



vow to the
DEVIL

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VIVIAN WOOD

Vow To The Devil

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

VIVIAN WOOD

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Chapter One

DARE

I t's growing dark. The pregnancy announcement party has long since been canceled. My relatives are gone; I would be, too, but I can't bring myself to leave the last place that I saw my heavily pregnant wife before she was kidnapped.

The dregs of the party mill around in the mostly empty ballroom, trying to leech the last drops of gossip from the event before they leave. The sparkling conversation and elegant laughter are gone from the grand ballroom, as is the jazz trio playing in the corner. Now all that remains is the hushed crinkle of women's crinolines and the whispered undertones of tuxedoed men.

I'm standing against the opposite wall from the ballroom's entrance, staring at it as though I can make Talia walk through it by sheer will. I know that she can't. I am all too aware of the fact that my twin brother Burn has been missing from the party for almost exactly the same length of time as Talia.

At this moment, I clutch her phone, the only evidence that she didn't go willingly. And all the while, I curse my brother's existence.

I know that motherfucker took my wife from me. I should have killed him the last time he touched her. Now I may not get the chance.

Fury and anxiety swirl in the pit of my stomach like acid.

"You don't look well, hon."

I glance up to see who is addressing me. An older lady I don't know veers toward me; her sympathetic expression

overlays what I know is the extremely curious beast beneath pawing for any crumb of information.

Rob steps out between us, effectively blocking me from the woman and her pitying smile. He holds out a hand to ward her off. “Mr. Morgan needs to be left alone, ma’am.”

Panic claws at my throat, squeezing the breath from my lungs. I turn away from the woman, my thoughts cyclical.

Where are Talia and Burn? What has Burn done with my wife?

My pulse pounds a staccato rhythm in my temples as a dozen horrific scenarios flash through my mind. Burn’s always hated Talia, blaming her somehow for the tension between us. And now he’s stolen her away, seeking revenge by kidnapping my wife from the middle of the crowd. My hands curl into fists, rage simmering beneath my skin. I’ll kill him if he’s hurt her.

No, I’ll kill him anyway. It’s the only way I can truly protect Talia.

The remaining guests continue to stand awkwardly in small clumps, whispering and watching my every move. My family have always been masters of deception, hiding our darkest secrets behind a veneer of civility and wealth. But now there is a big, juicy kidnapping for the muckrakers to feed on. It’s irresistible.

I pace the room, my eyes scanning every shadowed corner and alcove. But there’s no sign of them. Of course there won’t be, but I’m going out of my mind. My breath comes in ragged gasps as panic and fury war within me.

Where have you taken her, Burn? What have you done?

It’s a question that reverberates through my headline a faraway echo. I make a dark promise.

I swear, if you don’t bring her back to me now, you’ll regret the day you were born. This is a mistake you will not live to regret.

I grab Rob by the arm, my fingers biting into his slender wrist. “Where are you on tracking Burn’s phone?”

“We’re trying to make contact with his service provider.”

I look down into Rob’s face, snarling. “Move heaven and earth if you have to. Promise whoever helps us to find him a fortune.”

He blanches at the menace in my tone but nods. He pulls out his phone and disappears. But sure enough, when he returns, he waves a hand at me.

“We’ve tracked Burn’s phone to a remote island off the coast of Maine. It’s been still for half an hour now, so we’re pretty sure he’s stopped there.”

My heart thuds dully in my chest. I clutch Talia’s cell phone.

“Fuck. He’s on our family’s private island. My mother is buried there.”

Rob does a double take. “Are you sure? He could be—”

“I know Burn,” I say, cutting him off mid-sentence. A strange icy numbness spreads through my core. “He’s taken her there.”

“How do we get there?” Rob asks.

“Get my helicopter ready. I’m going alone.”

He opens his mouth to ask another question, then catches the intensity on my face. He closes his mouth and turns to send a text to my helicopter pilot.

Burn means to finish what he started all those years ago. But he won’t get the chance.

I’m coming for you, Talia. And this time, Burn won’t escape his fate.

Chapter Two

TALIA

The engine roars as the speedboat races up the coast. The icy sea spray stings my face. Chilly air fills my lungs as I exhale, almost as if it were providing me with the energy I need to keep going. I watch as the bright sunlight dances across the ocean, the waves lapping against the sides of the boat like a symphony in motion. It is beautiful, but I can't focus on it for long.

It's hard to forget the violent kidnapping I just went through only hours ago. I shiver against the crisp, briny breeze as I replay it in my memory. I squeeze my eyes closed and wrap my hand around my pregnant belly; the memory is sharp and harrowing.

My eyes open and slide from the endless blue ocean over to my captor. Burn stands at the helm of the speedboat, looking startlingly like his twin brother. As he put his hand over my mouth and whispered threats to get me to board the boat, I couldn't help but notice that he even *smells* like Dare.

Burn turns just a hair to see that I am still slumped against the leather seat behind him. There is a glint of satisfaction that I see in his eyes that gives me a chill. A glint that my husband Dare would have given me not so very long ago. It fills my heart with icy dread.

I swallow, touching the delicate skin covering my windpipe. My throat burns from screaming for help. But now that we're on the sea, no one will hear me out here.

The main question in my mind is how the hell I am supposed to escape this time. I cast my gaze around. It lands

on Burn's crumpled black tuxedo jacket carelessly thrown on the seat beside me. I narrow my focus and scoot toward it, wondering if there might be a cell phone tucked inside.

Burn grips the wheel, turning his head briefly to glance at me. "Don't do it."

I flush. "Do what?"

My voice comes out as a surprising croak. Burn shakes his head and stares straight ahead.

"Whatever you're thinking of, Talia. I can practically hear you trying to think of a way off this boat. I'm telling you, don't even bother cooking up a plan."

I scowl at him, my fingers curling into fists. "You can't keep me on this boat forever, Burn. I was at my own party when you kidnapped me. Eventually, your brother will notice that I've gone missing and come looking for me."

Burn chuckles darkly, his eyes remaining fixed on the horizon. "I'd like to see him try."

"What do you want? Where are you taking me?" I yell at him, exasperated and hoarse.

He shrugs a shoulder. Indignation floods my chest. I rise up and lurch toward him. I'm unsure what I intend to do, but I'm full to the gills with ire and fury.

He turns, letting go of the helm, and uses a single big paw to shove me back. I tumble backward onto the deck, falling on my ass with an undignified *whoof*. After the initial moment of shock, my entire backside throbs.

Burn extends a finger and grits his teeth. "Sit down and be a good little wife or I'll make you wish you had listened."

I scramble onto my knees, my backside burning. Getting back onto my seat is awkward and embarrassing. My entire body is ungainly, my pregnancy getting in the way. I heave myself back into my seat and scowl.

The shore is a thin gray line, fading into the distance. Panic rises in my chest. There's no escape, no help coming. I'm truly at the mercy of this madman.

Burn glances over his shoulder, a smug smirk on his face.

I can feel his eyes on me, like he's taking pleasure in my fear. A shiver runs down my spine, but I refuse to let him see me cower. "What do you want from me?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly.

Burn turns back to face the sea, his expression unreadable. "Dare was too blind to see what a manipulative little witch you are. But I know. I have had my eye on you since you appeared in Dare's life."

"You're insane." I struggle to stand, bracing against the railing. The boat leaps onto another wave, pitching me sideways.

"I'm the father of your baby."

My eyes widen. My mouth goes dry.

How could he possibly know?

"What?" I stammer. "That's crazy."

Even to my own ears, my protests sound flimsy and forced.

Burn erupts with a chilling laugh. "For a deceptive whore, you're terrible at lying. You might as well not even pretend. My memory of our night together might be hazy. But I have proof."

He pulls a folded piece of stock paper out of his pocket. He flings the paper at me haphazardly; it catches on the breeze and flutters up, tumbling across the back of the boat.

Out of sheer luck, I'm able to stick my hand out and catch it before it flies off the back. I glare at Burn's back as I unfold it, thinking that the paper could easily have been lost forever.

When I look down at the paper, my breath screeches to a halt inside my lungs. It's a photo booth reel of four quick images that feature two drunk girls stacked on the laps of two brawny guys. Everyone is dressed to the nines and laughing hysterically; from the flush in their faces and the slightly disjointed gazes, I can see that they are extremely drunk.

Olivia and I are the two women, without question. In half of the pictures, Burn and his friend are obscured by Olivia and I grinning at the camera. But in the bottom two photos, we have sat back... and I am clearly sitting on Burn's lap, laughing and having the night of my life.

A sense memory leaps forward in my mind. Burn teased me and tickled me to get me to lean back and let him be in the photo. I remember the cool swish of his suit pants against the bare skin of my back thighs. A cacophony of raucous laughter. The feeling of Burn's fingers tightening around my waist. The almost imperceptible sound of my fingernails scrabbling at Burn's clothed thighs.

"Oh," I say. The word is so small it's almost lost in the wind that whips around my head.

Burn snorts. "Yeah, *oh*. I can't believe my brother is such a fucking idiot. He's going to kill you when he finds out that he's not the father. I hope you're ready for the approaching storm."

I open my mouth to fire back a retort. But he just holds up a hand to silence me.

"We're almost to where we're going. Sit back and keep your mouth shut or I'll dump you overboard and let you drown."

Chapter Three

TALIA

When Burn finally helps me down onto a creaky dock, dusk is falling over the landscape. The rocks that jut out around the spot where he moors the boat throw creepy shadows. My mouth is pinched and my eyes rove constantly as I try to figure out where Burn has brought me.

The tip of the island is gray and rocky. As I follow Burn down the well-worn footpath, we are quickly engulfed in tall, fragrant evergreen trees. I suck in a breath of briny air. Burn could be leading me anywhere along the north Atlantic coast. Tears press at my eyes.

Where the fuck am I? I press my hands to my pregnant stomach, feeling my child moving restlessly inside. Thinking that the baby knows when I'm stressed, I try to calm the thrum of my pounding heart.

Burn doesn't bother looking over his shoulder when he speaks. He knows I'm still following his footsteps. "Come on. We're almost there."

I slow my steps, grimacing at Burn's back. All around us, the wind rustles the evergreen trees. Birds chirp. I can see the blue sky above and the endless dusty brown trail that we seem to be walking. But for the life of me, I can't figure out where we are.

Then the tree line thins as dramatically as it began. I step out from under the shelter of the last few trees and see a ramshackle cabin tucked in between two gentle hills. It's beside a peaceful, placid lake, hidden away from sight. The

lake is surrounded on three sides by rolling green hills and looks like something out of a movie.

I scrunch my face up, a strange sense of recognition rolling through me. I'm almost certain that I've been here. "Where are we?"

Burn snorts. "You don't get to ask questions, Talia."

He keeps walking, making a beeline for the little cabin. The structure is the same color as the dusty ground around it and the roof looks like it might fall in at any moment.

The cabin is small, a single story, built in the early 1800s. Though the outside is rotting and it's in serious need of a paint job, it still manages to look quaint, albeit run down.

There is a rusted tin roof in desperate need of repair, thick discolored glass for the windows, heavy, threadbare curtains, and paint peeling from the logs and rotting wood siding.

Once you get past the summer weeds, you see the pine logs that make up the cabin. They're weathered and worn, but it's clear this was once a place of beauty.

I follow Burn, anxiety beginning to build inside my chest as I close in.

Burn swings the cabin's door open, waving a hand at the plume of dust that rises in the air.

"After you, Mrs. Morgan."

His words hit me like he's plunged a knife into my heart. My hands tremble as I move forward, reaching out to the door. The door creaks when I pull it open, one of the hinges threatening to break in protest.

I step into the dim interior. There is no electricity, and my eyes have to adjust to the dim light from the doorway. The cabin is musty and dark, cobwebs clinging to the rafters. An old cot and a scarred table are the only furniture. Burn shoves me inside, the door creaking shut behind us.

"Please," I whisper. I turn to Burn, pleading with him. "You can still let me go."

“Not a chance.” He folds his arms, smug satisfaction etched into his features. “You’re going to stay right here until Dare comes to his senses.”

“My husband will come for me,” I say.

Burn moves toward me and for a second I fear that he’s about to hit me. But he moves past me and pulls out a silver lighter, lighting a kerosene lamp that hangs on the wall.

I clamp my mouth shut, staring at the floor. Do I really believe that Dare will rescue me from this lunatic?

Yes. I have to believe that he will come for me.

The light from the lamp is feeble, but it’s something. I turn, gazing at the space around me. The cabin is small with two windows facing the lake and a small fireplace in the corner.

“You’re a fucking idiot if you think he’ll come for you,” Burn growls, almost to himself. “And if he does, I’m ready to tell him the truth about the baby’s conception. He deserves to be told that I’m the father of your baby.”

“He already knows the truth!” I blurt out. Desperation and fury war inside me. “He’s known all along. It was his idea to deceive you in the first place.”

A tic pulses in Burn’s jaw and his eyes Burn into mine. “Bullshit.”

“You think I dreamed this whole thing up by myself and forced him into it? No one forces Dare Morgan into anything he doesn’t want to do.”

He sneers. “Liar. You manipulated him into believing your lies. But I won’t give up so easily.” He stalks toward me, backing me against the wall.

I shrink away, pulse racing. All my senses are on high alert and I have the distracting thought that Burn smells clean and masculine like Dare. Burn sees the conflict in my eyes and pounces on it.

“You want me,” he says softly. “I can see it in your eyes. And once Dare realizes you’ve moved on, he’ll be free of your

toxic influence.”

Revulsion rises in my throat. “I don’t want you. I had sex with you once, sure. But then I met Dare. I wish... I wish I’d met him first.”

He grabs my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. His eyes blaze with obsession. “You’re mine, Talia. You always have been, and you always will be. Deny it all you like, but we both know the truth.”

I wrench away, nausea churning my stomach. “The only truth is that you’re insane.”

Burn’s expression hardens. “You’ll change your tune soon enough.”

He turns on his heel and stalks out, slamming the door behind him. The sound of a heavy lock clicks into place, sealing me in my prison. Alone, with only the small lamp for solace. No escape to be had and no hope of salvation.

Burn has won this round.

Chapter Four

TALIA

I jolt awake at the sound of the door handle rattling. The first light of day creeps in through the window, and I see a silhouette of a figure standing in the doorway. Burn. He's here to take me back home.

He storms into the cabin, his face twisted with anger and accusation. "Get up."

I clutch my knees to my chest, suddenly feeling vulnerable and exposed in my wrinkled dress in sharp contrast with his muscular form dressed all in black. He strides across the room and stands over me, his eyes blazing hot with fury I can feel like an inferno between us. My pulse thunders in my ears and I stifle a scream of fear as he grabs my arm roughly and pulls me up from the bed.

He hauls open the door then turns back to grab my hand, pulling me out into the crisp morning air before I can even protest or think twice about what is happening.

His grip on my arm is bruising, but I don't struggle. What's the point? I'm trapped in this godforsaken place with a madman.

My stomach rumbles. It's been more than twelve hours since I ate or drank anything and I'm starting to feel lightheaded.

Not that Burn cares at all. He pushes me in front of him, frog marching me down toward the lake with ruthless silence. We head toward a small dock on which another black power boat is moored.

Apparently, we are going for a ride. I keep my mouth shut and clamber aboard. It is useless to resist. I choose to save my energy for escape.

Burn starts the engine, pointing to the seat beside his. Then he steers us across the still lake. Burn fishes in his pockets and throws a few protein bars in my lap.

I rip into one, devouring the whole thing in less than a minute. It tastes like sticky dirt, but I suppose that beggars can't be choosers. I try to think about where I can store the other two bars. In my bra?

My gaze slides toward Burn and I think better of it. I hold the bars close for the time being.

The icy wind cuts through my thin clothes, but I barely feel the cold. I'm numb inside. Is this what it feels like when you start to go crazy?

After a few minutes, Burn cuts the engine and the boat glides to a stop.

"Look." He points toward a small island, hardly as large as a swimming pool.

I shade my eyes and gaze at it. A chill runs down my spine, but I don't know why. The island is pristine, untouched by humanity. In its center is a tranquil lake, reflecting the pale sky. And at the very center is a corroded gray angel and a gravestone that has her name, birth date, and death date. Below it all, there is an inscription stamped into the stone. I can't quite make it out from here, though.

My eyes widen. My breath leaves me in a *whoosh*. Even without being able to read the epitaph, I can guess whose grave we are looking at. "Is that...?"

"My mother's grave," Burn says softly. He's still for several long beats of my heart, emotions flitting over his face. "Dare hasn't visited since the funeral. But this is the one place I know he'll never look for you."

Revulsion and fear curdle in my stomach. Bile rises in my throat, and I swallow hard, struggling not to retch. "You plan to hide me in a grave?"

Burn rolls his eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic. I’m going to keep you in the cabin we just left.”

My nausea subsides, but his answer isn’t exactly satisfying. “Ah,” I say faintly.

If Burn notices my discomfort, he doesn’t comment on it. His gaze bores into me, cold and hard as stone. “Dare abandoned me when I needed him most. He was never there for me, but I was always there for him.” His voice breaks, raw with remembered anguish. “When they told us our mother had died, he crumbled. I tried to comfort him, but he pushed me away. He left me all alone.”

I stare at him, aching with pity I don’t dare show. The little boy inside Burn, desperate for his brother’s love, refuses to perish. If only Dare had been there for him, instead of leaving him to face such grief alone. Maybe then Burn wouldn’t have become so twisted, obsessed with possessing what he cannot have...

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

It’s the truth, though I know Burn will never believe it. I see now the wounds that shaped him, the scars that time cannot heal. And I wonder if there’s any way left to save him...or if he’s already too far gone.

Burn bleats a laugh and then turns the boat around, rushing me back to the shore. He ushers me inside the cabin, his hand clamped around my arm. Inside, he releases me and strides to the fireplace, adding logs to the dwindling fire.

Flames leap up, casting a ruddy glow over his face. Then he turns to me, eyes gleaming.

Burn stops a few feet from me, his gaze searing my skin. I feel no fear. Instead, an unfamiliar heat surges through me, coiling tight in my core.

“You’re mine now,” he says softly. “You and the baby both belong to me.”

My mouth goes dry as I stare up at him. He’s so close I can feel the warmth radiating off his body. His eyes bore into me

like twin lasers, burning away all semblance of reason and logic.

I should be terrified—but instead I'm strangely drawn to him, like a moth to a flame.

He is so like his brother. I could almost close my eyes and pretend...

Burn reaches out and takes my hand, his fingers wrapping around mine in a gentle yet possessive grip. His touch ignites something inside me that has long been dormant— a forgotten spark of desire that had been smothered by fear and loneliness. Tears sting my eyes as he pulls me close, and before I know it, I'm melting against him, pressing my body into his as if there is no other place on earth for us to be but together.

He leans down and tries to brush his lips against mine. My body wants him, confused at his scent, his shape, his likeness to Dare.

But deep inside, I know that he is not my husband. So at the last moment, I flinch away from his kiss, squirming to free myself from his grip.

He hisses angrily.

Burn cages me in, hands planted on either side of my head.

"I'm the better twin," he rasps. His breath smells like clean mint, just like Dare's. "You know you want me. I'm the one you came to that night. I'm the one who gave you what you needed."

Revulsion rises in my throat like bile. I shake my head, shrinking away from his scorching touch. "No. I don't want you. I was drunk and confused, and you took advantage—"

I twist away from him, fear slicing through me. He reaches for me again, but I manage to scramble out of his grasp and stumble away. My heart beats wildly as I stare at him, my breath coming in short gasps.

Burn's face is a mask of rage as he stares at me. His jaw clenches and unclenches as if he's fighting to keep himself

from lashing out. Finally, he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly before speaking.

“You’re mine,” he says in a low voice. “No matter what you claim, I know the truth. You feel the same heat for me that I feel for you.”

My mouth goes dry at his words, but I refuse to back down. Summoning all my courage, I take a step forward and look him in the eye.

“I will never want you,” I say firmly. “I’m in love with Dare. Nothing you say or do will ever change that. My heart belongs to him.”

Rage flashes across his face like lightning, twisting his features into an ugly mask of hatred. He grabs my shoulders and shakes me so hard my teeth rattle.

“You’re mine!” he roars as his grip tightens painfully around my arms. “You belong to me, and no one will ever take you away!”

Dizzy and breathless with terror, I can only shake my head. Burn’s grip tightens until his fingers dig into my flesh, and he leans down, mouth seeking mine in a punishing kiss. I struggle wildly, fighting for air and freedom, but his hold is unbreakable.

Darkness crowds the edges of my vision. A single thought beats in my mind like a drum.

Dare, where are you? I need you. Please find me...

Chapter Five

DARE

The helicopter blades slice through the air above me as I leap from the open door, hitting the sandy ground and rolling forward to lessen the impact. I spring to my feet, eyes scanning the surroundings, heart pounding with adrenaline.

There is no point in trying to hide my presence here now that I just zoomed in on the chopper. But I still wave the pilot away, unable to hear anything but the beat of the blades. The pilot guides the bird up and away. My eyes dart around at the dusty ground, the low scrub brush, the picturesque lake to my right.

So this is the island where my mother is buried. I'm a little surprised at just how large the lake is. From Burn's description, I imagined this place being almost intimate, rather than the wilderness I see before me.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by the sound of a woman's yelp. I'm already running toward the sound as I search for its source.

There, in the distance! Talia's red hair whips in the ocean breeze as she struggles against the vice-like grip my brother Burn has on her arm as he pulls her down toward the lake's edge.

My gut twists. How dare he lay his hands on my wife?

I break into a sprint, my shoes kicking up dust and dirt.

"Burn!" My voice slices through the island's eerie stillness. He twists, eyes narrowing as they meet mine. I cup

my hands, slowing. “Let her go. Now. We can end this without a drop of blood shed.”

I lie as naturally as I breathe. My twin gives me a knowing nod and backs away, moving toward a dock and a speedboat bobbing at the water’s edge.

My hands clench, needing to tear his grasp away. He yanks Talia closer, his sneer dripping with contempt, and shouts to me.

“You don’t understand, brother.” He spits out the last word. “I’m doing this for you. To save you from her. She’s a liar. You don’t know all the things she has been covering up all this time.”

I halt, sand shifting under my feet. “Maybe not. But I love her. And I’ll fight for her, against you or anyone else who tries to take her from me.”

My heart thrums with purpose. For Talia, for us.

Burn’s lip curls, his grip tightening until Talia cries out. The sound pierces my soul. At this moment, my brother is a stranger to me. My family, my flesh and blood, means nothing if he threatens the woman I cherish above all else.

A grunt leaves my brother’s lips. “That’s funny. Your little witch said almost the same thing.”

I spread my hands wide in a gesture of surrender, my eyes never leaving Talia’s trembling form. “She’s not a witch. She’s my wife.”

“She is a liar,” Burn spits, his words hollow and bitter. “You may have married her, but your wife is carrying my child.”

I feel Talia flinch in his grasp, and I take a step forward, my fists clenching.

“You think I don’t know that, Burn?” I hiss.

He blinks. “What?”

“You heard me.” I take another step forward, my eyes blazing with fury. “I know that Talia is carrying your child.

But that doesn't change a damn thing. She's still my wife. And I'll protect her with my life if I have to."

Burn sneers at me, his grip on Talia's arm tightening even further. "You're delusional, Dare. You think that just because you forced her to marry you, you own her? You're just like our grandfather, thinking that everything is yours for the taking."

My blood boils at the mention of our grandfather, the man who had ruined our family with his greed and cruelty. But I refuse to let Burn's words get to me. I take a deep breath and fix my gaze on Talia's tear-streaked face.

"Talia, do you want to be with me?" I ask her, my voice gentle but firm.

Her eyes flicker to mine, and she nods. Her voice is reedy and damaged when she croaks out, "Yes, Dare. I want to be with you."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, relief flooding through me. But the tension in the air doesn't dissipate, and Burn's grip on Talia only seems to tighten.

"You're lying," he growls, his eyes narrowing. "She doesn't want to be with you. She's just scared of you."

I take a step towards him, my eyes flashing with anger. "Let her go, Burn. You have no right to hold her like this."

Burn sneers at me again. "I have every right. She's carrying my child."

I take another step forward, my fists clenched. "You won't lay a finger on her. You hear me, Burn? I won't let you hurt her or our child."

"We'll see about that!" he snarls.

I surge forward, ready to reclaim what is mine.

Burn's eyes flash with anticipation, sensing the impending confrontation. In one swift motion, he shoves Talia towards the docked speedboat. She stumbles, red hair flying as she falls hard into the boat. Burn lifts her legs without hesitation, and she falls inside the boat like an upended sack of potatoes.

“Talial!” I cry out, fear and rage twisting my gut.

Burn leaps into the driver’s seat, gunning the engine. The boat lurches away from the dock as I sprint desperately towards the shoreline.

No. I can’t lose her again.

“Rob!” I bellow into my earpiece. “Get the jet boat to my location, now!”

I hit the dock just as a driver pulls up in a slick speedboat, engine roaring. The boat was borrowed in haste, I’m sure, but it looks fast enough to beat anyone in any race. The driver is young and blond but focused.

“Jump in!” he urges me.

There’s no time to even think about life jackets. I vault over the side, landing hard on the deck.

“Follow that boat, full speed. Don’t lose them,” I order.

“You got it.”

The driver kicks the boat up to full speed and my hands grip the rail, salt spray stinging my eyes as we blast across the water. But I don’t blink, refusing to lose sight of the boat carrying my heart and soul inside.

I’m so close to Talia. I hope she knows that I’m going to save her if it’s the last thing I do on this earth.

Up ahead, Burn stands at the wheel, broad shoulders taut, dark hair ruffling in the wind. And beside him, a flash of red as Talia struggles against his hold.

I lean forward, willing our boat to close the distance.

You won’t take her from me again, Burn. My jaw clenches as we race across the waves. I’m coming, Talia. Just hold on, darling girl.

The island looms ahead, an ominous shadow on the horizon. Burn steers the boat towards the small sandy beach of the island where our mother was buried years ago.

He's taunting me, trying to unearth old wounds and painful memories. But I push it all away, focusing only on Talia.

Our boat skims over the waves, gaining ground. I can see her clearly now, hair tangled, mascara smudged, eyes wide with fear as she looks back at me. She reaches out a desperate hand.

"Dare!" Her scream carries over the wind.

"I'm coming!" I shout back, my heart pounding. Hold on, just a little longer.

With a scrape of metal on sand, Burn beaches the boat. In one swift movement, he yanks Talia onto the shore. She cries out, stumbling in the loose sand.

Burn whirls, one arm clamped around Talia's waist, the other holding a gun leveled at her head. My gut twists. No.

Our boat scrapes sand just feet away. I leap over the side, ignoring the sting of saltwater.

"Let her go," I rasp, hands raised as I approach. Blood roars in my ears. I meet Talia's terrified gaze, willing her to see my promise.

I'll get you out of this. And Burn will never hurt you again.

Burn's lips curl into a sneer, his grip tightening on Talia. "Come any closer and I'll blow her brains out," he snarls.

My pulse hammers, but I force myself to stay calm. Can't risk setting him off.

"Just talk to me," I say evenly. "We're brothers. Whatever is going on between us, we can work it out."

Burn barks out a harsh laugh. "Brothers? You lost the right to call me that when you stole everything that was mine." His eyes blaze with resentment.

I shake my head slowly. "That's not how it was. I never wanted to hurt you."

"Liar!" he shouts, jerking the gun against Talia's temple. She whimpers, eyes squeezed shut.

Rage surges within me. Careful. I take a small step forward, arms still raised.

“Walk away now, and we’ll forget this ever happened,” I plead. “Just let her go.”

It’s a lie and we both know it the second it leaves my lips. Burn sneers, but I see a flash of doubt in his eyes. He wavers, the gun lowering an inch. My muscles coil, ready to spring.

In that instant, Talia drives her elbow back into Burn’s gut. As he doubles over with a grunt, she twists from his grasp.

I lunge forward, tackling Burn to the sand. We grapple for the gun, sand flying. With a final burst of adrenaline, I wrench it from his grip and flip him onto his stomach, pinning his arms behind his back.

It’s over. Talia is safe. And now Burn will face justice for his crimes.

Burn thrashes beneath me, cursing and spitting sand. I press my knee into his back, leaning close to his ear.

“It’s over, brother. Just stop.” My voice comes out weary, saddened by how far he’s fallen.

With a guttural roar, Burn bucks hard, almost dislodging me. I slam him back down, my forearm crushing his neck.

“Why?” I rasp. “Why do this?”

He twists his head, bloodshot eyes meeting mine. “You know why,” he growls. “You always got everything. The family name, the money, the power. Even Talia. I got nothing.”

I stare at him. Is that what this is about? Jealousy?

“Things were never that simple,” I say. “We both had advantages. But real power comes from within, not from our last name.”

Burn scoffs. “Save your fortune cookie wisdom. You don’t know what it’s like, living in your shadow.”

I shake my head. Maybe if we’d talked more openly, it wouldn’t have come to this. But the past can’t be undone. Burn’s blows rain down relentlessly, fueled by years

of pent-up resentment. I block and parry, but he's fighting like a man possessed.

"She was mine!" he rages. "You stole her, just like you steal everything!"

"Just like you stole Daisy from me!" is my retort.

"I only stole her because she is a manipulative witch, just like your wife," he growls. "You keep thinking with your dick and making the wrong decisions."

I duck under a wild punch, coming up to smash my fist into his ribs. He staggers but doesn't go down.

"Talia chose me," I say through gritted teeth. "Get over it."

With a bellow, he charges forward, wrapping his arms around me in a crushing bear hug. We crash to the ground, grappling and rolling in the sand. I drive my elbow into his side, wrenching myself free.

We both climb unsteadily to our feet, chests heaving, bodies bruised and bloodied. This has gone too far.

"Don't make me fight you, Burn," I plead, looking him in the eyes. "I'm the only one with someone to lose. I'll win this fight."

His lip curls in a sneer. "Such pretty words from such a fool."

He rushes me again. I sidestep, sweeping his legs out from under him. He hits the ground hard, the impact knocking the wind out of him.

I stand over him as he gasps for breath, glaring up at me with undisguised malice. In his eyes, I see no trace of the brother I once knew. There's only venomous envy and a thirst for vengeance.

My heart sinks. Have we really reached a point of no return? I thought there was still hope of reconciliation. But now I see the bitter truth.

The brother I loved died long ago.

My fists pummel him mercilessly. This is not just about my wife and I think in the back of my mind I know it. I feel like every blow is a little repayment for all the anger I've felt inside for the past few years.

“Dare...” Talia says.

I smash my fist into his face, flecks of his blood hitting my face. I grit my teeth and the taste of his blood floods my senses. “This has to be over! I have to end things!”

“Stop! Dare, stop! You don't want to do this.”

Talia's pleas slow my fists. Burn isn't moving anymore. He doesn't even seem conscious.

I stare down at the broken shell of a man I once called brother, pity and regret welling up inside me. This is not how I wanted it to end between us. But his relentless obsession has left me no choice.

“I have to kill him,” I whisper.

“You stopped him, Dare.” She steps into my line of sight, clutching at her stomach. “Please. You've done enough.”

I step back, dragging a bloodied fist over my chin. My eyes are riveted on Burn. If he gets up, I'll have to finish what I started. But there is no movement that I can see other than the slight rise and fall of his chest.

He's still breathing, but he isn't about to come at me again.

“Dare.” Talia touches my arm and pushes me back a few more steps. “Say something.”

I turn to her, my hands coming up to cradle her face. Her skin is cold beneath my fingers. Gently, I brush back the windswept strands of hair from her eyes and then look down at her swollen stomach.

“Are you alright?” I ask urgently. “Is the baby okay?”

She nods, eyes brimming with emotion. “I'm okay now. Thanks to you.”

Relief floods through me. I pull her into my arms, holding her close against my pounding heart. The familiar scent of her

hair fills my senses. My heart beats wildly as I try to convince myself that the threat has passed.

We stand entwined on the beach as the waves slip rhythmically up and down the shoreline. The tumultuous storm within me begins to quiet. I focus only on the feel of Talia in my arms, her body pressed to mine. Safe. Unharmed.

Mine.

Chapter Six

TALIA

“**Y**ou’re doing the right thing,” I say, trying to keep my tone light.

Dare grimaces as he turns away from Burn, who is resting on the dusty bed in the dingy cabin. Dare flings a bloodied piece of gauze into a small pile of pads he’s used to wipe blood from his brother’s face after I talked him into half-carrying Burn inside.

“You seem so sure about that.”

“I am.”

I pluck an iodine filled swab from the first aid kit from the speedboat and hand it to Dare. He stares at it for a second before shaking his head and accepting it.

“We should have left him,” he grumbles. “Bastard deserves whatever he gets for laying his hands on you.”

The baby kicks me sharply and I make a face, rubbing a hand over my belly.

“I just don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret. Even though I think your brother is a prick and deserves to be punished... I don’t want to be the reason that you lose sleep.”

“Hah!” Dare rumbles. “No one’s losing any sleep over him.”

I watch as Dare leans in to tend to his brother’s wounds, his movements gentle yet efficient. It’s hard to reconcile this side of him with the man who forced me into marriage and who I still don’t fully trust. But seeing him care for his brother, the same brother who had hurt me, makes me see him in a new

light. It reminds me that there's more to him than just the ruthless billionaire who takes what he wants.

Dare's jaw tightens as Burn stirs. The injured man has a coughing fit, moving his battered hand up to his ribs. I wouldn't be surprised if Dare had broken a few of Burn's ribs during their vicious fight.

BURN'S eyes open and he immediately winces.

"Jesus," he breathes. His eyes focus and he looks between Dare and me, confused. "What are you still doing here?"

Dare leans forward, bristling.

"Talia wouldn't let me leave you where you fell. She also wouldn't let me kill you. You can fall to your knees and kiss her feet any fucking time you want."

If Burn blushes or looks ashamed, his puffy eyes and bruised cheeks make it hard to tell. He just grunts, leans over the side of the bed, and spits bloody phlegm to the floor.

Dare apparently feels like an apology is owed, because he grabs Burn by the collar of his dirty shirt and gives him an eyeball-rattling shake.

"You're lucky I didn't kill you," Dare growls. "But don't mistake my mercy for weakness. If you ever lay a hand on Talia or try to hurt our baby again, there won't be a next time."

I watch with a mixture of fear and awe as Dare releases his brother and straightens up. Burn rubs his neck and spits again. He glares at Dare as he spits, but there's a flash of fear in his eyes. That look reminds me that while Dare might be a lot of things, he's not a man to be fucked with.

"I'm sorry," Burn mumbles, his voice weak and raspy. "I was just trying to save you from yourself, Dare. Maybe I went about it the wrong way..."

He trails off mid-sentence, closing his eyes with a groan.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Dare demands to know. "Who are you even apologizing to?"

Burn's eyes open a crack. He's really beat to hell.

"I just want to protect you," he whispers. "I've always tried to honor our mother's wishes and lift you up whenever I could."

Dare scoffs.

"Protect me? You've done nothing but cause trouble since the moment Talia stepped into our lives."

Burn winces at the harsh words, and for a moment I see a flicker of sadness in his eyes before it's replaced with defiance. With great difficulty, he clammers to his feet. I reach my hand out to Burn, but Dare shoots me a glare so withering that I drop my hand.

He's right. I shouldn't feel bad for his twin, but my heart aches when I look at him. I think I must see Dare when I look at Burn. That's the only explanation for why I keep forgiving his atrocious behavior.

If only they didn't have the same troubled eyes...

Burn stands and faces Dare. "I did what I did because I knew that Talia hadn't told you the truth about who fathered her child."

Dare looks stunned. "How many times do I need to tell you? How many ways? Talia came to me after she found out she was pregnant, thinking I was you. And I talked her into marrying me instead of telling you that she was pregnant. This entire scheme was my idea, not Talia's. Get it through your fucking head!"

Burn gapes for a second, looking like he's been slapped.

Tears fill his eyes as he fists his hands and takes a step towards Dare. "No! You're lying," Burn whispers furiously, shaking his head. "I know you're lying. This was all Talia's idea."

"No," Dare says, shaking his head. "It was mine. I saw the opportunity to use Talia's baby as a pawn in the ploy to fool Remy into thinking that I was following his demands. Only that plan worked out differently than I thought."

He grasps my hand, squeezing it. My heart skips a beat as Dare looks at me. “I fell in love.”

I kiss the back of his hand, feeling my heart squeeze. Burn’s face twists at my display of affection and he spits on the ground.

“Love,” he says, as if it were a curse word. “It’s not real.”

Dare moves to shove his twin back down, but I pull gently at Dare’s hand. He resists for a moment and then relaxes.

As he staggers toward the door, I clear my throat. “Where are you going?”

Burn grunts and yanks the door open. “To my mom’s grave.”

He lurches outside and starts toward the dock again. I’m winded just watching him weave and wobble his way across the bare dirt ground. I look to Dare, my eyes wide. Dare’s eyes are narrowed as he glares at Burn’s disappearing figure.

“Bastard.”

I sink my teeth into my lip. “I think we should follow him.”

Dare is already getting to his feet. “Damn right I’m going to follow him. There are still a lot of things between us that are unresolved. We can’t live with all this unspoken hatred anymore. We’re going to hash it out right the fuck now.”

“Can I come too?”

He offers a big hand to pull me to my feet. “Darling girl, you can go anywhere you want to go. All you have to do is say the word and I’ll carry you, if that’s what you want.”

I slide my arms around him and give him a quick, deep kiss. Leaning close to his ear, I whisper, “Thank you for finding me.”

“I will always find you, Talia. *Always.*”

I press my forehead against his. “Did you mean it when you told Burn that you were in love with me?”

He toys with a piece of my hair and smiles. “Yes. I’m in love with you, Talia.”

Tears well up in my eyes. “You mean it?”

“I do. I don’t think I ever had any choice but to fall in love with you. It seems like we were meant for each other.”

I rise up on my tiptoes, slide my arms around his neck, and press my lips to his. Dare’s hands settle at my waist, pulling me against the hardness of his body. Tears slip from my eyes as I pull back breathlessly.

“I love you, too,” I whisper, looking deeply in his eyes. “I think I always have, from the very first moment we touched.”

Dare brushes my hair back behind my ear. “I thought that marrying you was just a ruse to fool my family and win my inheritance. But now...” He pulls back a little and rests his hand on my pregnant belly. “You’ve changed me, Talia. You’ve given me so much more than I ever thought possible.”

“Oh, Dare.” I give him a tight, hard hug. “You are infuriating sometimes, but I really am just completely crazy about you.”

After we share another kiss, Dare sighs. “We should go after Burn.”

I nod, hugging him a final time. He lets me go reluctantly and takes my hand, pulling me out the door.

Chapter Seven

The powerboat glides through the still lake, its prow slicing the waves. My stomach clenches at the sight of the barren, rocky island ahead—the place Dare’s mother lies buried, her body entombed in its stony heart.

Dare’s knuckles blanch around the steering wheel. His jaw clenches, eyes fixed ahead. I wonder if he’s thinking of the last time his entire family came here without him to lower his mother’s casket into the dark earth of her grave. He avoided coming here for his whole life.

But today, he will finally have to confront his mother’s death and the splintering effect it has had on his whole family. His mouth is pressed into a thin line and he gazes over the dark water, his eyes troubled.

Dare is obviously apprehensive enough without a word from me. But I do reach out, smoothing a hand over his back and rubbing shallow circles into his tense shoulders. The cool air makes me shiver but I don’t complain.

This is a somber but momentous event. When I stop touching Dare and pull my touch away, he catches my hand in his and kisses it.

The boat skids onto the shore with a crunch of stones. Now that I can see the entire island, it’s barely a few hundred yards in circumference. Dare leaps out onto the shore and hauls me up, his hands like iron around my waist. Underfoot is bare brown rock, the terrain uneven and treacherous.

Burn is already here, the shape of his kneeling body evident. He is alone on this small isle, his head bowed before

his mother's grave. The burial site is marked by a dark stone obelisk and a stone angel, each object about three feet high. Burn's head is bowed, and his eyes are closed, as though he is genuflecting before an altar.

I wobble as I step on the craggy stone ground. Dare grabs my arm, supporting me as we pick our way to stand beside Burn.

As we stand facing Dare's mother's grave, the chill seeps into my bones. I shiver, both at the cold and at the seriousness of the moment. Dare stares at his mother's headstone, his expression angry. A silent tear slips down his cheek before he dashes it away.

"You ruined me," Burn says softly.

Our heads whip around to Burn. He collapses back on his heels as though he has been carrying an immense weight on his shoulders. His mouth is still cracked and bleeding. His face is swollen and mottled red from the fight he just had with his twin. Bruises are already forming around one eye, which appears to be so puffy it is closed.

"Who are you talking to?" Dare barks.

"You." Burn gestures to the grave before him. "Mom. Dad. Remy. You all just... moved on with your lives. I feel like I *died* right here all those years ago when we buried Mom. You didn't even come—"

"Remy didn't want me to," Dare interjects. "I was a kid, too, Burn. I just did what other people told me to do."

Burn's expression turns furious.

"You never brought her up! You never asked about coming here to see Mom, ever!"

"I didn't know what to say. I thought..." Dare pauses, dragging in a breath. "I thought that *you* had moved on."

Burn laughs, an ugly sound. He shakes his head.

"No. I was hurting."

"So was I!"

Burn turns, peering at Dare for several long seconds.

“After you left, Remy—” He swallows hard. “Let’s just say that life got harder.”

“I know that life wasn’t easy for you. I know that things were never the same between us.” Dare flinches. “But you stole Daisy from me, Burn. And you never explained yourself!”

“You were going to marry her. You would have ruined your life,” Burn accuses, but there’s a tremor in his voice now. A fracture in the wall of anger and resentment he’s built around himself. He stands, dragging a hand across his lips. “I did what I had to do to show you she didn’t really care about you.”

I lick my lips nervously, my hands protectively shielding my unborn child. Burn would have been a terrible choice to be the father of this baby. And now that he has proven himself willing to kidnap me, I have every reason to distrust his slightest movement. As the two men circle each other slowly, I keep gradually orbiting around them.

“You have said that you stole Daisy to protect me. But you haven’t apologized for doing it the way you did.” Dare suddenly closes the distance between them and grips Burn’s shoulders. “I didn’t kill you today, even though I wanted to. I don’t want to lose you again. But I need you fucking tell me you’re sorry for all the shit that you caused. You tried to hurt Talia!”

Burn huffs. “She’s fine.”

“Talia is very much not fine. And she’s the only reason I didn’t kill you. So you had better own up to it all, admit your mistakes, and apologize to my fucking wife! Beg for her fucking forgiveness. And know that she doesn’t owe you a single thing.”

Burn searches Dare’s face, looking so much like his twin in this moment that tears prick my eyes. Then he nods once, a jerky motion full of emotion he can’t quite contain.

“I’m sorry,” Burn says to Dare. “I was just trying to help. And...” He glances at me, uncertainty splashing over his face. “I’m sorry to you, too, Talia. I was trying to protect my twin.”

Tears shine in his eyes as he says it and my heart actually aches for him.

Dare waits several beats before pulling him into an embrace. Burn goes rigid for a heartbeat before melting against his brother. They cling to each other, two boys grown into men but not yet ready to face the world alone.

Watching them reconcile after so long, I lay a hand over my belly and smile through my tears.

“God damn,” Burn curses. “I’ve missed you, fucker.”

Dare’s mouth curves up. He stays quiet but I can guess just how badly he has craved fraternal connection. I have the feeling that this means a lot to him.

“You too,” Dare grits out. He releases his twin brother and pushes him away.

The feud is over, but the damage remains. Years of hurt and betrayal don’t fade overnight, even with the best of intentions. Dare and Burn have a long road ahead of them if they want to rebuild the brotherhood they once shared.

Still, it’s a start. That’s more than they’ve had in far too long.

Dare threads his hand through mine and squeezes it, looking straight ahead. The stone angel stands, her hands held aloft, her limbs covered with algae and pocked by years of harsh salt water. We both stare at the grave, unsure what to say.

“This feels awkward,” Dare sighs. “Maybe it’s been too long. Maybe I’ve missed my chance to mourn Mom.”

Burn wraps an arm around his shoulders. “Talk to Mom’s grave. She can hear you. Tell her everything you need to say.”

Dare swallows hard and blows out a breath. He stares at the stone obelisk.

“The day you died, I lost Burn, too. We were so close as children, able to communicate without words. But after you were gone...” He shakes his head. “Gradually, we grew apart. The unbreakable bond between us shattered, leaving jagged edges that cut whenever we were together. I know that it wasn’t your fault, Mom. But you left us to the wolves after you died.”

Burn’s face twists with anguish. He bows his head. “I’m so sorry. I should have been there for you, but I was drowning in my own grief. Losing our connection was like losing a limb. Like losing Mom all over again. I think I’ve mourned it for my entire life.”

“As have I.” Dare clasps his hands in front of his body. “Perhaps it’s time we forgave each other... and ourselves. To rebuild what was lost, stronger than before.”

Joy flickers in Burn’s eyes as he gazes at his brother. “I’d like that.”

They embrace, clinging to each other. I breathe a sigh of relief, wiping away tears of my own. At long last, these two souls have found their way home.

