



BOSTON'S
BAD
BOYS

THE
WAY
WE
LIE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ADDISON JANE

THE
WAY WE
LIE

Addison Jane

The Way We Lie

Addison Jane

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Blurb

Reed Lawson was a man I had no business crossing paths with.

He was Boston's most eligible billionaire.

Rich and sexy, with a tortured soul every woman wanted to save.

The empire he'd created, he had built from the ground up.

I was simply a girl who worked in a library.

And when I was younger, a few risky choices cost me everything.

But now I was content in my safe, secure routine.

We were two different people.

Living two different lives.

His past was pushing him forward.

Mine was holding me back.

Yet, we somehow managed to meet at the perfect moment in time.

On my wedding day.

Table of Contents

[Blurb](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[More Books from Addison Jane](#)

[Connect With Me Online](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

VALEN

August 3rd

*Chad Buckland and Valen Maxwell
would like to invite you to join them
in celebration of their union...*

“Are you ready?” a sweet voice questioned from the doorway behind me.

My grip tightened around the bouquet of flowers in my hands, the stalks cracking and crunching under the pressure. “Nope,” I answered bluntly, finally pulling my eyes away from the wedding invitation tucked into the frame of the mirror in front of me.

My life was going to change today.

Dramatically.

And while I knew it would be for the better, it didn’t ease the waves of panic that had been growing steadily over the course of the morning.

It was a little after midday now, and somehow I’d managed to keep my head above water, though only barely.

“Valen?” The sweet voice again.

My wedding planner.

Because I was getting married—*today*.

Actually, right now.

“She’s ready,” Jade told the wedding planner, far more certainty in her voice than mine. A second later, she appeared in front of me with her brow pinched into a serious frown as she waved off the planner and her posse of helpers who had crowded in the doorway. “She just needs a moment.”

They hustled back down the hall in a flurry of concerned whispers, heading for the living room where the rest of my bridesmaids were waiting, tapping their feet as time ticked on.

“I think I need to call Maddie,” I told Jade, my hands shaking as I reached for my cell to call the one person who couldn’t be here, but whose voice would instantly calm me.

Maddie, Jade, and I had been best friends since we were freshmen in high school. We’d been inseparable, though people often wondered why, given our personalities were so starkly different.

In my mind though, that’s why our friendship worked.

We were the perfect mix.

The quiet friend.

The confident friend.

The cagey friend.

And given my eagerness to avoid my own wedding day and get the hell out of here, I’m sure it wasn’t hard to assume which one of these was me.

Maddie was the quiet, motherly type and exactly the person who I desperately wished I could speak to in this moment to talk me off the ledge, but Jade had other ideas. She swiftly intercepted my grasp, swatting my hand away and snatching the phone from atop the vintage desk in front of me. She backed away, holding it behind her and shaking her head.

“Jade...” I warned, though really, there was nothing I could do. She wasn’t the one wearing an over-the-top princess dress with a skirt so large it could house a small family. It would take me at least a full minute to get across the room to where she was standing.

“When this is done, we will call Maddie, and you can tell her all about the moment you freaked out before walking down the aisle. But right now, you have to trust that I love you and promise everything’s going to be okay,” Jade reassured me, tossing the phone onto the bed and holding her hands in the air, hoping I wouldn’t shoot.

For a second, I wanted to shoot.

The emotions I’d spent most of the day suppressing almost got the better of me.

I was frustrated and overwhelmed.

But if I let loose right now, I’d regret it later.

This time, she got a pass.

But next time...

She held her breath for a few moments until my glare seemed to subside, and my shoulders slumped. “Okay. This is good, Valen! We’re ten minutes late, but you know I love a dramatic entrance. You can do this. It’s scary, but I’ll be right there next to you,” Jade rambled on—her attempt to soothe my nerves only kicking them into high gear. She quickly closed the distance between us and grabbed one of my hands. “You look beautiful,” she whispered, tears brimming her eyes.

The way her breathing changed, I knew this emotion was real, which could sometimes be hard to read with Jade because she was always so cautious about how she looked on the outside. This time, she seemed so sure of what she was saying, but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised—she was the confident friend.

Self-assured.

Charmingly full of herself.

“Chad is waiting for you,” she stressed.

He was.

In more ways than one.

Chad and I had been together for around eighteen months.

He had a good family.

A good job.

And was content with mundane.

And while those things might be more like simple expectations people would have of someone they loved—during my life, I'd learned the hard way not to take some of them for granted. When you came from a life of chaos, you found comfort in the calm.

Sure, there was nothing overwhelmingly exciting about Chad and how he lived his life.

But, I was okay with that.

At least, I thought I was.

“And imagine how you're going to feel afterward.” Jade tugged on my hands to pull me out of my haze, a huge grin lighting up her face. “Imagine how happy you'll be.”

Happy.

Yeah.

Maybe.

I finally nodded, mirroring her smile. “Let's go.”

She let out a sharp, high-pitched squeal in delight. “She's ready!” she sang, bouncing on her toes.

With a symphony of footsteps, the planning team rushed in, helping me lift the weighty layers of fabric and maneuver me out of the bedroom, through the front door, and down the front porch steps. The beautiful little cottage we were exiting was dwarfed by the magnificent church that sat right next door.

Each rich, orange brick looked perfectly and meticulously placed, the condition of which made it look like it could have been built yesterday. However, I was beginning to learn that marrying into a Catholic family like Chad's was no joke when it came to their expectations of how things need to look on the outside.

Aspirations were high.

Almost frighteningly so.

They critiqued my hair, the way I dressed, my posture, and I'd spent more than my fair share of family events being grilled and interrogated about my past, present, and future. I'd stretched the truth a little in these departments but figured it wouldn't be enough to have the church burn down around me when I stepped inside.

As we walked the small path between the cottage and the church, I wasn't quite sure what people meant when they talked about getting cold feet before a wedding because mine were hot.

Sweaty.

Burning like the pits of hell.

We hurried up the front stairs and through the open doorway into a tiny foyer. There were two heavy wooden doors in front of me, the sounds of hushed voices and faint organ music playing on the other side.

Once again, I gripped the flowers in my hand tightly as the women around me primped, pulled, and plucked at my dress, erasing every imperfection until they deemed it flawless, and finally took a step back to admire their handiwork.

A loud creak startled me, the two doors suddenly easing open to reveal a church full of guests, the pews packed with family and friends—mind you, only a few of them were mine. I was fine with that because the idea of having my mother here gave me instant heart palpitations, and I was glad it was one less thing I had to worry about.

This day was already going to take the cake.

I didn't need them here eating it too.

“And... go bridesmaids,” the wedding planner ordered, shoving Jade and a couple of friends of mine from college out into the church.

A moment later, the music changed, and a few hundred pairs of eyes were suddenly focused on me.

Chad and his groomsmen were waiting at the altar, and I took a deep breath, ready to follow the bridesmaids down the aisle toward him. I forced myself to stare over his head at the beautiful stained-glass window illuminating the spot where I was about to stand. This moment was so different from the wedding day I'd imagined, and it was all I could do to keep the tears at bay.

The music softened into silence as I reached the end of the aisle. I passed my flowers to Jade and finally turned to stand before my fiancé. He looked as petrified as I did, and for a split second, I wondered if I was even going to be able to do this.

To get out the words I needed to say.

But then I saw Chad glance over my shoulder at Jade, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smile for a brief second.

And that was all the convincing I needed.

"Can I borrow this for a minute," I whispered to the celebrant. He paused, his mouth open, about to speak into the microphone he was holding. "I won't be a moment, I swear."

"What are you doing?" Chad whispered under his breath. He grabbed hold of my hand, his fingers tightening around it almost painfully as the celebrant reluctantly passed me the mic, his eyes skipping between us. "Valen..."

For someone who was usually so calm and relaxed, I didn't expect the flare of anger to spark in his eyes, but I had to push past it and carry on.

Pushing my shoulders back, I pulled free from his death grip so I could hold the mic with both hands and turned to face our guests. "Hi—" I jerked back when the echo of my voice came screaming back at me. The young guy behind the tech desk at the back of the church waved out and gave me a thumbs up, quickly letting me know it was fixed.

Jade reached over, a deeply etched frown on her face as she tugged at my dress. "Valen, what are you—"

"Hello, everyone," I tried again, this time with a much more pleasant sound coming from the speakers. "I know

you're all wondering what's going on... usually, speeches aren't until after the ceremony. But I wanted to take a moment to thank someone special for making this day one I'll always remember."

Jade's worried frown seemed to slip away the moment I turned to her, not so concerned about my interruption, especially now she could see it was going to be a special moment between the two of us.

Unforgettable, in fact.

"As many of you know, Jade and I have been friends since we were in high school," I explained, fighting the tears that had begun to burn at the back of my throat. I couldn't let them win, not until I'd said what needed to be said. "She helped me choose this dress. She organized almost every single detail of this wedding from the flowers to the music..." I paused, then continued with my next thought, "Oh! And she even helped Chad pick out the ring he proposed to me with."

Jade stared at me, her lip quivering and a few stray tears finally slipping down onto her cheeks. A little dramatic, but she'd always had a flare for it.

A wave of awws even moved through the crowd.

Probably because the crowd was full of her family and her friends.

It was sweet really. She hadn't wanted me to stand up here and have only a handful of guests there for me while Chad's side was full of a never-ending number of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins—that Catholic lifestyle coming in strong. So, she convinced her whole family to attend to fill my side to even things out.

At the time, I'd insisted these people didn't want to witness some stranger get married, but now, Jade's control over the guest list and Chad's excessively religious family were two factors that would make this moment so...

... beautiful?

No...

... satisfying.

“I wanted to take this moment to say thank you,” I declared, forcing a smile through the pain currently shooting through my chest. “Thank you for fucking my fiancé.”

Chapter Two

REED

The sounds of curtains being drawn instantly pulled me from my sleep, and without opening my eyes, I already had my hand inside my side drawer.

“You point that gun at me, Reed Lawson, and I am calling in sick for a month.”

The calm, motherly voice was familiar, and thank God because it was the only thing that kept me from shooting first and asking questions later.

“Martha,” I rasped, trying to blink through the sun’s attack on my eyes. “Last time I checked, you didn’t work weekends.” I shoved the drawer closed and threw my legs over the side of the bed, sitting up.

“It’s okay, you’re paying me overtime,” she answered, and even without seeing her, I could already imagine the smug smirk plastered across her face.

Martha had been my secretary for almost six years. Other CEOs I knew were hiring young, attractive, straight-out-of-college graduates with degrees but no actual experience. Martha was older and hadn’t been to college, but the woman’s knowledge and skills were so impressive there was no doubt in my mind she could organize and execute a full military operation with perfect precision.

She was also the only person who could get away with walking into my bedroom unannounced on a weekend and waking me without losing their damn job—or their head.

“Um... what’s happening?” another voice questioned. This one coming from *in* my bed.

I groaned and scrubbed my hand over my face.

“Sorry, love,” Martha apologized. She moved around the bed, crouching and picking up a pair of briefs off the floor and tossing them to me. “I’ll meet you out in the kitchen, Mr. Lawson.” Then she was gone, the bedroom door clicking softly closed behind her.

Something was happening, and it had to be important.

Martha was a mother and a wife, and we had talked endlessly about how important it was for her to spend her weekends at home with her family, doing whatever it was *real* families did. The only time she came in during that time was when we were dangerously behind and needed to catch up *or* something urgent had happened and needed dealing with immediately.

The latter had me moving a little quicker.

“You really should tell your staff not to barge in like that. It’s kind of rude.”

Gritting my teeth, I ignored the commentary from the woman behind me. Trina Morris had recently fallen into fame thanks to a stint on reality television and had become friendly with a lot of socialites here in Boston and down in New York City.

And it wasn’t her first time in my bed.

Maybe she thought that fact entitled her to have a say on what I should or shouldn’t find acceptable in my own home.

She was wrong.

Dead wrong!

“Get dressed,” I told her, slipping the pair of briefs Martha had passed me and pulling them up as I got to my feet. “I need to find out what’s happening.” I walked out of my room, pulling the door closed behind me, and as I headed down the hall to the kitchen, I made a mental note.

Never again.

My buddy, Bronson, had set me up with Trina—she was a friend of a girl he was dating.

At first, it'd suited me perfectly, our physical attraction winning out over everything else, and as a bonus, she didn't follow up that first night with phone calls or messages, looking for another date. A couple of weeks later, I'd run into her at a charity event, and naturally, we left together.

Last night though, she *just happened* to be staying at the hotel where I was attending a conference.

A coincidence—*probably*.

But it is starting to feel more like a commitment—*no, thanks*.

“Martha, it's Saturday morning,” I said as I took a stool at the breakfast bar, gratefully accepting the cup of coffee she slid across the kitchen island.

“It's two p.m.,” she corrected, hiding a grin behind her own mug as she raised it to her mouth.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, it's Saturday afternoon. What the hell are you doing here instead of at home with Joe and the kids?”

The thought of spending every weekend with my own family was like fucking torture. Our relationship was—for lack of a better word—fucked. But that didn't mean I didn't understand the importance of family for others, especially Martha, who had an amazing and supportive husband and three energetic kids at home. All of whom I'd watched grow and thrive in the loving environment their parents had created.

To which—*I couldn't relate*.

“Because of these.” She nodded toward a pile of papers, and I reached over and picked them up, instantly recognizing what they were—an acquisition contract. One I was sure had left my desk to be finalized weeks ago.

Six years ago, my dad inherited my grandfather's trucking company, AL Logistics. It wasn't a huge company, a little over seven hundred employees across a handful of different states, but it was well-known and trusted.

At least, it was until two years ago when my father married his latest wife.

Now, he was in debt up to his eyeballs and days away from losing this business, all because he was trying to live beyond his means in order to keep up with this woman's expensive taste.

I frowned, flicking through the pages. "I thought—"

"He hasn't signed them," Martha said with a sigh as I turned to the last page where the dotted line was blank.

"Of course he fucking hasn't," I muttered in disbelief, pinching the bridge of my nose and closing my eyes, taking a moment to breathe. The old man was so fucking stubborn and a goddamn idiot. "How long do we have?" I asked, still not opening my eyes.

"If they aren't signed today, there won't be time to get the bank to release the money, then get that money to the debtors before the deadline on Monday afternoon," Martha explained, the smile she'd been wearing a few minutes ago now morphed into a heavy frown. "His lawyer said they must have forgotten."

A load of shit.

This was a stalling tactic Dad was attempting while trying to find another option or another buyer. He didn't like the idea of having to sell to me because I was never meant to be the son who became successful. They saw me as a failure, and nothing I ever did or achieved would change that.

Though, I'd fought pretty fucking hard to try.

Part of me wanted to throw my hands in the air and say *fuck it!* Let the stubborn bastard lose everything. But this wasn't just about him.

If the debtors weren't paid, AL Logistics would be put into liquidation, and everything the company owned would be sold so they could get the money they were owed.

We'd lose my grandfather's company.

And seven hundred employees would lose their damn jobs.

All because of how much he hated me, and that wasn't their fault.

"I'll get it signed," I announced with my jaw clenched, given this was the last thing I wanted to be doing today.

"Good. Him and Cruella... I mean, Christine, are at a wedding just out of town," she advised, placing her coffee cup into the sink and grabbing her bag. "If you get there soon, you might catch the bouquet," Martha added after seeing the look on my face.

"Hilarious," I deadpanned, taking one final sip of my coffee before climbing off the stool and heading back to the bedroom. "Now... *go home*," I called back over my shoulder.

"Yes, sir!"

When I stepped back inside, I noticed Trina hadn't bothered to move from the bed. Instead, she sat up, the sheet tucked around her as she played on her phone. "I'm going out," I announced, not even bothering to try and disguise my annoyance as I grabbed my cell from the side table. "I'll text my driver and have him meet you downstairs. He'll take you home."

She laughed softly, though still made no attempt to get up. "Wow. That's it, huh?"

Maybe a better man would have apologized for being so blunt and uncaring, but I was *not* a better man.

"If you'd prefer, I could not text him, and you could catch an Uber. I have a wedding to get to, so I don't have the time for this," I retorted, my eyebrow raised, inviting her to say something else. *Any fucking thing*. A bastard wasn't my favorite part to play, but if there was one thing that brought him out, it was entitlement and ignorance.

Trina and I had already discussed expectations. While she was looking to land a man who could keep her relevant, she knew I wasn't looking for a permanent armpiece. Not because I preferred fucking around or that I feared commitment, but the idea of being *in* a relationship had me keeping everyone at

arm's length, knowing things would eventually come to an end.

And when you'd experienced the kind of loss I had, it was much easier to keep people at a distance.

Because you couldn't lose something you never had.

"Don't bother," Trina snarled, now in a hurry to gather her things and get out the door. "I'll get one of my friends to pick me up."

"Great," I answered with a shrug, heading for the shower. "Have a nice weekend."

"*Fuck you!*" she called after me, the bedroom door slamming closed a moment later.

Thank God.

That was one problem dealt with—with little to no drama—though I'm sure in the near future, I'll read all about it in some tell-all magazine. The headline reading...

The Bastard Who Fucks Women and Throws Them Out the Next Morning

For now, I had far bigger fucking problems to deal with.

Namely, a father who hated my existence.

And his money-hungry wife.

Chapter Three

VALEN

A collective gasp sucked the air out of the room, and Jade instantly tossed her bouquet into the crowd before reaching out, attempting to snatch the mic from my hands.

Her fingers wrapped around mine, and she tugged it away from my mouth. “Valen, stop! Don’t do this,” she pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper though her eyes were wide, panic plastered across her face. “You don’t understand...”

I shuffled my marshmallow-esque dress back a few steps, yanking the mic from her grip and raising it once again to my mouth. “Honestly, it might be the best gift anyone has given me. To think I could have *actually* married this lying, cheating piece of crap.” I swept my arm out toward Chad, who still had yet to move or speak. His lips were pressed so tightly together they turned white, and his eyes narrowed into slits. He was furious—an expression I hadn’t seen often, but now that I had, I was relieved to be making my escape. “Congratulations, Jade. This fine specimen of a man is *all yours*.”

My voice shook as the hurt I’d been smothering for the past few hours had finally won out despite my determination to keep my shit together. Though, thanks to the large speakers sitting on either side of the altar, everything I said sounded clear and full of confidence. It echoed loudly, bouncing back and forth against the walls and into the tall ceilings of the beautiful old church.

The church I’d soiled with the shitstorm I’d whipped up.

Chairs scraping against the old wooden floors and a chorus of heavy footsteps were my cues to wind things up and get the hell out of there before the floor opened up beneath me.

Or worse.

Before I let these people see me cry.

I tossed the microphone onto the floor, grabbed handfuls of the thick, fluffy tulle wedding dress that was all but swallowing me whole, and marched back down the aisle toward the exit. The chaos that had erupted around me made it feel like I was the main character walking out of the final battle scene at the end of a movie, my mission complete and my head held high while explosions and flames erupted behind me.

The fighter.

The survivor.

The hero.

In the moment, I felt like all those things, and yet, none of them at the same time.

Because it hurt.

It hurt so fucking bad.

Two of the most important relationships in my life—gone in seconds.

One of them I'd had for more than ten years and had been with me through hell and back.

People would question why I didn't simply walk away this morning when I'd found the texts and the pictures on his phone. Why I didn't approach them in private, let them know what I'd found, and talk about it like adults?

That would be because... *why the hell did I have to be the bigger person?*

Why did I have to walk away with my heart in shreds while they skipped off into the sunset like they weren't the ones in the wrong?

No.

Fuck that.

Call me vindictive.

Call me petty.

But as I rushed through the foyer at the rear of the church and out the double doors, I didn't regret one damn thing.

And if that made me the villain, then I'd be the villain.

The sunlight struck me directly in the eyes as I stumbled out into the fresh air.

Lifting my dress, I kicked off my shoes, the offending objects flying into the manicured hedge that bordered the building. It took some skill to get down the stairs on my own. This dress is not only completely impractical but also heavy as lead. The gravel of the parking lot dug into my feet and ripped and practically tore shreds off the bottom of my dress as I fought my way across it to the footpath while trying to remember which street in this small town I'd seen the sign for a bus stop.

My pride refused to go back and ask for a ride—a small detail I hadn't considered when I'd concocted this plan a few hours ago. Until now, anger and hurt had fueled me, and those were the only two things I'd been able to focus on.

We were at least an hour from Boston—from home—and my cell was back in the cottage, so calling an Uber or a cab wasn't going to happen either.

I was on my own.

But it wouldn't be the first time.

Probably not the last.

And like every other time, when I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was coming after me, there was not a single soul. No one calling for me to come back, no one yelling for me to wait so they could stand with me in solidarity. Nope, when I said on my own, that's precisely what I meant.

It was what I got for standing and speaking rather than sitting and shutting up. My heart did not allow me to see something was wrong and instead merely watched on, especially if it was hurting someone I love. As a result, I'd been arrested, I'd been in the news, and I'd been thrown out of the house—to name a few.

I'd also learned a lesson about who I could and couldn't trust.

At least, I thought I had.

But seems like a couple had slipped through the cracks.

The road I was now walking was the main road through the small town we were in, meaning cars were flying by, people honking their horns or practically sticking their heads out the windows of their cars to get a good look as I waddled down the street. I couldn't blame them, really. Unable to keep from staring at the disaster in front of you, it was like driving past a car wreck.

Now, I was that disaster.

Finally, I made it to a street corner with a handful of signposts, one pointing toward the bus station, which was in the opposite direction, back past the church. I bit hard on my lip, fighting the tears, but determined to keep them at bay until I could get somewhere on my own, where I could finally process exactly what had happened today.

I didn't know what to do next.

So I did nothing.

I collapsed onto the grass next to the sidewalk and leaned back against the picket fence bordering the house at the corner. It was almost impossible to breathe, and now I was on the ground it would take at least another person to help me get back up.

I groaned, pinching my eyes closed and my head lolling back, hoping that, by some miracle, the ground would open and swallow me whole. "Dear God..." I started, ready to try anything, even chatting with a man in the sky who I didn't actually believe existed, "... if you're out there, I apologize for cussing inside your church, but I could really use a break right now."

"You need a ride?"

No fucking way.

I opened my eyes, blinking against the sun to try and make out the dark figure walking around the front of a large black Chevrolet SUV parked at the curb. He wore a pair of black slacks and a gray suit jacket, but underneath was a simple, fitted white T-shirt. It was businessy, but in a way that told the world he didn't like to be defined by a suit—that's if the beautiful but dark tattoos that covered practically every inch of visible skin on his body hadn't already been a telltale sign.

“You should probably keep driving, buddy. This dress is not an invitation,” I answered, my shoulders slumping. “Because if you think this is where you kidnap me and demand a large ransom, good luck with that after the mess I've just made.”

His deep chuckle had me glancing up again. My eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight, allowing me to see a full picture of the man in front of me—a picture which, this time, I pieced together instantly.

The tattoos.

The striking blue eyes.

The suit.

We hadn't met before, but his face was literally on the covers of all the magazines.

“Reed Lawson,” I stated. My eyes subconsciously moved to his throat, where the haunting yet beautiful black-and-white design covered its entirety.

He didn't bother verbally acknowledging my assumption, though my confirmation came in the twitch at the corner of his mouth as he sat back against his car, crossing one ankle over the other. “So you're the bride everyone's looking for.”

I scrunched my nose. “I'm Valen.”

“Well, Valen, Jade's currently organizing a search party so she and your cheating boyfriend can try to explain themselves. So, if you don't want to deal with their bullshit excuses today, I'm willing to play Uber.”

This was easily going to top my list of strangest conversations I'd ever had.

Reed Lawson wasn't only the owner of a multi-billionaire dollar real estate development company and one of Boston's most desired men, his dad had also married Jade's mom a couple of years ago, making them step-siblings.

I licked my lips, telling myself it was because the August sun felt like it had been turned on high today and not because the sexiest man alive—*People Magazine* confirmed—was standing in front of me, offering to bail me out of hell by being my personal driver.

I cleared my throat. "You're gonna have to help me."

"Pretty sure that's what I'm trying to do?"

I held out my hand. "I mean... literally help me up. Because I'm starting to think they put me in this dress so I couldn't escape."

He smirked but didn't comment as he pulled me to my feet, then he opened the door to the back seat of his car and proceeded to help me shove and stuff layers and layers of fabric inside until he could slam the door behind me. I sat in the center seat with the dress pillowed around me.

He climbed into the driver's seat and looked back at me in the rearview mirror. "Where to?"

Anywhere but here was my first thought.

But as I opened my mouth, another came to mind.

"Do you know Dolores' Diner?"

Chapter Four

REED

“Here you go, dear,” Dolores said with a sweet smile as she slid a piece of apple pie before Valen. The hour ride here had been almost in silence. She’d stared out the window for most of it, a plethora of different expressions passing over her features, which I couldn’t help but take in as I glanced back at her in the mirror. “I hope this helps.”

I figured at this point, the two of them knew each other, given Dolores didn’t look surprised to see Valen wearing a wedding gown, and we hadn’t even ordered yet.

Hell, I think we’d been sitting for less than two minutes.

“Thank you so much, Dolores,” Valen murmured, forcing a smile as she looked up at the elderly woman who, with her tight gray curls and large round glasses, gave me major Mrs. Claus vibes. When she turned her attention back to me, she must have seen the curiosity on my face because she pointed to the pie with her fork. “Apple pie is my comfort food. It soothes my soul.”

Not one to judge what people use to get themselves through stressful situations, I held up my hands. “Sounds a lot better than my comfort food.”

“Which is?”

“Whiskey.”

She grinned. Her smile was infectious, and I couldn’t help but mirror it across the table.

“Anything for you, hun?” Dolores asked, pulling my attention to her. She was already poised, pencil and pad in hand, ready to take my order.

“Coffee,” I answered, pulling a fifty from my pocket and placing it on her pad. “Double espresso, please, and no change.”

“Coming right up, and thank you very much.” Dolores’ smile was a little playful, and I didn’t miss how she nudged Valen, their eyes meeting before she walked away.

Valen smiled across the table. “She likes you.”

I raised one of my eyebrows. “All I did was order a coffee.”

“Coffee orders say a lot about someone.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Okay, so how about you fill me in on what it is that I just told her about myself.”

She laughed softly, the sound light and airy. “Espresso. You can be an impulsive shoot-from-the-hip type. But it’s generally because you know what you want, and you aren’t afraid to speak your mind.” *Yes. Yes. Yes.* “Your honest and no-nonsense attitude also means you hate liars and when people try to bullshit you.”

And yes.

Today’s situation is an excellent example of exactly that.

Walking into the church amidst the chaos Valen had left behind, it hadn’t taken me long to realize I was in the wrong place.

With the wrong people.

“The hell is going on?” I called to my father as I walked up the steps of the church. Given I’d seen the bride storming off down the street and the entire bridal party was here and not chasing after her, I was assuming something dramatic had gone down.

Dad stepped out the doors, his eyes wide but his voice barely above a whisper as he gave me the rundown. “Fucking hell, what a shitstorm.” He nodded toward the guy standing in the corner, a heavy frown on his face as he stared into the distance, his arms folded across his

chest. “The groom and Jade were hooking up behind the bride’s back. She and Jade had been friends for ten years, and she outed them in front of the entire church full of people. Said, thanks for fucking my fiancé! Jesus Christ, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I need to find her!” Jade cried, struggling against the hold of a handful of bridesmaids. “We need to go and get her so I can tell her—”

“No, no, no,” Christine said as she crouched in front of her daughter and grabbed hold of her hands. “You need to let her throw her tantrum and speak to her when she’s cooled down.”

“A tantrum?” I scoffed. “Your daughter was screwing the groom behind her best friend’s back. Pretty sure the bride has every right to storm the hell out of here.”

Jade’s crying only got louder while Christine’s mouth fell open. “And whose side are you on?”

The side of the person who got hurt.

The one where nobody seemed to give a flying fuck.

That’s who.

Because it was a familiar feeling.

One I knew far better than any of these assholes.

Which is why I turned and walked out.

Another mission suddenly in my sights.

“Did you really thank Jade for fucking your boyfriend?”

“I believe the word I used was fiancé,” Valen corrected, piling a spoonful of apple pie into her mouth. I waited for her to send it flying back out again, given the pie filling was fresh out of the oven and probably equal to the temperature of the sun.

But she didn’t even flinch.

Instead, she seemed to relax back into the cushioned booth seat, the faux leather creaking underneath her. The dress she was wearing was absolutely ridiculous and slightly on the comical side. It looked like it was slowly eating her from the bottom up. The more she sunk into the seat, the more the poof swallowed her whole.

She let out a heavy sigh, dropping the spoon back onto the plate. “Your sister—”

“She’s not my sister,” I corrected, trying to keep the sharp edge out of my tone but failing. “Her mom married my dad, and in the past two years, the woman has all but sucked him dry.”

My disdain for Christine was something I didn’t sugarcoat, much to my father’s frustration. He wanted me to love her, to pull her in and treat her like family, and I knew why. Because it would be a huge *fuck you* to my mom to have this happy little family that they’d both always wanted but was torn away from them.

Personally, I didn’t think she’d give a damn either way.

She moved away to escape the pain.

To escape me.

It was that saying—*hurt people, hurt people*—and while it really fucking hurt to have to grow up knowing the only way I could have a relationship with her was through a few phone calls a year, she was still my mom.

Christine was not.

And would never be.

No matter how much my dad tried to force that bitch down my throat.

Valen rolled her eyes as she scooped another heap of pie onto her spoon. “That sounds about right. Your dad wouldn’t be the first she’s done that to.”

Her comment had me raising my brows. “What do you mean?”

“Your dad is Jade’s sixth stepdad,” she explained.

“Fucking hell. You sure?”

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed. “I should know. I’ve been at the past four weddings and heard all about the settlements Christine received from the last three divorces.” It was starting to become pretty fucking obvious that Christine may have never had a job in her life. It seemed to me like her permanent occupation was marrying old, rich men and taking half their shit.

Dolores came by and slipped my coffee onto the table in front of me before disappearing just as quickly as she appeared. When she was gone, I clenched my jaw tightly and spat out, “That part of her background, Dad conveniently forgot to mention.”

I sipped at the espresso in front of me even though the urge to shot the entire thing and ask for another was strong as hell.

Valen let out a heavy sigh. “I can’t wait to get home...” Her words trailed off, and suddenly, her head fell backward, her eyes drew closed. “This can’t be happening. It can’t be. Not again,” she whispered to herself. The words were probably not meant for my ears, but I couldn’t help but find myself strangely in tune to Valen’s frequency.

“I got you this far. I can probably manage to give you a ride home,” I offered, but she was already clambering awkwardly out of the booth. “Valen, what are you—”

“I don’t have anywhere to go,” she whispered, finally making it to her feet. “I gave up my apartment a little over a week ago and moved in with Chad.”

“You’ve only been living together a week?”

“Not helping, Reed,” she exclaimed, her voice hitting this high note that possibly could have pierced my eardrums. It was full of panic and a stark contrast to the complete poise she had maintained up until this point. She paused and pinched her brow, breathing in and out a few times before she finally looked up at me again, this time with tears sitting on her bottom eyelashes. Tears that made me want to murder the

person who put them there. “God, I need to get out of here and start making phone calls. With a phone I don’t have because I left it at the wedding. I just... have to go.”

I pushed what was left of my espresso away, ready to get out and help her. “Wait, I’ll—”

Too late.

She turned, twisting herself in the fabric, the ridiculous dress sending her off balance.

“Fuck!” I cursed, fighting to get to my feet.

I thought I’d made it, sliding to my knees beneath her, but on the way down, her head collected the corner of the table we’d been sitting at. As she fell into my arms, her body went limp, and a pool of blood instantly began to stream from her forehead.

Dolores was there in a second, tossing me a dishtowel, which I quickly pressed to Valen’s head. Her body flinched, but she didn’t come around.

“Call an ambulance,” I yelled, ignoring the flurry of activity around me, every ounce of my attention on the feisty Cinderella I held in my arms. “You’re okay.”

Fucking hell.

Today had already been a rollercoaster ride.

But I was pretty sure the ride wasn’t done, and all I could do was hope we both made it out alive.

Chapter Five

REED

“You said I didn’t have to do it anymore!” I cried, shaking my head as tears ran like waterfalls down my cheeks.

“Don’t be so selfish, Reed,” Dad snapped, grabbing my arm and dragging me from the sofa. I struggled against his death grip, trying to dig my heels into the carpet, but it was no use. I was only eight years old, attempting to take on a fully grown adult—a battle I wouldn’t win, but that I continued to fight.

“Mom!” I called, standing in the foyer as Dad pulled my coat on, roughly jamming my hands through the sleeves, which I instantly used to swipe at my nose.

Mom stepped out of the hall, her dressing gown wrapped around her, arms much the same, cradling her body. Her eyes were red and puffy, the dark circles under them making her look like a zombie. She hadn’t gotten out of bed for days, not since we got the phone call from the hospital.

“Mom,” I tried again when she didn’t answer. “I don’t want to do it anymore,” I whispered, my voice cracking.

Mom forced a smile—if you could call it that.

It may have just been the twitch of a muscle spasm in her face.

“This time, it will work,” she said, followed by a nod. “This time it will.”

