



PARADISE BAY

*Where We
Belong*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CLAUDIA BURGOA

Where We
Belong

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Also By Claudia Burgoa

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Dear Reader,

I write highly emotional romances that include thought provoking subjects. If you would like to see a list of them, please check the link below with more information.

[TW Website](#)

Happy Reading,

Claudia

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*Dedicated to my browser's incognito mode for helping me with
all the weird research while writing this series.*

“To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves.”

– Federico García Lorca

Prologue



Cory

HAVE you ever been in love?

I mean the kind of all-consuming love where you'll surrender everything to that person. They become your entire existence—your air, your heartbeat, and the only person you want to spend your days with.

They say true love comes once in a lifetime.

For me, that was Benedict Farrow.

But to him, I'm like the little sister he never had—one of the boys and forever his best friend's sister. I laughed at his jokes, joined in with him and my brothers when they were doing something fun, and sometimes, I even stood beside Ben during the worst times of his life.

In his eyes, I was forever tethered to be his friend, a tag that imprisoned me in a realm of unrequited longing. It was a relentless torture of unspoken words and silent glances. I yearned to tell him how I felt, to confess the depths of my love, but the fear of rejection paralyzed me.

Ben has always been protective of me but in a sibling kind of way.

Despite this, the Christmas he gave me part ownership of Paradise Bay Inn, so we could build a hotel together ignited a spark of hope in me. Perhaps, just maybe, we could become something more.

Today.

Well, today, everything came crashing down around me when my sister Fern called and said, "Ben just had a baby girl."

And what about me? Us?

My heart crumbles like a fragile porcelain figurine, each shard tearing at my soul. It feels like the world drops out from

under me. My stomach twists in knots and bile rises in my throat. I stagger back against the wall, Fern's words echoing in my head.

Tears blur my vision, and I clutch my chest as an agonizing heartbreak sets in. The man I've loved for so long, my Ben, is having a child with another woman.

I want to let out an anguished scream, to yell and rage at how unfair this is. But the energy drains right out of me, and I find myself sliding slowly down the wall until I'm huddled on the floor. I draw my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them tightly as if trying to hold myself together. Uncontrollable sobs shake through me in waves and tears stream down my cheeks. I bury my face against my knees, muffling the cries escaping my lips.

My whole-body trembles with the force of my weeping. Curled up small, I look like a child overcome with despair and not the independent woman I'm known to be. I feel powerless in this moment, unable to do anything but give in to the overwhelming heartbreak spilling out of me.

The fragile dream I held of Ben and I having a future together disappears slowly with every tear spilled. It takes a long time to calm down from the gut-wrenching sobs shaking through me. Once my breathing steadies, and I can trust my voice to sound normal, I call Fern.

"Sorry about that, had to take a call," I say, trying hard to mask the raw ache in my tone. "So, you were saying Ben got some one-night stand pregnant?"

"I said he had a daughter. You're the one who said it must've been a one-night stand." Fern lets out an exasperated breath, no doubt rolling her eyes. "The point is that there's a new baby, and I think you should call him, so he knows we all support him in this."

But I don't support him. I'm heartbroken—who's going to be there for me while I, once again, try to piece together my broken heart. Unrequited love sucks out your soul and makes you feel alone. Of course, I can't say any of that to my sister. I

think I've done a great job at letting everyone believe Ben is just a family friend and not the love of my life.

Like any other time, my sister requests something, I simply say, "Sure," my voice hollow.

"Everything okay with you?" she probes gently, clearly sensing my anguish. "It's Atzi, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I sort of lie, my voice barely audible.

She's not entirely wrong, but not entirely right either. Atzi, one of my closest friends, stopped talking to me after she had a falling out with my brother, Heath. And just now, I've come to the conclusion that this is all Heathcliff's fault. Fuck him for introducing me to my best friend *and* the love of my life.

My stupid brother ruined his relationship with Atzi, and she's no longer speaking to me. As for Ben... oh, I'm hopelessly and madly in love with him, and I'm left wondering what on earth I should do now.

"Heath will come around soon. He adores Atzi, there's no way he'll just let her slip through the cracks and lose her," Fern says, her voice brimming with assurance. "Give her space, okay?"

"I hope you're right," I mutter softly, closing my eyes and wanting to erase this horrible day from existence. "Say hi to the twins for me."

With that, I end the call and stare blankly at my phone, trying to gather strength to reach out to Benedict. When I dial his number, my call goes straight to voicemail. I don't bother leaving a message. Instead, I send a quick text: *I heard you're a father. Know that the family is there for you.*

Hours crawl by in silence before he responds with one word: *Sorry.*

I stare at the phone for several minutes—maybe hours—reading the same five letters. I don't understand them. What is he sorry for?

Not answering my calls? Shattering my heart to pieces? Does it even matter anymore?

He's never going to love me, I'm not sure how I can possibly move forward.

Will I ever find someone who will love me enough to make me forget about Ben?

The questions swirl endlessly in my mind, threatening to drown me in despair.

Chapter One



Benedict

THREE YEARS LATER...

The afternoon sun beats down on my brother's vineyard grounds as a lively children's party unfolds around me. Bernie's third birthday celebration is in full swing, with fairies and unicorns brought to life thanks to Piper's party planning mastery. My daughter squeals joyfully as she chases after her cousins, her purple princess dress flowing.

Yet despite the cheerful scene, melancholy threatens to swallow me whole.

"This is depressing," I mumble, lifting the beer bottle to my lips in an attempt to drown my frustrations.

Derek, my eldest brother, arches an eyebrow expectantly. When I don't explain myself, he prods, "Your daughter's birthday party is depressing?"

"Obviously, I'm not referring to that," I groan, holding back the urge to snap at him.

Ever since he came back into my life, he's gone above and beyond to be there for me—and for Bernadette too. When I moved to Paradise Bay he not only helped me, but he bought a vineyard close to my practice, so he can visit too. I mentioned I wanted to have a big party for Bernie, and he and his spouses made it happen.

I'm grateful to the three of them, but right at this moment, I feel like I'm failing at life. Is that even a thing though?

"Then I need you to elaborate more because I'm fucking confused," he exhales in frustration.

Piper, his wife, steps closer, slipping an arm around my brother's waist. She glances my way, then at Derek. Her eyes fill with concern. "What's annoying you, big guy?" She doesn't wait for him to answer and moves her gaze toward me. "Oh, it's about you. Are you okay, Ben?"

How does she know I'm the one who worries Derek? I wish I had telepathic powers like her. Well, she might not have them, but Piper knows everything that bugs Derek and their spouse, Finn. Everything.

I nod slowly, my lips pressing together in a thin line as I try to force a smile. It probably looks more like a grimace.

She raises an eyebrow, clearly not believing me for a second.

"I'm fine," I say, my voice catching in my throat. I drop my gaze, unable to meet her knowing eyes. Guilt and unease churn in my stomach. I don't want to burden my pregnant sister-in-law with my problems. Are they even problems?

"He thinks this party is depressing," Derek mutters, a hint of sarcasm lacing his words. "That might be code for you did a shitty job with the decorations."

I gape at him. Is he fucking kidding me? His comment strikes a nerve. He's making me look like an ungrateful douche. I'm nothing but grateful for everything he and his spouses do for me and Bernie—including this party.

I force a tight smile to stop Derek's misplaced irritation. "That's not it."

Derek's gaze sharpens as he continues to probe. "Then what is it, Benedict? Piper hired the best party planner to help her organize this event. There are fairies and unicorns scattered all over our backyard, and Bernie is having a blast with her cousins."

Maybe I should remind him that the only child related to Bernie is their daughter, Rhea. Everyone else is by proxy. Piper has a big family that has welcomed us since she, Finn, and Derek married. Apparently, Derek, Bernie, and I are a package deal. If it wasn't for them and the Spearman family—who also came along—I wouldn't have anyone.

"Don't antagonize him," Piper scolds gently, tapping Derek's chest to emphasize her point. Then she turns her attention back to me, her purple eyes inviting me to open up. "If you want to talk, we're here for you, Ben."

But what's there to talk about? I can't say anything without sounding like I don't value what they've done for me. Piper organized this whole party and brought her entire family to ensure it wasn't some sad, empty affair. She even handmade a princess dress for Bernie.

With a helpless sigh, I take another swig of beer and watch the party unfold, wishing I could silence the dark thoughts plaguing my mind. But despite my best efforts and all the joy surrounding me, I just can't.

Though, my child's birthday party is a reason to celebrate one of the best things that has happened in my life, it also serves as a painful reminder of how alone I truly feel. I can't escape the feeling that I'm failing as a father. Also, the one person I longed to have by my side is no longer a part of my life.

"She had a previous commitment," Piper says apologetically, seeming to read my thoughts. See, telepathic powers.

"Who?" Derek frowns.

"Cory," Piper answers.

"I wasn't thinking about her," I lie unconvincingly.

They both burst into knowing laughter.

"It's okay to miss her," Piper says gently once she calms down. "She did send a present for Bernie."

"What was more important than my daughter's birthday?" I snap bitterly, then clamp my mouth shut, regretting the harsh words.

Okay, so I'm probably upset because Cordelia Spearman didn't show up. In fact, a little more than six months ago she stopped talking to me and soon after she started dating some douche named dude, pal, or maybe buddy. I swear he has a fucking ridiculous name I can't stand. She claimed to love my daughter and now... now she doesn't give two fucks about Bernie—or me. Last week she left on vacation with the douche, and what about Bernie?

Piper steps away from my brother's embrace and loops her arm through mine, guiding me to the secluded part of the backyard where we can have some privacy.

"Are you going to drown me in the pool," I attempt to lighten the mood with a joke.

"You could go for a swim later once the party dies down so you can cool down," she says.

"Is it going to die?" I ask wearily. "Your family has been here since last night."

"Not all of them," Piper corrects me with a secretive grin, resembling a giddy teenager on the verge of sharing a stolen treasure.

I study her curiously. "Are you happy because they didn't crowd your place?"

"Actually, it's the opposite. I'm not thrilled they can't stay for long because there isn't a hotel in Paradise Bay," she admits, her gaze narrowing. "According to Fern Spearman, there used to be an Inn. There were plans to create something new, so the owner closed it, half demolished it, and..." She trails off, and I understand what she's implying: I fucked up the balance of the town.

"I bought it for her, you know?" I stare off at the horizon, remembering Cory's face when I gifted her the deed one Christmas morning. Of course, I pretended her brothers all pitched in, but it was only my money.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for her," I say, my heart heavy with the reminder that she now has a boyfriend. "But we can't be together. And what am I supposed to do with...?"

I don't even know how to finish the sentence. The rest of my life, without her, with all the love I have for her.

Piper considers this before responding. "Focus on Bernie and the hotel. As for Cory, you have two choices. You either try to win her heart, or you let her go. If you think living here is hard, then move to Seattle with us. Derek would like to have his youngest brother and niece around."

It sounds so simple when she says it, but I can't just leave Paradise Bay and forget about Cory. This town has always felt like home. The Spearmans took me in when I didn't have anyone, not even Derek. I appreciate that my brother is finally showing concern for me, and I owe it to Piper for bridging the gap. However, I can't just pack up and abandon the people who were there for me when no one else gave a fuck.

"If I stay, you guys would still visit often, right?" I ask hesitantly.

Piper nods reassuringly. "Of course. Finn is the one who suggested buying a house in Paradise Bay, so Derek could visit you as often as he could." She glances at the mansion they built almost two years ago. "We want Rhea and any other babies we have to get to know you and Bernie."

"But what am I supposed to do with a hotel?" I can't help but express my frustration. "I have a daughter, a medical practice, and very little time for anything else."

I glance toward the vineyard, remembering that Cory wanted the new place to look like the French château Atzi's family owns in France.

"The hotel is Cory's dream, you know?" I mumble, wondering if I can make it happen for her. Even if I can never have her, we can have that.

Piper's lips quirk up knowingly. "You have plenty of people who can help you. Ask Cory to share her plans. Maybe she'll be happy to help you with it—or continue the partnership."

"She has a boyfriend," I remind Piper, feeling a pang of longing deep within me.

"I said run a hotel with her, not propose," she teases, pointing at her ear with a playful smile. "You should clean them often, doc."

I run a hand through my hair, a mix of frustration and conflicted emotions swirling within me. "Just being near Cory and not..." My voice trails off painfully.

“You love her so much it hurts,” she mumbles, placing a hand on my arm. “You might want to follow your heart. Tell her how you feel.”

“But there’s nothing I can do about it. I can’t be who she needs.”

Piper’s expression softens. “This could be a chance for closure so you can move on. If not for you, for your daughter. I’m not saying rush to find someone new. Just find happiness outside of Cory.”

I glance at her, considering her advice and wondering if it could be that easy. She didn’t just start to date, Cory stopped coming around and talking to me. She sends my calls to voicemail and barely responds to my texts.

“But what if—”

“There are no ifs, just like there’s no try. *Do it*, and also find a therapist,” she advises, giving my shoulder a reassuring pat. “Your relationship with your parents shouldn’t be what stops you from being happy. And carrying old wounds isn’t healthy for your daughter. Have you heard of generational trauma?”

Just then, Finn, the second spouse in my brother’s ménage à trois, appears, holding their eighteen-month-old daughter, Rhea.

“Ma,” Rhea shouts gleefully, extending her arms toward Piper. Her bright purple eyes mirror her mother’s just like her smile.

“Hey, baby,” Piper coos, opening her arms. Finn gives her a peck on the lips as he hands over their toddler. “I take it it’s time for our nap?”

Finn nods, a tired smile playing on his lips. “Yeah, she loved the pony rides but she’s exhausted. How are you feeling?”

Piper lets out a soft yawn, her energy waning. “I probably need a nap too. Why don’t you stay with Mr. Grumpy? He’s planning on rebuilding the hotel. You’re the best person to help him.”

Finn glances my way, gray eyes studying me intently before slowly shaking his head. “Even though I could have everyone in place to start the construction tomorrow, he’s not ready for that yet.”

“How do you know?” I question, feeling a mix of curiosity and apprehension. “Wait, have you three been talking about the hotel?”

Finn pats me on the shoulder. “Derek is concerned about you. I’m happy to help with anything you need, but as I keep telling D and Piper,” he tilts his head toward his wife, “I’ll help when you’re ready, not a minute before.”

I close my eyes for a moment, contemplating Finn’s words. Am I truly ready?

All I want is what Derek has. Love, a family... Not once did I imagine that I would feel jealous of my brother’s life and happiness. In the past, I harbored resentment toward him, just like I did with the rest of my siblings. Our parents never encouraged a bond between us. Instead, they fostered animosity among us.

I used to believe I was better than all of them, but he changed my perception by showing up all the time. Now, I’m starting to feel jealousy toward him.

What the hell happened to me? When did I become so jaded? I shake my head, unable to comprehend how I’ve changed so much. I wasn’t an envious person before, and I genuinely rejoiced in everyone’s happiness.

Rhea and Piper yawn in unison. Finn gives my shoulder a supportive squeeze. “I have to get my girls back into the house, but if you need us, we’re here for you—all of us. We’re your family, Ben.”

Piper nods earnestly. “We just want you to be happy.”

“Appy,” Rhea chimes in, her tiny voice echoing the sentiment as she smiles at me before her dad scoops her into his arms.

“Time for a nap, jelly-bug,” Finn says.

Rhea rests her little chin on his shoulder, her eyes drooping with sleep. As I watch them leave, a deep longing settles within me. That's exactly what I want—a small family.

Someone to love and who'll love Bernie and me unconditionally. But how can I find that for us if Cory owns my heart?

Chapter Two



Cory

THE PARIS CITY lights glitter below as I lean against the balcony railing of Bodhi's apartment. "Bodhi Wainwright is the definition of the perfect boyfriend," I say, trying to convince Atzi, or maybe myself, that dating him is the best thing that has happened to me in the past year.

"Sure, but you skipped Bernie's birthday party," Atzi points out, a note of accusation in her voice.

"I sent a present," I argue defensively, knowing how feeble it sounds.

"That's the coldest thing I've ever heard you say in your entire life."

I sigh heavily, closing my eyes for a second as I try to respond without sounding bitter, but I can't come up with the right words. "What do you want me to do, Atz? She's not my child. Ben is just my brother's friend."

As much as it hurts, this is for the best. Did my heart shatter leaving Paradise Bay last week? Absolutely. I wanted nothing more than to plan Bernie's party and be there for her special day. But I can't keep playing the role of dutiful friend and babysitter, dropping everything whenever Ben calls. Not when I've stupidly loved him since I was fourteen.

"I was the first to congratulate you when you started dating Bodhi Wainwright. He seems to be perfect in many ways." Atzi's tone softens. "But Bernie asked for her Cory multiple times."

"It's for the best," I insist. "This is called moving on."

"Moving on is understandable, but you could've pulled away slowly. You just disappeared from her life as if she never mattered."

"Atzi—" I begin, but my voice catches as the emotions overwhelm me.

She can't fully grasp how agonizing it was to be there daily for Ben and Bernie. I'd arrive each morning to help them. I arrived right before breakfast and left after dinner. Twice a week I'd take Bernie into San Francisco for mommy and me classes. I played the doting aunt because I loved them. But for him I was still *just* Cory.

I recall the specific day my heart shattered beyond repair. It started like any other morning. I came over, and Bernie ran to me, grinning from ear to ear. She called out, "Mama!" and my heart swelled. That single word meant the world to me.

I already loved her deeply, but with that word, the connection between us seemed to intensify. The idea of being her mother filled my heart with joy. After all, she's Ben's child.

But then Ben interfered, picking Bernie up from the floor and laughing. "Now, Bernie, don't forget she's Cory. You could call her Aunt Cory. But not Mama, okay?"

In that moment, Benedict Farrow managed, once again, to break my heart, reminding me that I was just a friend—a mere side character in his life story, someone of no real significance to him.

It was then I realized I had to disappear from their lives. Sometimes, the best way to move on is to pretend that the source of your pain no longer exists. Finding happiness is hard, but if I can be content without them in my life, I call it a win.

When I glance toward the apartment and see Bodhi pacing while on a call, I smile. Perhaps, happiness is now attainable because Ben and Bernie are no longer part of it. Bodhi grins at me and puts his phone away.

He steps out to the terrace, eyebrows furrowed with concern. "You okay, babe?"

I nod, staring at my shoes. Hastily, I wipe the tears from my cheeks with the back of my hand. "Yeah." Turning to face him, I force a smile. "Let me say goodbye to Atzi."

“Cory, I only want your happiness. Bodhi might seem perfect, but I’m not sure he’s perfect for you,” Atzi states bluntly.

Her words strike a chord, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s right. If it’s not Bodhi, then who? I’m done kissing toads trying to find Mr. Right, but at least now I’m not breaking up after the third date just because the guy isn’t Benedict Farrow. It’s a matter of survival and finding someone I can share a lifetime of happiness with.

Rather than prolong this unproductive conversation, I cut it short. “Thank you for calling. Give my best to the triplets and Heath.”

Bodhi gives me a curious glance. “Who was that?”

“Atzi,” I answer casually, putting away my phone.

“What did she want?”

“Oh, we were just catching up,” I reply breezily, looping my arms around his neck. “So, what’s the plan for tonight?”

He smiles, and his dark brown eyes sparkle with warmth. “We’ll probably stay in, so we can recover from the jet lag, and tomorrow I’ll take you wherever you want.” Leaning in, he kisses me softly.