Dare pulls back, patting his brother’s cheek. “She would be proud of the men we’ve become. Of the family we’re building back up again.”

The ghosts of the past fade away, no longer standing between them. A new chapter begins—one of healing, hope and a love that transcends all else.

We stay for another half an hour and then walk back to the speedboat, driving it the long way around, through the narrow, windy river and out onto the open ocean once more. Burn slumps in the corner of the boat, picking the backseat and promptly falling asleep. I ride shotgun, keeping my eyes open though I’ve been through quite a bit in the last twelve hours.

As he motors the boat down the coast, Dare turns to me, eyes gleaming softly. “You know, when I first met you, I was drowning.”

“Were you?” I ask. My eyebrows rise. It was not what I expected him to say.

He nods. “I was adrift in a sea of sorrow and regret, certain I would never find my way back to shore. But your light guided me through the darkness. You don’t know it, but you healed me. You saw beyond the scars of my past into the man I could become. You made me want to be that man, if only to deserve you.”

His words pierce my heart, unleashing a storm of emotion. I reach over and cover his hand with my own, a tear slipping down my cheek. “You were always that man, Dare. I merely helped you remember the truth of who you are.”

He kisses me then, a sweet and tender kiss that speaks of forever.

Chapter Eight

DARE

The musty scent of oak and leather greets me as I stride through the front doors of Morgan Manor. My boots echo across marble floors, a familiar cadence I've known since childhood.

"Remy!" I call out, my voice reverberating in the cavernous foyer. No answer. The old man's probably tucked away in his study, scheming as always.

I spot Magda dusting the banister, her worn blue uniform reminding me of happier times. "He's not here, Mr. Dare. Gone to Montana, Clive says."

Of course. Remy always did prefer the wilderness when troubled waters churned in the family. My fingers curl into fists, nails biting into flesh. He can't hide from me forever.

I stalk towards the study, Magda's protests fading behind me. The room is dim, heavy curtains drawn. My eyes sweep over leather-bound books, cognac swirling in a crystal decanter, a half-smoked cigar resting in an ashtray.

There, on Remy's massive oak desk: a single yellowed envelope. My name scrawled across the front in a shaky cursive.

I snatch it up, pulse quickening as I tear through the seal. A single sheet of paper flutters onto the desk, three words stark against pristine vellum.

You're cut off.

"You son of a bitch," I hiss, crumpling the note in my fist. He can't do this. He won't get away with it.

I'll find a way to make him pay, consequences be damned. The company is mine, and I'll stop at nothing to take back what's rightfully mine.

Power above all else. That's the Morgan way. I might be trying to shape the future of the Morgan family, but that mantra is etched in my blood.

The study door creaks open behind me. I whirl around, note crumpled in my fist, as Clive steps inside.

"My apologies, sir. I didn't mean to startle you." His gaze darts to the note in my hand, brows knitting together. "Is everything alright?"

I force a smile, smoothing the note against my thigh. "Just fine, Clive. Has my uncle arrived yet?"

"Yes. Mr. Felix is having a drink in the living room." Clive's lips purse in a frown, aged eyes peering into my own. "Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but I have known you since you were a boy. If there's anything troubling you, I hope you know you can confide in me."

The urge rises to tell him everything, to confess my fears and seek solace from the man who raised me as his own. But I can't drag Clive into this mess. He's given enough to this family.

I place a hand on his shoulder, hoping to convey what words cannot. "You've always been there for me, Clive. Thank you. But this is a private family matter that must remain between me and my uncle."

Clive nods, a flicker of sorrow in his eyes. "I understand."

With a steadying breath, I stride into the parlor. Felix leaps up from an armchair, pupils dilated despite the ample lighting. The sickly sweet scent of bourbon clings to him like a shroud.

"Dare, finally! We have much to discuss regarding the company. This deal with the Norwegians is too good to pass up, and if we don't act quickly—"

"The company is no longer your concern," I interrupt, fixing him with a hard stare. "Remy has made it perfectly clear

that if I want the inheritance, I can't continue to do business with you. I'll write you a small severance check if you promise to cease all activity on my behalf." I pause, narrowing my eyes. "And if you go near those Norwegians, I'll see to it that you never work in this town again."

"What?" Felix blanches, eyes bulging. "You can't do this! The company is mine, you ungrateful brat. I made that company what it is today, not you or your pathetic excuse of a brother! I should be in charge!"

"The company is going to be well taken care of." I take a menacing step forward, relishing the fear etched into the lines of his face. "But not by you. You're done here, Uncle. Get out of my sight before I call the authorities."

Felix stumbles back a step, then turns on his heel and storms out. The front door slams shut behind him.

The throne will be *mine*. And God help anyone who tries to take it from me.

I shake off the remnants of Felix's toxic presence and make my way to the library. The familiar scent of aged leather and mahogany calms my frayed nerves.

Here in this room, my grandfather had taught me the intricacies of business over games of chess. "Think three moves ahead," he would say. "Anticipate your opponent's every maneuver. Only then will you truly be in control."

Remy may have the title of CEO for now, but his time is running out. It's my move, and when the board is clear, the company will be mine.

A soft knock on the open doorway interrupts my musings. Rob pokes his head in, brow knitted with concern. "Mr. Morgan, I've just had a call from Hope House. It seems there's been an incident with Solana."

My chest tightens at the mention of her name. "What happened? Is she all right?"

"She's fine, just a bit shaken up. Apparently, she had a tantrum and overturned some furniture. The staff felt it best if someone came to collect her for the day."

Talia. Of course she would step in to help. The thought of Solana in Talia's care brings an unexpected smile to my lips.

Their time together would do the girl good. "Yes, that's perfect. I'll text my wife. Thanks."

Rob nods. "Will that be all, sir?"

"For now. Thank you, Rob."

He closes the door behind him, leaving me alone once more with my thoughts.

Winning the game will not be enough. When all is said and done, I want something real to come back to. A family of my own, and perhaps a chance at happiness I've only begun to dream of.

And Talia—kindhearted, strong-willed Talia—may just be the one to share that dream with me. I pull out my phone, composing a text to my wife. As I stalk out of the room, completely distracted, I practically stumble over Felix as he stands in the foyer.

Felix's eyes narrow, sensing the shift in my mood. "What made you so cheerful all of a sudden?"

"Why are you still here?" I frown, feigning nonchalance. "Shouldn't you be planning to fuck off to Europe about now?"

"Don't give me that. I know you too well, nephew. Tell me what has got you looking like a ray of absolute sunshine."

"If you must know," I say, adjusting my tie. "Talia got me involved with a charity called Hope House. I'm on my way to see whether or not I can help my wife handle a rather trivial emergency."

All color drains from his face.

"Hope House? Isn't that an orphanage?"

I shake my head at him and start walking toward the front door.

"A youth shelter, I think it's called."

“And *she’s* involved you with that place?” His voice rises in anger. “Have you lost your mind? After all the work I’ve put in, you’d throw it away for some do-gooder and a bunch of unwanted brats?”

“What are you talking about, Felix?”

He hurries after me. “You’re changing, Dare. You don’t even see it, but I do. That woman has got you wrapped around her little finger somehow. She’s convinced you that you need to go and adopt a bunch of snotty kids. That’s insane. You’re a Morgan, for chrissake.”

“Shut up,” I say, gritting my teeth. “Leave me alone. I have to go help Talia soothe a little girl named Solana. I don’t need you wringing your hands and trying to figure out how to turn the situation to your advantage.”

“Solana? You’ve even given one of them a name?” He laughs harshly. “You’re more foolish than I thought. Once I tell Burn about this, he’ll—”

“You’ll do no such thing.” I step closer, staring down at him. “If you so much as breathe a word of this to Burn or anyone else, you’ll regret it. Are we clear?”

Felix glowers up at me but holds his tongue. He knows I don’t issue empty threats.

“Besides,” I add, “it’s time for new blood to take the helm. Fresh ideas and a clean slate, without all the backroom dealing and double-crossing that’s been the hallmark of this family for too long.”

A muscle in his cheek twitches. “You won’t succeed.”

I meet his gaze steadily. “Try me.”

He turns crimson. But I merely brush past him, leaving my uncle behind. I have far too many things on my mind and none of them are my greedy family.

Chapter Nine

TALIA

When I got up this morning, I found that I can no longer run. I can't really walk properly either, truth be told. I'm officially so pregnant that I hobble everywhere. My belly is this undeniable weight that puts immense pressure on all my internal organs and makes my back hurt with the strain of constantly carrying a bowling ball around.

I'm pretty sure that by the time that this baby is born, I will be the size of a planet and exert my own gravitational pull.

So I am moving pretty slowly as I climb out of the back of my chauffeured SUV. I have to accept the bodyguard's hand as I shuffle out onto the ground and let him stabilize me for a second.

"Thanks," I say. It sounds like a complaint coming from my lips, but Igor says nothing. He follows me closely as I approach the horse riding ring. The familiar scent of leather and hay fills my nose as I walk through the swinging wooden doors of the stables.

Olive spots me first, dropping the bridle she's scrubbing to pull me into a hug. "Talia, thank God. I was so worried when you disappeared."

Her arms tighten around my swollen belly and the baby kicks in response. I hug her back, breathing in the comfort of our friendship. "We're fine. Just had some things to work out. I would've visited you sooner, but I was called to Hope House to deal with a minor emergency. What can you do?"

She pulls back, eyeing me with concern. "You can tell me about it while we clean the tack. I've got a pile here with your

name on it.”

“Well...” I settle onto a hay bale and pick up a dirty bridle, the stiff bristles of the brush scraping away years of built up grime. “The gist of my disappearance is that Burn knows about the baby. That he’s the biological father, I mean.”

Olive’s eyes widen. “Shit. I didn’t see that one coming.” She shakes her head and sighs. “How did he find out?”

“He did the math, I think. Plus he had some photos that we all took that night. I don’t remember getting in a photobooth, but apparently we did.”

Olive squints. “I do remember something like that, now that you mention it. How did Burn react?”

“He was furious that I didn’t tell him. Now I’m afraid that he’ll want to be a part of my daughter’s life.” I work the brush in angry strokes. “I can’t handle the idea of sharing custody. And what if we don’t agree about something big? What if he tries to take the baby away from us?”

“Don’t borrow trouble.” Olive’s voice is firm. “You’re putting the cart before the horse. For now, focus on you and the baby. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

The brush slips in my grip, falling to the floor. Olive is right. I’ve been so worried about Burn that I’ve forgotten to enjoy this pregnancy, savor each kick and roll of our child. I place my palm on the taut skin of my belly, warmth and life pulsing under my hand.

Our baby. Mine and Dare’s.

Burn will not take that away from us.

Olive smiles, patting my knee. “That’s the spirit. Chin up, Talia. This too shall pass.”

The baby kicks again and I smile back at my best friend. Together, we turn back to the tack, the familiar rhythm of cleaning bridles and bits settling my nerves. Our lives may change, yes. But here, in this place of childhood memories, I find my strength again.

The scent of horse feed and manure is soothing, transporting me back to carefree summer days at the stables. Olive and I spent hours here as girls, grooming horses for lessons we couldn't afford, our laughter echoing off the wooden rafters.

I run a hand along a saddle, the well-worn leather soft as velvet. "Do you remember when we convinced the stable hand to let us ride Lemon and Duchess without supervision?"

Olive snorts. "As if I could forget. We were barely eight years old and thought we knew everything about horses. Gina nearly had a heart attack when she found out."

"We rode bareback, too, with only halters for reins." I shake my head at our foolishness. "It's a miracle we didn't break our necks."

"We thought we were such rebels." Olive's eyes crinkle with mirth. "And when we were a bit older, all those hours we spent mucking out stalls to earn riding time. I still hate the smell of manure."

I laugh. "Now look at us. You're in charge of a lab and running Minnie's store. I'm going to have a baby and for the first time, I'm not terrified. Somehow, we are both still finding our way back to the stables."

Olive slings an arm around my shoulders, and I lean into her familiar warmth. "Some things never change. Like our friendship—and this place. No matter what happens, the stables will always be our sanctuary."

Her words resonate within me and I cling to them like a lifeline. She's right. The stables are woven into the fabric of my childhood, a reminder of joy and adventure, and the bonds that sustain us through every trial.

Our lives may shift and change but here, I will always find my way home.

Olive presses a kiss to my temple. "Think of all the happy moments we have to look forward to. Soon we'll have a sweet baby to cuddle and spoil. I can't wait for all the joy she'll bring into our lives."

Her words lift my spirits and I smile through my tears. “You’ll be the best auntie ever. I’m so lucky to have you.”

“Nonsense. I’m the lucky one.” Olive pulls back to beam at me, her eyes suspiciously bright. “What else are best friends for if not to share in life’s greatest adventures?”

She places her palm over my rounded belly, her touch brimming with warmth and affection. “This little one already has so much love waiting for them. Everything will work out the way it’s meant to be, you’ll see.”

I cover her hand with my own, holding fast to her promise. In this place that has always brought me comfort, I find the hope and courage to believe her.

We fall into a comfortable silence, taking solace in each other’s presence as we continue cleaning tack. The familiar motions are soothing, my troubled thoughts settling into the rhythmic scrape of the brushes.

When Olive speaks again, her tone is hesitant. “Talia, there’s something else I wanted to ask you about. Have you heard anything about Dare’s plans for the company?”

I frown, dread coiling in my gut at the mere mention of his name. “Unfortunately. He’s determined to move the headquarters to New York City, which means pulling all resources and personnel from Harwicke. That means Hope House will eventually lose funding.”

Olive gasps, her eyes widening with disbelief. “He can’t do that! Hope House is the only refuge those children have. If he closes it down...”

She trails off with a shake of her head, too appalled to continue. My heart is so heavy in my chest. I shake my head.

“I know. It will destroy them, and this town. I’ve tried reasoning with him, but he won’t listen. He’s so focused on expanding his empire he doesn’t care who gets hurt along the way.” I grip the bridle tightly, rage simmering beneath my composure. “All he cares about is power and control. He’s making progress in some ways, but he still wants to move the company. Trust me, I’ve tried to talk some sense into him.”

“That’s terrible.” Olive lays a comforting hand on my arm. “What are you going to do? There must be some way to stop him.”

“I wish there was.” I release a weary sigh, the fight draining out of me. “But in the end, it’s his company. He can do whatever he wants, even if it’s wrong.”

“Don’t say that. We can’t give up so easily.” Olive’s eyes blaze with determination. “If anyone can make him see reason, it’s you. He may not listen to others, but he loves you. And you’re having his child. You have to try again.”

Her faith in me ignites a spark of hope in my heart. She’s right; I owe it to the children of Hope House, and our baby, to at least try. I won’t give up without a fight.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” I pull her into a fierce hug, gratitude swelling inside me. “Thank you for always knowing exactly what I need to hear.”

“That’s what best friends are for.” Olive returns my embrace, a silent promise of her support. “Now, go get our town back. I know you can do this.”

“I’ll try. No promises.”

We work in silence for a bit. Eventually she has to leave to teach a class. We hug and she rushes off. But I’m content to stay here, smelling the familiar, comforting smells of the stables. I work for the better part of an hour, humming faintly to myself as I finish cleaning the last bit of tack.

By the time I’m ready to go, my back hurts and the soles my feet feel like they have been beaten in some dangerous form of torture. I don’t see a living soul as I wander out of the stables and toward my chauffeured SUV. I’m thinking of how tired I am. These days, the baby seems to suck all the energy out of my body with such suddenness that it makes my head spin.

The bleat of the SUV startles me.

The familiar gleam of Dare’s SUV pulls into the stable yard, dust swirling around its wheels. My heart leaps at the sight of him climbing out, all lean grace and power in his

charcoal suit. Even after everything, he still has the ability to make me weak in the knees with a single glance.

I swallow hard and brace myself as he strides over, hands tucked into his pockets. “Rob said I might find you here.” His gaze flickers over the stables, a wistful smile curving his lips. “Brings back memories, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” I run a hand along the rough wooden beams, weathered and familiar under my palm. “I had some good times in this place.”

“So you’ve said. You told me you used to come here with Olivia a lot.”

I nod, turning back to see the stables. “This was our place. We could always come here, no matter what was going on at home.”

“I’m glad you had it, then. Though I have to say, I’m surprised you chose to come here in your condition. Not the most comfortable of places for a pregnant woman, is it?”

I arch a brow at him. “Just because there’s a baby on the way doesn’t mean I plan to spend the next few months wrapped in cotton wool. I’m still perfectly capable of mucking out a stable, thank you very much.”

He laughs, a warm burst of sound that makes my heart stutter. “I don’t doubt that. You’ve always been tougher than you look.” Sobering, he adds in a softer tone, “It’s one of the many things I admire about you.”

A blush steals into my cheeks. I look away, busying my hands by brushing them over my floral dress. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Mr. Morgan.”

“Will it not?” He steps closer, the scent of sandalwood and spice enveloping me. “I was rather hoping it might at least get me a smile. You have been avoiding me since our argument the other day before Burn kidnapped you. And I... I miss you. I miss this.” His hand covers mine, stilling my restless movements. “I don’t want there to be any more distance between us, Talia. What we have is too important.”

My throat tightens at the raw emotion in his voice. When I meet his gaze again, the longing and regret I see there undo me.

“I miss you, too,” I whisper. “I’m sorry things have been so difficult between us lately. That was never what I wanted.”

“I know. We’ve been under a lot of stress and pressure, and we took it out on each other.” He lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a tender kiss to my knuckles. “The last thing I want is for our child to grow up with parents who can’t get along. We have to fix this, Talia, before it’s too late. Will you give me another chance?”

I stare into the fathomless blue of his eyes and the choice is easy. It has only ever been him, from the very beginning. “Yes,” I say simply. “I will always give you another chance.”

His answering smile is like the sun breaking through the clouds. Then he’s drawing me into the circle of his arms, holding me close as if he never intends to let go. And this is where I belong, in this place that was once the scene of our sweetest memories. Here, with Dare, I am home.

At that moment, Baby Morgan decides to make her presence known. She flips and twirls, making me press my hand to my belly and make a strange sound.

Dare’s at my side in an instant, his hands covering mine. He looks down at my face. “Are you okay? Is the baby kicking up a storm in there?” His voice is hushed with wonder.

Another fluttering caress answers him, and his eyes widen. A laugh bubbles up in my chest, spilling out in a joyful burst.

“Our baby,” I say softly. “Our baby is saying hello.”

Dare kneels in front of me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pressing his ear to my belly. I comb my fingers through his hair, sharing this perfect moment. The life we created together, our daughter, is announcing herself to the world in the sweetest way possible.

After a long peaceful interval, Dare lifts his head to beam at me. His eyes are suspiciously bright. “Best dance partner ever,” he says hoarsely.

I cradle his face in my hands, overwhelmed by love for this man and the tiny being who will bind us together forever. “Looks like she’s jealous of us.”

“Well, she is certainly welcome to join us when she’s ready.” Dare kisses my palm, then my wrist, moving slowly up my arm. “Thank you,” he murmurs against my skin. “For this gift, for another chance... for everything, really.”

He kisses me, drawing me close, and the conversation falls away like grains of sand filtering through my fingers.

Chapter Ten

DARE

With my arm around Talia's waist, I take a deep breath and march up the cobblestone path. The mansion looms before us, a vision of red brick and white columns against manicured emerald lawns. A plethora of windows glint in the sunlight, revealing a hint of the grandeur within.

We enter through the front door, taking in the polished marble floors and ornate furnishings. A large staircase sits in the center of the foyer, its grandeur breathtaking. To our right is a formal living room, complete with a white marble fireplace and luxurious velvet chairs. To our left is an equally impressive dining room, adorned with crystal chandeliers and Persian carpets.

As we ascend the curved staircase, I look at Talia. The awe on her face at the mansion warms my heart. It's a wonderful thing to be able to give her such experiences for the first time.

"Wow," she says, looking at the intricately carved banister. "This place is amazing."

I smile, feeling a sense of pride at her reaction. "It's just a house," I say, trying to downplay its grandeur. "But I'm glad you like it."

We reach the top of the stairs and I lead Talia down a long hallway adorned with more artwork and antique furnishings. The scent of lavender and other aromatic oils fills the air, making it feel cozy and inviting. As we near the end of the hallway, I push open a set of double doors to reveal the master bedroom.

I pause in the doorway. A mahogany desk is pushed into a corner; framed photographs adorn every surface. There is a fireplace with a beautiful velvet couch and a matching overstuffed chair. A truly grand four-poster bed sits against one wall, its curtains drawn open to allow light to stream in. Beyond the curtains is a glimpse of a covered terrace with an outdoor lounge area, tucked away out of the sun.

Talia steps forward, her gaze sweeping around the room before settling on me. “It’s beautiful,” she whispers softly as if afraid to break any spell that might be lingering here.

Talia’s eyes are wide with wonder as she gazes around, savoring every detail. She looks like a child visiting a candy shop for the first time, and I can’t help but smile.

“This is only the beginning,” I reply, my voice low with emotion. Taking her hand in mine, I lead her to the bed and sit down next to her. We stay there for a long moment, my heart soaring at the knowledge that this is now our home—ours to make memories together here and enjoy the short time we have as husband and wife.

Talia turns to me then, her tone hushed. “Dare,” she says softly, “I don’t need to be showered with gifts.”

My throat tightens as emotion wells up within me, and I nod slowly before leaning in for a tender kiss. I mumble against her lips, which makes her smile.

“But what about mansions? You can’t expect me to live in squalor, can you?”

Talia huffs out a surprised laugh. “I would hardly call the luxury loft that we live in now squalid.”

“But it’s not as nice as this place.” I kiss her, stopping her protests altogether.

We stay locked in that embrace a while longer, content in each other’s arms until finally we break apart and just look into each other’s eyes. We’ve reached an unspoken level of intimacy lately and I have to say, I’m loving every second of it. I guess I was starved for affection, because now I just can’t get enough of it.

I sigh, pulling Talia to her feet, and show her the rest of the house. The bedroom just next door to the master that could easily be converted into a nursery. The huge kitchen, the French doors that lead outside onto a huge patio with an Olympic-sized pool and an outdoor entertaining space.

“It’s ten thousand square feet with eight bedrooms, a home theater, wine cellar, tennis courts—everything a family could want. If you like it, I’ll buy it for us. Then you and the baby can be comfortable.”

“We can be comfortable almost anywhere,” she quips. “Honestly.”

I grab her hand and graze her knuckles with my lips. “You are thinking too small. Dream big.”

Talia hesitates, glancing from the imposing facade of the house to my eager smile. Her fingers twitch in my grip. I plow ahead, picturing cozy nights by the fireplace, family dinners around an oak table fit for royalty, our child’s first steps on parquet floors.

“You’ll never want for anything again. No more cramped apartments or counting pennies or struggling to get by. I’ll give you the world, Talia. You and our daughter will have everything you’ve ever dreamed of.”

My heart swells at the thought, but Talia’s hand slips from mine. She takes a step back, pale and withdrawn. She seems shaky.

“I don’t need any of this.” Her voice cracks. “Not the mansion or the money or the life you’re trying to buy me. You have said that all women want this... and I just need you to know that this house is not the reason I choose to stay with you.”

The ground shifts beneath my feet. How could she not want this? I struggle for breath, chest tight.

“This is what I’m offering,” I say, my eyes narrowing.

“And I appreciate it, but...” Talia shakes her head. “I want *you*, Dare. Not this lavish fantasy world you’re trying to

create. I want the man I fell in love with, not the billionaire with a castle.”

Her words strike deep.

A chill runs through me as Talia’s words echo in my mind. Have I lost the man she fell in love with? I can’t help but think of the countless hours I spend at the office, buried in endless work, pushing off all other human contact. As I look around this opulent home, I’m filled with a sadness that has nothing to do with money.

Talia steps closer to me and takes my hand again. “Dare,” she says softly, her dark eyes full of understanding. “You are so much more than this—than your money and power.” She squeezes my fingers gently. “You’re strong and brave and kind, too. That’s why I fell for you.”

Her words soothe something inside me, like a balm on an aching wound. It’s been so long since someone saw beyond the billionaire playboy image to the real Dare—the one who spends his days volunteering at soup kitchens and rebuilding houses after natural disasters, the one who believes in second chances. Tears come to my eyes unbidden, and it feels like ages since I’ve felt this way—since anyone has seen beyond my surface-level persona.

“Talia...” I grit out.

Talia reaches up and cradles my face between her hands, kissing away the tears that have spilled down my cheeks. “You don’t have to buy happiness,” she whispers against my lips. “It’s already here. Make sure you never forget that.”

I reach for Talia’s hand again, clinging to her like she’s the most precious jewel in the world. She doesn’t pull away this time.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “You’re right. It’s just hard for me to think in terms of you wanting me, not... all the things that I come along with.”

A smile flickers on her lips and in her eyes. She squeezes my hand, and for the first time I feel the solid ground beneath my feet. “I’ve told you already. Stop doing what you think is

expected of you. Talk to me instead.” She presses my hand to her chest, just over her heart. “Ask me why I love you and I will gladly list off ten reasons. Not a single one of them will be the size of the diamond rings or the number of mansions you have.”

Something tightens in my chest. I draw her hand to my lips again, my stomach flipping.

Can I trust that Talia means what she says?

Talia’s words echo in my mind as we walk back to the car, hand in hand. Maybe I’ve been blind, chasing the wrong things.

The mansion looms behind us, cold and empty. I picture Solana running through its halls, Magda baking cookies in the kitchen, Clive tending the gardens. A family to fill these rooms with warmth and laughter.

“What are you thinking?” Talia asks.

I shrug, taking a long time to answer.

“That I was a fool to think a house could give us a home.” I pull her close, breathing in the scent of her hair. “You and our daughter are all I need. We’ll find a place of our own, something less decadent. All that matters is that we’re together.”

She smiles up at me, eyes shining. “I like the sound of that.”

We reach the car and I open the door for her, heart light. The mansion was a mistake, but I’ll try again. Next time, I’ll really try to take Talia’s personality into the equation. Maybe that will be the ticket.

I slide into the driver’s seat and Talia takes my hand, threading our fingers together. She kisses my hand as I back out of the driveway.

Talia’s phone buzzes in her lap, Olive’s name flashing on the screen. Talia bites her lip then makes an aggravated sound as she reads the message. I arch a brow, nodding at the phone.

“What’s the news?” I ask.

She shakes her head and grimaces. “Aunt Minnie’s gone back to the shop. The doctors told her to rest for another week, but she wouldn’t listen.”

Talia grits my teeth, heat rising in her cheeks. “That stubborn old bat. I’ve given her everything—took care of her medical bills, offered to renovate her store, fund her retirement—but she won’t be satisfied until she works herself into an early grave.”

My knuckles tighten on the steering wheel. “For God’s sake. I told her we’d take care of the shop and hire someone to run it for her. Why won’t she listen?”

Talia sighs, the fight draining out of me. “She’s always been independent, but... I just wish she’d accept our help for once.”

I reach over to squeeze her hand. “We’ll figure something out. Try not to worry—it’s not good for the baby.”

My touch seems to soothe her frayed nerves a bit. “I know you’re right, but how can I not worry? Aunt Minnie raised me after my parents died, and now she’s all alone. I won’t rest until I’ve made sure she’s safe and cared for, no matter how difficult she makes it. Family means everything, after all.”

I give her hand a gentle squeeze. “I know. I can see how hard you’re working to keep the boat steady.”

Her lips twitch and she moans. “Thanks for listening to me complain.”

The warmth in her gaze wraps around me like a blanket. Whatever challenges we face, we’ll face them together. Aunt Minnie, the baby, all of it.

She leans her head against the window, watching the countryside fly by. I can tell that she’s still puzzled over the situation, though.

After a few minutes of silence, I finally speak. “Maybe we should consider selling Minnie’s store or hiring someone new to run it for her.”

Talia shakes her head. “I don’t know...” she sounds hesitant.

“It would take the burden off of you and Minnie,” I suggest.

She nods slowly, still unsure of the idea. “But then where would she live? We can’t just ship her away from everything she knows!” Her expression is filled with worry and concern.

I take a deep breath, searching for something more comforting to say. Then, an idea strikes me. “What if we offered to buy a house for Aunt Minnie nearby so that she could still be around familiar surroundings? We could have someone look after her while we go on about our lives.”

Talia hesitates, torn between what’s logical and what Aunt Minnie might want. “She’s always been fiercely independent—relinquishing control of her store, even temporarily, would be difficult for her. I don’t know. Aunt Minnie can be stubborn. I doubt she’d go for it.”

“We have all the money in the world to fix this problem,” I say. “Use it.”

Talia bristles at my flippant tone. “This isn’t one of your business deals that can be solved by throwing money at it. Aunt Minnie’s happiness and well-being are at stake here. If you can’t understand that, then just stay out of it.”

“I’m trying to help,” I protest. “You’re the one who isn’t being practical.”

“And you’re the one who doesn’t understand that money doesn’t fix everything!” Talia hisses. “How can I expect you to grasp the complexities of family and loyalty when you’ve never had to work for anything in your life?”

My jaw clenches, my eyes going icy.

“Sorry I tried to help. I’ll stay out of it,” I say, venom dripping from my tongue.

“Thank you.” Talia gives her head a little shake and looks down at her phone, typing.

All the warmth and positive rapport that we spent building this morning has been wiped away, as quickly as a cat swipes away an offending insect from midair. I can feel the tension thick in the air, and I wonder if we'll ever be able to truly understand each other.

Chapter Eleven

TALIA

I stare at the blank brick wall, a canvas of possibility. The early morning light casts shadows across its uneven surface as ideas swirl in my mind.

I can feel the tension between me and Dare lingering like an oppressive fog. I have to shake it off, bring my entire mind back to this mural. I take a deep breath to clear my head and focus on the task at hand. This blank wall is in need of some love and attention. I scrunch up my face, thinking that the left side could be the perfect place to start.

I feel the sun on my back and a sense of anticipation bubbling up from within. I am finally doing something I've planned for quite a while; I'm helping to create something beautiful in this long-neglected area of town.

My swollen belly leads the way as I shuffle forward, paint cans clanking in my arms. The smell of fresh paint mingles with exhaust fumes. A city bus wheezes past, brakes screeching.

Beside me, Dare claps his hands and rubs them together, turning away from the wall and toward the group of Hope House kids. We've gathered an eclectic crew - a gaggle of wide-eyed children, their small hands clutching oversized paintbrushes.

He crouches, putting himself on their level. "What should we paint today? What story will we tell on this blank canvas?"

He waves toward the wall. His sleeves are rolled up, a smudge of blue paint already streaking his cheek.

One boy raises his hand and then shouts, “A bus full of kids on a ride!”

Dare nods. “We can put that over here, on a hill maybe?” His hand waves toward one side of the blank canvas. “Maybe we’ll do a landscape. The sun in the top left over a pretty blue sky. Then maybe pieces of our town below? We could paint a bus full of kids on the way to school.”

Solana walks over to me, her dark pigtails bouncing, a huge smile on her face.

“What are you painting?” she asks me, brown eyes dancing.

I smile down at her eager face. “That’s up to you. A forest? The sea? Our town?”

Her nose crinkles in thought. She points to my belly. “Let’s paint a baby! No, ten thousand babies! Ten million mothers, holding their babies.”

Laughter bubbles up. “Let’s start with one mom with one baby for now. Does that sound good?”

She nods. “What about Dare? What is he painting?”

“Why don’t you ask?” I suggest.

She pushes up the strap of her pink overalls, turning toward Dare. Marching over to him, she asks him a question. They’re too far away from me to hear it but the look of happiness that lights up his entire being makes my heart ache.

Dare doesn’t know it, but he was born to do this work with these kids. I think he needs it even more than I do.

Dare lifts Solana onto his shoulders with a grin. She squeals in delight and he chuckles.

Aunt Minnie walks up, pointing to my husband with a paintbrush dripping with orange paint.

“He’s changing,” she says.

I press my hands to my belly, where the baby is currently doing somersaults. “You’re right. He’s becoming the father I know he can be. The man behind the billionaire facade.”

Minnie wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“It’s about damn time. I thought he would always be a selfish little boy.”

I smile, shrugging a shoulder. Minnie seems to be looking for some kind of response to her allegation, so I slide my arm around her bony shoulders and ask her to help instruct the children on how to decide what they want to paint. I always ask Minnie where her inspiration comes from and I’m met with a puzzled glance.

But today she happily starts asking a small group of kids what they think should go in the bottom right corner of the mural. The kids are downright jubilant, and her question is met with several shouted suggestions.

I turn, cupping my hands to my mouth to call to everyone present.

“Alright troops,” I called out. “Let’s make some magic...”

Brushes swish through paint cans, vivid hues spreading. With each stroke, our mural comes alive - a fantastical landscape emerges. Greens and blues, purples and golds. Beauty transforming bland brick into a vision.

Solana perches on a step ladder adding finishing touches, an artist in her element. Her tiny handiwork brings it all together. As I step back to admire, she slips. Dare lunges, catches her just in time.

“My hero,” she proclaims, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Pride swells within me. This, right here?

This is the found family I have always wanted. However unexpected, we’re in this together. Creating something beautiful from scraps and fragments. Making connections that you can’t put a price on. This is the image that will remain with me long after the paint has faded. A lasting imprint on my heart.

Solana’s bossiness emerges as she directs the other children where to paint. “No, not there! Over here!”

She points insistently and waits until her words are turned into actions.

One boy's face falls at her tone. I'm about to intervene when Solana notices his reaction. She touches his shoulder gently, voice softening.

"I'm sorry. Will you please paint the sun right here? Your suns are always so bright and happy."

The boy beams and gets to work. Solana glances my way, as if seeking approval. I give her an encouraging nod. She's learning, taking steps from self-centeredness toward empathy.

"Lookin' good over here," Aunt Minnie says, taking a break from kneeling. "Seems like Dare is enjoying himself."

I follow her gaze to where Dare and Solana are working side-by-side. A smile tugs at my lips. "He's really embraced this. I think it's been good for him."

Minnie gives me a knowing look. "That little girl sure has stolen his heart."

"She's special. But also the first child Dare has ever really known." I sigh. "Makes me wonder what will happen when she leaves Hope House."

"She's been here for a long time. It's been longer than expected," Minnie agrees. "But her time will come."

"Yeah. I keep thinking how crushed his heart is going to be." I pull a face.

"It'll be as flat as a pumpkin run over by a semi. At least, that's what you were like the first time a kid you had bonded with graduated to a foster family."

Sadness washes through me. I wrinkle my nose. "Her name was Jacqueline Bolton. I remember her as though it was only yesterday."

Minnie pats my arm before rushing over to stop a little girl from adding a huge glob of black paint to the middle of the town skyline.

We take a snack break, and my husband Dare turns to me with a thoughtful expression.

“So, if we wanted to foster Solana... what would that entail?”

My heart cracks and warps at his kind impulse. God, he really is going to have the worst kind of heartbreak when she eventually goes to a foster home.

I take a deep breath and explain the complications.

“Well, first of all, it would require an assessment of our family dynamics. A home study process.”

I go on to detail the application process, including references from friends and family, background checks, and training courses to prepare us for parenting a child in need.

“We don’t have any kids, so we’d have to take a lot of parenting classes. Plus,” I add, “the state has strict guidelines about who is eligible for fostering.” I bit my lip, not wanting to dampen Dare’s enthusiasm. “It may be more difficult than you think, especially since we don’t really have a dedicated home.”

Dare shoots me an odd look. “But I’m rich. I can make anything happen. The state should be falling all over itself to have me as a foster parent. And with you along for the ride, I don’t see how they could say no.”

I shake my head, marveling at how little Dare understands about the system. “It’s not about money, Dare. It’s about stability, safety, and love.”

Dare leans closer to me, his eyes searching mine. “Do you think we could provide those things for Solana?”

I pause, staring at him in disbelief. Is he really considering this? The idea of Dare and I being foster parents seems so far-fetched, but the thought of having Solana in our lives forever fills me with warmth.

“I think we could definitely provide those things for her,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “But it’s not an easy

process. If we go through with it and get disqualified for some reason, Solana would be shattered.”

He nods slowly, processing the information. “I understand,” he says. He puts his arm around me and draws me close. “I just want to help her.”

“I know you do.” I kiss his cheek. “One step at a time.”

For now, we have this moment. Paint-splattered and laughing, connected through art. And I know - everything will work out just as it should.

I take a step back, surveying the scene before me. The once-barren wall is now bursting with color, brought to life by little hands. Dare stands in the center, paint smeared across his expensive shirt. Yet he doesn’t seem to mind at all.

A warmth spreads through me as I watch my husband gently guide the children. With patience and care, he shows them how to hold the brushes just so. How to mix the paints into new shades.

“Like this?” a little girl asks, seeking his approval.

Dare smiles. “Perfect. I love the purple you created.”

Aunt Minnie sidles up beside me. “Well would you look at that,” she says, nudging my arm. “Seems fatherhood agrees with him already.”

I nod, my throat tightening. “I know. Who would’ve thought?”

Just months ago Dare was closed-off, sheltered. Volunteering here has coaxed out a new side of him. A gentle, nurturing side I’d never seen before.

As if sensing my gaze, Dare glances my way. The pure joy on his face makes my heart skip. In that moment I just know.

He is ready for this. Ready to embrace the changes coming to our lives.

No matter what uncertainties lie ahead, we will face them together. As a family.

During a break, Dare comes over. His eyes shine as he looks at the mural taking shape.

“Dare, if we foster Solana, what happens to the next child who comes to Hope House needing care?”

Dare blinks, seeming confused.

“I know you’ve grown close to her,” I continue. “But our role here is to help whichever child needs us most. We can’t play favorites.”

Dare falls silent. Solana hops down and tugs his hand, ready to paint again. As he allows himself to be led back to the wall, Dare turns back.

“I just want to help,” he says at last. “However I can.”

I smile softly. Rising up on my tiptoes, I plant a kiss on his cheek.

“I know,” I whisper. “Just something for you to think about.”

His eyes search mine. After a moment he nods, squeezing my hand.

We return to the mural, side by side. There is still so much work to be done. But we will face it as a team.

Chapter Twelve

DARE

“Standards, boy. Morgan men must have standards.” Remy spews crumbs with each word, flecks of saliva catching in his white mustache. “You’ve gone soft. Knocking up the first piece of trash you—”

The aroma of truffle oil and rosemary assaults my senses as Magda lays the final course before Remy. His liver-spotted hands tremble around the silverware, years of greed and entitlement etched into the deep lines of his face.

“Enough.” The word comes out harsher than I intend, but I won’t have him speaking of Talia that way. I may have doubts about our marriage, about the way she’s changed me, but Talia is no whore.

Remy’s eyes narrow, peering at me through thick glasses. “You forget yourself. I built this empire from nothing, and I won’t have it crumble because you chose to saddle yourself with dead weight.”

My fingers curl into fists beneath the table, the leather of my gloves creaking. He’s always been cruel, but age has sharpened his barbs. “The company is secure. Our profits are higher than ever. When will it be enough for you?”

“It’ll be enough,” Remy sneers, “when we have it all. When every rival is crushed beneath our heels. You’re too soft for what needs to be done, too distracted by that woman and the brat she’s carrying.”

“Talia is my wife.” Even as I say the words, doubt flickers. Have I truly let Talia soften me, as Remy claims? Our

marriage was one of convenience, a means to an end, but now...

I shake off the thought, meeting Remy's gaze. "The company will be mine, with or without your blessing. I've proven myself, and it's time for you to step aside."

Rage contorts Remy's features, aging him twenty years in a heartbeat. "You ungrateful whelp. After everything I've given you, everything I've done to make you into a man, this is how you repay me?" His hand clenches around the knife, knuckles white. "You'll have nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing!"

Spittle flies from Remy's lips, the final shreds of his control unraveling. I stare at the knife in his grip, heart pounding. He may be old, but Remy has always been dangerous.

One wrong move, and this could end in blood.

I swallow hard, trying to keep my expression neutral. "There's no need for threats. We both want what's best for the company."

"The company is mine!" Remy snarls. "You'll get nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing!"

He raises the knife, eyes glinting with madness. My heart leaps into my throat, pulse racing as I calculate the distance between us. If I move fast enough, I might be able to knock the knife from his grip before he can—

A crash shatters the tension. We both start, turning to find Tripp crumpled at the foot of the bar cart, broken glass and amber liquid pooling around him.

Remy's face contorts with rage. "Look at you! You useless, sniveling drunk. Get out of my sight before you embarrass us further!"

Tripp flinches, scrambling to his feet and bolting from the room without a word. I stare after him, an odd pang in my chest. When did the disappointment I've always felt toward my father morph into something else?

Was it a pity? Guilt?

I shake off the thought, meeting Remy's gaze. His fingers flex around the knife hilt, eyes glinting with warning. The threat is clear: push me, and you'll end up worse off than him.

My jaw clenches. "If you won't hand over the reins willingly, I'll take them by force."

"You?" Remy laughs, a harsh bark that grates on my nerves. "You don't have the spine. You'll always be that pathetic little boy begging for my approval." His smile is razor sharp. "And you'll always be denied."

My fingers curl into fists under the table. "We'll see about that."

Remy scoffs, waving a dismissive hand. "Enough of this nonsense. What have you done with that brother of yours?"

I shrug, feigning nonchalance though my heart kicks into a gallop. Does Remy suspect I had a hand in Burn's recent beating? "He's recovering. Nothing to concern yourself with."

"Hmph. Useless, the both of you." Remy saws into his steak, juice dripping onto the plate. "At least your wife's proven useful. An heir at last, even if the timing's inconvenient."

I grit my teeth against the urge to slam Remy's head into his plate. "Talia is not a broodmare for your empire. Our child will have nothing to do with you."

"You seem to forget, boy, that you and everything you hold dear belong to me." Remy levels me with a glare, mouth twisting into a sneer. "Including that wife of yours and the bastard she's carrying."

Rage blisters through me, searing away all pretense of civility. How dare he threaten what's mine? I surge to my feet, chair crashing behind me, and slam my hands on the table.

"I will tear this whole goddamned family apart before I let you touch them!" I snarl, heart pounding as Remy rises with predatory grace. We're nearly eye to eye, generations of hate and violence stretching between us.

All at once, Remy smiles. “There’s the spine I’ve been waiting for.” He sits, picking up his knife and fork. “Prove you have the guts to take what’s yours, and the company is yours.”

“And if I refuse?” I ask warily.

Remy shrugs. “Then you’ll always be that pathetic little boy.” His eyes glint with menace. “And I’ll always be the one holding the knife to your throat.”

I grind my teeth, staring at the old bastard. He’s laid down the gauntlet, daring me to make a move against him. If I don’t, he’ll always see me as weak. But if I do...

The doors burst open with a crash, startling us both. Felix strides in, eyes wild behind his glasses.

“We have a problem,” he announces, barely sparing me a glance.

Remy’s gaze sharpens. “What is it?”

“The board is planning a coup. They don’t think either of you are fit to run the company.” Felix’s fingers press together in front of him like a monk praying to his god. “They’re going to call an emergency vote during the meeting this afternoon to remove you from your position. I’ve heard chatter about bringing in an outside CEO. Someone from New York.”

“Over my dead body,” Remy snarls, shoving away from the table. He storms toward the door, pausing only to spew venom over his shoulder. “If you want your birthright, boy, you’d better grow a spine... and grow it fast!”

In the ringing silence, Felix clears his throat. “So. It seems congratulations are in order for seizing control of Morgan Enterprises.” He offers a weak smile. “All hail the conquering king.”

I slump into my seat with a groan, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes. The board is making their play. Now I’m going to be forced to make mine.

To take the company by force and prove to Remy I have the guts to stand up to him. Or refuse, and forever remain under his thumb.

The knife's edge has never seemed sharper.

Felix sidles up beside me, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Come now, don't look so glum. This is what you've wanted, isn't it? The chance to finally take the reins and steer this company into the future?"

I shrug off his touch, glaring at the closed door. "Not like this. I wanted to earn it, not have it handed to me on a silver platter because the board thinks Remy's too unstable to remain in control."

"How doesn't really matter, does it? Only the end result." Felix's voice lowers conspiratorially. "We both know Remy's been losing his grip for years now. It's time for some new blood to take over. All you have to do is step up and seize what's rightfully yours."

"And if I refuse?" I ask quietly. "If I stand by Remy instead?"

Felix scoffs. "Don't be foolish. Remy would throw you under the bus in a heartbeat to save his own skin. You owe him nothing." His fingers dig into my shoulder, hard enough to bruise. "Don't throw away your chance at freedom for misplaced sentimentality. Take the company, Dare. Take it, and we'll finally be free of that venomous old bastard once and for all."

I stare at the table, at the remains of our lunch gone cold and congealing. My head pounds, a fierce ache building at the base of my skull.

Freedom. Power. A chance to reshape Morgan Enterprises and steer it in a new direction, one that doesn't involve bowing and scraping to Remy's tyrannical whims.

But at what cost? Betraying the man who raised me, no matter how cruel and abusive he's been? Selling out my own flesh and blood for my own selfish gain?

The knife twists, carving me in two. I don't know which way to turn without drawing blood.

I push away from the table, chair legs screeching against the tile. "Enough. I won't discuss this any further."

