

**THIRTY
DAY
FIANCÉ**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. S. COOPER

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About the Author

BLURB

Can a fake fiancé save the day?

My old-fashioned parents think that at twenty-six years old, I'm an old maid. They've decided to ignore all my assertions of being happy and have arranged for me to marry a family friend old enough to be my grandfather. No thanks, Mom and Dad. Unfortunately for me, my sickly grandmother has decided to cut off the entire family unless she knows I'm set to get married soon so that I can pop out babies, like some sort of vending machine.

I feel for my parents; I do. But I'm not about to marry Rumpelstiltskin's uglier brother so they can continue traveling the world in first class. I didn't know they'd show up in town trying to pressure me into "wedded bliss." I also didn't realize that Sebastian Bradley, the best friend of my best friend's boyfriend, would come to my rescue. Which I didn't want, as I couldn't stand the man.

However, Sebastian has convinced me to pretend to be engaged to him. If we can convince my parents and grandmother that we are in love and engaged, they will let me live my life. At first, I thought it was a great idea. But now, my grandmother is pushing for a wedding date, dress shopping, and baby names, which wasn't part of the plan. The worst part is that Sebastian seems to be egging on all the crazy ideas, and

I'm not sure why. He's the most confirmed bachelor I've ever met in my life, and I have no desire to change his mind.

ONE

STASIA

It was a perfect day. The sun was shining and caressing my face as a cool breeze kept me from overheating. I felt lazy and in total bliss. There was nothing that could ruin my good mood or day.

“Gemma, I must admit that at first, I thought I was going to be annoyed that you were dating Simon.” I looked over at my best friend. “Not because I didn’t like him or think you deserved to be with someone great, but because I thought you’d spend all your time with him,” I said as I lay on my back in the warm water of the swimming pool. Gemma was a few yards away from me, her face a rosy tan as she splashed around.

“I don’t spend *all* my time with him, Stasia,” she protested as she swam over to me and started treading water.

“I know; you spend thirty minutes a day talking about him as well.” I laughed and then splashed her. I quickly dunked my head underwater to avoid her splashing me back. “This is so cool,” I said as my head reemerged from the water. The slight taste of salt brandished my lips as the sun dried my face. Gemma’s brown eyes danced with mischief and humor as she swam away from me. I watched as her familiar long, dark hair moved and bounced in the water, and she grabbed a water gun.

“Noooo!” I cried out before she shot me with a stream of water. She laughed before dropping the toy back into the water, and I relaxed. I grabbed the float next to me and climbed on before lying back again. My body floated around the pool as if I were light as a feather. A bird chirping in the

garden made me look to the side, and I had to pinch myself. I couldn't believe I was in such a tranquil space in the middle of the city. And it was all thanks to Gemma.

Gemma was my best friend. We'd been best friends since we were young girls. We'd met at a boarding school in England and became fast friends. We'd both gone to the same university, and then after we'd graduated, we moved to Los Angeles to follow our dreams. I wanted to be a fashion designer, and Gemma wanted to be a business owner and design cool couture outfits for dogs. We'd been in the city for a few years, struggling to make ends meet by taking odd jobs here and there.

Then fate had played a hand in changing Gemma's hand. A couple of months ago, Gemma had met Simon Cambridge, a man we'd both initially considered to be pompous, arrogant, and far too wealthy for his good. She'd lost a bet to him and had to work for him for thirty days. During that time period, they'd fallen in love, and Gemma and Simon were now almost inseparable. I missed being able to spend as much time as I wanted with my best friend, but I loved the perks that came from her dating him, like this one. Today, we were swimming in Simon's pool in his huge backyard at his gorgeous house in West Hollywood. Simon was a millionaire, if not a billionaire, and his home was fantastic. Especially compared to our humble abode. Gemma and I shared a modest, two-bedroom apartment in Silver Lake. Even though it wasn't up-to-date, it was in a great area. It had been all we could afford. And even though Gemma was now dating one of the wealthiest men in the country, we were still struggling to get by.

Well, struggling was a bit of an overstatement. Simon had invested in Gemma's dream and helped her to get a business loan. He'd also helped me to get a meeting with some people in the fashion arena as well. So there was hope that I would be able to establish my business soon. But what Simon and I both loved about Gemma was that she wasn't interested in his money. She'd turned large amounts away because she wanted to do it on her own. Just because they were in love and now engaged didn't mean she wanted to rely upon Simon to get

ahead. She had something to prove to the world. However, that didn't prevent us from enjoying time at his house.

"I love that you're here with me, Stasia," Gemma said, smiling as she swam toward me.

"I love that I'm here with you, too. Honestly, I never thought we'd meet someone rich and famous who had their own house with a pool in LA."

"I know," she said. "Who would've thunk it?"

"Not me." I laughed. "But this is amazing. It's like a dream." I rolled my shoulders. "Guess what?" I stared at her for a couple of seconds, and she just shook her head.

"I don't know. What?"

"I got some messages yesterday."

"Messages from who?" she asked me, looking confused.

"Remember I told you I was going to join that dating app?"

"Oh yeah." She looked excited. "So you finally did it."

"I finally did it. If you are dating someone, I might as well see who's out there for me."

"So, did anyone good pop up?" she asked eagerly, hope in her eyes. I stared at her for a couple of seconds and made a face.

"What do you think?"

"They can't be that bad, can they?"

"Yes, they can." I burst out laughing. "In fact, they can be worse than bad." I swam toward the steps and walked out of the pool. I could feel my bikini bottoms clinging to me, and I pulled them out of my ass.

"Do you think this top is too tight and too small?" I asked her, looking down at my chest. I loved wearing bikinis, especially when it was warm and hot like this, so that I could tan all over, but I was starting to think that my top was a little

bit indecent. I really hoped Simon and his brother Sebastian weren't spying on us from inside the house.

"No, girl. You look super sexy." Gemma laughed. "Any guy would be drooling if they saw you right now."

"Maybe not gay guys." I shook my head and giggled. "They're not interested in boobs."

"Don't gay guys love boobs?" Gemma said with a raised eyebrow as she swam over to the steps and got out of the pool.

"Yeah. I mean, maybe they love them to look at, but they don't love them because they want to be with someone with them." I laughed.

"True." She nodded. "They don't want to motorboat."

"Gemma." I giggled. "I hate to burst your bubble, but all men love to motorboat my babies."

"What?" She burst out laughing as she shook her head. "So, are you going to show me these messages or what?"

"No, I'm going to do you one better. I'm going to read them out to you."

"You what?" she asked as she walked toward me.

"I'm going to read them out to you in the voices I think they have." I walked over to my handbag, opened it, and pulled out my phone. I opened the dating app and then sat down on one of the pool chairs and leaned back. I grabbed the fluffy white towel that was sitting on the end of it and dried my hands, face, and legs before looking back at the screen.

Gemma walked over and sat in the lounge next to me and lay back. "Oh my gosh, this feels amazing." She moaned as she reached over and grabbed a bottle of water and drank some.

"I know. I could quite happily live here for the rest of my life," I said, sighing, not wanting to go back to our cramped apartment.

"Well, we could move in," Gemma said, and I just gave her a look. "I mean, I know you don't want to."

“Who would want to live with their best friend and their best friend’s boyfriend?” I said, shaking my head. “No, no, no, no, no.”

“I think it would be kind of cool,” she said, eyes wide.

“That’s because you would get to live with Simon, but I would be the third wheel. I would feel so out of place all the time.”

“I wouldn’t let you feel that way,” Gemma said, but I knew that even though she wouldn’t want to make me feel that way, it would inevitably happen. You couldn’t live with your best friend and her fiancé and expect to be the center of her universe. At least now, when we were at home in Silverlake, we spent time together.

Yeah, she spent a couple of nights a week over at Simon’s, and Simon spent a couple of nights a week over at our place, but we still got to watch movies together. We still got to make each other breakfast. We still got to talk shit about our families and all the other gossip that went on in our lives. If Simon were a permanent fixture in our residence, they would be together all the time. While I knew it was coming one day, I didn’t want it anytime soon.

“It’s okay, Stasia,” she said, shaking her head. Her lips twitched slightly. “Don’t worry; I’m not going to move in with Simon just yet. I’m not crazy.”

“Yeah, you’re not crazy, but you love him.”

“Yes, I love him, but we’ve got our whole lives to be together. Right now, I’m just enjoying the wooing phase.”

“Lucky you.”

“What?” she asked innocently.

“I know you guys are going to Hawaii for a week in a couple of weeks.”

“Yes, it will be so much fun, and you’re welcome to—”

“Do not tell me I’m welcome to come. That would be even worse than living with the two of you. I am in no way going

on a romantic vacation to Hawaii with you. Oh my gosh. I would feel mortified.”

She laughed. “Okay. I get that. I don’t know that I’d want to go on a vacation with you and your significant other.”

“Yeah, well, you’re lucky because I don’t have a significant other,” I said sadly, making a face.

“Oh, you’re making me feel bad, Stasia.”

“Good,” I said, and we both burst out laughing.

“You’re horrible.”

“I’m not trying to be horrible. I’m just trying to be honest.” I winked at her. “But don’t worry. You know I love Simon, and I think you’re a perfect match. Anyway, you want to hear what the losers who have been trying to contact me have to say?”

“Yes,” she said excitedly. “I do.”

“You’re horrible. You just want to laugh.”

“Girl, it’s not like I’m laughing at you. I’m laughing at the guys.”

“You haven’t even heard them yet, Gemma.”

“I used to online date as well. I know how bad those messages are that guys send.”

“Well, trust me, the guys have gotten even worse. I think the guys in LA have no clue how to talk to women.”

“Okay, tell me. I want to hear everything.”

“Fine,” I said. I opened the first message. “This is from Jacob. He’s thirty-one. It says he lives in Culver City, and his bio says, ‘Love to dance, love to go out and drink, looking for a fun woman to discover life with.’”

“Oh, he doesn’t sound bad.” Gemma looked at me with a pleased smile. “He sounds like he’s quite the catch. Sounds like he might be a good one to meet.”

“You haven’t heard the message yet, girl.” I rolled my eyes and pretended to stick my fingers down my throat.

“Oh boy,” she said. “What did he say?”

“So we sent a couple of hi’s and how are you’s? It started great, and I was thinking, *Awesome, he’s polite*, and then...” I paused dramatically.

“Oh boy, what did he say?”

“And then he said,” I cleared my throat, “Hey there, girl. What you up to tonight?” I paused. “By the way, this message was sent at two o’clock in the morning.”

“Two o’clock in the morning?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Yep. So you know what that means?” I stared at her.

“Booty, booty, booty, booty, booty everywhere,” she started singing, and I laughed out loud.

“Yeah. He was hoping for a booty call.” I pursed my lips together.

“So what else did he say?” She giggled.

“He then went on to say, ‘You up? Want to come over to my place? I have half a bottle of wine that I’d love to drink off of you if you’re open to that.’”

“No, he did not say that,” she gasped.

“Oh yeah, and it gets better. ‘I also have some cheese sticks and marinara sauce, and if you want, you can put the sauce on my penis,’ and by the way, he spelled it in capital letters, P-E-N-I-S.”

She shrieked, “Oh my gosh. That’s crazy.” I stared at her for a couple of seconds.

“That’s one adjective to use for this man.”

“Then what did he say?”

“Then he said, ‘You can have double the pleasure, double the fun with cheese sticks and my P-E-N-I-S.’” I rolled my eyes.

“Wow,” she said. “So classy. Did you respond?”

“Oh yeah, I did.” I grinned wickedly.

“What did you say?”

I cleared my throat. “Why don’t you suck on my C-O-C-K instead?” I burst out laughing, and she fell back in laughter.

“Oh, Stasia!”

“What? He deserved it.”

“Did he respond to that?”

“Girl, he did respond.” I rolled my eyes.

“And what did he say?”

“He said, ‘If you’re into that.’”

“What?” She wrinkled her nose. “What does that mean?”

“I have no idea what that means.” I shook my head. “I didn’t bother to ask him.”

“Oh boy,” she said. “I can ask Simon if he has any friends that he could hook you up with.”

“That’s okay.” I shook my head. “We already know Sebastian, and I’m not interested in him.”

“What about Jake?”

“Simon’s twin brother?” I stared at her. “That would be weird.”

“Why would that be weird?” She looked like she seriously didn’t know why that would be weird.

“Because he looks just like Simon, and while I love you, Gemma, and you know you’re like a sister to me, I do not think I’m comfortable with us dating identical twin brothers.”

“Fine. Well, the other brother, Elijah, is showing up soon. Maybe he’s cool.”

“It’s okay. I do not need Simon to find me a match.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, “because the dating apps are going so much better than him helping you.”

I glared at her for a couple of seconds, and she held her hands up.

“Don’t kill me. I’m sorry, Stasia.”

“I won’t kill you. It’s fine, but I do think I’m about ready to have another margarita right now.”

“Okay,” she said. “I can text Simon and see if he’s nearly done with work.”

“Yeah, sure.” I shrugged. “Do you want to go in the hot tub for a couple of minutes?”

“Ooh, yeah,” she said. “I love relaxing in the hot tub.”

“Me too. I wish we could have a hot tub at our place.”

“Oh my gosh. Larry would just love that.” She laughed loudly. Larry was our annoying, perverted landlord.

“You never know. Maybe we could get away with it after Simon told him off that time.” I’d been very impressed when Simon had told Larry off for being rude and predatory. He’d practically told Gemma she needed to sleep with him or he would raise our rent.

“True.” She nodded. “Maybe, but unlikely.” We both laughed then, and I closed my eyes. The sun beating down on my face felt like heaven. My cheeks felt content, my entire body was at ease, but the little devil inside of me didn’t want me to feel too relaxed. As if on cue, my brain screamed at me, *Don’t forget your parents are arriving in two days*. I’d almost forgotten that I’d have to deal with their craziness soon. I loved them, but they were a lot of emotional work.

I pressed my lips together and rubbed my forehead as my eyes flew open, and I stared up at the blue sky. The clouds passed in front of the sun, stopping its rays from caressing me, and I felt like that was a sign of things to come. All I wanted was to enjoy the day and forget about their visit until I had to think about it. It wasn’t every day I got to relax in a five-million-dollar house, but anxiety didn’t care about that.

TWO

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

It's been a while since I've written. Sorry about that. Life got busy. You'll never believe it, but Simon has a girlfriend. A real one. Someone he loves. I was shocked. But she's nice. Her name is Gemma. I'm doing okay. Business is going great. I was thinking about you the other day when I drove by a house. It had sunflowers in the garden. I always remember how much you loved sunflowers. If things were different, I would have loved to have bought it for you. It was perfect. That's all for now.

Seb

“Dude, did you get lost?” Simon walked into the kitchen, an air of confusion on his face as he looked at me standing next to the sink. “Are you doing dishes? You do know I have a dishwasher and a housekeeper, right?”

“I’m not doing dishes.” I shook my head and pressed my finger to my lips as I nodded to the window above the double farmhouse sink in front of me. “I was listening to Gemma and Stasia.”

“Oh, are they going on about how great in bed I am?” Simon grinned, and I just rolled my eyes at his cockiness.

“How would they both be going on about that?” I raised a single eyebrow at my brother. “Only Gemma would know that fact.”

“True.” He laughed. “But I’m sure she would have bragged to Stasia about my prowess in the bedroom.”

“And you *don’t* understand why you don’t have many women friends?” I shook my head, and we both burst out laughing. Simon walked over to the fridge, opened the door, and just stood there for a few seconds.

“Want a beer?” he asked me as he pulled out a bottle and held it in the air. “Gemma brought over some Belgian Wheat Beers, and I’m trying to finish them, so she thinks I enjoyed them.”

“Go on, then.” I nodded and grabbed a bottle opener before taking the beer from him. “Stasia was telling Gemma about some creepy dude she met online.”

“Oh yeah?” Simon closed the fridge door and waited for me to pop my bottle cap off before grabbing the opener from me. “I didn’t know she was online dating.”

“Me either.” I took a sip of the beer and grimaced. “This is shite.”

“That’s why I’m having you help me finish them.” Simon laughed, and I rolled my eyes.

“Glad to know you want my help with all the important things in life, bro.”

“Shall we go outside and see what the girls want to do tonight?” Simon asked as he walked toward the french doors that led from the kitchen to his backyard.

“Sure.” I followed him through the doors onto the white travertine pavers that made up the back patio and surrounded his sizeable rectangular pool.

“Hey, girls,” Simon called out, and I watched as Gemma ran over to him and kissed him. She stared at him with a happy expression, and he playfully tapped her ass. I looked over and saw that Stasia was also watching them, expressions of happiness and contempt crossing her delightful features.

“I wouldn’t make that face if I were you.” I grinned as I walked over to help. “You don’t want your face to stay that

way if the wind changes.”

“Okay, Dad.” Stasia rolled her eyes, and I couldn’t help but notice how piercing they looked with the sun radiating off them. “I’ll try and remember that.” She grinned wryly and shook her wet hair. My eyes roved her body as she attempted to shake off every drop of water from her hair and skin. She was gorgeous, and the white bikini she wore emphasized all that was right with the world, from her large breasts to her flat tummy and shapely ass. Her legs were long, tan, and toned, and I could very much imagine them wrapped around me.

“Eyes on my face, Sebastian.” There was a lilt in her voice that sounded like she was close to laughing, and I reluctantly dragged my eyes from her calves to her face.

“I was just admiring—”

“I’ll stop you right there, Sebastian Bradford.” She shook her head and winked at me. “I don’t feel like slapping you across the face today.”

“You can slap me across the face any day of the week, Stasia Anabella Poe.”

“I really wish you didn’t know my full name.” She pulled her hair over her shoulder and twisted her hands to squeeze out as much water as possible before shaking it toward her back again. Her long locks shone like gold in the sunlight, and something in my stomach stirred. She was both beautiful and sexy, a combination that was hard to resist.

“But it’s so poetic.” I grinned at her. ““Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before; / But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token.””

“You know ‘The Raven.’” She nodded, and I wasn’t sure if I imagined it, but she almost seemed slightly impressed, which would shock me because Stasia always seemed disinterested in everything I had to say. Sometimes I wasn’t sure if she liked me or just tolerated me because we had to be in each other’s company.

“I love Edgar Allan Poe.” I tilted my head to the side. The sun was shining directly in my eyes, and I didn’t want to be blinded. “Were you named after him?”

“Kinda. My dad was always asked if he was related to him,” Stasia said and then laughed at whatever memories had filled her head. “My mother was drawn to him when they met because she thought he was. And her favorite poem is ‘Annabel Lee.’” She paused and then grinned at me. “‘It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea, / That a maiden there lived whom you may know. / By the name of Annabel Lee—’”

“‘And this maiden she lived with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me.’” I finished the rest of the stanza, and we shared a warm smile.

“So yes, that is why I’m Stasia Anabel Poe,” she said. “But we’re not related to Edgar Allan. Much to my mom’s dismay.”

“Stasia Anabel Poe. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.” I studied her body and tried to ignore the feelings of lust that filled me. Stasia was sexy, but she was also fun to be around. I didn’t want the voice in my pants dictating how I interacted with and looked at her.

“Thank you.” She blushed slightly, and a delightful cherry-red hue colored her cheeks. “Now, I need to go and change, as I feel dreadfully underdressed standing here next to you.”

“I can take off some clothes if that makes you feel more comfortable.” I pretended to start taking off my shirt.

“You wish.” She rolled her eyes and pressed her hand against mine to stop me from disrobing.

“I do.” I laughed then because being around Stasia always made me feel happy. She was one of those women that spoke her mind and didn’t put up with my nonsense. I wasn’t used to women that weren’t afraid to put me in my place.

“Are you two hungry?” Gemma sauntered over to us, a towel wrapped around her waist. Simon followed behind her like a puppy dog, and I pressed my lips together to stop myself from making a joke that would inevitably make him mad. He

refused to see and acknowledge that Gemma had him on a leash and that he was totally whipped.

“I could go for a bite.” I nodded. “What were you thinking?”

“Gemma wants to go for tapas,” Simon said. “She’s been craving Spanish food.”

“Ooh, wouldn’t it be cool if we went to Barcelona and had tapas there?” Stasia added, her eyes widening with excitement. “Are you going to fly us there, Simon?” She jumped up and down eagerly. “Please, please.”

Simon burst out laughing and shook his head. “You’re worse than my actual girlfriend, you know that, right?”

“Hey, I want best friend of the girlfriend perks.” She shrugged and then giggled. “It’s not every day that your best friend dates a millionaire.”

“We can’t fly to Spain.” Gemma shook her head. “Your parents are coming in two days, remember?”

“Oh gosh, don’t remind me.” Stasia groaned. “I am not looking forward to this trip at all.”

“Oh?” I asked her curiously. “Did you think about my offer?”

“I thought you were joking.” She shook her head quickly and looked away from me. “I should go and change. I’m hungry and need to get some yummy food in me.”

“Yes, let’s shower and change.” Gemma sounded eager. “Patatas bravas are calling my name.”

“I think I want to order gambas, albondingas, patatas bravas, chorizo.” Stasia rubbed her stomach. “And the list goes on.”

“I have no idea what any of those things are.” I laughed. “But you’re making me hungry.”

“Not hungrier than I’m making myself.” She shook her head, and a trickle of water drops ran down her face. I resisted the urge to lean over and lick them off of her. I didn’t really

fancy her slapping me across the cheek. Though maybe I'd quite enjoy it.

"I don't know about that." My voice was a low growl as I tried to ignore how horny I was starting to feel. "I think you'll find I'm very hungry."

"Are you indeed?" She took a step toward me, her eyes filled with mischief. "Just how hungry are you, Sebastian?" Her eyes looked me up and down, and my breath caught. She was teasing me the same way I liked to tease her, and it took me aback. Stasia never ceased to amaze me. Just when I thought I had her slightly figured out, I realized I was completely wrong.

"Follow me back into the house and you can find out for yourself," I whispered, my lips so close to hers that we were practically kissing. Her blue eyes gazed into mine, her pupils looking thoughtful, and my heart stopped. She was going to say yes. She was going to challenge me to follow up. I swallowed hard as she blinked and then took a step back.

"I think I should shower." She tossed her hair around and looked over to Gemma. "You ready to go inside?"

"Yup." Gemma nodded and gave Simon a quick peck on the cheek. "We won't be long."

"Take your time," I said nonchalantly, my eyes following Stasia as she headed back into the house. "I'm a patient man. I can wait."

"You will be waiting forever." She raised a single eyebrow at me. "I don't deal with fuckboys." She looked me up and down dismissively, and all I could do was stare at her. There was really no way to answer that comment that would go well for me. I was disappointed, but at the same time, I wasn't one to back down from a challenge.

THREE

STASIA

“Hey, Jake, you want another beer?” Sebastian asked as he opened our fridge door. Sebastian and Simon’s presence in my apartment had grown in the last few weeks. Not that I minded the company. It was nice to have more people in my space. And we all alternated spending time at my place in Silver Lake and Simon’s place in West Hollywood.

I looked over at Gemma, who was laughing at something Simon had whispered in her ear, and then looked over at Holly, who was grinning at me.

“Wish you could have made it to Simon’s place yesterday to swim.” I walked over to her. “It was so much fun.”

“That would have been amazing, but my cousin wanted me to go shoe shopping with her.” Holly made a face and then giggled as Simon went through almost every creaking cupboard and drawer in the kitchen looking for something. “Almost like they live here now, huh?” she asked, and I just nodded and laughed. Not that I minded that everyone felt so at home in my apartment. I loved it. I almost felt like I was a cast member on the set of *Friends* with my own group, and it was all thanks to Gemma and Simon.

Jake called over to me, and I looked over at him with a raised eyebrow. He was holding a beer up in the air and smiling. “Sorry, I didn’t hear what you said, but are you offering me one of my own beers?”

“Hey, now,” he said, shaking his head, his blue eyes twinkling. It was amazing just how similar to Simon his

mannerisms were. “Sure, technically, they are now your beers, but I did bring them.”

“And what does that mean?” I said, laughing, as he approached me.

“It means that I hope you don’t mind that I’m drinking them as well?” His voice was soft and teasing, and I beamed at him.

“I don’t mind,” I said. I liked Jake. He was new to the group but already fit right in. He was Simon’s twin brother, but they hadn’t known about each other’s existence until very recently.

Sebastian walked over to me with a bag of popcorn. “You want some?” He held the bag of salted caramel popcorn out to me. The sweet smell of sugar and butter floated up to my nostrils, and I tried to ignore it. I didn’t really need the extra pounds. I knew if I started eating, I wouldn’t be able to stop. Popcorn was one of my weaknesses.

“I’m good, thanks.” I shook my head, and I tried to ignore the feeling of excitement that I felt every time we glanced at each other. Sebastian was a hard man to read. On the surface, he was fun and jokey. He always had a pleasant smile. His demeanor was relaxed and at ease. Yet when I was around him, I felt like I was as tight as a coil. I didn’t know him deep inside, and I wanted to. Though I wasn’t going to pursue him. Sebastian was the sort of man that could break your heart without even thinking about it.

I’d spent quite a bit of time with him in the last couple of weeks, seeing as he was Simon’s best friend and brother. Yet I felt like I hadn’t scratched the surface of who he was as a person. Not that I wanted to. I enjoyed our light flirtation and didn’t really want it to go past that.

He was someone that seemed to not be looking for a relationship. And not in the way that he just wanted to screw as many women as possible, just in the way that he didn’t seem like he was emotionally ready to get into that place, and I didn’t really mind because I wasn’t really looking for that, either.

I loved that Gemma had found a relationship. I loved Simon. He was a great guy, and I was happy for her, but my career came first. I really wanted to make it as a designer. I really wanted to see my clothes in boutiques and stores around the world. It was my dream to see my dresses in Saks Fifth Avenue and stores of that ilk. And I knew that if I got into a relationship, a serious relationship, I would become distracted, and that was the last thing that I needed.

“Earth to Stasia,” Sebastian said, tapping me on the forehead. “Are you in there?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about *Friends*.”

“*Friends*?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. You know the TV show?”

“Sure, I know the show. Why were you thinking about *Friends*?”

“Um,” I looked at him and smiled as I waved around the apartment, “just how comfortable everyone is. You know, when Chandler and Joey used to go to Monica and Rachel’s apartment, they always used to make themselves at home, and I feel like that’s what you guys are doing here.”

“That’s okay, right?” Sebastian said softly, looking as if he were unsure of what I would say. He seemed nervous, and then his lips twitched, and I knew he was playing a part.

“Of course. It’s fine.” I laughed. “If it wasn’t, I would let you know. Trust me.”

“Well, I’m glad,” he said. “You guys have really made this your home.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s surprising because we didn’t have much money and yet—”

“Money doesn’t make a place a home,” he said, interrupting me as he looked around the living room. I saw the room through his eyes and smiled. We had a four-seater white couch covered in fluffy throws and patchwork pillows. The thick wool rug on the floor was soft and comfortable, and the

walls were adorned with artwork we'd picked up from all over the world.

"True." I nodded. "I mean, I love Simon's house, but it just seems so impersonal. Everything seems like it just came from the store, and it's not even really lived in."

"That's how my house feels as well."

"I've never been to your house," I said. "Scared to show me?" I teased, and he shook his head.

"Not at all. Any night you want to come over, I'm more than willing. Hey, you can even spend the night." He winked at me, and I groaned.

"Really, Sebastian?"

"What? A man can't flirt?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. "One of these days, I'm going to take you up on that, and then you're going to backtrack so fast."

"I don't think so," he said. His eyes moved to my lips, and I watched as his tongue darted out, almost as if he were trying to tease or seduce me.

"Uh-huh." I wasn't going to fall for his naughty ways. I'd met too many men that just wanted to flirt and bed me in my life. I wasn't going down that road again.

"Come on, guys, let's play a board game," Simon said, jumping up. "I think we should play charades."

"I'm down," Holly said. "Are we going to have partners, or—"

"Partners sounds good to me." Sebastian looked over at me. "Want to be my partner, Stasia?"

"Sure," I said, shrugging nonchalantly. I didn't want him to see how pleased I was that he'd asked me. It was only a game. It wasn't like he'd asked to travel the world with me or anything.

"And I want to be with Simon," Gemma spoke up.

Holly looked over at Jake. “So I guess we’re on the same team, then?”

“Sure,” he said, nodding. “Thanks for inviting me, guys.”

“Of course,” Gemma said quickly with a warm smile. “You’re Simon’s brother. You’re part of the group now.” She was responsible for Simon and Jake having found each other, and I knew how badly she wanted them to bond. She loved Simon so much that she wanted him to be the happiest man he could be.

Jake cocked his head to the side and grinned. “It’s really weird to know I have a twin brother.”

“I think it’s weird for all of us.” Holly laughed.

“Oh?” I stared at Holly. “Why is it weird for you?”

“Well, I’ve been working for Simon for a couple of years, and he’s been a terror in my life,” she said, giggling. “Now, there are two more potential terrorists.”

“I don’t know that anyone’s called me a terror before.” Jake walked over to her and looked her up and down. Her cheeks turned a dark pink as she realized she’d been overheard. “But I could see how you might think so.”

“Oh?” she asked him, eyes wide. They were making some serious eye contact, and I wondered if there was a potential love match there. “Why do you say that?” He bit down on his lower lip and leaned into her. He was definitely giving off an interested vibe.

“Some things are better off not knowing,” he said, leaning closer to her face, and even I blushed at the way he was looking at her.

I looked over at Gemma, and she looked back at me. We gave each other a look to express what we were both thinking, which was, *We need to chat later about this*. I had no idea what was going on between Holly and Jake. I couldn’t tell if they were flirting or fucking each other with their eyes. I couldn’t tell if they were into each other on a deeper level or if they just wanted to rip each other’s clothes off. I didn’t know what the vibe was, but something was definitely going on.

“Okay, so charades. I’ll go first,” Sebastian said quickly.

“No, I’m going to go first,” Simon said, flexing his muscles.

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Welcome to my childhood.”

“What?” Simon said, chuckling.

“You’re so competitive,” Sebastian said. “Wait till you get to meet Elijah.” He looked over at me and Gemma. “He’ll agree with everything I have to say.”

“I’m really excited to meet Elijah,” Gemma said. “He sounds cool.”