Unfortunately, his phone buzzes, breaking our moment. Bodhi groans when he checks it. “It’s Miriam. Let me make sure the kids are okay.”

“Of course,” I say with forced brightness, dropping my arms from his neck. Inside, irritation prickles through me at the call from his ex-wife.

While Bodhi takes the call, I turn back to the Paris skyline, clasping the balcony railing tightly. The cold metal bites into my palms. I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the nagging feeling that Miriam’s needs will always eclipse my own when it comes to Bodhi’s priorities. But shouldn’t his children come first?

I’m being unfair, unreasonable. The problem is that I’m not allowed to meet them unless our relationship deserves such

privilege. I respect the way they're raising their children, but it makes me feel excluded and insignificant, like I'm not important enough to be part of their lives. It also makes me feel like an outsider who's not fully part of Bodhi's life.

Painting a smile back on my face, I wait for Bodhi to return, pushing down all my doubts. Surely in time, he'll make me feel more like a partner, not just a distraction. I have to be patient and understand the complex family dynamics. One day, it'll get easier... won't it?

"Sorry about that," he says, returning after a couple of minutes.

"Everything okay?" I ask, trying to suppress my anxiety.

"Yeah." He slips his phone into his pocket. "Miriam's planning for next month and needs to know if I'll be home."

"Oh, anything I should schedule around?" I ask tentatively, wondering if I should stick around San Francisco in case he needs me.

Though, Paradise Bay is only an hour away from him. If he needs me, I can be there almost immediately. But will he need me?

He waves a dismissive hand. "Of course not. We'll be back by then," he assures me, flashing a big grin.

Bodhi might not rely on me when it comes to his children, but I'm determined to change his mind. He needs to see that I'm not just fun, but I could be an excellent addition to his family.

"You know, I'm great with kids. My brothers and sister all have them. The kids adore me." I try to sound casual, not clingy and insecure.

He nods, studying me carefully.

I can't stop myself from adding more. "Twelve." I pause to let it sink in. "Twelve nieces and nephews and three more on the way. They all adore me."

"You do have a big family," he says, almost scared at the thought of how many Spearman's are repopulating the world.

“I’m the fun one they all beg to babysit,” I continue brightly. “Super responsible too.”

Bodhi exhales, his brown eyes boring into me. “Is everything alright, Cordelia?”

“Sure, I just...” I shrug, not sure how to express my feelings. “Sometimes you make me feel like I’m in the middle of an audition—or a test. I want to pass it and get an A+ on it.”

Bodhi scoffs. “So what happens when you pass this alleged test?”

I bite my lip, considering. “I guess... I’ll finally figure out my future.”

“And what kind of future do you envision for us?” he asks pointedly.

I stare at him, trying to gauge his intentions. As I just said, sometimes it feels as if he’s testing me, but there are days when I don’t know how to respond to him.

Bodhi caresses my jaw tenderly. “Cory, of all the women in the world, I chose you. I hope you’ll continue to grace me with your company. I’m not an easy man to be with—or to love.”

His words don’t soothe me, and the doubts still nag my mind. What does our future hold? What exactly does he want from me? I wish I could read his thoughts as effortlessly as he seems to read mine.

Chapter Three



Benedict

THE SHRILL BEEP of the alarm jolts me awake. I slap a hand on the clock and stumble out of bed, rubbing the sleep from my gritty eyes. Trudging to the bathroom, I catch sight of my unkempt reflection in the mirror, and a grimace tugs at my lips. Bloodshot eyes stare back. They're the evidence of yet another restless night spent tossing and turning.

I splash cold water on my face, hoping it'll breathe some life into my tired soul. As I brush my teeth, I make a mental list of everything I need to accomplish today. Make breakfast. Get Bernie dressed. Drop her off at daycare. Go to work—the mundane routine of single fatherhood.

Down the hall, I hear the pitter-patter of little feet. Bernie's up. I plaster a smile on my face before entering her room.

“Good morning, sweet pea.”

“Dada.” Her face lights up like a thousand suns when she sees me. Her joy is infectious. I swoop her up, eliciting giggles as I blow raspberries on her belly as we make our way to the kitchen.

“Let's get some breakfast, munchkin.” I settle her into the highchair, and I'm rewarded with a grin that could melt glaciers. I hand her a sippy cup with milk and a bowl of berries while I prepare her oatmeal. As I'm busy cooking, I feel her curious eyes tracking my every movement.

“Co-ee?”

“She's still on vacation,” I respond with forced brightness, placing the bowl with oatmeal before her.

Bernie studies me, as if expecting more. She probably wants a specific day for when she'll finally see Cory again. We often give her a countdown for when she'll visit with aunts and uncles. Though she can't fully count yet, numbering the days soothes her.

Though, in this instance, there's nothing I can tell her. It's been six months since Cory disappeared from our lives. I hoped she would come to Bernie's birthday party, but she only sent a present in her place.

"Tomooow?" Bernie inquires, her big eyes searching mine for the answer she craves.

I squat down, heart sinking at the sadness in her little voice. Her vulnerability pierces my soul, and I wish I could conjure up her heart's desire with a snap of my fingers.

"What do you want to do tomorrow, pumpkin?" I gently inquire.

Bernie's lower lip trembles. "See Co-ee, pwease," she pleads, and her words tug at my heartstrings like a desperate melody.

I'm tempted to text Cory and demand she come to visit. How dare she disappear without a backward glance? Bernie misses her as much as I do.

When I moved to Paradise Bay, it seemed so simple—Bernie would be embraced as family by the Spearman's, just as they welcomed me all those years ago. I never counted on one complication: Cory. Kind, big-hearted Cory, who my little girl grew to adore. The woman Bernie started seeing as a mother figure. Oh, how I wish that dream could be real, but the harsh truth is far different.

Bernadette's real mother was a cold, calculating woman I made the mistake of becoming involved with briefly. Little did I know, she was married. When she found herself pregnant, her husband gave her a choice: she could keep the baby, as long as it was his. If not, she had to find a way to get rid of it or risk divorce and ruin. Though terrified at the prospect of becoming a father, the second I met Bernie, I fell hopelessly in love.

She's my life and my everything. If there's something I would love to give her, it's a mother who would love her as much as I do. Cory would be the best person. Except, I can't have Cory.

So the day when Bernie called her Mama, I had to stop everything. It was so fucking hard to remind her that Cory is like an aunt, never a mother.

And that's why Cory leaving was for the best, I repeat like a mantra. She doesn't belong with us.

But it is so hard to believe it.

The lines between friendship and motherhood were dangerously blurred. As much as Bernie saw Cory as Mom, it could never be reality. Cory has her own path to follow, her own love story waiting to unfold with someone who doesn't carry as much baggage as I do.

Attempting to distract Bernie from her yearning, I pull out my best silly faces and antics between spoonfuls of oatmeal. When I glance at the time, I realize we're running late. As I leave the bowl and spoon behind to pour myself some much-needed coffee, the air fills with the clatter of her delight.

When I turn back, my little artist has transformed herself into a masterpiece of oatmeal. Her chest puffs with pride at her messy creation. A stifled laugh escapes my lips. "Somebody needs a bath."

Bernie claps, giggling gleefully beneath her messy oatmeal costume. As I lift her up, I recall my talk with Piper and Finn. I need closure for myself and Bernie. There's a part of me that died or at least disappeared after my daughter came to my life. It's not her fault, but somehow it happened between changing my future, late nights, and moving to another state.

But that has to stop. My girl deserves the best of me. Somehow, I have to find that man—or a better version of him—for both our sakes.

BY NOON, I'm finishing up with my last patient. Before heading home, I stop by the ruined inn. It's a crumbling shell of its former glory. Half-demolished walls sagging, broken

windows gaping sadly. Maybe it's best to dismantle it fully and start fresh with a new building.

This place deserves a new slate, just like us.

There are a lot of decisions I need to make, and maybe the first one is contacting Cory. She's still in Paris, so it's best if I text her. She can respond on her own time or ignore me until she returns home.

I take a deep breath and type.

***Ben:** Hey, I hope it's not too late there, but I wanted to run some ideas about the inn by you.*

I stare at the screen for several seconds, expecting an answer, or at least the dancing dots acknowledging that she's seen my message, but nothing. I rotate my neck before I send a second one.

***Ben:** As you know, Paradise Bay needs a hotel. We own the old inn, but we haven't done anything with it in years. I was thinking about tearing it down and building a hotel.*

Finally, a reply pops up.

***Cory:** No. A generic hotel would be soulless, impersonal. Paradise Bay deserves better than that.*

***Ben:** What if we modeled it after a French chateau among the vineyards? It'll have more rooms than the inn, but it will still be charming.*

***Cory:** I don't have time for some big project.*

I sigh, then type.

***Ben:** Then, sell me your part, and I'll take care of it.*

***Cory:** It was MY idea to buy it and renovate it. You can't just steal it like...*

Since she's taking my text out of context, I call her. Thankfully, she answers the phone on the first ring instead of sending me to voicemail like she's been doing for the past few months.

"Why now?" she asks.

I try to hide my frustration as I respond, “Hey, how are you?”

“Benedict, I don’t have time for pleasantries. Why after almost four years?”

Fuck, why is she making this so difficult?

Would it kill her to answer my question? I need to know if that asshole, Bodhi Whineysomething or other, is treating her right. I’ve asked Derek to run a background check, and he’s refused to do it. We don’t know if that asshole is some sociopath who will abuse her or a criminal who might get her killed. He’s taking her away from us. That’s pretty much a red flag, isn’t it?

“I’m waiting, Ben,” Cory presses sharply.

“This weekend my family visited us, but they had to stay in the city because we don’t have hotel accommodations in this town,” I explain neutrally. “It’d be an easy fix if we just build one where the old inn used to be.”

“And who’ll design this mystery building?” she challenges.

“I’ll figure out that part once I know where you stand.”

“You’re dumping this on me?” she hisses.

I exhale slowly, tamping down my irritation. “Of course not. I’ll handle architects if you want me to or we can make the decisions together. Otherwise, I’m happy to buy your share.”

“Why don’t you sell me your part instead?” she volleys back.

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Is she serious? After everything we’ve been through, she wants me to give up my stake in the inn. My mind races, trying to comprehend her reasoning, but all I feel is a mix of frustration and hurt.

I hate to hit where I know it’ll wound, but I have to make her reconsider. “What guarantees that you’ll actually build if I sell? You don’t like to work alone.”

“It won’t be your problem anymore,” she argues.

“But it is,” I counter firmly. “The town needs those rooms. Every business, including my practice, would benefit from a local hotel.”

“I can handle it alone.”

“By yourself?” I sound redundant, but either she’s not listening, or she’s just being obtuse.

I wish I knew what I did to her, but this isn’t the time to focus on that. I need to know what we’re going to do with the hotel. She can claim that she’ll do it on her own but we both know that won’t happen.

Cory’s always done everything with Huxley, her twin. She likes partnerships. If there’s no one to work beside her, she loses interest. That’s who she is, and the reason why I bought the inn for her. Hux didn’t want to be a part of it anymore. And now that he’s engaged, his plans are a lot different from Cory’s.

“Huxley could—” she starts.

“Hux won’t do it,” I cut her off.

Would it be too cruel to remind her that his business partner is now Enid? I don’t want to hurt her, but she has to look at the bigger picture. But what if that’s her current problem—the guy she has spent her entire life with has somebody else. She’s not alone, but she can’t just call him at any time to bail her out like they used to do with each other.

If only she allowed me to do that for her, but she just cut all communication between us. This is the first time we’re having an actual conversation in months.

“Cory, I’m your only hope,” I push, knowing there’s a lot on the line.

A lengthy silence follows. All I hear is her breathing for a long moment. “Let me think about it.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Soon,” she mumbles.

I hesitate but have to ask, “Is *he* treating you right?”

“Why the fuck do you care, Benedict?” Cory snaps, icy anger lacing her tone. “We’re not family or friends. Stay out of my personal life.”

“We used to be friends,” I say softly.

“No. We used to hang out because you’re Heath’s best friend, but nothing else.”

Her words pierce through me like a thousand sharp needles. “Cory...” I trail off, unsure of what else to say.

So many unspoken thoughts swirl through me. I wish I could love you as you deserve. I wish I could be the man you need. I wish we could get past this pain between us.

“I’ll contact you when I’m home,” Cory states coolly. “If I don’t want to rebuild, I’ll sell and move on.”

Her words freeze my entire body. What can I say to make her work with me? I don’t have that right.

And actually, all I want to ask is for her to love me. I want her heart, her company, just *her*. If I can’t have any of those, I’d settle for just the gift of her company.

But the words stick in my throat, and she ends the call before I find my voice again. I’m left with nothing but regrets and doubts hanging heavy on my weary heart.

Chapter Four



Cory: I'll buy you out.

Ben: Excuse me?

Cory: I thought about this whole thing and decided that it's best if I buy your part of the old inn. I'm sure I can convince someone to help me with it if I decide to continue the project. Maybe Atzi can do it.

Ben: May I remind you that Atzi has three children, a chocolate factory, and Heath that occupy all her time.

Cory: Don't forget her chocolate sculptures.

Ben: So you agree, she won't have time for it.

Cory: There has to be someone else.

Ben: Me?

Cory: You're a doctor, busy with your child and your own life.

Ben: I wouldn't be asking to do this with you if I didn't have time.

Cory: What's your role in all this?

Ben: Currently, it's Desperate Partner trying to keep the ball rolling.

Cory: I'm serious, Benedict.

Ben: Well, this project has several stages. The first is to rebuild, and I want full input on that one. Then, you'll design the brand, and we'll hire the employees together. After that, I'll be as silent or verbal as you want me to be.

Cory: Selling it to me might be the best option.

Ben: And there you go trying to take the dream away from me.

Cory: What dream?

Ben: To own a hotel.

Cory: Since when did you have that dream?

Ben: When you told me everything that can be done with the inn. That's why we bought it and then demolished part of it.

Cory: I'm not sure this is a good idea.

Ben: Give me all the pros and cons.

Cory: As I said before, I can't make any decision or discuss this until I'm home.

Ben: You did, and then you texted me in the middle of the night to ask questions. I'm just trying to speed up the process.

Cory: Sorry, I forgot the time difference.

Ben: How long are you staying in Paris?

Cory: Not long. Bodhi has to be in San Francisco soon.

Ben: What kind of name is Bodhi anyway? Is that short for...

Ben: Sorry, I can't come up with anything. I doubt it's a name.

Cory: Don't start with that shit.

Ben: I heard from Heath that you haven't introduced him to the family yet.

Cory: So they can scare him? I don't think so. Maybe when things are more serious between us.

Ben: You're not serious about your relationship with him, and yet, you're in another country with him. What if the asshole is some sort of criminal who'll murder someone and blame you for their death?

Cory: You watch too many true crime stories. Bodhi is safe, and we've only been together for six months. That's not enough time to throw him to my brothers. They're very good at scaring my boyfriends.

Ben: When does a relationship become 'serious' enough to be introduced to your family?

Cory: I'm not sure. Usually, my brothers fucked it up before the three-month mark. I guess I should be thankful that Enid is around. Huxley is too busy to even bat an eyelash my way.

Ben: So this might be your longest relationship yet, huh?

Cory: He's perfect, you know.

Ben: Nobody is perfect.

Cory: He's thoughtful, a great father, and one of the few gentlemen left on this planet.

Ben: I had no idea gentlemen were an extinct species.

Cory: There aren't many of them.

Ben: Wait, did you say father?

Cory: Huh?

Ben: You said he's a great father. I'm assuming he's a dad. Or are you referring to some daddy kink you haven't told me about?

Cory: :unamused: emoji

Ben: It's okay if you have it. I'm not judging.

Cory: He has two... maybe three children.

Ben: Is he divorced or a widower? You don't know exactly how many? That's weird.

Cory: Why are we talking about Bodhi?

Ben: Weirdly, you've been with him for some time, and no one knows him. I just want to ensure you're with someone worthy of you.

Cory: Stay away from my personal life, Ben. I'll contact you with more questions or when I've made a decision about the inn.

Ben: By the way, Bernie misses you.

Cory: I hope she's doing well. Talk to you soon.

Chapter Five



Cory

CONTACTING BENEDICT WAS A TERRIBLE IDEA. I should've stuck to the original plan—reach out to him when I'm home and ready to discuss the old inn.

“You okay, babe?” Bodhi asks, his eyebrows drawing together in concern as I shuffle into the kitchen.

I force a smirk and nod, avoiding his gaze. Instead of pouring myself some coffee, I take a long sip of his, the rich bitterness jolting me awake. Perhaps, I should've done this before, drink something to wake me up before I texted Benedict and made a fool of myself. When I check the time, I realize it's too early to get out of bed. Bodhi is dressed. It seems like he's already read the news and even worked for a couple of hours.

“You woke up a little too early,” I state.

“Story called while we were still sleeping.” He glances at his watch. “It was about eleven at night in San Francisco.”

“She's ten, right?” I ask lightly, trying to sound casual as I fish for more information about his daughter.

He nods and there's a hint of a smile playing on his lips. Bodhi is nothing but a doting father. It's not as if he talks about his children, but I see how amazing he is with them. “Next month she'll be eleven. Two more years, and I'm going to have to buy Rowe a car. My only hope is that Tallulah doesn't grow up as fast as her two older siblings.”

I bite my tongue to keep from blurting out questions about Tallulah's age and the rest of his family. This might be the first time he's opened up about his children. I don't want to break the spell and have him shut down again.

“Do you mind if we go back home this Wednesday?” he asks abruptly.

His question catches me off guard. Is it rhetorical, or does he actually want my input? And what am I supposed to say? Sorry, but I need another week away from my family and *him*. I don't want to sound like some heartless woman who can't understand that his children come first.

"Story wants me there." A fond smile tugs at his mouth. "Though she's not the youngest, she's Daddy's little girl." He grins proudly, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"I'm sure you know how that is," he adds, glancing at me. "You're the only girl in your family, right?"

I plaster a smile on my face. "Fern. Fern was daddy's little girl." I shrug one shoulder, trying to look nonchalant even as my throat tightens. "Dad wasn't around much while I was growing up. He..." I trail off, shrugging a shoulder as if to imply it doesn't matter.

My father died when I was eleven, but before that, he traveled constantly for work. And when he was home, he poured himself into the family business and vineyard. Don't misunderstand—he was a loving father. But he divided his attention between my siblings, leaving me as an afterthought. The triplets—Aslan, Gatsby, and Lysander—as the oldest, got the most dad time.

Fern was daddy's little girl. Caspian got all his attention because he was his hockey prodigy. Heath could spend hours with him playing chess or just talking about adult things—even when he was a teenager.

Hux had a learning disability, so he tried to do his best to help him. And then there was me—self-sufficient and overlooked. Dad loved me in his way, but since I never demanded his time, he let me be. I think I was okay with my place in the family until I learned about his affair and the child he had with his mistress.

He could've given me that time. I could've spent more time with my father and less trying to impress my older brothers, hoping they would give me the time of the day.

“Cordelia, are you okay?” Bodhi draws me back into the conversation.

I blink a couple of times, making sure no tears fall. “Yeah, I was just remembering Dad.”

“You can always call him, you know?”

I press my lips together, recalling my conversation with Ben. Six months and I really don’t know much about Bodhi. Our relationship is superficial at best. Yet here I am in Paris, enjoying a free vacation from my family and the reminder that the hope of being with Benedict Farrow disappeared three years ago.

