind enough to put their associates in touch with Noah and me on the matter of Stella and Elijah’s custody issues.”

“We’re meeting them later,” Noah says. “And Theo will be joining us, since she has the most knowledge about the situation.”

“But I needed the four of us to reaffirm our commitment to Stella,” I add. “I know we’ve each shared and acknowledged our feelings for her, our emotional attachment to the kids, and our thoughts on her unexpected pregnancy. We’ve all said we would do everything in our power to bring her and the little ones back safe and sound, yet there is still this thorn in my side that’s really digging deeper.” I look at each of them, meeting their eyes. “Are we absolutely certain we’re going to go all the way through with it?”

Levi gives me a startled look. “What do you mean? Of course we’re sure.”

“Listen to me very carefully,” I reply. “I am ready to risk everything I’ve worked for in order to make this work with Stella. I am ready to risk the kind of public scandal that would destroy my entire family for this. That’s how sure I am. And I need to know that each of you is equally ready to do this with me. I may have had my doubts and fears in the past, but I’m not turning back now. Stella needs us all by her side, no matter what. No matter what those Hollywood execs tell you, Levi. No matter how many more West Coast hotels you buy, Beau. No matter what our parents expect of you once I start running for public office, Noah, if I even still can.”

A heavy silence falls across the table. It’s not a sign for me to stop, though. I’ve given this too much thought not to lay it all out so it’s crystal clear for everybody.

“Had it only been me, I would’ve taken Stella as my wife right away, no questions asked and gladly. But there are four of us, each with something massive to lose. And while it sounds romantic to say we’re doing it out of true love, we do need to be realistic. It takes more than that to be with her, to be

a part of her life. Those children deserve better, and we can't waste her time if any of us will turn around and desert her when it inevitably gets tough. Lucas and Ava need a father in their lives. And the four of us have repeatedly said we want to be dads to them. Which is why I need to make sure we're on the same page here."

Beau nods his agreement. "It's not about sacrificing our futures, our careers, and reputations. It's about coming together to make sure none of that happens while we also give Stella and her children everything they need and deserve."

"Precisely," I say.

Theo can't help but smile. "You guys are amazing, I swear. No one else in this world would have the balls to do what you're about to do. You say it's not just about true love, Isaac, but let's face it. It's exactly the love you feel for her that has you ready to put everything on the line like this. I only wish Stella could hear you. Maybe then she'd understand."

"She will," Noah says. "It's not an easy concept to grasp, I get it. I had a hard time reconciling my own thoughts on the matter. It's complicated, and it'll get even more complicated with a third child in the picture, but I know we can do this. I'm certainly willing to fight all the way through."

"Me, too," Levi replies. "You're right, Isaac. It can be done. It's not going to be easy, but if we've got enough legal juice, we could cover our backs on every possible front later down the line."

Theo clears her throat. "I think we need eyes on Elijah, first and foremost."

"We'll discuss this with our lawyers later today," I say.

And I'm certainly prepared to keep every possible option on the table. Even the options I wouldn't bring up now for fear of shock and awe. It takes a lot of grit and a skewed moral compass to thrive in America's political jungle these days. My parents and grandparents before me understood the risks, and none of them hesitated to get their hands dirty when push came to shove.

There are possibilities way outside the legal realm. Ugly things I'm ready to do in order to keep Stella and her children together. I only hope I won't have to go that far, but the mere fact that I'm willing to do so tells me I'm seeing this through. Truth is, there is no one I'd rather spend the rest of my days with. I don't care that my name might not be on a marriage certificate anywhere.

I don't care that our children will grow up having to hide the wonderful complexity of their family from the rest of the world. I don't care that I will always have to hide the best part of my life from my own family and friends. If that is what it takes for us to be together and happy, truly happy, I'll do it.

"Where is she now?" Beau asks.

"Portland. She's got a steady job at a diner downtown, and she's renting a nice, cozy little place. She even got her neighbor's kid to babysit Ava and Lucas," Theo says.

"And how is she feeling?" I reply.

Theo gives me a warm smile. "She's okay, I promise. Her last OB-GYN checkup was great. She's taking all kinds of vitamins, and her co-workers are helping her a lot. It's the stress I'm worried about. The sadness, too. Guys, she is just so sad and scared all the time. I don't know how it will impact the pregnancy going forward, but I do know she needs the four of you by her side, whether she's ready to admit it or not."

"We're not letting her fight what's coming alone," Levi declares.

The confidence in his voice tells me we are absolutely doing this. This is the confirmation I've been waiting for. I would've done it on my own if I had to, but I do know each of them would've regretted not coming through for her later down the line. We started this together, and we're going to bring it to a conclusion together. Stella fell in love with the four of us.

And the four of us need to shed every sliver of doubt left to fight for her.

I'll be damned if I will allow that prick Elijah to hound her like this. He had his chance and pissed it away. It's our turn now.

STELLA

My baby bump is becoming more prominent, though it's nothing my diner uniform can't hide. All I need to do is tie the apron higher around my waist. For the time being, it works. My ankles don't take as kindly to spending so many hours standing anymore, but Melissa makes sure I take as many breaks as possible throughout every shift. I owe this girl so many drinks and lunches for everything she's done for me so far.

The diner is getting busier in the evenings, now that warmer weather is just around the corner. It smells like boba tea and vanilla lattes, cinnamon cherry glaze cakes and pecan apricot pie resting comfortably beneath glass displays. Sam, our exceptional cook, saves me extra pieces every evening and hands them to me in boxes before I go home, so I've got that going for me. It's a silver lining, one of few these days.

Weekends are still my favorites, though. I get the morning shifts, and although we see more folks coming through the door as soon as we open, the work volume is still pretty relaxed, which allows me to take it easy. If it stays this way, I can work right up until I deliver and put away as much money as I can before I have to take time off for the baby. It's a scary prospect, but I've been assured I have a job to go back to after the baby is born.

My boss has told me I can even bring the baby in with me if I need to. Melissa is looking forward to keeping an eye on the little one while I wait tables. It's not the kind of life I wanted for myself, but it's the best I can do. Not a moment

goes by that I don't second guess the path I've chosen, that I don't think about Isaac and the guys. I have plenty of doubt in my aching heart, yet as the weeks go by, I do get a sense of clarity.

"Are you driving yourself home?" Melissa asks as we're getting closer to the end of a rather slow Saturday shift.

I nod once as I refill the coffee machine with fresh beans from a sealed bag. The smell alone is enough to drive me nuts, but I'll have to wait until the baby is born to once again enjoy a proper coffee. "Yes. I drove because of the rain this morning. But it's okay, the rest of the week is supposed to be warmer and sunnier."

"Hey, I can always come pick you up when the weather gets nasty," she says. "It'll save you some bucks on that tank."

"Melissa, haven't you done enough for me?" I ask gratefully, smiling.

"It's nothing, seriously. I live three blocks down from you, anyway. It's not like I have to cross the whole city to get you."

"Thanks. I'll let you know."

Sam calls out from the kitchen. "Hey, Stella! Do you want some apricot pie for the kids? I just baked a fresh batch, I can save you some."

"Thanks, Sam," I reply with a soft smile. "But let me pay for it."

"All I need is your smile, kiddo. That's the best currency I can think of," he chuckles and disappears behind the kitchen door again.

In his mid-fifties and a newly minted grandfather himself, Sam spent most of his youth working under prominent chefs down in New York. He even ran a 2-star Michelin restaurant of his own in Manhattan before he closed it and moved back to Portland. According to him, nothing he cooked made sense. He missed home too much, along with its simpler, more familiar comforts. To be fair, hiring him has turned the diner into one of the more popular places in downtown Portland.

We have so many loyal and returning customers because of him. His pies are phenomenal. His cakes are to die for. And the plainest scrambled eggs taste like heaven on one's tongue when Sam's working in the kitchen. But what makes him truly amazing as a human being is his kindness and generosity. I'm pretty sure he's the one who twisted our boss's arm into keeping me on the books to give me legal rights to a proper maternity leave. Melissa sure seems to think so.

"His apricot pie is the greatest," she swoons, taking a deep breath as the delicious fragrance starts sneaking into the dining room. "My God, if he weren't already married, I'd marry him myself. Five times over."

I laugh lightly. "Lucas loves the apricot pie, too. Every time I come home, as soon as he sees me coming through the door, he asks for it."

"Soon enough, he'll tar and feather you if you don't come home with a slice. And wait until the cherry pies start coming out of the oven," Melissa chuckles, then pauses to look outside. "Man, that rain is making me want to curl up with a thick blanket and a good book. It'll get warmer and sunnier soon enough, but until then I guess we still have to put up with these nasty bouts of rain."

"We're almost there, honey," I reply, checking my watch. "Speaking of, I need to skedaddle."

"Don't forget your pie."

"Like I ever could."

I get in my car and give the engine a few minutes to properly warm up. Noah's mechanic may have brought this old thing back from the dead, but it's still an ancient beast that needs proper time to be drivable.

The pie is safely stored in a box in the backseat, filling the whole car with its spectacular aroma. I'm practically drooling as I pull out into the main street and make my way home. The rain is getting heavier, but at least the wipers work fast enough to keep me driving safely through thickening traffic. Melissa is right. Summer needs to get here.

The light turns green, and I turn right on Fourth Street. I'm almost home. I can see the apartment building from here, and my heart becomes filled with a warm kind of anticipation. Had it not been for Lucas and Ava, I doubt I would've bounced back from that divorce the way I did. I didn't even have time to sulk and let the depression eat away at me. My instincts guided me so my children would never have to miss anything ever again.

Will my instincts pull me through again?

My phone rings. It's mounted on the dashboard. Isaac's number pops up. Almost instantly, my blood starts rushing, flooding my brain and limbs with uncomfortable heat. I can't take his call. Not today. I don't know when I'll be able to do it. I ignore it and choose to focus on the road, instead.

Slowly but surely, I pull up outside my apartment building.

"What does he want?" I wonder aloud.

The silence should've clued him in by now, and he's been quiet himself. The four of them have not tried to contact me for almost two weeks. Maybe they're rekindling their efforts to reach out to me.

Do I want them to do that? Why is this peculiar excitement building up in my chest?

As soon as I look out the car window, however, a whole different wave of emotions crash into me. Cold and merciless, biting and sharp as ice picks stabbing me everywhere. Elijah stands outside my apartment building, safe under a large black umbrella. Beside him, a man in a black suit and carrying an umbrella of his own watches me carefully.

"Oh, no," I whisper.

I know the blunt look on his face. I see the manila folder under his arm. This is it. The moment I had dreaded and hoped to avoid at least until I found a better lawyer. None of Theo's connections have come through so far, and Elijah has finally found me. My guess is a court order. I couldn't change my phone number without getting myself in deeper legal trouble

than this. Horror smacks me hard as I get out of the car, forgetting about the rain altogether.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hiss. I’m soaking wet by the time I reach him on the edge of the sidewalk. “I told you to leave us alone.”

“It’s not like you gave me a better choice,” Elijah replies with a casual shrug.

The man next to him shows me the manila folder, his expression never shifting into anything remotely human or compassionate. “I have a court order here, Ms. Snow. We’ve come to take the children away from what we believe is a neglectful environment.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” I gasp, staring at the folder.

“He’s not kidding,” Elijah says. I can see he’s having a hard time containing the pleasure he takes in causing me this much grief, and all I can think of are ways of gouging his eyes out. “You disappeared from the Elizabeth. You refused to let me see my children. You haven’t been answering any of my calls and messages. A legal course of action was the only way I could think of to make sure Lucas and Ava are safe.”

I give the lawyer a confused glance. “And you actually believe this bullshit? Or are you conspiring with him? I could have you disbarred for this.”

“How? Is anything untrue here? Twice, now, you’ve taken the children out of their father’s sight,” the man replies. “And while he may have had personal issues to deal with following your divorce, he could at least rest assured knowing where his children were at all times.”

“No, this can’t be happening,” I mutter and snatch the folder from the lawyer’s hands. I flip through the pages as he tilts the umbrella forward to shield the papers from the heavy rain while I read and struggle not to faint. “This can’t be real. No decent court would ever grant you these rights without at least calling me in for an interview first.”

“I’m afraid it was considered an emergency,” the lawyer says. “We expedited a custody hearing with the 8th district and got this order granted in under twenty-four hours. I’m afraid you have no choice but to let the children go home with their father today.”

I give him a furious glower, my teeth gritting. “Over my dead body.”

“Stella, I tried to be civil,” Elijah says. “You pushed me away, and your boy-toy banned me from the bed and breakfast. Everything is on record. Read it until you get it. But Lucas and Ava are staying with me until the court decides whether you’re fit to be their parent or not.”

“I would rather chain myself to these doors and gnaw off my own foot before I let you anywhere near my children!” I shout, shaking like a leaf. My jaw clanks with each breath. “You abandoned us, Elijah. Is that written anywhere in this joke of a court order?” I add and throw the file back at his lawyer. “You didn’t pay child support for months. You didn’t even call to see if Lucas and Ava were okay. You didn’t give two shits about us until Amanda dumped your sorry ass.”

“Whatever your past issues, the truth remains immutable. The children need to be in a safe environment,” the lawyer cuts in.

“And how do you ascertain whether an environment is safe or not? Do you even know what our home looks like?” I shoot back. “I’m paying rent on a two-bedroom apartment. I’m working hard to cover the bills and the food. My children,” I say, briefly glancing at Elijah, “are safe and well taken care of. They have a reliable babysitter looking after them while I’m working, and there is always food in the fridge. They have toys and playtime activities. Clothes and diapers. EVERYTHING!”

“You call a nineteen-year-old kid a reliable babysitter? Are you off your rocker?” Elijah snaps. “We asked around. I’m pretty sure you were fucking half of that bed and breakfast’s management team to get one of their premium rooms.”

My hand shoots out with lightning speed, smacking him across the cheek. His face turns instant crimson red, but the lawyer raises his arm to stop him from retaliating. “Remember what we discussed,” he tells Elijah. “If Ms. Snow decides to resort to violence, it’s only a disservice to her and no one else.”