“He is,” Simon said with a nod. “He’s slightly too cool for school, but we let it pass because he’s our brother.”

“I’m excited to meet him, too.” Jake’s deep voice sounded slightly jealous.

I wondered if he felt like the odd man out seeing as Simon, Sebastian, and Elijah had grown up together, and he was just a new member of the pack. It must have been weird to know you had a blood relation, a twin, someone that you should have been closer to than anyone in the world, yet you didn’t even know they existed for so many years. I felt sad for them both, but I was so glad that they’d finally gotten to know each other and knew of each other’s existence. Their relationship could only grow stronger.

My phone started ringing then. I was about to ignore it when I saw the name on the screen. It was my mom.

“Hey guys, just a second. My mom’s calling.” I answered the phone quickly. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

“Stasia, I have you on speakerphone. Papa is here as well.”

“Hi, Papa,” I said quickly.

Papa was my stepfather, seeing as my biological father had died when I was in school. He was a nice, loving man and came from a large Greek family. I knew that he absolutely adored my mother, and as such, he adored me as well. He’d always been there for me to lend a listening ear and a crying

shoulder. He'd always supported me when I said I wanted to become a designer. However, my mom was definitely the boss of the relationship.

"Stasia, I'm so excited to see you tomorrow," Papa said, genuine warmth in his voice.

"I'm excited to see you both as well. Let me know when you get to the airport, and text me right before your flight leaves so we can make sure that it's on time, okay?"

"Yes, Stasia," my mom said. "So we wanted you to make a reservation for the end of the week."

"What reservation, Mom?" I asked her questioningly.

"A reservation for dinner. Make it a very nice restaurant."

"Um, okay." That surprised me. My mom and dad were pretty cheap. They did not usually like going out to eat, let alone to nice restaurants.

"Yes. We have a very special guest that will be joining us," Papa said excitedly. "Someone I think you'll be very happy to meet."

I groaned inwardly. "Um, who's that?" I said, trying to feign ignorance. I had a feeling I wasn't going to like it.

"Oh, just a friend of Papa's," my mom said quickly. "Someone that is very well-off, has very good connections, and will—"

"And will what, Mom?" I said quickly.

"Nothing. We talk later. We talk later."

"Papa, what's going on?"

"Stasia, dear, my friend, he's very nice. His name is Dmitri. Good man."

"Why are you telling me this?" I said quickly.

"No reason. No reason. You make a reservation, okay?" my mom said quickly.

"Mom."

"What?" she said. "You know I like to eat the best food."

“Since when do you like to eat the best food, Mom? You said that no one’s food is even better than your home cooking.”

She started laughing then. “Well, you know Babuska teaches me and—”

“Mom, who’s coming to dinner with us on Friday?”

“Don’t you worry. Papa, do you have anything else to say before we get off the phone?”

“No, dear,” he said. “Stasia, we see you tomorrow. We give you a big kiss and a big hug.”

“Okay,” I said, wrinkling my nose as they hung up the phone. I looked around the room and saw that everyone was staring at me.

“What’s going on?” Gemma said, concern in her voice.

“Um, what do you mean?” I asked her, trying to process my emotions in a room full of people.

“So I have to call Camilla.” I looked at Gemma and wrinkled my nose. Camilla was my first cousin on my mom’s side, and she was pretty much just like my grandma, a huge gossip, which was one reason I disliked talking to her. I knew anything I said she wouldn’t keep secret. The plus side of her big mouth was anything anyone else wanted to keep secret, she would blab. Our family was like a real-life version of TMZ.

Gemma stared at me. “Are you sure you want to call her?”

“I need the dirt on what’s going down.” I nodded as I pressed my cousin’s number. It rang twice, and then she picked up.

“Hey, Stasia,” she said in her bubbly voice. “How’s it going in Los Angeles, City of Angels?”

I rolled my eyes. Every time I called her, she had to say “Los Angeles, City of Angels,” not because she thought it was such a fantastic place full of wonderful people, but because she thought it was where sinners went.

“It’s great. Thank you.”

“And how are Brad Pitt and George Clooney?” she asked me as if she believed I knew them.

“Oh, they’re doing great. Thank you. We had an orgy last night, and it was amazing,” I gushed. She was my cousin, and I wanted something from her, but I could be just as ridiculous as she was.

“What?” she said, gasping, and I giggled.

“Come on now. Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t know, Stasia,” she said. “Anything could be true in LA, where people go to the actresses and wind up as porn stars.”

I pressed my lips together. “Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t come to LA to be an actress then, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” she said. “So how’s it going with you? Are you still trying to be the next Carolina Herrera or…” She paused. I knew she was trying to think of a famous fashion designer’s name and couldn’t. My cousin thought the best clothes were sold at Kohl’s and Target. Sometimes she would give Dillard’s a run for its money, but she was not into haute couture or anything that would go down a runway.

“I’m still working on doing my best to make it in the fashion world, yes.”

“I told you to apply for *Project Runway*,” she said as if that would solve all my problems and was guaranteed to make me the next Vera Wang.

“Yeah, I know you did, but it’s not that easy.” I took a deep breath.

“What does that mean?” She practically cackled. “You applied and didn’t get on the show?” she said, and I knew she was itching to fill in every family member she could on my supposed failure. “I’m so sorry, Stasia.” Insincerity dripped from her voice.

“I never applied to be on the show.” I could hear the anger in my voice, and I took a deep breath. Sometimes I couldn’t

believe that she was my family member. It seemed like she wanted more bad things for me than positive ones. “Anyway, I was just calling to see how you’re doing and if you knew that my parents were going to be here this week.”

“Oh yeah, your mom and stepdad are going to Los Angeles, aren’t they? I heard that your stepdad’s got a very special surprise for you.”

“Oh yeah, they mentioned something about that,” I said innocently. “Don’t suppose you happen to know what the surprise will be, do you?”

“Well,” she said, “I shouldn’t say.”

“Oh, but please do. Please.”

“Well, I heard that there’s a certain man named Dmitri.”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“And he’s looking for a wife because he needs kids to continue on his family legacy because he’s worth millions of dollars, and his last wife wasn’t able to give him any kids, and then she died tragically.”

“Okay?” I frowned. “And do we know anything about this Dmitri?”

“Oh, well, I heard he’s old enough to be a grandpa.” She laughed.

“What does that mean?”

“He’s like fifty-something.” She giggled. “So, how does it feel, Stasia?”

“How does what feel?”

“That you’re going to be married to a man old enough to be your dad.”

“I’m not going to be—”

“Oh yeah, you are. I mean, it’s not like you have any prospects. You have no boyfriend, no husband, no real job, no potentials, no nothing. Everyone in the family’s talking about it.”

I pressed my lips together. “Well, I’m glad to know I’m a source of humor and interest.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. But I should go. *The Bachelorette*’s coming on tonight, and I just have to—”

“Okay, bye,” I said and hung up quickly. I let out a deep sigh and then screamed. Everyone looked at me in shock.

“Is everything okay?” Sebastian gave me a look. “That scream was enough to wake the dead.”

“My parents have done it now.” I shook my head. I jumped up. I was furious. “Everything is not okay. They have not done anything good.” I bit down on my lower lip. “They want to ruin my life.”

“What do you mean?” Gemma said nervously. “What’s going on?”

“They found some man for me to marry. That’s the surprise, and that’s most probably who’s coming to the dinner.”

“Oh, shit,” Gemma said. “I knew your parents were crazy, but that crazy?”

“I just am so fed up. They think this is the 1950s. They think that... Ugh!” I screamed again. “Sorry, guys. I’m just so frustrated and annoyed right now.”

“I understand,” Holly said. “That’s horrible. I’m so sorry. Though maybe it’s not so bad. Sometimes...” She paused. “Well, nothing.”

Jake looked at her. “What were you going to say?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think this is the time and the place.” She raised a single eyebrow.

“Well, I’m curious about what you wanted to say now,” he prodded her.

“Me too.” Gemma nodded.

“Me three,” I added.

Holly shook her head, her face going red. “Trust me, guys. You do not want to know what I was going to say.” She looked embarrassed and flailed her arms around.

Sebastian cleared his throat. “Well, I have a proposition for you, Stasia.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “What’s the proposition?”

“Well.” He licked his lips and took a couple of steps toward me.

“Get on with it.”

“Your parents are setting you up, right?”

“Yes.” I knew I had an attitude, but I didn’t care. I was pissed, and I didn’t care who knew it.

“Because you have no boyfriend.”

“Yes.” I pressed my lips together. Was he trying to make me madder?

“And you have no husband.”

“Yes. I just said this. What is your solution to my problem?”

“Well, how’s about I…” He grinned wickedly, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

“Nope,” I said quickly. “You’re not going to pretend to be my boyfriend. I’m not doing it. I’m not fake dating. I’ve seen too many movies, and that always goes horribly wrong.”

“Oh no,” he said, chuckling. “I’m not suggesting that we fake date. You don’t need a fake boyfriend in this situation.”

“Exactly. Thank you. I’m glad you realize that would not be an option.”

“I’m suggesting that I be your fake fiancé.”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

“Hey, a boyfriend means nothing. Boyfriends and girlfriends break up all the time. But if I’m your fake fiancé, well, then your parents will have to realize you’re in a serious

relationship, and there's a much likelier chance that you'll actually get married. And, well," he smiled self-confidently, "I'm rich. I will impress them with my money and my home and my cars and my business, and hey, they'll get off your back."

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. He would be the sort of guy a parent would love because he was right. He was made of money, and he was handsome, and he was a charmer. I knew my mom would love him, and my dad would be impressed by his business, but I didn't like the idea of lying to my parents, and I didn't like the idea of having to pretend with Sebastian. He looked all too smarmy and cocky.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said, shaking my head. "I just..."

"You just what? You'd rather get married to a man old enough than be your grandpa?" He wrinkled his nose. "Have you ever seen an old, well, you know what?"

"An old what?" I asked him, and then I went red. I knew exactly what he was talking about. "No, I had not."

"Well, let me just tell you. Prunes are not just a fruit."

I stared at him for a couple of seconds and then started laughing. I couldn't stop myself. "Really, Sebastian, prunes? That's the metaphor you're going with?"

"Hey, I'm just saying. If you want prunes for the rest of your life."

"I do not want prunes."

"Exactly. You want a banana, right? A juicy, plump, firm banana."

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. "A banana?"

"What?" He licked his lips. "I'm just saying. Prunes or a banana? I know which one I'd want if I was you."

"You do know that if I pretend to be your fake fiancé, I still won't want your banana." I looked him up and down. "I have high standards for the bananas I choose to eat."

Simon burst out laughing then. “Ouch, Sebastian. You just got shot down.”

“I wouldn’t say I got shot down,” he said. “I’m offering to help you, Stasia. So what’s it to be? Do you want me to help you, or do you want to end up with this mystery man who’s looking for children to carry on his family name?”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, and then I looked at Gemma.

“I think you should go with the offer you have.” Gemma shrugged. “I mean, I know your parents, and they will not stop until they have you doing what they want you to do.” She was right, of course. Gemma knew my parents almost better than I did. My mom and stepdad were loving, caring people, but when they had an idea, they didn’t stop until they were successful in getting what they wanted.

“Fine,” I said to Sebastian, “but we’re going to have some rules, things you can say and things you can’t say.”

“Of course,” he said with a small smile. “I would think nothing less.”

“Okay,” I said, grimacing. I wasn’t sure if I had just made one of the biggest mistakes of my life or if this was going to be a decision I’d live to regret. Sebastian and I already had a slightly awkward and flirtatious relationship, and I didn’t want us to cross any lines. I would just have to make sure that he knew and that there would be no consummating the relationship. There was going to be no touching, no inappropriate contact or messages. This was purely for show and nothing more. As long as he understood that, everything would be fine.

FOUR

SEBASTIAN

Hey,

I was thinking about you today. I miss you. Do you remember that time we went to the park to feed the ducks and we got told off for throwing them bread? I was nervous you'd be mad, but you just laughed. And then we held hands and walked to get milkshakes. I always remember that strawberry banana was your favorite. Mine was chocolate, but I always order strawberry banana now when I can. I've got myself a fiancée! Surprise. It's not what you think, so don't be mad! You'll always be my first love.

Sebastian

“I can't believe we're going to the airport.” Stasia looked at me with nervous eyes, her fingers tapping against the steering wheel as she drove. I'd offered to drive, but she'd declined my offer. I only hoped her parents didn't hold that against me.

“It's okay. It'll all be okay. Trust me.”

She bit down on her lower lip as her foot pressed down on the accelerator.

“Hey, there,” I said quickly. “You don't have to speed. You don't want to kill me before we arrive, do you?”

“No. Sorry,” she said. “I'm just freaking out because...”

“It's okay. I understand.”

“My parents are going to think I’ve absolutely lost my mind.”

“Why? They won’t think I’m cute?”

I gave her a half smile. She just glared at me.

“It’s got nothing to do with your looks. How will I tell my parents I am engaged when they didn’t even know I was dating anyone?”

“Well, they didn’t know you were dating anyone because you weren’t.” I started laughing then, and she just shook her head.

“Very funny, Sebastian.”

“What? I’m just trying to make you feel comfortable and at ease because if you don’t calm down very quickly, your parents are going to know that we are not together.”

She blinked as she stared at me. “Okay. Fine. You’re right.”

I looked at my watch. We had about thirty-five minutes until we would get to LAX.

“We’ve got thirty minutes to get to know each other.”

“What do you mean?” she said, turning the radio down slightly.

“I mean, we need to learn as much about each other as we can so that your parents think we actually have been in each other’s life for some time.”

“Shit. You’re right. I don’t even know your favorite movie.”

“*Goodfellas*,” I said quickly.

“*Goodfellas*? Typical.” She giggled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Every guy loves mafia movies. Like, what’s the deal?”

“I don’t know. You tell me, seeing as you’ve met every man in the world.”

“Obviously, I haven’t met every man in the world, but pretty much every guy I know, their favorite movie is either *The Godfather* or *Reservoir Dogs* or *Scarface* or...”

“Let me guess. *Taxi Driver*?”

“That’s not a mafia movie,” she said, and I chuckled.

“That’s my second favorite movie.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “*Reservoir Dogs* and *Taxi Driver*.”

“Yup. Let me see if I can guess your favorite movie.”

“I doubt you’ll be able to guess that,” she said, shaking her head.

“Is it *The Devil Wears Prada*?” I asked her.

“What? No way.”

Her jaw dropped, and I stared at her, feeling happy.

“Do not tell me I got it right.”

She burst out laughing then.

“No. You didn’t get it right. Why would you think it would be *The Devil Wears Prada*?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t that about a fashion designer or something?”

“No. It’s not.” She laughed. “But close. It’s about a girl that works at *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan* or something.”

“Okay. So that’s not your favorite movie. Then what is?”

“I’ll give you one more guess.”

“Oh, and if I get it right?”

She looked at me for a couple of seconds.

“If you get it right, I will give you \$10.”

“No fair,” I said, shaking my head. “I got plenty of money. I don’t want to win money.”

“Then what do you want to win?”

I stared at her for a couple of seconds, knowing exactly what I wanted from her, but I didn't want to make her shy or nervous.

"Come on, now, Sebastian. What is it that you'd like to win?"

"Shall I be honest or..."

"There's no other option but honesty."

She blinked at me.

"Really? My fake fiancé is saying there's no other option but honesty?" I chuckled, and she burst out laughing then.

"Sebastian, are you going to play games or—"

"I'd like a kiss."

"I'm not giving you a kiss."

"Really? You asked me what I wanted."

"Fine. You'll get a kiss on the cheek if you get it right."

"Okay, then."

I stared at her for a couple of seconds.

"What are you doing?" she asked me curiously, her face turning slightly pink.

"I'm trying to size you up to see if I can guess what movie is your favorite."

"You'll never get it."

"Is it *Mean Girls*?"

"*Mean Girls*?"

She giggled then.

"Oh my God. Really, Sebastian? How old do you think I am, eighteen?"

"I don't know. I feel like a lot of women like *Mean Girls*."

"Yeah, when they were in college. I'm not in college anymore."

“Okay. I don’t suppose I get a third guess, do I?”

“You can have a third guess, but if you get it right, you’re not getting a kiss.”

“Aw, shucks, man. Let me see. Is it *Frozen*?”

“You cannot be serious right now.”

Her feet slammed on the brake as we hit a stoplight.

“You do not seriously think my favorite movie is *Frozen*.”

“No, but I don’t have any clue. Tell me.”

“My favorite movie is *The Illusionist* with Edward Norton.”

“*The Illusionist*.” I paused for a second. “I think I’ve seen it. It was kind of cool. Was it also with Christian Bale?”

“No, silly. That’s *The Prestige*. They’re very similar types of movies, but different actors.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “You’re really into movies, huh?”

“We do live in LA.”

“Yeah, but neither of us is in the movie industry.”

“Yet,” she said.

“Oh.” I stared at her quizzically. “Are you hoping to be an actress or something?”

She beamed at me for a couple of seconds. “If I were completely delusional, I would say yes, but I’m not, so no.”

“What do you mean by that?” I frowned slightly.

“I mean, everyone in LA wants to be an actress and to make it. And what percentage of people actually do? What percentage of people have to sleep their way to the top, or even worse?”

“What’s worse than sleeping your way to the top?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. Overdosing on drugs or something. I’m just saying that that’s not my goal or my dream. I do like acting. I was in school plays, and I was told I had a natural talent. And

Jenna thinks I'm overdramatic. But my dream isn't to be a famous actress. I'd love to be a costume designer on movies."

"Oh, yeah. I think Simon mentioned that. That's a cool goal. I think you can do it."

"You've never even seen any of my stuff." She shook her head.

"Hey. Well, that's not to say I don't think you're talented." I frowned. "And I would love to see your stuff if you're willing to show me."

"Sure," she said, "if you want to."

"I'd love to," I said sincerely. "Okay. So we have favorite movies out of the way. What's your favorite dream destination?"

"My favorite dream destination?" She blinked. "Like to go with my friends? To go with my boyfriend? To—"

"Hold on." I cut her off. "For your honeymoon. Where would you want to go on your honeymoon?"

"The Maldives," she said quickly.

"Oh. You'd want to be in a bikini with me?"

She shook her head. A sly smile crossed her face.

"Oh, no. I wouldn't have a bikini on."

"Oh?" I said, my heart racing now. "What would you have on?"

"What do you think, Sebastian?" She turned to me and raised a single eyebrow. "I'd be on my honeymoon with my husband in the Maldives, in turquoise blue water, at a private bungalow over the sea." She licked her lips. "I'll leave it to your imagination."

I bit down on my lower lip. I knew exactly what she was saying, and in that moment, more than anything, I wanted to be there in that place with her, staring at her beautiful naked body.

"Okay, then. The Maldives it is."

“What about you?” she asked. “Where would you want to go on your honeymoon?”

“Australia,” I said just as quickly as she’d answered.

“Oh. Why Australia?”

“Because we could have an adventure and a romantic beach getaway.” I smiled. “Trust me. I’ve thought about this many a time.”

“Oh?” she asked. “Were you engaged before or...”

“No, but when I was younger, my mum and I used to talk about different countries we would visit when she had enough money, and Australia was always top of the list. We were going to go to Alice Springs, to see kangaroos and koala bears, and go to this island called Rottnest Island in Perth. And we’d see the...”

I paused then, starting to feel slightly overwhelmed and emotional as I thought back to conversations I’d had with my mother, conversations that I hadn’t thought about in a really long time.

“Hey,” she said. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks.”

“I didn’t realize that your mum used to share those things with you. Did she used to talk about them with Simon as well?”

“What?” I blinked as I gazed at her, confused at her question.

“You said your mum used to talk to you about—”

“Oh. Not my mom mom. Not the mom Simon and I share. My birth mother.” I pulled out my phone. “Oh, hey. I’ve got some work messages I have to respond to. Let me just answer these, and then we’ll finish asking questions about each other. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said quickly and nodded.

I knew I was being abrupt. I knew that I was being almost rude, but I didn’t talk about my mum with anyone. The

memories were too precious, too close to my heart, too protected.

As much as I liked Stasia and wanted to get to know her better, she wasn't someone I trusted with my innermost memories, the part of my heart that no one knew existed, not even Simon, no one. I couldn't believe I'd even told her about Australia. It had been a slip-up, and I had to make sure not to let that happen again. Those were protected, special memories. They were the things that kept me going when I thought nothing would ever be okay.

"Hey, Sebastian," she interrupted my thoughts. "Dear? Are we going to do a quick twenty questions before we get to the airport, or shall we just make stuff up about each other?"

"Oh, no. We should do a quick twenty questions. I just read the emails. Everything's fine."

"Okay. Cool," she said. "So, do you want to go first, or shall I?"

"Feel free to go first."

"What's your favorite color?" she asked me.

"Blue."

"Okay."

"What about you?" I asked her.

"Purple." She smiled. "It's such a gorgeous color."

"A royal color," I agreed.

"I'm not royal, though." She laughed.

"You never know. Have you ever done a 23andMe?"

"No." She shook her head. "Why would I have done that?"

"Well, unless you've done it, you can't rule out that you have royal blood in you."

"Yeah. My mum would absolutely love that." She laughed. "Sometimes we like to say that we're descendants of the Russian dynasty and related to Anastasia, but that's just something we say."

“I can see it,” I said, looking her up and down. “You are beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “I appreciate that.”

“It’s only the truth,” I answered honestly. “So your mum’s family is Russian?”

“No.” She laughed. “Well, years and years ago. She’s from the Ukraine, though.”

“Ah, I see. I guess they’re not quite friends right now, huh?”

“Not at all.” She shook her head. “Okay. Next question.”

“I’m listening.”

“What’s your favorite book?”

“Oh. That’s a good one.” I stared at her for a couple of seconds. “I think I would have to say *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.”

“*For Whom the Bell Tolls*?” She looked shocked. “No way that is your favorite book.”

“Yeah. I read it in high school, and I got through it, so that’s saying a lot.”

“Wow,” she said. “Okay.”

“What about you? What’s your favorite book?”

“*And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie,” she said. “In fact, I love every Agatha Christie book ever written. She was brilliant, a mastermind.”

“Yeah. She was. Did you know that that book used to be called *Ten Little Indians*?” I asked her.

She wrinkled her nose and nodded. “Yeah. And I know what it was called before then as well.” She sighed. “Kind of problematic, but the book’s still good.”

“Yeah. I think she was a great mystery writer.”

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s see. If you could live anywhere in the United States, where would you live?”

“LA, obviously. That’s why I’m here.”

“Really?” she said.

“Why? That’s not where you would choose?” I asked her, surprised.

“Not necessarily. Jenna and I came here for our careers, but as much as I love our place and what we’ve done with it, I don’t love the location, you know?”

“So where would you live if you could live anywhere in the world?”

“Hawaii,” she said.

“Hawaii?” I stared at her in surprise. “I see that you really like these beach locations, don’t you?”

FIVE

STASIA

“Oh, no,” I said as I stared at the text message from my mom.

“What is it?” Sebastian asked me, a curious expression on his face as he looked at my phone.

“My mom’s flight was delayed. They are not going to be here for another two hours. Sorry. I must have missed this message earlier.”

“No worries,” Sebastian said, shaking his head. “Well, what do you want to do?”

“Well, we could park and go into the airport. I’m sure there’s a coffee shop somewhere. Or we could go to a coffee shop around here and then go back to the airport?”

“Oh, I think we should go to the airport,” he said, his face serious.

“Oh? You sure?”

“Yeah. I want to make sure that we’re there when your parents arrive and they’re not waiting at all.”

“Oh. I mean, we still have plenty of time. We can definitely go somewhere else and—”

“No.” He shook his head. “You know traffic in LA. It changes at a flip of a dime.”

“True,” I said. I smiled at him warmly and took in his handsome side profile.

Sebastian was an enigma. He was flirtatious and fun, and yet sometimes he seemed to go to such a deep, serious place,

and I found it hard to reconcile that part of his personality, seeing as he was always so jokey.

“I am excited to meet your parents,” he said softly. “I think that this is going to be a really fun experience.”

“I hope so,” I said, making a face.

“I’m curious, though, about one thing,” he said, his eyes looking at me softly.

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Your dad. He is your stepdad, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, my lower lip quivering slightly. “My biological dad died when I was a teenager.” I bit down on my lower lip. Even though it has been years since my father had passed away, it still hurt like it was yesterday.

“You don’t feel weird calling your stepdad ‘Dad’?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I know it’s kind of weird because my dad was so cool and loving. But my stepdad, he’s taking me under his wing, so to speak. He’s been a really good guy in my life. He’s taken care of me and my mom, and it would feel weird to call him ‘Stepdad’ or by his name, you know?”

“Sure. I understand that.” He paused. “Can I ask you another question?”

“Of course. If your stepdad is so great, why is he trying to set up an arranged marriage for you?”

I understood his question, and it was legitimate. I let out a deep sigh.

“I know this is going to sound weird, but my parents still think they live in the 1950s where a woman can’t really take care of herself and needs a man to provide for her and protect her. And they feel like every woman just wants to get married and have kids and...” I shrugged. “It’s hard to explain. I know their hearts are in the right place and they think they’re doing this to help me—”

“But that’s not what you want,” he said. “Shouldn’t they respect your wants and needs?”

“You would think so,” I said. “But you have to remember, both my parents are immigrants. My mom moved here from Ukraine and met my dad, who was English, and my stepdad moved here as a little boy from Greece. So they still think about the old country a lot.” I shrugged. “I guess it’s hard to understand if you haven’t lived that sort of life.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I guess so.”

“Your parents are from Iowa, yeah?”

He laughed. “Well, now they are. If you’re asking their ancestry, they’re Norwegian.”

“Oh wow, cool.”

“Well, Norwegian and German,” he said, shrugging.

“That’s really cool.”

“Yeah, but remember, they’re not my biological parents.”

“Oh, yeah. Do you know your biological parent’s ancestry or—”

“My mom, she was Italian and Puerto Rican,” he said, smiling softly.

“Oh, cool. That’s an interesting mix.”

“My grandparents, her parents, met in New York in the Bronx. I can remember her telling me stories.”

“Oh, really?” I wanted to ask him if he could remember any of the stories, if he would tell me anything. I wanted to ask him what had happened to his mom and why she gave him up and what happened to his dad. But he hadn’t volunteered any of the information, and I didn’t want to pry.

“So you said there’s going to be a coffee shop in the airport?” he asked me with a raised eyebrow.

“Should be.” I smiled. “Normally I just get my ticket and go through security, so I don’t really know.”

“That’s okay,” he said, “if there is or if there isn’t. Or…” he said, grinning.

“Or what?” I asked him, wondering what he was thinking.

“We could get a ticket somewhere and go through and shop as if we were going somewhere.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, “and I don’t have money like that. There’s no way I could put a ticket on my credit card.”

“I don’t mind doing it,” he said, giving me a wicked grin. “I have plenty of money.”

“Yeah, but you’re not wasting your money on something like that.”

“We could get a ticket on Spirit Airlines or Southwest or something. They’re only like \$29.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “Still, that’s \$29 times two, plus taxes and other fees. It’s a waste.”

“Thank you for caring so much about my money,” he said, laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked him, wondering why he was chuckling so hard.

“Most women I meet can’t wait to spend my money.” He shrugged. “You, you don’t want to spend a penny of it.”

“Why would I? It’s not mine.”

“Yeah, but I’m offering.”

“That’s sweet of you, Sebastian. But the situation, it’s not about money. We didn’t meet because we had anything or I was asking you. We met because my best friend is dating your best friend and brother. And—”

“I know,” he said. “I guess we got lucky, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if they hadn’t met, who knows if you would’ve had me here to help you fool your parents?”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds and rolled my eyes. “Maybe that would’ve been for the best,” I said, laughing.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I kind of like that you’re in my life.”

“Oh? Why is that?” His words made my heart soar, and I wasn’t sure why.

“Because you’re fun and you’re cool and you’re interesting and I like you.”

“Thank you,” I said, not sure how I was meant to respond to that. I wasn’t sure what he meant by saying he liked me. Did he like me like me and want to date me or take me out? Or did he just like me as a friend?

I let out a small sigh. I hated being an overthinker. It was one of the things that annoyed me most about my personality. I couldn’t just take what people said with a grain of salt. I had to analyze every single word and thought and think about the meaning behind the word.

“Earth to Stasia,” he said, laughing.

“What?” I said, blinking at him.

“You looked like you were far away.”

“No, I was just—”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Sometimes we just need to be in our thoughts. You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, just thinking about his words. “It must have been difficult growing up on a farm with people you didn’t know,” I said, finally.

He stared at me and nodded. “It saved me,” he said, “in a weird way.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know that I’d be the man I was today or even here if it wasn’t for Simon and Elijah. We’re not blood brothers, but they’re the closest people I have in my life, and they came into my life at the right moment.” He pressed his lips together. “I’m sure you feel that way about Gemma.”

“I do,” I said. “It’s weird because people talk about their best friends being like their sisters, but Gemma’s like my

soulmate. She's always had my back. She's always been there to listen to me. She's never judged me, even when she's thought I'd done absolutely ridiculous things. She's always supported me. She's always laughed at my jokes no matter how far out they were. She's even bought me materials to design clothes when we were both broke. I know a lot of people think there aren't good people in the world, that most people are selfish and only think about themselves, but Gemma, she's one of the good ones. I mean, I know she wants to move in with Simon, but I also know that she's not doing it because she knows how much I don't want to be alone. And I love her for that. I love her for not forcing it on me.

“You see, when my dad died, I couldn't talk to my mom. She was in pieces and her heart was broken, too. And it was weird because I went to a therapist, and all they wanted me to do was talk about my dad and the good times and all my memories, but I didn't want to talk. I just wanted to be, and Gemma understood that fundamentally. She would just hug me and stroke my back and whisper that everything was going to be okay and that she would always be there for me. And that was all I needed, all I wanted. So yeah, I can understand why Simon and Elijah are so important to you because Gemma is the best friend and the best human being a person could ever have. And she's not my blood, but she's so much more than that.”

“Wow.” He stared at me, eyes wide. “You make me happy that Simon found her.”