“Reed, let’s go,” Dad urged, tugging at my arm.

“Reed. Reed, hello?”

Tug tug.

“Reed?”

Tug.

I jolted out of my daydream, gasping for air and shoving away the hand that kept pulling at my arm. “Stop!” I growled, blinking furiously, trying to bring reality back into focus but instantly regretting it. The white walls were blinding, but it was the sterile smell that sucked me straight back into the past. It was burned into my nose, and along with it came sights and sounds I’d spent years attempting to forget.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I pinched my eyes closed at the sound of Valen’s voice, taking a few breaths before I finally grew the balls to turn my head and face her. Her hands were in the air, a deep frown etched into her brow. A sight that almost made me smile, given she was sitting on the hospital bed with an absurdly large wedding dress draped down and over the sides.

“Fuck,” I cursed, leaning back into the old, worn hospital chair that felt like it could break underneath me at any moment. “Sorry, got in my head for a second.”

That was the only way I knew how to explain the mess my brain was in at that moment as I sat in the chair next to her hospital bed.

It was screaming... *run*.

Get the fuck out.

But instead of giving in to the loud, intrusive thoughts, I fought them, choosing to focus on Valen.

She pressed her hand to the side of her head, instantly sucking in a sharp painful breath.

“You’ve got eight stitches,” I told her and leaned forward, grabbing her hand and pulling it back down to her side when she went to reach for them again, maybe to check to see if I

was telling the truth. “Leave them alone.” I grabbed the glass of water from the table beside her bed and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she rasped, licking her lips and raising the glass to her mouth slowly, taking a few large gulps before handing it back. “How long have you been here?” she finally questioned, the plastic hospital pillows rustling under her head as she laid back.

“Few hours,” I answered with a shrug. “Why don’t you have any emergency contacts?”

I’d found Valen’s full name so they could look her up in their system. There was a record from a couple of years ago when she’d come in for an injury, but even after the nurses had made a few phone calls, there was no sign of anyone listed as the person to call if something happened.

Not that I would have left if there had been.

She pinched her eyes closed and cursed softly. “I don’t have a lot of friends and little to no family.”

“Dad?” I questioned.

“Dead.”

“Mom?”

“Dead to me.” She laughed, her head falling to the side, so she was looking at me. “Pretty sad existence, right?”

“Sometimes it’s better to have a small circle of people around you,” I said, clasping my hands together and cracking my knuckles—a bad habit I resorted to when I was uncomfortable. “When I was younger, people looked at me differently. But as I began to work hard and climb in the business world, those same people wanted to walk back into my life like they hadn’t walked out when I was worth nothing.”

She pressed her lips together for a second, and I could practically see the cogs turning in her mind as if she was carefully choosing the words she wanted to speak.

“I, um...” she started before letting out a heavy sigh. “I had the opposite problem. I grew up with money. Then when shit

hit the fan, and I lost everything... no one stepped up to help me because I didn't have anything to offer them anymore."

"How'd you lose everything?"

She swallowed hard, turning her gaze away from me again, directing it at the ceiling as she whispered, "I chose to fight instead of follow."

I wasn't sure why that simple explanation had this fury building beneath my skin. It'd taken one interaction for me to realize that this woman was worth so much fucking more than anyone had given her credit for. She had the perfect mixture of sweetness and strength—both I couldn't help but admire, especially now I was learning about what made Valen, Valen.

"Sometimes that's the only way," I assured her, reaching up and pinching her chin so I could force her to turn to look at me. "When we fight, we risk losing the people around us. But if we don't fight, we risk losing ourselves."

She held my gaze, her eyes glassy as she took a long, deep breath.

She heard me.

My words were sinking in.

And so they should.

Because they were coming from someone who knew exactly how she was feeling, I'd been there. I knew what it was like to stand up and fight for something every other person was telling you was wrong, but we knew was right.

You have to make a decision.

And then you have to live with it.

"You know, you've done your civic duty by coming by the hospital with me, but you can go if you want to," Valen urged, forcing a smile. "I'll be fi—"

"I'm not leaving."

"Good," Valen's doctor announced as she stepped through the small gap in the curtains. "Valen, I'm Dr. Holloway. It's so

good to see you awake and alert. You've been in and out since the ambulance brought you in."

"I have?" Valen questioned, her brow pinched.

Dr. Holloway nodded with a gentle smile. "I'm going to have some tests done, but I suspect you have a concussion. Which is pretty lucky considering how hard you hit that table."

"I'm burning this dress the moment I get the chance," Valen grumbled, and I chuckled softly under my breath. "When can I go..." She paused before she could say home because it didn't exist.

"After we do a scan, just to rule out anything nefarious," Dr. Holloway explained, using a pen to tap away at a handheld screen the size of a small book. "If it's all good, and there's no other symptoms or complications, I'll be able to send you home in a few hours. Do you have someone who can stay with you?"

"Why?" Valen questioned.

"We like to have someone with concussion patients for forty-eight hours after the incident, just as a precaution in case things go downhill."

"I don—"

"She's going to stay with me," I cut in before Valen could brush it off like it was no big deal.

She opened her mouth to object, but I wasn't about to let her win this one, so I simply turned my attention toward the doctor. "Just let me know what I need to look out for, and I'll keep a close eye on her."

Dr. Holloway continued to tap away at the small screen in her hands and a smile on her face. "Good. I'll get you an information sheet printed and get Valen booked in for her scan." She finished up her notes. "Okay, I'll be back when it's done. And if it's all fine, you'll be ready to head home."

"Thanks," I said simply.

Dr. Holloway grinned as she stepped out of the small cubicle and pulled the curtain shut again behind her.

I could feel Valen's glare burning the side of my face. "You can quit trying to slice my head off with the lasers you're shooting from your eyes."

"What—"

"Where exactly did you plan on going?" I challenged, leaning back into the flimsy chair with my arms folded across my chest. Valen was a fighter—I knew that much. But I'd also proven time and time again, so was I. "I've got plenty of space at my place. That way, you have someone around in case you have a damn brain aneurysm or something, and it will give you time to look for a new place."

The anger melted from her face, a wave of ease moving through her body, her muscles relaxing back into the bed. She laughed and shook her head. "You know how angry this will make Jade and your stepmom."

"Those are just bonus points."

She inhaled long and deep through her nose, obviously fighting a smile. "Okay. Thank you. But you better not be some weirdo."

"Says the girl wearing eight stitches and a bloody wedding gown."

"Touché."

Chapter Six

VALEN

The sun peeked through a gap in the curtains. The slither of light hit me directly in the eyes. I blinked a few times, fighting nature's wake-up call and attempting to roll over and go back to sleep. But the stitches in my forehead were already beginning to ache, and I'd need to get up soon and take some painkillers before that ache turned into a full-blown migraine.

I sat up, but the wave of dizziness that hit me was a warning. I was going to have to make this process slow. So before I got to my feet, I took some time to sit and admire the architecture I had been far too tired to appreciate when I was released from the hospital late last night.

There was an exposed brick wall as a headboard for the bed, the red and orange tones complemented by the bedding and the rug on the floor. It was a beautiful feature, immaculate from a distance, but up close, you could see the individual bricks were slightly worn and imperfect, which helped to give the room a homely and lived-in feel.

This house had history, and that alone had a warm and welcoming tone—surprising for what was essentially a billionaire's bachelor pad.

I slowly inched toward the edge of the bed as I continued to marvel at the details of the room. Large windows, hand-carved embellishments, and crown moldings framed the ceilings. They had this leafy, vine-like pattern I knew must have been original to the Victorian townhouse—something out of the early 1900s. You didn't see details like that in houses that much anymore because it was a feature that took time and effort.

Nowadays, everyone wanted fast and easy.

Their food, their work, their relationships.

No one took the time anymore.

Me included.

I'd thrown myself into a relationship with Chad, ignoring all the red flags that were fluttering and flying in my face. The main one being how he'd always ask to include Jade in things we were doing and places we were going. I thought at the time it was a way to show me he understood the importance of my relationship with my friends, which was a complete contrast to how I'd been made to feel when I was younger. But that relief was short-lived, and what seemed like a blessing yesterday became a curse when another person I loved was torn away from me.

First Maddie.

Now Jade.

Chad? No, not so much.

When I found the pictures and messages on his cell yesterday morning, I didn't feel the same dread and heartache at the thought of losing my friends. What hit me was an overwhelming feeling of relief. It was my gut telling me I'd actually known all along that my relationship with Chad wasn't what I wanted it to be. But instead of seeing the signs, I'd let this deep, entrenched trauma take over.

I needed to prove to the world I *could be loved*.

I needed to prove to the people who *should have loved* me that I *could be loved*.

But all I'd done was to prove how good I was at ignoring the signs when I wanted something so bad.

I groaned as I threw my legs over the edge of the bed, my body utterly exhausted and protesting every move I made. The oversized hoodie Reed had given me late last night hung almost to my knees as I finally got to my feet. It was thick and heavy, like a weighted blanket, but it was the smell that had me wishing I didn't have to take it off.

Whatever Reed wore was a far more masculine scent than you'd expect from your typical businessman. It was warm and woody, like sitting next to an open fire in the middle of winter. There was nothing like it—the smell of the fire burning, the flicker of the flames, and how they licked at your skin.

Captivating yet potentially dangerous at the same time.

Just like how I was beginning to see Reed.

He had the looks, the tattoos, the slightly cocky but not quite arrogant attitude.

He wasn't dangerous in your traditional sense, brandishing weapons or making threats of violence. Instead, the danger came in just how comfortable I felt around him and how easily I was already letting him in when I should really be shutting everyone out.

As I stepped around the bed, I noticed a couple of bags across the room by the window. I walked over and sat on the floor next to them, pulling one open and digging through the contents.

New clothes, underwear, toiletries.

All are folded and packed meticulously.

Tags still on.

And all the right size for me, which would have been quite difficult given my body had a little curve to it here and there.

Obviously, the work of a woman.

“Wonder if he has a girlfriend,” I murmured to myself, already planning an excuse for getting out of here if that were true.

“He does not.” Looking back over my shoulder, I found Reed with a smirk on his face as he leaned against a doorway—shirtless—his abs glistening with sweat and a loose pair of track pants hanging low on his hips.

Really low.

Heart-stoppingly fucking low.

Revealing a perfectly carved V that sunk below the waistband.

The tattoos from his neck crawled down onto his chest, covering every inch while leaving his torso almost completely clean, with the exception of a scar on his left side, a few inches long. I opened my mouth to ask about the story behind it, but I was quickly distracted as he took the T-shirt in his hand and pulled it over his head, letting it hang around his neck for a minute.

My heart picked up its pace, turning from a beat to more of a flutter.

“You want to check cupboards in case I have a girl stashed somewhere?” he teased with a raised brow.

My tongue snaked out, wetting my lips before they turned into a smile. “Probably no point, to be honest,” I fired back. “Apparently, I’m pretty good at not seeing what’s right in front of me.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I think we all have a bad habit of ignoring the signs that something might hurt us,” he explained as he unwound the tape that was wrapped around his hands and wrists. It was the kind fighters used to support their hands and prevent injuries. “That’s only human.”

“Well, I can confirm, whoever she was that helped you with this, she got everything right,” I commented, grabbing hold of the blankets on the bed and attempting to pull myself to my feet.

“I have an incredibly good assistant called Martha,” he said with a nod. “I’d tell her how well she did, but she’ll probably ask for a raise.”

“She deserves one.”

“I already pay her more than I pay my lawyer.”

Holy shit.

“Good.” I thought I’d made it, my feet flat, my body upright—but then the room started to spin. I swear it did. The

floor was moving on its own, and I stumbled, trying to find my footing.

Two hands grabbed my upper arms, steadying me, though everything around me was still a blurry mess. I closed my eyes, allowing Reed to keep me from falling until I felt like the spinning had stopped. Then, I blinked a few times to bring everything in the room back into focus. Reed kept a hold of me as I shuffled myself backward until the bed hit the back of my knees, and I dropped down onto the soft surface.

Then we both took long, deep breaths.

“Next time you stand, if you could do it a little slower, that’d be fucking great. I thought we were going to have a repeat of yesterday,” Reed growled, finally taking a step back. “If I didn’t already mention, the hospital isn’t my most favorite place to be, and going back isn’t on my list of things I want to do.”

The giggle that left me, I think, surprised both of us, and I pressed my hand over my mouth. “Sorry.” Another laugh escaped, though this one was much softer and more normal. “Honestly, the past twenty-four hours have been so ridiculous. It’s starting to feel like a fever dream.”

That was no joke.

One minute, I was about to get married.

The next, I was in Reed Lawson’s apartment, single again and sporting a head injury.

“I get it.” The acknowledgment felt genuine. Like he really did understand the nightmarish downpour I’d somehow found myself caught in without an umbrella. Surprising because a man like Reed didn’t seem like the kind to accidentally stumble into a storm.

He would more likely be the one creating them.

Reed held out his hand, and I placed mine in it, allowing him to pull me back onto my feet.

“You should get dressed,” he said, his hands hovering as I waited to see if the spinning top I was standing on was done

for today. Satisfied, he finally took a step back. “I’ve got a short meeting to catch, but it shouldn’t take long... then I have a surprise.”

“I don’t like surprises.”

“We can call it something else.”

I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t like surprises. I liked to be prepared, and with my world already feeling a little off-kilter, I’m not sure I could handle another movement of my axis. “How about you call it by the name of the place and include a brief description of what you do there.”

Reed smirked. “But then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Exactly.”

He backed toward the door, still refusing to give me much more than this smug, know-it-all look on his face. “Dress like you would if you were cutting down a tree.” With that, he turned, marching off down the hall. “We’re leaving in twenty minutes.”

“I’ve never cut down a tree,” I called after him, but there was no response.

What the actual hell was happening?

And why couldn’t I stop smiling?

Chapter Seven

REED

“You’re joking, right?” I questioned, staring at my father in absolute disbelief. “The offer we agreed to was five million, well over the three-and-a-half million dollar valuation we had done at the start of the year and almost twice the dollar amount you need to pay back the debtors you’re in the shit with.”

“You’re talking like you can’t afford it,” Christine commented, strumming her claw-like nails on the tabletop. “We are fam—”

“*We* are *not* family,” I snapped.

“Reed!” Dad hissed, slamming his open palm down, the loud bang pulling the attention of almost everyone within the bar for a few seconds before they returned to their drinks. My staff and security were watching cautiously, the boys on the door inching closer and closer as they felt the tension at our table rise.

Most were aware of how the relationship between my father and I had deteriorated even more than it already had since he married Christine a little over two years ago. I didn’t hide my disdain for the woman who slithered into his life like a damn snake and took control of everything from where he lived to what he spent his money on.

Anyone close to me who knew the history I had with my parents wondered why I even bothered to continue to fight for a man who had spent my whole life reminding me that despite everything I had achieved, I was still his biggest disappointment.

But I guess there would always be that inner child who needed acceptance.

And I think he knew it.

“Look...” Dad started again, his shoulders sagging. “Eight million dollars is what I need. That’s the bottom-line amount that will clear the debts but also allow us to pay for other things.”

I leaned back in my seat, folding my arms across my chest. “What *other* things?”

“A holiday home in Newport,” Christine announced, a lot louder than she needed to, before turning to look at her daughter, who sat quietly at the end of the table. “We need a place we can all go to destress sometimes. If we had it already, Jade could be there, making the most of the beautiful beach, healing after yesterday’s disaster.”

I raised my eyebrows at Jade. “Healing? You’re the one who needs healing? Maybe you could *heal* by taking more responsibility for your damn actions.”

Her body jerked, and she curled in on herself, wrapping her arms around her waist as if she was fighting a visceral reaction to my words. “Whose side are you on anyway?” Jade demanded, her shoulders drooping as she leaned back into the seat. We’d faced off before, our arguments often far more toxic than this, but she seemed to be shrinking away this time, and I wasn’t sure why.

“She’s right,” Christine interrupted again, the woman looking for any excuse to hear her own voice. “She’s your sister. You should be supporting her.”

My laughter boomed, everyone inside the bar once again glancing over at us, some trying to discreetly point their cell phones at us, no doubt looking for the next scoop to sell to the magazines. Usually, I wouldn’t give a damn, but I was also aware that Christine especially thrived in the spotlight, and I wasn’t about to give her that shit for free.

“I have a sister,” I said, lowering my voice to a growl. “Jade is not her.”

My parents separated during my junior year in high school.

My mom and my older sister, Violet, moved to Seattle shortly after, and I was left with Dad. Mom insisted I was the

reminder she couldn't handle seeing every single day.

At least they could run.

I was the one who had to look in the mirror every fucking morning.

“Oh yeah,” Jade taunted, her head falling to the side. “When’s the last time that so-called sister called you? When’s the last time she wanted anything to do with you? Oh, that’s right, she doesn’t.”

Rage burned like a fire, scorching my skin.

I glanced at my father, wondering if he would say something.

Tell her she was wrong.

Which she was.

That she was out of line.

Which she was.

But instead, he sunk further into his seat while the two women at the table sat taller. He wasn't in control here. I think I'd known that for a long time, but in this moment, it was so damn clear. And I wasn't about to let them think that they could simply come in here with their hands out and their noses in the air and get what they wanted.

Slowly, I rose to my feet, my chair scraping loudly as I pushed it back. “We’re done.” The heat from my anger instantly melted Christine’s smug smirk off her face.

She started to shake her head. “What does... wait...” she stammered, her eyes flickering from me to my father. “So are you going to pay the eight—”

“No.” I stepped to the side, shoving my chair in and jolting the entire table.

If this contract wasn't signed, then my grandfather's company would go into liquidation, and everything he had worked so hard to create would be lost to us forever. Christine wasn't wrong—I could afford to pay eight million. AL Logistics revenue would earn me that money back in ten to

fifteen years, and that was only if we didn't expand the company like my business advisors had said was extremely possible after an in-depth exploration into its finances.

But was I willing to allow these people to not just financially but also emotionally blackmail me so they could get more than what they deserved?

The answer was *hell fucking no*.

And if they wanted to play these games, I was about to prove why I was a hell of a lot fucking better at it than them.

"The deadline to pay what you owe is Monday. Tomorrow," I announced, slapping the contract down on the table before turning to my furious-looking step monster. "You might have to think a little smaller for your holiday home. Maybe instead of buying a home in Newport, you could rent one. I'll give you ten minutes to decide."

Anyone else probably would have thought that was a reasonable offer.

Not this woman.

I didn't look back as I walked away from the table, ignoring the angry whispers as they discussed exactly what the hell they were going to do now they hadn't gotten their way. I made a beeline for the bar, slipping in behind and grabbing a bottle of tequila from the shelf. "I'll pay for the bottle when I'm done," I told Aspen, one of my bar staff.

She hit me with a concerned look.

Aspen didn't only work here.

Her best friend was married to one of my best friends, so she knew me a little better than most of my staff.

"I'm fine," I added, answering the silent question in her eyes as I cracked the cap. "I just need to take a minute before someone else ends up paying for my personal problems."

Understanding dawned on her, and she nodded. "If you're not out in five minutes..."

"Yeah, yeah."

I didn't make a habit of drinking the profits, but with the way my hands were shaking in anger, a shot or two would be the best option to bring me back down to earth. It was hard to see my dad so broken down and dejected. He and I may not have seen eye to eye for a long time, but growing up, I'd been able to at least look at him and see a fighter. There were times when I was younger when our family was in tatters, and he'd been the backbone, he'd stood strong and held us up when everything was crumbling around us.

Crumbling because of me.

He and I were always going head-to-head, yelling, screaming with shit turning physical on more occasions than I would like to admit. But at least when we'd clashed during those years, I'd been able to respect what he was doing and fighting for.

That man out there who had cowered behind these two—I did *not* know him.

Stepping out from behind the bar, I made my way down a short hallway to the left, which had the public bathrooms on either side and a pair of large double doors at the end, which took deliveries from the alleyway out back. My office was just off to the right, and I stepped inside, slamming the door shut behind me, the glass panel in the center rattling dangerously.

The Kings Line was a bar I fell in love with years ago, well before I built the empire I had now. The atmosphere was different than other places I'd been within the city. The people who came in often sought something more relaxed. A place that felt less like a night out and more like having a drink at home with your buddies.

I ended up buying The Kings Line with a friend of mine, Drake Shaw, a little over a year ago, not because either of us was looking at adding bars and restaurants to the list of businesses we put our names to, but because with the way the city was growing and changing, we wanted to ensure no one could come in and tear it down. And given that was exactly the kind of business we were both in, we knew at some point someone would try.

The office was rundown, not flashy like the ones I had uptown. In a way, I think it brought me back to earth to be hiding out in some dark corner at the back of the pub, the walls decorated with 1960s beer advertisements and body-shaped dents that I imagined were courtesy of the odd bar brawl or two.

I sat in the squeaky desk chair, fishing inside the drawer for a shot glass. The one I pulled out read...

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL DEFIANCE MOTORCYCLE CLUB

I filled the glass, the liquid pillowing at the edges when I topped it a little too much.

Fuck it.

I moved quickly, lifting it carefully to my mouth and throwing it back, the sharp hit of liquor like a slap in the face, which stunned me momentarily. Maybe that's why it took me a few seconds to realize the buzzing sound in the room was coming from my jacket pocket. I shoved my hand inside and pulled out my phone, barely taking note of Bronson's name before pressing it to my ear. "Yeah?"

I'm not sure what it was about that single word.

Maybe it was the way I said it.

Or just the single-word answer.

But it must have been bad.

"I'm suddenly regretting this phone call," Bronson said with a heavy sigh. "What's up your ass, you grumpy bastard."

I could have hung up.

But Bronson Rhodes was one of the few people who actually knew me well enough to call me out when I was in a shitty mood. He was the heir to an empire—Rhodes Hotels.

They were a worldwide brand, with one in every major city, though its humble beginnings came from right here in Boston, the first having been built downtown, possibly close to a hundred years ago. And the latest being finished in recent years, a few blocks over.

Tucking my cell between my shoulder and ear, I screwed the lid back on the tequila bottle and pushed it to the side. “What’s going on?”

“You got time to chat about next weekend?”

I glanced over at the clock on the wall. I’d already been in here longer than I anticipated. Valen was still sitting out in the car, waiting for me to wrap things up so we could get going to the surprise I promised. “Yeah, can you meet me at Liquor and Lumber?”

There was silence for a breath. “You’re going axe throwing?”

“Yeah.”

“On your own?”

“No.”

“What the—”

“It’s a long fucking story, man,” I cut in, unsure how I would explain the events that had transpired.

“I’ll make time,” he insisted with a laugh. “I’ll meet you there.”

“All right, see you soon.”

I made my way back into the bar, letting Aspen know I was heading out again. I was already halfway to the exit when I heard, “Reed!”

I paused, glancing back over my shoulder.

Dad and Christine were still at the table where I’d left them.

Jade, though, was nowhere to be found.

Dad had a pen in his hand, and when our eyes met, he made a point of scribbling in anger on the final page before holding

it up in the air. “There. Happy?”

Happy?

Yeah.

So fucking happy to see the crater between my family and me crack open a little wider.

“Leave it at the bar,” I called back, ready to be done with this day and these people already.

I didn’t look back.

There was somewhere else I’d rather be.

And someone I’d rather be there with.

Chapter Eight

VALEN

“Liquor and Lumber?” I couldn’t say the name of the bar without laughing.

“Boston’s best-kept secret,” Reed insisted as he exited the car. I pulled the handle, getting out onto the curb as he rounded to my side, closing the car door behind me and offering me his arm.

I rolled my eyes at the gentlemanly gesture but still slipped my hand through the crook of his elbow, allowing him to lead the way. I wasn’t surprised when all eyes turned to us the moment we walked through the door of this axe-throwing bar, women and men both eyeing us from the fenced-off spaces around the room.

I leaned into Reed, lowering my voice to a whisper, “Do you ever get used to people just staring at you when you go places?”

I mean, I would be staring too, given how damn attractive the man looked today.

The business attire I’d seen him in made this man sexy, but today, he’d leveled that up by wearing a pair of dark blue denim jeans, a black hoodie, and a leather jacket pulled on over the top. The high-top black Nikes and Aviator sunglasses were the icing on what was already a very delicious-looking cake.

One that, with all these people staring, I was tempted to lick and announce to be mine.

But he wasn’t.

He was a nice person—a kind human being—helping out another human being.

Reed dipped his head, turning so his lips brushed my temple. “Pretty sure they aren’t looking at me,” he whispered back, sending a rush of heat burning straight up my neck and filling my cheeks as we stepped up to the bar.

“Mr. Lawson!” the perky male bartender called as he approached. “How can I help?”

“Martin. Both of us. Plus, Bronson will probably be here soon,” Reed explained like he was a regular—the fact that the bartender seemed to know him and whoever Bronson was suggested maybe it was true. “You have somewhere off to a side where we can have some space?”

Martin nodded, grabbing a couple of large flat menus before rounding the bar. “I’ll put you over here,” he said, gesturing for us to follow. We passed by rows and rows of twenty to thirty-foot ‘lanes’ made up of a large wooden bullseye on the wall at one end and a bar table at the other, with some wood and floor-to-ceiling netting that separated each.

It was loud, but not overwhelmingly so, with a lot of chatter and the odd thump as the axe collided with its target.

Martin took us to the lane at the furthest end of the bar, against the wall.

“I’ll make sure no one books out the place next to you so you can have some privacy,” he said, placing a couple of menus on the table. “Now, drinks? Food?”

He looked at me first with a wide smile. “Um... yeah. Margarita?”

“Absolutely. Mr. Lawson?”

“Just a beer... whatever’s on tap,” Reed answered. “Send Bronson over when he gets here.”

Martin nodded. “Sure, I’ll bring Mr. Rhodes over. Let me know if you want to eat.” Then he was gone, hurrying back across the bar.

The place was busy, and I couldn’t see a huge amount of staff around.

I was about to question Reed on why we came here when my brain finally put together the two names that had been used. “Bronson Rhodes?”

“Mmm...” Reed hummed, pulling out one of the bar stools for me before taking a seat on his own. “He called while I was in The Kings Line. Needs to have a chat about something, so he’s going to swing by.”

“Are you moving into the hotel business?”

Reed smiled but shook his head. “Bronson became a good friend when I was starting my business ambitions. He wants to expand the Rhodes brand into other things... apartments, resorts, spas. He asked if I’d be interested in working on it with him for a little while as business partners until he figures out what the best path is to take.”

“That’s kind of amazing,” I said, leaning in. “The world of the rich and wealthy isn’t often a place where you find those kind of people who you feel you can trust like that.”

I should know.

I’d been in it.

Every other week, I was hearing stories and being told who I could and couldn’t speak to anymore.

“Ah, right. You said the other night you grew up with money,” Reed mentioned, pausing as a waitress rushed over and quickly placed our drinks on the table before disappearing like a flash. “What’d your parents do?”

“My mom is Helen Maxwell. She’s an—”

“Actress,” Reed cut in, his brow pinched. “She’s won Academy Awards. A Golden Globe.”

“Yup.” I nodded as I picked up my margarita, swallowing two large mouthfuls before the sharp tequila taste hit my tongue, and I had to put it down. “Wow.” I coughed, banging my fist against my chest. “That’s *really* good.”

Reed sipped at his beer, not taking his eyes off me as I attempted to avoid having to discuss my mother and her

narcissistic tendencies. But I could already tell he wasn't about to let it go.

I let out a heavy sigh. "My parents divorced when I was finishing middle school. It was right when my mom had started to become a household name, and she was signing contracts left, right, and center. So my brother and I moved in with my dad because Mom was away so much, but I was really happy for her getting to follow her dreams. We would see her maybe one week or weekend a month, but then my dad was in a car accident when I was about fifteen, and he died, so my brother and I had to move in with my mom full time."

"Dynamics changed."

I scoffed. "That's an understatement. Suddenly, she had two kids to parade around like dolls, and it just sent me straight off the rails." I took a sip of my drink. "Then I pushed her boundaries until one day..." she pauses then continues, "... they broke."

"You couldn't help yourself, could you?" my mother accused, climbing into the back seat of the town car.

"Couldn't help myself?" I echoed, letting out a horrified laugh. "You have got to be joking."

She refused to look at me as the driver pulled us away from the police station, skillfully avoiding several paparazzi who had leaped in front of the vehicle to get those final few shots before we could escape.

"You could have walked away," she hissed, the heat of her anger swirling in the air like a thick smog, making it difficult to breathe. "Instead, you decided to make a scene."

She wasn't wrong about that part.

I'd just been bonded out of jail less than twenty minutes ago, and I'd already had almost ten messages from friends about the shaky cell phone video the news stations were playing on repeat. It had taken me all but a

few seconds to find it myself. The quality was questionable but the content clear as day.

Me in handcuffs.

Two police officers marching me down the front steps of a Dartmouth College frat house.

All while a hundred or more drunk college students stood watching on, some in horror, others in pure amusement.

Even at two in the morning, there had already been reporters everywhere screaming questions at me, their cameras flashing, desperate for a soundbite or a scandal. And while I'd somehow managed to keep my mouth shut—an achievement of its own—my silence wouldn't matter much.

The press would get their scoop soon enough, and I would gamble my inheritance on it being a load of shit. It would be some spectacularly spun story that would take the heat off me and probably pin it on someone else.

That's what publicists were for.

To sweep the rotten shit under the rug.

And my family had the best one in the city because we had the most shit to hide.

My brother's stint in the psych ward.

My parents' hateful divorce.

All hot piles of dog shit my mother paid someone to sprinkle with glitter so she wouldn't lose contracts, sponsorships, or movie deals.

And I just couldn't wait to see what kind of fucked-up lies I would read in the paper tomorrow to explain why award-winning actress Helen Maxwell's out-of-control daughter sent a Dartmouth College senior to the hospital with several broken bones. Not to mention how they were going to explain away the reason I wasn't being charged for attacking the sick bastard with a baseball bat.

Ironically, it would be the same reason why he wouldn't be charged for drugging and raping my best friend only a few minutes before.

Because money and status spoke louder than pain.

"This isn't about me trying to make you look bad, Mother," I snapped, turning my body to face her while she continued to stare straight ahead, her hands clenched tightly in her lap. "This is about Maddie and what that bastard did to her."

She waved her hand in the air and rolled her eyes as if she was trying to waft away the truth. "Don't be dramatic, Valen. They're young boys. They get a little too... excited when they're drunk."

"He raped her."

A sharp, narrowed glare was suddenly snapped toward me. "That is not a word you need to be throwing out into the world. Saying shit like that is how you get sued." She pointed her finger at my chest, her long, sparkly nail feeling like it might slice right through me if I wasn't careful with my words. "I will find out who this boy is, we will meet with him and his parents, and then you will beg for their forgiveness."

I scoffed. "His parents? He needs Mommy and Daddy to hold his wittle hand while the scary girl says she's sowwy?"

"You will apologize to him and his family," she ordered through gritted teeth. "You will not ruin everything I have created."

The pieces were falling into place.

Whoever this guy's parents were, they were rich.

Well connected.

More so than my mother.

And that's the reason she wanted me to fix this because if I didn't dig us out of this hole, they had the power to bury her in it.

“I should have known you’d be more worried about your own image than my best friend being sexually assaulted.” My mother’s selfishness knew no bounds, so I shouldn’t have been surprised that all she could think about was how this was going to impact her life.

I couldn’t remember the last time I felt anything but disappointment and disgust toward the woman whom I once admired and looked up to like she was a queen. The little girl in me still craved the mother who would braid my hair at the kitchen table as we ate breakfast, who would take me out on girls’ days to get our nails done, just the two of us, while my brother had to stay at home.

At the time, she’d been auditioning for small television roles, my dad supporting us by working two jobs so she could follow her dreams.

And that’s what she did.

She followed them straight into the depths of hell.

“I won’t,” I argued, shaking my head. “There’s no way in hell I’m saying sorry.”

Her lip curled into a sneer. “You broke three bones in his arm.”

“He’s lucky it was dark,” I answered with a shrug, leaning back into the leather seats and allowing my eyes to close. “I was aiming for his head.”

“Karl!” my mother called to her driver. “Pull over.”

Karl quickly jerked the steering wheel to the left.

I didn’t have time to grab anything as my body was tossed like a ragdoll against the door, then slammed into the front passenger seat when Karl tapped the brakes and pulled the car to a hard stop.

Then she looked at me with the kind of hatred in her eyes I would never forget. “Get. Out.”

Reed stared at me across the table when I was done telling him the story of how my mother condemned me. His features were frozen, pinched in a dark glare that I knew wasn't meant for me, but that sure as fuck felt as though it could vaporize me in seconds. "How old were you?"

I tipped my glass up, getting the last few drops of alcohol out of the bottom. "Seventeen. One of Jade's previous step-siblings went to Dartmouth at the time, and she'd invited Jade, Maddie, and I to this Halloween frat crawl. They didn't ID anyone who walked through the door. As long as you were wearing a costume, you were all good."

"Your friend, Maddie, was she okay?"

I pressed my lips together and forced a smile. "No. Did the guy get away with it? Yes."

His hands clenched a little tighter to his beer glass. "And she just threw you out like that?"

I managed to laugh a little, the tension of having to relive those moments slowly easing from my body. "In her defense, it had been years of me doing whatever the hell I could to push that woman's buttons."