Felix's eyes narrow. "You're making a mistake."

"The only mistake here is you thinking you can manipulate me. Now get out of my sight before I have you thrown off the property."

Felix sneers but says nothing more, storming off in a huff. I scrub a hand over my face and take a deep breath, trying to ease the pounding in my head. But it's no use. The vise around my skull is closing in with crushing force.

I need to find Talia. Now.

The walk to our rooms is a blur. Voices and figures swim in and out of focus, obscured by the fog in my mind. By the time I reach our suite I can barely see, staggering into the bedroom as the migraine overtakes me.

"Dare!" Talia is at my side in an instant, her cool hands guiding me to the bed. "What's wrong? You look terrible."

I groan, clutching at my head. "Migraine. Feels like my skull is about to split open."

"I'll call for the doctor."

"No, just... just give me my medication. It's in the bathroom cabinet."

She helps me take the pills, then draws the curtains and eases me down against the pillows. I cling to her, the only solid thing in a world gone hazy with pain. She takes off my shoes and draws the blanket over me, rocking me gently.

I pull her close and press my face to her belly. She startles, but then she sits down and runs her fingers through my hair.

If my head weren't about to explode, I'd seduce her right here, right now. I fucking love her.

"Shh," Talia murmurs, stroking my hair. "It's all right. I'm here. Just rest."

Here. She is right here with me. With her arms around me, the agony and confusion fade into the background. Here is the only place I want to be. My eyes sink closed.

Damn Felix and his schemes. Damn Remy and his empire.

Here, with Talia, is the only freedom I need.

Chapter Thirteen

DARE

As we're led to the private dining room in the back of Herbsaint, my hand rests on the small of Talia's back, guiding her inside. I come here fairly often, but this is the first time I've rented a private room for two.

It's nice that we have some firsts together.

Talia's wearing a simple but elegant black dress and her hands rest peacefully on her stomach, as is their wont these days. When we enter the restaurant's decadent dining room, Talia gasps. Everything is polished dark wood, beautiful black silk, and glittering crystal.

"It's beautiful," she whispers, gazing at the glittering chandeliers and velvet drapes. The aroma of truffles and champagne envelops us.

I pull out her chair and help her sit. "Not as beautiful as you."

She blushes, smoothing her dress over the swell of her belly. "You say the sweetest things."

"Only because you deserve them." I take my seat across from her. "How is the baby today?"

"Wonderful. The doctor says everything looks perfect." Her smile lights up the room. "Have you thought more about names?"

"A few. What do you think of Elizabeth or Hope?" I ask, studying the menu. Foie gras and lobster call to me.

"Lovely, classic names." She tilts her head, eyes gleaming with mischief. "But I was thinking of something unique, like

Aurora or Luna.”

“Like the princess and the moon,” I chuckle. “You do have a flair for the dramatic.”

“You love it.” She reaches across the table, her soft fingers curling around mine.

I turn her hand over, pressing a kiss to her wrist. Her pulse flutters under my lips, as rapid as the fierce love pounding through my veins. “Guilty as charged. I do love you.”

The admission tumbles out before I can stop it. But I don’t regret speaking the truth. She’s claimed my heart, and together we’ve created a new life. A family of our own.

“Dare.” Her eyes shimmer with tears as a radiant smile transforms her face into a vision of pure joy. “I love you, too.”

In this moment, holding her gaze, I know that we can face any challenge. Our daughter will be the living embodiment of the life we’ve created together.

“To our daughter,” I say, raising my glass. “And to the amazing woman who’s giving me the gift of fatherhood.”

“To our family.” She clinks her glass against mine.

I purse my lips.

“How about Emily or Chloé?” I suggest, leaning back in my chair. “Something timeless and elegant.”

She wrinkles her nose, fingers playing with the stem of her wine glass. “My counter is Phoebe or Rosalind. Names from Shakespeare.”

“Those are lovely, too.” I reach across the table, covering her hand with mine. “As long as our daughter has your eyes, I don’t much care what we choose.”

A blush stains her cheeks as she smiles up at me. “Flatterer.”

“Guilty.” I lift her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

Pride and purpose swell within my chest, as profound as the love that has reshaped my entire world. Together, we will guide our daughter's first steps. Share in her triumphs and heartaches. Watch her grow into a woman as strong, caring and independent as her mother.

The future unfurls before us, filled with promise and possibility. And I can't wait to embark on this grand adventure with the woman who holds my heart.

"Then we'll keep discussing," I say, smiling into Talia's eyes. "Until we find the perfect name. For our perfect daughter."

She rises on graceful legs, leaning down to brush a soft kiss over my lips. "I'll be right back."

I watch as she makes her way out of the room, a vision of maternal radiance in a dress of midnight blue. And I know, with sudden certainty, that our daughter already has the perfect name. One that embodies the light Talia has brought to my world of shadows.

Hope. Our daughter's name will be Hope.

Talia is gone for several minutes, giving me too much time to think. I'm still bothered by the things that Remy said yesterday. They burrow under my skin and keep pricking at me.

Remy's words echo in my mind, insidious as a black widow spider. *You're losing your edge, boy. Getting soft. What's the world coming to when a Morgan man lets a woman lead him around by the nose?*

I clench my jaw, staring into the amber depths of my brandy. He's wrong. Talia hasn't made me weak or ineffectual. If anything, her love has made me stronger, more determined to be the man she deserves. A man who rules with wisdom and compassion instead of fear and intimidation.

"Is everything all right?"

I glance up to find Talia regarding me with a furrowed brow, her hand resting on the swollen curve of her belly. She's

so attuned to my moods; she sensed my tension even before sitting down.

Smiling, I cover her hand with my own. “Everything’s perfect.”

Her answering smile lights me up inside, chasing away the last lingering shadows of doubt. How could I ever doubt what we have? My anchor. My compass star.

My hope.

“Shall we have dessert?” she asks. “I’ve been thinking about that chocolate soufflé all through dinner.”

“Your wish is my command, Mrs. Morgan.”

She laughs, the sound rippling through me like sun-warmed honey. And I know that Remy is wrong. Talia hasn’t made me weak or ineffectual.

She’s made me whole.

After dinner, I step away for a moment to take a call about a penthouse listing, instructing Rob to handle the details. When I return to the table, Talia is no longer alone.

Our dining room now holds a new figure, this one a shrew-faced young woman who points directly at Talia. She’s a waitress in a familiar all black uniform. I narrow my eyes, thinking that her face is familiar. Perhaps she served me once?

Then it clicks into place. I do know her.

The waitress used to work at that shitty restaurant that Talia worked at when I first met her. As I recall, she wasn’t especially friendly to Talia in my presence, either.

She hovers by our table and then drops down, giving Talia a sickly sweet smile that turns my stomach. I can’t hear what she’s saying, but her posture is aggressive. I look at Talia’s face. She has gone pale and clenches her hands into fists. My gaze flits to the waitress and I start to gear up.

The waitress is pretty clearly saying some nasty things to my wife.

When I approach, Talia's face is ashen, her lips pressed into a trembling line. The waitress leans forward, punctuating each insult with a jab of her finger.

"Look at you, tarted up like some two-bit floozy. We all know you're no better than you were, spreading your legs for any man with deep enough pockets." The waitress sneers, eyeing Talia's wedding ring. "Or did you finally find some poor sap gullible enough to put a ring on your finger? Like that'll make you respectable."

Talia shrinks into herself, and it takes every ounce of my self-control not to lunge across the table and wipe that smug smirk off the waitress's face. No one speaks to my wife this way.

No one.

"That's enough." My voice is steel, colder than the depths of space. They both startle, the waitress's bravado fading when she realizes just who I am.

"Mr. Morgan, I—"

"You're fired. Get out of my sight before I have you removed."

She stammers an apology and hurries off. I pull Talia into my arms, feeling her tremble. "Don't listen to her poison. You're the light that brightens my world, darling girl. No one can make you small. Not when you're my everything."

Talia clings to me, her tears soaking into my shirt. But she's trying her damndest to smile.

"How did I ever get so lucky?"

"I ask myself that every day." I kiss the top of her head, infusing the gesture with all the love and reverence in my soul. "No one will ever hurt you again. I promise."

The waitress that I just dismissed comes rushing over with a female manager, who has a vice-like grip on the waitress's arm.

"Mr. Morgan, I wanted to assure you that Melanie made an error in judgment. She shouldn't address customers in that

manner. She was just—”

I hold up a hand to stop her mid sentence and glare at the manager. Adjusting the cuffs on my suit, I pin both the waitress and the manager in place with my eyes.

“See that she leaves the premises immediately. And you’d better comp our meal, or your job is next.”

The manager gulps and stammers an apology, then ushers the waitress out. I turn back to Talia, wiping a tear from her cheek. “I’m so sorry you had to endure that.”

She shakes her head. “You have nothing to apologize for. You were amazing.” A watery chuckle escapes her. “My big, strong protector.”

“Always.” I take her hands, bringing them to my lips. “No one hurts what’s mine. And you, my love, are eternally mine.”

Her smile is radiant as the sun. “As you are eternally mine.”

“Damn straight.” I stand and offer her my arm. “Shall we?”

She takes it, leaning into me. “Yes. Take me home.”

Home. Our sanctuary from the world, the one place where nothing and no one can touch us. I signal for the bill, already planning how I’ll spend the rest of the night reminding Talia just how cherished she is.

The manager approaches with a folder. “Your meal has been comped, Mr. Morgan. Please accept my deepest apologies for the inconvenience.”

“See that it doesn’t happen again. No one should be dressed down by service staff when they eat here.”

The manager’s brows rise, but I’m not going to stick around to hear her comeback. I put my hand on the small of Talia’s back and steer her out of the restaurant.

The city streets are alive with noise and motion, but at this moment it’s only Talia and me. Together, hand in hand in the

glow of streetlights, walking our own private stretch of paradise.

Outside, Talia stops, turning to face me. Her eyes shine like twin stars. “Thank you, Dare. For everything.”

She rises up on her toes, arms winding around my neck, and kisses me with a slow, deep passion that steals my breath. I clutch her to me, my heart too full for words.

When at last our lips part, I press my forehead to hers. “You’re my heart, Talia.”

A soft sound escapes her, half laugh, half sob. “I’m nothing but an orphan from the wrong side of town.”

I tip her chin up with a finger. “You’re nothing short of a miracle. Don’t forget it.”

I take her hand again and lead her across the street to a sleek glass and steel high rise, unlocking the front entrance with a key card. We ride the private elevator up to the penthouse, and as the doors open, Talia gasps.

Candles flicker everywhere, casting a warm golden glow over the spacious room. Rose petals are strewn across the floor, leading to the bedroom. A bottle of Talia’s favorite wine chills on ice beside a platter of chocolate-covered strawberries.

Talia turns to me, eyes shining. “You did all this?”

“For you.” I brush a stray curl behind her ear. “Because you deserve the world, and I will move heaven and earth to give it to you.”

“You already have.” She kisses me again, slow and deep and passionate, her hands framing my face. I lift her into my arms and carry her across the threshold of our sanctuary, kicking the door closed behind us.

Tonight, the world beyond these walls ceases to exist. There is only Talia, only us, and a love that transcends all else.

Chapter Fourteen

DARE

Longing stirs in my blood, an ache that goes bone deep. I yearn for Talia with every fiber of my being, my desire for her a living, breathing thing.

Candlelight washes the room in a warm, golden glow and the scent of sandalwood and jasmine perfume the air. A fire crackles in the fireplace, the flickering flames casting dancing shadows over the walls.

Our bed is turned down, the sheets folded back in invitation. My pulse quickens at the sight, heat and need surging through my veins. I want nothing more than to lose myself in Talia's embrace, to drown in the sweetness of her kisses and the velvet heat of her body.

I cross the room in swift, purposeful strides and draw Talia into my arms. Her skin is soft as silk under my seeking fingertips, her heartbeat fluttering wildly against my palm. I bend my head and capture her mouth in a searing kiss, pouring all my love and longing into this single gesture.

She opens for me with a sigh, her lips parting to allow my tongue to sweep inside. I delve deep, tasting and teasing, reveling in her sweetness. My blood burns like liquid fire in my veins, my need for this woman an all-consuming flame threatening to devour me whole.

I lift my head, my breathing ragged. "Talia, darling girl. I want you. Now. Always."

Her eyes darken, passion and desire swirling in their depths. She reaches up and cups my face, her touch tender and

filled with love. “Then take me, Dare. I am yours. Today and forever.”

Triumph and possession surge through me as I lift Talia into my arms and carry her to our bed. Tonight I will worship her body and lose myself in her sweet embrace. Tonight, I will claim this woman, her heart, body, and soul. I will bind her to me for all eternity.

I lower Talia onto the silk sheets, my gaze devouring her every curve and hollow. She is beauty personified, my goddess, my everything. I capture her hands and pin them above her head, interlacing our fingers as I lean down to steal another searing kiss.

She arches into me with a soft moan, her body supple and yielding. I trail my lips down the delicate column of her throat, nipping and sucking my way to the generous swells of her breasts. Her nipples pucker under my tongue, ripe berries begging to be plucked. I close my mouth over one turgid peak and suckle strongly, drawing harsh gasps of pleasure from her parted lips.

A familiar ache builds in my loins, my erection straining against the confines of my slacks. I shift to give my arousal more room, then return my attention to Talia’s delectable body. I lavish the same attention on her other breast before continuing my sensual assault, tasting and teasing my way down to the apex of her thighs.

Her feminine scent envelops me, a heady perfume of desire and need. I nuzzle my face into her soft curls and inhale deeply, savoring her unique fragrance. Then I spread her nether lips and flick my tongue over her swollen clitoris, earning a strangled cry of bliss.

Talia’s hips buck, wordless pleas spilling from her lips as I feast on her sweetness. I drive my tongue into her channel, mimicking the act of sex and stoking the fires of her passion ever higher. Her inner muscles clench and flutter around my probing organ, slick juices coating my chin as I devour her with single-minded intensity.

I can feel her climax building, the tremors racing through her taut body. I redouble my efforts, my own arousal throbbing in time with my racing heart. Talia shatters into fragments with a keening wail, her essence flooding my eager mouth. I lap up every drop of her delicious nectar, prolonging her pleasure until she collapses back against the pillows, limp and sated.

Only then do I raise my head, wiping my mouth with the back of one hand. My shaft pulses impatiently, eager to sink into the velvet clasp of her sex. Tonight I will lose myself in Talia's sweet embrace, our bodies and souls joined as one.

I straighten and gaze down at Talia, her cheeks flushed and her chest heaving as she struggles to catch her breath. She's never been more beautiful to me, her ripe belly a symbol of the love we share. I skim my palms down her sides, thrilling at the feel of her soft skin and fuller curves.

Talia lifts her hands to my shoulders, her eyes clouded with desire. "Please, Dare," she whispers. "I need you inside me."

My control snaps and I surge forward, claiming her mouth in a searing kiss. Our tongues dance and twine as I position myself between her thighs, the broad head of my erection nudging at her entrance.

With a single thrust, I sheathe myself in her slick channel. We moan in unison at the exquisite sensation, our bodies fitting together like matched pieces of a puzzle.

I begin to move, my strokes deep and measured. The leisurely pace heightens our pleasure, every nerve ending igniting at the delicious friction. Talia meets my thrusts with the roll of her hips, her inner muscles rippling around my shaft.

"Harder," she pants, raking her nails down my back. I increase my tempo and force, pounding into her welcoming body. The bed creaks in protest beneath us, the headboard rattling against the wall.

Talia throws her head back, a strangled cry tearing from her throat as she shatters around me. The rhythmic squeezing

of her sex triggers my own climax and I bury myself to the hilt, hot seed spurting in endless waves.

We cling to each other as the tremors fade, our hearts beating a rapid staccato rhythm. No words are necessary in this perfect moment, our bond deeper than any vows spoken or rings exchanged.

Talia's body goes lax beneath me, replete and sated. I roll onto my side, pulling her against my chest. She nestles into me with a contented sigh, her head tucked under my chin.

My hand glides down her side in a slow caress, fingers splaying over the rounded swell of her belly. Our child stirs within, as if sensing the outpouring of love surrounding its cocoon.

"Are you happy, Talia?" My lips brush the top of her head as I speak.

She lifts her face to meet my gaze, eyes glowing with joy. "Deliriously so."

"No regrets?"

"None." Her hand covers mine, our wedding bands touching. "Loving you is the easiest, most natural thing I've ever done."

Relief washes over me, easing the last vestiges of doubt. I know with absolute certainty this is where I'm meant to be - here in this bed, holding the woman who owns my heart.

"Promise you'll never leave me," I say, only half joking. The thought of losing Talia is unbearable, a dark specter I push from my mind at every opportunity.

"I'm not going anywhere." She places a sweet kiss on my lips. "You're stuck with me forever, Mr. Morgan."

"Forever is not nearly long enough, Mrs. Morgan."

Talia bites her lips. "Can I..."

I brush my lips over hers, nuzzling her. "Can you what, darling girl?"

She turns red as a tomato. "I still want you. I'm... *horny*."

“Thank god for pregnancy hormones,” I mutter.

Before she even says another word, I move my hand down between her legs. Talia wasn't kidding. Her folds are slick and hot. My fingers find her clit like an arrow finds its target. I quickly circle my fingers around her clit and increase the speed. She throws her head back with a cry, inner muscles clenching around nothing as she comes apart.

My name is a benediction on her lips as she collapses against me, body trembling from the force of her release. I hold her close, pressing soft kisses over her face and neck until her breathing evens out.

“You're insatiable,” I tease, earning a breathless laugh in response.

“Only for you.” Her hand slides down to wrap around my erection, now rigid with need. “I want you inside me.”

I don't need to be told twice. Talia lifts up and I position myself at her entrance, sliding in with one smooth thrust. We gasp in unison at the sensation, our connection both familiar and new in its intensity.

My strokes are slow and deep, angled to hit the spot that makes her keen with pleasure. Talia meets each thrust, inner muscles squeezing tightly as if to keep me from withdrawing. The rhythm builds, our harsh breathing and pleased cries mingling in the space between us.

“Come for me,” I growl, circling her clit with my thumb. She shatters instantly, inner walls spasming around my length. I follow soon after, spilling deep inside her with a shout.

Her soft cries shatter my control, her inner walls convulsing around me as I pump into her silken heat.

“Your pussy is ruining me,” I grit out through clenched teeth. “Draining me.”

“Yes,” Talia hisses, nails biting into my back. “Take everything, Dare. It's yours.”

We climax as one, a shout of ecstasy ripping from my throat. For long moments, I'm adrift in mindless bliss, cradled

in her arms.

When I come back to myself, Talia is playing with the wedding ring circling her finger. I capture her hand, bringing it to my lips.

“What shall I buy you tonight, Mrs. Morgan?” I ask, half in jest. “Diamonds? Pearls? A small country?”

“You’re incorrigible.” A smile tugs at her lips as she strokes my hair. “Imagine what I’ll get in the divorce.” Talia’s laugh is light, but the words strike like a blow. “Half of everything. Maybe I’ll take one of the jets. Sell it and backpack around Europe for a year.”

I jerk away, propping myself on an elbow. The gleam in her eyes is too sharp, the curve of her smile too knowing.

Is it a joke? Or does she mean it?

My stomach drops and a bitter taste floods my mouth. How could I have been so blind, so stupid?

Talia slides a hand over my chest, her touch like a brand. “Don’t look so serious, darling. I was only teasing.”

But the damage is done. I stare at the diamond on her finger, a rock the size of a quail’s egg, and nausea churns my gut.

She wants my money. My power.

Just like all the rest.

Chapter Fifteen

TALIA

“Do you remember the summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college?” I ask.

The breeze whispers through the trees as we meander down the gravel path, the scent of lilacs perfuming the air. I glance at Aunt Minnie, her hair wisping out from under her floral hat, a contented smile on her face.

I continue: “You worked double shifts at the bookstore while I pulled a lot of all-nighters at Hope House. It was a difficult summer for everybody in town because the paper mill and shoe factory both shut down. I have such vivid memories of it.”

Minnie’s steps falter. “Of course I remember. But why dwell on the hard times now?”

I shrug. “I was just making conversation.”

“Well, pick a better topic. If I wanted to think about a time when we had no money, I could do that at home. There are so many bad memories to choose from.”

I nod sympathetically. “I understand. But sometimes it’s helpful to reflect on the past, to see how far we’ve come.”

Minnie lets out a sigh. “I suppose you’re right. But let’s talk about something more cheerful, shall we?” She hooks her arm through mine.

I stop, taking her hands in mine. Summoning a deep breath, I force a smile.

“I think that it’s time that we have a real, serious talk.”

Aunt Minnie looks bewildered. “A talk? About what, dear?”

I scrunch up my face. “About money.”

“Money?” she echoes. “Money comes, money goes. There will always be more money. I just don’t think too hard about it, and eventually the world comes up with more funds.”

I drop her hands, my face tightening. Minnie’s nonchalant response irritates me. She’s always been oblivious to the impact of her frivolous spending.

“I’m serious, Aunt Minnie,” I say, halting our stroll. “All those fancy clothes and restaurant meals we couldn’t afford put so much pressure on me. I was working every spare minute to keep us afloat while you breezed through life like money grew on trees.”

“Well, it basically does.”

“That’s not true, Aunt Minnie!”

She looks at me like I’m a puzzle she cannot figure out. “No? Why are you so focused on the past, Talia? I thought I raised you better.”

It takes me a second to come up with the words to express all the emotions racing around in my chest, filling me up until I’m about to burst.

“Because I never told you how hard it was! Scrimping every penny for groceries, skipping school to work extra hours. Staying up all night with homework and then babysitting all day so that we could afford to eat that day.” My voice catches. “I was just a child, but I had to grow up so fast.”

Minnie’s mouth opens in shock. “Talia, why didn’t you tell me? I had no idea you were struggling like that.”

“That’s because I have always balanced the checkbook and made sure that there was food in the pantry. When I was old enough to count dollar bills, you delegated that responsibility to me. And... and...” My voice is choked up with emotion. “There was *never* enough money. We were always just one missed paycheck away from disaster. And then, when my

parents died, I was alone. I had no one to turn to except myself. Do you know how lonely that made me feel?”

Minnie’s eyes glisten. She’s silent for half a minute as she works to control tears that press at the corners of her eyes.

“Oh, Talia, I had no idea. I thought I was sheltering you from the worst of it.” She embraces me tightly. “I’m so sorry you had to shoulder that burden alone. You were always so responsible. I didn’t realize...”

“That’s right, you didn’t realize,” I snap. “You didn’t think how it stressed me out, how I had to sacrifice my childhood to cover for your spending habits.” I rake a hand through my hair. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to attack you. But I need you to understand where I’m coming from.”

Minnie is quiet for a moment. “You’re absolutely right,” she says finally. “I was careless back then. I never meant to burden you, but I can see now the harm I caused.” She grasps my hands, eyes glistening. “I’m so very sorry, Talia. Thank you for being honest with me.”

I exhale, tension dissipating. “I know you didn’t mean it. I just had to get it off my chest.”

I cling to her, breathing in her familiar scent. “I didn’t want to worry you. But it took a toll, living on the edge like that.” I pull back, gazing earnestly into her eyes. “That’s why when the chance came to marry into money, I took it. So we’d never risk going back to that life.”

I blow out a long breath, cupping my stomach.

“There’s one more thing I should tell you,” I say after a few moments. I take a deep breath. “Do you remember when you took out that loan from Tony a year ago? The one with fifty percent interest?”

Minnie’s face falls. “Oh Talia, I’m so ashamed about that. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It puts us in a really tough spot,” I say quietly. “I was working so much already, and I knew there was no way I could pay it back for you. Not with the interest piling up.” I

swallow hard. “So I made the decision to...find another solution.”

Minnie stops, turning to face me. “Dare Morgan,” she whispers. “You married him because of my mistake.”

I nod, tears pricking my eyes. “I didn’t see any other choice. I know it seems glamorous now, but at the time, it felt like selling my soul. I was so angry at you, Minnie. Angry that your recklessness forced me into that position.”

“Oh honey.” Minnie pulls me into a fierce hug. “I am so, so sorry. I never wanted that for you.” She strokes my hair as I finally let the tears fall, years of resentment washing away.

I take a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. “It wasn’t just the loan shark incident. Even before that, money was always a source of stress for us.”

I glance at Minnie. “All those fancy dresses you bought, the lavish gifts for your gentleman friends...we couldn’t afford any of it. But I could never bring myself to say anything. I just kept working extra shifts, pinching pennies. I was so tired, Minnie.”

Minnie looks stricken. “Oh Talia, I had no idea. I thought since you never complained...” She trails off.

“I know,” I say gently. “I didn’t want to upset you, so I stayed quiet. But it took a toll, feeling like I had to shoulder the burden alone.”

“You’re right, you shouldn’t have had to do that.”

“Well... I did,” is all I can say.

Minnie squeezes my hand gently as we stroll along the path. “I hope you know how much I love you, Talia. You’re the daughter I never had.”

Her words make my eyes well up. “I love you too,” I say thickly. “I didn’t want you to feel bad about the past. But I’m trying to be more open when something is bothering me.”

“You did the right thing, dear.” Minnie pats my arm reassuringly. “Don’t keep your feelings bottled up on my account. You can always come to me.”

I nod, blinking back tears. “I will. It wasn’t easy but...I feel better having cleared the air between us.”

“Me too.” Minnie gives me a watery smile. “No more secrets, no more resentment. Just honesty and understanding from now on.”

We meander along the tree-lined path, leaves crunching under our feet. The tension that had coiled inside me for years has finally unfurled.

Minnie glances at me, her eyes crinkling with warmth.

“Talia, I want you to know that I’ll always be here for you, no matter what,” Minnie says softly. “You’re the daughter I never had. I know I made mistakes, but nothing can change how much I love you.”

Her words make my eyes prickle with tears. I blink them back, not wanting to break down again.

“I appreciate you saying that, Minnie,” I reply. “It means a lot to know I’ll always have your support.”

She gives my hand a gentle squeeze. I feel the warmth of her palm against mine, a reassuring presence.

Up ahead, a mother pushes her toddler on a swing set. The little girl’s delighted giggles float through the air. The mother’s face glows with love as she gazes at her child.

The scene makes my heart ache. I wish my own mother had looked at me that way, even just once. But she was always too lost in her addictions to care.

Minnie seems to read my thoughts. “I know I can’t replace your mother,” she says. “But I’ll always be here to listen and provide a shoulder to cry on. You’re not alone anymore.”

I nod, overcome with emotion. After years of loneliness, it feels unbelievable to have this kind of support. To have someone who wants only the best for me, who cares for me unconditionally.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I’m going to keep working on expressing myself more. No more locking away my feelings.”

“That’s wonderful,” Minnie says. “I’m so proud of you.”

We approach the front door of the house, and I take a deep breath before entering. So much has changed today. This morning I carried the weight of unresolved hurts and unspoken truths. Now that burden has lifted. The air feels lighter.

I glance at Minnie and we exchange a smile. Her eyes radiate warmth and love. For the first time, this house truly feels like home.

As I step inside, I vow to myself: no more hiding. No more fear of judgment or rejection. From now on, I will stand in my truth, expressing myself openly and honestly. The people who truly care about me will understand.

Minnie squeezes my hand reassuringly. “I’m going to start on dinner,” she says. “I’m going to actually cook. I can make your favorite, the chicken pot pies you love.”

My stomach rumbles in anticipation. “That sounds amazing. Thank you, Minnie.”

She winks. “What are aunts for?” Then she heads to the kitchen, humming a cheerful tune.

I head to my room, still processing the day’s events. Sitting on my bed, I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

The conversation with Minnie replays in my mind. I remember the look on her face when I told her how much the financial stress had impacted me. Her eyes clouded with guilt and shame.

But what matters most is that she listened. She didn’t get defensive or make excuses. She took responsibility for her actions.

And she promised to change.

I know that won’t happen overnight. Old habits die hard. But the fact that she wants to try means everything.

For the first time, I truly feel seen and understood. Like I’m not alone in this anymore.

Minnie loves me. I've never doubted that. But now I feel secure in that love, knowing it can weather any storm.

Money will likely always be a source of anxiety for me. But with Minnie's support, I can learn to manage it in a healthier way.

I don't have to be perfect or do it all by myself. It's okay to ask for help. And it's okay to speak up when I'm struggling.

As I sit there, I make a silent vow. No more silently bearing burdens too heavy to carry alone. From now on, I will lean on those who love me when I need it.

Chapter Sixteen

TALIA

I duck into the bookstore, escaping the cool spring breeze and the pangs of anxiety Dare's withdrawn mood has stirred. The familiar scent of aged paper and fresh coffee washes over me.

Olive stands behind the counter, eyebrows pinched in concentration as she taps on the register. No sign of Aunt Minnie.

I slide onto a stool. "How's it going?"

Olive's head jerks up, eyes flashing with surprise. "Talia! I didn't hear you come in." She blows out a breath, shaking her head. "University cut our funding again. I picked up a few shifts here to make ends meet."

I purse my lips, anger simmering in my gut. Of course the university slashed Olive's budget. Again. "Take as many shifts as you need. I worry about Aunt Minnie running this place alone."

"You haven't talked to her?" Olive frowns. "Minnie will throw a fit if she thinks I'm trying to take over."

"Things with Dare have been..." I trail off with a sigh. "I haven't found the right time."

Olive's eyes soften with understanding. She knows how complicated things have become between Dare and me since I told him about the baby. "You should talk to Minnie. Let me know what she says."

I nod, throat tight. Between Dare's moods, the baby, and now Aunt Minnie and Olive, I'm drowning in worries. But I

can't avoid this conversation any longer.

After tidying the counter, Olive comes around and wraps me in a hug. "It'll be okay," she murmurs. "You've always handled Minnie, and Dare will come around. He loves you."

I cling to Olive, breathing in her familiar scent of cinnamon and sandalwood. She's right. I can do this. I have to. For the sake of my family, I must stay strong.

I release Olive and square my shoulders. "You're right. I should go talk to her now."

"That's my girl." Olive squeezes my arm. "Call me if you need anything."

With a nod, I head to the back room where Minnie does the books. The door is ajar, and I rap my knuckles against the wood. "Aunt Minnie? Can I come in?"

"Of course, dear, come in." Minnie looks up from her ledger, lines creasing her forehead. No doubt going over the finances again. She gestures to the chair across from her desk. "What is it?"

I perch on the edge of the seat, clasping my hands in my lap. How do I bring this up gently? There's no easy way, so I blurt, "Olive has been helping out more in the shop. I wanted to see how you felt about that."

Minnie's eyes narrow. "Has she now? And when were you planning to discuss this with me?"

"I'm discussing it now. I know you value your independence, but the shop has been struggling lately, and with the baby coming, I worry about the extra burden on you." I rush to add, "Olive only wants to help. She's not trying to take over."

"I don't need help." Minnie's tone turns sharp. "Especially not from Olive. I've run this shop for over thirty years and done just fine."

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat. I knew this wouldn't be easy. "You have, but you're not as young as you used to be. Let Olive help. For me, if not for you." I place a

hand over my stomach, hoping she understands. “I need to know the shop—and you—will be okay when the baby arrives.”

Minnie stares at me for a long moment, anger etched into the lines of her face. But beneath the anger, I see something else: fear. Fear of aging, of losing independence and control. I understand that fear all too well nowadays.

Finally, she sighs and looks away. “I suppose a little help won’t hurt. But the moment she tries to take over, she’s out.”

Relief floods me as the tension seeps from my body. “Thank you, Aunt Minnie. You won’t regret this.”

I rise and bend to kiss her wrinkled cheek. She pats my hand, a smile peeking through. “You’re a good girl, Talia. Now go on—I have books to balance!”

Chuckling, I head out with a lighter heart, ready to call Olive with the good news. Stronger together, we’ll get through this. We have to. For the baby, for our family—and for the future.

Olive and I arrange the new releases in the front window, sunlight dappling the aged wood floor. “Did you speak with Minnie?” she asks, not meeting my gaze.

I nod. “She’s agreed to accept your help.”

Olive’s shoulders sag with relief. “Thank you, Talia. I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“You’re family,” I say simply. “We help each other.”

We fall silent, and an awkward tension stretches between us. I think of her words from before, wondering if there’s truth to them. Have I really built my identity around tragedy? Around being an orphan and coming from nothing?

Shaking off the thought, I glance out the window. “Another shop closed down the street. If things keep going like this, there won’t be any small businesses left in Harwicke.”

“I know.” Olive sighs. “So much history, gone in the blink of an eye. All to make way for bigger chains with no soul.”

She shakes her head. “Sometimes I think the only thing keeping this town alive is your husband’s family money. What will happen when he moves the company away?”

I frown, a knot forming in my stomach. It’s something Dare and I have discussed, but I’m not ready to face that reality. “He’s not set on moving yet. His grandfather is still CEO, and Dare wants to make the transition smoothly.”

“His grandfather won’t last forever, Talia.” Olive’s gaze is gentle but knowing. “You should start preparing now. For the move, and for taking on a role you never imagined.”

Irritation flares. I’m well aware of the challenges ahead; I don’t need reminders. “Dare will do what’s best for the company and for our family. I trust him.”

“I don’t doubt that. I just want you to trust yourself, too.” Olive smiles softly, but I can tell she’s holding back. And I realize, with a pang of sadness, that the distance between us is more than physical.

We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember, but maybe we’ve grown apart. Maybe the paths we’ve chosen in life have led us to different places, and there are things about my world now—a world of wealth and privilege—that Olive will never fully understand.

The thought brings tears. I blink back furiously. Our friendship has endured for so long, but will it survive the changes to come? I cling to the hope that love and honesty will see us through. They have to, or I’ll be adrift with no one to rely on. And this baby needs a family, a community, to call home.

Olive and I finish the display in silence. But before we part, I pull her into a fierce hug. “Thank you,” I whisper. “For everything.”

She hugs me back just as tightly. “Always, Talia. Always.”

And I believe her. Our paths may diverge, but our bond remains. Stronger together—yesterday, today and forever.

I leave the bookstore with a heaviness in my chest. Olive's words echo in my mind, a refrain of doubt that threatens to drown out all else.

Am I enough for Dare? Can I overcome the scars of my past and be the partner he deserves?

The questions plague me as I make my way down Main Street, the quaint shops and cafes a blur. My steps slow when I come upon the children's park, empty at this late hour except for a few teenagers loitering near the swings.

The sight of the park fills me with longing for the child who will soon be mine to love and protect. I place a hand over my swollen belly, taking comfort in the strong, sure beat of my baby's heart.

Whatever comes, this new life is a gift. A chance for me to build something lasting and true. To forge the family I've always yearned for.

My doubts begin to fade, replaced by a fierce surge of determination. I will be enough. For my child, for Dare, for the life we're creating together each and every day. The past can no longer haunt me if I choose to leave it behind.

Chapter Seventeen

TALIA

A week later, I sneak into the loft apartment that I share with Dare. Well, sneak is maybe the wrong word. It's hard for a seven and a half month pregnant woman to sneak anywhere, especially with arms full of shopping bags.

I do my best to move quietly through the penthouse, but Aunt Minnie ruins my discreet entrance. She pops her head around the corner from the back hallway, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Oh my lord," she exclaims. She sees me lugging the bags inside and hurries over to help. "What have you brought home?"

My cheeks flush. "I may have blacked out and bought too much. I blame it on Dare's limitless credit card. I've never in my life had a piece of plastic that let me take home literally anything in the store."

"Ah. Come sit down and put your feet up. I was just about to have a cup of peach tranquility tea. I'll pour you one as well."

"Thank you," I manage. "I shopped for too long. Now I'm exhausted and starving."

"I'll bring you a couple of fig cookies to bring your blood sugar back up." She bustles around, putting a tea cup down in front of me and adding a pair of tawny fig bars. I stuff one into my mouth, grateful that she knows me so well. As she pours me a cup of tea, Aunt Minnie's eyes track the bags. "What have you bought?"

“I’m embarrassed to say that I bought everything that caught my eye at the children’s clothing store.” I pull out a box of tiny socks with colorful, goofy dinosaur patterns on them. “I cried over how small and adorable these were, so I figured I should at least buy them.”

“I think Dare will like those.” Aunt Minnie’s grin widens. “He’ll be so excited to see what you got. And I’m sure he’ll love to see you.”

“I hope so.” I swallow my doubt.

My husband has been out of sorts lately. Not that he’s been giving me a play by play exactly, but I can tell that he is extremely stressed when he comes out of his office. This week especially, Dare has rushed off to meetings with Morgan Drilling investors and come back with a hard, antagonized expression on his face.

Aunt Minnie sighs wistfully as she looks over the collection of children’s clothing I have set out. “I still miss my bookstore,” she says.

I drape an arm around her shoulder and give her a gentle squeeze. “I know you do. How is it doing, in your absence?”

She waves away my concern. “Oh, they’re managing just fine without me. Olive is running things until further notice. But I still worry about how it’s all going to turn out in the end.”

I nod in understanding. Taking care of a business can be stressful, especially if it was passed down through generations like Minnie’s store was for many years. “Well, my little girl is due in less than two months. Maybe after the baby gets here and we’re settled into a routine, you could go back to working at the bookstore part-time? Or maybe even just on the weekends? That way you can ease back into running the store.”

Minnie smiles softly at me, her blue eyes twinkling with amusement and affection. “That’s so thoughtful of you, sweetie. I might just take you up on that.”

“HELLO, DARLING GIRL,” a deep voice murmurs, rolling over me. I open my eyes and find my husband looking down at me, his irises sparkling in the shafts of early afternoon sunlight that filter down from the high windows and into our bedroom. I blink and stir, my cheeks warming when I realize that I napped for several hours.

“Oh my god. I could’ve slept for days. This late in my pregnancy it feels like my body just wants to sleep.”

He leans down and gives me a soft, sweet kiss. “How are you feeling today?”

I stretch and groan as I make myself sit up.

“My back hurts and my ankles are swollen. And I am exhausted. But other than that, I’m fine, I think.”

Dare’s eyebrows rise. “You think?”

I flush and push my hair out of my face.

“I guess I’m not really sure what being pregnant is supposed to feel like, but I’m not complaining. I’m just glad that you’re here with me. I can’t imagine doing this alone.”

“I saw that we no longer have a kitchen island. It’s been replaced by a station where shopping bags are deposited.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You saw that, huh?”

“I did.”

He sits down on the bed, pulling my back against his chest. His hands caress my swollen belly, slipping under my blouse to stroke the taut skin. I melt into his embrace, desire flaring hot and bright.

“How much did you spend today, little one?” His lips brush the shell of my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

I squirm in his arms, not wanting to answer. “I don’t know...” I fib.

His right hand slides around to my back. With a flick of his wrist, he undoes the clasp of my bra, baring my breasts to his hot hands. He kneads my breasts and plucks at my nipples.

A whimper escapes my lips, making a quiet rumble of laughter emerge from Dare's chest. His lips find my ear, teasing and sucking.

"Dare..." I whisper.

He shifts, moving my body so that he has access to my pussy despite my swollen belly. One of his big hands slips between my bare legs, finding the damp heat there. Clever fingers circle and press until I'm writhing for more.

"Tell me how much you spent," he rasps, denying me his touch. I make a keening moan in protest, needing the release only he can give.

Pride wars with need, my body burning for his skillful caresses. I can deny him nothing, this man who holds my heart in his hands.

Defeated, I mumble the dollar amount under my breath. He chuckles, the sound dark and dangerous, stoking the fires within.

"Is that all, little one? You'll have to do better than that." His fingers slip inside me without warning, stretching and filling me in all the right ways. I cry out at the sudden invasion, back arching in pleasure-pain.

"Please," I beg, beyond caring about anything but the climax hovering just out of reach.

"Tell me," he demands again, adding another finger to torment my sensitive flesh.

I release a sob, uncaring who might overhear. All that matters is the bliss about to be mine.

Satisfied, he claims my mouth in a searing kiss, his clever fingers working me into a frenzy until the world shatters around me.

I come back to myself nestled against his chest, sated and sleepy. He strokes my hair, gently lulling me.

“I’m sorry I spent so much money,” I whisper, my eyes halfway closed. “I promise it’s all stuff for the baby.”

Dare’s lips twitch. “That was our deal in the beginning, wasn’t it? The whole reason you agreed to marry me in the first place was because I could provide you with resources beyond what you already had.”

I turn my head and open my eyes to look at him.

“I’m still skittish about spending your money.”

He shrugs. “You shouldn’t be. Now that we are married, it’s your money too.”

Tears prick my eyes at his acceptance and generosity. No one has ever cared for me the way Dare does, with a love as boundless as the sky.

“I don’t need expensive things,” I tell him earnestly. “All I want is you.”

“And you shall have me, always.” He kisses me then, soft and sweet, sealing his promise. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t spoil you at every opportunity. You deserve to have everything you were denied as a child and more.”

“As long as I have you, that’s all I need.” I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

A wave of gratitude overwhelms me, punching me right in the heart. I start crying, embarrassed and inundated by my sudden torrent of emotions.

He strokes my hair. “Why the tears, Talia?”

I shake my head and bury my face in the blankets.

Gradually, my tears subside. I take a deep, steadying breath and then meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry. The hormones—”

“Ah.” He runs his fingers through my hair, the gesture intimate. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

His reassurance calms my anxieties. I smile up at him, filled with warmth and gratitude for this amazing man who

came into my life. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“You were yourself.” He kisses my forehead, then my lips. “Kind, strong, determined, and so full of love. From the moment I saw you, I knew you were special.” He stops, his teeth biting his lip. “You brought light to my dark world, Talia. And now we’re going to build a new life together. Once I take control of Morgan Drilling, we’ll own the world.”

My lips curve upward at his optimistic view.

“We’ll also have a baby that cries in the middle of the night,” I tease.

Dare grins. “I’ll hire a night nurse so we can get our beauty sleep.”

I smack his chest in mock outrage. “You will not! I want to experience every part of being a new mother, even the difficult parts.”

“Whatever you say.” He takes my hand and places it over my rounded belly. “I don’t want to miss out on any crucial bonding moments, I guess.”

Joy blossoms inside me as I feel a faint kick against my palm. Dare’s hand covers mine, his warmth and strength enveloping us both. My mind drifts to the last time I was really, truly happy.

Maybe when I was a kid, playing in Olivia’s yard. Olive and I would play house, making mud pies, planting flowers, and hosting pretend tea parties.

“When I was a kid, there used to be this tree I loved.”

Dare quirks a brow. “That’s not what I expected you to say.”

“Sorry. I was just thinking how happy I am. And then I remembered the last time I was this happy. One really strong memory I have is this huge oak tree. It was in Olivia’s back yard and we spent all our time under its branches, playing and exploring. We carved our names in the trunk and put wishes written on paper inside a hole we found in it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “Until it was cut down when I was in high school, it was so great. I always loved that old tree,” I say wistfully. “It was the perfect place to escape and dream. After a long day of chores and schoolwork, we’d climb the branches or sit with our backs against the trunk.”

Dare squeezes my hand, his eyes sparkling with humor. “It sounds like you really loved that tree.”

I slap his shoulder. “Don’t laugh! Every kid should have a tree like that.”

“It sounds like you have one item to add to your list of must-haves when we go house shopping. A big yard with a nice old tree.”

Tears prick my eyes at his words.

“I... I never thought about going house shopping. I always assumed that I would just live wherever you live.”

“Talia...” He fixes me with his gaze. “I started this whole venture thinking that I was just getting an heir. But I’ve spent the last few months falling in love with you.” He cups my jaw and his eyes flash. “My goal is to make sure that you have every single thing you could ever want.”

The breath is knocked out of me and for a second, I struggle to suck air into my lungs. My heart threatens to burst. No one has ever cared for me the way Dare does. And I don’t know why he feels like I’m worth any of it, if I’m honest.

Flushing slightly, I realize I can’t quite address the feelings that I have right now. So I smile and shift the subject slightly.

“You’re going to spoil our baby rotten, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.” He grins. “She’ll be Daddy’s little princess. Now, tell me more about this tree. Did it have a tire swing? I want to know exactly what made you happy as a child.”

I snuggle into his embrace and begin spinning stories of better, simpler times. Of picnics in the park, catching fireflies on summer nights, and adventures in the woods behind our house. Dare listens with rapt attention, as if my memories are a treasured gift.

His thoughtfulness calms my anxieties. I smile up at him, filled with warmth and gratitude for this amazing man who came into my life.

Dare tenderly strokes my baby bump, feeling the little one flutter inside. He muses in a low voice about his own childhood.

“It’s funny. I had anything and everything my heart desired - ice cream for breakfast, the best bikes money can buy, an entire palace worth of clothes. When I got old enough, I had a fleet of cars and a yacht, too. But all of it feels... empty. My parents and Remy showered Burn and I with gifts. But they never spent much time with us. When they did, it was a boring business event where they talked to other adults. There were a lot of suits and ties in my childhood.”

He absently runs his fingers around his throat, under the collar of his shirt. His tie is gone now but I can see his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows; is he remembering the feeling of a tie around his neck?

I pull Dare’s hand to my chest, lacing my fingers with his as I press the back of his hand against my heart. He glances at me as if he’d forgotten for a moment that I was even here and smiles guiltily.