“What do you mean?” I said. “You weren't happy before?”

“No, I mean I was, but I don't really know much about her. Just that she seemed like a kind of goofy, funny woman.”

“What?” I said, staring at him.

“Don't tell her I said that. But the way you talk about her, she sounds amazing. More amazing than I gave her credit for and Simon needed someone like that.” He smiled wistfully. “I think everyone does.”

“Yeah, I agree. So now it's just you and Elijah.”

“And Jake, too,” he said. “Jake’s part of the family now.”

“I wonder how Jake feels,” I said softly.

“What do you mean?” Sebastian cocked his head to the side.

“Well, you, Simon, and Elijah grew up together and have always had each other, and it seems like Jake doesn’t really have anyone. I mean, he has you guys now, but I wonder if he feels alienated slightly because you guys have that bond. Not that he’s met Elijah yet. None of us have.”

“I didn’t think about that,” Sebastian said with a nod. “I’m sure it must be an awkward situation for him.” He pressed his lips together. “Thank you for bringing that up, though.”

“No worries,” I said with a small smile as my phone beeped. “Oh, wow. It’s my mom. They’ve just landed.”

“What?” he asked me, confused. “I thought they weren’t going to be here for two hours.”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” I said, laughing, “but knowing my mom, she got something wrong.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we didn’t go elsewhere to get that coffee, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “You were right.”

“You’ll find that I’m right about a lot of things, Stasia,” he said, winking, and I just rolled my eyes.

“Really? Is that what you tell yourself, Sebastian?”

“Oh, I don’t have to tell myself. I just know,” he said.

We shared a warm smile for a couple of minutes, and then I looked away.



The smell of burning oil greeted my nostrils as we exited my car. I sniffed and shook my head. “Man, sometimes, I just cannot get over the smog here in LA.”

Sebastian looked at me thoughtfully. “Do you have asthma?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think I could live here if I had asthma. It’s such a pity because it’s such a beautiful city, yet it’s been ruined by pollution.” I pointed over to the far distance where we could see the mountains and the valley. “Like if the air was clear, how gorgeous would that view be?”

“It would be absolutely gorgeous.” He nodded. “Is everything okay, Stasia?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?” I blinked at him as we made our way through the parking garage toward the elevator so that we could get into the airport.

“Because you’re mumbling about the air, and you’ve lived in Los Angeles for quite a number of years now. I would think that’s not the first thing that would be on your mind as we’re going to meet your parents for the first time as an engaged couple.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “Why does that sound so wrong?”

“I don’t know. It sounds kind of right to me.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re loving this, Sebastian, but how would you feel if it was real?”

“What do you mean how would I feel if it was real?” He stared at me in confusion.

“I mean, if I was really your fiancée and we were really getting married and you were really meeting my parents for the first time, would you feel this blasé and nonchalant about it? Would you be laughing, thinking that it was all good fun?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “Why? Do you think boys do not care about that sort of thing?” He grinned at me, and I started laughing.

“So you did hear me when I said that.”

“How could I not have heard you?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head as we got into the elevator. I pressed the button to take us down to the terminal. “You didn’t say anything when I said it.”

“How was I supposed to respond to something like that? It’s not every day that a cute girl calls you a bad boy.”

“I don’t know,” I said, staring at him and his twinkling blue eyes. He took a couple of steps toward me, and I could smell the warm scent of his musty cologne. I tried not to breathe it in too deeply. There was something about a man’s cologne that turned me on, that made me think naughty things, and I didn’t want to think of those sorts of things when it came to Sebastian. He was not a guy that I could get involved with in any way other than as friends, and then I wasn’t sure that we could be friends. I mean, yes, he was best friend to Janet’s boyfriend and would likely be in my life forever, but I didn’t like how he always had that cocky, charming, flirtatious look on his face. It unnerved me, and even though he was doing me this favor, I didn’t want him to think that it meant anything else. “Just so you know, Sebastian...”

“Yes?”

As we walk out of the elevator, I noticed his arm looked particularly muscular in the shirt he was wearing. He looked handsome, really handsome, and I knew my mother would be impressed by his good looks, with his dark hair and bright, radiant blue eyes and his golden, tan skin. He was a ten, maybe an eleven even. Not that I would tell him that. One thing my mother always appreciated was a good-looking man. A good-looking man and a rich man were two things she would find impossible to dislike, and that was maybe the reason why I had agreed to his absolutely ridiculous plan. If there was anyone that could get my mom off my back, it would be Sebastian. She just had to buy the act that we were really together.

“Uh, Stasia, you have clammed up again. I’m going to start to think I’m really boring or something.”

“Yes,” I said with a slight smile. I started laughing then. “Well, I didn’t want to tell you, but my words trailed off.”

His eyes just glanced at my lips. “I could say the same thing to you, you know.”

“No, you won’t,” I said with a small wink.

“Yeah, because I’m polite.”

“Oh, you’re far from polite, Sebastian.”

“Really? Is that what you think of me?” He stopped and folded his arms.

I just nodded. Before I knew what was happening, he’d taken another step toward me, and his hands were on the side of my face. I blinked at him in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Be quiet for one second, Stasia,” he said as he pressed his lips against mine and pulled me into him. His lips felt firm and moist, and as he deepened the kiss, I could feel myself melting against his body. Whoa, this was hot. Fireworks were going off in my stomach. Alarm bells were ringing my head. This man was really hot; his body felt hard and muscular. I pushed him away from me.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I think it was quite obvious,” he said, his lips tilted into a small smile.

“You can’t just kiss me.”

“Um, I’m your fiancé. I think it’s normal that we kiss.”

“But...but...” I blinked at him.

“Listen to me, Stasia,” he said. “We had to get that kiss out of the way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because that was our first kiss, right?”

“Yes, and...”

“And imagine if our first kiss was in front of your parents and you reacted like that. Our cover would be blown right away. They would definitely know that we were not together, had never been together, and were likely never to be together.”

He shrugged. "I was just trying to help you so the second time that we kissed you won't look so shocked and dazed."

I bit down on my lower lip. He had a point. His kiss had blown me away, and if the first time he'd kissed me had been in front of my parents, I would have looked like a befuddled child. "Fine," I said, blinking at him, "but don't do that again."

"What? A man can spontaneously kiss his fiancée when he wants to?"

"I'm not really your fiancée."

"And I'm not really sure I want to go through with it," he said, "if you're going to be so difficult."

"What?" I gazed at him. "So you don't want to?"

"I'm joking," he said as he threw his head back. I watched as he ran his long fingers through his dark, silky hair. "I kind of like this," he said after a couple of seconds.

"You kind of like what?"

"I don't know, being around you, flirting with you, teasing you, kissing you."

"Don't get too used to it, Sebastian, because this is not how it's always going to be."

"Okay." He blinked at me for a couple of seconds. "I have to know one thing, Stasia."

"What's that, Sebastian?"

"I want to know why you have this wall up around me."

"I don't have a wall up around you." I shook my head. "That's in your mind."

"Well, you certainly seem to speak to me distastefully, and I don't speak to you distastefully."

"I'm just not interested in what you're offering."

"Oh, and what's that?"

"Nothing."

"Okay."

“You’re offering nothing. You’re the sort of man that thinks he can have whoever he wants and do whatever he wants. Because you’re standing in your light and you’re not making any promises, if the woman ends up getting hurt, it’s on her and not on you.”

He stared at me for a couple of seconds. “And that makes me a bad man?”

“No. It just makes you the sort of man I don’t want to become involved with.”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “I don’t get it. If I’m not lying to anyone and...”

“It’s not okay to just sleep with women and flirt with them and not think they’re going to fall for you.”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions about me and my personality,” he said, his lips pressed together.

“I don’t think I’m making any presumptions about you that aren’t true.” I shrugged. “Or are you going to tell me that you’re a really sweet, loving guy that’s looking for a long-term relationship and you’re all about monogamy and you are looking for the woman you want to marry and...?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No. I’m not going to tell you that because life isn’t a romance movie. That’s not how these things work. It’s very rare that you’re going to meet a man that is going to tell you that his dream in life is to meet the love of his life and get married and have kids and buy a house and live in the suburbs and drive a Volvo and send his kids to private school.” He paused. “Well, you get my drift.”

“Some men want that.”

“No.” He shook his head. “No man wants that. Maybe his parents have given him expectations. That is what he should want in life. Maybe he gets a woman pregnant, and that’s the life he ends up with. Maybe he meets someone who has a lot of money, and in order to be with her, he takes up that life, but trust me, that is not a life that any man willingly wants to live. No teenage boy thinks to themselves, ‘When I grow older, my perfect life looks like that.’”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “Okay. Fine.

“You’re telling me that your teenage dream was to grow up, get married, pop out a couple of babies, cook, clean, do laundry, and shout at your husband for staying up late playing video games or going to the bar with his friends every Friday and ignoring you, for telling you you’re getting fat, for telling you to stop spending money at Target or on groceries, for telling you to keep the kids quiet.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “Wow. You make domesticated bliss sound awful.”

“How many people actually have domesticated bliss?” He raised an eyebrow. “Do you know anyone?”

“Wow. You just sound really bitter.”

“Well, you didn’t answer my question. Was that your dream when you were younger?”

“My dream when I was younger was to be a famous fashion designer and have models and actresses wear my dresses to the Oscars and the Grammys and the Emmys and the Tonys. Actually, part of that dream is to have my husband at my side and my kids at home watching on TV when I win an Oscar for best costume designer, and I can picture myself speaking into the camera and saying, ‘And this one goes out to my loving husband and my darling kids who are staying up late.’” I paused and burst out laughing. “Which I know is a weird daydream to have, but that is what I envisioned for my life when I was sixteen years old.”

He tilted his head and smiled. “I like that,” he said. “Good goals.”

“What do you mean, ‘good goals’? You were literally just telling me that no woman’s dream was to get married and have kids then.”

“Yeah, but you want more than just the homemaker thing.”

“Hey, if I just wanted to be a homemaker, that’s my prerogative. Some women love that life.”

“I’m not saying that it’s not a good life for some,” he said, “but it’s not the life that you want, right?”

“No.”

“And it’s not the life that I want, either.” He shook his head. “Am I going to be persecuted for that?”

“No.” I let out deep sigh.

“Can we be friends?” He held his hand out.

“We are friends.”

“No, you are begrudgingly my friend. We’re more like acquaintances.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “I mean, you’re here with me now, right?”

“Because I was your only option.” He gave me a forced smile. “You don’t have to pretend. I know that if you felt like you had any other option, you would’ve gone with that. It was basically me pretend to be your fake fiancé or you marrying some old man who could be Santa Claus’ brother?”

I burst out laughing then. “I was thinking you would know probably Rumpelstiltskin’s kid cousin.”

“That’s a good one.” He laughed. “With the long nose with warts as well.”

“Ew,” I groaned. “I sure hope not.”

“Hey, well, you don’t have to worry about him anymore because you have me.”

“If my parents buy it,” I said softly.

“Well, we’re just minutes away from me meeting them.” He gave me a big, warm smile. “We can do this, Stasia. Trust me. It’s going to be okay.”

I bit down on my lower lip. “I sure hope so because the only thing worse than me having to marry a gross older man is my mom and dad finding out I lied about being in a relationship and then them kidnapping me to send me to a convent or something.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Really, Stasia, and you’re telling me you don’t watch too much TV?”

“I don’t watch that much TV,” I giggled, “but maybe I read too many books.” We shared a warm, knowing smile, and I finally reached out and shook his hand. His grip was firm and his palms dry. I wasn’t sure why I noticed that. Maybe it was because I’d shaken so many men’s sweaty palms that I’d grown to dislike the feeling of a warm man, a warm hand against mine, but Sebastian’s grip was anything but sweaty and weak.

“We have a deal. I’ll be nice to you if you hold up your end of the bargain, and I’ll hold up my end of a bargain if you promise not to prejudge everything I do and say,” his eyes looked me over, “and to understand that you’re a beautiful woman, and I will flirt and shoot my shot every once in a while.”

“You can shoot your shot,” I said laughing, “but I have on a bulletproof vest.”

“Okay,” he said. “Madam, let’s see just how bulletproof that vest really is.”

SIX

SEBASTIAN

Hey,

It's days like today that make me wish I could pick up the phone to call you. Though I don't know if they have phones where you are. If they do, I don't have the number. I met someone. Don't get excited. Not the one or anything. But someone that makes me laugh and think and I don't even know how to describe it. I think you would have liked her. Her parents, too. I know how much you wished you'd had good parents. That's something we both missed out on in life. Did you know that sometimes when I close my eyes, I can still smell your floral scent. That sounds creepy, doesn't it? Or maybe the right word is weird. I don't know. I wish I could talk to you.

Sebastian

I could see Stasia's trembling as we stood next to baggage claim number six, where her parents were to pick up their suitcases and where they had told us to meet them.

"It's okay," I said softly, leaning toward her ear. She turned to look at me, her eyes wide and nervous. She bit down on her lower pink lip. I could see her nostrils flaring. I could see that her heart was racing from the rapid pulse in her neck.

"I sure hope so." She gave me a small smile, and all I wanted to do was lean forward and kiss her again. I could still taste the peach lip gloss that she'd had on her lips.

“I can tell you a joke if you want?” I attempted to make her smile. I always fell back on humor in tense and uncomfortable situations. It was the way I’d learned to cope. My therapist had said it was a coping mechanism that had worked for me for so long that it was like second nature. I wasn’t sure if I fully agreed with that, but she was the expert.

“What’s your joke?” she said, glowering at me in a challenging way. “Don’t let me hear a knock, knock joke.”

“What you... Say it again?”

“Knock, knock joke.”

I looked at her and laughed. “I’ll have you know I tell the best knock, knock jokes in all the land.”

“In all the land, eh? What are we, in a fairytale?” she said, giggling.

“I don’t know,” I snarled at her. “You tell me.”

“Well, I suppose we could be,” she said softly. “My dad died, and I have a wicked stepfather.” She laughed. “And your mom died, and you...” She paused as she stared at me. “Sorry,” she said quickly, her face going red, “I didn’t mean to say that. I wasn’t joking about your mom passing.”

“It’s okay.” I nodded, staring at her, bemused by the woe that was in her face. Did she really think I’d be upset by that joke? Did she really think I was that fragile? Granted, I didn’t like to talk about my mom and my childhood, but I was used to her not being here. I didn’t break down and cry every time someone brought up my dead mom. It was a fact of life. It was who I was. In fact, it was who many people were.

“Oh, don’t be mad at me, Sebastian.”

“If I said I’m mad at you, will be you nicer to me?” I asked her with a cocky grin.

“No,” she said, rolling her eyes. Her pupils dilated, and I could see that she was feeling a lot more relaxed.

“It’s okay, we got this,” I said, touching the small of her back. She gave me a warm smile, and I waited for her to tell me off for touching her.

“Sebastian,” she started, and I chuckled, knowing what was coming.

“Stasia,” I heard a heavily accented woman calling from the other side of the room. I paused and looked around. Stasia froze.

“Stasia, darling,” the voice sounded again. And that’s when I saw her: her mother, tall, slightly plump with long blond hair hanging down her shoulders. She had a beautiful face still, and she looked just like Stasia. I knew what Stasia would look like as a middle-aged woman, and frankly she was quite beautiful. Behind her stood a man who was slightly taller than me who must have been about three hundred pounds. He had thick, curly, gray-and-black hair and a thick mustache and beard.

“They look like complete opposites,” I said to Stasia, and she grinned.

“My stepdad is so happy that he got my mom,” she said, nodding. “Everyone told him he was punching, and he was, but he’s really nice so...”

“I guess nice guys don’t finish last, then,” I said to her with a huge grin. “I guess there’s hope for me still.”

“You are not trying to say you’re a nice guy, are you?” she said, shaking her head.

“Your parents are about ten seconds away. Do we really want to get into that argument right now?” I asked her, and she giggled.

“Stasia, darling.” Her mother was beside us now. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Mom.” Stasia gave her mom a big hug, and they kissed on both cheeks. “I’ve missed you, too, Papa.” She hugged her stepfather and stepped back. Her parents looked at me, both of the smiles gone off of their faces as they surveyed me. They looked very intimidating, and I swallowed hard. Maybe this wasn’t going to be as easy as I’d initially thought. “Mom, Papa, this is Sebastian, my fiancé.”

I had to hand it to Stasia. Her voice didn't even tremble. She was a good actress. Maybe she could make it in Hollywood after all.

"Sebastian," Stasia's mom said. She didn't hold out her hand; she didn't reach to give me a hug. In fact, she was glaring at me.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you."

"I've never heard anything about you before." She frowned. "Why is this? Why you not want to meet Stasia's parents right away? Why you not ask her papa's permission before you propose?"

I swallowed hard. That was something I hadn't thought about. Who knew her parents were so traditional? But then I guess I should have known that her parents cared that much about her being with a man; of course they would want the man she was with to ask permission before he proposed.

"I am so sorry. That is definitely not—"

"What do you do?" her papa asked me in a deep voice. I was surprised to hear that he still had a Greek accent.

"I am a businessman," I said, smiling widely. I held my hand out to him, but he just stared into my face. I wondered if Stasia was going to introduce us properly. Wasn't she going to tell me their names? I wasn't really sure what to call them, but it seemed like no real introductions were forthcoming.

"Business? What business? You drug runner?" He frowned at me.

"No. Real estate. Commercial real estate and some residential. My brothers and I run a company. Well, one of my brothers started the company, but my other brother and I, we're partners in the company and..." I paused. This wasn't going well. I looked over Stasia, who was frowning. She could tell her parents didn't like me.

"Real estate." Her father crossed his arms. "So you take money from the bank and you hope to pay it back by using other people's money, huh? Huh?"

I blinked him for a couple of seconds. “No, that’s not exactly how it works. In fact, we don’t actually borrow that much money right now. The economy is kind of shit, and we’d rather not pay a seven percent commercial jumbo loan, so we’re financing a lot of our own projects right now.”

“Huh,” he said and looked over at Stasia’s mom. She looked at me, her face scrutinizing mine.

“You pay for properties yourself,” she said, smiling slightly.

I guess money was important to her.

“Well, not just me, our company pays for it. Cambridge Enterprises, Incorporated, named after my one brother, Simon Cambridge, who’s dating Gemma, Stasia’s best friend?”

“Ah, yes. I hear Gemma dating someone now. Hm.” Stasia’s mom looked at me and then at her. “It’s funny because Stasia tell me about Gemma and Simon many times, but she not tell me about you. Why is she not tell me about you? If you so in love and if this relationship is good—or is it not so good and you make my daughter cry and—”

“You do not make my daughter cry, do you?” her stepfather interrupted.

“No. Mom, Dad, stop it,” Stasia finally spoke up. “You’re being horrible to him. Sebastian’s a great guy. He’s never made me cry. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye, he’s never made me cry. Have you, darling?”

“I should hope not,” I said as I wrapped my arm around her shoulder. She gave me a quick look, and I just smiled warmly at her. “I love your daughter very much. This is the best relationship I’ve ever been in. I do apologize for not asking for her hand in marriage, I realize that was wrong of me. You see, I hadn’t been planning on proposing so quickly, but we were at dinner one night and I was staring into her big, beautiful blue eyes and it suddenly hit me: I don’t want to be with anyone else again in my life. I don’t want to take another woman to dinner. And so I proposed impromptu style, you know?”

I stared at Stasia's mom and dad to see how they would take the news. Finally, Stasia's mom started nodding, a wide smile crossing her face.

"Oh, true love. You fell for my daughter. You fell for her beautiful face and witty sense of humor, which sometimes is not so witty but, you know, she cannot have it all." She started laughing, and Stasia shook her head and looked over at me.

"That's Eastern European moms for you," she said, rolling her eyes. "They'll love you to death, but they'll remind you of every single one of your flaws all of the time."

"Darling, I'm not saying that you're not funny sometimes. I'm just saying don't try to become a comedian, eh? You know Sarah Silverman, you know Chris Rock, you know..."

"I know, Mom. I'm not trying to become a comedian."

"So, how's it going with the fashion line?" her mom said, looking over at the stepdad.

"It's still going, Mom." Stasia pressed her lips together.

"Your daughter is a wonderfully talented designer, as I'm sure you know," I said quickly. "And I have a lot of contacts in Los Angeles. I'm fairly confident that—"

Stasia growled at me. "Sebastian, I told you I don't want your help. I want to make it on my own."

"It's just what people do for the ones they love." I glared at Stasia, and Stasia's mom nodded.

"She's so hardheaded. You think she would be happy for this opportunity. You are her fiancé, after all. You'll be the father of her children, you'll be the man she grow old with, yet she does not want your help. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. If your father were here, Stasia, he would..." She paused as Stasia rolled her eyes. "Well, you know your father would love you very much. He loved you very much and he always supported you, but he would tell you it's okay to accept help sometimes." Stasia's mom looked at me. "Well, it is nice to meet you, Sebastian. We must get to know you a lot better. And Stasia, we have to call your grandmother when we get home."

“Nana?” Stasia blinked, looking surprised. “Why do we have to call her?”

“We have some news for you, but we wait till we get home, okay?”

“Okay.” Stasia looked at me, and I shrugged.

“Well, let me give you a hug, Sebastian.” Stasia’s mother stepped forward and hugged me, and I hugged her back and kissed her on both cheeks. She looked up at me with warm eyes beaming.

“Yes. You are a very good-looking man. I see why my Stasia fell for you. I just hope that it’s not just looks. I hope that you have good personality and you good in business, and you know how to take care of my daughter.”

“Or you will be in trouble with both of us,” Stasia’s dad added.

I waited to see if he was going to extend his hand or give me a hug, but he hadn’t warmed to me enough yet.

“Let’s go to the car, Mom and Dad,” Stasia said quickly. “I don’t want to pay a billion dollars for parking.”

“You should not have parked,” Stasia’s mom said. “You wait outside and we would have come.”

Stasia took a deep breath. “Mom, the police that are standing outside of every single exit would not have allowed me to park and wait for you.”

“You just go around,” Stasia’s dad said. “That’s what I do.”

“This is LAX, Papa. It’s not quite that easy.”

“Well, what do I know? I’m only from...” He paused. “Well, I see our suitcases. We grab them and then we go. And we pay for the parking because you picked us up.”

“No,” Stasia said, shaking her head vehemently. “You’re not paying for the parking. There’s absolutely no way I’m letting you pay for the parking.”

“I got it,” I said quickly. “It’s my treat.”

Stasia glared at me, but Stasia's mom nodded happily. "He good man," she said to her husband. I smiled, feeling proud of myself. Oh, it hadn't been so hard, after all.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Stasia whispered in my ear as her parents walked over to grab their suitcases. "This was the easy part."

"The easy part?" I raised my eyebrows. "I felt like I was sitting in a precinct somewhere, and they were playing good cop, bad cop, but they both decided to be bad cop."

Stasia started laughing then. "Sebastian, you're such an idiot sometimes, you know that, right?"

"What? I'm just telling the truth."

"Well, if you thought they were playing bad cop, bad cop, just wait till we get home." She paused for a few seconds. "And I really hope they're not going to have you talk to my nana."

"Why not? Old women love me."

"Oh, trust me. Not my nana. She is very intense. She's from the USSR. It was hard when she was growing up. She's super old school."

"Well, I don't mind winning her over as well."

"You hope you can win her over," Stasia said, shaking her head. "Oh my God, I'm absolutely crazy to be doing this."

"You're crazy," I said, laughing slightly. "I'm the crazy one. I'm not even getting anything from this."

"Well, I may take you out to dinner or something at the end, if it all goes well."

"Ooh, I'll take the 'or something,'" I said with a wink, and she just shook her head.

"You wish."

SEVEN

STASIA

“So everything seems to be going really well,” Gemma said in hush tones as we stood in her bedroom.

I nodded slightly. “It’s kind of eerie how much my mom likes Sebastian,” I said.

“Why? He’s a really nice guy,” Gemma said a small smile. “In fact, I would say you should give him a shot, but...”

I glared at her. “But you know he’s a player, and the last thing I need in my life is another player.”

“Well, Simon used to be a player and look at him now.”

“Yeah, I don’t know that Simon was as big a player as Sebastian,” I said.

“Do you remember what he said to me that time I met him in the club when he asked you if we’d be willing to have a threesome?” she said, shaking her head and laughing.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Can you believe that shit? I mean, not only were you dancing with his brother and best friend and so obviously not interested in him, he still thought it was okay to ask me that. He was just joking, though, right?”

“I doubt he was just joking,” I said. “I’m sure if I said, ‘Yeah, I can convince Gemma, let’s have a threesome,’ he would’ve been all for it.”

“Well, he is a red-blooded male, Stasia.”

“I know he’s a red-blooded male, but that doesn’t mean that I have to give him a shot. Anyway, he’s not interested in

me like that.”

“Girl, the way his eyes follow you, he is definitely interested.”

“I mean, sure, he’d love to have sex with me,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But that’s not what I’m looking for.”

“I know,” she said and gave me a quick hug.

“So it’s cool that your parents like him, though.”

“Yeah. They want us to call Nana later. I have no idea why.”

“Oh,” she said. “Maybe just so she can say hello and see him.”

“I guess so.” I shrugged. “I mean, I didn’t really want to get more family members involved in this.” I let out a deep sigh. “It just feels icky the more people I have to lie to.”

“I know,” Gemma said with a nod. “I would feel the same way. But remember, you’re doing it because you were forced to do it. It’s not like you wanted to pretend you had a fake fiancé.”

“Yeah.”

There was a knock on the door that made us both jump.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hey,” Simon’s voice sounded from outside the door. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” Gemma said as she walked over to the door and opened it. “What’s up, honey?”

“I was just checking to make sure you were both okay. Your parents are enjoying some wine,” he said, smiling at me. “They’re really nice.”

“Thank you for bringing really nice wine.”

I gave him a smile. “And thank you for saying my parents are nice. They are generally cool people, which is what makes them trying to set me up even more troubling and upsetting.”

“I can see that,” he said. “But are you one hundred percent sure that’s what they were going to do?”

“I mean, I’m not one hundred percent sure, but I don’t really think my cousin would lie about something like that.”

“Yeah,” Gemma said. “She’s a gossip and a big mouth, but she’s not a liar.”

Simon shrugged. “Well, I think you guys should come out if you can. Your parents were starting to wonder where you were.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I just wanted to get myself ready for the barrage of questions I know is coming.”

He smiled then. “At least they love you.”

I looked at him, considering for a couple of seconds, and nodded. Of course I was being insensitive. Simon didn’t have parents, at least not his birth parents. He’d been given up for adoption when he was a baby, and he tried to find his parents, but they didn’t want to be found. He did have adopted parents, the same adopted parents as Sebastian, but they hadn’t been super loving.

“I know my parents mean the best for me,” I said. “Thank you guys for going along with this.”

“Anything for you,” Gemma said, hooking her arm through mine. “Come on, let’s go and face the music.”

Simon stared at me and then at Gemma and just shook his head. “I’m doing this because the woman I love is your best friend, but I know I said you don’t think it’s the best idea. I really don’t, and I know Sebastian’s the one that suggested this, but sometimes he can be a little crazy.”

“A little?” I said, and we all burst out laughing as we walked into the living room.

“There you are, darling.” Sebastian jumped up with a glass of wine in his hands. “I have this ready for you. It’s your favorite, Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said, smiling warmly at him. “How thoughtful of you.”

“I was just telling Papa that,” my mom said, smiling at Sebastian, a doting expression in her eyes. “He’s such a thoughtful man. It’s very hard to find men that will—”

“Mom,” I said, putting my hand up. “Really? If you keep praising him, it’s going to go to his head.”

“I need some praise sometimes,” Sebastian said.

And my mom laughed. “And he’s so modest.”

“He’s anything but modest, Mom.” I took the glass of wine from him. “Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, darling,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

It was weird feeling his lips pressed against mine as they moved toward my lips. I kissed him back lightly, not wanting to make it a big deal.

“Aw, the love birds,” my dad said, looking at us over his glass.

“So we call your babushka now?” he asked me.

And I just nodded. “If you think that’s a good idea, we could call tomorrow.”

“No, let us call her now,” my mom said, pulling out her phone and handing it to my dad.

“You call Babushka on Facebook for me. Okay?”

“Yes, honey,” he said, taking the phone. He pressed some buttons on the screen, and the phone started ringing. I prayed that Babushka was in bed or wouldn’t wake up, but unfortunately my prayers weren’t answered.

She spoke in Russian to my mother for a few seconds, and then my mom pressed her hand against her mouth.

“Ah, Sebastian, I’m sorry. You don’t speak Russian. We should not be rude. We shall speak English.”

“That’s okay,” Sebastian said. “I’m fine with that. And I’m pretty good with languages, so maybe I’ll learn some Russian.”

“Ah, good man.” She held up the phone. “This is my mother, Elena. Mama, this is Stasia’s fiancé, Sebastian. He is businessman. He very nice. He’s very sweet. He has business.”

“They’re engaged?” Babushka said, her face looking shocked. “Where is Stasia? Put Stasia on the phone. How’s she not tell me she’s engaged?”

I took a deep breath and headed toward my mom and the phone. I kneeled down and smiled.

“Hi, Babushka.”

“Stasia, my darling. I miss you so much. You not visit me in long time.”

“I know. I’ve been busy working, but I will come and visit you soon.”

“I hope so,” she said dramatically. “And you bring your fiancé?”

“Well, if he’s not working, I’ll try,” I said, stumbling over my words.

There was no way I could promise to bring Sebastian. That was way too much to ask of him.

“I did not want to tell you over the phone, but...”

“But what, Babushka? What’s wrong?”

“I’m dying,” she said, clutching onto her crucifix around her neck.

“What?” My jaw dropped. “What are you talking about? Mom, Dad, what’s going on? What is Babushka talking about?”

My mom looked at me with wide, sad eyes, and my father just shook his head.

“Babushka.”

“Stasia, I am so very happy to hear you getting married. My one wish for you before I die is to see you married and taken care of. I wish to go to your wedding. I wish to see your husband. If God willing, I wish to see your children, but I do

not know if that would be possible as I do not know how much time I have.”

My heart skipped several beats as I stared into the phone.

“How long do you have, Babushka?” I wanted to burst into tears. This was the worst news I’d heard in a long time.