"She still should have protected you. She's you're fucking mom."

"Eh," I answered with a shrug. "I don't really claim her anymore."

Sure, it hurt like hell to think about the bullshit I'd been through because of that woman. The lessons I'd had to learn on my own, the months I'd spent couch surfing in Jade and Maddie's homes until I turned eighteen. I'd given up a lot of things that could have been in my future had I just done what my mom wanted and not made waves so high that they could wash away her career.

I could have gone to an Ivy League college.

I could have used my family's powerful connections to get a high-paying job.

I could have had it easy had I simply kept my mouth shut and followed her rules.

But that wasn't me.

I believed in doing what was right and standing up for the people I loved.

So I went to community college, worked at a library, and lived from paycheck to paycheck.

What happened made my life harder, but it also made me stronger.

“So...”

The new voice finally pulled my attention from Reed. I was glad because I could see the way my story had affected him. It probably gave him a lot more understanding of who I was and why I made the choices I made on the day we met. That, or he was wondering what the fuck he got himself into by inviting me to live in his house.

I swallowed the hard lump that had formed in my throat and finally took in the incredibly handsome guy standing to my left. He smirked, this unexpected boyish energy in his eyes making me smile. “What'd I miss?”

When Reed didn't answer, I laughed. “You're gonna need to grab a drink. This might take a while.”

Chapter Nine

REED

“A librarian?” Bronson questioned, his eyes narrowed on an amused Valen.

“Yes, a librarian,” she insisted for what felt like the tenth time in the past five minutes.

I chuckled, and Bronson snapped his head toward me. “You’re fucking with me.” His eyes moved suspiciously between Valen and me as he twirled the axe in his hand. “Right?”

Valen threw her hands in the air but couldn’t stop smiling. “What is so shocking about me being a librarian? I don’t look like I could be intelligent enough?”

He lifted the axe, pointing it directly at her like he was eyeing her up. “Don’t try to entrap me with your word witchery.”

Valen threw her head back and laughed loudly before turning to me. “Reed. Come on.”

“She works at Boston U,” I told him, a fact I only knew because I’d had to fill in her forms at the hospital for her when her hands were a little shakey from her concussion. “It’s not like you would know what a fucking librarian looked like anyway. Have you even been in a library in the past ten years?”

“This is true. If our librarians looked like you, I would have spent a lot more fucking time studying when I was in college.” He turned back toward the target, barely pausing before launching the sharp weapon straight at it, hitting the center with little to no effort. “Maybe I should get a library card. Do they still have those?”

“Yes. We have library cards,” Valen explained extremely slowly with a smile as if she were a kindergarten teacher talking to a class of children.

Bronson directed his middle finger at her but thankfully refrained from poking his tongue out.

Valen threw back the last of her drink—the water she’d been drinking since that first margarita almost put her straight on her ass. “I’m going to the ladies’ room,” she announced, spinning on her heel and strutting across the bar.

I watched her the entire way until she disappeared behind two double doors that led to the bathrooms. When I finally turned my attention back to Bronson, he was staring at me, smirking. “Don’t fucking say it,” I ordered, getting to my feet and going around the tall table to the rack of axes.

“What shouldn’t I say?” he taunted, leaning back into the bar stool and folding his arms across his chest. “I shouldn’t say... this girl is hot, she’s smart, she’s bold.”

“She’s just walked out of a long-term relationship,” I added, grabbing an axe and swinging it in my arm to get a feel for the weight.

“And?” Bronson challenged.

“She’s just lost a best friend and a fiancé, who were fucking around behind her back.”

“And?”

I glared back at my friend.

Bronson and I had known each other for a long time.

We went to college together.

We’d done business together.

He was one of the few people in this world whom I trusted with my life, my business decisions, and to tell me the truth when most other people would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

“She’d be fucking good for you,” he said when I ignored him and walked over to the throwing lane.

“And you know that from spending the past forty-five minutes with her?”

“Brother, I would have fucking known that from spending five minutes with her,” he insisted, causing me to pause and actually turn to face him.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer, but I would ask it anyway. “And why is that?”

“Because you feel like you need to protect her,” he said, short of adding a ‘duh’ to it for effect. “When she was finished telling whatever story she filled you in on before I walked over, you looked like you were about to kill anyone who came anywhere near her.”

I was.

Her pathetic mother included.

“I just feel like she's been done fucking dirty,” I explained, turning back to face the target with my axe. “After everything she's been through, she deserves better.”

Two days.

That's all it had been since I picked up Valen on the side of the road and helped her shove her oversized wedding dress into the back seat of my car. Just two damn days, and here I was, ready to stand up and let the world know that this woman is worth so much fucking more than what the world had handed her.

I knew how ridiculous that probably sounded to anyone else.

But to me, it simply made sense.

“Don't tell me you two ladies have been busy gossiping and not throwing?” I glanced back as Valen slid onto a stool at the bar table with Bronson, looking extremely pleased with that insult.

“Actually, I was just about to let Reed know about a little problem we have for an event next weekend,” Bronson said, suddenly reminding me that there was another reason he had come down here, not just to be the nosey bastard he was.

I made quick work of tossing my axe, my aim a little off-center, before collecting it and returning to the table. “What’s happened? I thought everything was organized?”

Bronson nodded. “It was... until the venue had a burst water pipe and flooded yesterday.”

Valen’s mouth dropped open. “Oh wow. Is two weeks enough to clean it up before you guys need to use it?”

“Nope,” I answered, knowing already that was the problem. Bronson and I had recently purchased a small block out west in Allston. It was an up-and-coming area, and while we’d had some pushback from a few locals who didn’t see the benefit of the change, the student population in the area had a high turnaround. The local universities were ecstatic about the idea of us building more small flats and apartments, as well as a handful of business spaces to accommodate more jobs and opportunities.

The construction had begun a month or so ago, thanks to the investments both Bronson and I had injected, and we were at the next stage where we were planning an event to show off the building plans and models for potential buyers, which would be needed for us to continue construction and turn a profit.

We needed to show them exactly what we had and why they needed to jump on board.

“We’re gonna have to find somewhere else, like yesterday.”

“And catering,” Bronson added. “They were doing that too.”

“Don’t you guys have, like, event organizers or people who deal with these kinds of issues?” Valen questioned, leaning into the table. “You can’t just ask them?”

“We do, but I like to have a plan,” Bronson answered.

“What he means is that he can sometimes be a micromanager,” I explained, earning me a hard glare from my buddy. I learned a long time ago to try not to control every aspect of things. But this was Bronson’s first major step into my world, and if it was a place he was going to be a part of in

the future when expanding the Rhodes brand, he needed to ensure his first wade into the water didn't have him washed away.

“What is the event for?” Valen asked.

I went through the explanation, telling her about the area, the apartments, and the spaces we intended to add to an already busy and bustling area.

“Okay, so why can't you have it at the place you're building?”

I shook my head. “There's barely a first floor with four walls. The rest is steel beams and rebar.”

“Honestly, that might be kind of cool,” she said excitedly. “You could ask the locals to provide the food. It would give buyers a sense of what the area and the community are like, and it would help the locals build some trust in you that you want to include them and blend with the community, not overtake it. They will also get to meet potential buyers and could share their concerns.”

Neither Bronson nor I spoke.

But we both glanced at each other at the same time.

Bronson's smile said all it needed to say—probably a little more than needed, actually.

“It's just an idea...” Valen added when she didn't get an immediate response. “You coul—”

“Oh... I think it's a fucking amazing idea,” I cut in before raising my brow at Bronson. “Objections?”

“Not a single one here,” he agreed, already pulling his cell from his pocket. “I'm gonna make the call now so they can get started first thing in the morning.”

He got down from his stool and put his phone to his ear as he weaved toward the front door and away from the noisy bar.

Valen leaned in close. “Do you really think it's a good idea? You can be honest.”

I leaned in too, our shoulders brushing. “Truth is, I don’t particularly like lies. So you can be sure if I say it, it’s honest.” She pulled her bottom lip in between her teeth as she smiled. “All right?”

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed softly. “All right.”

“Good. Now it’s your turn, so grab an axe.”

She rolled her eyes, the sass switching straight back on the second I made a demand. It was like she hated it, but she hopped onto her feet and did it anyway.

The confidence Valen often showed was admirable and sexy.

She was a strong woman, determined not to be told what to do and how to live her life, even by people like her mom, who had so much influence and power in the world. I had so much fucking respect for that, given it was something at one point I’d been too scared to do myself.

But when she looked at me so shy and unsure of herself, fucking hell, it did something else.

It tugged on a part of me I didn’t recognize.

But that had me wanting to keep her close to me.

God help me if Bronson is right.

Chapter Ten

REED

“You going somewhere?”

Valen looked up from the purse she was furiously shoving her phone and the house keys inside. I’d given them to her yesterday morning since I’d had to attend several meetings and didn’t want her to think she was trapped inside the house without me.

The sharp pinch of her brow relaxed the moment she saw me, and she exhaled a hard breath. “Yeah,” she answered, her shoulders slumping. “I need to go and get my things from Chad’s apartment. I’ve been putting it off, but I left the keys there to the storage unit with my stuff in it, and at some point, I’m going to need them. He was planning on returning to work today, so I thought it’s probably the best time to do it.”

“All right,” I said, pulling at my tie as I headed for the staircase. “Wait a minute, and I’ll get Karl to drive us.”

“Reed, it’s fine,” she protested, but I was already halfway up the stairs. “Reed!”

“I’m coming with you,” I called back, not about to let her go there on her own in case the bastard was there. I’d seen his face that day she left him at the altar, how he’d stood in the corner silently stewing instead of chasing after her. To me, that was the sign of a man who was far more furious about how Valen had bruised his ego than he was about how he’d actually hurt her.

And a man like that was unpredictable.

My fingers worked on my button-down as I made my way past the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom. The shirt came off the second I entered my bedroom, and I tossed it onto my bed before stepping into my walk-in wardrobe.

“Reed, seriously, you don’t... have... to...” Her speech began to slow, and I could feel her behind me.

Not many people came into this room.

It was why I kept the things in it that I did.

Not just my clothes, but memories and achievements. Ones that I didn’t feel needed to be boasted or be asked questions of by hanging them in the open. Now though, Valen had seen them, and I could practically hear her reading the framed news articles that decorated one of the walls.

Designer Baby Saves Brother with Bone Marrow

and

*Brother Once Again Becomes Hero with Kidney
Donation*

“Is that you?”

I turned slowly, my eyes following her finger as she pointed to one of the many pictures on the wall. This one, in particular, was of me and my older brother, Gabe. We were both lying in hospital beds, holding hands between us. “Yeah,” I said quietly. “I got this scar that day.”

I dropped my eyes to my abdomen, brushing my finger lightly over the uneven scar on my left side. It was a little jagged, not exactly pretty.

“You had a kidney transplant,” she stated with confidence, inching a little closer as she examined it with her eyes. My muscles tightened as she studied me, this almost beautiful look of wonder on her face. “You needed one?”

“I gave one.”

Her eyes instantly shot up, meeting mine while her mouth dropped open. “What? Who?”

It wasn’t a story I explained to many people. Not if I didn’t have to. Sharing that part of myself was daunting, but for the

first time in years, my palms didn't sweat, my heart didn't race, and I found the words falling with ease from my mouth. "Have you ever heard of savior siblings?"

Her brow instantly pulled together, and she slowly shook her head from side to side. "I haven't."

I leaned back against the built-in units that lined my wardrobe, my hands gripping the edge tightly as all those emotions resurfaced like it was yesterday. "My older brother, Gabe, was diagnosed with leukemia when he was five years old," I explained, pushing through the uncomfortable twist in my stomach when I said his name out loud. "He needed stem cells to try and fight the cancer, but they couldn't find a match. So, they made one. Me."

"Wait!" There was no hiding her emotions as she processed the bomb I'd just dropped. I was quickly becoming obsessed with just how expressive Valen's face was. The way her eyes sparkled and her smile stretched across her whole face, it was the brightest I'd ever fucking seen. But it also meant when I caught signs of pain or hurt in her features, I practically felt them in my damn chest, and I was ready to kill.

"You're gonna have to give me something else," she started, taking a step back so she could lean into the wall. "Because my mind has just taken what you said, and it's running."

"Yeah," I replied, unable to keep from letting out a short laugh, realizing just how ridiculous I was about to sound. "I was made in a little dish in a lab, then tested with a handful of other embryos to see which of us lucky little group of cells was the perfect match."

It sounded crazy, but it wasn't exactly a completely odd prospect these days. There were even movies and television shows that covered the conversation and debate around whether it was ethical to create a child to serve a purpose.

A medical purpose.

One that would mean, on some levels, that child had no rights over their own body.

“The bone marrow was the first attempt to cure Gabe. I was less than a year old,” I continued, finding I wasn’t hitting the wall I usually did, the one I often built myself to keep people from seeing my vulnerabilities. Instead, the bricks were on a pile at my feet, and there was not a single thing stopping her from seeing me. The *real* me.

“Then he got sick again, and he underwent full renal failure this time. Chemo, more cells, tests. So many fucking tests. He managed to make it through, and after a couple of years in remission, I gave Gabe my kidney.”

Her chest rose dramatically as she inhaled and exhaled. “You only look little,” she murmured, her eyes again drifting over to the photograph on the wall.

“Mmm...” I agreed. “I spent my eighth birthday in bed because I’d had surgery two days previous.”

Her shoulders slumped, and as she returned her gaze to meet mine, her eyes glistened in the fluorescent lights. “That’s a heavy burden,” Valen said quietly. “I’m sorry you had to carry that on your shoulders.”

I lifted my chin, trying to keep the lump in my throat from rising to the surface and blocking my ability to talk. “You know, that’s the first time anyone has ever said that.”

My parents had never.

They believed they’d made me for a purpose.

And it was my job to fulfill it.

No matter the damage it did to me mentally, emotionally, or physically. They were ready and willing to sacrifice me if it meant giving Gabe life.

That was the reason I existed on Earth.

That was my only job.

And I failed.

“When I was twelve, Gabe’s cancer came back, this time, with a vengeance,” I explained, unable to keep my voice from cracking. It was like every time I spoke about this fucking

cancer, I could feel it growing in my throat. Fucking haunting me. “My parents were ready to have me do more tests, to take more bone marrow, organs if needed. But he said no.”

“Your brother?”

“Yeah,” I rasped. “Gabe told them he was done making me fight his battles, and they’ve hated me for it ever since.”

Valen pressed her hand to her stomach, and her breathing elevated. “Oh God.” That sparkle in her eyes was back. However, this time, it wasn’t the brightness of her smile but the tears filling her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Reed.”

I forced a laugh to cover the thick emotion that kept catching on my words. “Don’t be. Without all that happened, I wouldn’t have had the drive and determination to build my business. I wouldn’t be who I am or where I am today.”

“Why is that so important to you?” she questioned, her head falling to the side.

“I was determined to prove I was worth more than what I was made for.”

Both corners of her mouth turned up as a tear dripped onto her cheek.

I made it across the tiny room in two steps, reaching out and quickly brushing the salty droplet from her face as I shook my head. “You start crying now, you’re gonna have bloodshot eyes, and if your stupid ex shows up while you’re at his place, he’s gonna think these tears were for him.”

Her laughter was melodic. “Thanks,” she said, sucking in a long deep breath. “All gone.”

I didn’t take a step back.

Not for a long few seconds.

But neither of us said anything.

Neither of us looked away.

There was this understanding between us. We’d both shared pieces of ourselves over the past few days—the hard pieces, the most broken pieces—and it was those pieces that weighed

me down. But right now, I was feeling like something had been lifted.

Or maybe repaired?

“So, you going like that, or...” Valen teased, her eyes flickering down to my naked chest and back up. “Not that *I* mind, but—”

“Go,” I ordered, tapping her on the hip before I took a step back. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Yes, sir,” she murmured, and I spun back to her, smirking.

“What was that?” I challenged.

She quickly ducked out the door, calling back, “Nothing! Meet you downstairs.”

“Mmm...” I growled, fighting the urge to chase after Valen and drag her back in here. Fuck the ex-boyfriend. Fuck getting her stuff. I’d buy her whatever she wanted. Brand new. *Goddammit! What’s this woman doing to me?*

I didn’t know.

But I fucking liked it.

Chapter Eleven

REED

“You want me to come in with you?” Reed questioned as we stopped outside the door of Chad’s apartment.

I shook my head, sorting through the mess of miscellaneous keychains on my keyring to find the sparkly new key hidden within. A key he’d given me only the day before the wedding, yet he’d had one to my place a few months after we’d started dating. His insistence that he enjoyed his privacy had made sense to me at the time—past me especially appreciated the need to keep his personal life quiet and intimate. But the rose-colored glasses I’d been wearing for over a year had been completely shattered, and I was seeing things a lot clearer than ever before.

“Nah, I’m okay,” I said, flashing Reed a forced smile as I put the key into the lock and turned. “Honestly, I doubt he’s even here, and I only moved in last week, so I was still living out of a suitcase. It’ll only take me a few minutes to gather my clothes and stuff.”

Reed folded his arms across his chest and leaned into the wall, kicking one foot up. “All right. I’ll give you five.”

Rolling my eyes, I pushed the door open and hurried inside, fully aware that he wasn’t joking. If there was one thing about Reed Lawson that I’d learned in the past few days and knew without a doubt, it was that he didn’t say anything he didn’t mean. And when you’ve realized you’ve been lied to for over a year, honesty suddenly becomes an extremely attractive quality.

I didn’t waste a second, jamming my keys into the back pocket of my jeans—jeans that had just appeared, tags still on, at the end of my bed this morning—and headed for the

bedroom, determined to get in and out and be done with this shit.

My large green duffle bag was exactly where I'd tossed it last time I was here. I picked it up off the bedroom floor, opening it wide before heading to the bathroom to dig out my dirty clothes from the laundry basket.

Chad's apartment wasn't large—an open-plan kitchen, dining, and living room big enough to have a loveseat and a television, but not actually enough room to have anything to dine at, meaning we always ate sitting on the couch.

There were two bedrooms and a small bathroom with a shower over the tub. The shower head I was sure I would miss more than Chad himself. It had been my best friend on multiple occasions when my *needs* had got the better of me.

I hadn't complained, though.

I respected it.

Admired his loyalty to his faith.

What a damn joke!

Slamming the bathroom door open in frustration, I hadn't expected the thick cloud of steam that suddenly hit me in the face. "Holy crap," I choked out, waving my hand in my face.

"Valen?" Chad's voice startled me, and I stumbled backward into the small hallway. He appeared a second later, wrapping a towel around his waist as he emerged from the mist like in some weird horror movie...

Return of the Cheating Ex

no

Escaping the Fuckboy

Internally, I chuckled.

"Hey," he said after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence.

I was surprised at how easy it was to keep from getting emotional. There was a part of me that was sad because I'd been betrayed by two people I cared about—two people I thought I loved—and it wasn't a pain that was going to simply disappear. Betrayal is a torment that's hard to bear. But instead of giving in to that torment and letting it overwhelm me, I decided to focus on something else.

My anger.

"Excuse me," I asserted, nodding to the open doorway behind him. "I want to get my things from the bathroom, then I'll go."

"You don't have t—"

"Move, Chad."

He let out a dramatic sigh and stepped to the side. "Sure. Go ahead."

I didn't waste a second, slipping by him and making quick work of digging out my clothes from the hamper. Then I grabbed my toothbrush and a few bits and pieces, including body wash and skin care I had scattered around.

By the time I got back to the bedroom, Chad was wearing a pair of jeans and was pulling a fresh shirt on over his head.

I tossed the pile of things in my arms into the duffle bag, the contents now spilling over the sides, but I continued to stuff them down, eager to get the hell out of there. Wrapping my fingers around the handle, I couldn't help but pause for a second, wondering if I should say something.

See you around.

Hope you have a nice life.

Lies.

I didn't want to see him around.

And the petty part of me did not want him to have a nice life.

It wasn't that I wished death or pain on him, but it would make me feel better if he was constantly inconvenienced.

Things like...

Every time he came to a traffic light, it turned red.

Whenever he bought a chocolate chip cookie, they gave him oatmeal raisin by mistake.

Then, for some reason, I had the urge to go back to the bathroom and put all his toilet paper into the shower and turn it on before I left—an uncomfortable surprise for the next time he went to do his business.

But in all honesty, I had no plans to waste any more time on *this man*.

This boy.

This scum.

So I hefted my bag from the bed and turned on my heel, marching out the bedroom door.

“Valen,” he called, the heavy thump of footsteps following behind me. “Valen, stop!”

Suddenly, there was a hard yank on my bag, ripping it from my grasp and tossing it to the side. I spun around, frozen in shock.

Who the hell was this?

Where had this aggression come from?

“The hell is wrong with you?” I demanded.

“I asked you to stop,” Chad exclaimed as if it was my fault. “Stop being such a bitc—” He reached for me, and I pulled my fist back, swinging it hard into the side of his face.

He stumbled to the side, cradling his cheek. “The fuck!” he roared, catching me off guard. “You whore!”

I took a step back, slowly forcing some distance from his erratic behavior as I shook out my hand. “I’m leaving. You and Jade are going to be very happy together, I’m sure, but I don’t want to be anywhere near either of you.”

He stood slightly taller, squaring his shoulders and clenching his fists at his sides.

We didn't argue often, but I'd never seen him act this way before.

All the signs point to him being ready for a fight.

And I was starting to wonder when he had decided it was okay for him to make it more than just a battle of words.

"You know, at least Jade and I love each other," he spat, the words fired at me with an intention to cause pain. What a joke. He should be begging, pleading, desperate for forgiveness. "You humiliated me in front of my family, then continued to rub salt into the wounds by running off and marrying a man you hadn't even met."

Hold on.

Is he speaking English?

Because my brain was struggling to decipher the words he'd just said. "Have you completely lost it? What the hell are you talking about?"

He let out a hard laugh, shaking his head. "I've seen the pictures, Val. I've read the articles."

"What pictures?" I questioned, getting increasingly lightheaded by the minute as I tried my best to piece together his cryptic answers. "What articles?"

"So you're just gonna play dumb?" He scoffed, his playful tone growing lower and more serious. "Reed Lawson. The pictures of the two of you are everywhere, people talking about how you left your boyfriend at the altar for this billionaire. And Jade's brother, for God's sake!"

"Don't call him that," I ordered. The response was automatic and, strangely, the only part out of that crazy rambling I felt the need to correct.

He was hurt—angered and upset by the idea I could have moved on with another man so quickly when he had just admitted to falling in love with *my best friend*.

While we were together!

Chad's eyes narrowed as though he was focusing me in his sights and preparing his shot. "So it's true, huh?"

"That's no longer any of your business," I answered simply, then I took a deep breath. I stepped around him and, with my good hand, picked up my bag from the floor. I wasn't going to play these games where he attempted to make me look like the villain so he could feel better about *his* fucked-up choices. Not that I cared anymore about him, per se.

"That's it?" he taunted, following me as I walked to the front door and pulled it open.

I paused in the doorway, turning to face him one last time. "Yes! That's it."

My heart pounded against my chest. Was I ready to walk out of here and try to explain to the hot billionaire businessman waiting in the hall that, apparently, the world had assumed we got married? And instead of correcting that assumption, I decided to let my ex believe it to be true.

Hell yes, I was.

But there was a chance Reed would throw me out on my damn ass.

He would probably get a restraining order.

Or have me straight up arrested.

"Wow," Chad said, shaking his head. "I never thought you would be so bitter about me withholding sex from you that you would jump into bed with the first guy you saw on the street—"

"Watch how you fucking speak to *my wife*." The deep, threatening growl was accompanied by two heavy hands that settled possessively on my hips. Instantly, the tightness in my body eased as they guided me backward, out into the hall. Reed then stepped around me, placing his body between mine and Chad's like a shield of armor. He knew I needed that space. He also knew I needed room to breathe and to gather my thoughts before I let Chad's idiotic accusations soak into my skin.

Reed was protecting me.

And it had been a long time since someone had given enough damn about me to do anything like that.

“I let Valen handle this because she insisted I not get involved, but now I am, here is your one and only warning...” Reed advised calmly, but there was no mistaking the *take-no-shit* undertone that instantly chilled the air, “... don’t fuck with what’s mine. *Understood?*”

I couldn’t see Chad anymore, but I could hear him shuffling. “I... it... I’m—”

“Good,” Reed declared, turning to me and taking the bag from me before pressing his hand to my lower back. “Time to go home, honey.”

I didn’t argue.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure I could, even if I wanted to.

Instead, I let him guide me in silence back down the staircase to the foyer and out to the street where his car was parked. Karl was waiting with the door open, and he took my bag from Reed and closed the door behind us once we were both settled in the back seat.

The silence felt familiar, and I hated it. My mother had this wonderful habit of pretending everything was perfectly fine with the people around us while her anger at me bubbled and fumed on the inside.

Building and building.

Bubbling and boiling.

Until the second we were alone, it would explode like a volcano, her words like lava, burning and destroying everything in its path—which was usually only me.

As we pulled away from the curb, the silence within the car became too much, and I turned to Reed, expecting to feel the heat of his anger on my skin, and prepared to apologize profusely. “I’m really sorr—”

“Karl, we need to make a quick stop at Dolores’ Diner,” Reed said loudly as he casually typed away on his phone.

“Yes, sir,” Karl answered, instantly making what I was sure was an illegal U-turn in heavy Boston traffic, heading back across the other side of the city to the place where our epic journey had begun just four or five nights ago.

“Why are we going to Dolores’?” I asked, though a million other questions ran through my brain at high speed.

Are you mad?

Can I borrow your phone so I can start looking for a hotel to sleep at tonight?

Why did you tell Chad I was your wife?

He looked across at me with his eyebrow raised. “Pie,” he answered as though it was obvious.

“Pie,” I echoed, making sure I heard him right.

“You told me it makes you feel better when you’ve had a bad day. And I’m not sure what other places in the city sell pie you like. So, we’re going to Dolores’.”

The sharp, breathy laugh that fell from my lips surprised even me. “To get pie,” I repeated, well aware it was the fourth time the word pie had been used within the last fifteen seconds, but once again, I needed confirmation before I allowed myself to feel the warmth of his gesture.

Not the first, or even the largest, given he’d rescued me from the side of the road and also given me a place to stay.

But this? It meant the most.

A soft chuckle came from the front seat while a smirk twitched at the corner of Reed’s mouth. He leaned back into the seat, dropping his phone into his lap. “Am I speaking another language?” he teased.

“Nope! Got it!”

The smirk stayed on his face as he looked back at his cell. “Good. I also thought Dolores’ would be a good place to finalize the formalities of our... *marriage.*” *Oh shit.* “I just

texted my assistant and asked her to meet us there with my publicist and a couple of rings.”

I waited for him to turn to me, see the shock on my face, and laugh.

But he didn't.

I hope Dolores made a lot of pie today...

... because I was going to need it!

Chapter Twelve

REED

“I said catch the bouquet,” Martha teased, peeking at me out of the corner of her eye. “Not steal the bride.”

I didn’t bother to argue or reason with her about why I was doing what I was doing. At this point, Martha was acutely aware of my impulsive habits. She’d had to deal with the aftermath of many of them, but I could count on one hand those that crashed and burned.

More often than not, my instincts in any given situation were right.

I let them lead.

I simply followed.

“I didn’t have to steal her,” I told Martha, not having to even glance at her face to know she had her *yeah-sure look* plastered across it. “She walked out on that bastard all on her own.” My attention was focused on Valen. She sat in another booth across the other side of the diner with a plate of apple pie in front of her and Dolores sitting opposite, chatting away excitedly. Dolores had closed the diner an hour early so we could use the space to make a plan.

Every day I spent around Valen, I was learning more and more about how strong this woman was. But I also began to understand that much of that strength was reactionary. She hadn’t been brought up as a fighter, raised to stand up and speak out. No, this strength came because she’d spent so long being told to sit down and shut up.

It was commendable.

And kind of fucking beautiful.

“The pictures are everywhere at this point,” Tracy, my publicist, said as she turned her laptop to face me. “Searches of your name or Valen’s all come up with this.” She scrolled through Google images, the majority of them the latest pictures of Valen and me walking into Dolores’ Diner, her still in her wedding gown, but there were a handful of others too. A couple were even taken as we left the hospital.

“And you think we should just write a press report and clear it all up?” I questioned, maybe a fraction too harshly, because Tracy instantly sat back.

“I’m not saying you should clear anything up if that’s not what you want,” she said with complete conviction. “If you need me to tell the world the two of you are married, and that’s all there is to it, you know that’s what I’ll do. No questions asked.”

“Not me,” Martha cut in, shaking her head. “I have questions.”

I huffed out a breath. “Of course you do.”

“Starting with... could *marrying* her negatively impact your reputation or future business dealings?”

It was a fair question.

Yet I still fucking hated it.

“I don’t care—”

“Reed—”

“She’s not a fucking serial killer, Martha,” I hissed under my breath, hoping Valen wasn’t listening. I knew the second she got any whiff people were against this, she was going to run. And not because she didn’t want people to think bad of her, but because she wouldn’t want people thinking bad of me because of her.

“Look, she’s got a past. So do I. But that will not be the defining factor in what we do here.”

“Fair enough,” Martha conceded. “Then what is?”

“She is.”

I got up and walked across the diner, sliding into the seat beside Valen.

“I’ll let you two chat,” Dolores said with a grin before making a hasty exit.

Valen and I turned toward each other, and she lay her cheek against the seat as she watched me. “What do we do?” she whispered.

“What do you want to do?”

“Why is it up to me?”

“Okay...” I tried again. “How about you answer this question? When Chad accused you of being married to me, why didn’t you just tell him it wasn’t true?”

She could have.

She could have denied it all.

Let him know I’d been there to give her a ride and nothing more than that.

She was quiet for a minute.

Her fingernails picked at the worn, flaking cushion.

“I know it probably seems like I was trying to get revenge... hurt him like he hurt me.”

“I never said that,” I argued, knowing Valen was strong but not vindictive.

She sat up suddenly, pushing her shoulders back and lifting her chin, like she was giving herself a mental pep talk to get the words out of her mouth. “I think I’m just so *done* with being the one who always has to lose,” she finally admitted, and the fact her eyes were so deeply connected to mine as she shared those hard truths was the only reason I didn’t walk straight out of there and return to Chad’s apartment. There was plenty of time to break Chad’s face, but I refused to break this connection I was making with Valen.

It was becoming far too important.

She was becoming far too important.

“I get it. When someone betrays you, the last thing you want to do is give them another nail to hammer in the fucking coffin lid.”

Her head bobbed up and down. “It wasn’t that I wanted to hurt him. But I couldn’t watch him be all smug and happy after what he’d done.” She leaned back against the window and pulled her knees up, wrapping her arms around them. “Why did you go along with it and tell him I was your wife?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because in my case, a handful of people thinking I got married is no big deal. It will blow over in a few weeks. But in your case, the world thinks *you* got married, and that isn’t going to just... blow over.”

One corner of my mouth curled up a little. “I think this is far simpler for me than you think it is,” I told her, earning me a confused frown. “Because I don’t give a fuck what the world thinks.”

She barked out a sharp laugh, throwing her head back.

If she thought I was being dramatic or trying to be funny, I wasn’t.

“I told you earlier that I pushed so hard to be successful because I wanted to prove I was worth more than some spare parts in a fucking petri dish.”

“Mm-hmm,” she murmured. “You did.”

“Well, when I said that, I meant the only person I wanted to prove it to was me,” I explained, enjoying how her face instantly softened and that nervousness she had been filled with seemed to ease as a gentle smile grew. “So no, I don’t give a fuck if the world thinks I’m married. What I actually give a fuck about is you.”

She pulled her lips in and pressed them together, wiggling them around as if shuffling through the words inside her mouth, searching for the right ones to speak. “It’s been nice...” she started, pausing for a second as a slight flush of red flooded her cheeks. “It’s been nice to have you in my

corner. I honestly don't know what would have happened if you hadn't pulled over and given me a way out that day."

"And a ride to the hospital when you tripped on that fucking dress and cracked your head open," I added.

"And that."

"And a place to stay because you waited until the week before your marriage to move in with the doucheba—"

"Okay," she exclaimed, laughing loudly.

Boy, did I love that damn sound.

The sound of Valen being happy.

Something I was sure I could make her—for a while, at least.

And just like that, I had a plan.

"Look, how about this..." I started, piecing it together in my head as I explained. "You don't have an apartment, and you're gonna need time saving for a security deposit, right?"

Her brow pinched, and her shoulders slumped. "Thank you for that reminder, but yes. That's right."

"I have several events and other things coming up, like mine and Bronson's opening, which I'm expected to attend with a date," I added, not sure she was keeping up but continuing anyway. "You have somewhere to stay while you're looking for a place, expense-free. I don't have to find dates—"

"Because you must have so much trouble finding dates," she teased, but she sat forward, so I knew I had something.

"It's not about the finding dates, it's all the other bullshit that goes along with said dates. Getting to know them, hoping you have some chemistry, knowing most of them are there only because they want to get seen with you, not because they actually give a fuck about the project you're supporting or the people. At least we already know each other, you're already involved, and there won't be any question about whose place we're heading to after."

She rolled her eyes. “Is there really any question about whose house?”

