



Un
FORGETTABLE

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BY

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Dedication

To our readers who feel forgettable.

We hope you find that one person who makes you feel
unforgettable.

Songlist

Click here - [Spotify](#)

Forgettable – Project 46, Olivia

Happier Than Ever – Kelly Clarkson

Helium – Sia

Kiss Me – Ed Sheeran

A Thousand Years – Christina Perri

Unwanted -Camylio

I Tried – Camylio

You & I – One Direction

When I Look At You – Miley Cyrus

Synopsis

Life has taught me I'm forgettable, unless someone needs something from me. While things are going great, people forget I exist, but the second hell breaks loose, my number is the one they call.

It sucks.

Just once, I'd like to be a priority in someone's life. I'd like to be taken into consideration. I want my voice to be heard.

But that's never going to happen.

I'm the forgettable one. Always have been. Always will be.

Wanting to feel like I'm a priority for one night, I take matters into my own hands and book a date through *The Perfect Gentleman's* service. I figure if I'm going to pay for the date, the guy will be forced to give me the attention I've always craved.

I'm not going to lie, I almost cancel the date a hundred times, but gathering my courage, I head to the restaurant to meet Mr. Perfect.

Mr. Perfect turns out to be *PERFECT* in the looks department. His blue eyes are seductive and playful, luring me in like a moth to a flame, and the dominance radiating from him actually makes me feel safe.

Little do I know my entire life is about to be turned upside down.

Unforgettable

*Contemporary Romance / Opposites Attract
/ Billionaire Romance*

STANDALONE ROMANCE

Authors Note:

This book contains subject matter that may be sensitive for some readers.

There is triggering content related to:

Being taken for granted.

Being ignored by loved ones.

Abandoned by parents.

Always being the one to give and never getting anything in return.

Emotional and mental abuse.

Loss of a loved one - leading to PTSD and control issues by the main male character.

18+ only.

Please read responsibly.

*“Never make someone a priority when all
you are to them is an option.”*

— **Maya Angelou**

Chapter 1

Callan

Callan Wright; 32. Lillian Harrison; 25.

Walking down the staircase as I head toward the living room, I answer the incoming call with a grumble, “I’ll be at the office by nine. Surely this call can wait until then?”

Easton, my personal assistant, lets out a chuckle, “Your idea of nine a.m. and mine are two very different things. This can’t wait until *twelve*.”

I usually start working around lunchtime because I’m always busy until midnight, but today, I’m heading in early as we’re planning the company’s tenth anniversary.

“I’m leaving my apartment as we speak.” I grab my tailored jacket from where it’s draped over the back of a white leather couch and shrug it on. “I’m just going to get a coffee from Starbucks, then I’ll be at the office.”

“Get me an iced latte. Two pumps of vanilla.”

I shake my head, a grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. “Shouldn’t this be the other way around?”

“Yeah, but you’re already on your way to Starbucks.”

The little shit has always been too casual with me, but it’s his personality, and I’ve learned to accept it. Easton is good at

his job, and it's all that matters. It took some time getting used to him, but now he's the life of the office.

"See you in twenty minutes," I say before ending the call and leaving my penthouse in the Ritz Carlton.

The past ten years I've worked my ass off to get an apartment overlooking Central Park. I don't come from a wealthy family and made my fortune from running an escort service. Now, I'm one of the most eligible bachelors of Billionaire's Row.

But I don't care what people think of me. At the end of the day, only my family and friends, my business, and what's in my bank account matter.

Stepping out of my apartment, I take the elevator to the lobby. When the doors open, Mrs. Hill, who lives a floor beneath me, gives me one glance before inspecting her *Gucci* bag as if it holds all the answers to the universe. God forbid she has to greet me. Mr. and Mrs. Hill think they shit gold, and I'm far beneath them.

Just to fuck with the entitled woman, the corner of my mouth lifts in the sexiest grin I can muster at eight-thirty in the morning. I drop my voice lower, so the tone is inviting. "Morning, Mrs. Hill. Love the pearl necklace you're wearing."

Her cheeks flush bright red, and offended, her eyes widen. Her lips try to form a reply, but I leave the lobby before she can find the words.

Instantly, I'm hit with the city's energy buzzing as people hurry to work. Bumper-to-bumper cars line the streets.

Luckily, my office is only two blocks away, and I enjoy the short walk. Nearing Starbucks, a glance through the window tells me I'm going to have to wait a while for my coffee. I enter the crowded establishment and join the long line of people waiting to get their morning caffeine fix.

I could've had coffee at my apartment or the office, but I don't mind waiting in line. It gives me a chance to people-watch, which is something I like to do.

A delicate scent of vanilla and cinnamon drifts in the air, and for a moment, I think it's from the beverages until the woman in front of me drops her phone. We both crouch to pick it up, and it brings her closer, giving me a stronger whiff of her perfume. The vanilla and cinnamon scent is definitely coming from her. She's got good taste, and it suits her.

Her blonde hair is tied up in a ponytail, and her face is makeup-free, which I don't see often around here. Most women glam up to go jogging, knowing they might run into someone they know at any moment.

The black jeans and camisole she's wearing make her look younger, but I'd guess she's in her mid-twenties.

Picking up the device, I hand it to her. Her voice is soft as she says, "Thanks."

"You're welcome," I murmur, not thinking much of the incident.

We both straighten up again, and I'm given a timid smile before her attention is focused on her phone.

My own device vibrates, and pulling it out of my pocket, I see a message from Harper, one of my best friends and the

manager of my company.

While you're at Starbucks, grab me a caramel macchiato.

Shaking my head, I let out a chuckle before typing out a reply.

Yes, boss.

She instantly replies.

I wish.

Tucking my cell phone away, I take a couple of steps forward as the line moves. Slowly, we inch closer to the counter until the woman in front of me says, "Can I have a breve latte, please?"

"Sure," the barista mutters. "Name?"

"Lillian."

When Lillian pays for her beverage and moves to the side, I notice the barista, Eddie, writing Julian on her cup. He probably heard wrong.

"Hi, Callan," Eddie greets.

"Morning." I gesture at the cup. "You got the name wrong. It's Lillian."

He nods and fixes it before asking, "What can I get you today?"

I give my order, and after paying, I join the rest of the customers waiting for their fix of caffeine.

My eyes scan over the people in the store. Some are seated at tables, engrossed with their phones, while others look like

they're barely awake.

One thing I've learned from watching people is that most put on an act. I seldom see someone with a genuine smile on their face.

Everyone's faking it while they're trying to make it.

"Lillian," Eddie calls.

There's a shocked expression on Lillian's face as she whispers, "Wow, that's a first. He actually got my name right." She hurries to the counter to get her latte.

She looks like the shy and introverted type. Experience has taught me introverts suffer when they have to be out in public.

Thank God I'm an extrovert.

"Callan." Hearing my name, I head to the counter to grab the three beverages.

Taking a sip of my medium freshly ground coffee as I walk toward the exit, I notice Lillian sitting down at a table that's just opened up. It surprises me. I would've thought she'd want to escape the crowded space as quickly as possible.

I step out onto the sidewalk and walk the two blocks to where *Perfect Gentleman* is situated. I started the company with my best friend, Dylan, while we were in college. We needed extra cash and figured being male escorts was a quick way to earn it.

It all happened because Dylan agreed to take his neighbor to the prom. She used to be bullied and just wanted one good experience before school was over. It made us realize there

was a demand for male escorts to accompany women to various events.

We never performed sexual favors and always kept things professional. If a girl needed a date to a function, whether it was a funeral, wedding, or business event, we were the guys they called.

By the time we graduated, we had over twenty men working for us, and *Perfect Gentleman* was born. To this day, we still stick to the same principles.

Now, I have branches nationwide with over ten thousand employees working for me.

I wish Dylan were here to see how much The Perfect Gentleman has grown.

Thinking about Dylan, there's a stab of heartache in my chest. It's been six years since I lost my best friend and I don't think I'll ever stop missing him.

Thank God I still have Harper. She's also been there since the beginning when she started as our PA. Now she helps me run the company. She's one of the few people I trust.

Entering the sky-scraper where my offices are situated on the thirtieth floor, I glance around the lobby. The security desk is on the left, while on the right, an abstract art piece covers the entire wall.

Up ahead are two sets of three elevators and a single black velvet couch. The rest of the décor is dark steel and glass, with floor-to-ceiling windows allowing natural light to spill into the lobby.

Nodding my head at the three security guards, I grab the designated elevator for the top five floors.

I sip on my coffee as I'm taken to my floor, and the image of Lillian ghosts through my mind. Something about her left a lasting impression on me.

The elevator comes to a stop, and stepping out, I'm met with a wide grin from Easton.

"I'll take that while you take this," he says, grabbing the beverages from me and shoving a tablet into my hand. "We're going to have a busy two weeks. We need to hire more men. Harper is talking with HR to set up interviews as we speak."

I glance at the extensive list of bookings, and walking to my office that's at the end of the hall, I say, "Let me verify the bookings before you go into panic mode."

I run an exclusive business, and not every request gets approved.

I take a seat behind my desk, and setting the tablet and coffee down, I open my laptop and log into the system.

Easton hovers in front of my desk until I lift an eyebrow at him.

"Sooo, I'm going to need next Friday off," he says, giving me a pleading smile.

"For?"

"Personal reasons."

"You can't take care of this personal issue any other day of the week? We're busy on Fridays."

Easton sits down in one of the leather chairs in front of my desk. “Josh and I are hoping to adopt a child.”

My eyes widen with surprise. “Wow. Okay. That’s a huge step.”

“We’ve talked about it for ages, and we feel the time is right to expand our family.” Easton lets out a nervous-sounding sigh. “My stomach’s been a tight ball of nerves since we got notified about the meeting.”

“You can have next Friday off,” I say, so he’ll have one less thing to worry about.

A smile brightens his face again, and he lets out a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry too much about the meeting. You and Josh will make great parents.”

“You’re the best boss in New York,” he says as he gets up.

“Only in New York?” I joke with my PA.

Rolling his eyes, Easton heads out the door, leaving me to check the new requests.

Chapter 2

Lillian

Wow. Miracles still happen.

I can't stop smiling as I sit down at an open table. I've been coming to this Starbucks for three years, and the barista, Eddie, always remembers the regulars' names. Everyone's but mine.

I've been called Julian, Gillian, Ian – everything but Lillian.

But today, he finally got it right.

I can't help but steal a glance at the handsome man who was standing behind me in line. When I accidentally dropped my phone and we both crouched down to pick it up, I got an up-close view of his dark blond hair and perfect features. The man is a dead ringer for Jensen Ackles. If it weren't for his bright blue eyes, I'd be willing to bet good money that I just came face-to-face with Jensen himself.

It was enough to weaken my knees and make my stomach buzz with sudden attraction.

I'm not the only one staring. Every woman in the near vicinity has their eyes on him.

My gaze follows the impressive man as he walks past the window and disappears from my sight.

Damn, he's one fine specimen. All broad shoulders with an immaculate suit that's clearly been tailored to his muscled body.

Plus, he has a strong...no...dominant aura vibrating from him. He's probably used to being a leader and having people do his bidding.

Still, it was kind of him to pick up my phone.

Taking a sip of my beverage, I let out a satisfied sigh as I continue to stare out of the window.

I hear two women seated near me laughing and feel a flicker of loneliness.

Even though I have family, friends, and a job I enjoy, I always feel alone because none of the people in my life make an effort to keep in contact with me. If I don't reach out first, I never hear from them.

My mother will contact me eventually, but it won't be out of concern. It will be because she feels offended I haven't called her.

It sucks being the one who always has to text and call first, but I do it because I don't want to be totally alone in this godforsaken world.

Life has taught me if I'm out of sight, I'm out of mind. *Forgettable*. That's the word I'd use to describe myself. Not out of self-pity but because of how people make me feel.

I suppress a sigh and enjoy a sip of my latte as I glance at the two women to my left. They look like they could be best friends...or sisters. The smiles on their faces make the corners of my mouth curve up.

“If you don’t tell me about last night, I’m going to pour my hot chocolate over your head,” the platinum blonde threatens with a playful expression.

“Okay...so...I wore the red dress we decided on,” the brunette replies before letting out a little shriek. “Everyone’s eyes were on me. Especially Jeff’s. He had a sour look on his face all night long.”

“Eat your heart out, Jeff,” the platinum blonde mutters. “Serves him right for trying his luck with you while he’s married. Such a sleazeball move. I pity his wife.” She leans forward. “Let’s get to the juicy part. What was your date like?”

The brunette sets her cup down and gives her friend an elated look. “Jess, the man was drop-dead gorgeous and so polite. He had everyone he talked to eating out of his hand.” She raises her eyebrows. “I might be in love.”

The platinum blonde, Jess, lets out a chuckle while shaking her head at her friend. “I told you hiring a date is worth the enormous amount you have to pay. Was I right, or was I right?”

The brunette relaxes back in her chair. “You were right. It was worth every penny.” She tilts her head and thinks for a moment, then adds, “These days, when I go on a date, I never know what I’m going to get. It was nice having a conversation with a man, knowing I was in full control and safe.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “And it didn’t hurt that he was handsome and gave me all his attention. It was nice to feel special.”

“Now you understand why I always hire my dates for special events from The Perfect Gentleman,” Jess says.

The Perfect Gentleman. Hmm...

I'm so engrossed in the conversation between the two women that before I know it, my latte is finished.

As I get up to dispose of my cup and walk out of Starbucks, their conversation sticks with me. Particularly the part where the brunette said it was nice to have a conversation with a man who made her feel special.

I wouldn't mind having dinner with someone who actually takes an interest in what I have to say.

Damn, would I really hire a man? I mean...it's not like the attention will be genuine. He'd fake everything. Right?

I don't know how I feel about that. It's defeating the purpose, isn't it?

Still, it would be nice to have dinner with someone who's focused on me.

With the thoughts mulling in my head, it only takes fifteen minutes before I reach the gallery where I work as an art conservator. I've been with ART24 for three years. When I started, the manager, Ridge, promised they'd consider looking at my art once I've been with them three years.

For the past two weeks, my stomach's been spinning with nerves. I'm in two minds about waiting for Ridge to bring up the subject or approaching him myself. He's not the easiest person to talk to.

During my spare time, I've been working to create a collection for when my moment comes.

Entering the gallery, I smile at the guard, Jerry. "Morning."

“Morning,” he says, only giving me a quick glance.

Heading down to the basement, where various art pieces are stored, I place my handbag on a desk and grab hold of my apron. While I put it on, I inspect the two pieces that got damaged when a pigeon flew into the gallery last week.

It was a shit show, quite literally. The pigeon kept slamming into the walls, and it didn't help that Ridge was scared of the bird. In his haste to get away from the flying devil, he bumped into the metal tree art piece depicting two faces, and it got a couple of scrapes and chips when it fell over.

The other art piece is quite old, and the pigeon pooped all over it.

Grabbing a cotton swab, I carefully begin to remove the poop, trying to salvage as much as possible of the original oil painting.

I love art and don't mind restoring pieces, but I'd much rather work on my own designs. It's my dream to make a living from my artwork. It will show my parents I have talent and didn't choose the wrong career.

Art has always been my passion.

I come from a family who are all in law. My father is a judge, and my older brother and younger sister are lawyers. My siblings, Mark and Sadie, just opened a law firm together, and because of it, I had to hear what a disappointment I am to the Harrison name.

I'm not going to lie. Sometimes, it feels like I was adopted because I don't fit in with my family. I love arts and crafts,

strolling through markets, and dressing comfortably.

My family loves all things law-related, exclusive events, and getting dressed up on a daily basis. They never dare leave the house in something as simple as jeans and a camisole. Or, God forbid, a T-shirt.

They love heated debates, and I hate confrontation.

They love going to the golf club on Sundays for lunch to mingle with the rich and famous, while I prefer to fly under the radar.

Mom and Sadie have set weekly appointments for their nails and hair, whereas I keep my nails short and neat and only visit a salon twice a year for my hair.

I'm the odd one out. Always have been and probably always will be.

Honestly, there have been times they've forgotten to invite me to a family event. Lately, it's been happening more and more, though.

There's a familiar sad pang in my chest, but shaking my head, I focus on the painting. It doesn't help to dwell in my thoughts, and it only makes me feel depressed.

As I lose myself in my work, time creeps by, and before I know it, the day is over. I stand back and inspect the painting, happy with the progress I've made. Tomorrow, I'll be able to patch up the faded spots.

After I wash my hands, I grab my handbag and head up the stairs. Goosebumps spread over my skin as I walk through the gallery that's much warmer than my workspace.

The basement is always cold, which is nice during the summer, but in winter is downright arctic. Because the art pieces are stored down there, there's no heating, so I have to dress super-warm.

It's not the best work conditions, but I'm holding out so I can get my chance to show my work to the gallery.

With summer coming to an end, I make a mental note to go through my winter clothes this weekend to make sure I don't need anything new.

Just as I walk into the lobby, Ridge comes from the other hallway.

Even though my back is aching from all the bending and I'm exhausted, I smile brightly, "Hi, Ridge."

He hardly glances at me. "Not today. I'm in a hurry."

I pick up my pace to catch up with him. "When can we meet to discuss my collection?"

"I'm busy all week. Once things are quieter, I'll let you know," he mutters as we step out onto the sidewalk.

It's the same excuse he gave me two weeks ago, and I scowl as I watch him climb into a cab.

I'll only give him one more month of my time, then I'll try my luck at other galleries. Hell, I'll even try selling my work at markets.

Letting out a sigh, I head toward my apartment. Actually, it belongs to my father, and he only lets me stay there to ensure I don't negatively affect his public image.

After all, Judge Harrison can't have one of his children living in poverty.

I roll my eyes at the thought because even though I don't make millions, my salary is enough to get a studio apartment and take care of my expenses.

I'm saving up for a deposit, and once I have the funds, I'll look for my own place. It's not that I'm ungrateful my father is offering his apartment to me, but because I want to be independent.

I'm worried about how my parents will take the news once I tell them I want to pay for my own apartment, which won't be as luxurious as the one I currently live in.

If I do it, they'll probably be embarrassed because image has always been important to my parents. My family's in the newspapers every other week, and the strain of living up to their super-high standards is taking a toll on me.

I don't care about living in a penthouse. I just want a little apartment that's mine.

I want to make the rules in my life.

Chapter 3

Callan

Dressed in a three-piece suit with Harper by my side, I struggle not to glare at the other people around us.

Most of the guests attending the fundraiser are entitled and arrogant, thinking their wealth gives them the right to treat other people like shit.

I'm not a fan of events. Whether they're fundraisers or for business, I don't care for them at all.

"Smile," Harper hisses. She's looking drop-dead gorgeous in a pink formal dress, and I'm proud to have her on my arm.

Harper's husband, Daniel, should be here soon. When they met after college and fell in love, I was lucky to gain him as a friend, and I know I'm one of the few men he trusts with his wife.

I force my lips to curl up, then grumble, "We're not spending a second longer than an hour here."

"It's good publicity for people to see you at fundraisers," she reminds me. "It shows you have a heart."

I notice my neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Hill, sucking up to Eloise Torres, a professional friend of mine. Unable to resist a chance to rattle the Hills, I tug Harper closer to the group.

Mrs. Hill is the first to notice me, and looking like she stepped in shit, she pats her husband's arm to get his attention.

Eloise has made a name for herself in the art world, and everybody clamors to be seen with her.

Pulling away from Harper, I place my hand on Eloise's lower back, and the moment she makes eye contact with me, a beautiful smile spreads over her face.

Even though she's in her fifties, she can give any thirty-year-old a run for their money. The woman is aging like fine wine.

"Callan, I'm so glad you could make it." She presses a kiss to my cheek and smiles at Harper before turning her attention back to the Hills. "Have you met Callan Wright and Harper Jones? They're friends of mine."

The news rattles the older couple, but Mr. Hill recovers first. "Oh, yes. Mr. Wright is one of our neighbors."

"Is that so?" Eloise says. "Such a small world."

Eloise was one of my first high-profile clients, and through her, I learned the beauty of art. We've never crossed the line and never will. Besides Eloise being twenty years older than me, she loves her single status and doesn't have time for a romantic relationship in her life.

The Hills excuse themselves, and when they walk away, I murmur, "You look beautiful as always, Eloise. How are things at the gallery?"

"Thank you, sweetheart," she replies. "I'm bracing for the storm. We have exhibition after exhibition lined up for the

next six months.” She smiles at Harper. “When you grow tired of Callan, you can always come work with me.”

I wrap an arm around Harper and playfully shake my head at Eloise. “Harper is my sidekick. Get your own.”

“Yeah, but she’s my wife,” Daniel suddenly says as he joins our group.

I let go of his wife and grin at my friend as I shake his hand. “Glad you could make it.”

“I can think of a million places I’d rather be,” he mutters as he glances around the room. “I see every socialite has their eyes on you. Good luck with that.”

I let out a dissatisfied grunt, hating the feel of the hungry and longing eyes on me.

“Let’s grab a drink.” I lift an eyebrow at Eloise. “Can I get you anything?”

Holding up her martini glass, she shakes her head. “This will last me a while.”

Leaving Harper to talk with Eloise, Daniel and I make our way to the bar.

“Two Jack on the rocks,” Daniel tells the barman before glancing over the room again.

“How’s work?” I ask.

His gaze swings back to me. “Busy as always. The construction of the bridge will begin soon.”

Daniel’s a structural engineer and has a weird fascination with bridges. He and Harper always used to argue about the

framed photos of bridges he put up in their home, but eventually, she gave in and made her peace with it.

“You should come over for dinner. It’s been a while,” he states.

“Saturday?” I ask. When he nods, I offer him a smile. “I’ll bring the wine.”

“Evening, gentlemen,” Suzanna Bloomberg interrupts us.

I almost let out a groan but stop myself in time. “Evening,” I mutter, not sparing her as much as a glance. Instead, I pick up the tumbler the barman just placed in front of me and swallow a sip.

“Can I have a moment of your time, Callan?” she asks.

Daniel chuckles as he takes his drink and walks to where Harper is standing, leaving me alone with the she-wolf.

Sucking in a deep breath, I level my gaze on Suzanna. She’s one of the most sought-after socialites, and it’s gone straight to her head. A Mrs. Hill in the making.

I haven’t had much time for dating, but if I were to start a relationship with a woman, she would be down-to-earth with a heart and a soul.

“What can I do for you?” I ask.

Her fake smile brightens, and as she steps closer to me, she slants her eyes to the side, making sure the other socialites see her with me.

“I need a date for Belinda Newman’s thirtieth birthday.”

Knowing exactly where this is going, I can’t resist to fuck with her. “Put in your application with my company, and I’ll

see who I can pair with you.”

Her lips part with an offended breath, her eyebrows drawing together. “You’re misunderstanding, Callan. I want you to accompany me as my date.”

A chuckle rumbles from me as I shake my head. “That’s not going to happen.”

Placing her hand on my bicep, she widens her eyes and gives me a seductive look. “Surely you can make an exception for me? We’ll look good together.”

Shaking her hand off my arm, I step away from her. “I don’t have any interest in dating you,” I say to make myself clear to the woman. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

As I walk to Harper and Daniel, I feel Suzanna’s eyes shooting daggers into my back.

Honestly, I’d rather remain single, like Eloise, than settle for the likes of Suzanna.

“Harper tells me you’re planning the ten-year anniversary,” Eloise says. “I hope I’ll get an invitation.”

“Of course.” I grin at her.

“Before I forget. I’ll need you on the twenty-sixth for the Art Gala,” she adds.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I add her to my schedule. “What time should I pick you up?”

“Seven.”

“It’s a date,” I reply with a smile.

A couple of years ago, I told her she doesn't have to pay any longer and that I'll accompany her as a friend. Now there's a running joke between us where she pays a hundred dollars into my account after every event.

"Daniel tells me you're coming for dinner on Saturday," Harper says. She glances at Eloise. "You're welcome to join us."

Eloise lets out a sigh. "I wish I could, but I have an exhibition. Once things are quieter at work, we can have dinner. Thank you for the invite, though."

I keep an eye on the time, and once an hour has passed, I say, "That's me for the evening. I've made an appearance."

Harper gives me a playful glare. "The moment you leave, I'm donating a million on your behalf."

I let out a chuckle. "I'll take half out of your bonus."

She scrunches her nose but gives me a friendly smile. "I'll see you at the office."

I shake Daniel's hand and press a kiss to Eloise's cheek before I head out of the building.

Just as I take the steps down to the sidewalk, I hear Suzanna call, "Callan, just a moment, please."

Letting out an audible sigh, I glance over my shoulder.

She comes to a stop on the steps and levels me with a scowl. "You owe me an apology."

My eyebrow lifts. "For what?"

"For being rude to me at the bar." Her face pinches with anger. "You should feel flattered that I asked you to be my

date to the party of the year.”

Christ help me.

Turning around, I continue down the stairs and mutter to the valet. “Callan Wright.”

He speaks into a radio for my car to be brought to the front, and as I wait, Sophie appears by my side, looking enraged. “How dare you?”

“You’re making a scene,” I mutter, hardly sparing her a glance. “It’s unattractive, Suzanna. Show some class.”

I swear I hear her huffing and puffing, her breaths escalating as if she’s a volcano about to erupt.

“Everyone in our social circle will hear about how rude you’ve been to me.”

I let out a chuckle, and meeting her eyes, I lean a little closer. “Does it look like I care?”

My car pulls up, and I give her a disgusted look before I walk to the driver’s side and slide behind the steering wheel.

Leaving an offended Suzanna Bloomberg on the sidewalk, I drive away.

It’s at times like this I miss the peace and quiet of my old life before I became a billionaire.

With my phone connected to the Bluetooth in the car, I dial my father’s number.

“Hey, son,” his grumbly tone comes over the line. “Is everything okay?”

He’s probably worried because I’m calling so late.

“No, I just wanted to check in with you. How are you?”

“Good. The hip is doing much better.”

My father had a hip replacement a couple of months ago, and he’s been driving my step-mother insane.

“Take it easy with the exercises. I don’t want to hear from Naomi that you’re pushing too hard.”

Dad lets out a huff. “Don’t listen to her. She exaggerates things.”

“Right,” I chuckle.

“Is that Callan?” I hear Ellie’s excited voice. “Put him on speaker.”

My little sister is fifteen years younger than me, but we have a fantastic relationship.

“Hey, Ellie,” I say, happiness shining through in my tone.

“When are you coming over again?”

“I saw you on Sunday.”

“So?” she snips at me.

“Want me to pick you up from school tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yes!”

“Hi, Callan,” I hear Naomi call out.

“Hey, Naomi. Is Dad still giving you trouble?”

“Of course,” she mutters. “The man’s on the treadmill for an hour a day. Talk to him.”

“Dad,” I say, my tone filled with warning. “Don’t make me strap you down in front of the TV.”

He lets out a disgruntled huff. “You and what army.”

“Callan, you hold him, and Mom and I will tie him to the couch.”

I let out a chuckle. “Just take it easy, Dad.”

“With you all ganging up against me, I don’t have much of a choice.”

I talk with my family until I stop my car in the basement parking area of the company’s building.

Saying bye to everyone, I tuck the device back into my pocket and head up to my office so I can get some work done before midnight. It’s a routine I find hard to break, so I’ve stopped trying.

Chapter 4

Lillian

I wipe off my kitchen counters, and with my entire apartment spotless, I still feel restless.

Maybe I should go out and get some fresh air?

Deciding to message my friends to see if they're free for lunch, I grab my phone and open our group chat.

I've known Beverly and Denise since high school, and even though I'd call them my best friends, they seldom reach out to me first. It's something I've gotten used to.

Lillian: Hey guys. How about we meet for lunch? It's been a while since I saw you.

The message shows that it's gone through, and I stare at the screen for a moment before I walk to the spare room I use for my art. It will take them a while to reply.

Hopefully, they see the text today.

I set the device down on my work table and look at the piece I'm busy with. The mediums I like to use are a combination of plaster and oil paints on a canvas. I feel it makes the image stand out.

Currently I'm working on a piece depicting a child sitting on a heap of trash consisting of cell phones, laptops, TVs,

wrappers, and junk food. I'm trying to convey that a child's foundation is important.

I'm busy with the plaster phase and will only get to add color with my oil paints in a couple of days. Probably by next weekend.

As I sit down to continue working, I glance at the collection I already have. Ten pieces that took me two years to create. They vary from an old woman walking between tombstones, showing how lonely it is when everyone you know has passed away, to a man sitting on a heap of people to convey what it took for him to get to the top. They all show the struggle of life through my eyes.

They're my most prized possessions. I've poured my heart and soul into them, and if anyone had to ask which one's my favorite, I wouldn't be able to answer them.

A sense of pride pours into my heart before it's joined by a pang of loneliness. No one in my life is interested in my artwork. My parents haven't even seen any of my paintings.

I squash the emotion down and get to work, building the layers of the pile the child is sitting on, carefully adding plaster to the canvas.

Once I'm done with this collection, I want to create pieces showing the joys of life. My mind floods with ideas while I get lost in my art.

When my stomach grumbles and I lift my head, I realize the room is growing dark. I get up from my stool, and stretching, I check the time on my phone.

Wow. Seven-thirty. Time just flew by while I worked.

I go into my messages and see neither Beverly or Denise has read the text I sent earlier.

Maybe we can meet for lunch during the week?

Wanting to check with them, I press dial in the group chat. It takes a few rings before Denise answers.

“Hey. What’s up?”

Beverly doesn’t answer the call, so I ask Denise, “I sent a text earlier in the group chat, but you must’ve been busy. How does lunch sound sometime during the week?”

“Oh, sorry. I’ve been busy planning my birthday party,” Denise apologizes. “Lunch would be nice. I’ll talk to Beverly and let you know which day works for us.”

“That will be great.” I leave my art room and head down the stairs to the living room. “What are you planning for your birthday party? Is there anything I can help with?”

“I’m making it an Arabian Night’s theme. It’s going to be incredible.”

“That sounds exciting.” A smile curves my lips. “Is there anything I can do?” I ask again.

“No, we’ve got it covered. You won’t be bringing a date, right?”

The smile fades from my face. I hate that everyone just assumes I don’t have a boyfriend. *Even if it’s the truth.*

On the spur of the moment, I say, “I’m bringing a plus one.”

“You are?” she gasps. “Do I know him?”

“No...ah...we met at the gallery,” I lie through my teeth.

“Good for you,” she says, her tone friendly. “Charles will be my plus one. Things are getting serious, and I’m hoping he’ll pop the question at my party.”

Charles?

“You haven’t told me about Charles,” I murmur. “How long have you been dating?”

She lets out a chuckle. “I’m sure I told you. He’s all I talk about.” She chuckles again. “We’ve been together for six months. He’s a stockbroker at Daddy’s firm. I’ll send you a photo of us.” She hesitates, then adds, “I’m dead sure I told you about him.”

She probably told Beverly, but wanting to set her at ease, I say, “Shoot, you did. Sorry.”

“Yeah...so, I have to go.”

Feeling a little awkward, I suck in a deep breath of air. “Sure. Let me know when we can meet for lunch. It will be good to see you and Beverly again.”

“Will do,” she says in a sing-song tone before ending the call.

There’s a heavy feeling in my gut as I walk to the kitchen to fix myself something to eat.

I really didn’t know about Charles, and thinking hard, I realize I haven’t seen Beverly and Denise since Beverly’s birthday – which was over seven months ago.

I sit down by the island in my kitchen and stare at the marble top.

Has it really been that long?

I open our group chat and scroll through our texts. What I see makes me feel like I'm begging for their friendship.

Over the past year, I was the one to reach out first, and there were many times I've mentioned for us to get together, but they were always busy.

My shoulders slump as I'm forced to accept the fact that I'm not as important to them as they are to me.

Or were to me.

I'm done being the first to message them.

Letting out a huff, I drop the device on the counter and walk to the fridge.

My cellphone beeps, and when I pick it up again, it's to see a photo from Denise. It's of her, a guy who I assume is Charles, Beverly, and some guy who's probably Beverly's date.

Denise: I have good taste, don't I?

They're all smiling, and from the background, they seem to be at Denise's house.

A burst of anger explodes in my chest because I'm clearly wasting my time on people who don't care about me.

I don't even bother replying to Denise's text, and walking to the living room, I grab my handbag and keys from where they were lying on the couch.

I leave my apartment, and thirty minutes later, I reach my destination. Whenever I feel overemotional, I come to The Rage Cage, where I use one of their rage rooms to let off steam. It's my version of a therapy session because talking to a stranger about how I feel is something I'll never do.

I only have to wait ten minutes before a room opens up, and after putting on the required coveralls, I pick a sledgehammer for my choice of weapon.

When I walk into the room filled with old printers, VCRs, and various electronic equipment, I pull the safety goggles on.

I close my eyes and allow all my emotions to bubble to the surface.

All the moments people have made me feel like less, like I meant nothing to them.

All the times I've been forgotten.

All the times I've reached out first, only to be ignored, or worse – they get back to me the next day or a week later with an excuse of being busy.

It's always worse because, by doing so, they make it clear that you're not a priority in their lives.

My parents. My brother and sister. My so-called friends. Work. The freaking barista at Starbucks.

I take a swing at a monitor, then another, and another. I keep hitting every piece of equipment until I'm out of breath and surrounded by shattered plastic and glass.

Gasping for air, I sink into a crouching position while going through the process of squashing all the destructive

emotions back into the darkest corner of my soul.

I hear the door open behind me, then the guy who works here says, “We’re closing. Time to finish up.”

I nod as I rise to my feet, and following him out of the room, I take off the safety goggles. When I reach the reception desk, I place the sledgehammer and goggles on the counter and quickly step out of the coveralls.

I’m still a little breathless as I leave the establishment, and walking toward the subway station, I wrap an arm around my middle.

It’s okay. It’s not as bad as you think.

Your expectations are too high.

People have lives.

Chin up. You have a lot to be thankful and happy about.

I force myself to think of my art as I head home, and as the creative juices start to flow through me, I feel calmer and less lonely.

Chapter 5

Callan

Taking time out from my busy schedule, I'm at my dad's place for an early dinner with my family.

The aroma of Naomi's pot roast fills the air while I listen to Ellie's college choices. She wants to study business management because she's dead-set on joining my company one day.

I don't have a problem with it at all. My little sister and I have always had a good relationship. She's clever and more mature than most kids her age.

And it's nice to know she has an interest in what I do. Even though there's a fifteen-year age gap between us, we're very much alike. She's a mini version of me.

To say I'm highly protective of my little sister would be an understatement.

"Dinner is ready," Naomi calls out.

Dad and Naomi got married when I was twelve. My biological mother skipped out on us, and I lost touch with her. Naomi's never treated me like a stepchild and raised me as if I was her own.

As we head to the dining room, Ellie asks, "Which college do you think is the best?"

“NYU,” I reply with a grin. “It’s only twenty minutes from my place.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Now you sound like Dad.”

As we take our seats, I grin at her. “Just want to keep you close to us.”

Her face brightens as an idea hits. “Does that mean I can come live with you?”

Shit.

My mind races.

I won’t be able to bring a woman over if Ellie is living with me.

But then again, I rarely bring people over to my place.

I’m hardly home.

Still, at least I’ll know where she is.

Letting out a slow breath, I lock eyes with my sister. “It’s something we can discuss if you choose to study at NYU.”

A wide smile spreads over her pretty face. “Really?”

Naomi places the pot roast on the table, giving me a hopeful look. “Knowing Ellie’s with you would make us worry less. I never liked the idea of her staying in the dorms, or God forbid, alone in some apartment.”

“You would be doing us a huge favor, son,” Dad adds his thoughts.

Shrugging, I wink at Ellie. “Well, then it’s settled. Enroll at NYU, and I’ll let you move in with me.”

“Eeeeeep!” Ellie darts up from her seat and rushes around the table. I get up just in time to catch her in a brotherly hug. “I promise I won’t get in your way. I’ll cook and clean.”

I push her back so we can lock eyes. “I have one condition.”

“Anything.”

“I want to meet every single guy before you’re allowed to go on a date with them. You’re not alone with a man unless I’ve given my approval.”

She rolls her eyes again and walks back to her seat as she mutters. “Like I said, you sound like Dad.”

Dad lets out a chuckle. “It’s because we want to protect you from the bastards out there.”

Ellie’s eyes slant to me. “Fine. It’s a deal.”

The corner of my mouth lifts, and I help myself to the delicious meal Naomi’s prepared for us.

I only get to take four bites before my phone begins to ring. Letting out a sigh, I answer, “Callan speaking.”

“It’s Harper. We booked Steven for the date, but his car broke down, so he decided it was a wise move to send one of his friends in his place. The first I heard of the shit show was when Miss Dos Santos called to inform me. She’s upset that we sent a different escort without notifying her, which we obviously didn’t do. How do you want me to handle the situation?”

Christ.

Sylvia Dos Santos is the daughter of an influential man, and the last thing I need is her father breathing down my neck.

Anger starts to simmer in my chest as I get up from the chair. “Send me the client’s address and tell her I’m on my way.”

As we end the call, I give my family an apologetic look. “Work emergency.”

“We understand,” Dad says.

He’s always supported me, and tonight is no different. I’m well aware of how lucky I am to have such an amazing family.

“I’ll put some food in a container for you. Give me a minute,” Naomi says, jumping up. She rushes to the kitchen, and I take a moment to press a kiss to the top of Ellie’s head.

A minute later, the food is shoved into my hand, and Naomi kisses my cheek. “Drive safely, and good luck.”

“Thanks. Sorry I have to cut the visit short.”

“It’s okay. We’ll see you soon,” Naomi says.

With a last smile at my family, I rush out of the suburban house and get into my car. I check the message Harper sent containing Sylvia’s request and all her details and program the address into my GPS.

Date requested to accompany her to her twenty-five-year school reunion.

Assigned companion: Steven Hall

Seeing as I went to Dad’s place straight from work, I’m still dressed in a three-piece suit, so I’m ready to accompany Sylvia.

I can't believe Steven sent his friend. What the fuck was he thinking?

I'm firing his ass as soon as I've dealt with the situation.

Twenty minutes later, I stop the car outside Sylvia's apartment building, and climbing out, I see her arguing with a man on the sidewalk. She's wearing a formal black dress.

At least my suit matches her dress. That's one less worry.

"Leave before I call the police," she threatens a man who's leaning against a sedan that's seen better days.

When I near them, her eyes swing to me, anger tightening her features.

I hold out my hand to her and say, "I'm Callan Wright, the CEO of The Perfect Gentleman. I apologize for the unprofessional behavior of my employee."

Her eyes widen on me as she places her hand in mine.

My eyes flick to the other man. "You can go."

"Are you sure? I don't mind taking her," he says, his demeanor way too casual for the explosive situation he finds himself in.

I take in the guy's cheap cargo pants and long-sleeved shirt that's a size too big, then growl, "Leave."

I turn my full attention to Sylvia. "I'll escort you to your high school reunion."

Relief washes over her features before it looks like she might cry. "I'm a nervous wreck, and that guy..." she gestures at Steven's friend, "just made everything worse."

I place my hand on her shoulder and give her a comforting smile. “Take a deep breath.”

A smile wavers around her mouth as she sucks in a couple of breaths.

Gesturing at my Bugatti, I ask, “Are you okay driving with me, or would you like to take your own car?”

“I’m okay going in your vehicle,” she replies, still looking shaky.

Placing my hand on her lower back, I steer her to my car and open the passenger door for her. Once she’s seated and pulling on her safety belt, I shut the door and walk to the driver’s side.