“You are not taking my children away from me!”

“It’s out of your hands for now,” the lawyer says. “The police are on their way to make sure the transfer of custody is handled appropriately.”

“You can bring the entire United States Army down here, mister, but you are not taking my children away from me!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “I’m the one who carried them, who brought them into this world. I’m the one who’s been raising them by myself while this prick was busy cheating on me. He’s lonely and suddenly remembered he had a family. That’s all this is! His way of getting back at me because I wouldn’t welcome him with arms wide open.”

“Tell that to the court, Ms. Snow. I’m afraid you can’t do anything about it today,” the lawyer replies.

“This isn’t legal,” I tell him furiously. “I don’t know what kind of lies you told the judge, but I know custody isn’t granted like this.” I glare at both of them. “I’m going to fight you until you lose not only custody, but all parental rights.”

“Excuse me,” a familiar voice interjects, promptly followed by a dwindling siren and a sea of red and blue lights.

Isaac stands in the rain, his coat drenched, his blonde hair darkened by the water. Yet his blue eyes feel like home to me as soon as they find mine. I’m breathless, stunned and unable to move.

“Isaac,” I manage.

“Who are you?” Elijah’s lawyer asks with a heavy frown.

The cops come out of two vehicles. Only now do I begin to register the entire scene unfolding around me. Noah, Levi, and Beau join Isaac on the sidewalk, not caring in the least about the rain as they all look at me with warm eyes and reassuring

smiles. I don't know what to think in this moment, yet I cannot deny the faint relief currently sneaking through me, gradually unlocking my frozen joints.

"Isaac Kendrick," Isaac briefly introduces himself, then nods at the manila folder. "I assume that's the hastily procured court order you got solely for the purpose of tormenting Ms. Snow and her children?"

"You need to mind your own fucking business," Elijah retorts, pointing a finger at Isaac.

"I reckon you need to keep your mouth shut for a minute or two," Noah shoots back. "Unless you want to leave this place in the backseat of a police car."

"Who's this?" Elijah asks me, pointing a thumb at Noah. "Did you gather all your boyfriends to try and stop me from taking my children away from you?"

"My children," I say it again. "You were just the sperm donor."

I can tell from the hard looks on the men's faces that I'm not losing my kids today. Whatever this is they're playing at, I've got a feeling it's the kind of power game neither Elijah nor his attorney were prepared to deal with. And judging by the team of lawyers getting out of yet another vehicle that has just pulled up, I'm starting to think my luck may have turned toward even better avenues.

Once more, Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau have come to my rescue.

STELLA

I have so many questions.

“Are you okay?” Levi asks and brings an umbrella over to me. He springs it open and keeps it above the both of us. All I can do is nod softly, barely able to look him in the eyes.

“They’re trying to take my children,” I whimper, close to tears.

“Again, I ask, who are you and what business is this of yours?” Elijah’s lawyer asks. “I have a court order here that clearly states Mr. Cummings has been granted temporary custody of his children until a court analyzes Ms. Snow’s situation to ascertain whether she is fit to retain her parental rights.”

“And while I understand you feel entitled to use that court order to intimidate Ms. Snow, her attorneys would like to have look at it before you’re allowed to take the children away from her,” Isaac replies.

As if summoned, the lawyers step in and request to see the papers. What follows is a tense conversation between them and Elijah’s attorney as they go over every single line in the manila folder. Elijah is getting restless, and I can tell from his growing anxiety that he’s not exactly sure whether he’s going to pull it off anymore.

Meanwhile, I’m speechless and slowly leaning against Levi, watching the lawyers’ back and forth with bated breath. Noah eyes me intently, his gaze swirling with glimmers of concern and... love. It has to be love. I’m hoping it’s love,

because I see it in Levi, Isaac, and Beau's gazes, too, as they all look at me. I've been naked and afraid out here, frozen and helpless, only for the four of them to simply catch up, swoop in, and make me believe there's a sunrise coming after this terrible storm.

"I'm sorry we were so late," Isaac tells me. "You didn't make it easy for us to find you."

"Just don't be mad with Theo. She was only trying to help," Levi whispers.

"How... What are you doing here, though? Who are those guys? I don't have a lawyer," I reply, trying to catch up with my hurtling thoughts. "I don't understand."

Isaac smiles softly. "We aren't going to let you go through any of this alone," he says. "You do have lawyers. See those guys over there, currently telling Elijah that his court order won't help him today? They're your lawyers."

"I can't afford those suits," I reply.

"Please stop," Noah groans, jokingly rolling his eyes. "Did you really think we'd let the mother of our future children suffer like this? Come on."

Future children?

As if reading my mind, Beau chuckles lightly. "Well, you've got one already on the way, but there are four of us. Three of us will be hoping for our turn."

"We'd be more than willing to adopt Ava and Lucas if you don't feel like popping out an entire football team," Levi chimes in.

I'm close to laughing, though it's hard for me to focus as my gaze keeps bouncing between these incredible men and the lawyers they brought in. The cops stand back in their black raincoats, waiting patiently for a peaceful conclusion. I guess Isaac called them in to make sure Elijah doesn't get away with this filthy number he just tried to pull on me. Whatever "legalese" is involved in this, I'm starting to think Elijah didn't prepare for every possible scenario when he came after me today.

“What are my chances?” I ask the guys.

Elijah’s lawyer shakes his head as the attorneys give back the manila folder with equally satisfied smirks. “So, from where we’re standing, that court order cannot be enforced at this point in time,” one of them says. “Whether you did it on purpose or not, it is clear you didn’t supply the judge with all the available information before they signed off on it. And if you do insist, we will have no choice but to bring you and your firm to court for egregious malpractice.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Elijah asks his guy.

The lawyer gives him a sour look. “We may have to step back this time.”

“No, I’m taking my kids home with me today!” Elijah tries to go into the building, but the cops quickly step in and drag him back, restraining him as he struggles to free himself. “Let me go! I’m getting my kids back! I’m getting my kids back!”

“Mr. Cummings, I’m afraid that is not happening,” one of Isaac’s attorneys says.

In his wild struggling, Elijah throws his head back, catching one of the officers in the nose.

“That won’t bode well for him,” Noah says as the officer grabs his nose to stem the flow of blood. “That’s gonna land him in jail.”

The other officers cuff Elijah and stuff him in the back of the car, while his lawyer tries to calm him down. “You should’ve listened to me,” he says. “I told you we were gambling too much here! Now, sit your ass in there and say nothing until I handle your arraignment!”

“It was all a spoof,” Isaac concludes. “They withheld information from the judge when they obtained the court order. Fortunately, our firm has experience with the tricks some of these lawyers use in custody hearings.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I say, completely numb and senseless as I look around and try to piece everything together.

I watch as the police cars drive away and Elijah's lawyer settles behind the wheel of his sedan and starts making whatever calls he can to get his client out of jail sooner rather than later. Isaac's lawyers assure him it is taken care of, and we'll meet again soon to discuss the next steps prior to an official custody hearing. It's as though I'm limp and motionless in a chair at an old theater, watching the movie roll through the credits. I can't get up. I can't do anything.

"How... How... Why?"

Isaac bids his lawyers goodbye for the time being, then turns his focus back on me. "Why? Stella, isn't it obvious? You needed help. You needed protection. None of us could live with the idea of you being out here, all by yourself and hounded by that worthless prick."

"You'll never be alone again," Noah says. "We hesitated. And I'm sorry we did."

"We're all sorry," Levi adds. "We should've thought everything through. It got so deep so fast between us, it caught everyone by surprise. But we should've been there for you."

"You needed comfort and reassurance," Beau sighs, "especially when you found out you were pregnant again. That being said, dammit, ma cherie, you should've told us."

I lower my gaze, heat burning through my cheeks. "Yeah, I know."

"Come on, let's get you inside," Levi says, gently guiding me toward the apartment building.

Upstairs, Lucas and Ava are waiting for me. I've weathered yet another storm, even though I didn't have a single oar for this dingy I've been struggling with for so long. Despite my departure, despite the tension and the uncertainty, Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau still found a way to get through to me, to keep me and my children safe.

Once we get upstairs, I slip out of my wet clothes and into a hot shower before I pull on a pair of fluffy house jammies on. Clint and his sister take some time to get to know Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau better while Lucas and Ava are

positively delighted to be around so many wonderful people at once. I listen to their laughter and radiant giggles as I blow-dry my hair and quickly pull it into a loose bun, then join everyone in the living room.

My muscles are soft after a long-lasting hot stream. My skin feels tender again. My joints have come loose, and I'm able to sit down with Lucas in my arms while Isaac holds Ava with the warmest smile on his face.

"You're looking fresh," Beau chuckles as he takes out a hundred-dollar bill and hands it to a wide-eyed Clint. "Here's a weekend tip for you, kiddo."

"Oh, my God, Beau!" I exclaim. "I'm paying my babysitter!"

"Don't you worry about it. My treat," he replies with a playful wink.

Clint gives me a wicked wide smile. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

"Bye! We're having pizza tonight!" Sadie exclaims as Beau escorts them out of the apartment. I can't help but laugh wholeheartedly while Lucas wraps his arms around my neck and showers me with warm, sloppy kisses.

"You guys are incredible," I manage.

Noah sits on the sofa next to Levi. Beau takes a seat in the armchair, while Isaac settles next to me on the plush carpet with Ava cooing gleefully in his arms. I love this look on him, and he is clearly melting over my little girl as usual. I can't believe I ran away from these men. I can't believe I thought I could live well without them—technically speaking, I could survive. I could live. I'd make do. But what sort of life would that be? Why deny myself the sweet, sweet love the four of them are so eager to give me? It seems foolish, now. I feel foolish.

"Stella, I meant every word," Isaac tells me, his gaze softening as he looks at me. "The Elizabeth hasn't been the same without you. We've been miserable without you. We were so busy worrying about what we could lose if we shared

our lives with you that we didn't realize how much more we were standing to lose if we let you leave."

"I haven't been the easiest to deal with, either."

"No, we should've seen the signs," Isaac insists. "And I should've been more determined when you asked me if we could ever be together. I should've said yes. It's a mistake I hope to never make again. Would you be willing to give us another chance?"

I'm staring at Isaac as though I'm seeing him for the first time. As though it's really him. It's always been him. But this is the first time he has allowed himself to be completely vulnerable in front of me and in front of his closest, dearest friends. I could tell him no, right now. I could send him away, and he would respect my decision. Yet he has opened himself up to me, he has accepted his own flaws and he is asking for my forgiveness. This is the purest version of him that I will ever see.

And I would be a fool to turn him down.

He's in it for the long haul. So are Noah, Levi, and Beau. I guess, in a way, they were always ready for the long haul, but Isaac's doubts held them back. They operate as a team in every aspect of their lives. They are also self-governing individuals, and they could've settled with losing him from our relationship. I would've struggled, yet I would've accepted the outcome. Knowing it would hurt me deeply, knowing it would hurt us—and most importantly, knowing it would hurt him in ways he'd never be able to recover from, Isaac has chosen to come forth and claim me once more.

And this time for good.

"I guess I could consider the possibility," I reply coyly, though deep down my heart is already screaming YES a thousand times.

"Really?" Levi asks, light glazing his green eyes.

I offer a gentle nod, unable to stop myself from grinning. "Well, yeah. I was foolish, too, for running away. I let my fears and frustrations get the better of me. It cost me a good

job and four wonderful men who were actually making my life easier and sweeter. I lived in constant dread that it would eventually end, so I couldn't really enjoy it without a dose of self-sabotage. You guys may have had your doubts, but I didn't make it any easier either. And after everything that's happened, I need to come to terms with and accept the hard truth." I sigh heavily, pausing for a moment. "I can do it on my own, but that would be a terrible and miserable experience, and it would be awful for my children, too. If you guys want to go all in on this, I'm with you for the whole ride."

"Stella, I love you," Noah says, his voice sweet and soft. "We all love you in ways we didn't think were possible. We're not letting you get away from us, ever again."

"It's not like you can tie me to the radiator or something," I chuckle lightly.

"Bondage sounds like a pretty interesting avenue, if you ask me," Isaac replies.

My cheeks burn hot, but the sensation quickly fades as Lucas yanks himself up and proclaims he's hungry. Levi takes him from me, eager to hold and play with Lucas. My kids are so lucky right now. With a little bit of patience and love, they'll be lucky with four dads for a long, long time.

"I love you all," I say to my men. "I love each of you, deeply. I never imagined I'd ever feel this way, let alone for four men. It's weird, even now, to think about it, but there is no denying it anymore. We're good together. We could be more together. I believe that with all my heart... So, yeah, you know what? Screw society. We can do our own thing."

"There is the matter of public opinion," Isaac says, barely able to take his eyes off Ava. "One of us will have to be the public partner. We will eventually have to find a formula where we could all live together. I'm definitely eager to work toward that. But until then, we need a public face. And Stella... I think you should be the one to choose."

"Why me? Each of you has a public life and certain aspirations," I reply. "I don't care which of you wants to be the face as long as we're happy and together in private. It'll be

weird explaining it to the kids later, but I guess those can be separate, future milestones to deal with.”

Noah smiles at his brother. “You know, Mom and Dad would throw a magnificent hissy fit if you step out with Stella. It wouldn’t impact your political prospects in any way though.”

“If anything, it would give me a positive boost in the polls,” Isaac replies, devilishly amused.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

They all nod at the same time. “I think Isaac needs this,” Levi says. “Personally, I don’t care who poses for the cameras, so to speak, as long as we’re together. Like you said, it doesn’t matter as long as we know it’s the five of us. I love you, Stella. Deeply.”

“The bottom line, ma cherie, is that we are going to make this work,” Beau lovingly declares. “Je t’aime. I love you. I may have loved you in another lifetime, I don’t know, but I do know we’re not letting you run away from us, ever again. From now on, if we have troubles, we discuss them. We work through them together, okay?”

“Okay,” I reply, though I am still concerned. So I tell them. That’s what we promised. “I’m worried about the custody hearing. Elijah will keep playing dirty.”