Don’t get me wrong, I adore Bernie, but I’m not even allowed to love her, so what’s the point?

Realizing that I’ve been keeping Bodhi at arm’s length, I do what I expect him to do with me. “Umm, I probably forgot to mention before that... he died when Hux and I were eleven.”

Bodhi’s shoulders slump. “Shit. I’m so fucking insensitive.”

“You’re fine,” I answer, but then add, “You might want to make sure Tallulah gets to be daddy’s girl too. I get the birth order, but you don’t want her to end up with some trauma because she didn’t get enough attention.”

Bodhi bobs his head slowly, staring at me. “Thank you for the tip.”

I wave a hand and turn around to prepare my coffee, trying to deal with all the emotions suddenly colliding inside my chest. Memories of my father, dreams that can’t come true, and this man who is perfect, but doesn’t make any attempts to reach out and get to know me.

“So, is it okay if we head back on Wednesday?” he asks.

“Of course.” I keep my tone light as I pour milk into my coffee. “Thank you for offering your apartment while I wanted to get away.”

“Don’t mention it,” he answers breezily. “We could plan something when it’s Miriam’s turn with the kids.”

“Sure, let me know what works.” I stir my coffee, staring into its depths. What else can I say? Even on his off weeks, he’s still in their lives, and Miriam is in his unless she’s traveling.

I take a seat, grabbing a croissant to give my hands something to do. “So... is it safe to ask why you two divorced?” I ask casually. “You seem to have a great relationship now.”

Bodhi scoffs. “Fuck, that was five years ago.” He shakes his head, brow furrowing. “We just grew apart over time. She couldn’t stand that I was more successful. Our kids were basically raised by our parents, not us.” He pauses, nodding to himself. “She was falling in love with her boss too.”

He meets my gaze. “Miriam didn’t cheat, but we realized our love for each other had faded. I think having Tallulah was a last attempt to fix our family but with a new baby...” He trails off. His gaze is lost in some distant memory. “Things just spun more out of control.”

And though everything he said matters, I hold onto the one thing I can use. They fell out of love. So people can fall out of love, huh?

Can I do it?

Can I fall for Bodhi as I’m falling out of love with Ben?

“What are you thinking?” he asks, studying my face.

I reach for his hand and squeeze it, forcing a smile. “Nothing much, just thankful you’re trusting me like this.”

“I’m trying,” he says simply.

But something in his tone makes me uneasy. He’s trying to do what, exactly? A sliver of doubt worms its way into my mind. Should I end this relationship before it goes too far? But if I do, what comes next for me? I feel lost, torn between the safe comfort of Bodhi and the unknown future without a dream and without Benedict Farrow.

Chapter Six

Cory: How many architects are you contacting?

Ben: Hello, Cordelia. How are you doing today? In case you're wondering, I'm doing wonderfully, thank you for asking.

Ben: Wait, isn't it one in the morning on your side of the world? Are you drunk-texting me?

Cory: I'm actually on my way to San Francisco and why in the world would I be drunk-texting you?

Ben: :raised-eyebrow: emoji Are you already flying home?

Ben: You'll drunk-text me because you miss me. Somehow I feel like you ghosted me.

Cory: Yes, we had to cut our trip by a few days.

Ben: You ignored the part where you ghosted me six months ago, but are you okay about cutting your vacation short?

Cory: I don't have anything to say about your ridiculous ghosting suggestion. As for the trip, it's fine. Bodhi needed to leave earlier. I can go to France when Atzi visits her family.

Ben: It doesn't sound like you're okay. More like you're convincing yourself that it's for the best, but deep down you're feeling disappointed.

Cory: You got all that from my text?

Ben: Yep. You're the kind of person who'll do anything for others if it makes sense. It doesn't mean you're a doormat, only that you put other people's needs ahead of yours.

Cory: One of his children wanted him back home.

Ben: Was he sick?

Cory: No, Story missed her dad. She's daddy's little girl.

Ben: How old is she?

Cory: Eleven.

Ben: Nope. She doesn't miss her dad. She doesn't like that her father has someone else in his life. I bet she puts herself before her siblings.

Cory: How do you know this?

Ben: Shannon, my older sister—she's the middle child. She used to be like that while growing up. If I was sick, she'd pretend to be sicker. If one of my brothers did something, she'd figure out a way to bring the attention back to her. If Dad was on a date, she'd do the impossible to drag him home. She manipulated our parents. My father, more than my mother.

Cory: You never talk about your siblings.

Ben: You know Derek. He's the only one who matters. The rest are inconsequential.

Ben: I just mentioned Shannon because I don't think this relationship is going to work.

Cory: Stay away from my personal life.

Ben: If I didn't know where this was heading, I would, but hear me out. The moment my sister figured out that our father was in a relationship, she'd make this woman's life miserable until they broke up. He's a difficult man, but Shannon made everything a million times harder.

Cory: So, if you're on vacation with your girlfriend, and Bernie asks you to go home, what are you going to do?

Ben: Why do I have to go back home? If it's because Bernie's sick, I'll ensure the plane lands within hours. If it's because she misses me, we can have a nice video call, and she'll see me once I'm back. It's called boundaries.

Cory: Wow, that's not exactly what I was expecting. I would think you'd run to her.

Ben: In this hypothetical scenario, she accepts the woman I'm dating, and they get along. In your scenario, I have the feeling that Bodhi isn't being truthful with himself or his daughter. Be careful, okay?

Cory: It's not like I plan on marrying him tomorrow.

Ben: Then why are you with him?

Cory: Can we stop talking about me, please?

Ben: You started this. Why did you text?

Cory: I have a Wi-Fi connection and decided to start writing the pros and cons of our partnership.

Ben: But you had another week to think about it.

Cory: As I said before, life changes.

Ben: You never told me if he's divorced or a widower.

Cory: Divorced. Apparently, they fell out of love.

Ben: Well, you know what they say, half of all marriages end up in divorce. You should wait until he marries a couple more times before taking that step.

Ben::laughing: emoji

Cory: That's a terrible joke, and where did you get those numbers?

Ben: There's some statistic lingering around the dark corners of the internet. Search for it, I bet there are millions of studies.

Cory: No, I want to know your source. Was it some bait-click article?

Ben: Why are you asking for the source?

Cory: It's important. I have seven siblings who are happily married—or engaged. If you're telling me four of those relationships will fail, I want to be prepared.

Ben: None of them will fail.

Cory: You just said that according to your sources, four out of eight marriages will end in divorce. That's half of my family condemned to your prophecy.

Ben: Your siblings don't count. Well, I'm not sure about Aslan. He has four children, and I can see Keaton dumping his ass for being too fertile.

Cory: She can't leave him. Can you imagine what'll happen if she does? He'll either destroy the entire world or die of sadness.

Ben: Don't worry about it. I'm sure it'll never happen. Your siblings are safe from any fucked-up study humans might devise to satisfy their morbid curiosity. Likely because most of my own siblings are divorced. That gives you the rate of 50% of marriages end up in divorce. Mine are bitter, while yours will live in eternal bliss.

Cory: Derek has one of the happiest marriages I've ever seen.

Ben: Derek is the exception, mostly because his mother was a saint, and ours was the bitch who destroyed her marriage and her life. They call that karma.

Ben: Did I tell you Piper is pregnant again?

Cory: Rhea's having a little sister—or a brother? That's going to be adorable.

Ben: Yep. We're all excited.

Cory: Congratulations. The next time they're in town, I'll make sure to give them a present or something. I would say drinks are on me, but she can't.

Cory: Wait, I can gift her a free massage or Haux drinks (the best mocktails in the world).

Ben: We should move the spa to the hotel.

Cory: I haven't decided yet if I'm going to do this.

Ben: Regardless, you can build one there, close to the indoor pool.

Cory: I might sell all my businesses and move out of Paradise Bay.

Ben: What happened to 'I want to rule the entire town.'

Cory: Didn't I mention that dreams change?

Ben: Picture the hotel in the middle of a vineyard, the spa next to it. You can add anything you want. The lot is big, and the possibilities are endless.

Cory: Fine, let me think about it.

Ben: Of course. In the meantime, I'm taking a tour of the property and calling some of the best architects I know.

Cory: Make sure to reach out to Elliot. It's not nepotism. Even when he's Fern's husband, he's really good at what he does.

Ben: He's on the top of my list. Safe travel.

Cory: Talk to you soon.

Chapter Seven



Benedict

THE FIRST STEP toward the rest of my life is... apparently, therapy. Thankfully, I'm not alone in this, and Derek's family supports me. Piper sent a lengthy list of potential therapists. After countless calls, I settled on Dr. Andrew Rhodes.

"What brought you here?" he asks, peering at me through the video call.

I arch an eyebrow, and he chuckles, rubbing his temples. "Right, telemedicine. I apologize. You're one of the few patients I don't see in person, so I'm still adjusting."

"I can't imagine," I say truthfully. As a small-town doctor, I run things differently. If a patient can't come in, I go to their homes and even bring medications to immobile patients.

"Tell me why you reached out," Dr. Rhodes repeats, studying me through the screen.

I stared back, unsure where to even start. This reminds me of when I pushed Heath into therapy to fix his issues. I was so good at pointing out how he'd fucked up with Atzi, and how he needed to work through his mommy issues. But I've never examined my own problems. Just pushed them down and pretended that having a dysfunctional family doesn't affect me.

Leaving home after graduating high school and never speaking to them seemed to have fixed everything. Or that's what I've told myself. Until now, as I try to raise my daughter alone and feel like I've lost myself somewhere along the way.

So where does that leave me? Do I just lay out my dysfunctional childhood, my fucked-up family... But aren't those the same things? I'm probably overthinking this. It's simpler than that.

I take a breath and begin. "I used to be really easygoing. My friends said my goal was to befriend everyone in the

world.” I give a wry half-smile. “Now I only have a few close friends. The change was gradual, but I’m not that fun, friendly Ben anymore.”

“So you miss having friends?” He rubs his chin. “If I understand correctly, you don’t like that your social circle decreased because you became a new parent.”

“No.” I grimace, rubbing my forehead. “I hate that everything sets me off now. I’m angry and nothing works in my favor.”

“How is fatherhood treating you?”

At the thought of Bernie, a stupid grin spreads across my face. “She’s my everything, but I don’t think I’m winning at that either.”

“How’s your relationship with her mom?”

I open my mouth and close it. “There’s no relationship there.” I don’t stop, giving him the abbreviated tale of my daughter’s donor.

“It was never a relationship—just a string of one-night stands over several weeks. Months later, she contacted me saying she’s expecting, and only had a few weeks to go before the baby was born.” I tap my temple in disbelief. “She wasn’t even sure if the baby was mine or her husband’s.”

I cradle my head, tamping down the familiar rage. It’s been more than three years and speaking of this still makes me mad. “She was fucking married. I’m very upfront with my hardest limit—I don’t fuck married women, no matter how hot she is. I had the one rule.”

I exhale sharply, realizing I’m losing control of my temper, again. I can feel my pulse accelerating and the vein in my temple throbbing.

“Why do you think this makes you feel so strongly, even now?” Dr. Rhodes asks and I clench my jaw, resisting the urge to end the video call right then and there. I don’t want to be in this therapy session, but I stay for Bernie’s sake.

I stare at the screen, not having an answer for him. “It’s been three years, yet you’re still angry,” he states flatly, his tone professional. “What is it that angers you the most about the situation?”

My nails dig into my palms. Everything about that situation infuriates me. Everything. She didn’t respect my boundaries. “I was almost responsible for breaking up a marriage.”

He bobs his head a couple of times. “Somehow, I don’t think this is about integrity. Has anyone in your family had a similar situation?”

I let out a derisive laugh, gaze flickering away. That exact situation is the story of my existence.

I clear my throat, rubbing the back of my neck. “My mother...” My voice trails off, and I swallow hard. “She was the nanny for my father’s children while he was still married to his first wife.”

I explain to him how my father left his family after the affair. His ex-wife spiraled into depression and killed herself. My half-brothers were sent away to boarding school. The youngest of the two was killed in some sort of accident. I barely remember it, and my father never spoke of him again.

“Affairs destroy lives,” I tell him, moving my tight jaw as I try to relax. “Not once in my life did I want to be responsible for a tragedy like the one my mother and father created. This fucking woman dragged me into an affair without consent.”

“So you blame yourself for that?” he asks gently. “You’re afraid that could’ve caused a tragedy. You think you’re responsible for the affair.”

I run a hand through my hair in frustration. “Of course I do. I should’ve made sure she was indeed single.”

He shakes his head. “I was actually talking about your parents’ affair.”

I frown, confused by his comment. “What?”

“Have you considered that you took on responsibility for their actions at some point? I wonder when that was.” He’s looking directly at the camera, but I’m guessing he’s trying to study me.

“I—I don’t think you’re right.” I swallow hard.

“When you had this affair, what else happened? The marriage ended, clearly, and you feel like you’re shouldering some burden—”

“Oh no, they’re still together,” I cut him off, holding up a hand. “To stay married, she had to relinquish her parental rights. So, she’s not in my daughter’s life now.”

“Then what broke because of that affair?” He leans forward. He’s looking directly at the camera, at me. “You have yet to tell me what this relationship destroyed that shattered your world.”

“Why do you assume something broke?” I counter, defensive.

Am I upset at that fucking woman for dragging me into her little drama without warning? Of course. My entire life shifted, but I did get one wonderful thing out of all this, didn’t I? “That’s in the past, and I got Bernie,” I say firmly. But am I trying to convince him or myself?

He nods, glancing at his watch. “This is a great start. We’ll pick up here next session—there seems to be something underlying it all. Perhaps your father’s affair, or... how’s your parents’ marriage?”

I scoff bitterly. “They divorced. Neither one of them knows how to be faithful.”

“So, maybe we can unpack that next time,” he says, glancing to his left. “When would you like to schedule our next appointment?”

Tomorrow, in an hour? “How soon can you fit me into your schedule?”

He chuckles. “You think speaking to me for hours will give you an immediate answer, don’t you?”

I open my mouth and then close it because that's exactly what I expected. Sure, I have problems, but I didn't want him to drag this all the way back to my childhood and dysfunctional parents.

"We can book something as early as Thursday, or maybe Friday. That gives you plenty of time to think about this session," he proposes.

"Thank you for this," I say. I'm not sure if I should feel grateful or look for someone else.

None of what we discussed helped me with my current problem. I don't know if I want to continue on this path, let things go, or... what is my other option?

Chapter Eight

Ben: So, did you make it back home?

Cory: Yeah, I'm in San Francisco.

Ben: When will you be back in Paradise Bay?

Cory: Soon. I still have a few days left of my vacation. I'm staying in the city to help Aslan and Keat with the quads.

Ben: I don't envy them one bit. I still remember those nights when Heath and I woke up every three fucking hours to feed Bernie. I love my child, but it was exhausting.

Cory: If you had asked for help, I'm sure everyone would've pitched in during the first few months.

Ben: It was a strange period. I was thrilled to be her father, but there were too many changes. It made more sense to power through and focus on doing than reaching out to anyone to ask for help.

Cory: Heath helped you.

Ben: Mostly because he was my temporary roommate. He was also going through a big transition. He had just moved out of San Francisco, started a new fellowship, and lost Atzi.

Cory: Right. It was around the time when he fucked up his life because my mother manipulated him. I hate that woman.

Ben: Have you considered therapy?

Cory: Ha, no amount of therapy will make me forgive her. She killed my father. You do understand that's not something you can get over, right?

Ben: But you can let go of the anger.

Cory: I'm not angry, just hopeful that she's suffering half of what we children suffered because of her actions.

Ben: Understandable. Heath's my best friend and knowing that she manipulated him since he was a child upsets me. Though, he's working on that, and maybe you should too.

Cory: How did we go from your sleepless nights to our criminal mother?

Ben: You asked me why I didn't reach out for help.

Cory: Right. Well, now you know what to do the next time you knock up one of your one-night stands.

Ben: It wasn't intentional.

Cory: Accidents happen, obviously. I remember Dad used to say that actions always had consequences. Or was it, there's always a price to pay for your mistakes?

Cory: :thinking-face: emoji

Cory: The point is that when you have sex, there's always the possibility of... babies, STIs, and more.

Ben: So, you don't mind if you and Mr. Perfect end up having children?

Cory: We're being cautious.

Ben: I was cautious.

Cory: Well, I don't think it'll happen.

Ben: But what if it does?

Cory: I'm sure he'll be happy. The guy adores his children.

Ben: How many does he have?

Cory: Three. The youngest is five or six.

Ben: Do you get along with them?

Cory: I haven't met them yet. I'm pretty sure we already went through this.

Ben: :shrug: emoji

Ben: It's possible, I do recall discussing his bratty daughter. I just don't understand why he'll take you to Paris, but won't introduce you to his children. It's weird.

Cory: There's nothing wrong with that.

Ben: Unless he's married and pretending he's divorced.

Cory: He's divorced. What is your problem with him?

Ben: I just want to make sure you don't end up with a douche that's living a double life.

Cory: :raised-eyebrow: emoji

Cory: Have I mentioned that you have to stay in your lane?

Ben: What does that mean?

Cory: As I keep reminding you, we're not friends. You have to stay out of my life. If you're bored and need someone to text, try Heath.

Ben: He just left for Mexico and won't return until next month. Something about Atzi's family and several celebrations. He invited me to join him in a few weeks. You should join me.

Cory: So, you're bored, and I'm your Heath replacement?

Ben: That's not what I meant. You and I used to be friends.

Cory: No. If I recall, I was just Heath's little sister. Remember? If not, try hypnotherapy. I've heard it helps bring back lost memories.

Cory: I'm going to silence my phone. Please stop messaging me.

Ben: We haven't discussed the hotel.

Ben: Cory, we need to come to some kind of agreement.

Ben: Text me when you're back in Paradise Bay.

Chapter Nine



Cory

ONCE UPON A TIME, Benedict Farrow and I used to text constantly. He would text me about his day and tell me about his patients—without breaking any HIPPA laws or doctor/patient confidentiality agreements. I used to pour out my every thought to him. He was my journal come to life.

From my first moments waking up to finally laying my head down at night, we chatted about everything and nothing. Our conversations flowed steadily all day unless he was in surgery, or the hospital was particularly busy. But they stopped when Heath moved in with him. Obviously, he didn't need me anymore. Ben had his best friend back, and the understudy—me—was dismissed.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Ben again. I sigh, my shoulders slumping, and silence it before slipping it back into my bag.

“Is everything okay?” Fern asks, her brows furrowing with concern as she peers up from her laptop.

“Uh-huh,” I say, my lips pressed in a tight smile. I avoid meeting her gaze and focus on pulling out my laptop, my hands fumbling clumsily.

“So, when are the gala invitations going out?” I ask, trying to move the attention away from me. Fern doesn't know about my current situation with Ben, and I want to keep it that way.

“Couple weeks. Hopefully, I'll have Maia's guest list by then,” she says.

“She's making a list, checking it twice?” I half-joke.

I open the document she sent me yesterday and stare blankly at the blinking cursor, my thoughts drifting toward Ben despite myself.

Forget about him. The gala is more important than your stupid childhood crush.

This is my second year helping Fern with the gala. Usually, it was something she handled with Mom before... their relationship fell apart. Right after Fern began dating Elliot, my mother changed her demeanor toward her. Their relationship wasn't great before, but after, it became painfully cold.