Before I start the engine, I capture her eyes with mine. “Once again, I apologize. You’re in safe hands. Is there anything I need to know before we go to the reunion?”

She seems to hesitate, then blurts out. “I used to be obese, so I was bullied a lot.”

Nodding, I give her a comforting smile. “You look beautiful, Sylvia.” More tension leaves her face, then I ask, “Do you need me to be a buffer between you and the other people attending?”

She nods. “Please. I just want to show them they didn’t break me.”

Giving her an encouraging look, I say, “I have rules. The only physical contact allowed is an arm around the waist and holding hands. Are you comfortable with that?”

She nods quickly. “Yes.”

“Okay.” I smile at her again, then start the engine. “Try to enjoy the evening. This is your moment to shine.”

When my office door opens, and a worried Steven slinks in, it takes all my strength not to get up and punch the shit out of him.

Usually, I don't deal directly with the staff, but he upset a VIP client.

My cold stare locks on him, and once he stops on the other side of my desk, looking like a chastised kid, I continue to stare at him. The silence between us can be cut with a knife.

Luckily, I was able to salvage things, and by the time I dropped Sylvia off at her home, she was happy with how the night had gone.

I slowly suck in a deep breath before murmuring in a low tone brimming with anger, “What made you think it was okay to send your friend in your place?”

Steven nervously licks his lips. “I panicked when my car wouldn't start, and Joseph was close to Miss Dos Santos' apartment.” He holds a hand up to stop me from talking, which only pisses me off more. “Look, I know I screwed up. I should've called Harper, but I promise I will never make the mistake again.”

“You're right,” I mutter as I turn my attention to the schedule of appointments I have to approve, “You'll never make the mistake again because you're fired.”

“Sir,” he groans. “Please. I need this job.”

Not looking at him, I snap. “Get out, Steven. I don’t give second chances.”

I can feel he wants to beg some more, but I continue with my work, and a minute later, he drags his feet out of my office.

I pick up the phone on my desk and dial Easton’s extension. He picks up, and before I can give the instruction, he says, “I’ll make sure he’s escorted from the building.”

“Thank you.”

Jesus, why can’t people do their job right the first time? I need more employees like Easton.

Before I hang up, I add, “Have flowers with an apology sent to Miss Dos Santos with a ten percent discount code for the next escort she requests.”

“Will do.”

Steven had a pleasant demeanor about him. That’s why I paired him with Sylvia. I hate that I had to fire him, but I can’t have my staff fucking up on appointments.

Rolling my shoulders, I get to work while doing my best to forget the unpleasantness of firing someone.

Chapter 6

Lillian

Having restored the painting to its original state, so you can't tell a pigeon pooped all over it, I hang it back on display.

I let out a satisfied breath as I look at the art piece.

I did a good job.

Turning around, I walk to the exit of the gallery. I'm heading to a Subway that's a couple of blocks away to order a sandwich for lunch.

Well, a late lunch. I didn't want to take a break before finishing the painting. After I've eaten, I'll get to work on the sculpture.

The sidewalks are bustling with pedestrians, and when I dart into the Subway store, I let out a breath of relief.

It's so hot today that you wouldn't think winter is just around the corner.

I order my usual sandwich, asking for extra pickles, and after I've paid, I move to the window and watch the people rushing by the store.

Everyone's in a hurry to get somewhere.

It only takes a few minutes before I get my sandwich, and as I walk back to the gallery, I glance around at the other

people. Everyone looks depressed that it's Monday and there's a whole week of work ahead.

Suddenly, my eyes lock on Denise and then Beverly. They're on the opposite side of the street, their arms filled with shopping bags.

There's a sharp ache in my chest, and I stop walking for a moment, my gaze following them.

They're smiling and clearly happy about something.

When I spoke to Denise on Saturday night, she didn't mention anything about the outing. Beverly still hasn't replied to my messages.

The ache grows, and it's joined by a sense of loss and loneliness.

I'm so done with them. It's crystal clear they don't view me as a friend.

Shaking my head, I continue to walk back to the gallery while trying to process all the negative emotions that seeing them stirred in me.

It hurts that I mean so little to them.

Denise will probably send me an invitation out of obligation.

Will I go to her birthday party?

It will only add to the heartache.

I let out a sigh, and stepping into the gallery, I head down to the basement.

I place the uneaten sandwich on my desk and sit down on the stool. Staring at the floor, I think about the birthday party.

What's the use of going?

I'm sick and tired of feeling like this.

Forgettable.

Meaningless.

I shake my head again and close my eyes as another wave of heartache hits. This time, it's joined by anger.

I'm so over everything. This is not the life I wanted for myself – groveling for a bit of attention from the people who are important to me.

Just once, I'd like to feel like a priority to someone.

Opening my eyes, the memory of the two women at Starbucks talking about The Perfect Gentleman pops into my head.

Maybe if I pay for a date, the guy will be forced to give the attention I crave.

Playing with the idea for a moment, a plan starts to form.

I'll hire a drop-dead handsome man to be my date for the party. Besides getting some attention, it will also show everyone I'm not hung up on them. I have a life, and I'm happy.

I lift my chin as the idea of hiring a date settles in my broken heart.

Leaving the sandwich untouched on the desk, I get to work on the statue, my mind buzzing with thoughts of hiring

someone from The Perfect Gentleman.

The moment I get home, I head straight for the living room. As I sit down on the couch, I drop my handbag next to me and pick up my laptop from where it's lying on the coffee table.

With resolution flowing through my veins, I open the laptop and turn it on. The instant it connects to the WIFI, I open the web browser page and Google The Perfect Gentleman.

The site loads onto the screen, and I stare at the black and gold design of the page.

Am I really going to do this?

Pressure builds in my chest, forcing me to my feet. I walk to the kitchen and prepare a cup of green tea, hoping it will settle my nerves.

With the beverage in hand, I walk back to the couch and sit down again. I stare at the screen as I take a few sips before placing the cup on the coffee table.

I go to the menu and snoop around for a couple of minutes. Everything looks professional. There are different packages to choose from, and it looks like you can practically build the perfect date.

Curious, I enter the application page and start to sift through all the options.

Height. Hair color. Eye color. Body built. Education. Specialties.

Oooh. I can get a chef with a six-pack to cook for me.

Remembering the man I saw in Starbucks, I select all the options matching the mysterious Jensen Ackles lookalike.

The next page asks for my personal information, and the pressure in my chest returns, along with a nervous buzzing in my stomach.

Darting to my feet, I head to the kitchen again. I decide to fix myself something to eat, seeing as I haven't eaten all day.

I pull a chicken breast and brocolli from the fridge, and while I grill the meat, I keep glancing a the laptop.

Maybe I should go to dinner with the man before I take him to the birthday party. Kind of like an interview.

That way, I'll be more comfortable with him.

I set the grilled chicken aside and turn off the stove.

Walking back to the living room, I take a seat again and start to fill out my personal information.

There's a comment section asking for specifics about the date. It requests honesty so the company can assign the perfect man.

Ugh. Am I really going to spill my guts to some escort service?

Feeling apprehensive, I type;

I need a date for a birthday party. I feel like I'm forgettable to my friends. I want to leave a lasting impression on them.

Honestly, I want to show off that I don't need them, even if it's not the truth. Please don't judge me. I know it's stupid, but I just want to make a statement that I have a life, too.

Forgetting that I'm filling out an application, I start to vent as if I'm writing in a diary.

I'm already regretting this, but for once, I want to make them see me. I want them to think, 'Oh shit, we didn't know she was dating a drop-dead gorgeous man. When did I last contact her? We should do lunch.'

Then I can ignore them the way they've ignored me.

I know it's petty. Again, don't judge me.

I just want to be seen. I just want to feel special.

Just once.

Letting out a deep breath, I stare at the screen again, the arrow hovering over the submit button.

Yeah, there's no way I'm submitting that. It was cathartic to type, though.

I reach for the mouse to move the arrow to the X at the top right-hand corner of the page but accidentally click on the submit button.

“Shit!”

The words ‘**Your application has been submitted for review. We will be in touch within twenty-four hours,**’ appear in the middle of the screen.

“NoNoNoNoNo!!!”

I slap my hand over my mouth, my eyes wide with shock. “Shit.” I shake my head before I start to look for a way to cancel the application.

The verification has been sent to my email, and there’s no way to cancel it.

“Ugh. I screwed up.” My shoulders slump, and I’m overcome with embarrassment.

When the company contacts me via email, I’ll just cancel the application.

Shaking my head again, I slump back against the couch and stare at the ceiling. “This is what you get for wanting to be spiteful.”

Chapter 7

Callan

When I walk into Harper's office, it's to see a frown on her face, her attention on the computer screen.

"What's wrong?" I ask, taking a seat across from her desk.

"A sensitive application came through." Her eyes flick to me as she turns the screen so I can see the details.

My eyes skim over all the information, and when I see the photo attached to the file, it feels like I know the woman from somewhere.

"Is she an existing client?"

Harper shakes her head.

I look at the photo of the blonde woman, and it takes a second or two before I remember where I know her from. Starbucks. The introvert.

My eyes flick to her name. Lillian Harrison.

Yeah, that's definitely Starbucks-girl.

"She didn't give a date for the event," Harper informs me. "I'll have to call her before we decide who to pair her with."

"Make a shortlist and see who's available once we have the date and time," I say. I point to the phone on Harper's desk. "Call her while I'm here."

Harper dials the number, and I quickly press the speaker button so I can hear what's said between the two women.

A moment later, the call is answered with a cautious tone, "Lillian speaking?"

"Miss Harrison, this is Harper Jones from The Perfect Gentleman. How are you today?"

"Oh...ahh...crap," Lillian stumbles over her words. "I'm sorry. I thought you would reply via email. The call is unexpected. Sorry."

Harper's eyes meet mine before she says, "We just need a date and time to arrange an escort for you."

"Ahh...so, the thing is, I accidentally hit the submit button." Lillian lets out an audible sigh. "I'm sorry for venting on your website. I didn't mean to send you all of that...the rambling."

"It's okay, Miss Harrison," Harper says, her tone filled with understanding. "How would you like to proceed?"

"Can we cancel the whole thing? Initially, I wanted to meet for dinner. I don't even know when the party will be. My friend's birthday is on October seventeenth, but it's a Tuesday. She'll probably have the party the weekend before or after her birthday. I won't know until the invite arrives. But, like I said, I accidentally submitted the application."

"Why don't you go ahead and meet our escort for dinner? If the date goes well, we'll know who to book for the party."

"Yeah, I'm not sure."

I grab a pen and notepad and quickly write;

Tell her we'll give her a 10% discount for the first appointment.

“We'll give you a ten percent discount for the first dinner. Treat yourself, Miss Harrison. I promise you won't regret it.”

There's a pause in the conversation as Lillian thinks about it, then she murmurs, “If I meet the man and I feel too awkward, can I cancel the dinner at any time?”

“Yes,” Harper replies. “You'll have complete control over the date. All our employees are vetted, and you'll be safe.”

“Ahh...okay. When's a good day to do this?”

“When works for you?” Harper asks. “We'll work around your schedule.”

“Tonight?” A burst of nervous laughter comes over the line. “If I wait too long, I'll probably chicken out.”

There's a flash of worry on Harper's face because we're fully booked for the next two weeks.

I quickly write on the notepad again.

Dinner at seven. I'll go.

Harper raises an eyebrow at me, then says, “Does seven work for you, Miss Harrison?”

“Yes. Uhm... where?”

“You can choose the restaurant,” Harper informs her. “Unless you want us to recommend one?”

“Yeah, sure. I can't think of one off the top of my head.”

La Magnifique.

Harper reads what I've written. "We'll make a reservation at La Magnifique. Should we pick you up at your home or office?"

"No. I'll meet whoever you're sending at the restaurant." She pauses for a moment, then asks, "Will you let me know who the ahh...escort is?"

"Callan Wright. He's the CEO of The Perfect Gentleman. I'll text you a photo along with the reservation confirmation at La Magnifique."

"Thank you." Before Harper can end the call, Lillian adds, "And thank you for being so patient with me and not judging me for everything I wrote on the application."

Harper's tone is soft as she replies, "You're welcome, Miss Harrison. If you need more information or just want to talk again before the dinner date, you're welcome to call me."

"Okay. Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your day," Lillian says.

"You too."

The call ends, and Harper's eyes lock with mine. "I know it's not something you like to do, but I think it's good you're taking the date. The poor woman sounds like a nervous wreck."

"I saw her at the Starbucks around the corner a couple of weeks ago," I admit to Harper. "She came across as the introverted type, and this call just confirms it."

"I'll make the reservation for seven," Harper starts to look for the phone number of the restaurant.

Getting up from the chair, I murmur, “Thanks.”

She finds the number then looks at me. “Are we going to fill the vacated position?”

“Yes.” I walk to the door, then pause to say, “Have HR set up a couple of interviews. Once they have a shortlist, I’ll take a look.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll send my details to Lillian,” I tell Harper before leaving.

When I’m back in my office, I take a seat behind my desk. I pull up Lillian’s application on my laptop and read through her details.

Name: Lillian Harrison.

Age: 25

Hobbies: Anything art-related.

Once I’ve memorized her personal information, I program her number into my phone. Sending her a text with my photo, name, and contact number, I mention that I’ll call an hour before dinner to confirm the plans.

It’s seldom I take a date. Usually, it’s only when I have to do damage control, but Lillian seems like a sensitive person, and the last thing I need after Steven’s fuck up is another unhappy client to deal with.

I’d rather go to dinner myself and make sure she’s happy and comfortable.

Chapter 8

Lillian

I'm sitting with my face in my hands, internally dying of embarrassment after the call.

Ugh, I could've handled that better.

My phone beeps, and I quickly grab the device. Opening the message, I see it's from the assigned escort, and I want to die all over again.

That's until I see Callan's photo. My eyes go wide as saucers, and my mouth drops open. With my jaw practically hitting the floor, I stare at the familiar handsome face of my Jensen Ackles lookalike.

Holy crap.

What are the odds?

Even though it's only a photo, I can feel the dominance coming from the man, and knowing he's the CEO of The Perfect Gentleman, it makes sense. He runs a company, hence the air of power around him.

And it makes me a hell of a lot more nervous about the dinner date.

This is insane. Am I really going to go to dinner with this man?

What will people think if they find out the truth? The story could leak to the press.

My parents will kill me.

I stare at the photo of the gorgeous man.

Damn, he's good-looking.

The date is confidential. No one will find out unless I let it slip.

It would be nice to have dinner with him.

That's if I don't have a nervous breakdown before we meet.

I place my hand over my spinning stomach and take a couple of deep breaths.

It's just dinner. I can cancel at any time.

Deciding I'll worry about it later, I type out a quick reply, then put my phone on the desk so I can get back to work.

I try to focus on smoothing out the chips on the statue, but my thoughts keep revolving around the dinner date later tonight.

When it's time to go home, my stomach feels hollow, as if something is gnawing a burning hole through my insides.

Grabbing my bag, I head out of the gallery, and during my walk home, I consider canceling the dinner a million times. At one point, I pull my phone from my handbag and type out a text to call the whole thing off, but I can't bring myself to press send.

Suddenly, my phone starts to ring, and seeing Callan's name on the screen almost gives me a heart attack. The hollow

pit in my stomach fills with a weird buzzing as I stare at the name flashing on the screen.

“Crap!” I whisper. My finger hovers over the answer icon, and biting my bottom lip, I take the call. “Hello?”

“Lillian?” His voice sounds like smooth velvet wrapped around pure dominance and masculinity.

Holy shit.

My breathing instantly speeds up. “Ah...yes. Hey. How are you?” I stumble over my words.

He doesn’t burst out laughing at my awkwardness but instead says, “I’m good. How are you holding up? Nervous?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Very nervous.”

“Try not to overthink things. We’ll share a relaxing meal and talk about art.”

Did I mention I love art on the application form?

Probably.

“Okay.” I begin to nibble on my bottom lip, my hands trembling from just taking his call. “I’m going to be super awkward,” I admit.

“And I’ll set you at ease. Do you have any questions for me?”

My mind is blank from all the tension. “No. Not at the moment.”

“Okay. I’ll see you at seven.” Before I can reply, he adds, “Just think of it as dinner with a friend. There are zero expectations on my part.”

“Okay. See you at the restaurant,” I murmur before we hang up.

I wipe my palm over my clammy forehead, and clutching my cell phone to my chest with my other hand, I rush to my apartment where I can have a panic attack without any witnesses.

Shit. I can't believe I'm doing this.

Usually, I like getting to know new people, but hiring a date is way out of my comfort zone, hence all the nerves and awkwardness.

As I step into my living room, my phone beeps with a payment request from The Perfect Gentleman, and before I can chicken out, I transfer the required amount to them.

It's just dinner. I'll get to enjoy a meal with an attractive man. There are no expectations.

Taking a calming breath, I head to my bedroom to get ready for tonight.

I'm standing outside the restaurant, dressed in black pants and a dark green blouse, with a light jacket for the nippy autumn air. For the hundredth time, I wonder whether I shouldn't just cancel this crazy idea.

Don't be a coward. It's too late to cancel.

It's just dinner.

I suck in a deep breath of air, and before I can change my mind, I walk into the restaurant.

My stomach tightens horribly, and I feel nauseated as I stop in front of the host. The man smiles as he asks, “Good evening. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes. I’m meeting Callan Wright,” I say, my voice sounding scratchy.

I clear my throat and force a smile to my face.

“Right this way, ma’am,” the host murmurs.

I follow him past candle-lit tables and notice how busy the restaurant is. I’m taken to the back, and when my eyes land on Callan, my heartbeat sets off at a crazy pace.

Shit. What was I thinking?

Whatever you do, don’t puke.

In a smooth motion that reminds me of a wildcat, Callan gets up from where he’s sitting, and I hardly notice as the host smiles politely at me before returning to the front of the restaurant.

My eyes are glued to the man in front of me, who’s dressed in an impeccable three-piece suit, looking as if he stepped out of a fashion magazine.

Just like at Starbucks, I’m struck speechless by the intensity of his bright blue eyes and extraordinary good looks.

He’s easily a head and a half taller than me, and he seems downright powerful.

It’s intimidating.

Shit, I should've worn a dress or something more formal and impressive.

“I’m glad you didn’t cancel,” Callan says, a comforting expression forming on his handsome face.

I quickly wipe my palm on my pants before shaking Callan’s hand. “I thought about it a million times,” I admit nervously. “Ah... I’m Lillian Harrison. Nice to officially meet you.”

His mouth curves up at the corners, and it makes him look a zillion times hotter. “Please, sit down.”

Honestly, I feel a little lightheaded from the intensity of the moment and quickly take a seat across from him.

An awkward smile pulls at my lips, and I feel sweat beading all over my body.

As I suck in a deep breath, Callan tilts his head, and his eyes settle on me. “Take another deep breath,” he instructs while pushing a glass of water closer to me. “It’s just dinner, Lillian. There’s nothing to worry about. You’re in complete control.”

I nod as I desperately swallow half of the water. Setting the glass down, I give him an apologetic smile. “I’ve never done anything like this before. I have no idea what to do.”

“First things first, would you like an appetizer?”

“Oh, right! Dinner.” I pick up the menu and quickly scan over the selection of appetizers.

I have zero appetite right now.

“The shrimp is very good here,” Callan murmurs. “Do you eat seafood?”

I nod, then say, “I’ll go with your recommendation.”

He gives me an encouraging smile, then asks, “Would you like me to place the order?”

I let out a chuckle. “Please.”

Callan signals for a waitress to come closer, and with an air of confidence I envy, he gives her our order. When she leaves us alone again, Callan’s eyes lock on me.

An unnerving feeling scurries down my spine, and I swallow hard.

“I don’t know if you recall, but we’ve met before,” he says. “At Starbucks a couple of weeks ago.”

Surprise ripples through me. “You remember me?”

He nods. “Of course. You ordered a breve latte.”

Wow. The man has one hell of a good memory. I’m officially impressed.

“You have a good memory,” I compliment him.

The corner of his mouth lifts in a grin that makes him look even more dangerously attractive. I glance at the flickering candle, the table cloth, the napkins, and cutlery – everywhere but at him.

“You like art?” he asks.

My eyes dart to him before I pick up my napkin and fold it into various shapes to keep my hands busy.

“Yes. I studied art. I’m an art conservator.”

Callan's right eyebrow lifts, giving me the idea he's impressed by what I'm saying, and it makes a foreign sensation creep into my heart.

"I've never met an art conservator. What do you do?"

I force myself to stop fiddling with the napkin and meet his eyes. "I restore damaged paintings, sculptures...any piece of art to their original state."

Again, he seems impressed by what I said, and it gives me a confidence boost.

"I have a close friend who owns a gallery, so I know enough to hold a conversation about art."

I'll die if the friend turns out to be my boss. I better not let it slip which gallery I work at.

"So you like art?" I ask.

Callan nods. "I own a couple of pieces." He picks up his glass and takes a sip of water.

As if caught in a trance, I watch his throat move as he swallows.

Wow. That's hot.

His attention is one hundred percent focused on me as he asks, "Do you only restore art, or do you work on your own pieces as well?"

It feels weird talking about myself when I answer, "I'm currently working on a collection. I hope to have an exhibition one day."

With his eyes locked on me as if nothing can tear his attention away from me, he says, "Tell me about your

collection.”

Damn, this man is good. He really knows how to make his date feel special.

My nerves ease a little. “I like to think of it as expressive art. I use a combination of plaster and oil paints to create pieces showing the negative side of life.” Not wanting to come across as a depressive person, I add, “After I’m done with this collection, I’ll work on one showing the joys of life. Kinda like Yin and Yang.”

“I’d love to see your work.”

Like a mother with a newborn baby, I dig my phone out of my bag and open the gallery. “I have photos.”

Callan stands up and moves his chair to my left. Leaning closer, he says, “Show me.”

A whiff of his aftershave hits me. The scent is spicy but not overwhelming. It’s just enough to catch your attention, and it suits him.

I turn the device so he can see the screen and explain, “This one is of an old woman walking between tombstones, showing how lonely it is when everyone you know has passed away.”

Callan is quiet for a moment as he stares at one of my precious pieces, then his eyes flick to mine. A loaded silence hums between us before he murmurs, “You’re really talented, Lillian. The painting speaks volumes.”

He swipes to the next photo, and this time, I feel more comfortable as I say, “The man sitting on a heap of people, is to convey what it took for him to get to the top.”

I continue to show my paintings to Callan, and only when the server brings our appetizers do I realize he's the first person ever to see my work.

A wave of emotion hits me square in my chest, and my hands start to tremble.

Callan immediately picks up on the emotional moment I'm having and places his hand on top of mine. "I take it you don't get to talk about your art often?"

Feeling self-conscious, I nod while my eyes flick from the shrimp to Callan and back to my meal. "You're actually the first person who's seen my collection."

His touch is warm and comforting as he gives my hand a squeeze before letting go.

"I'm honored, Lillian." He pours us each a glass of wine, then asks, "How many pieces will be in the collection?"

"Twelve. I'm almost done." I take a much-needed sip of the wine.

"I'm sure you'll sell every piece when you have your exhibition. Your paintings are extraordinary," he compliments me, his tone filled with confidence.

My eyes flit to his. "You really think so?"

"Yes. I've seen my fair share of art but never anything like yours."

A wide smile spreads over my face as happiness and pride burst in my chest. "Thank you."

Chapter 9

Callan

I wasn't lying to Lillian to stroke her ego. The woman is fucking talented. I'd love to see the actual paintings.

With my eyes glued to her, I once again take in her beauty, and after spending some time with her, there's a flicker of instant attraction, which I ignore.

Unlike at the Starbucks, her hair is loose with the ends curled, and she's wearing makeup.

But it's not her physical features that grabbed my attention. It's her extraordinary talent, and the fact that she's brave enough to come to dinner even though it's clearly out of her comfort zone.

After the emotional moment hit her, she seems to relax a little, which I'm taking as a win. I only have two goals tonight: to make her feel comfortable and to ensure she enjoys my company.

We're enjoying our appetizers when she suddenly asks, "If you're the company's CEO, why do you accept appointments?"

I pat the corners of my mouth with the napkin before answering, "When the client seems sensitive, I tend to step in."

Her cheeks flush red again. "Sensitive?"

Damn, the blush on her cheeks only makes her look more beautiful.

Her shyness brings out a protective feeling in me.

Keeping my tone gentle, I ask, “You’re an introvert, right?”

She nods, then points out, “But I didn’t say that in my application.”

“I picked up on it at Starbucks,” I explain. “And earlier on the call with Harper, you sounded very nervous.”

The red on her cheeks deepens in color. “Harper told you about the call?”

“You were on speakerphone,” I answer. Needing to set her at ease, I lean a little closer and capture her eyes. “Don’t feel embarrassed. It’s normal to be anxious when you use our service for the first time.” I give her hand another squeeze, my gaze holding hers. “Don’t worry about the call.”

She takes a deep breath before helping herself to a couple of sips of her wine.

Her eyes flit between me and her plate of food. “Is it okay with you if I ask questions about your company and personal life?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“The men working for you, are any of them married, and if so, isn’t it weird if they go on dates?”

My mouth lifts into a smile as I answer, “Some are married, and before you ask, their wives know what they do for a living. My married employees only escort women to

events. They're not actual dates, and my company has a no-physical-intimacy policy."

"Right." She pops a shrimp into her mouth.

"My single employees usually take the appointments where they have to pretend to be in a relationship. I take great care when matching an employee with an applicant."

The corner of her mouth lifts. "That's good to know." Then her eyes widen. "Are you married?"

I let out a chuckle while I shake my head. "No, I'm happily single."

"Thank God," she breathes, relief washing over her beautiful features. "If, by some miracle, I use your company's service again, don't pair me with a married man."

"You won't be paired with someone else. If you choose to use The Perfect Gentleman for the birthday party, then I'll be your escort," I say to put her mind at ease.

A breathtaking smile graces her lips. "Thank you."

"You're single, right?" I ask to turn the conversation back to her.

"Yes." She scrunches her nose in a cute way. "But I've dated. I'm not always this awkward."

"You're not awkward at all." I give her another encouraging smile.

"Liar," she teases me, and I watch as she relaxes.

Chuckling, I shake my head at her. "So, besides art, what else do you love?"

“I like going to markets and browsing through the stalls.”

“Were you born in New York?”

She nods. “And you?”

“Me too.” While talking, we finished our appetizers, and I ask, “What would you like for the main course?”

Lillian takes a minute to look at the menu, then says, “I’ll have a rib-eye steak.”

“How do you want it prepared?”

“Medium, please,” she answers as she sets the menu down.

I signal for the waitress to come closer and give her our order.

When we’re alone again, I ask, “Do your family live in New York?”

She nods. “And yours?”

“They live in Short Hills.”

There’s a moment’s silence, then she gives me a questioning look. “What made you start an escort company?” She lets out a chuckle. “Is that even the right term to use?”

“It is.” We’re sipping on our wine as I say, “It was actually my best friend’s idea. He took his neighbor to her prom and saw there was a market for accompanying women to events.”

“Oh, so you and your friend run the company?”

I shake my head, an echo of grief creeping into my heart. “He passed away in a car accident.”

Lillian’s eyes widen. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. It happened six years ago, so the worst of the grief has passed.”

But I’ll always miss him. Losing Dylan left a gaping hole in my life.

Lillian’s eyes lock with mine, then she admits, “I have to be honest, I didn’t expect the dinner to go so well. You’re really good at putting a person at ease.”

A grin tugs at my mouth again. “Years of experience.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?”

“Thirty-two.”

“And still single?” she gasps. “Why? Or is it by choice?”

“Definitely by choice. I haven’t met the right woman yet.”

“It’s funny,” she murmurs, her attention entirely on me. She has completely relaxed, giving me my first glimpse at who she really is. “We live in a city with eight point five million people, and we can’t find the right one.”

I chuckle at her statement. “True.” My smile widens. “Then again, I’ve been too busy at work to date.”

And I don’t care much for the women in my social circle.

Lillian tilts her head, thinking about something. “I haven’t thought much about dating. I spend all my spare time working on my collection.”

“Maybe you’ve already found the love of your life,” I say.

Her eyes narrow slightly. “Who?”

“Your art.”

Laughter bursts from her, the sound carefree and holding the power to make me smile.

“You’re right. No man will be able to take the place of my precious paintings.”

A server brings our main course and fills our wine glasses.

Once we’re alone again, I glance at Lillian and ask, “Is the collection you showed me the only pieces you have?”

She shakes her head. “I have a bunch of paintings in storage. I was thinking of selling some of them at a market.”

“You should do that,” I say to encourage her. Keeping the conversation on her, I ask, “So what do you do for fun?”

She thinks for a moment before replying. “Normal stuff. Watching a movie. Reading a book.” She cuts a piece off her steak, then grins. “Eating.”

Seeing her relaxed fills me with pride.

“What do you do for fun?” she throws the question back at me.

“I love spending time with my family.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Are you close with them?”

I nod. “I’m especially close with my little sister. She’s fifteen years younger than me, so I’m an overprotective big brother.”

There’s a flicker of sadness in Lillian’s eyes, which catches my attention.

“That must be nice,” she murmurs before focusing on her meal.

I feel the need to ask what the sad look was for, but keeping things professional, I pretend I don't notice it.

Chapter 10

Lillian

I'm surprised by how well the dinner is going. Callan has managed to make me feel relaxed to the point where I enjoy his company.

That is, until he asks for the check.

Do I pay?

I should pay, seeing as I hired him, right?

I nibble the inside of my mouth, then gather the courage and ask, "I pay for the dinner, right?"

He shakes his head. "It's included in the fee you paid. After all, it wouldn't feel like a date if you pay."

"Ohhhh." I give him a playful expression. "You're giving away your business' secrets."

I'm rewarded with a hot grin. "Don't tell anyone."

The server places a black folder down beside Callan, and I watch as he takes a black Amex card from his wallet.

When the payment is done, I pick up my handbag and stand up. "Thank you for tonight."

Callan rises to his full height and takes a step closer to me. "You're welcome."

He gestures for me to walk, and when we exit the restaurant and step out onto the sidewalk, he asks, “Can I take you home?”

My eyes flit to his before I glance up and down the busy street.

Should I take a cab?

It's not like he's a serial killer.

I look at Callan again before replying, “Won't it be out of your way?”

“Where do you live?”

I hesitate for a few seconds before saying, “Sutton Place. 58th Street.”

His right eyebrow lifts. “It's just down the road from me. Let me take you home so I can make sure you're safe.”

Feeling a twinge of nervousness, I nod. “Thanks. It's kind of you.”

Callan places his hand on my lower back, instantly making me overly aware of him. He guides me to a matte black Bugatti and opens the passenger door.

If only all men had manners like Callan. I wouldn't be surprised if every woman he's accompanied to an event or for dinner has fallen head over heels for him.

Just keep your feet firmly on the ground, Lillian. This is nothing more than a job for him. You're paying for a service.

Getting into the car, I put on my safety belt. When Callan slides in behind the steering wheel and shuts the door, the

atmosphere ripples with the intensity coming off him in waves.

As the engine roars to life, Callan's eyes flick to me, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly before he pulls away from the curb.

Holy hotness.

He doesn't try to fill the silence with unnecessary conversation, and only when he turns into 58th Street does he ask, "Which building?"

"One Beacon Court." I watch as my apartment building comes closer, then say, "Thank you for tonight."

Callan parks in front of the entrance and surprises me when he climbs out and comes to open my door.

When I step onto the sidewalk, he says, "I'll walk you to your front door."

"You don't have to."

His palm rests on my lower back again, giving me a soft nudge. "I'll feel better knowing you're safely home."

We enter the foyer, and I smile at the doorman before I dig my keycard out of my handbag. Swiping over the elevator's keypad, I press the button for the top floor.

The doors slide open, and we step inside. When they close again, Callan's overwhelming presence fills the small space.

"We don't live far from each other," he mentions.

"Yeah? Where's your apartment?" I ask to make conversation.

“The Ritz Carlton.”

I’m not surprised.

The doors open on my floor, and as we walk to my front door, Callan asks, “I might be pushing my luck, but is there any chance you’ll allow me to see your paintings?”

Caught off guard, my eyes fly to his face.

He notices my strong reaction and says, “Only if you’re comfortable letting me into your apartment.”

I know he won’t try anything. I’m just surprised he wants to see my artwork.

“You can come in.”

Opening my front door, I step inside. I switch on some lights and place my handbag on the couch before gesturing to the stairs.

“I use one of the spare rooms for my art studio.”

Callan waits for me to take the lead, and as he follows me to the room, he says, “You have a lovely home, Lillian,”

The way he says my name makes goosebumps erupt over my skin.

“Thank you.”

When we step into my sacred space, I gesture at my collection. They’re all resting against a wall, and I watch as Callan moves closer to them.

He takes his time looking at each piece, making my stomach tighten with nerves.

Wrapping my arms around my middle, my eyes keep darting between my artwork and Callan's handsome face.

After what feels like an eternity, his eyes flick to me. "You shouldn't be working as an art conservator."

What?

As a frown starts to form on my forehead, he adds, "You should be painting twenty-four-seven. Your talent needs to be shared with the world."

A sense of pride and appreciation wells in my chest.

Callan walks over to the easel and looks at the piece I'm working on.

Stepping closer to him, I say, "It's far from done."

He glances around my work area, then a smile spreads over his face. "So this is who you are."

I give him a questioning look. "I'm not following."

"Seeing your apartment and art gives me a sense of who you are. You come from money, and you have an amazing talent. You're expressive and not as introverted as you come across at first glance."

"I'm actually down to earth. I was just nervous tonight because I did something out of my comfort zone."

He nods, then smiles at me again. "When you're ready to sell your art, I want first pick."

I let out a burst of laughter. "We'll see."

I'm just about to offer him a cup of coffee when he gestures to the door. "I better get going."

“Right.”

I follow Callan to the front door, my eyes dancing over his broad shoulders and back.

The man looks devastatingly handsome in a suit.

When he opens the front door, he pauses to look at me. “Thank you for showing me your paintings.”

“You’re welcome.”

There’s a weird pull between us.

“When you receive the invite to the party, just send me a message. You don’t have to fill out an application again.”

“Okay.” My head bobs up and down. “Drive safely.”

I’m given a last smile by Callan before he walks to the elevator. It’s only then I remember I need to let him down to the lobby.

“Wait,” I call out before grabbing the keycard and rushing toward me. “Sorry. I need to scan the card for you to go down.”

I swipe the keycard, and when the doors open, Callan steps inside then turns to face me.

“It was nice meeting you, Lillian,” he murmurs.

“You too.”

Our eyes lock as the doors start to close, and I feel a punch in my stomach from the intensity of his gaze.

The connection between us is broken as the doors shut, and I let out a shaky breath.

Wow.

Just freaking wow.

A wide smile spreads over my face, and I almost let out a happy shriek as I walk back into my apartment. Shutting the door, I rest against it, letting out a sigh.

“That was perfect.”

Callan made me feel special, and it really felt like he saw me.

I’ll definitely make another appointment with him. Even if I don’t get invited to the party.

At least wait three days before you book him again so you don’t look desperate.

Shaking my head, I mutter to myself, “And don’t forget you’re paying him for his time.”

Chapter 11

Callan

Harper and I are busy reviewing the financials the accounting department sent to us when Easton comes in with our lunch.

“Time to eat,” he says, placing the pizzas on the round table we use for meetings.

“Thank God,” Harper mutters. “My stomach won’t stop growling.”

We move to the table and start to devour the pizza.

“Have you heard anything about the adoption?” I ask Easton. He went with his partner, Josh, to the meeting last Friday, and my PA has been on edge ever since.

His face lights up, and he nods as he swallows the bite he just took. “They called earlier. We’ve been approved.”

“Oh God,” Harper shrieks. She pats Easton’s shoulder. “Congratulations.”

“I’m happy for you both,” I say.

“We’ll meet our little boy next week, and then we’ll schedule visits until we get to take him home,” Easton informs us.

“How old is he?” Harper asks.

“Two.” There’s a flash of anger in Easton’s brown eyes. “Can you believe he was left at a fire station?”

“That’s so sad.” Harper shakes her head. “Then again, if that didn’t happen, you and Josh wouldn’t get to adopt him.”

“Silver lining,” I murmur.

“Yeah.” Easton glances at Harper and me. “What’s new in your lives? I feel like all we ever talk about is me and my shit.”

“Your shit is interesting,” Harper chuckles.

“Ellie is going to move in with me when she starts college,” I mention.

“Really?” Harper asks. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Of course.” I grab another slice of pizza. “I’ll be able to keep an eye on her if she’s living with me.”

“I wish I had an older brother,” Easton says. “It sucks being an only child.”

“You can have my siblings,” Harper chuckles. “Growing up in a house with six brothers and sisters, there was always a fight about the most random shit.”

There’s a smug smile on my face as I say, “Ellie and I get along. We’ve never had a fight.”

Harper playfully narrows her eyes at me. “Not everyone has a perfect life like you.”

My grin widens. “I’m pretty lucky, aren’t I?”

“Shut up,” she grumbles.

My phone beeps on my desk, and it has me saying, “Time to get back to work. Don’t leave the leftover pizza here.”

Easton gathers the boxes, and while he leaves the office, Harper comes to grab her laptop from my desk.

I pick up my phone, and seeing a message from Lillian, a smile makes my lips curve up.

“What’s the smile for?” Harper asks.

“Lillian just sent me a text.”

“Oh? For another appointment?”

“I’ll let you know.” I gesture to my open office door. “Shut it on your way out.”

Taking a seat behind my desk, I open the message.

Lillian: How much do you charge for a whole day?

Still smiling, I type a quick reply.

Callan: I charge double. What do you have in mind that will take a whole day?

The message is immediately read, and I watch as she types.

Lillian: How do you feel about the New Jersey State Fair?

My eyebrows lift. I haven’t been to a fair in ages. Before I can respond, another message comes through.

Lillian: I really want to go and would like some company. If it’s not your thing, I’ll understand.

Callan: The client gets to choose. When would you like to go?

Lillian: This Saturday?

I check my schedule and see I have a dinner date with Eloise.

Callan: I'm available as long as we're back by five p.m.

Lillian: Is that a yes?

Callan: Yes. What time should I pick you up?

I watch as she types, and it takes a minute before her reply comes through.

Lillian: Eight a.m. Wear jeans and a T-shirt. A fair is no place for a three-piece suit.

With the smile still firmly on my face, I send my reply.

Callan: Yes, ma'am. I'll have Harper send you the invoice. See you Saturday morning at eight.

Lillian: Thank you! Enjoy the rest of your week.

Callan: You're welcome.

I set the device down, and pulling Lillian's profile up on my computer screen, I stare at the photo of her.

I'm not going to lie. The woman's been on my mind since we had dinner, and knowing I'll see her on Saturday makes me feel excited.

Usually, I don't get excited about appointments, but the attraction I feel for her has steadily been growing.

She's a beautiful, talented woman. It's only normal that I find her attractive.

But nothing will come of it. I'll accompany Lillian on dates and remain professional.

Chapter 12

Lillian

Feeling positive and excited about my date with Callan, I have a huge smile on my face.

The carnival and farmers market are always my favorite attractions. Getting out of the city will do me a world of good.

And I get to spend time with Callan.

Even if I have to pay him for his time.

During my lunch break, I dial my mother's number for our weekly call.

Mom answers after a couple of rings. "Hey, sweetie. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you?"

"Good. Why didn't you come over on Sunday? We missed you."

"Sunday?" I frown forms on my forehead. "I didn't know anything was happening. What did I miss?"