“You don’t have to worry about him anymore,” Isaac says, giving me a long, thoughtful look. “Whatever my lawyers can’t handle, my checkbook definitely will.”

“Isaac, no... Money again?” I shake my head.

He smiles. “Don’t you get it? I don’t care about money or wealth or political power. I don’t care about any of it unless I can share it and enjoy it with you and our children. If I have to pay that bastard off to keep him away from you, I will absolutely do that, without hesitation.”

“You are safe, Stella,” Noah adds.

And for the first time in what feels like an eternity, I can actually acknowledge the sensation. The peace of mind. The

soulful tranquility. The mental balance. The safety of good men, of reliable men, of men who will go above and beyond and spare no expense in order to keep me and my children—our children—happy. What more could I ask for after everything I've already been through?

It's time to thrive and live. It's time to leave survival mode and embrace love with all of its complexities and colorful nuances. It won't be easy, I know. But as Noah, Isaac, Levi, and Beau come closer to hold me in a warm and loving group embrace, I understand we will always have each other, we will never be alone or frightened ever again. Nobody ever said love was easy.

But it's absolutely worth it.

Lucas reminds us again, "I'm hungry!"

We laugh, and Noah asks what he thinks about ordering pizza.

A month practically flies by when you're happy and at peace with yourself. For most of my life, I thought I'd acquired a sort of balance from the moment I became a published author. I'd thought having money and a successful career would be everything I needed to feel truly fulfilled. It wasn't until Stella came along that I understood how much was missing from my life.

We got rid of Elijah pretty quickly.

Isaac sat him down one day, about a week after the Portland events, joined by each side's lawyers. Granted, Isaac had four of them. Elijah still had his measly dude with nothing but legal fluff and way too much confidence in his ability to negotiate. After some additional investigations, it was revealed behind closed doors that Elijah had done some less than lawful things while shackled up with his waitress girlfriend. There was proof of illegal substances, gambling, and other equally unsavory activities. On top of that, the way in which the original court order had been procured was not based on complete information, so once the issuing judge found out, Elijah was slapped with a blistering court fine. And to make matters worse, it became obvious toward the end of the conversation that any court in this country would irrevocably grant Stella full parental rights.

But Isaac didn't stop there. No, he paid the prick off, just to make sure. He also added a solemn promise: if Elijah didn't officially and legally renounce his parental rights, the four of us would financially empower the law firm to destroy him

until nothing is left. So, Elijah did the only smart thing he could. He took the money and instructed his lawyer to start the legal process for him to terminate his parental rights. That told me everything I needed to know—the man was never interested in his children. He never loved them. He never cared. They were simply a way to hurt Stella.

It did sting for Stella, at least on an emotional level. It was a disappointment, a reminder that Elijah was never the man she'd thought. He'd been wearing a mask for so long that by the time Ava was born, he just couldn't play along anymore. He's gone now, and with his absence comes a sense of peace.

Moreover, each of us has taken steps to take our new life together to a whole new level. Beau is scouting Cape Elizabeth for a good home for us. It needs to be big and spacious. At least eight bedrooms and just as many bathrooms. A ginormous kitchen and plenty of greenery outside. We want the kids to grow up in the heart of nature but with access to everything designed for comfort and utility. It's only a matter of time before we get the keys to our future home.

“What did your agent say?” Stella asks.

We're having dinner in Noah's Portland apartment. We'll be back at the Elizabeth by the weekend, and Stella and her children will be staying there indefinitely. Until then, we're going to have some time off to ourselves, away from the rest of the world. Clint is babysitting Lucas and Ava one last time this evening, which means we have our lovely woman all to ourselves. It's about damn time, too. I've missed her like crazy.

“About the TV gig? He wasn't happy but as long as he's getting a generous cut, he was able to negotiate new terms for the contract,” I say.

“What does that mean?” she replies.

“It means I'm not moving to Los Angeles. I'll fly down once every other week or so, but most of the conversations will happen remotely. You know, the good ol' fashioned Zoom meetings and whatnot,” I say, then give Isaac a thankful nod as he refills my wine glass.

“That’s great news!” Beau exclaims. “I think I’m more excited than you are.”

“No, no, trust me, I’m definitely happy about it,” I laugh. “I’m just surprised I managed to get my agent to do it.”

Isaac smiles as he fills his plate with careful and calculated movements. “Money can be a great motivator for those who have built their lives around it.”

“So, you’ll be staying here,” Stella concludes, her plump lips stretching into a delicious grin. “Which means the five of us will definitely be together.”

“I promised, didn’t I?” I reply and take her hand in mine. I kiss each knuckle gently, my eyes never leaving hers. I see the darkness of desire taking over and turning that deep smoky blue into something akin to a tourmaline held against a flame. “Besides, I’d rather be here with you than in Los Angeles, constantly bombarded by plasticated dolls and buffed up beef jerky dudes.”

“Hey, don’t forget the culinary extremists,” Noah laughs. “You’re better off here, man. Oh, by the way, how’s the new novel coming along? Don’t you have a deadline this December?”

I nod once. “It’s going great, actually. I managed to put in about four hours a day for the first draft.” I pause and look at Stella again. “Thankfully, I’ve got my muse back, so the writing process has been infinitely more pleasurable.”

“Aw, I didn’t know I was your muse,” she replies, blushing pink.

“Of course. I modeled my main female character after you.”

“You did?” she gasps.

Beau gives her a long, hungry stare. “Ravishingly beautiful, extraordinarily strong, resilient, brilliant, ambitious, determined, and ridiculously sexy. Right?”

“Yes,” I say. “Given the villain she has to go up against in the book’s climax, she has to be all of those things.”

Fortunately, Stella is an endless source of inspiration. It makes everything easier. Better.”

“Now, you’re going to make my head swell,” Stella giggles. “I’m not used to this much external validation.”

Isaac leans in and kisses her cheek. “You’d better get used to it, baby. You’ll keep getting this and more.”

“How did your last checkup go?” I ask, noticing how her bump is starting to show.

It makes her figure fuller, and I love the accent added to her curves. Her breasts are starting to swell, and her skin practically glows in the simple, short black dress. She wears her black hair combed over one naked shoulder, cascading in generous, luscious curls. I lick my lips instinctively as I count whatever time is left until we get to dessert.

We’re having her tonight. Over and over until we’re all spent and sated.

“Oh, we’re good,” Stella says. “Vitals are great, I’m ticking every box as well. The doctor said I should go easy on the physical labor, though. I don’t know if I can continue my job as a maid at the Elizabeth for much longer.”

Noah shakes his head. “We wouldn’t let you do that ever again, anyway.”

“Well, I can’t do nothing. I don’t want that.”

“Which is perfectly understandable since you’ve got four strapping lads here to make sure you don’t sacrifice your career goals any longer,” Noah replies. “We have an opening in the executive department at the Elizabeth, and we’re going to make an official offer first thing Monday morning.”

Stella gives him a stunned look. “Wait, what?”

“You’ve got the resume for it. The education. The mindset. And on top of that, you’ve got plenty of hospitality experience. Enough, in fact, to understand the inner workings of a hotel. We need that. The four of us are business partners and co-owners, but as you know, we’ve got other businesses to tend to, as well,” Noah says. “So, the guys and I talked about

it. We agreed you could easily start taking over some of our management responsibilities. I believe you could run the Elizabeth all by yourself within a year, maybe two, considering the baby we've got on the way and the other two we're looking forward to raising together."

"Oh, wow." She tears up. I give her a silk napkin to keep the waterworks under control. I know she put in some effort for tonight's makeup, and I know she'd hate to ruin it so early. I intend to ruin it later in a more decadent way. "You guys are serious."

"We've been serious for a while now," Isaac says. "This is just us coming through for you, like we promised. You deserve to have more time with the kids, with us, and for yourself. You've already got so much on your plate, so why should you jump through unnecessary hard labor hoops when you possess every single quality needed to actually run the Elizabeth? We just didn't think it made sense."

"I won't let you down," Stella promises through sniffles. "Thank you so much."

"You don't have to thank us," I reply. "You've already proven yourself, baby."

Beau opens another bottle of wine. "You, my love, won't be having any of this, but I think the boys could use another glass. We're working up to something here."

"Oh?" she asks, curiously glancing at each of us around the table.

"Yeah, we need a little bit of courage," Noah chuckles.

"What for?" Stella replies, the cutest frown marring her perfect face.

"It's something we've wanted to do for a while," I say. "Something I know you're going to love."

After dinner, we clear the table and finish the rest of that wine while Stella freshens up in the bathroom. Noah left a gift bag for her there. By now, she's blushing and wet, hopefully wearing what we got for her. I'm proud to have been the one to choose that particular set. I've passed by the store so many

times, having admired it on a mannequin—granted, said mannequin was nowhere near as appetizing as this magnificent woman. My cock twitches as I wait for the bathroom door to open. The four of us are in the living room, patient and quiet and stealing glances at one another. My heart is racing, and for good reason.

“I could use another drink,” I mutter.

“Save it for later,” Isaac chuckles.

Noah gives me a broad smile. “For what it’s worth, we’re all dying to see what it looks like on her.”

Finally, Stella comes out of the bathroom, and a sudden fiery heat wave washes over me. She is truly a vision in gray lace. The bra cups are adorned with genuine pearls and Swarovski crystals, beautifully outlining her full and generous breasts. She is beyond aroused at this point, judging by the naughty perk of her nipples. The straps are all finely cut from Japanese silk, the gray hue capturing some of the overhead light’s silvery sparkle. Each is tied tightly around her plump figure, creating mouth-watering curves that make my fingers itch.

She’s barefoot and gorgeous. The baby bump makes her look like a Venusian goddess. That’s the fruit of our labor growing in there.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. “I’ve never had anything so pretty before. It must’ve cost a fortune.”

“Oh, none of that matters. But the outfit isn’t complete,” Isaac says, then walks over to her and takes the diamond necklace he bought out of a black velvet box.

“La piece de resistance,” Beau smiles.

Stella’s eyes grow big. “Isaac... Are those diamonds?”

“The first of many,” he says and puts the necklace around her neck. It’s a Harry Winston-style piece that covers the base of her neck and the top half of her chest. It’s a work of jewelry art, in my opinion, and it suits her perfectly. My cock seems to agree.

“You are a splendid woman, Stella, and you deserve splendid things,” I tell her, my gaze hot.

“Oh, Isaac,” she sighs and kisses him on the lips.

That’s the catalyst. The beasts within us awaken. Our beauty has summoned us, and so we must possess her once again. I can feel the fire burning hotter in the pit of my stomach, tension stretching and tightening my muscles at the same time.

“What do you want me to do?” she asks with hooded, shadowy eyes as she looks at each of us.

One by one, we slip out of our clothes, hard and ready for Stella’s sweet loving. It’s been a while. But we’ve got all night, and I intend to make the most of it. Isaac gently scoops her hair up and ties it into a loose bun at the back of her head with a gray silk ribbon. He has another one which he ties around her wrists at the front. The movement presses her breasts together, the cleavage deepening to the point where I can barely breathe.

“Dammit, you’re a fucking work of art, Stella,” I grunt, stroking myself.

“How about you start on your knees,” Isaac commands her.

Slowly, she kneels on the soft carpet, her lips parting with desire as her eyes scan each of us from head to toe. I see the hunger in her eyes. She knows what’s coming, and she plans to take everything we give her.

“Yes, sir,” she says. “Now, what?”

“Now, open wide, like the good girl you are,” Isaac replies.

Taking turns, we each fill her mouth. I watch and save myself for last, my own grip tightening as Beau pulls back. Stella exhales sharply, pre-cum glistening down her fine jaw as she looks at me. “Give it to me, baby... All of it.”

“Gladly,” I say and come closer.

I cup her face with both hands and slide right in. She opens wide and relaxes the back of her throat, moaning with each intensifying thrust. I can feel everything, the wetness, the

softness, the tenderness of her tongue and mouth. It's the most intimate kind of loving, and it's sending my senses into a complete tailspin. My blood boils as I hold on to her and fuck her mouth, slowly at first. I go deeper as she looks into my eyes.

"Fuck." I almost come but I manage to pull back just in time, prompting a smile to bloom on her beautiful face.

"I need you inside me, Levi," Stella says.

"Fuck." There goes my plan to last until midnight. But if my woman wants me inside her, I have no choice but to fill her to the brim. I nod slowly and guide her to the bed. "We do it my way, though."

"Whatever you want, baby. I'll take it all," she replies.

"Isaac, center stage," I say, "and make sure she stays put."

Isaac smiles and gently helps Stella bend over. She spreads her legs for me. Beau and Noah flank Isaac, so she's got three thick, veiny cocks to feed on while I take her from behind. Her pale flesh glistens in the evening light, generous hips beckoning me closer.

"Oh, that's it, honey," Isaac hisses as she takes him in her mouth, while Noah and Beau stroke themselves, eagerly awaiting their turns.

I pull the panty strings loose, leaving her naked. Her pussy is slightly swollen, pink and slick as hell. Her juices trickle down the insides of her thighs, and I take a minute to explore that paradise. My fingers slide between her folds, her clit awaiting my touch. She moans harshly with a mouthful of Beau as I insert a thumb inside her, leaving my index and middle finger to tease her button until I feel her clenching tightly.

"Suck him harder," I command her as she takes Noah on next. She gladly obeys as I revel in the sounds of her licking and sucking and lapping at the man like he's her favorite ice cream cone. I dig my thumb deeper and apply just enough pressure against her clit until she cries out in sweet ecstasy,

gasping for air as I feel her come, pussy gripping my thumb. “That’s it, baby, that’s it.”

Before she can catch her breath, Isaac shoves his cock deep down her throat just as I spear her from behind. Fuck, she’s extraordinarily tight and wet and hot at the same time, I can’t take it. But I have to. I want to enjoy this moment for as long as it’s humanly possible.

“That’s it, honey,” Noah says when she reaches him again. It’s hard for Stella to move with her hands tied, but that’s part of the fun.