“I guess I shouldn’t be complaining about never having to think about money.”

My mouth curves up in a gentle smile. “I’ll allow it this once.”

“It’s stupid to feel deprived.”

I shrug. “It sounds like you needed someone to really care for you and comfort you. I’m sorry that you went through that. But having lived the experience, you can decide that you’re going to raise your daughter differently.”

Dare’s gaze flits away for a second. His throat works and for a second, I think he’s going to say something raw and emotional. But he seems to tamp down on whatever grief he is feeling.

He clears his throat and changes the subject. He rubs his hand over my belly, eliciting a kick. I make a face because the baby just jabbed my kidney. But Dare's gaze is fixed on my belly.

"She's got quite the pair of legs already," Dare murmurs, awe softening his tone as our daughter unleashes another flurry of kicks. "I can tell she's going to be a fighter, just like her mother."

"Hopefully not too strong-willed," I laugh. "Between the two of us, this little girl won't stand a chance at reasonable behavior."

"She'll be perfect," he insists, eyes glowing with pride and love. Then his expression sobers, and a shadow crosses his face. "My childhood was very different. Burn and I had every toy and luxury a child could dream of, but money can't buy happiness. Or love."

I lace my fingers through his, offering comfort. "You have love now. A family who will cherish you for the amazing man you are, not for your bank account or fancy cars."

"You're right." He lifts my hand to his lips, brushing a soft kiss over my knuckles. "I only wish I'd found you both sooner, so I could have spared you years of hardship and struggle."

"All that matters now is building a future together. Our daughter will never want for anything, especially not affection and care. You're going to be an amazing father, Dare Morgan. I can feel it in my soul."

"I think our daughter will be born lucky."

I swallow hard. "You know, I never thought I'd have this. A real family, and a man who loves me for who I am."

Dare cups my face, his gaze intense. "You deserve every happiness in the world, Talia. And I will spend the rest of my life ensuring you have it."

His words pierce my heart, unleashing a swell of emotion.

When the storm passes, I draw a shaky breath and wipe my eyes. “I’m sorry. Hormones again. They are kicking my ass today.”

“Don’t apologize.” Dare kisses my forehead, hands gliding in slow circles over my back. “You have nothing to hide from me, Talia. I want all of you. Everything that makes you who you are.”

I smile up at him, tracing the strong line of his jaw. “And you have all of me. Today, tomorrow, forever.”

“Forever,” he echoes, claiming my lips in a tender kiss.

I find myself thinking that maybe this could work, though there are enormous differences between us. Dare grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth, lavished with every luxury money could buy, while I struggled each day just to survive. He wields power and influence like a natural-born king, accustomed to having the world bend to his whim, whereas I’ve spent my life battling for each hard-won scrap.

And yet, in some ways, we are two sides of the same coin. Orphans both, denied the one thing every child craves most: a mother’s love.

Our little girl will have the attention that we both craved as children, if it’s the very last thing I do on this Earth.

Chapter Eighteen

DARE

The amber liquid burns down my throat as I swallow hard. I grip the glass tight, knuckles white, and signal the bartender for another. He nods, used to men drowning sorrows in overpriced whisky at this upscale bar.

I came to Herbsaint to get away, to think, but her voice echoes in my head. *“Forgive your brother, Dare. Please, for me. He’s family.”*

Spoken by a woman who’s never had a sibling. My wife’s naïveté shows.

I shake my head sharply as if I could shake away the memory.

My brother. My enemy. No, I won’t forgive Burn. Not after everything.

The bartender slides another glass in front of me wordlessly. I toss it back, hoping to scorch every memory from my mind.

The cabin that I found Talia in. Her cry of pain. His hands on her. My fists slamming into his face. The graveyard. Her tears.

No. He doesn’t deserve forgiveness. My loving wife may plead for reconciliation, but some betrayals cut too deep. I stare into my empty glass, seeing only the past.

Burn turned my world upside down. Stole my fiancée. Tried to steal my wife. I can’t forget. I won’t forgive.

The bar fades away as I’m pulled back into the dark vortex of memory. Her voice anchors me, calling me home.

Talia. My light in the darkness. The only one who can still the storms inside me. I long to return to her, to leave these ghosts behind. But forgiveness for my twin? That I cannot give.

The memories overtake me once more. There she is, my Talia, cornered by him. Burn crowds her against the brick wall, hands gripping her arms.

“Let her go!” I shout, seeing red.

He sneers over his shoulder. “Or what, brother? She’s mine now.”

I charge forward, grabbing Burn and throwing him off her. He stumbles but comes back swinging. I block his punch, fueled by rage.

“She will never be yours,” I snarl.

We trade blows. Talia cries for us to stop but the world narrows to me and him. All the years of jealousy, bitterness and betrayal boil over.

I knock him to the ground, straddling him. My fists slam into his face relentlessly. Blood spills but I don’t stop. Not until her voice breaks through.

“Dare, please!”

I freeze, chest heaving. Burn lies motionless beneath me. Talia pulls at my arm, sobbing. I look down at my battered hands, the red haze receding. What have I done?

Shakily I get to my feet, taking Talia into my arms. She clings to me, trembling. I stroke her hair, whispering apologies. Over her shoulder, I meet Burn’s glare. No remorse.

The glass in my hands comes slowly into focus. I’m breathing hard, trying not to lose my shit in the middle of Herbsaint. I blow out a breath.

Some betrayals can’t be forgiven. The past can’t be undone. But I have Talia... She is my future. She’s my light, my whole world. I can’t lose her now.

I would do anything for her.

Does that mean giving Burn another shot at being the brother I've always needed him to be?

I'm shocked back to the present by someone scraping the bar stool next to me across the floor. I blink down at my drink, giving myself a little shake.

"Is this seat taken?" a female voice purrs.

I freeze up. I used to hear that voice in my dreams on an endless loop. Daisy slinks into the seat next to me, her perfume cloying, her red dress plunging in the front and the back.

"Fancy seeing you here," she purrs, running a manicured nail along my forearm. I resist the urge to recoil. "It's been too long, Dare."

I take a swig of whiskey, keeping my eyes fixed on the rows of bottles behind the bar. "Not long enough."

She pouts, leaning in close. I catch a whiff of gin on her breath. "Don't be like that. We used to have such fun together."

Her hand trails higher up my thigh. I grab her wrist, removing it firmly.

"Used to being the operative words. I'm a married man now, if you hadn't heard."

Daisy scoffs. "Oh please. We both know this little farce with Talia won't last." She tosses her dark hair. "You need someone who understands your world. Someone born into your world of wealth and privilege. Besides, I've missed you, Dare."

I finally turn to look at her, disgust churning my gut. "You don't know the first thing about me or my world. Not anymore." I toss a few bills on the bar and stand. "Do yourself a favor, Daisy. Stay away from me and my wife."

I stride out without a backward glance, Daisy's shrill voice fading behind me. The night air is cool and crisp, clearing the cloying perfume from my senses.

I take a deep breath, the night air filling my lungs. For the first time in a long while, my mind feels clear.

Daisy was an error. I can see that now with crystal clarity. But Talia...she's different. With her, I feel like I've found solid ground after years of drifting aimlessly at sea. Our love woke something in me that I didn't even know was sleeping.

"Where are you going?" Daisy asks. "Dare, stop."

She reaches out and catches my arm. I rip my sleeve from her hand and continue on my way, pointedly looking at the ground in front of me.

Daisy isn't ready to let me go that easily. Though I've left the bar, she follows me, her heels sounding like gunshots on the pavement.

"Dare, you're being unreasonable," she wheedles. "Come back inside and buy me a drink."

I shove Daisy away as she tries to press herself against me, her cloying perfume invading my senses.

"Don't touch me," I snap. "You're the most awful fiancée I've ever had the displeasure of knowing. I never loved you. Not really. It was all a naive illusion in my mind."

Daisy scoffs, her eyes narrowing into slits. "Oh please, you know you wanted me. Who do you think you're fooling with this '*I love Talia*' act?"

"It's not an act," I retort. "I know what real love feels like now, and you and I never had that."

"You expect me to believe you actually have feelings for that mousy little twit?" she says with a cruel laugh.

I bristle at her insult toward Talia. "Believe what you want. The only one I care about convincing is my wife."

Daisy rolls her eyes dramatically. "You two won't last a month once the shine wears off. She's just a placeholder until you realize I'm the one you really want."

She reaches for me again, but I grab her wrist tightly. "Let go of your delusions, Daisy. I don't want you. Not now, not

ever again.”

I release her hand and turn to leave, ignoring her sputtering indignation. I take a deep breath, the night air filling my lungs. For the first time in a long while, my mind feels clear.

Daisy was a mistake, one that I let cloud my judgment for far too long. When I look back on our relationship now, all I see is a tangled mess of mind games and manipulation.

“Dare!”

I whip my head around, my eyes searching for my brother. Daisy leans against the entrance to Herbsaint, and I see my twin come jogging up the sidewalk, his eyes sliding between us.

“And just what’s going on here?”

Chapter Nineteen

DARE

I lock eyes with Burn. My twin, jogging down the sidewalk towards me, eyes accusatory. I stiffen, clenching my fists. What's he doing here?

I don't have time to wonder before a hand grasps my arm. I whirl to find Daisy at my elbow, ruby lips curved into a sultry smile.

"Change your mind?" she purrs, sidling closer. Revulsion twists my gut.

Burn is nearly at the entrance now, focused on the entrance to the bar. With a smirk, I grab Daisy and pull her against me. She gasps in surprise. Perfect.

"Burn!" I shout as he steps onto the curb. His head snaps up, eyes narrowing when he spots us locked in what must look like an intimate embrace. I don't give him a chance to react before I add, "You'll never believe what Daisy just said. Unless I am very mistaken, she's making a pass at me."

Daisy stiffens against me, outrage coloring her cheeks. But it's too late. Burn is stalking towards us, fists clenched at his sides.

Burn stops just shy of us, practically vibrating with anger.

"What are you doing here?" he growls, glaring at me. Daisy extracts herself from my loose hold and hurries to his side.

"He's lying!" she exclaims, grasping Burn's arm. "Dare's just trying to mess with you. Don't listen to him."

Burn shakes her off, fixing her with a piercing look. “Why should I believe you?” he asks coldly. “I know my brother. If he says you came onto him, then you did.”

Daisy gapes, clearly not expecting this reaction. I suppress a triumphant smile. The wedge is driven firmly between them now.

“But...I thought you two hated each other,” Daisy says after a moment, confusion in her eyes as she looks between us.

Burn’s expression softens slightly. “We did,” he admits. “But we’re trying to change that.”

I watch the exchange, trying to gauge Burn’s reaction. He’s clearly not happy with me, but I can tell that Daisy’s words have rattled him. Good. The more they fight, the less they’ll focus on me and the less likely they are to find out my true intentions.

“Look, I don’t want to cause any trouble,” I interject smoothly, holding up my hands in a placating gesture. It’s a lie, of course; I want to break them up, permanently. “I just wanted to let you both know what was said.”

His gaze flicks to me briefly before returning to Daisy. The silence that stretches between the three of us is deafening. But Burn finally breaks it.

“I think it’s time you gave me back my ring.”

Daisy’s face falls as she stares at Burn. Her fingers curl protectively around the diamond ring on her finger, as if to ward off any attempt to take it away from her.

“No,” she whispers. “I won’t give it back.”

Burn’s expression is unyielding. “You don’t have a choice,” he says sternly. He takes a step closer and reaches for her hand, gently but firmly prying her fingers away from the ring.

With a primal screech, Daisy rips the massive diamond ring from her finger and hurls it at Burn. He ducks just in time,

the ring pinging off the wall behind him. He is quick to scoop it up, his expression dour.

“Get the fuck out of here, Daisy. I meant it when I said I didn’t want to see you anymore.”

“You can’t do this!” Daisy shrieks. “I won’t let you throw away everything we had over one stupid argument!”

She grabs Burn’s arm, nails digging in. He shakes her off with a glare.

“We had nothing real. I see that now,” he says coldly.

Daisy’s chest heaves, eyes wild. “So what, you’re just going to walk away? After everything we meant to each other?”

She turns on me. “This is your doing! Poisoning him against me because you couldn’t stand to see your brother happy!”

I snort. “Don’t flatter yourself. My only regret is not opening his eyes sooner.”

“Damn you both!” Daisy shrieks, face mottled with rage. “I hope you rot!”

“We should talk. *Alone*,” she says, looking pointedly at me. “I can convince you, Burn. You know you want me to.”

“We are done,” he says flatly, looking at Daisy with a mixture of regret and determination in his gaze. “I’m sorry that it had to end this way. But if I never lay eyes on you again, it’ll be too soon.”

Daisy looks like she wants to argue, but one look at Burn’s face has silenced her protests. Tears fill her eyes as she turns and hurries away from us without another word.

I resist the urge to applaud. My brother has finally seen the light about his manipulative fiancée. Perhaps our relationship can be salvaged after all.

Daisy’s face twists in anger as she realizes Burn is serious.

“You’ll regret this,” she hisses. “Don’t come crawling back to me when you realize what a mistake you’ve made.”

Burn doesn't respond, letting the ring fall to the floor with a clatter. Daisy gives us both a look of pure loathing before spinning on her heel and stalking back inside the bar.

An awkward silence descends. I clear my throat. "Well, I'm glad you finally saw through her act," I say tentatively.

Burn runs a hand through his hair. "Yeah. I should have known from the start." He glances at the discarded ring, then back at me. He picks it up and puts it away in his coat pocket. "Thank you, Dare."

I nod, a bit taken aback. I hadn't expected gratitude. But before I can respond, Burn continues.

"Let me buy you a drink. I know we have a lot to work through, but...this is a start."

I hesitate. Talia is waiting for me at home, heavy with our child. The anger still simmers beneath the surface between my twin and me. But the hopeful look on Burn's face gives me pause.

Perhaps one drink won't hurt. I have hope that our fractured relationship can heal.

I consider Burn's offer carefully. One drink to celebrate the end of his toxic engagement can't hurt. And if we're going to repair our relationship, I need to take steps towards trust.

"Alright," I say finally. "One drink."

Burn's face lights up. He waves the bartender over and orders two whiskeys, neat.

As we wait, an uneasy silence settles between us. The history of rivalry and resentment won't disappear overnight. But Burn looks contrite, and I know how deeply Daisy's betrayal must cut.

The drinks arrive. Burn lifts his glass in a toast. "To new beginnings," he says.

"To family," I reply, clinking my glass against his.

The whiskey burns comfortingly as it goes down. Burn sighs, rolling his empty glass between his palms.

“I should have listened to you about Daisy from the start,” he admits. “I guess I just wanted to believe she truly cared.”

I nod. “I know the feeling. But there will be someone real someday.”

Burn smiles slightly. “I hope so.” He glances at his watch. “I should let you get home. Give my best to Talia.”

“I will.” I stand, pausing. “Thank you for the drink. This... It meant a lot.”

Burn clasps my shoulder. “Anytime.”

I step out into the night alone. The air is cold and bracing, clearing my head. I take a deep breath, exhaling a cloud of white.

My thoughts turn to Talia, her smile, her laughter. The swell of her belly where our child grows. The loft isn't far, but I find myself hurrying, eager to see her face.

Perhaps Burn and I can find our way forward after all. For now, my little family is all that matters.

Chapter Twenty

TALIA

Olive, Minnie, and I are all piled in the backseat of a chauffeured SUV, on our way to meet a real estate agent. Minnie needs a nicer house, something that will be more accessible for someone her age to get around in with ease. I merely suggested to Minnie that we should look yesterday... and today, we are already looking at properties.

Minnie is way more ready to spend the Morgan family trust than I am. And apparently, she moves fast when there's money to be spent.

At this precise moment, Minnie's frail fingers dig into my arm, her gnarled knuckles protruding under wrinkled, spotted skin.

"There, there, little one," she coos at my swollen belly. "Your granny Min can't wait to spoil you rotten."

Normally I would roll my eyes at her presumption. But not today. Apparently, my hormones are driving this Mack truck and they are swayed by Aunt Minnie's antics. Tears prick my eyes at her tenderness.

Olive brushes a knuckle under my chin, catching a tear before it falls. "May I?"

I nod, throat too tight to speak. Olive lays a gentle hand on my stomach, her eyes softening with wonder. "Hello in there. We're all so excited to meet you."

Love swells in my chest, vast and deep as the ocean. My found family, the one I chose, is whole and happy in this

perfect moment. A bubble of laughter escapes me as I cry. I feel like I'm no longer in command of my emotions.

The baby squirms under their hands, as if eager to join us. "Seems someone wants to say hello, too."

"Of course!" Minnie chuckles. "This little darling knows love when she feels it."

We pull up at the manicured curb of the first place Minnie's realtor wants us to see.

"Let's go! I'm not as spry as I used to be, but damn if that will keep me from exploring every inch of this property!" Minnie exclaims.

"Anything for you, Min," Olive says, tucking Minnie's arm through hers.

I follow them up the walkway, desperately trying to calm my wild emotions. A sleek silver Mercedes pulls into the driveway, tires squealing to a stop. A gorgeous woman in her fifties dressed in a power suit hurls herself out of the car. She marches over, heels clicking decisively on the pavement, and introduces herself as Susan, the real estate agent.

Aunt Minnie interjects. "I met Susan a few weeks ago at the farmer's market. She told me what she does and gave me her card. When we talked about buying a house last night, her name immediately came to mind."

"Lovely to meet you ladies! Are you ready to see the property?" Susan's smile is polite but distant, her handshake brisk and businesslike. Clearly, she values efficiency over idle chit-chat.

"We are," Olive confirms.

"Lead the way, Susan," Minnie says.

Susan launches into a rapid-fire description of the house's many charming qualities. The two-story brick residence has rose bushes and neat, white-trimmed windows. A sprawling wraparound porch offers ample space for sitting on summer evenings. Hardwood floors throughout, original fixtures dating

back over a century, a hand-laid stone fireplace in the sitting room. Lots of eccentric historical details...

Basically, she wants us to know that this house is a gem before we even get in the front door.

Minnie's eyes gleam with delight. "I do believe I'm in love! Did you hear that, sweet pea?" She pats my stomach conspiratorially. "We've found our home!"

I want to roll my eyes, but I just bite my tongue.

Charmed by Minnie's enthusiasm despite herself, Susan's composure slips for a moment. A fleeting smile softens her sharp features before she recovers her professional mask. "Shall we continue inside?"

"Please lead the way," Olive says.

Susan strides up the front steps and unlocks the heavy wooden door with a creak. We file in after her, assaulted by the mingled scents of lemon oil and aged wood.

"The kitchen and dining room in the back have French doors opening onto a shaded patio and rose garden," Susan says, pivoting on one high heel to face us. "A perfect space for entertaining on summer evenings."

"Or reading," Minnie says dreamily. "One could spend hours lost in a book out there."

"Just so," Susan agrees. "This house has so many quirky historical details and eccentricities. It will be an absolute gem for whoever decides to purchase it."

"Gem is precisely the word," Olive says, sliding me a sideways glance.

Minnie turns to us, eyes shining. "Would you darlings give me just a moment alone with Ms. Susan? I'd like to discuss some specs."

"Of course," I say. Olive and I move away, pretending interest in the carved mahogany bannister.

Their voices murmur softly behind us. I resist the urge to eavesdrop, fidgeting with the pearl buttons on my cardigan.

After a few moments, Minnie calls out, “All right, dears, you can stop examining the woodwork now. Let’s chat in the sitting room, shall we?”

We follow Minnie into a cozy room with a bay window overlooking the front garden. She perches on a floral sofa and pats the cushion next to her. “Come sit by me, Talia. And you too, Olive.”

I lower myself gingerly, mindful of my pregnant belly. Olive sinks down on Minnie’s other side.

“Now tell me,” Minnie says, patting my knee. “Why did you really bring me here today?”

I meet Olive’s eyes across Minnie’s lap. She gives me an encouraging nod.

I swallow hard. “This is a gift. But this gift comes with strings attached. If you accept the house, you must also accept a permanent helper in the store. In my condition, I’m not able to assist like I used to.”

Minnie’s face darkens. “Absolutely not. I won’t have a stranger coming in and mucking about in my shop.”

I meet Olive’s gaze again. She clears her throat delicately. “What if it wasn’t a stranger, but rather...me?”

Shock flickers across Minnie’s face. “You, my dear? But your teaching position at the university—”

“I’m considering going part-time for a while,” Olive says. “Until I determine my next move. I would love nothing more than to manage the bookshop for you. You would really be doing me a favor by letting me work with you.”

“And her pay will come from us,” I add quickly.

Minnie is quiet for a few moments, looking back and forth between the two of us.

“You really want to come work with me?” she asks Olive. Olive nods and hurries to explain.

“I’m in a little bit of hot water since the university folded my lab into a larger lab that’s already run by someone else.”

Minnie squeezes Olive's hand, misty-eyed. "Well in that case, my dear girl. It would be an honor to have you at the shop." She turns back to me with a slow smile. "It seems you've thought of everything! I accept your gift gladly, along with its strings."

Olivia heaves a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Minnie."

Minnie pats her face and gives her a hug.

Relief washes over me. The first part of the plan is complete. Now I just have to bring Dare on board.

We talk for a few minutes more before parting ways. I give Minnie a final hug, blinking back happy tears. I'm making my way back when the window of an idling black SUV rolls down. Dare squints out the window at me. I wasn't expecting him, yet I am so glad to see him that the emotion nearly brings me to tears.

"Looking for a ride?"

I grin and hurry to climb in the back seat with him.

Dare glances up from his phone, eyebrows raised. "That was quick. I take it everything went smoothly?"

"Smoother than I expected," I admit, exhaling as I settle against the plush leather. "She agreed to let Olive help manage the bookshop in exchange for the house."

"Excellent." Dare slides his phone into his breast pocket and takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. "You handled that brilliantly. I know confronting Minnie with her lack of mobility can't have been easy."

I shake my head wryly. "I was a bundle of nerves. But it worked out in the end, thanks in large part to you." I smile at him gratefully. "I don't think she would have accepted Olive working at the shop so easily without the house being part of the bargain. You were instrumental in making this plan come together."

“MORE LIKE MY MONEY.” Dare lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles. “All that matters is Minnie will be taken care of, and you’ll have one less burden to shoulder before the baby arrives.”

I lean against his solid shoulder, finally allowing the tension to drain from my body. “I’m so worn out,” I murmur. At least with Minnie sorted and the shop under control, I feel ready to embrace the future stretching before us.

“Come here, my love.” Dare pulls me into his arms, his large hand cradling the back of my head as his lips find mine. He kisses me deeply, tenderly, as if reaffirming our bond. I melt against him, my earlier anxiety fading away.

When we finally break for air, Dare keeps me tucked close to his chest. His voice rumbles low and warm against my ear. “Everything’s falling into place now. Minnie has the house, Olive will manage the shop, and soon we’ll be holding our baby.” He splays his hand over my belly, over the precious life we created together. “It won’t be long now before our family of two becomes a family of three.”

I cover his hand with my own, emotion swelling in my heart. “Our family,” I whisper. After so many years alone, the words feel sacred. I blink back tears, overwhelmed by how much has changed since I stumbled into Dare’s world.

Chapter Twenty-One

DARE

I ‘ve been summoned.

The rotting wooden stairs groan under my Italian loafers, years of salt and sun bleaching the once cherry-red boards a pale gray. At the bottom, the boathouse comes into view—weathered shingles curling up at the edges, cobwebs clinging to corners.

And there he is. Burn.

Scraping at the hull of our grandfather’s prized mahogany speedboat, a tumbler of whiskey sweating in his other hand. The sharp tang of alcohol and burnt wood chips assaults my senses, dragging me back to our boyhood.

I clear my throat. Burn startles, the knife slipping. A bead of crimson wells on his thumb.

Our eyes lock. Blue on blue.

How many times did we stand like this as children, sizing each other up before launching into a fight?

Burn recovers first, wiping the blood on his trousers. “You came.” His voice is rough, strained.

“You asked.” The words taste bitter on my tongue. I promised Talia I’d make an effort, but that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten.

Or forgiven my selfish bastard of a brother.

Burn looks away, scanning the hull for imaginary imperfections. “I know I don’t deserve it, after...everything.

But Talia's right. It's time to bury the hatchet. If not for us, then for the baby."

The baby. My baby. I flex my hands, fighting the urge to clench them into fists. He has no right to claim any part of my child's life, not after what he did.

But Talia wants this. And I can deny her nothing.

I jerk my head toward the boathouse. "You have whiskey. I have time."

The corners of Burn's mouth twitch. Not quite a smile, but close enough.

He passes me the tumbler wordlessly. I take a swig, savoring the slow burn down my throat.

Maybe this is what it takes to move on. Whiskey and uneasy truces.

Burn carries the bottle out to the dock. It's the middle of the day but there is a definite chill once we take off our shoes, roll our pant legs up, and sit on the dock's edge. I dangle my feet and stare out at the sea, the waves crashing against the shore in a steady, rhythmic beat.

It's been years since Burn and I have spoken like this. Since we've been brothers, instead of enemies. And even now, with Talia and the baby between us, it's hard to let go of the past. But I have to try. For the sake of my family.

"So, what now?" I ask, my voice gruff.

Burn takes a long sip of whiskey before answering. "I don't know. Maybe we could start by apologizing. Really apologizing."

I snort. "You think a simple sorry is going to make it all okay?"

Burn shakes his head, "No, but it's a start. Look, Dare, I know I messed up. I shouldn't have slept with Talia in the first place. And stealing Daisy... I shouldn't have hurt you like that. But you have to understand, it wasn't just about her. It was about me feeling like I could never measure up to you. Like I was always living in your shadow."

I stare at him, trying to gauge his sincerity. He looks back at me, his eyes clear and earnest. Maybe he's telling the truth. Maybe he's just trying to manipulate me again. But I can't keep living like this, always second-guessing myself and everything around me.

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of everything that has happened between us. "I appreciate the apology, Burn. But there's more to it than that. You slept with Talia and now she's carrying your child."

"Yeah." My brother's gaze is on the horizon. "I think we both know that that baby isn't mine. Not really."

I blink at him, surprised. "I thought that you were going to be a complete prick about the baby."

He shrugs. "I'm full of surprises today."

We both fall silent. The constant slap of the water against the dock can't fill the air between us. I realize just now that I've been tensed for a fight between us that might or might not happen. Cracking my knuckles, I take a deep breath and blow it out, willing my muscles to relax.

"So, what's it like?" Burn's voice is low, hesitant.

I glance over at him, surprised. "What's what like?"

He shrugs, looking sheepish. "Being married. Being...in love."

I snort, taking another swig of whiskey.

Burn sits across from me, nursing his own drink. The silence stretches, full of things unsaid. I clear my throat. "Talia wants me to forgive you. She's so fucking gracious that I want to shake her."

He flinches. "I don't deserve her forgiveness. Or yours."

"No. You don't." I take another swig of whiskey. "But she's carrying my heir. So for my daughter's sake...I'm willing to try."

Burn's eyes snap to mine, wide with surprise.

“A girl,” he echoes faintly. He passes a hand over his face, looking suddenly weary. Older than his years. “Christ, Dare. I’m going to be an uncle.”

“If I allow it.” The words come out harsher than I intend, a reflexive response to the thought of Burn in my daughter’s life. I sigh. “Talía wants her daughter to know the family. She’s so anxious for everybody to get along.”

“I understand.” Burn stares into his glass. When he looks up again, his eyes are troubled. “Dare, I... what I did, taking Talía—”

“Don’t.” I cut him off with a sharp gesture. “I’m not ready to hear your apologies about that. Not yet.”

He nods, accepting. “Will you ever be?”

I consider it. The tumbler is empty; I tilt it to catch the last drops. “I don’t know,” I say at last. “Maybe, in time. But first...” I meet his gaze, willing him to understand. “First you have to prove you’ve really changed.”

Burn looks away. Takes a long swallow of whiskey. When he turns back, his jaw is set in a familiar stubborn line.

“I’ll try my hardest to convince you I have.”

The silence stretches between us, thick and cloying. I stare out at the swell and pitch of the sea beyond us, listening to the rhythm of Burn’s breathing.

Finally, he speaks. “Dare, say something. Anything.”

I turn to find him watching me with a mix of hope and apprehension. My brother, who was once my best friend. Now a stranger.

“Did you ever truly love her?” The question escapes before I can stop it. “Daisy, I mean. Or was it all just a game to you?”

Burn flinches. “I cared for Daisy,” he says slowly. “As much as I was capable of, at the time. But you were right about her. About the type of woman she was.” His mouth twists. “The type of man I was, to go along with her schemes.”

“And now?” I press. “What type of man are you now?”

“I don’t know.” He smiles without humor. “Trying to be better, I suppose. The type of man who won’t make the same mistakes.”

I study him, searching for any sign of deceit. But his face is open, his tone sincere. Maybe - just maybe - he means it.

“Dare.” Burn leans forward, hands clasped between his knees. “I know I have no right to ask this. Not after everything I’ve done. But I want us to be brothers again. To put the past behind us, once and for all.”

His words awaken a yearning I’ve long tried to bury. A vision of two little boys racing along the beach, laughing in the sun. Before money and power and deceit came between us.

I clear my throat. “It won’t be easy.”

“I know.”

“And if you betray me again - ”

“I won’t.” Burn’s eyes meet mine, hard as flint. “I swear to you, Dare, on our mother’s grave. I will never betray you again.”

The vow hits its mark. I feel the sharp ache of memory and it’s not even touched by the burn of the whiskey I’m drinking. Our mother is the most sacred thing between the two of us lost souls.

If Burn’s willing to swear on her memory...

I take a deep breath and extend my hand. “Brothers, then.”

Burn’s face floods with relief. He clasps my hand in both of his hands, grip strong. “Brothers,” he echoes fiercely. “Always.”

A smile tugs at my mouth as I look at him. My idiot brother. Maybe this is a mistake - but it feels right.

The sun breaks through the clouds as our hands meet, bathing the sea and shore in golden light. A sign, if ever there was one.

We sit in silence for a couple of minutes before Burn sighs. “Do you want to know how I know that Talia really loves you?”

I cock a brow at him. “I don’t know, do I?”

Burn pulls out his cell and plays an audio file. Talia’s voice filters through the speaker, soft but unwavering: “I will always love Dare. No matter what you do to me.”

He turns it off and then stares off into the water. “I recorded that during her kidnapping. I was trying to convince her that she should be my wife instead of yours.”

My heart clenches at the words. My hands itch to throttle Burn’s neck.

“Why are you trying to remind me?” I hiss.

“Did you listen to what she said?” Burn looks at me, his gaze direct and intent. “She said that no matter what, she’ll always love you. Most people would kill for that kind of affirmation.”

I suck in a breath. “Replay it.”

My twin obliges, putting his phone on the dock between us.

“I will always love Dare. No matter what you do to me,” Talia says.

The depth of feeling in Talia’s voice shakes me; she means every word.

Burn points to the phone. There is more, apparently.

“Come now, Talia. Be reasonable. Dare’s just like the rest of us - he only cares about money and power. He’ll never really love you,” Burn’s tinny voice hisses.

“You’re wrong,” Talia says calmly. “Dare is different. He cares about people - about me. And I love him with all my heart.”

The recording ends. I stare at the phone in Burn’s hand, stunned into silence.

“Well?” Burn prompts. “What do you think now?”

“She really does love me,” I say wonderingly. “I’m not sure how I managed that.”

“Congratulations, brother. It seems you’ve found a keeper.” Burn claps me on the shoulder, his expression somber. “Don’t let this one get away.”

“I won’t,” I promise.

But a niggling doubt remains: does Talia love the man, or the illusion of the man she’s created? Does she love me, or my money?

It is a question that has been in the back of my mind ever since she said *I do*.

Burn’s suggestion comes back to me. Perhaps the only way to know for sure is to destroy the illusion - strip away the wealth and privilege, the trappings of power - and see if Talia’s love remains. It’s a risk.

“I wish that you could prove Talia’s loyalty,” I say slowly.

He tilts his head to the side. “I just played a secret recording of Talia declaring that she loves you.”

“But would she love me if I couldn’t provide things she wants?”

A laugh burbles from his lips. “You’re crazy.”

“I’m serious.”

Burn’s eyes lock onto mine, the dim light from the antique chandelier casting haunting shadows across his chiseled face. It takes a long time before he answers.

“I’ve got an idea,” he says, his voice low and urgent. “You could lie to Talia. Tell her you’ve been disinherited. That you’ll be poor and have nothing. Gauge her reaction. Then you’ll know whether she is staying with you for the money or for love.”

As soon as Burn says it, I know that it needs to happen. Before I give myself to Talia completely, I just have to know how much of her love I bought and how much I actually

inspired. My heart pounds in my chest as Burn's suggestion echoes through my mind.

It's a gamble, but it might just work. The truth is slippery and evasive, and the thought of living with this uncertainty is suddenly unbearable.

"You're right," I say quickly, my emotions running high. "It's the only way to know."

"Not the only way," Burn starts to point out.

But I'm not listening to a word he says.

The truth must be revealed; the veil of deception lifted. It's a dangerous game we're playing, one that could either cement our love or shatter it beyond repair. I know that I owe it not only to myself but to Talia as well.

"Tell her," I whisper to myself, steeling my resolve. "Tell her and let the chips fall where they may."

Chapter Twenty-Two

TALIA

The automatic doors slide open and a wave of vanilla scent washes over me. My heart stutters at the sight of plush cream carpeting, soft pink walls and sleek chrome accents. I clutch at Olive's arm.

Suddenly, the thought of giving birth is real. And this place is shoving it in my face. I pale and gulp.

Luckily, a familiar face awaits. Dr. Nathan, the nicest obstetrician in the world, stands in the foyer to greet me.

"Welcome to Adams-Rosenbaum Birthing Center, Mrs. Morgan," Dr. Nathan says, shaking my hand with a practiced grip.

Beside her stands a short woman in bright pink scrubs, her name tag reading *Mercy, Physician's Assistant*. She gives me a smile, warm brown eyes crinkling at the edges.

"Congratulations on your pregnancy, Mrs. Morgan. We're so happy you'll be delivering here with us."

Mercy's enthusiasm seems genuine, but I wonder if it's only because Dare's name opens doors in Montpelier like a golden key. My fingers tighten around Olive's as another wave of nerves rolls through me.

"Adams-Rosenbaum is the premier birthing center on the East Coast," Mercy continues. "Our facility is state-of-the-art, and we provide only the highest quality care. You'll have a spacious birthing suite, the finest midwives and doctors, and any service you require."

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate all the time and care you’re putting into this.”

It’s the truth. As uneasy as their lavish accommodations make me feel, I want only the best for my baby. If Dare’s wealth and status can provide that, I’ll make use of them.

I lay a hand over my swollen belly, feeling the baby roll under my palm. *You deserve the world, little one. I’ll make sure you have every advantage.*

“Why don’t we show you to your suite now?” Dr. Nathan suggests. “We designed it to be a fully self-contained home away from home during your stay here. Please let me know if there’s anything else we can do for you.”

“Thank you,” I say again, squeezing Olive’s hand. “I’m sure it will be perfect.”

My heart flutters with joy and nerves as we walk down the corridor. Everything here is so pristine, so perfect. Rather like a fairy tale.

But a niggling worry worms its way through my anticipation. Fairy tales often hide thorns beneath their gilded petals. I can only hope this glamor doesn’t come with a price.

Mercy swings open a set of ornate wooden doors and ushers us inside. I gasp. The suite is the size of Aunt Minnie’s small house, decorated in shades of blush and ivory with gauzy drapes and plush carpeting. A four-poster canopy bed dominates the center of the room, piled high with silk pillows.

“The nursery is through here,” Mercy says, leading us through another door. My heart melts at the sight of the pastel jungle animals painted on the walls, the crystal chandelier, the stuffed toys arranged just so on a miniature sofa.

“It’s too much,” I whisper to Olive. “Simply too much.”

“Nonsense,” she says, giving my arm a squeeze. “Every new mother deserves to be pampered, and you most of all. Now come on, let’s see the rest!”

Mercy shows us the en suite bathroom with its sunken marble tub, the fully stocked kitchenette, the home theater, the

massage parlor. By the end of the tour I'm dizzy from excess. Part of me thrills at such luxury, but the rest feels unmoored. As if I've tumbled down a rabbit hole into a strange wonderland where nothing makes sense.

After Mercy leaves us alone, I sink onto the edge of the bed and take a steadying breath. Olive sits beside me, a warm and comforting presence.

"What is it, Lia?" she asks, smoothing my hair. "You seem quite overwhelmed."

I give a shaky laugh. "I feel like an imposter. As if I don't belong in a place like this, with all this finery. I'm just a small-town girl from Vermont, not royalty." I twist my wedding ring around my finger, the diamond catching the light. "Dare's world is still so foreign to me. I worry I'll never truly belong in it or be enough for him."

Olive pulls me into her embrace, cradling me as I've always imagined a mother might. "You are enough, Talia," she says fiercely. "You're a strong, caring, intelligent woman, and any man would be lucky to have you. Don't ever doubt yourself or let Dare's trappings make you feel otherwise."

Her words are a balm to my troubled soul. I cling to them, and to her, drawing solace from the steady beat of her heart. She's right—I am enough. I have everything I need inside me already. No gilded cage, however luxurious, can contain my spirit. Dare chose me for who I am, not what I might become. I won't forget that again.

I leave the birthing center with renewed confidence in myself and my relationship. The drive back home is peaceful, my worries calmed.

When I enter the loft, exhaustion hits me like a brick wall. My back aches, my feet are swollen balloons, and the baby is doing somersaults on my bladder. All I want is to put my feet up and rest.

I sink onto the couch with a groan and prop my feet on the ottoman, massaging my soles. My wedding ring cuts into my

puffy finger, the metal band too tight. I twist and tug until it comes free, leaving a red indentation behind.

Dare chooses that moment to stalk through the front door, a thunderous look on his face. My heart leaps in trepidation. His temper has been unpredictable these days, his moods as changeable as the weather. I can only hope this storm will pass quickly.

“You’re home early,” I say, aiming for a casual tone.

He grunts and throws himself into the armchair, clearly distracted. “What have you been doing all day?” he demands.

I hesitate, then decide honesty is the best policy. “I toured the birthing center with Olive. It’s a lovely place, very well-recommended. Dr. Nathan will be delivering the baby there.”

Dare’s eyes narrow. “How much is that going to cost me?” he snaps.

Stung, I stare at him. Surely, this is an entirely different man than the one that teased me about spending money just days ago.

“I didn’t ask. I chose the center based on the doctor’s recommendation, not the price tag.”

“Watch how you spend my money,” he warns. “I won’t have you bleeding me dry for every little whim.”

Anger sparks in my chest, chasing away my earlier peace. This is insane.

“This is our child we’re discussing, not a ‘little whim’! I will do whatever is necessary to ensure his or her health and well-being. If you have a problem with that, you’re welcome to find another wife to bear your heirs.”

Dare surges to his feet, eyes blazing. “Don’t you dare speak to me like that! I own you, Talia, and everything you hold dear. You’d do well to remember your place.”

I rise as well, standing as tall as my swollen belly allows. “I won’t allow you to treat me like this, Dare. I know my place,” I say coldly. “And it is not at your beck and call, to be ordered about like a possession. I am your wife, not your

slave, and I deserve to be treated with respect. If you cannot give me that, then we have nothing more to discuss.”

With that, I turn on my heel and storm off to the bedroom, slamming the door behind me. My heart pounds as I wait to see whether Dare will follow. Our marriage hangs in the balance, the future unclear. All I know is that I won't back down from this fight. The time has come to stand up for myself—and my child. The rest is in fate's hands.

But Dare does not follow.

I pace the room like a caged tiger, fury and adrenaline coursing through my veins. How dare he speak to me that way? As if I were nothing more than a trinket for his amusement, to be shelved and taken down at his whim.

After everything I've done for him—after all the love I've poured into this marriage—this is how he repays me? With threats and contempt?

My hands curl into fists at the thought. I want to scream, to throw something, to inflict on him the pain he's caused me. But I restrain myself. That will only make the situation worse.

Several hours pass before I hear the loft door open and close again. By then my anger has cooled to a simmer, though it's still there, lurking beneath the surface. I stand at the window, watching the city lights blink on against the gathering dusk.

When Dare enters the room, I don't turn around. I can see his reflection in the glass, hovering uncertainly on the threshold. He opens his mouth as if to speak, then closes it again, at a loss for words.

At last he says, “I lost my temper with you earlier.”

I huff. “You think?”

“Did you only marry me for my money and status?”

“Of course not,” I protest. “I never said that.”

“You didn't have to.” He stalks across the room like a caged animal, gesturing wildly. “It's obvious you regret tying

yourself to me. As if I'm not enough, as if you need an escape hatch in case a better offer comes along."

"Dare, stop. That's ridiculous and you know it." I struggle to remain calm, though his accusations sting. "I love you. I chose you, and I don't regret it for an instant."

"Then why are you so eager to get rid of your ring?" He points an accusing finger at the wedding band on my finger. "Our sacred symbol of commitment—you can't wait to cast it aside!"

"My fingers are swollen from the pregnancy. The ring doesn't fit right now." I spread my hands in supplication. "You're reading too much into this."

"Am I?" His eyes are chips of blue ice. "Or have I simply been blind to the truth all this time? Maybe you only want me for my money after all."

"I don't care about your money!" Tears of frustration prick my eyes. "I married you because I love you. But right now, I don't even know who you are."

Dare flinches, but quickly hides it behind a mask of indifference. "Perhaps we've both made a mistake then," he says coolly. "If you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to."

With that, he strides out of the room, leaving me alone with the ruins of our fight.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DARE

The leather seat sticks to my back, sweat pooling between my shoulder blades. My heart thumps an anxious rhythm as our SUV crunches up the winding gravel drive.

“I don’t think our grandfather needs to know that you got my wife pregnant. Why can’t it stay a secret between the three of us?”

Burn’s gaze burns a hole in the side of my head. “Just tell Remy the truth. It’s the only way.”

I rake a hand through my hair, tugging at the roots. “He’s going to disinherit me, and this time it will be for real. I’ve lied to his face for months.”

“I think you are putting words in his mouth. You don’t know that he’ll care who the father of the baby is.”

The baby. My baby.

I sigh. How did I let things spiral so far out of control?

“You didn’t lie to be malicious. You were protecting Talia. He’ll understand that, once he cools off.”

Once he cools off. As if Remy’s temper is a summer squall, swiftly fading into the distance. More like a hurricane, leaving devastation in its wake.

“I lied to win the inheritance race between us. I think he’ll be furious.”

“You have to tell him. Do not let him find out some other way. Control the narrative.”

He's right, of course. If multiple people know the secret of my baby's parentage, it's not going to stay secret forever. Even the best kept secrets eventually leak. And letting Remy know now is the only way to have full control of the story I'm telling.

The SUV slows, coming to a stop outside the sprawling Tudor estate. Home. The place I've spent my whole life, yet never felt like I truly belonged.

Burn puts his hand on my shoulder, his eyes searching my face. "We're in this together, remember? I'm right beside you."

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat and nod. Together. Just like the old days.

The doors open, sunlight spilling into the manor. Our footsteps are quick, sounding loudly as we march in time to Remy's office. I take a deep breath, steeling myself, and step out to meet my fate. Knocking on his door is the hardest thing I've ever done.

"Come in," comes a muffled voice.

I open the door and step through the doorway, trying not to look as nervous as I feel. Burn is right behind me, backing me up. Remy stands at the window, gnarled hands clasped behind his back. His pale eyes gleam under bushy white eyebrows, and his bloodless lips twist into a sneer.

"Well, well. The prodigal sons have finally returned." His mocking tone slices through me, as sharp as any knife. "Come to beg for forgiveness, have you?"

My stomach roils, but I keep my face blank. Show no weakness. "We need to talk."

Remy's sneer widens. "Oh, do we now? This ought to be interesting."

Remy turns and paces to sit behind his massive mahogany desk, fingers steepled under his chin. His pale eyes gleam with malice in the dim light. He reclines and looks from one of us to another.

Burn clears his throat. “Remy, we have come to tell you -”

“Spare me your pathetic attempts at courtesy.” Remy’s voice is icy. “You’ve wasted enough of my time already. Out with it, or get out of my sight.”

I brace myself, searching for the right words. How do you tell a man like Remy Morgan that your brother knocked up your wife, but everything is fine between you two?

I jump in. “Remy, we wanted to talk to you about your heir.”

He goes still. “Are you about to tell me that there is no heir?”

“What?” Burn shakes his head. “No.”

Remy fixes me with a stern glance. “You two need to come out with it. You’re making me nervous.”

I rub my hands together. “Talía is pregnant.”

“I know that,” Remy spits.

“The baby is Burn’s.”

I have never seen shock on Remy’s aged face. He seems too wizened and knowing to be scandalized by anything.

But at my words, his jaw drops. His face goes scarlet. “I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

Burn clears his throat to speak but I shake my head.

“Burn fathered the child. But Talía and I are going to raise it together.”

“Like hell you will!” Remy bursts out. “You can’t be Talía’s husband. You have to let her go and file for an annulment. Burn will have to be the one to marry her. And he’ll have to take over the company. There is no way that I’m going to let a degenerate liar like you raise the child. That’s my heir!”