That's when everyone realized Mom wasn't some delicate widow who needed our protection, but a woman who destroyed our family and left us practically orphans.

Last year I began to help Fern with the gala, not to replace Mom, but because it's important for the family. We do it for Dad. Our brothers and sisters-in-law help in different ways.

"You laugh, but Maia knows a lot of people who're willing to open their hearts and wallets for us," she states.

Fern is right, Maia has a lot of connections, and if they don't come to the gala, they at least make a huge donation to our charity. "Let me know when you need me again. I'll block my calendar," I offer with a small smile.

Fern studies me for a moment, her gaze searching for something. "So, will you tell me what Ben wanted?" she asks.

My shoulders tense, and I try to keep my smile in place. "Nothing important."

"Are you ever going to tell me why you've been avoiding him? It's like you're no longer friends."

I let out a hollow laugh. "We were never friends."

Fern's eyes narrow, and I feel the weight of her scrutiny. "If you had said anything else, I might have let it go," she says slowly. "But there's clearly more to this."

I raise a brow and glance at her before turning back to my screen. Ignoring her is the only way to evade the inquisition. I open my emails and start to respond to them. She's not getting any information out of me.

"Don't dodge the subject," she insists.

"Drop it," I murmur, my fingers dancing across the keyboard.

“You know who’s paying for this?” she asks, her voice carrying a little anger.

I sigh, biting my tongue. I want to tell her that she’s being fucking dramatic. “No one is paying for anything.”

“Bernadette,” she says pointedly.

I sigh inwardly, fingers pausing over the keys. “What do you mean she’s paying for this? She’s three. I doubt she’ll remember my name.”

“Bernie keeps asking for you. Her face falls when we tell her Cory isn’t around. She’s hoping that you’ll be there tomorrow.” Fern looks at me sadly. “But I don’t think tomorrow is ever going to happen, is it?”

“It’s for the best,” I say hollowly, dropping my gaze. It breaks my heart knowing that Bernie misses me, and I can’t be there for her. I adore that little girl. From the first moment I held her she stole my heart.

One soul lays itself bare, surrendering every beat of its vulnerable heart, every hushed whisper of private dreams. The other remains untouched, standing at the threshold but never crossing over, cradling a heart not theirs to keep. The imbalance is palpable, a quiet torment reverberating through the chambers of the longing heart, reminding the bearer of a love that could have bloomed but never took root. But that person who surrendered everything doesn’t care. They believe they can love for two. And there’s the biggest lie of them all: you can’t make anyone love you.

Everyone thinks I’m just not willing to help Ben because I’m busy. They don’t know I was heartbroken because I lost the two people I never had. Some nights it still hurts. Being in love with Benedict Farrow was a dangerous game, waiting for him a losing bet. I loved him silently and even when I tried to be careful, my heart was sliced into pieces.

Fern crosses her arms and gives me that stern maternal glare that says either you talk or face the consequences. “What exactly is for the best?”

“You’re a mother, Fern. You, more than anyone, are aware that children need stability. I can’t help them all the time. I have businesses to run and a life to live,” I say, hoping this does the trick because I hate when she’s on my case.

Just let it go, Ferny.

“I don’t buy that. What really happened between you and Benedict?” she presses.

Why the fuck is she not backing down?

I let out a loud breath, my shoulders slumping in defeat. “Ben didn’t like that Bernie and I were getting close. I realized it was time I distance myself so—”

“No. Something else happened,” she cuts me off sharply, clearly not believing my story. My sister’s bullshit detector is working overtime.

“She called me ‘Mama,’” I say quietly, my voice quivering as I remember that morning. “Right as I was coming into the house. She saw me and said, ‘Mama.’ Bernie gave me the biggest smile in the world and ran to greet me. He stopped her and made sure to tell her I was just Cory. Just Aunt Cory.”

I swallow hard. This time I don’t shed any tears.

“So, we’re also protecting your heart, aren’t we?” Fern asks gently.

“As I mentioned before, it’s for the best.”

“Somebody has to shake some sense into that man and make him realize what’s in front of him,” she says exasperatedly.

I stare at her in confusion, her words not making sense. “Who?”

“Ben,” she states pointedly. “He’s so hung up on his fucking friendship with Heath that—” she stops herself abruptly.

I study my sister, sensing she’s hiding something. “What were you going to say?”

She waves her hand dismissively. “You two have to fix your issues.”

“There are no issues,” I say flatly, my jaw clenched. “I’m just his best friend’s little sister.”

I don’t add that I was Ben’s afterthought. I remained loyal by his side for years, hoping he’d fall in love with me, gratefully receiving those meager crumbs of attention he tossed my way. I stayed even when he repeatedly broke my heart.

The incident with Bernie was the final straw, the moment I realized enough was enough. “Let this go, okay.”

Fern nods reluctantly. “How are things with Bodhi?”

I exhale in relief, my body relaxing. This is a conversation I can have with anyone, even her. “It’s good. Paris was fun. Yeah, things are definitely better.”

“Were they bad?” she screeches.

I give her the short version of our relationship. When I finish, she says, “You have a type.”

I stare at her, unamused. “A type of what?”

“Men,” she answers.

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Oh please, I can’t wait to hear this. What is my supposed type?” I give her a skeptical look. “Just in case things don’t work out with Bodhi, I have to add it to my dating profile.”

“Emotionally unavailable.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh.

“Laugh all you want, but you chose him because he’s harmless to your heart.”

I glare at her, irritation simmering. “So, you don’t think this is going anywhere?”

“Who knows? At least he’s being honest with you. He seems to care...” She trails off, pondering. “Give him time, but don’t give him your heart yet.”

That's simple. I don't have a heart to give, but I do want to share my life with someone. Maybe what I need to do is to decide how I want my future to look and make it happen with Bodhi.

Ben who?

Chapter Ten

Ben: Hey, are you available?

Cory: Nope. As I said the last time, I can't babysit Bernie anymore. The hotel can wait, and if you need someone to entertain you, text Heath.

Ben: I wasn't going to ask for that, but if you ever have time to drop by and visit Bernie, she'll appreciate it. She misses you.

Cory: I'm sure she'll forget me soon, give it time.

Ben: Doubtful.

Cory: You're a doctor. You should know that childhood memories disappear, and you only have a few flashbacks by the time you're an adult.

Ben: Where did you read this? Was it click-bait?

Cory: Does it matter?

Ben: See, you say that, but crap that happens during your early years scars you.

Cory: Is that something you read online or from some early-childhood class you took during college?

Ben: I studied chemistry and then medicine. Why would you think it's an early-childhood class?

Cory: Just guessing since you seem to know all about childhood memories and scarring.

Ben: According to my therapist, I have Childhood PTSD.

Cory: What could've possibly happened to you? Did they give you regular spoons instead of silver spoons? The horror!

Ben: My parents' separation and the way they treated each other and us left me and my siblings scarred—we just don't recognize it.

Cory: Didn't they divorce when you were older?

Ben: Define older. Also, you need to add that they were fighting all the time. I don't recall a day in my life when they weren't being assholes to one another. I was born when they were already in trouble.

Cory: Is that why you never had a serious relationship?

Ben: :thinking-face: emoji

Ben: You might be on to something. This might be why I'm apparently angry at the world.

Cory: Whoa, how did we go from are you available to anger issues?

Ben: If we scroll up, we might find the answer. The point is that you helped me with my homework.

Cory: Why do you have homework?

Ben: I'm going to therapy.

Cory: How did that happen?

Ben: I'm trying to find the old Benedict.

Cory: You lost him? I heard your brother has a company that can search for people. Have you contacted him?

Ben: :unamused: emoji

Cory: Fine, tell me what happened to old Ben?

Ben: It seems like he's been gone for a while.

Cory: The fact that you stopped partying doesn't mean you're lost. It's probably growth.

Cory: Is this because your friend Avery misses you? I bet it's hard not to have dear 'ol Ben following you around while you spend Daddy's money.

Ben: Insightful. Tell me more about this growth.

Ben: And yes, I refuse to discuss Avery with you. Focus on my real problems, Cory.

Cory: Avery was a big problem, but let's forget about her.

Cory: You're a father. You can't just be sleeping around or traveling to another state (or country) when you feel like it.

Ben: Oh, you're talking about taking time off and enjoying life. The fact that I went with Avery was because she was always available. How many times did I invite you, and you were occupied? That's not the point, though. I'm referring to fun Ben—the one who made friends with everyone.

Cory: You stopped trusting easily. But probably most of those friendships were superficial, and you're at a point in your life where you don't want to waste your time with them. Your daughter takes precedent.

Ben: Can I take you to my therapist?

Cory: Ha, I don't think so.

Ben: But this is really helpful. And it's more like a video call, so you don't have to go anywhere. I'll come to you.

Cory: Definitely no. You're on your own.

Ben: I need you.

Cory: So what happens if Ben never comes back?

Ben: You have little faith in me.

Cory: People change, evolve, and take different paths. You just have to learn to live with that.

Ben: I just want to stop being angry at the world.

Cory: Huh? That's impossible. You're a marshmallow inside.

Ben: I don't know how to take that comment.

Cory: Well, you usually are... no, now that I think about it, you're right. In the past three years, your fuse has shortened, and you snap easily at everyone.

Ben: Now you understand why this is important. It scares me to think that I'll start yelling at Bernie, or that maybe I'm angry at my daughter.

Cory: Doubtful. She's your entire world.

Ben: Then, what is it?

Cory: They say the first step is to accept you have a problem, which you did. I'm sure you'll figure out the rest. So why did you ask if I'm available?

Ben: We have to discuss the inn.

Cory: As I mentioned before, we'll do it when I'm ready.

Ben: You're killing me, Cory.

Cory: You waited four years. You can wait a few more weeks—or months.

Ben: Fine, but I'd appreciate it if you speed this up.

Cory: Don't push me, talk to you later.

Chapter Eleven



Benedict

THE TEXT with Cory and my last therapy session have me spiraling down memory lane, re-examining my past, present, and what I need to do to avoid repeating my parents' mistakes. Because the ugly truth is, that's exactly why I've avoided serious relationships my whole life.

Do I love Cordelia Spearman?

With every fiber of my being, but she doesn't deserve to end up with someone like me. A man who comes from a long line of assholes who destroy families. As much as it would kill me, I know my best friend would never forgive me if I made a move on her and hurt her. Heath knows I'm a fucked-up man.

Yet Cory is the love of my life, and even when I promise myself I'll let her go, I just can't stay away from her for long.

I wish I could be selfless and genuinely want her happiness with Bodhi. But I'm a selfish bastard, just like all the Farrows. That poisonous legacy is why we're all so damn unhappy, living such miserable lives. Everyone around us suffers the consequences of our actions. Shannon's children are the best example. She and her ex fought bitterly for custody during the divorce. The only ones who suffered were the little ones. They're teenagers now, but still, I bet they have wounds as deep as the Krubera Cave.

Or maybe they're not as bad since Derek took the time to keep an eye on them while their parents were in the middle of the exhausting divorce that landed my sister in jail. Still, Farrows are too fucking toxic. Well, everyone except Derek. He's different.

Somehow he bypassed the asshole gene. Is it because he has a different mother than us?

Probably. The Yates DNA might've saved him from being just like the rest of us. His mother probably raised him with compassion, integrity, and love. All the things my parents

didn't have. We never got along, but he always tried to keep an eye on me. Once he tried to fix our relationship, I realized Derek is a good man—I'm grateful he's a part of my life.

Knowing he's better than us makes me want to reach out to him. He might be able to help me understand my past and how it's fucking with my present. I wish he was close by so I could drop by his house, but since he's already in Seattle, I text him.

I hope he's not away on a mission. Having a brother who owns a private security company is great until he shows up bloodied on my operating table from who the fuck knows what because he never discloses what happens to him.

Well, the latter only happened once while I was still working in New York. Derek showed up bloodied on my doorstep instead of at the hospital. I think it was the first time I realized he wasn't like the rest of my family—he genuinely cared about me, trusted me with his life. Ever since, I hold my breath whenever I learn he's off the grid on some top-secret mission.

I wait anxiously for a response, but instead of texting back, he calls.

“Hey,” I greet him, trying to sound casual.

“Is everything okay?” he asks, and his concern is palpable.

I pause for several seconds before asking, “Why wouldn't it be?”

“Your text sounded cryptic,” he answers. “That's why I called. What's going on, Ben?”

“When did you stop being mad at our father for fucking up his marriage with your mother?” The words burst out impulsively, I should've worded it in some other way, but there's nothing I can do now.

“That's a loaded question,” he responds after a long silence. It takes several more seconds before he says simply, “Piper.”

Though I adore his wife, I don't understand what she has to do with this.

“Mmm, I’ll need more than that because saying ‘Piper’ doesn’t help me at all,” I say, unable to mask my confusion.

Derek sighs heavily through the phone. “Meeting her made me want to be better. Learning about her amazing family showed me how my past was poisoning my present and future. So, I got professional help.”

“So that’s how you forgave our father,” I conclude.

“In a way. More like I made peace with what happened between my parents, Mom’s death, and... my past in general.” He goes quiet, the silence heavy between us. “We—Dad and I haven’t spoken in years, and I intend to keep it that way. Why are we talking about this?”

I give him a quick summary of my current situation—the anger, my therapist’s theory about my family origin issues, and my fears.

“So, this therapist thinks it all traces back to your parents’ trainwreck of a marriage?” Derek whistles. “That’s deep and pretty fucked-up—like their lives.”

“Maybe. Or it could be something else,” I say, trying not to sound desperate but failing miserably. “I just need to figure it out so I can fix myself.”

“From what you’re telling me, something triggered your anger around the time you knocked up this woman,” he states.

“Exactly.”

“What else happened? You had a child, but you’re not angry about her. We all can see that you embraced fatherhood and are doing amazing.”

“But what if I start resenting Bernie?” I voice my deepest fear for the second time today.

“Not possible. You’ve changed your whole life for her. If you resented her even a little, you would’ve let her mother raise her.”

At the thought of not having Bernie with me I snap. “She’s mine. I’d give my life for her. I gave up everything and everyone because all I cared about was her happiness and

well-being. I want her to feel loved.” Derek goes silent, and that’s when it hits me. I let out a strained chuckle. “Okay yeah, so I do care about my daughter, and I’m not upset with her.”

“Yeah, but you emphasized giving up *everyone*,” he points out. “Your voice changed. I think you need to explore that more. Is it because you stopped being a surgeon and became a family doctor? You had to leave your cozy apartment and your friends behind.”

“New York wasn’t the best place to raise her,” I automatically say, knowing that opening a practice in Paradise Bay was for the best. I respect the doctors who can juggle their career with a family, but I didn’t want to see if I could be one of them.

“Sure, but specifically, who did you leave behind?” he presses.

“My friends in general. I used to travel a lot—”

“If you’re going to stay in denial, I can’t help you, buddy,” Derek interrupts bluntly.

A flash of rage courses through me. “Don’t fucking call me that.”

“Buddy?” Derek chuckles. “Why is that name getting under your skin so much?”

I clench my jaw. “Cory’s boyfriend. The asshole’s name is Bodhi.”

“Ah, I think we’ve hit on something.” I don’t care much about his taunting tone, but before I can say anything, he adds, “You’ve been pissed off ever since she started dating Bodhi Wainwright. How many times have you asked us to run a background check?”

“The prick’s too old for her. And probably married,” I spit out.

“Finn and Piper are over a decade younger than me. Do you judge me?” Derek counters.

“No, it’s different for you.”

“How so?” he challenges.

“It just is,” I snap.

Derek pauses before asking bluntly, “Have you ever told Heath how you feel about his sister?”

I scoff angrily. “She’s off-limits. Heath doesn’t know. When she was sixteen, Aslan threatened to fuck up my face if I ever made a move.”

It wasn’t because of the threat, but because of everything I would lose if I dared to cross the line. Plus, she was a lot younger. But I fell hard for her, so fucking hard.

“Well, good news. She’s an adult now who can decide for herself. Get over yourself and go for it.”

“She has a boyfriend. And she seems happy with him,” I say dully.

“Then get closure and move on. Stop taking your anger out on everyone because you let her go. Why didn’t you tell her once she was old enough?” Derek demands.

I stay silent; the memories surfacing against my will. There was that time I couldn’t resist her, and I showed her exactly how I felt... but regretted it immediately, knowing I could lose everything.

Derek sighs heavily through the phone. “I’ll take your silence as confirmation something did happen between you two.”

I sighed, the memories of that night flooding back. It was in college, at a party. Heath had asked me to watch over Cory and Atzi since it was their first real party. I knew how they could get—especially Cory. Sheltered by her siblings her whole life, she was naïve about these things. Heath just wanted to protect her from anyone trying to take advantage.

All night I watched them like hawks, but it was so fucking hard. Watching Cory dance, her body swaying in time to the pulsing music... She was temptation personified.

Cory looked radiant, full of light and laughter, her dress clinging to every alluring curve. I forced my eyes away, heat

rising in my cheeks. Aslan's warning echoed in my mind—Heath's little sister was off-limits, no matter how badly I ached for her. I downed my beer, trying to drown my desire, but my self-control already hung by a thread, ready to snap.

Later I followed her to the back porch, which was almost empty. Her arms wrapped around herself against the night's chill.

"Escaped the noise for a bit?" I asked, leaning on the railing beside her.

She smiled up at me, eyes warm. "It got a little too crazy in there," she confessed.

"You get used to it," I say with a casual shrug, trying to downplay the craziness of college parties. "Or you just avoid them and live a quiet college life."

Our conversation flowed easily, as always. Cory was so effortless to talk to. When she shivered, I didn't hesitate to take off my sweatshirt and drape it around her shoulders. My fingers lingered, adjusting the fabric. She didn't pull away.

Our gazes locked, and I felt drawn to her, powerless to resist. Slowly, hesitantly, I reached out, brushing a strand of hair back from her face, caressing her cheek with my fingertips. Her lips parted slightly as I lowered my mouth to hers.

The kiss started gently, almost chastely. I was afraid of pushing too hard and scaring her off. But when she opened her mouth under mine, granting access, restraint abandoned me. I drove my tongue between her lips, taking control. Her body relaxed into my arms, melting against me. I drank her in, caressing her with my hands, my tongue, losing myself in her sweetness. Heat coursed through me as she surrendered to my passion. I couldn't stop, didn't want to stop. I crushed her lithe form to me, craving more.

But then reality crashed in, doused my fire like ice water. This kiss was everything, but the risk was too high. I couldn't lose her friendship, or my best friend. Her family would never allow this. Wrenching away from her was painful. It filled me

with immediate regret. Cory looked up at me, eyes wide, confused, lips kiss-swollen.

“Sorry,” I muttered, the word hollow and useless. Without another word, I turned and walked away, hating myself. Yet even through the churning self-loathing, I didn’t regret the feel of her lips on mine for a moment. The memory would be seared into me forever.

Chapter Twelve

Ben: We never talked about the kiss.

Cory: Excuse me?

Ben: Back when you were in college and we...

Ben: Kissed.

Cory: What's there to discuss? You said, "I'm sorry, I'm too drunk, and I don't know why I did that." Then you left me standing there, and... well, let's not talk about it, okay?

Cory: Was there anything else that needed to be covered?

Ben: First of all, I only said I'm sorry. Never mentioned anything about being drunk. Also, I was a very stupid kid.

Cory: Ben, is there a point to this text message? I have a lot to do.

Ben: There were many things that were left unsaid.