"We had lunch to celebrate Mark and Sadie getting a huge case."

With my smile gone, a heavy feeling creeps into my heart. "No one told me."

This has been happening more and more.

“I’m sure I told you when we spoke last week,” Mom argues.

Feeling down, I mutter, “You must’ve forgotten.”

“Shoot. Sorry, sweetie. It probably slipped my mind. Your dad and I have been busy with social events. And with Mark and Sadie opening the law firm, I’ve been spread thin.”

“I understand.” Wanting to end the call, I say, “I have to get back to work.”

“Come over for dinner tonight. Mark and Sadie will be here to discuss a legal case with your father.”

Really?

Intense hurt fills my heart.

So they would’ve gotten together again without thinking to invite me?

“It’s okay,” I murmur. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“Nonsense. Dinner will be ready at seven-thirty,” she says, not picking up on the hurt in my tone. “See you later, sweetie.”

The call ends, and my hand slumps to my lap, the device’s screen going black.

Anger slithers through the heartache.

It’s always the same excuses.

It must’ve slipped my mind. I didn’t think of it that way. I’m sure I told you.

Did I really commit such a big crime by not going into law that my parents don’t treat me the same as Mark and Sadie?

Still hoping for a miracle, I go into my chat with my mother, but there's nothing about the lunch.

It's one thing being forgotten by my friends, but to have my own mother forget about me hurts like a bitch.

Letting out a sigh, I drop my phone on the desk so I can get back to work. I look at the four paintings Ridge bought from a late estate.

He still hasn't made time to talk about my collection.

Needing to take my anger out on someone, I get up and walk out of the basement. With every step I take toward Ridge's office, my anger grows.

I knock, and not waiting for an answer, I push the door open.

Ridge is sitting behind his desk, and Ivy, his PA, is comfortable in one of the chairs across from him. They're laughing about something, but it's cut short when they see me.

"Lillian," Ridge says, lifting an eyebrow at me. "Why are you barging into my office?"

Ivy gathers up their empty sandwich wrappers and coffee cups and places them on a tray.

"I should get back to work," she excuses herself.

I shut the door behind her, then turn my attention to Ridge. "I'm done waiting, Ridge. Are you going to look at my collection of paintings, or should I take my work somewhere else?"

"I don't like ultimatums," he mutters, a displeased expression on his face. "You know this is a busy time for the

gallery. We have exhibitions scheduled up until December.”

There's time for everyone else – just not me.

Nodding, I let the reality of my situation sink in. Nothing I say will make him look at my artwork.

I nod again, and locking eyes with him, my voice is filled with determination when I say, “I’ll email you my resignation letter.”

Done with this place, I yank his office door open and hurry away from the man who’s kept me waiting for far too long.

“Lillian,” he calls, and I hear him coming after me. “There’s no need to overreact. I’ll look at your collection in January.”

I spin around and level him with a glare. “That’s five months from now, Ridge! Five!” Done playing the waiting game, I shake my head. “You can find someone else to repair your paintings and sculptures. This is not what I signed up for.”

His features tighten with anger, and his eyes narrow. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

The bastard!

Feeling close to tears for all the time I’ve wasted here, I rush to the basement, grab my personal belongings, and hurry out of the gallery.

When I started working at ART24, Ridge promised my art would be considered after a three-year probation period. Stupidly, I thought he’d keep his word.

I fight the urge to cry until I reach the safety of my apartment, where I slump down on a couch.

I've given that man three years of my time.

I rest my face in my hands as the tears come, feeling utterly miserable.

What am I doing with my life?

At twenty-five, I'm still living in my father's apartment. I only have an investment account to my name. Oh, and paintings only one person has seen.

My anger flares up again, and I shake my head as I wipe the tears from my cheeks. "I'm done with everything."

Getting up, I walk to my art room, and sitting at the desk, I open my laptop to create a plan of action. I'm taking control of my life.

- 1. Find somewhere I can hire a stall to sell my art.***
- 2. Move into my own place.***
- 3. Create a portfolio of my collection to show galleries in and around NYC.***
- 4. Talk to my parents about how they treat me.***

Looking at the short list, determination fills my heart. I open Google and start to research weekly and monthly markets where I can sell my art.

I've spent the entire afternoon making a list of places to contact about hiring a stall.

Tomorrow, I'll look at apartments.

Wearing my usual jeans and T-shirt, I head to my parents' house for dinner. They always complain about how I dress, and sometimes I make an effort, but tonight is not the night.

When I reach their limestone mansion in the Upper East Side, I knock on the front door. I wait a while before knocking again, and it takes a few more seconds before the door opens.

"Oh, hi, sweetie," Mom says, a smile forming around her lips. As always, not a hair is out of place, and her makeup is perfect.

Dressed in a cream skirt and matching coat, she looks like she's going to work and not having dinner with her husband and kids.

"Hi, Mom," I say as I enter the house.

"Everyone's in the dining room. We started early because your father was hungry," she informs me.

Right.

When we walk into the dining room, I notice Sadie's plate is already empty.

This is the last thing I need after the day I've had.

"Why didn't you let me know you're starting dinner earlier?" I ask as I take a seat.

"I didn't think about it. Sorry, sweetie," Mom replies.

Dad's eyes flick to me. "Couldn't you wear something more appropriate?"

"Hi, Dad," I mutter. "It's nice to see you too."

His eyebrows draw together. “Don’t take that tone with me, young lady.”

“Let’s not make a scene at the dinner table,” Mom interjects before she continues to eat the rest of her food.

“Hey.” Sadie gives me a tired smile.

Mark just gives me a chin lift before he turns his attention back to Dad.

Why do I still bother?

Because you don’t want to be completely alone in this godforsaken world.

Maria, the housekeeper, brings an extra plate, and even though my appetite is gone, I help myself to some of the leftover food.

When I sit down again, I force a smile to my face. “How is everything coming along with the law firm?”

“It’s been crazy busy. We’re taking our first couple of cases,” Sadie answers me.

“I hope you win them all.” I turn my attention to Mark and ask, “How are Libby and the kids?”

“They’re good,” he mutters absentmindedly before talking to Dad again.

I listen as they discuss a labor lawsuit and let out a sigh.

Trying to start a conversation with Mom, I smile at her. “Is that a new outfit?”

She pats a hand over her coat. “Yes. I got it on Saturday morning. Sadie had to get new clothes for work, and I joined

her for an outing.”

There’s another stab at my heart, and I can’t bring myself to eat.

“I went back to Versace to get the silk blouse,” Sadie tells Mom. “You were right. It fits with the black suit.”

I watch the conversation between my parents and siblings, feeling left out. No one bothers to ask about anything related to my life. It really feels like they don’t have any interest in me.

Not caring about whether I make a scene, I drop a bomb when I say, “I resigned from work today.”

The conversations stop, and everyone’s eyes snap to me.

“It’s about time,” Dad grumbles. “Now you can study law and join Mark and Sadie’s firm.”

I stare at the grumpy expression on my father’s face and wonder when last I saw him smile.

“I’m not going to study law,” I reply. “I’m going to make a living from selling my art.”

Dad’s features grow darker as he shakes his head at me. “When will you stop playing around and start your studies? You’re twenty-five and have nothing to show for your life.”

I hate when he diminishes my passion for art like this.

“I’ve already studied,” I say. “I have a degree in art, remember?”

“I allowed it, hoping you’d get over the whim eventually. You can’t make a living from occasionally selling a painting.” He looks at me with disappointment, which is another stab to

my heart. “I didn’t raise you to be a struggling artist, Lillian,” he continues. “What will people say? Have you thought about how this will reflect on the family name?”

Slowly, I shake my head. “What’s wrong with me being an artist? It’s not like I’m committing a crime.”

“It doesn’t pay, Lillian!” his voice thunders through the dining room.

Mom places her hand on Dad’s forearm in an attempt to calm him down, but it doesn’t work.

He levels me with a non-negotiable look. “I refuse to look after you for the rest of your life.”

“I can look—”

“That’s enough!” he shouts, slamming his fist on the table.

Prickles of shock ripple over my skin, and with wide eyes, I watch as my father gets up and walks out of the dining room.

Mark stands up to follow Dad, and as he passes my chair, he mutters, “Get your shit together, Lillian.”

Silence falls over the table, and I try to process what just happened.

“I wish you wouldn’t push your father like that,” Mom murmurs with a worried tone.

“Just go study law,” Sadie adds her two cents. “Why do you keep fighting the inevitable?”

I glance at my mother and sister, then say, “I want to be an artist. I don’t understand why that’s such an issue with everyone.” Needing to get my opinion across, I add, “I plan on moving into my own place. I have enough money to take care

of myself. I'll sell my art, and with time, I'll make a name for myself."

"Stop!" Mom snaps. "Really, Lillian, enough is enough."

A heaviness wraps around my soul, and taking a deep breath, I get up from the chair. "I think it's better if I leave."

"Don't be childish," Sadie scolds me. "Apologize to Mom and Dad and enroll in law school."

My eyes lock on my sister, and for a moment, I stare at her before I shake my head. "I don't tell you what to do with your life. Don't tell me what to do with mine."

I turn my attention to Mom. "Thank you for dinner. I'll call you next week."

Leaving the untouched plate of food, I walk out of the dining room.

"I'm so upset," I hear Mom tell Sadie. "I don't know how to get through to her. It's only a matter of time before your father disowns her. I can't handle all this stress."

"I'll talk to her," Sadie replies, and it has me walking faster.

I slip out the front door and make it down the stairs before I hear Sadie call out, "Lillian. Wait."

Stopping, I close my eyes and pray for strength before I turn around. "What?"

"Why do you have to make everything so hard? Mom and Dad are upset, and you're just going to leave?"

"I didn't start the fight."

She crosses her arms over her chest, and with her light brown hair and amber eyes, she looks like a mini version of our mother.

Mark also has brown hair and amber eyes.

I'm the only blonde in the family, and sometimes I wonder whether I was adopted.

But I have my father's gray eyes.

"No one's telling you to stop painting. You can still do it as a hobby while you practice law," Sadie says.

I shake my head at her. "I don't want to practice law, Sadie. I understand you and Mark love it as much as Dad, but that's not me. I love art. I can't change who I am because you all demand it of me."

"We're not asking you to change who you are. Just be realistic for once. Art doesn't pay as well as law."

"God help me. If I have to hear about how little art pays one more time, I will scream," I mutter angrily. "I don't need to be a millionaire. Not everything is about money."

A disappointed look settles on my sister's face. "You're being impossible."

Exhausted, I say, "Let's just agree to disagree. I'm going home." I give her a half-hearted wave. "Night, Sadie."

As I walk away, frustration and loneliness wrap around me like a dark cloud.

Am I the unreasonable one?

Is it really asking too much for them to support my life choices?

Chapter 13

Lillian

I've spent the rest of the week securing stalls at two different markets. One is in Hastings-On-Hudson every Saturday from eight to one, and the other is on the last Sunday of every month at The Westfield Garden State Plaza.

I've also looked at two apartments, but they cost more than I'm willing to pay. I'm determined to find a two-bedroom apartment that will cost less than two thousand five hundred dollars a month, so I've started to look at neighborhoods and villages on the outskirts of New York.

I'm considering living in Hastings-On-Hudson, as I'll work in the vicinity every Saturday. I can travel to New York whenever the need arises.

Whatever I decide, I have three weeks to get my life in order before I start working at the stalls.

Excitement fills my chest at the thought of selling my art, which is a reminder I need to retrieve all my paintings from storage.

I also have to create new pieces because I'm not selling the collection I'm currently working on. Those paintings are reserved for whatever gallery gives me an exhibition.

Being busy has helped me get through the rough week. I sent a message to my mom to apologize, and she replied a day later, saying we'll talk once my dad's calmed down. Other than that, I haven't heard from my family.

Even though my life sucks right now, I'm trying to remain positive. Soon, I'll start selling my art and prove to my family I can look after myself. I'm hopeful that if they see I don't live in poverty, they'll be more accepting of my life choices.

But today, I have a date with Callan, and I refuse to worry about my problems. I just want to have fun at the State Fair.

After looking at my finances, I'll only be able to hire Callan twice more. After that, I'll have to stop.

Unless I sell a lot of paintings.

I've prepared two coffees in travel mugs and bacon and cheese sandwiches for the long drive to the State Fair.

I'm waiting in the lobby when I see Callan's Bugatti stop in front of the building. I'm still nervous and a little embarrassed that I have to hire someone to spend time with me. Not wanting to ruin the day, I try not to think about it.

Callan gets out of his car, the expression on his face almost predatory, until his eyes land on me. A smile curves his lips, making him look happy to see me.

Damn, will I ever get used to how intense he is?

I'm awestruck because the man looks unbelievably good in jeans and a white T-shirt. The jeans wrap around his thighs in a delicious way that makes my abdomen clench.

I'm pretty sure he'd look good in anything.

I walk toward him, and lifting the paper bag containing the sandwiches and travel mugs filled with coffee, I say, “Morning. I have coffee and breakfast for the long drive.”

His smile widens, an expression I can’t place, softening his eyes. “Morning. You look beautiful.” He takes the bag from me. “I only had one coffee this morning, so you’re a live saver.”

I let out a chuckle, and before I climb into the passenger side, I ask, “Are you also a coffee addict?”

“Yes. Without caffeine, I can’t function.” He places the paper bag on my lap before he shuts the car door and walks to the driver’s side.

As Callan slides behind the steering wheel, he says, “I’m actually looking forward to today.”

I grin at him, the excitement in my chest growing tenfold. “I’m happy to hear that.” I hold out his travel mug with coffee. “Have some before you start driving.”

He winks at me as he murmurs, “Yes, ma’am.” His tone is low and bordering on husky, causing tingles to spread through my body.

When he takes the travel mug from me, our fingers graze. There’s a spark, leaving me a little breathless.

Holy hell, that’s hot.

I have to tear my eyes away from him and keep myself busy by pulling our sandwiches from the paper bag.

After taking a couple of sips, Callan places the coffee in the cup holder, and starting the engine, he pulls away from the

curb.

“Can I put on some music?” he asks while focusing on steering the car through the Saturday morning traffic.

“Sure.”

I watch as he selects a pre-programmed playlist, and soon, emotional instrumental music plays softly in the background.

Before I can think of something to talk about, Callan asks, “How was your week?”

You don't want to know.

“I resigned from my job at the gallery.”

“You did?” His eyes flick to mine. “Do you plan on focussing on your own art?”

It feels so good to talk to someone who's supportive of my choices. “Yes. I've booked stalls where I sell some of my older paintings. I'm also setting up a website, and as soon as I'm done with the collection I'm currently working on, I plan on visiting galleries.”

“I'm impressed.” He shoots me a grin. “You have no doubt you're going to be successful.”

Warmth floods my chest and I can feel myself blushing. Clearing my throat, I ask, “How was your week?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “We're busy making arrangements for the company's ten-year anniversary.” His eyes flick to me before returning to the road. “Did you manage to work on your painting?”

“Yes, I'm done with the plaster phase. Tomorrow, I'll start painting it.”

“I can’t wait to see it once you’re done.”

Why can't my parents show an interest in me like this?

I instantly ban the negative thoughts from my mind and focus on Callan. “Do you have any hobbies?”

“Work keeps me busy, so I don’t have time for hobbies,” he answers.

“If you had time?”

He shrugs and seems to think for a moment before he says, “I can’t think of anything.” A smile curves his mouth up, and his eyes settle on me for a few seconds before focusing on the road ahead again.

“You don’t mind the long drive, do you?” I ask. “Sorry, I should’ve asked earlier.”

“I don’t mind at all,” he murmurs. “Like I said earlier, I’m looking forward to getting out of the city. Is there something specific you want to see or do at the fair?”

“The carnival and farmers market are at the top of my list. After that, we can just walk around.”

“Sounds good.” He gives a curious look. “Are you going to go on rides?”

“Definitely.”

He lets out a chuckle. “I get motion sickness.”

My eyes widen, and I quickly say, “You don’t have to go on any of the rides.”

“For you, I’ll try a couple.”

I appreciate he's willing to try, but the last thing I want is for him to get sick. Keeping the conversation light, I tease him, "Okay, we can go on the teacups."

I'm rewarded with a playful scowl. "Teacups, my ass."

Chapter 14

Callan

After I find a parking spot at the fair, and we're walking toward the entrance to get in line for tickets, I glance at Lillian for the hundredth time.

There's a bruised expression in her gray eyes and dark circles beneath them.

She must've had a stressful week.

I wish we were close enough so I could ask her whether she's okay.

She's constantly smiling and seems excited, but it doesn't hide the shadows in her eyes.

And it fucking bothers the hell out of me.

She might be a client, and I'm just her escort, but my attraction for her makes it hard not to take a deeper interest in her.

As we fall into line to get tickets, there's an urge to wrap my arm around her shoulders so I can pull her closer to me. Instead of giving in, I settle for placing my hand on her lower back.

Feeling the heat from her body on my palm, the attraction I feel for this woman stirs in my chest. Every second I spend

with her, it becomes stronger.

Lillian's eyes dart to my face, then she says, "It was my idea to come to the fair, so I'm paying for everything."

"You already paid the fee, which includes the cost for the fair," I remind her.

Her eyebrows draw together. "Please. I want to pay."

Not wanting to cause her any kind of embarrassment, I agree, "I'll allow it this once."

She lets out a snort that's followed by laughter. Her tone is playful as she teases me, "Wow, guess who's used to laying down the rules."

"You have no idea."

When we reach the ticket booth, it's hard for me to stand and watch as Lillian pays. I'm always the one paying, so this isn't something I'm used to.

Once Lillian has our tickets, we enter the fair, and she glances around before deciding on a direction for us to head in.

There's excitement in the air, along with children's laughter and people having fun.

"Carnival first," she says as she points to the right side of the grounds.

Soon, we're heading down a path that's lined with booths. There's every kind of game imaginable, but Lillian keeps walking until we reach the bumper cars.

She gives me a daring look. "Ready to get your butt handed to you, Mr. Wright?"

Christ, I love this playful side of her.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “You can try.”

After standing in a short line, we climb into the cars, and Lillian quickly steers hers away from me. I set after her, and as she’s trying to make a turn so she can come at me, I slam into the rubber lining around her car.

Laughter explodes from her, the sound clearly audible above the music and other noises. It’s carefree, making me chuckle.

My eyes are locked on her, and I drink in the sight of happiness on her face. Seeing her so happy makes a warm emotion fill my chest.

Christ, she’s beautiful.

We keep bumping into each other, and Lillian’s laughter and shrieks fill the air. With a permanent smile on my face, I can’t stop staring at her.

No woman has ever affected me like this in the past ten years of running the company.

Lillian’s eyes stay on me, and I swear I see the same attraction I feel written all over her face.

I bump into her again, and as she throws her head back, uncontrollable laughter spilling from her, I can feel myself starting to fall for her.

Her eyes sparkle, and she’s practically glowing from all the fun she’s having.

My heartbeat speeds up, and captivated, I realize there’s no stopping my growing feelings for this woman. It’s sudden and

totally catches me off guard. Something like this has never happened to me before with a woman.

I try to process the emotion Lillian woke in me as our session comes to an end. Climbing out of my car, I walk to hers, and holding out my hand, I help her to step out of her car. The moment she's standing in front of me, I wrap her up in a hug against my chest.

I drink in the feel of her body pressed against mine and the soft scent of vanilla and cinnamon coming from her.

She fits perfectly in my arms.

The hug lasts a couple of seconds too long, and to keep the atmosphere between us light, I chuckle, "You're a little daredevil."

"You bumped the living crap out of my poor car," she playfully complains as she pulls away from my chest.

Her eyes linger on mine, telling me she also feels the connection between us.

Wrapping my arm around her lower back, I steer her away from the bumper cars. A family of five comes toward us, and I pull Lillian tightly to my side so they don't accidentally knock into her.

I feel her glance up at me, but pretend I don't see her questioning look because I need time to process what I'm feeling before I address the matter.

I also want to make sure she feels the same as me before I cross the line.

God, I hope she feels the same, and I'm not imagining things.

After we pass a couple of booths, Lillian pulls me to a stop. "I'm winning you a stuffed animal."

"I'm pretty sure it should be the other way around," I argue.

Playfulness dances in her eyes. "I'm in control, remember? Your words, not mine."

Letting out a sigh, I mutter, "Fine."

When we step up to the booth, I see a pyramid made up of stacked cans on a shelf, and the aim of the game is to knock them all down.

"You only get two balls," the attendant tells her.

Lillian takes the balls and throws the first one, only knocking off the top can. She throws the other one, but it keeps missing the pyramid.

"Again," she tells the attendant, a determined look on her face.

The attendant quickly stacks the pyramid again and hands Lillian two more balls.

I cross my arms, and with the corner of my mouth lifting in a crooked smile, I watch as she starts to go to town on the pyramid of cans.

It feels like I can stare at her all day long, and I won't grow tired.

By the sixth try, I ask, "Do you want some help?"

She narrows her eyes at me. “No. I’m going to win you the stuffed animal if it’s the last thing I do.”

I love how determined she is, and while I watch her throw ball after ball, I wonder how it’s possible this woman is single.

She’s talented, down-to-earth, fun, and breathtakingly beautiful.

Obviously, I’m still getting to know her, but she looks pretty perfect to me.

On the ninth try, Lillian focuses on the middle of the pyramid, and she finally gets all the cans knocked off the shelf. With a happy shriek, she throws her arms in the air and starts to jump up and down.

Christ.

My eyes are locked on her as I drink in her excitement. With a wide smile, she takes the stuffed animal from the attendant and turns to face me.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she says, handing me the prize she won for me.

“I’m impressed with your determination,” I compliment her.

“Thank you.” She’s already glancing around for something else to do, and soon, I’m following her as she walks toward one of the food vendors. “Do you like fries?”

“I eat anything.”

While she orders a large fries covered in cheese sauce, I take a moment to message Eloise.

Callan: Can we postpone the dinner by an hour?

Eloise: Sure. Is everything okay?

Callan: Yes. I'm with a client, and the date might run longer than anticipated.

Eloise: Okay. I'll see you at eight.

Tucking the device away, I smile at Lillian as she comes toward me with a huge serving of fries. We continue to stroll between all the booths while sharing the snack.

The moment is intimate, and from the flush on her cheeks, I assume she's noticed. She keeps stealing glances at me, making me confident that this isn't a one-sided thing.

As the day progresses, Lillian sticks to milder rides that won't make me sick instead of going on the wilder ones, which shows she's considerate.

After Lillian has had her fill of the carnival, we head over to the farmers market. We take our time browsing through all the produce and goods before finding a spot to enjoy a late lunch.

Sitting at a bench with burgers the size of Texas, I ask, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

She nods, the everpresent smile still on her face. "It's such a nice day. Thank you for coming with me."

"You're welcome." I take a bite of my burger, and after swallowing, I wipe my mouth. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Her eyebrows draw together. "Sure."

"What do you look for in a relationship?"

She lets out an awkward chuckle. “In general, like with friends? Or with a man?”

“With a man.”

She sinks her teeth into her burger while she thinks about her answer. It takes a few seconds before she says, “I want to feel like I matter to him.” She tilts her head, her eyes meeting mine momentarily before she glances around us. “I want to be a priority in his life.”

“That’s a given,” I agree. “What else?”

Her shoulders lift in a shrug. “That’s all I can think of right now.” She sets the burger down on the wrapper and takes a sip of her milkshake. “As I mentioned on my embarrassing application, people tend to forget about me.”

My eyebrows lift as I stare at her. “I find that hard to believe.”

There’s a flash of sadness on her face before she forces a smile to her lips again. “Can we talk about something else?”

I stare at her for a moment, not liking it at all that she thinks she’s forgettable.

Sensing now is not the time to push the subject, I ask, “Is there anything else you’re good at besides your talent for creating masterpieces?”

She chuckles again and instantly relaxes. “I’m really good at cooking and baking.”

“Is that so?” My eyes are locked with hers. “Are you going to invite me over for dinner sometime?”

A playful expression forms on her face. “Then I’ll have to charge you.”

“I’ll pay.”

She shakes her head. “Just kidding.” For a moment, she stares at me with interest in her eyes. “When I’m done hiring you, I’ll invite you over for a thank-you dinner.”

Getting to spend the day with Lillian, and seeing how she looks at me, I decide I’m going to terminate the agreement between us so I can pursue her. I just need to find the right time to take the huge step.

Chapter 15

Lillian

When Callan parks his car in front of the Ritz where he lives, I give him a questioning look, which he doesn't see because he's already climbing out of the Bugatti.

I open my door, and getting out of the vehicle, I wonder if I should walk home.

Callan's eyes lock on me. "Next time, wait for me to open the door for you."

Feeling a little confused, I just nod.

I glance up the road in the direction of my place and say, "Thank you for the day. It was fun." I take a few steps away from him and feel awkward when I meet his eyes. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

A frown forms on his forehead, and he shakes his head at me. "You're not going home yet."

"Oh." My nervous chuckle sounds like I'm a deflating balloon. "I'm not?"

The corner of his mouth curves into a sexy grin as he walks closer to me, and taking my hand, he pulls me across the road and in the direction of Central Park.

"You said you had to be back by five p.m.," I remind him.

He shakes his head again. “I have a bit more time as I pushed my plans for the evening back by an hour.”

He did?

My heart sets off at a crazy pace because after spending the entire day with me, he’s giving me more time.

I glance away from him so he can’t see how much this means to me.

You’re just a client he enjoys spending time with. Don’t get caught up in your feelings.

My eyes lower to where his hand is wrapped around mine, and I struggle to ignore how good it feels.

Don’t misunderstand what’s going on here, Lillian. Callan is used to pretending to be a woman’s date. It’s just a habit for him.

He lets go of my hand and points toward Gapstow Bridge. “Are you okay with taking a walk?”

I nod, and as we follow a path, I forget about my worries.

Callan glances down at me, and the intensity of having his eyes on me hits me square in my chest.

“I’m actually surprised we haven’t met at an event or fundraiser before.”

I scrunch my nose. “It’s not my kind of thing. My older sister is the socialite in the family.”

The past week pops into my mind, and I wonder what my parents would say if they knew I was hiring the wealthy CEO, Callan Wright, to spend time with me. He’s been featured in

news articles before and was voted New York's most eligible bachelor.

Still, the part about me hiring him won't go over well with my parents.

God forbid they find out. They would die of heart attacks.

"I'm not close with my family." I instantly regret letting it slip and quickly change the subject by asking, "Do you enjoy social events?"

"Hell no," he chuckles. "Harper forces me to attend them. We're close friends, so she gets away with murder by making me endure boring functions."

"She was really nice when she called me," I mention.

"The two of you would get along. She's also down-to-earth."

We reach the bridge and stop to stare at the scenic nature below. After a while, I turn around and scoot my butt onto the ledge so my back faces the water.

Callan lifts his eyebrow. "Careful. Don't fall in." He moves closer until he's standing in front of me, and for an intense moment, he just looks down at me.

Unable to read his expression, I ask, "Do I make you nervous by sitting on the ledge? I can get off."

Shaking his head, he glances to our left where a couple is taking photos of each other and a group of guys are kicking a ball around.

"I don't get to come here often."

"Me too," I murmur.

We had fun at the fair, but during the drive home, Callan grew quiet.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yes.” His eyes flick back to me. “Why? Don’t I look okay?”

“You’re quieter than usual.”

“I’m just enjoying the quiet after all the noise at the fair,” he explains.

Suddenly, a ball flies our way, and I duck to avoid it hitting me. “Oh crap!” I shriek as I start to tumble backward.

Callan reacts fast, and while slapping the ball away, he grabs hold of my arm and yanks me off the ledge. My body plows into his, and I grab hold of his sides so I don’t lose my balance.

Standing so close to him, I’m instantly overwhelmed by how amazing his body feels against mine.

Lifting a hand to my face, he nudges my chin up, his gaze filled with worry. “Are you okay?”

Feeling a little stunned, I whisper, “Yeah.”

“Sorry,” one of the guys calls out, but Callan doesn’t even acknowledge the apology.

His eyes keep darting over my face while his hands rub up and down my arms. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Thanks to your quick reflexes, I’m fine.” I give him a grateful smile.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and pulling me against his side, he steers me away from the bridge.

We must look like a couple to everyone passing us by, but Callan doesn't seem to care.

After Callan saved me at the bridge, we walked back to the car, and at his insistence, he drove me home even though I only live down the road from the Ritz.

Once he dropped me off at home, I took a quick shower. Dressed in a pair of leggings and a T-shirt, I'm sitting in my living room, looking at rental after rental.

I struggle to focus, though, because my mind keeps drifting to Callan and the fun day we had.

How sad is it that I have to pay for someone to give me attention?

Callan has a way of making me feel special, but I know it's just because he's doing his job.

It sucks because he's my ideal man.

Whenever I'm with him, I keep forgetting it's a business arrangement. One that will end soon. Hence, me keeping a firm control over my emotions so I don't go and fall in love with him. That would be stupid of me.

Until I start selling my art, I have to be careful with my finances.

Which reminds me...

I still haven't heard from my mother, and I hate the silent treatment my parents are giving me.

Seeing as I'm already in trouble with them, I open the chat I have with my mother and type out a message.

Lillian: I hope you and Dad had a pleasant week. I'd like to come over so we can talk about everything. Let me know when you have some free time. Also, Dad doesn't have to send me the monthly allowance anymore. Please tell him I appreciate everything he's done for me, and I'm not doing this out of spite. I want to become independent so you can be proud of me. Love you.

I reread the message before pressing send, then reread it several times more.

Did I do the right thing?

I'm probably just making matters worse, but I'm adamant about standing on my own two feet. I also want to talk to them about my feelings, but I'm not sure how that will go.

Letting out a sigh, I continue to work my way through all the rentals, and two hours later, I've managed to make a short list of four places to view.

One is a two-bedroom house in Hastings-On-Hudson. It looks cozy, and I feel a flicker of excitement thinking about how I'll decorate every room.

My father bought most of the furniture in this apartment, and I want to get my own things.

Looking at my finances again, I make a detailed list of expenses to see how long I'll be able to survive before I have to start panicking.

I have four to five months at most.

I'm sure I'll sell a couple of paintings at the markets.

Opening a new document on my laptop, I make a list of all the paintings I have. I work until well past midnight on new ideas for additional pieces that won't take too long to create.

Deciding it's time for bed, I check my phone and see that my mother has read the message but hasn't responded.

Wow, Mom. You couldn't even reply?

The familiar feeling of rejection and loneliness wraps tightly around my heart as I switch off the lights and head to my bedroom.

What makes me so unlovable?

Chapter 16

Callan

I took Lillian home because I was a second away from telling her how I feel. Not wanting to act too hasty, I need time to process my emotions and make sure it's not fleeting.

The last thing I want to do is cross the line only to realize I made a mistake.

It's Tuesday, and all I've done the past couple of days is think about Lillian. It's safe to say that what I feel for her is the real deal. I want to get to know her on a deeper level.

Having made my decision, I dial Lillian's number.

She answers within seconds. "Hi."

"Morning. How are you?"

"I'm good, and you?"

"Good." I get up from my chair and move to stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling window in my office. "Can we meet tonight? I have to discuss something with you and prefer to do it in person."

"Oh..." she pauses for a moment before murmuring, "Sure. Where do you want to meet? What time?"

Happy that I'll get to talk to her tonight, a smile curves my lips. "I'll pick you up at seven."

“Okay.”

There’s a knock at my office door right before Harper lets herself in.

“Great. I’ll see you at seven,” I say. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You too.”

I end the call before looking at Harper. “What’s up?”

“Here are the final quotes for our anniversary function.” She sets a folder down on my desk, then her eyes narrow on my face. “Why do you look so happy?”

“I always look happy.”

She plants her ass in a chair and lifts an eyebrow at me. “Come on. Give me the tea.”

Sitting down, I grin at my friend. “I want to get to know Lillian on a personal level.”

Harper’s eyes widen with surprise. “Lillian Harrison?”

“Yes. I’m attracted to her and would like to see if there can be more between us. We’re meeting tonight so I can tell her how I feel.”

“Give me a moment to process this. It’s a shock,” she teases me. A massive smile forms on her face. “Tell me everything!”

Letting out a chuckle, I say, “Lillian is talented, considerate, and fun. Christ, Harper, you have to see her artwork.”

“Aaaand…” She gestures for me to keep going.

“She’s beautiful, and when she blushes, it does things to my heart. I like her a lot and want to get to know her better.”

Harper just watches me with a huge grin on her face.

“Say something,” I mutter.

“I’m happy for you.” She leans forward, her eyes locking with mine. “I’m glad you’re putting yourself out there, and I hope things work out between Lillian and you.” She gets up from the chair. “Let me know how tonight goes.”

“I will.”

For the first time in a long while, I can’t wait to get through my work so I can pick up Lillian and tell her how I feel.

Lillian

My stomach is a knot of nerves. Since Callan called, I’ve been worrying. With the way things have been going in my life, I’m assuming the worst.

He’s probably going to tell me he can’t meet with me anymore. After all, he’s the CEO of a billion-dollar company. He’s busy and doesn’t have time to escort me on dates.

It sucks, though. He’ll probably arrange for someone else to escort me to the party.

I don’t want to get to know another man, and at this point, I’m just going to decline the invite to Denise’s birthday.

Not knowing what tonight will hold, I get dressed in black pants and a light cashmere sweater. It might be the last time I get to see Callan, so I put on some makeup and curl the ends of my hair.

There's a heavy feeling in my chest when I leave my apartment to wait in the lobby. When the elevators open, I'm surprised to see Callan's already waiting for me.

His mouth curves in a smile. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

He's wearing one of his impeccable three-piece suits and looks as handsome as ever. But there's no way I'm telling him that.

He gestures to his car and waits for me to climb in before he walks to the driver's side.

After sliding behind the steering wheel, he asks, "How was your day?"

"It was eventful. I retrieved some of my paintings from storage to make sure none of them got damaged." I clear my throat, then ask, "How was your day?"

"Good." His eyes flick to my face. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"Sure," I murmur, still trying to brace myself for whatever will happen tonight.

When he pulls away from the curb, my stomach tightens even more, and I struggle to keep my hands from fidgeting with my handbag.

We don't drive far, and as Callan brings the Bugatti to a stop in front of The Ritz, I figure we'll probably have dinner or a drink at the bar.

Remembering what he said on Saturday, I wait for him to open my door.

As I get out, his eyes scan my face, and a frown line forms between his eyes. Taking hold of my elbow, he steps closer to me and asks, "Is everything okay?"

I force a smile around my lips. "Yes." Glancing at the impressive building, I ask, "Where are we going?"

"For a walk."

His hand moves to my lower back, guiding me toward the park.

I have to make a conscious effort not to cross my arms over my chest or fidget with my handbag.

When we near a bench, Callan murmurs, "Take a seat."

I sit down and turn my body to face him. "What do you want to talk about?"

He removes his jacket and places it over the back of the bench before rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

I try not to focus on how everything he does is hot and masculine.

His eyes lock on my face, and seeing his serious expression, my stomach tightens even more.

"It's about our arrangement."

Shoot, I was right.

Wanting to get this over with quickly, I rise to my feet again. “Oh, you could’ve told me when you called instead of meeting in person. I understand you’re super busy, so you don’t have to explain anything.” A dark frown forms on Callan’s face, which has my fingers twisting the strap of my handbag. “Thank you for all the time you’ve spent with me. I appreciate it.” I gesture with my thumb over my shoulder. “I can walk home. It’s not far.”

Before I can turn around, Callan darts to his feet and grabs hold of my arm. “That’s not what I wanted to say.” He pulls me back to the bench. “Sit down.”

Slowly, I take a seat again, my gaze resting on Callan. “Sorry, I thought you wanted to end the meetings.”

He turns his body, so he’s facing me, and places his arm on the back of the bench.

Tilting his head, his eyes drift over my face. “That’s the opposite of what I wanted to say.”

It is?

Cautious hope trickles into my heart.

I feel his fingers brush against my shoulder blade, the slight touch sending tingles rushing through me.

Callan’s tone is deep and intimate when he says, “I enjoy spending time with you.”

My mouth curves into a smile, and my heart starts beating faster.

Callan’s gaze locks with mine, and I feel the intense punch in my chest.

God, it feels like he sees right into my soul.

“I’d like to cancel the arrangement because I want to get to know you on a personal level.”

My eyes widen with surprise, and my breathing speeds up from the anticipation building in me.

Is he saying what I think he’s saying?

Lifting an eyebrow at me, he asks, “How do you feel about us getting to know each other better?”

Not wanting to assume anything, I ask, “Do you want to be friends?”

Determination tightens his features, and my stomach explodes with butterflies.

“I’m saying I’d like to get to know you romantically.”

My jaw almost drops to the ground as I stare at Callan in shock.

That’s the last thing I expected him to say.

Callan wants to date me?

I continue to stare as I process what he just said to me.

A romantic relationship.

With me.

Holy shit.

The corner of his mouth lifts, and with an expectant look on his face, he murmurs, “Now would be a good time to say something.”

“Oh...right.” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before I admit, “You caught me off guard. Honestly, I thought you were going to call things off.”

Only then does it *really* sink in – Callan wants to date me.

With an amused look, he asks, “How do you feel about dating me?”

A smile curves my lips, and I let out a nervous-sounding chuckle. “I’d like that.”

Very much.

Relief eases the faint lines on his face. “Just to be clear, this is no longer business for me. I like you, and I want to get to know everything about you.”

My cheeks flush with heat as I admit, “I like you too.”

He leans forward and pulls me to his chest, which has my heart going wild behind my ribs.

I’m not paying for this hug.

Callan likes me.

I hear him take a deep breath before he murmurs, “I’m going to assume you’re mine for the rest of the night. You don’t have other plans, right?”

I shake my head. “I’m all yours.”

Hearing my words has my entire face going up in flames. I press my cheek against his chest and close my eyes, enjoying the feel of his arms around me.

A happy smile curves my mouth as I inhale his addictive scent.

Holding me for way longer than just a couple of seconds, Callan eventually pulls back and tilts his head to catch my eyes. “What would you like to do tonight?”

Feeling giddy, I say, “I’m good with anything.” I turn my body so I can lean my shoulder against the back of the bench. “Can I ask why you want to date me?”

His expression is warm as he replies, “Because I’m attracted to you.”

My smile widens, and a warm sensation floods my chest before spreading down to my abdomen.

Lifting a hand, Callan reaches for my face and tucks some hair behind my ear. “You have a lot of the qualities I’ve been looking for in a woman.”

It’s nice to hear the words from him. Knowing this isn’t a paid date and Callan is interested in me makes me feel special.

Chapter 17

Lillian

I'm not going to lie, I feel off-kilter and don't know what to do or say.

With Callan canceling the business arrangement, I'm no longer in control.

In a matter of minutes, we've come from being acquaintances to dating. Like I mentioned earlier, this is not how I expected the evening to go.

My emotions are all over the place. Excitement, anticipation, and shock keep hitting me in waves.

Suddenly, Callan stands up, and grabbing his jacket from the back of the bench, he says, "Let's take a walk."

"Okay." I get up, but before I can take a step, he drapes his jacket over my shoulders.

I'm enveloped in a cloud of his scent.

Keeping hold of the lapels, he tugs me closer to him. I have to tilt my head back to look at him, and my mouth grows dry when I see affection in his eyes.

For a moment, we're caught in a trance, and just staring at each other, there's an intense tension between us.

I've dated men before, but none of them made me feel like this. The attraction has never been so powerful that it leaves me rattled and unable to think clearly.

Just as I wonder if he's going to kiss me, the corner of his mouth lifts, and he takes hold of my hand.