Her thighs and calves are tense, the muscles taut as she maintains her balance with the help of the two flanking her. My fingers dig into her hips, and I fuck her senseless. I lose my mind altogether and go hard, deep. Faster and faster, the pressure building up in my balls as they slap her pussy with each thrust. I love that sound. Harder, faster, I pound into my woman and watch as Isaac comes in her mouth first.

Beau finishes next as Stella grins and licks him clean. I’m almost there. I need more, so I keep one hand on her hip while the other settles on the back of her neck. I need her to stay put as I possess her body and soul for one moment and the rest of eternity.

My release comes violently, each thrust making her ass jiggle. I spill my seed deep into her core as Noah shoots his load down her throat. She welcomes everything we give her. Like the good girl she is. It’ll be a long night.

I’m nowhere near done.

Even as I’m drawing my breath, even as Stella looks back at me with glistening, parted lips, I am nowhere near done. I feel myself twitching and pulsating inside her, my fury dwindling as I am relieved of all pressure. But the barrel will be full again. I only need a minute.

I’m loving Stella tonight with everything I’ve got. I’m loving her for the rest of our lives. She’ll never be alone again.

EPILOGUE I

STELLA

I'm so close to my due date that I'm pretty sure I'm going to burst wide open when this baby decides to come out. My feet feel heavy, my ankles swell if I stand for more than five minutes, and I'm constantly hungry and full at the same time. I sleep more, and I spend most of my day with Lucas and Ava at the Elizabeth. But I am happy. I'm so happy I sometimes worry I'll wake up one morning and realize it was all a dream.

It's not, though.

It's real, and it is strange and beautiful. We are making it work. It's a team effort, of course. Only Theo knows about us, and we intend to keep it that way for as long as possible. She comes down to Cape Elizabeth once every two weeks, and we get to sit down and eat great food and catch up on everything we've been doing.

Her TV show's first season recently got its release on streaming services worldwide, and it's an absolute hit. She's also a fan favorite, which has promptly translated into a surge of other TV and movie offers. Her career is taking off in a big way, and I'm so thrilled for her. After all these years, after the hard work and sacrifices, Theo is finally thriving and living in the limelight, performing in front of the cameras and enjoying every damn second. I'm pretty sure there's a beau in the picture, but she isn't sure about him just yet. She'll tell me when she's ready. Theo has always been the more cautious one.

On the other hand, I've managed to get some work done before my men promptly declared I should take some time off.

They're more than happy to cover for me while I prepare to deliver their baby. We agreed we wouldn't do a DNA test unless a specific medical reason is invoked. It's their baby, not just one man's. And Isaac has also filed all the appropriate papers in a district court to adopt Lucas and Ava officially. My children will carry the Kendrick last name, and that comes with some extraordinary benefits. They will be well taken care of, no matter what happens.

I'm not used to not working, though, so more often than not, I end up sneaking into my office on the ground floor to catch up on orders and emails. Noah frequently catches me and kisses me until I'm bright and pink before he practically drags me back upstairs. He and the guys take turns spending time with Lucas and Ava, too, and it's always such a joy to watch them together. My children are so lucky—I will never tire of saying this. The little one on the way will be just as fortunate with four doting and loving fathers looking out for him.

"We're here," Isaac announces as he pulls up outside a massive brick and wrought iron fence. "Everybody ready?"

We left the kids with Bella, who has been more than happy to resume her babysitting duties, while Isaac drove the five of us two miles south of town to see "something wonderful."

My heart is thumping out of my chest because I'm sure I know what this is about. It's the moment I've been waiting for, the moment I'd hoped to see happen sooner rather than later.

Once we get out of the massive, black SUV, Levi and Beau flank me, making sure I'm okay. I'm way heavier these days, and my movements have become slow and clunky. The pregnancy is progressing perfectly, but it has become a question of physics at this point. This kid's gonna pop out big and strong, obviously.

"Are you okay?" Noah asks, concern etched into his handsome features.

"Yes, my love. Just... huge," I reply bluntly, then gaze past him at the brick fence. "Wow, it's pretty."

The fence surrounds a large property, though I can't see past it just yet. I can only see the yellow and orange oak crowns exploding above. A clear blue sky is a beautiful backdrop, and I'm thankful for the autumn weather we've been having. I need warmth and sunlight for my baby and my soul. We make our way toward the front gate, and as soon as Isaac opens it with a remote control, I'm treated to a most stunning view.

There's a gorgeous mansion at the end of the alley, with white French windows and a reddish brick façade. The front garden is a sprawling paradise of cherry and magnolia trees that'll bloom splendidly next spring, ancient pines and oaks guarding the outer borders of the property. I can hear the sound of running water, and my gaze is immediately drawn to a gushing fountain made of white marble—the star of the show, so to speak. It was built in the middle of the garden, and the stone paths were laid around it before they were allowed to stretch outward so visitors might enjoy the deeper, wilder parts of the property. Blankets of fallen leaves in shades of burnt red, brownish gold, and soft amber cover the ground.

“Oh, my God, it is spectacular,” I manage, my jaw dropping.

“Right?” Isaac replies, definitely proud of himself. “It took us a while to get it ready, but it's ready.”

“How long have you been working on it?” I ask.

Beau smiles as he takes my hand and guides me through the wide open gates. The pebbles on the driveway crunch under my boots. It's a pleasant sound. I'm going to enjoy getting used to this. “We've had architects and engineers in here every day for the past couple of months,” he says. “All we did was oversee the whole project, making sure you'd love it.”

“I already love it.”

“Wait until you see the inside of this place,” Noah says. “It used to belong to some English aristocrat when the first rich settlers sailed across the Atlantic in the late 1700's. They built it in their English style, hence the sturdy structure and

sumptuous architecture. Frankly, the designers were the happiest I've ever seen when they first saw the mansion and were told they'd have to spruce it up."

"It's been owned by the same family ever since," Isaac adds. "But the last descendant passed away last year, and the house became part of a charitable trust. Given the fluctuating economy, the trustees decided to sell the place, and here we are today."

The closer we get to the front steps with its elegant port-cochere, the harder it gets for me to breathe. "It's just so beautiful. This is too much, guys, way too much."

"There's no such thing as too much for our woman and our children," Levi declares. "It has everything we'll ever need. Privacy, most of all. Beau had a top security system installed, with cameras and sensors everywhere, and the private security firm in charge can get here in a matter of minutes. Not that we'd really need them. I mean, we're in the middle of nowhere here, in the heart of the woods. But we had to think ahead for when Isaac starts running for office."

I nod slowly. "Yeah, the press and his opposition will be getting busy, doing research, investigating, looking for dirt. I get it."

"But we'll always be safe and happy here," Isaac assures me.

We take a moment to simply admire the front of the mansion. The original brickwork has been repainted in a shade of red that likely matches what it used to look like when they first built it. The porte-cochere is held up by four tall columns, each decorated with sculptural leaves that remind me of ancient Greek colonnades. Above, a generous terrace opens up to give a splendid view of the fountain and the front garden. The porch is ginormous, the floor made of thick reddish stone tiles and fully furnished to fit the five of us plus our children.

"Come on, let's go inside, and then we'll check the back," Noah says, leading the way.

As soon as the door opens and I go in, I can feel my heart fluttering with awe and wonder. It's so beautiful, I could cry. I really could cry. The attention to detail is astonishing. The flooring is all soft, cream marble with gold veins, while the walls rise in warm whites. Every piece of furniture was carefully selected to evoke harmony and comfort—most of it walnut or old oak with a smooth polish and bronze-brushed knobs and handles. There are flowers everywhere. Marigolds, lilies, hydrangeas, roses, tulips, dahlias... everything autumn has to offer was brought in and stuffed into precious porcelain vases. There are paintings on the walls. Some of them are older, Modernist works, while others clearly belong to the past couple of decades.

It's a superb mix between the past and the present.

"We figured the living room should have room for everybody," Noah explains as we go into the open lounge area. "The kids have their own spot over there," he points to an area already fitted with children's furniture and a plethora of colorful toys, "and everything else is ours."

The living room features red walls and a caramel shade of hardwood flooring, while the seating—of which there is plenty and modular and looking ridiculously comfortable—is upholstered in three different shades of beige. The bookshelves are loaded with books. Some are mine, I notice. They had them brought over the other day, surely. I didn't even notice they were missing from my office at the Elizabeth. But the others are all theirs.

"I'm guessing your share is the biggest," I say to Levi as I run my fingers along the spines.

"Oh, yeah, definitely. But at least the kids will have plenty of reading material to keep them busy," Levi replies. I can tell he's nervous and delighted at the same time, but my face should tell him everything he needs to know.

"We started bringing some of our stuff in," Isaac says as we follow him into the kitchen, which is a microcosm of good taste and practicality, neatly wrapped into a cool, minimalist style. "But we're going to have to buy some things. A lot of

things, actually. Up to this point, we've been living at the Elizabeth for the most part, enjoying the perks of its staffed kitchen."

"Right, so, we're gonna need pots, pans, plates, glasses, and so on and so forth," I say, making a mental note to start making a list at some point, because I've got a feeling we'll have a lot to buy. "Not a problem."

We are starting anew, though we are starting in a gorgeous home that will have room for the whole family. My mind is quick to register and record items for the shopping list—we'll need linens, towels, bedspreads, toiletries, cleaning stuff, coasters, knick-knacks, all those little things we will find and pick up along the way.

It will be crazy busy just to get everything, but then it will be so much fun to realize we have completely stocked and prepared our new home for spending the rest of our lives here. I can't help but smile as I take the whole kitchen in before I'm shown to the home offices, of which we'll have two.

"You'll have yours, should you need it. It could also double as a quiet room if you ever want to hide from the kids," Isaac says with a chuckle.

"We'll have the second one," Beau adds. "It's big enough to fit four desks and even a sofa. I doubt we'll bring much of our work home, though, to be honest. I'd rather keep business out of this place."

"I'm at a loss for words," I reply, genuinely stunned and speechless.

The furniture alone must've cost a fortune. I know expensive ebony when I see it. Teak in abundance. Custom-made chairs I saw in a design magazine not that long ago. I'm pretty sure Noah, Isaac, Beau, and Levi have been earmarking pages in every single magazine I flipped through over the past couple of months. I remember admiring one object or another in the process, and I know my men are mindful of my preferences. They made notes and bought the things I liked. My soul is overflowing with love. I am positively overwhelmed, yet I can't stop.

I keep moving, walking through the house.

The whole movie stops once we reach the master bedroom.

“This will be ours, for the nights we spend together,” Levi says. “We thought it would work great as a private playroom, separate from our individual bedrooms, since we agreed we would have plenty of nights to ourselves if we wanted. And in the spirit of absolute freedom, we figured the master bedroom/playroom would always be a pleasure to be in, since it would bring the five of us together.”

“Do you like it?” Noah asks.

I’m still trying to process every inch of this room. The floor is covered in a soft cream rug, while the walls are dressed in a black silk wallpaper with subtle floral motifs embroidered across. The gargantuan bed has a canopy and an abundance of silk pillows. There’s a dresser and chest of drawers, which is where my naughty lingerie and outfits will go—my men have been buying them incessantly. Not that I mind; it keeps us spicy in the bedroom.

Isaac walks over to a wall cabinet and opens the walnut doors to reveal an assortment of sex toys. Some I recognize. I’ve played with them, they’ve played with them, we’ve all played with them in every possible way. Some are new. If I weren’t so far along, I’d probably strip naked right here, right now, and ask my men to fuck my lights out until I can’t stand anymore. Alas, all this will have to wait until after the baby is born. Which feels like any minute, now.

“We will never be bored,” Isaac gives me a devious smile.

“Get me out of here, I’m too far along to even be standing in this room,” I laugh, and the guys escort me out and up the stairs, where another slice of heaven awaits.

It feels like a visit to one of Maine’s prettiest museums, only we are going to live here. My bedroom is massive, with cots and cribs for each of my children, but they also have a room of their own. To my delight, Isaac, Noah, Levi, and Beau have had cribs and cots added to each of their rooms, as well. They are taking their promises to the next level here, making

sure there's space for the kids everywhere. I cannot thank them enough for these magnanimous efforts, for all the thinking and reasoning that went into the process.

What I am looking at now is the result of four brilliant minds coming together to make their woman and their children happy.

“By the stars, you even had fresh lavender brought in for the bathrooms,” I croak as I point to a purple sprig currently resting in a small bronze tube on the edge of a clam-shaped sink. “You boys went all out.”

“Do you want to know the best part?” Beau replies. I wait for him to continue, my heart stuck in my throat as the anticipation builds up. “No, actually, let me just show you, ma cherie.”

We're pretty much done with the tour of the house. I will have plenty of time to roam these halls soon enough. The backyard is next, and holy smokes, it's like I stepped right into the pages of a fairy tale. I see rich emerald, evergreen shrubs and centuries-old oaks, tall grass and several large decorative rocks scattered across the green space. I see a giant pool with crystal clear water, and a separate smaller pool for the children, each decorated with polished river rocks and vintage-style mosaic tiles.

I see plenty of room to run and cheer and hide. I see one particular old oak maple tree that would look particularly snazzy as a tree house.

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” Isaac comes closer, his lips so close to my ear it tickles with each word.

“What do you think I'm thinking?” I reply.

“Tree house?”

“Dammit, babe, you really are a mind reader,” I gasp.

Isaac laughs. “No, I simply remembered how badly you wanted one when you were a kid. We'll build one, Stella, I promise.”

“Oh, I believe you.”

“Look over here.” Beau darts ahead and points to a generous patch of lavender bushes. “Our lavender is done blooming for this season. The one you saw upstairs was dried and preserved from last year by the caretaker, long before we bought this place. But we’ll have fresh lavender this next summer, just for you, ma chérie.”

And now I’m crying. Tears of joy stream down my warm cheeks as I finally understand the whole picture. As I finally acknowledge every step and every torment that has brought me to this place. Every doubt and fear materialized before I found the courage to look at Isaac, Noah, Beau, and Levi, and decide to take a chance. I see it. And it was worth it.