“The doctors, they do not know, but they say it’s not good. Let me see that fellow of yours. Put him on the phone. I want to make sure he’s a good match.”

“Okay.”

I turned to look over my shoulder, and Sebastian was standing there looking down at me. He rubbed my shoulder. I could see the warmth and concern in his eyes.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

I nodded, thankful that he was being a human being and not trying to joke in a time like this.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Do you mind talking to my babushka?”

“Of course not.” He shook his head.

I handed him the phone, and he smiled warmly.

“Bonjour,” he said and then started laughing. “Sorry, I took French in college, and I don’t really know any Russian.”

“Are you funny, boy?” Babushka said, laughing slightly. “And you very handsome. Look at those blue eyes. Mwaa,” she said, kissing into the phone.

I blushed and shook my head. Babushka was even worse than my mother when it came to handsome men.

“You and my beautiful Stasia will make very pretty babies.”

“Well, thank you,” Sebastian said with a wicked grin. “I think so as well.”

“Oh, Anastasia, let me see you next to him,” she said.

And Sebastian blinked and looked down at me. “I didn’t know your full name was Anastasia.”

I bit down on my lower lip. That was most probably something I should have told him. I looked over to my parents, but they hadn't seemed to notice what he'd said. I moved to stand next to him and looked into the phone. Babushka gazed at both of us with wide, happy eyes.

"Oh, you are such a cute couple. I love it. I want to see you both soon."

"Well, I'll see what we can do, Babushka."

"You know, your stepfather, he have man for you. And if you did not have fiancé, well, this man would've been your husband." Babushka laughed.

"Now don't get upset, my Stasia, but you know I need to see you happy before I die. Your grandfather, he take care of me all my life, and I want a man to take care of you. And before you protest, I know you independent woman, like that song, eh? Miss Independent."

"Yes, Babushka," I said, not arguing with her.

In my culture, you did not argue or get upset with your elders, no matter how much you wanted to.

"Well, you can be independent and you can marry. I think that is good solution, don't you?"

"Yes, Babushka. I think that's great," I lied.

I was only saying it because I was still overwhelmed by the fact that Babushka was dying.

"So when I see you both, and when is wedding?"

"What?" I said, swallowing hard. That was a question I hadn't anticipated.

"When is the wedding? I need to get dress. We need to make plans. I need to speak to my priest to make sure he can hold the wedding. And then we need to invite family members in Ukraine to see if they come. And then your papa, you have family members in Greece that would want to come, and then your father has family members in England that would want to come. And then other family members all over the United

States and then of course Sebastian's family. Oh, there's so much to do, so much to do. So little time."

"Oh, we have plenty of time, Babushka," I said quickly. "We're not trying to rush into the wedding or anything. We need time to make plans and save and—"

"Save?" my mother said, frowning. "Save for what? Is your fiancé not a millionaire?"

I stared at her in shock. "What? What are you talking about, Mom?"

"He tell me he very rich. He say he millionaire. Papa even look him up on the Google. Why you need to save?"

My jaw dropped. I could see Sebastian was trying not to laugh.

"Well, we can discuss this later. Babushka, was there anything else you wanted to say?"

"Not right now. I think I sleep well tonight. Tonight I will not die." She smiled into the phone. "You have sweet dreams, and tomorrow you call me and give me date for wedding."

I just stared into the phone in shock. I didn't know what to say.

"We will do that, Babushka," Sebastian said in a firm voice.

I swallowed hard as I looked at him, but he was avoiding my eyes.

"Don't worry. You sleep well," he added.

"Thank you, my dear boy. Have a good night."

"Good night," he said.

"Night, Babushka," I said quickly.

I was going to have to have a serious talk with Sebastian. What the hell was he thinking? Did he not realize that my babushka would take him up on his word? She would want to know a date tomorrow. Maybe he had a plan and he was going to tell me later. I crossed my fingers. I seriously hoped his plan

was going to be good because I didn't know how we were going to get out of this. I hadn't anticipated my parents and my grandma acting so crazy.

"So I'm feeling hungry," my mom said. "The food will be here soon?"

"Yes, Mom. It'll be here soon."

I looked over at Gemma, who was staring at me with wide eyes. I knew exactly what she was thinking: that I'd walked right into a storm that had just picked up speed and I was in for terrible destruction.

"You ordered the food from the Mediterranean place, right?"

"Yeah." She nodded quickly. "I'll check my phone and see when it will be here."

"Thanks," I said and quickly drank the rest of the wine in my glass. I looked over at Sebastian.

"Can you fill me up, please? I think I'm going to need a lot more glasses tonight." He smiled at me, and I could tell from the twinkle in his eyes that he thought the entire situation was absolutely hilarious.

EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

Today was a good day. The first day in a long time when all I did was laugh. I felt happy today. Well and truly happy. The last time I felt like I had an almost perfect day was when we were together. I wasn't sure I'd ever feel that again. Don't get me wrong, I still have good days, but there is almost always a moment of panic and anxiety that sparks in me at some point. That didn't happen today. I just wanted you to know. I still miss you, though.

Sebastian

“So it seems like the parents love you.” Simon grinned at me as he held up his hand to high five.

We were back at his house having a late-night drink before I went home.

“I don't know if that's something I should be high fiving about,” I said, shaking my head. “Seeing as her parents are taking this a little bit more seriously than I would've thought.”

“What? You didn't think her grandma would be begging for the wedding to happen immediately?” He burst out laughing.

“First of all, her name is Babushka,” I said, shaking my head. “And secondly, hell no, of course I didn't think that.”

“So you're going to go with her to meet her?”

I stared at him and shrugged. “I mean, I guess I have to at this point, right?”

“You don’t have to,” he said, holding up his glass and taking a sip of the very expensive Scottish whiskey Elijah had sent him the previous year. “I’m not really sure why you’re doing this,” he said as he tilted his head to the side.

I just stared at him wordlessly. I wasn’t really sure why I was doing it, either. Sure, Stasia was a beautiful girl, and I wanted to get to know her better, but it wasn’t like she was my best friend. It wasn’t like I owed her a favor. It wasn’t like I wanted to be with her or anything like that.

Simon took another sip of his whiskey.

“So I was thinking that this is your way of getting her into bed.”

“Excuse me? How dare you say such a thing?” I laughed and sipped some of the whiskey myself. “As if I would stoop so low just to get a woman into bed.”

“I mean, I know you’re used to women trying to trick you into getting into bed,” he said with a laugh. “But looks like it’s your turn now.”

“Trust me, Simon.”

I shook my head and ran my fingers across the smooth crystal at the top of the glass as I sat there, pondering what he just said to me.

“It’s just all very peculiar,” he said, shrugging. “Not a situation I ever thought you would be in.”

“Okay, who did you think would be in such a situation? Yourself?”

“Heck no,” he said, shaking his head. “None of us. Not you, not me, not Elijah. We just weren’t brought up that way.”

“I know,” I said. “We were brought up to work hard and think about women last.”

He stared at me for a couple of seconds. “She’s a nice girl, though.”

“Who?” I pretended I didn’t know who he was talking about. I knew I sounded like a fool.

“Stasia,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, I thought you meant Gemma,” I said, laughing. “I was like, is he trying to pawn off his girlfriend onto me?”

Simon just glared at me. “Not very funny, Sebastian.”

“What? I’m just saying. You guys haven’t been together that long. Maybe you’re feeling like you got into something too quickly?”

Simon held his hand up. “I’m not you, okay? And you know I love you, but I don’t want you disrespecting my girl like that.”

My eyes widened at his words. Simon had never spoken to me like that before in our lives.

“Whoa,” I said. “Seems like you are really digging this chick. Whatever happened to bros before hos?”

“Number one, she’s not a ho,” he said.

“And number two?” His eyes twinkled as he looked at me. “Yeah, continue,” I prodded him.

“I don’t think you’re going to want to know the answer, Sebastian.”

“Tell me. What was number two?”

He stood up and walked over to the mirror that was above the fireplace. He looked at me through the reflection and then turned, a cunning smile on his face.

“Number two, dear brother, is that Gemma will always come before you now.” He shrugged. “I know that might sound harsh given how much we’ve been through together, but she’s my lady now, and she will always come first in my life, even before myself.”

My heart thudded, and strangely enough, I was happy about his words. Not because it meant I had been demoted in his life, but because he’d been able to open up his heart to

someone else. Something I'd never thought would be possible for any of us.

"You really love her," I said softly, and he nodded.

"It's scary, love." He wrinkled his nose and sighed. "I love it. I love being with her. I love protecting her. I just want to spend the rest of my life with her. But the thought that something could happen to her or to us, it scares the shit out of me. I don't think I could ever survive if she wasn't in my life."

"Thank you for that," I said, laughing.

His eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"You just gave me an extra level for my relationship with Stasia." I grinned. "Imagine if I said that to her parents. They'd love me even more. Or if I said that to her about Babushka."

Simon looked angry then. He walked over to me and put his hand on my shoulder, pressing his fingers in.

"Hey, what's up, dude?"

"I know you're joking, and I know you think this is for fun, and I understand why you're doing this. She needs your help. Her parents are being absolutely ridiculous, but don't worry about those things. Don't be insincere."

"I know it's a fine line because it's not the truth, but..."

He shook his head. "Don't play it like that, man."

I stared at him and nodded. "Okay," I said. "I won't tell them I'd take a bullet for their daughter."

Simon shook his head and smiled. "You know what, Sebastian?"

"What, dear brother?"

"I love you," he said. He leaned down and gave me a quick, awkward hug, and I hugged him back.

"Life is changing for us, huh?" I said, slowly realizing that the evolution of life came for every man. No matter how much

you wanted things to stay the same, that's just not how it worked. "I think I'm going to go and call Stasia now," I said.

"It's late, dude." Simon frowned.

"Yeah, but she might be up, and I wanted to ask her how she wants to handle this with her mom and dad and Babushka and how I can support her."

"She's going to see right through you, dude," Simon said.

"Excuse me? What are you talking about?"

"It's one o'clock in the morning," he said. "You're calling to ask her how she wants you to handle the situation with her babushka at one o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes," I said indignantly. "Why else would I be calling?"

"I don't know. But a certain thing called phone sex came to mind. Bow chicka bow wow."

I burst out laughing then and shook my head. Simon was a man now, but sometimes he still acted like a teenage boy.

"Really, dude?"

"What? You're telling me you're not going to ask her what she's wearing as you're talking to her?"

"Dude, would I do that?"

"Yes," he said. "You would, and you've done it before, and I totally know you will do it with her."

"Well, I'll have you know, Mr. Cambridge," I said, my eyes twinkling as I stared at him, "I'm going to assume she has on nothing. So I won't need to ask her what she's wearing."

Simon shakes his head. "Oh my. I really hope you know what you're doing, Sebastian."

"I do," I said. "I'm just helping her. Anyone would do the same thing for a friend."

"Uh-huh," he said. "I don't know about that, but if you are sure you know what you're doing..."

"I do," I said, feeling annoyed.

I didn't want to question my motivations too much, and I didn't want him questioning them, either.

NINE

STASIA

I stretched in the bed, my eyes feeling tired, but somehow I just couldn't fall asleep. My phone beeped, and I grabbed it quickly, wondering who could be texting me so late at night.

"You up?" the single text said, and I smiled as I saw that it was from Sebastian.

I was going to ignore it. I wasn't the sort of woman that answered texts from men after ten o'clock at night just because there was really only one reason why men would be texting that late. But Sebastian was doing me a favor, so I decided to respond.

"No."

He sent back a smiley face, and I laughed. I was glad he had a sense of humor, even if he was a player. My phone started ringing, and I rolled my eyes as I picked it up.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Who do you think it is?" he said, laughing.

"Why are you calling me at one o'clock in the morning?"

"Because you're up."

"I am not really up. I'm actually about to go to sleep."

"Yeah, well, I thought maybe we could have a little conversation. You can fall asleep to my voice."

"True," I said. "That will most probably happened very quickly."

“Ouch,” he said. “Am I really that boring?”

“I mean, I didn’t want to say you were boring, but…”

“But we both know I’m not. We both know that I’m the sort of man that can keep you up all night long.”

I burst out laughing then.

“What? You don’t seem to think much of my come-on line.”

“If that’s the best you have, Sebastian, then no, I’m not worried that you’re going to seduce my pants off of me.”

“I was kind of hoping your pants were already off,” he said in a low voice, and something in my stomach stirred.

I mean, I was a woman. I was human, and he was a very good-looking man.

“Sebastian,” I said softly. “Don’t make me hang up the phone on you.”

“What? You’d hang up on your fiancé? How rude.” He sounded shocked.

“Very funny.”

“What? I think your parents liked me, though. Did they say anything about me after I left?”

“No,” I lied. “What would they say about you?”

I wasn’t about to tell him how much my mom had gushed about him and how she told me to ensure I cooked dinner for him every night so that he wouldn’t stray. I didn’t want him getting any ideas.

“So I was thinking,” he said.

“Yes?”

“What if we fly your babushka out instead of having to go and see her?”

“Huh?” I was surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I can charter a private plane, have a limo pick her up, bring her to Los Angeles. I’ll have her stay at my place, which

is amazing.”

“Which I still haven’t seen,” I said, laughing. “I can’t believe I’ve never seen my fiancé’s house.”

“Ah, so you do like saying the word?”

“I meant to say my fake fiancé’s house,” I said quickly.

“I know. We need to remedy that. I was thinking I can give you a tour tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can my parents come?”

“Sure. If you think they’d like to.”

“Oh my gosh, they’d love to,” I said. “Trust me.”

I didn’t want to tell him that my dad had asked me how many square feet his house was, how many bathrooms and bedrooms he had. What size his lot was, if he had a pool, a sauna, or a hot tub. How much his property taxes cost per year and if he needed a discount on his insurance because his cousin started an insurance company and could get him a great deal. Nope. He was doing me a favor. I didn’t need to expose him to just how crazy my family was.

“Stasia,” Sebastian said, chuckling slightly.

“Yes, Sebastian?”

“You’re huffing and puffing, and I have a feeling that something’s on your mind. Are you going to tell me what you’re thinking about or do I have to guess?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about some of the comments my parents made tonight.”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t think you’d want to hear,” I lied again. “They weren’t very complimentary.”

“Oh, so they loved me then, huh?”

“Well…” I paused. “I don’t want you to get too big of a head.”

“Oh, trust me. I don’t think it can be any bigger.”

“Oh, so you are admitting it, then? You are egotistical?”

“What?” He sounded surprised.

“What do you mean, what? You said you have a big head, and I’m saying so you’re admitting you’re egotistical.”

“Oh.” His voice lowered. “I was talking about a different sort of head.” He cleared his throat. “I was talking about the head that can make you cum.”

“Oh my God, Sebastian.”

“Sorry,” he said. “You know I have to push my luck a little bit.”

“And this is why I don’t like you. This is why you get on my nerves. That’s totally inappropriate. How are you going to make that comment to me?”

“You’d think my fiancé would want to know about my penis,” he said, surprised.

“Ha ha. Very funny. I have no interest in knowing anything about your penis.”

“What about my dick?”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Stasia, I’m starting to think that you’re a little bit of a prude.”

“And why would you think that?” I asked him. “Just because I’m not interested in hearing your disgusting little details?”

“My disgusting little details? I can’t believe you said that to me.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“Because they’re not little, Stasia. They’re big. Very, very big.”

“I’m about to hang up the phone, Sebastian.”

“Oh, I get it,” he said knowingly.

“You get what?”

“I get why you have to hang up the phone.”

“Yeah. Because you’re annoying me.”

“Sure,” he said. “Tell yourself that.”

“Why do you think I’m going to hang up the phone, Sebastian?”

“I don’t know. Maybe your panties are wet. Maybe you have a tingle between your legs. Maybe your fingers are itching to touch yourself and think of me.” He growled. “Shit, I’m so hard right now.”

“Okay, that’s it,” I said, and I hung up.

I stared up at the ceiling, my face bright red. I couldn’t believe he’d said that to me. And what was worse? He was partially correct. My panties were wet, and I was starting to feel horny. The sound of his voice on the phone at one o’clock in the morning saying naughty words had done something to me. And, well, it annoyed me, not because I was a prude or not a sexual person, but because it was him.

Sure, he was doing me a favor, and sure, at times I thought he was okay. It was just totally inappropriate for me to even think anything sexual about him. Just because he had the most dazzling blue eyes I’d ever seen and the pinkest, softest lips and the most gorgeous body I’d ever felt. Not that I’d felt it, felt it, but I touched his arms and his shoulders a couple of times and wow. He was rock hard. He must have had abs of steel.

I licked my lips nervously. My phone started ringing again. I sighed and picked it up.

“Say one more dirty thing and I’ll hang up on you again,” I said.

“What time do you want me to pick you up in the morning?” he asked. “I’ll take you all to breakfast.”

“You don’t have to do that, Sebastian.”

“It’s my treat,” he said. “And then we’ll talk about flying your babushka into town.”

“I’m really starting to think this is just a bit much. I mean, I really appreciate your help and that you’re a godsend for doing this, but I don’t want you out any money, and I will pay you back for the breakfast tomorrow. Maybe not right away because I have rent due soon and...”

“Oh my gosh. If you even try to give me a penny, Stasia, I will...” He paused.

“You’ll what?” I said.

“Well, I’ll think of something.”

“Okay.”

He started laughing then. “I mean, I know what I was going to say, but I don’t want you to hang up on me unceremoniously again.”

I rolled my eyes. “Is that all you think about?”

“No. I also think about going down on you.”

I sighed. “Really?”

“What? You haven’t imagined what my tongue would...”

“Sebastian,” I warned him, “come on now.”

“Okay, Stasia,” he whispered into the phone. “I’ll pick you up at eight?”

“Make it nine. My parents can be a little slow in the morning.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll pick you up at nine. I really liked them, by the way,” he said softly. “You’ve got a nice family.”

“Thank you,” I said. “They did like you a lot,” I admitted to him. “And even though I said it before, thank you for doing this. I know it’s a lot, and well, just thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Stasia. It’s my pleasure. It would be more of my pleasure if you—”

“Good night, Sebastian,” I said and then hung up quickly.

I smiled to myself as I peeled my panties down. Just because I wasn’t on the phone with him didn’t mean I couldn’t think about his voice as I pleased myself.

TEN

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

Sometimes I wonder what you would think of the man I've become. I'm so different from the boy you knew. I hope you understand that every day I try and think about the person you would want me to be. I don't always succeed, but I try. I realize now that love is something that can never be taken away. No matter what happens in the relationship.

Sebastian

I closed my eyes as the hot water cascaded onto my naked body. All I could think about was Stasia and her sexy voice and her teasing tone. I sighed and turned the water temperature to cold. Maybe a hot shower in the morning wasn't the best thing. I didn't think it was going to take my blue balls away. I was horny as hell, and I needed some relief; I didn't think I was going to be getting it from Stasia any time soon, no matter how much I wanted to be with her.

It was a pity that she seemed to have no interest in being with me sexually because I thought it would be a really fun experience for us to get to know each other intimately while going along with this charade. It would've made it so much more pleasurable, but Stasia wasn't the sort of girl that seemed to be interested in friends with benefits, though I thought it would benefit both of us. I'd seen the way she'd looked at me a couple of times. I felt her lips pressed against mine when we kissed, the way her fingers had dug into my body, the way

she'd melted against me. Even though she was loathe to admit it, Stasia was definitely turned on and attracted by me.

"Fuck," I mumbled under my breath as my hand moved down to my cock.

I was hard and horny, and I knew if I didn't wax one out before I headed over to pick Stasia and her parents up, I'd find it very hard to concentrate on anything other than trying to fuck her.

I closed my eyes and pictured her face as my fingers moved up and down my cock. I could hear her saying my name.

"Sebastian, you're a bad boy." I groaned. *"Sebastian, don't say those naughty things to me."*

"Fuck yeah. Fuck. I bet your pussy's all wet for me right now, isn't it, Stasia?" I grunted as I felt myself reaching climax. "Say my name, Stasia. Say my name."

"Sebastian," I heard her teasing silky voice admonishing me in my head, and I erupted ferociously like Mount Vesuvius into the shower.

I leaned back under the streaming water, grabbed my body wash, and started soaping myself up. Fuck. That had been the most intense orgasm I'd ever had from masturbating in the shower, and it was all thanks to Stasia. I smiled to myself as I thought about thanking her when I picked her up for breakfast. That would make her blush. I knew it was a wicked thing to do, but I just loved seeing her eyes telling me off.

I finished showering quickly, grabbed my clothes, and jumped into my car and headed over to Stasia and Jenna's place in Silver Lake. Their apartment, while beautiful on the inside, was not in a great area, and I really wished that they'd taken Simon up on his offer to relocate them somewhere else. I didn't like the location, and I knew Simon didn't, either. It wasn't particularly safe, and their landlord was a jackass who seemed more interested in getting into their pants than collecting rent. I knew men like that. They tried to take advantage of women like Stasia and Gemma. They were

strong and independent and brave, but I still didn't like the fact that they were alone.

I got out of my car and headed up the stairs to their apartment. I saw Larry hanging down in the yard at the front, and I frowned. He had a beer in his hand.

"Hey, dude," he said as I walked.

"Hey." I looked down at him. He appeared to want to say something, so I headed back down the stairs before going back up. "Hey, Larry, right?" I stared at him.

"Yep and you're John, right?"

"No. My name is Sebastian."

"Oh, for some reason I thought it was John." He shrugged. "Maybe because you are their John."

"I'm who's John?"

I knew what he was trying to intimate, but I wasn't going to hit him just yet.

"Those two hos in apartment—"

"Hold on a second," I cut him off. "Which two hos?" I said in a deathly sweet voice.

"That Gemma and Stasia bitch. I see you and that other dude in the Mercedes coming over here all the time. How much you paying? Is that the reason they don't want to give it up to me? I don't got money for them like you?"

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, feeling my blood boiling. "I know you're not talking about Gemma and Stasia like that. Didn't my brother warn you that if he thought you were saying or doing anything that was negative or derogatory toward them, we were going to have a problem?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," he said, shaking his head. "Who's your brother?"

"Simon. The man in the Mercedes."

"The blond dude?" He looked me up and down. "That dude's blond and you're brunette. You look nothing alike."

How's he your brother?" He rolled his eyes. "Or do you mean devil's threesome sort of brother?"

"What the fuck?" I said, grabbing him by the shirt. "If I—"

"Hey, Sebastian."

Stasia's voice stopped me from hitting the man. I saw her standing there on the stairs, her eyebrows raised.

"Hey," I said, letting go of Larry. "Are you out somewhere? You going out somewhere?"

"No, but my mom and dad were pretty sure they saw you getting out of your car, and then when you didn't get to the door, I wanted to make sure everything was okay." She looked at me, then Larry. "Is everything okay?"

"It will be," I said, nodding and smiling at her. "Larry just seems to have a communication issue."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh boy. What's he gone and said now? Don't tell me. He asked you for some money."

I laugh then. "He knows better than that, don't you, Larry?"

"Whatever, John," he said, an attitude in his voice. I actually kind of respected it because he had to know I could kick his ass and have him flat on the ground within ten seconds flat. The fact that he was willing to continue being a jackass in the face of total destruction meant he was a bigger fool than I thought.

"Come on, Stasia," I said, putting my hand on the small of her back. "Let's go upstairs." I looked at Larry as we moved away. "Your days here are done, son." I smirked at him. "Your days here are done."

He picked up his beer bottle, chugged a little bit, and then spat it on the ground. I didn't respond and just continued off after Stasia.

"You just need to ignore him," she said. "He's all talk. He's a jackass, yeah, but..."

“Oh, trust me, Stasia, you won’t have to be dealing with him much longer.”

She stopped on the middle of the stairs and looked at me. “Why is that? I told you and I told Gemma we can’t move. We can’t afford somewhere new, and neither one of us is comfortable with Simon paying—”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I know you two want to make your own way, though I don’t know what you’re going to do when Gemma marries Simon and ends up living in a \$10 million house. Or are you expecting Simon to move to the projects because Gemma can’t afford to pay much for her half?”

Stasia looked at me and shook her head. “Whatever. Obviously that’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying that...”

“You’re just saying that you’re not ready for your best friend to move on. I totally understand that. I’m not ready for Simon to move on with his life, either.”

I thought about the comment Simon had made to me about hos being before bros and felt a twinge of regret at the fact that my brother was moving on in his life. It wasn’t that he was leaving me behind. It was just that he was maturing and progressing. Not that I was going to tell Stasia any of that information. I didn’t want her thinking I was soft or anything.

“So anyway, my parents are really excited for breakfast. I mentioned to them that you had an idea to bring babushka to LA, and they think it will be a great idea.” She paused.

“What?”

“You seem slightly annoyed right now.”

“No, I’m not.” She made a face. “It’s just the fact that she’d be flying on a private jet seemed to make them a little bit too excited for my tastes.”

“Oh?” I laughed. “And why is that?”

“Because, and I’m only telling you this because I know they’re going to ask this of you, they will most probably ask you get a private jet for them to fly home.” She sighed and put

her hands up. “And I know you, you’re going to want to say of course, but you’re not to do it. I do not want my parents getting spoiled, and I do not want them having high expectations.”

“Okay,” I said, laughing. “But if they beg me, I’m not going to be able to say no.”

“My parents aren’t that classless,” she said, giggling. “I mean, they can be pretty tacky at times, but I don’t think they’d beg you for the private jet.”

“Okay,” I said. “Well, we’ll see. By the way, Stasia, you look very beautiful this morning.”

“Thank you, Sebastian. You look not so bad yourself.”

I started laughing then. She really had a way with words, and I absolutely loved her for it. She was one of a kind.

ELEVEN

STASIA

“Mom, Dad, Sebastian’s here, and he’s ready to take us to breakfast.”

“I’m very hungry,” my papa said as he jumped off the couch. “Where are we going? Someplace where we see movie stars? Perhaps Pamela Anderson or Angelina Jolie?”

My mother gave him an admonishing look. “Really, Stavros?”

He shrugged and gave a guilty smile. “Hey, when we’re in LA, we do the things the people in LA want to do.”

“Really, Papa?” I said, laughing. “I don’t know many people that are hoping to have breakfast with Pamela Anderson and Angelina Jolie.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Simon said, and Gemma just rolled her eyes.

“Really, Simon?”

“What? I didn’t say I want it or need it, but I wouldn’t mind,” he said quickly. “Right, Sebastian?”

Sebastian looked at me and then shook his head. “The only person I would like to have breakfast with is my darling Stasia. The light of my life, the love of my heart, the joy of my —”

“Okay, Sebastian,” I said, trying not to glare at him. He was really overdoing it.

“Are you a poet?” My mother walked over and gave him a big hug.

He beamed at her as he hugged her back. “No. Why do you ask?”

“Because your words are beautiful and your voice, it is dulcet.”

“Dulcet,” he said, nodding. “Wow. That’s a SAT word if ever I’ve heard one.”

“SAT word.” My mother blinked. “What means this?” She looked over at me.

“I think he’s saying that it’s an impressive word.”

“Well, I learned English from some of the best,” she said, smiling warmly at him. “But you remind me of a Lord Byron or William Wordsworth.”

“My mom’s kind of into poetry,” I explained to Sebastian. “My dad, the one that passed away,” I said quickly, “he was English, and he was really into poetry and used to recite it to my mom a lot when they were courting.”

“He went to Oxford, you know,” my mom said. “He took me to Stratford-upon-Avon one weekend, and we rowed in a boat, and he said to me, ‘You are so fair, so pretty, the prettiest flower in the land.’”

“Oh, who wrote that poem?” Sebastian asked curiously, and I laughed.

“No one famous wrote that poem, silly. My dad was making it up for Mama in the moment.”

I looked over at my stepdad to make sure he wasn’t upset or jealous. I knew sometimes it hurt him to think that my mother missed my father as much as she did. She talked about him quite frequently, which I knew most men wouldn’t be happy with, but my stepdad was pretty confident in their love and didn’t get upset too easily.

I noticed that Sebastian was wondering the same thing because I could see his eyes on my stepdad.

“So Stavros,” he asked my stepdad, “do you write poems as well?”

“Yes. I wrote a nice poem just last Valentine’s Day, didn’t I, darling?”

My mother just stared at him. “It was quite nice,” she said succinctly.

“Oh, what was the poem?” I asked, curious.

Stavros cleared his throat and then beat his chest like a baboon coming to find its dinner. I burst out laughing.

“Roses are red,” he said. “Violets are blue. Sugar is sweet and so are you.”

I looked at Sebastian who was looking at me, and we both burst out laughing.

“Not bad, Papa.” I walked over to him and gave him a big hug. “At least you tried.”

“It was my own creation. Original, no?”

His twinkling eyes told me that he wasn’t being serious.

“Come on, guys. Let’s go for breakfast,” I said.

Sebastian nodded. “Yes. I’m taking you to a pancake place. I hope you like pancakes.”

“I like everything,” my stepdad said, and my mom nodded as she grabbed her purse.

“He really does. So when we plan the wedding dinner, you do not have to worry about papa and his tastes.”

I swallowed hard. “Okay, well, that’s good to know.” I really didn’t want to talk about the wedding that wasn’t going to happen again.

“But I do have a suggestion for the wedding cake,” my mom continued.

“Oh, what’s that, Mama?” I licked my lips nervously as we left the house, calling out, “Bye, Gemma. Bye, Simon. See you later.”

“Have fun,” Gemma said, winking at me, and I glared at her.

“Well, I was thinking we could have one of those Russian cakes. Maybe not as the main cake, but one of the cakes, and Papa, you know he likes his baklava. So maybe we also have some baklava.”

“Oh yes,” Papa said, as we walked toward Sebastian’s car. “We have to have baklava, and also I was thinking maybe I make some of my fresh hummus.”

“I love hummus,” Sebastian said. “That would be amazing.”

“And I know to make pizza,” my mom said proudly. “It tastes very authentic.”

“Well, we’re kind of skipping ahead of ourselves, Mom. We’re only newly engaged. We’re really not thinking about the wedding just yet.”

“Oh, well, I suppose.” My mom looked over at my dad, and I frowned.

“What’s going on?” I asked quickly.