With our fingers interlaced, we slowly walk down one of the many paths in the park. It's starting to get dark, and with the park's lights coming on, the atmosphere feels romantic.

"I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask," Callan mentions.

Nodding, I glance up at him.

His eyes sharpen on my face. "Why do you feel like you're a forgettable person?"

"Wow. Straight to the hard stuff." I let out a nervous chuckle. "It's just the way people treat me."

He raises an eyebrow, silently asking me to continue.

I shrug and glance around us. "It's little things." My tongue darts out to wet my lips. "Whenever I text my friends or family, they either leave me on read or only reply a couple of days later. No one ever asks how I am." I shake my head. "No one takes an interest in my life."

I let out a chuckle as I shake my head, then add, "Whenever my dad addresses my life, it's always to voice how unhappy he is with my career choice."

Callan's hand squeezes mine before he asks, "Why is he unhappy with your choice of career?"

A heavy feeling settles in my heart, and I wish I could change the subject.

“He doesn’t approve of his daughter being a struggling artist. He feels it reflects badly on the family name.”

Callan gives me an incredulous look. “Has he seen your paintings?”

I shake my head again, and feeling a little vulnerable, I admit, “You were the first person to see them. I think I mentioned it before.”

He pulls me to a stop in the middle of the path, and taking hold of my shoulders, he turns me to face him. “I thought you meant the collection you showed me.” A dark frown forms on his forehead. “So, no one has ever seen any of your paintings?” When I nod, he shakes his head. “You’re kidding, right?”

I’m starting to feel miserable, and not wanting my problems to ruin tonight, I ask, “Can we talk about something else?” I let out an awkward-sounding chuckle. “This is a little too depressing.”

Callan tilts his head, his eyes keeping mine prisoner. “Don’t do that, Lillian. I meant it when I said I wanted to get to know you. The good and the bad.”

“Let’s focus on the good,” I say, injecting lightheartedness into my voice. “Seeing as the business arrangement is over, I owe you a ‘thank you’ dinner.”

The corner of his mouth lifts into a hot smirk. “That’s right. You do.”

“What do you like to eat?”

We continue to walk down the path until we exit the park and head toward the Hudson River.

“Southern fried chicken,” he replies. “Or pot roast.” Chuckling, he adds, “I’m not a picky eater.”

The sidewalks are filled with people, and it has Callan wrapping his arm around my shoulders. He pulls me close to his side, acting as a buffer between me and everyone else.

Now that I’m no longer paying Callan, keeping myself from falling head-over-heels for him is difficult. My heart keeps beating with excitement, and there’s an endless fluttering in my stomach.

Unfortunately, I’m still awkward as hell, but wanting to keep the conversation flowing, I ask, “If you could only eat one thing for the rest of your life, what would it be?”

“Let me think.”

His arm tightens around me as we pass three men.

“My stepmother’s pot roast.”

My eyes dart to his face, but I don’t dare ask about the dynamics of his family.

As if he can read my mind, Callan explains, “Naomi is my father’s second wife. She practically raised me.”

My mouth lifts in a smile. “It sounds like you care a lot about her.”

“I do. She’s never treated me differently from Ellie.”

“Ellie is your little sister, right?”

He nods, seemingly comfortable talking about his family. I wish it were the same for me.

As we slowly walk alongside the Hudson River, I say, “I’m sorry I’m so awkward tonight.”

He tugs me to a stop, and we turn to face each other.

Needing to explain myself, I continue, “I’m not used to having conversations about myself.”

Or conversations in general.

I give him an apologetic look. “And truth be told, I’ve never really had a relationship.”

His eyebrow lifts, an incredulous expression tightening his features. “You’re kidding, right?”

Shaking my head, I admit, “The longest I’ve been with a guy was three weeks.” I let out a nervous burst of laughter. “And honestly, it never felt like any of the guys wanted to get to know me.” *I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but here goes...* “They kinda ghosted me after getting what they wanted.”

Callan’s eyes are glued to my face, a frown marring his forehead. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

I shrug and glance at the river. “It is what it is. I just wanted to tell you so you understand why I’m...” I pause while searching for the right word, “...inexperienced when it comes to dating.”

Tilting his head, the corner of his mouth lifts slightly. “Would you prefer I take the lead?”

“Please.” A relieved smile spreads over my face. “That would be great.”

Callan lifts his hands and settles them on my shoulders. He takes a step closer, and with his attention solely on me, he says, “I have one request.”

It feels like I’m being swallowed by the intensity coming from him, and I barely manage to whisper, “What?”

“You have to be honest with me at all times. If I do something you’re uncomfortable with, tell me.”

“Okay.”

Instead of stepping away from me, he moves his hands to the sides of my neck. My heart goes from calm to beating a mile a minute, and I can’t tear my eyes away from his.

With a serious expression on his handsome face, he says, “You’re incredible, Lillian.”

I feel the words in my soul. Once again, this man makes me feel special.

With his eyes locked on mine, he slowly lowers his head. My lips part as my breaths rush over them, anticipation tightening every nerve in my body.

Callan completely mesmerizes me, and as his mouth brushes against mine, it feels as if my world explodes with color.

He pulls back an inch, and his eyes stare deep into mine. The tension between us builds until it becomes unbearable.

God, what is this man doing to me?

My chest rises and falls with every breath, which explodes from me in a whimper when Callan's body slams into mine. With his hands still on either side of my neck, he keeps me in place as he claims my mouth in a toe-curling kiss that makes me forget where we are.

My hands fly to his sides, and I grab hold of his waistcoat.

I smell the spice of his aftershave and feel the power in his body. Consumed by Callan, there's not a thought in my mind.

There's only him.

Tilting his head, his tongue brushes over my bottom lip, making tingles zap through me like bolts of lightning.

Oh, God.

One of his hands moves to the back of my head, and as his tongue enters my mouth, a groan rumbles from him.

I'm utterly overwhelmed as he continues kissing me as if he can't get enough of the taste of me. His lips knead mine, his teeth tug at my bottom lip, and his tongue explores my mouth with a sense of urgency.

This is incredible.

Chapter 18

Callan

I didn't plan on kissing Lillian so soon, but the moment I taste her, my control slips.

With every brush of my tongue against hers, the need for more grows.

I have no idea how long the kiss lasts, and by the time I lift my head, we're both breathless.

I watch as Lillian opens her eyes, and seeing the desire in them has my cock growing harder.

Her lips are swollen, her cheeks flushed, and I almost kiss her again. Not wanting to push her too much tonight, I move my hand to her cheek and brush my thumb over her bottom lip.

The corner of my mouth lifts in a satisfied smile as I admit, "You're testing my self-control."

Giving me a playful look, she asks, "How am I doing that?"

I pull her into a tight hug as I groan, "By tasting so fucking good. You're my new favorite flavor."

She pulls back so her eyes can meet mine. "As long as I'm not just the flavor of the month."

I shake my head. “I didn’t mean it that way.” Wanting to make sure she hears every word I’m about to say, I frame her face with my palms, forcing her to keep looking at me. “When I say I’m serious about dating you, I mean it. And I sure as fuck don’t play with people’s emotions.”

A beautiful smile spreads over her face, and her eyes sparkle in the moonlight. I feel her fingers grip my waistcoat tighter as she lifts herself on her tiptoes. She presses a tender kiss to my mouth before whispering, “In that case, you’re my new favorite flavor, too.”

My chest fills with warmth and possessiveness.

In my past relationships, my jealous and possessive nature always got in the way, but I get the feeling it won’t be the case this time.

At least, I hope it won’t.

“What are you thinking about?” Lillian asks.

Deciding to be honest, I admit, “I tend to get jealous easily, and I’m possessive. Is that something that will bother you?”

“You need to explain it a little more before I can give you an answer.”

Glancing around us, I see an empty bench nearby. I take hold of her hand, and pull her toward it, where we take a seat.

I rest my arm on the back of the bench before I say, “I’ll get upset if I find out you’ve been alone with another man.”

It doesn’t look like she’s bothered by what I just said. Instead, she asks, “Does family count?”

“No.” To be clear, I add, “I’m talking about social settings with male friends or colleagues.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Her words are followed by a chuckle. “I don’t have any male friends.”

A satisfied grin tugs at my mouth. “Good.”

“You also said you’re possessive?”

Nodding, I explain, “I want all your attention. If I call you, I expect you to pick up. If I send a message, you need to reply quickly. When I’m in a committed relationship with someone, I expect the person to make me a priority.”

I don’t mention that part of the reason is trauma-related. That’s something I’ll tell her once we’ve been together for a while.

Instead of telling me it’s too much, Lillian’s smile widens. “As long as the same counts for you, I have no problem with it.”

“Of course. I’ll also make you a priority in my life.” My eyes rest on her gorgeous face as I add, “I also expect you to run things by me before you make decisions.”

“What kind of things?”

“If you’re planning to do something over a weekend. If you’re going to dinner or for drinks with friends.” Taking hold of her hand, I weave my fingers with hers. “I want to know where you are at all times.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “Is it because you don’t trust people easily?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s because I want to know you’re safe.” Chuckling, I admit, “I have control issues.”

Her features soften, and she looks a little emotional.

I shift closer to her and move my arm from the back of the bench to wrap it around her. Getting more comfortable, she leans into me and rests her head on my shoulder, which has satisfaction filling my chest.

Lowering my head, my voice is low as I ask, “Are you okay with everything I just told you?”

“Yes.” She tilts her head back to see my face. “Very okay.”

I stare into her eyes for a moment before I lower my head and press a kiss to her lips. Of course, a quick taste is not enough, and moving my other hand to her cheek, I claim her mouth with all the attraction I feel toward her.

Lillian’s fingers wrap around my forearm, and when my tongue sweeps through her mouth, she lets out a soft moan.

Christ.

The sound has me hardening at the speed of light, and I have to break the kiss before I give in to the urge to pull her onto my lap.

After all, we’re out in public.

Lifting my head, I drink in the sight of the dreamy expression on her face.

Without realizing it, a bubble forms around us, cutting us off from the rest of the world.

Not wanting to disturb the intimate moment between us, I keep my tone low as I whisper, “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She looks at me with her emotions shining in her eyes.

I trail my fingertips over her cheek and along her jaw, memorizing how soft she feels.

Her voice is filled with awe when she asks, “Is this really happening?”

“Yes.” A smirk tugs at my lips. “This is happening.”

Now that I’ve tasted Lillian, my attraction for her has grown tenfold. Every free minute I have will be dedicated to getting to know her.

Chapter 19

Lillian

Sitting in front of my easel, I stare blankly at the painting. My thoughts are miles away, and I'm unaware of my surroundings.

I'm dating Callan Wright.

After our date last night, I Googled him, needing to learn as much as possible about him. Unfortunately, the articles were mostly about his business and how he's the most eligible bachelor in New York.

The only two women he's been photographed with are Harper or Eloise Torres. I know Eloise is the owner of one of the largest galleries in the city.

I keep replaying last night, over and over, in my mind.

It feels like a dream.

When I think of how he kissed me, tingles spread through my body, and my stomach erupts with a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

A smile plays around my mouth while my hand lies in my lap with the paint drying on my brush.

Letting out a happy sigh, I shake my head and try to focus on the piece I'm almost done with.

Suddenly my phone beeps, and I quickly grab it from the workbench. Seeing a message from Callan, my smile widens.

Callan: What are you doing?

My fingers rush to type out a reply.

Lillian: I'm painting.

I take a photo to show him.

Lillian: Almost done.

I watch as the message shows he's reading it, and soon he's typing.

Callan: You only have one left after this one is completed, right?

Lillian: Yes. What are you busy with?

Callan: Besides checking in on you? I'm approving the invites for the company's tenth-anniversary function. Will you be my date?

Grinning like an idiot, I let out a happy shriek.

Lillian: Yes.

Callan: Good.

Callan: Do you miss me?

I feel giddy as I chat with him.

Lillian: Yes. I'm not getting much work done, because I keep thinking about you.

Callan: Me too. BTW, you owe me dinner.

Lillian: I do?

Callan: You said you'll invite me over for a home-cooked meal once the arrangement ends.

Lillian: Right. When would you like to come over?

Callan: Friday night.

Lillian: It's a date.

Callan: I'll check in on you again later. Get to work on your masterpiece.

I stare at the chat, rereading our conversation.

After a couple of minutes, another message comes through.

Callan: Are you painting?

Letting out a burst of laughter, I type a quick reply.

Lillian: Yes, Sir.

I set my phone down on the workbench, and picking up my palette and brush, I get to work.

Only when the room starts to grow dark do I sit back, and with a proud smile, I stare at the completed piece. My eyes dart over every inch of the painting, making sure I didn't miss a spot.

Happy with the final result, I set the palette down and drop the brush in a jar. Tired, I quickly clean my brushes before calling it a night.

Getting up, I stretch out before picking up my phone and heading out of the room. I walk to the kitchen and pull a plate with leftover lasagne from the fridge.

Popping it into the microwave, I open my cellphone screen so I can send a text to Callan.

Lillian: I've just finished the painting. How was your day?

I set the device down and pour myself a glass of orange juice. Before I can take a sip, my phone beeps.

Callan: I'm proud of you.

Callan: My day was busy. I'm still at work and will only head home around midnight.

Callan: What time do you usually go to bed?

When my food is warm, I remove it from the microwave and take a seat by the island. Popping a bite into my mouth, I type out a reply.

Lillian: Around midnight. Why are you working so late?

Callan: Because I have a problem delegating work.

Lillian: Have you eaten today?

Callan: I shared a seafood platter with Harper. Did you eat?

Lillian: I'm having lasagne right now.

Callan: Good. I'll call you when I get home. Get some rest.

Setting the phone down, I take another bite of my food.

It's nice to have someone who wants to talk to me.

I swipe over the device's screen to open it again and go into the chat with my mother. The message I sent her on

Saturday shows that it's been read, but she hasn't bothered to respond.

“God, why can't she just reply?”

I pick up the device and press dial on Mom's number. It takes a few rings before she answers, “We're busy with dinner. I'll call you later.”

“I notice you read the message I sent on Saturday. Why haven't you replied?”

Mom lets out a sigh. “Because it's absurd and doesn't warrant a reply. I'll talk to you when I have time.”

The call ends, leaving me to stare at the screen in disbelief.

Really?

I quickly open the chat with my mother and read the message I sent to her.

I hope you and Dad had a pleasant week. I'd like to come over so we can talk about everything. Let me know when you have some free time. Also, Dad doesn't have to send me the monthly allowance anymore. Please tell him I appreciate everything he's done for me, and I'm not doing this out of spite. I want to become independent so you can be proud of me. Love you.

What's so absurd about asking to talk with them and saying I want to be independent?

Dropping the device on the counter, I shake my head. No longer hungry, I throw the leftovers in the trash and rinse the plate before placing it in the dishwasher.

My mother will probably ignore me for the rest of the week before deciding to talk about everything. She's done it before. It's her way of showing she's unhappy with me.

I head upstairs to take a shower, and not wanting to worry about the impending fight with my parents, I focus on Callan.

He makes me feel like I matter. I know it's early days, but it's nice.

I really hope things work out between us.

After going through my routine, I put on a pair of leggings and a T-shirt before returning downstairs. I grab my phone from the island and take a seat on one of the couches.

Switching on the TV, I put on the crime network, hoping it will make me sleepy.

Just after eleven, my phone begins to ring, and seeing Callan's name flashing on the screen, I quickly turn down the sound and answer the call.

"Hi."

"Hey, beautiful. Did I wake you?"

"No. I'm watching some TV. Are you done at work?"

"Yes." He lets out a chuckle, then asks, "Can you come down to the lobby?"

I shoot to my feet and stare at my front door. "You're here?"

"Yes. I just want to see you before I head home."

"I'm coming."

Ending the call, I drop the device on the couch before rushing out of my apartment.

The elevator ride down to the lobby feels like it's taking forever, and when the doors finally slide open, I bolt out of the small space.

Seeing Callan, a wide smile spreads over my face. Not caring if I look stupid or too excited, I practically throw myself at him.

He catches me, and his arms lock around me like steel bands.

Letting out a groan, he says, "Christ, it feels good to hold you."

I wrap my arms around his neck and take a deep breath of his aftershave. "I missed you."

"Not half as much as I missed you."

He moves a hand to the back of my head, and wrapping his fingers around my ponytail, he pulls until I tilt my face up to his. His mouth takes mine in a heated kiss that robs me of my ability to breathe.

When he lifts his head again, his eyes lock with mine. "You smell like cinnamon and vanilla."

"It's my body wash," I whisper while still trying to catch my breath.

"I love it," he says, then taking a step back, his eyes rove over my body. "I like your PJs."

Realizing I'm not wearing a bra, I quickly cross my arms over my chest. "I wasn't expecting anyone."

Callan steps closer to me, and taking hold of my wrist, he pulls my arm away from my chest. Heat makes his eyes shine like clear pools of water as he looks down.

His voice is deep and commanding as he says, “Don’t ever hide from me.”

Keeping hold of my wrist, he pulls me toward the elevator. He takes the keycard from my hand and swipes it. When the doors open, I’m tugged inside.

Callan presses the number for my floor before gripping hold of my hip and pushing me back against the wall. His eyes lower to my chest again, where my nipples form hard peaks beneath the fabric of my T-shirt.

His gaze flicks to mine, and when I see the desire in his blue irises, my abdomen clenches with anticipation.

Dear God.

Lifting his other hand to my face, he brushes his thumb over my bottom lip.

The air grows thick with the sexual tension building between us. My breaths come faster and faster, and my heart threatens to beat right from my chest.

Holy crap, this is intense.

Chapter 20

Callan

I watch as Lillian's pupils dilate with hunger, but I have no intention of fucking her tonight.

I want her to know how attracted I am to her before we take things to the next level. I want her to feel desirable.

When the doors open, I pull her out of the elevator and walk to her apartment. I press the keycard against the pad, and pushing the door open, I tug her inside.

I drop the access card on a side table before I frame Lillian's face, and slamming my mouth down on hers, I kiss her without restraint.

A whimpering sound escapes her, which drives me wild.

Using my body, I push her backward until she's pressed up against the door. My lips devour hers, my teeth nipping at her bottom lip until it's swollen.

Christ. She tastes so fucking good.

Lillian wraps her arms around my middle, her palms flattening over my back. Her body strains against mine, trying to get as close as possible.

My cock is impossibly hard for this woman who's taken my life by storm. Everything about her lures me in.

Her beauty. Her femininity. Her talented mind.

By the time I break the kiss, we're breathless. Lillian's face is flushed with desire, and it takes all my self-control not to strip her out of her clothes so I can fuck her until I've had my fill.

"Christ, do you have any idea what you do to me?" I ask, my eyes drinking in the perfect sight of her.

"Hopefully, the same as you're doing to me," she breathes.

I stare down at her and see a vulnerable look creep into her eyes.

After getting to know more about her, I'm quickly realizing the people in Lillian's life are assholes. It only makes me feel more protective of her.

Keeping my tone low and intimate, I ask, "What are you thinking?"

"I'm wondering if this is a dream."

Shaking my head, I lean down until our mouths are close enough to taste each other's breaths. "This is real." I press a tender kiss to her mouth before admitting, "Every moment I get to spend with you makes me feel more attracted to you."

Her mouth curves up in a stunning smile. "I feel the same way."

"You better," I mutter, keeping my tone playful. I give her another quick kiss. "I better go."

She looks a little disappointed but doesn't argue.

"I'll see you Friday for dinner," I say to confirm our date.

“Okay.” As we move away so she can open the door, she asks, “Are you allergic to anything?”

“No.” I step into the hallway with her, and remembering she completed the piece today, I say, “Wait. Show me your painting.”

Her face lights up with excitement, and I quickly follow her to her art studio. She switches on the light and gestures at the easel.

I step closer to her latest masterpiece and admire the detail she’s put into every item that forms a heap beneath the child, conveying that a child’s foundation is important.

With nervous tension in her voice, she asks, “What do you think?”

“Christ, Lillian. Your talent is next level.”

I hold my hand out to her, and when she places hers in mine, I tug her closer. Together, we look at her hard work.

“The detail is out of this world,” I murmur.

Leaning the side of her head against my bicep, she whispers, “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it.”

“I only have one left to complete, then I’ll make a portfolio with photos of all the pieces to show to galleries. Hopefully, they feel the same as you about my work.”

“Once you have a portfolio ready, I’d like one,” I say, with the full intention of showing it to Eloise.

“Okay.”

Lifting a hand, I place a finger beneath her chin and nudge her face up, then leaning down, I press a soft kiss to her mouth.

“Your talent is extraordinary, Lillian.”

She gives me a self-conscious smile that tells me she’s not used to receiving compliments.

“Thank you.”

I don’t understand how no one has discovered her art. Or how the men aren’t lining up for a chance to date her.

It’s their loss because I plan on making her mine in every possible way.

I steal another kiss before we leave the room. When we reach the front door, I pull her against my chest, wrapping my arms tightly around her.

“Tell me to go home,” I chuckle.

She shakes her head, laughter bubbling from her. “I’m enjoying this hug too much.”

I squeeze her against me and kiss her hair before reluctantly letting go. My eyes capture hers as I say, “Night, Lily.”

The sudden nickname feels as natural as breathing and suits her a million times better than her given name.

A happy smile forms on her face, and it’s clear she likes that I called her ‘Lily.’

She follows me to the elevator, and after I’ve stepped inside, we stare at each other as the doors slide closed.

“Night, Callan,” she murmurs right before disappearing from my sight.

On the ride down to the lobby, satisfaction fills my chest.

Lily.

Softly chuckling, I shake my head because it’s only been a matter of weeks, and she’s already got me wrapped around her little finger.

As I leave the building and climb into my car, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull the device out and grin when I see a text from my woman.

I quickly change her name from Lillian to Lily, then read what she’s sent me.

Lily: Thank you for coming over tonight.

Lily: PS. I really like the nickname.

I type out a reply before I start the engine and pull away from the curb.

Callan: Please tell me I’m the only person who calls you Lily.

The device connects to Bluetooth, and I see when her text comes through.

Lily: You are.

A satisfied smirk forms on my face.

Who would’ve thought I’d be possessive of a name?

Chapter 21

Lily

If it weren't for the problem with my parents, I'd be on cloud nine, twenty-four-seven.

It's been two days since I called my mom, and I still haven't heard from her.

Enough is enough.

After spending the morning setting up a website for my art, I decide to go see my parents so we can talk in person.

I send Callan a quick text telling him where I'm going and that he might not be able to reach me.

His reply comes through within minutes.

Callan: Enjoy the visit. Let me know when you're home again.

Lily: Will do xox

Taking a cab to the mansion, my stomach tightens with nerves. Even though I know the chances are slim to none, I keep hoping my parents will see things my way.

The cab stops at the address, and after paying the fee, I get out. My eyes land on the limestone house where I grew up, and taking a couple of deep breaths, I climb the steps and knock on the door.

Here goes nothing.

It takes a moment before I hear movement, and when Mom opens the front door, surprise ripples over her face. “Oh. Lillian. You didn’t say anything about coming over.”

She steps aside, and I enter the foyer. “Can we talk, please?” I ask, my tone hopeful.

“Your father is still very upset about your recent behavior.” A frown forms on her forehead. “Honestly, Lillian. What’s gotten into you? First, you fight us about studying law, and now you want to move into a different place?” Shaking her head, she lets out a huff. “And telling your father to stop sending you money? What were you thinking? You don’t even have a job. Are you going to live in some rat-invested one-bedroom?”

Dad comes around the corner, and when he sees me, his features instantly harden. “Let’s talk in my study.”

Mom and I follow him to his sacred space, and once we’re all sitting down, he levels me a glare, a stern expression darkening his frown. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Giving my parents a pleading look, I ask, “Can you just hear me out without getting angry?”

Dad just stares at me while Mom sighs.

Swallowing hard, I say, “I want to be independent. I understand image means a lot to you, but I have different priorities. I want to achieve things at my own pace.”

“Achieve what?” Dad snaps. “You’re unemployed, for God’s sake.”

“I’m not,” I argue. Anger starts to simmer in my veins. “I’m starting my own business. I’ve already found two stalls at markets where I’ll sell my artwork. Once I complete the collection I’m working on, I’ll approach galleries until I find one that will give me an exhibition.”

Looking horrified, Mom shakes her head while Dad glares at me as if I’m not his daughter.

Heartache bleeds through my chest, and the urge to cry becomes strong.

Gathering all my courage, I stand up for myself. “I can’t do this anymore. You’re my parents, but you treat me like crap.” I turn my attention to Mom. “You say you love me, but it doesn’t feel like you do. You ignore my texts. You arrange family gatherings and forget to invite me. How do you think that makes me feel? What did I do to deserve this?”

Mom just stares at me in total disbelief.

My gaze turns to my dad. “You’ve never seen any of my paintings. All that matters to you is law school. I’m more than a degree, Dad. I have my own dreams.”

“Enough!” Dad shouts, his face turning red with anger. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Where the hell did we go wrong with you?”

His words hit me like a slap across the face.

He leans forward, and folding his hands together, he addresses me as if I’m a criminal in his court. “This is the last chance I’m giving you, Lillian. You *will* continue to live in my apartment and keep up the pretense that you’re a part of this family. Your mother *will* send you the application for law

school, and you'll enroll. I'm done putting up with your whims. You'll do as I say, or I swear, I'll disown you."

"Oliver," Mom whispers. Her eyes dart between my father and me before she gives me a pleading look. "Just listen to your father. This unpleasantness is killing me."

No.

I swallow my tears back, and my voice is hoarse as I say, "I wish you could've loved me for who I am and not who you want me to be." Getting up, I'm unable to stop a tear from escaping, and it rolls down my cheek. "It's clear you won't listen to what I have to say. I apologize for wasting your time."

When I walk to the door, Mom cries out, "Lillian! Don't do this. You're breaking our hearts."

You broke mine first.

I glance back at my parents. My tone is filled with bitterness and heartache as I say, "I'm sorry I'm such a huge disappointment to you. I'll let myself out."

"Let her go, Sophia," Dad grumbles, his eyes hard on me. "We've done everything we could. She has to learn the hard way."

Lifting my hand to my mouth, I smother a sob as I rush into the hallway. When I reach the front door, I yank it open and flee the house where I grew up.

With every step I take, the crack in my heart grows bigger until it's a gaping gorge.

God. It hurts.

Feeling like I've been abandoned by my parents, I walk back to my apartment, and when I shut the door behind me, I sink to the floor.

Sobs burst from me, and desperately needing comfort, I wrap my arms around my middle.

I don't know for how long my tears flow, but when they dry up, I'm exhausted. I lean back against the door and stare at the luxurious apartment my father is paying for.

I'm going to make it on my own. I'll show them they were wrong.

Even if it takes years.

As I get up off the floor, my cell phone starts to beep like crazy in my handbag. I walk to the living room while digging the device out, and taking a seat on the couch, I see one message after the other from Mark and Sadie.

Sadie: What have you done??? Have you lost your mind??? Mom is hysterical, Lillian. How could you hurt her like that?

Mark: Stop being a spoiled brat. You're becoming a nuisance. You're twenty-five, Lillian. Get your shit together!

Sadie: Call Mom and apologize right this instant. God, you're infuriating. You better grovel for their forgiveness.

Sadie adds a screenshot of a group chat for Mom, Dad, Mark, and herself, and I read the messages they've sent each other.

Sadie: Look what you've done. Mom's heart is breaking. I can't believe you're doing this.

In short, Mom is telling them I've just thrown the biggest tantrum and broke their hearts. I'm made out to be the villain.

Is it even worth pleading my case to my siblings?

Needing to stand up for myself, I create a group chat with Mark and Sadie so I don't have to repeat anything.

Lillian: The family has a group chat, which doesn't include me. Are you not seeing how you've shoved me out of the family circle? You all have gatherings, and no one thinks to invite me.

No one asks how I am and what's happening in my life. It's always about you, your feelings, and what you want.

I'm not throwing a tantrum. I'm standing up for myself, which I should've done a long time ago. I'm an individual with my own hopes and dreams. Just because I don't practice law, it doesn't make me any less of a person. I wish you could all support my art (which, BTW, none of you have ever seen) instead of constantly belittling it.

Honestly, I won't put up with this any longer. If you can't treat me with common decency and take an interest in my life, you're welcome to disown me. I'm no longer going to beg for scraps of your attention.

Before I can change my mind, I press send on the message. My heart beats out of my chest for a solid minute, and realizing neither of them will read the text anytime soon, I drop the device on my lap and bury my face in my hands.

I can't do this anymore.

I'm so upset my body trembles, and it takes a while before I'm able to calm down.

Picking up my phone again, I read the text and instantly regret everything I typed. It's going to explode in my face.

Suddenly, a message comes through from Denise, and I let out a sigh as I open it.

Denise: My party is on September thirtieth. Yay Me!!!

I know it's a little early, but Charles and I are joining Beverly and John for a couples trip to Paris. We didn't include you because we know you're single, and we don't want you to feel like a fifth wheel. Anyway, I need to get shopping done before the trip, so the party is being held at an earlier date. I hope you can come. EVERYONE will be there, and you don't want to miss out. RSVP soon. Kisses.

Holy freaking shit. Fifth wheel!

I clearly remember telling Denise I met someone and was bringing a plus one when I spoke with her a few weeks ago.

Have I stepped into some alternate dimension? What's wrong with everyone?

I reread the message with anger bubbling in my chest, then type out a reply.

Lillian: I'll attend your party, and I'm bringing a plus one.

Needing a moment to recover from blow after blow, I switch off my phone.

Shaking my head, I whisper, "Seriously? Is it me? Am I the problem?"

Chapter 22

Callan

Sitting in the boardroom with Harper after the department heads have cleared out, we're discussing my upcoming trip to visit the branches in other states.

I let out a tired sigh. "This trip will take two weeks. Will you be okay running everything while I'm gone?"

Harper rolls her eyes at me. "You ask the same question every year."

Chuckling, I mutter, "I take it you'll be okay."

She relaxes back in her chair, and the expression on her face turns sad and concerned as she mentions, "There's another anniversary coming up."

Harper is always cautious around the topic of Dylan's death, and she's got good reason. I still get panic attacks from the trauma I suffered when I lost my best friend, but they've lessened over the years.

The familiar grief ripples through my heart. "I can't believe it's already been six years."

When Dylan died in a car accident, my entire world imploded. We met in school, and when his parents passed away, he came to live with my family.

He was more than my best friend – he was my brother – the other half of my soul.

He was killed when an intoxicated driver drove head-on into Dylan’s vehicle. I had just spoken to him at work, and the next minute he was gone.

I only found out later that night after I left a dozen messages and missed calls on his phone. It was the darkest time in my life, and I don’t think I’ll ever fully recover from losing him.

Tapping a finger on the desk, I mutter, “You know the judge is still practicing law?”

“Yep.” Harper shakes her head. “It sucks that Harrison is still sitting on the bench.”

“There was a recent article that Jackson was arrested for domestic abuse,” I tell Harper. Theo Jackson is the fucker who killed Dylan. It’s a name I’ll never forget. “A couple of days later, his wife dropped the charges.”

“He probably paid off another judge,” she grumbles.

After Dylan’s death, I lost my fucking mind. Harper and my family were the only people who could get through to me.

“He should be behind bars.” My eyes lock with Harper. “But it is what it is, right? Some types of people will always get away with murder.”

The thought fills me with anger, and I do my best to breathe through it.

She nods, then asks, “What do you want to do after we visit Dylan?”

Every year, Harper and I take time on the anniversary of Dylan's death to visit his grave. Afterward, we'll have dinner or drinks to talk about our memories of him. It's our way of remembering the amazing person he was.

Harper sticks to my side because it's also the day where I tend to lose it a little.

"The same as always," I murmur.

She reaches across the desk and gives my hand a squeeze. "Are you okay?"

I nod so she won't worry.

"Okay. I'll schedule it into our diaries." She gets up and gives me a smile. "Time to get back to work."

"Yes, boss," I tease her, a grin slowly forming around my mouth.

Shaking her head, she leaves the boardroom while muttering, "I wish."

"You can take over any day," I call after her.

"There's not enough money in the world," she laughs.

Climbing to my feet, I gather my laptop before heading back to my office. As I take a seat behind my desk, I pull my phone out of my pocket to check my messages.

There's nothing from Lily to say she's gotten home safely.

I check the time, and noticing it's already after five, I wonder if she's still visiting her parents.

Opening the chat, I type out a quick message.

Callan: Just checking where you are. Miss you.

The text doesn't show it's delivered, which has a frown forming on my forehead.

I wait a couple of minutes, and when it's still not delivered, I press dial on Lily's number.

The call goes straight to voicemail, and once it beeps for me to speak, I say, "Please call me back as soon as you get this message."

Worry slithers into my chest, but I set the device down. I try to focus on my work for an hour or so before checking for messages, which is stupid because I would've heard the phone beeping if I'd received any.

Christ! It's almost seven, and I still haven't heard from Lily.

My worry spirals out of control, and I try her number again. When it still goes to voicemail, I get up from my chair. Fearing something might've happened to her, I leave the office and head to her apartment.

With my heart pounding way too fast, I park my Bugatti in front of her building. I rush into the lobby and inform the doorman, "I'm here to see Lillian Harrison."

"Who may I say is here to see her?" he asks.

"Callan Wright."

He picks up the earpiece of the phone on his desk and dials her apartment number. After a few seconds, he shakes his head at me. "There's no answer, Sir. Would you like to leave a message with me?"

Fuck. Where is she?

Just as I'm about to lose my mind, my phone starts to ring, and I yank the device out of my pocket. Seeing Lily's name on the screen, I let out an audible sigh of relief as I press answer.

"Where are you?" I demand.

"I'm home. Sorry. My phone was off."

"I'm in the lobby. Tell the doorman to let me up," I order, my tone harsh from all the worry.

"Okay."

Lily hangs up, and a second later, the phone on the desk rings.

"Yes, Miss Harrison?" He listens before murmuring, "Will do."

Getting up from his chair, he gestures to the elevator. He scans his keycard, and the doors open. I step inside and nod at the man. "Thank you."

During the ride up, I put my phone back in my pocket while trying to regain control over my emotions.

After what happened with Dylan, and not being able to reach him for hours before I found out he was dead, I tend to overreact when I can't get hold of someone I care for.

And it's clear I care a hell of a lot more about Lily than I initially thought.

I've gone for therapy, but it's not something I can stop doing. That's why I told Lily about my controlling side when we agreed to date.

The elevator opens, and when I step into the hallway, I see Lily standing by her front door.

“I was worried out of my fucking mind,” I snap as I walk toward her. “Why was your phone off?”

We move into her apartment, and she shuts the door before answering, “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I just...” Her words trail away, and she swallows hard.

It’s only then I notice how pale she is and the dark circles beneath her eyes.

Jesus.

Instantly, I’m overcome with concern for my woman. “Are you okay?”

She lifts a trembling hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, and it looks like she’s about to cry.

“Lily?” I move closer and reach for her arm. “Talk to me, baby.”

Before I can take hold of her, her face crumbles, and she quickly turns away from me. “I-I’m sorry. Just give m-me a second.”

When she heads toward the kitchen, I shoot forward and grab hold of her hand. Tugging her to a stop, I place a finger beneath her chin and nudge her face up.

When I see the heartache in her eyes, I pull her against my chest and wrap her up in a tight hug.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” I murmur. “I was worried.”

“I-I’m not upset b-because of you,” she whispers. A sob escapes her, and she presses her face into the fabric of my shirt to smother the sound. “God...I don’t want to cry in front of you.”

Jesus Christ. I'm going to kill someone.

Intense anger bleeds through me, and my jaw clenches.

“What happened? Who’s responsible for making you cry?”
I demand.

Lily pulls slightly back but keeps her head bowed as she says, “I had a huge fight with my parents, and then my brother and sister got involved.”

It takes a lot of effort to soften my tone before asking, “What was the fight about?”

She shakes her head before using the back of her hand to dry her cheeks. “It’s not something I’m ready to talk about. I’m still processing everything.”

Lifting my hands, I frame her face and force her to look at me. When I see her tears, there’s another explosion of anger in my chest.

The pads of my thumbs brush over her cheeks, and I lean down to press a soft kiss to her lips. “I’m here when you’re ready to talk.” Tilting my head, I add, “Maybe I can help.”

She nods before burrowing against my chest. “I just need a hug.”

I wrap my arms tightly around her and press a kiss to her hair. “Whatever you need, baby. I’m here for you.”

I hold my woman for as long as she needs while trying to get my own emotions under control.

My need to find out exactly what’s wrong, so I can solve the problem is intense, but there’s nothing I can do until she chooses to open up to me.

It's frustrating as fuck.

She pulls back and, once again, tries to hide her face from me by keeping her head bowed.

“Don’t hide from me.” I place a hand on the side of her neck and brush my thumb over her soft skin. “Look at me, Lily.”

When she finally glances up at me, she says, “I really didn’t want you to see me cry.” She lets out a hollow chuckle. “I look like crap.”

No, she doesn't.

I take in the fragile expression in her eyes, and it makes my protectiveness for her grow rapidly.

Shaking my head, my gaze drifts over her face. “You look beautiful.”

“Liar.” She lets out a burst of laughter, then glances in the direction of the kitchen. “Can I get you something to drink?” Her eyes flit back to me. “Have you eaten?”

The corner of my mouth lifts up. “Yes, I’d love some coffee, and no, I haven’t had time to eat.”

“Can I make you dinner?” she asks while walking toward the kitchen.

I follow Lily, wanting to keep the physical distance between us as small as possible.

Taking mugs from the cupboards, she continues, “I know we’re having dinner tomorrow night, so if you don’t feel up to eating with me tonight as well, I und—”

“I’d love to have dinner with you tonight,” I interrupt her.
“And tomorrow night.”

My words make the sadness in her eyes fade a little, which I take as a win.

I step closer to her, and lifting my hand, I grip hold of her chin. I turn her face up as I lean down and press a slow kiss to her mouth.

Pulling back, I lock eyes with her. “I missed you today.”

An emotion I can’t place ripples over her beautiful features. “I missed you too.”

Lowering my head again, I take her mouth in a deep and passionate kiss, and I don’t stop until she’s breathless.

Lily stares up at me, her eyes clouded with desire, which is a hell of a lot better than sadness.

With our gazes locked, I murmur, “My Lily.”

A smile tugs at her lips. “What made you call me Lily?”

I shrug while brushing my fingers down the side of her neck. “It just came naturally.”

Emotion tightens her features, giving me the impression she’s overwhelmed, then she whispers, “I’m glad you’re here.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

I pull away so she can prepare the coffee, and while she’s busy, I say, “Let’s order in. You’ve had a rough day.”

“That would be nice.”

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I ask, “What would you like to eat?”

Lily shakes her head. “Anything. You can choose.”

I dial the number for La Magnifique, and even though they don’t usually offer takeout, they always make an exception for me.

When I end the call, Lily hands me a cup of coffee, and I follow her to the living room.

I wait for her to pick which couch she wants to sit on before taking a seat next to her. Turning my body to face her, I take a sip of my beverage.

“Before I forget.” She gestures at her phone. “I received the invite for the birthday party I mentioned in my application.”

“When is it?”

“The end of this month.” Her eyebrows draw together. “Will you be able to go with me?”

“Of course.” I set my cup down on the coffee table before taking hold of her hand. “Give me a quick rundown of your friends.”

The sadness returns to her eyes. “They’re not my friends.” She swallows hard. “Not anymore.”

“What happened?”