Isaac takes me in his arms and holds me tightly. Levi kisses my temple. Beau tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. And Noah rests a hand on the small of my back. I’m crying like a little girl, I’m crying my heart out as I taste true bliss, the truest bliss ever bestowed upon a living human being. Maybe my pregnancy hormones are adding some fuel to this moment, but dammit, this is as close to perfection as I will ever get.

“I told you,” Isaac whispers. “I told you you’d never be alone again.”

“You are loved, Stella,” Noah says. “You’re loved in so many ways.”

“I feel safe,” I tell them. “I feel so safe here with you.”

Levi smiles, then kisses my temple again. “Which is what we’ve always wanted. It’s perfect.”

“And you are perfect,” Beau adds.

“You’re right, guys,” I manage as Noah wipes a tear from the corner of my eye. “It is perfect. And the only way in which I’m perfect is because I’m a part of this whole unconventional family unit of ours. God, I love you all so much, it hurts.”

We stay like this for a while, basking in the autumn sun and smelling the wildflowers, the blossoming red-leaf maple trees that stretches over the pool. We stay like this for what feels like forever, our bodies and souls melting into one

another as we find comfort and joy in togetherness. We're going to make it work.

We're going to make a home of this heaven.

EPILOGUE II

Raising three children with four men is the kind of math I didn't imagine I'd ever have to deal with, yet it's the best kind. We are thriving. Part of me doubted we'd make it work for so long, but here we are, almost four years later, living in our mansion two miles down from the Elizabeth Bed & Breakfast. Love is always in the air, and we can't get enough of each other.

Lucas and Ava are both in school—there's only one in Cape Elizabeth, but it was privately funded by Isaac's family, so it's a great place for my children to get their education in a safe and pleasant environment. Of course, I make sure to get frequent text updates from their teachers, but that's just for my peace of mind. Benjamin, our third bundle of joy, is still a playful and curious toddler in need of my full attention, but he's lucky to have a brother and a sister who love him deeply. Lucas actually enjoys keeping an eye on him when we're at home.

Benjamin is an angel with blue eyes and curly blonde hair. We all know it's one of two Kendrick men who contributed to this model, but we've also talked about making our family even bigger. It's just a thought for now, though. We're way more careful these days, and I've been focusing more on my career, anyway. Three children are more than enough, and even they can be a handful for the five of us. But it's fun and sweet. I no longer suffer from exhaustion and sleep deprivation. The days when I had to raise Lucas and Ava on my own are so far behind me, I can barely remember that dreadful time.

I've been an assistant manager at the Elizabeth for almost three years now. I've learned a lot, and I've even had the chance to work at Beau's other hotels over the course of a few months here and there, depending on where he needed my calculated approach. Our figures are looking good, though. We've noticed significant growth in the off-season, which seemed like Mission Impossible for a bed and breakfast on the coast of Maine. But we did it. I love my job. I love how my career is growing. I'm catching up on everything I put on hold while I wasted away in a marriage shamble with Elijah.

We haven't heard nor seen from him since Portland. I know Isaac paid him off, but sometimes I think his request was expressed more sternly than he told me. It doesn't matter, though. The kids only know the four men. For safety reasons, they know Isaac is their dad, and their uncles are so close and loving they also pass as extra dads—or so we tell anyone who asks why Lucas calls out to his dads and all four show up.

“This birthday dinner is the best I've had so far,” Isaac declares at the end of a glorious feast.

Today is Isaac and Noah's birthday. We celebrated earlier with the kids, but all three are upstairs and sleeping soundly in their rooms while the grownups take some time off to blow some candles and drink a good French wine. We're gathered around the dining table, the remnants of a delicious pot roast languishing in silver platters in the center, while Beau refills our glasses.

Theo has joined us. She moved to Los Angeles for good after her career jumps. The first TV show was the catalyst for something truly spectacular. She's been in five feature films, and there are Oscar rumors revolving around the last project she headlined. In every other sense, however, Theo remains the same. Quirky, funny, loving, and sweet.

“Dude, that's like saying your wife only bothered to cook a good meal for your birthday,” she laughs, then looks at me. “What have you been feeding him?”

“Boiled potatoes and cow hooves,” I chuckle.

“But at least she drizzles them with balsamic vinegar first,” Noah chimes in.

“It helps it all slide down easy,” Isaac shoots back.

We laugh, and Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick watch us all with a mixture of wonder and lighthearted humor. It’s been a while since we’ve seen them, but that’s only because they’ve been on a few trips across Europe. That’s what the great retirement years are supposed to be about. Seeing places you’ve never seen before. I hope I’ll get to do the same with my men when it’s our turn.

“Are you okay?” Levi whispers in my ear.

I give him a slight nod. “I’m just nervous.”

“Can’t blame you, babe. But we’ve got this. We can do this.”

We can. I hope. Thing is, nobody knows about our relationship except Theo. It’s too delicate and sensitive and scandalous for us to risk telling anyone else. But given how far Isaac has come in the political aisle, he is actually considering a run for State Senate next year, which means we have to close ranks and be even more careful—this means finally telling his parents about us. Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick only know that Isaac and I are an item, that he has adopted my children and that we have a child of our own.

To their credit, they have been equally loving grandparents to all three, and they have been nothing but kind to me. I’d feared they would never accept me as a part of their family, but I was wrong. They welcomed me with arms wide open and warm smiles on their faces, which is why the guys and I have recently begun talking about telling them the whole truth.

“So, how was Paris?” I ask the Kendricks, hoping one of the guys will segue into the sensitive subject we’ve been angling toward all evening.

“Oh, it wasn’t our first time,” Mrs. Kendrick replies. “Granted, every other time we went there, it was for business purposes, so it was nice to actually have the whole city to ourselves.”

“There is plenty to see and enjoy when you’re not rushing from one meeting to another,” Mr. Kendrick adds. “I swear, I should’ve retired earlier.”

“Well, you’ve got good men taking over,” I say with a warm smile as I look to Noah and Isaac.

“Are you ready for your campaign kickoff in spring?” Mr. Kendrick asks Isaac.

“Straight to the point, then,” Isaac chuckles dryly and takes a long sip of his wine. “I am, actually. But there is something I’ve wanted to discuss with both of you before I start setting interviews with my future campaign staff.”

Here it goes. I take a deep breath and hang on for the ride. Theo gives me a reassuring smile, while Levi buries his face in the crème-fraiche-based dessert. Noah is so nervous, I can see droplets of sweat blooming along his temples. Beau is quiet, lips glued to his wine glass and eyes bouncing between Isaac and his parents. We did vote that he should be the one to tell them.

Mr. Kendrick frowns slightly. Mrs. Kendrick doesn’t seem worried about whatever their son wishes to address. For a moment, I imagine myself bolting away from the table and running for my life. But whatever happens, we’ve made an oath to one another—the five of us, that is. We will stick together through thick and thin. No matter what.

“As you already know, Stella and I are a solid item. We have a child together, and we’re also raising Lucas and Ava. We’re happy here. Really happy,” Isaac says, his voice trembling slightly.

“Yeah, newsflash,” Mrs. Kendrick quips, half-smiling.

“The happiest I’ve ever been, anyway,” Isaac continues, taking my hand in his. I can tell from his grip that he is scared yet determined. I find a strange sense of comfort in his gesture. “Thing is... it’s not just the two of us. It’s me, Noah, Beau, Levi, and Stella. We’re in a polyamorous relationship. We’re living together, and we are the best versions of ourselves when we’re together.”

Theo nearly snorts the wine out through her nose when Mr. Kendrick starts laughing. Mrs. Kendrick is quick to join him, while the rest of us stare at them, confused and honestly terrified. It's not the reaction we were expecting, and I'm not sure laughter is a healthy coping mechanism in these circumstances.

"I'm serious. The four of us are living with Stella, and we're raising our family together. Only those present know about this, and we intend to keep it that way," Isaac adds, looking from one parent to another. "I wanted you two to know because of my political future. I'm ready to give it up if anyone even thinks about putting an end to our personal arrangement. I'm ready to give everything up if it means I get to be with Stella, with my brother and best friends, and our children."

"Did you actually think we wouldn't have figured it out on our own?" Mr. Kendrick takes a break from laughing, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Wait, what?" I manage.

Mrs. Kendrick looks at me, her gaze soft and warm. "Oh, honey. We're both old reptiles of American politics. We do our due diligence on everyone and everything, including our own children. It's the only way to protect our name and family."

"We've known about you for almost three years," Mr. Kendrick says. "Son, I figured what you and Noah were up to from the moment you bought this house and having plenty of knowledge regarding your previous exploits. I realized it was serious business when you moved Stella here."

"So, you've known all along," Isaac mumbles, his eyes wide with shock.

"And you didn't say a word," Noah adds.

Mrs. Kendrick giggles. "Love is love, honey. Who are we to judge? We may be old-fashioned ourselves, but we've had our share of kinky business over the years, too."

"Ew, no, stop," Noah squirms.

“The truth is, your mother and I know we raised two decent men, two honorable and loyal and loving men,” Mr. Kendrick says on a more serious note, his gaze moving around the table to meet each of us. “I understand that whatever it is you folks have, it’s precious and beautiful enough for you to take these chances and actually live together. As long as you are careful, as long as nobody else knows, you’ll be fine. You’ve done wonderfully so far.”

Whoa. I didn’t expect this. I didn’t even imagine this scenario. Hell, I imagined screaming and shouting. Threats. But not this. This is way better, though. Infinitely better. It means we have their full support, and that will go a long way for Isaac in his political endeavors, too. I can’t help but breathe a sigh of relief as Mr. Kendrick looks at me.

“Stella, you are a part of our family. And so are your children. Beau and Levi have long been Kendrick extensions as well,” he says. “I’ll make sure to keep as much of the press’s attention away from your home and family going forward, and I trust the five of you will watch your backs.” He turns to Theo. “I don’t know you well enough, Theo, but if my sons trust you, I have no choice but to trust you, too.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Mr. Kendrick,” Theo replies. “I’m here for my friends, now and forever. Like Mrs. Kendrick just said, love is love. Who are we to judge, especially when it’s the most important people in our lives?”

A heavy silence falls across the table. Relief makes our shoulders drop slightly as we exchange amused glances. Isaac then takes out a small, black velvet box from his jacket pocket. “Well, then, I might as well take it to the next level,” he says, looking at me.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

He gets up and comes around, kneeling beside me. “I have to make it official. I need a wife, going forward, not just a partner. Of course, consider this coming from the four of us. I may be the one who ends up signing the marriage certificate, Stella, but you’d be marrying the four of us.”

“Oh, my God,” Theo gasps.

I catch a glimpse of Mrs. Kendrick squeezing Mr. Kendrick's hand on the table.

"What is going on?" I mumble, shocked out of my mind.

"We love you," Noah says. "We've loved you for years. We plan on loving you for plenty more."

"And we want to spend the rest of our lives with you, ma cherie," Beau adds.

Levi smiles softly. "A ring from the four of us feels like a natural progression, babe."

"Stella, I love you. We're doing so well together. I want to make it as official as we can possibly make it in these circumstances," Isaac says, opening the box to reveal a gorgeous diamond ring. My soul practically leaves my body as I gawk at the magnificent opal stone mounted on a sleek platinum base and surrounded by tiny sapphires that, oddly enough, match the color of my eyes. "Marry me. Marry us, Stella, and make us the happiest men on this earth."

They have been faithful. They have been loving and fierce. They have claimed me in more ways than one.

These four men have given me a home and a whole new life. They've taken my children as their own, and they're raising them with me. They have been patient and nurturing. Bold and ambitious. Caring and attentive. We've had our ups and downs, like every other relationship, but at the end of the day, we've stuck together through and through.

It makes sense.

"Yes," I say, having found my voice again.

What else could I say? As Isaac slips the ring on my finger, as he and Noah and Levi and Beau take turns kissing me, as I lose myself in the tightest embrace of their arms wrapped around me... I tell myself... It couldn't have gotten better than what we already had—until it did.

All it took was a ring and a promise.

We made it through the fire and the rain. We've survived so many terrible odds. I love them equally, and they love me

intensely. Yes. A thousand times yes.

The End

Thank you for reading Tapped Out Single Mom.

If you loved this book, then you will love [Single Mom's Glow Up](#). Here's what readers had to say:

“What’s not to like about rescuing a damsel in distress with two babies?” - Amazon Reader

“Such a good spicy book! 10/10 recommend this book.” - Amazon Reader

“Their journey is enthralling with a broken-down single mom. This mature explicit romance is consumed by steamy passion, desire, lust, and spice with all the feelings, menage, plus-size FMC, best friends, danger, suspense, a million-dollar company, brothers, military romance, action suspense, drama, heartfelt emotions, and more. I recommend reading this book by an extraordinary author who knows how to captivate her readers’ hearts and attention with a broken-down single mom and explicit romance that is so hot it will leave readers sweating and begging for more.” -Goodreads Reader

[Click here and get Single Mom's Glow Up now.](#)

SINGLE MOM'S GLOW UP (PREVIEW)



“You shouldn’t be here in the middle of a storm.”

“I had no choice, Officer. My husband is a dangerous man.”

His jaw clenches in anger. “Did he hurt you?”

In the middle of a winter storm - I’m stranded and desperate.

I have no food or money to feed my two little girls.

If I’ve ever needed a miracle it’s NOW.

A Sheriff's car pulls up.

This man is a giant *by no exaggeration*.

Sheriff Kellan makes a phone call to his twin brother, Fallon.

The two of them waste no time getting my girls and I out of the harsh cold and into their car to meet their best friend, Luke.

Just like the brothers, Luke is a war veteran and as mesmerizing to look at as a Greek statue.

I'm shocked when Luke says we can stay 'for as long as desired' in this breathtaking lodge - where he runs his million dollar business.

I should be grateful but my husband is a dangerous man with connections.

Could this all be a ticking time bomb?

Or do decent men *actually* exist in this harsh world??

Considering the rush of emotions I feel when these three ex-military alphas melt like puppies for my little girls...

And the way they look at me with such admiration and a yearning...