“What do you mean?” my mom protested, looking at me innocently.

“The look you just gave Papa. What’s going on? What’s going on, Mom? Tell me now.”

“Well, as you know, your babushka, she’s dying.”

My heart started to ache. “What happened? Does she have cancer?”

“I don’t know what she has, but she just tell us she’s dying. She’s made her will. However, we will not get anything if you are not married before she dies.”

“What?” My jaw dropped.

“And she wants to cut us off.”

I stared at them in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you know babushka gives us some money to help with the day-to-day affairs.”

I nodded. “Yeah, and?”

“And you know your papa, he worked, but he cannot work anymore. He lost his money in the stock market.”

She pressed her lips together, and my stepfather looked down. My papa had invested all of their savings in cryptocurrency and then panicked and sold everything when the market had dipped. They literally had nothing, and while I was grateful they owned their house, I knew day to day was hard for them. They were getting social security, but that wasn't even \$2,000 a month. My babushka supplemented their income and had been quite generous in the amount she gave them. So generous that my parents had gone on two around-the-world trips in the last three years and flown first class both times.

“I am sure Babushka is not going to cut you off if I don't get married.”

“Yes, she is,” my papa said, looking at me with saddened eyes. “That is why I helped to find you a man to marry.”

“What?” I said as I stopped at Sebastian's car and looked at my parents. “You found me some old man to marry because Babushka was going to cut you off? Not because you were concerned that I was going to be an old maid and die alone with no future and no kids and no one to love me?”

My mom pressed her hands to her mouth. “Oh darling, you do like to be dramatic. You're not even thirty yet. You're not an old maid yet. No. We would not push husband on you this early. We know you are in LA pursuing your dreams, but circumstances, you know.”

“So you'd rather pimp me out to some old loser than not go on a couple of trips around the world?” I knew I was being harsh, but I couldn't stop myself.

“Darling,” my mom said, walking up to me and touching my arm, “I'm old now. I cannot sit in economy. My back, it hurts. In first class, you lie flat. You hear me? You lie flat and

they give you champagne and they give you caviar. Oh, it is amazing. The mattress almost as good as our bed at home.” She looked over at my stepdad. “I tell you to replace the mattress.”

“We just bought the mattress three years ago. It cost \$3,000. We do not need to replace it again.” My stepdad started getting heated. This was obviously a conversation that had come up many times before.

I could feel myself growing angry and embarrassed. I did not want Sebastian to witness this conversation. I looked up at him. He was staring at me with concern. I was grateful for that. At least he wasn’t laughing. That would’ve tipped me over the edge.

“Shall we get in the car and continue the conversation?” Sebastian said as he opened the door.

We all got in, and I pressed my lips together as I clicked my seatbelt. Then I turned around to look at my mom.

“Mom, I am really upset with you and ashamed of you because—”

“But darling, it’s okay. You don’t have to marry him. You have fiancé here and now Babushka happy. She can die in peace. Oh, that’s the only thing she wanted. She called the priest and she said to the priest, ‘I’m worried about my granddaughter Stasia. She’s beautiful. She’s independent. She’s feisty, but she has no man, and I worry she will be alone forever. And when I’m gone, I will not be able to look after her. So please pray to God for me that I will stay alive for as long as she is still single.’”

“What?” My jaw dropped as Sebastian pulled into the street. “Babushka is asking the priest to pray for her to stay alive just so she can see me get married?”

“Yes, and the money that she was giving us, she’s tithing to the church.”

“No way. The priest did not ask her to pay for that.”

“Of course not,” my stepfather said angrily. “The church would never ask such a thing. Babushka volunteered because

she's asking for special prayer, and it worked. God is real. You have a fiancé and he's a billionaire."

"Well, millionaire," Sebastian said, clearing his throat, and I glared at him.

"Ah, but one day you'll be billionaire," my mom said. "I can tell."

"Well, thank you," he said. "I sure hope so."

"And you, my darling daughter, will be taken care of, and you too can fly first class. Perhaps when you get married and you go on your honeymoon, you experience first class for the first time. Ah, and then he will take your virginity," my mom said, and I stared at her with wide eyes.

"What did you say, Mom?"

"Well, I noticed that he did not sleep over, and your father and I, well," she blushed slightly, "we think you have not slept together yet, which I love. You are saving yourself for marriage. Oh, my darling daughter, you are such a good girl."

I pressed my lips and looked out the window. I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or cry. I was not a virgin, but I could not tell my mother that, and I certainly couldn't tell her the reason why Sebastian and I had not slept together had nothing to do with the fact that we were saving ourselves for marriage.

Sebastian cleared his throat. "You know, I love your daughter so much that I would wait any amount of time for her. It's about more than the physical and sex," he said. I cringed inside. "It's about our mental connection and how—"

"Okay, Sebastian," I said, glaring at him.

"What, darling?" he said, reaching over and squeezing my upper thigh.

I felt a chill of excitement run through my body at his touch. He left his hand there for a couple more seconds and moved his fingers up slightly. I wanted to push his hand away, but I knew my parents would question that.

"Your parents obviously understand how complex our relationship is. I just wanted to tell you," he turned around and

looked at my mom, “that of course we have shared the same bed, but out of respect for you, I told Stasia that I did not feel comfortable sleeping over. Even though she begged me last night and she called me at one o’clock in the morning asking me to sneak in. She said what you didn’t know wouldn’t hurt you, but I told her I respect you and your parents too much to sneak in.”

My jaw dropped at his blatant lie.

“Oh my God, he’s perfect,” my mother squealed. “Oh, absolutely perfect. You see Stasia? Everything is working out for the greater good.”

TWELVE

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

I love you. Always. Nothing will ever stop that. Just wanted to say that. I know it's been a few days. My life is hectic right now. Good hectic, though. Weird hectic, too.

Sebastian

“**O**h, wow! This is absolutely amazing,” Stasia’s mom exclaimed as we sat down at the cute little restaurant in Larchmont.

“I’m glad you like it. This is a really nice part of town. I’ve often thought that I would buy a house around here if I were to get married and have kids.” As soon as I spoke, I realized what I’d said, and I smiled over at Stasia. “I mean, when we get married you’ll have to let me know if this is an area you can see yourself living in.”

“Oh, she would love it. Wouldn’t you, Stasia?” her mother answered for her, and Stasia just nodded with a tight smile.

“So Stavros, was there anything in particular you wanted to see while you were here in Los Angeles?” I asked him as he flipped through the menu.

“I don’t know. Maybe a Lakers game if we can get tickets.” He looked at me. “Courtside would be amazing.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said with a smile.

Stasia gave him a look. “Papa, those seats are expensive.”

“It’s okay, Stasia. I can afford it.” I smiled at her, and she shook her head.

“I know you can afford it, but I don’t want my parents thinking that your money is their money.”

“How dare you, Stasia!” her mom exclaimed. “We would never think that!”

Stasia just gave her mom a look. “Really?”

“I mean, yes. Once you two get married, we will be family, and family does for each other. But we would never have any expectations. Plus, once you are married, Babushka will go back to giving us our little...” She paused. “Well, you know.”

I smiled, and I could see that Stasia was upset. She didn’t like her parents talking about money. I suppose she thought it was uncouth or slightly unusual. I mean, most elderly people didn’t take money from their parents, but I understood there had to be a reason. Her parents didn’t seem like the sort that would just take advantage of an old lady or the sort to be completely self-centered.

“So I was thinking that I would get the pancakes,” her mother said. “And Stavros, you can get the eggs Benedict.”

“But I wanted to get an omelet,” he said.

“But I would like the eggs Benedict, and I would like some pancakes. So if you get one and I get the other, we can split.”

“But I wanted to get—”

“Stavros.”

He looked over at her and nodded. “Fine. I’ll get the crab cakes eggs Benedict.”

“No. No.” She shook her head. “I want you to get the salmon eggs Benedict.”

“But I don’t even like salmon.”

“I’m sure it will be good. Everything’s good here, isn’t it, Sebastian?”

She looked over at me, and I just nodded. “Most of the food here is absolutely delicious. But you know what? If you would like to get the eggs Benedict and Stavros would like to get an omelet, I can give you some of my eggs Benedict,” I said quickly, hoping to play mediator.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, Sebastian.” She shook her head. “Stavros is more than happy.”

“I’m fine with him doing that,” Stavros said quickly. “I would like to get the Greek omelet with feta cheese and olives and—”

“Fine,” Stasia’s mother said quickly. “But it’s just ridiculous. Imagine if I were to go to restaurants and ask for borscht all the time.” She shook her head. “So what do we have planned for the day?”

“I don’t know. I was hoping you could tell me what you’d like to do,” I answered.

Stasia gave me a look. “I’m sure you guys will be fine at home. Sebastian has to work and—”

“It’s fine. I would love to take the day off and take your parents around Los Angeles.”

“You’re such a sweet man. And you know? We should call Babushka when we leave and tell her to start packing so that she can get ready for her private plane.”

“Mama,” Stasia said quickly, “we never actually confirmed that.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “When would she like to come?”

“I’m sure Babushka would love to come as soon as possible,” Stavros said. “And in fact, I was thinking we could postpone our tickets as well.”

Stasia looked shocked and upset. “What do you mean? Why would you postpone your tickets?”

“Because we want to stay here longer so we can make plans.”

“What plans, Papa?”

Stasia took a deep breath. I leaned over and pressed my fingers on top of hers. “Honey, shall we get massages this weekend? You sound like you’re a little stressed out. I know the design stuff is making you upset, but we’re happy to have your parents here, aren’t we?”

“I’m not feeling that happy right now,” she said, annoyed, pulling her hands away from me. “Mom and Dad, look. I understand you have my best interest at heart, but you’re kind of being ridiculous. I just told you that I’m recently engaged. I’m not going to rush into a wedding so you can get money from Babushka. In fact, if I start feeling all this pressure about the wedding, I might even call it off, and then there will be no wedding at all. And then I will also not be interested in meeting anyone you have planned for me to meet because I know it’s not because you have my best interest at heart. It’s because you want to continue flying around the world in first class. I love you. But no, I’m not marrying a man so you can say in first class. Would I marry a man if it was so you had somewhere to live? Perhaps, perhaps not. But now that I—”

“Oh, Stasia, you are raising your voice,” Stavros said in an upset tone. “Your mother, she’s not happy.”

“I’m not happy, Stasia. I did not raise you to talk to me like this.”

“Stasia, maybe you should just calm down a little bit,” I said quickly.

“Excuse me?” she said, staring at me. “Are you telling me to calm down right now? Are you seriously going to say that to me, Sebastian?”

I pressed my lips together. This was a side of Stasia I hadn’t seen before. She was pissed, understandably so. But if she kept it up, she was going to upset her parents. And that was something I didn’t want for her or myself.

“Ah, Stasia darling.” Her mother reached out and touched her other hand. “You are stressed out, eh? Because we did not let your boyfriend sleep the night you missed him?” She looked over at me. “We understand you are both modern couple, and you most probably like to sleep together. I, myself,

get upset and lonely when Stavros is not in the bed with me at night. So I understand, my darling Stasia, why you are feeling this way. So I propose that it is okay for your fiancé to spend the night with us. I know that you two will not do any hanky-panky or anything naughty. You just want to snuggle in bed together. And I do not want to ruin your relationship or help you angry at your fiancé because he's very nice, very patient man, Stasia. And you do not want to lose him."

"And he billionaire," Stavros said quickly.

I didn't bother correcting him again. To Stavros, millionaire and billionaire was synonymous with the same thing: money.

It didn't upset me. I was used to people being impressed by how much money I had. And frankly, I kind of liked it sometimes. It was nice to be someone that people admired. It was nice to be someone that people wanted to be around. Granted, I didn't like to be used. But I understood their concern for their daughter. If I had kids, I would want her to marry well as well. I certainly wouldn't want her with some bum living in that shithole of an apartment she lived in.

I wondered if I could use this opportunity to get Stasia and her parents to come and stay with me for a little bit. Maybe if Stasia stayed in a nice place, she'd realized just how much of a shithole her apartment really was, and then she and Gemma would be more likely to move.

"So maybe we could come to my—"

"Nope," Stasia said quickly. "Not going to happen, Sebastian."

"Okay. Fine," I said quickly, knowing she'd known exactly what I was going to say. "Then I will just spend the night with you."

"You don't have to do that," she said, glaring at me. "In fact, didn't you say you have to go on a business trip tomorrow? And so you'll be going out of town and..."

"Oh, no," I said, grinning at her. "I canceled that. Didn't Gemma tell you? Me and Simon don't have to go any longer."

Two can play that game, I thought to myself. There was no business trip. Obviously, Stasia was hoping to get me out of the picture. This wasn't going how she'd intended, but I was quite liking the charade that we were pulling. I liked her parents. Even though they were kind of quirky, they were still fun. And I liked being around her and spending time with her.

I had never experienced a family dynamic like this before in my life, and I wasn't opposed to it. There was something quite warm about it, something very Wes Anderson about the whole thing.

"Then it is settled. Tonight you stay with us. Maybe when we drive around Los Angeles today and look for George Clooney and Brad Pitt, we can stop by your house and pick up some clothes. Unless, of course, you already have a cupboard in Stasia's bedroom and then you don't."

"No, I don't have a cupboard there yet," I said with a smile. "So we can stop by my place and pick up some clothes. I'm glad you actually brought it up because I was hoping you could come and see my place before you left."

"Oh, we'd love to see your place," Stavros said quickly. "I was wondering how big it was."

"Twenty thousand square feet," I said. His eyes widened, and I laughed. "I'm just joking. It's only five thousand square feet. It's quite small."

"Oh!" Stasia's mom's eyes widened. "Five thousand square feet. Very nice for a single man. Well, technically not single, seeing as you're marrying my Stasia. But seeing as she doesn't have the wedding ring yet, you're still legally single. But we both know you will be my son-in-law, my very much beloved son-in-law."

"Mom, you're really carrying this too far," Stasia said, rolling her eyes.

"I think your mom's lovely, Stasia," I said, beaming at her. "In fact, I can see where you get your beautiful looks and charm from."

Stasia stared at me. I knew she wanted to cuss me out. I turned to her mother. “So that’s settled, then. We’ll have breakfast. We’ll go to Rodeo Drive and do some shopping because I’m sure there are some things you might want to buy.”

“Oh, well.”

“On me, of course,” I said quickly. “I have to treat my future mother-in-law.”

“Well, if you do want to treat me. I mean, I really shouldn’t, but...”

“If the man’s offering, we cannot be impolite and say no,” Stavros said. “I have heard there are many nice shops on Rodeo Drive.”

“Oh yes,” I said with a warm smile. “There are many nice shops, indeed. So then we’ll shop. We’ll go to my place and grab lunch. And then we’ll book the plane for Babushka. And we’ll spend the evening at your place, my darling Stasia.”

I could see ice in her eyes as she stared at me. “I did miss hugging you last night,” I said. “And I know you missed me. But don’t worry, darling. I’ll be there to keep you warm this evening.”

“Oh, I’m not worried,” she said with a sickly sweet smile. “I’m fact, I’m very much looking forward to it. I just hope that it’s not too cold for you.”

THIRTEEN

STASIA

“Sebastian, where’s your T-shirt?” I stared at him as he stood in front of my bed in just a pair of red silk boxer shorts.

“What do you mean, where’s my T-shirt?” he said, a cocky grin on his face.

I tried not to stare at his built chest. It was tan with just a smattering of hair, and he looked absolutely gorgeous. My eyes rolled down his body and looked at his muscular thighs. This was a man that worked out.

“So what are you thinking about, Stasia?” he said, his eyes laughing at me as I turned to look away from him.

“Nothing. I think you should put on a T-shirt and then you should leave because I need to change.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He walked toward me and tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to look at him. “And yes, I did used to play soccer.”

“What are you talking about?” I said as I stared into his laughing blue eyes.

“I saw you checking out my thighs. You were thinking to yourself, *How did he get them so muscular*, right?”

“No, I was not thinking that.”

“Oh, were you checking out another part of my body, then?” He stared at my lips, and I felt myself swallowing hard.

“No, I was just...” I mumbled incoherently. “Just get out of the room and put on a T-shirt, please.”

“Don’t you think your parents would think it’s strange if I’m wearing a T-shirt to bed?”

“No. My dad wears a T-shirt to bed all the time. Thank you very much.”

“Well, okay then. I guess I’ll put on the T-shirt because you can’t handle yourself around all this sexiness,” he said, doing a dance move that looked like it belonged in *Magic Mike*.

“Did you use to be a stripper, Sebastian?”

He started laughing then. “No, but I’ll accept some singles if you want me to give you a lap dance.”

“I don’t think so.” I giggled slightly. I couldn’t help myself when I was around him. Even when he frustrated and irritated me, he still made me laugh. “By the way, I’m so mad at you.” I poked him in the chest. That had not been a good idea. His skin felt warm to the touch. I stepped back quickly as he licked his lips.

“Why are you mad at me now, Stasia? You know, I’m starting to think this is a real relationship. You get mad at me so frequently.”

“Why did you tell my parents you would stay the night? This is so not cool. It’s going to be so uncomfortable.”

“Why is it going to be uncomfortable?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Because my bed is not that big. It’s only a full, and we are not actually together, and we shouldn’t be sharing a bed together and—”

“Oh, stop getting worried. I’m sure you can resist me for a couple of nights.”

“I can resist you for the rest of my life if I want to,” I said quickly. “It’s not about that. It’s about you having to resist me.”

“Oh,” he said. “You’re worried that my fingers might slip somewhere they shouldn’t?”

I bat my eyelashes at him. “No, because I have a knife in the drawer next to my bed, so if your fingers even think about slipping somewhere they shouldn’t, you’ll no longer have any fingers.”

“Wow. You sure know how to turn a man on.”

“Good. I’m glad you feel that way.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” I said sweetly. “Now scat. I want to change.”

“You can change in front of me. You don’t have anything I haven’t seen.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Oh, what? You got a third nipple or something? I’ve never seen that.”

“No, I do not have a third nipple. But you have never seen my body and you’re not about to see it now.”

“Honey, I hate to tell you this, but I saw you in a very skimpy bikini not too long ago. I’m sure it covered less than your bra and panties cover now.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Because right now I have on a thong.”

“Oh wow.” He let out a low whistle. “Now I really don’t want to leave the room.”

I hit him in the shoulder. “Sebastian, really?”

“What?” he said, grabbing my wrist. “You sure like touching me, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. I’m just saying that—”

“You’re just saying what?” He pulled me closer toward him so that I could feel his breath against my face.

“Let go of my wrists, please.”

“Or what?” he said, holding them tighter. “You’re going to fight me?”

“I could take you any day of the week. I used to take self-defense classes.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s see, then.”

“Let’s see what?” I said. And before I could even process what was happening, he’d grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back.

“Ow, that hurts.”

He let it go slightly and then put his arm around my waist and pulled me into him hard.

“Let me go.”

“I think you can let yourself go. Right?” he growled into my ear.

I struggled against him. “Sebastian.” I elbowed him in the gut.

“Ow, that wasn’t very nice,” he said, licking my earlobe.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m just seeing if you’re as strong as you said you were.” He chuckled slightly.

I could feel myself growing hot and bothered. His body behind me felt hot and hard, and I wasn’t sure that I was going to be able to resist him for very long if he kept this up.

“Sebastian,” I said, wriggling against him. I pushed my butt back and tried to push him away hard, but all that did was seem to turn him on if the hardness I felt pressed against my ass cheeks was anything.

“Oh yeah, baby. Do it again,” he said.

“Sebastian.” I pinched him and then pulled away slightly.

He lightened my grip and then turned me around so that I was facing him. He held my hands up above my head and then pushed me against the wall. He pushed his body against mine so that his chest was crushed against my breasts.

“Sebastian,” I said, my voice sounding like a moan.

“Yes?” His blue eyes glittered as he stared at me.

I could feel that he was breathing just as heavily as I was. “You shouldn’t be...”

My voice stopped as I felt his lips pressed against my neck. I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds. As he bit down, I knew I should tell him to stop, but it just felt so nice. I hadn’t had a man kissing me in such a long time, and I didn’t know that I wanted it to stop. His lips moved further across my skin, toward my mouth, and then he was kissing me for real. I pressed my lips together so I wasn’t kissing him back, and he chuckled slightly.

“Don’t resist me, Stasia. Your parents will want to see that you’ve been well and truly kissed, and I’m sure they’ll appreciate a love bite on your neck.”

“You are not going to mark me, Sebastian. That is not your place.”

“It’s not?” he said. “As your fiancé, I would rather think that it was my place, if anyone.”

“Sebastian, how many times do I have to—”

I moaned slightly as his hand moved down the side of my body and caressed my breast. Oh my gosh. My entire body was on fire. He slipped his hand up under my T-shirt, and I felt his fingers moving under my bra. I was so hot and bothered, I couldn’t say anything. And then his lips moved back to mine again and kissed me gently at first. I couldn’t resist, and I couldn’t push him away.

I kissed him back passionately. He growled as his tongue slipped into my mouth, and I moaned as he somehow undid my bra and his palms rubbed against my nipple.

“Oh yeah,” he said against my lips.

He let go of my other wrist, and my fingers moved down to his hair, gripping his dark locks as we kissed.

“You’re hot,” he said.

“Shut up.” I glared at him, and he laughed, his whole body shaking.

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, and then he pressed his lips against mine. “You taste so delicious.”

“I’m only kissing you because of my parents,” I lied. Wanted him to think that was the only reason I was letting him get away with this and not because I was more attracted to him than any man I’d ever been attracted to in my entire life.

“I know,” he said. “Of course. But doing it because of your parents.” He pulled my T-shirt up, and before I could protest, it was on the ground, my bra following soon behind it. He looked down at my naked breasts and let out a little whistle.

“Beautiful,” he mumbled before he leaned down and started sucking on one of my nipples. My fingers ran up and down his back. Fuck, this was so hot and so bad, but I couldn’t resist.

“Oh yeah, baby,” he said as his fingers moved down to my shorts.

“Sebastian,” I said, stopping him.

“What?” He licked his lips. There was a burning lust in his gaze.

“I don’t know,” I said, my stomach in knots in sweet anticipation, waiting for him to continue.

“I know,” he said in a dark, husky voice. “Fuck, I know how badly I want you, Stasia.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “Sebastian.”

“We can. We can,” he said, and then he pulled my shorts off.

He picked me up and carried me over to the bed and dropped me down, and I looked up at him and watched as he pulled his box of shorts off. He was magnificent. His cock was long and hard, and I had never seen anything more beautiful in my life. He reached down and kissed me on my stomach, his tongue running circles around my belly button, and I giggled.

“You’re ticklish, huh?” he said, looking up at me through hooded eyes, and I nodded shyly, feeling slightly self-conscious in the moment. “I like a ticklish girl,” he said.

His fingers traced up and down my body before gripping on the sides of my panties and pulling down. He leaned forward, his teeth on the top of my panties, and he used them to remove them. I closed my eyes. I was so hot; burning desire flooded through me. The buildup of our tension the last couple of weeks, the flirting we'd done, and it was all coming to our head now, and I couldn't stop it. I felt the tip of his tongue touching my clit, and I moaned out loud.

"Oh yeah," I said. "Don't stop." There was nothing I wanted more in that moment but for him to go down on me.

"Oh, I won't," he said, grinning as his tongue flashed back and forth on me.

"What are you doing?" I said, moaning as my fingers gripped the sheet.

"I'm about to make you come harder and faster than you've ever come before in your life," he said.

His fingers spread my thighs apart as wide as possible, and I groaned out loud as he started kissing and sucking on my clit.

"Oh yeah," I moaned. "Oh my gosh. Yes, Sebastian. Yes. Fuck yes."

And then there was a banging on my door and we both froze.

"Stasia, darling, we're about to make some hot cocoa. Would you like some?" My mother's voice sounded excited. "Let Sebastian know he's welcome to some of my shortbread cookies as well. I'm sure he must be hungry."

I looked at Sebastian, and he looked at me, and we both just burst out laughing.

FOURTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

My life is changing. I think I have a heart. Or rather, I think the ice is thawing. My guards are coming down. I should be scared, but I'm too amazed to really process everything.

Sebastian

“The shortbread is delicious. Thank you.” I smiled at Stasia’s mama as I sipped on the hot cocoa.

Stasia was seated across from me at the table, her eyes alight with mischief as she nibbled on one of the chocolate chip shortbread cookies that her mom had just made that evening.

“You’re very welcome, Sebastian. I’m so happy that you like it.” Her mom beamed at me with pride. Stavros was sitting in the living room watching football on TV and yawning.

“It’s really past our bedtimes,” she said, “but we wanted to make sure that you two children had a good evening because I said, ‘We did not eat much at dinner, and I bet you they are hungry.’”

“Oh, thanks, Mom,” Stasia said, a wicked smile on her face. “Sebastian was, literally, in the bedroom telling me how hungry he was right before you knocked on the door.”

“That is true,” I said, grabbing another cookie. “I said to Stasia, ‘Man, oh man, do I want to eat. I want something really tasty on my lips and in my mouth.’” I licked my lips

deliberately and stared at Stasia in the eye. I could see her face burning. I smiled and then looked over at her mom. “So thank you.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome. Stavros tried to tell me that we should not interrupt you once you’re in the bedroom, but I knew you good kids. You must probably thinking about playing a board game or watching TV, and I say, ‘Why don’t they have some cookies and cocoa?’”

She walked over to me and gave me a hug from behind. “And you know when I’m a babushka to your babies, I will make them healthy cocoa with no sugar and oat milk, or almond milk, or rice milk, or soy milk, or whatever is in fashion at the time.”

“I like good old cow milk, actually,” I said, laughing.

“Oh, good, because sometimes I really wonder if all Americans are going crazy.”

“You can’t say that,” Stavros said, speaking up from the couch.

“What do you mean I can’t say that? I can say whatever I want to. Right, Sebastian?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, grinning at her.

I looked over at her, and I could see just how sincere and sweet that she was. Sure. Did they have their priorities wrong? Maybe. The fact that they were willing to pimp their daughter out to an older man just so they could start getting money from her mother again was slightly troubling and concerning. But it wasn’t like I knew their family dynamics all the way. Maybe there was something else going on that I didn’t know about.

“So Sebastian, when will we meet your parents? I bet you must have the best mother and father to have raised such a good boy.”

My heart stilled then. There was nothing I would’ve wanted more than for Stasia’s mom to have met mine, which was weird because this entire thing was a sham and we weren’t really together. But it felt kind of real. The more time I spent with them, the more I liked them.

“Oh, Mom, you won’t be able to do that,” Stasia said quickly. “It won’t be possible.”

“What you mean it won’t be possible? They do not like you?” Her mom’s tone changed, and she frowned. “Why your parents not like my daughter? She not good enough for them because we’re not millionaire? I tell you, back in my country, my father was very respected. He—”

“Mom, no, that’s not it.” Stasia sighed. “Please, Mom, just stop pushing it for once, okay?”

There was a harsh tone in Stasia’s voice, and I was surprised that she was speaking to her mother that way. Her gaze softened as she looked at me. “Sorry, Sebastian. I didn’t want my mom to push you into having to say anything you—”

“It’s okay.” I was surprised. She was trying to be careful of my feelings. She was trying to protect me. I could have laughed, though. She was such an enigma.

I turned to Stasia’s mother and shrugged slightly. “The reason you won’t be able to meet my parents is because my mother died when I was a boy and I never knew who my father was. I grew up with a family in Iowa. Simon and my other brother Elijah were also adopted, and, well...” I shrugged. “I’m thankful that they gave us a home and we just didn’t have to keep bouncing around foster homes until we were eighteen. But they’re not really the most loving and supportive parents, so yeah.”

Stasia’s mom looked at me. There was a wiseness in her eyes as she nodded with what seemed like love and compassion for me. Surprisingly, it didn’t make me angry or sad, but rather warm toward her. She pat me on the shoulder.

“Well, I will be your mother. Obviously, not your mother that you lost because no one will take her place, but I will be her angel on earth to guide you in that role.”

“Mom,” Stasia said, “he’s a grown man. He does not need you to guide him and—”

“He may be a grown man, but every boy needs his mother.” It was Stasia’s mom’s turn to speak to Stasia with a

note of something indignant in her tone. “Stasia, you’re my daughter, I love you, but you do not know everything, okay?”

“Yes, Mom.” Stasia shrugged.

“Sebastian, I’m sorry that you lost your mother. Maybe one day you will tell us more about her?”

“Mom, he—”

“It’s okay,” I said, smiling at Stasia. I knew she was only saying these things because she was worried about me. She didn’t want me to feel bad because I hadn’t opened up to her about my mom and anything that had happened to me as a child.

In fact, no one knew the full story, not even Simon or Elijah. I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t been able to tell them. Maybe because my story had been so different from his. He’d truly been abandoned. He’d truly been an orphan with no one, no one in his memories that loved him. My situation had been different. My heart broke for a few seconds thinking about my past, my history.

“I’d love to tell you both sometime.”

“Tell us both?” Stasia’s mom frowned, and then she looked at Stasia, who had wide eyes and an open mouth. Well, that cat was out of the bag. Oops.

“Yeah. I haven’t actually shared it with anyone,” I said honestly, “stories about my mom. But now that I’m joining your family, it’s only right.”

Stasia’s face and expression turned to one of concern. She stretched slightly and yawned. “Well, Mom, I’m kind of tired now. I think we should go to bed. Right, Sebastian?”

I blinked at her, surprised. “Oh, you want me to come with you?”

She shook her head, a small smile on her face. “Yes, dear. I think it’s time for us to go to bed.”

I grinned at her. This is the first time she’d really gotten into the role. “Oh, do you want me to hug you and kiss you good night?” I asked, grinning at her.

“Oh, yes. I mean, that’s what I’ve been missing, right? That’s why I was so irritable today. Right, Mom?”

Her mom looked at her and then looked at me and narrowed her eyes. “Is there something I’m missing here?” she said. “Something I don’t know?”

I could feel my body stiffening. Did her mom know we were lying? Had we given ourselves away already?

“No, Mom. Why would you ask that?” Stasia said quickly, nervously.

“I don’t know. Just something. Hm. But anyway, the two of you go to bed, yes? You have sweet dreams?”