“Never. Doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen, though.”

While there was soft music playing in the diner’s speakers, I was well aware that both Martha and Tracy could hear everything we were saying. And honestly, I was glad.

There was a reason I kept a lot of women around my business and me, and it wasn’t because it boosted my ego. It was because I could trust them to see things I couldn’t and then be honest about it afterward.

And that’s exactly why I ensured Valen and I worked this out right here.

Because... *I was starting to feel something.*

Something I was pretty sure I hadn’t felt before.

“Okay,” she conceded after a few minutes. “I’m in.”

Thank God, because I’d been watching the crowd outside grow steadily for about ten minutes, and I was ready to get the fuck out of this place and take Valen home so she could actually have time to process everything that had happened this afternoon.

“Good.” I shuffled out of the booth, holding my hand out to help her do the same. “Martha, we’re going to head to the jewelry store on the way home.”

“I’ll call them and let them know you’re on the way.” Martha’s smile was all that needed to be said.

It wasn’t tight.

Or anxious.

Or nervous that I was about to make a huge mistake.

But as I took Valen’s hand and headed for the diner’s doors, Martha’s smile actually grew bigger.

We paused at the doors, Valen suddenly spotting the handful of paparazzi outside, looking to get the most exclusive images to sell to tomorrow’s gossip magazines. Her fingers

tightened around my hand, and she let out a shaky laugh. “You know, you only told me the other day that you didn’t really like lies,” she murmured as Karl met us at the front door and pushed them open.

“I like the way we lie.”

She turned to look up at me, eyebrow cocked. “Why?”

“Because it means I get to do this.”

With my free hand, I curled it around her jaw, the cameras flashing, people shouting as I dipped my head, hovering just a breath away from her lips. She grabbed my wrist, and for a moment, I thought she was going to pull it away, that maybe I’d gone too fucking far.

But instead, she held it tightly and pushed up on her toes, our mouths colliding in like what felt like a flame meeting a fuse—the explosion of fireworks instant and amazing.

And even as we stood there on the sidewalk outside Dolores’ Diner, I knew I was kidding myself.

I’d made a deal I thought I could handle.

One where I knew and was prepared for there to be an ending to this, which eliminated that fear of loss that usually ate away at me.

But I’d made a mistake.

Because as our lips moved together, and I swallowed the breathy little hums of happiness coming from Valen’s mouth, I suddenly realized the few feelings I already had for my fake wife were pretty fucking real.

And by the time this was all over, they would only grow.

And now, in short.

I was fucked.

Chapter Thirteen

VALEN

“You want some food?” Reed asked as we pulled up outside his house. “There’s a pizza place around the corner that’s pretty good.”

As if summoned by the talk of food, there was a loud grumble. “If you didn’t understand that, it was stomach for *please feed me.*”

Reed chuckled, quickly typing on his phone for a few seconds before tucking it away in his pocket and throwing open the car door. I did the same, climbing out of the SUV and onto the curb, waiting while Reed spoke to Karl through his window. Reed’s street was pretty, especially at night. The avenue he lived on was a long, stretched-out O-shape. You drove in one side and out the other, with all the houses on the left. In the center to the right was a community park with trees, benches, and a little playground.

During the day, you couldn’t see them, but at night, the fairy lights hidden within the trees lit up the park, twisted around branches, and looped between trees—the people who lived here had created something special for sure.

I’d lived in Boston most of my life and had never seen another street like this.

Not even when we lived with my mom on the Upper East Side.

“Valen.” There was a gentle tug on my ponytail, and I spun around to find Reed watching me. “You good?”

I nodded, suppressing a shiver as a light breeze whipped by my body. “Yeah, I just love how pretty it is out here. Something you read about in some meet-cute romance where the guy brings the girl here for a date.”

They were the kind I loved.

The kind of stories Chad had continuously told me were unrealistic.

Reed pulled his phone from his pocket again, not saying anything as he dialed and pressed it to his ear, holding my gaze as it rang.

“Sir?” I heard Karl answer on the other end.

“Yeah, instead of coming upstairs with the pizza, can you call me when you arrive, and we’ll come down? We’re gonna eat at the park.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then he was gone, and Reed was again tucking his cell away. He looked up, catching me staring. “What?”

“So, is this a date then?” I asked casually, tugging at the oversized hoodie and jean shorts I was wearing. “I’m not really dressed for such an occasion.”

“Well, we’ve got time.” He tapped me on the ass, and I jumped forward. “Let’s go find you something picnic-worthy.”

Who was this man?

I’d heard stories about womanizing.

About arrogance.

I’d even seen headlines questioning bruises on girls he’d been seen with.

But so far, all I’d encountered was a protective and caring man who hadn’t been given the opportunity to share the most incredible parts of himself because as far as the people in his life were concerned, they created him for one thing...

... and he failed.

They couldn’t give a fuck what else he had done in his life to prove himself worthy of love.

And while that made me furious, it also warmed me.

It meant I was seeing parts of him he didn’t share with others, and that meant far more to me than I ever thought it

would have. It also had me reconsidering everything I thought I knew about relationships and everything I thought I knew about love. Because if a man who was almost a stranger less than a week ago could bring me into his world, protect me, care for me, and sacrifice his reputation for me—what the fuck was I doing with a guy who couldn't even bear to live with me until a week before our marriage.

Or who, eighteen months in, was still splitting the bill with me.

How damn low had my bar been set?

Reed's hand pressed to my back and guided me up the staircase, the sensor light at the top flashing on as we got about halfway.

By the time we had finished at Dolores', it was already late.

But then we'd made stops at the jewelry stores—three of them until Reed found exactly what he'd wanted.

The whole past few hours—they'd all been a blur.

All since the kiss Reed and I had shared outside the diner.

Was I crazy?

Was this really a good idea?

To stay here, to be living as someone's wife.

Not just someone's wife—a billionaire's wife.

"You look worried," Reed noted as we entered the front foyer. "Are you—"

"Oh shit," I cursed as I grabbed the banister of the staircase, jerking back like it had burned me. "Ouch."

"What?" Reed demanded, and I gritted my teeth as I held my right hand up in the light, clenching and unclenching my fingers, the pain the first sign something was wrong. And after closer examination, the fat ring finger was the second.

"Dammit! Chad tried to grab me," I explained, trying not to swallow my tongue as Reed stepped closer to me, his baby blues shadowed by a heavy brow. "So I punched him."

It wasn't too bad, but the knuckle on my finger was a little swollen and a light shade of purple. My hand had been aching a little since I'd plowed it into Chad's face, but I'd never actually punched someone before, so I thought that was probably normal.

"Fucking hell, Valen." Reed took my hand, and I sucked in a sharp breath, a bolt of pain shooting up my arm. "Fucking idiot," he growled.

"I know."

"Not you," he corrected, his arm circling my waist. "*Him.*"

Without protest, I let him direct me up the stairs and into the kitchen. He placed his hands on my hips, gently lifting me onto the edge of the breakfast bar before walking over to the freezer and pulling out an ice pack.

"Does he have a habit of being handsy?" Reed asked while his back was turned, but I could hear the clench in his jaw.

"Not at all. We didn't argue very often," I explained as he returned. "But even when we had, it was nothing like that. Today it was like seeing someone flick a switch... a real Jekyll and Hyde." He handed me the ice, and I clenched my teeth as I placed it on my knuckles.

Reed ripped off the jacket he wore and tossed it across the room onto the sofa before taking a step back, propping himself on the edge of the counter and folding his arms across his chest. His black shirt stretched tight over his biceps, looking like they could tear through it with ease. "When it feels better, I'll teach you how to throw a real punch. One that won't break your hand."

"Honestly, I probably just need to *not* physically assault people," I told him, shaking my head. "It's never really gone in my favor."

"Mmm..." he hummed. "The thing with Maddie, right?"

My stomach sank, as it always did when I remember that night. But once the memories started, there was no stopping them. "He was hurting someone I loved," I whispered, feeling

the sights and sounds crawl up the back of my neck. “So I had to stop him.”

“Maddie!” I called, ducking and dodging around a drunk group of Disney Princesses and a werewolf that had clearly strayed from his pack. “Maddie! Come o—” Then a second later, “Woah!”

I turned the corner at the end of a long hall, colliding with a tiny blonde wearing angel wings and a white mini dress. We were both thrown off balance, and I fell backward into the wall, a painful jolt shooting through my shoulder. Tiny angel girl stumbled around for a second, the drink in her hand sloshing back and forth.

“Mario!” she announced when she finally found her footing and let out a high-pitched giggle. “Cute costume.”

“Thanks!” I groaned, rolling my eyes and suddenly regretting my offer to be the sober driver tonight. It was like being the only adult trapped in a house with a hundred toddlers. Shaking my head, I paused and took in a calming breath. “Don’t suppose you’ve seen Luigi?”

Halloween was my favorite holiday.

Maddie and Jade weren’t as big of fans, but because they knew I loved it, for the past six years, they’d allowed me to torment them with matching costumes.

Mike, Sully, and Boo.

Winnie, Tigger, and Piglet.

And this year—Mario, Luigi, and Princess Peach—one guess at who wanted to be the princess.

“Yes!” The young drunk girl’s head bobbed enthusiastically, and she pointed back down the hallway she’d come from. “She’s with Peter!”

We were in some random Frat house in Dartmouth’s Greek Row. I’m not sure why this girl would think I had

any idea who Peter was, but given the hall was a dead end, they couldn't have been too far.

It wasn't like Maddie to disappear on me for a guy.

I was usually the one who got doe-eyed and stupid for the wrong men—the red flags seemed to look less like warnings and more like beacons.

“No... no...”

I stood straight, holding my breath.

“Maddie?” I cautiously called again, hoping like hell my overactive imagination was playing tricks on me. It wouldn't be the first time.

“Stop...”

The whispered protest came again, and a shot of adrenaline ripped through my veins. It was like a large magnet had been switched on, and I was being pulled forward, to hell with anything in my way.

I'd go over it, under it, through it.

I passed by the open rooms, frantically checking each until I reached a closed door. Jiggling the handle, I tried to push it open, but this house was old, and many of the doors needed a little persuasion. I shoved my shoulder into it, not giving a damn about the shooting pain that ripped like an electric current down my arm. Almost losing my footing, I fell inside.

The light from the hallway illuminated the room.

“What the hell—”

“Valen.”

My entire body jolted back to life, like those dreams you had when you were falling and you woke just before your body hit the ground. The violent jerk had me tossing the ice pack he'd handed me across the room. Reed stepped in, wrapping his arms around me. I pressed my forehead to his chest and took a couple of deep breaths.

I didn't speak about Maddie very often because this was what happened.

It was like a wound that had never healed.

Never scarred over.

And every time I bumped or scraped it, the damn thing reopened—painful and bloody, just as though it had happened yesterday.

“Breathe,” Reed ordered, rubbing his hands up and down my thighs.

I blinked, a couple of stray tears I hadn't noticed dripping onto my cheeks.

“This happens every single time,” I whispered, irritated at myself for falling to pieces. I was stronger than this, than these thoughts. “Sorry. It takes me by surprise sometimes.”

“You wanna talk about it?” He reached up, gently brushing my hair away from where my stitches were, before curling it around the side of my face and cradling my jaw. I leaned back, taking advantage of the opportunity to see his eyes up close. The pools of blue were a little darker today than they had been before. It was like staring into the ocean, knowing under the surface, things were far deeper than most people could imagine. And that could be scary for some, but for me, I simply wanted to dive in and explore.

“No. I don't.” I cleared my throat, then added, “At least, not today.”

“Okay.” I was happy he didn't push it. “You need something else to focus on.”

I laughed. “And what exactly do you sugge—”

His mouth claimed mine, the kiss soft and brief at first, leaving me a little stunned when he pulled away just enough to allow a breath of air to pass between our lips. “What are you doing?” I whispered, reaching out and twisting my fingers in the bottom of his T-shirt.

“Helping you focus on something else.”

Chapter Fourteen

VALEN

His lips moved away from mine, brushing along the edge of my jaw.

We'd done this dance only a few hours earlier, but this time it felt different.

There was no one else here.

We weren't posing for cameras.

This was him and me.

I reached out, wrapping my arms around his neck and dragging his lips back to mine, the two of us crashing together feverishly. He hooked his hands under my thighs and directed my legs around his waist while I slid my fingers into his hair.

What started as a gentle kiss quickly became something much more intense than I anticipated.

And I loved it.

It felt good.

It felt right.

Every inch of my skin electric.

Every time he touched me, it felt like another surge of power shooting through me, and I couldn't get enough, so ready to get completely lost in this man.

Our mouths moved in sync, neither of us wanting to break apart, merely catching a breath whether we could. Reed's fingers reached for my shorts, flicking open the button and yanking on the zipper before tugging on them. I lifted my hips, giving him enough to pull them off and toss my shorts over his shoulder onto the refrigerator.

I giggled as he once again wrapped his arms around me. This time lifting me off the counter and carrying me from the kitchen to where?

I had no idea.

And I didn't care.

At this point, I was done questioning anything and was ready to just feel.

There was a spark between Reed and me.

I'd felt it almost since the day we met.

While I'd tried my best to convince myself he was only being kind and he probably picked up a lot of women off the side of the road and took them home. So he could look after them when they had a concussion, introduce them to his friends, and pretend to be married.

But the more I knew Reed, the more obvious it was that this was not *his normal*.

This was different.

For me...

... and for him.

And there must be a reason why, so I needed to stop fighting and follow it.

When Reed dropped onto the sofa, I tightened my arms around his neck, letting out a breathy laugh as I fell forward, straddling his lap. "Jesus, warning next time."

"Next time," he repeated, reaching for the hem of the hoodie I was wearing—his hoodie—and pulling it up, his hands gently guiding it over my head so it didn't brush my stitches. "I like the sound of next time."

So did I.

Next time.

And the time after that.

And the time after that.

I had a feeling I may never be able to get enough of Reed.

It was the way he talked, the way he moved. He was unlike any other man I'd known, and I'd spent plenty of time with the wealthy type. He had the lifestyle, but he was not them, and after all I'd learned about him the past week or so, I understood why.

We'd shared pieces of ourselves with each other.

The deep, dark pieces.

And I knew there was still more to explore.

Right now, though, I was putting that all aside because the only thing I wanted to explore in this moment was his body.

With the hoodie free, he tossed it back over his shoulder. The crop top and bra I wore underneath quickly followed until a pair of black panties were the only thing left on my body, leaving me feeling a little exposed.

It had been years since anyone had seen me like this.

Naked and needy.

And for a brief second, every bit of confidence I had flew out the open windows, and I pulled my hands away from him to cover myself.

"Stop," he growled, grabbing my wrists and moving them behind my back. "You're fucking beautiful. Don't you dare cover yourself in front of me again." He gathered my wrists together so he could hold them in one hand at the base of my back. It forced my chest out, and he quickly took advantage of that fact, dipping his head and pulling my right nipple in between his teeth.

"Oh my God," I moaned softly, allowing my head to loll back and my eyes to flutter closed. My long hair trickled down my back, the strands tickling at my naked skin, igniting a wave of goose bumps that only made every nerve ending more sensitive.

I ground my hips down and pressed my chest further forward, eager and greedy for more since he was refusing to let me touch him as he tortured my body with his mouth.

“Please, Reed.”

His soft laughter sent a warm breath of air over my skin—another sensation added to the list of things in that moment that were driving me crazy in the best way possible. “Say please again,” he murmured, his free hand gripping my breast almost painfully.

I lifted my head, licking my lips as I looked down at him, his mouth hovering over my breast while his eyes looked up at me, waiting.

“Please.”

He flicked his tongue across the hardened bud that was at his complete and utter mercy, and I let out a desperate moan.

“Please,” I pleaded again, and he sucked it into his mouth, swirling his tongue around and around it.

“What do you want, Valen?” he taunted, tugging it hard between his teeth before he drew his face back to look at mine. “Right now! What do you want?”

“To come.” The words fell so effortlessly from my lips, but I was quick to add, “I want *you* to make me come.”

I’d been doing it myself for more than two years.

Two years later, I knew my body inside and out, the exact spots to hit, what was going to allow me to hold on and ride it out, and what was going to make me explode in seconds. But it came without the excitement and anticipation of having a partner learn those things about your body or having them electrify you by showing things you would have never tried before.

Reed chuckled. “Here I was thinking you were gonna give me a challenge.”

I didn’t even have the chance to scream before I found myself on my back on the sofa, with Reed spreading my thighs before laying down on his stomach so his face was perfectly positioned over my pussy. With my hands free, I reached down, threading my fingers through his short hair, and he

strategically shimmied my panties down my thighs and dropped them to the side.

There was no hiding now.

He wrapped his hands around my thighs, yanking me closer to his greedy mouth.

The second his tongue swiped through my center, I was done. My hips lifted from the sofa, and Reed had to grip them a little tighter, chuckling as he fought to keep me where he wanted me.

Another swipe, then another, his tongue flicking over my clit every single time.

It was like he was striking a match, and the fiery heat consumed me.

Over and over again.

He dipped his tongue deep inside like he was fucking me with it, pushing it in and out several times, savoring the wetness I could feel leaking from inside me. Then he'd use it, swirl it around my clit, forcing it to grow big and needy.

I threw my head back, twisting and writhing, knowing I was probably creating a large mat of hair in the back of my head, but I couldn't stop. It was building inside me, this warmth flooding between my legs, growing increasingly intense as he continued to tease me, over and over, lapping at my pussy like I was his last meal.

Quickly, I tightened my grip on his hair, pulling it back from his face so I could see his eyes.

He pulled back for a second to take a breath, his chin gleaming with my juices. "Fucking hell, you taste like pure sex and honey," he growled, and I couldn't help but be curious as to what it was that he couldn't get enough of. So I moved my hand to his mouth and swiped my thumb over his lips before lifting it to my own and sucking it into my mouth.

"Holy fuck," he cursed. "Goddamn. You like how you taste, baby?"

It was sweet.

But different.

A taste I could find myself going back for.

I could see why he wanted more.

I wanted more.

I pulled my bottom lip in between my teeth and nodded.

He lifted his body, crawling up over the top of me. At the same time, he swept two fingers through my folds, and for a second, I thought he was going to offer them to me, but then he drove them deep inside my pussy.

But before I could moan, the pressure of his thick fingers filling me so damn good, he covered my mouth with his, swallowing every sound. He pulled back, and just for a second, his breathing labored. “You want to taste yourself? You taste it from my fucking lips.”

My tongue snaked out, flicking at the corner of his mouth, making him groan loudly and drive his fingers deeper.

Faster.

Stretching me.

He covered my mouth again, the kisses frantic and out of control as we fought the urge to breathe, knowing we had to but reluctant to pull apart from each other.

I lifted my hips toward his hand, meeting his thrusts as I felt my orgasm building, burning, desperate for release, but Reed pulled back, pressing his free hand against my hips and holding me down. “You told me you wanted me to make you come,” he rasped. “You can fuck yourself on my hand another time, this is my turn. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Sir,” he ordered.

“Yes... sir,” I whispered breathlessly. “Please, sir.”

“Good girl.”

There was nothing I could do.

I was at his mercy.

He held my hips down and drove two fingers deep inside, using his thumb now to brush back and forth across my clit. I clawed at the sofa, my nails all but tearing it to shreds as I was driven closer and closer to the edge.

Deeper.

Stronger.

Faster.

He pressed hard against my clit, and my back bowed as my orgasm hit me like a tidal wave. I gasped, fighting to catch my breath. Reed slowed a little, but he didn't stop, pulling his fingers from inside me and using the wetness I'd created to circle my clit, to draw every last bit of ecstasy from inside me.

And God did he.

I rode it and rode it.

Sweat built at my hairline, and my body shuddered.

“Oh God, yes, yes,” I whispered, my voice shaking.

I let my eyes drift closed, sweeping my fingers through my hair and holding them there in absolute disbelief. Reed chuckled, the sound closer than I anticipated, a warm breeze brushing over my cold, damp skin before his lips met my neck.

I shuddered again, reaching for him—my arms finding his neck while his squeezed under me, between my body and the sofa, the sweat coating my skin was probably sinking into his shirt.

And that was how we lay for a long time, our breathing falling into sync with each other.

Until realization dawned on me, and I let out a heavy sigh. “I don't want to move,” I murmured, nuzzling my face into his neck. “But I am so sticky and sweaty.”

Reed chuckled and, with some feat of strength, lifted my body with him as he sat up and then got to his feet with my legs wrapped around his waist.

“Where are we going?” I questioned, though it didn't really matter.

He could have said Hell, and I would have simply held on for the ride.

“Well, I helped to make the mess,” he explained as he carried me to his bathroom and sat me on the counter. He opened the cabinet below, pulled out a cloth, and placed it next to me before moving to the large tiled shower that took up half the bathroom. “So it’s only fair that I help clean it up,” he said as he flicked the faucet for the shower head.

He leaned back against the wall as he held his hand under the water, waiting for the temperature to change. And while he did, I sat and waited.

I wasn’t lying when I said I was holding on for the ride. I was learning quickly that being around this sexy, intelligent, one-of-a-kind man was like being on a rollercoaster ride full of twists and turns that I thought I’d prepared myself for. I thought I knew what Reed would be like from the images and information the media shared.

Withdrawn.

Cocky.

Maybe a little self-pretentious.

But he was none of the above.

And I was so *not* prepared for him.

What I did know, though? Rides eventually came to an end.

So, all I could do was hold on and enjoy the fun while it lasted.

When everything was to his liking, he walked over and held out his hand. I placed mine in it, the both of us pausing to look down at the diamond ring that was now decorating my ring finger. He brushed his thumb over the large rock as he stepped in again.

“It’s actually kind of unreal,” I whispered. “I left my fiancé at the altar and still managed to end up with a ring and actually get the sex I’d been waiting on for almost two years.”

Reed froze. “Say again?”

I cleared my throat. The steam in the room was becoming thicker and thicker, and all the heat was filling my cheeks—the ones on my face. “Chad was Cathol—”

“He didn’t believe in sex before—”

“Not with me. But he was still doing Jade every other day on the side,” I joked, though my laughter fell off, and my mouth suddenly became dry as hell when I noticed Reed’s eyes darken and become more primal. His hand moved from the ring on my finger up my arm, his fingertips leaving a trail of goose bumps behind them as they brushed over my shoulder and curled around my neck.

He gripped it tightly but not painfully. “I try to tell myself to take this slow,” he said quietly. “But then I keep learning more and more about how that motherfucker did you wrong. How he has no fucking idea about how a man should treat a woman.”

I was vulnerable.

Naked.

Exposed.

But the way Reed looked at me, I’d never been so confident.

“Are you on birth control?” he asked.

The question startled me for a moment before I nodded. “I am.”

“Good,” he growled, dipping his body slightly and hooking his arm under my ass, lifting me off the floor and carrying me back toward his bedroom. “Because fake or not, I’m about to show you exactly how I treat what’s *mine*.”

Chapter Fifteen

REED

Two Weeks Later...

“Harold Dennison is here,” Martha announced from the doorway to my office.

I opened my mouth, ready to tell her to make some excuse so I didn’t have to see him, but as I lifted my gaze, he came charging through the open doorway past her.

“Mr. Lawson, you are a hard man to tie down,” Dennison loudly spoke as he strolled into my office like he owned the place. “Or are you avoiding my calls?”

Martha was pushing the door closed before I could even hit her with a hard glare and let her know I was not fucking happy.

Dennison walked straight over to my desk, the heavy-set gentleman dropping his large body into one of the leather chairs opposite me. I closed my laptop and leaned back in my seat, folding my arms across my chest. “What can I do for you today, Mr. Dennison?” I asked casually like I didn’t already know exactly what had brought him down here.

Harold Dennison was the CEO of the Boston Children’s Hospital.

I’d known him for years, since I first opened my business and was making enough to begin donating to the hospital. The first amounts weren’t much, not enough to make a blip on the radar of the CEO.

But over the years, they had become bigger.

And bigger.

Until two years ago, I funded an entire project.

“Any other business would be on my ass, demanding I make a spectacle and tell the world what they’d done,” he started, his large hand reaching up and stroking at his thick beard. “But not you. You brush me off like I’m some debt collector. I’ve tried phone calls, emails, letters, damn smoke signals. I swear, even the president is easier to get an answer from. But his security team has nothing on your assistant out there.”

“She’s worth every cent,” I told him with a shrug, knowing precisely what Martha would do to protect me if she had to. The list was a lot longer than helping me dodge a few phone calls. “I don’t donate because I want everyone to look at me like I’m some kind of hero. I do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

“You do it because you know what it’s like to live in the hospital,” he argued. “Because you know what they need. You know what would make their lives easier. More comfortable. You have experienced the things they are going through and come out the other side strong. If you come to the opening, you can inspire them to—”

“I’m sorry you feel the need to come all the way down here because the answer is still no.”

It was no over a year ago.

It was no nine months ago.

And the answer would still be no in six weeks when the hospital had a large-scale opening for a new cancer wing I had funded.

“Reed, I know you know how big this is. How much good this new building will be able to provide.” Dennison leaned in, bracing his forearms on his knees. “Wouldn’t you want to thank the person who stepped in when you were at your darkest and created something that would make your life a little easier? Wouldn’t you want to tell them how much you appreciate them?”

I was already shaking my head before he was done. “I don’t need thanks.”

He didn't understand.

Knock. Knock.

Thank God.

“Come in!” Getting to my feet, I shoved my chair back and walked around the desk. “I appreciate you coming down here to try and get me involved, but—”

“Involved?” I glanced up as Valen stepped through the door, her eyes cautiously assessing the situation.

Dennison was quick to leap from his chair, his eyes alight with opportunity. “Mrs. Lawson,” he crooned, holding out his hand. Valen glanced at me questioningly before returning her attention to Dennison, a pinched smile on her face as she shook his hand. “It is such an honor to meet you. Reed and I were just discussing his attendance at an event.”

“We were just discussing how I won't be attending,” I corrected firmly.

I liked Harold Dennison.

He'd been a big supporter and cheerleader of mine over the years, even coming to me several times to introduce me to high-powered connections that had led to large, profitable jobs.

What I didn't like was constantly being hounded to be a poster boy for the hospital, which, in turn, would lead to people asking questions, and having some damn documentary team come digging into my story and my past, looking to make something out of it.

I had my own qualms with my existence in this world.

I didn't need Christians with pitchforks chasing me back to fucking hell.

Dennison stepped back from Valen with a genuine smile on his face. He finally thought he'd found a loophole. “I was hoping maybe your wife might be able to convince—”

“Reed is a smart man,” Valen cut in, stepping around him and walking over to me. “I'm sure whatever choice he's

making is one he has seriously considered and not taken lightly.”

A diplomatic way of telling Dennison she wouldn't be convincing me of fucking anything. I watched a lot of people underestimate Valen and her strengths. One of them being her ability to read and assess a situation and act accordingly.

The kind of woman a king would want at his side.

One who was going to challenge me about this choice but who had the respect for me to do it in private. I knew Valen would follow my lead, but she wouldn't do it blindly.

I got to my feet, and Valen stepped beside me, slipping her hand into mine and leaning into my body. The white button-up blouse she had tucked into a knee-length pencil skirt had me gritting my teeth, but it was the stiletto black heels she wore that almost had me throwing her onto my desk, whether Dennison was there or not.

It was fucking sexy.

Librarian chic.

I cleared my throat and cracked my neck from side to side. “Like I said, I appreciate the acknowledgment, but I'm not coming to cut that oversized ribbon next month.”

Dennison let out a heavy sigh, his wide shoulders falling dramatically as he exhaled. “It's such a shame. But, the offer will stay on the table in case you change your mind.” The grin on his face was one to be admired, even as he walked out the door without what he came here for.

There was a reason Harold Dennison was the CEO of the children's hospital.

There were not many things in this world that would keep this man from getting what he needed to support those children. He would fight tooth and nail. He would not walk away with a promise of something, whether that was a full donation, a part donation, or even a promise that you'd think about donating.

Which is why I found it so fucking hard to get mad at him for always being on my back about getting involved.

Because I knew it was genuine.

Not a gimmick.

The second the door clicked closed behind him, Valen turned and stepped in front of me, her eyebrow cocked though she still held my hand tightly. “Who—”

“The CEO of the Boston Children’s Hospital.”

“Okay...” she brushed her finger back and forth across the gold ring I was wearing.

“He wants me to open this new wing of the children’s hospital, which will focus a lot on their minds and trying to keep them healthy alongside their bodies.”

Both her eyes and mouth were pulled into a bright smile. “That’s so beautiful! How come they’ve asked you to be a part of that?”

“Because I paid for it.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she tightened her grip on my hand as she coughed out a laugh. “You... wait... Reed, that’s amazing. But wait... you said no?” the sparkle of happiness was quick to disappear.

I shook my head and spread my legs, moving my hands to her waist before pulling her in between them. “We’ve talked about this. How much being in the hospital can fuck with my head. Every time I walk into that place, I’m hit with flashbacks, images, sounds, smells. Every single one of them is a reminder of all the pain both Gabe and I had to go through. All a reminder that after all that shit, I was the only one who walked back out again.”

She lifted her hands and took hold of the lapels on my suit jacket.

I noticed how it had become a habit for her to wiggle and adjust them, like an unconscious routine that helped her focus on what she wanted to say when we were this close. And for the past two weeks, close was exactly what we’d been.

The romantic picnic in the park I thought we were going to have that night turned into Valen and me eating two large pizzas in my bed.

In between getting to know each other.

Mind.

Body.

Past.

Things shifted.

Both our worlds changed, and since then, we'd been riding this high I never fucking wanted to come down from and, for now, I was going to tell myself I never would. Valen got her things from the storage unit, and she moved them into my place—herself into my bedroom. And for two weeks, Karl had either been picking her up from work before he came to collect me, or on the days she worked late, I would swing by the Boston University library and collect her myself.

We'd fallen into a routine, and up until this point, other than people taking photographs and the odd questionable article, what we had was mostly undisturbed by outside forces.

But I could feel in my bones that it was about to change.

And it would test the stability of the foundation we'd built.

“You think I should do it, right?” I said before she could muster up the courage. “You can say it.”

“Okay.” She dropped her hands to the buttons on my jacket, popping them open and sliding her hands inside as she held my gaze. “I think you should do it.”

“Why?”

“Because when people see you step forward and do something like this, hopefully, they will be inspired to step forward and do something similar,” she explained, this serious look settling into her face, surprising me a little. “I don't just mean for the children's hospital but for other hospitals and other departments. The mental health system is fucked. It needs support like this.”

I leaned back a little, ducking my head so I could see her eyes. Eyes that seemed to be firmly focused on the pinstripes of my shirt instead of looking straight at me. “Woah, hey,” I urged, brushing her hair back from her face and gently tugging at it so she would look up at me. “Explain.”

Her hands moved to my lapels again.

Tugging.

Straightening.

Tugging.

“It’s just—” she started but quickly stopped herself. “You... my...” She pinched her eyes closed and huffed loudly. “Sorry. It doesn’t really matter.” She took a step back, and I allowed her to have that space, knowing she needed it to gather her thoughts. But it wouldn’t last long because I wanted to know what was happening in that brain of hers.

“It matters to me. You can say whatever you like here, you know that. It’s just us.”

I didn’t want her to ever feel like she couldn’t speak her mind.

I didn’t want her to ever feel like I was smothering that passion and strength I was so in awe of.

She processed for a few minutes before she finally turned to face me, an armchair between us. Valen placed her hands on the back, bracing herself, like everything she’d just gone over in her mind was so heavy she needed support. “My mom was so popular back in the day, right?”

“I think she still kind of is,” I added with a shrug.

“Right. So she has quite a standing, a lot of influence. People want to support the things she supports. Hear her views and opinions... no matter how fucking self-centered they usually are.” Valen’s eyes remained down, scanning the floor nervously, and I was starting to understand why. “What always bothered me about her was that she would never use any of that to help anyone but herself.”

“Valen—”

“I know, I know,” she objected, holding up her hands. “You aren’t my mom. You are generous. You want to do your part where you can.” She swallowed hard when she finally looked up at me. “But throwing money at things isn’t always the *best* way to help.”

I wanted to be angry, fucking pissed off. She was saying all the shit I did with the hospital was just me ‘throwing money at it.’

But as much as it hurt, she wasn’t completely wrong.

She threw her hands in the air and rushed around the chair, making her way back toward me. “I’m not trying to downplay the things you’ve been through or all the amazing things you’ve done. It’s j-just...” her voice began to crack, and I reached out, taking her hand and pulling her into my chest. She took another deep breath and looked up at me. “I watched Maddie go through this crisis after everything that happened to her. I watched her scream out for help, and the resources weren’t there to support her, and I couldn’t help with everything—”

“And you shouldn’t have been expected to,” I confirmed, brushing the hair back from her face.

She licked her lips. “I just wish there was more. And I know you do your best with the things you do. Paying for a whole hospital wing... holy shit, Reed.”

She was ranting.

I could see the fear in her eyes.

She thought she’d overstepped.

That I was waiting for my moment to tell her she was so damn wrong.

But...

“You’re not wrong,” I told her honestly, brushing my thumb over her cheek as I cradled her face in my palm. “And while I can’t promise I’m going to change my mind about this event, or even the next, I promise that in the future, I will be more

aware of what I can do to use my influence to create more opportunities and help for people.”