I can't help but wonder: Do happily ever afters exist outside of cheesy romance novels?

This is a sexy, stand-alone reverse harem romance filled with humor, danger, and generous amounts of love. It also contains blistering hot MFMMM, ménage fun times, in single and multiple partner scenes so HOT they're bound to melt your kindle! HEA guaranteed.

PROLOGUE

“Undress for us,” Kellan whispers, then takes a step back.

We lose our layers at the same time, watching one another as our clothes hit the floor. The shoes and boots go first. Then the pants and shirts. My lingerie is the last to fall as I stand naked and ready before them. Their eyes darken with desire as they move closer, lips parted as shadows dance across their faces.

Their dominant presence overwhelms me in a way I can't even describe.

Kellan stands tall and strong, muscular and gorgeously fit. I admire the tattoos and the narrow dip of his hips while my hands gradually work their way up my own body. I feel the need to touch and squeeze my breasts as I shift my focus onto Fallon, this mountain of a man with a gargantuan cock and a hungry look in his eyes. He could crush me in the palm of his hand if he wanted to, yet his touch is so soft and delicate, I practically melt when his fingers find my nipple and pinch it, ever so lightly.

My breath hitches as I gaze up at Luke, my whole body quivering as he smiles and trails kisses down the side of my neck. He's a beautiful soul, a handsome man, a provider through and through. His prosthetic and his scars only serve to amplify him in the best possible way. If anything, I want him even more because of it, not less.

I touch his chest, letting my palm splay across the blonde curls covering his rippling pecs, trailing my nails back and

forth.

Fallon takes my other hand and guides it down to his cock. I grab hold and welcome the firmness, the enormous girth. I lick my lips, dying to feel him inside me once again. Kellan cups my pussy gently, getting a feel for what awaits him.

“I love how you’re always ready for us,” he says, his fingers sliding between my wet folds.

My swollen nub instantly reacts to his touch, my core tightening as he teases me.

“Your skin is so soft,” Luke adds, then kisses my shoulder. He bites into it, gently at first, until my nipples perk up under Fallon’s hungry eyes.

“Are you a good girl, Avery?” Kellan asks me.

I nod once. “I’m a very good girl.”

“Then get on your knees,” he commands me.

Without hesitation, I kneel as they close ranks in front of me, cocks twitching with anticipation. I know what they want, and I do it gladly, willingly, hungrily. I take each of them in my mouth, never breaking eye contact as I relax the back of my throat and loosen my jaw to get as much in as possible. Slowly but surely, Kellan fills my mouth and I feel the veins swelling along his shaft.

I taste the precum on his tip, licking it off, eager for more.

“Fucking hell,” Luke curses under his breath as he shoves both hands in my hair to hold my head in place. “Take it, baby, all of it.”

And I do. He fucks my mouth with decisive thrusts, and I take him in, deeper and deeper until I can barely breathe. Tears trickle down my cheeks, but they’re nothing compared to what drips down the insides of my thighs as Fallon takes his turn. He’s the biggest and the thickest. My lips stretch as I feed on him, as I suck and lick him into a frenzy, holding the base of his cock with one hand while I massage his hardened balls with the other.

“You’re a fucking natural,” Kellan whispers when he retakes control.

Deep-throating me, he smiles like the devil as he claims my mouth, deeper and faster and harder. I’m so wet, I’m dripping, hoping that they don’t intend to let me suffer for much longer. Before I can register the shift in our positions, I find myself back on my feet and bent over the bed.

Luke’s hands run up and down my back as he fucks me from behind, with Fallon and Kellan kneeling on the bed in front of me. With their engorged cocks in each of my hands, I moan and whimper as I blow them, ravenous in my exploits and licking every glorious inch. Luke thrusts himself deeper and harder inside me, stretching and filling me to the brim.

“Oh, God, don’t stop!” I cry out when his hand slips around my hip and finds my clit screaming for attention. The orgasm rocks me to the very core of my existence as he pounds into me, harder and harder until I unravel, feeling as if I just broke apart into a billion little pieces.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” he growls as he fucks me senseless. I melt against him while Kellan and Fallon keep my mouth busy.

They take turns, giving me everything they’ve got. When Fallon spears me with his full length, I come again, arching my spine as he grabs a handful of my hair and gently pulls my head back. He gives it to me with perfection, each thrust intensifying my orgasm, my pussy overflowing with sweet juices.

Kellan gets on his back and I climb on, riding him, as Fallon massages my breasts, pinching my nipples until a third climax washes over me. My flesh is like melted butter, my skin hypersensitive, my core unraveling as I fill myself with Kellan. It’s delicious and mindless madness as I surrender to them.

“I want you in my mouth,” I tell Luke at one point, dazed and hungry for more.

I'm standing now, bent over as I suck him hard and fast. Fallon takes me from behind again, while Kellan is beside us with one hand between my legs, stroking himself and my tender clit at the same time. Fallon grunts harshly as I feel him come, feel him spilling his seed with deep thrusts. My knees are weak, but I don't want this to end.

"Take me, Kellan," I whimper, then look up at Luke. "I want you, too. Inside me. Fill me up."

Luke smiles and bites his lower lip, one hand caressing my face as Kellan claims me yet again. I'm shivering and crying tears of joy as I suck Luke while Kellan comes with a hefty burst. I revel in the slapping sound of skin on skin, my heart singing as I clench myself tightly around him, squeezing him dry. By the time Luke finishes inside me, I'm somewhere up in the heavens, held firmly by Fallon and Kellan.

I need them to keep me upright while Luke takes what I gladly and gleefully offer.

I need them to consume me, to turn me over, to squeeze my ass and fondle my breasts, to run their fingers through my hair, to kiss me relentlessly as Luke explodes into a fucking frenzy and pounds me into oblivion.

I don't ever want this night to end.

It was only just beginning.

Two Weeks Earlier

“M omma?” my daughter calls out from the backseat of my car, now deceased Citroën, to be specific. “We’re cold!”

“I know, honey,” I reply, trying to make myself heard over the howling of a raging winter storm. “Keep your sister close and stay under the blanket!”

Miley is only five years old but smart enough to know when to listen to me. Annie is three and doesn’t understand what’s going on. Hell, I’m even baffled as to how we got to this point, but I had no other choice. This is what I get for trying to work things out with a narcissistic psychopath. I never should’ve married Daniel. I never should’ve stuck around for as long as I did. That’s all part of the past, though and that’s where it will stay. Besides, there is nothing I can do to change it. All I can do now is look forward and make a better life for my kids.

We’re a few feet away from Johnson Lake, stuck on the side of the road with too many miles between us and the next town. My car died, and I am nowhere near capable or equipped to fix it myself. To top it all, this snowstorm has me stranded and unable to walk all the way to Lexington with my daughters to an overnight shelter. The snow is too heavy, the wind is biting cold, and I can barely see ten feet ahead of me.

It’s the middle of winter in Nebraska. What did I expect?

“Mommy is trying to find a way to get us somewhere nice and warm,” I tell my daughters, hoping they can hold on for at least a couple more hours.

We only have what little heat the engine delivered before the car died, so I told Miley to keep the windows up so we can preserve that for as long as possible. I keep looking around, praying for a pair of headlights to appear from either direction but even that could end up being a double-edged sword. What if it’s Daniel?

I smacked him over the head pretty good with that lamp. I would’ve bashed it all the way in, but Miley and Annie were screaming, terrified of their own father. He wasn’t supposed to be able to find us and I don’t understand how he did. The restraining order didn’t faze him in the least. He just wanted to hurt me, to make me suffer for having had the audacity to divorce him.

Shuddering, I check my phone again. The battery is drained, and the screen is black. We’re stuck out here on the side of the road in a Nebraska snowstorm, and I don’t know whether I can rely on the kindness of strangers. With this low visibility, it could be Daniel who finds us. And then it’ll be over. I’ve no doubt he will kill me. I hit him with the lamp, I grabbed my daughters, and then I drove off as fast as I could, not caring about the thickening snowstorm at that point. I had to survive. I had to put some distance between us and him.

My girls are huddled together, shivering under the blanket. I reckon most of the warmth has faded by now and they are relying on one another’s body heat. We’ve been out here for maybe half an hour, and I haven’t seen a single car or truck drive by. Who would be nuts enough to drive in this weather? Well, me, obviously. I would’ve tolerated Daniel hitting me. I would’ve tried to talk some sense into him, at least until I could call the cops, but when he laid his hands on Miley, I just snapped.

“I didn’t have a choice,” I mutter through gritted teeth, my jaw clenched as my whole body involuntarily bucks against the freezing cold.

All I have to keep me relatively warm is this hooded winter parka of mine and the boots I managed to slip into before I ran out the door. The three of us were in our jammies when the bastard broke in. Everything happened so fast. My arm still hurts from where he grabbed me and my cheek stings from where he slapped me so hard I saw stars. I'll take the cold of winter over being anywhere near Daniel ever again. But my babies... we won't last much longer if we aren't rescued soon.

Eventually, I'll have to get in the back with Miley and Annie so I can give them what's left of my own dwindling body heat. It'll drop dramatically below zero later in the night, and I doubt we'll survive until morning if the weather reports turn out to be accurate. But I will do whatever I can to give my daughters a chance to make it, even if I don't.

Less than four hours ago, we were eating mac and cheese and watching a Tom & Jerry marathon on TV. We'd only just moved to Campbell. I liked that town. It was small, quiet, and far enough away from Daniel to allow me to sit comfortably in the evenings while planning for the weeks ahead of my already frazzled life. Damn Daniel for ruining things again.

My breath gets stuck in my throat as I see a pair of headlights approaching. For a moment, my heart stops beating altogether. Terror grips me until I realize the car is coming from Hershey, not Campbell. Daniel would be coming from Campbell, where I left him bleeding on the floor.

I start honking my horn, my muscles heating up with every frantic motion. I hope the driver can see me through this dense snowfall and hear the horn blaring over the wind. The lights get brighter, and the car starts coming to a slow halt. A heavy sigh leaves my body as I recognize the Sheriff's red and blue lights glowing overhead. I can hear the tires sliding on the snow as the car gets closer. "Thank God," I mumble as I cautiously open my door.

I freeze again when I see this mountain of a man getting out from the driver's seat. Holy hell, he's massive. Tall and broad-shouldered, made even bigger by a thick winter jacket with a brown fur collar. I see the badge on his leather belt. The

woolen cap with the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department logo just above his forehead. Then the piercing green eyes that seem to be able to look right into my soul.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" the man asks as I open my door a little more to talk to him.

"No, I am anything but alright," I reply with a trembling voice. "My car died."

He looks inside the car and spots my girls in the backseat. "Are they your children?"

"Yes. We've been stuck here for a while. Not a car in sight," I say.

"Where were you coming from?"

I have the sudden fear that Daniel has woken up and called the police to say I've kidnapped my own children.

"Ma'am where were you coming from?" he asks me again, this time more sternly.

"Does it matter?" I shoot back, my shoulders squared. I have no idea what I'm trying to do here other than protect my children. "Officer, we just need some help, please. Maybe a jump start."

The man looks at me with the kind of intensity that has my skin tingling all over. He's handsome and then some. Olive skin, soft lips, just enough stubble to make my fingertips feel ticklish. I can imagine layers of rippling muscles underneath that uniform. *Snap out of it, Avery.* "Where were you coming from?" he insists, speaking more slowly this time, enunciating each word.

"Does it matter?" Two can play this game.

"Momma, we're cold!" Miley cries out from the backseat.

"Dammit," I curse under my breath. "Campbell. We were coming from Campbell."

"Alright," the man replies. "And where are you headed?"

My shoulders drop. I'm exhausted from constantly being afraid all the time, so wary of danger because of Daniel. This

truly could be just an officer of the law doing his job. He's supposed to ask questions. He's supposed to get as many details out of me as possible in order to make an informed decision. I'm seeing Daniel's flying monkeys everywhere these days, and it's hindering my efforts to keep my own daughters safe. My eyes sting as tears threaten to make everything worse.

"As far away from my ex-husband as possible," I say, a knot tightening in the back of my throat.

The man stills and narrows his eyes at me. "Did he hurt you?"

"My daughter, too," I nod slowly. "Listen, if you can't help me out with the car, could you at least give us a ride into the next town? My phone's dead, but I've got some cash, just enough to keep us in a motel or something until the morning."

"There are no motels anywhere nearby. The closest one would be in North Platte," the man says.

"Could you take us there?"

"I need to know your name, first."

I scoff. "Do I have to get arrested in order to put a roof over my daughters' heads tonight?"

"That's not necessary," he says. "I just need a name."

"I could try and punch you. That'll get us an overnight stay in jail, right?" I'm willing to do whatever it takes at this point. Either the snowstorm caused my brain to short-circuit, or I really am that desperate.

"A name."

"What's yours?" I reply instead. "How do I know Daniel didn't send you? He's probably looking for me right now."

"Ma'am, I'm Kellan Cassidy, Sheriff of Lincoln County. No one sent me," he says firmly, sounding somewhat offended. Not that I can blame him. "I knew there might be trouble on the roads tonight on account of this weather, so I decided to do a slow and steady tour of the main roads before I head back home for the night. It seems as though my instincts

served me well since I found you. Chances are you won't get another car driving by at least until the morning. Entire sections of this road have already been closed, blocked off by snow."

I look around, and all I see is a sea of white underneath a gray sky. Somewhere beyond, I know there's Lake Johnson. It's close enough, but the constant snowfall makes me feel cut off from anything and everything. I'm alone out here, alone with two babies who depend on me for their safety.

"Can I see your badge, Sheriff?" I ask politely. "I just need to be sure."

The sheriff nods and takes the badge off his belt, then brings it forward with cautious steps. I notice his other hand is resting on his weapon. I inspect it quickly and allow myself a sigh of pure relief. "I would like to help you," he says. "The temperatures are set to drop well below zero before dawn."

"Thank you, Sheriff. Can you take us to the police station at least? Or a motel in North Platte?"

He comes closer as he replaces his badge, his gaze softening as it settles on my face. I must look like crap.