“Thanks, Mom.” Stasia stood up and walked over to her mom and gave her a hug and a kiss on both cheeks.

“Sleep well.”

“Night, Stavros.”

“Good night, Sebastian,” he answered me. “Good night, my darling Stasia.”

“Night, Papa,” she said.

We said our good nights and then hurried into the bedroom. I closed her bedroom door and locked it behind me.

“Well, I guess you really wanted to finish what we started, huh?” I winked at her, and she just shook her head. She walked over to me and grabbed my hand and squeezed it tightly.

“Hey,” she said softly, looking into my eyes.

“Hey,” I asked her curiously. “What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to apologize about my mom for her pushing everything.”

“There’s nothing to apologize about. It’s only natural she would’ve wanted to know about my parents.”

“Yeah, but I know, well, I know how hard it is for you to talk about your mom, and I don’t want this stupid situation to make you uncomfortable. I know you’re doing this for me, and

that's really nice of you because, well, we haven't really treated each other most nicely."

"Just because we banter doesn't mean we've treated each other badly."

"I know," she said quickly, "but some things..." She paused. "Well, there are some lines." She sighed. "I just don't want you to think that your mental health or emotional wellbeing is not important to me. In fact, it means a lot more than this whole thing. Now that I know that my parents' intentions weren't because they wanted me to be in a relationship as much as they wanted to start receiving money from babushka again, I don't feel so bad about telling them no and moving on with my life."

"But your babushka wants you to be happy and married before she dies, and you would not want her to suffer in silence because she's worried about you."

Stasia sighed. "You're right, of course. But when Babushka gets here, we'll just let her know that we're happy. We haven't set a date yet, but we're happy and we'll get married, too, and—"

I grabbed her hands and pulled her toward me and kissed her sweetly, softly. "It's okay, Stasia. We can take it one day at a time."

"I know, but this is just getting so complicated." She sighed and touched the side of my face. "When you talk about your mom, your eyes light up. Did you know that?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I didn't realize that."

"Yeah, I've never seen you look that way before, so full joy and happiness and, well, she must have been a really great person."

"She was," I said softly. "She was the best person I ever knew."

"I know I shouldn't ask this," she said, and before she could finish her sentence, I pressed my lips against hers again.

I knew it was going to be something about my mom, and while I was going to share my story with her eventually, it wasn't what I wanted to do in that moment. I couldn't. I was already at an emotional standstill. I knew that all of the day's activities had forced me to analyze where I was in my life and what I wanted in my life. I'd always thought, assumed, that I didn't want a family, or kids, or anything that felt real. But hanging out with Stasia and her parents and hearing them argue and fight, but love each other and speaking to her babushka on the phone, well, it felt warm and fuzzy and real, and I wanted that in my life.

My hand slipped up under her T-shirt and pulled it off. She didn't stop me. Instead, she moaned against my lips and reached down and grabbed my ass through my shorts. I laughed slightly as she squeezed. "You're like my tight buns, huh?"

"Oh, Sebastian," she said, laughing, "that I do."

We moved over to the bed and fell down and she pulled off my T-shirt while I pulled off her top. She leaned over and kissed me on the side of the face, and I moved my lips toward hers so that we were kissing properly. I ran my fingers down her body and played with her nipples, and she moaned as I touched her tender buds. My fingers slid down her stomach toward her panties, and I rubbed her clit. She was already wet and willing, waiting for me. I slipped a finger inside, loving this feeling of being close to her. Fuck.

"Oh, Sebastian," she groaned.

I loved the way she said my name. I pulled her shorts and panties down again and threw them on to the floor and stared down at her naked body. She was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen in my life and the only woman that I'd wanted this desperately.

She reached up and pulled off my top and then pulled down my shorts until I was naked as well. I got down onto the bed and kissed her. Her hands reached up and ran down my shoulders, her fingernails digging into the skin on my back. I let my body lower so that I was pressed against her, my weight

resting on my elbows at each side of her. She reached up and grabbed my head and pulled me toward her, and my tongue slipped into her mouth and we kissed. We moved back and forth from the body, her hands, my hands, her legs, my legs intertwined in such a sensual way that I didn't know where her body started and mine ended.

My fingers rubbed her gently, and her fingers grabbed a hold of my cock until I was thick and hard, all eight inches of me ready to go. There was a question in my eyes as I looked down at her, and she nodded imperceptibly. I grinned and then spread her legs slightly before positioning myself inside of her. I grabbed the tip of my cock and rubbed it against her clit, and she moaned as she reached up and tried to pull me down. I laughed slightly as I slipped inside of her. There was almost no friction because she was so wet. She cried out as I thrust in deep and hard. Fuck.

“You're so big,” she said.

I growled into her ear because she made me feel like a man, powerful, sexy, in control. I moved slowly at first, loving the feel of her breasts rubbing against my chest, loving the way she whimpered as my cock slipped in and out. Her legs were trembling. Her entire body was shifting on the bed. She was so close to orgasm, and so was I. I grabbed her face and kissed her passionately as I increased the tempo of my cock inside of her. Then I felt her body shaking as the orgasm released itself onto my cock, nice and lush and wet. I thrust two more times inside of her and felt myself coming hard and fast deep inside of her. She gasped as she held onto me, and then, spent, I collapsed down onto her, kissing the side of her face. I wiped the hair away from her cheek, and she moaned.

“Okay. So that was kind of hot, wasn't it just?” I said, grinning lazily at her.

“Don't let it get to your head, though, because—”

“I know,” I finished her sentence. “It was just for your parents.”

“It was totally just for my parents so they would know we were actually together.”

“I know. I think we should do it like five more times so we can make sure they really know.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said with a slight smile.

“Um, just one thing that I perhaps should have asked before I came inside of you,” I said with a laugh.

“Yes, Sebastian, I’m on the pill. No, not because I’ve been sleeping anyone. It helps to regulate my period. I haven’t actually slept with anyone in a while, and I’ve had STD tests done recently.” She paused. “I’m really hoping you’re going to say the same thing.”

“Actually, I had a three-month physical about a month ago, and I had STD tests.” I smiled. “And no, I haven’t slept with anyone since then.”

She looked at me in surprise.

“What? You think I’m some sort of male whore?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly say that.”

“But you were obviously thinking it.”

“Well, I don’t know you like that.”

“Well, now you do,” I said, pulling her into my arms. “This was really nice. I had a really great time with you.”

“I had a great time with you, too, Sebastian. Thank you for being my,” she wrinkled her nose, “fake fiancé.”

“Anytime, my love,” I said, and then we both froze at my words. I started laughing. “Ha, ha, I gotcha.”

“You’re a goof,” she said, but we both just stared at each other, a slight tension in the air because we both knew and understood that this was about more than being in a fake relationship.

There was a real connection here, but I wasn’t sure that either one of us really wanted to acknowledge that because I wasn’t sure that we knew what we would do next if there actually was chemistry between us. Because, ultimately, we had to break up, or her parents would wonder why we never got married. But how could we break up a fake engagement

and then start dating? It just didn't make sense. Though that was something I didn't want to think about right now; I just wanted to appreciate every moment that we had.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her toward me. “I'm ready again.”

FIFTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

I wish you were here. You'd be so happy.

Sebastian

When I woke up, Stasia was already out of the bed, and that made me disappointed. I had hoped that we'd have some morning sex before we went out to breakfast. But as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I realized how unrealistic that was. Last night had been amazing and we'd both really enjoyed ourselves, but I knew Stasia. She most probably had misgivings this morning because that was just who she was. She wasn't the sort of woman that slept casually with a man without having some sort of expectation, and even though I wasn't a male whore, I certainly didn't need to see a woman a second time just because I'd had sex with her.

I sat up in the bed and was thinking about what I was going to say to make her feel better when the door opened and she walked in with two cups of coffee. I frowned in surprise.

"Hey, morning." She grinned at me wickedly. "Sleep well?" My jaw dropped. "What? You didn't think I'd bring you coffee in the morning?"

"I just thought maybe you'd left the bedroom because you were embarrassed and regretted what happened last night."

Stasia burst out laughing. "This isn't the 1950s anymore, Sebastian. A woman doesn't have to feel embarrassed for

sleeping with a man. I don't feel any shame. I had a good time."

"Good enough for us to have a repeat this morning," I said, winking at her and loving the fact that she was so confident with herself and her body and who she was.

"We don't have time. My mom wants us to call Babushka because she is going to every department store where she lives to buy presents for everyone, because she's so grateful that you have chartered a private plane for her to come to Los Angeles. And she's called all of her friends in the old country and all of her friends at church and, well, you get it," she said as she handed me a cup of coffee.

I took a sip and moaned. "This is amazing."

"Thank you."

I stared at her for a couple of seconds. "And you added cinnamon and some honey, right?"

"Yep. I listened to how you wanted your coffee yesterday."

"You were really paying attention, weren't you?"

"Oh, I always pay attention," she said, laughing. "Like when you were playing with my ass last night," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," I said, grinning at her wickedly.

"And your fingers kind of touched my asshole." She raised an eyebrow as she sat on the edge of the bed.

I started laughing. "I was just touching you, Stasia. That was it."

"You weren't hoping for a little ass play or anything, were you?"

"What?" My jaw dropped. "Why, were you hoping for that?"

"No. I don't know that any woman is ever hoping for that." She shook her head and started giggling. "In fact, I've never done anal, and I've never had anything up my ass."

“And you want it to stay that way?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged, biting down on her lower lip.

I couldn't stop myself. I reached forward and kissed her on the lips.

“Now that's how you say good morning,” she said with a wicked smile.

“You really surprise me,” I said, shaking my head and then taking another sip of my coffee. “Here I was waking up disappointed, wondering what I was going to say because I was nervous you were going to be upset that we'd slept together and regretting your life decisions and trying to avoid me, but here you are laughing and happy and joking about last night.”

“As I said, Sebastian, I'm a modern woman, and I'm not going to be embarrassed by having a healthy sex life.”

“Even though your mom thinks you're a virgin.”

“My mom knows I'm not a virgin.” She rolled her eyes. “I don't know what she was on yesterday. Maybe she was trying to make you think I was because that would make me seem more desirable.”

“But we're already engaged.”

“You don't know mothers,” she said, laughing, and then paused, absolute shock on her face as she realized what she said. “Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I—”

“It's fine. I'm not that sensitive,” I said with a laugh. “I am a man that has emotion, but I'm not ultrasensitive every time you mention the term mother or not having a mother. I've been alive for a good number of years without having one. I don't think I'm going to crack just because you make a joke.”

“It wasn't a funny joke, though. I—”

“Oh my gosh. Stasia, it's okay.”

She tilted her head to the side. “I know, but I just want to be sensitive to your feelings.” She wrinkled her nose. “Okay. Maybe I'm treating you like a pansy, but...”

“It’s okay,” I said, “because I was treating you like one, too. Or we were thinking of each other as pansies.”

“I don’t know that I like that term anymore,” she said, shaking her head. “I’d rather be a kickass flower.”

“What’s a kickass flower?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. Maybe a sunflower or a rose.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Roses have thorns.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Just like me, they’re prickly.”

I laughed then. “I don’t think you’re that prickly.”

“Yes, you do, Sebastian, but that’s okay. You need to know I’m prickly so that whenever you think you’re going to act up, you know there’s a high probability that you are going to get dun dun dun dun,” she said and pointed her hand at me.

“Tricked?” I responded, and she grinned.

“You learn fast.”

“Well, I do try,” I said. “Are you sure we don’t have time for a quickie?” I ran my fingers up and down her leg.

“We don’t. Sorry.”

“But you want to, right?”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds, and I could tell she was thinking about what to say.

“Here’s how I’m going to answer that,” she said with a sweet smile. “Last night was fun, and I think that if the opportunity were to come up again, I might not say no.”

“Oh, wow. Strong praise.” I shook my head. “You make me feel like a winner, Stasia.”

“I do aim to please.”

She gave me a wicked little smile, and she leaned forward and kissed my lips. Her tongue slipped into my mouth, and I pulled on her hair. She moaned slightly as she pulled back.

“Now, there’s a proper morning kiss for you. It’s time to get showered and ready for the day.”

“Oh my gosh,” I said, “you sound like a right bossy boots.”

“Hey, you wanted to stay here. These are the rules.”

“The rules are I must get showered and ready for the day right now?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Well, if those are the only rules that you have for me, I think I can abide by them.”

“Oh, I have other rules for you,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

“And what rules would those be?”

“You’ll find out later.”

“Well, I have a rule for you as well.”

“You do?” She paused as she got up. “And what’s that?”

“You’ll find out later, too.”

“Oh, you totally have nothing, do you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re only saying that because I told you I had more rules and I’m not going to tell you until later. So now you’re trying to one-up me.”

“Is it working?” I laughed as I got out of bed.

She nodded slowly as she stared at my naked body. I licked my lips and then ran my hands through my hair as I stood there enjoying her gaze on me. I could see her eyes had fallen to my manhood, and my cock rose to the occasion. I watched as she swallowed hard.

“You should put some clothes on, Sebastian,” she said quickly.

“Oh, you mean I can’t go out like this? Would your mother not approve?”

“Very funny,” she said, shaking her head. “Sebastian, put some clothes on.”

“But I haven’t done my morning routine yet,” I said as my hand moved down to my cock and slowly moved back and forth.

“What are you doing?” she said breathlessly, her eyes fixated on my fingers as they moved up and down my ever-hardening cock.

“Well, you said you wouldn’t give me any morning sex, and I’m horny as hell, so...”

“Oh my God, really?” Her eyes widened, and she took a step forward.

That had not been something I was expecting. “Really?” I said, closing my eyes for a couple of seconds as I felt my cock getting harder and harder.

“Oh, Sebastian,” she said, and my eyes flew open as I felt her hands on my shoulders, pushing me back onto the bed.

“What’s going on?” I asked her in surprise.

“You’ll see,” she said.

Her lips touched mine, and then she kissed down my chest toward my cock. My eyes widened as she opened her mouth and took me into it. She moved her tongue along the length of my shaft and sucked on my head until I thought I was going to explode for days. I felt her fingers on my balls, playing with them, as she continued to take me deep into her mouth.

“Oh fuck, don’t stop.” I grunted as my fingers moved to her hair and scrubbed her scalp.

She didn’t respond but continued with her blowjob.

“Oh yeah. Oh yeah,” I moaned as she bobbed her head up and down. “Fuck,” I said. “You need to move now, Stasia. I’m going to cum. I’m going to cum.”

But she didn’t stop. Instead, she just took me deeper and deeper until I exploded into her mouth, and she kept on sucking and licking.

“Oh my gosh,” I said, my body completely relaxed as I finished cumming.

She licked my penis dry and then kissed back up my chest and kissed my lips.

“Now, I hope you’re ready to listen to all my rules today. It seems like you’ve released everything you had to.”

“What the fuck?” I said, laughing. “Who are you?”

“I’m Stasia,” she said, “your fiancée. Nice to finally make your acquaintance.”

“Fuck yeah,” I said, nodding as I looked to her. “I’d like to make your acquaintance every second of the day.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“Can I return the favor?” I said, pushing her back.

“Not right now,” she said, shaking her head. “We don’t have time.”

“What do you mean we don’t have time?”

“What I said,” she said.

“Fine,” I said, running my hand to her breast and squeezing. “But tonight, tonight I will dominate you.”

“We’ll see,” she said, winking and pulling me up. “Now go shower. We have a lot to do today.”

SIXTEEN

STASIA

Sebastian was humming to himself as we made our way into the kitchen. My mom had made omelets with toast and was smiling at us as we entered.

“Good night?” she asked.

“Very good, thank you. How did you sleep, Mrs. Poe?” he asked her, the smile not leaving his face.

“Very well, indeed. It was so nice of Gemma to lend us her bed.”

“Well, now that she’s dating that millionaire,” Stavros said, smugly.

“Well, yes.” My mom nodded. “I just think it’s a little bit tacky, though, don’t you?”

“What are you talking about, Mom?” I stared at her with a bemused expression.

“Well, I mean, Gemma just has a boyfriend, and she’s spending almost every night with him. And you are here with a fiancé and, well, you barely sleep in the same room. I just think that her parents would be so disappointed if they knew that she was—”

“Mom, what are you trying to say?”

“Your mother’s trying to say that she has very modern values,” Stavros added, and I rolled my eyes.

“You know what, guys? That is really old fashioned of you, and I don’t think it’s very nice. Gemma is like your

second daughter, and—”

“You know we love her,” my mother said. “Sometimes you’re too sensitive, Stasia.”

“I definitely agree with that,” Sebastian added, and I raised a single eyebrow at him.

I couldn’t believe the gall of this man to agree with my mother after what I’d just done to him. I licked my lips and shook my head at him. He was going to pay for that later tonight.

I had to admit that the previous evening’s fun and what I’d done this morning had awakened me in ways I hadn’t known I was missing. There was just something about Sebastian that made me feel flirty and carefree. And I knew we were complicating the situation we were already in, but I didn’t care.

“So have your breakfast,” my mother said.

“Mom, can we?”

“Please have your breakfast, Stasia. And no, you’re not going to argue with me again today.”

“I’m not trying to argue with you. I’m just trying to say—”

“We have to call your babushka. She’s going shopping, and she needs to know if she should get the bathing suit.”

“Mom, why would she need to get a bathing suit?”

“In case we go to Santa Monica Beach.”

I burst out laughing then. “Really, Mom? Babushka’s going to go into the ocean at Santa Monica Beach?” I took a deep breath. My parents were really trying my patience.

“I mean, she might like it,” Sebastian said as he sat down and started eating his omelet. “This is absolutely delicious. Thank you, Mrs. Poe.”

“Oh, you’re welcome. I do like a man that likes to enjoy his food.”

“Oh, I love to eat,” he said. “Isn’t that right, Stasia?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “All the time we’ve been together, I seem to be the one doing the most eating.”

“Well, that’s because you like to eat, too,” he said, winking at me. “And to be quite honest, I like watching you eat.”

“I’m sure you do,” I said, “though sometimes the food’s a little salty.”

“Well, that can’t be helped,” he said. He stretched slightly and then rubbed his stomach. “You know what I’ve been craving?” he asked no one in particular.

“No, Sebastian. Why don’t you tell us what you’ve been craving?”

He bit down on his lower lip and smirked. “Some fish,” he said, and I gasped.

Was he kidding me?

“Fish and chips, you know?” he said again, and I let out a low sigh.

If he kept this up, my mom and dad were going to know what was going on. They were old, but they weren’t stupid.

“Oh, I love fish and chips,” my mom said. “When we were in England, we went to Brighton, which is a very nice city by the sea, and we had fish and chips, and it was so fresh.”

“Oh, I love fresh fish,” Sebastian said. “Cod, haddock, salmon, tuna.” He lowered his voice. “...Stasia.”

I glared at him. “Sebastian, why don’t you finish your breakfast instead of talking about other food? I have a feeling you’re not going to be having any fish or chips for a long time.”

“I don’t need the chips so much,” he said, winking at me. “The fish will do.”

“Well, let’s make sure we get you some fish today, then,” my mom said, completely oblivious to what the conversation was really about. “So you nearly finished with your breakfast, Stasia?”

“Mom, I’ve literally had one bite of toast.”

“Okay, I’ll call Babushka now, then.”

It was Sebastian’s turn to chuckle. “Oh, I’m so happy you’re part of the family, Sebastian.” My mom rubbed his shoulder.

I was pleased that she liked him. They really seemed to be forming a bond. But it made me dread the time when I was going to have to tell her that the relationship was over. I knew she’d blame me, she’d say I was too sarcastic or too mean or too surly, and that’s why the relationship ended. And I’d have to take it because, well, it wasn’t like I could say, “The relationship was never real in the first place, Mom. We were just doing it so you wouldn’t try and marry me off to some geriatric wannabe.”

“Okay, Stavros, get the phone and do the FaceTime. Let’s get Babushka on the line.”

“Yes, dear.” My stepdad stood up and walked over to her. He pulled out his phone and pressed the button.

Within a couple of seconds, I could hear Babushka’s voice on the screen. “Ah, Stavros, Stavros! I’m here, in Macy’s. I’m thinking, ‘Do I get a bikini or do I get a one-piece?’”

My jaw dropped. There was no way in hell my babushka was considering wearing a bikini, was she?

“Oh, let me put Stasia on the phone. She know best.”

The round face of my babushka was on the screen. “Good morning, Babushka.”

“Morning, darling Stasia. Where’s that handsome man of yours?”

I turned the phone toward Sebastian.

“Morning, Babushka.”

“Ah, there he is. He looks even better in the light of day.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “So Babushka, what’s this I hear about you wanting to get a bikini?”

“Well, I was thinking to myself, ‘I’m going to be in Los Angeles and what do people in Los Angeles wear? They either

go nude or they wear bikini.’ And I’m too old to go nude. So I say, ‘Why not wear a bikini, eh?’”

“Babushka, no one is going nude at Santa Monica Beach, trust me. You can get a one-piece if you really want to go. But are you sure you want to go to the ocean? It’s the Pacific. It’s cold.”

“I just want to do whatever you want to do. I’m so excited. I tell all my friends I’m going to Los Angeles in private jet, million-dollar jet. Oh, everyone’s so jealous. I tell them, ‘Don’t be jealous, my granddaughter marrying a billionaire who will fly me here, there, and everywhere, wherever I want to go.’”

“Babushka, that’s not exactly true. We’re just having you fly down because…” I bit down on my lower lip. “Anyway, have you spoken to your doctor? I really want to know what’s going on. I don’t understand exactly what ailments you have. You seem like you’re doing okay if you’re going to Macy’s and looking for swimsuits.”

“Oh, my darling, everything aches. When you get to my age, your back aches, your legs ache, your arms ache, your head aches, even your tongue aches. I can barely eat my food without it aching.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Babushka,” I said, biting down on my lower lip. “So there’s just one thing Sebastian needs to know.”

“What is that, darling?”

“Babushka, I chartered the plane and the limo to collect you, and I just wanted to know if you knew how long you wanted to stay in town because I want to make sure that we have the best jet available for you when you are flying back home.”

“Oh, I don’t know when I’m going to be flying back,” she said. “I was thinking after the wedding?”

My jaw dropped and my heart started racing. This could not be happening. “I think you’re confused, Babushka. You’re

not coming for the wedding. You're just coming to meet Sebastian," I said quickly.

"But we'll have to go dress shopping and we have to look at venues and then we have to look at houses."

"Why do we have to look at houses?"

"Because you will move into a new house when you get married, no? And you don't really understand the things to look for like I do."

"Babushka, no, you're going too fast. You're just coming so that we can show you around LA and you can meet Sebastian and you can see how happy we are and—"

"Oh, darling, my head is starting to hurt. Eh? Put your mother on the phone."

"Yes, Babushka." I handed the phone to my mother.

She started speaking in Russian very quickly and moved into the other room. I wasn't sure exactly what she was saying because I couldn't hear, but I knew whatever the conversation was about had to do with me.

I leaned forward and whispered to Sebastian, "We need to come up with another plan because my mom, Stavros, and Babushka are really getting out of control, and I have a bad feeling that they're going to be pushing for a lot of crap when they get here that is just not going to happen."

"I don't know," he said with a smile. "I'm sure they're just talking. What can they really try and do?"

"I don't know, but you don't know them like I do."

"I don't want to know them like you do," he said. "I just want to know you." He threw his head back and licked his lips, and we both burst out laughing. "Okay, that sounded a lot cooler in my head than it did in person."

"Sebastian, sometimes I really wonder about you and what is going through your brain."

"Well, right now I can tell you exactly what's going through my brain."

“Oh, yeah? And what is that?”

“I’m thinking about...” He leaned forward and whispered into my ear. “Right now I’m thinking about you on all fours, buck naked, me behind you, cock in my hand, and I’m getting ready to thrust into you so deep and hard that you scream out my name and everyone in this apartment complex hears and you blush furiously because—”

“Is everything okay?” my mother said, walking back into the kitchen.

My face was bright red and my heart was racing. “Um, yeah, Mom. Is Babushka okay?” I leaned back quickly.

There was a devious glint in Sebastian’s eyes, and I knew that he knew how much he had turned me on.

This had to stop. If he continued with these crazy little messages and conversations, he was going to blow everything because I was either going to blow up at him or I was going to do something that would embarrass me for the rest of my life. I would be absolutely mortified if my parents heard me having sex, calling out his name. And the thing was, I knew he wasn’t lying.

I knew that when he whispered those things, he meant every single word. He wanted me on the bed and he wanted me to call out his name. All night, he’d been telling me, “Say my name. How badly do you want it? Beg me, beg me.” And I’d whispered softly and groaned and moaned and he’d fucked me mercilessly.

But I knew he wanted more. He wanted to go harder, faster, and I wanted that, too. But that couldn’t happen with my parents here, and it wouldn’t happen when my parents were gone. I was not going to keep messing around with him once they were out of town.

We had to end this thing, and we had to end it quickly. Everything was just becoming too twisted up in my brain. I was finding it hard to think straight. I was finding it hard to think about anything other than being back in the bed with him, and that was the last thing I needed or wanted.

I had to concentrate on making Babushka happy. I wanted her to meet Sebastian, have a fun time in Los Angeles, and then go home and feel like she was satisfied with where I stood in my life. I didn't want her to be worried about me. I didn't want whatever treatment she was going through to not work because she was so focused on what was going on in my life. I needed Babushka to be calm and at peace with whatever was going on.

I just had to think of a way to stop her and my mom from going completely overboard because there wasn't actually going to be a wedding happening, and it wasn't like I could tell them that. I had to do everything in my power to make them satisfied enough that they wouldn't push for anything too concrete. The last thing I needed was for Babushka to be sending save the dates out all over the world.

"Stasia," Sebastian said with a small, little smile, "I think your mother is ready for us to go out in a little bit. Will you be out of your daydream by then?"

I blinked at him and blushed furiously. "Of course," I said, looking around the kitchen. My mother was no longer there, and neither was Stavros.

"They've gone to get ready for the day," he said. "Your babushka's arriving tomorrow. They want to get some special foods in place for her."

"Oh, yeah. That makes sense." I nodded.

"And I offered to buy a new mattress topper for the bed she'll sleep on because I guess she likes her mattress to be a certain firmness."

"You don't have to do that. I'll pay you back. Actually, I'll buy it. I have a credit card."

"No," he said. "It's okay. You can pay me back in other ways."

"If by that you mean giving you another blowjob, I don't do that because you're helping me out. I do that because—"

"I know why you did it, Stasia. You did it because you couldn't go another second without having me in your mouth."

And I'm here to tell you right now that I don't want to go another second without fucking you. So finish eating your omelet and let's go to the bedroom so I can fuck your brains out before we leave the house. Okay?"

I stared at him, loving the authoritative tone in his voice. I could see that he was wondering if he'd pushed it too far, but my panties were wet and I was ready and willing to go. "Okay," I squeaked out, laughing at him. "But this time, I'm going to be on top."

"You can be on top after I fuck you from behind," he said. "My rules." And we both hurried up and finished our meal.

SEVENTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

If I were to buy you a ring, what sort of ring would it be? Gold, silver? Would you prefer a diamond or a ruby or a sapphire, maybe even a garnet? I don't even know. That makes me sad. There are so many things I don't know about you. That I will never know. So many questions I will never get to ask. I think that makes me the saddest of all.

Sebastian

I stared at my journal and wondered if there would ever come a day when I didn't want to write in it. Would there come a day when I didn't want to write her a letter? It was something I'd been doing since I was a teenager, something that I'd been told would help me, and in some ways it had, but in other ways it made me feel even sadder. When you had a love, a true love, it was hard to accept that it was over and gone from your life. It was hard to accept that it would never be again. And it doesn't matter if that person was the love of your life, your soulmate, or your parent. It just mattered that it had existed and that somewhere in the universe there was a memory of those two hearts loving each other purely, fully, and thoroughly. I put my journal back in my drawer and closed it. My journal was my safe space. I said things I never dared speak out loud, and I never shared them with anyone. I couldn't even imagine letting anyone read or hear those personal thoughts.

I looked around my bedroom and wondered what Stasia would think of it. It was so different from her space. Where hers was colorful and bright, mine was stark and gray, with light gray walls and dark gray floors. Even my duvet was a grayish blue. There was no color in my life, and I hadn't even realized it until I'd met her. My phone rang, and I looked at the screen. I smiled when I saw it was Stasia. Had she known I was thinking about her? I picked it up, a smile on my face. Stasia always made my heart happy.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Not much," she said softly. "I just wanted to let you know that if you want to back out now, you can."

"Why would I want to back out?" I chuckled, knowing exactly why any sane man would want to back out.

"Because my entire crazy family will be staying in your house in less than twenty-four hours, and you're used to living alone."

"I invited them, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that was before you knew just how crazy they were and you haven't even met Babushka in person."

"I think I know how crazy she is without meeting her in person, and I say that with all the love that I can muster." I laughed. "Don't get me wrong, your babushka sounds absolutely delightful, but I've already been able to tell she's probably going to be a handful."

"You can back out, Sebastian." She almost sounded like she was the one that wanted me to do that.

"I don't want to," I said. "I would like some people in my space, filling up the chairs at my dining room table, people cooking in the kitchen."

"You've never cooked in your kitchen?" She sounded shocked.

"I mean, I've made pasta and eggs."

"Oh, for all the women you've had over," she said, and I wasn't sure if there was a tinge of jealousy in her tone. I didn't

want to admit to her that the eggs had been for women that stayed over. For some reason, I didn't want to remind her of the fact that I had gotten around. Sure, I didn't get around as some men got around, but I wasn't an innocent schoolboy.

"Oh my gosh, Sebastian, I'm taking that as a yes." Stasia giggled, and I could tell that she wasn't judging me for my past.

"Hey, now. I didn't even say anything," I spoke up quickly. I didn't want her to think I was some sort of male whore. I hadn't been with *that* many women.

"You didn't have to say it. The fact that you went completely quiet was enough for me."

"Okay, Sherlock," I said. "You really can't take that to mean anything."

"Don't worry," she said. "I know you haven't been a monk."

"And that doesn't bother you?" I asked her.

"Why would it bother me? It's not like we're dating or anything."

"No, we're just engaged."