Her body slumped, and she instantly leaned into me, tucking her head under my chin.

I couldn't see her face, but I could feel her nodding. “Thank you. I'm sor—”

“Don't you dare say you're sorry for expressing your feelings,” I snapped.

A light laugh fell from her mouth. “Okay, I'm not sorry.”

“Good.”

She pulled back, pressing a soft kiss to my lips before taking a few steps back out of my arms. “I need to call Maddie,” she said, pulling her phone from her skirt pocket and holding it up with a sad smile. “I'll just be a minute.”

“Take all the time you need.”

She already had it pressed to her ear, and I could hear it ring as she pulled my office door open and stepped outside.

I braced my hands on my desk, letting my shoulders slump and my head hang.

“Everything okay?” Martha asked from the open doorway.

“Yeah,” I answered, taking a couple of breaths before I finally looked up. “Everything is really good.”

Martha raised her brow like she wasn't sure if I was being serious or sarcastic, but she soon nodded, “Okay,” and then she stepped away.

Having your thoughts challenged is never a fun experience. Honestly, I was exhausted but in the best way. We all had tunnel vision sometimes. We get set in our ways, and deviating from those can be scary, daunting, and make us defensive.

But when Valen crashed into my life a few weeks ago, I never considered how much my life could change. How much more of the world I'd be opened to.

New thoughts.

New ideas.

New experiences.

And I was pretty sure I never wanted to go back.

Chapter Sixteen

VALEN

“Hold it right there. You have another twelve seconds,” Abby warned me when my legs began to shake. A bead of sweat slipped down my face, tickling the skin and making me desperate to move and wipe it away. “Don’t you dare, or you’ll be doing another sixty,” she growled as if she knew the exact moment I was ready to give up.

The plank I had been holding for almost a minute made my muscles burn. It was as if someone had poured gasoline over me and set me alight. I would have quite happily thrown in the towel at twenty seconds, hating how my body trembled and shook as I pushed it to its limits, but this was exactly why I had Abby.

She refused to let me quit when shit got too hard.

She wouldn’t let me give up.

And if, for some reason, I did, there were consequences, ones she knew I would hate. So I damn well pushed through with every bit of strength left inside my body.

I’d never been the fittest, the strongest, or the slimmest person in the world, but I’d always been content with my body—its shape, its weight. If there was one thing I could thank my overbearing, perfectionist of a mother for, it was for teaching me how to be confident in my own skin. And for those days when I didn’t feel so confident—how to fake it.

Unfortunately, there had been a few moments after the wedding where I’d questioned my body and its worth. Though the few times they had flashed into my mind and I’d suddenly tried to cover myself while I was naked, Reed had made quick work of eradicating those thoughts by absolutely worshipping every inch of my body.

When I'd talked to him about coming back to see Abby—who had been a personal trainer and a friend I'd worked with for years—he'd questioned why. And it had taken a lot of explaining for him to understand that working out for me right now wasn't about losing weight or trying to be something I thought would make me more attractive, it was about growing stronger.

Physically, mentally, and emotionally.

So I never again had to feel that I was not enough.

Add in an agreement with Reed that I would let him teach me how to protect myself and throw a punch at least once a month, and I was ready to take on the world.

“Three... two... one... and done,” Abby called.

I collapsed onto my yoga mat, my chest heaving as I fought for breath.

“You know, you need to remember to breathe through these exercises, or one day you'll just pass out.”

“That's the plan.” I groaned as I rolled over onto my back, sweat soaking through my clothes in all the uncomfortable crevices.

Abby stood at my feet, grinning as if she, in some sick and twisted way, loved the torture she forced upon her victims. I guess she must because that was the life of a personal trainer, wasn't it? Getting enjoyment out of someone else's pain.

The loud ring that filled Abby's small home gym was obnoxious and annoying, but that was the purpose of that specific ringtone because it was assigned to someone who shared that same energy.

“That's the third time Jade's rung since you've been here. You want me to answer it next time?” Abby questioned, folding her arms across her chest. Abby was petite, maybe a little over five foot two. But she was ready at any moment to prove she was more than what people saw on the outside.

With a heavy sigh, I sat up, ignoring the way my abs screamed at me to lay the fuck back down. “No. I'm hoping

she'll get the point soon. She hasn't called, or text, or anything since the wedding more than three weeks ago. Not to check and see if I was okay without a place to live. Not even to ask if I needed the things I'd left at her house. Or to simply say sorry."

Though I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it.

Abby eased her body onto the floor beside me, offering me a comforting smile. "People don't understand how much a friendship breaking up can hurt more than a relationship."

She wasn't wrong.

I knew in my heart that Chad wasn't the man I'd envisioned him to be in my head. Over the year and a half together, I'd somehow created this perfect image of a good Catholic boy who was respectful and focused on what he wanted. It shocked me now to think of how I was so willing to give up things I craved and valued in a relationship just because I *thought* he was what I wanted.

No, not wanted.

What I *needed*.

With Reed, fake or not, the way he treated me was a sick reminder of all the time I wasted with that piece of trash human being.

In the end, though.

Chad was an asshole but wasn't the worst part of the shit show.

It was Jade.

It was knowing that someone who knew my heart and soul and how damaged I'd been in the past could so willingly and easily go out of their way to hurt me. Someone who had been there. Who'd seen me live those parts of my life which were the darkest.

It was like reliving that pain all over again.

It felt like I'd thrown myself into the water back then to douse the flames, and now I was drowning in it. There was no

escaping betrayal and the dark thoughts that came with that bullshit. It was so much more than shedding a few tears and moving on.

If things had been different, I would have been left alone.

No one had come after me.

No one gave a fuck.

I could only imagine the dark hellhole I'd be in right now without Reed pulling over that day and holding out his hand.

In retrospect, I should have seen it coming. When the shoe dropped, and the pieces fell into place, I questioned my intelligence.

Jade had planned the guest list, chosen the flowers, and she even picked the style of my dress and the color of Chad's suit.

This whole time, she hadn't been the best friend helping me plan *my* wedding to *my* fiancé.

She'd been planning *her* wedding to *my* fiancé.

The wedding he wouldn't give her because he was scared his parents would never approve.

Though I guess now they'd seen the alternative was a crazy bitch who uses the word fuck in church—Jade looked like a damn angel.

More ringing filled the small studio, and while I'd been happy to leave it alone before and let her sit and stew about what she'd done, I suddenly had a burst of *fuck that*. I leaped off the floor, ignoring the screaming in my muscles as I quickly walked over to where my phone sat, Jade's face lighting up the screen.

I reached for it, my anger almost making me toss it across the room before I could answer, but I paused and swiped, pressing it to my ear. "What the hell do you want?"

"Valen, I just need to talk—"

"No," I snapped. "I don't want to hear what you have to say. Actions, Jade! They speak louder than words, and the world heard yours."

I thought I heard a sniffle.

Maybe that should have spurred me on, but really, it tugged at a string I wasn't anticipating. Not because of the tears but because Jade never cried. I hadn't seen a tear in her eyes the entire time we'd been friends.

Not even because of Maddie.

Jade was the only one of the three of us who was always so confident, so sure, so ready to take on anything that came her way.

At times, it drove Maddie and me crazy, but for the most part, it gave the two of us the boost we needed to take chances, to not be so cautious, to live life.

So I paused.

And I waited.

"I need to tell you..." she said quietly before clearing her throat and lowering her voice to a whisper. "There's things I need you to hear."

I looked up at Abby, who was standing a few feet away, shaking her head.

I know I should have ignored this.

I should have hung up and walked away.

But there was a reason this shit with Jade had hurt so bad, and it was because I did care about her... so much. She'd had my back at times when no one else had. She'd stood up for me, fought for me, and together, the both of us had fought back through the dark.

"Valen, p-please," she pleaded again, her voice cracking. "Please, just hear me out."

I stood a little taller, my heart and head battling inside me.

One said *listen*.

The other screamed *to hell with that*.

Unfortunately, there would always be one that was stronger than the other.

Chapter Seventeen

REED

“What do you think?” Valen asked as she sat on the edge of the bed, threading a tiny strap through a buckle on her heel.

“That dress is making me think we should skip this party and stay the hell home,” I told her seriously as I pulled on my jacket and tugged at the cuffs. Her rose gold strapless dress accentuated the curve of her breasts and her slim waist. The length just brushed the floor with a split up the right side as high as her hip.

She’d had it on for less than twenty minutes and I was already struggling to keep my eyes and hands to myself.

While I didn’t believe in perfection, I struggled to see anything besides that with this woman.

She had all the right curves.

The right amount of confidence.

And we could speak for hours about anything—business, sports, movies. And even when we disagreed, the way she so passionately argued her point could be the sexiest fucking thing about her.

There were men out there looking for women to be submissive, to see them as the income earner, the head of the household, and the one who made the decisions.

But that had never been me.

I wanted a woman to stand with me, who felt like she could speak her mind and be heard. I wanted her to feel revered, not like a pretty accessory on my arm. Because I know life is not perfect. There will be times when I will feel knocked down and find the urge to lean on her for support. Because while it seemed so easy for us to lift each other during the good times

if we couldn't be each other's balance in the bad times, then we both crashed and burned.

Maybe that's why this felt different.

The idea of forming some kind of relationship with someone had forever been the dread that sat in my stomach. It was the fear of loving someone so hard and fighting for them but then watching them leave anyway.

I'd felt that pain before.

I loved Gabe, and no matter what I did to help him, he was taken from me.

I loved my parents, but when Gabe died, even having given parts of my body wasn't enough for them. All they could do was look at me with disappointment and blame—a bitter pill to swallow.

So I lost them too.

With Valen though, we'd begun building something from nothing. There'd been no expectations. No pressure. Things between us had developed naturally as we'd gotten to know each other. Just two people whose lives crashed together and were now moving along the same track. And while there was still a part of me waiting for it to derail at any moment, both of us had taken turns over the past few weeks to keep things straight and steady.

“Earth to Reed?”

I blinked a couple of times, moving my gaze to her face, where I was met with a knowing smile.

She laughed softly, pointing at her face. “My eyes up are here, Mr. Lawson. And I meant... what do you think about me seeing her later?”

“Well, Mrs. Lawson, you knew full well what putting on that dress would do to me.” She reached for me, and I took her hand, helping her to her feet with a little extra tug that had her falling into my chest. My arm circled her waist, and with my free hand, I hooked her hair back behind her ear. “Do you really want to see her?”

Valen had explained about her phone call with Jade yesterday.

I'd been fielding my own phone calls from my dad and Christine—mostly Christine—including some pretty angry voicemails about how Valen was being stubborn and insensitive by not hearing Jade out. And how I was only feeding her vindictive ways by giving her somewhere to stay.

My first instinct was to keep Jade the hell away from Valen.

There was nothing she could say or do to excuse her actions.

However, those plans were beginning to falter when I saw how eager Valen was to suddenly hear her out.

“I didn't think I wanted to see her,” she said with a heavy sigh before reaching for my tie, straightening it, and pressing it flat against my shirt. “I honestly thought I'd be happy if I never saw either of them again, but then I heard her voice, it just didn't sound right. She was upset and teary.”

My brow pinched. “I didn't take you for one to have your heartstrings tugged on by some tears.”

She pulled back from me and shook her head firmly. “It's not like her being upset makes me feel bad or anything. It's more like a feeling that I am missing something.”

That didn't make me feel any better.

In fact, it gave me a sense of dread I wasn't expecting, a heavy feeling in my stomach, which I'd learned to take notice of over the years. “When are you planning on seeing her?”

“She said she'd meet me at the party tonight. That we could find a quiet corner to talk,” she explained, though the way her nose scrunched like a little rabbit let me know even she was feeling a certain way about it, and it wasn't good.

“Tell me.”

She inhaled deeply. “It's just... she said, *at least then Reed will be nearby.*” The look on my face must have changed dramatically because she nodded hard. “Yeah. Exactly.”

I was not Jade's favorite person.

Not by a long shot.

"We'll be careful," I concluded. "I'll be close by. I will also let Karl and some of the security know to be on the lookout."

Her body slumped. "Okay. I just want to move on. Think about something else."

"Red. Trolls. That mountain in Japan."

The corner of her lip curled up, and she raised one eyebrow just slightly. "That's funny. Last time I asked for a distraction, you practically mauled me with your mouth on the living room sofa." She began walking backward, out of the bedroom and into the hall.

I tugged at my cufflinks, following her, matching her step for step. "I already made the offer that we could stay home. It's no longer on the table, and we are now running late."

"Okay," she said with a smile, though the smile on her face and the sureness in her tone told me she had yet to admit defeat on this particular topic. "Is that your final decision, or would you like to revisit it before I step out the door?"

I scoffed and rushed forward, wrapping my arms around her and holding her captive. "You know, I find it sexy as hell when you talk in circles around men like Harold Dennison. But it's not so much fucking fun when you turn that intelligence on me."

She grinned and ran her tongue along her teeth. "I don't know what you mean."

"Mmm..." I hummed, shaking my head. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah."

I took her hips and turned her toward the exit, allowing her to lead the way as I grabbed my cell from the kitchen counter and switched off a few lights.

"I probably should have taken you up on that first offer to stay home," Valen commented as she stepped down the stairs

to the foyer, and I trotted behind to catch up.

“Why’s that?”

She paused at the front door, turned to face me, and reached between her breasts. “I would have put these on instead,” she said as she slowly dragged something out.

String?

Lace?

It took me a moment to decipher exactly what I was staring at.

Her fucking panties.

Stuffed down her dress.

Which meant...

It clicked just as she turned and reached for the door handle, and I quickly rushed up behind her, pressing my chest against her back and slamming my palm against the door so she couldn’t open it.

She laughed softly, but her breathing was uneven and heavy as I pressed her forward, grinding my hips against her ass. “We’re going to be late, Mr. Lawson,” she teased breathlessly.

“Girl, you are playing with fire,” I murmured in her ear as I took the panties from her hand, scrunched them up, and slipped them into my own pocket.

“Thankfully, I like it hot.”

Fuck.

Chapter Eighteen

VALEN

“This really is something else,” I said for about the fifth time, my mouth still practically hanging open as we made another loop through the first floor of the building. Something was to be said about the contrast of thick blocks of concrete and brick mixed with sparkling fairy lights and some pastel-colored balloons.

Add in the delicious aroma of the food vendors who all had stores in the next block and the small four-person orchestra—a local family from down the street—the ambiance of this event was unlike anything I think anyone could have imagined.

“We never would have thought of it,” Reed said with his hand against my back, moving us through the crowd. “This way, we can take interested parties up to see the actual layout, have them stand in it, and get a feel for the space. That will increase buyers tenfold over trying to explain what it will be like using a model and some slides on a projector.”

It felt good.

To have been able to give something positive to Reed, especially after everything he’d done for me. I couldn’t stop smiling—it really was special. “You’ll think you’ll do something like this in the future?”

Reed chuckled, leaning in. “I don’t think we’ll do things any other way in the future. Look at the smiles on people’s faces and how they’re enjoying the atmosphere. A lot of these people are real estate agents whose clients live overseas or out of state. Usually, they come, grab a pamphlet, have a drink, get the information needed, and then they leave.”

We watched the mixture of people mingling, Bronson deep within the crowd, turning from one person to the next, using

his hands a lot like he was explaining things to them. “They’ve never been this eager or excited before. They want to know everything. They want their clients to be a part of it. Not just because the project is stunning but because they can see how we’ve included the community and more often than not, developers don’t. They take over, and that causes problems later on.”

It was easy to tell by the way Reed kept talking and talking that he was excited about the prospect of what might happen.

From what I could tell, tonight would be the first night investors or buyers would be able to purchase or make deposits to secure apartments or spaces within the building, and just how important it was to at least get a handful on board so Reed and Bronson weren’t footing the bill for everything and draining their funds.

It really was fascinating, the entire process—something Reed went through, from what I could tell, maybe once or twice a year, depending on size—but was brand new for me to experience.

“Lawson! Get over, and let’s talk,” an older man called, waving Reed and me toward the far end of the room. It was a little amusing to see all these men and women dressed in cocktail dresses and three-piece suits, with their looks topped off with a yellow hard hat, but that was a requirement of stepping inside this party.

This was a construction site, after all.

“Good to see you all here,” Reed greeted the large group before slipping his arm around my waist and pulling me into his side. “This is my wife, Valen. Valen, this is...” Reed’s voice melted into the distance as he listed the handful of gentlemen.

Bill, Greg, Samuel, Curt... maybe it was Burt.

I simply nodded and smiled. “Thank you all for coming. It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Now Reed,” Bill—I think—started. “Bronson has promised me first option on one of the large offices upstairs.

I'm expanding the firm, and this could be a nice place to do just that."

The noise of their discussions faded into the background as I watched Reed step into himself and own the conversation. It was pretty damn hot, if I was being honest, the way he controlled the direction everything went and how he didn't allow their slight jabs about his age to do anything but spur him along.

Reed was young, and he hadn't been in the business for long, but there was no questioning how fucking good he was at what he did. Hell, all you needed to do was look up exactly what he and his company were worth.

Not millions.

But billions of dollars.

Reed himself is on many of Forbes lists—youngest CEOs, fastest growing companies, self-made billionaires.

I was proud.

Was that weird?

We hadn't known each other for long, but we'd both been pretty open about the things we'd struggled with in our lives. And if there was one thing I knew for sure—no one would have blamed Reed if he'd decided he was done fighting. He'd been doing it for years.

Fighting through operations.

Fighting to be strong for Gabe.

Fighting to hold the weight of his family and their expectations.

After losing his brother, he could have sat down and simply said, "I'm done."

And people would have understood.

But he didn't.

Instead, he fought harder.

And I'm so damn glad he did because seeing this world he'd built, the way people looked at him, how they admired his work, he deserved this.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I'm just going to get a drink," I told them, squeezing Reed's hand before I pulled back. Though I should have known I'd never escape that easily.

"Back in a moment, gentlemen." Reed also excused himself, holding tight to my hand as we stepped away from the group of businessmen. "I'm probably going to have to show this lot around. But I'll try to make it quick."

"I will try not to get into much trouble," I teased, pressing my hand to his chest. "Go. Do your business. I'll be fine."

He looked uneasy about it, but he slowly backed away, returning to the party of men whose excitement about the project and about Reed would hopefully lead to an amazing sale before the night was done.

"Drink?"

I turned to find Bronson holding out a glass of champagne, that boyish grin I'd come to know well plastered across his face.

Taking the glass, I nodded. "Thanks. How are you feeling about everything?"

"Feeling like I wish I would have spoken to Reed about this plan a whole lot earlier because it's so damn good," he answered, the both of us looking over at where Reed was leading the way to the elevator. "I've been doing business shit since I was a teen when my dad took over the running of the hotels. I'm the one who pitched this idea of us stepping into things like apartment buildings, and change can make those old bastards like my dad fucking nervous. So to see how this is all coming together, it's good. Really fucking good."

I nudged him with my elbow. "I'm sure this is the first of many projects that are going to take off like wildfire. I can't wait to see them."

"Good," he noted, leaning into the wall beside me. Bronson was far more laid back than Reed. He was playful and

sarcastic, the playboy everyone warned you about. “Because I’m hoping you’re gonna stick around. You’re good for Reed. And I think he’s good for you too.”

Laughing softly, I shook my head. “I wasn’t prepared for a deep and meaningful tonight.”

His grin grew a little wider. “I’m not exactly the type either, but it’s been a long time since I’ve seen Reed like this.”

“Like what?”

“Happy.”

Warmth spread through me, and I glanced down at the ring on my finger, the fairy lights decorating the walls sparkling within the large diamond. It felt heavy on my finger, as though it had, in a way, grounded me when I felt like my world was spinning out of control.

It made me forget for a minute that it was all a ruse.

At least, it had started out that way.

Now, we were sharing a bed, our bodies, and pieces of our souls.

What came next?

“So, do you need me to help you find a future wife so you’re not on your own?” I teased Bronson, choosing not to ask all the questions racing through my mind about whether Reed had spoken to him about us. Had he mentioned our relationship being fake, or had it become something else without us realizing it?

Bronson’s eyes scanned the room. “Oh, trust me, I’m hardly ever on my own,” he mused as he sipped his beer.

It was one of those fancy beers.

Craft beers.

It suited his personality, if I was being honest.

A little quirky, slightly pretentious, and even though you don’t want to admit it, usually better than the normal kind.

“You’re just going to be forever single?”

Bronson opened his mouth to answer, the grin on his face letting me know it was going to be the smart-ass reply I should have expected, but before he could speak, a woman's voice from behind me cut him off.

“Are you Valen?”

Spinning around, I found a stunning young woman standing so close behind me that I had to take a step back to keep our noses from brushing. She had a model's body and a Disney villain's smirk.

“I am,” I answered, suddenly feeling Bronson a little closer behind me. “Can I help you?”

She nodded, placing a hand on her hip and popping it out to the side. The couple of girls behind her doing much the same as they giggled and whispered amongst themselves. I knew who they were immediately—not by name, but by action. And theirs gave off the kind of *mean-girl* energy I hadn't experienced since high school.

“I just wanted to let you know—”

“Trina, you better be *very cautious* of the words that are about to leave your fucking lips,” Bronson warned, his voice having changed dramatically from light and playful to sharp and serious. “You don't want to know what Reed will do—”

Trina flashed Bronson a narrowed glare as she cut him off. “This is none of your business.”

“You better believe it damn well is,” Bronson threw back, inching forward a little farther as if he was going to step in front of me. But I held my arm out, stopping him from stepping past me.

“It's okay. It sounds like Trina has something she would like to say,” I tried, meeting Bronson's eye. I appreciated him wanting to stand up for me, but it would be a cold day in hell before I'd let another woman think that they could walk all over me.

I returned my attention to Trina. “Go ahead.”

This woman was already agitated.

And I was stirring the pot by treating her like she was nothing.

Because to me, she was.

I didn't know her.

I didn't give a damn what she had to say.

But I'd let her say what she needed to get out.

"I was with Reed the night before you were married." She stood a little taller the second she was done, acting all proud of herself like she'd dropped some kind of bomb, and I was going to run out of the room crying.

"Okaaay," I answered with a nod. "That all?"

Bronson laughed, and Trina fired a hard glare at him over my shoulder. "I just thought you should know what kind of man you have married."

Had Trina come over and asked for a private moment to share this information with me, with the intention of doing another woman a favor by sharing what she thought was infidelity, I probably would have thanked her and explained the entire situation so there was no confusion. But the fact that she'd brought her friends and decided to try and one-up me by telling me she slept with my 'husband' in front of whoever was listening meant all she was going to get was indifference.

And probably sarcasm.

"Thankfully, I already know," I assured her. "But next time you have the urge to interfere in someone else's relationship to make yourself feel better, maybe you should reevaluate your life choices and think about how you can lift other women up instead. Feminism!"

"Come on," Bronson urged, wrapping his arm around my elbow and turning me away from the stuck-up bitch. The amused smile on his face caught me off guard, and I instantly started laughing.

"Seriously, do people not want me to be happy? Is that a running theme?" I questioned with a light giggle, though the joke wasn't much of a joke.

Bronson paused with a heavy frown, but there wasn't even time to think of how to answer before someone yelled for him.

“Bronson!” a young man called through the crowd. “Reed needs you upstairs.”

He looked at me, but I quickly waved him off. “Go!”

There was uncertainty in his eyes, but he backed away. “I’ll be back soon.”

Good.

Because I needed another drink if I was going to make it through the rest of the night.

Chapter Nineteen

VALEN

I'll be there soon. Can you meet me out the front?

The text message had come through a few minutes ago, but I'd yet to move.

I tapped my foot for a few moments, searching the room for Reed but unable to find him. I'd seen him for a few minutes here and there, but he'd disappeared about thirty minutes ago with some more of the investors and buyers on tours of the single, staged apartment and the layout for the other business spaces they intended to include.

That's why he was here.

Not to babysit me.

I'd watched him tonight speak to these people. I'd seen glimpses of Reed, the businessman, before, but not like this. He was strong and sure of himself, and it was a role I could easily see turn the wrong type of man into an arrogant bastard when you had this many people wanting to get time with you and be involved in the things you create.

But he wasn't like that.

There was a sense of humbleness to him as he pitched his ideas and plans. He spoke about the construction company, the interior designers, the engineers—he talked up their skills and the way they had added to the project and how they had brought his ideas to life. He constantly drew Bronson into the conversation because, while Bronson was big in his own circles, this was a new space for him—and a new venture. And while Reed could have taken all the praise and the pats on his back, he didn't.

It was so damn attractive.

And it was also why I wasn't about to rain on his parade by dragging him away when I was pretty sure this conversation with Jade was going to be done in a few seconds.

So I quickly typed back...

Be out in one minute.

Then I maneuvered my way through the crowd, the waiters, and the food stalls, ducking and diving around people, leaving me breathless by the time I reached the exit out onto the main street.

The cool night air hit my skin, and I shuddered, wrapping my arms around my waist as I navigated the makeshift path to the sidewalk, my eyes searching the street.

It wasn't exactly busy, but also not dead with people coming and going from the party, couples and groups saying their goodbyes at the curb.

I stepped straight underneath the nearest street light, knowing it would illuminate me, and looked down again at my phone.

Nothing.

So I typed...

I'm here?

No reply.

I glanced up and down the street. There were a bunch of people milling around, chatting, smoking, networking.

"Jade?" I called, and a couple who were climbing in their car down the street looked over at me. I made a point of waving like I knew them before lowering my voice to a growl. "Jade, I swear to God I'm about to wal—"

“Jade couldn’t make it.”

The sinking feeling I felt as Chad stepped out of the darkness was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. It was like driving toward the edge of a cliff and knowing even if you put the breaks on now, there wasn’t much you could do about the incoming destruction.

“Where’s Jade?” I demanded, my eyes frantically searching the shadows, waiting for her to pop out from within them.

But she didn’t.

And all he did was move closer, Chad’s shoes scuffing the concrete as he moved down the sidewalk.

“I heard she called you,” he explained, tugging the hoodie from over his head so I could finally see his face. “I told her to give you some space before she tries to talk to you. She’s still not really ready.”

I scoffed loudly, the sound bouncing off the walls of the construction site behind us. “She’s not ready to say sorry. This is a joke, right? What the hell are you really doing here, Chad?”

He scrubbed at the stubble on his face, a rather dramatic change considering he used to shave it every morning, even when I asked him to leave it a little messy. He’d always insisted work liked them to look clean and presentable.

Obviously, that was no longer a concern for him, but it was a bright red flag for me, and I was starting to think about how exactly I was going to get myself away from him. His voice was different, the way he stood was different, and there was something in the way he looked at me that had my internal alarms screaming.

“I want you to fix the shitstorm you created,” he finally demanded, his hands curling into fists. “Jade needs to hear it, and I need to hear it, so we can start to move on with our lives.”

“Hear what?”

His brow pinched. “Hear you admit that you were *wrong!*”

I choked on my spit as laughter flew from my mouth.

I was in the twilight zone, for sure.

There was no way in hell he could look me in the eye like he was and believe what he was saying—not in a sane world. Sure, I could have handled things differently, I could have done them in private, but the pain caused by this chaos was not fucking equal.

I cleared my throat, suddenly not so cold as anger sparked inside me like gasoline to a lit flame. “You and Jade made your bed,” I hissed, shaking my head. “I hope you enjoy fucking each other in it.”

“You stupid bitch!” He launched at me, shoving me hard and forcing me to stumble back into the chain link construction fencing behind me, the entire thing rattling loudly as the sharp points tore at my skin. “Do you have any idea what you’ve don—”

Smack.

Suddenly, he was gone.

The ground beneath me jolted as Chad’s body hit the concrete, but Reed wasn’t done. He went after him, grabbing hold of the front of his hoodie and lifting him off the ground just so he could drive another fist through his face.

And another.

The sound of fists connecting with skin filled the night air.

My body was frozen on the spot as I watched Reed beat Chad like a damn boxing bag, Chad’s limbs flailing in an effort to fight back.

“I told you!” Reed spat, lifting Chad’s entire body off the ground and slamming it against a car parked at the curb, the window cracking under the pressure.

That’s when I finally snapped out of my haze.

Reed was protecting me.

Fighting for me.

And that was going to get him hurt, or worse, arrested.

“Reed!” I screamed, hurrying forward and grabbing a fistful of his suit jacket. “Reed, stop.”

He stumbled back a step, allowing me to rush around him and place my hands against his chest. His breathing was heavy, his heart pounding so damn hard I swear my palms were the only thing keeping it inside his body.

Reed pointed over my head. “I warned you about fucking with what’s *mine*,” he growled out, pushing against me like he was going to have another go. “Next time, nothing’s going to stop me.”

People hurried around us.

Shoes tapping on the concrete, people whispering as I felt a crowd begin to form, but it was when cameras started to flash in the darkness that I knew we needed to get the hell out of there. “Come on,” I said quietly. “We need to go.”

“She’s right.” Bronson appeared to my left, Karl on my right. “Come on, brother,” Bronson encouraged, physically moving Reed backward through the crowd and back into the building.

“Oh my God, what the hell is going on?”

Jade’s voice had me throwing my hands in the air, and I spun around just as she appeared out of the back seat of an Uber. “Your boyfriend shoved me, and Reed lost his shit,” I answered, my tone sharp. “You need to take his ass home.”

“Wait,” she said, swallowing hard, her eyes shifting from me to Chad, then back to me. “Valen. I didn’t—”

“All I was doing was trying to work things out with the woman I was meant to marry,” Chad exclaimed from behind me, pandering to the people who had crowded around. I spun on my heel, taking in the scene. “She left me at the altar for that monster.”

Karl tried to grab my hand, but I twisted from his grip.

Lucky, there were only a few people around.

Some had followed Reed back inside—uncaring for the drama—while a handful of others helped Chad to his feet. He was bloody, his nose possibly broken and bent a little to the left, and his lip split, blood flying from his mouth as he spoke.

I wanted so badly to correct him.

To tell those people the truth about what actually went down.

But honestly, it didn't matter.

Chad wasn't about to go to the cops. He was at least smart enough to know that it wouldn't go in his favor, not against Reed Lawson. Well, I would have said he was smart enough before he showed up here, demanding all these insane things and then coming at me like a crazed man.

“Jade, you need to get him the hell out of here,” I pleaded, feeling all the adrenaline drain from my body, leaving me so fucking exhausted. Looking over at my friend—my old friend—I held her gaze. “Please, just get him out of here. I can't do this right now.”

Jade didn't reply, not out loud, at least. She simply nodded.

I didn't know why he was here or why she'd shown up later, after him. But I just knew I didn't have the energy to piece together this messed-up puzzle right now.

“Come on,” Karl insisted, stepping in front of me so I could no longer dwell on the carnage. “Reed will want to make sure you're okay.”

I nodded, walking with him back into the building, things inside almost as I'd left them.

People mingling, drinking, laughing.

There was no trepidation twisting their stomach, but the weight of mine was becoming tighter and tighter by the minute.

And while I couldn't figure out exactly what was wrong.

I knew it wasn't right.

Chapter Twenty

REED

“I’ll get this statement typed up, ready to send to anyone who requests it,” Tracy said as she closed her laptop and stuffed it back into her bag. “I don’t see there being any issues with assault charges, given there are witnesses who saw him attacking Valen and you protecting her. But I will make sure I liaise with our person in the department downtown so we cover all our bases.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed, knowing she was right.

Chad had lost it on Valen, and people were there.

They’d seen it.

Heard the shit he was spitting at her.

Saw him shove her.

That was a good thing and went well in my favor.

“Can you make sure Valen’s work is also aware of what happened before it comes out on the news?”

She nodded, grabbed a pen, and quickly scribbled a note on the back of her hand before sticking the pen through the center of the messy bun that sat atop her head.

That was new.

And I also hadn’t ever seen her with glasses on—I assumed she usually wore contacts.

But it was one in the morning, and I’d dragged her out of bed to do some kind of damage control for the shitstorm I’d created earlier in the evening. The party itself had gone off without a hitch. Even after I’d beaten Chad’s ass out on the sidewalk, we’d still sold over eighty percent of the spaces that

were for sale—a record for me. And I knew it was in part thanks to Valen and the ideas she'd suggested.

“Thanks for coming so late,” I told Tracy as I walked her downstairs to the foyer. “Appreciate you looking after this.”

She laughed softly as she paused at the door. “You’ve been pretty tame up until this point. I’m actually kind of glad I get to finally put my skills to use. Now go look after that girl,” she insisted as she walked to the bottom of the stoop where Karl was waiting to give her a ride home. “She needs you.”

I nodded, closing the door with a soft click, my eyes dropping to where I held the handle. My knuckles were still red, and there was a few spots of blood still splattered across them. A lot less than what there could have been if Valen hadn't grabbed me.

I wasn't super excited about this interaction getting out into the world, given I had a pretty good reputation for being someone who was always in control and hardly ever shaken, but I hadn't always been that way.

I'd lost my shit before.

And I could remember the last time pretty fucking clearly.

“He’s not gone, he’s not,” I screamed, fighting against the nurse who was attempting to drag me from the hospital room. I grabbed hold of anything I could get my hands on, tossing the metal pole with the bags of liquid onto the floor and upturning the table he’d usually use to eat his food or color with me.