Lily’s eyes drift to the windows. “I was more invested in the friendship than they were.” Her gaze flits back to me. “But I still want to go to the party.”

Remembering everything she said in her application, I ask, “You want to make them see you?”

She nods, but then guilt tightens her features. “With you by my side, they’ll have no choice but to notice me.” Her shoulders slump. “Please don’t think I’m only taking you to impress them. It might’ve been the case two weeks ago, but it’s not anymore.”

“I know, Lily,” I say so she won’t worry. “We’ll go.” My lips curve in a smile. “And I don’t mind if you show me off to your friends.” I shake my head. “Let’s rather call them acquaintances instead.”

She leans forward and presses a kiss to my mouth. “Thank you.”

Wanting her to open up to me, I say, “In the application, you mentioned they ignore you. What’s that about?”

Her eyes lower to the cup in her hand. “Whenever I send a message, they take days to reply.” She lets out a sigh. “Sometimes they don’t even bother responding.” Emotion tightens her features, and her eyes well with unshed tears. “My family does the same thing.”

She shakes her head again, biting her bottom lip to keep it from quivering.

Moving closer, I wrap my arm around her shoulders. I press her head beneath my chin.

“You’re the first person who checks in on me,” she whispers. “You always reply within minutes. You even got upset because I didn’t answer your messages quickly enough. I’ve never had that before. It’s nice to feel like I matter.”

Christ Almighty.

Taking hold of her jaw, I tip her head back so I can see her face. “You’re kidding, right?”

She doesn’t have to answer me. I can see the pain in her eyes.

My heartbeat speeds up, and a wave of anger hits me square in the chest.

I can’t believe her friends and family treat her this way. What the fuck is wrong with them?

Capturing Lily’s eyes with mine, my voice is filled with certainty when I say, “You matter to me. More than I care to admit at the moment.”

She gives me another kiss, then murmurs, “I needed to hear that. Thank you.” She takes a sip of her coffee before placing her mug next to mine. “Enough about me.” Her eyes flick to my face. “How was your day?”

“It was good until you disappeared on me,” I tease.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

I weave our fingers together before I say, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Chapter 23

Lily

Staring at Callan, who can have any woman he wants, I find it hard to believe he's interested in me.

Yet, he's here.

He comforted me and listened to my problems. I don't think he'll ever understand how much that means to me.

With his thumb brushing against my skin, a serious light creeps into his blue eyes.

"I want to explain why I reacted so strongly tonight," he says, his tone deeper than usual.

"Okay." I give him all my attention as I wait for him to continue.

"Remember I told you about my best friend who passed away six years ago?"

I nod. "I remember."

Callan takes a deep breath, a flash of grief tightening his features. "His name was Dylan. We were like brothers."

To be supportive, I give his hand a squeeze.

"The day of the accident, I tried messaging and calling him, but there was no answer. I only found out much later he died. His death hit me hard, and it was the most traumatizing

thing that's ever happened to me. If it weren't for Harper and my family, I'm not sure I would've survived losing Dylan."

I scoot closer to him. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly. It makes him look so sad I want to hug him and never let go.

"I tried therapy, but it didn't help. Since then, I have a controlling need to know where my loved ones are. If I can't reach one of you, I worry, which makes me lose control of my emotions."

"It's understandable," I murmur.

"It's the reason my previous relationships ended," he admits. "People tend to feel suffocated by me. I'm being upfront with you because I want to make this relationship work."

What are the odds?

I almost let out a chuckle but suppress it. "Callan, you can never suffocate me. Since I've met you, you've made me feel so special. I wish I could describe how amazing it feels to finally have someone who shows an interest in me and my life." This time, I can't suppress the chuckle. "And here I was worried about coming across as needy or emotional."

A smile spreads over his face, and pulling his hand free from mine, he cups my cheek. "You can never be too needy or emotional. I want you to share everything about your life with me. I want you to come to me if you have a problem. I want to be the one to comfort you when you have a bad day."

Feeling that I've finally found someone who understands me, I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face against his skin.

"I'm sorry I made you worry earlier. I'll never turn off my phone again," I promise.

Gripping the back of my neck, Callan pulls me away so he can see my face. "Thank you for understanding, Lily."

His nickname for me makes me smile and my heart flutters in my chest.

Suddenly, my phone starts to ring, and seeing it's the lobby, I answer, "Hi, Peter."

"There's a delivery for you, Miss Harrison."

"I'll be right down."

We end the call, and I grin at Callan. "Our dinner is here."

"I'll get the food while you get the plates and cutlery ready," he says as he rises to his feet.

I watch as Callan takes my keycard and leaves the apartment before I walk to the kitchen. Deciding we can eat at the island instead of the dining room, I set our places and pour some wine into two glasses.

Soon, the front door opens, and Callan comes in with our dinner. He sets the containers down on the counter, and while I open them, he takes off his jacket so he can be more comfortable.

Suddenly, it hits hard that this incredible man is here because he cares about me.

He's interested in me. He's making time for me.

I have to breathe through the emotions the thought causes to well in my chest.

Noticing he got us shrimp for appetizers and rib-eye steak for the main course, I grin at him. “I love that you remember what we ate when we met for dinner.”

I set our plates across from each other, but Callan moves mine beside his. When he sees I’m watching him, he explains, “I want you next to me.”

Warmth floods my heart, and smiling like a love-sick idiot, I quickly dish up our food.

I’m not going to lie, I’m starting to fall for Callan. It’s a little scary because we’ve only been officially together for a week.

Not so fast, Lillian. At least wait a month to see if he’s going to stick around before you give him your heart.

If life has taught me one thing, it’s that actions speak louder than words.

Sitting down, I pick up my wine glass and take a sip.

Callan eats some of his shrimp, his eyes constantly settling on me.

Curious to know his thoughts, I ask, “What was your first impression of me?”

“The first thing I noticed was your scent. You smelled like cinnamon and vanilla.”

My mouth curves up in a smile before I take a bite of my food.

“Then I noticed how beautiful you were. You weren’t wearing makeup, which impressed me.”

“I don’t like wearing makeup every day,” I admit.

He lifts a hand and brushes his knuckle over my cheek. “When we met at La Manifique, you kept blushing. I loved it.”

As if on command, heat spreads up my neck and face.

A hot smirk forms on his face. “Yeah, exactly like that.” Leaning forward, he gives me a kiss then continues to eat.

After a couple of bites, he asks, “What was your first impression of me?”

Chuckling, I shake my head.

“Lily,” he mutters, his tone commanding.

“Obviously, I thought you were handsome.” I shift on the stool and take a quick sip of my wine. “You look a lot like Jensen Ackles, and your eyes are really intense.”

Gesturing at the smirk on his face, I add, “And you look way too hot when you smile like that.”

Clearing my throat, I turn my attention back to my food.

“Did you know about me before we met?”

I shrug. “I’ve heard your name in social settings.” Giving him a playful look, I say, “After all, you are New York’s most eligible bachelor.”

“That’s the biggest load of shit,” he mutters.

We continue to eat, and once our plates are empty, I load them in the dishwasher.

“Would you like another glass of wine?” I ask.

“No, thank you.” He comes to stand in front of me, and placing his hand on my hip, he tugs me closer. “I have to go.”

“Okay.”

He presses two quick kisses to my lips, then grabs his jacket and shrugs it on.

“Thank you for coming over,” I say as I follow him to the front door.

He stops walking and turns to face me. “This might be too soon, so you can tell me to go to hell, but would you like to stay at my place this weekend?”

Holy crap.

The air whooshes from my lungs.

Before I can jump to conclusions, he adds, “No strings attached. You can use one of my guest rooms.” He takes hold of my hand. “I just want to spend time with you.”

“But what about the dinner I’m going to make for you?”

His eyes drift over my face as if he’s trying to read my mind.

“You can prepare it at my place.” Before I can come up with a reply, he adds, “You can give me an answer tomorrow. Think about it.”

Nodding, I say, “Okay.” My eyes widen. “I mean, okay, I’ll think about it, not okay, I’m spending the weekend at your place.”

A chuckle escapes him. “I guessed as much.”

I walk Callan to the elevator where I'm pulled into a hug before he gives me another kiss.

I watch as he steps into the elevator, then say, "Night, Callan."

"Night, Lily," he murmurs right before the doors close between us.

I stare at the elevator for a moment, thinking how Callan has come into my life when I needed someone the most.

Feeling a little better after his visit, I head back into my apartment.

He wants me to spend the weekend with him. Wow.

Excitement trickles into my chest, thinking it might just be what I need.

I mean, it's not like I'm going to sleep with him.

Even if that happens, there's nothing wrong with it. We're adults. We find each other attractive.

Are we moving too fast?

Slumping down on the couch, I let out a sigh while my mind races a mile a minute.

I should just do it. It will be a hell of a lot better than sitting at home, wondering whether my family will ever going to speak to me again.

My last thought is enough to get me off the couch, and grabbing my phone from the coffee table, I text Callan.

Lily: I'd love to spend the weekend with you. What time should I be at your place?

Lily: Also, what's your apartment number?

It takes a couple of minutes before he replies.

Callan: I'll pick you up at five. Can't wait.

Grinning like an idiot, I let out a little shriek before rushing upstairs to pack an overnight bag, even though I have the entire day tomorrow to do it.

Chapter 24

Callan

I've been at work since five a.m., so I can leave early to pick up Lily.

I didn't plan on asking her to spend the weekend with me. It just happened. In my previous relationships I didn't tolerate any sleepovers. It's just something I never felt the need to do.

This woman has me doing things I've never done before.

Not that I regret asking her. Quite the opposite.

I'll have Lily to myself the entire weekend, and knowing that has made the day crawl by at a snail's pace.

When I'm done with the final financial report, I send it back to the accounting department and switch off my laptop.

Letting out a sigh, I gather my cell phone from the desk, and getting up, I grab my jacket from the back of my chair and shrug it on.

As I open my office door, I see Easton sitting behind his desk. "I'm heading home," I inform him.

Giving me a mischievous grin, he says, "Have a great weekend, boss. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Little shit.

He overheard my conversation with Harper when I told her how well things were progressing between Lily and me.

“See you on Monday,” I mutter before leaving the office and heading home for the weekend.

On my drive to Lily’s place, my lips curve into a grin. Just thinking about the time we’ll spend together makes me excited for the weekend.

I park my car in front of her apartment building, and heading into the lobby, I nod my head at the doorman.

“Miss Harrison is expecting you, sir,” he says, getting up to scan his keycard so I can go up to Lily’s floor.

Stepping into the elevator, I murmur, “Thank you.”

When I reach Lily’s floor, it’s to see her waiting by her front door. Excitement shines from her eyes, making warmth spread through my chest.

She’s wearing a long flowing skirt with a floral print and a cream-colored blouse. The outfit is different from what she usually wears.

“Hey, my beautiful Lily,” I say as I pull her against my chest for a hug. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” She nods and tilts her head back so I can press a kiss to her mouth.

We enter her apartment, and while I grab her overnight bag, Lily retrieves a shopping bag with ingredients from the kitchen counter.

I take in the extraordinary women who’s agreed to date me, thinking I’m the luckiest bastard alive.

She's mine for the next two days.

The sudden thought makes my heart constrict with emotions – everything from pride to falling hopelessly in love with her.

I'm well aware it's all happening pretty fast, but I'm too far gone to care.

If someone had to ask me why I've grown so attached to Lily in such a short amount of time, I wouldn't be able to answer the question. It just happened.

Even though she's the opposite of me, everything about her fits me perfectly.

Leaving her apartment, I wait until we're taking the elevator down to the lobby before I ask, "How was your day?"

"Good. I've set up a website so I can sell some of my older paintings, and I started working on the last piece in my collection."

As the doors slide open, I say, "I'm glad you had a good day."

"How was yours?" she asks.

I open the car door and set her luggage and the groceries on the backseat. "The day felt long." The corner of my mouth lifts as I shut the rear door and open the passenger's side. "I just wanted to get done with work so I could get to you."

I can see she appreciates my words. She steals a kiss before climbing into the car.

When I get in behind the steering wheel, I ask, "Are you ready?"

“Yes.”

We drive the short distance to The Ritz, and as we’re taking the elevator up to my penthouse, I notice the nervousness on Lily’s face.

The doors slide open, and she glances around when we step into my foyer.

It’s been a while since I’ve had a woman over. Obviously, Harper, Naomi, and Ellie don’t count.

Lily slowly walks to the kitchen and places the groceries on the counter before walking closer to the floor-to-ceiling windows to look at Central Park down below. “The view from up here is spectacular.”

“It is,” I agree.

I continue to watch her closely as she glances at the living room, the dining area, and the balcony.

The décor is sleek and modern – a typical penthouse. I have photos of my family standing on a mantelpiece. There’s also one of Dylan and me on our graduation day.

The furniture is dark gray, and I have a couple of selected art pieces decorating the walls.

Other than that, I haven’t put much of a personal touch to the penthouse.

“Your place is beautiful,” Lily says, then she turns her gaze to me, and looking uncertain, she asks, “Can I get to work preparing the meal?”

Shaking my head, I pull two wine glasses from the cupboard and pour us some wine. “Let’s relax for a while.”

“Okay.”

Carrying the glasses to the living room, I say, “Come take a seat.”

When I hand her a glass of wine, she perches her butt on the edge of the couch as if she’s ready to make a run for it, should I make any sudden moves.

Keeping my tone soft, I say, “Relax, Lily. I don’t bite.” A smirk tugs at my mouth. “Unless you want me to.”

A burst of laughter escapes her as she scoots back on the couch, getting comfortable.

“I love your paintings,” she mentions.

I glance at the pieces on the walls. “I have a friend who owns a gallery. To support her, I’ve bought an art piece here and there over the years.” I take a sip of my wine, then ask, “Have you heard of Eloise Torres?”

Excitement lights up in her eyes. “I have. I’m obsessed with the exhibitions her gallery hosts. They’re always vibrant and speak to my soul.”

“I’ve known Eloise for over four years,” I tell Lily. “She was my first high-profile client.” I let out a chuckle. “We have a running joke where if we meet for a casual dinner, she pays me a hundred dollars.”

There’s a look of caution in Lily’s eyes when she asks, “How often do you accompany clients to events?”

Turning my body so I can lean my shoulder against the back of the couch, I answer, “Not often at all. I’m actually in

the process of training one of my employees to deal with any emergencies that may arise.”

Lily’s eyes glide over the living room before she asks, “Do you have any other female friends?”

Nodding, I answer truthfully, “Harper is my best friend, but she’s happily married to Daniel, who’s also a close friend of mine. You’ll meet them soon enough.”

“I’d like that,” she murmurs. Glancing in the direction of the kitchen, she says, “I better start with dinner. Will you show me where everything is?”

“Sure.”

We move to the kitchen, and I give Lily a quick rundown of how the appliances work before I take a seat at the island.

I watch as she rinses some vegetables before cutting them up, and I quickly find myself mesmerized by how delicate her movements are.

Chapter 25

Lily

It was fun preparing seared scallops and baby spinach with spiced pomegranate glaze, and even if I have to say so myself, it tasted delicious.

Callan's just placed the last of the dishes in the dishwasher when he says, "You weren't lying when you said you're a good cook. Thank you for the mouthwatering dinner."

Basking in the compliment, I reply, "You're welcome."

He comes to take my hand, and leading me back to the living room, he puts on some music before pulling me into his arms.

I let out a chuckle, feeling a little awkward when his arm locks around my lower back, and we slowly begin to dance.

I can't dance to save my life, but this is romantic.

Glancing up at him, and seeing desire in his eyes, my cheeks flush with heat. When I look away, he lifts a hand to my face, brushing his thumb over my cheek.

"I love when you blush," he murmurs, his tone low and seductive.

There's an intense fluttering in my stomach. "It's a curse that comes with being blonde."

The corner of his mouth curves up, and I can't help but stare at his handsome face.

My heart clenches before it's filled with an emotion I've been doing my best to keep at bay.

Don't fall madly in love with him. Not yet.

The last thing you need is to get your heart broken by a man.

As my eyes remain glued to his face, I realize that stopping myself from falling in love with Callan is easier said than done.

The heart wants what the heart wants.

As if he can read my mind, he murmurs, "Your heart is safe with me, Lily. Stop fighting it."

I search his face, and seeing his sincere expression, my heart begins to beat faster.

Because of the people in my life, I've always been cautious about letting someone in.

But I do feel safe with Callan.

Lifting myself on my tiptoes, I bring my hands to either side of his jaw and press a tender kiss to his mouth. He allows me to control the kiss, and when I pull away, our eyes lock again.

"It feels like you can see into my soul," I whisper.

A smile curves his mouth. "You have a very expressive face."

With an overwhelming tension building between us, we continue to dance for a couple of minutes before Callan pulls me into a hug.

With his arms tightly wrapped around me, I feel like I belong here with him.

He's everything I've ever wanted and so much more.

My heart beats faster and my breaths speed up, the realization that I've already fallen for him hitting me with a wave of tingles spreading over my body.

All my problems fall away until my attention is only on Callan and the time we're spending together.

Letting go of me, he asks, "Would you like more wine?"

"Please." I turn to stare out the window at the city lights while trying to calm my racing heart.

Callan brings two glasses of wine back to the living room and hands me one. "Come take a seat."

I sit down beside him and relax against the back of the couch.

"What's the last painting in your collection about?" he asks.

My cheeks flush again, and feeling self-conscious, I answer, "It's about a woman standing in the middle of people who all have their backs turned to her. It depicts loneliness."

His eyes narrow slightly, a frown line forming between his eyebrows. "Is it a reflection of how you feel?"

Feeling seen, I nod and quickly take a couple of sips of the wine before whispering, "Yes."

He tilts his head. “Even after meeting me?”

A smile curves my lips. “No. You’ve changed everything.”

Callan places his hand on my thigh just above my knee, and his touch sends a wave of tingles through my insides.

Lowering my hand to his, I draw lazy patterns on his skin with my fingertip. Just before dinner, he took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, which allows me to follow the line of his veins snaking up his forearm.

The tension between us keeps building, making it impossible for us to focus on anything to talk about.

Before I know it, my wine glass is empty, and I set it down on the coffee table.

To break the silence, I ask, “What do you normally do on Friday nights?”

“If I’m not spending time with my family or a friend, I work. And you?”

I shrug and gesture at the TV. “I’ll either watch something on true crime, or paint, or go for a walk.”

He lifts an eyebrow at me. “True crime?”

I chuckle at his reaction. “I find it relaxing.”

“Okay.” Callan gives me a playful expression. “Remind me not to look for trouble with you.”

Feeling completely relaxed and enjoying the night, I ask, “Do you watch TV?”

He empties his wine glass and places it next to mine. “I don’t have much time for TV, but I like psychological

thrillers.”

I glance at the TV again. “Do you want to watch a movie?”

“Sure.”

He gets up and grabs a universal remote from the coffee table before sitting down again. He’s much closer, and as he switches on the TV, he wraps his arm around my shoulders.

I lean into his side, enjoying the feel of his masculine body. My mouth lifts at the corner when I place my hand on his abs, my fingers itching to explore all of him.

“Have you watched *The Girl on a Train*?” he asks.

I shake my head, and as he presses play for the movie to start, I snuggle against him, letting out a happy sigh.

Callan pushes a hand beneath my knees and lifts my legs to rest over his. My heartbeat instantly picks up speed, and I glance up at him. Meeting his eyes, a blush spreads over my cheeks, and I quickly turn my eyes to the TV.

I’m overly aware of him as anticipation tightens the air around us.

Callan places his hand on the side of my ankle, and my eyes flick to where he’s touching me. I watch as his palm brushes up my calf, the fabric of my skirt bunching around his forearm.

Dear God.

My breathing speeds up, and my abdomen tightens with need.

With the movie forgotten, my eyes stay glued to his arm as his palm moves to the side of my thigh. I swear my heart is

fluttering like a caged bird when he starts to trail his fingers up and down my thigh.

My body is tense with desire, and it feels as if my abdomen is humming.

I glance up at him again, and when his eyes flick to mine, heat spreads over my neck.

Once again, I look at the TV, but I have no idea what's happening in the movie. I'm so conscious of Callan and his fingers trailing over my skin. I don't notice I'm fiddling with the buttons of his waistcoat.

Suddenly one comes loose, and my eyes widen in shock.

Shit.

Callan lets out a predatory-sounding chuckle, but before I can get embarrassed about what I've done, he gets up, and with a single smooth move, he drags me down so I'm lying on my back. Pushing my legs open, he crawls over me, his eyes raking over my heaving chest before settling on my face.

"You can pull all the buttons off," he teases me right before his mouth crushes mine in a hot-blooded kiss.

Holy crap.

The fabric of my skirt is bunched around my thighs, and when Callan's body presses down on mine, I feel his hardness between my legs.

Instantly, heat flushes my core, and I'm totally overwhelmed by what's happening between us.

His tongue strokes hard against mine, his teeth nipping until my lips tingle from all the friction. It feels so

unbelievably good a moan escapes me.

The way he kisses me makes me feel as if I'm floating on clouds where nothing can reach me. It makes me feel womanly, wanted, and cared for.

I get lost in Callan, and when he rubs his hardness against the valley between my thighs, I gasp into his mouth from the intense tingles spreading through my body.

I feel his hand grip my hip before it moves down to my thigh.

I swear I'm going to overheat, the anticipation of what will happen if we take this further leaving me breathless.

I want him.

So freaking badly.

Callan breaks the kiss, and lifting his head, his eyes search my face to make sure I'm on the same page as him.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," he says, his voice hoarse with desire.

"Yes." I'm so overwhelmed by the intensity coming off him, I reply without thinking. I shake my head quickly, then blurt out, "I mean, don't stop."

His mouth lifts in a hot smirk, and his eyes keep mine captive as his hand moves to the inside of my thigh.

Oh God.

My heart is threatening to burst from my chest that's rising and falling with desperate breaths.

There's such a predatory expression in his eyes as his thumb brushes along the edge of my underwear I accidentally let out a whimper.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

Chapter 26

Lily

Callan rests his forearm next to my head while his left hand keeps stroking the inside of my thigh, a mere inch from where I really want him.

God, I'm going to go up in flames.

He keeps torturing me, driving me wild until I feel feverish, and I'm a second away from begging him to make me come.

I'm practically caged in by his powerful body, making me feel small and desired. I lift my hand to his face, dragging my nails through the day-old stubble covering his jaw.

His eyes caress my face as if I'm the most precious thing he's ever seen.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Lily," he murmurs, his voice low and intimate.

His need for constant eye contact is next level because he keeps my gaze imprisoned as his thumb pushes beneath the fabric of my underwear. The instant he brushes over my slit, my lips part, and my hips stir, begging for a hell of a lot more friction.

He pushes the fabric completely out of his way, his tone commanding as he orders, "Open your legs wider, baby."

My soul, that sounded so hot.

I do as I'm told, and my body jerks when he strokes his finger up and down my slit before circling my opening.

I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and pull his face down toward mine. Our mouths crash together as he pushes a finger inside me, my hips swiveling with need.

"Yes," I moan against his mouth before I kiss him with all the desire he's making me feel.

The scent of his aftershave fills my lungs, and I'm so lost in him, a bomb could detonate next to me, and I wouldn't know.

Our mouths devour each other while he alternates between massaging my clit and thrusting a finger inside me.

My butt lifts, and I begin to rub myself against his hand, and much to my embarrassment, it only takes a minute before my body tenses and an orgasm threatens to spasm through me.

Callan breaks the kiss, and breathless, he groans, "Jesus Christ, Lily." His hand moves faster. "Come for me, baby."

My head tilts back as I convulse beneath him, my toes curling and my lips parted with gasps and moans spilling over them.

God.

Ohhhhh God.

All my energy drains from me, leaving me a pile of mush beneath Callan.

Wow. Just wow.

Callan presses a kiss to my neck, then on my jaw, before finally brushing his mouth over mine.

When his eyes lock on mine again, he adjusts my underwear before pulling his hand out from between my legs. Instead of getting up or continuing with what we're doing, he just rests his forearms on either side of my head while staring down at me.

His eyes shine like pools of clear water as he playfully says, "Now that I have you all relaxed and at my mercy, tell me your deepest, darkest secret."

I let out a burst of laughter. "Hell no. You'll have to pay me way more than one orgasm before I start spilling my secrets to you."

A smirk lifts the corner of his mouth. "Okay. Let's negotiate. How many orgasms?"

I love that it doesn't feel awkward after the intimate moment we shared.

Bringing a hand to his shoulder, I flatten my palm against him and enjoy the feel of his body heat.

I pretend to think for a while, then reply, "It's hard to say. We'll have to play it by ear."

His body still covers mine, and his weight presses me into the couch. I freaking love it so much.

Callan makes me feel like I'm all that matters. It's something I've desperately craved but could never find. Not until now.

His eyes drift over my face, then he asks, “Okay, we’ll keep the secrets for later. Tell me your dreams.”

I trail a finger through his stubble and down his neck while I answer, “I want my own exhibition and to be recognized for my talent. I want to sell every piece.” I let out a chuckle. “For millions of dollars.” Shaking my head, I sigh, “It’s just a dream.”

Callan looks content as he listens to me, making me fall a little harder for him.

“I have a feeling your dream is going to come true,” he murmurs, brushing a finger from my temple to my chin. “With your talent, it’s impossible not to.”

Completely spellbound by this incredible man, I ask, “What do you want from the future?”

He doesn’t have to think about his answer and replies immediately, “I want my family and friends healthy.” Pressing a kiss to my mouth, he murmurs, “I want a peaceful life with my loved ones.”

Callan pushes his body up, and climbing off me, he takes my hand and pulls me to my feet. “I need to get out of this suit. Let me show you to the guestroom.”

“Okay.”

He picks up my overnight bag, and as I follow him up the stairs, he chuckles, “After we’ve freshened up, we can try watching the movie again.”

I let out a burst of laughter, feeling happy that I decided to spend the weekend with him.

Callan

After getting Lily settled in the guestroom, I leave her so I can take a shower.

It took all my willpower to stop after I made her come. Christ, the sounds she made. The way she moved beneath me. The expressions on her face. It was all driving me insane with the need to fuck her senseless.

I strip out of my clothes and chuckle when I see the missing button.

I loved how she blushed whenever I caught her looking at me.

Lily's a little more closed off than I expected, but over the past two days, I've gotten her to open up to me more.

Walking into the ensuite bathroom, my cock is still hard as steel. I open the faucets, and waiting for the water to warm up, I bring my hand to my face and take a deep breath of her scent lingering on my fingers.

Christ, she smells edible.

I step beneath the spray, letting the drops rush over my wired body. Flashes of Lily moaning beneath me in desperate need have me wrapping my fingers around my cock.

My body is fucking tense as I pump my cock faster, imagining Lily's hand gripping me like a vice.

With my mind filled with image after erotic image of my woman, I stroke myself harder, desperate for release.

The memories of Lily coming have me shooting my load on the tiles, but it does nothing to take the edge off.

Fuck. I'm not going to get any sleep knowing she's just down the hall.

Needing to get my desire for Lily under control, I take my time showering. It doesn't help for shit, though, because when I turn off the faucets and dry myself, my cock is still fucking hard.

I'm going to die of blue balls long before this weekend is over.

Heading to my walk-in closet, I grab a pair of sweatpants and drag them on. Lifting my hand, I ruffle my hair, getting rid of the last drops of water as I walk to the door.

I reach for the doorknob but stop when I hear Lily whispering on the other side of the door, "Crap, what if he thinks I'm desperate."

I pull my bedroom door open, and it has Lily freezing like a deer caught in headlights. She's wearing silk pajama shorts with a matching shirt, and I can clearly see her nipples pressing against the fabric.

My eyes lower to her exposed legs, which are sexy as fuck, and I almost groan.

When I bring my gaze back to her face, it's to see her stare at my bare chest with wide eyes, her pupils dilated and her lips parted.

“Like what you see?” I tease her, my tone low and gravelly.

Lily nods as she closes the distance between us. She places her hand on my chest, then brushes her palm over my skin as she moves up to my neck. Pushing her body on her tiptoes, she tugs my face down but pauses with her mouth right by mine.

Her gray eyes are dark with seduction when she whispers, “I want you, Callan.”

That’s all it takes for me to say fuck you to my self-control.

I grab her hips and yank her flush with my body as my mouth crashes against hers. The kiss is wild and filled with the hunger we have for each other, and somehow, I manage to get us to my bed without falling over our feet.

I break the kiss and push her backward, asking in a demanding tone, “Birth control?”

She nods as she scoots onto the mattress. “I’m on the pill.”

Thank fuck.

I crawl over her body, my hands pushing the silky fabric of her shirt up to expose her breasts. Letting out a satisfied growl at how perfect she is, I lower my head and suck a taut nipple into my mouth.

Lily’s fingers get lost in my damp hair as she arches her back.

With a tug of my teeth, I release her nipple, then taking hold of her wrists, I pin them above her head, ordering, “Keep your hands there.”

Her chest rises and falls with desperate breaths as she nods.

I unbutton her pajama top and push the fabric aside before I run my hands up and down her chest and stomach. I get drunk on how soft she feels, and gripping her shorts, I tug them down her sexy legs.

I take a moment to stare at her incredible body, my cock aching to be inside her.

When I push my sweatpants down, Lily's eyes move over my body, not hiding how impressed she is.

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, then she admits, "It's been a while for me."

I crawl over her again, my hand feasting on the feel of her skin. "How long?"

"Ah..." she actually has to think. "Three years?"

"Are you asking or telling me," I tease her.

She lets out a chuckle. "Telling."

Needing to get her ready for me, I push her legs open, and order, "Keep them open as wide as you can, baby." When she starts moving her arms, I raise an eyebrow at her. "Don't move your arms."

Her cheeks flush, and with her spread out before me, I take my time looking at her sensual body.

"You're bossy," she complains.

I press a kiss on her stomach before moving down to her pussy, then I ask, "Is that a problem?"

She quickly shakes her head, her eyes locked on me.

“Good,” I grumble right before I close my mouth around her clit.

Lily’s ass lifts off the bed, and I grab hold of her hip to keep her in place as I lick and suck her clit.

When she tries to close her legs, I stop and level her with a look filled with warning. “Keep your legs spread wide.”

“I don’t have that kind of self-control,” she complains.

A dark chuckle rumbles from me. “Yes, you do. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

She opens her legs as much as possible, her thighs quivering. As a reward, I bury my face in her pussy, and eat her like a starving man.

“God...Callan...shit...” she whimpers and moans, her body trembling from all the effort it takes to keep still.

It’s not that I don’t want her to move but because I enjoy dominating my partner in the bedroom. It’s all about who’s in control.

Chapter 27

Lily

Every time I get close to coming, I move, which has Callan stopping.

He's freaking torturing me.

Sweat beads over my body, and my muscles strain. Pleasure builds between my legs, and once again, I can't keep my butt from lifting off the bed in pure desperation to rub myself harder against his mouth.

And, once a-freaking-gain, Callan stops. With his intense eyes capturing mine, he shakes his head once.

"You're only making this harder for yourself, baby."

I let out a frustrated groan before keeping still for him. My heart is hammering against my ribs, and my skin feels sensitive.

Callan's teeth tug at my clit, making my body tremble.

"Please," I whimper.

He sucks harder, and instantly, pleasure builds in my core.

"Oh God. Please, Callan. Please," I beg shamelessly.

His mouth latches onto my clit, and he sucks so hard, I swear I see stars as my orgasm tears through me with the power of a category-five tornado.

I let out a cry, my body shaking uncontrollably. My vision goes black, and I'm unable to suck in a breath of air, the pleasure too intense.

By the time I come down from the orgasm, I have zero strength to move. Callan crawls up my body, his eyes admiring the sight of my flushed face as I gasp for air.

"I love the way you come." The words rumble from his chest, his features downright ravenous.

No one has ever made me orgasm like this or looked at me like they might die if they didn't get to fuck me.

Lying down on top of me, his weight forces me into the mattress. His hand brushes up and down my side, and feeling his hard cock against my core has my desire for him skyrocketing.

Getting to see Callan's incredible body, his six-pack, and the delicious V curving from his hips down to his impressive manhood is one thing, but feeling him against me is intoxicating.

Figuring I can move, I start to lower my arms from above my head but stop when Callan raises an eyebrow at me, a dominant expression tightening his features.

I've realized it's a hell of a turn-on for him to be in control. With a chuckle, I keep still again, my body exposed for Callan to do whatever he wants with me.

His hips move, and he rubs his cock up and down my slit creating some much-needed friction between us.

God, he's already made me orgasm twice, and I'm still desperate for more of him.

With every brush of his hardness against my clit, the anticipation grows in my abdomen. I can't wait to feel him inside me.

Knowing what he wants, I whisper, "Please, Callan. Fuck me."

A hot smirk curves his lips, but instead of giving me what he wants, he continues to torture me by thrusting against my clit.

He lowers his head, bathing my jaw and throat in hungry kisses. His hand closes over my breast, massaging and squeezing as if he can't get enough.

The air tenses with my desperation and anticipation until I beg, "Please. Please. Please."

With his lips brushing over my racing pulse, he asks, "How badly do you need me to fuck you?"

"So...so very badly," I groan, my hips swiveling in an attempt to feel more of him.

His palm connects with the side of my ass. "Not badly enough, seeing as you're moving."

Holy shit, that's hot.

Callan doesn't miss my reaction, and his mouth curves up in a predatory grin. "You liked that."

With heat bursting in my cheeks, I nod.

Intense satisfaction tightens his features, and it makes me feel so freaking good.

Needing to please him more, I swivel my hips again, earning myself another smack on the side of my butt. I lower

my lashes, and keeping my expression submissive, I moan to show him how much I'm enjoying this.

Callan's eyes are locked on me with so much intensity I feel he will set me on fire with a single look. "Christ, Lily." The words rumble from him. "You're fucking perfect."

My teeth tug at my bottom lip, and I pray to God I look seductive as I beg, "Please. I need you so much it hurts."

It works, and his mouth claims mine in a wild kiss, his teeth punishing my bottom lip before his tongue eases the sting. I feel him line his cock up with my opening, and my heart practically beats out of my chest with anticipation.

"Please," I whimper against his mouth.

He pushes his hand beneath my butt, his fingers gripping an asscheek. His abs rub against my stomach, and with a single unbelievably hard thrust, he enters me.

I'm no virgin, but it's been so long, and he's above average in size, causing a sharp ache deep inside me.

The air bursts from my lungs, and I can't stop a soft cry from escaping me.

Callan rests his forearm next to my face, his eyes searching mine. "Does it hurt?"

Lying, I shake my head.

His eyes soften on me. "Liar."

"I'm fine," I whisper, trying to adjust to his size.

I thought he was all the way in, but clearly, I was wrong because he thrusts again, filling me so much I feel impossibly full.

Shit. Oh God.

It hurts so damn good.

Keeping still inside me, Callan murmurs with a demanding tone, “Tell me how it feels to have me inside you.”

Embarrassed voicing my thoughts, I obey, “Full and stretched to the limit.”

He pulls out only to thrust inside me again, making me moan, “Oh God.”

He lowers his head until our mouths are a breath apart, and thrusting into me again, he inhales the burst of air coming from me.

Holy shit, this man is next level.

He keeps the pace slow, his eyes imprisoning mine. The intensity between us is scorching, setting my skin on fire.

Suddenly, he pulls out. Yanking me up against his chest so I’m seated on his lap, he slams back inside me. My body curls into his, and I quickly wrap my arms around his neck.

Face-to-face with Callan, our chests pressed against each other, his thrusts are torturously slow and deep.

I feel achy and needy, a moan spilling over my parted lips.

“Do you need me to fuck you harder?” he asks, his tone low and commanding.

He thrusts into me again, and I gasp, “Yes. So much harder.”

His hands grip my ass, and he starts to move faster with savage thrusts, creating so much friction inside me there’s a

constant pulse of pleasure in my abdomen.

Lifting a hand, he grips my hair in a fist and tugs my head back so his teeth and lips can feast on my throat.

Moans and whimpers pour from me as he continues to fuck me hard. His thrusts grow wilder, and soon, I'm a whimpering mess as another powerful orgasm builds inside me.

With his fist in my hair, he tilts my head further back, his eyes locking with mine. "Come for me, Lily."

On his command, my body begins to convulse. My nails dig into his back, and as the orgasm tears a cry from me, I'm overwhelmed by intense pleasure.

My body jerks uncontrollably as he fucks the living hell out of me. He pushes me backward, and I slump against the mattress. Then, with his hand gripping my hip, he hammers into me with all his strength.

It prolongs my pleasure, and at some point, I'm pretty sure I orgasm again...and again.

Seeing how his muscles strain as his body moves against mine, I'm entranced while captured in an assault of intense ecstasy.

Callan's features tighten, and he begins to jerk inside me, his pace faltering. With absolute awe, I watch as pleasure washes over his face.

His body strains as a low growl rumbles over his lips, and I fall madly in love with how hot he looks when he empties himself inside me.

Callan begins to thrust into me at a lazy pace, and every time his pelvis grinds against mine, residual spasms of pleasure ripple through me.

We come down from our highs, and breathless, we stare at each other as we return to reality.

Chapter 28

Callan

Resting my forearms on either side of Lily's head, I stare deep into her eyes.

She has surprised me in so many ways, and the way she submitted to me fills me with immense satisfaction.

I press a tender kiss to her lips before murmuring, "You're perfect."

Her fingers trail up and down my back, sending goosebumps over my skin.

Chuckling, she says, "You weren't lying when you said you're controlling."

I tilt my head and brush my lips over her jaw before nipping at her earlobe. "Doesn't look like you mind."

"Not at all."

Giving her a playful grin, I mutter, "Next time, I'm tying your wrists together."

Her cheeks turn pink, but she doesn't argue.

When I pull out of her, my body spasms with an echo of pleasure. I press a kiss on Lily's abdomen before leaving her on the bed. I head into the bathroom and clean myself, then rinsing a washcloth beneath warm water, I walk back to her.

My eyes drift over her naked body, her hair scattered over the black rumped covers.

I place a knee on the bed, and pushing her thighs open, I gently clean her, my gaze locked on her blushing face. Once I'm done, I take hold of her hand and pull her into a standing position.

I pick up her pajama pants and crouch in front of her. "Left foot," I order.

She lets out a chuckle, and placing her hand on my shoulder to keep her balance, she allows me to pull the fabric up her legs.

I pick up her pajama top and hold it for her to put on. While she pushes her arms through the sleeves, our eyes meet, and even though we've just had sex, heated tension starts to build between us again.

Once I have Lily dressed, I swipe my sweatpants from the floor and pull them on.

Bringing a hand to my abs, Lily trails her finger along the seam of my pants, a smile curving her mouth. She traces the prominent V of my hips, then bites her lip.

Her eyes flick to mine, and seeing that I'm watching her, she chuckles. "Sorry. You have one hell of a hot body." She lets out a contented sigh. "And you know how to use it in bed."

"I aim to please," I tease her.

Wrapping my hand around her throat, I lean down so I can taste her lips with a passionate kiss.

Her hands brush over my chest and abs as if she can't get enough of how good I feel beneath her palms.

The kiss grows wilder, and soon it's downright filthy.

"Fuck this," I growl as I grip her shorts, practically ripping the fabric off her.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I shove my sweatpants down as I yank Lily onto my lap. She straddles me, and before I can give a command, she sinks down on my cock, taking me all the way to the hilt.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders as our mouths ravage each other. Moving like a fucking goddess, she swivels her hips.

Gripping hold of her hips, I set a punishing pace as I fuck her with all my strength until she's nothing but a whimpering mess on my lap.