"We're not really engaged, Sebastian. We're..."

"What are we, Stasia?" I asked her softly.

"What do you mean, what are we?"

"I mean, what are we?" I asked her. "Sure, we're fake engaged for the purposes of your family not trying to marry you off to a prune, but—"

"Oh no. You're not going on about prunes again, are you?"

"I thought now that you've had the banana, you would appreciate it even more." I laughed as she groaned.

"I wouldn't exactly say a banana. I'd say..." She paused and giggled.

"Out with it, Stasia."

"I don't think you want to know what I have to say."

“I think I do. What were you going to say? Eggplant?”

She groaned. “Really, Sebastian?”

“What? I wasn’t going to say it because that’s what everyone calls it, but I do think I am akin to an eggplant.”

“I was going to say carrot,” she said, laughing loudly.

I growled into the phone. “Carrot. Really? Carrot?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not too skinny, but it’s not overly large.” She giggled.

“What the hell does that mean, Stasia?”

She stopped then. “I don’t want to hurt your pride.”

“You’re not hurting my pride. I can whip off my pants right now and send you a dick pic if you want. So you can see how much I’m not like a carrot. In fact, I might Instacart some carrots to my house and do a comparison shot.”

“No, thank you, Sebastian.”

“What? You don’t want to see how much larger my dick is than a carrot?”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“I think you will, and you have,” I said. “I’m going to bring a carrot into the bedroom tonight and you’ll suck on that, and then you’ll suck on me, and then you’ll be able to compare.”

“Oh my God. Sebastian, it’s not that serious,” she said, laughing.

“I think it’s kind of serious. You—”

“Oh my gosh.” She cut me off. “Do not say I insulted you because you know I’m just joking with you and you’re constantly—”

I burst out laughing then. “Gotcha. I’m not that sensitive. Darling, I know you think I’m this fragile man that can be broken by words or jokes or insensitive comments, but trust me, I’m tough. When you grow up in the foster system, you have to be.”

“I know,” she said. “And I love joking with you. That’s the best part of our relationship, friendship, whatever it is, but I also don’t want to insult you. I know men can be...” She paused. “Well, I don’t want to say fragile, but you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean. And I’ve met plenty of guys like that. I played football in high school, so trust me, I know men whose egos get bruised very easily, but I’m not one of them. Neither is Simon. Neither is Elijah.”

“You and your brother talk about Elijah all the time, yet no one’s met him.”

“I know. I miss him. He enjoys being in England, but I know Simon and I wish he was back in the States.”

“Well, he’s coming to visit soon, right?”

“Yep.” I smiled. “And then you’ll get to meet him. Just don’t fall for him.”

“Why would I fall for him?”

“Because he’s handsome, and he’s cocky, and he is arrogant, and he goes for every pretty woman he sees.”

“Okay? And?”

“So when he sees you, he’ll go for you.”

“Well, let’s hope not, right? Seeing as I’m your fake fiancé.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Well, Elijah’s not the sort of guy that lets that get in the way of his flirting.”

“Oh my God. He sounds horrible. He would really sleep with someone that you’re sleeping with?”

“No, but that wouldn’t stop him from trying to pull my girl. I know I’m making him sound horrible, but he’s really not that bad. Anyway, you changed the subject quickly there, Stasia.”

“No, I didn’t,” she said. “Anyway, Mom and Dad are just packing up their stuff. We’ll be ready when he comes to pick us up. Let me make sure I’ve got the plan straight. We’re

going to go to the airport and get Babushka and the limo, and then we're going to go back to your place?"

"Yep," I confirmed. "I have a private chef coming over to cook us dinner." I smiled, proud of myself for having thought of that. "And then Simon and Gemma will join us. I've invited Jake as well. He's not sure if he can make it."

"What about Holly and Claire?" she asked softly.

"I've invited Holly, and Claire said she's not available, something to do with her son."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. She would need to find a babysitter."

"Yeah." I nodded. "But yeah, we'll see who's there. I mean, I don't mind if it's just you, me, your mom and dad, and Babushka. Really get to know everyone well."

"Yeah," she said. "I kind of don't want it just to be us because then I know the focus is going to be on the wedding, and I really don't want to argue with everyone tonight."

"Just let it go, Stasia. Don't take it so seriously."

"Trust me when you're in a wedding, standing at the end of the aisle, waiting for me to come down it because we just let things go. Don't blame me."

"Well, we wouldn't let it get that far, would we?"

"It's a slippery slope, Sebastian. You let one thing go, you end up letting ten things go. Trust me. I know my family."

"Hey, we'll just play it by ear," I said. My doorbell rang then, and I frowned. "Hey, someone's here. I'll call you when I'm leaving."

"Sounds good. See you later, Sebastian."

"See you later, doll," I said and hung up as I walked down the stairs toward the front door. I opened it and frowned. There was a young guy with a cap standing there. "Hello."

"Hi. Are you...?" He looked at the pad in front of him. "Sebastian Bradford?"

“Yeah. Can I help you?” What the fuck was going on? I wasn’t being served, was I? I didn’t know who would be serving me.

“This is for you.” He handed me a manila envelope.

“What is this?”

“I don’t know, sir. I just work for the company. I don’t put the stuff in the envelopes.”

He stared at me, and I rolled my eyes. “Okay, then. Thank you.” I was about to shut the door, and he cleared his throat. “Is there something else?” I asked him.

He gave me a glare. “Yeah, I’m a delivery person.”

“Okay. And?”

“And I just delivered you an envelope.”

“Okay? And?”

“I make minimum wage, buddy.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds, not comprehending what he was going to say.

“You live here in this mansion, and I live right off the skid row. Say you could hook me up with a tip or something.”

My jaw dropped. Was this guy crazy?

“Didn’t you get paid to deliver this envelope?” I held it up and waved it in front of his face.

“Yeah. But didn’t you know tips are mandatory these days?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said tips are mandatory. When you got a delivery, you’re meant to tip thirty percent.”

“Get out of town, buddy.”

“Oh, let me guess. You’re one of those right-wing conservatives that don’t like to pay a penny more.”

I stared at him, stared at the envelope, and rolled my eyes. “Buddy, if you don’t like what they’re paying you, get a job.”

He pulled out his phone and started recording. “I am here in West Hollywood with this man that lives in a mansion that must have cost at least ten million, and I am a delivery man, and I just delivered him something and he told me that he’s not going to tip me and he told me to get a job when I have a job. He is trying to discriminate against me because—”

My jaw dropped. This was not happening. “Dude, what are you doing?”

“I’m taking a video, and I’m going to put it on social media and get you canceled, Mister...” He looked at his pad again. “Sebastian Bradford.”

I started laughing then and shook my head. “Canceled from what, dude?”

“From your job, and from your girlfriend or whoever, and everyone’s going to know that you don’t respect people like me.”

“Dude, you literally showed up at my house with an envelope. Go and cut your hair, wash your face, and find another job if you don’t like what this one’s paying you. I’m not tipping you for delivering me an envelope.” I took a deep breath. “And if you’ll excuse me, I am going to go back into my house now, which didn’t cost ten million, by the way. It cost seven-point-three million.” I smiled at him sweetly. “Have a nice day.” I shut the door and closed my eyes. Was the world going crazy? What the hell was wrong with people? What was the hell wrong with the youngsters of today? The kid with literally an asshole. And then he was trying to make me look bad. He didn’t know anything about me. I took a deep breath. I didn’t know whether to shout or laugh at what had just happened. I grabbed my phone and punched in Stasia’s number. “Hey,” I said when she picked up the phone.

“Hey, did you change your mind already?” she said, laughing.

“No, I just had a really weird incident go down.”

“Oh no. What happened?” she asked softly. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine. You know someone was at my door just now.”

“Yeah. Who was it?”

“It was some guy who handed me an envelope.”

“Oh, okay.”

“And then he went off on me and told me he was going to get me canceled because I didn’t want to give him a tip.”

“What?” She sounded shocked. “Who tips for an envelope?”

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head. “The world has gone crazy.”

“Are you meant to tip UPS and FedEx drivers?” she asked. “That’s crazy. I was at the coffee shop the other day and I literally got a hot coffee to go and they asked me if I wanted to tip \$5. I was like, no, I don’t want to tip \$5. The coffee only cost me three.”

I laughed then. Talking to Stasia always made me feel better. I wasn’t sure why she affected my mood so positively, but I was grateful for it. “Yeah, it’s crazy. I don’t know what’s going on in the world anymore.”

“It’s not your fault, Sebastian. People are weird these days.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“For what?” She sounded confused.

“For making me feel like I’m not some sort of tightwad asshole.”

“Oh, you’re definitely not. You’re one of the most generous people I’ve ever met in my life. Don’t worry about that guy. He’s an idiot.”

“He had the gall to take a video of me as well.”

“He did?” she asked. “What?”

“He told me he was going to put it on social media.” I rolled my eyes. “Like I care.”

“Oh, that’s so sad,” she said. “I mean, I get it. For people that do really egregious things, they do need to be called out, but I feel like so many innocent random people are being videoed for just living their daily life, and it’s not right. I feel like it’s almost like a form of blackmail. Do this, or do that, or agree with me, or don’t express your opinion, or I’m going to cancel you.”

“I know,” I said. “I totally get it when racists are called out or discriminatory people. I mean, I’ve seen some videos that made my jaw drop, but all of that, enough is enough. Come on. But just everyday stuff.” I shook my head. “I was reading about one video where a girl was in the gym, and she was like this guy is making me uncomfortable. And he literally just walked past her, grabbed his weight, and continued going. It’s just ridiculous.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s a sad state of affairs when you can’t even live your life without worrying someone is going to video you or take what you say out of context to make you look bad.”

“Wow,” I said.

“What?” she asked.

“I can’t believe we agree about something.”

“We agree about many things, Sebastian.”

“I guess that’s why we get on so well,” I said.

“Perhaps. I also like the fact that you make me laugh.”

“You make me laugh, too,” I said softly. “But anyway, I should get going. I’ll see you soon.”

“Sounds good. Sebastian. And hey...”

“Yeah?” I asked her.

“Don’t let it bother you. Okay? You’re a good man.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me, especially coming from you.”

“Oh,” she asks.

“Yeah. I respect you and your opinion, and I think you have a good judge of character. So if you think I’m a decent guy, I can’t be doing everything so badly.”

“You’re a great guy, Sebastian.”

“Thank you. Am I also the best lover you ever had?”

She burst out laughing then. “I’m going to go now. I’ll see you later.”

“You’re the best lover I’ve ever had,” I said softly. And she was quiet for a few seconds.

“Okay. Eggplant,” she said and then hung up.

EIGHTEEN

STASIA

I looked over at Sebastian in the back of the limo and studied the side of his face. He was a really thoughtful and sweet guy. I could hear my mom still oohing and ahing over the roses he'd gotten her. And my papa was extremely excited to smoke the Cuban cigars he'd been gifted. Sebastian held another bouquet of roses in his hands that he was going to present to Babushka when we got to the airport. "What are you thinking?" he said as he turned to look at me, a small smile on his face.

"Nothing," I said quickly, slightly embarrassed to have been caught staring at him.

"So we should be there in about five minutes," he said, his hand moving to my knee and squeezing. "I'm excited to meet your babushka."

"I think she's going to be really excited to meet you, too. Scratch that," I said, correcting myself, "I *know* she's extremely excited to meet you. Also," I lowered my voice, "thank you so much for the flowers. I've never seen my mom look happier."

"I'm glad she liked them," he said, his eyes on mine. "Thank you for making me feel better this afternoon, by the way."

"Oh?" I stared at him, looking at his lips, wanting to kiss him, but feeling awkward about that.

"Yeah, that little situation I had with that pipsqueak little boy." He shook his head. "I was starting to get angry, but after

talking to you, I felt fine. All I could do was laugh.”

“That was a weird situation,” I said. “I would’ve been annoyed myself.”

“You’re really beautiful, you know that?” He looked at the side of my face, and I frowned.

“What are you staring at?”

“You’re going to make fun of me if I tell you.”

“No, tell me.”

“I was looking at the way the hairs at the side of your face curl behind your ear. It’s just so cute.”

“What?” I said, laughing. “What are you talking about?”

“I told you it was weird. I guess I’m a weird guy.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said as I stared back at his dark locks. I loved his hair. How silky it felt, how it fit his face perfectly. “By the way, what was in the envelope after all that?”

“You know, I didn’t even open it.” He started chuckling. “By the time I got off the phone with you, I went and had a glass of coffee and made sure to Instacart some vegetables.”

I glared at him. “Oh my gosh, Sebastian, what did you Instacart?”

“Some carrots and some eggplants.” He laughed.

“Really?”

“What? I have a point to make.”

“Okay, but I’m saying it’s more like an eggplant.” I realized that I said the wrong word as soon as it slipped out, and his eyes widened with glee.

“I told you it was more like an eggplant.”

“I mean carrot.” I burst out laughing. “A carrot. A carrot.”

“Is everything okay, darling?” my mom asked from her seat across from us.

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Because I heard you talking about carrots rather loudly. Please don’t tell me you’re on another one of your diets where you’re only going to eat lettuce and carrots.”

“If she just wants to eat carrots, let her eat carrots,” Sebastian said.

I just glared at him. “We were talking about something else, Mom.”

“Oh, what were you talking about?” my mom said, and I wanted to groan.

“I was just thinking about possibly getting a rabbit,” I said quickly. “And if I get a rabbit, it will need to eat lots of carrots, as he was saying.”

“Oh darling, please don’t get a rabbit.” My mom shook her head. “You really don’t need a rabbit. Don’t even get a dog. You two want to have plenty of time to travel the world and do whatever you want to do before you get any pets. I suggest getting married in a few months, traveling the world for a year, and then start popping out babies so all of us are still able to help. Perhaps Papa and I can move to Los Angeles or San Diego or Santa Barbara or wherever you guys end up going.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?” I stared at her in confusion. “Whoever talked about San Diego or Santa Barbara?”

“Well, I was telling Papa that when you get married, you don’t want to be in such a big city, and San Diego and Santa Barbara are absolutely gorgeous, and I was thinking you two could move there and you could buy two mansions. You two could live in one mansion, and then Papa and I could live in the other one. And if it had a guest house, Babushka could live in the back, and that way you’d have free babysitting forever.”

“Mom, Sebastian is not about to buy you a mansion in San Diego, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, San nothing.”

“Well, you don’t have to be like that, darling. I didn’t mention San Francisco.”

“Mom, I can’t believe you would even—”

“It’s okay,” Sebastian said, laughing. “In fact, I think that’s a really good idea.”

“What?” My jaw dropped as I glared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, who will we trust more than your parents to look after the kids when we want to go out for dinner or maybe go on a quick business trip?”

“Um, Sebastian...”

“I’m just saying little Sebastian and little Stasia will want to be with their grandparents more than they’ll want to be with some random stranger.”

“I’m not calling my kids Little Sebastian and Little Stasia.”

“Okay, well, we can have a talk about the names,” he said. “We don’t have to go with that just because I mentioned it now. I am open to other names.”

“Oh, I was thinking you could name one of your kids Matilda,” my mom said.

“Matilda? Are you crazy, Mom?”

“Well, you always did love that book when you were younger, and I thought, ah, Stasia with a little Matilda. How beautiful would that be?”

“Mom, I’m not naming my daughter Matilda. And Sebastian, we do not even need to be having this conversation right now.” I could hear that I was getting upset, but this was getting absolutely crazy. And the sad part was a part of me could picture having kids with Sebastian. A part of me would love to be a mom. Not anytime soon, but eventually. I loved kids. I wanted kids. I wanted to get married, but I had to remind myself that just because Sebastian and I were hooking up now, it didn’t mean that we were really in love and that we were really going to get married. It was just a perk, a benefit of the charade that we were playing. I needed to stop getting invested in this situation.

“I like the name Pizza,” Sebastian said.

“What?” I blinked at him.

“For a boy, Pizza,” he said. “If it’s not going to be Sebastian, Jr., then what about Pizza?”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds. “We can discuss this later, okay? I mean, there’s no possibility that I’m going to be pregnant anytime soon so...”

“I mean, if you want to talk about us having kids earlier rather than later,” he said.

I was going to kill him. I was going to absolutely kill him. When I’d asked him to be part of the plan, this was not what I meant. These were conversations I did not want to be having. I didn’t want to get my mom excited about grandkids because she was going to think they were going to be coming in a couple of years, and I didn’t even have a man like that. I took a deep breath. “Honey, aren’t we close to the airport?” I said softly. I reached over and grabbed his thigh and squeezed, my fingernails digging into his leg.

“Ow,” he said, grinning at me. “Someone’s getting a little feisty.”

“I’m not getting feisty. I’m just saying that I’m super excited that we’re about to see Babushka, and we really don’t want to have this conversation in front of her. Okay?”

“Yes, dear,” he said softly. “Whatever you say, dear.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, trying not to move my fingers higher up his leg.

“Okay, we’re here,” he said finally. “Everyone ready to greet Babushka?”

“Oh, I’m so ready,” my mom said excitedly. “I bet you she had an amazing flight.”

“I heard everything went smoothly,” Sebastian said as he looked at his phone. “In fact, they just landed a couple of minutes ago, so perfect timing.”

“Awesome,” I said softly. “Thank you so much for this, Sebastian.”

“I know. Stop thanking me, Stasia. You don’t have to thank me. We’re in love. I do things for the people I love.”

“I know,” I said, knowing that my mom and dad were listening. “But—”

“But nothing.” He leaned forward and gave me a huge kiss. “I will always treat your family as my own,” he said, “because that’s how much you mean to me.”

NINETEEN

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

For the first time in my life, I have my heart beating and racing in something other than trepidation and fear. It's an odd feeling. I didn't realize how much I was living in anxiety and fear. It's nice feeling light and carefree. That's the thought of the day.

Sebastian

As soon as I saw Babushka walking down the stairs toward the waiting room, I knew that she was going to be amazing. She was short and round and plump with long blond hair that was tied in a bun. She was wearing a floral dress and had two suitcases that a young man was pulling behind her. She smiled warmly at me as she saw me. Her eyes lit up with happiness.

“Stasia, my darling,” she said, and I watched as Stasia went running over to her and gave her a big hug.

“Babushka, I've missed you so much.” They hugged for what seemed like minutes, and then Stasia stepped back.

Babushka looked her up and down. “You look beautiful, my darling.”

“Thank you, Babushka. You're looking well. Everything's okay right now?”

“Everything is fine. Yes, my bones are achy and breaky and sometimes I feel very tired, but I'm doing my best. I'm taking it day by day. Where is my daughter and her husband?”

she said. Stavros and Mrs. Poe stepped forward. “Darling, you look well.”

“Hello, Mama.” Stasia’s mom gave her a quick hug, and then Stavros kissed both cheeks.

“You’re looking beautiful, Babushka.”

“Stavros, you are such a sweet man,” she said. And then she turned to me. She stared at me for a couple of seconds and then just nodded. “And you, I presume, are the fiancé, Sebastian.”

“Hi,” I said with a quick nod. I stepped forward, not knowing whether to offer my hand or whether to envelop her in a huge hug. She seemed to sense my hesitancy, so she opened her arms and wrapped them around me.

“Sebastian, you look like a good man. And I’m not just saying that because you sent me a private jet to fly on.” She laughed. “My very first experience on a private jet. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I enjoyed it very much.” She stepped back. “Now, let me look at you. You are the man that is in love with my granddaughter, yes?”

“Yes,” I said. She stared into my eyes for a few seconds and then broke out into an even bigger smile.

“You’re very handsome. My Stasia did well.”

“I think she did,” I said, chuckling as I looked over at Stasia, who was blushing furiously. I walked over to her and put my arm around her shoulder. “You see? Even your babushka that I’m a catch.”

“Really, Sebastian?” she said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes at me.

“What? I just want you to know that you’re not the only woman that thinks so,” I said and then leaned down and gave her a kiss. She seemed surprised by the act but kissed me back. I felt her fingers wrapping around my neck, and I ran my hands around her waist and brought her into me. “You’re

beautiful, Stasia, and your family is amazing.” Stavros cleared his throat, and I stepped back. “Oops. Sorry, I had almost forgotten where I was.” I looked over at Babushka. “I’m sorry to kiss your granddaughter in front of you.”

“Oh no,” she said, laughing. “I’m fine. I’m not an old fuddy-duddy.” She smiled at Stasia. “He’s very nice man, and I see that he really does love you.”

“Babushka.” Stasia looked down. “Let’s get to the car,” she said, “and we can go to Sebastian’s house.”

“I’m very excited to see his house,” Babushka said.

“It is big mansion,” Stavros said. “Well, I haven’t seen it yet, Babushka, but I can only imagine, seeing as it is over...” Stavros stopped and looked at me. “Well, I know it must be a nice house.”

I laughed then. “I hope you all enjoy it. I do have to admit that the furnishing is not suitable for a family. It is stuff that I chose when I was still a bachelor, stuff I chose before I knew Stasia. Once everything is settled, I will have Stasia redo all the furnishings to her taste because I know that she will make it feel a lot more like a home. It doesn’t feel like a home now, and I apologize for that.”

“But you would buy a new place when you get married, no?” Babushka asked me.

“Well, yes, if that’s what Stasia wants.”

“I think it’s always good to buy new house when you start new life together,” she said. “Now come. I cannot stand on my feet much longer. I need to sit and maybe have a drink.”

“Oh, I have some water here for you.” I held up a bottle of water toward her.

“Oh no, I don’t want water to drink. I would like some vodka.”

I burst out laughing then. “Babushka, you are a woman after my own heart.”

“Well, if I was fifty years younger, I would give Stasia a run for her money, yeah?” She reached out and grabbed my

hand. “Now Sebastian, you walk me to the plane?” She paused. “I make a mistake. I mean you walk me to the car.”

“It would be my pleasure to,” I said, holding her hand. “And I think I might even have some vodka in the limo for you.”

“You see? You think of everything. I like a man that thinks of everything.” We walked behind everyone toward the limo. Babushka held on tightly to my hand. I felt a surge of warmth and happiness. She was a good woman. She was a wonderful woman, and I wished she was my grandmother.

I never really thought about my biological grandparents. My mom’s parents had died when she was younger, and I didn’t know who my father was. Sometimes I wondered if he was still alive and if his parents were still alive. Did they know about me? Did they care? And if they did know about me, did they ever think about me, wonder what I was doing? I pressed my lips together. I didn’t want to start feeling too emotional. Babushka stopped suddenly, and I looked down at her in concern.

“Is everything okay? Would you like us to walk slower?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I just wanted to have a quick word with you before we got to the limousine.”

“Oh, okay.” I smiled warmly at her. “What can I do for you?”

“So there’s something I would like to say, and I hope you do not take it in the wrong way.”

“Of course.” I swallowed nervously, saddened for some reason she didn’t like me. She didn’t want me to marry her granddaughter. She was going to tell me that, and she didn’t want to upset Stasia so she didn’t want to say it in front of her. I took a deep breath. “I’m a big boy. I can handle whatever you have to say.”

“You’re a very nice man,” she said, looking at me, “and I know that we have not known each other for very long. In fact, we’ve just met. But I’m an old woman, and I’m wise beyond my years, and I’ve got many years.”

“I’m sure you’re very wise, Babushka.”

“I also know my children and my grandchildren very well. My Stasia, she’s my favorite grandchild. I would not tell them that, but she is. She’s always been a darling to me, you know? She’s always been strong, independent, beautiful, wonderful.”

“She is indeed all of those things,” I said, nodding subtly.

“And I know she is a free spirit, you know?”

“I know,” I said, laughing. “Trust me, I know.”

“I also know that the two of you, you’re not engaged.” I froze as I stared at her. Did she know, or was she guessing to see how I reacted? I pressed my lips together. “And now in your head you’re thinking to yourself, ‘Do I continue with the lie because that is what Stasia would want, or am I honest because I do not want to lie to Babushka?’” She laid her hand on my arm. “And I know you do not want to lie to Babushka. Sebastian, my granddaughter has told me about every boy she has ever loved her entire life, every single boy from kindergarten all the way through school and college. She even told me about the boy she dated a couple of years ago. I knew he was not the one.”

“Oh, okay.” My mind immediately went to the guy from a couple of years ago. Who was he, and was he still in her life?

“And I tell you this, Sebastian, because if my darling Stasia was really engaged, she would not have just dropped it on me at the last moment right when her parents find a match.” I bit down on my lower lip. Babushka was very smart and intuitive. “So here’s the thing, Sebastian. I’m not upset that you lied, because I understand why. Her parents, I love them, but they’re a little greedy, and they like to travel, and they want my money. They want the best for their daughter, of course, but they also want money.” I licked my lips nervously. I had no idea where she was going. “But Sebastian, I’m going to say something that might shock you, because I think you have not realized it yet, but I think you do love my granddaughter, and so I will go along with this.”

I stared at her, my heart racing. “Wait, what?” I said.

“I see it in the way that you look at her, the way that you touch her, the way that you kiss her, and I see it in the way that she responds to you. I don’t know what is going on between the two of you really, but I do know that what you have is a genuine connection. So we will keep this our secret. You will not tell Stasia what I know, and you will go along with whatever I say in the upcoming weeks. Okay?”

I stared at her for a couple of seconds. “Okay.”

“Because, darling Sebastian, you are the right match for her. And whether or not you realize it or know it, one day she will be your wife. I would like to facilitate your relationship.”

“Oh. I mean, I don’t know exactly what Stasia wants and...”

“Stasia wants to be a successful fashion designer, and she will be one. She’s very talented. You want... I’m not sure. I think you want love. I heard your mother is no longer with us.” I nodded. “But you remember her. You remember the love you had with her.” I stared at her in shock. She really was intuitive. “You have a good soul, Sebastian. You are a good man, and I think you’re to be a great addition to the family. And I do not say this because you have money or you put me on a private jet. I say this because I feel your soul. I feel in my heart you are the right one for my granddaughter. I would say this even if you were working at the pizza shop. Sometimes it’s the right person, sometimes it’s not. It’s nice that you have money, because then Stasia does not have to worry, but I do not say this because you have money. I want you to understand that.”

“Sure,” I said, nodding. “I understand.”

“And you will go along with this, right? You will not tell Stasia?”

“Okay,” I said. “I will not tell her.”

“I know you will find it hard because Stasia, she likes to talk, and you two have a very good connection. I see. But for me, keep it secret for now. And no matter what I say this week

or how preposterous I am, go along with it. It is a part of my plan.”

I bit down on my lower lip. “Okay. If you say so.”

“It does not worry you what I have said?” she asked, peering into my eyes.

“No,” I said honestly. “In fact, it makes me feel pretty good, if I’m honest. I think I do love your granddaughter, and I would love to make this real. I just don’t know if she would believe me, you know?”

“She will. Trust me. Just go along with what I say, and it will all work out.”

“Thank you, Babushka.”

“No worries. Now, let’s hurry to the limo, or they will wonder what has happened.”

TWENTY

STASIA

“Hey, is everything okay?” I asked Sebastian as we walked into his house. I could hear my mom oohing and aahing over the vast space that was his home, but all I could think about was why he and Babushka had been talking for so long when we walked to the limo. I hadn’t wanted to ask him whilst we were on the drive because I knew he wouldn’t be able to say anything with everyone in earshot.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Why?” he asked, his eyes shifting away from mine as if he didn’t know how to look me in the eyes and be honest at the same time.

“I don’t know. You and Babushka were talking for, like, fifteen minutes while we were waiting in the limo, and I’m just concerned that—”

“It’s nothing, okay, Stasia? Just leave it.” His tone was brusque, and I felt a little bit upset.

“Okay, fine.” I shrugged and walked away from him. If he was going to act like that, then I wasn’t going to be concerned. I walked over to my mom and papa and asked if they would like to see their room.

“Of course we do,” my papa said.

“Sebastian, can we show them to their room?” I asked him coldly. He gave me a searching look, and I just looked away. If he didn’t understand why I was upset, then he was dumber than I thought.

“Sure, come this way, but Babushka, let’s show you to your room first.”

“Thank you, dear Sebastian,” she said, following behind him. We walked into a large room that was absolutely gorgeous. It was at the back of the house, so the windows looked out into the backyard. There were French sliding doors that led out to a patio, and beyond the patio I could see a pool and lots of green grass.

“Wow,” I said walking over to the French door and sliding it open. “This is beautiful.” I stepped out onto the patio, and to the left I could see a rose tree that was in bloom. Lots of beautiful light and bright pink roses adorned the side fence. “This is really nice, Sebastian,” I said, looking back at him.

“I have a gardener,” he said, laughing, “not a green thumb.”

“Well, your gardener did an amazing job.” I was still upset with him, but I didn’t want to have an attitude in front of the family.

“This is absolutely wonderful, Sebastian. Thank you very much.” Babushka went and sat on the bed. “Oh, and this is the perfect mattress for me. Thank you, thank you.”

“I want to see my room now,” my mom said, and we all laughed.

“Come on,” Sebastian said. “We can actually go through the back if you want.”

“Through the back?” I raised a single eyebrow at him.

“Yeah. Your mom and dad’s room is the next door, and they have their own patio as well with French sliding doors.”

We all went outside and stopped outside the next room. He opened the door, and we stepped inside.

“Wow,” I said, gazing at the room. “This is amazing. You do have a really beautiful house, Sebastian. It’s beautiful, but it’s cold. Is that struggling? It doesn’t feel homey. You just need some throw pillows and a little color,” I said, laughing. I stared at the monochrome paintings on the wall. “I mean, shit, we could do our own paintings and replace them and it would bring some brightness to the room.”

“That might be fun,” he said, nodding. “You want to go painting sometime?”

“Sure.” I shrugged, not knowing if he was asking me because he wanted to make it a family activity or if he actually wanted to go painting with just me, which would be weird because we didn’t have a relationship where we did stuff one-on-one together. We never had. I mean, the only thing we’d done one-on-one was make love. I blushed thinking about that.

“And let us see your room, Sebastian?” Babushka asked. “Let me see the room where you call home.”

“Sure,” he said. “Come on, everyone.”

I followed right behind him. I, too, was curious to see his bedroom. I wanted to see the lair where he took all the ladies, though I tried to dismiss that thought. I didn’t want to think about him with other women. I wasn’t typically a jealous person, but something about Sebastian made me not want to think about him with others.