Burn and I glance at one another. So much for Remy understanding.

“It’s already decided,” Burn says. “Talia agrees that she wants to stay with Dare.”

“Who cares what she wants??” Remy screams. “Are you both trying to kill me?”

“We wanted to tell you first,” I say. “Man to man.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then Remy erupts from his chair, face contorted with rage. “You foolish, worthless boy!” He hurls a crystal decanter at my head. I duck just in time, and it shatters against the wall, raining glass and brandy.

“How dare you disgrace this family like this!” Another object whistles through the air and Burn yanks me out of the way. My heart pounds as Remy continues his tirade, grabbing anything within reach and flinging it at us.

“Get out!” he thunders, eyes wild and spittle flying from his lips. “Get out before I throw you both out myself!”

Burn grabs my arm and pulls me toward the door. No point arguing now. We flee from the study with Remy’s furious shouts chasing after us, escaping with our lives intact, if not our dignity.

So much for presenting a unified front. Remy can’t be reasoned with, not when he’s like this. All we can do now is weather the storm - and figure out where to go from here.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DARE

The next day, Remy summons me to his study. I steel myself for another barrage of rage as I enter, but he receives me with deceptive calm.

“I’ve made my decision,” he announces, steepling his fingers under his chin. “Your brother will marry that woman. We’ll do it quickly, this week if possible.”

I squint at him. “Is that what you called me here to discuss?”

He bangs his hand on his desk. “You’ll do what I say, Dare. If not, you will be given two options. Sign over your claim to the company immediately or be cut off without a cent. You have until the end of the week.”

I stare at him, stunned. “You can’t do that.”

“I can do as I please. This is my legacy, and I will not have it fall into the hands of a fool who can’t keep his whore in line.” His eyes gleam with malice. “Make your choice.”

Anger flares in my chest, hot and sharp. How dare he speak about Talia that way? I draw a steadying breath, clenching my jaw. I will not give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

“The child will still be your heir,” I say evenly. “Your legacy will live on, whether or not I have a hand in the company.”

“Don’t pretend you care about my legacy,” Remy sneers. “You’re even more worthless than your father. Get out of my sight before I decide to cut you off right now.”

I turn on my heel and stalk from the room, rage simmering in my veins. He means to strip me of my birthright, all because of his hatred for Talia. But he won't get away with this. I'll find a way to stop him, to protect what's mine. No one threatens what I hold dear and lives to tell the tale.

When this is over, Remy Morgan will regret the day he ever crossed me.

Burn waits for me outside Remy's office, concern etched into his features.

"I take it that didn't go well," he says.

I drag a hand through my hair, exhaling harshly. "He's threatening to disinherit me if I don't leave Talia."

Burn's eyes widen. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious." I glance over my shoulder at the closed doors. "He seems to believe he can control my life, even now. I won't stand for it."

"What are you going to do?"

A plan starts to take shape in my mind. One that will cut Remy's legs out from under him and leave him powerless.

"We're going to lie," I say. "We're going to make him think he's won. Then I'm going to destroy him."

Burn studies me for a long moment. "You're playing a dangerous game, brother."

I meet his gaze, unflinching. "So is he."

When I return home later, Talia is waiting for me in the foyer. Her eyes light up at the sight of me, a smile curving her lips that makes my chest ache. How could Remy ever think I would give her up?

I swallow hard, my throat closing as I stare into Talia's deep blue eyes.

"Talia, there's something I have to tell you."

Her hands tighten around mine, her gaze searching my face. "What is it?"

The words stick in my throat, an ugly knot of deceit. I force them out. “My grandfather has disinherited me. Cut me off completely.”

Shock ripples across her face, followed swiftly by anger. “He can’t do that! You’re his grandson, his heir—”

“Not anymore.” My chest aches as if my heart is breaking apart, shard by shard. “He’s furious with me for refusing to break up with you. Says if I won’t do my duty, I don’t deserve the Morgan name or fortune.”

Talia’s hands clench into fists, rage darkening her eyes, but when she speaks her voice is soft. “Oh Dare, I’m so sorry. How are you feeling?”

Her compassion undoes me. I drop my gaze, unable to bear the tenderness in her face. What have I done? She thinks I’ve lost everything for her sake, when the truth is I’ve let uncertainty guide my actions.

I clear my throat, forcing steadiness into my tone. “We’ll be fine. I have some money set aside, and there are always opportunities for a man with my skills and experience.”

“Of course we will.” Talia wraps her arms around me, pressing close. Her warmth and scent envelop me, achingly familiar. “We don’t need your family’s money or name. All we need is each other.”

Talia kisses my cheek, my jaw, the corner of my mouth, love and reassurance in every touch. My treacherous heart thrills at her touch even as guilt threatens to choke me. She believes in me, trusts me without question, and I’ve repaid that gift with deceit.

Her eyes flash with determination as she pulls away, scanning the room as if solutions might materialize from the air itself. She switches modes, seeming to forget that she was comforting me.

“Right. First things first, we need a new plan for the birth. No fancy private hospital for us now, I suppose.” She laughs, a brittle sound. “The irony. I’d have given anything for a normal delivery, and now I’ll get my wish.”

I flinch at the bitterness in her tone. “Talia, I’m so sorry. You don’t deserve this.”

She waves a hand, dismissing my apology. “Nonsense. What’s done is done. At least now I’ll get to experience childbirth like any other woman.” Her smile is strained, but she soldiers on. “We can stay at my aunt’s place until we get on our feet. She’s always offering to put us up, and the bookshop will give us both temporary jobs. It won’t be glamorous, but we’ll make do. We have each other, and that’s all that matters.”

Talia’s optimism only makes my guilt cut deeper. I should tell her the truth, but I’m a coward. I can’t face her anger and disappointment, not now when she’s so determined to stand by me despite the loss of everything familiar and comfortable in her life.

“Talia,” I begin, but she presses a finger to my lips, silencing me.

“Hush. No more apologies. We always knew your family might disinherit you, and now it’s happened.” Her eyes soften, and she cups my face in her hands. “But you still have me. I’m not going anywhere, Dare. We’ll build a new life together, just the two of us. Our baby is all the family we need.”

She believes in me so profoundly, and I’ve been over here, making mountains out of molehills.

Talia sighs. “Now, we have plans to make. The first thing is finding a new place to live before the baby comes. We can stay at Aunt Minnie’s for now, but we’ll need our own space eventually.”

Her practical tone sets my teeth on edge. As if I’m not still reeling from the betrayal. Anger and hurt curdle in my gut, and I turn away from her probing gaze.

“You don’t seem very upset about this.” My voice comes out harsh, accusing. “Aren’t you worried how we’ll provide for ourselves? For the baby?”

Talia frowns, hurt flashing across her face. “What on earth is going on with you, Dare? I swear, for the last week you’ve

been all over the map. First you tell me how you're going to spoil our baby. Then you yell at me when I pick the birthing center recommended by the doctor that you insisted on. Today, you tell me you're disinherited. I comfort you. And then when I start talking about the practical side of things, you blow up on me."

"Maybe I'm hurting."

She waves her hands. "Look around. You're going to be fine. And because I'm your wife, I'm going to be fine. We have to make some quick decisions, though."

I glare at her. "It must be nice to be so unperturbed."

Anger flashes across Talia's face.

"Of course I'm worried. But getting upset won't solve anything. We have to stay focused on the important things, like making sure we have a safe place to bring our child home."

"The important things," I scoff. "Like your promises to Aunt Minnie and Olive. What about your promise to stand by me?"

"That's not fair." Talia's eyes narrow, and her mouth presses into a thin line. "I'm trying to handle this responsibly, for our family's sake. Yelling at me won't make things any easier."

"I don't need you to handle me," I snap. "I need to know you actually care about what I'm going through. Or is my pain just an inconvenience to your plans?"

She makes a frustrated sound. "Grow up, Dare! You're about to have a kid. That means you can't just yell when you don't get your way!"

"I'm just saying what we're both thinking. Go ahead, tell me that you don't have a plan to leave me now that I'm broke."

Talia flinches as if I've struck her. "How can you say that? I love you, Dare. More than anything in this world. I'm trying to be strong for both of us right now." Her voice wavers, and

she wraps her arms around her middle. “If you can’t see that, then I don’t know what else I can do.”

I slam out of the room, hating everything I see, but myself most of all.

Chapter Twenty-Five

TALIA

I 'm standing in front of my closet, reaching as far as I can on my tiptoes, when I feel the first contraction. My breath hitches in my throat as I clutch the closet door, trying to steady myself. I make a strangled sound in my throat as I clutch the closet door, trying to steady myself.

What is going on?

When nothing else happens, I shrug and move to get the shoes I was trying to reach. I get them and move toward the bathroom, performing my usual waking up ritual.

Wash my face, brush my teeth, take a handful of prenatal vitamins, rub my whole body down with lotion.

The strange cramping spasm comes again, spreading across the front part of my lower belly. I look down, gaping at my stomach, as if I can understand better just by looking.

Is this... labor?

It's too early for that to be happening!

Just when I decide to call someone about it, the contraction, if that's what it is, ends. I sit down and decide to wait a few more minutes, just to be sure before I make a huge deal out of nothing.

I'm about to give up when I'm gripped again by another searing pain in my abdomen. I press my hand to my stomach, feeling sweaty. Something is *wrong*.

This can't be labor. But it hurts!

I'm not due for another six weeks. Panic starts to rise inside of me, and I begin to hyperventilate. I need to call Dare. He needs to know what's happening.

I hobble quickly to the phone, my breaths coming in shallow gasps. I dial Dare's number, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Dare, something's wrong," I gasp out when he answers. "I think I'm in labor."

There's a moment of stunned silence on the other end of the line. "What? Talia, you can't be. It's too early."

"I know," I say through gritted teeth. "But my body is in control. And it thinks I'm having—"

My belly ripples and the baby moves, shoving and elbowing my guts and stealing my breath. I gasp, clutching the marble countertop until my knuckles whiten.

"Talia?" Dare sounds scared, which makes me terrified. "I'll be right there, darling. Call the doctor while you wait for me."

The contraction eases and I hang up and dial Dr. Nathan's number. She doesn't answer, but I do get her service. A soothing woman's voice tells me that she'll call the nearest hospital and tell them to be ready to admit me. She also says not to worry, that things will be perfectly fine.

I hang up and hobble to the living room, pulling on some shoes. The contractions seem to have eased, but my mind doesn't stop its whirlwind ball of motion for a second.

Panic rises in my chest at the thought of something wrong with the baby. I glance at the clock, willing time to move faster.

Where is my husband?

The pain comes again, and I double over with a groan. Beads of sweat break across my forehead.

I have to stay calm, I tell myself.

Many women experience Braxton-Hicks contractions, and everything is probably fine but—

The front door bursts open. “Talia!” Dare rushes into the loft, eyes wild. He takes one look at me, bent over and clutching my middle, and in two strides crosses the space between us.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?” His hands grip my shoulders as his gaze searches my face.

“The contractions,” I gasp. “They really hurt, Dare.”

“We have to get you to the hospital. Now.” He scoops me into his arms, carrying me toward the front door.

“It’s too soon,” I howl. “She’s not due for another six weeks!”

I cling to him, burying my face in the collar of his shirt.

“Shh, don’t worry. I’ve got you.” His voice is steady, but I feel the tension in his arms, sense the worry emanating from him in waves. “We’ll get the best doctors on this. Our baby will be just fine.”

He carries me outside and gently sets me in the back of the idling SUV. Sliding in beside me, he pulls me close. I breathe in his familiar scent—cedar and spice, safety and comfort.

His hand strokes my hair as the contractions ease once more.

“It’s going to be okay,” he murmurs. “I’m here now. I won’t leave you again.”

I cling to him, trusting that together we will get through this. We have to. Our daughter’s life depends on it.

We make it to the hospital in record time. As we are entering the emergency room, I gasp. I stop and double over as another contraction hits, this one stronger than before.

Dare presses down on my shoulders, forcing me to sit down in a wheelchair. I clutch at his sleeve, looking up at him, clawing at his arm to make him understand that what I’m saying is important.

“I can’t lose her, Dare.”

“You won’t. I won’t allow it.” He bends down to hug me. “Our daughter is strong, like her mother. She’ll fight through this.”

I search his face, looking for any sign of insincerity, but all I see is love and determination. Still, old wounds and fears die hard. “Do you mean that?”

“With all my heart.” He kisses my forehead, my cheek, the tip of my nose. “You and our baby are my world now. I’m yours, Talia, forever and always. No matter what happens, we’ll get through this together as a family.”

Just then, I am swarmed by nurses and doctors. I’m hurried back to an exam room where Dare stands beside me and holds my hand as I am poked, prodded, and questioned.

I can feel his eyes on me as the doctor examines me. I feel weird when the doctor asks to do a pelvic exam. But Dare’s grip on my hand tightens as I wince in pain. When it’s over, he helps me sit up, and I lean into him, exhausted. I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.

Dare helps me get dressed and the young male doctor turns to us, putting the stethoscope back around his neck. “I have good news, Mrs. Morgan. You are not in labor.”

“I’m not?” My hands slide around my stomach.

“Nope. You are experiencing what are known as prodromal labor pains, which is the fancy term for Braxton-Hicks contractions. Basically, your body is practicing for the real thing.” The doctor gives me a sympathetic smile. “They can be uncomfortable, but they’re not harmful to you or the baby. They most likely mean that you’re a bit dehydrated. So before you leave, we’ll get you to power through a few electrolyte drinks.”

I let out a sigh of relief and turn to Dare, who looks just as relieved. “Thank you,” I say to the doctor, before turning to Dare. “I’m sorry for dragging you here for nothing.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dare says, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “I’m just glad everything’s okay.”

“I’m so glad it’s not labor yet. I’m not ready for this baby to come.”

Dare nods in understanding, his hand still holding mine. “I know, darling. But we need to start getting ready. We have a lot to do before the baby arrives.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Yeah. Should we get ready to go home?”

Dare looks at me like I’m crazy. “You aren’t in immediate danger, which is great. But if you think I’m letting you walk out of here without being checked over by Dr. Nathan, you’re insane. Better safe than sorry.”

I squint at him. “I thought we were changing our birth plan and our doctor.”

He runs a hand down his shirt. “Dr. Nathan stays. The rest, I can take or leave. Now let me step out and call Dr. Nathan down here.”

I sit back and sip the bright blue electrolyte drink that a nurse brings me. The hospital is a blur of activity and noise. Monitors beeping, doctors and nurses bustling about, Dare barking out questions and demands in a tone that brooks no argument.

Dr. Nathan shows up some time later and checks me out thoroughly.

After she gives the all-clear, Dare walks me out to the waiting SUV like I’m made of glass and one wrong step could shatter me.

Through it all, a cold kernel of anger remains lodged in my chest. As much as I need Dare, as much as I love him, I hate feeling so helpless. So dependent on him.

When the crisis passes and I’m settled into bed at home, Dare finally stills. His gaze searches my face, regret and tenderness and a plea for forgiveness all reflected in his eyes.

“I’m sorry about our fight.”

“Dare, I don’t have the strength to argue.” He opens his mouth to protest, but I stop him by holding up a hand. “Please.

Put our baby first. Let me rest.”

I turn away from him, feigning sleep though slumber remains elusive. I can't forgive him, not yet. Can't give in to the urge to melt into his embrace and let him make everything better.

Because he can't. Not this time. He has to grow up and I can't help any more than I have already.

Dare sighs, his hand gently squeezing mine before he slips from the room. My fingers curl into a fist, clinging to the memory of his touch.

I'm no longer sure it's enough, though.

When the first rays of dawn filter through my window, I'm still awake. Still wrestling with emotions too complicated to name, a future too frightening to face alone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DARE

Felix saunters into the little office I have set up in the loft, a smug grin plastered on his face. My fingers instantly curl into fists beneath the desk.

“How did you get in here?” I hiss.

He chuckles, leaning against the door frame. “You really need to invest in better security, nephew. Those security guards you have posted let me just breeze in.”

“I doubt that very much.”

I stand up, feeling the need to contain Felix’s toxic ooze to one room. I usher him in, pointing to a seat and closing the door. Felix saunters over to the seat and crosses his arms, deliberately defying me.

I grit my teeth. “What do you want, Felix?”

He shrugs, still grinning. “Just checking in on my nephew. And his new wife, of course.” He emphasizes the last word, his gaze flickering to the door. “How is Talia doing?”

I tense at the mention of Talia, my grip on the desk tightening. “That’s none of your business.”

Felix shrugs and looks around my office, as though bored with the conversation. “You know, Dare, I never thought you had it in you to marry. Let alone force a woman into being your wife. But I have to admit, it’s quite a scandalous story.”

I feel a muscle tic in my jaw. “My patience is wearing thin. What is it that you have gone out of your way to commit felony trespass to say?”

He spreads his hands and gives me a pacifying smile.

“Have you reconsidered my offer?” His voice drips with false charm.

I clench my jaw, grinding my teeth. “There’s nothing to reconsider. You’re not getting part of the company. Remy has made several conditions for me to take over the company. And I plan to abide by them.”

That’s a lie. Remy also demanded that I divorce Talia and give her to my brother. Which will happen approximately when there is an icy day in hell.

Felix’s eyes narrow, the congenial mask slipping. “You always did have to make things difficult.” He prowls closer, looming near. Trying to intimidate me with his height, though he’s close to my own stature. “But you’ll come around. You always do.”

My heart pounds as I click my tongue, refusing to be intimidated. “Get out.”

“Or what?” He laughs, a harsh bark. “You’ll throw another tantrum? We both know you don’t have the spine to—”

I slam my fist onto my desk. “Enough! I will not give you an inch of Morgan Drilling. Now get out before I have you removed.”

Felix’s lips peel back, rage twisting his features. “You always were a smug little bastard. You’ll regret this.”

He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a folded sheaf of papers. Making aggressive eye contact with me, he drops them on my desk and then storms out, slamming the door behind him.

Ignoring the papers he left, I whip out my phone, texting my bodyguard that he’s in the building.

Then I slip down the corridor to my bedroom, where I open the door an inch. Talia is sprawled out across the bed, blankets and hair askew, sleeping like a dead thing. Watching her for a few minutes is comforting to me, even though I’ve just come to watch over her while Felix is lurking around.

She is so peaceful. I almost want to join her, but I decide against it after a moment. It's better to let her nap. Returning to the office, I sag into my chair, dragging a hand over my face. My mind turns back to the situation at hand.

Namely, my uncle breaking in here to tell me that I'll regret it if I don't cut him in on the family business. Is it just grandstanding? Or is it something more?

Using two fingers, I pull the first page out of the sheaf of papers that Felix dropped on my desk. I scan the document for a moment before I crumple the paper in my fist. Felix is fucking suing me for control of the entire company.

And Felix won't give up so easily. He's been circling like a vulture for years, waiting to pick the company apart. But it's mine. I have *earned* it. And I'll be damned if I hand it over without a fight.

This is only the beginning. The battle for Morgan Enterprises has just started. But when the dust settles, only one of us will be left standing.

And it sure as hell won't be Felix.

My heart is still pounding when Rob peeks in, eyes wide behind his glasses. "Mr. Morgan? Are you all right?"

"Fine." I wave him off, but he slips inside and closes the door.

"Sir, I just stepped away for a couple of minutes. The bodyguard said that your uncle had been here. Did he threaten you again?" Rob's voice is tight with anger. He's been my assistant for over a decade and has seen Felix's manipulations firsthand.

I breathe deep, trying to settle my nerves. "He wanted me to hand over control of the company. I refused."

"Of course you did." Rob's lips curl in a rare smile. "Morgan Drilling would be nothing without you at the helm. Mr. Morgan can throw all the tantrums he likes, but he'll never gain control."

“You’re damn right.” I stand, smoothing my tie. “Now, I have a board meeting in twenty minutes. See that I’m not disturbed.”

“Yes, sir.” Rob nods and slips out, closing the door behind him.

Alone again, I go to the window, gazing out at the rooftops of Harwicke.

Felix wants war? He’ll get one. But victory will be mine. Morgan Drilling is my legacy and I’ll stop at nothing to protect it.

Even if that means destroying my own uncle.

LATER IN THE DAY, a heavy knock startles me from my brooding. I glance up as Tristan strides into my office, concern etched into his features.

“So? What’s the news?” His gaze darts around the room, as if expecting to find it in shambles.

I scrub a hand over my face and sigh. “Just my uncle making threats about the company, as usual.”

Tristan’s expression darkens. “What did he want this time?”

“Control of the company. Money. Power. The usual.” I gesture to a couple of decanters filled with amber liquid. “Drink?”

“Please.” Tristan collapses into one of the leather chairs across from my desk. “Felix will never change. I don’t know why you continue to humor him.”

I pour two fingers of scotch into a glass and hand it to him. “He’s my uncle. He’s still a part of the family, no matter how ill-mannered his behavior.”

Tristan snorts. “You’re too sentimental for your own good.” He takes a long sip of his drink. “So what happened?”

What threats did the bastard make now?"

Rubbing the back of my neck, I sink into my chair. "The usual. That he'll destroy me and take the company. Honestly, his threats don't worry me." I meet Tristan's gaze. "But he's growing more desperate. And desperate men do dangerous things."

"You think he'd actually try to harm you?" Tristan sits forward, alarm etched into his face.

"It's not me I'm worried about. It's my wife, who as you know is in a delicate condition." I stare into the depths of my glass. "I can't take that chance. It's time to cut him off for good."

Tristan is silent for a long moment. Then he sets his glass on the desk with a sharp click. "What do you need me to do?"

Loyalty and concern for my well-being emanate from him in waves. I'm grateful, as always, for his friendship.

"Nothing, really. Keep your ear to the ground, let me know if you hear someone galloping my way," I say. "We'll be ready to act if Felix makes a move."

Tristan's jaw tightens. "You don't even have to ask."

"Thanks." I give him a tight smile.

I stare into the amber liquid in my glass. The bitter taste of betrayal is familiar, but no less unpleasant.

Felix has left me with no choice. He threatened me for the last time.

The war has begun.

Tristan studies me, his gaze searching. "There's something else bothering you. What is it?"

Damn his perceptiveness. I debate deflecting, but Tristan knows me too well. He'll persist until I tell him the truth.

With a sigh, I say, "It's Talia."

One eyebrow lifts in surprise. "What about her?"

“I thought...” I trail off, staring into the amber depths of my drink. “For a moment, I thought she was different. That I could trust her.” I give a harsh laugh, devoid of humor. “But she’s just like all the rest. Out for what she can get.”

“I don’t understand.” Tristan’s frown deepens. “What happened to Talia?”

The memory rises, bitter and harsh. I recount the events of yesterday, when I laid a trap for Talia to test her loyalty.

And my little wife failed my test.

When I finish telling him the story, Tristan is silent for a long moment. Finally he says, “You’re an idiot.”

I jerk my head up, startled. “What?”

“Only you could be foolish enough to push away the one woman who genuinely cares for you.” Tristan shakes his head, exasperation etched into his face. “When are you going to stop punishing people for the sins of your family?”

“This has nothing to do with my family,” I grit out.

“It has everything to do with them.” Tristan pins me with a hard look. “You’ve been betrayed so many times, you don’t recognize genuine affection when you see it. Talia cares for you, you idiot. And you are trying your damndest to ruin the best thing that’s ever happened to you. Jesus, man.”

I stare into the amber depths of my drink, anger and doubt warring within me. “She lied to me. She wants my money, not me.”

“She loves you,” Tristan says quietly. “It’s obvious enough to anyone who looks at you two. Why can’t you see it?”

“Because I’m not a fucking idiot,” I retort, a note of bitterness in my voice. “She wants me because I’m rich.”

“Do you think that you’re the only rich man in town? Or the only handsome one? You have a literal twin who is the father of her baby. Staying with you doesn’t make any fucking sense, especially with you brooding about Talia’s ‘intentions’. But she hasn’t left, even though it would be much easier for her to go.”

I narrow my eyes. “But—”

Tristan leans in sharply, cutting me off.

“I’ve watched you around Talia, Dare. You fucking love her. And she looks at you like you hung the fucking moon. What’s your excuse for not seeing it? What do you want her to do to prove her love?”

“Nothing,” I say in a low voice. I don’t know what I want. I only know I want her, and I’m a fucking idiot.

“That’s right. Nothing.” He throws his hand up in the air, raising his brows. “The only thing stopping you from being happy is your years of practice at being miserable.”

His words strike deep, igniting a spark of hope I thought had been extinguished. Could he be right? Did I misread Talia’s actions? The memory of her tear-filled eyes and anguished pleas echoes in my mind. She begged me to understand, to listen to her. But I was too blinded by rage and a lifetime of bitter lessons to listen.

“Am I really the problem?” I wonder.

“You’re the only one standing in your own way. You’re the only one who decides what your happiness is. You’re the only one who can make you happy by stopping this bullshit. You’re the only one who needs to change. And if you want to change, then you might as well change for the right goddamn reason.”

I gape at Tristan, wide-eyed.

“And the right reason is Talia.”

Tristan tosses back the rest of his drink and stands.

“Now, I’m going to go home and fuck my wife. You should do the same.”

“Tristan…” I say his name as a plea. I want him to guide me, not leave.

“Go to her,” Tristan urges. “Beg her forgiveness if you must. Tell her the truth—that you love her with all your scarred and battered heart. Before it’s too late.”

His advice is at war with years of instinct. I've never trusted easily or given second chances. But for Talia...perhaps I could try.

I drain my drink and rise to my feet, determination steeling my spine. "Thank you," I say simply.

Tristan's lips curve. "Don't thank me yet. Just go get your girl."

I nod and stride from the room, my path now clear. I won't give up on Talia without a fight. She's the light that led me out of darkness, the balm for my wounded soul. And if Tristan is right, if she truly loves me... then our story isn't over yet.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

DARE

The yacht's engines rumble beneath my feet as we glide across the dark waters. Dare sits opposite me, his shoulders hunched, eyes downcast. The tension between us fills the cabin like a dense fog.

I've made him bring me here for a purpose. I want to clear the air for a final time rather than spend the rest of my life bickering with Dare. And I figure that here, he's less likely to throw up so many walls that I will have to climb over.

Now that we are both here though, I find my pretty, elegant thoughts have all run away. Dare is staring at the floor like he's lost in thought.

I find myself studying him. His features are sharp and chiseled, as if they were carved from stone. His eyes are an unnervingly electric blue, and I can see the pain and regret etched in them. He's perfect, and yet so flawed.

Then again, aren't we all?

I clear my throat. "Dare, we need to talk. Really talk this time. No more sniping. We're going to have a baby soon and we need to figure out how to love each other and have each other's backs before she gets here. I won't raise my baby around conflict and shouting."

His eyes flick up to meet mine briefly before dropping again. He nods, the movement barely perceptible.

"Agreed."

My heart aches at the distance between us. I reach across the polished wood table, grasping for his hand. His fingers

remain limp in mine. I swallow against the lump in my throat.

“Please, look at me,” I whisper.

Finally he raises his head. The pain in his eyes pierces my soul. I grip his hand tighter.

“You and this baby are everything to me.” My voice cracks. “I need to know what the real issue is. We’ve both got to get every single piece of baggage out on the table. We need to unzip those bandages and let the wounds breathe while we are on this boat. If we don’t face the future together, it will eat us alive.”

Dare searches my face.

“I have spent so many sleepless nights worrying that you are just with me for my money and prestige.”

My mouth opens in surprise. “What?”

“I’ve been saying that for a while now.”

I blink. “I didn’t know you were serious about it.”

It’s like a dam breaks loose in Dare’s heart and the deluge that floods out is the most toxic, damaging stuff that he’s been keeping inside for too long.

Dare’s words wash over me like a wave of cold water. He’s been holding this in for so long, and it’s breaking my heart to see the pain etched on his face. I reach out for him, cradling his face in my hands. His cheeks are wet with tears.

“Oh, Dare,” I whisper, my voice shaking with emotion. “You don’t have to worry about any of that with me. You know that you can trust me.”

He looks away, struggling to find the words he needs to say.

“It feels like I’m dragged back to my younger days. Days when I dated women who weren’t really interested in me. Women who were only interested in my last name and getting a ring on their finger that would make them a Morgan.”

“Oh, honey.” I kiss his knuckles. “It’s not like that between us. You know that.”

“It’s just... I’ve worked hard to build a life for myself. Yet you know that you could take it all away from me if we ever divorced. It makes me wonder what your motives are. And if the life I’ve given you tempted you into marriage, or if you truly love me. I don’t think I will be able to recover if you leave me,” he finishes softly.

Understanding dawns. I understand now why Dare has erected those walls between us. The fear of being hurt again was too much for him to bear. No wonder he was so scared of getting close to me in the first place.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” I tell him gently, wiping away the tears from his eyes. “I love you for you. Money doesn’t factor into it at all.”

After an endless moment, Dare squeezes my hand. “I want to believe that,” he says, his voice rough. “But how can I trust it’s really true?”

I blink back tears. “Because I love you. Only you. Not your money or your name. Just you.”

The words hang between us as the boat motors onward through the night.

Dare’s eyes glisten as he takes a shaky breath. “I’ve spent my whole life feeling used. Like people only wanted me for what I could give them. My grandfather, my father...” He trails off, looking into the distance.

My heart breaks for the lost little boy inside this powerful man. I wait silently for him to continue.

“Even Daisy,” he says after a moment. “Our relationship was never real. Just for show, because it benefited us both. But I thought it was real at the time. The way it ended *wrecked* me.”

He refocuses on me, doubt clouding his face. “So how can I believe you’re any different?”

I squeeze his hand fiercely. “Because I walked away from you once. I was ready to raise this baby on my own rather than be bought. Does that sound like a gold digger to you?”

Dare blinks as my words hit home. I press on.

“I came back because I love you. Because we’re a family now, the three of us.” I place my free hand on my belly. “I don’t need your money, Dare. I just need your heart.”

Tears spill down Dare’s cheeks. In a rush he pulls me into his arms. I cling to him as the boat rocks gently beneath us.

“I’m so sorry I ever doubted you,” he murmurs into my hair.

“Shhh. It’s okay.” I stroke his back, soothing away the pain. “No more doubts. No more fear. Just us.”

Dare pulls back to look at me, his eyes searching mine.

“I meant what I said before,” he says. “About using my wealth to lure you into marriage. That wasn’t right of me.”

I nod slowly. “I know your intentions were good. You wanted to provide for our child.”

“Yes, but…” He trails off, conflicted. “I manipulated you with money and power. Just like my family has always done.”

I cup his cheek. “The past is the past. All that matters now is that we love each other.”

Dare shakes his head. “How can you be so forgiving after everything I’ve done?”

“Because you’re a good man, Dare,” I reply firmly. “You’ve made mistakes, but so have I. That’s life.”

I take his hand and press it to my belly. “This baby will learn from our example. We have to be better. For them.”

Dare pulls back to look at me, his expression turning serious again. “There’s one more thing we need to discuss.”

I nod, steeling myself for whatever is coming next. “Okay. What is it?”

He takes a deep breath. “I know you were just joking before, but your comment about taking me for everything in a divorce…it really hurt. It made me feel like you only see me as a bank account.”

My heart sinks. I never meant to make him feel that way.

“Dare, I’m so sorry,” I say earnestly. “I was trying to be funny but clearly missed the mark. I don’t care about your money or your family’s prestige. None of that matters to me.”

He starts to say something in reply, but I hold up a finger.

“One second.”

I go into the cabin and return with a blank piece of paper. “We’re going to write a postnuptial agreement stating that I forfeit any claim to your assets or inheritance. You and I can sign it right now. I can get it notarized as soon as we get off this ship.”

Dare examines the paper, surprise registering on his face. He seems to come to a conclusion after a moment and he sets it aside.

“Keep it,” he says. “I don’t need it. You’ve already proven your sincerity a hundred times over. I think I just needed to be reassured and reminded that we’re in this together, for better or for worse.”

“Are you sure? You’re about to become a dad. You’re going to be sleep deprived and stressed out. I’m going to be a hormonal zombie who is recovering from pushing a whole baby out of her body. I just... I don’t mean to be petty, but I can’t have you throwing this argument in my face again and again. I need it to be settled between us. I need harmony. I need you to be my rock, not shifting sand beneath my feet.”

He frowns and tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“I’m sorry that I let my insecurities get the best of me. I just... I think you’re fucking magical, darling girl. And sometimes I start to look at you and how great you are. And then I look at myself, and how fucked up I am... I guess it’s just hard to believe that you would want to be with me for any reason other than my money.”

“Look at me.” I grab his hand and kiss his knuckles, staring into his eyes. “I love you, Dare Morgan. You’re smart, cunning, strong, wise... and you fuck like a starving man

falling on a piece of bread. You make me feel desired.” I rub my belly. “Even now, which is a miracle.”

Dare sinks his hand into my hair, leaning me back and kissing me like I don’t think I have ever been kissed before. His lips are savage, his kiss primal. By the time he breaks away, we are both panting. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. I want to bury myself in you and be lost forever. I want to spend every fucking hour naked. I want to keep getting you pregnant over and over again because I love the feel of this.”

He presses his hard stomach against mine, catching my hand in his and twining our fingers together. He pulls me close again. “All I need is you, Talia. Just you.”

I gaze into Dare’s eyes, still clinging to him. “We could walk away from all of this, you know. The money, the family business, the social obligations. We could leave it all behind. We could start fresh in a small town somewhere, get regular jobs, and live a simple life. As long as we’re together, I know we’d be happy.”

Dare looks thoughtful as he considers this. “You would really be willing to do that? Leave everything behind for a modest life with me?”

I nod, running my fingers through his hair. “In a heartbeat. My happiness comes from you, not your bank account.”

A smile tugs at Dare’s lips. He takes my hands in his and kisses them tenderly. “You never cease to surprise me, Talia. Just when I think I have you figured out, you show me another side that’s even more remarkable.”

He pulls me in for a lingering kiss. When we finally come up for air, our faces are flushed.

“Wherever our journey leads, I want to walk that path with you,” Dare says earnestly. “But maybe we don’t have to choose extremes. Maybe there’s a balance we can strike between simplicity and security.”

I nod and take a deep breath, knowing it’s my turn to be vulnerable.

“Dare, while we’re getting all our issues out on the table...”

He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. “Mhm.”

I try to smile at him, but inside I feel uncertain. “I still have this nagging fear that I’ll never measure up as your wife or the mother of your child. I’m terrified our baby will know right away that I’m an imposter, just pretending to fit into your world.”

My voice cracks a little as I admit my deepest insecurity. Dare squeezes my hands reassuringly.

“Oh, darling girl. I know I once had misgivings about you blending into my family’s elite social circles. But I was so wrong. You bring so much heart and vibrancy to everything you touch. My world was dull and monochrome before you burst into it in a blaze of brilliant technicolor.”

I blink back tears at his poetic words.

“I was only living half a life before I met you, Talia. You make me feel fully alive for the first time. I want you to know that our child will feel nothing but love and belonging. How could she not, with you as their mother?”

I don’t know how to answer that, so I duck my head, my cheeks flushing. “I don’t know...” I say honestly.

Dare puts a finger under my chin and lifts my head, looking deeply into my eyes.

“Talia, I’m embarrassingly in love with you. Deeply, irreversibly in love. I feel desperate for you to love me in a way I’ve never felt before,” he says, his voice thick with emotion. “I love you so much it scares me. What if you can never love me as completely as I love you? What if I’m always the one who loves more?”

My heart aches at the vulnerability in his question. I cup his handsome face in my hands.

“Dare, I love you as deeply as you love me. I promise you that with all my heart and soul.”

He looks at me for a long moment, his eyes searching my face. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Gazing into his eyes is like looking into the depths of the ocean. "I love you more than anything or anyone in this world. I may not have chosen to marry you willingly, but I can't deny the feelings that have blossomed inside me. And it's not just because of our child. I love you for who you are, Dare, flaws and all."

Relief and joy wash over his features. He leans his forehead against mine.

"We've both been running scared for too long," he whispers. "We have both been so paralyzed by our fears."

I tear up at his words.

"Here and now, we have a chance to put it all aside. We can start all over again."

Dare kisses me tenderly at first, then with rising passion. He pulls back just far enough to whisper against my lips.

"Tell me that you're certain, Talia. Because there's no turning back for me after this."

I smile up at him, my hands still cradling his face.

"I could never turn back now. You've changed me forever with your love. I'm not the same woman I used to be."

Our lips meet again and again, each kiss deeper than the last. Dare's hands roam urgently over my body as my fingers tangle in his dark hair. We are consumed by a passion that's been simmering for far too long.

"I need you, Talia," Dare rasps, his breathing ragged. "Here. Now."

My pulse races at the raw desire in his voice. "Yes," I gasp. "I'm yours, my love."

In one smooth motion, Dare lifts me onto the table, scattering maps and charts. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him against me. We shed our clothes in a frenzy until it's just skin against skin.

Dare enters me swiftly, filling me completely. I cry out, clutching his shoulders. He sets a relentless rhythm that drives me to the very brink, again and again. I have never wanted someone so much.

“Look at me, Talia,” Dare commands through gritted teeth. “I need to see you.”

I meet his smoldering gaze, utterly lost in the stormy blue depths. He is everything to me in this moment. My past, my present, my future.

Release crashes over us both like a wave. Dare collapses over me, his heart thundering against my chest.

“I love you,” I whisper, stroking his hair. “With all that I am.”

Dare lifts his head to smile tenderly at me. “As I love you. Always.”

We kiss once more, a promise sealed. Dare’s fingers trace delicate patterns on my skin as we lie tangled together, spent. The boat rocks gently beneath us.

“No more doubts between us,” he murmurs. “You are my heart, Talia. Without you, I’m adrift.”

I caress his beloved face. “We wasted so much time questioning. But no more. This is real.”

Dare nods, his eyes never leaving mine. “I would face anything with you by my side. Even my family’s wrath.”

My heart clenches. The Morgans wield immense power and influence. Defying them is no small matter.

Sensing my unease, Dare touches his forehead to mine. “Don’t be afraid. You give me courage I never knew I had.”

I cling to him, my anchor in the storm. “Whatever comes, we’ll weather it together.”

Dare smiles, a rare unguarded smile that makes my breath catch. In this moment, with the sun on our skin and the sea breeze in our hair, nothing else matters but our love. The future feels bright with hope and promise.

I take a deep breath, savoring the salty tang of the ocean air. Dare's arms are my refuge, his heartbeat a lullaby beneath my cheek. I know that soon we must return to shore and face harsh reality once more. But not yet.

"Can we just stay like this?" I ask wistfully.

Dare's chuckle rumbles low in his chest. "I wish we could. But the world awaits, my love." He kisses the top of my head. "Don't worry. I'll be right by your side."

I cling tighter for a moment, then sit up with a sigh. The sun has begun its descent towards the shimmering horizon.

Dare brushes a windblown strand of hair from my face, his expression tender yet solemn. "It's time."

With a nod, I rise and begin dressing. Dare does the same. We move in easy synchrony, the intimate dance of lovers.

Once ready, we make our way hand in hand to the upper deck. Dare steers us smoothly back towards the marina. I stand beside him at the wheel, drinking in these last moments of solitude.

Too soon, the bustling port comes into view. Dare cuts the engine and drops anchor. For a long moment, we simply gaze at each other.

"No regrets," Dare says huskily.

"Never." I rise on tiptoe to kiss him, sweet and lingering.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DARE

I step out of my SUV, shading my eyes against the bright sun. It's fiercely windy out here on the Maine coast and I wish I had brought a heavier jacket than the fine wool blazer I am wearing. I'm here for a business meeting, though, and I want to look my best and most intimidating. I narrow my eyes, starting toward the dock.

Rob catches up to me after a few strides.

"I brought this just in case." He offers me one of my coats, as if he just knew somehow that I wanted it.

I take it, slipping it on. "Thanks. Make a note in my schedule to give you a raise."

"Consider it done." He smirks as he types something into his cell phone.

I spot Adam Larsen, the project manager that I've hired to step in and take over for my uncle, standing on the pier. He's standing on the dock, looking down at a clipboard with a frown.

"Larsen!" I call.

He looks up at me and gives me the ghost of a smile, then goes back to his clipboard. He's an older man, probably in his late fifties, with thinning gray hair and a potbelly. He's wearing work pants with a button-down shirt over a turtleneck sweater.

I stroll up to him. "Tell me something I want to hear."

Larsen releases a huge sigh. "Well, I have the signed deed. So that is one good thing."

I close my eyes briefly in lieu of actually fist pumping.

“Thank god for that.”

“Yeah.” He scratches his chin. “Can I speak frankly with you?”

His tone says I’m not going to like what he has to say. “Sure...” I say.

Larsen squints down at his clipboard. “This project is a mess. It has a thousand moving pieces. A quarter of those are missing. And a quarter of the pieces don’t fit in this puzzle. Most of the appropriate paperwork is nowhere to be found. I’m not sure how the last guy kept track of things, or if he just winged it...”

He looks back up at me. “You just handed me a shit sandwich, excuse my French. And the deadlines you guys had set are impossible, even if we had all the puzzle pieces.” He points to his clipboard. “The bottom line is, I’m going to start trying to source new equipment today. But we are looking at, conservatively... probably twelve or eighteen months before we can build a platform, get drilling equipment, and establish a deep sea operation.”

“Oof.” I wince. “That’s a long time without earning a cent in profit. We have money. Can’t we grease some palms and get things moving faster than that?”

“I already included that in my time estimates.” Larsen shakes his head. “That’s the best I can possibly promise.”

“Shit.” I shove my hand through my wind-tousled hair. “The guy you replaced was family. Now I’m wondering what exactly the last guy had planned. How was he going to pull this off?”

“In my opinion, there was no way. He would have run into roadblocks immediately. I’m sorry to say this, but I think you were sold a bill of goods.”

Larsen looks apologetic, which only makes me angrier.

“Well, where do we go from here?” I ask.

He shrugs. “First, we have to pull everything together. We need to go through all the paperwork and see exactly what we have. I suggest you talk to your family and see if they know anything more than what I’ve discovered so far.”

I give a low laugh. “I don’t think he’ll be very helpful. We parted on bad terms. Even if I offered him money, I don’t trust that what he’d tell me was legit.”

He nods. “Okay. Then I want the latitude to hire some good people to work on this project. The faster we can get it up and running, the sooner we can get things back on track.”

“Whatever you need. My assistant Rob will handle any purchase orders or bank drafts you might need.”

Adam Larsen sticks his hand out. I shake his hand and he looks me in the eye.

“This project is my baby. Take good care of it.”

He gives me a nod. “Will do.”

When he lets my hand go, he hands me a slip of paper. “There’s your deed to the area.”

“Thanks,” I say, my eyes riveted on the paper. I have waited months for this.

The thick parchment crinkles under my grip, sea-salt and pine wafting from the page. My heart thumps as I scan the deed, a surge of triumph and longing warring in my chest.

The Maine coastline. Jagged shore and misty mornings, my childhood sanctuary. How many summers did I race Burn across the rocky beach, sand and surf stinging my feet? Remy would bark orders from the wraparound porch of our weathered beach house, whiskey in hand though the sun had barely risen.

Now it’s mine. Mine to shape and wield as I see fit.

Images flash through my mind, unbidden—the craggy cove transformed into a private port, sleek yachts docked where once Burn and I built sandcastles. An airstrip cut into the dense forest, my jet waiting on the tarmac to whisk me off at a moment’s notice.

But most of all, an oil rig, way out in the ocean. Pumping that precious black gold out of the earth.

My knuckles pale around the deed as purpose surges within me. Let Felix cling to his lies and manipulations. The past is dead, and I'll stop at nothing to forge a future of my own design.

Maine will be my first conquest.

I start to fold the deed with care and tuck it into my jacket, a savage smile twisting my lips. The game is afoot.

My triumph evaporates at the last second as something on the paper catches my eye. I unfold the paper and my gaze lands on the looping scrawl at the bottom of the page.

It's not my signature.

Not Remy's, as it would be if the land were a Morgan Drilling asset.

No, there on the bottom of the page is scrawled Felix Morgan.

That *motherfucker*.

My vision blurs. I can't even believe what I am looking at. It seems Felix couldn't resist one final jab at me. Or maybe he was planning this the whole time.

The paper slips through my fingers, drifting to the ground. *Felix*. Bile rises in my throat at the sight of that hated name.

I turn away, my quick steps carrying me to the SUV. I climb in and Rob dashes to the other side, hurrying to clamber in before we take off. Rob tries to ask me a question, but I shake my head and stare out the window.

I don't remember the last time I was this angry. Years of work, of carefully laid plans and sleepless nights, all for nothing. The empire I've sacrificed everything to build teeters on the brink of growing old and dying.

And fucking Felix holds the deed that could keep it level or bring it crashing down.

He's signed his own name to the deed in place of mine. How he managed to do that, I'm not even sure. Legally, I'm the source of the funds and the property definitely belongs to me, but if it went to court, it would be tied up indefinitely.

I lean against the SUV's door, chest heaving from exertion and rage. Of all the times for that spineless sycophant to grow a backbone. Bile and bitterness rise in my throat, old wounds torn open with a few strokes of the pen.