When her body tenses, I command, "Come, Lily."

Her pussy clenches hard around my cock, sending me over the edge, and as we orgasm simultaneously, our eyes are locked on each other.

When we start to come down from the pleasure, she wraps her arms around my neck and buries her face against my skin.

Engulfing her in my arms, I hold her and feel as a tremble ripples through her body.

Intense emotions assault my heart. Possessiveness. Affection. Protectiveness.

There's no doubt in my mind that Lily is mine.

“Tell me something about you no one else knows,” I whisper against her skin.

Lily pulls back, and framing my jaw with her palms, she looks deep into my eyes. “I’m falling for you.”

Lily

My heart is beating a mile a minute as I watch his reaction to my confession.

There’s no shock or awkwardness, but instead, a smile curves Callan’s lips. He lifts a hand to my temple and brushes some of my wild sex-hair out of my face.

“You’re mine.” The words are filled with certainty and domination, making my stomach flutter.

Breathless, I whisper, “I’m yours.”

And he’s mine.

His smile turns into a smirk. “At this rate, I’m just going to remain buried inside you. There’s no point in us getting dressed.”

A burst of laughter escapes me as I climb off his lap. “I need water, or I’m going to dehydrate.”

When I turn around, Callan’s palm connects with my ass. I let out a soft shriek, my hand flying to the stinging spot.

Grabbing hold of my hips, he tugs me back. “Move your hand.”

I do as he says, and he presses a kiss to my asscheek before saying, “Next time, you wait for my permission to come.”

Holy shit.

I’ve never thought I’d like being spanked and bossed around, but with the heat gathering in my core, it’s clear I love it.

I’m given another soft pat on my butt before Callan gets up, and taking my hand, he leads me into the bathroom.

I glance around, taking in the spacious shower and his toiletries before watching him rinse the washcloth he brought from the bedroom.

My cheeks instantly heat up.

It feels super intimate when he cleans me, filling my heart with warmth because it shows how much he cares.

My face goes up in flames when he cleans himself in front of me, my eyes darting to the window and the city lights beyond.

Suddenly, Callan’s finger brushes over my cheek before his hand wraps around the back of my neck. My eyes fly to his right before he kisses me.

He pulls back, then says, “You keep blushing like that, and I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk.”

Tender from our sexcapades, I chuckle, “I need time to recover.”

“Christ.” Concern tightens his features. “Are you sore?”

Knowing he’ll see through my lies, I admit, “Just a little.”

He leaves me standing by the shower, and butt naked, he opens the faucets in the bath.

This man is really comfortable with his body.

Then I realize I'm also naked, and I cross my legs in a stupid attempt to hide myself.

Callan pours some oil into the bath, and soon, a fresh aroma fills the air.

“Come, baby,” he murmurs.

I move closer, and when he's happy with the temperature of the water, I step into the tub.

“Soak a little, while I get you a bottle of water.”

God, is this man real or a figment of my imagination?

I lean back in the tub, enjoying the feel of the balmy water with a wide smile on my face.

When he returns, he's wearing his sweatpants, that, quite frankly, makes me lose my mind with lust.

He takes the cap off before handing me the bottle. I take a couple of sips and set it down on a ledge, then watch as Callan fetches a loofah and body wash from the shower.

He crouches beside the tub, and squirting some body wash onto the loofah, he gestures for me to sit up.

When he starts to wash my back, my head falls forward, and I let out a happy moan.

Not thinking before I speak, I playfully say, “Yes, I'll marry you.”

His hand pauses on my back, and an intense silence falls between us.

Oh crap!

My eyes fly to his face. “I’m kidding. Crap.” Feeling embarrassed, I start to ramble, “That was a joke. A stupid one. I’m sorry.”

Callan starts to chuckle, shaking his head at me. “There’s no reason to apologize. Relax, baby.”

I let out an awkward burst of laughter, turning my gaze to the water.

Then he teases, “But I’m glad to know what the answer will be when I ask you.”

He continues to wash my back before moving to my chest. By the time he’s taken care of my entire body, I feel pampered beyond belief.

Callan helps me out of the tub, and grabbing a heated towel, he carefully dries me before pulling me into a hug.

I nestle against his chest, letting out a contented sigh.

“Sleep in my bed tonight,” he demands because it sure doesn’t sound like a question.

I’ve never spent the night sleeping with a man. The few times I’ve had sex, they left right after, never to be heard from again.

Tilting my head back, I look up at Callan. “Are you sure?”

A frown forms on his forehead. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No reason.”

He takes my hand and leads me into his bedroom. I glance at the modern walk-in closet where all his suits hang neatly on one side. It looks like something out of a fashion catalog.

Callan pulls the covers back, then says, “I want you naked beside me.”

I lift my eyebrows and give his sweatpants a pointed look, which has him chuckling and stepping out of them.

Climbing beneath the covers, I’m pulled against Callan’s chest. I snuggle against his side, loving the feel of his naked body against mine.

I can get used to this.

Because he’s opened up so much to me about the death of his friend and his control issues, I feel comfortable when I admit, “This is the first time I’m going to sleep next to a man.”

He turns onto his side so he can look at my face. “Really?”

I nod, still feeling a little self-conscious talking about it.

Or just talking about myself in general. I’ve always craved it but never had anyone interested enough to listen.

Closing the small distance between us, he presses a tender kiss to my mouth. “I’m honored to be your first.”

Forget about not falling for this man or trying to protect my heart. It’s too late. I’m so far gone for Callan, there’s no trying to stop the emotions he’s stirring in my heart.

Chapter 29

Lily

Not wanting to spend any of my money on a dress for Denise's party, I decide to wear one of my older ones. I really don't think anyone will even notice.

Their eyes will be on Callan.

The thought brings a smile to my face.

The past three weeks we've officially been together have been the best of my life. I'll go as far as to say I've never felt so loved.

Unfortunately, Callan has to go on a business trip for the next two weeks.

I'm going to miss him so much.

I intend to enjoy my last night with him because he's leaving for Texas tomorrow.

I haven't heard from my parents or Mark and Sadie since our huge fight, and knowing they might be at Denise's party has my anxiety spiking.

At the very least, I hope they'll be civil when I introduce Callan to them. That's if they attend the party. The odds are good, though, because Dad plays golf with Denise's father on a regular basis.

Standing in front of the mirror, I stare at my reflection, making sure I look my best. I've curled my hair and taken great care with my makeup.

The light blue silk gown makes my skin look pale and brings out the gray in my eyes.

I feel beautiful, and making eye contact with myself, I try to see what Callan sees when he looks at me.

My phone beeps, pulling me away from the mirror. Opening the text, I read it quickly.

Callan: I'm on my way, baby.

As always, a smile spreads over my face.

Lily: Can't wait to see you!

Grabbing my clutch purse, I tuck my phone inside and hurry out of my bedroom. Leaving my apartment, I head down to the lobby, and a minute later, the Bugatti stops in front of the entrance to the building.

When Callan climbs out of his car, and I see how incredibly handsome he looks in a tuxedo, my heart flutters in my chest.

God, I'm so lucky.

His eyes land on me, and he stops dead in his tracks. He places a hand over his heart and stares at me for a moment before saying, "Wow. Just fucking wow, baby."

My heart fills with pride and affection as I bask in the admiration written all over his face.

He comes closer, his eyes filled with awe. "You look breathtaking, my Lily."

“Thank you,” I murmur, tilting my face up when he leans down to press a gentle kiss to my lips.

Thank God for smudge-proof lipstick.

His eyes caress my face. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

Tonight, I’m going to show everyone I’m not lost without them.

Callan places his hand on my lower back, then says, “Hold up. I have to see you from behind.” His palm brushes over my butt before giving me a love tap. “Christ, I love you in this dress.”

Letting out a chuckle, I walk toward his car, and once he’s opened the passenger door, I climb inside.

After Callan gets behind the steering wheel, he takes a moment to stare at me. “Fuck, I’m a lucky bastard.”

“Stop,” I laugh, his attention making my heart feel as light as a feather.

He starts the engine, and pulling away from the curb, he steers the car toward Tavern On the Green, where the party is being held.

“Have you packed for the trip?” I ask.

Callan shakes his head. “After you left this morning, I worked on the presentation. I’ll pack tomorrow.”

“Your flight is at eleven a.m., right?”

He nods, then gives me a mischievous grin. “You can always come home with me and help me pack.”

Chuckling, I nod. "I'd love that."

When we pull up to the venue, the valet stands ready to take the car keys from Callan.

I swallow hard on my anxiety, trying to brace myself for whatever will happen tonight.

Callan holds his arm out for me to take before his eyes meet mine. "Take a deep breath, baby."

I do as I'm told.

"Chin up," he orders.

I lift my head high, and walking to the courtyard where the party is in full swing, I try to ignore the nerves spinning in my stomach.

There are so many people, and I don't know most of them, but the moment Callan and I walk into the courtyard, eyes turn our way.

Slowly, a murmuring of voices spread through the crowd.

"Lillian!" I hear Denise shriek.

I glance over the people, searching for her. Suddenly she appears, hurrying from the back of the courtyard.

"Oh my God," she exclaims, her eyes darting between Callan and me. "I didn't know you were bringing a plus one."

Of course, you didn't.

"I did tell you. Twice," I correct her before placing my left hand on Callan's chest. "You know Callan, right?"

"Only from the news. We've never had the pleasure to meet in person." She smiles at my man, holding her hand out

to him. "I'm Denise Davis."

He glances down at her with disdain clearly on his face. "You'll have to excuse my not shaking your hand. I have a thing about germs."

Oh my God.

Callan doesn't have a problem with touching people. He's being blatantly rude to her because of how she's treated me.

Be still my heart.

I think I've just fallen in love with him again.

"Oh." Denise looks visibly rattled.

Callan smiles lovingly at me. "Can I get you something to drink, baby?"

I nod and watch as he walks to the bar. Everyone's eyes follow him, but my attention is pulled back to Denise when she grabs my forearm.

"You're dating Callan Wright?"

I look at the woman who's made me feel like I'm nothing but forgettable. "Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asks as her eyes go to where Callan is talking to a man I don't recognize. "Damn, woman."

I don't bother answering her, and as I glance to my left, it's to see my parents and Sadie greeting the Jacksons before heading in my direction.

Oh shit!

Callan returns to me and hands me a glass of white wine, and I quickly whisper, “My parents and sister are here.”

“Where?” he asks.

“Lillian,” Mom says as they reach us, a questioning expression on her face. Her tone is cool as she asks, “How have you been?”

Do you even care?

I turn to Callan so I can introduce him to my parents, but seeing rage tightening his features, I’m thrown for a loop, and my words dry up.

Denise glances between everyone with a wide smile on her face as she moves closer to Sadie, who’s practically gawking at Callan.

Mom and Dad wait for me to introduce Callan.

But a sickening feeling spreads over my body when Callan’s angry gaze flicks from my parents to me.

Intense sorrow tightens his features even more, and as I stare at him with confusion, his eyes snap back to my father.

“You have no idea who I am, do you?” he bites the words out through clenched teeth.

Taken aback, Dad’s eyebrows draw together. “Of course I do. You’re Callan Wright.”

Callan shakes his head. “Think hard. I sat in your courtroom once.”

What?

Chapter 30

Callan

Coming face-to-face with Judge Harrison, my entire world shudders.

I'm instantly thrown back to the past, and six years of healing goes out the window as I'm transported back to the courtroom where Theo Jackson got away with murder.

My body is numb, and my heart lies shattered at my feet as the courtroom empties.

I can't believe what just happened. Judge Harrison let Theo Jackson off with a three-month community service punishment.

No jail time!

No fucking justice for killing the person I loved most in this world.

Jackson got away with murdering my best friend – my brother.

I gasp through the debilitating rage and sorrow that are hellbent on destroying my soul.

I feel Dad's hand on my back before he mutters, "Let's go, son."

"No." I shake my head. "It's not fair."

“I know.”

My eyes fly to my father’s face. “We have to appeal the sentence. He deserves to rot in prison for the rest of his life.”

Dad nods, giving me a comforting look. “I’ll speak to the prosecutor.”

He helps me to my feet, and in numb shock, I walk out of the courtroom.

As we come around a corner, my eyes land on Judge Harrison. I see him shaking hands with the murderer’s father, George Jackson.

Before I can react, Dad’s arms wrap around me, pulling me away from the men.

My breaths rush over my lips. My heart hammers against my ribcage.

And like so many times since Dylan died, I’m overwhelmed by a panic attack that drags me to the pits of hell.

I stare at the man who let a murderer walk free because he’s friends with George Jackson. Uncontrollable rage and hatred darkens my soul.

He’s still looking at me with confusion after I told him I’ve been in his courtroom.

The atmosphere has grown tense, and I can feel Lily’s eyes on me.

“Dylan Williams was my best friend,” I say to jog the corrupted Judge’s memory.

Still, the fucker only stares at me. He doesn’t even remember.

The grief I've worked so hard to deal with hits me square in the chest.

Dylan.

I see his face as clear as daylight.

I see his broken body lying on a cold slab in the morgue.

My heart is ripped clean from my chest, and all the trauma rushes back.

My voice sounds foreign as I growl, "You let Theo Jackson walk free with nothing more than a slap on his wrist."

Realization registers on Harrison's face as he finally puts two and two together. He's clearly caught off guard and adjusts his jacket before giving me a haughty look.

"The case was ruled an accident," he tries to defend his actions.

Jackson's alcohol level was three times the legal limit, but the evidence mysteriously vanished.

"Did I hear my name?" a familiar voice comes from my right.

Turning my head and seeing the man who murdered my best friend, a violent craze takes control of me. I lunge forward, and grabbing Theo's lapel, I swing my fist at him.

Lily rushes between us. "Callan!" she shrieks, closing her eyes as she braces for the punch she's willing to take for the piece of shit.

Somehow, I manage to stop an inch from slamming my fist into her face.

There's a roar of murmurs and gasps around us.

I let go of Jackson, my eyes still burning on Lily.

She's Harrison's fucking daughter.

She hasn't told me much about her family.

Christ, she's the fuckers daughter.

With a tiny moment of clarity, I turn around and walk away before I kill the man responsible for Dylan's death and the judge who set him free in front of a crowd of witnesses.

"Callan," Lily calls, and I hear her behind me. "Callan." Her tone is filled with shock and desperation, but I keep walking.

Dylan.

When I reach the valet, I bark, "Get my car."

Lily grabs my hand, but I rip it free from her hold. "Don't fucking touch me."

"I didn't —"

"There is nothing you can say I want to hear right now," I snap at her.

My head spins, and my breaths speed up as memories of Dylan bombard me.

Standing outside the room where my best friend's body is being held, I can't breathe through the agonizing heartache.

The police contacted the last number Dylan called. That's how they reached me.

"When you're ready," the cop murmurs.

I'll never be ready.

I nod, my body trembling like a leaf in a shitstorm.

The door is pushed open, and I walk into the icy room. A body is lying on a steel slab, a white sheet covering it.

No.

I can't.

The cop pulls the sheet back, and the world rips open beneath my feet.

The pain is brutal as it shreds through my soul.

I stare down at Dylan's pale face, unable to accept what I'm seeing.

"No," I growl as I shake my head to rid myself of the dreadful memory.

Unable to control my chaotic emotions, it's impossible to think clearly.

I need to get to my father.

Dylan.

"Callan," Lily whimpers. "Let—"

"Stop!" I silence her.

My Bugatti stops in front of me, and I rush to the driver's side. As I slide behind the steering wheel, Lily climbs into the passenger side.

I'm in such a state I can't bring myself to look at her. "Get out," I growl, the last of my sanity threatening to leave me.

I need to get to Dad.

“Don’t do this,” she begs.

“Get the fuck out,” I shout.

Finally, she listens, and when the door shuts behind her, I floor the gas, the tires squealing as I pull away from the curb.

Dylan grins at me as we look at the money we’ve made this month. He pats my shoulder before grabbing me and excitedly shaking the hell out of me. “Now that’s what I call a good month.”

“We’ve worked our fucking ass off,” I chuckle at him.

He gets up from the chair and gives my shoulder another pat. “I’ll grab us a couple of beers and pizza so we can celebrate at home.”

“Okay.” I turn my attention back to the financial spreadsheet.

I hear Dylan walk to the door; then he says, “Hey.”

I glance up. “What?”

There’s happiness shining in his eyes. “We did it, brother. We’re in the big leagues now.”

I let out a burst of laughter as he leaves the office.

I see Dylan’s face clearly in my mind’s eye as I struggle to focus on the road ahead.

I hear his laughter.

Somehow I make it to my father’s house and park the Bugatti haphazardly across the curb and lawn. I throw the door open, and with sweat coating my skin and no air reaching my lungs, I stumble toward the front door.

I just need my Dad.

Before I can knock, the door opens, and I can barely make out Dad's worried face. "Callan?" I see him dart toward me. "Fuck. Ellie! Naomi, come help!" Dad's arms wrap around me, and I slump into his body. "Jesus Christ. I've got you, son."

My breaths are ragged, and I struggle to stay in the present. I'm dragged into the house, and Dad helps me to sit on a couch.

"What happened?" I hear Ellie's worried voice.

Dad's hands frame my face, and he forces me to look at him. "Talk to me, son."

"Dylan," I manage to whisper.

"Jesus." Dad looks at Naomi. "Get the extra pills I keep next to my bed for Callan."

Dizzy, it feels as if all the pain is crushing my chest.

"Dad," I groan.

He grips my chin. "Open your mouth."

My lips part, and Dad places the pill beneath my tongue, then he orders, "Get some coke from the fridge."

It takes minutes of my father forcing soda down my throat before I become aware of how badly my body is shaking.

"Shhh...take deep breaths," Dad says. He wraps his arms around me, and I'm pulled to his chest as if I'm a little boy.

The sedative starts to work, and I'm dragged into a restless sleep.

Chapter 31

Lily

After Callan left me at the party, I couldn't bring myself to go back to the courtyard. I took a cab home and have been trying to reach him ever since.

Feeling worried, I send another message.

Lily: Just let me know you're safe.

I've left a crazy amount of missed calls and voicemails on his phone.

I'm hurt by the way Callan shouted at me to get out of his car. It's so unlike him, and his uncharacteristic behavior has me worried out of my mind.

What if he blames me for everything?

God, he was so upset when he left. He shouldn't have been driving.

A pounding on my front door has my head snapping up, and thinking it's Callan, I rush to open it.

My father shoves his way into the apartment, with my mom and Sadie following after him.

Shit. I don't have the energy for them right now.

After glancing around the apartment, Dad levels me with an angry glare. "Where is he?"

I cross my arms over my chest. “Callan’s not here.”

“I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life,” he barks at me. “You will end whatever relationship you have with Callan Wright.”

I stare at my father as if he’s lost his mind, then shake my head vigorously. “I won’t.”

“He embarrassed the family!”

“Lillian, come on,” Sadie jumps into the conversation. “It’s not like you’ve been dating him for that long.”

I give my family an incredulous look. “Do you hear yourselves? What’s wrong with you?” I throw my arms open in absolute frustration. “You can’t tell me to leave the man I love, and that’s not the issue right now.” I lock eyes with my father. “You were the presiding judge for the case regarding Callan’s friend? What did Callan mean when he said you let Theo walk free?”

“I’m not discussing a court case with you!” my father snaps. “You’ll leave that man, or I will disown you.”

There’s a sharp stab of heartache in my chest.

My hands fall to my sides, and I can only shake my head in disbelief at my father before I manage to say, “Again. It’s your go-to threat.” Letting out an empty-sounding chuckle, I shrug. “Just do it. I’m never going to study law. I’m never going to be the person you want me to be. AND I’m never leaving Callan because you demand it of me.” I take a step forward, anger making me braver than I feel. “Callan is the only person who has shown any interest in my life. He’s the only one who cares about me. I’ll never leave him.”

“Lillian, stop!” Sadie hisses.

Mom looks horrified by my outburst as she says, “You saw how volatile the man is. Even you jumped in the way to protect Theo. Callan almost hit you!”

God help me.

“I didn’t stop Callan to protect Theo,” I almost shriek. “I did it to protect Callan from an assault charge.”

Dad stares at me with something akin to hatred. “Are you saying you’re choosing that man over your own family?”

Feeling exasperated, I shake my head. “No.”

I look at the man who was supposed to love me but could never find it in his heart. He only loves his stupid status in the community.

Tears prick behind my eyes as I whisper, “You’re making that choice for me.”

“Lillian,” Mom gasps. “Have you lost your mind?”

My eyes drift from Dad to Mom to Sadie. I look at the people who’ve disappointed me one too many times.

“You alienated me first.” My tone sounds heartbroken and lost, and I hate that I can’t be stronger. “You excluded me from family BBQs and dinners because you never even thought to invite me. You leave my messages on read or reply days later. You give me silent treatment whenever I don’t do what you demand.”

A sob catches me off guard as it escapes my lips. I take a moment to breathe through the tears.

“You make me feel utterly forgettable where Callan is the only one who’s treats me like a priority. If you force me, I’ll always choose him.”

My father glances around the apartment before giving me a threatening look. “Are you sure that’s the road you want to go down?”

My voice is strained with heartache. “You’re giving me no choice.”

He points at me with disgust tightening his features. “Pack your shit and get out of my apartment.”

“Oliver,” Mom gasps.

“Now!” His voice is like a clap of thunder, making me jump with fright.

Absolutely devastated, I stare at him.

His eyes drop to my hand, and he points at my cell phone. “Leave that here. You’re not taking anything I’ve paid for.”

I grip my phone tighter. “No, I need it. I’ll pay you for it.”

My father stalks toward me, and grabbing my wrist, he twists my hand hard as he rips the device from my grip. I let out a pain-filled cry before he shoves me out of his way.

I fall to the side and try to catch myself, but my palm slams into the floor, causing an intensely sharp pain in my wrist. Sitting in utter shock from what just happened, I pull my injured hand to my chest.

“Oliver,” Mom shrieks.

“Jesus,” Sadie gasps. “Mom, get Dad out of here. I’ll make sure Lillian leaves and take the keycard from her.”

My parents storm out of the apartment, and Sadie just watches as I climb to my feet.

“All of this could’ve been avoided,” she snaps at me.

In too much shock because of how my father manhandled me, I don’t reply.

“I’ll help you pack. You can stay with Denise until you find your own place.”

Sadie rushes up the stairs, then yells, “Come, Lillian. I don’t have all night!”

Intense anger erupts like a volcano in my chest, and going after my so-called sister, I shout, “Get out! I’ll pack without your help. You can wait in the lobby.”

She shakes her head and watches me like a prison warden. “You’ll lock the front door the moment I leave.”

Absolutely rattled by everything that’s happened tonight, I quickly strip out of the silk gown and put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. When I use my right hand, the sharp pain is so intense it steals my breath.

I ignore Sadie and retrieve my luggage so I can pack enough to get me through a week. “Obviously, I can’t take everything tonight,” I mutter to her. “I’ll come back as soon as I have my own place to get the rest.”

Which is hopefully in the next couple of days.

“Fine.” The word sounds bitingly cold.

I use my left hand to push the luggage out of the bedroom, and Sadie breathes down my neck all the way to the front door.

My emotions are all over the place, and it's not until I'm standing in the lobby that the realization of what just happened shudders through me.

"One day, you'll come to your senses and crawl back with your tail between your legs, and it will be too late," Sadie says to me, a vindictive cruelty in her eyes.

I lift my chin and give her a scathing glare. "I'd rather starve on the cold streets of New York before that happens."

She looks me up and down with disdain before heading back up to the apartment.

Once she's gone, I let out an emotional sigh, and giving Bobby, the doorman, an apologetic look, I ask, "Can you please call a cab for me?"

His eyes rest on me with compassion, making me want to cry. "Of course, Miss Harrison."

I take a seat in an armchair and glance down at my aching right hand. There's already swelling around my wrist.

Shit.

"Your ride will be here soon, Miss Harrison," Bobby says.

"Thank you."

Callan.

My worry for him, along with my anger, disappointment, and hurt toward my family keep hitting me in relentless waves.

I can't process everything that's happened.

Picking up my handbag, I begin to search for my cell phone before I remember my father took it.

Shit!

Intense panic flares through me because there's no way for me to call or message Callan.

God.

When the cab pulls up in front of the entrance, I rush out of the building and quickly climb into the vehicle. "To The Ritz, please."

We drive the short distance, and the driver helps take my luggage from the car. I pay him the fee and, hurrying inside, I head straight for reception.

"Evening, ma'am. How can I help?"

"Can you call Callan Wright's apartment, please? Tell him Lily is here to see him."

I wait a minute or so before the lady at reception says, "Mr. Wright doesn't seem to be at home. Can I take a message?"

Worried about Callan, my teeth tug at my bottom lip.

"Can I have a room for the night?" I ask.

"Let me see what we have available."

It takes a while before I'm handed a keycard for their cheapest room, that's still so expensive it leaves a small dent in my finances.

"When Mr. Wright returns, can you tell him what room I'm staying in?"

"Yes." She gives me a professional smile. "Is there anything else?"

“Can you please have ice sent up to my room?”

“Of course. I hope you enjoy your stay, Miss Harrison.”

“Thank you.” With a heavy heart, I take the elevator to the assigned floor, and when I step into the room, I push my luggage to the side and slump down in an armchair.

I stare at the cream bedspread, so upset and lost I can't even cry.

Chapter 32

Callan

When I wake up, I let out a groggy groan.

“Dad, Callan’s awake,” Ellie calls out before she leans over me with a concerned look. “Hey.”

I let out another groan as I blink through the fog in my mind. “Hey,” I mutter.

Coming into the living room, Dad asks, “How do you feel?”

“I have one hell of a headache...” I sit up on the couch and rub my fingers against my aching temples. “I feel completely out of it. Christ.” I take a moment to try and catch my bearings.

“Ellie, get your brother some coffee,” Dad says. He watches me for a moment before asking, “You haven’t had such a bad panic attack in a long while. What happened?”

I glance at my father and see him sitting on his recliner.

“I saw Jackson at a party and completely lost my shit.”

“Christ, son,” Dad gets up to come sit next to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “I’m sorry you had to run into that fucker.”

Not once in the past six years have I come face-to-face with Judge Harrison or Theo Jackson – until last night.

All it took was one look at the fucker, who decided Theo Jackson was a bright and upstanding young man that didn't deserve to have his life destroyed, to send me spiraling.

Just one look at that murderer's smug fucking face.

Jesus, I shouted at Lily.

I just left her there.

Christ. What have I done?

The thoughts flash through my mind, and my breathing begins to speed up again.

The threatening panic attack has Dad gripping my chin, forcing me to look at him. "Focus on my face, son. Take deep breaths."

I stare at the lines on my father's face while sucking in deep breaths of air.

"Start counting backward from a hundred by threes," he orders.

"One hundred. Ninety-seven. Ninety-four. Ninety-one." When I reach the seventies, the panic attack slowly retreats, leaving me drained of the little energy I had.

Jesus. What time is it?

I check my wristwatch, shocked when I realize it's already after nine in the morning.

How long did I sleep?

Ellie brings me a cup of coffee, and I take a couple of sips before I say, “I have a flight in two hours. If I don’t get going, I’ll miss it.”

“You need to take some time off from work,” Dad argues.

“I’ll take a vacation after this trip. I’m heading out to all the branches. It can’t be postponed.”

“Christ, you’re in no shape to travel,” he mutters.

“I’ll sleep some more once I touch down in Texas,” I say so he’ll stop worrying. I set the mug down on the coffee table. “I still need to pack.”

And I need to talk to Lily.

Intense worry floods my chest about how she’s going to react.

Dad holds up a hand. “Naomi and I will go to your apartment and pack what you need, then I’ll take you to the airport.” He gestures to the window. “You damaged the car when you drove over the sidewalk.”

“Shit,” I mutter. I get up, and my head spins as I walk to the window and peek through the curtains. The left front wheel is fucked. “Sorry, Dad. I’ll have the car removed.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of everything. You have enough on your plate.”

I take a seat again just as Naomi comes into the living room. She leans over me, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “You okay?”

No, I feel like I’ve been hit by a bus, and I’m worried about my woman.

I nod before drinking more of the coffee.

“We need to go to Callan’s place to pack for a business trip,” Dad informs Naomi.

“Okay.”

“Are you sure about going to my apartment?” I ask. “I don’t want to put you out.”

“Nonsense. Ellie will make you breakfast. We’ll be back soon,” Dad says.

“What do you need us to pack?” Naomi asks.

“I’ve set out the suits on my bed. Just add a couple of sweatpants and T-shirts. Also, grab my laptop. I left it on the coffee table in the living room.” I try to think what more to add, but thinking proves to be a challenge today. “My phone and laptop chargers. They’re somewhere in my bedroom.”

If I need anything, I’ll just fucking buy it.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Naomi says. “I’ll make sure to pack everything I think you might need.”

“Which means half the closet,” Dad teases her. “Where’s your keycard so we can get into your apartment?”

I gesture to where my jacket is lying over the back of Dad’s recliner. “My wallet is in the inner pocket.”

Dad gets the keycard before leaving the house with Naomi.

“What can I make you to eat?” Ellie asks, her eyes filled with worry.

I shake my head and hold the empty cup out to her. “Just more coffee, please.”

She takes the cup and heads to the kitchen.

Needing to call Lily, I get up and grab my jacket before sitting down again. I pull my phone from the inner breast pocket and unlock the device. Seeing all the messages and missed calls from Lily, I mutter, “Fuck, she must’ve been so worried.”

I open our chat and feel like absolute shit when I read the messages.

Lily: I’m so sorry about tonight. Please call me. I didn’t know anything. Please, Callan.

Lily: Are you okay? I’m losing my mind with worry.

Lily: Please don’t ignore me. Just tell me you’re okay.

Lily: Callan, please reply to my messages.

Lily: I didn’t know about the case or my father’s part in everything. I didn’t know Theo was responsible for Dylan’s death. I would never have taken you there if I had known. Please believe me.

Lily: Just let me know you’re safe.

The last message was sent just after ten the night before.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I quickly press dial on her number, but it just rings before going to voicemail.

“Hey, baby. I’m so fucking sorry about last night. I’m at my father’s place. Let me know when you get the message so I can call you again.” I check the time on my wristwatch, then add, “I have to fly out at eleven-fifteen, but I’ll have my phone on, so call me anytime.”

Ellie enters the living room as I hang up, and I take the steaming mug of coffee with a grateful smile. “Can you get me some Tylenol, please?”

“Sure.” My sister darts away to retrieve the medication.

The headache grows stronger as I remember how I shouted at Lily before leaving her at the party, and I hang my head in shame.

I wish I could turn back time and stop us from going to that godforsaken party.

Opening the chat with Lily, I type out a message.

Callan: I’m okay. I’m sorry for how I spoke to you. I’m sorry I left you there. Please call me so I can explain.

I watch as the message goes through and wait until Ellie comes back with the tablets before I close the chat.

“Thanks, Ellie,” I murmur as I take the Tylenol from her. I swallow it down with some coffee, then lean back on the couch.

After my third cup of coffee, I start to feel a little better.

I check my phone and see Lily still hasn’t read the message, so I type another one.

Callan: Hey, baby. I wish you’d respond so I could explain my actions from last night. I’m so fucking sorry I raised my voice at you. I was having a panic attack and lost

my mind. Not that I'm excusing my behavior. I just want to explain myself. I miss you.

“Who are you texting?” Ellie asks. “Lily?”

I've only told my family about Lily but haven't brought her around to meet them because I wanted to keep her to myself a little while longer.

Jesus, I hope I still get the chance to introduce Lily to them.

“Yes.” I let out a heavy sigh. “I fucked up last night.”

“How?” my sister asks.

I glance at Ellie, then admit, “After I saw Jackson, I kind of lost it.”

Her eyes widen. “What did you do, Callan?”

“I was going to punch Jackson, but Lily jumped between us.” When my sister looks like she's going to have a heart attack, I quickly add, “I didn't hit Lily! Jesus, Ellie. You know me better. I stopped in time.”

She lets out an overly dramatic sigh of relief. “Then, what happened?”

“I rushed out...” I lower my eyes to the phone in my hands as I mutter, “I shouted at Lily and practically threw her out of my car.”

I hear Ellie gasp. “Nooooo, Callan. Shit. You didn't mean to though? Right?”

I shake my head. “You know what happens when I get one of those attacks. I didn't want the woman I'm in love with to

see me like that.” *So fucking weak.* “I was losing my mind.” I let out a sigh. “I just knew I needed to get to Dad.”

Ellie comes to sit next to me and wraps her arm around my lower back. “Oh, Callan. I’m sorry.”

The corner of my mouth lifts in a worried smile. “She’s not answering my call or messages. I’m scared she won’t give me a chance to explain.”

Ellie lets out an audible sigh. “Give her time. If a guy shouted at me and chased me out of his car, I wouldn’t speak to him for days.”

My heartbeat speeds up as I stare at my little sister. “Days?”

I’ll die if I have to wait that long.

Unlocking the screen, I open my contacts list, but before I can press dial, Ellie grabs the device from me. “Don’t do that.” She levels me with a serious expression. “You need to give Lily time. You’ve already left messages. You’ll just upset her more by hounding her.”

Fuck.

“Okay.”

“Give her at least until tonight,” Ellie adds before she drops my phone on the coffee table.

“I might die before then, but okay.”

My little sister hooks her arm through mine and rests her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry all of this happened. I’m sure Lily will talk to you again.”

“I pray you’re right,” I murmur.

Christ, I don't know what I'll do if Lily can't forgive me.

Chapter 33

Lily

I've barely slept, and to say I'm worried about Callan is the understatement of the century.

Using my laptop, I've managed to contact the landlord of a two-bedroom house in Hasting-on-Hudson, and he's agreed to let me view the place at nine-thirty. The rent is two thousand six hundred, which I'm able to afford for at least five months.

It gives me time to sell some of my art pieces.

You're going to be fine.

My wrist feels much worse today, but I don't have time to go to the emergency room. There's too much to do.

Hating that I have to leave The Ritz, and fearing Callan will return while I'm gone, I take a cab to meet with Jeffrey, the landlord.

I just hope I get to speak to Callan before he flies to Houston.

Honestly, I'm scared out of my mind that he won't want to see me again. With my father's role in letting Theo walk free, I know there's a possibility Callan will end things between us.

God. Please. Don't let me lose Callan. Give me a chance to explain things to him.

As I send up the prayer, the cab stops outside the rental. “Can you wait five minutes?” I ask the driver.

He nods, and as I climb out of the car, my eyes scan over the modest house. The garden needs some attention, and a new coat of paint on the walls will do wonders.

I walk to the front door and glance up and down the street after knocking.

The door opens, and a man in his late fifties lifts an eyebrow at me. “Lillian?”

“Yes. You’re Jeffrey?” I force a smile to my face.

“Yes.” He nods for me to come in.

“Thank you for allowing me to view the house on such short notice.”

He leaves the front door open and walks into the living room. “Take a look around.”

I ask Jeffrey questions about the plumbing, gas, and maintenance of the house as I move from room to room.

Everything feels outdated, but beggars can’t be choosers.

I give Jeffrey a hopeful look. “When can I move in?”

“As soon as you pay the deposit.”

“So if I make the payment now, I can move in today?”

When he nods, intense relief spreads through my body. “We have to sign a contract, but yes. The place is empty, so there’s no reason for you not to move in.”

“Thank you so much!” Looking around the living room, there’s a glimmer of hope that, just maybe, things will get

better.

“Can we meet here at two this afternoon to sign the contract?” I ask.

“Sure. I’ll be here the whole day.” He gestures to the kitchen. “I want to check the plumbing.”

“Thank you!” Walking out the front door, I head to the cab.

During the drive back to The Ritz, my thoughts return to Callan and what happened last night.

Callan shouted at me and chased me out of his car.

Just thinking about it, intense embarrassment and heartache threaten to drown me.

The fight with my parents and having them disown me.

I close my eyes when the wave of disappointment and hurt hits again.

And Sadie. She was so cruel.

I shake my head while biting back the tears.

The cab stops in front of The Ritz, and I settle the fee before climbing out of the car.

When I walk into the lobby, I stop by reception. A different woman is on duty this morning.

“Can you check if Callan Wright is home, please?”

Her eyes flick to me, a light frown on her forehead. “Who can I tell him is here?”

“Lily.”

She dials his number, but just like the night before, there's no answer. "Once Mr. Wright returns, we'll notify him you were here."

She turns her attention back to her work, clearly dismissing me.

I go up to my room to wait for Callan.

That's if he even comes to my room.

God.

Please don't let me lose him.

Covering my face with my hands, I burst out in tears. My sobs are uncontrollable, my shoulders shuddering beneath the weight of everything that's happened.

It takes me a while to regain control of my emotions, and I quickly wash my face.

Noticing it's almost eleven, intense panic seizes my heart. Not caring that I look a mess, I hurry out of the room and take the elevator down to the lobby.

When I approach the reception counter, the receptionist frowns at me. Before I can ask, she says, "Mr. Wright isn't home."

My heart sinks to my stomach. "Are you sure?"

Offended, her frown darkens. "Ma'am, make an appointment with Mr. Wright before coming back. We uphold a high policy of privacy regarding our residents."

My shoulders sag, and having no choice, I go back to my room to collect my luggage.

When I'm back in the lobby, the receptionist gives me a look filled with warning.

"I need to check out," I mutter, giving her a glare of my own.

Cow.

She takes my keycard, then says, "We hope you enjoyed your stay at The Ritz."

I shake my head at her. "No, I didn't. Your service sucks."

Turning around, I walk away from reception, feeling rattled that Callan isn't home yet.

With the weight of the world bearing down on my shoulders, I drag my luggage behind me as I walk to the nearest electronics store so I can buy a new cellphone.

It takes over thirty minutes, and when I leave, I head to the subway.

On my way to the rental that will be my new home for the unforeseeable future, I realize I have no one's phone number. I won't even be able to call Sadie so I can get the rest of my belongings.

God. When will this stop. I can't handle any more problems.

I'm mentally and physically exhausted by the time I reach the rental, but it takes another hour of signing a contract with Jeffrey and going over all his rules before I'm finally alone.

The house is so empty I hear my footsteps echo as I pull my luggage to the bedroom.

Letting out a sigh, I feel downright miserable.

Callan's probably on his way to Houston already. Even if he returns my calls, it's of no use because my parents have the phone.

What am I going to do?

I don't have his family's address or phone numbers. I have to wait until tomorrow before I call his office, but there's no guarantee they'll give me his number.

Maybe Harper will. I'm sure Callan has told her about me.

Then again, if he's decided we're over, she won't.

Shit.

Sitting down on the carpet that needs a good cleaning, I cradle my sprained wrist against my chest.

Why is everything so hard?

The realization hits me square in the chest – if everyone is upset with me, I have to be the problem.

Am I too stubborn? Should I have studied law and listened to my parents?

I sure as hell shouldn't have taken Callan to that stupid party.

But no, I still don't feel like I'm in the wrong where my parents are concerned.

Rubbing my palm over my face, I let out a groan.

Get your butt up off this floor. You have a lot to do.

Dragging myself to my feet, I grab my wallet and new phone and leave the house. I make sure to lock the front door

behind me and quickly Google the nearest store so I can get some groceries.

There's such a long list of things I have to get, it feels overwhelming. A bed. Furniture and a TV.

Taking a deep breath, I lift my chin and face the day head-on.

It takes hours to get half of the things on my to-do list done, and the bed I managed to find will only be delivered in two days.

Tomorrow I'll search for furniture. I also have to face my parents so I can get the rest of my belongings.