Cory: Nope. It was pretty clear. You were drunk, I was available, and things happened. You apologized, and that's the end of the story.

Ben: But that's not really how it happened.

Cory: You're here to change history? I'm pretty sure one of us was sober that night, and it wasn't you. If you're trying to say that I took advantage of you, I don't think that's true. It was just a fucking kiss.

Ben: Can we talk?

Cory: Nope. I'm busy. Haux Drinks is having a little snuffle, and we're working to get that cleared out.

Ben: What kind of snuffle?

Cory: Someone is suing us because they had an allergic reaction to the mango-rita. The one that says it contains mango puree. Why on earth would they drink it if they're allergic?

Cory: : face-palm: emoji

Ben: I know several lawyers who could help you.

Cory: Thank you, but our legal team is amazing —no need to add anyone else to the mix.

Ben: Please let me know if I can help you with anything.

Cory: How about you stop contacting me?

Ben: We still have to figure out the hotel. You can take your time, but please don't forget that.

Cory: Sell it. Let it be someone else's problem.

Ben: It's Paradise Bay.

Cory: What does that even mean?

Ben: You've always wanted to run the town.

Cory: There's a lot of things I wanted when I was younger—life changes and I have to go with it. You can keep it.

Ben: I bought it so you could build your dream, not to take it away from you.

Cory: You think my dream was to have a hotel in the middle of a small town?

Ben: Then what was it?

Cory: I didn't have what most of my siblings did. Dad was too busy with everyone else. Mom didn't give two fucks about us. But I recall hearing stories about them hosting wine tastings at the vineyard and being the town's hostess. They were a big family receiving everyone with open arms and making them feel like a part of the Spearman's. I thought I could make that happen again on my own terms.

Ben: You can still do it.

Cory: I don't know if I want to do it anymore.

Ben: What changed?

Cory: For that to happen I would need a family, and I'm not sure if I'll ever get married and have children.

Ben: Is it because Bodhi already has children?

Cory: You're such a smart man, Ben, but also so fucking stupid.

Ben: Whoa, what did I do? I just want to help you.

Cory: You can't help me. My heart has been broken too many times, and I'm not sure if I want to put myself on the line again.

Cory: I have things to do. Lose my number, okay?

Ben: I just want you to know that I wasn't drunk when I kissed you. I stopped it because I thought it was for the best.

Cory: Best for who?

Ben: We have to discuss this in person.

Cory: Not interested but thank you.

Ben: Please, give me a chance.

Cory: Is this part of your therapy?

Ben: Probably.

Cory: Well, try to fix your shit without me, okay?

Ben: What if YOU are what I need to fix everything?

Cory: Then don't. It's pretty simple. Leave me alone.

Ben: I will, but if you find it in your heart to hear me out, you know where to find me.

Chapter Thirteen



Cory

FUCKING BENEDICT FARROW.

I swear that man has a death wish. One of these days—probably tomorrow—I'm going to maim him, and no one will find his body. Okay, I need to rethink that plan because his daughter needs him for at least another fifteen years. But after that, he's going to meet his maker, I swear.

Thanks to him, I was distracted during our meeting with the lawyers. My thoughts were consumed by Benedict. His recent texts burned in my mind, dragging me back to that kiss years ago. The kiss he gave me during my first college party when I was just a freshman. It's ancient history now. It happened. He rejected me, and yet...

I'm still hurting.

I remembered it all too vividly. My hesitant lips, the warmth of his mouth... the fantasy that one day he would see *me* becoming a reality.

In that instant, I longed to beg of him, please, love me, be gentle with me. For one fleeting heartbeat of time, I thought he did—he was loving me. He caressed me with his tongue, his soul merging with mine. His hands were so tender as they cradled my face, his body pressed to mine with such warmth. In that beautiful, delusional instant, I felt seen, cherished, adored—like I was everything to him.

But as quickly as it bloomed, the fantasy died. The feeling that I meant something vanished, leaving me empty, used. The cold void tore ragged chunks from my naïve heart. For years after, I hoped we could regain that closeness, that intimacy. I twisted myself into who I thought he wanted, dimming my own light, just praying for another scrap of the affection I craved.

Anything to taste again that one perfect moment when I believed I was his entire world—when he was mine.

Now, now my heart is done with him. It took so long for me to realize I deserve more than a few crumbs of affection, more than constantly struggling to earn someone's love and respect. I've been swallowing my own voice and needs for too long. The girl who lived for that kiss died years ago. Now there is only me, free to walk away and finally live for myself. My heart is still mending, but I am no longer his. I'm my own person.

"You okay?" Huxley asks as we leave the lawyer's office.

"Yeah, fine," I lie, keeping my eyes fixed ahead, hoping he's still too enamored with his fiancée to notice the turmoil roiling inside me.

"You sure? You seemed distracted," he presses.

"Just concerned about the lawsuit," I say, trying to keep my tone light, casual. If he realizes this is about Benedict, we'll fight. Huxley hates when I keep things from him and hates it more that I can't let Ben go.

My twin is the one person I've never managed to fool. He's known about my desperate crush since the first time we met Benedict years ago.

Hux scoffs, clearly not buying it. "You were completely checked out back there."

I tap my temple, forcing a smile. "Don't worry. I got it all up here."

"Uh-huh. I'll send you my recording just in case you missed anything," he says as he punches the elevator button. I resist the urge to grind my teeth in frustration.

"I never forget details. You know that."

He shakes his head. "Wanna tell me who was texting you while we were in there?"

"What? No one," I say quickly. Too quickly.

"I know you, Cory. Someone messaged, and you spaced out. What gives?" His eyes bore into me, seeing too much as always.

“That’s—”

“I’m your twin,” he cuts me off sharply. “I know you better than anyone else.”

I clench my jaw, glancing away. “Well, you’re wrong this time,” I lie. Of course, he’s right—a ghost from my past dragged me back to the personal hell I’ve been trying to escape.

If Huxley learns the truth, I’ll never hear the end of it. He’s lectured me for years about forgetting Benedict Farrow. Sure, they’re friends, but Hux wishes he could hate his guts for how he’s hurt me. This is all my fault for giving my heart to someone who clearly doesn’t give two fucks about me.

“Is it that new guy?” Hux prods.

I furrow my brow, feigning confusion. “What new guy?”

Huxley sighs, raking a hand through his hair. “Come on. I can tell you’re going through something. It’s not pleasant, you know. I hate when you hurt because I feel it too.” He presses a palm to his chest, his eyes softening with empathy.

“I told you, I’m fine,” I insist, forcing a tight smile.

He grins wryly back. “Yeah, the magic words that tell me things aren’t going well, or Benedict is screwing with you again.”

Finally, the elevator doors open. I sag in relief seeing it crowded, granting us momentary silence during the descent. But the respite ends as we step out into the lobby.

Huxley turns to me, brow furrowed. “I knew cutting him off wouldn’t work. Ben snapped his fingers, and you went running back.”

I bristle, halting in my tracks to glare at him. “It is not like that this time.” My voice rings with conviction.

“He did what Ben does best,” he states. “He fucked up and upset you. You decided to cut all contact, but he snaps his fingers, and you go running back.”

“You’re wrong,” I say firmly, hands clenching.

Huxley comes to a halt, crossing his arms over his broad chest. His eyes bore into mine. “So what exactly happened that’s distracting you and breaking your heart?”

I close my eyes briefly, exhaling, and explain everything—the inn, the texts, all of it leading up to today.

When I open my eyes, Huxley stares at me, eyes narrowed, jaw tight. I can feel the judgment radiating off him.

“Don’t give me that look,” I mumble.

“Explain this kiss again?” he demands.

“What kiss?” I play dumb because why the fuck did I just tell Hux about it?

“You never told me he fucking kissed you. I’m going to mess up his pretty face.” Huxley’s hands ball into fists.

“It was just a little kiss, nothing serious,” I say quickly.

Huxley scoffs. “It was serious if neither of you are over it.”

I sigh, shoulders slumping. “Listen, it was intense, okay? Like nothing I’ve experienced since. But... he backed off right after, apologized, and we never talked about it again.”

Huxley shakes his head bitterly. “Want my advice? Delete his number, block him everywhere, and tell the family he’s not welcome anymore.”

I bite my lip. “He doesn’t have anyone but us...”

“It’s either you or him, and I’m biased—you’re my twin. He’s disposable.”

“But he’s family,” I protest. “We Spearman’s open the doors to others and keep them forever. You can’t just kick him out.”

Before Huxley can argue further, Gatsby jogs up to us. “What did I miss? Tried to get here sooner, but traffic was a fucking nightmare.” His gaze darts between us. “Do we need a new legal team for the lawsuit?”

“No, they’ve got it handled,” Huxley assures him. “We won’t settle. This guy tries to shake down small companies

into paying him off. Well, we're shutting his operation down instead."

Gatsby exhales in relief, shoulders loosening. "Good. But what's with the faces?" His eyes narrow with concern.

"It's nothing," I say quickly, sliding on my sunglasses to hide my unease.

"Uh-huh. You look thrilled. Life's clearly amazing," Gatsby retorts dryly. "Come on, what's the deal?"

"She's having man drama," Huxley blurts out. "Wanna join our slumber party and dish?"

Gatsby's eyes widen slightly. I know he remembers my emo-teen years. I resist the urge to grind my teeth in annoyance. I'm not sixteen anymore—I can handle this.

"It's not a big deal. I've got it covered," I state firmly.

Gatsby bobs his head slowly. "Alright, but I'm having Lang, Caspian's agent, run a background check on your boyfriend just to be safe. It's past time."

Panic spears through me. "Don't do that. Please." I'm sure there's nothing wrong with Bodhi, but he has no right to invade his privacy just because he can't trust anyone.

Gatsby's eyes narrow. "Then introduce us properly. We'll all meet at the winery on Sunday for family dinner."

I shake my head quickly. "That's not... I'm not bringing anyone."

He shrugs. "Fine, but don't complain when I know his social security number, his favorite food, and his driving record by Monday morning."

I scowl. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Probably so, but if he's going to be in your life, we need to meet him," Gatsby states firmly.

I grit my teeth. "If you scare him off, I swear—"

"That's usually Heath and Ben's area. But Heath's away, and Ben's occupied, so your guy will be safe from them. At

least for now.”

I open my mouth to argue but then close it. He’s right—it’s often Heath who sabotages my relationships. I doubt Benedict has ever cared enough to intervene.

“Fine, I’ll bring him unless he has a family thing,” I concede.

Gatsby’s eyes narrow. “He should bring his family too.”

I shake my head sharply. “No, he can’t.”

“Why not?” Huxley asks, frowning.

I sigh, casting my eyes downward. “He’s not allowed to introduce me to his kids.”

Gatsby’s nostrils flare, but he simply asks, “I see. And why is that?” His tone is measured, but I can detect a simmering anger beneath the surface.

I wave a hand vaguely, unwilling to explain further.

After a heavy moment, Gatsby nods. “Just be careful, alright? You need to figure this out because if he’s married or stringing you along... just watch yourself.”

“Of course, I will,” I say lightly.

Gatsby leaves, and Huxley remarks, “I’m impressed.”

“By what?”

“He didn’t blow up, and you didn’t scream. It’s like you two can actually talk now instead of competing.” Huxley nudges me playfully. “My baby sister is maturing.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I need to get going.”

“You just need to push away that crush you have for Ben and make sure the fucker you’re dating is safe,” Huxley says, kissing my forehead. “Stay away from Benedict, and call me if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” I say sincerely before climbing into my car.

As I sink into the seat, relief floods through me. My family won’t be exiling Benedict because of my stupid feelings. Everything will be okay.

Chapter Fourteen

Cory: How dare you bring up that kiss?

Ben: Sorry.

Cory: That's all you can say? Sorry? I don't even know what you're sorry about.

Ben: Then, maybe we should get together to discuss it in person.

Cory: Nope.

Ben: Listen, I want to figure things out between us.

Cory: There's no between us, Ben.

Ben: Can we talk?

Cory: No, and I know Fern invited you to the winery this Sunday, but this is your invitation not to be there.

Ben: You know that makes no sense, right?

Cory: I'm uninviting you, does that make sense to you?

Ben: Why?

Cory: Because I don't want to see you.

Ben: You've made that perfectly clear, but this is a family dinner.

Ben: Hello, is this thing still on?

Ben: Cordelia, what's happening?

Cory: I was about to say that you're not family, but I'm not cruel.

Ben: What's really happening? I get that I did something that pissed you off (still trying to figure out what), but you need to tell me so I can fix it, babe.

Cory: a) don't call me babe.

b) I just don't want you in my life.

c) There's nothing to fix.

Ben: Wow, so really nothing, huh? Like you're actually telling me to fuck off and leave your family, aren't you?

Cory: I wouldn't do that. They're yours too.

Ben: What did I do?

Cory: Let it go, okay?

Ben: How can you ask me that when you're practically telling me that you don't want to see me ever again?

Cory: I'm just asking you not to go this Sunday.

Ben: Sure, but now I've come to realize that for the past six months, you've been absent from your family's celebrations to avoid me. You really don't want me in your life. I want to know why, and then, I'll walk away.

Cory: You need them.

Ben: No. I need you, but if I can't have you, I won't come between you and your family.

Cory: Ben, those are not my intentions.

Ben: Talk to me, just one last time, and then I'll leave you alone.

Cory: I'll think about it. Don't contact me please.

Chapter Fifteen



Benedict

AFTER READING Cory's last text, a heavy weight settles in my chest, stifling my breath. This could be the last time I speak to her. If I do this, I might lose the Spearman—the one family that's been there for me since I left home at seventeen.

For years I've been afraid, but it's time that I find the courage and put all my cards on the table. If I ever want Cory to love me, I have to handle this like an adult. This is my only move, and even when I might lose her and all the Spearman, I have to do it.

So, I make the call I've been avoiding for what feels like an eternity.

On the first ring, Heath's gruff voice answers, "Yeah?"

I hesitate, my throat tightening. "Do you remember threatening me years ago? About seeing your sisters as more than friends or family?"

His chuckle has a sharp edge. "No, I distinctly recall saying 'I'll fuck you up if you cross that line.'"

I rub my temple. "Semantics. But you do remember it happened, right?"

He snorts. "The sentiment stands. And if you're hinting that you're falling for Fern, Elliot might be the one adjusting your pretty face."

"Can you take this seriously for one second?"

After a heavy moment, Heath sighs. "What the fuck do you want, Benedict?"

I draw in a shaky breath, letting the words tumble out. "I'm in love with Cory."

Silence rings for several beats before Heath groans loudly. "You're confused because she helped you with Bernie. Get over this little crush and move on. My sister is *off-limits*."

I grit my teeth, gathering my courage. “Heath, listen to me. Please don’t interrupt.”

I take his silence as permission to continue. Swallowing hard past the lump in my throat, I start, “It happened the first Christmas I spent at your house—or maybe the first day I went to Paradise Bay.” I stare down at my hands, unable to believe I’m finally confessing this secret I’ve kept for so long.

Slowly, haltingly, I recount everything—how Cory captured my heart from that very first holiday we spent together. How over the years, my feelings for her grew, even as I knew nothing could ever happen between us. Nothing I’ve tried has stopped me from loving her. In fact, every day I love her even more, including the way she took in Bernie and cared for her as if she’s part of the family.

My daughter doesn’t miss having a mother because she has Cory. Though, because of my friendship with Heath and stupid misconceptions, I didn’t allow this to happen.

When I finally fall silent, Heath demands roughly, “Why are you telling me this now?”

I run a shaky hand through my hair. “Because as I mentioned, I love her. And I asked her to give me a chance to... to figure us out. When I talk to her next, I want to lay everything on the table—my feelings, my intentions. I’m tired of hiding from this out of fear of hurting her or losing you or your family. Even if I lose everyone after this call, at least I’m finally trying.”

Heath exhales loudly. “Listen, you’re my best friend, Ben, but this is...” He trails off, and I can feel his frustration simmering.

“I know, I’m a fucked-up mess, and I don’t deserve her. But I swear I’m getting my life together, for Bernie and Cory,” I say almost enthusiastically. “I just need you to hear me out.”

After a tense moment, Heath asks wearily, “What, exactly, do you want from me here?”

“I really don’t know. I just...”

“You don’t even fucking know?” he growls. “Do everyone a favor and stay the fuck away from her.”

Before I can respond, Atzi’s voice sounds in the background. “I’ll talk to him, Heath.”

“He has to stay away,” he groans.

“It’s not that simple,” she says. “This is definitely not about you, but Cory, even when he’s trying to do the right thing and tell you about his feelings.”

“But—” Heath starts talking, but Atzi interrupts him.

“Hey, Benedict,” she greets me. “So, you’re finally ready to confess your undeniable love for her?”

“I’m trying,” I whisper.

“Listen, I’ll talk to Heath about this, but you...” she sighs. “You have to promise me that you won’t hurt her this time.”

I frown, stung. “When have I hurt her?”

She laughs. It’s a humorless laugh. “Men. You’re so fucking stupid.”

“Probably, but if I hurt her before, it wasn’t on purpose.”

In the distance, Heath growls, “I might kill him.”

“You won’t,” Atzi says firmly. “Let them figure this out.”

“Ben, I swear...” Heath continues cursing, and I can barely hear what he’s saying.

I run a hand through my hair, emotion swelling in my chest. “I’ve tried not to love her, I swear. But it’s impossible. She captured my heart so long ago... I don’t want it back.”

How do I explain to them that she’s where I belong? My person, the one soul that matches mine. The problem is I’ve lived my life terrified—of hurting, of being hurt. And now, facing Cory’s rejection head-on, I realize just how much I’ve lost. How many moments I missed with her because I was a coward.

I remember the first time I saw her, a teen in her brother’s oversized hoodie, hair escaping her braids. She grinned at me

with that wide, innocent smile, and in that instant, I was lost, even if I didn't understand it yet.

Over the years there were a thousand chances—stolen moments on lazy Sundays, nights talking by the fire long after the others wandered off to bed, road trips where it was just the two of us belting out songs at the top of our lungs. Daily texts talking about anything or maybe nothing. Cory was always there when something bad happened to one of my patients.

I had a thousand chances to tell her how I felt, how she set my soul ablaze, how I wanted to spend every mundane, beautiful, messy moment by her side. And I said nothing. I let fear freeze the words in my throat.

Now she's slipping through my fingers, and the regret is eating me on the insides, threatening to swallow me whole. I know I can't get back what we lost. That's on me, my cowardice. But if she gives me a chance, just one, I'll spend every day making up for that lost time.

I'll show her all the ways I love her that I never had the courage to do before. I'll give her my battered, imperfect heart and pray she still wants it. This may be my last opportunity, and I'm terrified, but more than anything, I'm determined not to waste another second we could spend together. I can't lose her again without trying.

I can't recover what we lost because I was an idiot, but if she lets me love her, I'll make up for every second we missed.

Chapter Sixteen



Cory

THIS TIME, I don't let myself wallow in misery over Benedict. I shove him into the darkest corner of my mind, buried next to my mother and others who have hurt me or my family. He will stay locked away for good.

Around five p.m., Bodhi texts inviting me to dinner. Excited at the prospect of finally meeting his kids, I accept immediately. But as he pulls up in his Porsche thirty minutes later, I realize with sinking disappointment that it's just the two of us.

"Thought you had the kids tonight?" I ask, securing my seatbelt.