We stepped into a room on the far corridor, and my jaw dropped. His room was larger than my entire apartment.

“Wow,” I said, looking around. He had a California king-size bed on the right-hand side. In the middle of the room, there was a fireplace, and above the fireplace was a TV. I walked past the TV and saw the master bath. My jaw dropped. There was a huge, six-foot clawfoot tub on one side, and then the other side was a shower with three showerheads and two benches. “This is absolutely amazing.”

“Turn around,” he said, his voice coming from behind me. I looked around and he pointed in the corner. “There’s a sauna in there.” He winked.

“Wow, you have a sauna in your bathroom?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. It’s crazy what you can have when you’re rich.”

“I guess so.” I giggled. He walked over to me, wrapped his arms around my waist, and pulled me into him.

“Everything okay?” he said softly, looking down into my eyes. I nodded. I stared up into his eyes and wondered if I could get the truth out of him later that evening.

“What did Babushka say to you?” I whispered up to him. His eyes stilled, and he looked away and shook his head.

“Not now, Stasia,” he said. He leaned down and kissed me, and I kissed him back, running my fingers along his shoulders. I melted against him, loving the feel of him, loving his scent, loving everything about this moment. I felt his hands moving down to my ass, and he squeezed. I gasped slightly as he shifted against me, and I felt his erection against my stomach. He was hard, and I was horny. I wondered if I could get my parents to take a nap and Babushka to go sit in the yard or something.

I needed this man. I wanted to fuck him, and I knew it would be hours before everyone went to bed. I bit down on my lower lip and looked up at him. There was a teasing glint in his eyes. “What is so funny?” I asked him with a slight attitude.

“You want to fuck, huh?” he said in a low voice, and I blushed.

“What do you mean?” I said quickly.

“I can tell what you’re thinking, Stasia, and you totally want to fuck me right now.” I had no idea how he knew I was horny and that I wanted him, but it scared me that I was that transparent. “Don’t worry, I totally want to fuck you, too.” He pushed my ass closer to him, his erection pressing into me hard. I reached down and rubbed it, and he gasped as he grew harder in his jeans.

“Fuck, Stasia. You cannot do that. Your parents are literally a couple of yards away.”

“And?” I said, licking my lips, laughing slightly against his.

“Do you want me to bend you over my bathtub and fuck you right here and right now?”

“You wouldn’t do it.”

“You want to bet?” he said, raising a single eyebrow.

“You would not fuck me knowing my family could walk in at any minute.”

He chuckled. “Then you’re right. Maybe in a different circumstance I would, but not with Babushka, your mom, and Stavros. It wouldn’t feel right.”

“Told you.” I laughed. “You think you’re mister eggplant, big man on campus, but really you’re—”

“Really I’m what?” he said. As he pushed me back off against the wall, his hand slipped down the front of my skirt, and I gasped as he slipped his fingers between my panties.

“What are you doing?” My eyes widened as I felt him rubbing my clit.

He chuckled. “You think I wouldn’t pull down your skirt and your panties right now, Stasia?” he said, another finger joining his first one between my legs. He rubbed roughly, and I felt my knees buckling. “You think I wouldn’t fuck you? You think—”

“Oh my gosh. What are you doing, Sebastian?” I gasped, gripping his shoulders. “If they walk in, you’re dead meat.”

“Yeah. Maybe I like a little bit of a risk,” he said. He pulled his fingers out of my panties, and I just stared as he reached them up to his mouth and sucked. “Fuck. You taste like cotton candy.” He licked his lips and then pressed them against mine. “And I want to eat me some cotton candy,” he muttered. I felt his hand running down the side of my body, and I shivered. I licked my lips nervously.

“Oh, yeah? How badly do you want that cotton candy?” I said, teasing him. Taunting him.

“Very badly,” he said, “and I’m about to have some.”

TWENTY-ONE

SEBASTIAN

Hi,

Too much to say right now. I'm overwhelmed. Happy, but overwhelmed. More later.

Sebastian

“So I was thinking that perhaps we can go out today.” Stasia’s mom looked at me with expectant eyes as if I knew where she wanted to go.

I was smart, but I wasn’t a mind reader. I nodded, encouraging her to continue. “And where would you like to go, Mrs. Poe?”

“Well, I was thinking...”

“Oh, just come out with it,” Babushka says. “We want to go to Rodeo Drive. We would like to look at some wedding dresses. I think that darling Stasia would look amazing in a Vera Wang.”

“Really, Babushka?” Stasia sounded annoyed. “We’re not going to look at wedding dresses. I told you we’re not at that stage yet.”

“But darling, I want to be able to help you find the perfect dress for your perfect day. We cannot expect Sebastian to pay for me to fly back and forth across the country multiple times. He’s rich, but I do not want to spend all of his money.” She giggled, and I just shook my head.

“It’s fine, Babushka. Anytime you want to come to LA, I’ll fly you and maybe we can come and see you soon as well.”

She looked at me with a pleased expression and nodded. “That would be very nice, Sebastian.”

I could feel Stasia’s gaze on me. I knew she was upset with what I’d said, but the truth of the matter was I did want to go and visit Babushka in New York, and it wasn’t just because Babushka wanted me to go along with whatever she was saying. I truly loved her. She was the grandma I’d never had and always wanted. I only hoped that when this entire situation was done, I’d get to keep Babushka in my life, and a small part of me hoped that she would be my real Babushka.

I knew it was crazy. I knew that I couldn’t even explain it to myself why I was feeling this way, what I was thinking. But something about my conversation with Babushka had seemed to cement for me that I had fallen in love with Stasia.

This was more than me just wanting to help a friend of a friend. This was more than me just wanting to have some excitement in my life. I had feelings for Stasia. She was everything to me. I loved the way she smiled. I loved the way she got upset with me, with her eyes. I loved the way she teased me. I loved everything about her. She was gorgeous and fun, and she was daring and independent, and I hadn’t known women like her existed. I’d always assumed that women played games, and if they wanted you, they played hard to get because they wanted you. Or if they didn’t want you, they were bitches.

Stasia had showed me that that wasn’t always the way it went. She was completely in control of her sexuality. She didn’t mind joking around with me. She wasn’t embarrassed. She owned who she was and owned who she was with me, and I loved it. I loved being with her. I loved her, and I wanted us to get married one day. Maybe this wasn’t the right time. We weren’t even in a real relationship and never even dated. But I could see having children with her, a real family with her. I wanted her family to be mine.

“No, Mom. We’re not going to Rodeo Drive,” Stasia said. “In fact, I was thinking that perhaps we could go to Santa Monica Beach seeing as Babushka was going on and on and on about wanting to swim in the ocean.”

“Well, darling, I did not get a bikini after all.”

“You don’t have to have a bikini, Babushka. We could walk along the sand, and then we can get a drink or a coffee or something.”

“Oh.” Babushka shook her head. “That sounds like it would be not so nice for me right now. I came to help with the wedding.”

“Babushka, we’re not planning the wedding right now, okay?”

Stasia jumped up. “Hey, Sebastian, can we talk in the other room, please?”

“Ooh, what’s going on?” Stavros said, his eyes widening in glee. This was the drama he’d been waiting on all morning.

“Nothing’s going on, Papa. I just need to speak to Sebastian about something.”

“I have been summoned,” I said as I jumped up and followed Stasia out of the kitchen. “What is it, darling?”

As soon as we got to my bedroom, she slammed the door behind me and poked me in the chest hard.

“Ow, what’s that for?” I attempted to grimace. “That hurt.”

“That did not hurt, Sebastian.” She glared at me. “What are you playing at?”

“What do you mean, what am I playing at?”

“Telling Babushka we could go to Rodeo Drive to look for Vera Wang wedding dresses. Are you out of your mind right now?”

“No. I thought it sounded like it could be quite fun.”

“Quite fun? Me trying on wedding dresses for a wedding that is not even going to happen?” She took a deep breath.

“Look, I know you and Babushka get on and you want to make her happy, but it’s okay to say no. It’s okay to say, ‘Shut up, Babushka, we’re just going to Santa Monica beach instead.’”

My jaw dropped. “There’s no way in hell that you expect me to say shut up to your babushka.”

She started giggling then. “Oh, but you can say shut up to me?”

“You’re you, Stasia. I’m not going to say anything like that to your babushka.”

“What? I don’t command the same amount of respect?”

“I don’t know,” I said, pressing my lips against hers. “Maybe.”

I started tickling her, and she wiggled away from me. “Sebastian, no. Stop.”

“What?” I asked her innocently.

“I know where you think this is going and it’s totally not going there right now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sebastian, we’re not getting one in real quick.”

I started chuckling them. “I have never said that before in my life, thank you very much.”

“But you were thinking it, though.”

“Hey,” I said, biting down on my lower lip. “You can’t blame a man for trying when he’s engaged to the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Her eyes softened them, and she cupped the side of my face. “You’re sweet. You know that, right?”

“I am?” I was shocked. This was the most sincere, nicest comment that Stasia had made to me. “Do you really think so? I’m surprised you didn’t say I was just saying it so I could get in your pants.”

“I know when you’re flirting with me to get something and when you’re flirting with me just because,” she said. “And that was just because.”

“You’re right,” I said, nodding. “But I also want to say that I do like your babushka, and I am going to agree with what she says because she’s an old woman and she doesn’t have much time left,” I said. “And I just want to make her happy.”

Stasia stared at me for a couple of seconds and nodded. “You’re sweet, Sebastian, but she’s not dying.”

“What do you mean, she’s not dying? She is. She said.”

She rolled her eyes. “I spoke to Mama and Papa when we were by the limo because obviously I was very concerned and very nervous. I didn’t know what disease she had and how much longer she had to live. But Mama called her doctor and spoke to him, and there’s nothing wrong with her.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, there’s nothing wrong with her?”

“She has no sickness, no illness. She could live most probably another twenty, thirty, forty years for all we know. Essentially, she’s trying to lay a guilt trip.” She took a deep breath. “That’s just what my family does. She wasn’t technically lying because she’s dying like all of us are dying because all of us will die one day. Did you notice when I asked her if she knew how much time she had left, she didn’t really say anything, and when we asked about the sickness, she didn’t really say anything? Because there was nothing to say. She just wanted to make us feel bad so that we would get married. Or rather, she would force me into finding someone to get married so that I could pop out some kids, have some babies, and make her feel better about her life.”

“You popping out kids would make her feel better about her life?”

“You know what I mean. I don’t mean better about her life, but just not as worried about me. In my family, it is important to be with someone.” She sighed.

“They feel like a man will protect you and take care of you, and is that so wrong to have someone take care of you? I mean, be your partner or whatever?”

“No,” she said, “but everything in its own time, right? I’m doing okay by myself right now.”

“Hey, I get it.” I grabbed her hands and pulled her close to me. “I’m here for you. Remember, I’m your support. Whatever you want, whatever you need from me, you got it, Stasia.”

Mentally, I asked her to forgive me because I knew that I was going to push things that Babushka wanted me to push because I wanted Stasia, and I wanted Stasia to want me.

I loved that she was an independent woman, but I wanted her to be okay with being in a partnership with me. I wanted her to be okay with me encouraging her dreams and helping her in whatever way I wanted to. Just because I was rich didn’t mean I want to give everything to her, but it did mean I wanted to help her achieve her dreams, and I could do that. I loved her. I wanted to do that, and I knew, well, I knew that my mom would love her, too. I knew my mom would want me to be happy, and I knew that she was the one for me.

I took a deep breath. “So no matter what Babushka asks or pushes, we’re in this together, okay? Let’s just make her happy for however many days she’s in LA with us.”

She stared at me and touched the side of my face. “Okay, Sebastian, I suppose you’re right.” She shook her head. “Gemma called me this morning, and she was absolutely laughing about everything that’s going on.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She just thinks it’s hilarious that she’s the one in the actual relationship and her parents haven’t even been asking about when she’s getting married, and yet here we are. We’re not really in a relationship, and my entire family’s trying to push the wedding as if I were pregnant and there was some shotgun marriage having to go on.”

I started laughing then. “Well, there’s no possibility you could be pregnant, right?”

My heart thudded for a couple of seconds, but not in fear. It was more unhappiness. I wanted to be a father. I realize that now more than ever, that that was something that was important to me. I wanted to have kids. I wanted to be in someone’s life in a meaningful way.

“As I said, I’m on the pill,” she said, laughing. “So I don’t think I’m pregnant. I mean, there’s a very small possibility that it can happen, but...” She touched me on the shoulder lightly. “Does that scare you? Are you nervous? Do you want to wear protection the next time we...” She paused and bit down on her lower lip.

“No, I don’t want to, unless you want me to. Does that make you feel better?”

“I’m okay,” she said. “This is a weird conversation for us to be having right now, isn’t it?”

“No. It should never be a weird conversation. If two people are sexually active, they should be able to talk about their means of contraception.”

I smiled at her, and she laughed. “You sound like my high school teacher when she was talking to us about sex and everyone was laughing.”

“I hope I’m not obnoxious about it,” I said softly.

“You’re not, but you’re not worried I could be pregnant?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I mean, if you got pregnant, we’d be parents and that would make your babushka very, very happy.”

She started laughing then. “Sebastian, you are...”

“I know, a goof,” I finished for her. “Shall we go out and tell them we’re ready to hit Rodeo Drive?”

She took a deep breath and let it out. “You do know that if we go wedding dress shopping, you can’t be in the store with me. The groom can never see the bride in her wedding dress before the wedding.”

“Oh, I didn’t even think about that,” I said, nodding. “Well, then I guess wedding dress shopping is definitely out.”

“Why is that?” she asked. “I thought you’d be grateful for the reprieve from having to hang out with my crazy family.”

“Oh no.” I shook my head. “I love spending time with them.” I smiled sincerely. “In fact, I can’t remember a time in the past decade that I’ve had more fun spending time with a group of people that I didn’t really know.”

“Oh Sebastian, you’re sure going to get to know them a lot better this week.”

“I’m glad,” I said. “I want to get to know them better, and I want to get to know you better, too.”

“How much better do you want to get to know me?” she said, winking, and I tapped her on the ass.

“I think you know.”

“Oh my God, Sebastian. Really?”

“What? You asked.”

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Okay,” I said softly. “We’ll see.”

And then we both burst out laughing.

TWENTY-TWO

STASIA

“Oh darling, this is one of the best days I’ve had in such a long time,” Babushka said as she drank her mimosa from the rooftop bar we were all sitting in.

“I’m glad you’re having a good time, Babushka.” I smiled at her warmly, love filling my heart. She was so precious to me, and I was so grateful to have found out that she wasn’t actually dying, even though I was very annoyed by her emotionally manipulative ways. I wasn’t sure why my family was like this. I knew that they did it because they cared and they thought I wouldn’t listen to them unless they manipulated me into thinking something. I watched as Sebastian showed something to Stavros on his phone. My papa was nodding excitedly, so I knew it had to be something real estate or money related, possibly a car. Anything that cost a lot of money got my papa very excited, which was slightly ironic, seeing as he no longer had any money.

When he’d met my mother, he was fairly well off. He’d done well in his business and had been able to afford her a great lifestyle up until he lost all the money investing in crypto, which I wasn’t sure why he’d done it. He knows he hadn’t even understood what it was. When he told me that he was thinking about buying Bitcoin or Ethereum and I’d asked him what it was, he’d said, “Those coins that you use at the video arcade, I know they’re going to blow up. Kids love going to the video arcade.” And that’s when I’d known things weren’t going to be good. But I was glad they still had their home and they were still able to eat, and Babushka, I knew, would always have their backs if push ever came to shove.

She had quite a bit of money stashed away, even more than my parents knew about. I knew this because she told me about some secret accounts that she'd asked me not to tell my parents about, and she had over \$3,000,000 stashed away. Turned out my grandfather had had several life insurance policies, and when she died, she'd saved them and put them in different CDs and just let the interest grow and grow. She didn't want my parents to know because she didn't want them to spend all the money. And I understood why my papa, God bless his heart, would most probably want to invest it in the hopes of making more and then just lose it all and then that wouldn't help anyone.

“So, darling Stasia,” my babushka says, interrupting my thoughts.

“Yes, Babushka?”

“I was thinking that we can go and try some cake.”

“What?” My jaw dropped. “Cake?”

“Yes. What flavor wedding cake?”

“We already discussed this and you already let me know what—”

“Oh, Stasia,” she said, pouting. “You do not let me have any fun. I'm not young anymore. I want to experience what it's like to plan a wedding again.”

“But we're not planning...”

Sebastian put his hand on my arm. “Darling, let's let Babushka have some fun. It's the only time we're both going to get married after all.”

I stared at him, not believing the words that were coming out of his mouth. What was he playing at?

“Babushka, maybe we don't do the cake today, but maybe we can go and look at some flowers. There's a botanical garden called the Huntington Library that I would love to take you to. They have a plethora of different roses and cacti and just many different variations of plants. In fact, you can get married there if you want to. That's a nice little thought, but I

was thinking if Stasia likes the location we could try and make a booking.”

I cleared my throat. What was he saying? Was he crazy? I'd been to the Huntington Library Gardens before, and they were absolutely amazing. The rose gardens were beautiful. Of course my babushka would say let's do the wedding there. And of course she would demand to see a manager about making a booking right away. I bit down on my lower lip. I was going to kill Sebastian. I'd have sex with him one more time because, well, the sex was just that good. But then I was going to kill him with my bare hands, and then I'd go to jail, and it would be my family's fault, and I would make sure they knew I was blaming them when I got home. Because if they hadn't pushed me into this absolutely ridiculous scenario, none of this would be happening.

“I think that sounds like a very good idea,” Babushka says. “I love botanical gardens, and I love roses. Pink roses, yellow roses, red roses. Do they have purple roses?”

“I'm sure we could create our own variety if they don't,” Sebastian said, grinning at her. “We could call it the ‘Babushka’ rose.”

“Oh!” She laughed. “You're so sweet. You know, I am thinking, Stasia,” she looked at me, “that perhaps...”

“Yes, Babushka?” I stared into her cunning blue eyes.

“I'm thinking that perhaps I may make a run for your fiancé myself. Hah. He's such a nice boy. I think your grandfather would be okay with it, no?”

“Ha ha, Babushka.” I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Sebastian did smile.

“I'd say if you're interested in me, Babushka, then why not?” he said.

Babushka started laughing then. “But yes, let us go and see these roses. Ah, Stasia, get your phone.”

“My phone? Why?”

“Let us make a call.”

“A call to who?”

“To the library where the gardens with the flowers are and see what timeline and availability they have for a wedding.”

“We haven’t even seen the place yet, Babushka.” I stared at her like she was crazy. “You cannot expect me to—”

Sebastian held his phone up. “I’ve got the number. Would you like me to call them?”

I was going to slap him. I was going to do it right here in front of everyone.

“Yes. Yes.” Babushka took the phone from him. “Hello? Is this Huntington Library where they have the beautiful roses? Ah, good, good. My granddaughter and her wonderful fiancé, who has plenty of money so you don’t even have to ask, want to get married in your rose garden. How much and when is next availability?” I licked my lips and drank two larges from my own mimosa.

“\$150,000? Ah, that’s nothing. That’s nothing. When next availability? Next summer? No, no. Not acceptable,” she said. She looked at Sebastian. “Not acceptable, right?”

“Not at all. See if they can’t fit us in next month,” he said. My jaw dropped.

“Sebastian, honey, we’re not ready to get married next month.” I could hear the anger in my tongue, and I didn’t even care at this point.

“Ah, so for \$250,000 perhaps you could fit us in earlier. Okay, well, we come in soon. Yes, my name? Well, I’ll give you my granddaughter’s fiancé’s name. His name is Sebastian Bradford, you may have heard of him. He’s big billionaire in the Los Angeles area with plenty of properties. Very handsome man. Okay, well we speak to you soon. Goodbye.” She hung up and looked around the table. “It’s done. If we go and we like the roses, we have wedding venue.” She handed Sebastian his phone. “I feel very productive this morning. I feel maybe I can have another mimosa.”

“I think you’ve had enough, Babushka,” I said, glaring at her.

“Stasia, why do you look so weird? You forget to put your makeup on this morning?” My jaw dropped as Sebastian started laughing. “Come on, Stasia, have another mimosa. It’s okay.”

“Uh-huh. Okay, Sebastian, if you think so. But when I take half your billions because we rush into the marriage too soon, that is going to be on you.”

“I’ll hedge my bets,” he said, shaking his head. “I have a feeling that everything’s going to work out just the way it’s supposed to.”

“Oh, yeah. You have a feeling, do you? Well, I have a feeling that tonight it’s going to be particularly cold and lonesome for you.”

“Oh, no,” he said. “What are you planning on doing?” He gave me a wink. “Not anything naughty, I hope. Not in front of your grandparents.”

I just glared at him.

“Treat your fiancé nicely,” Babushka said, touching my arm. “It’s not every day that you find a man that wants to spoil you.”

“I’m very grateful for that,” I said quickly. I did not need to meet with Sebastian every day of the week at all.

TWENTY-THREE

SEBASTIAN

Stasia was practically hissing at me as we made our way into my bedroom. “What the hell was that, Sebastian?” She glared at me.

“What?” I asked her innocently, pretending I had no idea what she was talking about.

“You put a deposit down at the Huntington Library of \$25,000?”

“Well, I needed to put a deposit down to save the date.”

“There is no date to save, Sebastian. Are you out of your ever-loving mind?”

“Hey, don’t be mad. I’m just trying to make Babushka happy.”

“I don’t want you to make Babushka happy anymore. This is absolutely ridiculous. I regret ever asking you to do this. This is out of control.”

“Okay, if you say so.” I leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the lips.

“Oh, no way, Sebastian. There is no way I am making love to you right now.”

“But I really want you to.”

She shook her head. “Nope, not going to happen.”

She went and sat at the edge of the bed and put her hands on her face. She then leaned over and buried her head into the duvet and screamed.

“Uh-oh, are you okay?” I walked over to her and rubbed her back.

She looked up at me with wide eyes. “No, I’m not okay. This is absolutely ridiculous. Sebastian, why did you do that?”

“I don’t know. Your babushka was really pushing for it, and it was beautiful, and then we saw that rose, and I could picture it in your hair. And I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“Sebastian.” She grabbed my hand. “I love that you’re going along with this and you want to make my family happy, but this is too much.”

“What if that’s not the only reason I’m doing it?” I said, my voice lowered.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if…” I let out a sigh. I couldn’t tell Stasia what Babushka had asked me to do. I didn’t want to betray her trust like that. I shook my head. I would have to keep it to myself.

“What’s going on, Sebastian? I am just so confused right now.”

“Nothing,” I said and leaned back. I stared at the ceiling. “She knows Simon and Garfunkel.”

“The band?” she asked in confusion.

“Yeah. My mom used to love Simon and Garfunkel. I can remember her playing the songs over and over again on her cassette recorder.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, staring at me.

I nodded. “Yeah. Her favorite song was ‘Mrs. Robinson.’ ‘What’s that you say, Mrs. Robinson?’ she would just sing, and it made me happy because hearing my mom sing made me happy, you know?”

“I get it,” she said, rubbing my hair. “Have you been missing your mom?” I nodded. I felt choked up. “I know you don’t really like to talk about it, but if you want someone to talk to, you can talk to me.”

“I know,” I said.

I sat up and walked over to the side of the room and opened a drawer. I pulled out my rubber-bound journal and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” she said, blinking.

“Open it,” I said softly.

She opened it, and I could see her eyes fiercely reading across the page. “Who’s this? Are you in love with someone or you dated someone and you broke up or...”

“No, goofy,” I said, laughing. “Those are letters that I write to my mom.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened, and she closed it. “I shouldn’t be reading this.”

“No, it’s okay. I want you to read them.”

“But why?” she said. “They’re so personal to you.”

“They are. They’re the most personal thing to me in the world, and I want to share them with you because you are the most important person in my life, Stasia. I know this whole thing is a bit of a joke and is not real, but the feelings I have for you are real, and so are the emotions I feel for you. I love you, and I know you’re going to think I’m crazy, and you’re going to say sex doesn’t equal love, and pretending to be engaged doesn’t mean we’re really engaged, but I kind of want this to be real. I want to take you on dates. I want to spoil you. I want to dance with you in rainy streets. I want to walk barefoot on the beach and skinny-dip in the ocean.

“I want to take you to Universal Studios and scream as we go on rides, and stuff our faces with popcorn at movie theaters, and complain about old people in the park who just glare at us when we’re running and laughing. I want to sing karaoke in a bar full of people who wonder how we were brave enough to get up on the stage, and I want to try exotic foods, and get a dog and have kids and marry you. One day I really do want to marry you.”

I stared at her then, wondering what she was going to say. Wondering if she was going to think I'd lost my ever-loving mind. If she was going to slap me and tell me to stop being an idiot. If she'd even believe me.

Her eyes were filled with something akin to joy, and I felt myself relaxing as she leaned forward and kissed me, her fingers in my hair.

"I love you, Sebastian. You are the most amazing, sweetest, kindest, generous man I've ever met, and obviously we're not getting married in three months like we told the people at the Huntington Library, but I'd like to date."

"I have an idea," I said softly.

"What's your idea?" She looked nervous.

"What if we just have a party at the Huntington Library instead to celebrate our three-month anniversary?"

"Our three-month anniversary of what?" she said.

"Of dating." I grinned at her. "Because I hope officially we're boyfriend and girlfriend now?"

She stared at me and nodded. "I'd like that. I'd like that a lot."

"Me too," I said. "Who would've thought I was meant to be your thirty-day fiancé? Though the engagement ended in less than thirty days, I got a girlfriend out of it."

"Yeah," she said, laughing. "Though I don't know how we're going to tell my family that we've gone from engaged to dating."

"Maybe we don't have to tell them," I said. "Maybe we'll find ourselves engaged sooner rather than later."

She hit me on the shoulder and shook her head. "Sebastian Bradford, you are not going to propose to me just because of my family."

"No, of course not. I'm going to propose to you because I love you and I want to make you mine, and I want every man in the world to know he has to back off because you're taken."

She giggled then. “Oh, I love you, Sebastian.”

“I love you, too.”

I stared down at the journal and picked it up. I grabbed my pen and smiled.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I opened one of the pages.

“I’m writing a new letter to my mom. You want to hear it?”

“Yes, please.” She nodded.

I thought for a couple of seconds and started writing, and then I read it out loud. “Hi, Mom, it’s me, Sebastian. I’ve missed you so much. I can still remember every single thing about you. The way you smiled at me, the way you loved me, the way you sung to me every night, the way you held my hand, the way you told me look left, look right, look left, look right, and then when you think you see no cars, look left and right again. I was just a kid when you passed, when cancer took you from me. I knew it pained you knowing you weren’t sure what was going to happen to me. And I’m not going to lie, it was rough. I was lost. I was scared. I was heartbroken, and I had no one.

“I bounced from home to home, and I thought that would be my life forever. But then I was adopted by a family, and I got the best two brothers in the world. I thought life wouldn’t get much better than that, but then I met Stasia. You’d love her mom. She’s beautiful and warm, and funny, and kind and sweet, and she loves me and I love her. My greatest wish in this world would be for you to meet her. I’d give up every penny that I have just for one more day on this world with you to hold you, to kiss you, to tell you that your boy is okay.

“But I know I’ll see you one day. I know that we’ll be reunited and then you’ll get to meet Stasia, and our kids, and our grandkids because we’re going to populate the world, Mom. I love you. I don’t know why life happens the way it does. I don’t know why I lost you so young. I don’t know why I went through so many years of pain, but I’m actually feeling

okay now. Stasia has filled my heart up again, and her family's wonderful. You'd love them and they would've loved you. Babushka is the grandma I've always wanted, always needed, and I know that she's happy for me and Stasia. I'm going to go now because I know you want me to be happy and celebrate the moment, but I just wanted you to know that you're always in my mind. You're always in my heart, and I will never forget you. I love you. I really love you, and I want nothing more than to see you one more time. You're everything to me. Your son, Sebastian."

The tears were rolling down my eyes as I finished writing the note in the journal. Stasia took my hands and leaned forward and kissed the tears away from my cheek.

"That was beautiful," she said. "Absolutely beautiful."

"You don't think that I'm..."

"Shh," she said, pressing her finger against my lips. "It's okay to be vulnerable, Sebastian. You can cry in front of me. You can break down in front of me. You can laugh, you can sing. You can be whoever you want to be because I love you for the man that you are, every single part of you. You're a good man."

She held me close to her. "I can't imagine what it must have been like to see your mom die and then have no one, but you have me now, and you have my family, and you have my friends, and we're going to take over this world, Sebastian Bradford."

"Promise me one thing, Stasia," I asked her softly.

"Anything," she said. "What is it?"

I grinned at her. "You'll let me fund your business." She was about to protest, and I glared at her. "I'm not saying I'm going to do everything, but just help me to help you."

"How am I going to help you to help me?" she said, laughing. "That doesn't even make sense."

"There are going to be many things I say that don't make sense, but just roll with it. Okay?"

“Okay,” she said, laughing, and we fell back onto the bed.

I slipped my hands up her shirt and she pulled mine off quickly. We were both feverish. We both wanted each other. Before I knew it, we were naked. Stasia rolled on top of me and reached down, her hands on my cock sliding back and forth quickly.

“I don’t even know if we have time for this,” she said, giggling as she gyrated her hips back and forth.

“Oh, we have time,” I said, holding her and pulling her down on me. “Your babushka knows that we needed to talk.”

“Yeah, but I told her we’d be out in five minutes.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. She knows a lot more than you think she does.”

Stasia frowned then. “What does that mean?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I said as I rolled her over onto her back and then thrust into her hard and fast. “I love you, Stasia.”

I pressed my lips down against hers, my hand rubbing her breasts as I made sweet, passionate love to her.

“We’ve got forever to talk about anything we want to.”

The End

Thank you for reading *Thirty Day Fiancé*. The next book in the series is *Thirty Day Roommate* and features Holly and Jake. You can [preorder it here](#). Join [my mailing list](#) to never miss any of my new releases!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. S. Cooper is a steamy contemporary romance author. You can find me on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), & [TikTok](#).