That's not going to go well.

I'm busy making a grilled cheese sandwich while sipping on a cup of coffee.

I have to sleep on the floor until my bed arrives, so I've purchased a couple of blankets and pillows that will just have to do in the meantime.

I let out another sigh as I look around the empty house. Everything feels foreign, only adding to the debilitating loneliness in my chest.

I wonder if Callan returned my calls or messaged me.

Tomorrow I'll ask my mother if I can look at the phone.

Chapter 34

Callan

I've been doing my best to take Ellie's advice and have waited until after I got settled in my hotel room to call Lily again.

It's been a long six hours of waiting.

I press dial on Lily's number and listen as it rings. When the call goes to voicemail, I push a hand through my hair in frustration.

"Lily, please answer your phone. I'm in Houston." I close my eyes as worry seizes my chest. "Please don't end things between us. Give me the chance to explain everything." I pause again, a wave of intense heartache rippling through me. "I love you." I let out an empty-sounding chuckle. "This is not how I wanted to tell you. Please call me back."

Ending the call, I have to resist the urge to throw the device against a wall and instead toss it on the bed.

The phone beeps, and I almost tackle the fucking bed to get it.

Relief washes through me when I see a message from Lily.

Lily: Your actions last night were unacceptable. You almost hit me!!!!!! I can't look past your violent behavior. It's over between us. Don't contact me again!!

No.

Hell, the fuck, no.

I dial Lily's number but, once again, it goes to voicemail.

Ending the call, I type a message.

Callan: I would never hit you, Lily. You know me better than that. Answer my call so we can talk about this.

My heart is beating out of my chest as I watch her read the text and reply.

Lily: I don't want to talk to you. Leave me alone.

I stare at the words that are so unlike Lily, but figuring she's speaking out of anger and hurt, I try again.

Callan: I'm sorry I hurt you. That was never my intention. I had a bad panic attack and wasn't thinking straight. After all we've shared, I deserve more than a breakup over text. I'll give you time. When I call tomorrow, please answer so we can talk about everything.

Lily: There's nothing to talk about. I'm going to block your number if you continue harassing me.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Is this really happening?

I read the messages again, unable to accept Lily won't even hear my side.

Dropping the device on the bed, I rest my elbows on my knees and rub my palms over my face.

Lily is just upset. Once she's calmed down, we'll talk about this fucking mess.

Unless her parents got into her head.

Fuck.

Staring at the desk where my laptop lies, fear bleeds into my heart.

Lily hasn't told me much about her family. She said they weren't close, but that doesn't mean she wouldn't listen to them.

Still, the Lily I've gotten to know would, at the very least, talk to me.

I think about all the time we've spent together. Our conversations. Making love to her.

I know she has strong feelings for me.

My gaze settles on my cell phone, and feeling frustrated and confused, it takes all my willpower not to message her again.

Give her until tomorrow.

Getting up, I open my luggage and pull out a pair of sweatpants. I head to the shower with my toiletry bag, and after freshening up, I throw the covers back on the bed and lie down.

I stare up at the ceiling, my thoughts filled with everything Lily and I shared over the past month.

There's a relentless ache in my heart every time I think about the possibility that I might lose her.

Did she even listen to my voicemails? Did she hear me telling her I love her?

I love her.

Panic bleeds into my chest, and closing my eyes, I start counting back from one hundred.

I refuse to lose Lily. I just have to get through these two weeks, and when I'm back in New York, I'll go to Lily's place so we can talk face-to-face.

That's if she doesn't take my calls.

Jesus, what a fuck up.

Lily

Standing outside my parents' house, my stomach is spinning violently with nerves.

Just get this over with.

Sucking in a fortifying breath, I lift my chin before knocking on the door.

When my mother opens, her expression turns to stone. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to collect the rest of my belongings from the apartment." I clear my throat, then add, "I also need to look at the phone so I can retrieve some of my contacts' details."

She lets out a huff. "Your father threw the phone in the trash. We'll let you know once we're ready to see you. Only then will you be allowed to clear out your belongings."

“I need my art supplies and paint –”

She slams the door shut in my face, and for a moment, I can only stare.

Excruciating heartache rips through me, and my breathing speeds up. Turning around, I rush down the steps and walk away.

I gasp through the intense pain caused by the heartless actions of my parents.

What have I done to deserve this? They never treat Mark and Sadie like this. Why only me?

Without noticing, I walk toward The Ritz, and standing across the road from the building, I look up to the top floor.

Callan.

I pull my phone from my pocket and Google the number for The Perfect Gentleman. When a receptionist answers, I ask, “Can I talk to Harper, please?”

“Who can I say is calling?”

“Lily Harrison.”

“One moment, please.”

I listen as music plays before a man answers, “Easton speaking, how can I help?”

“Can I talk to Harper, please?”

“She’s currently in a meeting. Can I take a message?” he asks.

I worry my bottom lip before saying, “What time will she be out of the meeting?”

“At eleven.”

“I’ll call back.”

Hanging up, I look up at the top floor of The Ritz before heading to the subway.

All my recent art and supplies are stuck in my father’s apartment. Needing to get back to work, I go to the storage facility so I can get some of my old supplies and paintings.

I have a stall booked for this coming Saturday. It will be the first time I attempt to sell any of my work, and now I don’t even have the pieces I’ve selected.

Also, I can’t work on my final piece.

Frustrated and worried, I almost burst into tears while I walk to my storage space. I roll the shutter door open, and stepping inside, I start looking through everything.

Not finding much I can work with, I cover my mouth with my hand, sinking into a crouching position.

I can’t take this anymore.

I don’t have my art.

I haven’t spoken to Callan. I have no idea how he feels or what he’s thinking, and the uncertainty is driving me insane.

God, my life is such a mess.

Standing up again, I look through my old supplies and art pieces and take everything I might be able to use.

It’s better than nothing.

Chapter 35

Callan

Sitting in a meeting with the director of the Houston branch, I can't focus on work.

Picking up my phone from where it's lying face down on the desk, I check for messages, but there's only one from Dad asking how I'm doing.

I haven't heard from Lily and plan on calling her after the meeting.

Paul, the director, explains the projections for the next year, but I can't even focus on the numbers.

"Should we take a break?" he suddenly asks.

I let out a sigh and nod. "We can resume the meeting in ten minutes. Thanks, Paul."

Getting up from the chair, I walk out of his office and leave the building so I can get some fresh air.

I feel claustrophobic from not being able to talk to Lily.

The moment I step onto the sidewalk, I suck in a deep breath and dial her number.

When it goes to voicemail again, I almost crush the device in my fist. "Fuck!"

A passerby glances at me, but I couldn't give two fucks what the woman thinks of me.

Anger begins to swirl in my chest, and opening the chat with Lily, I send her a text.

Callan: Are you really not going to talk to me?

It only takes seconds before she responds.

Lily: I told you to leave me alone. There's nothing to talk about. What you did was unforgivable, and I would be stupid to continue a relationship with a man who can turn violent at the drop of a hat. WE ARE OVER.

Angry and fucking hurt, I throw the device, and it shatters against a wall.

One of the security guards comes rushing out of the building. "Sir? Are you okay?"

I hold up a hand, and try to breathe through the rage, before I say, "Have someone clean up the mess."

"Yes, sir."

Linking my hands behind my head, I gasp for air.

Lily fucking ended things without even giving me a chance to explain. I can't fucking believe it.

"Fuck," I shout, my heart turning to dust in my chest. "Fuck," I gasp, struggling to come to terms with the fact that we're over.

No.

Never.

I don't know how long I stand on the sidewalk with my life in pieces by my feet.

Paul comes rushing out, concern etched on his face. "Mr. Wright? Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "I have to return to New York. I'll send Mrs. Jones in my stead."

I can't focus on work right now.

I can't focus on anything but the anger and heartbreak Lily has caused me.

"Is there anything I can help with?"

"Arrange for my private jet to be ready for take-off and a car to take me to the airport."

"I'll take care of everything. Please come inside. You can wait in my office."

I walk back into the building, and when I enter Paul's office, I pick up the earpiece of his desk phone and dial Harper's number.

Christ, Lily. Did we mean so little to you?

How the fuck can she just end things like this?

"How did the meeting go?" she answers.

"I'm coming back. Sorry to drop this on your shoulders, but can you take over?"

"Why? What's going on?"

Another wave of pain rips through my heart.

"Lily ended things between us. I need time..." my voice disappears.

“Jesus, Callan. I’ll call all the branches and push the meetings up. Don’t worry about work. Are you okay?” She pauses, then mutters, “Stupid question.”

“Can you pick me up from the airport?”

“Of course. Let me know what time.”

I sink down on Paul’s chair. “I broke my phone. Please send Easton to get me a new one.”

“Okay. What else?”

We can’t be over. Not like this.

I shake my head. “I can’t believe she ended things.”

“Why, though? I thought things were going so well,” Harper asks.

“Saturday night, I ran into Theo Jackson. I had a panic attack and shouted at Lily.” I swallow hard on my actions. “I kicked her out of my car and left her at the party.” Intense shame fills me as I admit, “And I took a swing at Jackson, almost hitting Lily.”

God. What have I done?

“Jesus,” Harper whispers.

“I lost my mind. You know how I get when I have a panic attack.”

Still, it’s no excuse. I lost Lily because I couldn’t control my issues.

“Did you explain it to her?”

I rub my over my eyes. “I tried. She says she refuses to forgive me.”

Her smiling face flashes through my mind, and it causes me immense pain.

“Oh, Callan.” I hear Harper move, her heels echoing on the floor tiles. “I’m so sorry.”

“It is what it is,” I mutter.

Paul comes into the office, and I say, “Hold for me, Harper.” I give him an expectant look.

“The plane will be ready in thirty minutes, and there’s a car waiting to take you wherever you need to go.”

“Thank you.” I check the time on my wristwatch, then tell Harper, “I’m flying out in thirty minutes. I should and in New York at a quarter past two.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Harper,” I murmur before ending the call.

Getting up from the chair, I shake Paul’s hand. “Thank you. I apologize for the chaotic day. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, Sir. Will Harper be in touch?” he asks as he walks out of his office with me.

“Yes.”

We head to the boardroom so I can retrieve my laptop before Paul introduces me to Andrew, who will be my chauffeur.

Having said goodbye to Paul, I leave the building, and once I’m seated in the back seat of the SUV, I instruct Andrew to take me to the hotel.

During the drive, my thoughts revolve around Lily.

We were so fucking happy.

This can't be how we end.

It just can't.

My heart beats faster and faster, and when Andrew stops the car at the hotel, I hurry inside to grab my luggage. While I check out, the pain in my heart spreads to my soul.

Keep your shit together until you're home.

I quickly remove the sedatives from my luggage before allowing Andrew to load it into the trunk. Knowing the pills knock me out, I focus on my breathing and keep counting back from one hundred.

My hands begin to tremble from the effort it's taking not to let my emotions overwhelm me.

Deep breaths.

You can fix things with Lily when you're back in New York.

When I walk into my apartment, I feel numb from the heartache.

I shove my luggage to the side and turn to face Harper. There's so much concern on her face it makes me feel like crying, which is something I haven't done since Dylan's funeral.

“Take a seat on the couch and tell me everything,” she says.

When we sit down, I shake my head. “I already told you everything.” My shoulders shudder under the weight of the pain. “Lily ended things without giving me a chance to explain.”

“What did she say?”

I shrug out of my jacket, and resting my forearms on my thighs, I stare at the coffee table.

“She said she can’t be with a volatile person like me.”

“Let me get this straight.” Harper tilts her head. “You come face-to-face with the man who killed Dylan. You lose your shit. Somehow, Lily ends up between the two of you as you take a swing at him, but you stop short of hitting her?” Her eyes meet mine. “Am I right?”

“Yes. Then I left the party. I shouted at Lily and told her to get out of the car.” I give Harper a pleading look. “I didn’t want her to see me in such a state, and I needed to get to my Dad. That’s all I could think of doing while I was losing my fucking mind.”

Harper shakes her head. “Look, I understand you might’ve given her a fright, but that’s a gross overreaction, Callan. Everyone knows you’re not a volatile person. It’s the biggest load of bullshit.”

I rest my head in my hands, and closing my eyes, I whisper, “It hurts. So fucking much. I thought we meant more to each other.”

Harper comes to sit next to me and rubs my back. “I’m here for you.”

It feels as if Lily ripped my heart out of my chest.

How do I let her go? It's impossible.

“Take the week off. I’ll make sure everything runs smoothly at work.”

I can only nod as wave after wave of despair tries to drag me down.

“I’ll have your new phone delivered to you.” Harper gives me a quick sideways hug before getting up. “Call me or Daniel if you need anything. We’ll come over in a heartbeat.”

“Thanks, Harper.” I can’t lift my head to even look at my friend. “I just want to be alone.”

“I’m still going to check in on you,” she mutters, and I hear her walk to the elevator. “Eat something and get rest.”

I nod but have no intention of doing either of those things.

When I hear the elevator open and close, I slump back against the couch and let out an anguished groan.

Finally alone in the safety of my apartment, I let go of the tight grip on my emotions.

My entire world shudders around me.

I see Lily’s beautiful smile.

I can still feel her in my arms.

I can still taste her.

How could she just decide we’re over?

I gasp through the unrelenting heartache while gripping my hair.

“Christ, Lily,” I groan.

How do I forget about her and just go on with my life as if we never happened?

How do I stop loving her?

Chapter 36

Lily

I tried to call Harper again, but she was out of the office. I left my new number with her assistant and pray she returns my call.

Until then, there's not much I can do.

If Callan weren't in Houston, I'd freaking camp outside The Ritz until I got to see him.

Feeling absolutely lost, I stare at the art pieces that are not my best work. I check my finances and feel a little anxious about buying new supplies.

There's no way I can sell the old stuff.

God, I only have four days to create pieces I can sell on Saturday.

With my stress levels sky-high, I leave the house again to run to the store where I always get my supplies.

I'm careful with what I place in the cart, not wanting to overspend.

Before I get to the counter to pay, my phone starts to ring. My breaths explode over my lips, and I quickly dig the device out of my handbag.

“Hello?”

“Lillian? It’s Harper. I’m returning your call.”

“Thank God,” I breathe. “I know Callan is in Houston for business, but can you get a message to him?”

“Actually, he’s home.” I hear her take a deep breath, then her voice comes clipped over the line. “Lillian, don’t you think you’ve done enough?”

He never went to Houston?

But...

Confused, I whisper, “What?”

“Things are over between you and Callan. The least you can do is leave him alone.”

My entire body goes numb from shock.

“Look, I understand things got out of hand on Saturday, but Callan didn’t deserve any of this.” I hear another voice in the background, then Harper says, “I have to go. Keep well, Lillian.”

For minutes after she ended the call, I stand with the device pressed to my ear while staring at an easel.

We’re over?

Callan ended our relationship without talking to me?

And he’s been home all this time?

Leaving the cart in the aisle, I walk out of the store. I wrap my arms around my middle, trying to keep the pain from ripping me apart.

I don’t take in my surroundings. I don’t hear anything.

There’s only the devastating disappointment and heartache.

I understand Saturday night was one hell of a shock for him, but not giving me a chance to explain is unfair.

But my father is the judge who let Theo walk free. Maybe Callan can't be with me because of my family.

Even though I've cut ties with them, it probably won't matter to Callan.

Who would want to be with the daughter of the man responsible for allowing your best friend's murderer to walk free?

God.

I gasp as the cold, hard realization sinks in.

He's been ignoring me all this time. It's probably why the receptionist at The Ritz was so rude toward me.

Oh God.

Callan ended things with me.

Did he even leave a message on my old phone, or did he ghost me like everyone before him?

The pain flays me to my soul, and I begin to run in an attempt to get away from it.

When I reach my house, I rush inside and slam the door shut before ugly sobs burst from me.

God. I'm alone.

I'm completely alone in this world.

I lost Callan.

My sobs turn to heartwrenching cries as I sink down to my knees. I wrap my arms tightly around myself and sway back

and forth.

I can't.

This is too much.

Lying in a fetal position on the floor of the empty living room, lost sobs shudder from my chest.

Slowly anger creeps through the devastation, and it lights a fire under my ass.

No. He doesn't just get to ghost me.

I'm done with people treating me like shit and getting away with it.

Pushing myself up off the floor, I grab my handbag before storming out of the house.

Come hell or high water, I will talk to Callan tonight and give him a piece of my mind.

Hailing a cab, I watch as the car stops and quickly climb into the backseat. "The Ritz Plaza, please."

Tonight is the night I stand up for myself, and God help anyone who dares get in my way.

When I'm done telling Callan what I think, I'm going to my parents' house. They will give me my belongings, and then I never want to see them again.

I work myself up into such an angry state it makes the pain lessen. When the cab stops in front of the Ritz, I pay the fee and shove the door open.

I storm into the building, ready to fight my way into Callan's apartment, but I calm a little when I see the nice receptionist behind the desk.

She gives me a friendly smile. "Welcome to The Ritz. How can I help?"

"Is Callan Wright in?"

She gives me an apologetic look. "What's your name again?"

"Lily...Lillian."

I watch as she calls his apartment, and a wave of shock ripples through me when she says, "Mr. Wright, sorry to bother you. There's a Lillian to see you at reception." She listens with a smile. "Thank you, sir." She places the earpiece down.

My heart beats out of my chest, and I swear if she says –

"Let me just grab my keycard, and I'll let you up."

What?

My heart scampers off at an insane pace, and my mouth grows dry. The blood drains from my face as I follow the receptionist to the elevator. When the doors open, I step inside while she presses the number for Callan's floor.

"Enjoy the evening, Lillian," she murmurs, the friendly smile still on her face.

I doubt I will.

"Thank you."

The doors slide shut, and my eyes settle on the numbers as I'm taken to the top floor.

Stand your ground.

Nerves explode in my stomach, and when the doors open and my eyes land on Callan, my legs almost give way beneath me.

Dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, he looks at me with something akin to caution as he murmurs, "Lillian."

Lillian.

I'm no longer Lily.

The blow hits hard as I step out of the elevator. I glance over my shoulder, watching the doors close, then look back at Callan. "Thank you for seeing me."

He nods and gestures to the living room.

"If it's okay, I'd rather stay here. I just came to say my piece, then I'll leave."

Callan crosses his arms over his chest and nods at me. "Only if you'll listen to what I have to say as well."

My tongue darts out to wet my lips. "Fine, but I go first." I start to cross my arms over my chest as well, but a sharp pain from my wrist stops me, and I drop my hands to my sides.

Taking a deep breath, my gaze flicks over his apartment before resting on him again. "I understand Saturday night was a shock to you. I would never have taken you there if I'd known my father was the judge who let Dylan's killer walk free. Honestly, I didn't know about it until the party."

My voice trembles so much I have to pause to breathe through the intense emotions in my chest.

I can't help but drink in the sight of Callan. I still love him even though he's hurt me.

God, this is hard.

I take another breath, but suddenly, the urge to cry hits. "Did you even send me a message, or were you just going to ghost me?"

A frown line forms on his face. "What are you talking about?"

"I spoke to Harper." I almost try to cross my arms again, but instead, I wrap my left arm around my middle. "She told me you ended things between us, and I should leave you alone."

He shakes his head hard and takes a step forward. "What the hell are you talking about?" He gives me an incredulous look, his eyes shining brighter than the stars. "You ended our relationship."

I blink at him for a moment before I shake my head as well. "No, I didn't."

"Christ, Lillian," he snaps. "What do you call all the messages you sent me?" Raising an eyebrow at me, his tone is tight with the pain that's etched into his face as he says, "You made it clear you never want to see me again."

Frowning at him, I argue, "The only messages I sent you were begging you to tell me you're okay. You..."

Oh God.

My hand flies to my mouth as I realize what must've happened, then I ask, "What did the messages say?"

Absolute heartache tightens his features. "That you can't be with a volatile man, and you'll never forgive me."

Oh my God.

I can't believe my parents went that far.

They're monsters.

Chapter 37

Callan

Christ. Lily's here, and she's talking to me.

It's hard not to get my hopes up as I stare at her beautiful face.

Her skin grows pale as she whispers, "I didn't send those messages."

Her words send ripples of shock cascading through my body.

She places a hand over her heart and clutches hold of her shirt. "My father took my phone on Saturday night. In the last message I sent you, I asked if you were safe."

Fuck.

"You didn't send any messages after Saturday night?" I ask to make sure I understand.

"No." Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, her eyes huge with uncertainty and heartache.

Jesus Christ.

"You didn't break up with me?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No. I thought you broke up with me." She gestures to the empty space between us. "I came

over to...ah...fight.” A hollow chuckle escapes her. “Which feels pretty pointless right now.”

Needing to know what’s happening, I ask, “Just to be clear, neither of us ended the relationship?”

She gives me an unsure look. “It depends on you. I never wanted to end things.”

Hope threatens to overwhelm me. “I don’t want to end things between us.”

Her eyebrows pull together, and her chin begins to quiver. Her voice sounds unbearably fragile as she asks, “You still want to be with me?”

Darting forward, I yank her into my arms and squash her against my chest. With my mouth in her hair, I say, “Yes. I want to be with you.”

A sob bursts from her, and she wraps her left arm around my lower back. “Oh God,” she cries. “I...I...I.”

Lily’s body slumps against mine, and if it weren’t for the cries shuddering from her, I’d think she passed out. Pushing an arm beneath her knees, I pick her up bridal style and carry her to the living room.

I set her down on the couch, and crouching by her knees, I take in her distraught state. She struggles to get air into her lungs, and recognizing the signs of a panic attack, I frame her face with my hands and force her to look at me.

“Count with me, Lily. One hundred. Ninety-seven. Ninety-four. Ninety-one. Eighty-eight.”

Her voice is hoarse and shaky as she sputters her way through the numbers.

Her breathing begins to slow down, and it has me saying, “Take a deep breath, baby.”

When she’s calmer, I quickly get up and rush to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water for her. I also dart into the guest restroom and swipe the box of Kleenex from the counter.

Heading back to the living room, I set the Kleenex down on Lily’s lap before opening the bottle of water for her.

“Drink some, baby.”

She reaches for the bottle with her right hand but stops and switches to using her left hand.

My eyes lock on her bruised wrist, and seeing the swelling, I ask, “What happened to your wrist?”

She drinks some water, then sets the bottle down on the table before grabbing a tissue to wipe the tears from her face.

“There’s so much I need to tell you.”

I turn my body to face her and lean a little closer. “We have a lot to talk about. Do you mind if I go first? I really need to explain my behavior from Saturday night.”

She shakes her head, the tissue in her hand being obliterated to pieces as she fidgets. “Okay.”

I take a deep breath before I start, “I was shocked to see your father and Theo Jackson. It’s been six years since the court case, and seeing them made the trauma of losing Dylan resurface.”

Lily lifts her eyes to me, and seeing them drowning in sadness takes a swing at my heart. “I’m so sorry. If I’d known...”

I place my hand on her knee. “I’m not blaming you. I just want you to understand how I felt.”

She nods as she takes a quivering breath. “Okay.”

“I have really bad panic attacks,” I admit to her.

Lily’s eyes lock on mine as her eyebrows pull together again.

I clear my throat, then continue, “I’ve been having them less and less, but Saturday night’s panic attack hit me off my feet.” I lean closer to her, and mean every word as I say, “I didn’t mean to shout at you. I wish I could turn back time, Lily. I feel fucking horrible for kicking you out of the car, but I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

She nods before grabbing another tissue to tear apart. “I was worried you’d get into an accident. Where did you go?”

“To my dad’s place. He gave me a sedative that knocked me out.”

Lily’s eyes are filled with concern. “Are you better now?”

I nod, and moving my hand to hers, I brush my thumb over the swelling around her wrist.

“A therapist said I have PTSD from losing Dylan.”

Her face tightens with remorse. “I’m so sorry for taking you to the party.”

I shake my head. “I just need you to understand where my head was at.” Needing to address one more thing, I say, “I’d

never hit you.”

Her eyes jump to mine. “I only got between you and Theo because I didn’t want you arrested for assault.”

Jesus. Lily was protecting me.

I lift my hand to her face and tuck some hair behind her ear. “Thank you, baby.”

“I understand why you pushed me away, but if we’re going to be together, I need to know next time something like that happens you’ll let me help you.”

“Okay,” I agree because I’ll do anything for her.

“You have to tell me what and what not to do, so when you have a panic attack, I can help you through it.”

The corner of my mouth curves up. “Okay.”

Lily falls silent and stares down the pieces of Kleenex on her lap.

“Tell me what happened after I left,” I say, keeping my tone soft.

She closes her eyes, and the intense pain on her face almost sends me into a fit of rage.

“My parents and sister came over.” Her voice sounds hollow as fuck. “They demanded I stop seeing you.”

“What did you tell them?”

Her eyes lift to my face. “That I choose you.”

Fuck. She chose me.

Needing to hear her answer, I ask, “Why have you never spoken to me about your parents and who they are?”

She lowers her head, her voice soft as she says, “It’s a painful topic.”

I take hold of her chin and nudge her face up until her eyes meet mine. “Tell me, Lily.”

I watch as an intense wave of pain hits her, and it guts me.

“I don’t even know where to start.” Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, then she begins, “I’m a disappointment to my family. They’re all involved in law. My father wanted me to get a law degree, but instead, I studied art.” She lets out a burst of laughter that sounds so fucking sad. “He called my art a whim I needed to get over.”

I remember her saying I was the first person who saw her paintings. “Have they seen your work?”

She shakes her head. “They’ve never taken an interest in me or my life. My father threatened to disown me if I didn’t study law.”

Anger bubbles in my chest, and I clench my jaw in an attempt to control the violent emotion.

“My family have BBQs and dinners, and they forget to invite me. My mother and sister go shopping and never ask me to come along. Whenever I call them, they’re busy. When I send messages, they take forever to respond or just ignore me. They’ve basically pushed me out of the family.”

I stare at Lily as if she’s lost her mind, unable to believe her family could be so cruel to her.

Christ, I should’ve fucking punched her father.

“Anyway,” she sighs, “my father gave me the ultimatum to study law or he’d wash his hands of me. That was the day you came over because my phone was off.”

“The fight you mentioned?”

She nods. “Yes, and on Saturday, it all just came to a head. He gave me twenty-four hours to move out and took the phone...” She lifts her right hand, “he grabbed my wrist and twisted it so I’d let go of the phone, then he shoved me. I fell and landed on my hand. I think I sprained it.”

God help me.

The rage fuming in my chest is so potent I could kill the fucker for daring to touch Lily.

I close my eyes and take deep breaths in an attempt to calm down, but when I speak, my voice is harsh. “Your family are fucked up people.”

Lily just stares at the coffee table while she nods in agreement.

Then everything she said registers. My heart clenches as I ask, “Lily, where have you been staying?”

“Saturday night I spent here, and Sunday, I found a two-bedroom house in Hastings-on-Hudson. But all my art and supplies are still at the apartment. My parents said I could get my stuff once they’re ready to see me.”

Don’t fucking lose your shit.

Stay calm.

Don’t get violent around her.

“Christ, Lily,” I breathe as I wipe my palm over my forehead.

Not only did her parents kick her out after fucking hurting her, she couldn’t get a hold of me and thought I left her.

Fuck.

I grab hold of her shoulders and yank her to my chest. Wrapping my arms tightly around her, I place my hand behind her head and press a kiss to her hair.

“I’m so fucking sorry you went through all of that alone.”

Her left hand grips my side as her body starts to tremble, and my woman whimpers against my chest, “I thought I lost you.”

“Jesus. Never, baby,” I assure her. “You’re stuck with me forever.”

God hear my vow; I will find a way to make Harrison pay for what he’s done to Lily and me.

Chapter 38

Lily

I feel weirdly empty after telling Callan everything.

I'm not going to lie, tonight went differently than I expected.

I pull back from Callan, and reaching for the bottle, I take a sip of water.

Callan is quiet for a solid minute before he asks, "So with all the shit you were already dealing with, you had to move without your belongings?"

I nod. "That about sums up my past three days."

"And you thought I bailed on you?"

I nod again. "It's been a real shitty three days."

"Fuck, baby, if I had known. You said you spoke to Harper today. Why didn't you come here?"

I let out an exhausted sigh. "I left messages for you with reception." My eyes flick to his. "Trust me, I tried to get in contact with you."

"I trust you," he murmurs. "Jesus, if I had known..." He pulls me into another hug. "You're here now. It's all that matters."

I close my eyes and soak in the feel of his arms around me. “You’re still mine,” I whisper, the relief I fear audible in my voice.

“I’m still yours.” He presses a kiss to my forehead then pushes me back. “Let me look at your wrist.”

While his fingers gently probe my bruised skin, he asks, “Did you get it checked out?”

“No. It doesn’t hurt as much anymore.” My eyes settle on his face, then they widen because he looks just as angry as he did at the party. “Are you okay?”

His eyes flick to mine. “Yes. Why?”

“You look like you’re about to kill someone.”

He shakes his head. “I’m pissed off with your fucking family.”

“I was starting to think I’m the problem,” I admit.

His thumb brushes over my wrist, and his eyes lock with mine. “You’re not the fucking problem.” The anger coming off him in waves makes goosebumps spread over my skin. His tone is unforgiving as he says, “We’re going to get your belongings and bring them here.”

“I don’t have the keycard to the apartment.”

“Then we’ll go to your parents to get it.”

There’s so much determination in his eyes, it gives me the courage to face them again.

“You don’t mind?”

“Hell no.” He gets up from the couch. “I’m just going to change into a suit before we leave.”

Worried about Callan, I ask, “But what if seeing my father triggers another panic attack for you?”

He shakes his head. “I was caught off guard at the party. I’m prepared tonight.”

“Okay. I just don’t want you to get upset again.”

He lets out a dangerous chuckle. “It’s too late for that. I’m pissed off and ready to give that fucker a piece of my mind.”

He begins to walk away, then stops and gives me an expectant look. “Come, baby.”

“Oh.” I dart up and take his hand. “I don’t mind waiting in the living room.”

“Fuck no. I’m not taking my eyes off you anytime soon,” he mutters. “I missed you too much and need to have you in touching distance at all times.”

I’ve been an emotional mess with everything that’s happened, but Callan’s words act as a soothing balm on my wounded heart.

When we come to a stop in his bedroom, I take a seat on the edge of the bed and watch as he gets undressed.

I’m so freaking relieved I didn’t lose Callan, and I can’t stop staring at him.

He’s exactly what I’ve needed all my life.

Callan puts on a suit, and when he’s fastening the buttons of his waistcoat, I whisper, “I love you.”

He freezes, and his eyes fly to me. For a moment, he just stares at me before the corner of his mouth lifts. “What did you say?”

My voice is much stronger the second time around. “I love you, Callan.”

He fastens the last button, and walking toward me, he leans over me. His face is inches from mine, his eyes burning intensely on me.

“I love you, Lily.” The corner of his mouth lifts again. “I said it in a voicemail to you on Sunday.”

Lifting my left hand to his face, I cup his jaw. I lean forward and press a soft kiss to his mouth before saying, “I’m glad I heard it in person from you.”

Only then does it hit what he said.

Callan loves me.

A wide smile spreads over my face, and throwing my arms around his neck, I let out a burst of happy laughter.

He straightens up and holds me so tightly to him my feet are lifted off the floor.

“Thank you,” I whisper, sounding like the emotional mess I am.

“For what?”

“Agreeing to accompany me to dinner after reading my crazy application. For going to the fair with me.” I swallow hard on the lump in my throat. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“Baby, since I laid eyes on you, you’re all I see.”

I pull back so I can look into his eyes. “When you’re having a panic attack, I want to be the one you come to for comfort.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was weak.”

I shake my head while cupping his jaw. “I’ll never think that, Callan. You’re so strong it gave me the strength to stand up for myself.”

“Jesus, Lily,” he whispers, his eyes filling with the love he feels for me. It’s the most amazing sight I’ve ever seen. “I love you so fucking much.”

I press my mouth to his, kissing him with everything I am.

I give him my abused heart.

I give him all my lonely days.

I deepen the kiss, needing him to know how much I love him.

And I pour all my dreams into him.

When I pull back, a tear spirals down my cheek. Meeting his loving gaze, I say, “Thank you for making me feel unforgettable.”

He lifts his hand to my face and wipes the tear away. “My beautiful Lily.”

He presses a chaste kiss to my mouth, then lets go of me. I watch as he grabs a jacket from his closet and shrugs it on before taking a sweater from the shelf and coming over to me.

“Arms up, baby.”

I do as he says and let him pull the warm fabric over my head.

“You need to dress warmer,” he orders.

“I left the house in a hurry and didn’t think to bring a jacket.”

Taking my hand, he pulls me out of the bedroom while muttering, “That won’t be a problem after tonight.”

“Why?”

As we head down the staircase, he shoots me a hot smirk. “Because you’re moving in with me.”

I almost trip on the last step but catch myself. “Don’t you think that’s something we should discuss?”

Callan stops walking and turns to face me. “Okay. Let’s talk.”

“I just signed a lease for a house?”

He shrugs. “I’ll get it canceled, or I’ll just buy the house.”

I take a deep breath. “It’s only been a month.”

His eyebrow lifts. “Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“And I love you. What’s the problem?”

I start to chuckle. “You’ve already made up your mind, haven’t you?”

A playful grin spreads over his face. “Yes.”

My expression turns serious. “Are you sure?”

Lifting a hand to the back of my neck, he tugs me closer. His eyes are intensely blue as he looks deep into mine. “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

He gives me a quick kiss before taking my hand again. Grabbing a set of keys, his wallet, and his phone from the side table by the elevator, he glances at me. “We need to get you a new phone.”

“I already have one.”

He hands me his device. “Program your new number in under your name. The code is five, seven, eight, six.”

As we step into the elevator, I grinning like an idiot as I key in the code.

Giving me his code shows Callan trusts me.

Chapter 39

Lily

When Callan leads me to an SUV, I ask, “Where is the Bugatti?”

“It got damaged on Saturday.” Before I can ask how, he explains, “I hit the pavement at my father’s house. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Right. I shake my head as I climb into the passenger side. “You’re never driving again if you’re upset.”

I see the smile on his face as he shuts the door, and I realize Callan loves when I fuss over him.

He slides behind the steering wheel, then asks, “What’s *their* address.”

I give it to him, and as he drives us there, my stomach begins to spin with nerves.

Hopefully, tonight will be the last time I see them because I’m done with that family after everything they’ve put me through.

As Callan parks the car in front of their house, he rolls his shoulders, anger burning in his eyes.

“Are you –”

With determination, he interrupts me. “Yes. I’m dead fucking sure.”

Callan climbs out of the SUV, and I wait for him to open my door. When I step onto the sidewalk, I look at the house, wondering how I lasted so long with the scraps of attention my family gave me.

It’s because I knew one day I would find someone like Callan.

“Let me do all the talking,” he orders as we take the steps up to the front door.

Callan knocks, and I grip hold of his jacket, my fingers twisting in the fabric.

When the door opens, shock washes the color from my mother’s face. “Mr. Wright.” Her eyes dart between Callan and me.

Callan places his hand against the door, and pushing it all the way open, he steps into the house. “Get your husband.”

I stick like glue to Callan’s side and ignore the questioning look my mother shoots my way before she calls out with panic in her voice, “Oliver, we have company. Mr. Wright is here.”

It only takes seconds before my father stalks into the foyer, a dark frown on his face. “You’re not welcome in my house. Get out.”

Callan moves forward, ripping his jacket from my hand, and the next moment, he grabs my father by the front of his shirt.

“You’re a corrupted piece of shit,” he growls in my father’s face. “I have something you don’t – a weekly golf date with the Chief Justice.”

For the first time in my life, I see my father’s face turn ashen with fear creeping into his eyes.

Callan shoves my father back. “So you will do everything I say or find yourself waist-deep in shit when I tell Chief Justice Cutler just how fucking corrupted you are.”

“You have no proof,” my father dares him.

“That may be the case, but you’ll still be investigated.” Callan lets out a predatory chuckle. “It’s not easy removing that kind of stain from your name.”

The fear thickens on my father’s face. “What do you want?”

A winning smile lifts the corners of Callan’s mouth. “The keycard to the apartment.”

Dad gestures for Mom to get it, and she scurries off.

“Where is Lily’s phone?”

“Lily,” my father scoffs as if the nickname Callan calls me is absurd. His eyes flick to me, and with disdain, he mutters, “You’re dead to me.”

Callan reacts, and before I know what’s happening, his fist slams into my father’s face.

No. Not my father. From now on, he’s Oliver to me.

“That’s for Lily,” Callan growls.

As Oliver stumbles backward, Callan grabs him by the front of his shirt and punches him again.

“And that’s for Dylan.”

He lets go with a shove, and it has Oliver sprawling over the floor.

Holy shit. I think I just fell in love with Callan all over again.

Mom, no...Sophia comes rushing back into the foyer and lets out a shriek when she sees Oliver’s bloody nose. “What have you done?”

Callan grabs the keycard from her before leveling them with a scalding glare. “People like you don’t deserve to be parents. How the fuck you spawned an extraordinary person like Lily is beyond me.”

He sucks in a breath of air, then shouts, “Lily’s fucking phone. Now!”

Again, Sophia scurries to retrieve the device, and I realize she must’ve replied to Callan’s messages. When she comes back, Callan rips the phone from her hand and passes it to me.

Sophia helps Oliver to his feet, and feeling braver than I ever have, I say, “After today, I want nothing to do with you ever again.”

Callan points a finger at them, his tone filled with danger as he threatens, “If you ever contact Lily again, I’ll fucking ruin you. I’ll use every dollar to my name to destroy everything you hold dear.”

He takes hold of my hand and pulls me to the front door.

“Don’t ever come back here,” Oliver shouts. “Leave the keycard with the doorman.”

“Christ, how you fucking survived with them for parents, I’ll never understand,” Callan mutters as we leave.

“It’s thanks to my pure determination to prove them wrong,” I whisper.

He ushers me into the passenger side and jogs around the front of the SUV.

When he slides into the driver’s seat and takes hold of the steering wheel, I see the blood on his knuckles.

I almost jump into his lap to get to his right hand. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” He wipes the blood off on his pants, then grins at me. “But don’t let that stop you from fussing over me.”

My mouth crashes against his, and I kiss the everloving shit out of my man. When I pull back, I meet his eyes and whisper, “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, baby.”

He starts the engine, and as we drive away, I don’t bother looking at the house where I grew up.

I’m done with them.

I place my hand on Callan’s thigh and stare at him as he drives to the apartment.

He’s the only family I need.

Chapter 40

Callan

I would've loved nothing more than to kill Harrison, but I had to settle for a couple of punches.

Christ, it felt good to make the fucker bleed.

Parking the car outside the apartment building, Lily and I get out of the SUV.

The doorman's face lights up with a smile when he sees her. "Miss Harrison. Welcome back."

I need to change her fucking last name.

"Hi, Bobby. We're just here to collect my belongings and will be in and out and couple of times."

His smile falters. "I'm sorry to hear you're moving. You'll be missed."

She gives him an appreciative smile before we head to the elevator. During the ride to her floor, Lily hooks her arm through mine and leans her cheek against my bicep.

Noticing she looks a little nervous, I ask, "What are you worried about?"

"That they did something to my paintings out of spite."

Christ. Then I'll end them.

When the elevator opens, we hurry to the front door, and the moment we burst into her apartment, we rush to her art studio.

I switch the lights on, and seeing her beautiful paintings standing proudly against the wall with zero damage to them, I let out a relieved sigh.

“Thank God,” Lily gasps.

She walks closer, and I watch as she touches each one with love, as if they’re her children.