"Is Daniel your husband?" the sheriff asks.

"Ex-husband. I have a restraining order against him. But he came after us anyway."

"Did that happen tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

Miley pipes up from behind me. "Momma! Are we going home?"

"Oh, God, I need to get them out of this cold," I burst into tears. This is it. My breaking point coming at the worst possible time. I can't control my body from shuddering as I drop my head on the steering wheel and start crying my heart out. "I had to get away from him but the car... I knew I'd need to get a mechanic to check it before I took it out on the road again but Daniel... my girls... we need help." And then it hits

me. “Oh, no, no. NO!” I cry out as I frantically pat my coat’s pockets.

“Ma’am, you need to calm down,” the sheriff says, crouching down beside my car door.

“I left my wallet in Campbell. Daniel has my wallet! My ID, my driver’s license... oh, no, no, this can’t be happening. My bank cards. Whatever cash I had left. Oh, God, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

The sheriff opens the door a bit wider and takes me by the shoulders. “What’s your name?”

“Avery, Avery Madison,” I manage between sobs.

“Okay, Avery. Can I call you Avery?”

“Yes.”

“Avery, I need you to listen to me very carefully now,” the sheriff says. “You need help, you need a place to stay, and it is more than an overnight stay at the police station could provide.” I look up, barely able to see him through the rivers of tears constantly flowing from my eyes. “I’d like to help you, if you’ll let me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t have any cash or cards. You said it yourself. You left your wallet behind when you were understandably fleeing for your safety,” he says. “You need a warm place to stay, at least for a few nights until you sort out a new driver’s license, new bank card, and anything else you’ll need. Shelter and food for yourself and for your daughters is first and foremost. Do you agree?”

I nod slowly. “Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Kellan,” he replies, a warm smile sketched across his lips. “I can help you. There’s a place I know where you would be the safest. Will you let me take you and the girls there?”

Blinking the tears away, I try to process every word coming out of his mouth. “Where is that, exactly?”

“It’s just outside North Platte,” Kellan says. “It’s a big house, top notch security. It’s the HQ of a security firm, but one whole wing doubles as a private residence. There’s a room available for you and your girls. And once we get you settled in, we can work on getting your life back, one step at a time.”

All I can do is stare at him in sheer disbelief. My mind draws a repetitive blank as I try to think of something to say but nothing comes. What’s the angle? Maybe there isn’t one. Maybe the sheriff of Lincoln County is honestly offering me much needed help. I can hear Miley weeping behind me, Annie crying next to her. I can’t falter. I can’t hesitate.

My babies depend on me.

“Okay,” I finally say. “But I’ll pay you back for everything.”

“You don’t have to worry about that right now,” Kellan replies as he lets go of my shoulders and stands back up.

“You’re too kind.”

“Come on, let’s get your girls in the backseat of my car where it’s warm, the heat is on.”

Shaking like a leaf, I get out of my car and open the back door, bending down to help the girls out. Miley is the first to move, quickly wrapping her arms around my neck. She’s shivering, poor thing, mumbling something about it being so cold that her teeth keep clattering. Kellan joins us with a pair of blankets he fished out from the trunk of his vehicle, wrapping one over Miley.

“Go with the sheriff, honey,” I tell her. “He’ll get us warm in no time. I have to get your sister.”

“Okay, Momma,” she replies, her head already resting on his shoulder as I hand her to him.

For a split-second I watch my daughter as she so eagerly relaxes in his arms, and a peculiar kind of warmth fills my heart. We might actually be okay. Maybe it’s just fickle and treacherous hope toying with my senses, but at least my girls will be warm tonight.

“I’ll call my brother to come and tow your car,” Kellan says as he carries Miley over to his vehicle.

I get Annie from the backseat. She's awake and cranky, but as soon as I wrap her in the second blanket and shower her cold, pink face with kisses, she calms down long enough for me to move her safely and smoothly to the warmth of the sheriff's vehicle. Miley holds her close, constantly whispering words of comfort like the wonderful big sister that she is, and it's all I can do to stop myself from breaking down again. They both deserve better than this.

I walk back toward my car where Kellan is just ending a call. "Thank you so much," I tell him as he puts his phone away.

The wind is blowing harder now, each flake smacking my face like a tiny blade. I pull the hood of my parka over my head, having completely forgotten about how cold I am. My toes hurt. Kellan frowns as he sees me wrap my arms around myself in a tight hug.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "My brother will be here in twenty minutes. He was on his way back to North Platte after an emergency job with his pickup truck. Lucky for us."

"I'm not sure what qualifies as luck anymore," I reply.

The intensity of his gaze makes my body light up from the inside. How am I even able to register these reactions when I've been in fight-or-flight mode for so long? Kellan comes closer, his green eyes searching my face, while I can't help but admire the soft line of his lower lip.

"I have an extra blanket in the trunk," he says. "That is, if you want to stay out here. The passenger seat is heated. Up to you, Avery."

"A blanket would be great," I tell him. "If I get in the warm car now, I'm pretty sure I'll pass out."

He nods, smiles subtly, then goes back to his car. I watch him tread carefully across the snow, each step echoing determination and strength. Kellan returns with a third blanket which he gingerly drapes over my shoulders pulling me closer as he brings the corners together for me to hold.

"Thank you."

He makes sure I'm sufficiently bundled, then takes his phone out again. "Give me your ex-husband's name and description. I can put a BOLO out on him and make sure he's apprehended sooner rather than later."

"Daniel Madison," I say, wondering if a BOLO would be enough to stop that bastard from coming after us again. "Once I get my phone charged, I can send you more details," I add. "Like social security number, pictures, that kind of stuff."

"License plate number, last known address, any official court documents will all be helpful," Kellan says. "We'll sort the rest out tomorrow at the station. But the name and a description should do for the time being."

"Six feet tall. Medium brown hair. Brown eyes. Medium build. Works for a finance firm. Or did. I don't know anymore. I don't keep up."

"I suppose the divorce was messy," he says.

I nod once. "It was, but I didn't have enough evidence to keep him away from the girls. So, the court granted him visitation rights once every two weeks. Until he hit me. That's when I got the restraining order."

"When was the divorce finalized?"

"Five months ago."

"And when did you get the restraining order?"

I need a moment to remember the exact date. "December first. Last week. We moved to Campbell as soon as I got it."

"Does he still have visitation rights for the girls?"

"No. Temporarily suspended, pending a court hearing. I'll need to file some papers for that. Damn, I need a lawyer. I need a lot of things." And I'm about to hyperventilate as the prospect of going through the court system again fills me with anxiety. "I thought I'd put him behind us."

Kellan looks at me with kindness, not pity. "Listen, forget about him for now. At least for tonight. Give yourself some peace. You and your daughters have been through enough."

I look again at my surroundings. We're still in the middle of nowhere during a terrible snowstorm, yet there is a sense of safety wrapping itself around me, and I can feel my whole body gradually relaxing. Granted, this blanket is definitely helping, but so is Kellan's overwhelmingly masculine presence. I wonder if the universe saw me in desperation and decided to give me a break this time.

"How old are the girls?" he asks as we wait for his brother to reach us.

"Miley is five. Annie is three. Although Miley is way more mature for a kid her age. Or mellower. Whatever it is, I'm thankful, because I doubt I would've been able to handle two wound up girls in these circumstances."

"And what do you do? For a living, I mean."

"I'm an interior designer, though I didn't start my career until after I got divorced," I say with a heavy exhale. "I've been taking on clients here and there, mostly remodeling projects. I handle everything from top to bottom—carpentry, plastering, painting. I do it all."

Kellan gives me a long and curious look, a glimmer of fascination in his eyes. "You do the hard labor too?"

"I can't afford to pay additional contractors. But I'm really good at it. I used to help my dad out a lot on his remodeling jobs when I was a kid so I'm familiar with the work."

"What about you?" I ask Kellan. "Did you always plan on becoming the sheriff of Lincoln County?"

"Not really. My parents figured I'd take over the family business, but I decided to join the Navy instead."

"Oh. Quite the twist," I chuckle softly.

He smiles, but there is a tinge of sadness shadowing his expression. "Yeah. It was an intense and eye-opening experience, to say the least. But then I got my honorable discharge and came back here. I joined the Police Academy and saw how poorly the whole county was doing in terms of law and order. I wanted to do something; it was almost like a

calling.” He pauses upon seeing a pickup truck approaching us from the north end of the snowy road. “There he is.”

“Your brother?” I ask, immediately aware of the tension in my voice.

“You’re safe with us, I promise,” Kellan replies gently. I reckon he can tell I’m still on edge.

It’s only when his brother pulls over and gets out of the car that I realize this could very well be the spiciest visual Christmas present I never imagined I’d get. Kellan’s brother is almost identical, albeit significantly larger, taller. An even greater mountain of a man with equally striking green eyes and dark hair. He’s dressed in charcoal gray overalls and a thick black turtleneck.

“This is Fallon,” Kellan says.

Fallon definitely lives at the gym or deadlifts a dozen tractor tires every morning just for kicks. I feel so tiny by comparison. Then again, at five-foot-five I’m practically minuscule compared to these two. I can’t help but lick my lips as I gaze at them, unable to look away.

“Hi, Fallon,” I mumble.

He grunts something that sounds like ‘Hi’ before he glances over at my old Citroën. “That it?”

“Yeah. We’re not sure what’s wrong with it,” Kellan tells him.

Fallon walks over to my car and opens the driver’s door. The keys are still in the ignition, so he tries to get the engine started, checking the dashboard with each turn. “I think it’s the electrical system,” I blurt out when Fallon gets out of the car and decides to look under the hood next. “There’s no power whatsoever. It’s done this before.”

“Possibly,” he replies, giving me a steady, dark look.

I imagine this is what a deer caught in the headlights feels just before the inevitable impact.

“You’ll have plenty of time tomorrow to look at it,” Kellan tells him. “I’m gonna take the girls back to the house for the

night.”

“That’s sensible,” Fallon replies, then glances my way again. “I’ll give you a diagnostic tomorrow after I check everything.”

“Thank you so much,” I reply.

Kellan gently nudges me with his shoulder. “Come on, time to go. Your girls need warm food and a decent bed to sleep in.”

All I can do is follow him back to his car as the snowfall thickens and the winds howl even harsher against the white night. Once I’m in the passenger seat, seatbelt fastened, I find myself depleted and sinking into an unexpected dream state. I catch one last glimpse of Fallon pulling his pickup truck closer to my car so he can anchor it to his pulley before my eyes surrender and darkness beckons me.

I’m not sure how long I was out, but I awaken just as we are pulling up outside a ginormous mansion—a magnificent colonial-style construction set within a sprawling beautiful garden. The hedges are all covered in snow, much like the rest of the property, but I can imagine this place on a hot summer’s day, greenery everywhere beneath a clear, blue sky. The building itself is U-shaped, with a dark-red brick façade and French windows, wrought iron terraces on the first and second floors, and white stone columns adorning the porte-cochere.

“Are you doing okay?” Kellan asks as he takes the keys out of the ignition.

“Yeah. I must’ve dozed off.”

“You did and that’s a good thing. It means you felt safe enough.”

I lose myself in his eyes for the better part of a minute until I remember my girls are in the backseat. One quick glance as I catch my breath and smile, seeing both of them fast asleep and wrapped up in their blankets, their plump cheeks pink with warmth. “I think I can put them straight to bed,” I whisper. “We did manage to eat something earlier before...” My voice trails off as the horror of what happened returns to haunt me.

Kellan takes my hand in his and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “That’s alright,” he says. “Their room is ready, and so is yours.”

“Hold on, two rooms? That’s too much, Kellan. We can just use a single room for the night.”

“Nonsense. There’s plenty of space for the three of you. Just relax tonight and tomorrow we will deal with your ID, bank cards, and your car, along with whatever else you need.”

I don’t like this feeling of helplessness. “I... I don’t know.”

“Accept the kindness of strangers,” he says. “It won’t cost you anything, Avery. It’s literally the least I can do.”

“What about your brother?” I ask. “I don’t expect him to fix my car for free.”

“He owes me a favor.”

I scoff and nod toward the mansion. “And what about this other guy who lives here? Does he owe you a favor, too?”

“As a matter of fact, he does,” Kellan shoots back with a confident smirk that has me hot and slick between my legs.

“Oh, great. So, what, you’re just going to cash in on all your favors for me, a total stranger? That’s too much.”

“It’s my decision,” he says. “All you have to do is let others take care of you and your girls for once. What have you got to lose?”

Not much at this point. He’s right, I need help. I need to keep my babies safe and fed while I rebuild my life. And if Kellan is willing to help me, why the hell not? I will need to find out what the conditions are, the details. I’m hoping there isn’t a catch, but even if there is, it can’t possibly be worse than freezing to death on the side of the road or having to deal with Daniel ever again. I shudder at the mere thought. And to think I was ready to give that man my whole life. For better and for... gah. Lies. All lies. I married a monster, and this is the price I have to pay.

Kellan takes Annie while I handle Miley as we make our way across the driveway and up the stairs leading to the front

door of the mansion. We're greeted by a tall man with dazzling blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Avery, this is Luke," Kellan says.

Luke gives me a polite nod, his gaze softening at the sight of my daughters sleeping soundly in our arms. "Welcome, Avery. Consider this your home for as long as you need it," he says.

He's in his mid-thirties, I'm guessing, much like Kellan and Fallon, and he is just as well-built. His jeans hug his muscular thighs, while his sweater is taut across his chest and shoulders. The term eye-candy comes to mind.

"Thank you for your hospitality," I reply humbly. "We'll be out of your hair in no time, I promise."

"There's absolutely no rush," Luke says, a smile testing his lips. "Come on, let's get the little ones to bed first, and then we can talk about what you need."

Kellan gives me a quick wink. "I know where he keeps the good scotch."

I smile as I follow the two men inside, although I struggle to breathe once I take in the enormity of this place. The foyer is huge, with an elegant marble floor and modern wood planks on the walls. There's plenty of nineteenth century art hanging everywhere, the gilded frames carrying subtle marks of the passage of time. Every side table features mother-of-pearl inlays, and there are Chinese-style vases everywhere, each loaded with an assortment of surprisingly beautiful and finely crafted faux flowers. As an interior decorator, I can't help but register all these marvelous details.