"I do, but it's their grandfather's birthday. Miriam took them to celebrate with her parents," he explains casually.

I've never been divorced myself, but this seems... odd. "You two seem to have a very, very friendly relationship."

He shrugs. "What's the alternative to getting along?"

"I guess you're right," I murmur, leaning back in my seat. I try convincing myself this isn't a big deal—he never actually promised I'd meet his kids tonight. But resentment still prickles under my skin.

I am my own worst enemy, setting expectations and giving endlessly just to be disappointed. Well, it's mostly love, and the only recipient is Benedict. For years I surrendered myself to him, hoping that he'd fall for me. Like a movie, I recall every single moment when he didn't do what I had hoped.

Like my high school graduation. He came with my family, and while everyone hugged me and congratulated me, he just said, "You two did great." Not just me, but also Huxley. By then, he knew how much I hated it when people lumped us into just one person. I love my twin, but some people think we function as one—we don't.

Every Christmas, we exchanged presents, and I foolishly hoped he would finally look at me and say, “I love you, Cordelia.” Nope. He never did. There’s the time when the entire family gifted me the inn—he offered to partner with me. We began to work on it, but then let it fall into despair, fractured like my heart and our relationship.

“Cory? You still with me?” Bodhi’s voice snaps me from my spiraling thoughts.

I refocus, smoothing my expression. “Sorry, you were saying about divorce...”

“Right,” he continues, eyes on the road. “Some people go to extremes to prevent their ex from being happy. It wasn’t easy at first,” he admits after a pause, hands tightening on the wheel. “But we agreed to co-parent peacefully for the kids’ sake. They still live in our family home full-time. Miriam and I just trade off staying there every other month.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that you two still live together?”

“I wouldn’t phrase it that way,” he says, a bit defensively.

“But you have the same address. Even if you’re not there at the same time, you still live together,” I point out, suspicion creeping into my tone. Gatsby’s warning echoes in my mind at how little I truly know about Bodhi. “Do you ever share the same roof?”

After a lengthy pause, Bodhi finally concedes, “We do spend Christmas in the same house—for the sake of the children. There’s also the odd day when Story is having a hard time.”

I cross my arms. “So, whatever happened to her boss? The one she was in love with.”

Bodhi clears his throat, staring fixedly ahead at the road. “As I mentioned, things weren’t that simple in the beginning. I’m not proud of my actions back then.”

“What did you do?” I press, imagining the worst.

My mind spirals with the worst possibilities. My own mother killed my father when they couldn't agree on divorce terms. For all I know, Bodhi hired a hitman to dispose of Miriam's lover. I scan the road ahead, plotting my escape in case he decides I'm next.

"Oh, I just added a clause that neither of us can remarry until Tallulah turns eighteen. Neither one of us can introduce them to a love interest, unless it's serious," he explains casually. Glancing over, he's grinning with sheer satisfaction, like he just got the best blow job ever.

His words sink in slowly. "So, neither one of you can get married in the next twelve years or so, huh?"

He nods and grins smugly. "Yeah."

"You do understand that this affects you too," I point out.

"I don't care." He shrugs. "I'm not planning more than... this." His eyes flick to me briefly. "A fun relationship with a beautiful woman."

"Fun," I echo dully. "You never want marriage again. Just fun."

I sound a little off. It's not like I expected a proposal tonight, but we obviously want different things. We've already peaked. Any further growth is off the table.

"This... us, where do you see us in five years?" The question escapes before I can stop it. I need to know if I'm wasting my time on a dead-end here.

Around me, my family and friends are settling down, building futures with their spouses or in Hux's case, his fiancée. And me? I keep trying to replace Benedict with carbon copies of him—emotionally unavailable men who will never give me what I truly want or need.

"We'll be traveling a lot," Bodhi muses when I ask about the future. "Living our best lives together."

I blink, confused. "Do you see us eventually living together?"

He makes a noncommittal sound. “I mean, we could get a place to share during my kid-free months. But you can never really be part of their lives.”

My jaw drops. “Wait... why are we even dating if I can never meet your kids, and you don’t want a real future?”

“We’re having fun,” he says, as if it’s obvious. As if I’m crazy for wanting more.

I recall him saying in Paris he wasn’t an easy man to love—or was it to get along with? I can’t remember but that was clearly an understatement. With all his baggage and restrictions, we can never move forward. I’m just a fun destination for him, not a home port where we can build a life together.

Ben’s questions come back to mind, and I have to ask them because I hate to live in a world where Benedict Farrow is right about the man I’m dating. “Are you sure you’re even divorced?”

“Of course,” he insists. “We just have a very unconventional custody agreement. But we’re done, I swear.”

I can’t help but laugh bitterly. Bodhi seems to check all the boxes on paper, but the fantasy dissolves under closer inspection. Whether he’s trying to spite his ex or cling to her, I want no part of it.

Though our time together was enjoyable, it’s time to leave this car ride—permanently.

“Would you mind taking me home?” I ask abruptly.

He frowns, eyes fixed ahead. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“I just realized that my sister was right,” I say, releasing a hollow chuckle.

“Care to share more?”

Since this is the last time I’m seeing him, I might as well be honest. “She said I had a type, emotionally unavailable men.”

“I could fall for you, if we had more time,” he argues.

I roll my eyes. “I’m not interested.”

Because even if he did love me someday, that’s as far as we could go. It would be the same movie on repeat—me falling helplessly while he holds back. I already lived that script once with Benedict. I won’t keep recasting the role, hoping for a different ending.

“We could really try, make it work,” Bodhi presses earnestly.

I just laugh mirthlessly. “No thanks.”

I slump back in my seat, staring out the window. I’m done chasing men who will never prioritize me. It’s time I learn to walk away when they show me who they are. No more waiting around for unavailable men to change.

Chapter Seventeen

Cory: Men are stupid.

Ben: All of them or just a few of us.

Cory: You're probably on top of the list.

Ben: I would agree, but I have the feeling I'm not the only stupid man. What happened?

Cory: I want to believe that Bodhi is indeed divorced, and he has a pretty unconventional custody agreement.

Ben: What happened?

Cory: He can't get married until his youngest (who is five or six years old) turns eighteen. He shares a house with his ex-wife but only lives there every other month with the children. It sounds... weird.

Ben: I can ask my brother to look for the divorce settlement. Finn can hack almost anything.

Cory: Nah, if he was lying, shame on him. If it's true, he's a complete idiot and knowing the truth won't change anything.

Ben: Why exactly?

Cory: He did it to fuck his ex-wife, but I think this is why he can't have a long-term relationship.

Ben: I'm taking that Bodhi isn't perfect after all, huh?

Cory: He checked all those boxes.

Ben: Which boxes?

Cory: First impression ones that make a woman think he could be a long-term relationship or even more—their everything. Obviously, he's not.

Cory: Bodhi is just another man who left me wondering what's wrong with me.

Ben: There's nothing wrong with you.

Cory: Oh, I think I've realized that now. Though, I have one big fat flaw.

Ben: Care to share with the class?

Cory: I either fall in love with the impossible or date emotionally constipated men.

Ben: Sorry things didn't work out with him.

Cory: You're not.

Ben: I am. All I want is for you to be happy, Cory.

Cory: I want to believe you.

Ben: But you don't, huh?

Cory: Not one bit. Gatsby said you and Heath are who ran off any man I dated.

Ben: I plead the fifth.

Cory: Why would you do it?

Ben: Where are you?

Cory: Home, why?

Ben: Paradise Bay or at your apartment in San Francisco?

Cory: Does it matter?

Ben: Yep.

Cory: After he dropped me off, I decided to drive to Paradise Bay because I didn't want to be alone. When I moved into Aslan's building, I thought being close to my brothers would be cool. I didn't realize that no one was living there until I unpacked the last box.

Ben: Caspian is there during the off-season, isn't he?

Cory: Nope. They are staying in Oregon. If they visit, they go to their house in Paradise Bay. Once Cas retires, he and Rys plan on settling here. Cas thinks it's the perfect place to raise Eris and any future kids.

Ben: He's right about that.

Cory: Obviously, considering you plan to raise Bernie here yourself.

Ben: It all depends.

Cory: You're not sure?

Ben: I might have to move out.

Cory: Your practice is here.

Ben: Sure, but what if I have to leave?

Cory: Leave and go where?

Ben: Probably Seattle. One day Derek, Finn, and Piper will stop jumping around and settle there since it's Piper's hometown.

Cory: But then Bernie wouldn't grow up with Eris.

Ben: She'll make other friends.

Cory: Is this because I said to skip the family dinner? I won't be there either, so there's no point in you not going.

Ben: You shouldn't miss out because you can't stand me.

Cory: It's fine. I see everyone often enough.

Ben: Can we talk?

Cory: What's there to talk about, Benedict?

Cory: Ben...

Cory: Ben...

Cory: Okay, so you want to talk, but you're ignoring me.

Cory: Don't message me, I have a visitor. It's probably Hux or Kenzie. I don't want you to interrupt me..

Cory: Go away, Benedict.

Ben: Can we please talk?

Cory: Go away!

Ben: Please, open the door.

Cory: Nope. Where's Bernie?

Ben: Kenzie is babysitting for me. Can you give me ten minutes, please?

Cory: Don't make me regret this.

Chapter Eighteen



Cory

AFTER BODHI DROPPED me at my apartment, I needed a distraction from replaying our disastrous six-month relationship. I headed to Paradise Bay. There's always something to do at the bar. But once I stepped in and saw how the staff had everything under control, I remembered that it's been almost two years since Hux and I stopped working on the everyday tasks.

We oversee operations but focus on the administrative side of our businesses now.

Huxley freed up his time to travel with Enid and run their bookstore. And me? Well, I did it to help Benedict with Bernie. She's too young to go to daycare. Sure, plenty of children don't have a stay-at-home parent, but knowing how important the formative years are, I offered to be there for her.

Tonight is the first time I've realized I altered my entire life for them. Who does that? Someone very, very stupid and blinded by love.

When I get home, I search "how to stop loving someone" and fall down an internet rabbit hole. Many of the sites I visit have one thing in common. They recommend closure.

Since I don't have much to do I... do something stupid. I text Benedict so I can get some kind of closure or... I need that guy who'll come running because I had a crappy date. The guy who'll hold my hair if I have the flu and am puking up my guts. Honestly, I'm not sure why I did it, but instead of asking for closure outright, I started the message the way I used to, before things went bad between us.

Big mistake.

Huge mistake.

Now he's outside my door wanting to talk.

I can't ignore him. He knows I'm here and is paying my niece, Kenzie, so she can babysit Bernie—on a school night.

New plan: I'll hear Benedict out, then request my heart back in some symbolic way. Should I just confess I was in love with him?

No, I can't make myself that vulnerable.

Another knock sounds at the door, his voice muffled. "Cory..."

I sigh, smoothing my expression before swinging the door open. "Here goes nothing," I whisper.

"Hi, thank you for opening the door," Benedict says, relief flashing across his face as he steps inside. His eyes drink me in like a man finding an oasis in the desert.

I fold my arms over my chest. "I don't know why you had to rush over."

"You sounded upset earlier. Among other things, I wanted to check on you," he explains.

I huff impatiently. "It wasn't anything serious. We aren't even really friends, Benedict."

That's just like Benedict—he'll drop everything and rush to the side of whoever needs him the moment something goes wrong. Even after all this time, he's never been able to bear the thought of anyone being alone. That's probably why he was one of the best surgeons and now a great family doctor.

I think back to all the times over the years when he's shown up, no questions asked, just because he assumed I needed him. Like the time I shattered my arm skiing in Steamboat with my cousins. He flew in that very night to help me while I was there and to bring me home. Or when my first big relationship imploded in my second year of college, and he was at my door with ice cream and watched rom-coms with me to cheer me up.

But that's how Ben is with anyone. If one of his friends is at their lowest, Benedict appears to lift them back up. He'll drop everything because he's that kind of guy. If it's me, he

never judges or says empty platitudes—just lets me rage and cry until I’m spent. He’s always there with warm bear hugs, gentle advice, and reassurances that I’ll get through whatever happened to me.

There were times I believed he was attuned to my pain—that he’d drop everything just for me. That made me fall madly in love with him, and of course, I wished he’d fall for me the same way. This is why I can’t move on.

Benedict fucking Farrow acts like we share some bone-deep connection. But that’s just my fantasy. The truth is, helping people comes as naturally as breathing to him. He’ll always be the first to anyone’s rescue, not just mine. That’s what makes him a great doctor.

Poor Cordelia Spearman, she’s starving so much for love and attention that thought she could be important to a man like Benedict.

“I’m fine, you can go,” I say sharply, irritated he’s making me question my resolve. It’s not his fault I misunderstand his intentions every single time he comes to my rescue.

“Though, I’m glad to learn that this asshole didn’t break your heart,” Benedict says, “I’m here for more than just him.”

I frown. “Well, I can’t watch Bernie anymore if that’s what you want.”

He nods slowly. “I understand, but may I ask why you stopped suddenly?”

I sigh, hugging myself. “We were getting too close. She was confused about who I am to her. It’s best if I keep my distance.”

“I handled that poorly,” Benedict says quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You always put her first. That’s one thing I admire about you,” I admit reluctantly.

“Not always,” he argues. “You and Bernie are equals in my life, just in different ways.”

I scoff bitterly. “What does that even mean?”

“Before her, you were my entire world. Now you both share that place, but you’re irreplaceable in your own way.” His words squeeze the breath from my lungs.

“I still don’t understand what you’re trying to say, Benedict?” I shake my head, trying to ignore the way my traitorous heart quickens at his words. I can’t let him back in so easily, no matter how sweetly he speaks.

I’m no one to him—at least, that’s what I tell myself. I’m working so hard to erase him completely, to cauterize this wound he left in my soul. But it’s so easy to slip back into old habits with him.

No, I refuse to be swayed by sweet nothings no matter how much my foolish heart wants to believe them. I’m no longer the naïve girl who mistook his friendship for something more. It’s time I learn my worth, even if it means finally saying goodbye to this man I’ve loved my whole life.

He may have been my entire world once, but I cannot build dreams on a crumbling foundation, no matter how badly I wish otherwise.

“You know what? I don’t care. Just leave.” I point toward the door.

I need something solid, lasting—not sweet words written in sand for the next wave to erase.

Chapter Nineteen



Benedict

“YOU KNOW WHAT? I don’t care. Just leave,” Cory snaps, jabbing her finger angrily toward the door. Her eyes blaze with hurt and fury. Jaw clenched tight.

I stand frozen, her words hitting me like a physical blow. This can’t be how it ends between us, not like this, not when it never started.

“Cory, please...” I begin, my voice cracking painfully.

She crosses her arms, glaring at me. “I truly don’t know what you want from me, but as I keep saying, I’m not interested in your friendship or whatever it is that we’ve had. I deserve better.”

Her rejection slices through me, but I know I’ve brought this on myself.

I did it every time I hid the depth of my feelings for her and pushed her away out of fear. My regrets and longing pour out of me.

“You’re right. You deserve so much more, which is why I’ve kept my distance from you since I met you,” I say, straightening my back and grabbing hold of this situation.

If this is our last conversation, I’m laying it all on the line. I held myself back, missing chances with her due to my own cowardice. Atzi says I broke Cory’s heart, and knowing I hurt her makes me feel ill. Because the truth is, I adore Cory with all my heart. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.

I should have loved her openly, long ago. Instead, I waited too long, and now I’ve lost her. By the fury in her eyes, I’m certain she must hate me. I rake my hands through my hair, desperately seeking the words to break through to her. But the damage seems too deep to repair.

“Please Cory, please,” I rasp in agony. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I can’t lose you. Not when I finally

understand what you mean to me. How much I lo—”

“What are you doing?” she interrupts sharply. Slowly, she begins shaking her head, face crumpling as she covers her ears. “No. No, no. No, no, no, no, no. I won’t listen, not after everything you put me through.”

Her rejection lands like a knife in my heart. I reach for her instinctively but stop myself, hands falling uselessly to my sides. All I want is to comfort her, but I know I’m the one causing this pain. This beautiful, vibrant woman that still owns my battered heart—I’m the reason she’s broken.

After a few minutes, Cory stands directly in front of me, poking my chest sharply. “How dare you come here and...” She trails off, huffing as her eyes blaze. “Why are you really here, Benedict? I’m trying to move on. You’ve broken my heart too many times.”

“If I had known, I would have—”

“Stop,” she cuts me off harshly.

“Just give me five minutes to explain,” I plead.

“You don’t deserve even that much,” Cory snaps. “Let me tell you what would have happened if I’d confessed I was in love with you back then. You would have rejected me, called it some stupid fantasy. But now that I’m not fawning over you, you need my attention again?”

I open my mouth, but she barrels on. “Every time I start to heal, you rip the stitches open. My heart begins to bleed and no one, *no one*, is ever there to hold me. This time was worse because it wasn’t just you—it was Bernie too.” Her voice catches as tears shimmer in her eyes. “You made it clear I’m not allowed to love her. I’m done with you.”

This is all me. My girls are hurting because I’m emotionally immature. I thought I knew more than many and that having millions of friends made me better than many. Nope. If there’s something I’m learning through therapy, it’s that sometimes perception is different from reality.

“This is a poor excuse, but I followed the wrong advice,” I admit, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“I don’t care,” Cory says sharply, arms folded across her chest.

She may not want to hear me, but I won’t leave until she has the full truth and can make an informed choice.

“Lysander kept insisting I forget you and just focus on Bernie. That you deserved better than the mess I’ve made of my life.” I snort derisively. “Day in, day out, the same lecture came from him.”

I pace the living room, frustration boiling up. “Just like when we were young and Aslan threatened me, and Gatsby always warned me away from you. I let their disapproval get in my head.”

Cory’s eyes flash. “So you’re saying my brothers are to blame for you being an ass?”

I rake a hand through my hair. “No, that’s on me. I just... I admire them so much, like the big brothers I never had. I let their opinions sway me because I wanted their approval.”

“Just get out,” Cory snaps, trembling with anger. “I hate all of you.”

I nod, gutted. “I hate myself too. But I want to make this right, I swear.” My voice cracks with emotion. “I want to fix us.”

“That kiss. My *first* kiss—what did it mean to you?” she asks abruptly.

“Everything,” I reply without hesitation.

Her eyes search my face. “Then why now? Why confess this after all this time?”

“While I’m trying to figure out why I’m upset at the world, I realized it’s me who I’m angry at. I’m furious because I put myself in a situation where I had to choose between a baby and you—I destroyed any chance I had to be with you.” I run a hand through my hair in frustration, pacing her living room.

“Is that why you said sorry when I congratulated you on Bernie’s birth?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I stop, facing her.

“So why are you mad at the world?” Her eyes search my face.

I take a shaky breath. “My therapist and I are working on that, but most of the things upsetting me lead back to you.”

Cory frowns. “Me?”

“I’m angry that I can’t let myself love you like I want to,” I confess raggedly.

She shakes her head, looking away. “You can’t do this now, Benedict. Is it because of Bodhi?”

I scrub my hands over my face. “No. I swear I was trying to stay away so you could be happy. But knowing I couldn’t have you was eating me.”

“Sorry, Ben—”

“No, don’t apologize and disregard me,” I cut in desperately. “Just give me a chance to make this right.”

Her eyes narrow. “What exactly do you want from me here?”

I take her hands in mine, forcing her to look at me. “I don’t want a kiss, or just forgiveness, or a few dates. I want you to make me work for a chance at forever with you.”