I glance at her art supplies and ask, “Do you have boxes we can pack everything in?”

“I have a couple from when I moved in. They’re in the guest room. I’ll get them.”

When Lily leaves the room, I pull my phone out of my pocket and take a photo of each of the pieces before sending them to Eloise.

Callan: I thought you’d appreciate seeing these.

Just as Lily comes back with the folded boxes and tape, Eloise replies.

Eloise: Tell me you know who the artist is!!!

Callan: Lillian Harrison.

Eloise: Can you put me in touch with her?

Callan: Come over for dinner tomorrow night, and I’ll introduce you.

Eloise: What time?

Callan: Seven. PS: The photos don’t do them justice.

Eloise: Will the paintings be at your place?

Callan: Yes.

Eloise: It's a date.

I put my phone away and get to work helping Lily pack up her art supplies. It takes a couple of trips to the SUV, and I manage to fit some of the boxes with four paintings into the back of the vehicle.

“Keep packing, baby,” I tell Lily as I open the door to the driver's side.

“Okay.”

I watch as she walks into the lobby so she can continue packing while I take the first load to my apartment. Climbing into the SUV, I start the engine and head toward The Ritz.

Even though Lily and I worked until well past eleven last night, we're up early to get the last of her belongings from the rental.

We're driving to Hastings-on-Hudson when I say, “I want the rental agreement you signed.”

“Okay.”

My eyes flick to my woman, and seeing the tired lines on her face, I say, “Once we get home, you should take a nap.”

She shakes her head. “There's too much to do.”

“The unpacking can wait.”

“It’s not that. Remember, I’ve booked a stall at a market for Saturdays so I can sell my art? I have to make sure the paintings are ready.”

Fuck, I forgot.

As I park the SUV in front of a dilapidated house, I turn in my seat to face Lily.

“One thing I’ve noticed is you don’t share what’s happening in your life. It has to change, baby.”

She gives me a remorseful look. “Sorry. I’m not used to talking about myself.”

“Work on it for me. I need to know what’s happening with you at all times.”

A smile curves her lips, and her love for me shines from her eyes. “Okay.”

“Things have been crazy lately. Will you be ready in time for Saturday? Is there anything I can help with?”

She shakes her head. “Just you supporting me is all the help I need.”

Taking hold of her hand, I lift it to my mouth, and press a kiss to her skin. “I’ll always support whatever you want to do.” My eyes flick to the house, and I mutter, “Let’s get the rest of your belongings.”

After we’ve climbed out of the SUV, I struggle to suppress my anger as I look at the piece of shit Lily was planning to live in.

Jesus.

If she didn't come to my place last night...if she kept thinking I ended things...fuck...she would've stayed here.

She would've disappeared without a trace.

Realizing how close I came to losing the love of my life, I grab hold of Lily's arm and yank her into my arms. I bury my face against her blonde hair and take a deep breath of her cinnamon and vanilla scent.

"Callan?" she whispers. "What's wrong?"

"I just need to hold you." My voice is rough from the thought of losing her. "I just realized how close I came to losing you forever."

She wraps her arms around me, careful not to hurt her sprained wrist, and we hold each other for a moment.

When I finally let her go, I scowl at the fucking house. "Open the door so I can get your stuff. Christ, this place is a dump, Lily. Please tell me you didn't sleep here."

She unlocks the door, and when we step inside, I see how empty it is. "I only slept here for two nights."

Christ Almighty.

I walk down the hallway, and finding the main bedroom that's smaller than my apartment's guest restroom, the blood runs cold in my veins.

There's no bed. Only a small pile of blankets and two pillows.

"Where did you sleep?"

She gestures at the filthy carpet, then her eyes widen, "The bed's being delivered today. It was supposed to come

yesterday, but there was a delay.” Pulling her phone from her handbag, she mutters, “I have to cancel before they bring it.”

Anger detonated in my chest. “You fucking slept on the floor!”

Lily startles, and her eyes fly to my face.

I hold up a hand and attempt to breathe through the sudden rage, but every time I look at the disgusting carpet, my anger spikes dangerously high.

“Why are you angry?” she asks, caution lacing the words.

It’s not just this fucking house or that I came way too fucking close to losing Lily. It’s learning about everything she’s been through.

And she probably hasn’t told me half of the shit.

Reaching for her, I pull her into my arms again.

Fuck, I want to keep her locked against my chest where the world can’t get to her.

“No more, Lily,” I say, the anger making my tone harsh. “You never keep anything from me again. If someone upsets you, I want to know immediately.”

“Okay...but I didn’t intentionally keep anything from you.”

“I know, baby.” I pull back so I can frame her face with my hands. Looking deep into her beautiful gray eyes, I say, “You’re mine to protect. To take care of. To love.”

Emotion tightens her features, showing me how much my words mean to her.

Lowering my head, I press a tender kiss to her mouth before murmuring, “I love you so fucking much.”

A happy smile spreads over her face. “I’ll never get tired of hearing that.”

When I let go of her, I say, “There’s not much to pack. Let’s grab your things and get out of here.”

So I can take her home where she belongs.

With me.

Chapter 41

Lily

After unpacking all my supplies and turning one of the guestrooms into an art studio for myself, I head down the stairs.

I'm not going to lie, the past few days have been insane. I don't know whether I'm coming or going.

But I'm here with Callan, and that's all I choose to focus on. Not my parents. Not Sadie and Mark. Definitely not Denise and Beverly.

Just my wonderful boyfriend.

When I take the last step, Callan glances up from where he's sitting on the couch with his laptop open in front of him.

Hearing me behind him, he glances over his shoulder, and asks, "How's everything coming along?"

I walk to him, and leaning over the back of the couch, I press a kiss to his mouth. "All the boxes are unpacked. Should I put them in the other guestroom?"

He shakes his head. "Place them in the foyer. I'll have housekeeping clear them out." He lifts an arm, and wrapping his fingers around the back of my neck, he tugs me down for another kiss before saying, "We're having company tonight. Do you mind making dinner?"

I straighten up and glance at the kitchen. “Of course not. Who’s coming?”

“Just a friend,” he cryptically replies.

I head to the fridge, and opening it, I glance over the vegetables, meat, and fish. “What should I make?”

“Whatever you want, baby,” he murmurs, his attention back on his laptop.

I hear the elevator door open and lean back so I can see who’s here. A stunning woman smiles at Callan as she walks toward him. She reminds me of Jessica Pearson from the TV program Suits.

“Hey, you’re here,” he says as he gets up off the couch. “What time is your flight to Houston?”

“At two-thirty.” Her eyes search his face. “How do you feel today?”

“Much better.” He gestures in my direction. “Lily, come meet Harper.”

Oh shit.

Wiping my palms on my jeans, I move closer to them. Yesterday, when I spoke with Harper, she wasn’t thrilled with me.

Instead of giving me a stinking look, Harper smiles apologetically. “Hi, Lily. First things first. I’m so sorry about yesterday.”

I wave a hand between us. “It was a misunderstanding.”

She holds her hand out to shake mine, but Callan says, “Lily’s wrist is sprained.”

“Oh, in that case...” She pulls me into a quick hug, then chuckles, “I’m glad to finally meet you face-to-face.”

“Me too. Are you joining us for dinner?”

“No.” She glances between Callan and me before saying, “I just came over to apologize. I still have a million things to do before my flight.”

I give her an appreciative smile. “Thank you. I know you and Callan are close, and it’s important to me that we get along.”

She places her hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “Once I’m back, we’ll go out for lunch.”

“I’d like that.” When she turns toward the elevator, I add, “Have a safe trip.”

She smiles warmly at me before turning her attention to Callan. “Send me the last report, and I’ll read over it during the flight.”

“I’m almost done then I’ll email it to you.”

After Harper leaves, I return to the kitchen while saying, “That was really nice of her.”

“It’s important to me that the two of you get along,” Callan murmurs as he sits down on the couch again.

“So if Harper isn’t staying for dinner, who’s the friend that’s coming over?”

“It’s a surprise,” he chuckles before focusing on his work.

Giving him space to finish the report he needs to send to Harper, I pull my phone from my pocket, looking for an idea of what I can make for dinner.

Finding two recipes I really like, I check whether we have everything before asking, “How many people are coming over tonight?”

“Just one,” Callan answers absentmindedly.

Great! The chicken and potato gratin with brown butter cream, along with stuffed eggplants and zucchini in rich tomato sauce, will work well for three people.

Getting to work on the two recipes, I soon lose myself in cooking dinner for tonight.

Suddenly, Callan wraps his arms around my waist, his chest pressing into my back. “It smells delicious in here.”

“I’m almost done,” I whisper, my attention focused on plating the food on platters. Pulling away from Callan, I stick them in a lukewarm oven to stay warm, then ask, “What’s the time?”

“Seven.”

My eyes widen, and seeing Callan dressed in a three-piece suit, I dart toward the stairs. “God, I’m a mess. You should’ve told me how late it was.”

I hear him chuckling. “You look perfect, Lily. You don’t have to change.”

I shoot him a scowl before heading to our bedroom, but the moment I reach our walk-in closet, I don’t know what to wear tonight.

“I’m serious,” Callan says as he enters the bedroom. “You don’t have to change into something else.”

“But you’re wearing a suit,” I argue.

“Lily, I always wear a suit.”

Shit. True.

I glance down at my jeans and light pink cashmere sweater and agree that the outfit doesn't suck.

“I just need to pull a brush through my hair and put on some mascara and lipstick.”

Callan points to my bare feet. “And shoes.”

“Right,” I chuckle. I grab a pair of slip-on ballet flats and put them on before walking to the bathroom.

I hear Callan's phone ring, then he says, “Let her up, please.”

It's only then I notice reception didn't call to announce Harper, which means she's probably authorized to just come up. It shows me how close Callan is with her.

I really need to build a friendship with her.

While Callan heads out of the bedroom, I quickly put on mascara and nude lipstick before brushing my hair, then rush downstairs to meet our company for the evening.

I hear a woman chuckling. “Dinner smells mouthwatering.”

“Lily is an excellent cook,” Callan mentions.

When the foyer comes into view, I almost trip over my feet with shock.

Eloise Torres.

Holy shit.

My heartbeat takes off at a crazy pace, and I instantly start sweating with nerves.

It's been a lifelong dream of mine to meet her.

Callan turns his head to me and holds out a hand. "Eloise, this is the amazingly talented artist I told you about."

An anxious smile forms on my face, and taking Callan's hand, I move right to his side before rambling, "It's such an honor meeting you, Miss Torres. God," I pull my hand from Callan's to press my palm against my heart, "you're such an inspiration to me." I let out an awkward chuckle. "Meeting you is..." I shake my head in awe of her. "It's such an honor," I repeat the only words I can think of.

I don't care if my wrist is sprained, I take her hand when she holds it out to me and ignore the sharp pain.

Callan places his palm on my lower back. "This is Lily, my girlfriend."

Eloise might be in her fifties, but she carries herself with such class and grace, I don't even notice the fine lines on her face.

I want to be her when I grow up.

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Lily," she murmurs before glancing around the apartment. "Where are the paintings?"

My mouth drops open, and I look like a gaping fish for a few seconds. "You want to see my art?"

"That's why Eloise is joining us for dinner," Callan explains.

“Oh. My. God.” I’m fangirling so hard right now. “They’re in my studio.”

Callan gives me a sideways hug before saying, “Let’s show Eloise your art before sitting down for dinner.”

I have the biggest smile on my face as we head up the stairs, and when I open the door to my studio, my stomach goes crazy with nerves.

We step inside, and my eyes flick over each painting before settling on Eloise’s face.

Her eyes settle on my collection, and I watch as her lips part, a look of wonder washing over her features.

I lift my left hand to cover my mouth so I don’t interrupt her while she takes her time inspecting each piece.

The suspense builds in me until I’m trembling.

“The detail is perfect,” she murmurs, and crouching in front of the one depicting an elderly lady walking through a graveyard, she whispers, “You’ve captured her loneliness so well.”

God.

My breathing speeds up and tears jump to my eyes, my entire face flushing with heat from the intense emotions gripping my chest.

Receiving validation from an expert fills me with so much pride a tear spirals down my cheek.

This is all I wanted. Recognition for my hard work.

Eloise doesn’t notice my reaction as she asks, “What materials did you use?”

“Plaster.” I have to clear my throat before continuing,
“And oil pants.”

She shakes her head. “The way the detail stands out from the canvas is magnificent.”

I don’t know what to do with my hands as more pride pours into my chest.

Callan wraps his arm around my shoulders and tugs me to his side.

I’m trembling so badly from biting the happy tears back because I don’t want to be a sobbing mess in front of her.

Eloise easily takes thirty minutes to admire my paintings before she seems to come out of a trance. Her attention turns to me. “You have an extraordinary talent, Lily.”

Oh my gosh!

“Thank you so much,” I whisper, overcome with too many good emotions.

“Let’s talk business over dinner.”

Business?

“I told you seeing them in person is something else,” Callan tells Eloise as he tugs me out of the room, and it feels as if I’m walking on clouds as we head downstairs.

Chapter 42

Callan

I help carry the food to the table, and after we've all taken a seat, I say, "Help yourself, Eloise."

Looking at the incredible dinner Lily's prepared, Eloise compliments me, "You've got a very talented girlfriend, Callan."

"Thank you." I let out a proud chuckle.

Lily is rattled and clearly emotional, which has me picking up her plate and loading it with food. When I set it down, I lean into her and whisper, "Eat, baby."

Seeing my woman so happy fills my heart to the brim with satisfaction.

I open a bottle of wine and pour some into the glasses before helping myself to some food.

Eloise takes a bite of chicken, enjoyment washing over her face. "It's delicious." She glances at Lily. "I assume you're not signed with a gallery?"

Lily shakes her head. "I wanted to finish the collection before putting myself out there."

Pleased by Lily's reply, Eloise says, "Have you thought about the price you'd like to ask for each painting?"

Lily shakes her head. "I've done some research but don't know enough to make an informed decision."

Eloise takes a sip of her wine, but before she can speak, I say, "Lily's work will garner a lot of welcomed attention for your gallery. I suggest she pays your required fee and retains the sole rights to her work."

It means Lily gets every dollar paid for her paintings.

"You've always been such a shrewd businessman," she chastises me. "Are you open to negotiating?"

I nod, willing to hear her offer.

Eloise glances between Lily and me. "I'll pay five hundred thousand dollars upfront and keep thirty percent of every sale."

Lily gasps, her hand flying to her mouth.

"For thirty percent, Lily wants one million upfront." Eloise narrows her eyes at me, which has me saying, "You've seen her work. She's going to sell out instantly."

"Wait," Lily gasps. "Give me a second to process this." She grabs her glass of wine and takes a couple of sips before setting it down again. Clearing her throat, she says, "I still have to complete the final painting."

"It doesn't matter," Eloise murmurs. "I know it will be a masterpiece." She rests her elbows on the table and clasps her hands together. "I have an opening two weeks from now. It's from the Wednesday to Friday. I was going to use the time for a short vacation in Aspen, but I would much rather organize an exhibition for your collection."

“Two weeks,” Lily whispers, shocked by how fast everything is happening. “I...I...”

Locking my eyes on her face, I ask, “Will you be able to finish the last painting in two weeks?”

She shakes her head, and I can see her mind racing. “I can try...ah, if I work day and night, I’m sure I can make it.”

“Great, now we just have to agree on a price,” Eloise responds.

I give her a pointed look. “One million upfront for thirty percent.”

She stares at me long and hard before giving me her counteroffer, “Eight-hundred-and-fifty upfront. Thirty percent for every sale.”

My mouth curves in a satisfied smile as I turn my attention to Lily. “Are you happy with the deal?”

She shakes her head, and burying her face in her hands, she takes a couple of deep breaths before losing the battle and bursting into tears. “This is so surreal. I need a moment.”

I rub Lily’s back while giving Eloise a grateful smile and mouthing, *‘Thank you.’*

‘You’re welcome.’

When Lily gains control over her emotions, she looks at Eloise. “Thank you so much. This means everything to me.”

“Do you accept my offer?” Eloise asks her.

Lily nods frantically. “Yes! Yes.Yes.Yes.”

I let out a burst of laughter, and tugging Lily closer to me, I press a kiss to her temple.

“Wonderful. I’ll send over the paperwork tomorrow,” Eloise mentions before she continues eating.

Lily only manages to nibble on her food, which is understandable with the high she’s on.

Tonight turned out exactly as I’d hoped.

Enjoying the rest of the meal, the conversation revolves around art.

Eloise insists on viewing Lily’s artwork again before she heads to the elevator. “Thank you for a lovely evening.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I say as I press a kiss to her cheek.

Lily gives her a hug. “It was such a pleasure meeting you.”

“Likewise, Lily.” She presses the button to call the elevator and promises, “I’ll be in touch tomorrow.”

“Drive safely,” I mention, and when the doors shut behind her, I turn to face my deliriously happy woman.

Lily lets out a shriek and throws herself into my arms. “Oh my gosh, Callan! Thank you so much. This is a dream come true.”

“You’re welcome, but I didn’t do much. I just invited Eloise over. The rest was all you.”

Lily pulls back to look up at me. “You did all the negotiating.”

“Only because I have your best interests at heart.”

She lifts herself on her tiptoes and kisses the living hell out of me before pulling away and doing a little happy dance, which is the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen.

Chapter 43

Lily

How do I describe everything I'm feeling?

The past two weeks of my life have been a whirlwind of working, eating, sleeping, and more work.

And so much love and attention from Callan my heart can't contain all the happiness.

With the payment I received from Eloise, I don't have to worry about my finances. Even though Callan insists on paying for everything, it's still important for me to have my own income.

Staring at the last painting in my collection, I make sure I didn't miss a spot. My eyes caress the woman who's standing in a crowd of people, all with their backs turned to her.

All except one who's glancing at her from over his shoulder.

Callan.

I hear him sneak into the room as he's done hundreds of times over the past ten days.

My wrist is tender as I set the paintbrush down.

Realizing I'm done, a wave of emotion hits me. After two years of working on the collection, it's finally finished. I've

poured so many hours into my babies that part of me doesn't want to sell them.

“What do you think?” I whisper.

Callan moves closer, and placing his hands on my shoulders, he presses a kiss to the top of my head. “It's my favorite piece.”

“Why?”

“It shows hope instead of just loneliness.”

I point to the man. “That's you.”

Callan pulls me up from the stool and turns me around to face him. He frames my face and stares deep into my eyes, the intensity of his love wrapping me in a safe bubble.

Slowly, he lowers his head, and his lips brush over mine. His eyes meet mine again. “I love you.”

“I love you more than anything,” I whisper, my heart full and content.

Callan grips hold of my hips and lifts me against his body. I quickly wrap my arms around his neck, and as he carries me to our bedroom, I press kisses along his jaw.

He lays me down on the bed before pulling my leggings and underwear off.

While he pushes his sweatpants down his legs, I get rid of my T-shirt.

He's been careful with my wrist, and like before, he orders, “Spread out on the bed, baby. Arms above your head.”

I do as I'm told and scoot back on the bed. Lying down, I place my hands above my head and spread my legs as wide as possible.

Callan's eyes feast on me before he says, "Christ, you're a work of art."

He crawls over me, and when the weight of his naked body settles on top of me, I revel in how good it feels.

He rests a forearm beside my head, and his eyes are filled with love as he says, "Thank you for accepting me and all my shit."

"Your shit meshes well with my shit," I tease him.

A smirk lifts the corner of his mouth before he claims me in a passionate kiss. I feel him position his hardness at my opening, and with a hard thrust, he surges inside me.

Within seconds, I lose myself in Callan. My hips move with his, matching his thrusts while my moans and whimpers spill into his mouth.

When Callan pulls his hands away from my eyes, I blink before glancing around me.

My hands fly up to my mouth as I see my paintings hanging on the walls of The Eloise Torres Modern Art Gallery.

Someone pinch me.

Callan insisted on bringing the paintings, and Eloise and her team mounted them on the walls. There's a spotlight on

each art piece while the general lighting in the room is dimmed.

Lowering my hands, I grin like a fool, high on all the happiness I'm experiencing lately.

"Ten minutes until the doors open," someone calls out.

"Are you ready, baby?" Callan asks, his hand brushing over my lower back.

I shake my head. "I'll never be ready."

He lets out a chuckle and wraps his arm around my waist.

Eloise comes around a corner with a man who's carrying a camera. "There you are." She gives me a kiss on the cheek, then says, "This is Brian Walsh from the New York Times. He needs a photo of us before the doors open."

Holy shit. This is amazing!

I smooth out any wrinkles in my black silk dress while asking, "Where do you want me?"

I've been dealing much better with the sudden shock every time something good happens.

"In front of *Seclusion*," she orders.

It took Eloise and I an entire day to give each painting a name. It was freaking stressful.

"You too," I hiss at Callan when he doesn't walk with us.

He shakes his head. "This is your moment, baby."

I take a deep breath as I pose next to Eloise for my first official photo.

This will be in the New York Times. Everyone will see it.

Including my so-called family.

They will see that I've made a success of my art.

I smile, making sure my pride and happiness shine on my face.

The flash blinds me for a moment, then Brian says, “Thank you for your time, and congratulations on your first exhibition.”

“Thank you.”

“Opening in three...” someone calls out, “two...one.”

“Oh God.” I rush to Callan’s side and grip his hand tightly.

“You’ve got this, Lily.” He presses a kiss to my temple, then whispers, “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“You’re going to make me cry,” I hiss while trying to keep a smile on my face.

Slowly, people stroll into the room, and when I hear the first audible gasp, I blink like crazy to keep my eyes from blurring with tears.

Don't ruin your makeup!

Callan and I are standing near *First Glance*, the painting of us, as I look at the guests.

A couple stops in front of *The Summit* – the painting of the man on top of the pile of people he used to climb to the top.

Not even noticing what I’m doing, I slowly move closer so I can hear what they’re saying.

“Brilliant,” the man murmurs.

“It would look lovely in your office,” his partner remarks.

Letting out a chuckle, he glances at her. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Lillian!” A familiar voice tears my attention away from the couple.

Seeing Ridge, my former boss, I can’t keep a triumphant smile from forming on my face.

He hurries closer and gestures at my artwork. “Your work...it’s...” At a loss for words, he shakes his head before giving me a playful scowl. “You were holding out on me.”

“No.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You didn’t have time for me, remember?”

He laughs as if I told him the biggest joke. “That’s not true.”

“Sorry, Ridge. You’ll have to excuse me. I’m quite busy right now. Maybe I can make some time for you three years from now.”

Walking away from the absurd man, I return to Callan’s side.

He leans down, asking in a low voice, “Who’s that?”

“My idiot ex-boss.”

Callan wraps his arm protectively around my shoulders, and when a server comes to us, we help ourselves to a glass of champagne.

Eloise weaves elegantly between all the guests, a proud smile gracing her lips.

A man stops in front of *First Glance* and admires it for a while before signaling the sales representative closer. When he

talks to Nate, I can't hear what they say.

I met Nate when I came to sign the contract with Eloise. He's worked at the gallery for over ten years.

I watch as Nate shakes his head at the man before gesturing at some of the other paintings.

The man looks disappointed and quickly hurries toward *The Summit*.

Stepping closer, I take hold of Nate's forearm. "What did he ask?"

Nate smiles and explains, "He wanted to purchase First Glance, but it's already sold." His smile widens. "Along with Seclusion and Fundamentals of Destruction."

A shockwave ripples over me.

I've sold three paintings.

Oh my God.

I swing to Callan with a huge smile. "Three!"

He pulls me closer to him. "Congratulations, Lily."

Eloise brings a couple to introduce to us, and soon, my head is spinning with everyone telling me how much they love my art.

I'm bombarded with people, doing my best to answer all their questions.

Every now and then, Callan pushes a bottle of water into my hand with the command that I take a sip.

The evening is such a success until my eyes land on two familiar faces. The blood instantly chills in my veins, and I

hurry toward them.

Sophia, the person who gave birth to me, smiles cautiously when I'm near them. "Darling, you should've told us you were having an exhibition. It broke my heart to read about it in the paper."

"Get out," I hiss.

A comedic expression flits over her face. "Lillian, we're here –"

"Out! Now!" I whisper-shout.

"Leave before I have security throw you out," Callan threatens from behind me.

Oliver and Sophia rush to the door, and I follow after them to make sure they leave.

When we step out of the gallery, I settle a scolding glare on them. "How dare you come to my exhibition!"

"We wanted to show our support," Sophia exclaims, visibly shaken. "We've realized we've been a tad harsh with you."

Are you freaking kidding me?

When Sophia opens her mouth again, I hold up my hand to silence her.

Looking at Oliver, I demand, "I want to hear the words from your mouth."

He's clearly upset but surprises me by saying, "I might've been too hard on you."

Slowly, I shake my head at them. “You’re only here to take credit for my success, which I sure as hell will not allow. I meant it when I said I never wanted anything to do with you again. Don’t ever come near me again.”

Turning around, I bump into Callan. He quickly wraps an arm around me while his eyes burn on Oliver and Sophia. “If you ever try to contact Lily again, I’ll make sure everyone knows how fucking corrupt you are.”

He ushers me inside, and giving me a concerned look, he asks, “Are you okay?”

Surprisingly, I am.

The corner of my mouth lifts as I let out a pent-up breath. “I’m better than okay.”

Walking back to my exhibition, I quickly forget about the unpleasantness as I bask in all the praise for my paintings.

When there’s a lull in the evening, I glance at my babies, and knowing they’ve all found new homes makes this experience bitter-sweet.

“I wonder who the buyers are?” I mention to Callan.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

Slowly, people trickle out of the room until only the buyers remain to pay for their purchases.

Pulling away from Callan, I take a moment in front of every painting to say goodbye.

I remember the endless hours I poured into creating the collection and the tears I cried, thinking no one would love them.

The last piece I stop by is *First Glance*. My teeth tug on my bottom lip as I fight the tears.

Callan wraps his arms around me, and with his chest pressing against my back, he whispers, “I bought First Glance.”

I spin around in his arms. “You did?”

When he nods, I throw my arms around his neck and hug the living hell out of him. “God, Callan. And here I was, saying bye to my baby.”

He lets out a chuckle. “Our baby.” He brushes a stubborn curl away from my face. “I want to make it a tradition to buy one from every collection you create.”

God. My heart.

“I’m the luckiest woman alive,” I murmur as I stare up at the man who’s only brought happiness to my life.

“I’ll remind you of that when you’re angry with me,” he teases before pressing a quick kiss to my mouth.

Chapter 44

Callan

Pulling into Dad's driveway, I can feel the nervous tension coming from Lily.

"Relax, baby. They're going to love you."

"Uh-huh," she mumbles.

I get out and walk around the front of the Bugatti to open the passenger door. When Lily climbs out, her eyes dart over the typical suburban house.

After I became a billionaire, I offered to buy Dad a new house, but he wouldn't hear of it.

I take Lily's hand and lead her to the front door. Before I knock, Dad pulls it open, a big smile on his face. "Finally."

He pulls Lily into a hug before pushing her back so he can look her up and down. "You're too beautiful for the likes of my son," he jokes.

"Are they here?" I hear Ellie call out. She comes rushing down the hallway as we step into the house and almost plows Lily off her feet.

"Careful," I mutter.

"I'm so glad to meet you," Ellie tells Lily. "I told Callan if he didn't bring you around, I'd break into his apartment."

Lily lets out a chuckle. “Hi, Ellie.” She glances at everyone. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Naomi joins us, and I have to wait as everyone talks to Lily before I’m able to pull her back to my side.

Dad looks at us with a twinkle of mischievousness in his eyes. “I was starting to think Callan was never going to bring a girl home. I have so many embarrassing stories to tell you.”

“Dad,” I grumble.

“Don’t shush your father,” Lily chastises me. She walks closer to Dad, and hooking her arm through his, she says, “Tell me everything.”

With a smile curving my lips, I follow them into the living room, and when Dad sits down next to Lily, I have no choice but to sit on the recliner.

Ellie slides up to my side and whispers, “She’s so pretty. Did you talk to her?”

I nod. “Lily’s fine with you staying with us while you study.”

Ellie’s face brightens up at the news. “She is?”

“Yes. She’s actually looking forward to it.”

“I’m so happy!” Ellie gives me a quick hug before moving to sit on the armrest next to Lily. “Callan told me the good news,” she interrupts their conversation.

“What good news?” Lily asks.

“That it’s okay if I stay with you,” Ellie explains.

“Oh.” A smile spreads over my woman’s face. “I can’t wait. It will be fun.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Naomi goes to open it.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” I hear Harper say.

I get up as Harper and Daniel enter the living room, and I shake Daniel’s hand. “I’m glad you’re here. I need your help silencing my father. He’s telling Lily all my embarrassing moments.”

Daniel lets out a burst of laughter. “Hell no, brother. I’m here for the show.”

We all find a place to sit, and I watch as Lily gets to know the important people in my life. They keep vying for her attention, which has me smiling.

“Callan.” My eyes turn to Harper, then she says, “We need to talk about the meeting –”

A chorus of ‘no’ fills the air.

“No talking about work,” Dad orders with a stern look at Harper and me.

We both start to laugh because they fall for the same thing every time. It’s Harper’s favorite way to get them riled up.

“Let’s move to the dining room,” Naomi says before hurrying back to the kitchen.

I follow after her and help by carrying the massive golden brown turkey to the table.

When I take a seat next to Lily, I grip her hand beneath the table and lean in to whisper, “How are you holding up?”

Her eyes sparkle with happiness as she admits, “It’s amazing. Your family is so welcoming.”

Knowing they’ve already accepted Lily, I correct her, “*Our* family.”

Lily

Henry, Callan’s father, clears his throat, then says, “I’ll start.” The room grows quiet before he continues, “I’m thankful for my family, their health, and the delicious food my beautiful wife prepared.”

When I walked into the house, I felt overwhelmed, but they’ve all gone out of their way to make me feel welcome.

The atmosphere is loving and peaceful, which is something I never experienced growing up. Our Thanksgivings were always stiff, as if we were all attending a business meeting.

“I’m thankful I didn’t burn the turkey,” Naomi says, then she glances lovingly around the table. “And I’m thankful for another year with my loved ones.”

“My turn.” Ellie clears her throat. “I’m thankful I’m almost done with school.”

“You still have college,” Callan mutters beside me.

She levels Callan with a scowl. “You know what I mean.”

Daniel is next, but Harper has to elbow him before he says, “I’m thankful you’re all here to witness how Harper abuses

me.”

She gives him a shocked expression.

He lets out a chuckle. “I’m thankful for my wife, who’s the most amazing woman I know.”

“That’s better,” she mutters playfully before saying, “I’m thankful the company’s tenth-anniversary celebration is over and that it went well.”

“Christ, you and me both,” Callan agrees. He gives my hand a squeeze and locks eyes with me. “I’m thankful that somehow I got you to fall in love with me.”

I grin at Callan until I realize it’s my turn.

Oh shit.

I glance at everyone, and still trying to think of something to say, the truth spills over my lips, “I’m just thankful Callan agreed to escort me to dinner.”

“He jumped on your application like white on rice,” Harper mentions, making everyone laugh.

Henry gets up and starts to cut pieces off the turkey, then places a couple of slices on everyone’s plate.

The conversation starts to flow, and I get lost in watching Callan’s family and friends tease each other.

“Lily,” Naomi says to get my attention. When I look at her, she asks, “Have you always wanted to be an artist?”

Nodding, I smile wide. “Yes. For as long as I can remember.”

“Callan says you’re busy working on commissioned pieces?” Harper asks.

I let out a chuckle. “I’ve had so many requests I’ve had to decline most of them because I’m also working on my next collection.”

It makes me think about my painting Callan purchased and how *First Glance* is proudly hanging in our living room.

I want to create another one in my Joys of Live collection that’s just for Callan and me.

As we begin to eat, Callan leans into me. “Love you, baby.”

With my head close to his, I whisper, “I’m thankful for finding you and all the strength you’ve given me to become the person I am today.”

He presses a tender kiss beneath my ear.

I’m thankful for all the success I’ve had in such a short amount of time.

I’m thankful Callan’s family and friends seem to like me.

Mostly, I’m thankful I get to love Callan Wright. He could’ve had any woman, but he chose me.

Epilogue

Lily

(One year later...)

Standing in the middle of the room with Eloise, I point to our left. “I think *Unforgettable* should hang there.”

She takes a deep breath as she gives the spot a critical look, then says, “I think you’re right.” She gestures for Nate to hang the piece, and when he steps away from it, we stare at the painting.

I painted *Unforgettable* for Callan.

It shows a woman drowning in words and sentences. They’re slurs and insults meant to break her down. But there’s a man gripping her hand and pulling her out.

I strategically placed forget-me-not flowers beneath certain words, and if you read them, it says, ‘*You make me feel unforgettable.*’

“Perfect,” Eloise murmurs, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I glance around the room, all set for my next exhibition that starts tomorrow.

I’ve worked my butt off to get the collection done in time, and looking at my paintings, pride fills my chest.

I let out a deep breath, then smile at Eloise. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Go home and get some rest.”

She waves a hand in the air. “I have a couple of things still to do.” She begins to walk in the direction of her office. “Say hi to Callan for me.”

“I will.”

When I’m alone in the room, I look at my paintings once more before heading to the exit. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, I’m surprised to see Callan waiting for me. He’s leaning against his Bugatti, checking something on his phone.

Dressed in his usual three-piece suit, my man looks as hot as ever.

“Hi.” I give him a playful look. “Please tell me you’re single. I’d like to take you out for a drink.”

He catches on fast, and shakes his head at me. “I’m taken by a gorgeous woman.”

I scrunch my nose, pretending to look disappointed. “Such a bummer.”

He catches my hand and tugs me against his chest, then murmurs, “Hey, baby.”

I press a kiss to his mouth. “I missed you.”

“Not half as much as I missed your sexy ass.” He opens the door for me and waits for me to get into the car before shutting it.

After he gets in behind the steering wheel and pulls away from the curb, he asks, “Is everything ready for tomorrow?”

I nod, tired from the long day's work. "After the exhibition, I want to sleep for a week."

His eyes flick to my face. "You need some time off."

Silence falls between us, and I almost drift to sleep when Callan brings the Bugatti to a stop in our parking bay.

I sigh as I climb out, and taking his hand, we head to the elevator.

Resting my head against his bicep, I watch the numbers as we're taken to our apartment, and when the doors slide open, my jaw drops to the floor.

"Oh, my God," I whisper as I look at the foyer.

Red rose petals are scattered on the tiles to form an aisle, and as I walk down the path, I see the living room has been cleared of our furniture.

My hands fly to my mouth while my eyes feast on the fairy lights hanging everywhere. There's an intimate round table in the middle of the room.

"Callan," I breathe. When my eyes find him, they instantly blur from the sight of Callan on one knee.

With his eyes filled with the intensity of his love for me, he says, "Your hand is the only hand I want to hold. Your mouth is the only mouth I want to kiss. Your soul is the only soul I want to cherish."

He rises to his full height and steps closer to me as I try to smother a sob.

"I can buy anything my heart desires...anything but you."

He opens the small box, and seeing the beautiful diamond ring, I give up on fighting the tears and let them flow freely.

“I’m asking you to give yourself to me. To spend every day of your life with me. To love me above all others.”

I begin to nod even though he’s not done proposing.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “After the first time we made love, you said yes to marrying me.”

I let out a burst of laughter. “God. Thanks for that reminder.”

His smile widens. “So I owe you a question...”

Looking at him with anticipation, Callan drags the freaking moment out before he asks, “Will you marry me, Lily?”

Darting forward, I throw my arms around his neck. “Yes. A million times, yes.”

Callan holds me for a few seconds before letting go. “I need to see my ring on your finger.”

Laughter bubbles from me as I watch him slip the stunning diamond onto my ring finger.

“Perfect,” he whispers before framing my face with his hands and crushing my mouth beneath his.

Callan

(Five years later...)

Standing next to Dad while he grills some steaks, I say, “Did you read the paper this morning?”

“No.” He gives me a questioning look. “What did I miss?”

“Judge Harrison has been exposed for the corrupted bastard he is. Apparently he’s under investigation for taking countless bribes.”

Dad’s eyebrows fly into his hairline. “Well, it’s about time.”

“Yeah.” I stare at the sizzling meat, feeling a sense of justice after so many years.

Lily didn’t even bat an eye when she heard the news and just muttered that he got what he deserved.

The women come out of the house with salads, plates, and cutlery. My eyes lock on Lily’s glowing face, and it makes the corner of my mouth lift.

She’s twenty-two weeks pregnant with our first child, and as soon as the steaks are done, we’re shooting fireworks that will reveal the gender of our unborn baby.

I’m a little nervous. Don’t ask me why. It doesn’t matter whether we have a boy or a girl as long as our baby is healthy.

Walking to my wife, I wrap an arm around her waist and place my hand over her growing pregnant belly. I press a kiss to her temple, then ask, “Are you nervous?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m excited. I want to stop calling our baby all kinds of fruit and give him or her a name.”

As I chuckle, Dad says, “Steaks are ready. I’m just letting them rest in the oven. Be back now.”

My heartbeat speeds up as we wait for Dad to return from the kitchen.

Lily leans into my side, and tilting her head back, she looks up at the night sky.

“Okay. Let’s get this show on the road,” Dad says as he joins us again.

He comes to stand next to us while Daniel checks that the fireworks are ready. He grins at us. “Three...” The fucker pauses for way too long. “Two...”

“Light it already,” Lily laughs. “You’re killing us with the suspense.”

“One...” Daniel lights the fuse and darts away from the fireworks.

There’s a whistling sound, and the next second, the fireworks explode into the sky. At first, it’s yellow, and with another bang, blue rains down on us.

Christ.

My eyes instantly mist up, and grabbing Lily, I hug the fucking shit out of her.

“We’re having a boy!” she shrieks in my ear.

Dad pats my back, and soon, we’re surrounded by our excited friends and family.

Not caring, I frame Lily’s face and press a hard kiss to her mouth.

Her eyes shine up at me as she whispers, “We’re having a boy.”

“I know.” I’m so fucking emotional when I say, “Dylan.”

She nods, tears spiraling down her cheeks. “Dylan.”

I sink to my knees in front of her and press a kiss to her stomach.

We’re naming you after Daddy’s best friend.

I can’t wait to meet you, my boy.

When I rise to my feet again, Lily wraps her arms around my neck and rests her cheek against my chest.

Letting out a contented sigh, she says, “Thank you for giving me this unforgettable life.” She watches as our family and friends celebrate our good news, then whispers, “We have a beautiful family.”

“We do,” I agree.

The End.

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Acknowledgments

Michelle: When Sheldon brought Tayla home the first time, I couldn't fathom how important she would become to me. Yes, we're mother & daughter-in-law, but she's also my best friend, my soulmate, my comfort person. That's why the first book I'm co-writing is with her. We wanted to share something special with you all.

Tayla: Michelle, in many ways, became my Callan. My strength and voice of reason – she protects and loves me unconditionally. She's my best friend, and before her and Sheldon, I was forgettable. With her, there's not a moment where I don't feel important because she makes me feel unforgettable.

Thank you to Sheena, our editor, who has nerves of steel with all the deadlines whooshing past us. Thank you for putting up with us.

To our alpha and beta readers – Leeann, Brittney, Sherrie, and Sarah thank you for being the godparents of our paper-baby.

Candi Kane PR - Thank you for getting our book out there.

Michelle's street team, thank you for promoting our book. It means the world to us!

A special thank you to every blogger and reader who took the time to participate in the cover reveal and release day.

Tayla & Michelle.