“Reed, stop!” the nurse screamed. “Help! I need help!”

“No! Gabe!”

I kicked back, driving my heel into the nurse’s shin. She screamed, dropping me like a load of rocks onto the floor. “Jesus, Reed,” she cursed, but I didn’t care. I scampered across the floor, throwing myself onto my brother’s bed and onto his chest.

I'd seen nurses do it before.

Two hands.

Over his heart.

I thumped hard, jolting Gabe's lifeless body.

Over and over and over...

"Get him off," my father screamed, hands reaching for my body, grabbing at my arms and legs. "Reed! Leave him alone."

"He's not dead," I cried, fighting for breath.

My father finally grabbed me, lifting me onto the floor and holding my face in his hands so I couldn't look away. "Gabe is gone. He's gone. Stop making this harder for us."

Harder for them.

Like it was so fucking easy for me to watch the only person in this whole world who really loved me, and now he was leaving me on this earth without him.

No.

Please, no.

"You okay?"

I looked up at the stairs where Valen stood at the top, a towel wrapped around her body while another pulled her wet hair up on top of her head and she still looked just as fucking beautiful as she had when she'd walked out of here earlier.

Nodding, I quickly locked the door and took two stairs at a time, meeting her at the top. "Yeah, I'm fine," I told her, my hands settling at her waist and skimming over the soft green towel as I walked around her.

It wasn't pretty, and I had to grit my teeth as I assessed the damage Chad had done when he'd pushed her back against the fencing at the construction site. The sharp pieces of fencing wire had torn five or six long scrapes between her shoulder

blades. Thankfully, they weren't deep. They appeared more like an angry cat had gotten hold of her—enough to draw blood and leave some really fucked-up scratches.

It had infuriated me the moment I saw him hurting her.

His hands on her.

That crazed look in his eyes told me he might not be able to stop himself.

Instincts took over after that.

Valen's body tightened, and she sucked in a sharp breath as I looked a little closer, my breath tickling at her skin. "Bastard is lucky I didn't see these earlier," I murmured, trying to focus on Valen and convince myself I had done enough and shouldn't go out looking for him again.

It was actually harder than I thought it would be because it had been a long time since I'd had someone this close. Someone who I felt a connection with far past what I was sure either of us anticipated when we started this charade.

Valen inhaled, her shoulders rising dramatically. "I'm really s—"

"Stop."

"No," she argued, spinning on her heel to face me with a heavy frown and tears sparkling in her eyes. "Fuck that! I caused this, and I'm sorry. All I've done is cause problem after problem for you. None of this is okay, and I think it's time we ___"

"No. No fucking way," I snapped, taking her hand and gently tugging her toward the living room. She didn't fight me, not even as I fell onto the couch and guided her into my lap. She came willingly, curling into my chest and laying her head on my shoulder. "I think it's time we admit to ourselves that this fake relationship has become very fucking real."

It was a hard admission to make for me. The events of tonight proved to me that I was in deeper than I ever thought, and that meant all those emotions I thought at the start of this I might be able to avoid were making a rush back.

When she didn't answer right away, I figured I was going to have to go all in and hope that I haven't been the only one imagining what's been growing between us.

"I can admit pretty honestly that seeing Chad with his hands on you tonight scared the shit out of me for a moment."

Valen sat up so I could see her face, my hand on her thigh, thumb stroking softly over her skin. "Scared? Why?"

"Because in the past, the universe has had a habit of taking the people I care about and tearing them from my life."

I hated being vulnerable. Hated showing that I had a weakness when I'd spent so many years proving I was stronger than it.

"Honestly, I thought I might have been going a little crazy," she admitted, her voice soft, almost a whisper. "I figured I was falling into some knight-in-shining-armor syndrome. You know... girl gets saved and becomes obsessed with the hot, tattooed, *rich* guy who saved her. Girl gets slapped with a restraining order."

I huffed out a laugh. "You really think knights in shining armor look like this?" I asked, holding up my tattooed arms and twisting them around. Not a clean speck of skin to be seen from the top of my hands to my chest.

"In my story they do," she said as she reached for one, pulling it into her lap and tracing the lines with her finger. "Why all the tattoos anyway?"

I followed her finger with my eyes, feeling my body relax a little as the two of us fell into some kind of comfortable trance. "A couple of reasons... mostly so I wouldn't forget." I pointed out my brother's signature, next to it the beginning of a daisy chain that wound up and around my arm. "A single flower for each chemotherapy appointment Gabe went to. When I was old enough to go with him, I never missed a chance to sit by his side as they pumped him with poison."

Her eyes stayed on my tattoos for a minute, continuing to follow the lines and examine the pictures within. They told a story, one that maybe someday she would be a part of.

“They’re beautiful.”

“The bonus part is they’re a big *fuck you* to my parents.”

She finally looked up again. “They don’t like them?”

“They don’t think I deserve to have the skin the ink is tattooed on.” She swallowed hard, and I could tell she was forcing down words she was unsure of. Words she thought might upset me. “You can say anything you know.”

“I’m worried,” she instantly admitted.

“Everything will be fine. Tracy’s on it, she’ll make sure it ___”

“Worried about Jade.”

With how well I’d gotten to know Valen and her heart, I should have known that would be on the top of her list, above herself even. “I’m a little concerned myself. Him showing up tonight, knowing that she should have been there... it’s not right.”

It was twisted.

There was no doubt.

“You don’t think her phone call the other day was to draw you out so he could have a go at you tonight?”

She shook her head. “I saw the look on her face when she showed up. She was shocked. And I should have waited around. I should have talked to her.”

“Nope,” I argued. “No, the most important part was for you to get out of there so things could calm down.”

Valen stared off into the distance. Her face pinched tightly like she was trying to solve a math equation. “Jade has done some shit in her life, but this is not her. I know it in my bones. And it’s starting to make me question everything.”

“Everything?”

She nodded slowly. “*Everything*. The more I see this monster beneath, I have to wonder if I was seeing one version of Chad while Jade has been dealing with another.”

It was fucked up.

Seriously fucked up.

But so far, Valen's gut had been right, so I wasn't about to question it.

"I think it's time I hit up my dad and see what he and Christine know."

Valen nodded, and her body instantly relaxed as she curled herself back into my chest, tucking her face into my neck while I wrapped my arms around her. These past few weeks had been hard for her, but I was anticipating that the surprise I had planned would hopefully help her find some kind of clarity within the chaos.

At least, that was the plan.

And those had gone so fucking well so far...

Chapter Twenty-One

REED

“You ready to go?” I stepped up to the main library research reception desk and placed both my hands on the polished timber.

The routine we’d started felt like puzzle pieces fitting together.

Some days, I picked her up. Others she came to work with me for a while.

It was easy.

And after a lifetime of complicated relationships—with my dad, my mom, my siblings, and even with myself—it felt so damn good for once to have something that was simple. Simple if you didn’t consider the fact that when Valen and I started this, we were faking it, and yet, it had become the realist fucking thing I’d felt in forever.

Usually, we’d head home, and because neither of us really enjoyed cooking, we’d order in.

But tonight, that was going to be different.

Because after the previous weekend with Chad and Jade, she was starting to question a lot of things, including whether she’d judged the entire situation wrong.

Jade wasn’t my favorite person in the world. As far as the Jade I’d met a handful of times, she was spoiled, bratty, and entitled.

Valen saw something else, though. A Jade she’d grown up with, who had supported her during bad times and who had celebrated with her during the good. It’s why the idea that Jade could have done this was so heartbreaking in the first place.

And now, she wanted to ease that ache.

She wanted to believe it wasn't true.

I wasn't sure she was going to get the answers she needed, but I was going to help her find them.

"Valen," I tried again when she didn't even look up at me from the book she was reading. "Excuse me, *Mrs. Lawson*."

Valen almost leaped out of her skin. She scrambled to catch the book she was reading, which bounced out of her hands a couple of times before she finally held it tight in her grasp. "Jesus Christ, Reed," she hissed in this angry whisper tone I'd become used to over the past couple of weeks when I'd come to pick her up after work.

Apparently, I caused a commotion.

I didn't notice it much myself, but maybe I'd learned how to zone out the sound of clicking cameras and excited whispers of Boston University kids as they watched on, pretending to be studying or searching for books. I didn't often get this much attention, but since news dropped about Valen and my scandalous shotgun wedding and Valen leaving her boyfriend for me—it all seemed like the magazines and social media had labeled us 'the most wanted,' and everyone was looking for an opportunity to snap a shot.

"Mrs. Lawson," I said again. The term had become a running joke between us since Bronson and my event. "We have somewhere to be."

She looked up at me with her face scrunched in confusion. "We have somewhere to be?"

"We do."

"Where?"

I leaned in, lowering my voice, "Across town, so if you don't move that sexy ass, we're going to be late."

A couple of college kids peeked around corners, and others blatantly watched as I rounded up my wife. Valen hated it. The attention wasn't her favorite part of all this, which I knew for sure.

And I could choose not to torture her.

I could simply let Karl pick her up.

Make things a little less dramatic.

But then I wouldn't get to see that cute frown on her face as she attempted to scold me for, once again, invading her space. And then the smile that came next when I told her I didn't give a shit. Let's face it—I was going to do it anyway.

"I'll just go get my stuff." Valen finally got to her feet, rolling her eyes as she reached over the desk. "I'll be back in a minute," she said, slamming her book against my chest and flashing me a smile.

It was only a few minutes later she walked out, struggling with her bag and another pile of six or so books she was attempting to balance in her arms.

"Jesus," I muttered, hurrying around the desk and easing the books from her arms, placing the one I was already holding on the top. "Did you leave any for anyone else?"

She let out an exhausted laugh as we finally made our way out of the front foyer and through the large double doors that led outside. "I'm making up for lost time, I guess you could say," she explained as she walked beside me down the sidewalk to my car. "Chad didn't like me reading *dirty books*," she said simply, her tone mocking.

I choked out a laugh. "What?"

"He always said the relationships and the sex were all unrealistic." By the way she spat the words out, I could tell it was something she'd been told time after time. The intention was to make her feel embarrassed and stupid for wanting to believe there might even remotely be men out there who would treat their women like prized possessions, even during sex.

"Chad was scared because he knew he could never please you in this kind of way," I told her, tapping my finger on the stack in my hands. "Fuck! This shit makes me want to go back to the other night and beat the crap out of him all over again."

Valen sighed heavily, leaning back against my car as we stopped beside it. "I can't believe I let his idiotic opinions and

shit impact my life. I love to read. It's really been the only constant in my life since I was really little, being able to pick up a book and become lost in it. But I didn't read much while we were together. Stupid, really."

"It's not stupid," I argued, putting the books on the trunk of my car and stepping around in front of her, brushing the stray strands of hair away from her face. I hooked my finger under her chin and pulled at her lip with my thumb, tugging it from between her teeth where she was attempting to chew it off. "Eventually, you'll get past the damage he did. He thought he was gonna mold and break you into this woman he wanted. Meek and submissive."

Her eyes fell closed for a few seconds, and she shook her head. "I really couldn't see it, you know. Or maybe I just chose not to. God!" Her eyes flew open, her brow creased and pinched in anger between her eyes, though she still let out a sharp laugh. "Do we have to go to this appointment? Maybe we can swing by Dolores' Diner and get some pie—"

I leaned in, grabbed her face with my hands, and quickly captured her mouth, cutting her off.

She reached for me, slipping her hands inside my suit jacket and taking hold of my waist, steadying herself as I pulled her toward me.

I could feel her smile as we kissed, and as I pulled back, a happy sigh fell from her lips. "Thanks," she whispered, curling her hand around my jaw and scratching her fingernails over the rough bristles I hadn't shaved off this morning.

I pressed my lips to her forehead and stepped back. "We really have to go. The person we're meeting already isn't a fan of mine, so we should probably try not to be late."

"Someone doesn't like you? Shocking."

Tapping Valen on the ass, I stepped around her and opened the rear door of the car before gathering the books and safely settling them so they would slip around too much as we navigated the city streets. "Did you always want to be a librarian? Because of the books."

“Not really,” she answered as we both climbed into the car and she pulled on her seat belt. “Being a librarian isn’t all that exciting, if I’m being honest. But it’s something I’m good at, something I know. My dad had put money from his life insurance into a fund for me to pay for college. Thankfully, he thought ahead because Mom had kicked me out the year before, and she refused to help at all. But Dad’s money only paid my fees, and I needed money to live on, so I took a job here part-time. Then, three years later, I left college with a major in English and the offer of a full-time position, so I just accepted it.”

My hands on the wheel, I turned my head and looked at her, my brows raised. “You’ve never even applied for a job anywhere else?”

She shook her head, laying back against the headrest and closing her eyes. “Nope. I need stability. Certainty. Or I will go crazy.”

That wasn’t new.

Not only had we talked about how much she hated surprises, but I could also see how relaxed she’d become as we’d gotten used to each other’s presence and mannerisms. It was also why I think she had ignored all the signs there was something not right with her relationship with Chad because, for the most part, he was boring and predictable.

“And if you could choose anything, any job, what would you want to do?”

She turned to me with a smile. “Reed...”

“Hey, I might be good, but even I can’t apply for jobs and sit interviews for you,” I defended, knowing what she was thinking. “I’m just wondering in what direction I might need to push you in the future when you start to feel like you can do that.”

She smiled but fiddled nervously with her seatbelt. “I like to write. So maybe write my own novel or get into journalism for a paper, a magazine, or a website. Something where I

might be able to use all this practice I've had at the library, learning to investigate and study things."

I nodded, keeping my eyes directly ahead as I started the car's engine and threw it into reverse. "I think that's a great idea."

"Reed."

"Mmm?"

"What do you think you're doing?" she questioned, but I was already too far gone—not that I was going to let her know that.

"A man can't ask interesting questions about his wife? Get to know her a little better."

"Uh-huh," she said slowly. "You think you're gonna be sneaky, but... I know you, Reed Lawson."

I didn't respond.

Instead, I grinned as I backed up and pulled into traffic.

I know you, Reed Lawson.

It's funny how only a few weeks ago, that would have been more like, *I don't know you, Reed Lawson*. We were strangers, and now, we were living in the same house, sleeping in the same bed, and our fake marriage was becoming an incredibly real relationship.

Turned out, you got to know someone pretty damn well when they were at their most vulnerable. You saw their lows, and you helped them reach their highs again. It was like dating in a pressure cooker.

I could spend years with someone and not know them as well as I now knew Valen.

There was still more about her, parts and pieces I hadn't explored yet.

But I planned to.

I wanted to know it all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

VALEN

“Wow,” I said in awe as Reed pulled into the driveway of a beautiful old colonial home in a cute little neighborhood outside the city. It was two stories, with dormers in the ceiling telling me there was probably an attic as well. The shape was rectangular, the windows completely symmetrical and even across the front and sides.

It was almost a little odd-looking but stunning at the same time when you thought about the history of this house and the others like it on the street.

He’d barely put it in park before I was climbing out onto the driveway and admiring the idealistic front yard. I took in the magnificent house and the rest of the street. It was like stepping back in time. These homes were preserved and maintained, making them look like they could be brand new.

“They’re all gorgeous.”

Reed followed my gaze before adding, “I think so. Come on, we’re going inside.”

Holding the railing, I made my way up the front steps behind him to the doorway. He turned the knob and stepped to the side, nodding for me to head in.

I didn’t wait another second, practically skipping over the threshold. “Is this place yours?”

“This one, no,” Reed answered as he closed the door behind me. “It’s actually my dad’s, though he doesn’t spend a lot of time here anymore. He spends more time at the townhouse he and Christine bought a few months ago.”

I nodded. “I know the one. We had a party there... my bachelorette, I guess you’d call it.” A photograph on the wall

caught my eye, and I couldn't help but be pulled toward the two smiling children. "Is this you and Gabe?" I admired the large image of Reed and Gabe standing in front of a pinball machine, the boys both looking like they'd just hit the jackpot on Christmas morning.

"Yeah, we spent a lot of time at the arcade a few blocks over when we were kids," he explained, and even without looking back at him, I knew there was a smile on his face. He set his chin on top of my head as he looked over me at the picture. "Gabe was probably fifteen there," he said, the both of us now examining the picture. "I would have been eleven or twelve."

There was a good four years difference between them, but you'd never guess. Reed must have sprouted early because they were easily the same height and build, but I knew Gabe's slim nature was more from what his body had been through as opposed to the build he could have had as a budding teenager.

I turned, looking up at the now-grown version of the photograph. "I don't think I've ever seen your smile that big."

"Gabe was funny as hell," Reed explained, his face brightening even more. "Hilarious, actually. It was like how some people cracked jokes when they were uncomfortable or awkward, but for Gabe, he cracked them when he was in pain. His way of trying to be tough, I guess. Then we'd both laugh, and he would hurt more because of the laughter, and the nurses would tell us off."

I leaned back into the wall. Of all the conversations we'd had about Gabe, this was the first time I'd see Reed this happy—his blue eyes wide and sparkling. When we lose people, the pain can sometimes take over and numb everything else. It can be hard to remember the good things, the fun times, but obviously, there was something about this memory in particular that Reed felt a lot deeper than others.

"Sounds like the two of you together would have been quite the package."

"Yeah, we had this running joke about how he got the humor, but thankfully, I got the good looks."

A deep laugh from my left had my body jumping, and I turned to find Reed's dad standing in the archway to the next room. "Gabe was intelligent too, so much so it was almost like a superpower. But he preferred to spend all his time with Reed using those smarts to run his cheeky mouth rather than actually doing any kind of school work."

I couldn't be sure if it was some kind of low jab or his attempt at a joke about the boys' relationship, but Reed's jovial mood was instantly sucked away, and the room began to feel extra freaking heavy. Almost as though someone had broken the dam of memories, and they were quickly flooding in around us.

But Reed was quick to shut it down and stem the flow. "Thanks for meeting us here," he said, his tone flat—the expression on his face much the same.

His dad nodded and waved us through to the next room, which was just as stunning with its tall ceilings, architecture, and modern renovations.

"You have a lovely home, Mr. Lawson," I praised.

He took a seat in a large armchair in the living room. "Thank you. Christine prefers to be in the city, but I occasionally manage to escape and come out here to enjoy the quiet." He cleared his throat and reached for a cup of coffee on the small glass side table beside him. "I do have to head back to Boston, though. So what can I do for the both of you?"

I went to move forward and take a seat, but Reed hooked his finger through the belt loop of my jeans and tugged me back. "We won't take up much of your time," Reed said pointedly, letting me know there was no need for us to settle in. "We were hoping you might know where Jade is so Valen can speak with her."

His face scrunched as he seemed to slip into thought for a moment. Jade had been living with them for at least a year now and, as far as I knew, had no intentions of leaving or going out on her own until she paid off her student loans.

Which I wouldn't say would take long, given she had a really great job as a veterinary nurse.

He finally placed the coffee cup back on the table. "We really haven't seen her since a week or more after the wedding. She came and got some of her things... said she was going to stay at a hotel."

"She was by herself?"

He nodded. "She mentioned going to see Chad, but when we asked about him, she got very defensive and said she didn't want to talk about it. But I don't blame her really, after everything she'd been through."

Another small jab, this time, the target being me.

I inhaled long and deep. "Did she say where she was going?"

"She didn't."

My brow scrunched together. None of it made sense. I'd known Jade for more than ten years, and I'd been with her through all the hardest times in her life—breakups, losing family—and I'd seen her at the worst of times.

But I'd never seen her *quiet*.

I'd never seen her shut down.

That's just not the type of person she was.

She bitched. She moaned. She cried about it.

When we argued, she wouldn't let me leave until we had yelled and screamed out our issues.

That was her process.

The more I thought about the phone calls I'd had and now how she'd been acting, I knew there was something wrong.

"Do you think—"

Mr. Lawson scoffed. "Look, Valen. While I appreciate you wanting to make things right after what you did, I doubt Christine would agree to let—"

“I’m sorry,” I cut in, standing a little straighter. “After what *I* did?”

He looked up at me, his eyebrow raised. “You humiliated your fiancé and your best friend in front of a church full of people who love them.”

Reed tightened his hold on me, slipping his finger from my belt loop and grabbing hold of my waistband as I edged forward. *Smart man.*

“I loved them.” I jabbed my finger into my chest. “I did. Both of them. And you’re saying *I* should be the one to suck it up and shut my mouth?”

“Come on...” Reed growled, wrapping his arms around my waist. He lifted my body and turned me to face the exit. “Let’s go.”

“Reed...”

With a sharp shake of his head, he let me know he wasn’t playing around. “Valen. Let’s go.”

“You should just go,” Reed’s dad said, getting to his feet with a barely-there laugh. “The boy has this hero complex where he has to be the one who comes to the rescue. I’ve seen it over and over again. It’s just a shame it didn’t work on the one person he was here to save.”

Reed pressed his hand against my back, trying to force me to the front door. I would have gone too if his dad had kept it about me and the mistakes I’d made. I could handle those. Take responsibility for my *own* choices and the repercussions of them.

But he couldn’t help himself.

He couldn’t miss a chance to drag his son down.

I slipped out of Reed’s grasp and stormed back toward the awful piece-of-shit man, who I’d tried everything to be fucking respectful to until this point. And while I knew Reed was perfectly capable of defending himself, I also had this habit of having to speak up and fight for the people I cared about. It’d gotten me into plenty of trouble before—arrested,

thrown out of my home—so this time, I was going to keep it short and sweet.

“You’d think for a man who has little to no money and a wife who’d leave him in a second if she found out, you’d be a little more humble toward the son who’s keeping you afloat.”

The past few weeks I’d been spending at Reed’s office in the afternoon had helped me to learn a lot about just how far Reed was going to make sure his father didn’t crash and burn.

His dad’s eyes grew wide, his mouth falling open.

At the same time, a low, gravelly laugh came from behind me as a tattooed hand circled my waist. “Time to go now,” he murmured, his father still frozen. “See you around, Dad.”

I allowed him to pull me with him toward the door, but not before throwing one last fuck to the wind. “So lovely to see you again, Mr. Lawson,” I called from the door before adding, “But next time we visit, watch how you fucking speak to my husband.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

VALEN

It took a little over a half hour before we arrived home.

Reed had been quiet, and I'd let him have that silence in the car. Having to interact with a parent who you know has no respect for you was draining. I'd tried over the years to do it with my mom, but essentially, I'd given up.

It was too much.

It stole too much of my peace.

So I stopped.

Maybe Reed would too one day, but it was obvious that despite how strong Reed had become through his trauma, he was still searching for some kind of acceptance from his family. And while I didn't think he needed to prove to them how worthy he was of his place on this earth, I'd support him in continuing to fight for it in whatever way I could.

Even if it meant shutting my mouth and not swearing and cursing about his arrogant, obnoxious father the whole way home.

We climbed the stairs to the living area, and I placed my bag on the kitchen counter while Reed unloaded the heavy stack of books. "You want me to order some foo—" Without warning, Reed paused in front of me and dipped his shoulder, pressing it into my stomach and lifting me off the floor. "Reed!" I screamed, dangling behind him as he marched down the hallway to the bedroom, carrying me like I weighed nothing at all.

He paused, and suddenly, I was being tossed through the air, my body landing on the pillowy, cloud-like blankets that covered his Californian king.

I started to giggle as I lay back, my hair spread like a fan, probably looking like a damn hot mess as I stared up at Reed.

He stood at the end of the bed, staring down at me with this intense, thoughtful look. “I don’t know many women that would stand up and speak to my father that way,” he started, and my laughter quickly turned to silence. “He’s been berating and belittling me my entire life, and for the most part, I just let him, thinking one day I might actually do something that makes him proud.”

I pushed myself into a sitting position and turned onto my knees, shuffling forward. I grabbed his waist and looked up, really having to crane my neck as I kneeled in front of him.

Reed was always so stoic.

It was hard to imagine a man like him letting someone else beat him down.

But it was just another reminder that we can’t always see the hurt beneath a person’s happy.

“Not only am I grateful to have someone beside me who is willing to stand up and fight for me,” he started, reaching out and threading his fingers through my hair. “But, hearing you demand respect for me and call me your husband in the same fucking breath, was the sexiest thing I have ever heard in my entire damn life. And now, I want to show my wife how much I fucking appreciate her having my back.”

I licked my lips, enjoying the way his eyes had changed. How they had gone from narrowed and thoughtful to looking like he was trying to decide which part of my body he was going to devour first. Only, I was going to beat him to it.

I let my hands trail lower to the waist of his pants, making quick work of his belt, button, and zipper before reaching my hand inside and wrapping my hand around his thick cock. My mouth watered as I pulled it out, sliding my hand along its length.

Reed’s fingers tightened in my hair, his grip becoming almost painful as he used it to tilt my face up toward him. “Tongue out.”

I opened my mouth, sticking my tongue out flat and holding his gaze as I placed the head of his cock on my tongue and removed my hand.

Reed held my head as he pushed his hips forward, his cock sliding into my mouth and down my throat. I gagged a little, and he pulled back, but I reached for his hips and pulled them toward me, letting him know I wanted this.

I wanted more.

God, there was nothing like kneeling before your man and having him in control.

I was a pretty damn independent woman outside the bedroom, but with Reed when I gave him the power, he gave me the rewards. And I took them like a greedy girl.

In and out. He slowly slipped his length in and out of my mouth, and when he almost slipped free, I would swirl my tongue around the end like a lollipop and pull it right back in. "Goddammit," he cursed, finally letting go of my hair, and I took advantage, holding him tightly so I could stroke up and down as I swallowed him with vigor.

He reached for my blouse, grabbed hold of the front, and ripped the buttons open in a way you only read about in romance novels. They all popped off, exposing my bra, which Reed quickly tugged at, allowing my breasts to pop free.

Saliva dripped from my mouth down onto them, making them slick and wet in Reed's hands.

He kneaded at them, pinching my nipples as I had him buried deep in my throat.

My eyes rolled back, and I moaned loudly.

"Fucking hell. Yes, fuck, that feels so damn good, baby." The pleasure in his voice spurred me on, and I moaned again. "Holy fuck. I need to get inside you before I come all over this pretty face."

He stepped away, tearing his shirt and tossing it across the room, while I sunk back onto my knees, wiping my face with the back of my hand.

“Come here,” he demanded, holding out his hand.

I took it, and he helped me to my feet, though my legs shook a little, the blood pumping through me, making me a little unsteady with excitement. I wanted to touch Reed. I wanted to feel him around me. We had a connection that started out as just words, getting to know each other, forming a bond. So when we touched, that connection only intensified, and I was beginning to crave it.

He made me feel wanted.

Appreciated.

Worshiped.

And I wanted to show him I felt the same.

I stood in front of him, and he unbuttoned my jeans, wiggling them over my curvy hips until they fell to the floor. My underwear quickly followed, and I kicked them both to the side before looking up at him again.

One step at a time, he walked me backward until my knees hit the bed, then he reached down and grabbed the back of my thighs, lifting me off the floor and forcing my legs around his waist.

I held on tight, my arms wrapped around his neck, our faces a mere breath apart as he lowered us both onto the bed. When my back was settled into the blankets, he pressed his lips to mine, kissing me so hard my head spun for a moment.

Reed ground his hips forward, the tip of his cock slipping through my already drenched pussy, the head bumping my clit and making me gasp. He bit down gently on my bottom lip as I groaned loudly and lifted my hips, wanting more.

His lips moved to my neck, but he pushed his hips forward again, still not filling me.

Just teasing.

Tormenting.

“Reed,” I whispered as he peppered kisses along my collarbone. “Reed, please.”

He nuzzled at my jaw with his nose, the both of us already struggling to breathe with the sexual tension, the build-up, the anticipation.

My chest heaved.

I was hot.

Needy.

I wanted him.

“Tell me what I want to hear, and I’ll give you what you need, Valen,” he growled in my ear.

“Fuck me,” I whispered, and he began to chuckle.

“Not enough. Tell me *exactly* what you want.” He pulled his hips away, and I whimpered and shook my head.

“I want you inside me. I want you deep and hard inside me until I’m screaming your name,” I hurried out breathlessly. “I want you to fuck me until I come.”

He groaned, the deep, gravelly sound rumbling through me. “Anything you want, I promise I’ll give you.” I was sure he meant right now, but the way he said it made it feel like more than that. More than just a promise of a few minutes of pleasure and something like a promise of the future.

And if that was ever the offer, I knew I’d take it.

He sat back, grabbed his length in his hand and lined it up with my pussy. He brushed the head through a few times, coating it in my wetness and driving me just that little bit more crazy before he finally slipped inside.

I tossed my head back, my body bowing off the bed. “Yes. Reed...” I moaned, grabbing fistfuls of the blankets beneath me. He lifted my legs, throwing them over his shoulders and bending me almost in half as he drove deep inside me like I was his own personal toy.

I’d never felt so full.

He sped up, the bed creaking beneath us as he thrust harder and faster inside me.

“Fuck. So fucking tight,” he cursed, his body over mine as he had me bent in half, the air squeezed from my lungs.

Then suddenly, he was gone, and I was, once again, tossed through the air as he flipped my entire body over. “Hands and knees, Valen.”

In my pleasure-filled haze, I somehow managed to scamp onto my hands and knees a few seconds later, almost laying flat again when his hands grabbed both my ass cheeks and spread them.

Then I felt his tongue.

It tickled across my clit, and I had no fucking idea I was so close to coming, but my orgasm hit me like a freight train, moving from my pussy, straight up through my body and out my mouth. “Fuck! I’m coming, oh God!”

He was relentless, sucking and licking at my clit as I tried not to collapse, my entire body shaking and shuddering. His fingertips dug into my skin painfully, holding my wet hole to his face as I came all over it.

“Tastes so fucking good,” he murmured as he finally shuffled up behind me and slowly drove himself into my spasming pussy. “Holy shit. You’re gonna cut my dick off with how tight you’re squeezing it right now.”

I pushed back against him, and he chuckled.

“You want more? You think you can take it?”

“Please!”

“Hold on, Mrs. Lawson,” he warned, pulling back and thrusting so hard it almost threw me onto my face. “I’m going to fill you with my fucking cum.”

He pounded hard, and each time he bottomed out inside me, I screamed. My body climbed higher and higher again, like the waves rushing out into the ocean before the tsunami hits.

Building and building.

“Yes! Yes!”

“Here comes the edge, baby,” Reed warned, though I could hear he was close. “Look at me as you fly over it.”

I turned, looking back at him and holding his gaze just as my orgasm hit. “Oh shit!” I groaned, clutching the blankets and pressing my ass back against him. My pussy pulsed and tightened around his length, and it wasn’t long before he fell apart with me. With one last thrust, he drove all the way in, holding himself there and throwing his head back.

“Goddamn, Valen.”

My skin tingled. It was hot, sweaty, and my heart was pounding so hard I was sure I was about to have to call an ambulance and explain Reed Lawson fucked me so hard I had a heart attack.

I leaned forward, burying my face into the blankets, trying not to collapse. Then there was a loud slap and sharp sting on my ass, and I jolted back up, looking back over my shoulder with narrowed eyes. Reed chuckled, rubbing his hand over the spot to soothe the sting.

Two could play that game.

I clenched, squeezing his cock, which was still inside me. The smile dropped into an incredibly sexy but also very scary glare, a warning growl rumbling from deep in his throat. “Playing with fire, Valen.”

“I like it hot,” I teased as he pulled out finally and got to his feet. I rolled over, pulling the blankets around me and closing my eyes. “Sleep now?”

He grabbed my feet, and I screamed as he pulled me toward the end of the bed, leaning in and bracing his hands on either side of me as he loomed. “Dinner time. You choose dinner. I get to pick dessert.”

I raised my brow. “What do you want for dessert?”

He pulled away the blanket I’d wrapped myself in, and his eyes ran down the length of my body, taking his time as he took in every damn inch of me. My heart, which had just begun to slow, instantly kicked up again, and I started to wriggle under his stare.

Then he finally met my eyes again, a smirk curling at the corner of his mouth. “It’s already here,” he answered, licking his lips. “So you better hurry up and order your dinner ’cause I’m gonna be wanting something sweet, real fucking soon.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

REED

“Sorry, sir,” Karl said, shaking his head. “I’ve tried all the downtown hotels, and so far, no sign of her. At least in the places where I could get answers. She’s not answering any phone calls, not even from Valen’s phone number.”

I gritted my teeth as I strummed my fingers on my desktop. “Dad said she was staying at a hotel. He didn’t mention her leaving the city or going out of state.”

I’d been trying to find Jade for days but coming up with dead ends left and right. I needed to speak with her and get all this tension and unknown out in the open so Valen could either move on or they could start repairing their relationship. I felt the toll it was taking on Valen, the regrets she’d begun to have with how she’d handled everything.

I didn’t want her to live like that.

Having it plague her mind.

Because I knew that feeling far too well.

The what-if-I’d-done-it-different feeling.

“I’m going to try her social media,” Karl said, getting up out of the armchair opposite my desk. “Then maybe her work.”

“Thanks. I should be done soon. I’m waiting for some things from Martha. You should go get Valen and take her home.”

He nodded. “Will do.”

I’d had a buddy of mine do a background check on Chad, including who his family was, where he grew up, his job, the company he worked for, what kind of employee he was, and his criminal record.