Cory stares at me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. I wish I could glimpse her thoughts, but all I see is anger.

“I don’t know if I can handle that again,” she says finally.

“This time, it’ll just be me convincing you I’m worthy of your heart,” I urge. “You won’t have to do much.”

She regards me warily.

“We can take it slow, rebuild the inn together like you wanted,” I suggest. “Create that hotel of your dreams.”

Cory bites her lip. “But what if it doesn’t work out? Being around you would be impossible, let alone working together.”

I nod. “Then I’ll leave Paradise Bay. You can sell the place, at least it’ll be your vision.”

She considers this for a long moment before speaking. “We can compromise.”

Hope leaps in my chest. “I’ll do anything you want.”

“We start slow, working on the hotel,” she says carefully. “But Bernie can’t be involved yet.”

My smile fades. “Why not?”

Cory looks away, pained. “If this fails, another separation will hurt her even more than it’ll hurt us. She’s only three, but this could affect her whole life.”

I sigh but nod in understanding. I’ll work tirelessly to win Cory back, no matter the terms. With her, I can be charming and persuasive when I put my mind to it.

“You won’t regret this,” I promise, leaving the apartment before I do something stupid, like kiss her senseless.

Chapter Twenty

Ben: Good morning.

Cory: It's a little too early.

Ben: The little munchkin woke me up at five this morning. She learned last night that Ralph and Mia are coming to town. She swears those puppies are hers.

Cory: Shouldn't she be more excited about Eris?

Ben: Actually, Rys and Eris aren't coming. Cas is dropping the pups with Lysander. Kenzie's puppy-sitting them for the next couple of weeks.

Cory: I'm surprised you know more about my brother's whereabouts than me.

Ben: Kenzie is a big source of information.

Cory: My niece is worse than the gossips in town. I'm not sure how she's going to handle college without knowing everything that's happening in the family and Paradise Bay. Should I be concerned?

Ben: Leave that to her father. By the way, I had a long talk with Lysander.

Cory: What kind of long talk? No wait, I don't want to know. I need coffee and maybe a few hours of meditation before I have to deal with my brothers.

Ben: There's nothing to deal with, I just told him I plan to win your heart.

Cory: Did I agree to that?

Ben: Yep. We should've shaken on it or signed with blood.

Cory: That's a little morbid, isn't it?

Ben: I'm just afraid you're going to go back on your word.

Cory: As I mentioned last night, I'm going to try. We're taking it slow. In fact, we shouldn't be texting.

Ben: Why not? I like to send you a morning text to see how you're doing—you're lucky that I waited an hour before I messaged you.

Cory: Lucky? I don't know if I would use that word to describe this.

Ben: How would you describe it?

Cory: I barely slept, and you woke me up.
(inserts big yawn)

Ben: If I could, I would drop by with a coffee.

Cory: No, I'd rather go to bed.

Ben: What if I bring you coffee and a pastry? I'll drop by the coffee shop and ask Rita for your usual.

Cory: Remember we said Bernie won't be involved in this experiment.

Ben: I'll take her to school before I come to visit you.

Cory: How's she doing there?

Ben: Everyone adores her, and she has a couple of friends.

Cory: I miss her.

Ben: She misses you too. Sorry for fucking up royally.

Cory: I'm not sure how to follow that. I adore her and you...

Ben: And I didn't want her to get the wrong idea because what if you wouldn't love her the same way? Her mother rejected her.

Cory: I would never do that to Bernie.

Ben: Yes, but what if you didn't want me the way I wanted you? What if you decided to date me for a month and then dump us because I'm not what you need?

Cory: You know what you should have done?

Ben: Nope.

Cory: Figure out your shit right after she was born.

Ben: I was too busy trying to survive with a newborn, remember? That woman just dumped her on me, and I had to figure out everything within a week.

Cory: Has her mother ever contacted you?

Ben: Nope, and that's totally fine. She gave up her parental rights to continue having a happy life with her husband's money.

Cory: Bernie doesn't need her. She has a great father who obviously has a lot of issues, even when he seems to have his shit together.

Ben: Fake it until they believe it. :wink: emoji

Ben: As much as I would love to keep chatting with you, the video of Baby Einstein is over, and it's time for our morning routine.

Cory: Have fun.

Chapter Twenty-One



Benedict

WE'RE ALMOST out the door when Bernie's big green eyes lock with mine. "Whes Co-ee?" she asks, her little voice wavering and her lip quivering.

A twist of pain spirals in my chest, the weight of guilt pressing against my ribs. Both my girls are hurting, and it's all because of me and my fucking fear. Fear of commitment, of intimacy, of truly living. No matter how many times I've jumped off bridges or out of planes, I've never been brave enough to take the ultimate leap—to open myself to love. Those thrills were just adrenaline, a distraction from what was missing.

I avoided the terror of embracing raw emotions, and what did I gain? Nothing. I could lose one of the most important people in my life if I'm not careful.

"I want Co-ee," Bernie insists, her lip protruding in an adorable pout that tugs at my soul.

"She's working hard on a special project, pumpkin. She'll be back to us soon," I whisper, pressing a gentle kiss to her upturned nose, trying to reassure her, or trying to reassure myself, that I can bring her back home and this time it will be for good—forever.

"Tomoow?" Hope glimmers in her eyes.

Every fiber of my being wishes I could give her a firm yes, and even help her make a cute countdown calendar for Cory's return. After my conversations with Cory, I'm determined to make things right with her and show her how much I love her. However, I don't know how long it'll take me to convince her that I can be the man she needs. I probably have to make sure I become him before making any false promises.

Earning back Cory's trust will take time, patience, and probably a miracle.

I lift Bernie, so we can leave. Drawing in a shaky breath, I admit, “Cory won’t be here tomorrow, sweet pea. We don’t know when she’ll be back.” Her arms wrap around my neck as she heaves a tiny sigh that pierces my heart.

I HATE BEING the one causing her sadness. I hate myself for constantly pushing Cory away with my fear. But I’m done being a coward. I’m ready to fight for the life and love I want, no matter how vulnerable it makes me feel.

For my girls.

I’ll do it for my girls.

AFTER DROPPING off Bernie at daycare, I hurry to the coffee shop to grab Cory’s usual before swinging by her apartment. Rita shoots me a death glare as I order Cory’s reserve hazelnut bianco latte, extra foam with an extra shot of espresso. Thankfully, she doesn’t say a word. I just hope the rumors don’t spread like wildfire—as it usually does in Paradise Bay.

The short distance to Cory’s apartment feels like miles. Once I arrive at her place, I ring the bell, hoping she won’t make me beg like last night. I know I deserve it, but today I have back-to-back appointments. Leaving my patients hanging isn’t something I want to do, even when I want to swoon the fuck out of Cory.

I pause for a moment outside her door, taking a deep breath and letting my racing heart calm down.

Cory’s voice, slightly muffled by the door, reaches me loud and clear. “The coffee wasn’t necessary, Benedict.”

“But I’m here, and you know you want it,” I reply teasingly.

The clicks of the locks being undone make my shoulders sag in relief. Cory’s face comes into view as she opens the door. She’s in a snug tank top that accentuates her toned arms,

and the leggings hug her curves just right. Her dark hair is braided loosely, a few stray tendrils framing her face, lending her an effortlessly sexy aura.

“Morning,” she says. Cory takes it, her fingers brushing mine. Electricity, subtle but palpable, sparks between us.

I lean in, letting my lips graze her cheek, feeling the soft warmth of her skin. “Morning, gorgeous,” I reply. “I have patients to see soon, but I wanted to drop this off and say hi before heading to the practice.”

Cory shakes her head, but a hint of a smile teases her lips. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Seemed like the perfect excuse to see your pretty face.” I wink.

“Collecting brownie points already?” Cory arches a brow.

“Doing my best to convince you I’m worthy of your heart.” I give her my most charming grin.

Cory’s gaze intensifies, her eyes gray, darkening like the sky in the middle of the storm during a September night. “Subtle,” she teases, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Really, not at all obvious.”

Laughing lightly, I tuck a stray strand of her hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger just a moment too long. “Hey, I’ve been hiding my feelings for you for years. I’m planning on telling you how I feel every day.” The words may sound casual, but they are a promise, one that I’m determined to keep.

“Feelings, you say?” she challenges, her eyebrow arching even higher as she questions my motives or maybe... is it going to be that hard to convince her that I love her?

Exhaling deeply, I reach out, gently taking her hand in mine. “You’re doubting me, aren’t you?”

“I wish I could say I’m not, but Lysander did give me a call and talked about all those feelings,” she says, sucking on her bottom lip.

A heavy sigh escapes my lips. “Do I even want to know what he said?”

Cory gives a half-hearted shrug. “He said they—Gatz, Aslan, and Ly—knew about these supposed feelings.”

I rub my chin. “Funny, but Gatsby never threatened me. I always wondered why since he seemed to be the one more in charge of telling people to back off his youngest siblings.”

“I’ll never understand those three,” Cory says with an eye roll. “Bad cop, good cop, and who the hell knows with Lysander. They could be pretty harsh on us, even though we were saints compared to many of our friends and classmates.” She smirks. “Aslan will pay when the quads grow up.”

I chuckle. “Probably. Was your father a triplet too?”

“Nope. There are two sets of Spearman twins in his generation, though.”

Genetics are so intriguing. If I wasn’t a doctor, I’d probably be a geneticist. Based on the family history here, I tease her, “You do realize we’ll likely end up with twins, right?”

Cory takes a step back, eyes wide. “Whoa, what happened to taking it slow?”

“I did say we would take it slowly, and I meant it,” I assure her. “But that doesn’t stop me from wishing for more, Cory. I want it all with you—your love, your heart, and yes, a future filled with you, Bernie, and maybe a few more little ones.”

Cory takes a long, deliberate sip from her coffee, her gaze drifting away momentarily. When she finally meets my eyes again, there’s a hint of uncertainty. “You already have Bernie.”

I rub the back of my neck. “You don’t want more kids?”

Cory bites her lip. “Does it matter what I want? What if I don’t want more children?”

“Then we’ll only have Bernie,” I say gently.

She cocks her head, regarding me curiously. “You seem really sure this relationship is going to happen.”

“I’m not giving up on you easily,” I murmur. “You’re too important to me. I’ll do whatever it takes to convince you we’re meant to be together.”

Cory’s cheeks are stained with a pretty blush. “You always were stubbornly persistent.”

“Only when it comes to you.” I brush a tender kiss over her forehead. “I’ve never stopped caring about you, Cory. And I never will.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I glance at the screen. It’s a text from the receptionist saying my first patient has arrived.

“I gotta run,” I say regretfully, shoving the phone back into my pocket.

Cory exhales, shoulders losing some tension. “I’ll see you later then.”

“I’ll be back around noon,” I promise as I step out the door. Before shutting it completely, I pop my head back in with a grin. “This is as slow-ish as I can go.”

Cory’s melodic laugh follows me out. The sound makes my heart relax yet swell with hope. This just might work out the way I want, after all. With a spring in my step, I hurry off to start my day, counting down the minutes until I can see her again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ben: Miss you.

Cory: You said slow. Missing me makes this sound fast-ish.

Ben: I'm trying my best. You should be thankful I didn't kiss you.

Cory: Look at you, restraining yourself. I'll give you an award.

Cory: Don't you have work to do?

Ben: I'm in between patients and wanted to check on you.

Cory: I'm at the winery with Lysander. Apparently, Cami is expecting a baby.

Ben: Oh, we're making it official?

Cory: You know about it?

Ben: I'm the doctor. Of course, I know what's happening with your siblings. Two weeks ago, Cami was puking her guts up, and they called me to see if she was dying of a weird virus or if Lysander had finally knocked her up.

Cory: I didn't know they were trying to have a baby.

Ben: Are we seriously discussing your brother's sex life?

Cory: No, I'm... it's like all of them suddenly have families and children and... I don't have anything.

Ben: Sorry.

Cory: You should be sorry. If it hadn't been for you, maybe I would already be married with some...

Ben: Please finish that sentence.

Cory: Actually, I can't. I really can't see myself with anyone...

Ben: I need you to text in complete sentences, Cordelia.

Cory: I don't think I'm ready to say it.

Ben: Please?

Cory: You, okay. I always thought you and I would end up together. I hoped that you'd notice me, but that never happened.

Ben: I noticed you. I was terrified of messing things up, including you. You're too precious to be with an asshole like me.

Cory: But you're not, you're...

Ben: You can't call me perfect.

Cory: Of course not. I would never dare to do that. You're Benedict, the guy who always shows up when anyone needs him.

Ben: Not just anyone, I do it mostly for you.

Cory: Do you, really?

Ben: Of course I did. I adore you, Cory, why wouldn't I be there when you needed me?

Cory: And see, that's what made me fall for you. Maybe that's why I can't see myself with anyone else.

Ben: No idea if that's true, but I'm fucking thankful for it.

Cory: This doesn't make things all better.

Ben: I wouldn't expect it to, but it gives me hope.

Cory: You really think we can work things out?

Ben: Yes. I love you. You kind of like me... I just need you to fall in love with me—catch up, glide, and fly.

Cory: Can I ask you about Avery?

Ben: Why?

Cory: Were you ever with her? I really need to know.

Ben: She asked me once if we could try it—after Rys and Caspian got together. I explained to her that even though she's lovely, my heart belonged to someone else. That's when we stopped being friends.

Cory: Who were you talking about?

Ben: You, of course. You've owned my heart for a long time. As I told you before, my friendship with her was because her family and mine kind of gets along.

Cory: Do you miss her?

Ben: No, and I don't miss those friends I left behind after I moved out of New York. It's more like I miss being calm and chill about things. Now I'm always stressed about everything.

Cory: Is the therapist helping?

Ben: I want to think that we're making progress, but it's a long road. I let a lot of things accumulate, and now I have to unknot too many issues—for Bernie, you, and me.

Cory: I'm here for you if you need anything.

Ben: I only need you.

Cory: I want to believe you, but...

Ben: You don't have to believe me. I plan on showing you. Hope you're ready for it, talk to you later.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Cory

AROUND SIX O’CLOCK, my phone chimes with a text from Ben. He wants me to meet him on the roof of the bar. I breathe a sigh of relief that he didn’t summon me all the way to the man cave in San Francisco.

Don’t get me wrong, the rooftop has been not only a hangout spot for my brothers, but also a romantic rendezvous location for them and their wives over the years. Soft lights and greenery transform the space into an urban oasis. The glittering bay at sunset is a sight to behold.

When I step out onto the rooftop, the soft amber glow of the setting sun paints the sky with a delicate blend of orange and pink, casting a warm hue over the sprawling vineyards below. Paradise Bay might be one of the most beautiful places in the world. It’s a breathtaking sight from up here, atop the bar’s roof, where Ben has set up a scene straight out of a rom-com.

Candlelight flickers gently across the space. Ben turns from where he’s leaning on the railing, the dancing flames accentuating his athletic frame. He smiles softly, eyes crinkling at the corners, and my breath catches at how irresistible he looks. *Down girl*, I mentally chide my raging hormones. But the butterflies in my stomach don’t seem to care. A part of me is ready to jump him.

As I take it all in, Ben watches me, his warm green eyes searching for mine.

“It’s enchanting,” I admit in a hushed voice, lost in the moment and his eyes.

He steps slightly closer to me, the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile. “I wanted tonight to be special, the first of many.”

I raise an eyebrow, aiming for a teasing tone to lighten the suddenly charged atmosphere. “I didn’t know you had such a

romantic side. So how did you pull this off?”

Ben winks. “I have my secrets.”

“Huxley?” I dare to ask.

He laughs, the rich sound sending a thrill through me. “Nope.”

I tap my chin, trying to figure out who could’ve possibly helped him pull this off. I doubt it was Atzi. She’s all the way in Mexico. There’s Fern, who... is too busy with the twins and the gala.

“I actually hired a company to handle all this,” he answers me as he gestures around us. “I don’t know how they work their magic, but they set everything up. What do you think?”

“It’s perfect,” I say honestly.

Ben moves even nearer, his spicy, masculine scent enveloping me. “I’m not looking to be perfect, just to love you the best way I can.”

My heart melts at his words. Though part of me wants to keep making him work for my forgiveness, I know I can’t keep stringing him along indefinitely. I should tell him now that I love him, and all I wanted is for him to give me his heart. What would I accomplish if I kept my heart locked until I made him suffer for everything he did?

I’d probably be no different from his family, who never loved him and always made him feel like an outsider. Holding back now isn’t going to take us anywhere, will it?

Earlier today, Atzi called me. She told me about the conversation Ben had with Heath. My brother isn’t happy, but if Benedict makes me happy, he’ll support this relationship. If not, he’ll kill him with his own hands—Atzi’s words.

“We could make this work,” Ben suddenly whispers with the softest voice I’ve heard him using in a long time. “I promise we really could.”

I smile at him because I see it, the fear, and the vulnerability in his green eyes. The wall he’s put between us is gone, and now I can see the one thing he hid from me, his

heart. I wonder if hiding himself had been necessary. For a second, I wonder what would've happened if he had told me how he felt all those years ago.

“What are you thinking?” he asks with a trembling voice.

“What would've happened if you had taken the leap before today—maybe when you kissed me?”

The corner of his lip lifts slightly, and he shakes his head. “I don't have an answer for you, though. It could've worked perfectly fine, or I would've fucked up like the rest of my siblings. We weren't taught how to love, only to destroy.”

I finally walk closer to him and put a hand on his chest. “Your heart was made to love.”

He takes my hand and feathers kisses on the inside of my wrist. “Still, I didn't know exactly what I was doing. It's not until now that I'm ready to work on my fears and try to become a better man for my girls.”

Somehow, it surprises me that he sees himself as a failure. He doesn't understand how loving, caring, and amazing he is. “Do you always compare yourself to your family?”

“That's where I came from,” he states matter-of-factly.

“But you're nothing like them,” I counter, shaking my head. “You're so different—it's why you left and avoided them for years.”

Ben's shoulders slump. “I was scared I'd become like them. That's why I thought staying away from you was best for both of us.”

“But it wasn't,” I mumble, gaze dropping involuntarily to his lips.

“I know, and I'm so sorry.” He cups my chin, tilting my face up to meet his earnest eyes again. “Hurting you is my biggest regret. Please believe me when I say I love you.”

My heart pounds wildly as I search his intense green eyes, full of longing. The air around us crackles with electricity, drawing us closer. I can almost taste the anticipation hovering between us.

My breath catches as Ben slowly leans in, close enough that I feel the heat radiating from his body. His heated gaze never leaves mine. With a featherlight touch, he brushes a strand of hair from my cheek, sending tingles dancing across my skin.

The moment stretches taut with tension. Ben moves nearer still, until I can feel the warmth of his breath on my face. His eyes, dark with emotion, search my face before dropping to my lips. I sway toward him instinctively. This is it—the point of no return.

My heart races as he moves closer until our lips are a hairsbreadth apart. Ever so gently, he brushes his lips against mine. The touch is soft and tender, yet the passion simmers behind it. How long has it been since we last kissed? It feels like an eternity.

The gentle caress grows more heated as his hand slides up to cradle my cheek. His touch is at once powerful yet incredibly tender, and I find myself melting into his embrace. Our lips move in perfect sync, the kiss deepening as sparks ignite between us.