We go up the stairs and down a dimly lit corridor in the west wing of the mansion. The girls' room is decorated in a classic western style, with oak and walnut furniture, plaid patterns in shades of brown and green, and soft linen curtains hung over tall windows. There's a bed big enough for both girls to comfortably sleep in, and as we settle them in together,

I kiss each of my daughters on the forehead, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I have friends who come to visit occasionally,” Luke says as I carefully close the door behind me and join him and Kellan in the hallway. “Some of them have small children, so I’ve made sure I could provide them with all the comforts of home. As soon as Kellan called, I knew I’d be able to accommodate the three of you.”

“Again, I cannot thank you enough for this,” I reply.

“And again, please, don’t worry about it. We’ve got service staff coming in on a daily basis to clean and cook, so your girls will be well-looked after,” he says.

My heart is growing to the point where it feels as if it might explode. This really is too much, but I am too overwhelmed and exhausted to argue. Besides, I shouldn’t. I need to accept the kindness of strangers, just like Kellan said. So I offer a nod of appreciation and a soft smile. “They’ll be hungry when they wake up.” “We should call Helen,” Kellan tells Luke.

“Who’s Helen?” I ask as we make our way back down the stairs and into a lounge area on the ground floor.

“My aunt,” Kellan says. “She’d be happy to help and she’s an excellent babysitter.”

“Oh, I can’t afford a babysitter. I can look after my girls.”

The sheriff takes a seat in one of the massive leather armchairs by the window, pointing at the other one next to him. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“I’ll cover the babysitting expenses,” Luke says, walking over to a beautiful ebony cabinet with hand-painted doors. I notice a subtle limp as he moves, but he doesn’t seem to be in any kind of pain. It must be an old injury.

“Why on earth would you do that?” I ask, my breath faltering.

Luke gives me a sideways glance as he takes out three tumblers and a bottle of Laphroaig whiskey, bringing

everything over to the coffee table in front of us. “Because you need some time for yourself,” he says. “Come on, Avery. I know enough about what you’ve been through to understand that you could use the respite. It doesn’t cost me much, and Kellan’s aunt could also use some paid work.”

“I’ll pay you back,” I insist.

“I’m not worried about that,” he says and pours a generous amount of whiskey in each glass. I’m immediately enthralled by the smokey fragrance that accompanies the dark amber liquid as it settles.

I shake my head. “I insist. I pay my own way,” I say stubbornly.

He nods and gives me a soft smile. “Alright, but until then, rest assured that all of your needs will be taken care of.”

I can’t help but question their generosity, though. I look over at Kellan. “Why are you all doing this?” I ask. “I mean, your brother is fixing my car. Your friend here is giving me a place to stay and food, not to mention a stiff and delicious glass of whiskey which, by the way, I’m probably gonna finish that bottle tonight. And you made all these calls on our behalf... why? I understand kindness and generosity, but it still feels like it’s over the top.”

“Avery, let me tell you a little story about us,” Kellan says, his gaze bouncing between Luke and me. His friend takes a seat on the couch, quietly sipping his whiskey as he watches us with curiosity. “Luke, Fallon, and I were Navy SEALs. Far from home, always in combat mode, always fighting and watching each other’s backs in the most hostile places on Earth. The three of us have been through unimaginable moments together and have come close to death more than once. Hell, we damn near lost Luke during our last mission.” He pauses and finishes his whiskey in one gulp, then pours himself another. “We’ve seen what violence does to innocent people. And we’ve seen what happens when those innocent people don’t get the help they need. So we made an oath upon returning to the states.”

“We swore to help those in need, no matter what,” Luke continues. “It costs us little to nothing to do it. It’s pennies, Avery, I promise. Barely a blip in the bank account.”

“Judging by the size of this manor, I believe you,” I mutter, then give Kellan a frown. “You don’t have to go out in this blizzard again, do you?”

“I live here,” Kellan says.

That has me stumbling for a reply. “What?”

“We all live here. Luke, me, Fallon. The west wing is ours. The rest of the place is dedicated to our security business.”

“Hold on, I thought you were the sheriff of Lincoln County.”

“I am. But I’m also a partner in Wolfhound Security, which is Luke’s company.”

“*Our* company,” Luke corrects him with a half-smile before he looks at me again. “When we came back from the service, I had enough money saved to invest in this property. It was being auctioned after the bank repossessed it from a defaulting former owner. Kellan and Fallon pitched in with money of their own, and we decided to invest in a private security business. The Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office pays for our services once in a while, but the bulk of our clients are corporate giants from both the states and overseas. I’ll give you a tour of the place tomorrow, though my point is you’re safe here, Avery. You’re safe and taken care of until you’re able to get back on your feet.”

“Our honor demands it,” Kellan says, never taking his eyes off me.

I feel tiny, sinking into this chair, unable to say anything. They’re being genuine, and I have to accept that there are still good people in this world. Decent people who are willing to help me without wanting anything in return. It just so happens that these guys are also hot as a midday in August, and my body is responding in ways I’d forgotten it could to the presence of a man.

A couple of hours go by as we talk about my situation and how I got to this point. I figured that if I'm to be protected, they need to know more about Daniel and our relationship. Both Luke and Kellan listen quietly as I tell them about my troubled adolescence, both making sure my glass is never empty. I'll give the whiskey credit—it has loosened up plenty inside of me, and not just my tongue.

“After Dad died, my mom remarried soon after. I'm sure they already knew each other, ” I pause to take another sip. “Point is, after that, things went downhill quickly. My mother stopped listening to me, paying attention to me. It was all about Greg and his big plans, his feelings. That we should be thankful for Greg, that we'd be poor and miserable without him. It didn't matter that he had a drinking habit or that he liked coming into my room without being invited.”

“Did Greg ever touch you?” Kellan asks, his voice low and his eyes as dark as the night outside.

It has stopped snowing, but there is no moon in sight. Only a black sky over a sea of sparkling white. It's eerily beautiful and comforting to admire from the warmth of this armchair. “No. He never had a chance. I was about seventeen when he first tried anything,” I reply. “But whenever he came into my room, I made sure to ask him loudly what he wanted so my mom could hear. She was crazy jealous, even of her own daughter. Like I would actually try and steal her new husband away. I have no idea what made her change so drastically, but I reckon Dad's death sort of broke her beyond repair.”

“And you said you moved out of the house as soon as you turned eighteen?” Luke confirms.

“Yes. I met Daniel through a friend. He was an instant charmer. He was quick to woo me, to make plans, to plant ideas of a future together.” I sigh deeply. “I was scared and desperate to get away from Greg. Mom wasn't really there anymore, physically or mentally, and she'd started drinking as well. I had to get out of there, and Daniel made me believe that I would be safer with him.”

“What happened after you moved in with Daniel?” Kellan asks.

“Oh, it was good for a while. He love bombed me in all the right ways. Made sure I was hooked. He even helped pay for design school. Once I got my degree, I was eager to get my career going, to pay him back for what I’d thought was kindness, love, and much needed support. But then I got pregnant with Miley, and Daniel insisted that I become a stay-at-home mom, that I could do interior design once Miley got bigger.”

“I’m guessing you became pregnant the second time around just as you were preparing to focus on your design career again,” Kellan concludes, slowly shaking his head.

“Bingo.”

“Was he abusive the whole time?” Luke asks.

“No, not right away. Well, not physically anyway. I know now that abuse comes in many forms. Whenever I resisted him, whenever I went against his word, he’d find ways to punish or to sabotage me. I was raising Miley and Annie on my own. We couldn’t get a babysitter because Daniel wouldn’t pay for one. I didn’t have any friends because he wouldn’t let me.”

“Why would you need friends when you had Daniel?” Kellan exhales sharply.

“Precisely. But like you said earlier tonight, none of that matters anymore. I managed to get away from him. And I found myself in the company of good people tonight. So, here’s to you, Kellan. Here’s to you, Luke. And here’s to Fallon, too. I just hope he can do something about that old car of mine.” The three of us clink our glasses together before taking another sip of whiskey.

Luke checks his watch, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Well, I’m off to get some shuteye. Early start in the morning. Avery, please, we mean it when we say stay as long as you’d like. There’s no rush. You’ve got the time and

space and resources here to do anything. Just make sure you allow yourself to rest.”

“Thank you, Luke.”

He gives Kellan one last nod, then slowly gets up and walks out. I listen to the sound of his receding footsteps, registering the slight difference in his rhythm. There’s definitely something off with his right leg, though I dare not ask what. Given that they were in the Navy together and based on the few details that Kellan let slip during our earlier conversation, I can only assume that Luke is living with a service-related injury that left him with that subtle limp.

Silence falls over the room for a short while as my gaze wanders around.

An entire wall is covered with bookshelves—all precious or first editions, judging solely by the intricate engravings on the spines and the high-quality leather binding. There are plenty of sculptural bookends sprinkled in between, likely collected from their overseas travels. I see East Asian motifs, African totems, and Polynesian patterns here and there, along with various vintage weapons mounted in glass cases.

“It’s been a long day,” Kellan says, pulling me out of my brief reverie. “You must be exhausted.”

“I am, but that catnap I had on the way here pulled the dial back a bit,” I giggle, noticing that my glass is empty. “You’re right, though. I should get some sleep. I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Oh, I wasn’t implying that at all,” Kellan replies. “I’m just surprised you’re still able to walk and talk after what you’ve been through tonight and being out in the freezing cold for so long. The Nebraskan winters aren’t known for being gentle on the human body.”

I get up and find myself wobbling. “I guess I’m not that good at the walking part anymore.”

In the blink of an eye, Kellan bolts from his seat and catches me before I fall. I remain soft and gooey in his arms as he holds me, my body burning hot against his. Our lips are

dangerously close. Our eyes shadowed and hooded. The alcohol must be working some kind of voodoo on the both of us, because neither can pull away.

I can feel his heart thudding against mine.

“I think I’m still stiff from the cold earlier,” I whisper.

“I won’t let you fall,” he says softly. His rock-hard body has me anchored safely, each muscle twitching nervously beneath his sheriff’s uniform.

“Thank you,” I reply.

“You’re welcome,” he says, his gaze dropping to my lips.

I should go upstairs. My room is next to my girls’ room and I know I should sleep. But I cannot pull myself away from this sizzling man, and I don’t think he’s ready to let go of me yet, either. Time slows down as we look into each other’s eyes, flames burning within. The fire consumes me from the inside to the point where I can no longer take it. Whatever is about to happen, I’m going with it. I deserve to allow myself this moment, to feel good and forget, even if just for a moment.

“I might kiss you,” Kellan says.

“I’m hoping you will.” *Where did that come from?* Never mind. Can’t take it back.

He captures my mouth in a kiss. It’s sweet and tender at first, breathing one another in. Eyes close as our tongues slip through, tasting, discovering. But then a ravenous hunger strikes, and we’re devouring one another. My God, he is delicious. His tongue swirls and wrestles mine. My pulse starts racing as his hands move up and down my back, fingers digging into my hips. He pulls me closer, and I feel him hard against my core, ready to consume me.

“Oh, wow...” I manage as he trails wet kisses down the side of my neck.

I’m still wearing my velvety pink jammies from our Campbell place, which is actually a good thing, because all Kellan has to do is tug and... there goes his hand, right under my panties. He lets out a hiss of a sigh as he peers deep into

my eyes while his fingers slide between my slick folds. “Fucking hell, Avery. You’re so wet.”

I gasp as his fingers explore me while his other arm wraps tightly around my waist, holding me firmly in place. “Oh... Oh, right there.”

It’s been so long since I’ve felt a man’s touch. The last man to touch me turned out to be a despicable monster. Every intimate moment I’ve ever had with Daniel has been soiled by the ugly truth of his nature, and so I am compelled to create a new and sweeter memory with this man standing in front of me. Kellan kisses me once more, deeper this time. It’s intoxicating.

My hands rest on his shoulders, my mind ablaze as I try to get them to move. I’d love to get under his shirt, to feel his skin against mine, but I’m grounded where I stand. He’s got me paralyzed, my legs parting gradually as his fingers continue working me closer to the edge. I’m panting, my breasts pressing against his rippling muscles as one finger slips inside.

“Ah,” I whimper against his lips, my eyes wide open as I look at him.

He’s loving every second of this. A devilish smile slits his handsome face as a second finger goes in. I’m gushing like a river as he licks his lips, his breath ragged as I feel his cock twitching against my belly.

“I think you need this,” Kellan says. “I want to see you come.”

“Oh, Kellan.”

He’s got the base of his palm pressing my clit while a third finger penetrates me. I hold on to him tight as the pressure builds up inside my core, every nerve ending alight while I try to remain standing. He is right about one thing—I desperately need this release, and he’s determined to make that happen. “Deeper,” I whisper. “Harder, please...”

“Gladly,” he grunts and starts finger-fucking me mercilessly.

I hear the wet sounds of my pussy as he works me into a blinding frenzy. The orgasm rocks me to the core and I cry out in agony and ecstasy, the waves rippling through me until my knees give out. And just like that, all the turmoil I've endured up to this point dissipates in a colorful cloud of blinding sparkles, my heart exploding as he teases my pussy and squeezes every last drop of pleasure out of me before pulling his hand back and licking his glistening fingers. He stares into my eyes as he does so and it's so hot, I nearly come again.

He gives me a moment to recover but he never lets go. He simply holds me close, watching, analyzing every feature of my face as I try to take all of him in. I didn't expect tonight to end this way, but I knew from the moment I met Kellan that I wanted him. Badly. All of him. To my shame, I'm craving his brother, too. And Luke is a morsel on his own. *Good grief, Avery, the snowstorm must've burned your brain circuits.*

"I think it's time you get some sleep.," he says gently.

I nod, suddenly exhausted beyond reason. I'm confident that I'll be having sweet dreams.

I hope you enjoyed the sneak peek, [Click here for full story.](#)