The only things that had come up were some sealed records from when he was a minor. There was no way to see inside them and no indication of what the crimes could have been or whether he was charged with anything. It was interesting, to say the least.

Records for juveniles were sealed so they wouldn't have to report their criminal record to landlords or employers. A lot of us do stupid shit when we're young, but then we grow up, and this way, thankfully, those people don't have to constantly pay for actions they took when they were young, dumb, and not able to comprehend the consequences.

None of this helped me any, though.

I still had no fucking idea what kind of psycho I was dealing with.

As far as anything I'd found, Chad was an average guy. Didn't leave the house much, didn't make waves, went to work, came home. He visited family every couple of weeks. He didn't have any crazy hobbies—Valen said he was a little obsessed with online gaming, but that wasn't exactly out of the ordinary for young guys these days.

I honestly didn't know what to think.

Like the feeling he gave off was that he was this normal guy, but in reality, he had women tied up in his basement. I mean, at least I knew he didn't have a basement.

But the key to all of it was finding Jade.

I may not like the woman all that much, but even I was starting to believe Valen's theory that something wasn't right.

"Reed?" I looked up from my desk as Martha walked in, holding a handful of papers. "That confirmation email came through, but I don't think it's what you're expecting."

I sat forward as she placed the papers on my desk. Quickly, I pulled them toward me and scanned the front page, my eyes sweeping at speed over the email—a response to one I'd had Martha send earlier today.

I read it once.

Then again.

Thinking maybe I had missed something the first time.

But I hadn't.

I looked up at Martha. "Are we sure this is the right person?"

Martha's eyes saddened, and she nodded to the papers. "Flick to the next page. I found it online."

So I did.

What I saw was confusing in many ways, but in one, it made me want to go home and wrap Valen in my arms and never let her go.

MADLINE "MADDIE" DUNHAM

May 3rd 1999 – November 4th 2017

Madeline Julie Dunham, affectionately known as Maddie, age 18, passed away suddenly on November 4th 2017.

She is survived by her parents, Linda and Barry Dunham, and sisters, Olivia, Penelope, and Charlotte. Maddie was an animal lover, often found on her parents' farm working hard or playing with the animals, and if she wasn't there, you could find her with her two best friends, Valen and Jade, living life to its fullest.

VALEN

Hearing Reed's footsteps come up the stairs and down the hall brought a smile to my face.

"Hey! I was just about to pour a glass of wine," I called out before he appeared around the corner. "You want something?"

He hooked a finger in his tie, tugging it free from around his neck and placing it on the counter. “Yeah, coffee would be good.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn’t question why he was in need of a coffee at the end of a long workday. Though he did look tired and a little dejected, his confident shoulders were somewhat shrugged. “Bad day?” I questioned, grabbing a mug from the cupboard and walking over to the coffee machine in the corner next to the refrigerator.

“How come you never told me about Maddie?”

I froze, my hand gripping tight to the coffee mug.

Reed and I had spoken about Maddie.

He’d heard the story of what had happened.

Hell, I’d even shown him the news report with the video of me being handcuffed and forced into a police car. But there was something I hadn’t mentioned—that I never mentioned to anyone who didn’t know—because I was still scared the more I talked about it, the more real it would be.

Fucked up, given it had been very fucking real for years.

“What about her?”

“What happened—”

“I told you what happened,” I cut in, shaking my head. “Someone attacked her, and I—”

“What happened *after* that,” he corrected, an edge to his voice, but it wasn’t sharp or angry. It was almost... sad. “Look at me, Valen.”

I swallowed hard, gritting my teeth as I gently placed the mug in my hands onto the counter and stepped back so I could turn and face him. Things were clicking, falling into place—the main one being the look on Reed’s face, letting me know I didn’t need to say the words because he already knew them.

He knew.

But somehow, I managed to say them anyway, “She overdosed,” I whispered, my body physically aching as I said

the words, having not spoken them out loud for years. “She couldn’t live with the memories anymore.”

He cleared his throat. “I tried to look her up,” he started, reaching for my hand and linking our fingers. Twisting them together, he continued, “I thought maybe she’d have a lead on Jade. Or, if not, I figured talking to your best friend would still be a good way to learn more about you. I had these big plans to have her come to Boston and surprise you. I assumed—”

“You didn’t assume,” I interjected, shaking my head. “I led you to believe that Maddie was alive because I don’t speak of her as if she isn’t.”

“I’ve heard you talking to her. I’ve heard the phone ring, and her pick up.”

I swept a couple of tears from my cheek, forcing a smile. “It’s her voicemail. Her sister keeps her phone charged for me so I can call her and leave voicemails. Tell her about my day. Update her on my life. And just so I can hear her voice. I know it seems a little fucked up, but it is what got me through losing her, and the habit has never stopped.”

I talked to Maddie’s voicemail every few days. It was like a diary entry I could never hear back from or a therapist who never spoke or gave advice. I would just talk, tell her everything, and at the end, I would feel like I was lighter. Maybe it was just that simple, speaking my problems into the universe, or maybe she was really out there listening.

Reed began to back up, holding my hand tight and pulling me with him as he headed for the living room. He took a seat, and I followed suit, turning my body to face him.

“Tell me about her,” Reed said simply. “I want to know everything.”

I let out a loud laugh but felt this sudden warmth flow through me at the idea I had the chance to share another piece of my heart with this man. “She was quiet, thoughtful. The one who kept Jade and me in line and who talked us through our problems. And we had a hell of a lot of them, the both of us

coming from fucked-up homes while Maddie's family was so freaking wholesome and loving and supportive."

It wasn't even an exaggeration.

Maddie's family was practically perfect.

Her mom was this amazing cook, determined to solve the world's problems by bringing people together with food. Her dad was a veterinarian, so their farm was filled with stray animals whose families didn't want them or didn't think they were fixable. So he would bring them home, and not a single person would question him, knowing his heart was too big not to do something.

Plus, together, they had three daughters.

Three caring, empathetic, gorgeous daughters.

Reed took my legs and pulled them over his lap, his thumb stroking my thigh as he smiled. "Sounds like she would have been the person to sit you and Jade down and really figure out what the hell happened."

I scoffed and shook my head. "If Maddie had been here, I doubt I'd have even entertained the idea of being with Chad. I think at the point where he came along, I was in a phase of trying to slap Band-Aids on the kind of heartache that really needed surgery and stitches. It was all about the quick fix."

He nodded. "Makes sense. It was probably close to the time you accepted that full-time job at the library."

I paused, my entire face scrunched and my nose wiggling back and forth as I did the math. "Yeah, actually. Within a year."

"You'd had college to focus on for those few years after Maddie's death, so you threw yourself into that because it was the best distraction." Even as I heard him explain my life to me, it was like he was talking about someone else. "That kept you afloat. Then, when that was done, the holes in the boat began appearing, and you were scared of sinking. So, you clogged those holes with a boring job and a lame-ass boyfriend."

It made sense.

So much fucking sense.

But I never would have seen it.

I thought I was being responsible, making myself a life that was foolproof with a sensible job and a good husband. They were smart choices—I was sure of it.

When, in fact, I'd been fighting to keep myself from drowning.

“Holy shit,” I cursed, my eyes wide and tears beginning to stream down my face as I stared at Reed. “I can’t... h-how did you—”

“Because you aren’t the only one who has done whatever was required to plug the holes in their sinking ship.”

I was already in Reed’s lap before he’d finished his sentence, my arms wrapped around his neck. He gathered me in his arms, and we held each other.

We could have been there for five seconds or five minutes.

I had no idea.

But I knew then that this was where I was meant to be.

Chapter Twenty-Five

VALEN

“Karl?”

“Yeah?” He called back from the front seat of the car as we pulled away from work.

“How long have you worked for Reed?” I asked, curiosity having got the best of me while I’d sat in the library on my break today.

The man was enigmatic. He didn’t say much. He was always around, and I’d never seen him in anything but a perfectly pressed suit. I’d made bets with myself about how old he was and whether he was once a secret service agent for the president.

He just had *that look*.

Broad shoulders.

Square jaw.

Dark glasses covering a consistent frown.

Most people thought he was only Reed’s driver, but not many people knew Karl was also his bodyguard. Reed liked to keep that part quiet, under the radar, because while Reed seemed like any other corporate CEO, he wasn’t immune to crazy.

I’d seen some of the emails and a few of the hand-delivered notes he had lying on his desk. People threatened to hurt him or his family if he bought certain real estate. Women swearing black and blue that they’d had one-night stands that resulted in babies—babies they were going to abort if he didn’t pay them a lot of money.

Reed would never bitch or moan about these things—I’d only seen or heard them in passing—but it was proof you

couldn't always assume things were all perfectly peachy in a world like his. The higher they are, the further they have to fall.

"I've been working for Mr. Lawson for about four years," Karl finally answered, glancing back in the rearview mirror and meeting my eye. "Why?"

"You ever work for the FBI?"

He snorted loudly. "Nope. No FBI."

"CIA?"

"Who do y—"

"You a Russian spy?" I teased with a smile.

Karl laughed, the deep, hearty rumble filling the vehicle. "I was in the Navy and did some time in the Marines."

"Some time?"

"Only like six years."

Rolling my eyes, I sat back in my seat. "Oh yeah, try to downplay a casual stint in one of the hardest occupations and environments in history," I joked before adding with a heavy sigh, "Though that makes a lot of sense."

He didn't offer anything else.

He never really did, though. Just this knowing smile, which could be seriously irritating at times.

Then I got a flash of an idea. "Have you got a girlfriend?"

"I do not," he replied with a heavy sigh, though I couldn't tell if it was because of maybe a bad breakup or because I was driving him somewhat crazy with my questions.

"A boyfriend?"

He chuckled. "No. I married my high school sweetheart, but she struggled with me being deployed all the time, so we divorced after a couple of years."

My heart felt the pain in his voice. "That must have been really hard."

He cleared his throat, and I pretended as if I didn't notice the way his hands had gripped the steering wheel tighter. "It was. But I wanted her to be happy, not sitting around at home, jumping every time the phone rang. So we agreed it was best we both moved on. That was almost fifteen years ago."

I quickly did the math in my head.

Karl was probably closing in on forty, but he sure as hell still looked like he could take on anyone half his age and kick their ass.

"Why all the questions?" he asked, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"I have this friend, Abby..." His laughter was loud but also kind of nice to hear, given how serious Karl could be. "Seriously, she's a personal trainer. She's strong. Smart. Funny! I think she'd give you a run for your money."

I sat up a little so I could see more than just his eyes in the mirror. There was a smile! A genuine smile. I'd take it.

"I won't say anything else, but the idea is there if you're looking for a fun date."

"I'll let you know." It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no, and I was going to consider that a win. It wasn't often I got to actually set my friends up with men who I knew for sure were one of the good ones. And Karl was a good one.

"Reed's got a late meeting this afternoon," Karl explained as we pulled past Reed's uptown office. "So I'm just going to take you home."

I think I'd become a little too accustomed over the last month to having someone drive me around instead of having to catch buses, trains, or taxis. It meant I got to appreciate the city a lot more and see things and places I didn't usually get the time to admire, even though I'd lived in Massachusetts for the majority of my life.

"That's fine. I think I'll have a long shower and read for a while," I told him as I stared out the window, watching the buildings pass by. Thinking about curling up in my pajamas

for a couple of hours and losing myself in a book already had my shoulders dropping and my body sinking into the seat.

Since the talk I'd had with Reed the other day about reading and what I wanted to do with my future, I'd thought a lot about what kind of options I had and which jobs were on my dream list.

The library had been convenient for so long.

It paid reasonably well.

It was something I was good at.

It had been close to where I lived.

But Reed had me questioning everything in so many different ways. We were two strangers. I was some random runaway bride he'd stopped and picked up on the side of the road. What happened after that, neither of us could have predicted or prepared for, but it had been the most amazing few weeks of my life. It had me thinking that maybe good things could actually come from taking that leap into the unknown.

Something I'd avoided for years.

My mom took everything away that night after Maddie's attack. I was seventeen, and she left me stranded on the side of the road with no money, no home, and no transport. She called my private school and told them she'd no longer be paying my fees. She canceled my cards.

In seconds, it was all gone.

And the fear of that happening again kept me prepping and planning ahead.

But maybe it was time to let go and take another leap, starting with my job.

"Change of plans," Karl called from the front seat, making me sit a little taller. "Reed wants us to meet him somewhere."

My eyebrows shot up. "Okay. Where?"

He pulled into another street and made a quick turn before heading in the other direction. "Dolores' Diner," he said as he

pulled back out onto the road. “He said something about needing pie.”

Shit.

Chapter Twenty-Six

REED

Staring up at the ugly, bad-side-of-the-track motel in front of me, I shook my head. “Are you sure?”

“That’s what her credit card details say.”

I let out a long sigh. “Okay, thanks.”

It’d cost me a lot of money and a favor I was probably going to regret later, but I’d finally found the place where Jade was hiding out. I’d promised Valen I would find her. Whether she needed help or not, I was going to offer it, and we were going to get to the bottom of what the hell was going on.

The guy working the front desk had caved for a hundred-dollar bill, and as I walked up the stairs to the second story, I could feel the adrenaline begin to flood my veins and ramp my heart rate skyward. I wasn’t sure what to expect.

Was Chad going to be there, ready for another ass-beating?

Or was Jade going to tell me we were all fucking crazy, and she was happy as hell with that dumb bastard?

I was hoping for option one.

But I am expecting option two.

Either way, I had no idea as I lifted my fist and slammed it hard against the old wooden door.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Then I held my breath, waiting, expecting it to open any second.

Thirty seconds.

One minute.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I pounded again. This time, though, I called out, “Jade! You in there?”

Silence.

“Jade!”

I raised my fist as the door finally swung open and Jade appeared in the doorway, her arms folded defensively across her chest. “What do you want, Reed?” she demanded, her eyebrow raised like I hadn’t just been about to kick the fucking door down.

“Nice to see you, too,” I replied dryly. “Can I come in?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she quickly leaned toward me, glancing both ways down the balcony of the cheap motel to make sure I was alone. She had her walls up. That was obvious to me now. The past few years I’d known Jade, I’d seen this attitude as her being cold, heartless, or just a damn bitch. But since then, I’d heard Valen talk about what her relationship with Jade was like. It was supportive, encouraging, and a little over the top.

And I started to see that the Jade I got seemed to be a mask or a shield she put on when she was feeling vulnerable. And I needed to try and get past it if I was going to convince her to come and work things out with Valen.

I looked left down the balcony of the cheap motel, then to the right. “Seriously, if I stand out here much longer, I might get shot or something,” I joked, though it wasn’t exactly funny knowing what part of town we were in.

She sighed dramatically but stepped to the side, letting me slip by her and into the room so she could close the door behind me. “Mr. Richie Rich feels uncomfortable, does he?” she taunted with a smirk.

I said nothing, simply pointed at the towels she had laid across the weird little sofa in the corner of the room and the sleeping bag on top of the bed, making it obvious that she wasn’t actually getting between the sheets and trying to avoid touching anything completely.

“Seriously, Reed, you are the last person I want to see right now. So if you could explain exactly what the hell you’re doing here so I can go ahead and tell you to get the hell out, that would be great.”

“Valen wants to see you. She wants to talk—”

She barked out a laugh. “I tried that already. I came to that stupid event, but shit had hit the fan, and somehow I ended up having to deal with the results.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “Shit had just hit the fan, and it wasn’t exactly the time and place for the two of you to have a fucking come-to-Jesus moment, was it?”

She took a couple of steps back, collapsing onto the sofa and shaking her head. “I can’t. I tried, but she didn’t want to talk to me. I tried.”

“So *try again*.” It was harsh. I knew it, but I needed it to be to start breaking through that rock-hard shell. “Try again. Come and face up to this shit.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes glistening, but she was still looking at me as if she was trying to shoot laser beams out of her eyes. “Try again? Seriously? You have no fucking idea what is going on. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“So. Tell. Me,” I exclaimed, throwing my hands in the air. “This is driving Valen absolutely crazy worrying about you. So come and talk to her so you both can either make up or move on.”

She blinked a couple of times, her head falling to the side. “She’s worried?”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s more than worried. She’s hurt. She’s upset. But she’s also concerned that Chad has you locked in a basement or hypnotized... dammit! She has considered every option.”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t have a basement, he lives in an—”

“Jade. Seriously. I’m here. I’m listening.”

She pushed off the sofa, got to her feet, and walked over to the little side table beside the bed, where she picked up her cell phone and began to scroll. “These are the messages Valen saw,” she said quietly, crinkling her nose as she turned the screen to face me.

Reaching out, I took the phone from her hand, scanning through the messages and trying not to let it show on my face how uncomfortable I felt to be reading her and Chad all but sext each other, including images which I quickly skimmed over. “I’m really glad I got to take this sickening dive into your love life, but I could have done without the visu—”

“Read the damn date on the messages, Reed,” she snapped, leaning over and jabbing her finger at the screen.

I pulled it a little closer to my face. “Okay...”

“These messages are from March last year,” she explained, as if I should know what that means. When I didn’t reply, she sighed heavily. “Chad and Valen didn’t start dating until May.”

It took a second.

It shouldn’t have.

But it did.

Because it was actually so stupid.

So fucking stupid.

“Why the fuck wouldn’t you just say that?” I exclaimed, waving the phone in the air. “Why the hell didn’t you chase after her and show her she was wrong?”

She plucked the phone from my hands and tossed it onto the bed. “Because, at first, I was hurt!” The way her voice caught like she was fighting back tears took me back for a moment, and then, out of nowhere, she began to laugh. It was a little manic and reminded me for a moment of Gabe. The way he used to laugh and make jokes even though he was hurting like hell because it made the pain easier to take.

“I was so hurt.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said softly, finally feeling like the mask was gone.

It was clear.

It was like her whole body changed, and the way she held herself changed. The walls were coming down, and with them, her shoulders fell as she curled in on herself.

“Straight after, I was so angry that she would even think I would do something like that to her. I know I do stupid shit sometimes, but I didn’t think I came across as the friend who would steal your boyfriend.” She swiped at the tears on her face and licked her lips before she finally met my gaze again. “Everyone just stood around, saying how they couldn’t believe Valen would treat me and Chad that way. How she was selfish and how I should just let her live in that pain and heartache for a while before I told her the truth and demanded an apology. And I listened to them.”

It made sense, and I actually understood how she must have been feeling at that moment. Emotions running high, people telling you how you should feel, how you should act, what you should want.

Hurt people, hurt people.

And Valen and Jade had both done it.

Valen mentioned her and Jade’s friendship was never perfect. They were two very different people, which meant a lot of ups and downs. Jade was usually outgoing, opinionated, and honestly, a little hard to swallow with how confident and unafraid of speaking her mind she usually was. It had confused me for a long time as to why Valen and she would be friends, considering Valen’s sweet and thoughtful nature. But the more I learned about Valen, the more I understood. It was all about balance.

Like a see-saw—too much one way, and one person falls on their ass. Too much of something else, and the same thing happens. Jade, Maddie, and Valen had been the perfect balance of each other. While Valen lived in a world that was built on uncertainty and usually ran at the sign of anything

unstructured or unknown, Jade was the friend who pushed her toward taking chances, living life, and being free.

You could see their love for each other was strong but needed to be handled carefully, and up until a few years ago, they had a mediator who was always helping them navigate their fights and their differences—*Maddie*.

Maddie was the see-saw.

She was the one who held the scales and made sure the balance was equal.

Now, things were harder.

This meant if they were going to work things out, they were going to have to figure out a new way to balance their relationship.

“Is that why you’re hiding out here in this dirty ass motel?”

She glanced around as if she’d managed to blank out where she was for a moment. “Yeah. There was too much noise. Mom was furious about the scene that’d been made. Chad kept calling and texting, trying to get me to go around and see him.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“He was ranting about how Valen made him look bad. How his buddies were laughing at him because she’d walked out on him and hooked up with you.” A visible shudder moved through her, and she wrapped her arms around herself as if chilled to the bone. “He’s not taken it well.”

His buddies.

He was more concerned about how he looked to them than how he felt or how his family saw things. That told me a little more about exactly who I was dealing with.

“When Valen went to get her things, he told her that the two of you were in love.”

Her eyes shot open. “What? No.” She shook her head hard. “No. I texted him once and told him I was going to go and meet Valen at that event you had. That I was going to set

things straight. But then, when I showed up, and he was already there, things were chaos.”

The puzzle pieces were settling into place.

“We’re going to sort this, and we’re going to do it today,” I said sternly. “Get your shit, and let’s go.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t argue, hurrying to collect her stuff that was strewn around the room.

I pulled my cell from my pocket while stepping out of the tiny motel room and hit dial to call Karl. I’d already planned to have him meet us with Valen—knowing full well once I found Jade, I wasn’t leaving until she agreed to at least have a conversation with Valen.

Now I knew, though, that Jade had been trying to fix things, while Chad didn’t want the girls to have their happy ending.

He wanted Valen to continue to hurt.

And now I was starting to wonder to what extent he was willing to go to make sure she felt that pain.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

VALEN

Every time the little bell over the door rang, I looked up, expecting to see Reed. My leg bounced nervously under the table.

I wasn't sure why we were here, but with the way Karl kept looking at his phone with this heavy frown, I could tell it wasn't a casual visit for pie.

Reed knew I'd need it.

He knew it would comfort me.

I just wasn't sure why.

"Here you go, dear."

Dolores placed a plate of apple pie down in front of me, and I looked up at her with a smile. "Thank you so much."

Her smile was so sweet and comforting. Like a grandma I never had. My grandparents on both sides had my parents later in life, so by the time I came along, they had already either passed away or were in homes, and I didn't get to spend that much time with them.

Maybe that was why I spent so much time here because it had this homely vibe that I'd felt like I was missing for a long time.

I had a spoonful of pie hovering in front of my mouth as I heard the bell over the door ring again. My eyes were instantly drawn to the noise and my spoon clattering back into the plate when I saw who was walking through the door, wearing a dark hoodie and a menacing glare.

I shook my head and gripped the table. "Chad, you need to leave," I said loudly as he walked straight toward me, his eyes narrowed.

Karl leaped from the booth, putting himself in front of me, his arms spread wide. “Walk away, Chad,” Karl ordered, planting his feet firmly. “You need to turn around and walk a —”

Chad stopped, lifting the gun grasped in his hand and pointing it directly at Karl’s chest.

The handful of people within the diner gasped and screamed while Karl made a reach for his weapon, but Chad already had the barrel of his gun practically pressed to Karl’s chest.

“Don’t move.” Karl froze, every muscle in his body poised as Chad reached forward and pulled Karl’s gun from his holster. He tucked it away in the back of his jeans before waving his gun around. “Now get out of the way.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Karl replied.

“Move.”

“I’m not—”

Chad swung, clocking Karl across the face with the butt of his gun and sending him sprawling onto the floor.

“Oh my God.” I tried to shuffle out of the booth, but Chad took a step closer.

“*Sit. Down!*” he screamed, turning the gun on me, the dark, deadly barrel hovering right at eye level. It had the power to destroy me in less than a second. Less than a breath. And all I could do was sit there and listen to my heart pound in my ears. “Sit down,” he repeated, this time calmer. Quieter.

There was movement around the diner, just a little, and I knew at least someone probably would have called the cops.

I also knew Reed was on his way.

Things would be okay.

Well, that I didn’t know because there was this guy standing in front of me. A guy I was meant to marry less than two months ago, and as it turned out, I had no idea who the hell he was.

I eased back into the seat. “Chad, if you need to talk, we can talk,” I said, speaking slowly and softly despite the way my racing heart was demanding we move quickly to escape the danger. “But, just sit down and put the gun away.”

Silently, he slipped into the booth across from me, gun resting on the tabletop instead of pointed at my head.

Progress.

“I’m sorr—”

“No, you’re not,” he snapped, clenching his jaw tightly. “You’re just out here, living up life like nothing happened. Like you didn’t completely humiliate me at our fucking *wedding*.”

My body jerked at the tone of his anger, my eyes drawn to the way he curled his fingers a little tighter around the gun.

I’d caused this.

I’d made him react this way.

And it was going to be my fault if people got hurt.

“I’m really sorry,” I said, though it came out barely above a whisper, fear clogging my throat and making it hard to breathe, let alone speak. “Maybe we could get out of here, go somewhere. Talk about it. These people don’t need to be involved.” I gestured to the people who were scattered around the room, hiding behind counters and booths.

“Valen...” Karl warned as he climbed off the floor, a hand pressing hard against the side of his head. Blood was smeared on his shirt and the floor, and I had to fight the urge to leap up and help him, but any kind of movement right now would end in disaster.

Chad waved the gun at Karl. “Stay over there. Don’t fucking come near us.” Karl lifted his hands in the air, reluctantly staying ten feet away. Chad turned his attention back to me, though he continued to watch Karl out of the corner of his eye. “We’re not leaving. We’re going to do this *right here*.”

I swallowed hard. “You realize someone has probably called the police. It won’t be long until this place is crawling with cops and news vans.”

“That’s the plan,” he answered simply with a casual shrug. “And when they all get here, the whole world is going to see the kind of man I am. You are the one who tried to ruin me and everything I stand for, so it’s only fitting you get to be here while I rectify it.”

He was calmer now.

And that scared me even more than when he’d stormed in here only a few minutes ago. “How did I ruin you?” I asked simply to keep him talking, to see if there was maybe a way this could end peacefully and not with him firing the loaded weapon he was holding.

He scoffed. “We’ve already gone over this. You not only embarrassed me in front of my friends and family but the fucking world. You made me look like an idiot. Like I wasn’t man enough because you walked out on me to go throw yourself at this fucking billionaire!”

“I’m sorr—”

“No, you’re fucking not!” he spat. “You’re *not*. So stop lying. Just stop lying.”

“Okay,” I started, trying a new tact. “You’re right. I think you deserved to be called out. You’re the one who cheated.”

His angry frown morphed into a twisted grin, one that sent a chill shooting up my spine. “You’re right. You’re so fucking right. I did cheat. A couple of times a week actually with whores off dating apps.”

Sick.

That was the only way to explain how I felt in that moment.

So fucking sick.

“You want to know the real kicker, though?”

I didn’t.

But I played along.

“Sure.”

He held my gaze. It was hard and intense, and I knew he wanted to ensure I heard whatever it was he was about to say. “Not a single fucking one of those girls was Jade.”

My mouth flooded with saliva, and that sharp, acidic taste tickled the back of my tongue. “What...” I started but had to pause and collect myself again, hoping that I’d heard wrong, or maybe, actually hoping I’d heard right. “What do you mean?”

He rolled his eyes dramatically like a teenage girl would to her parents when she had to repeat something she’d said. “Jade and I hooked up before you and I started dating. Not after. Not during.”

“The texts—”

“Were from last year.”

The speed of my heart beating was like nothing I’d experienced before. My entire body was pulsing as the blood rushed through my veins at high speed while I considered what it meant if he was telling the truth.

No.

“She didn’t want to tell you because she thought it might affect our relationship,” he continued to explain, obviously pretty damn proud of himself as he rubbed the salt a little deeper into the gaping wound.

I wasn’t sure what my face looked like exactly, but I could imagine the shock plastered across it that made Chad begin to laugh. The sound was so dark and cold, like someone was running an ice cube over my skin, goose bumps popping up in its wake.

“Yeah. You called your bestie a whore in front of her friends and family,” he taunted. “Not a lie, but a bitchy thing to do anyway.”

Tears burned at the back of my throat.

This couldn’t be reality.

What the hell had I done?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

VALEN

It was like a punch in the face, and I was suddenly questioning every fucking thing I thought I knew.

I should have talked to Jade.

Heard her out.

But then what would have happened?

I would have still gotten married.

I would have married this fucking man in front of me, admitting he cheated a few times a week. That this asshole was fucking his way through Boston but not wanting to touch me at all. “So was the whole perfect Catholic-boy thing just bullshit too?”

His brow pulled into a frown. “What? No. That’s why I was waiting for us to get married.”

I choked out a laugh. “You didn’t wait! You just said you were fucking around with every girl this side of the Charles River.”

He slammed the gun down on the table, and my entire body jumped off the seat. “That’s lust! I loved you, so I didn’t treat you like a whore by fucking you on our first date.”

Jesus Christ.

How did I miss this?

How did I not know that this was what was inside him? Was he like this all the time and had disguised it well? Or did I bring it out?

The bell over the door rang for the first time since Chad had walked in, and I couldn’t help but look up.

Jade ran in first, and I immediately launched my body out of the booth. “Jade, get out,” I yelled, but she kept hurrying across the diner toward us, a determined look in her eyes. Reed shot through the door behind her before it had closed completely, his fists clenched and his eyes carefully surveying the room.

“Oh good! The whole gang is here,” Chad exclaimed, casually slipping out of the booth behind me as I stumbled into Jade’s arms.

We didn’t need words at that stage.

There would be time for words later.

Time for “I’m sorry” and “Please forgive me”—both on my part.

Right now, it was life or death, and we had to make sure we walked out of here the former as opposed to the latter. Reed stepped up beside the both of us, scanning my body with his eyes and squeezing my hand for a brief second before he slipped away, edging closer to Chad.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noted Karl doing the same thing off to the other side, little by little, moving closer to the danger.

“All right,” Jade announced loudly, holding her arms out. “We’re here. Let’s talk.”

Chad sat back against the table of the booth where we’d just been sitting, the gun in his hand hanging by his side. “Talk? Who said anything about talking?”

The sirens had started, and there was more than one, growing louder and closer. We were about to descend into absolute chaos—police, fire, ambulance, probably SWAT.

Up until this point, other than a few angry outbursts, Chad had been surprisingly controlled, and concern began to twist in my stomach, thinking maybe all the law enforcement about to pull up was going to be the thing to send him over the edge.

But then I saw his eyes light up.

He could hear them too, and it wasn't fear that was spreading across his features.

It wasn't regret or surprise even.

It was joy.

Glee.

This was what he wanted.

An audience.

He'd said earlier this was his plan.

"What is your goal here?" Jade questioned, pulling Chad's attention back to her. She stepped in front of me, still holding her arms out like she was offering to be some kind of target practice. "What do you want from this *little moment*?"

"My goal?" he echoed as several red and blue flashing lights began to dance across the walls of the diner and a handful of police cars pulled to a hard stop right outside the windows. "My goal is to make sure my name is cleared."

He was here to change the narrative that I'd put out in the world by leaving him at the altar for Reed. If it had happened at any normal wedding, only friends and family would have known. But when the story of Reed and I being married became headline news, so did the story of the guy I left at the altar.

Chad's embarrassment was online.

It was on gossip channels, podcasts, and social media.

That was the information out there about him, and now, he wanted that narrative to be different. He wanted it to show him in a light he thought was stronger. And he was going to use all of us here, and all the people watching out there, to prove a point.

All because of me.

Because of what I'd done.

"I'll get you a stage, a microphone, anything you want," Reed tried to bargain. He was close now, and I wasn't sure

Chad had even realized what was happening. He was too focused on Jade and me and on the people outside—the cops, the cameras, the attention. “I’ll give you the biggest platform in the world so you can explain your side. You simply have to let everyone in here go. Come on, man, isn’t that what you want?”

Chad turned his narrowed glare on Reed. “You think it’s that easy to undo the damage she’s done?” He lifted the gun, pointing it across the diner at Jade and me. “Anyone can say words. It’s actions that mean the most. They are the proof of who someone is, and I’m about to make sure everyone knows just who I a—”

Karl and Reed dived at the same time, their bodies hitting Chad from both sides.

Bang.

The gunshot boomed within the small space, the explosion sending sound waves resonating through me, so loud and intense it felt like it was shifting the organs around inside my body.

Bang.

Another shot, closely followed by a hard thump of something hitting the linoleum floor. Maybe two somethings, along with heavy breathing as if there was a struggle, but I couldn’t see because Jade had already turned, wrapping her arms around me, herding me to the side of the diner, the two of us dropping to our knees behind the counter and covering our heads.

People were screaming, footsteps pounding.

That high-pitched squealing noise was in my ears.

It was all I could hear.

The constant high-pitched sound was like a monitor in a hospital, and the person was flatlining.

Was I flatlining?

“Help!” Karl suddenly called. “Reed, look at me, man!”

Jade and I took one look at each other.

Just a breath.

But we both knew.

I scampered across the floor on my hands and knees, not caring how dirty or disgusting it was, just determined to get around the counter. I paused on the other side, assessing the situation.

Chad was face down a few feet away, his hands pulled behind his back, and his cheek smashed against the floor. Karl was practically sitting on top of him, pinning him down as he writhed and screamed profanities and threats.

“Goddammit,” Reed cursed, pulling my eyes across the room.

He sat on the floor, his back to a wall and his hand pressed to his stomach.

Blood.

There was so much blood.

“No, no, no,” I chanted, slipping and sliding as I fought to get to my feet and rush across the room to where he was, but before I could even get close to him, the doors of the diner burst open, and more screaming began.

“Everyone down!

“On the floor!

“Hands where we can see them!”

Jade grabbed and pulled me back as the police swarmed the room. “It’s okay, he’ll be okay,” Jade kept repeating, despite the cops calling desperately for medical because of a gunshot wound.

It was all just noise, though.

Nothing made sense.

It all blended into one.