He's outmaneuvered me again. But if he thinks this is the end, he's gravely mistaken.

I'll have that deed, even if I have to pry it from his cold, dead hands.

When I can think straight, I call Felix. He answers on the first ring and turns on the video.

"Dare." He smirks at me. His voice is smooth and even, the bastard. I grit my teeth and imagine how satisfying it would be to wring his neck.

"Sign it over."

"I'm sorry?"

"The deed. Sign it over."

"You mean the deed to the property?"

"Yes, I mean the deed to the property!" I hiss.

He pauses, giving me a coy smile.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"What do you mean you can't do that?"

"Sorry, I meant to say that I *won't* do that. You tried to cut me out, but obviously you failed."

"You listen to me, you two faced gutter rat. You're going to sign over that deed right this second. Or you'll face the full force of my wrath."

Felix scoffs and scrubs his hand through his thinning hair.

"I'd be careful if I were you. You don't want to say anything you'll regret."

“I’ll regret nothing when I beat you to a pulp and then sue you to within an inch of your life.”

“You know, your mother would have wanted you to keep your family close, Dare,” Felix says. “I’m just helping you to respect her wishes.”

My hands clench into fists. How *dare* he.

“Don’t you speak of her,” I growl. “Don’t you dare.”

He shrugs, utterly unconcerned. “It’s the truth. She always loved me doting on you when you were young. Me owning the deed to the Maine property would have delighted her.”

I take a sharp breath through my nose, wrestling back the urge to wrap my hands around his scrawny neck. He’s trying to goad me into doing something rash, and I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“If only she had lived to see you turn into a disgusting, lying, cheating, thieving, conniving piece of trash.”

“Well, she didn’t. And I’ll sign the deed over to you over my rotting dead body.”

My lips curl into a humorless smile. “If need be.”

He makes a noise of disgust. “You always were an ungrateful brat. I should have known you’d turn out just like your father.”

The comparison hits its mark. I flinch as if struck and my free hand turns into a fist.

“I am nothing like him,” I snarl. “And if you value that forked tongue of yours, you’ll keep his name out of your mouth.”

Felix pauses, bloody and triumphant. He’s won this round.

“I’m going to kill you, Felix.”

“Is that a threat?” He laughs. “You’ve gone soft. Marrying that woman has turned a tiger into a housecat.”

He hangs up and I hurl my phone at the floor. Rob stays perfectly still, as if I can’t see him if he doesn’t move.

My head pounds in time with my heartbeat, fury and frustration warring inside me. I should have expected Felix to play dirty; he's always been a snake. But the mention of my father still cuts like a knife, even after all these years.

Some wounds never truly heal.

With an effort, I take a deep breath and force the chaos in my mind to settle. Anger will only cloud my judgment, and I need to be sharp if I'm to outmaneuver Felix. He may have won this battle, but the war is far from over.

When I open my eyes again, I pick up my phone and scroll to a copy of a photograph that I usually leave inside a drawer in my desk: my mother's smiling face gazing out at me, her arm wrapped around my shoulder. I pick it up with care, tracing her features with a fingertip as I have so many times before.

What would you do? I ask her silently. How would you handle this situation?

Of course there's no response, but I find a measure of comfort in the ritual all the same. It helps me feel close to her, even now that she's gone. I draw on the strength and wisdom she tried so hard to instill in me over the years.

I know she would advise patience and caution. She would want me to think before I act, to consider all angles before making a move. And above all else, she would tell me not to lose sight of what really matters.

Not power or prestige. Not some plot of land in Maine. But family. The bonds that truly define us.

Setting my phone down, I straighten in my seat. Felix isn't going to win. Not if I have anything to say about it. The company will be mine, and on my terms and my timeline.

I look over to Rob, who is sitting next to me, stiff as a board. "Clear my schedule for the rest of the day," I say. "I have plans to make."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The part of Harwicke where Hope House sits is usually all but abandoned this time of night. There was a 911 call reporting a fire at Hope House and Aunt Minnie called me, as her name is on the building lease.

Of course I said I would be right over. And I dragged Dare along, figuring that his name and connections could be of use.

As we race through the streets, we can see the faint hazy light of a fire rising against the black night sky. I clutch Dare's arm, my eyes searching for any sign of Aunt Minnie and the others who live at Hope House. My heart pounds in my chest, fear and worry for their safety taking over me.

When we reach the scene, the fire truck and police car have already arrived. The firefighters are rushing in and out of the building, while the police officers are trying to keep the crowd that has started to gather at a safe distance.

"Go find out what you can," Dare orders, pointing towards the fireman. "I'll go talk to the police."

I nod and hurry over toward the fireman, my eyes drawn to the devastation only a hundred yards away. Flames lick at the night sky, devouring wood and brick. The inferno roars, muting the sirens from approaching emergency vehicles.

A huge chunk of the top of the building breaks off and falls, landing with a crash on the lawn. I swear, during that moment, everyone moves away from the fire and holds their collective breath. Hope House is crumbling before my eyes.

When I look up, the fireman I was heading towards is now running toward the burning house.

“The children...” I murmur, my hands coming up to my lips.

God, where is Solana? And what about Aunt Minnie?

My gaze darts around, searching. There is so much going on that for a moment, I’m overwhelmed.

A little girl’s piercing scream pierces the night sky. A fireman appears in the doorway of Hope House, holding a tiny body and running as fast as he can. “That’s it! The fire has taken the house! Everybody out!”

Oh my god. My mouth goes dry. I swing my gaze around, trying to fix on where I can be of the most help.

There is an ambulance pulled up on the curb just to my right. One of the paramedics is helping an adult Hope House volunteer limp toward the ambulance. A little girl struggles in the other paramedic’s arms as he carries her away from the burning house. Dark hair swings wildly around her soot-stained face.

Solana.

I break into a run, heart pounding. “Solana!”

She sees me. Arms outstretched, she shrieks, “Talia!”

The paramedic rushes to strap an oxygen mask over her face but she bats it away, coughing and gasping.

I grab her from him, swinging her around to avoid my pregnant stomach, and clutch her close. She’s shaking, a blistered red burn on both her arms, but she’s *alive*. Thank God, she’s alive.

“Ma’am, could I check her out?” the paramedic asks.

Solana screams so loud that the paramedic backs away and puts his hands up. I wrap my arm around her, pushing her face against my shoulder with gentle force.

“Shh, I’ve got you honey, it’s okay. No one is going to touch you.” I rock her gently, smoothing her hair. She clings to

me, face buried in my neck, sobs wracking her small body.

I glance up at the EMT and make an apologetic face. “Sorry.”

“Make sure she goes to the hospital. She needs to be checked out thoroughly. She could have *inhalation damage*.” He drops his voice to a stage whisper for the last two words.

“I will. I promise.” I bounce Solana around, mimicking a mother soothing a fussy baby. It seems to work on Solana because her sobs grow quiet.

Dare appears out of the inky black night, putting his soot-covered hands on my shoulders. “Is that Solana?”

I grip one of his hands briefly. “It is. She seems fine, but I need to get her to the ER. Have you seen the other kids?”

Dare nods, looking behind him. “Most of the kids are already on their way to the hospital. They are okay, maybe some smoke inhalation—”

As if on cue, Solana starts coughing terribly. The cough wracks her little body and hurts my soul.

“Aunt Minnie?” I ask. “And what about the adult volunteers?”

“Everyone made it out alive. Your aunt went with the first ambulance full of kids.”

My throat tightens. Tears burn in my eyes.

“So everyone will be okay?”

Dare squeezes my shoulder. “Yes. They were lucky. I heard that the whole house went up really quickly.”

“It did,” Solana whimpers.

I put my hand on her head, gently stroking her hair. Then I cover her ears and whisper.

“She’s traumatized.”

“You should go, then. There are plenty of ambulances waiting.”

I nod but hesitate. “What about you?”

“I’m going to stay and help out here. I won’t be in any danger. After you guys get all checked out at the emergency room, I’ll meet you there.”

I nod again, grateful for his reassurance and the comfort he’s offering. “A kiss for good luck?”

“Absolutely.” His lips just brush mine for a second, but I can feel my spirits lift.

“I’ll see you soon,” I promise.

Lifting Solana up and cradling her in my arms, I make my way to the ambulance.

The ride to the hospital is a blur. My mind is consumed with worry for Solana and the other children. Dare’s words replay in my mind, “everyone made it out alive,” but the fear of what could have happened is still overwhelming. I hold Solana close to me, trying to soothe her. Her little body trembles with each cough and I feel helpless. Finally, we arrive at the hospital and I carry Solana inside, following the medical staff to the pediatric ward. She’s admitted immediately and given an oxygen mask while they run tests.

I sit by her bedside, holding her hand and watching her sleep. The minutes tick by slowly until finally, Dare arrives.

He looks tired, his suit wrinkled and his hair disheveled, but he still manages to look breathtakingly handsome. I feel a pang in my chest as I take him in, realizing how much he means to me now. I never thought I could fall for the man who forced me into marriage, but here we are.

“Is she okay?” he asks, his voice low and hoarse.

I nod, feeling a tear slip down my cheek. “She’s stable for now. They’re still running tests to see if there’s any damage to her lungs.”

Dare takes a deep breath and sits down beside me, his hand finding mine and holding it tightly. He kisses my knuckles. “Thank God. I was so worried.”

I can see the genuine concern in his eyes. I reach my arms out to him and he responds by beckoning me closer, wrapping

me in a warm embrace. I don't resist and bury my face in his chest, inhaling his scent and feeling his arms wrap around me protectively. We sit like that for a while, holding each other.

Doctors and nurses rush past the door of the room, their hushed voices blending into a chorus of anxiety.

Eventually, Solana falls asleep in her room. I pace the floor, hands clenched around my swollen belly as if I can shield our baby from the anguish ripping me apart. Dare sits with his head in his hands, elbows propped on knees.

"Have you seen Aunt Minnie?" I ask.

"She's here. I saw her. She's caring for another kid."

I nod. "That sounds like the Minnie I know."

He reaches for my hand and I cling to his fingers, drawing strength from his touch.

The memory of Solana's blistered skin and rasping cries haunts me.

The door swings open. A doctor in blue scrubs searches the room, concern etching lines in her forehead. "Are you Solana's family?"

Dare and I stand up, as if that makes us more official. "Yes, we're here for Solana." My heart jackhammers against my ribs.

"Solana suffered severe smoke inhalation and minor burns, but she's stable now."

Tears blur my vision. Thank God.

The doctor smiles gently. "She's a fighter. She's going to be here for about twenty four hours, then I'll release her to you. If you want to come with me, I will walk you to her room. You can stay with her if you want."

Dare is on his feet and already ushering me into the hallway. "We're ready."

Dare squeezes my hand and I breathe again. Solana is like family to us; it just took this act of God for us to realize it, I think.

“Thank you,” I say, trying not to cry.

Dare refuses to leave Solana’s side so I bring him coffee and sandwiches, coaxing him to rest when I can. She has nightmares and Dare sits beside her in the bed, stroking her hair.

At one point, she wakes up from a bad dream, her fingers clutching at Dare’s chest. She is in the space between sleep and wakefulness and seems to be in the grip of utter terror.

“I’m going to be alone!” she shouts.

I move to shush her but Dare kisses the top of her head.

“You’ll never be alone, Solana,” he swears. “Never.”

She looks up at him, half blind from sleep. “Am I coming home with you? Are you going to be my new parents?”

There is a long beat before he answers. I close my eyes, already knowing that he’s going to say what’s in his heart. He’s not going to stop and think about what’s best for Solana’s future.

“I want you to come live with us,” Dare says. “I want us to be a family.”

His words slay me, because I was an orphan in Solana’s position not all that many years ago. I know I would have given anything at that age for someone to say that they wanted me and cherished me. If someone had told me that they wanted me to come be part of their family, I would have followed them to the ends of the fucking earth.

I swallow hard and cup my belly.

But Solana’s reaction is cut off by a nurse sweeping in to take Solana’s vitals. “Hello! How are we feeling, Miss Solana?”

Solana frowns but starts talking to the nurse instead. And by the time that the nurse gets ready to leave, Solana is sagging back against the bed, her eyelids growing heavy.

Dawn peeks through the windows as a nurse chases us from Solana’s room. “She needs to rest. Come back this

afternoon.”

Dare runs a hand through his hair, bleary-eyed. “I should check on the rebuilding efforts at Hope House.”

“I’ll stay here and check on all the kids.” I kiss his cheek. “Get some sleep first before you do anything else. Please?”

He pulls me close, the warmth of his embrace calming my frayed nerves. “Thank you. For everything.”

I cling to him, breathing in his familiar scent. “We’re in this together. Always.”

After he leaves, I curl up on the hard waiting room chairs, exhaustion dragging me under. The faces of children lost and found swirl through my dreams, a reminder of how much work is left to be done.

My heart aches for the children who will be released into temporary foster care until more permanent solutions can be found. If only we had room...

What the hell are we going to do about Hope House?

I wake with a start, disoriented until I see the clock. Only an hour has passed. My back protests as I stand, stretching to work out the kinks.

The nurse smiles when I peek into Solana’s room. “She’s awake and asking for you.”

Solana’s eyes light up when she sees me. “You came back!”

“Of course I did.” I perch on the edge of her bed, taking her small hand in mine. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.” She frowns. “Are the other kids okay too? And when can I go home?”

Home. The word pierces my heart. I wish I had an answer for her.

“The other children will heal, thank goodness.” I choose my words carefully. “As for going home. I know this is difficult to understand, but Hope House was destroyed in the fire. We haven’t figured out where exactly you are going to go. Somewhere safe, that part I know for sure.”

Her lip trembles. “But I want to stay with you and Dare. You’re my family now.”

Oh, sweet girl. If only we could give you the home you deserve. I swallow the lump in my throat even though I know better than anybody how impractical the desire to take Solana home is.

“Dare and I care about you very much, Solana, and we’ll do everything we can to make sure you have a good life. I promise.”

I shouldn’t be promising her anything. But how can I refuse?

She throws her arms around me, and I cling to her just as tightly. We’ve only known each other a short while, but I would move heaven and earth to help this child.

When she pulls back, I ask, “Do you need anything? Are you hungry?”

She shakes her head. “Will you read to me?”

“Of course.” I summon a smile, hoping to lighten the mood. “What would you like to hear?”

“Anything.” She scoots over, patting the space beside her. “I just like listening to your voice.”

My heart melts. I climb onto the bed, gather Solana close, and begin to read.

Chapter Thirty

TALIA

I continue reading to Solana until she drifts off to sleep, her head resting on my shoulder. Carefully, I ease off the bed and tuck the covers around her. She looks so small and fragile, it's hard to believe the strength and spirit within her.

When I step out of the room, Dare is waiting in the hall, concern etched into his features. "How is she?"

"Asleep for now." I rub my temples, exhaustion seeping into my bones. "We need to talk about what you said in there, though."

He winces. "I know. I shouldn't have promised we'd keep her forever. I just..." He shakes his head. "Seeing her like that, so scared and vulnerable, I wanted to reassure her. But you're right, we can't make a commitment we may not be able to keep."

"You already said that you would take her home. That's asking for heartbreak, for both of you. She's already lost so much. I don't want to get her hopes up only to tear them down again." My voice wavers, and I swipe at my eyes. "She deserves stability. A real home."

Dare pulls me into his arms, one hand cradling the back of my head. "I know, sweetheart. We'll find her one, I promise. For now, we'll give her all the love and comfort we can. She's not alone in this."

I cling to him, drawing strength from his embrace. "What are we going to do, Dare? There are so many children who need help, and this is only the beginning."

He presses a kiss to my hair. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something that I could say to make you feel better, darling girl."

I shiver and press myself closer. For all my misgiving about Dare, he has always been my champion and my protector. I know that in his arms, I've finally refuge.

We go to Solana's hospital room, where she's curled up in bed, clutching a brand new stuffed rabbit. At the sight of us, her eyes light up.

"You came back!" She struggles to sit up, wincing. Bandages peek out from beneath her hospital gown, stark against her brown skin.

Dare rushes to her side, gently easing her back against the pillows. "Of course we came back. We told you we would, didn't we?"

Solana nods, then winces again. "My head still hurts. And my arm. The doctor said I have to stay here for a little longer." Her lower lip wobbles. "I don't want to be alone."

"You won't be alone," I promise, perching on the edge of her bed. I take her uninjured hand in mine, giving it a comforting squeeze. "We'll be here with you the whole time."

Dare nods. "Talia's right. We're not leaving you, Solana."

Her eyes fill with tears, and she throws her arms around my neck in a fierce hug. I clutch her close, blinking back my own tears. We've only known this little girl for a short time, but already I feel fiercely protective of her. I can see the same sentiment reflected in Dare's eyes.

Dare clears his throat, gaze fixed on the wall. "You can stay with us at least until we figure out where you are going permanently."

Solana peeks up at him, eyes wide with wonder. "Really?"

"Really," Dare says gruffly. He ruffles her hair, smiling. "We'll take really good care of you."

Solana beams, throwing her arms around Dare in a hug. He hugs her back awkwardly, clearly unused to such open

displays of affection. But there's a softness in his eyes that wasn't there before as he holds the little girl close.

When Solana finally releases him, Dare clears his throat again and straightens his jacket. But he can't hide the smile tugging at his lips.

"Now, the doctor said you need to rest," he says, voice gruff again. "So no more excitement tonight. Talia and I will be back first thing in the morning."

"You promise?" Solana asks, clutching his hand.

Dare glances at me, eyes questioning. I give a slight nod, and he squeezes Solana's hand. "I promise. Now get some sleep."

Solana nods, stifling a yawn. Her eyes drift shut, and within minutes her breathing evens out as she falls asleep.

Dare and I tiptoe out of the room, careful not to wake her. Once we're in the hall, he pulls me into his arms with a ragged sigh.

Dare clutches me tightly, and I feel the tremors running through his body as he struggles not to cry. We stand there in the empty hall, holding each other, and for the first time I realize that maybe Dare's childhood wounds run even deeper than I imagined.

Chapter Thirty-One

TALIA

The burned husk of Hope House looms over me like a corpse still strung up by a noose.

The acrid smell of smoke still lingers in the air. I peek through the window at the charred remains of what was once a warm, loving home for children in need. Now there is only devastation here. Collapsed walls, piles of ash where there were once beds and toys, floors made unstable by the roaring fire that swept through the entire house.

How is it that this place, once so sacred to me, is now just an incinerated ruin?

Something drips on my dress. I look up and there is nothing but blue sky above me. Then I touch my face with two gentle fingertips. When I pull my hand away, my fingertips glisten.

I'm crying over this house. Over what it meant to me. How could such a sacred place just simply burn to the ground?

Exhaling a deep breath, I wipe my face and move away from the burned husk of the building.

When I round a corner, I see my husband heading my way. He has a very determined look on his face, as if he has decided something. I slow my steps, take a deep breath, and use my hands to take some of the weight of my burgeoning stomach off my back.

“Talia,” Dare says, striding towards me, “I have a plan.”

I eye him warily. “What kind of plan?”

“I’m going to move the kids to a hotel for now.”

I narrow my eyes. “Which hotel?”

“The Windsor. The manager there loves me, or at least he loves my repeat business. So I assume he will let us rent all the rooms that they have available.”

I shake my head, anxiety rising. “Dare, that’s far too expensive. Why don’t we try a budget hotel?”

“Nonsense.” His tone brokers no argument. “The children need stability and care right now. I’ve already called a nanny agency and a social worker. This is happening, Talia. I won’t take no for an answer.”

Seeing the stubborn set of his shoulders, I know not to fight him on this. Dare Morgan is a man accustomed to getting his way. With a cautious sigh, I nod.

Dare makes a call to Aunt Minnie, who is with the children at the hospital. I can’t hear her end of the conversation, but she quickly agrees to round the Hope House children up and deliver them to the hotel.

After a short drive, we pull up to the imposing edifice of the Windsor Hotel. The grand lobby of the Windsor Hotel is a world away from the cramped dormitories at Hope House. Crystal chandeliers drip from ornate ceilings, illuminating marble floors that stretch on for acres. As we enter with the children in tow, the opulence is overwhelming.

The staff eyes our ragged group with unveiled disdain. A bellhop’s nose wrinkles at a child’s runny nose. The front desk clerk grimaces as a toddler’s shriek echoes off the cavernous walls. Their judgmental glares follow us as we shuffle to the check-in counter.

As Dare strides to the front desk, the concierge’s eyes widen in alarm at the sight of the bandaged children trailing uncertainly behind us. Aunt Minnie is right behind them, telling them to make themselves comfortable wherever they want.

“You can have some if you want,” I hear her telling a child who is licking his lips at the sight of a table piled high with cookies and other baked treats.

“Solana,” I call out. Solana sees me, grins widely, and runs to hug my legs. I feather her hair with my fingers. “Hey there.”

“You came!” She squeezes me so hard that I flinch.

“Be gentle,” I caution her. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better.”

She looks at me worshipfully. “Ms. Minnie says I am a great healer.”

I can’t do anything but smile at her and touch her nose playfully with a fingertip.

“Let’s go see what Dare is up to,” I suggest.

“Yeah!” Solana takes off, running full tilt at Dare. She flings her arms around his legs just as he stops before the hotel’s check in counter. He grins and kneels down, exchanging a few words with Solana. Then he stands up again, ruffles her hair, and looks expectantly at the young woman behind the counter.

Dare slaps his black Amex on the counter. “I’ll be renting out the entire penthouse floor. And before you say anything, know that I am comfortable demanding that I rent the whole hotel.”

I watch the exchange with a mix of admiration and confusion. Dare is so confident, so assured of himself. He knows what he wants, and he’ll stop at nothing to get it.

The receptionist’s eyes widen at Dare’s audacious statement, but she quickly regains her composure and starts punching in some keys on her computer. “Of course, Mr. Morgan. Your assistant called and said you would be arriving with some... guests. We have the Windsor Suite available for your use and all the rooms on that floor are ready as well.”

“Sounds great. Do me a favor and send up that French chef of yours. The kids are going to need to be fed pretty soon.”

I stifle a smile at Dare’s arrogance. It’s one thing to be rich, but it’s another to flaunt it like he does. The woman at the counter nods nervously and hands him a set of keys.

“See that the children are treated like royalty during their stay. These are all my valued guests.” His voice rings with absolute authority.

The concierge swallows hard and nods, not daring to refuse.

The doors open to our floor and a maid immediately recoils at the sight of us. Her nostrils flare in disgust at the group of grubby orphan children flooding the pristine hallway.

I put a protective hand on Solana’s shoulder as she shrinks back, stung by the rejection.

Dare steps forward, eyes blazing. “This young lady will be staying in the presidential suite,” he informs the maid coolly. “Please see that it’s prepared for her immediately.”

The maid blinks in shock but doesn’t dare disobey. With a reluctant dip of her head, she bustles off to ready the room. Solana looks up at Dare with awe.

One by one, Dare assigns the children to lavish accommodations, his manner leaving no room for debate. The staff hurries to comply, though their displeasure is palpable.

I follow the children around the penthouse floor, marveling at the lavish furnishings and sweeping views of the city. This is a world away from the cramped dormitories at Hope House.

Dare is on the phone organizing an army of nannies, tutors, and counselors to care for the children. His confidence and take-charge attitude are reassuring, but I still have logistical concerns.

“Dare,” I say gently, “this is incredibly generous, but how long do you plan on keeping up something this extravagant? It will cost a small fortune.”

He ends his call and turns to me, his gaze intense. “Money is no object. All that matters is creating stability after the trauma they’ve endured.”

I look down, touched by his dedication but anxious about the burden he’s taking on. “I thought you were cut off?”

Dare tilts his head. “Not from my personal accounts.”

My brows rise. Personal accounts?

I shake my head, realizing that I may never understand how rich people think.

“It’s just...this is a massive undertaking. Are you sure you can get the staff to handle it? And what about long-term plans for the children?”

Dare steps closer, tilting my chin up to meet his eyes. “Talia, please trust me. I will do whatever it takes, for however long, to make sure these children thrive. You have my word.”

His solemn promise sends a shiver down my spine. I know at this moment that Dare would move heaven and earth for those in need. And I realize, with dawning wonder, that I would do the same for him.

The children burst into their rooms, marveling at the plush king-sized beds, massive flat screen TVs, and decadent marble bathrooms.

“This is amazing!” shouts Miguel, jumping up and down on the bed. Little Rosie’s eyes widen as she takes in the ornate furnishings, so different from the sparse dormitories at Hope House.

I follow Solana into the presidential suite, where she immediately heads for the bowl of chocolate truffles left on the nightstand.

“Just one for now,” I say gently, guiding her over to the walk-in closet. Her small shoulders slump in disappointment.

A knock at the door reveals a trio of smiling young women. “We’re the nannies Mr. Morgan hired,” explains the one in front. “We’re here to help the children get settled.” Behind them is a middle-aged man in a suit. “And I’m the social worker assigned to oversee their care.”

I sigh in relief. With their expertise, we can create some semblance of normalcy for the kids.

As I show them around, the nannies coo over Solana. “We’ll have lots of fun together,” promises one, her voice

warm and reassuring.

Solana gives a small smile.

Out in the hallway, the butler Clive supervises as bellhops lug up bags of toys and art supplies. He nods approvingly as they begin transforming the cold, formal space into an area bursting with color and laughter.

Solana tugs excitedly on my hand, pulling me towards the hallway. “Come see, come see!” she urges.

I let her lead me to the elevators, where a group of kids waits impatiently. With a ding, the doors slide open, and they rush in, jostling playfully.

On the ground floor, Solana makes a beeline for the shimmering pool. She lets out a squeal, kicking off her shoes and plunging her feet into the cool water. Nearby, Clive watches indulgently as other children cannonball in, clothes and all.

Waiters in crisp white uniforms deliver heaping sundaes to poolside tables. Solana’s eyes go wide at the towering mounds of ice cream, drizzled in chocolate and caramel.

“For me?” she asks in disbelief when a waiter sets one down. He winks. “On Mr. Morgan’s orders.”

Tears prick my eyes as I watch Solana devour the treat. The child who just yesterday had nothing now knows only joy and plenty, thanks to Dare.

As if reading my thoughts, he appears at my side. “How are they settling in?” His eyes scan the scene, his mouth curving into a satisfied smile at the sounds of delight.

“I can’t thank you enough for this,” I tell him earnestly. “They’ve lost so much, but you’ve given them back laughter and hope.”

He shakes his head dismissively. “It’s only money.” But I know it’s more - his immense privilege wielded to shelter the vulnerable. In that moment, I feel deeply grateful for his kindness and generosity.

I nod slowly, taking in the opulence surrounding us. The soaring marble columns, the plush velvet furniture, the grand piano in the lobby - this is a world unfamiliar to most.

Yet Dare navigates it with ease, commanding resources and loyalty through sheer wealth and influence. He turned this bastion of privilege into a sanctuary for lost children with one flash of his black Amex.

Watching Solana eat her ice cream as if she's a girl without a care in the whole wide world, I'm reminded how innocence persists, even amidst tragedy. The fire stripped the children of home and stability, but it could not touch their resilient spirits.

In the shadows of the lobby, I spot Magda directing staff to set up arts and crafts. She catches my eye and winks reassuringly. I know she'll watch over the children as if they were her own.

Turning back to Dare, I squeeze his hand in gratitude. "Thank you."

He looks at me, eyes glinting. "Don't thank me. I'm just doing what anyone would do."

I snort. "Anyone with a huge heart and a big fat trust fund."

Dare shrugs, dropping a kiss to the crown of my head.

"Maybe so."

I wrap my arms around him, unable to believe that he's the same man I found eight months ago at that garden party.

Chapter Thirty-Two

TALIA

The morning sun streams through the curtains, bathing the suite at the Windsor in a warm glow. I stretch beneath the silken sheets, reveling in the luxury surrounding me. But my contentment fades as I remember the children under my care, the orphans we brought here from Hope House.

I slip out of bed, a knot of worry tightening in my chest. The nannies should have woken them by now, started lessons and activities. What if something happened in the night? What if one of them wandered off, alone and afraid in this huge hotel?

I hurry to the door, my breath quickening. The empty halls echo my footsteps as I rush downstairs. The sound of young voices drifts from a parlor where tutors sit with students, patiently guiding them through French conjugations and algebra equations.

The dining room comes into view, chandeliers glittering, tables set with gleaming china. The sun streams into the grand hall, illuminating the long mahogany table set with crystal glasses and silver platters heaped with pastries, fruit, and eggs. But I barely notice the opulent display or the staff bustling about, too consumed with concern over the children under my care.

I scan the room, searching for any sign of a young, dark haired girl. Instead, I see only well-dressed businessmen and women, absorbed in their morning papers and phones.

I nearly stumble upon a little girl when I walk purposefully toward the table. She is sitting on the floor, still as a stone. A

plate of half-eaten pancakes is abandoned on the table. When I stumble into her, she looks up at me with big, innocent eyes.

“Good morning,” I say softly.

She puts a finger to her lips and then points to one of the nannies, who’s at the far end of the table. The nanny looks like she’s in her early twenties, with chestnut hair twisted into a bun at the nape of her neck. She’s currently striking a pose and being perfectly still.

I mouth thank you to the little girl and stride down to talk to the nanny, who is holding all the kids in rapt, silent attention. The nanny looks at me and claps her hands.

“Good job pretending you are statues! Wow, that’s great! You were very still. Everybody relax and eat for a few minutes. Then we’ll try another round.”

I give the nanny an anxious smile. “Hi. I’m Talia. I’m... Dare’s wife. And I have volunteered with Hope House for years and years.”

The words sound odd coming out of my mouth, but the nanny beams at me.

“I’m Maddie. It’s so nice to meet you, Talia. Dare told us all about you. You’re doing such a wonderful thing for these kids.”

I nod, feeling a bit self-conscious. “Thanks. You are too. They already love you!”

Maddie’s smile doesn’t dim. “I’m still working on it. They’re great kids, though.”

“They are.” My smile fades. “I see that you only have a portion of the children here. Do you have any idea where the rest of them are?”

She purses her lips. “Julie is with a little boy named Max. They went upstairs to change. Several of the children had to go back to the H-O-S-P-I-T-A-L to have checkups run. And Sophie left with one little girl. She was ordered to take her to some family, I think.”

My heart squeezes. “What little girl?”

Maddie looks thoughtful. “You know, I’m not sure. I’m sorry, I had my hands full at the time.”

“When did they leave?”

Maddie looks at her watch. “About thirty minutes ago, I think. I didn’t see them leave.”

I thank her and walk out of the dining room. My pulse pounds, scenarios flashing through my mind. Was Solana taken somewhere? Did someone slip past security?

I have to find her. I *promised* to keep her safe.

I burst through the glass doors leading to the pool area, the smell of chlorine sharp in my nostrils. My eyes frantically scan the shimmering water and surrounding lounge chairs but find no sign of the children. The space is eerily quiet and still, devoid of the usual splashing and playful shouts. I run to the pool, peering around the cabanas and lounge chairs.

No one is here.

Dread wells up inside me as I jump in the elevator and press the penthouse floor button impatiently, heading for Solana’s room.

I arrive at her door panting, heart lodged in my throat. With a trembling hand I turn the handle and step inside the spacious suite.

“Solana?” My voice echoes in the empty room.

The bed is neatly made, not a wrinkle marring the silken duvet. I rush to the armoire and wrench open the doors.

No Solana.

My hands shake as I grab my phone, ready to sound the alarm and call in the calvary. *Where is she?*

Suddenly, Dare appears in the hallway, confusion clouding his face at my panic. He crosses the room swiftly and grasps my shoulders.

“Talía, slow down. Breathe.”

His deep voice is calm, but his eyes are troubled.

I shake my head wildly. “I can’t! Solana’s missing.”

He nods, brows furrowing. “Okay. Easy. You’re raising your blood pressure. Panicking helps no one.”

Despite his reassuring tone, his jaw is tense. My panic feeds off his poorly concealed worry. What does he know that I don’t?

My heart races as I try to explain the situation to Dare. “One of the nannies said that one of her coworkers left with a little girl about thirty minutes ago, but she didn’t know who the girl was or where they were going. I’m about to tear my hair out.”

Dare’s eyes widen, and he looks just as troubled as I feel. Before he can respond, the elevator doors open. Aunt Minnie rushes out, her voice gentle as she takes my arm.

“There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you two.” Despite the circumstances, her voice holds a note of gentle reprimand that makes me feel like a child again.

Dare releases me and I step back, swiping at my tear-stained cheeks. “Minnie, Solana is gone. There is no sign of her anywhere...” I trail off helplessly.

“There now, let’s not jump to conclusions,” Aunt Minnie says soothingly. She pats my hand. “I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation.”

I shake my head in frustration. Does no one understand the gravity of this?

But Aunt Minnie continues on blithely. “The children from Hope House were taken to the hospital this morning, remember?” she says. “The doctors just want to test to make sure everything is okay.”

My anxious mind grasps her words. The hospital. Of course.

I stare at her blankly. Could it be true? Could this just be a horrible misunderstanding? The spark of hope flickers tentatively inside me.

Dare clears his throat. “Of course. The hospital visit. That must be it.” But his eyes are uncertain.

I cling to the fragile possibility like a lifeline. Solana is at the hospital. She has to be. I take a deep breath, steadying myself. There is only one way to know for sure.

“I need to make some calls,” I say firmly.

Dare nods.

“We’ll get to the bottom of this, Talia,” he promises. His hand finds mine, gripping it tightly.

I pull out my phone with shaking hands, scrolling to find the number for Amelia, the Hope House volunteer who stayed here at the hotel with us last night. Dare squeezes my hand reassuringly as I press call and raise the phone to my ear.

The line trills endlessly. Come on, come on, I urge silently. Finally, a breathless voice answers.

“Talia, hey.” It sounds quite noisy in the background where Amelia is. “Sorry, I’m at the hospital and it’s busy here.”

“Amelia, hi. I’m calling about Solana. She’s one of the kids staying with us at the hotel.”

“Oh yes, Solana!” Amelia responds brightly. “What’s up?”

I rush on. “Is she with the group that went with you to the hospital this morning?”

There’s a pause. “Solana?” Amelia sounds confused. “No, she isn’t one of the kids that needed to come back to the hospital.”

No. No, no, no. I squeeze my eyes shut, willing her words to change.

“As far as I know, Solana is with the kids at the hotel,” Amelia continues, oblivious to the bomb she’s just detonated in my heart. “Isn’t she?”

The phone slips from my fingers, falling to the marble floor with a crack. Solana is gone.

Dare catches me as I sway, his strong arms the only thing still holding me upright. This can't be real. It has to be a nightmare I'll wake up from.

But the stark terror in Dare's eyes mirrors my own. He knows this is no dream.

Fear rises in me, acidic and burning. I think of all the horrific possibilities. Did she wander off and get lost? Did she leave with a nanny as Maddie suggested? Was she lured away by a stranger? Oh god, all the unspeakable things that could happen to a child alone and unprotected in the city...

I sag against Dare. He grips my shoulders, his face pale but determined.

"We'll find her," he says firmly. "I swear to you, Talia."

His words steady me slightly, though my heart continues racing wildly. We have to hold it together for Solana's sake. I take a deep, shuddering breath and nod.

"Call hotel security," I tell Dare, my voice low but urgent. "Get your security team down here. We need to organize search teams and alert the police."

Dare is already pulling out his phone, barking orders to his head of security. In moments the hotel is abuzz with activity, staff spreading out to search every inch of the massive building. I make call after call; to Hope House volunteers, the local police station, even Solana's social worker. Nothing yet.

Dare looks over at me, a quiet fierceness in his gaze. His phone vibrates in his pocket and pulls it out with a frown, scanning the message that pops up on screen, color draining from his face.

"What is it?" I demand. "Have they found her?"

Wordlessly, he turns the phone so I can see. It's a photo of Solana, eyes wide and terrified, a gag wrapped tightly around her mouth.

The message below reads: *Sign over your future shares of the inheritance and she'll be returned to you. Don't... and you won't like what happens next.*

Ice water floods my veins. I stare at Dare, stunned into silence. He looks just as shocked, jaw clenched so tightly I fear it may shatter.

“Felix,” he grits out at last. “The bastard’s finally shown his hand.”

Anger ignites in my chest, hot and swift.

“You knew,” I spit. “You knew he was dangerous, that he’d already hurt innocents, and you let Solana wander off right into his clutches!”

“I didn’t know he’d go this far,” Dare says defensively.

“Well, you should have!” I shove away from him, pacing the length of the room.

“Talía, please. We have to stay calm.”

“Calm?” I whirl on him, eyes blazing. “That monster has Solana, and you want me to stay calm?”

“We have a choice to make here,” Dare says, “and we must make it carefully. If we alert the authorities, Felix may panic and hurt her. If I sign over my inheritance, it only encourages him to continue terrorizing others. But if we do nothing at all...”

He trails off, unable to voice what we both already know: Solana will die.

My chest constricts at the thought, a sob rising in my throat. How did we come to this? When did everything fall so utterly apart?

“I don’t know what to do,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around myself. “Just tell me what to do.”

Dare steps forward and wraps me in his embrace. I cling to him, trembling.

“We will get her back,” he murmurs. “I swear to you, Talía, we will bring Solana home.”

Home. The word cracks something open inside me. We were meant to be Solana’s home, to give her safety and shelter and love. And now...

I pull away, wiping angrily at my eyes. “How? How will we get her back from your vile excuse of an uncle?”

Dare’s jaw clenches. “I think I should sign over my inheritance.”

“You can’t be serious!” I cry. “How do you know he won’t just take the money and kill her anyway?”

“Because he knows if he harms one hair on her head, I will hunt him to the ends of the earth.” Dare’s eyes gleam with a dangerous light. “He knows what I’m capable of. He won’t cross me again.”

I stare at him, stunned into silence. In all our time together, I have never seen this side of Dare.

This is not the kind, compassionate man I know. This is a stranger with power and vengeance in his eyes. This is a beast, formed from anger and desperation. But I can’t deny that I feel a thrill of excitement at the thought of him going up against his uncle. Maybe this is what it will take to finally end this nightmare.

“Dare, I—”

He silences me with a finger to my lips.

“You always make sure everyone is taken care of, Talia. Let me take care of you this once.”

I stare into his eyes, nodding. Dare kisses me briefly, then takes a step back, his eyes never leaving mine. He reaches for his phone and dials a number.

“Yeah. It’s me. I need you right now.”

NEW CHAPTER

MY MIND RACES, thoughts swirling like a hurricane as I pace the length of the penthouse. Solana’s wide brown eyes and dimpled smile flash through my mind. That sweet little girl, abducted from the hotel by one of the nannies. I find

myself going over and over the fact that Solana was kidnapped by my own uncle. Rage boils up inside me and I slam my fist against the wall. The dull thud does nothing to abate the tempest whipping through me.

I hear soft footsteps and Talia appears, her face creased with worry. She opens her arms wordlessly and I go to her, pressing my face into the crook of her neck. Her floral scent envelops me as she strokes my hair.

“We have to get her back, Dare,” Talia murmurs. “I don’t know how, but there must be something we can do.”

I clench my jaw and pull back to meet her gaze. “I should have known Felix would try something like this. He’s always wanted control of the company.”

Talia cups my face in her hands. “This isn’t your fault. But we can still save Solana. We just need a plan.”

I cover her hands with mine, hope flickering inside me. With Talia by my side, I feel like I can do anything. “You’re right. Felix wants my future shares of the company. I’ll offer them to him in exchange for Solana.”

Talia’s eyes flash. “Yes. Make him think you’re willing to give him what he wants.”

My heart swells looking at this fierce, brilliant woman. I lean in and kiss her deeply. Just as our lips meet again, the elevator doors slide open. We spring apart and find ourselves face to face with my brother Burn.

He raises an eyebrow, glancing between us. “Am I interrupting something?”

I clench my jaw, irritation flaring. Trust Burn to show up at just the wrong moment.

“You came. I wasn’t sure you would.”

Burn saunters into the loft, hands in his pockets. “I was in the neighborhood, thought I’d stop by.” His gaze travels over the modern furniture and floor-to-ceiling windows. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

“Cut the small talk,” I snap. “I don’t have time for this.”

Burn's eyes narrow, his nonchalant facade cracking. "Time for your own brother? I'm wounded. Besides, *you* called *me*."

Talia touches my arm, a subtle reminder to stay calm. I take a breath. "I have a situation to deal with. It's... urgent."

"What kind of situation?" Burn asks. When I hesitate, he adds, "Maybe I can help."

I consider him for a moment. Bringing Burn in is risky, but he could be the key to this puzzle. And despite our incredibly rocky past, he's still my twin brother.

"All right," I say finally, heaving a sigh.

"Solana's been kidnapped by Felix."

Burn's nonchalance evaporates, his eyes widening. "The little girl you took in? Why would he do that?"

"To get at me. He wants my shares of the company." I run a hand through my hair. "I need to get Solana back safely. Whatever it takes."

Burn is silent, processing. Then he meets my eyes. "Tell me what you need me to do."

I let out a breath, gratitude welling up. I clasp his shoulder. "Thank you. First we need to meet with a lawyer, start the process of transferring the shares of company stock that I will inherit into your name."

Burn frowns. "Wait, I thought..." His brow knits. "I'm confused."

"It's a ruse to get Solana back unharmed. I will transfer all my future shares to you first. Then I'll sign my shares over to Felix... only I will have already signed them over to you. So I will essentially be signing nothing over to him. Then when I sign the papers that Felix wants me to sign, he'll give me back Solana and get nothing in exchange."

Burn nods slowly. "Clever. Felix won't see it coming. But... that means you would have to trust me not to screw you out of your entire inheritance."

I nod, my jaw clenching tightly. “I don’t have many other choices.”

Our gazes clash. Burn’s eyes probe my face for several long moments.

“I know I haven’t given you many reasons to trust me,” Burn says, his voice low and sincere. “But I swear to you, Dare, I’ll do whatever it takes to get Solana back. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

I look into his eyes, searching for any hint of deception. But all I see is determination and sincerity.

“Okay,” I say at last. “Let’s do this.”

I look at Talia. Her eyebrows raise in question, but I give her a subtle nod to let her know it will all be fine.

“We’re heading in to meet with the lawyer now,” I tell her. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but can you give us a few minutes?”

“Of course.” She comes over and gives me a quick kiss. “Be safe. And let me know as soon as you have a plan for getting Solana back.”

“I will. Thank you, Talia.” I squeeze her hand, then head to my office.

Burn hangs back a moment. “Don’t worry,” he tells Talia solemnly. “We’re going to make this right.”

She smiles faintly. “I know you will.”

A SHORT WHILE LATER, I am crammed into my small office with Burn and the family lawyer. They both stand with their arms crossed as I pour over the transfer documents, reading each line carefully. My birthright, my legacy, all spelled out on sheets of paper. Signing them over to Burn feels like chopping off one of my limbs.

But for Solana, I’ll do it. I’ll sacrifice anything.

“This is the only copy of the contract,” the lawyer explains. “Once you sign, any future shares you might inherit are legally Burn’s.”

I nod, jaw tightening. Burn grips my shoulder.

“It’s just a means to an end,” he reminds me gently. “We’ll get her back.”

Taking a deep breath, I scrawl my signature on the pages. The lawyer gathers them up and snaps his briefcase shut.

“It’s done,” I say heavily.

Burn pulls me into the briefest of embraces. His show of solidarity takes me aback. After so many years of resentment between us, I’m not accustomed to having him at my side. But Solana’s life is on the line.

Old grudges can’t matter now.

I return his embrace firmly, letting the gesture speak what words cannot.

That I’m grateful for his support.

That I want to believe our fractured relationship can be repaired.

That I’m trusting him, against my better judgment, not to betray me again.

When we separate, Burn searches my face, as if gauging the sincerity of my response. I meet his gaze steadily, letting him read the truth there.

After a tense moment, he nods. The hint of a smile touches his mouth.

“Brothers to the end,” he says gruffly.

“Brothers,” I echo. And for the first time in forever, I mean it.

I extend my hand. Burn grips it without hesitation, completing the unspoken pact between us. We will save Solana, together.

For now, that's enough. The rest of it, rebuilding our bond, restoring our family... that can come later. What matters is Solana's safety.

When we emerge, Talia is waiting in the next room, her worried gaze fixed on nothing at all. When Burn and I enter, her eyes dart between us, taking in our resolute expressions.

"It's done," I say simply. "The shares are Burn's now."

Talia lets out a shaky breath, pressing her palm to her heart. I know this has not been easy for her either, watching me surrender my birthright and tie my fate to my estranged brother's. But she has supported me without question or complaint.

Talia is as fierce as she is steadfast. For that, I count my many blessings. I open my arms and she steps into them, hugging me tightly.

"Thank you," she whispers against my chest.

"Of course. You and Talia have plans to adopt Solana. Therefore, she is our family. And when it comes to family, there is no other choice. You have to give up everything to save them."

I smooth back her hair, kissing the top of her head. After a long moment we separate. Talia dabs at her eyes, then gives Burn a quivery smile.

"Thank you," she says softly. "For standing with Dare. It means a lot."

Burn shifts, seeming both moved and uncomfortable with Talia's open gratitude.