All I could see was his blood.

Even as they loaded him onto a stretcher and hurried him out the door, I kept staring at the place on the floor where he'd been lying. The puddle. The dark, rich crimson color was for sure going to stain the white floors. Dolores was never going to get it out. It would be there forever. Reed's blood stai—

“Valen, stop,” Jade snapped, grabbing my face and jerking it toward her.

Tears flowed, trickling down the side of my cheeks. “I'm so sorry,” I whispered, not knowing if she'd be able to hear me over the bedlam. But they were words I needed to say. “I'm so fucking sorry.”

“Stop!” she ordered again, her stern tone not as stern as usual. “Valen, this is not our fault. Friends fight. They make up. We didn't ask to be a part of some fucked-up reality that Chad had created.” She reached for my hands, and we both squeezed as tight as humanly possible. “We both made mistakes, but *that* doesn't justify *this*.”

This whole situation—fucked.

How we got to this point—fucked.

But she wasn't wrong.

Jade and I could have already sorted this shit out if it hadn't been for Chad taunting me and showing up at places he damn well shouldn't have been. We could have moved on. He kept this going. He wanted us to feel this pain. This was what he wanted. And I'd be damned if I was going to let him get the satisfaction of seeing how much it fucking hurt.

“I have to get to the hospital.”

Jade didn't need another word. She got to her feet, ignoring the cop screaming at her to sit down, walking directly toward who I assumed was the detective in charge. He was young, with messy black hair and just the hint of stumble decorating his jaw, which he seemed to have clenched hard as he examined the scene. “Excuse me, sir?”

He turned to Jade and raised his eyebrow. “Ma'am, I'm going to need you to sit—”

“That was Reed Lawson, who was just transferred to the hospital,” she cut in, and for the first time in hours, I felt a smile tug at the corner of my mouth. This was *my Jade*. The Jade who wasn’t about to let even the cops stand between her and her getting me to the hospital to be with Reed.

“Yes, we are aware,” the detective confirmed, though it was through gritted teeth. “Now could you pleas—”

“That woman there...” Jade announced, pointing across at me. “Is Reed Lawson’s *wife*.”

More than a few eyes widened around the room, all looking over at me as I sat slumped on the floor, waiting for my turn to be questioned about what happened.

“Now, sir, I don’t want to be the bearer of bad news,” Jade continued, thriving on the fact that all eyes were on her. “But your ass is going to get fired, or worse, sued, if this woman isn’t allowed to go and be with her damn husband. So, I suggest you get one of these lovely officers to pull their car around so she can do just that!”

I had to hide the growing smile on my face.

He wouldn’t be fired.

Or sued.

And as a man of the law, he knew that.

But a few minutes later, I found myself being escorted out to a waiting vehicle, Jade’s hoodie on and pulled up over my face as I gripped her hand. We were ushered into the back of an unmarked vehicle, the detective slamming the door but leaning in the window before we pulled away.

“I’ve got three officers who are going to stay with you and take your statements at the hospital. If either of you...” he directed a sharp glare at Jade before continuing, “... try and delay those statements, I’ll have you arrested for interfering with an investigation. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed with a nod.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jade said dismissively, but I was sure at this stage she was looking for excuses to agitate the man. “Thank

you! Let's go!"

The car pulled away, crowds of people flashing by as we pulled out of the police cordon and into traffic, the driver hitting the lights and sirens.

I leaned my head back into the seat and turned to look at Jade. "I missed you so much. I'm so—"

She held up her hand. "So am I, but we'll cry, hug, and make up later, okay? I can only deal with one crisis at a time, and right now, all I want is to get you to that hospital."

I wasn't sure what Reed had said to Jade, what he'd told her about us, but she knew. She knew how important he'd become to me.

"I can't lose him," I whispered, blinking back tears. "I can't."

"You won't. I promise."

I wish that was a promise she could make and keep, but it wasn't.

Yet I still chose to believe it.

Because I didn't want to think of the alternative.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

REED

“Will it hurt?”

Gabe’s eyes fluttered open, and he turned his head so he could see me, though it seemed like even just the little movement took the same amount of energy I would use during a whole soccer game.

He was always so tired now. Like, he was tired before, but since he’d made what my parents were calling the decision, his eyes had become darker and his skin much paler. It’s almost like I could see through it.

“Will what hurt?” he murmured, licking his dry lips.

I grabbed the glass of water from the tray over his bed and lifted it to his mouth, letting him take a few small sips before I put it down again. “Will it hurt when you die?”

“I don’t really know.”

I leaned in, bracing my elbows on the side of the bed. “Isn’t that scary?”

A small grin began to brighten his face. Gabe smiled a lot less now, so my heart skipped a little at the sight of his mouth curling upward. “I’m not really sure what dying will feel like. But one thing I know for sure is that this is not what living should feel like.”

I’d wondered for a long time exactly what my brother would have wanted living to feel like if he’d had a choice. If he hadn’t been locked up in a hospital for most of it, navigating surgeries and medications.

Would he have wanted it to be love.

His job, his house, the woman of his dreams.

Or would he have leaned more into experiences, like traveling the world, tasting foods, and seeing things and places that people often only experience once in a lifetime?

My parents would have hated it, but in my mind, Gabe would have been an adrenaline junkie. He would have been all about living life to the fullest, throwing himself out of planes and riding the tallest, scariest rollercoasters in the world.

He didn't get the chance or the opportunity to pick a path.

So I decided a while ago that I was going to do all of them.

I was going to make sure I had experienced it all so when I got to see Gabe in the next life, I could tell him. I wanted him to feel like he hadn't missed out. So I went, and I saw the Eiffel Tower and jumped out of a fucking plane.

I'd done all the crazy stuff.

And up until now, I'd been missing a few things.

But I knew soon I was going to be able to tell him what it felt like to fall in love.

"You should try and get some rest," Valen urged as she sat down on the hard plastic hospital chair beside my bed before offering me a coffee that probably tasted like hell.

Exactly what I needed.

I took it and sat a little straighter, sucking in a sharp breath as I felt a pull at the stitches in my side. "I'm fine."

She chuckled softly, leaning back into the chair with her eyebrows raised. "Yeah. You're fine. Your leg is bouncing so much it's shaking the entire third floor of the hospital."

I grabbed my leg—the leg I hadn't realized I was even moving—forcing it flat on the bed. I held it there, ignoring the smirk on Valen's face as I sipped at the nasty fucking coffee.

I wanted out of here.

It'd been two days.

Two fucking days, and I swear I hadn't slept for either of them.

The beeping sounds.

The footsteps that echoed down the hall drove me crazy.

The clean chemical smell.

It made my stomach churn, and I was using every ounce of energy and determination inside me to keep my ass in the fucking bed, even though I desperately wanted to get the hell out of there. "Where's the doctor? I need to ask him again about leaving."

"God, you're such a baby." I looked up as Jade walked through the door. Detective Carter, who'd been handling what happened, was following closely behind her.

"I got shot," I countered.

She rolled her eyes. "But did you die? No."

"That's enough, you two," Valen scolded, though she was quick to get up and give Jade a hug. The two of them really have held on tight to each other the past couple of days through hard conversations and hurt feelings. But they'd be stronger for it, that was for sure. I just wasn't sure I was going to handle having Jade around the house more, especially now they were once again two peas in a pod.

"I just wanted to keep you both updated on the case," Detective Carter interrupted, opening the folder in his hands. "We've done some extensive probing into Chad's computer over the past day, and there's been a lot of interesting things come up. Seems he was part of a group online that our Cyber Crime Department has been keeping an eye on with relation to sexual assaults around the city."

Valen pushed her hand to her stomach, shaking her head. "He said he spent a lot of time with women, meeting them on apps a couple of times a week."

It was hard for her to hear, knowing that someone you were in a relationship with for over a year and had intended to

marry seemed like he had an entirely different persona than the one she'd been shown.

She still felt at fault for everything that had happened, but I kept trying to make her see just how lucky she was that it happened this way and not when she was in far too deep.

“We also got a court order to unseal his files because of some messages we found were rather incriminating toward that case.”

“Can you tell us what the case was?” I questioned, and the detective quickly glanced over his shoulder before he stepped in closer.

“There's not much I can say, but it was to do with a young woman who was forced off the road in her car and killed.” My stomach twisted, and he shook his head. “At the time, Chad was her ex-boyfriend, and she'd put out a restraining order because he was stalking her. The defense attorney tried to charge him, but there was little evidence, so it was dismissed and his file sealed.”

“Thanks, detective,” Valen said, forcing a smile.

He nodded. “I'll probably be in touch, but for now, I hope you get some peace.”

He backed away, and Jade slowly moved with him. “I'll walk him out,” she said with a smile before ducking out the door. I wasn't sure what'd happened there, but you could practically see the hearts dancing in her eyes when she looked at the man.

“Did I miss something?”

Valen chuckled softly, taking my hand. “Jade yelled at him, and he helped us out.” I waited for more, but she just rolled her eyes. “Don't ask me how her mind works when it comes to men.”

“Okay, about the doctor then...”

She got to her feet. “Okay, okay... I will go and see if the doctor has decided on a time for letting you out of this prison. But I can't promise anything. You were shot, Reed.”

I knew.

It hurt.

But I didn't need surgery, and there'd been no complications.

It had just been a flesh wound.

I hated the hospital, but the path that had landed me here, I'd never regret for a second because it was on this path that I'd found Valen.

Everything I'd been through, every choice I'd made, every stomach-churning, heart-aching, fucking thing that had happened to me in my life.

All the shit I could never comprehend, never understand why I was the one chosen to live through it.

All of that had to happen to lead me here.

To her.

To Valen.

And even if I only got to have her in my life for this short time, and she decided to move on, I would say it was all worth it. But I was going to fight for more. I was going to prove that I was worthy of more.

I'd done it once.

I could do it again.

Chapter Thirty

VALEN

Three Months Later...

“Seriously, what is actually happening?”

“We have somewhere to be,” Reed answered casually as if we hadn’t just driven through airport security like we were traveling with the president.

“And where might that somewhere be?” I questioned as we drove out onto the damn tarmac, the bright lights of the airport runway flickering past the window as we cruised along. “Reed?”

I glanced over at him, but he simply shrugged. “You’ll see,” he teased, but then added, “Well, actually, you won’t see. Not until we get there.”

“What do you...” He pulled a silky black blindfold from within the backpack that sat at his feet, twirling it around his finger a couple of times before finally holding it out to me. I shook my head. “Um... how about no?”

He rolled his eyes, placing his hand over mine while I gripped tight to the seat, holding on for dear life as Karl maneuvered around large planes and these speedy little carts carrying luggage, thinking he was in the damn Formula 1 or something.

The smile I could see on his face in the rearview mirror was one that screamed he’d done this many times before.

I wouldn’t have been surprised.

Reed definitely would be the type to encourage this kind of behavior.

We sped farther and farther from the large, busy part of the airport and closer to the end, which had several large hangars,

pulling up finally outside one where there was a small plane.

What I was sure the wealthy called *a private jet*.

“You’re joking,” I whispered, practically mashing my face against the window as I took in the bright lights and the production Reed had orchestrated waiting for us outside. Karl leaped out, pulling my door open and offering me his hand.

I suddenly felt severely underdressed in the pair of black dress pants and white T-shirt I’d worn to work today because as I climbed out of the car, I was met by three impeccably dressed flight attendants and two pilots with not a hair out of place, hats tilted at the perfect angle and their shirts all perfectly tucked and folded in the right places.

One of the pilots stepped forward as Reed rounded the car, offering his hand.

“Evening, Mr. Lawson,” he greeted with a strong shake, turning to me to offer the same. “Mrs. Lawson.”

I shook his hand quickly, offering a smile. “Evening.”

“We have a clear shot to our destination tonight—”

“Which is?” I probed, eyebrows raised.

“Not far,” the pilot responded strategically with a nod and stepped back into line. “Our flight attendants will help you get settled, and we will have wheels up in less than fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you,” Reed said as he placed his hand on my hip, dipping his mouth to my ear. “Nice try.”

“I don’t like surprises,” I whispered as the lovely ladies directed us to the staircase next to the plane.

We’d been over this already.

I liked to know what was happening so I could ready myself—an occupational hazard that comes from being thrown out on your ass with no money, no explanation, and nowhere to live. And while I appreciated Reed wanting to do something special for me, he knew this, and I could already feel my heart beginning to race as we stepped inside the plane.

The inside was beautiful.

Simple but elegant at the same time—the furniture was mostly rich brown leather with dark green accents and embellishments. There were a couple of single chairs on each side, facing each other closer to the front of the plane. Further back, there was a booth-like space, and right at the back, a lounge-style area with a television on the wall. There were a couple of couches that looked like they probably folded down into beds with a curtain that was currently pulled back but could easily separate that part if need be.

I took a seat in one of the front seats, Reed sitting directly opposite me while Karl walked past us to the rear and leaned back into the sofa-style seats, relaxing like he'd done this a thousand times before.

Probably because he had.

Reed didn't often go anywhere without him, and with the events a couple of months ago, Karl had been around even more than before, plus an extra set of eyes. Little Karl, I'd been calling him, but his name was really Luke. He was my shadow, and while it could be frustrating to have someone constantly on your heels, I hadn't complained. For now, it was making both Reed and I feel just that little bit more comfortable and a little less on edge.

Reed leaned forward, placing his hands on my knees. "I know you like to be in control and not knowing makes you feel panicky, but you have to trust me here. This will be a good surprise. I'm ninety-nine percent sure of it."

I chewed my lip for a second. "And that one percent?"

"That one percent is the part of you that I'm still learning about," he explained, strumming his fingers on my leg. "There's still some mystery when it comes to you, Valen."

I leaned in, lowering my voice, "That's my allure," I whispered with a smile. "And I do trust you. You wouldn't have got me on this plane had I thought there was a chance you would do something fucking stupid like force me into a parachute and push me out the door at five hundred feet."

He leaned back into his chair, this smirk on his face that instantly made me want to wrap my hands around his throat. “Baby, five hundred feet is not high enough for me to push you out. We need to get to at least three thousand.”

The plane door suddenly slammed closed behind me, and my entire body jerked, making Reed laugh. “I swear to Go—”

“If everyone would please fasten their belts, we can start the safety procedures and get you all on your way,” one of the sweet air hostesses announced, and I couldn’t help but ask.

“Get us on our way to where again?” I questioned, looking up at the beautiful blonde.

“To your destination,” she sang happily, flashing me a knowing smile before backing out of the cabin. It was only a few seconds later that the engines started up, and I could feel us begin to move, taxiing down the runway.

I looked back to Reed, whose smile was getting fucking bigger by the second.

“How much did you pay these people not to give me a single clue about where we’re going?”

“A lot.”

“I hate you!” I huffed and grabbed my belt, dramatically clicking it together and sitting back in my seat with my arms folded across my chest.

Reed sat forward again, lowering his voice, “You’re lucky Karl is in this plane with us. Otherwise, I’d be removing that cute pout on your lips by slipping my cock between them.” He growled, tugging at my lip with his thumb before wrapping his hand around my neck and pulling me close enough for our lips to brush.

“And you’re lucky I like it there, so I probably wouldn’t bite it off,” I whispered back, and Reed barked out a laugh before pressing a hard kiss to my lips.

I smiled as he pulled back, shaking his head. “I’m starting to regret getting on a three-hour flight where I can’t fucking touch you.”

Given just how damn hot he looked right now in a casual pair of dark jeans and a leather jacket pulled over a black hoodie, I was also regretting this silly choice he had made. I had the sudden urge to throw Karl out the door and onto the runway before we got off the ground, just so I could really experience what it was like to join the mile-high club with the sexy billionaire sitting opposite me.

“I guess now, at least, I know how far away we are going,” I said, sitting back and folding my legs, trying to calm my body the hell down.

Reed did the same, his head falling to the side. “And does that information help you at all?”

“Not a bit,” I admitted, having no idea how far away anything was from Boston. I’d lived there so long, and I didn’t often travel outside, not far enough to constitute a plane ride.

“Guess maybe you should just lay back and try and get some sleep or something then,” Reed encouraged. “We’ll head to a hotel when we arrive and do the surprise tomorrow, but we’ll only be there for a few days. We have to be back in Boston later in the week for something.”

“For what?”

He smirked. “It’s a surprise.”

This fucking man.

Chapter Thirty-One

REED

“How many people are going to be at this event?” Valen questioned, adjusting the tight metallic blue dress she had on. It was fitted at the top but flowy and free from the waist, where the silky fabric fell beautifully until it just skimmed the floor.

“What event?” I questioned casually, continuing to keep this façade going right up until we walked into the ballroom downstairs.

She glanced over, her eyes narrowed. “Come on, Reed. We’ve been in this hotel room since late last night.”

The corner of my mouth twitched. “We’ve made the most of it, though.”

Her cheeks instantly changed, flooding with heat and turning this soft crimson color I had learned to fucking love.

Yeah, we’d been in this hotel room for almost twenty-four hours, but we’d kept plenty busy.

It’d been like the honeymoon we’d never had for our fake marriage.

There was a soft knock on the door, and her eyes lit up, following me as I strolled over and pulled it open, just enough for me to see Bronson grinning on the other side. “They’re all good downstairs,” he said, pressing his hand to the door and forcing it open to where he could see Valen. “You can’t keep beauty like this all to yourself, man. Time to share.”

I elbowed him in the ribs. “Keep your eyes off my wife, brother.”

Valen hurried over, throwing her arms around his shoulders. “Oh my gosh, it’s so good to see you. Well, it’s good to see

anyone. But especially you!”

“Hey, I wouldn’t miss this event for the world,” Bronson said as he stepped back, and I had to roll my eyes as Valen snapped her head toward me with a raised eyebrow.

“*Event*, huh.”

“Come on,” I urged, ignoring the knowing look on her face as I stepped out the door, linking her fingers with mine. “Time to go.”

The hallways were empty. Anything that needed to be covered to disguise what we were doing had been. It’d been an elaborate ruse, and one I hoped was so fucking worth it when she realized just why we were here.

Valen took in everything as we headed for the elevator. It was like a person seeing white walls for the first time, her eyes scanning over them, then over them again like they held the answers to the universe.

In a way, I knew it was a little cruel.

Valen hated surprises.

She hated the unknown, and I hadn’t even let her look out of the hotel room windows, so she had no idea what floor we were even on. I knew even though she trusted me to not do anything that would hurt her, this entire situation was out of her hands, and she was shaking like a leaf at the thought of walking into something she couldn’t prepare for.

But that was the way I wanted this to be.

I wanted to try and change that fear she had developed.

Maybe not tonight, or even the next time I plan something crazy, or the time after that. But my hope was that eventually, surprises would become something she loved. Something she could look forward to and associate with things that have brought her joy instead of fear.

Because she deserved that.

And more.

But I was happy to start here.

When we got downstairs, there were more people—hotel staff and people who'd come to stay, and neither could keep their eyes off Bronson as we breezed by.

And I wasn't the only one who noticed. "We're in a Rhodes Hotel, huh," Valen said, side-eyeing Bronson, who was casually strolling beside us.

He frowned and looked over at her. "How'd you—"

"Everyone is staring at you like they just saw Jesus step inside this place," she said out the side of her mouth as we passed by another couple staring.

Bronson was about to protest but was cut off by the sound of applause, and suddenly, Valen's eyes were going crazy, searching for the source of the sound, and as we stepped around the next corner, we were suddenly right in the midst of it.

She gasped as we entered the ballroom of the Rhodes Hotel, with decorations, a stage, and full to the brim with people sitting at large round tables.

The MC clocked us the moment we walked in. No doubt he'd be waiting, entertaining the audience for a while as we made our way down here. "And here is the man of the hour! Mr. Reed Lawson!"

Valen jumped a little as people scraped their seats back so they could get to their feet and applaud. She squeezed my hand a little tighter, and when I looked down, expecting her to be frightened, instead, the smile on her face was so wide. "Come on."

We made our way to the stage with Bronson in front of us. He walked up first, then held his hand out to Valen, who took it gratefully as the stairs were quite steep and not so sturdy, so I walked behind her, just as a precaution.

Bronson led Valen over to the side while I stepped up to the mic and cleared my throat. Speaking in front of a room full of people was not my favorite pastime, but I had to do it every now and then. This time though, while there was still a twist in my stomach when I looked out and saw those people in the

crowd that I knew for sure Valen hadn't noticed yet, I had never felt more confident about anything in my damn life.

“Over the past few months, I have had the chance to learn a lot about mental health. Not only from doctors whose knowledge I value and trust but also from the people who directly and personally live through it every day or are impacted by it,” I explained, standing tall. “It has not only been eye-opening but heartbreaking, to say the least. I've experienced the good, the bad, and, as some of you may have read about a few months ago in the paper, the severely disturbing.”

Many heads nodded around the room, and out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Valen pushing her shoulders back.

Standing taller.

Giving her lungs more room to breathe through the thoughts of that night.

“When we talk about health, we so often relate it to fixing our bodies but don't consider our minds. They are a part of us, a pretty damn important part, so when it's sick, we need to be able to treat it.”

People burst from their seats, clapping and hooting.

The people in this room had been invited because of their passion for what we were talking about. They had felt it. Experienced it. Treated it. And those were the people I wanted to hear this.

“It's why I decided to create this foundation. Where we can have events like this, take donations, raise funds, and direct those toward the places which are really working and doing extraordinary things within this field, like research and resources and programs,” I explained, raising my voice when the applause only got louder. “Or if that's not enough, we can create something brand new.”

A hand grabbed hold of mine, and when I turned my head, Valen stood there, tears streaming down her face as she smiled out at the crowd of people.

But I wasn't done yet.

So I held her hand, and I watched her as I spoke, seeing the expressive nature of her face having quickly become an obsession of mine. “So ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first dinner and auction of The Maddie Foundation,” I announced, and Valen sucked in a sharp breath of air, her eyes shooting wide open as she looked at me, then out at the crowd, then back at me, before launching herself into my arms.

I barely had enough time to catch her, and she pressed her face into the crook of my neck.

“I hate you for telling me this while we are on a stage in front of hundreds of people,” she hissed through tears before pulling back so I could see her face. “But God, I love you.”

I grabbed her face and pulled her mouth to mine, kissing her so fucking hard that I forgot anything around us even existed.

I love you.

She had said the words I’d been wanting to say for a while.

But I wanted to wait until she was ready.

I wanted everything to move at her pace.

I didn’t want to rush her, not after the start of our relationship had been zero to one hundred in a heartbeat.

But now...

I pulled back, ignoring the crowd’s excitement in the background as we both fought for breath. “I fucking love you too.”

She laughed and swiped at a tear that dripped down her cheek. “Goddamn you, Reed Lawson. You’ve completely messed my makeup.”

“It’s probably going to get worse,” I warned, adjusting a few rogue strands of hair with my fingers, forcing them back into place. “Did you see the table in the front to the right?”

The smile dropped into a frown, and she turned, scanning the crowd until she found them. “Oh my God,” she gasped, pressing her hand to her heart. “Oh my God. How did you...

it's... oh my God." She swung back to face me, a fresh set of tears tumbling down her cheeks.

"Go," I ordered, and when she paused for a second, I tried again. "Go."

She swallowed hard and sucked in a long, deep breath before turning and hurrying to the edge of the stage, wobbling down a couple of steps and opening her arms wide.

Maddie's family scooped Valen up, so much so she almost disappeared underneath Maddie's parents, sisters, and Jade.

I cleared my throat and stepped back closer to the microphone. "I'd like to thank Madeline Dunham's family and friends for being here today. Maddie was my wife's best friend and the inspiration and namesake for our foundation."

When Valen questioned me that day about using my influence to do things that are bigger, better, and that encourage others to do the same, honestly, it had been something I hadn't considered much before. I had PR teams, advisers, and people I fucking paid to help me navigate the world I lived in, and yet, Valen, on more than one occasion, had helped me to see so much more than I had before.

Not just what I should be doing with my power and influence.

But why I was here.

I'd spent a long time questioning my existence.

Fighting to prove my worth in the world.

But Valen had shown me that there were so many reasons I was here.

So many more than I could have ever imagined had I not found her all twisted up in a wedding dress on the side of the road that day.

Valen had changed the way I viewed the world and my place in it, and now, all I wanted to do was share it with her.

Technically, we weren't married, but I had been making plans to make Valen, Mrs. Lawson—legally. And now that I

was looking at her—the woman I fucking loved—I was wondering why the hell I was waiting.

Life wasn't getting any shorter.

And I didn't want to spend the rest of mine without her as my wife.

Chapter Thirty-Two

VALEN

Every time I thought I knew Reed, that I knew what to expect from him, he surprised me.

And honestly, I was starting to consider that maybe, surprises weren't so bad.

Not when they were so beautiful.

So meaningful.

Reed and I had talked a lot about money, status, and influence. I'd been around it, and I'd seen both the positive and negative impacts it could have on people. My mom, for example, believed that it was everything. She thought the most significant thing in life was to be someone important, someone people admired and wanted to be like. She thrived on the attention and being revered, which was great for her fans but not so great for me and my brother, who were pushed aside and treated like a second thought.

Reed didn't live in that world.

He understood the power he had, but for him, it wasn't an everyday tool to get what he wanted.

He also understood me.

He knew I wasn't exactly floored by dollar signs and expensive things, but he also wanted to be able to use the resources he had to make me happy. And I honestly wasn't sure he could ever get it more right.

"I hate you for keeping this from me and making me all crazy and paranoid about what the hell was going on for the past twenty-four hours," I ranted, squeezing his hand as I finally managed to get a moment alone with him. "But this is

by far the most amazing, beautiful, and thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me.”

“You deserve to be acknowledged for the way you fight so hard for the people you care about.”

My throat tightened. It wasn't the answer I was expecting, and I found myself fighting back the tears. “I don't expect to be acknowledged for that.”

“And I think that's the best part,” he answered with a grin as he guided me into another room down the hall. He shut the door behind us, and I immediately noticed the garment bag hanging in the corner. “Time for a costume change,” he said simply like I should have expected it. “The night is not over yet.”

We'd spent an hour or so at the banquet, watching the dollar amount rise as they auctioned off luxury holidays and dates with wealthy men, including Bronson.

“More surprises?”

Something fluttered in my stomach, and where before I'd assumed it was nerves, I couldn't help but think this time it was excitement. I trusted him. I trusted that he wanted to do things for me that made me happy, that made me smile—which made the fear of something bad sink away.

He must have seen the uncertainty on my face and instantly reached for me. His palm curved around my jaw, and he tilted my head up so I could look into his eyes.

“I want to give you the fucking world. This is just the start...” My heart warmed, and I tiptoed up to place a gentle kiss on his lips. “Now, let's get you out of this dress.”

I turned away from him and gathered my hair to one side, letting it fall over my shoulder. Reed pulled the zipper down the center of my spine, allowing his fingers to tickle my skin. When it stopped, he reached for the straps over my shoulders, slipping them off and letting the dress pool around my feet. Feeling a little naked, standing there in some random conference room in just my underwear, I moved to cover my breasts.

Reed grabbed my wrists and stepped in behind me, pressing his body to my back and nuzzling his face into my neck. “What did I say about covering yourself in front of me?”

I let out a soft laugh. “Well, if you’d get the other dress, I could be not naked in this random room where someone could walk in at any second.”

“They won’t.”

“How do you know that?”

“Karl’s out there,” he answered, then began peppering kisses down my neck and across my shoulder, lighting every inch of my body on fire. His hands moved to my waist, and I couldn’t help but lean back into him as they found my breasts, and he took handfuls of both. His thumbs brushed over my nipples, enticing them into tiny, hard buds.

I pressed my ass back into him, grinding it on the hard length that was growing.

“We have somewhere to be,” he murmured in my ear playfully before twisting one of my nipples between his fingers.

I gasped, and instantly I was wet as hell, my pussy throbbing as he teased me. “They’ll wait,” I whispered, and that was all he needed.

“Panties off,” he demanded, and there was a sudden sharp sting on my ass cheek as he stepped back. “Then put your hands on the table.”

I hurried to slip my panties off, letting them slide to the floor and kicking them off to the side, then I leaned forward, placing my palms on the table, knowing I was absolutely bare to him. The feeling of his hands skimming over my skin sent a shiver up my spine, and my legs were already threatening to give way. Then there was his lips—soft kisses began at the base of my spine, one by one, working their way upward.

“Reed,” I murmured breathlessly. “Reed, please.”

His cock brushed against my entrance, and the second I felt it there, I pushed back, my nails scratching at the table as his

length completely filled me.

“Goddamn,” Reed cursed, grabbing my hips. His fingertips pinched at my skin, but I didn’t give a damn because it felt like home. “This is gonna be hard and fast, or we will be late.”

He pulled back and drove hard inside me again. I moaned loudly, my back arching as I threw my head back, letting my hair cascade down my back.

The feeling of having Reed buried inside me is like nothing I could explain. We connected already on so many levels that this one was just another, and it was so intense and intimate. It was a connection I never wanted to lose because losing it would mean losing a piece of myself.

He reached for my hair, grabbing it in his fist and pulling it back as he drove himself deep inside me, in and out, over and fucking over again.

“You ready to come for me, baby,” Reed asked as he reached around me with his free hand and slipped it between my legs. The second his fingers brushed over my clit, it was like a fuse was lit, and I cried out, not giving a damn in that moment if there were people outside or if Karl could hear me coming.

“Yes.” I groaned loudly, riding out my orgasm as Reed continued to flick his fingers over my clit, drawing out every little bit of ecstasy from my body. “Reed, oh God.”

With one final thrust, he filled me to the brim.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back against his chest, burying his face in my hair. I leaned my head back against his shoulder, trying to breathe as my heart felt like it was about to explode from my chest.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered, and I could feel his smile as he pressed his lips to my neck before he stepped back, slipping from inside me. I quickly grabbed my underwear, pulling them on to keep the mess he’d left from slipping down my thighs.

When he’d said hard and fast—it was exactly that.

And God did it feel so fucking good, my body alight with excitement.

“Was this your plan all along?” I questioned, letting out a breathy laugh. “You put the dress in here just so we’d have a reason to fuck.”

I was teasing.

“Exactly that.” But apparently, I was right. He laughed softly as he walked over and grabbed the garment bag, zipping it open to expose the dress inside, and then he pulled out the white, silky fabric. “It was really just an excuse to touch you and remind you that I will spend the rest of my life worshiping you like this if you say yes.”

“What do you...” the words faded out as I watched him pull the stunning floor-length dress from the bag and walk toward me.

I couldn’t speak.

Not even as Reed dropped to one knee and held the dress open.

I stepped into it, one foot after another, allowing my heart to lead instead of my head.

I didn’t want to overthink this, not like I usually would, scared of how it might affect our future. Instead, I wanted to live it and trust Reed.

I trusted Reed.

He pulled the straps up over my shoulders before he rounded my body, tugging the zipper up so it pulled the dress in, fitting the curves of my body perfectly like it had been made for me.

“Come on,” Reed said, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the door. “We’re gonna be late.”

“Reed!” We hurried out the door, almost running Karl over in the process. “What are you talking about?” I couldn’t stop laughing, my giggles filling the halls as we rushed in the opposite direction down the large Rhodes Hotel hallways until

we reached the room at the end, and Reed slammed his hand against the doors, throwing them open.

A handful of faces turned, all lighting up with the brightest smiles I'd seen in a long time.

Jade rushed toward me down the makeshift aisle that had been decorated with streamers from the fundraiser next door. They were tied to chairs that held a few people, including Aspen, who worked at Reed's bar, and his friends, Drake and Cassie, who I'd met a couple of weeks ago and loved instantly. Bronson stood at the other end, holding some kind of book in his hand, looking formal and completely giddy at the same time.

I looked up at Reed with a wide smile. "I'm guessing this wasn't exactly planned."

"The dress, yes," he answered, sweeping my hair back from my face. "This, no. But I had a bit of a realization tonight. And I wasn't about to wait any longer."

"This is insane!"

It was.

It was crazy.

And unexpected.

And shocking.

But I loved it.

I loved him.

"You ready, Mrs. Lawson?" he asked, holding his hand out for mine.

"I am, Mr. Lawson," I answered, never more sure of anything in my life. "I am."

Believe in fate or not, our worlds colliding had made me start to consider whether everything that had happened in our lives happened so we would find each other.

It couldn't be a coincidence.

With how close our journeys were, how we'd both lost someone, and in turn, that loss had totally changed our lives.

Losing Gabe pushed Reed forward.

Losing Maddie pushed me back.

But we still met at the perfect moment.

And we were better and stronger because of it.

Together.

THE END

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About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author **Addison Jane** is a born and bred kiwi girl with a passion for romance and writing.

When she gets the chance she enjoys the little things in life such as reading, dancing, music, and Facebook, but her world really revolves around the little girl who calls her Mum. It's an awkward balance between alpha males and Disney princesses, but it works.

Growing up on a small farm next to the beach will always make her a country girl at heart. But since moving away to a small town close to the city, she's discovered a dangerous love for shopping.

Writing stories has been something that's come naturally since she was young, and with the massive support of her friends and family, she finally decided to step out of her comfort zone and share them with the world.

She enjoys bringing her books to life with strong female leads, sexy, passionate men and a rollercoaster of twists and turns that lead to the happily ever after that her readers desire.