"Yeah, well," he mutters. "You're both family."

The lawyer heads out the door, contracts locked away in his briefcase. The deed is done. I've signed away my legacy and future, placing all my trust in the brother who was once my greatest rival.

Talia slips her hand in mine again, grounding me. On my other side, Burn grips my shoulder.

“Done. Now it’s time to play our trump card with Felix. He thinks he has me over a barrel—but little does he know that I already sealed away my stake in the company.”

“What do you plan to tell him when you contact him?”

I light up with a sly smile. “That I’ll gladly give my shares to him in exchange for Solana’s safe return. He’ll assume he’s won, so he’ll agree to meet, confident that I’ll be willing to give him anything he wants. But what he doesn’t know is that we’re setting up an ambush. We’ll propose a trade. Then once she’s back in my arms, you and Tristen will swoop in and take Felix down for good.”

I glance back at Talia, seeing the same fierce protectiveness reflected in her eyes. Talia nods, silently supporting me.

I take a deep breath to steady my nerves before dialing Felix’s number. My heart pounds as the line rings, each trill ratcheting up the tension.

Chapter Thirty-Three

DARE

“Is this the place?” Tristen asks, pointing to a strip of sleazy businesses coming up on our right.

“Lucky Sixes?” Burn asks.

“That’s it.” I ease the car up to the curb and kill the engine. “You guys might have to hold me back in there. I might actually kill Felix when I see him.”

“He’s a snake. Nobody notices when snakes get their heads cut off,” Tristen grouses.

“They do when Remy Morgan is the snake’s father,” I say. “Don’t let me rough him up so badly that he needs a ventilator afterward.”

Burn climbs out of the car. “He’s old. What if he just happens to have a heart attack and we just happen to leave with the kid he kidnapped?”

I follow him up to the door, shading my face from the sunlight. “We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it.”

The smoke and raucous laughter hit me like a slap as I shoulder through the door of Felix’s favorite dive. My gaze rakes the room, landing on his broad back hunched over a whiskey at the bar.

Burn and Tristen fan out on either side of me, a wall of tense muscle. Worry for Solana drives me on.

I stalk over to Felix, my steps ringing loud on the scuffed wooden floor. He doesn’t look up until I slam my palm on the counter beside him, making his glass jump.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he sneers.

“Cut the crap, Felix. Where’s Solana?” I demand.

He raises an eyebrow and shrugs. “Couldn’t say. Do you have what I asked for?”

Felix turns at the scuff of my boot, eyes widening. His cronies turn as one, hands sliding under coats.

“You’ll get it when I’m ready to give it to you.” I square my shoulders and meet his gaze. “Where is she, Felix?”

He bares his teeth, reaching beneath a newspaper for a silver handgun and sliding it into view. A raucous laugh comes from another table and makes me jumpy. I glare at my uncle.

“Don’t drag this out, you pathetic excuse for a human.”

Felix hesitates, cold calculation in his eyes. He also chose this meeting location carefully. He probably figures that I’m not going to try anything in front of witnesses.

He figures *wrong*.

“Fuck you,” I sneer.

My palm slams on the table again. I lunge forward and shove his hand away from his weapon.

“I won’t hesitate to strangle you. Just give me a fucking reason.”

He smirks and rubs three fingers together.

“I need a signature from you first.”

“You’ll get your signature, Felix. When you show me Solana, *alive*. There had better not a be fucking hair on her head that’s out of place.”

A snort of disgust is his only response as he shakes his head. He waves a dismissive hand.

“The girl? She’s safe. For now.” He smiles as he pushes a sheaf of papers across the table and nudges a pen toward me. “In exchange for that, she goes free. Refuse...” He draws a finger across his throat with a raspy chuckle.

My fist clenches on the documents signing away my birthright to a man who has never cared for me. The urge to grip his throat and bash his head into the bar in front of him is so strong, my blood thrums with it. How the fuck did it come down to this?

Burn's voice rasps in my ear, "You good, brother?"

I meet Felix's gaze again and see the truth all too clearly. Felix will never honor any bargain. Solana's life means nothing to him. She's merely a pawn in his game of power.

The papers crinkle in my grip. I need to pretend to have a moral struggle.

I think about the fact that all my life I've struggled to do right by the company. I think about the employees who depend on its success. I pull a long face, trying to tell Felix that I'm at war with myself.

If I am not convincing enough, he'll kill her without a second thought. I can't lose her. Not when I promised Talia that I would bring her back safe.

My kingdom or the girl who's become my family? There's only one choice.

I step forward, pulse pounding in my temples, and pick up the pen. It takes only seconds to scrawl my full name across the dotted line. Then I toss the pen onto the counter again.

"The company is yours," I declare. I try to seem defeated, to really sell this fiction.

Felix snatches the papers with a triumphant smirk. "At last. You've made the wise choice, nephew."

Nephew. The word curdles my stomach like sour milk.

He folds the documents and tucks them into his jacket, already counting his winnings. "The girl is being held at the old warehouse down by the docks. She'll be released within the hour."

"I'm not waiting an hour. I want to her out now. That's how this works."

His smirk widens. “So distrustful. I’m a man of my word.”

“If you want the money, I get the girl. It’s as simple as that.” My heart hammers in my chest.

For a moment his eyes narrow. But then he smiles as if I’ve just offered him a glass of damned lemonade. “As you wish. But if you try anything, the deal is off.”

He scrawls something I can’t see on a piece of paper, then slides it across the table to me. My eyes latch onto the address. It’s not far from where Hope House used to be.

“I’ll accompany you,” my uncle says with a smirk.

I yank the table away from him. “Let’s go.”

It’s a tense ride over to the warehouse district. Tristen is boring a hole in my uncle’s head with his eyes. Burn is driving like a fucking maniac. And I am looking straight ahead, trying not to sweat through my suit.

When we arrive at the warehouse, Felix leads us inside. And there she is.

Solana, locked in a cage, but otherwise unharmed.

Her face lights up at the sight of me. “Dare!” She rattles the bars, reaching out her hands. Her little voice is raspy and desperate.

I hurry to her and grip her fingers. “I’m here now. You’re safe.”

“Here is your property. Returned safe and sound, like I promised.”

Tristen and Burn rip the cage apart and Solana comes sprawling into my arms with a shriek. I cup the back of her head and try to remain calm. But inside, I’m roiling with turmoil.

“Shh,” I whisper, stroking her hair. “You’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

She clings to me, tears streaming down her face. “Thank you, Dare. Thank you.”

I hold her for a long while, refusing to let her go until I'm certain she's okay. Then, with a sigh, I point at my brother Burn.

“Tell him.”

Burns straightens and faces him. “The deal is off.”

“What?” Felix's eyes bulge. “You lying, double-crossing —!”

“You really thought that we would hand over the company that easily?” I nod to Tristan, who steps forward, a shiny silver gun glinting under the dim light. “You're more gullible than we realized.”

Felix sputters in rage, hand darting into his jacket. But Tristan pulls his gun and points it directly at Felix's heart.

“Give me a reason,” Tristan warns softly.

Felix glowers at him, then turns to me. “You'll regret this.”

“The only thing I regret is not seeing through your transparent schemes sooner. I'll be seeing you very soon, Dare.”

He leaves the room. I don't bother to watch him go, but I hear an engine fire up in the distance.

I say nothing, hugging Solana to me. What I neglected to tell Felix, and everyone else, is that I have tipped off the FBI. I let them know not just about Solana's kidnapping, but about some Ponzi schemes that my uncle set up and watched collapse. They happened a decade ago... but the state statute of limitations for wire fraud and investment advisor fraud still has five more years before it lapses.

The FBI should be calling on my uncle sooner rather than later. I offered to testify if they need me. And when the Feds nail him for wire fraud, he's going to prison for life.

Burn steps up to us, features tight with concern. “The police are on their way. Felix won't get away with kidnapping.”

“Good.” I meet Tristen’s gaze over Solana’s head. “Thank you. Both of you.”

“What are friends for?” Tristen’s mouth quirks.

Burn’s hand settles on my shoulder, grip warm and steady. “We protect our own.”

A surge of gratitude fills me, easing the last of my tension. Together, we’ve overcome every challenge. We always will.

I smile down at Solana. “Let’s go home.”

Solana nods against my chest, her hair tickling my chin. *Home.*

The word resonates within me as we leave the bar behind, Tristen covering our backs in case Felix attempts anything else. But he won’t. His thirst for power and control has been quenched by a bitter dose of defeat.

Burn’s hand remains on my shoulder, a comforting weight. “Remy hasn’t officially stepped down from Morgan Drilling yet. But I’ll get started on the paperwork transferring partial control of the company to you. You might be penniless, but you’re a penniless man who is going to inherit a billion dollar company. Don’t worry about that for now.”

I glance at him in surprise. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.” His lips curve. “And I want to sign over my parental rights, too. Consider it an early wedding gift.”

“But—”

“Hush. No arguments.” His eyes glint with humor and affection. “You’ve more than proven you’re ready, and it’s what Mom would have wanted.”

My throat tightens. If only Remy could see how far we’ve come. How, despite all the odds, we overcame his poisonous legacy to forge something better. A family based on trust and support rather than greed and betrayal.

By the time we reach the car, Solana has drifted to sleep in my arms. I cradle her close as Burn and Tristen slide in on either side of me, flanking me like the brothers they are.

“To the manor?” Tristen asks.

I shake my head. “To the Windsor hotel,” I reply softly.

I stare out the window as the cityscape blurs past, Solana’s even breathing a balm against my neck.

We did it. We won.

And yet why does victory taste so bittersweet?

Perhaps because the price of success was too dear. Perhaps because for all the wrongs Felix committed, he was still my uncle. Perhaps because in the end, we were all orphaned boys craving a father’s love and approval, even if it could never truly be given.

“You’re brooding again.” Burn’s voice is gentle.

I glance at his reflection in the glass. “Am I so obvious?”

“To me.” A wry smile. “I’ve had a lifetime to learn your tells.”

I huff a laugh. “And here I thought I was inscrutable.”

“You are to most. But not to us.” Tristen leans forward to squeeze my shoulder. “We know you, Dare. The good and bad and everything in between.”

My throat tightens. How did I get so lucky to find not one but two men who would stand by me through thick and thin?

“Thank you,” I say roughly. “For today.”

Burn’s eyes soften. “Always.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

TALIA

The door bursts open and there she is. Solana, pink dress dirty and torn, wrapped in Dare's arms. When Dare puts her down, I drop to my knees and pull her into a fierce embrace, sobs wracking my body.

"Oh, honey. You're home, you're safe." I run my hands over her hair, her arms, needing to feel the solidness of her. The bone-deep terror and grief of the last twenty-four hours melts away and I'm left trembling with relief.

Solana clings to me, face buried in my neck. I feel her small body shaking as she starts to cry, too.

"I thought... I thought I'd never see you again," she admits between hiccuping sobs.

"No, honey. Dare and I will always find you. No matter where you go, you'll always end up back in our arms." I kiss her damp cheeks, wipe away her tears.

Over her head, my eyes meet Dare's. His jaw is tight, eyes shadowed. I know getting her back wasn't easy. But he did it. For me. For us.

I cup Solana's face in my hands and make her meet my eyes. "You are part of this family now. No one will ever take you from us again. I promise you that."

Fresh tears spill down her cheeks but she's smiling now. "You mean it? I can stay with you?"

"Forever, honey." I kiss her forehead and draw her close once more.

Dare's presence is a looming force behind me, his body radiating tension. His hand tightens almost painfully on my shoulder as his gaze sweeps the lobby, alert for any threats. Solana is safe in my arms, but he won't relax until we're behind closed doors.

I know he hates feeling this edgy, this out of control. Hates that his uncle almost succeeded in stealing Solana away. But Dare got her back. Checkmated Felix in their twisted game of power and manipulation.

Now Dare and I just need to make it official. Give Solana the home and family she deserves. The words spill out before I can stop them.

My face still pressed against Solana's head when I whisper, "I want to adopt her. Make her legally ours."

Dare goes utterly still. I hold my breath, waiting. This goes against every rule of our arrangement with Hope House. But after almost losing her, I don't care about rules anymore.

Finally Dare nods, his eyes finding mine. "It's about time," he says simply. "I know it's against the Hope House rules, but I don't feel bad about it for an instant."

Relief and joy crash over me. I turn back to Solana, take her small hands in mine.

"How would you like that, little girl? To be part of our family forever?"

Her eyes go wide, still swimming with tears. She looks between me and Dare like she can't quite believe this is real. Then her face crumples and she starts sobbing again, even as she nods her head frantically.

"Yes, yes please! I want to stay with you always!" she manages to get out between heaving breaths.

I sweep Solana into my arms, holding her tightly as she cries into my shoulder. Dare moves closer, wrapping us both in his strong embrace. I meet his eyes over Solana's head and see my own elation mirrored there.

The door bursts open, making us all jump. Aunt Minnie comes bustling in, trailed by a stern-looking doctor clutching a large black bag.

“Let me see the child, let me see!” Aunt Minnie cries, her voice thick with emotion.

She has clearly been crying, her eyes red-rimmed behind her glasses.

With gentle hands, I detach Solana from my neck and pass her over to Aunt Minnie’s waiting arms. The doctor steps in, opening his bag on the nearby table.

“I must examine her thoroughly, just to make sure she’s in good shape,” he declares officiously.

Solana shrinks back against Aunt Minnie’s bosom but allows the doctor to take her wrist, checking her pulse and peering into her eyes.

Dare hovers close, tension radiating from him. I know he won’t relax until we have confirmation of Solana’s health. I slip my hand into his, anchoring him as the doctor continues his methodical inspection.

After what seems an eternity, the doctor steps back. “She is in perfect health,” he pronounces. “We will want to keep an eye on her burns, of course. But I think Solana will be just fine.”

Dare’s shoulders slump in relief. Aunt Minnie makes the sign of the cross, praising God as she rocks a now sleepy-eyed Solana. The ordeal has exhausted the poor child.

I nod to Aunt Minnie, who understands my silent request and carries Solana off to bed. The child is barely awake, her little hand curled against Aunt Minnie’s collar.

As their footsteps fade down the hall, Dare pulls me into his arms. For a long moment we simply hold each other, processing the tumultuous events of the past few hours. So much has changed, so quickly.

“I can’t believe you managed to trick Felix,” I finally say, pulling back to search Dare’s face. “Handing over your

inheritance, your place as CEO...”

Dare’s mouth twists wryly. “A small price to pay for Solana’s freedom. The company is in good hands with Burn now.”

He pauses, his gaze growing distant. “You know, it was always supposed to be like this. Me running things behind the scenes, guiding Burn as he took the reins publicly. But over the years, I let ambition cloud my judgment.”

His eyes meet mine again, soft with wonder. “You helped me find clarity. You reminded me what really matters.”

My throat tightens with emotion. I press my palm to his cheek. “I’m just glad we got her back safely. Our family...it feels complete now.”

Dare covers my hand with his own. “It does,” he agrees solemnly. “Our family.”

We stand there a moment more, hearts full. Then Dare tilts my chin up, lowering his head to capture my lips in a searing kiss.

Our kiss deepens, a reaffirmation of our bond after the day’s trials. Dare’s arms wrap around me, warm and solid, as my hands slide up his chest to twine behind his neck. For long moments we are lost in each other, our bodies pressed close.

Finally we break apart, breathless. Dare rests his forehead against mine.

“I know there’s more we need to discuss,” he murmurs. “About my company, about Solana...” His thumb strokes my cheek. “But right now, I just want to be with my wife.”

I smile softly, trailing my fingers down his jaw. “I want that, too.”

Taking his hand, I lead him towards our bedroom. The stresses of the day slip away as the door closes behind us with a quiet click. We have weathered the storm and found safe harbor in each other’s arms.

Dare’s hands slide down to my hips as he pulls me close again, his mouth finding the sensitive spot below my ear. I

gasp, tangling my fingers in his hair.

“I need you, Talia,” he growls against my skin.

My pulse quickens at his raw desire. “Then have me,” I whisper.

With a low groan, Dare sweeps me up and carries me to the bed. He lays me down gently amid the pillows before stretching out above me. We undress each other slowly, fingers trailing over newly bared skin.

When at last we are naked, Dare pauses to look at me, his gaze scorching. “You are so beautiful,” he says reverently.

I flush under his admiration. “So are you,” I breathe, taking in his muscular frame.

He gives a wolfish grin before lowering his head to kiss a blazing path down my body. I arch into his touch, dizzy with need.

I don’t want any penetration, but Dare doesn’t even ask for it. He focuses on me, his eyes intent. I cling to Dare, overwhelmed by the intensity of our connection. I reach the peak and sail over it, my whole body tightening in pleasure.

Afterwards we lie entwined, hearts thudding in tandem. Dare presses a kiss to my hair.

“I love you, Talia,” he whispers. “Today, tomorrow, always.”

I smile softly. “I love you, too. I think I always have. And I know without a shadow of a doubt that I always will.”

We share a final lingering kiss before settling into sleep, still wrapped in each other’s arms.

As we drift off, my thoughts turn to Solana. My heart swells with love for the little girl who has come to mean so much to both of us. With her addition, our family finally feels complete.

I know the road ahead won’t always be smooth. There will be challenges as Solana adjusts to her new life, and dangers

we can't yet foresee. But together, Dare and I will face whatever comes.

Tomorrow we'll figure out the steps to make Solana's adoption official. I picture her joyful tears and Dare's proud smile. We'll be a family in truth as well as heart.

With Dare's strong arms around me and Solana sleeping safely down the hall, I know I have everything I need.

As sleep claims me, I make a silent promise: to nurture this new family we are building and to love them all with everything I have.

NEW CHAPTER

I RUN my fingers through Solana's dark hair, smoothing it away from her tear-stained cheeks. She clings to me, her small body tucked into the curve of mine as we sit together on her canopy bed.

"It's okay, sweetie," I murmur. "Everything's going to be alright."

Aunt Minnie perches on the edge of the mattress, her wrinkled hand covering Solana's. "That's right, dear. You're safe here with us."

Solana nods, her breath hitching, but she doesn't speak. My heart aches for this little girl who has already endured so much loss and uncertainty in her short life.

First the loss of her family, then getting shuffled between foster homes. Just when she started settling in with us, Felix kidnapped her, plunging her back into fear and uncertainty.

It's almost too much for one tiny heart to bear.

I wish I could promise her that nothing bad will ever happen again, but I know better than to make vows I can't keep.

The sound of footsteps draws my gaze to the open bedroom door. Dare fills the frame, impeccably dressed as always in one of his tailored suits. Our eyes meet and an unspoken conversation passes between us. He knows I don't want him to go, but his business can't wait any longer. Solana needs me more right now.

"I have to head out for a bit," he says. "But I won't be far if you need me. Just call."

"We'll be alright," I say with more confidence than I feel. "Won't we, Solana?"

She nods again, clutching me tighter. As Dare turns to leave, guilt wars with relief inside me. I want him here, yet his presence is a reminder of the world I tried to leave behind. The world that refuses to let me go.

Aunt Minnie gives my arm a gentle squeeze. "Why don't I make us some tea?" she suggests.

I force a smile. "That sounds perfect."

As she shuffles out of the room, Solana lifts her head from my shoulder. Her dark eyes are still swimming with tears, but there is strength there, too. She has endured so much, but she is a survivor.

Exactly like I am.

The sound of raised voices drifts down the hallway, preceding angry footsteps marching toward us. I brace myself as Remy bursts into the room, his wrinkled face flushed with rage.

"What's the meaning of this?" he bellows. "Summoning me here like I'm some damned servant."

His cruel gaze falls on Solana and she recoils. Anger flashes hot inside me.

"Get out!" I yell, putting my body between Remy and Solana. I bare my teeth at him. "Out of this room right now!"

Dare appears in the doorway.

"That's enough," he says, his voice low but firm.

Remy whirls toward his grandson, sputtering indignantly. But Dare silences him with a look.

“Let’s go. You don’t need to intrude here,” he growls.

“But—”

Dare leans toward Remy menacingly. “Don’t make a scene, Remy.”

A look of concern flits over Remy’s face. He clears his throat. I’ve never seen the old man back down so quickly. He glares at Dare, resentment simmering in his eyes.

“Fine,” he grits out.

“Burn and I need to discuss some things with you,” Dare continues. “Right now.”

He turns and strides from the room, not bothering to see if Remy follows. After a moment, the old man shuffles after him, grumbling under his breath. Solana squeezes my hand tightly as their voices fade down the hall.

“Are they going to fight?” she whispers.

“They’d better not, if they know what’s good for them.” I smooth her dark hair gently. “Dare won’t let anything happen to us. I promise.”

She considers this, chewing her bottom lip. Then she nods and nestles against me once more. I continue stroking her hair, offering what little comfort I can. But my thoughts are with Dare, hoping he can finally make his grandfather understand.

Hoping this family’s cycle of lies and manipulation can end here and now. With me.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. Solana is right to be worried - when Remy and Dare clash, things often spiral out of control.

The minutes tick by slowly. I strain to hear the conversation down the hall, but only muffled voices reach us. Solana fidgets in my lap, her small body tense.

I kiss her forehead and slide her from my body. She whines, but I shush her. “It’s okay. Aunt Minnie is right here

with you still. She'll keep you company while I just check on everyone else."

I tiptoe into the living room, peeking around the corner. Remy stands on one side, his face flushed, eyes blazing. Dare stands on the other, his jaw set. One look at his stony expression and I know Remy is refusing to listen to reason.

"This is outrageous!" Remy bellows, jabbing a finger toward Dare. "You have no right to speak to me this way. I am the head of this family!"

"Not anymore," Dare says evenly. "Things are going to change around here."

Remy scoffs. "You think you can threaten me into obeying you?"

He turns and notices me for the first time. His lip curls in disgust.

"And with the help of this gold-digging little—"

"Don't," Dare snaps, his voice like a whip crack. Remy blinks in surprise.

I make my way into the room slowly, one hand supporting my heavy belly. Remy regards me, his gaze flitting to my stomach. Uncertainty passes over his expression.

Is that longing I see?

"The baby's kicking," I say softly. "She's pretty riled up. I think she can sense the yelling and arguing going on out here."

Remy purses his lips. "Are you here to tell me to shut up, too?"

I shrug and cup my baby bump.

"I'm telling you that there are bigger issues than whatever you are griping about. You're in my home. You should respect my need for a quiet, tranquil atmosphere. I'm carrying your legacy in here. I would think that you would remember that."

My words catch Remy off guard. He opens his mouth, closes it, and then says, "I didn't realize that you could hear us."

I fold my arms across my chest.

“Everyone can hear you, Remy. Not just here. But in basically every room you’ve ever walked into. You terrify people.”

He glares at me. “Surely you overestimate my might.”

“I don’t think I do.”

Dare seizes the opportunity. “It’s time to make a choice, Remy. Are you going to keep up with your reign of terror? Are you going to keep poisoning this family with your manipulation?” He pauses, licking his lower lips. “Or will you help it heal?”

Remy turns away, his shoulders hunched. For a full minute, the only sound is the ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the corner.

Finally, he speaks. “I’ve made mistakes.”

That was *not* what I was expecting him to say. My jaw drops but I’m too overwhelmed to interject my mixed up thoughts.

Dare waves a hand. “Do you care to expand on that?”

Remy gives him a look but purses his lips. Silence reigns again.

Dare shakes his head and stomps his foot. “If you’re not going to apologize, Remy—”

Remy holds up a hand and Dare falls silent. Remy speaks haltingly at first, then his words come pouring out like a floodgate has just been opened.

“I... I treated you boys harshly after your mother passed. Made you compete for everything. My attention, the family business. Tried to make you as hard and ruthless as me.” He glances at Dare. “Maybe I went too far. Your mother wouldn’t have wanted that.”

Dare’s jaw tightens. “You think?”

Remy winces at his grandson’s sarcastic tone. “I thought it would make you tough. Ready to take over the empire

someday.” His voice drops. “Like my father did to me and my brother.”

Burn looks surprised. “You have a brother?”

Remy’s eyes darken. “Had. I haven’t spoken to him in forty years. I don’t even know if he’s still alive or not.”

He falls silent again. The clock ticks steadily on.

Dare steps forward. “It’s time to break the cycle, Remy. No more lies and manipulation. Things are going to change around here.”

Remy rubs a hand over his face. For the first time, he looks every one of his eight decades.

“Maybe you’re right,” he says finally. “I’m an old man set in my ways. But perhaps... maybe there’s still time to change.”

He meets Dare’s eyes, and for once there is no malice there. Dare studies his grandfather, arms folded across his chest.

“That’s not an apology.”

Remy’s face mottles. “Are you going to fucking make me say the words?”

I chime in. “It would be nice.”

He gives me a cutting look.

“Fine! I’m sorry. Okay? Sorry for not being the grandfather you needed.”

Silence reigns for almost half a minute. Dare scrubs a hand through his hair.

“It’s nice to actually hear an apology for once,” Dare says finally. “But I’m not ready to forgive you yet. You have a lot to make up for. If you really want to change, if you want me to stay here in Harwicke, you’ll have to prove it.”

Remy’s shoulders slump, but he nods. “Understood. I’ll... I’ll try to do better.”

My eyes fix on Dare. “Wait, did you just say... are you thinking of keeping the company here in Harwicke?”

He nods. “I am.”

“Do you really mean it?” I whisper, my heart pounding in my ears. Dare takes both of my hands in his and looks me in the eye, determination shining in his gaze.

“Yes,” he says firmly. “For you, I’ll give up everything. All I need is right here.”

My breath catches as he leans in to kiss me, sending sparks of warmth radiating through my body.

Remy clears his throat from the other side of the room. A sliver of ice forms in my chest, but I meet his gaze head-on. He looks like he’s about to say something when he notices the protective hand that Dare has placed over my growing belly.

“Talia,” Remy starts gruffly, the apology painfully slow to form on his lips. “I owe you an apology as well. I shouldn’t have insulted your background or tried to use you as a pawn against my grandsons. That was wrong of me.”

I suppress the urge to throw him out then and there. Instead, I look pointedly at Remy and reply coolly, “I accept your apology. On one condition. That you never raise your voice to a woman again. And you need to learn to hold your tongue.”

My words seem to surprise him, because for once his mouth stays shut. He makes a face like he is being forced to absorb something unpleasant. For Remy, I guess this is a brand new concept. He simply nods and turns away without another word, shuffling off into the dark hallway like a chastised child.

Dare gently wraps his arms around me and presses a kiss to the crown of my head. “Don’t let him get to you,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear. “You handled that like a pro.”

I smile up at him, the warmth of his embrace soothing away the last of my tension. “I’m just glad it’s over,” I admit, leaning into his chest. “I don’t think I could handle any more drama right now.”

Dare chuckles and runs his hand down my back, sending shivers through my body. “Well then, let’s forget about all this and focus on each other,” he suggests.

My lips turn up at the corners and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him in for a deep kiss.

Chapter Thirty-Five

DARE

I straighten my collar in the gilded mirror, the crisp edges of my button-down stark against the opulent wallpaper. I've elected to wear a pair of chinos and a simple light blue button up shirt. Hardly wedding attire, even for an impromptu vow renewal. But we didn't want to repeat the wedding that we already had.

I wanted something more intimate, just a small gathering to celebrate our vow renewal.

Besides, we couldn't wait. Not with the baby coming. Soon, we will be too busy with a new baby and a new adopted daughter to think about ourselves.

This is our last chance to be selfish.

My fingers tremble as I fumble with the cufflinks Talia picked out for me. I'm more nervous now than I was at our first wedding.

This one feels real. Permanent.

"It's time, Mr. Morgan."

I turn to see Clive in the doorway, prim and proper as ever in his coat and tails. He's been a fixture of this house for decades. The closest thing Burn and I ever had to a father.

I clap him on the shoulder.

"For the thousandth time, Clive. It's Dare. And thank you for the heads up. How's it looking out there?" I ask.

"Perfect, sir— er, Dare. Just as you envisioned."

I nod, exhaling slowly. "And Talia?"

“Radiant as ever. I believe Ms. Solana is keeping her occupied.”

Despite the churning in my gut, I smile.

Solana. The sweet, fiery orphan who burrowed her way into our hearts. When I picture my future, she’s a giant part of it.

Another deep breath. “Well, let’s not keep them waiting.”

Clive bows. “Right this way, Mr. Morgan.”

Frowning, I follow him out, each step heavier than the last.

The gardens are resplendent, overflowing with roses and peonies. White chairs line the stone pathway to an arch woven with hydrangeas and lilies. Our closest friends and family fill the seats - Aunt Minnie dabbing her eyes, Rob fussing with the programs.

At the end stands the justice of peace, holy text in hand. A door swings open and heads begin to turn.

My heart races as I catch sight of Talia. She’s wearing a stunning blue dress that hugs her curves in all the right places. It does nothing to hide her obvious pregnancy, but that’s more than okay with me. Her hair is swept up in an elegant bun and she’s clutching a bouquet of red roses. She’s *breathtakingly* beautiful. For a moment, I forget why we’re here and just stare.

Solana is at Talia’s side, pink petals spilling from her small hands. The sight takes my breath away.

My breath catches as Talia lifts her eyes to meet mine. The nerves melt away. All I feel is joy. Absolute certainty. No more games or misunderstandings. This is real.

She beams as I take my place beside her.

“You look beautiful,” I whisper.

“So do you.” She smooths my collar, her ring catching the light. The one I slipped onto her finger seemed like a lifetime ago.

The justice begins, his voice distant. My focus stays on Talia. The woman who fought her way into my heart. The one who makes me want to be better.

“Do you, Dare, take Talia...”

“I do,” I say firmly.

Her eyes glisten as she echoes the vows. We speak the traditional words, but for us they carry new meaning. In this moment, we create our own family. Our own future.

I slide the ring that Aunt Minnie gave Talia onto Talia’s finger. Looking at her, thinking how this moment symbolizes our stories coming together. It’s not just about us anymore. It’s about the life growing inside of her. It’s about Solana. I swear to protect and love them all with everything I have.

“You may kiss the bride,” the justice intones.

I cup her face in my hands and kiss her deeply, sealing our promise. Applause erupts around us. Solana skips over, hugging our legs.

I bend down and scoop Solana up, lifting her so that she too can share an embrace.

We are Mrs. and Mrs. Morgan again. But we’re so much more than that. And it feels so damn right.

Talia pulls back, laughing through her tears.

“We’re really doing this,” she says.

I smooth a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “No backing out now.”

My thumb brushes her cheek, and she leans into my touch. A tender moment before the reception sweeps us up.

“Can I have cake?” Solana inquires.

Talia laughs and nods. “You certainly can, honey.”

A server appears with a tray of champagne flutes, her broad smile creasing her wrinkled face. Standing right behind the server are Magda and Clive, watching the server with rapt attention.

Clive stands ramrod straight, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief. Magda takes several flutes off the tray and offers them to us.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Morgan. Everyone gets sparkling cider, out of respect for the baby.” Magda presses glasses into our hands. “Let us all drink to new beginnings.”

We clink glasses and drink. The bubbly liquid stings my throat. Makes me feel alive.

Rob weaves through the crowd toward us, phone glued to his ear as always. But his grin is genuine. He covers the speaker and whispers.

“I’ve got Felix’s lawyers on the line.”

I huff a laugh. “You should just hang up on them. Tell them they’ve got a loser of a case.”

Rob nods and turns away, still listening to the speaker.

Talia slips her arm through mine. “Shall we mingle, husband?”

The word sends a thrill through me. I squeeze her hand.

“Lead the way, wife.”

We descend the steps into the gardens and a shower of rose petals. Solana dances around us, her flower girl duties done.

As we make the rounds, my thoughts linger on Talia beside me. Her inner strength. Her compassion.

Talia’s arm loops through mine as we make our way through the well-wishers. I catch glimpses of the ornate diamond on her finger, glinting in the sunlight. Aunt Minnie’s ring, passed down through generations and now resting on Talia’s hand. A Chance family treasure.

Beside it, the impressive rock I presented her glimmers. Overkill, Tristen called it. He’s not wrong. But Talia deserves the best and deserves to feel how much she means to me.

We pause as Solana skips over. Her grin is bright beneath her flower crown.

“Do you like my dress?” She gives a little twirl, the tulle skirt fanning out.

Talia crouches down, eye level with her. “It’s beautiful. You make a perfect flower girl.”

Solana beams and throws her arms around Talia’s neck. My heart swells, seeing their bond. Knowing Solana needs this. She needs *us*.

I ruffle Solana’s hair as she pulls away. “Yeah, not too shabby, kid.”

She scrunches her nose at me. Sassy as ever. But her eyes are warm.

Watching her scamper off, I feel Talia’s hand on my arm. Our eyes meet, a silent understanding passing between us. Solana has carved out a place in our lives.

I take Talia’s hand, our fingers intertwining. The crowd parts as we make our way toward the garden gates.

There waits the sleek white limo, ready to whisk us away. To our new beginning.

But first, farewells must be made.

Magda steps forward, eyes glistening. She clasps Talia’s hands in her wrinkled ones. “Welcome to the family, dear girl. You make our Dare very happy.”

Talia smiles, voice thick with emotion. “Thank you, Magda. For everything.”

Magda pats her cheek fondly before turning to me. “You take good care of her,” she instructs in her heavy accent.

“Always,” I promise. We embrace tightly. The woman who bandaged my childhood scrapes, who snuck me cookies before dinner. My second mother.

Next is Clive, posture ramrod straight in his coat and tails. We clasp hands. “Congratulations, Dare,” he says stiffly, though his dark eyes shine.

“Thank you, Clive.”

He leans in close. “Your mother would be so proud of the man you’ve become.”

I grip his hand tighter, words escaping me. Clive nods in understanding.

Finally, Burn steps up, trademark smirk in place. “Try not to run this one off too fast,” he jokes, but his tone holds warmth.

I pull him into a bear hug as he thumps my back. My brother. My family.

With final waves, Talia and I duck into the waiting classic silver two seater Aston Martin convertible. I am beyond happy to drive as I wink at Talia. I gun the engine and put my hand on the stick shift.

“Are you ready to take this adventure with me, Mrs. Morgan?”

She smiles up at me, eyes brimming with promise. “Always, Mr. Morgan.”

Her kiss is soft and sweet, a delicate promise. As we break apart, her fingers trail down my jaw, eyes searching mine.

We pull out, though we have to go slow while we’re still in the miles-long driveway.

“I know it hasn’t been an easy road for us,” she says, shouting to be heard. “But I meant every word today. I’m yours, Dare. For better or worse.”

My throat tightens. No matter how many times I hear it, her devotion still amazes me.

“I’ll spend every day trying to be the man you deserve,” I vow.

Her lips quirk. “You already are.”

The sprawling green acres of the estate fade into the distance out the convertible top. There is a definite chill in the air, despite our wedding taking place in the late morning. I reach into the back and pull out a heavy blanket that I put there just for this moment.

Talia glances at me with a laugh and tucks the blanket around her shoulders. “You think you know me so well.”

“Darling girl.” I smirk at her. “If I don’t know everything about you by now, then I have the joy of learning. I’ve got the rest of our lives.”

Talia doesn’t answer but she rests her head against my shoulder. God damn, that feels so exquisite.

Despite the urgency of our sudden wedding, contentment settles through me. With Talia by my side, I’m ready to face whatever comes next. Diaper changes, sleepless nights, spit up. Bring it on.

I drive just outside the city, to a two-story chrome and white house, a luxury vacation rental. We’re parents now, so we can’t go on any long honeymoon far away from Solana or the birthing center.

But I can have Talia to myself for tonight. I slow the car and pull into the drive. I step out and offer Talia my hand.

“Shall we, Mrs. Morgan?”

She takes it, beaming. “Yes please, Mr. Morgan.”

Talia squeezes my hand as we walk into the yard and onto the beautiful verandah. She looks just like a movie star just now, her blue dress billowing in the breeze. I can’t take my eyes off her glowing face.

“Just think,” she says. “In a couple of weeks, we’ll have a little girl with us.”

I grin. “Our lives are about to change in the best way.”

As we settle on the luscious outdoor furniture, Talia pauses, placing her hand on her pregnant stomach.

“This place is very nice.”

I cock a brow at her. “Do you want me to buy it for you as a vow renewal present?”

She rolls her eyes, kicks off her shoes, and puts her feet in my lap. “A foot rub would be nice.”

I massage her feet, which are swollen and red. I don't say a word about it. Rather, I relax and soak Talia in.

"It's so crazy to think our baby is growing in here right now," she marvels, cupping her stomach.

Reaching out, I gently lay my palm next to hers. A fierce protectiveness rises in me, determination steeling my spine.

"I'll always keep you both safe," I vow, my voice rough with emotion. Talia's eyes shine with unshed tears. "Solana too."

"I know you will."

Her lips curl and she leans forward to brush her lips over mine. In that kiss, I taste our future - one filled with love and family and new beginnings.

Chapter Thirty-Six

DARE

The elevator doors slide open with a soft hiss, revealing the pristine interior of the Morgan Building's top floor. I step out, Talia's hand clasped loosely in mine, her swollen belly preceding her. My brother waits by the frosted glass doors of the conference room, arms crossed, face unreadable.

Talia squeezes my hand before letting go. "I'll be right here when you're done," she says softly, lowering herself onto a leather couch outside the room.

I nod, throat tightening, and push through the doors. Burn's impassive facade cracks into a smile as he steps forward to embrace me.

"It's good to see you, brother," he murmurs, clapping me firmly on the back. For a moment, we simply stand there, clasped in each other's arms. The knot of tension that's sat heavy in my chest for months finally begins to unwind.

Stepping back, Burn gestures to the glossy oak table. "Shall we?"

I sink into the plush leather chair, exhaling slowly. "I'm glad we're doing this. Moving forward, together."

Burn nods, eyes glinting. "Me too. It's time the Morgans present a united front."

I lean forward, steepling my fingers on the table. "No more lies. No more betrayals. We face the future as brothers."

Burn's mouth twists ruefully. "You're right. If it wasn't for Talia, I don't think we ever could've bridged the chasm

between us.”

I nod slowly, old regrets and hurts simmering beneath the surface. “She made me see what really matters. She’s helped me realize how badly I have always wanted a family of my own. And she opened up my eyes to the fact that you and I still have a chance to be brothers again.”

The conference room doors bang open, making us both jump. Our grandfather stands in the doorway, his hawk-like gaze piercing. Behind him, the lawyers shuffle uncomfortably.

Burn rises smoothly to his feet. “Gentlemen, would you mind giving us the room?”

After they’ve left, Remy stalks forward, eyes flashing. “What’s the meaning of this meeting? Conspiring together, are you?” He slams his palms on the table.

I don’t flinch. Calmly, steadily, I meet his glare. “Yes. We’ve been doing some thinking, Grandfather. About the past, the present, and the future.”

Remy snorts derisively. “Don’t waste my time with sentimental rubbish. Say what you came here to say.”

Burn steps up beside me, shoulder to shoulder. “Things need to change. Starting today.” His voice rings with quiet authority. “For the good of the family.”

Remy’s hands clench into fists, but he holds his tongue. His eyes dart between us, as if trying to find a crack in our united front. But Burn and I stand resolute.

Finally, Remy speaks, his voice dangerously soft. “You think you can come in here and dictate terms to me? I built this empire from nothing. Morgan Industries exists because of my sweat and sacrifice. You ungrateful brats owe everything you have to me.”

I feel Burn bristle next to me, but I touch his arm lightly. “It’s true, you created a successful business,” I say evenly. “But the way you pitted Burn and I against each other, turned us into rivals instead of brothers - that ends today.”

Remy opens his mouth to interrupt, but I hold up a hand. “From now on, there will be no more manipulating, no more emotional warfare. If you want to remain part of this family, you’ll treat us with respect.”

Burn jumps in. “Things need to change, Remy. For the next generation. That is, your great-grandchild.” He glances meaningfully at Remy. “We will not tolerate toxicity or abuse. Not anymore.”

Remy looks back and forth between us, realization dawning. We’re presenting a united front that he can’t divide. The twins have wrested control from the old man.

Jaw clenched, Remy gives one sharp nod. Message received. The Morgan empire just shifted on its axis.

Remy’s eyes narrow, his wrinkled hands curling into fists at his sides. I can see the struggle raging within him - his iron will battling the inevitability of change.

“You expect me to just roll over? Give up everything I built?” His voice shakes with fury.

Burn folds his arms. “What we expect is for you to stop this pointless war between us. If you can’t, you’ll remove yourself from our lives completely.”

I nod. “No more leverage, no more power plays. It’s time for this family to heal.”

Remy scoffs. “Family? You’re just worried about your own skin.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I say gently. “We’re thinking of the next generation now.”

I glance at Burn and he gives an almost imperceptible nod.

“Your legacy,” Burn says. “If you choose to be part of your heir’s life. It is your choice.”

Remy is silent, stunned. In this moment, the fight bleeds out of him. His shoulders slump in defeat. We have a checkmate.

“Alright,” he rasps finally. “You win, boys.” A wistful glint enters his gaze. “I suppose it’s time to pass the torch.”

Relief floods through me. The war for the Morgan empire is over.

Remy shuffles to the conference table and sinks into a chair, suddenly looking every one of his years.

“I don’t expect forgiveness,” he says heavily. “I know the damage I’ve caused. But I’d like the chance to make amends...to my great-grandchild, at least.”

He meets my eyes pleadingly. I feel a pang in my chest. Despite everything, Remy is still family.

I glance at Burn again. He gives a slight nod.

“We’re not doing this to punish you,” I say gently. “We just want what’s best for the next generation.”

Burn steps forward and puts a hand on Remy’s shoulder. “No more lies. No more manipulation. If you can abide by that, you’ll have a place in your great-grandchild’s life.”

Remy places his gnarled hand over Burn’s. “You have my word,” he rasps.

For the first time in decades, the hardness in his eyes has dissolved. I realize with a start that they are bright with tears.

Burn smiles and squeezes Remy’s shoulder. “Then it’s settled.”

He retrieves the legal documents from his briefcase and slides them across the table. Remy scrawls his signature without hesitation, signing away his empire.

There are no more words needed. The air hums with new possibilities.

Remy’s hand trembles slightly as he signs the documents relinquishing control of the company. I feel a pang of sympathy for the old man. Despite everything he’s done, this can’t be easy for him.

As the ink dries on the paper, the weight of the moment settles over us. Decades of toxicity and manipulation are

finally coming to an end.

Burn neatly gathers the documents and replaces them in his briefcase. He turns to Remy.

“Thank you, grandfather,” he says solemnly. “I know this wasn’t easy, but it means a great deal to Dare and me.”

Remy nods, his eyes glistening. “I’ve made many mistakes. But perhaps there’s still time for me to make amends.”

He glances between Burn and me. In his watery eyes I can see a glimmer of hope.

“We’ll give you that chance,” I say. “The future starts today.”

I step forward and extend my hand. After a moment’s hesitation, Remy takes my hand in his own. His grip is weaker than it once was, but there’s warmth there that I haven’t felt in many years.

Burn places his hand over ours. The three of us stand in silence for a moment, letting the meaning of this new bond resonate.

When we break apart, Remy wipes his eyes discreetly. Clearing his throat, he says, “Well, I suppose I should go greet my future great-grandchild.”

Burn smiles. “I think she’s anxious to meet her great-grandfather.”

Together, we walk toward the light of a new beginning.

Remy’s steps falter as we approach the waiting room where Talia sits. He pauses just outside the door, uncertainty flickering across his face.

“It’s all right,” I say gently. “Talia has agreed to put the past behind her if you will. All we are asking is that you be respectful.”

He takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders before pushing open the door.

Talia looks up from her magazine, one hand resting lightly on her swollen belly. She offers Remy a tentative smile.

“Hello, Mr. Morgan.”

“You can call me Remy.” He shuffles over to perch awkwardly on the edge of a chair near her. “I, uh...I know that congratulations are in order. I expect you’re due any day now.”

“In about five weeks.” Talia glances at me, and I give her an encouraging nod. “We’re very excited to meet our daughter soon.”

Remy’s eyes drop to Talia’s stomach. “A little girl,” he murmurs. “May I...?”

Talia nods and guides his trembling hand to rest against her belly. Remy’s breath catches at the gentle fluttering movement beneath his palm.

As Remy feels the soft kicks of his great-granddaughter, his eyes fill with tears. Talia’s hand covers his, offering silent support. For a brief moment, the three of us are united by the new life growing inside of Talia.

“She knows her great-grandfather is here,” Talia says softly.

Remy nods, his gaze still fixed on Talia’s stomach. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

I watch the exchange with a sense of heartache and longing. This was the family I had always wanted, a family that was happy and full of love. I didn’t have it as a child, but I suppose starting now is better than never having it at all.

“She’s really active right now.” Talia presses her hand to the side of her belly. “I guess it’s her way of saying hi.”

Remy stares at her stomach and blinks back tears. After a moment, he clears his throat gruffly and pulls his hand back.

“Well, I won’t keep you. I’m sure you’re eager to get home and rest.”

He stands awkwardly, not quite meeting our eyes. I step forward and clap him gently on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Remy.”

Burn steps forward and pulls Remy into a rough embrace. Remy stiffens for a moment before relaxing into his grandson’s arms.

“From now on, we’re going to be the kind of family that hugs,” Burn murmurs.

Remy’s voice is muffled against Burn’s shoulder. “Don’t make me regret signing the company over.”

“We won’t.” Burn pulls back and grasps Remy’s shoulders. “The past is behind us now. It’s time for a new beginning.”

Remy nods slowly, a myriad of emotions crossing his weathered face. After a long moment, he turns to me and Talia.

“You’ll bring the baby by the manor to visit her great-grandfather?”

“Of course,” I assure him. “We’re family.”

Remy’s eyes glisten as he takes in the three of us - his grandsons and the new life we have brought into this world. For the first time, I can see a glimmer of the man he must have been before grief and anger consumed him.

“Family,” he repeats softly.

He looks decades younger in this moment, surrounded by the family he thought lost forever. The shadows of the past will always linger, but here and now, bathed in the warm glow of new beginnings, we are simply a family reunited.

Remy nods, then shuffles out without another word. But as he leaves, I see the faintest hint of a smile touch his lips.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

TALIA

A single flickering candle casts dancing shadows across the crisp white tablecloth. The soft clink of silverware and murmur of conversation cocoon us in the dimly lit corner of the eatery. It's a nice enough place very close to the birthing center. We've eaten here a handful of times since we took up residence at the nearby hotel in anticipation of the birth.

Across from me, Dare gazes into my eyes, his rugged features softened by the candle's glow.

"How are you feeling, darling girl?" he asks, reaching for my hand. His rough palm engulfs my slender fingers.

I sigh, shifting in my seat. "I'm a week past my due date. So I'm basically over being an incubator. I want my body back."

"I know you do. But I promise you, it will all be worth it when our little girl arrives."

I scrunch up my face. "This baby is taking her sweet time."

Dare's thumb strokes my knuckles. "It won't be much longer now. Just think, soon we'll be holding our child."

The excitement in his voice makes me smile. I lean back, permanently uncomfortable no matter how I sit.

"You're going to be an amazing father," I say, focusing on Dare.

"And you'll be a wonderful mother," he says. "I can't wait to add to our family together."

Our tender moment is interrupted by the waiter delivering our entrees. As we eat, we chat about Dare's recent visits to the estate and finalizing plans for the nursery. He seems more preoccupied with the impending birth than I am, eager to ensure everything is perfect.

Between bites, we steal kisses and whisper sweet nothings. His leg presses against mine under the table, our passion still burning despite my bulging belly between us.

"Maybe we should skip dessert and head home for our own private celebration," Dare suggests, desire darkening his eyes.

I swat his arm playfully. "Is that all you think about?"

"Only when it comes to you, darling girl," he says with an impish grin.

Our flirtatious banter is interrupted when a sharp pang seizes my stomach. I gasp, gripping the table.

Dare is at my side in an instant. His face creases with worry. "Talia! What's wrong?"

Before I can respond, I feel a rush of warm liquid between my legs. Our eyes meet with a dawning realization.

"I think... I think that my water just broke," I breathe. "Oh my god. I got it all over the restaurant's booth."

"Don't worry about that right now." He whips out a wad of bills and peels several off, dropping them on the table. "Let's go."

I grip Dare's hand, overcome by a wave of nerves and excitement as another contraction rips through me. He rubs my shoulders soothingly, murmuring words of encouragement, though his furrowed brow betrays his own anxiety.

"Just breathe, Talia. I'll get you to the birthing center," he says. "Just like we practiced."

I nod, focusing on my breathing as we hurry out of the restaurant. The valet rushes to bring Dare's car around while curious diners stare. I'm too distracted to care, consumed by the increasing urgency of my contractions.

Dare helps me into the passenger seat, then races around to the driver's side. As we speed away, I stare out at the city lights blurring past, one hand resting protectively on my belly. After so many months of waiting, it's finally time to meet our baby.

I'm more terrified than I think I've ever been about anything in my whole life. But the thought is soon erased by another contraction.

"Oh, fuck!" I wheeze.

"You're doing amazing, Talia," Dare says, reaching over to squeeze my hand. "We'll be there soon."

I smile tightly, sweat beading my forehead as another contraction builds. The pain is intense, but it fills me with purpose. My body knows what to do.

I take a deep breath as we pull up to the birthing center, its warm lights welcoming in the darkness. Dare helps me out of the car, keeping one arm wrapped firmly around my waist for support. We make our way inside, where nurses are already waiting with a wheelchair.

"Your room is all ready, Mrs. Morgan," one says kindly as she helps me sit.

I sigh in relief, beyond ready to lie down. As they wheel me swiftly through the halls, I catch glimpses of other laboring mothers, some pacing, others moaning through contractions. It's comforting to know I'm not alone.

Once settled into my private room, I change into a gown while Dare speaks with the midwife. Though he's trying to hide it, I can tell he's anxious. This is all still so new for him.

For both of us, really.

When a strong contraction hits, Dare rushes to my side. I grip his hand tightly, focusing on my breathing as he coaches me through it. His calm strength helps temper the rising waves of pain.

"You're so brave, Talia," he murmurs, brushing damp hair back from my forehead after it passes. "I'm right here with

you.”

Despite everything, I smile up at him. “We’re going to meet our baby soon,” I whisper.

Dare grins, eyes full of awe and excitement. “I can’t wait to hold you both in my arms.” He kisses me tenderly.

I take a deep breath as another contraction builds, trying to stay relaxed. Dare keeps a steady grip on my hand, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Breathe through it,” he coaches. “That’s it...you’ve got this.”

I focus on his voice, letting it anchor me. The pain crests and then slowly ebbs.

Dare wipes my forehead with a cool cloth, his touch infinitely gentle. “You’re amazing,” he says. “Our baby is so lucky to have you as their mom.”

Despite the circumstances, his words make me smile. “Suddenly you’re full of positive and affirming thoughts,” I gasp.

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“Uh huh. You’re full of it, but I appreciate it anyway.”

Dare grins, though there’s an edge of nervousness behind it. I can feel him growing apprehensive.

“Hey,” I say, taking his hand. “Our child is going to adore you.”

Dare squeezes my hand, emotion shining in his eyes. He starts to reply, but he’s interrupted by another one of my powerful contractions. I cry out, clutching his hand tightly as this one peaks. It leaves me shaking and spent.

“Breathe, just breathe,” Dare murmurs. “I’ve got you.”

I nod, focusing on my breathing as the contraction fades. We’re getting closer now.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” he murmurs.

This one seems to go on forever. When it finally passes, I'm trembling and covered in sweat.

I cling to his hand, overwhelmed by the reality that our baby will soon be here.

"Just focus on me," Dare murmurs. "Breathe through the contractions. You've got this."

I anchor myself to the sound of his voice. The pain crests and falls like waves but Dare remains my rock amidst the storm.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

DARE

I hold my sweet baby girl in my arms as Talia lays exhausted in the hospital bed. I honestly could look at her forever. Her eyes are a vivid shade of blue. She has the tiniest hands, the smallest fingernails, and the softest tufts of red hair. I can't believe I'm a father. And yet, the knowledge fills me with a sense of wonder and awe.

Talia looks up at me, her eyes shining with tears. "She's beautiful," she whispers.

"She is," I agree, marveling at the miracle in my arms. "And so are you."

Talia smiles, but it's a dogged smile. I know she's been through so much. I can't help but feel responsible for it all.

As if sensing my thoughts, she holds up a hand to touch my arm. "I love you."

I manage to rip my eyes from the baby in order to pay attention to my wife. Opening my mouth, I'm quite surprised to find I'm all choked up with emotion.

"God, Talia. I love you, too. Both of you. I feel so... overwhelmed with gratitude?"

She squeezes my arm. "Me too, Dare."

My daughter's tiny fingers curl around mine. My heart swells, tears pricking my eyes. This perfect angel is our daughter.

"Hope," Talia murmurs. "We should name her Hope."

“Hope,” I echo. “I’ve always loved that name. It’s beautiful, just like her.”

Talia closes her eyes. “What do you think her middle name should be?”

I reply without even thinking, my voice cracking. “Hope Grace.”

Talia smiles, her eyes glistening. “Hope Grace Morgan.”

I choke back a sob, nodding. The name sounds poetic, lyrical. Fitting for the tiniest princess.

Hope lets out a small cry and I cradle her closer, smoothing back the fine hair on her head. She is so tiny, so fragile. I will move mountains to protect this child.

“Shh,” I whisper. “I’m here. I will always be here for you, Hope. Always.”

Talia reaches out and squeezes my arm, her skin warm and soft. Our eyes meet in a transcendent moment. No matter what storms we’ve weathered, this miracle lying in my arms makes everything worth it.

I lean down and press a feather-light kiss to Hope’s forehead, breathing in that sweet newborn scent. The scent of innocence. Of hope.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself before I speak.

“Do you want me to call Burn?” I ask Talia tentatively. “Let him know that the baby has arrived?”

Talia’s face clouds over at the mention of my twin.

“Burn doesn’t need to meet Hope yet, Dare,” Talia says softly. “Burn may be mending fences with you, but he’s definitely not welcome at my bedside. He’ll forever be the man who tried to keep us apart. That, and our baby’s uncle. But Burn is nothing more than that. You know that, right?”

I nod, exhaling in relief. I think a small part of me has always wondered what Talia’s reaction would be at this moment. And I have to say, my wife certainly doesn’t disappoint.

“I know,” I say. “I’m trying to be flexible.”

“You’ve been here for me, for our daughter,” Talia continues, her eyes boring into mine. “You’re the one who read to Hope in my belly, who held my hair when I had morning sickness.”

I clutch her hand, blinking back tears. She’s right. This pregnancy deepened our bond in ways I never dreamed possible.

“Hope is your daughter,” Talia finishes firmly. “Our daughter. Burn can know when we’re ready.”

“I agree completely,” I reply. My love for this woman swells in my chest. No matter what the future brings, we have each other. Hope is the living embodiment of that love.

I lean in and kiss Talia’s forehead, then Hope’s, breathing in the scent of the two people I cherish most in this world.

I gaze down at the swaddled newborn in my arms, her pink face scrunched in sleep. Overwhelmed, I sink into the chair beside Talia’s hospital bed.

“Let me take her for a minute,” Talia says gently. She eases Hope into her own embrace.

I drop my head into my hands, choking back tears. The tidal wave of emotions threatens to pull me under. Joy, excitement, fear, protectiveness, and gratitude all war within me to be the emotion I express. I stifle a sound deep in the center of my chest.

Talia’s hand rests on my knee. “I know,” she murmurs. “I know. Just let it all out. You don’t have to be strong right now.”

I look up, meeting her understanding eyes. She knows me better than anyone. My weaknesses, my wounds, my dreams.

“I fucking love you so damn much,” I grit out.

“Come here,” Talia says, shifting over on the bed.

I climb up carefully, wrapping my arms around her and Hope. I smell the baby’s head, breathing deeply, feeling a

sense of calm settle over me. Talia leans her head on my shoulder.

“We’re in this together,” she reminds me.

“Together,” I echo, finding peace in her presence. I kiss Talia’s hair, then Hope’s downy head. My family, my heart.

A soft knock interrupts us. The door cracks open to reveal the nurse.

“Special delivery,” she announces with a smile. Aunt Minnie, Olivia, and little Solana file in behind her.

Their joyful exclamations wash over me as they crowd around the bed to meet the newest member of our family. Hope yawns, blinking up at the beaming faces surrounding her, and I try to keep my emotions in check.

They don’t make it easy, though.

Olivia holds Hope first and cries so hard that Aunt Minnie has to take the baby from her.

“You made that!” Olivia tells Talia. “I can’t believe what an angel she is!”

Then she proceeds to practically dissolve into a puddle of tears. Aunt Minnie has a very different reaction. She coos at Hope, bouncing her gently, beaming at her.

“I’ve been here for five minutes and she’s already got me wrapped around her little finger,” she laments.

Solana stands on her tiptoes, trying to get a good look at the bundle in Minnie’s arms. “Can I see?”

“Here, come sit next to me,” Talia says, patting the space on the bed beside her. Solana scrambles up eagerly.

Minnie hands the baby to Talia. Then Solana’s eyes go wide as saucers when Talia places baby Hope in her small arms.

“Support her head just like that,” Talia instructs gently.

Solana cradles Hope with care, utterly transfixed. “She’s so tiny,” she whispers.

Hope squirms and Solana looks up at me with alarm.

“It’s okay, you’re doing great,” I assure her.

Solana relaxes and gazes back down at Hope. “I’m gonna be your best friend,” she tells the baby seriously. “We can have tea parties and play dress up and I’ll teach you everything I know.”

Talia meets my eyes over Solana’s head, both of us smiling at the promise. I reach out and squeeze Solana’s shoulder.

“She’s lucky to have you looking out for her,” I say.

Solana grins up at me proudly. In this moment, with my daughter and her self-appointed guardian angel side by side, my fractured heart feels whole.

Talia’s eyes start to droop as the activity and excitement of the day catch up with her. I gently take Hope from Solana’s arms and settle her into the bassinet beside the bed.

“I think it’s time we let Mommy get some rest,” I say, lifting a protesting Solana off the bed.

She pouts but allows me to set her on her feet. I crouch down to her level.

“You were amazing today, sweetheart. But now it’s time for the baby to sleep, and your mommy, too.”

Solana sighs. “Okay. Can I come see Hope again tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I promise, kissing the top of her head before standing. “I’ll come get you first thing in the morning. Let’s let them sleep now.”

Solana gives Talia a quick hug, then skips out of the room. The others file out after her, clasp my shoulder and congratulate me again on the way out.

Then it’s just Talia, Hope, and me.

I sit on the edge of Talia’s bed and take her hand in mine. Her eyes are already drifting closed.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

She forces her eyes open. “For what?”

“For our daughter. For being here. For... everything.” My voice breaks with emotion.

Talia smiles drowsily up at me. “Come here,” she murmurs.

I lean down and she pulls me into a kiss. It’s soft and warm, filled with an innate sense of rightness.

God, it feels good to love Talia.

When we finally pull apart, her eyes are bright. “I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you, too.” I kiss her forehead. “Now sleep.”

She sighs contentedly and closes her eyes. I sit watching her and Hope, marveling at the family Talia has gifted me. My heart is so full it feels fit to burst.

I gently pick up Hope from her bassinet and cradle her against my chest as I walk over to the window. The sun is just beginning to rise over the city, casting everything in a warm, rosy glow.

“Look at that, little one,” I murmur. “It’s a new day. The start of your life.”

Hope stirs slightly, nuzzling into me. I chuckle and brush a finger over her downy hair.

“You have your whole life ahead of you,” I tell her. “And I promise, I will always be there to love and protect you.”

I turn back to look at Talia, sleeping peacefully. “We both will.”

At that moment, with my daughter in my arms and the woman I love by my side, I feel a sense of peace that I’ve never known before.

We’re a true family now.

And I will do anything for them.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

DARE

“I ‘m so tired,” Talia sighs as I lead her into the formal living room at the Morgan Estate. “I love Hope to pieces, but my sleep is all out of whack because of hormones and her breast feeding schedule, which has me getting up every few hours. No one told me about that.”

“I’m sorry. I know you haven’t had a proper night of sleep in the last week.”

She wrinkles her nose as I haul Hope’s bassinet into the room and set it beside the couch.

The late autumn chill bites through my cashmere sweater as I sit Talia down on one of the plush velvet sofas in the room. Dark circles pool under her eyes. Her auburn hair has been in a messy bun since we left the hospital. I don’t blame her one bit for not managing her usual long, silky tresses while she’s still adjusting to life as a new mom.

In Talia’s arms, our newborn daughter Hope fusses, her tiny rosebud mouth rooting for a breast. Talia puts a blanket over the baby and adjusts her top so that she can breastfeed.

Solana enters the room at a run. “Talia! I want to show you something.”

Talia gives her a weak smile. “What is it, honey?”

The little girl presents a leaf to Talia.

“I found it for you,” she says. “Isn’t it nice?”

“So nice. Thank you so much.” Talia reaches out and cups Solana’s face briefly, then takes the leaf. “I’ll hold onto it.”

Solana beams. "I'll look for more leaves for you."

"That sounds good to me."

Magda walks in, holding her side. She's out of breath and I try to offer her a seat.

"No seat." She shakes her head and sucks in a huge breath. "Miss Solana is high energy! She keeps me on my toes."

Talia smiles and nods sympathetically. "She definitely has a lot of energy. Thank you for taking care of her, Magda."

"Of course! I am so happy to have her here. She brightens up my day whenever you visit."

I look down my nose. "As long as she doesn't wear you out. Let me know when you need a break."

The older woman waves me off. "I am fine. Thank you."

I look over to Talia, who is looking more and more zombielike by the minute.

"Magda, would you mind taking Solana for hot chocolate?" I ask the housekeeper, my eyes never leaving Talia's exhausted face.

"I love hot chocolate!" Solana cheers.

Magda flashes me a smile and herds her out of the room. The little girl's footsteps patter away down the hall.

I sit next to Talia on the sofa, taking her free hand in mine. Her skin is like ice. I warm it in both of my hands.

She needs more support. She needs to be around family.

"We need to talk," I say gently.

She blinks slowly, like a cat. "Can it wait? I'm so tired, Dare."

"Don't worry, I won't ask anything of you right now. I just want you to know my plans for the future."

She nods, eyes already drifting shut. I forge ahead quickly.

"The children from Hope House are still at the Windsor hotel. It's been a month now, and that hotel is no place for

them long term. So I've decided they'll come live here, at the estate."

Talia's eyes fly open, suddenly alert. "What?"

I rush to explain. "We have so many empty rooms, acres for them to explore. We can make playrooms, get tutors and therapists. Give them the childhood they deserve."

Her mouth opens and closes, her expression startled.

"Dare... that's a wonderful idea, but..."

I cut her off as gently as possible.

"I was thinking about us, too. I was thinking that we could eventually move in here. And I thought that we could make Minnie a room that is close at hand. Olivia, too, if she wants to come stay. One day, we can build stables out back so you can have your very own horses. That way you would have all the support you need, not just from me, but also from the women in your life."

I search her face anxiously. Does she understand my intentions? The last thing I want is to stress her out.

Wordlessly, she lays Hope in the bassinet beside her. She goes down without a fuss. Then Talia throws her arms around me, hugging me fiercely. I'm a little taken aback.

Is this a ringing endorsement of my plan?

"You're amazing," she whispers. "This is my dream come true."

I clutch her tight, relief washing over me in a dizzying wave. I stroke her hair. I'm still in disbelief that she supports my decision.

"You like the idea?"

She presses her face against my chest. "It's amazing. I never thought about it, but there is plenty of space here."

"I know it won't be easy," I say. "We'll need to hire more staff, make renovations. And deal with Remy..."

I trail off, not wanting to think about Remy's reaction when I told him. He barely tolerates my wife's presence in his ancestral home. How will he handle a dozen rambunctious children running wild in the hallways?

Talia pulls back, searching my face. "What did Remy say? Does he know?"

I grimace. No point lying to her. "I told him this morning. He wasn't exactly pleased."

That's an understatement. Remy ranted for a full hour about disrespectful young upstarts destroying his family legacy. His tirade only stopped after I threatened to move him to a nursing home.

"But he agreed, reluctantly. The children can move in as soon as we finish renovations." I brush a strand of hair from Talia's face. "Don't worry about Remy. I'll handle him."

She smiles softly. "I know you will."

Rising on tiptoe, she kisses me. I wrap my arms around her, marveling again at her inner strength. With her by my side, I can conquer anything.

Talia's smile fades as she considers the logistics. "It will be a big change for Remy. Are you sure he understands what this means?"

I shrug. "Does it matter? I'm not asking his permission. This is my house now, and I'll do as I please."

She gives me a reproachful look. "Dare, he's your grandfather. You can't just disregard his feelings."

I scowl, even though I know she's right. Remy doesn't deserve Talia's compassion after how wretchedly he's treated her.

"Fine, I'll speak to him again," I concede. "Make sure he grasps the situation fully."

Talia nods, appeased. She kisses Hope's downy head as the baby drifts to sleep in her arms.

Watching them, resolve hardens within me. I will not fail these children as my grandfather and father failed me. They will have everything they need, both material and emotional.

She looks up, eyes shining. “Dare, you’re making my childhood dreams come true. The fact that we can give these children a real home, a chance at a future. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

I caress her cheek, heart swelling with emotion. “Anything for you, darling girl. Your happiness means everything to me.”

She kisses me softly. “I really think you would do anything if I asked.”

I kiss her knuckles, vowing silently to live up to her faith in me.

“I promise this is just the beginning,” I tell her earnestly. “You’ll see. Our little family is going to grow much larger. But you’ll want for nothing. I’ll move heaven and earth to give you the life you deserve.”

Her radiant smile is all the reward I need.

Chapter Forty

DARE

THREE MONTHS LATER

I watch as four burly movers lug a massive oak desk up the grand staircase. “Careful with that!” I call. “It’s antique and not replicable!”

The movers grunt in response, focused on their task. I sigh, realizing that unless I want to help carry the heavy piece of furniture myself, I have little or no control over how the movers choose to carry it.

Behind me, childish giggles and pounding footsteps echo through the cavernous foyer. We are several days into the moving process here at the estate. And I’m having trouble repressing my disapproving, uptight inner critic.

Needless to say, it’s been quite an adjustment for everyone.

My wife Talia appears at my side, resting a hand on my forearm. Our baby Hope is sleeping blissfully while she rests in a baby sling, tucked up against Talia’s breasts. Talia is in overalls and a long sleeved t-shirt and looks absolutely radiant.

“You’re doing so well,” she coaches me gently. I soften under her touch, reminded of why we endure this chaos.

Our ever growing family.

I kiss her briefly. She smiles and wiggles her eyebrows.

“Will you carry this box into the kitchen? It’s filled with the new baby bottles and bottle warming equipment.”

“Of course,” I reply, hoisting the box with ease. “I live to serve, Mrs. Morgan.”

I lift the heavy box marked ‘Kitchen’ and carry it toward the east wing, Talia trailing behind me. As we walk, she talks about the new paint colors and turning one of the formal living rooms into an area for all the children to have quiet time. My lips twitch.

Since we made it past the first month with the new baby, Talia seems to have bounced back from the severe sleep deprivation. Now, she is at her personal best, planning and executing her own ideas.

The move to the estate has been better for her and I can't say I regret a moment of it.

We reach the kitchen and set down the box. Talia smiles up at me, radiant as ever.

"Thank you." She smooths my rumpled t-shirt down over my pec. Her eyes shine with mischief. "This shirt looks incredible on you. You might have to wear it to bed tonight."

"Is this some kind of blue collar fantasy fulfillment for you? Do you secretly wish you had married someone else?" My words are teasing, but I want to hear her say that she chose correctly when she married me.

"Absolutely not." Talia grabs a fistful of my shirt and pulls me down to kiss her. "You know I'm crazy about you."

We kiss again, this time more gently, but more passionately. She truly believes our love can overcome anything, even my family's sordid past. I cup her face in my hands, wishing I shared her faith.

A crash echoes from downstairs, followed by childish arguments. Talia pulls away from me with a sigh, mindlessly bouncing to keep Hope asleep.

"Let's go see what that was," I say.

As Talia and I head back downstairs, the foyer is even more chaotic than before. Children dart between movers carrying heavy furniture while staff members shout instructions.

In the center of it all stands Magda, looking for all the world like a stern-faced general commanding her troops. Her usual blue uniform is missing and in its place is a bright pink tracksuit. She marshals the movers like soldiers, directing them where to place each item.

“That box is labeled ‘Main Bedroom’. It goes in the main bedroom, not the living room!” She snaps at one bewildered mover in her thick Eastern European accent. “And be careful with that cabinet, it is an antique!”

I’m impressed by how Magda takes charge. She’s weathered countless Morgan family dramas over the years yet remains unflappable.

A loud crash makes me wince. Two young boys have knocked over a lamp while play-wrestling. Before I can react, Magda swoops in, scolding them in her native tongue. They freeze under her harsh gaze.

Satisfied they’ve been cowed, Magda turns and assigns tasks to the other staff. A new maid will unpack the kitchen, while two of the movers will arrange the furniture. They spring into action.

In the whirlwind, I’ve lost track of the children. But then I spot Clive, the family butler, gathering them together.

“Let’s go discuss the rules for your new home,” he says in his smooth voice. “Anyone who’s good will get a treat...”

The rambunctious children surprisingly listen as he leads them away. Clive was like a father to me growing up; perhaps he can instill some discipline in this unruly bunch.

I let out a breath as some semblance of order takes shape from the chaos. If anyone can transform this circus into a functioning household, it’s Magda and Clive.

I make my way through the controlled chaos, sidestepping movers hauling furniture and boxes. I spot Talia directing traffic in the foyer, one hand on Hope’s sleeping form.

“Have you seen Solana and Remy?” I ask.

“I think they were in Remy’s study the last time I saw them,” Talia replies, flashing me a smile before returning her focus to the movers.

“And you left them there?” I ask.

“Remy was being sweet. Solana knows that she can shout for us if something happens that she doesn’t like.”

Narrow my eyes and shaking my head, I hurry up the grand staircase two steps at a time and walk down the long hallway lined with ancestral portraits. At the end is Remy's study, all leather and mahogany and old books.

I pause in the doorway. There sits my grandfather in his wingback chair, Solana curled up in his lap. Her dark hair spills over the armrest as Remy reads aloud from a book.

He doesn't seem to notice me, enraptured by the story. I observe the tender scene, struck by the vulnerability in my grandfather's expression.

When I was a kid, I was *terrified* of Remy. He cut an imposing figure then, though now he seems like a mellow, doddering old man. Where was this attitude when I was growing up?

I stand in the doorway and watch them. Solana looks utterly content and Remy more at peace than I've seen him in years. Solana interrupts his story to ask a question. I flinch, but he doesn't even blink. He just answers her question and moves on with his reading.

Genuinely perplexed, I let this moment stretch on a little longer, frozen in time, before the chaos intrudes once more.

I step into the room quietly, not wanting to disturb Solana's drowsy state. Remy's eyes flick up at my entrance and he gives me a nod in greeting but keeps reading in a hushed tone.

I sink down onto the sofa opposite them, watching my grandfather's weathered hand stroke Solana's hair. He's capable of physical intimacy with someone who has been a part of our family for mere months. Where Remy seemed unable to deal with Burn and I whenever we scraped a knee or told him about a school bully.

Talia was right all along. People apparently can change. Even the surliest old men can show a softer side if given enough room for improvement. I'm startled, but I try to hide it.

When he finishes the tale, Remy closes the book and looks up.

"How are you holding up, Remy?" I ask in a whisper.

“Tolerably well,” he replies. “Though I can’t figure out what these young kids are talking about. Solana told me a long story about robot dogs that are police officers. Something about paw scouts? Christ, what does that even mean?”

I smother a smile. “Yeah. She’s been really into this cartoon lately.”

He flaps his hand. “It’s insane. She needs to go outside more.”

“It’s cold and rainy outside today. Or else the kids would be out there exploring with one of the nannies, I’m sure.”

Remy *hmpfs*. “Well, I guess Solana doesn’t need to catch a cold. Right?”

He looks at Solana, who nods drowsily.

I purse my lips and engage Remy carefully. “Thank you for keeping her busy today. I know it’s a lot, having all of us invading your home.”

Remy’s mouth turns down at the corners. “You didn’t give me much of a choice, Dare. Still, it’ll be good to have children running about again.” His eyes crinkle with warmth. “This old place could use some fresh air circulating around inside it again.”

My stern grandfather isn’t normally one for sentimentality, so I’m absolutely stunned at his words. My mouth opens and closes a few times before I get a grip.

“I think moving here with the children from Hope House is going to be a huge change for all of us. But maybe... maybe it will give us a chance to reconnect,” I tell him sincerely. “I want you to know...” I pause, hesitating before my next words. “I love you, Remy. And I think if you act like this, everyone else will, too.”

Remy blinks rapidly and looks down at Solana. When he meets my gaze again, his eyes are bright.

“I love you, too, my boy.” His voice is gruff with suppressed emotion. “I’m glad you’re all here.”

He strokes Solana's hair, and she burrows deeper into the recesses of his lap.

We share a smile, this simple admission meaning the world to me. In Solana, Remy has found unexpected joy.

The chaos envelops me as soon as I step out of the quiet respite of Remy's study. Children dart through the halls, weaving between movers hauling furniture.

"Watch it!" a burly man bellows as two young boys nearly crash into his legs.

The boys ignore him, laughing as they race each other down the corridor. I watch them fondly before turning to survey the controlled madness.

Boxes line the walls, contents spewing forth. The air is thick with dust motes swirling in the streams of sunlight. Snippets of conversation fill the space.

"No, no, that box says 'Kitchen'! So take it to the kitchen, for god's sake!" Magda's accented voice rings out.

"Has anyone seen my dinosaur?" a little girl wails.

"Right here!" shouts a boy.

Glass shatters, followed by a muffled curse.

I smile. This is insanity. But it's my life now.

Walking down the grand staircase, I head to find my wife, unable to keep the grin from my face.

Chapter Forty-One

TALIA

I stand in the corner of the opulent office, watching as Dare and Burn sign the official contract. Olive stands beside me, rocking Hope in her arms. She looks like mentally, she is in another space instead of being here in this lawyer's office. I'm a bit jealous of her.

Dare and Burn's pens scratch across the paper, sealing their fates as co-owners of the family's controlling business interest.

"There you go," Burn says as he finishes signing with a flourish. "You are now officially my co-CEO. Welcome back to the family business."

Dare accepts the document with a nod, his eyes scanning over it quickly. "It's good to be back," he says. A smirk rides his face.

Burn gives him a knowing smile and claps him on the back. "You know, it's not so bad having a partner in crime."

Dare chuckles, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Oh, I plan on being much more than just a partner in crime."

He glances at me and I give him a vague smile. Folding my arms across my chest, I carefully avoid Burn's questioning gaze.

Burn sticks his thumb out, gesturing to me.

"Is your wife ever going to defrost?"

Dare bleats out a laugh. "I don't speak for her. But I wouldn't expect much in that department. You're in the doghouse."

I glare at Dare and his laugh dies off. He clears his throat. Burn rubs a hand over his mouth and looks at me.

“I’ll find a way out eventually,” he says.

I turn away, attending to Hope. Olivia stares at me and touches my hand. It’s her way of silently communicating that she understands why I’m so tense and upset.

Dare sets down his pen first, his eyes flashing with triumph. Burn’s mouth quirks in a grin as he signs the final page with all due fanfare. They clasp hands firmly across the desk, solidarity in success.

But Dare’s grip lingers, and unspoken emotion passes between them. My throat tightens at the rekindled love these brothers share, forged in fire.

Burn pulls Dare into a crushing bear hug, thumping his back. Dare returns it with equal fervor, the brothers reveling in their hard-won victory.

“I can’t believe that we actually took charge of the company,” Burn murmurs, his voice thick. “I secretly thought that Remy would stay in place as CEO until he died.”

Dare shakes his head. “Remy is undergoing a sea change right now. He’s talking a lot about family. And yesterday, I saw him help a kid tie her shoes without getting angry even once. It’s a little eerie, honestly.”

Burn nods slowly. “Well, this empire is ours now. And we’re going to build it into something greater than ever.”

They break apart, clasping forearms.

My heart swells with pride and love for my husband, who is half of the Morgan Drilling company now.

All those who betrayed him will rue this day. But especially Felix... that no good daughter stealing son a bitch.

With Dare’s brilliant strategy and Burn’s ruthless drive, they will reclaim their birthright. The world has yet to witness the true power of the Morgan name.

But it soon will. The brothers' jaws are set, spines straight with purpose. This contract is only the first blow in their calculated war to restore their dynasty. Their enemies and doubters will scatter like leaves before a hurricane.

Burn turns to me, eyes glinting. "What do you think, Talia? Are you ready for Dare to disappear into the world of business? If I predict correctly, in about two months, he will be so busy that you won't see him for weeks on end."

I whip around, my eyes going to Dare. "Is that true??"

"No." He glares at his brother. "I'll never let business take me away from you, darling girl."

Burn huffs. "We'll see about that."

Hope wakes up and starts crying. Olivia is quick to hand her over to me, turning her back to shelter me as I pull the blanket over the baby and present my nipple to her. The baby immediately relaxes as soon as the milk starts to flow.

"We're getting good at that transition," Olive says. "I feel like we could enter some sort of timed race."

I smile ruefully. "They could call the race The Golden Nipple, maybe," I tease.

Burn appears out of nowhere at my elbow, looking over my shoulder to see the baby. Or maybe he's just a disgusting pervert who wants to see my breasts while I feed Hope. I don't know and I don't wait around to find out.

Out of pure knee-jerk reaction, I raise my elbow and hit him in the throat *hard*. "Get back!"

Burn clutches his throat and staggers back, his eyes going as wide as frisbees. He makes an unintelligible grunt of anger.

My face flushes and I step back. Olive steps in front of me, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

"I train in Muay Thai. I would love to put you on the ground," she growls at Burn.

"I was just trying to see the baby," Burn protests. "I didn't realize she had her tits out."

Bristling, I hiss, “*She* wants you to stay at least twenty feet away.”

Dare enters the fray, pushing his brother back a few feet. “You need to give Talia some space.”

“I just want to meet my baby,” Burn says.

Dare slaps Burn’s cheek, so fast that I barely see it.

“Look at me, asshole. Hope isn’t your baby. You drunkenly slept with a girl. That’s it. Everything else that happened after that was just biology. Get it through your incredibly thick skull.”

Burn lurches back another step. “I just wanted to see Hope. That’s all. Maybe... Maybe I shouldn’t have called her mine.”

“You’re goddamn right, you shouldn’t have!” Olivia’s hackles are definitely raised. I put a hand on her shoulder, shushing the conversation.

“Shh. Can we all argue about this more quietly? I’m trying to nurse a baby here.”

Dare lowers his voice to a stage whisper.

“We talked it over, Burn. We’re not ready for you to be a part of Hope’s life yet. You have a lot to make up for. You have to prove that you will be a beneficial influence on our daughter.”

“And not be a fucking idiot,” Olivia hisses.

Burn looks at the faces of my defenders. Finally he sighs. “Right. We still have work to do.” He glances between Dare and I, resolve etched on his face. “There are a ton of Morgan Drilling investors coming to the estate today. Even if we aren’t in perfect agreement—”

Dare pushes out a breath of laughter. “You can say that again.”

Burn eyes him. “Even if we aren’t in perfect agreement, we need to look like we’re one solid entity. Fake it till we make it.”

Olive crosses her arms but Dare nods.

“He’s right. We keep our personal wars private.”

I arch a brow. “Agreed.”

The brothers exchange a knowing look, ghosts of past betrayals darkening their eyes. Then Dare turns to me, expression softening. “Tonight, we celebrate.”

Burn grins. “I’ll open a thirty year old bottle of Scotch.”

MUCH LATER, we all reconvene at Remy’s study on the estate. Remy is sitting at his desk, his lips pulled into a permanent pout.

He doesn’t relish the fact that we are going to be announcing the changing of the guard today. But at least he has the decency to stay quiet about it. That may or may not have something to do with the two hour closed-door meeting he had with Dare and Burn just prior to this.

Olive and Minnie sweep into the study, glasses of champagne fizzing in their hands. They are dressed to the nines, Olive in a sleek green dress that matches her calculating eyes, and Minnie in a frilly pink confection as deceptively sweet as her smile. But there is iron beneath the silk and lace.

“Congratulations!” Olive purrs, kissing Dare on both cheeks. She hands him a glass with a smile. “To the future.”

“Hear, hear!” Minnie chimes in, pressing a flute into Burn’s waiting hand. “Here’s to taking over the world.”

Dare chuckles. “It’s just a company, Aunt Minnie.”

“For now,” she says with a grin. “But Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

They clink glasses in a toast, and I can’t help but smile. Despite their flaws, this family has endured. Watching Minnie fuss over Dare’s hair, and Olive pick up a napkin that Burn dropped, I feel a pang. They each care immensely in their own little ways.

And I'm so happy to have them in my little family. Scratch that... not so little anymore.

Dare catches my eye, raising his glass higher. "To new beginnings."

"New beginnings," I echo, meaning it with all my heart.

I turn my attention back to the party, watching the celebration unfold. Music plays softly in the background as guests mingle and chat, glasses clinking. In one corner of the room, Hope sleeps peacefully in her stroller, oblivious to the momentous occasion. Olive and Minnie make a fuss over the baby, cooing softly.

"Just look at that little angel," Olive sighs. "She has the Morgan nose."

Minnie chuckles. "Poor thing. Hopefully she inherits the chin to balance it out."

They both dissolve into giggles and I can't help but smile. They do dote on Hope and I can't fault a single thing they do.

Dare slides up beside me, slipping an arm around my waist. "Can you believe we pulled it off?" he murmurs, his breath tickling my ear.

I lean into him, breathing in the cool scent of his cologne. "I never doubted you for a second."

His eyes crinkle at the corners as he grins. "Liar."

Across the room, Burn is holding court, charming the investors and board members with ease. He catches my eye and winks, raising his glass in a silent toast.

I return my attention to Dare, raising up on my tiptoes for a kiss. The future unfurls before us, bright and full of promise. Together we will transform the Morgan legacy into something better, something good. All my life I've searched for home, for family, for belonging.

I've found it at last.

For the first time, I feel like I truly belong.

Dare's arm settles around my shoulders once more, the heat of his body warding off the chill. I lean into his strength, his warmth, and know that I have forever with this man.

Chapter Forty-Two

DARE

The sun glints off the sea. I shade my eyes and look out as the yacht beneath me sails ahead.

Who knew that a chance meeting with Talia a year and a half ago would lead me where I'm standing today?

The sea churns beneath us, azure swells rolling under the bow of the sleek white yacht. Talia stands at the railing, wind whipping her red hair as she stares out at the approaching island. For now, it's just a dark smudge on the horizon. Beside her, I slide an arm around her waist, feeling comfort in the familiarity of that gesture.

I nuzzle her neck and take a moment to kiss her hot skin.

"Almost there," I say quietly.

Behind them, the Hope House kids race around the deck, laughing and shouting. Solana sits tucked against the cabin wall, knees to her chest, watching the others play. Her dark ponytail sways in the breeze.

Magda emerges from below deck, gray hair escaping her bun and her neon green track suit nearly blinding me.

"Children, shh," she scolds lightly, her Eastern European accent rounding her vowels. "Wait until we get off the boat."

The kids gradually settle as the island nears. Clive stands by watchfully as the captain steers the yacht into a small cove, his slender frame bent over the wheel. Clive's eyes meet mine, a moment of silent understanding passing between us.

We disembark onto a beach of sugar-white sand. Remy hobbles down the gangplank, stooped frame leaning heavily

on his cane. His icy blue eyes study the island dispassionately.

He doesn't say a word, but I can read the frown on his face. Remy doesn't think any good can come from visiting my mother's grave.

He's wrong, though.

I take Talia's hand as we walk towards the shaded grave site. My thoughts drift to my mother. Her kind smile, her gentle laughter, her warm embrace. The wound inflicted by her death still feels raw, even after all these years.

Burn waits silently by the white marble headstone, shoulders slumped. Beside him, my father sobs silently, tears tracking through the wrinkles on his weathered face. Tripp looks small, diminished. But his eyes are clear when they meet mine.

Talia and I approach the grave and my eyes never leave my father.

"Four months sober today," he says hoarsely.

My eyebrows knit. I glance at Burn, but he only nods.

"He's off the booze."

The kids gather behind Talia and me, their faces solemn. Solana slips her small hand into Talia's and peers up at her with big brown eyes.

Talia kneels down and looks Solana in the eyes.

"This is Dare's mother, honey," Talia murmurs. "She is so special that she got her very own island. Isn't that nice?"

Solana screws her face up and looks at the grave.

"I guess so."

Aunt Minnie appears beside Talia, cradling baby Hope. "We'll look at some pictures of Dare's mom later. I think it's kind of hard for you to think of someone you have never met, huh?"

"Yeah." Solana favors Aunt Minnie with a beaming smile. "Can we go explore?"

Minnie looks at Talia for approval. She nods and reaches out to take the baby from Aunt Minnie's arms. Then she bounces and rocks Hope, whispering to her.

"That's your grandma. She died when Daddy was little, but we still come to her grave to pay our respects. Right?"

Talia coos to the baby nestled against her and my heart gives a squeeze. Hope gurgles happily, then laughs, a clear bright sound that seems to chase the shadows from this place. The sun is warm on our skin. The waves lap in the background, gentle and soothing.

Talia's eyes meet mine, soft with understanding. My family surrounds me, finally whole. All is not perfect but hope blooms like the white lilies adorning my mother's grave. I breathe deep, taking in the scent of flowers and sea air.

This is healing.

Talia bounces little Hope in her arms, cooing softly to the baby as she takes in our surroundings.

"Look at the pretty water, sweet girl," she murmurs, brushing a finger over Hope's downy cheek. The baby turns her head, nuzzling against Talia's chest, eyelids drooping sleepily.

A shout rings out as the Hope House kids race across the stony ground of the small island.

"Children, please show some respect!" Clive calls out, a bit breathless. "Mr. Dare's mother is buried here."

The kids skid to a halt, chastened. Solana walks over to Clive, chewing her lip.

"I didn't mean to be bad," she says earnestly. "I just wanted to explore the island. It's so pretty here."

Clive's expression softens. He lays a hand on Solana's shoulder. "I know, dear. But this is a solemn place. We must be quiet and well behaved to honor our ancestors."

Solana nods, blinking back tears. The other children gather around her, faces serious.

“We’re sorry,” says one little boy. “We’ll be good now.”

The kids clasp hands, united in contrition. Watching them, my heart swells.

I clear my throat and take Talia’s hand in mine. “It’s alright,” I say gently. “Just walk softly around the grave.”

Hope stirs, then settles against Talia once more. The waves shush rhythmically along the shore.

I glance over at my father. He stands before my mother’s grave, shoulders hunched, staring down at the simple stone marker. Grief carves deep lines into his face.

I approach slowly, not wanting to startle him. “Dad,” I say softly.

He looks up, eyes bright with tears. Seeing his pain lances through me. I pull him into a fierce embrace.

“I miss her so much, Dare,” he chokes out. “Every damn day.”

“I miss her, too.” I swallow hard. “But she’d be so proud of you. Four months sober now, right?”

He nods, swiping at his eyes. “It’s been hard. But I’m trying, son. For you and your brother.”

I clasp his shoulder, emotion threatening to overwhelm me. In this serene place, it feels like healing can finally begin. That the wounds of the past can scab over, scars fading with time.

We stand in silence then, father and son, gazing at the marker engraved with my mother’s name. The one who brought us into this world, gone too soon. Though her body rests here, her spirit lives on in her sons. That bond can never be broken.

Talia approaches me, holding Hope against her chest. The baby is swaddled in a soft pink blanket, little fists waving as she babbles happily.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet,” Talia says softly.

My father looks up, eyes widening as he takes in the tiny bundle. “Is that...is that my granddaughter?”

His voice cracks with emotion.

Talia's smile is radiant. "Yes. This is Hope. Your first grandchild."

She passes the baby gently into my father's arms. He cradles her against his chest, tears flowing freely now. "She's beautiful," he breathes. "Absolutely perfect."

Hope gazes up at her grandfather, entranced. Then she gives him a toothless grin, waving her hands.

He lets out a watery chuckle. "Aren't you just the sweetest thing?"

Talia slips her arm around my waist. We watch together as my father bonds with his granddaughter, hope and joy shining on his face. The others gather around, oohing and ahing over Hope. She laughs happily at all the attention.

The sun beats down on us as we stand clustered around my mother's grave. The breeze carries the scent of salt and sea, rustling through the willow branches that shade this peaceful place. Hope burbles happily in my father's arms, oblivious to the somber mood that surrounds her.

I glance over at Talia, taking in the serene expression on her face as she watches Tripp with the baby. Her inner strength astounds me, even now.

Looking at my father, I see a light in his eyes that has been absent for far too long. Holding his grandchild has brought him joy, but even more than that, it has reignited his will to live. I can tell just from the determination in his posture that he plans to stick with his sobriety, if only to remain a part of Hope's life.

My own heart feels uncomfortably full.

Talia slips her hand in mine, squeezing gently. I squeeze back, letting her know I'm here.

Hope babbles again, and we all laugh. The sound seems to lift years of sorrow from this little island. I know my mother is smiling down on us.

“Thank you for this,” I whisper, too low for anyone else to hear. She smiles and leans against me, sighing.

As we walk back to the yacht hand in hand, I know Talia is thinking the same thing. The past can't be changed, but the present is ours to shape.

This family has been given a second chance. It has grown by multiples and simultaneously been cobbled together, creating a mishmash of found family and blood relations. It's a bit unwieldy and oddly shaped, but harder than granite where it counts.

This is *my* family.

And I'll do everything in my power to embrace it.

About Vivian Wood



Vivian likes to write about troubled, deeply flawed alpha males and the fiery, kick-ass women who bring them to their knees.

Vivian's lasting motto in romance is a quote from a favorite song: "Soulmates never die."

Be sure to [join her email list](#) to keep up with all the awesome giveaways, author videos, ARC opportunities, and more!

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