His tongue glides along my bottom lip, exploring and tasting, sending waves of pleasure washing over me. My hands trail up his firm chest, fingers tracing the hard lines of muscle. His free hand slides down my back, pulling me tighter against him. I can feel his racing heartbeat thudding against my palm.

Finally, we break apart, lips clinging for a few lingering moments before separating. His eyes lock with mine, blazing with that same intense emotion as before. But now there is no fear, no holding back. This time he's ready to surrender himself completely.

“I love you,” he whispers. “I always have.”

I capture his lips again in a searing kiss, pouring all my bottled-up feelings into it.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Benedict

MY LIPS TINGLE as I pull away from the most incredible kiss of my life. A kiss that was far too long in the making. Cory's eyes flutter open, lips parted, and cheeks endearingly flushed. She's so fucking beautiful. She takes my breath away.

I brush my thumb over her bottom lip, still stunned that this amazing woman is giving me a chance after years of pushing her away out of misguided fear. She waited for me until now, and I'm finally ready to give her my whole heart. It's not like she didn't own it, just... I couldn't believe that a man like me could ever have a woman like her.

She's so much more than I deserve. Still, she's willing to let me regain her trust and love her forever.

"I've wanted to do that for so long," I confess, shaking my head ruefully. "If I could, I'd kiss you all the time."

Cory gives me that smile that makes my chest tighten. "Well, we might do it more often. I mean, you need to make up for all the long-lost time, right?"

I grin. "Is that an invitation?" I wrap my arms around her waist, our bodies fitting together perfectly like two lost souls reuniting at last. "Because I fully intend on kissing you every chance I get from now on."

Cory lays her head against my chest with a contented sigh. As I hold her close, I make a silent promise. Never again will I make the mistake of letting her go. She's my future now.

Except I should probably let her go before dinner gets cold, and she can't enjoy it. Though, the way she's looking at me, I'm tempted to drag her downstairs and get her naked. Gotta pace myself.

"We should eat," I say reluctantly.

"Who cooked?" she asks, intrigued.

“I’m not sure...” I trail off, realizing I have no idea.

Cory frowns slightly. “I saw people going in and out of your brother’s place earlier. One was carrying pots. I was wondering where they were going.”

“That’s probably it. Finn’s sister owns a concierge company who put this together. I bet they cooked everything there?” I shrug because, honestly, after I called them last night, they just told me they’d take care of everything.

Cory nods as I show her the wine bottle. “Rosé?”

She makes a face. “That’s not from the Paradise Bay winery. I’m a Spearman. I can’t just drink anything.” She bursts into a sarcastic laugh.

“Well, this is all I have. Bliss Winery is owned by one of Finn’s older brothers. He also owns a vineyard, and I think will be working on Finn’s land,” I explain with a wink. “You can drink other brands tonight. I won’t tell your brothers.”

She bursts into laughter. “Fine, I’ll cheat just this once. Unless it’s really good, then I’m drinking this rosé until my brothers make something better.”

I chuckle and shake my head, knowing she’ll lord it over them for months or maybe years to come.

“Where’s Bernie?” she asks.

“At home with Kenzie. Probably getting ready for a bedtime story.” I glance at my watch.

Cory smiles wistfully. “It’s weird to think my first niece will be leaving for college soon. What will the Spearman do without her?”

“She’ll be back to visit a lot,” I assure her, brushing my knuckles gently across her cheek.

“Yeah, she will. Eventually, everyone returns home. Caspian will retire in a year or two, and then he’ll be back here full-time. Lysander never left. Hux travels, but this is his home base...” She trails her gaze and smiles at me. “Even you came back.”

“Thank you for welcoming me, even after I almost messed this up for good,” I say sincerely, removing the coverings from our dinner plates. “Ready to eat?”

Cory reaches across the table, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. “The past is the past. All that matters now is the future—hopefully, *our* future.”

We’re in the middle of dinner when the soft strains of a string quartet startup. I glance around in surprise as they play from a darkened corner of the rooftop—I have no idea when they arrived, but the music makes this moment even more perfect.

Once our entrées are cleared, a waiter presents a dessert of pears and cranberries poached in wine. I stare at him for a moment, surprised because I had no idea we had someone waiting on us.

Cory sighs blissfully. “This is... I’m speechless.”

Me too. When I reached out to the concierge company requesting a romantic dinner worthy of the world’s best restaurant, I wasn’t sure what to expect. But so far, I’m impressed by their services. More so because Cory is enjoying every second of this.

“I’m glad you liked it,” I say, raising my glass. “Hopefully, the first of many dates together.”

Cory lifts her glass to clink mine, eyes glinting mischievously. “You’re far swoonier than I expected, Farrow. To many more dates and whatever the future holds.” She smirks. “But don’t forget, you’re still on probation.”

I chuckle. “Trust me, I know I have years to make up for.” I drain the last of my wine. “We should check out the inn tomorrow and start making plans,” I suggest eagerly.

Cory shakes her head, her smile softening. “Let’s not discuss business now. Today is just for us.”

She’s right. But I’m so terrified this will end up being just another dream where we’re free to love each other openly, then morning will come, and I’ll wake up hollow and Cory-less again, that I want to accelerate everything.

I reach across the table and twine my fingers with hers. “You’re absolutely right. Today is about me proving how much you mean to me. The future can wait.”

Cory squeezes my hand gently. “One day at a time, Benedict.”

One day at a time, indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ben: Good night, beautiful.

Cory: You could've stayed a few more minutes.

Ben: We're doing this slow, remember.

Cory: What if we skip to the good part?

Ben: Nope, I don't want to risk our relationship. What if you resent me for not doing it right? I might get something wrong if I don't follow the steps... also, we have to do this for us and Bernie.

Cory: I hate that you're right.

Ben: Me too. :kissing-heart: emoji

Cory: Thank you for tonight, though. It was extraordinary.

Ben: Glad you liked it.

Cory: Will I see you tomorrow?

Ben: Am I allowed to drop by with coffee?

Cory: I don't want you to rush Bernie because of me, though.

Ben: Promise to take my time—and leave a small buffer between you and my first patient.

Cory: Don't worry about me. I can make my own coffee.

Ben: Yes, but I can deliver it along with your morning kiss. :wink: emoji

Cory: Then, I won't complain about you dropping by. See you tomorrow.

Ben: Sweet dreams, love.

Ben: Good morning! Hey, I had to drive to San Francisco last night. I'll have someone deliver your coffee.

Cory: Where's Bernie?

Ben: Derek flew down here. I'm doing him a favor, so he's with Bernie.

Cory: If you need anything, I'm here.

Ben: Thank you. Maybe we can schedule Elliot for next week and see what we can do with the inn?

Cory: You got it, but I was talking about Bernie.

Ben: She's ready to see you, and she misses you a lot, but... I'm unsure if we're ready for it. You can't disappear from her again.

Ben: And I know it was all my fault. I should've handled that day a lot differently. It was probably to protect myself more than to protect you.

Cory: Protect yourself from what?

Ben: What if you never loved me?

Cory: :rolling-eyes: emoji

Ben: I don't understand that answer.

Cory: You can be infuriating, but I do more than care about you. I'm just not going to say the L word because... I don't think we're ready for that, either.

Ben: Once you're ready, then we'll take the next step.

Cory: Have I ever told you how much I admire you?

Ben: Nope, but you're going to have to hold that thought. I'm being called for another surgery. Talk soon.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Cory

THE FOLLOWING Monday finds us standing before the weathered façade of the old inn, accompanied by Elliot. I'm surprised to see he's already carrying detailed blueprints and has set up an architect's table displaying sketches of the property.

"We can create a château aesthetic while also increasing the number of rooms," he explains, finger tracing over the drawings. "The spa would fit nicely here, and we could do standalone ballrooms nestled within the gardens for events."

"Convenient," I murmur, carefully studying the plans. "What's your estimate for completion time? And the overall budget?"

Ben jumps in before Elliot can respond. "Don't worry, I'm covering it."

I shake my head. "We're partners now in this venture and our relationship. I want to contribute equally."

Ben grins and nods. Though I love that he's trying to buy me the world, I want us to learn how to share responsibilities not only in our relationship but also as business partners.

Looping my arm through his, I draw us closer. "We're doing this together, right?"

"You're absolutely right, together." He brushes a kiss over my temple.

"Then you'll have to let me pay my share," I insist with a playful nudge.

He grins. "You're right. I have to learn how to do this relationship thing better."

Elliot smiles at our exchange before he begins to roll the blueprints. "Well, I'll work up some solid estimates on timeline and budget. This is going to be something special

when it's finished, but it might take a couple of years to build.”

I gaze up at the old inn, picturing the stunning new building that will take its place. Not just a business, but a legacy for us and our family.

Once we're done at the inn, we head to my apartment. I promised Ben lunch before getting back to work. We could've gone somewhere else to eat, but I want privacy for our conversation. And if something else came out of this little reunion—like a kiss—I wouldn't certainly not object to it.

Last night left me unsatisfied if I'm honest. Dinner was lovely, but dessert should've been me, served up on the table for Ben to savor, not poached pears. All I wanted in that moment was at least a nibble of Benedict, and I got nothing.

As we enter my apartment, Ben quickly sheds his lab coat, revealing the sharp lines of his suit beneath. The sight of him always a tad overdressed brings a smile to my face. “Ever thought of going casual for work?” I tease, eyeing the knot of his tie, fingers itching to draw him nearer.

He narrows his eyes at me, a playful suspicion dancing in their depths. “What are you thinking?”

I bite my lower lip, hesitating briefly, then boldly step into his space. My fingers find the silky texture of his tie, and I use it to bridge the gap between us. “I believe,” I whisper, “you owe me a kiss.”

His hands slide to my hips, drawing me against the hard lines of his body. The world narrows down to just the two of us, our lips colliding with a fervency that far surpasses our previous encounters. His warmth engulfs me, and a gentle tug at my hair from his fingers sends a shiver down my spine. The intimacy of the moment has me pressing closer, my hands wandering over his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart.

He pulls back ever so slightly, our breaths mingling. The longing in his green eyes is palpable. “Cory,” he starts, voice ragged. “I didn't come here to—”

Cutting off his words with a gentle touch to his lips, I whisper, “But I want you to.” The vulnerable hope in my eyes is clear. I pray he doesn’t turn me away.

His gaze searches mine. “Are you certain?”

With every fiber of my being, I nod. “Absolutely.”

The intensity of his gaze has me trapped. Drawing me in, he cradles my face and our lips meet, a magnetic pull neither of us can resist. The world fades as he traces a path down my neck, setting my skin ablaze. My pulse races under his touch, every nerve ending on fire.

He nudges my shirt off my shoulders, pausing to appreciate the sight before him. A startled gasp leaves me as his lips find my collarbone, every kiss sending sparks throughout my body. With deliberate slowness, he undoes each button, revealing the delicate lace beneath. As he traces the edge with his thumb, my body arches toward him, seeking more of his touch.

“Stop toying with me,” I whisper urgently, aware of the little time we have for us. “Ben...”

His eyes, full of mischief and promise, make silent promises I hope he can accomplish right now. Swiftly, he removes the last barriers between us, leaving me vulnerable and expectant. In one fluid motion, he lifts me, carrying me to the waiting bed.

As he sets me down, he hovers above, our bodies close, and our eyes lock again. My breath catches, the emotion in his eyes so evident: a mixture of raw passion and deep love. Our lips reunite, hands exploring every inch, every curve. The warmth from his skin and the rhythm of his heartbeat resonates with mine.

He unclasps my bra, helping me take it off. His hands swirl around my breasts, slowly, methodically, making me shiver. My nipples tighten until they ache. He bends to claim one side with his mouth, sucking the flesh, tormenting me with his tongue. Needy moans leave my throat as he continues.

In the heat of the moment, I reach out to his pants, undoing them fast and tugging them down. I reach for his length, wrapping my fingers around it. He's thick, hard—and mine. He only lets me play for a few seconds before he begins to move his mouth down my body, nipping, kissing, licking.

He finally kneels between my legs and kisses the inside of my right thigh, then the left, and slowly, he begins to move higher and higher.

“Close your eyes,” he orders. “Just feel.”

I do as he says. This was hot before, but now my skin is burning on each place his lips touch. They keep teasing me, moving up my thigh until his breath caresses my folds.

“You're deliciously intoxicating,” he says, then his tongue dives between them, licking my clit.

“Ben,” his name escapes my lips in a pleading sigh.

A gentle pressure on my hips keeps me grounded. “Don't move. Let me eat you before I have to go back to work.”

I relinquish control, letting him take the reins.

“Your pussy is delicious,” he groans, tormenting me with his mouth and fingers.

I moan, arching into his touch. “More, please.”

I don't have to ask twice. The ministrations intensify, pushing me on the verge of climax. This is so fucking good. I'm going to need more. More of Ben, more of his mouth, his fingers.

His fingers curl and rub faster, and suddenly I'm flying, flying and crashing over the precipice into blissful release. This might be considered the best orgasm in the history of the world. Wave after wave crashes through every cell of my body. He slips a condom along his shaft in record time and soon, he's holding his shaft at my entrance.

Patiently, he begins to slide his length inside. Slowly, he sinks into me, stretching and filling me exquisitely. Ben leans closer, his mouth finding mine, kissing me at the same rhythm as our bodies move. He thrusts deep and pulls away, making

me needy. As the kiss deepens, I'm consumed by the realization that there's no other place I'd rather be. His love feels like an uncontrollable blaze, engulfing us both, and I can sense its intensity deep in my core.

This is incredible. The way he grunts as he thrusts deeper, trying to fuse our bodies. The passion of the kiss. This man is making me feel loved, and treasured, and... his.

Time blurs as we chase oblivion. Our movements synchronize, lips never parting. And then, in a blissful moment, with gasping breaths, we cling together, sated in body and soul. The security of his arms around me and the comforting heat of his body is everything. At this moment, all is perfect. It's the exact moment when we finally find where we belong.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ben: You left my bed too early.

Cory: Or too late... I'm not staying at your house until Bernie knows about us. It's only been two weeks and I'm sure neither one of us is ready to tell her. More so when I'm heading to Cancun with Atzi.

Ben: Wait, why are you leaving?

Cory: She called me earlier asking if I could help her and Heath with the triplets. We'll be back next week.

Ben: Cordelia, don't leave me.

Cory: :shrug: emoji

Ben: That's not enough. I need you.

Cory: When I'm back, we can plan how to tell Bernie.

Ben: Can I create a countdown calendar for that?

Cory: Yes?

Cory: Wait, you'll need an exact date. Maybe do it for two Saturdays from today.

Ben: That's a long time.

Cory: Sure, but look at it from the bright side. We can still sneak around before the big day. After that, I don't know how much free time we'll have.

Ben: We'll always have the lunch hour. :wink: emoji

Cory: True, there's always that!

Ben: So, you, me, lunch hour forever?

Cory: Wow, you want a commitment now?

Ben: Always, but I'm not ready to propose.

Cory: :raised-eyebrow: emoji

Cory: What happened to slow?

Ben: Slow-ish. I'm trying my best, babe, but it's getting harder and harder to live without you.

Cory: Well, I keep seeing things getting hard when I'm close... Can you swing by before you have to work?

Ben: What time are you leaving for the airport?

Cory: Shoot, I'm running late. Never mind, I'll see you when we're back.

Ben: Text me when you arrive at the airport and drive safely.

Cory: I'm about to board the plane.

Ben: Something tells me that you barely made it on time for your flight.

Cory: It's all your fault. You distracted me.

Ben: This time, I won't take the blame, but I'm glad you made it on time.

Cory: Barely, being the keyword. And I just learned this flight doesn't have Wi-Fi. Hux won't be happy.

Ben: Do you need me to help you with anything?

Cory: We had a conference call with the lawyer. I told him that I could probably take it on the plane.

Ben: Just so you know, you can't do video conferences on commercial flights.

Cory: I've seen Gatsby work from the plane.

Ben: His private plane?

Cory: :unamused: emoji

Cory: Hey, I have to turn this off. I'll contact you when I get to the house.

Ben: Have a safe flight. Miss you.

Cory: Miss you more.

Cory: I just landed in Cancun. See attached picture.

Ben: Itzel looks adorable with that headband. Did you buy that best-aunt T-shirt for her?

Cory: Yep, I bought one for each.

Ben: How's everyone?

Cory: Heath wants to kill you. Atzi is stopping him, and the triplets are as adorable as ever. I can't believe they're getting so big.

Ben: It's time for a new baby in the Spearman family.

Cory: That's why Lysander and Cami are having one—they said you confirmed it's only one.

Ben: I tried to keep them in suspense, but Lysander can't take a joke.

Cory: At least he's not as grumpy as Heath.

Ben: True. Keep sending me pictures since I won't see you until next week.

Cory: Miss you.

Ben: Miss you more.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Aslan: You can't be serious about dating Benedict Farrow.

Cory: I'm not sixteen anymore. Thank you for looking after me, but I'm old enough to make my own decisions.

Aslan: Are you sure about this? He has a child.

Cory: An adorable little girl who everyone loves. She calls you Uncle Aslan, and you're calling her baggage.

Aslan: I didn't say that. I just want to make sure you're aware of what you're getting into.

Cory: A loving relationship with a man who's trying his damn best to be a better version of himself for his daughter and me.

Aslan: Wow, I wasn't expecting that answer from you.

Cory: As I said before, I'm not sixteen. You should be more supportive of my decisions, though I appreciate that you still worry about me as if I was your child.

Aslan: And we always will. I understand none of us are your father, but we tried our best.

Cory: Did he ever love me?

Aslan: Why would you ask that?

Cory: I feel like he had time for everyone but me.

Aslan: Ha, you were too independent. Most times, you would get annoyed when any of us—including Dad—tried to help you. He just gave you the space he thought you needed.

Cory: I wish he hadn't. Everyone has memories of him but me.

Aslan: How about those annual father-daughter dances in elementary school?

Cory: They were fun.

Aslan: He always looked forward to taking you and even ensured that Mom had a seamstress make a tie from the fabric of the dress you were wearing.

Cory: I don't remember that.

Aslan: Lysander might have saved some of your boxes. I remember seeing a dress or two with the matching tie.

Cory: I'll text him. Hopefully, it's in the big storage place.

Aslan: Probably. I'm sorry you don't have many memories of him. But I can tell you that he adored his little Cory. You were Daddy's little girl.

Cory: No, that was Fern.

Aslan: Nope. I have a better memory than you. Though, the point of this conversation is that I need you to be careful with Ben. I don't want him to break your heart.

Cory: I promise we'll be careful with each other's hearts. Thank you for being an amazing big brother.

Aslan: Love you, little sister.

Cory: Love you just as much, big brother. Say hi to Keat and the quads.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ben: I love the pictures you've been sending, but can you come home, please?

Cory: It's just been a little more than twenty-four hours since I left. You'll be fine for six more days.

Ben: You think, but I'm finding it impossible.

Cory: I'm sure you'll be fine.

Ben: Send me a selfie wearing a bikini.

Cory: I don't think so. You can see it the next time you come down with me. Heath said he rescinded his invitation to Cancun. Is that true?

Ben: Nah, I told him no one could cover the practice. Then, he said I was uninvited. He would never do that to me. I'm his favorite friend.

Cory: Probably his only friend.

Ben: True, that guy's circle of trust is so tiny I'm impressed that I'm still a part of it.

Cory: You're like his brother. Hence, why he's not that happy. He believes you should've said something way before. I hope you two fix your differences.

Ben: We will.

Cory: Okay, my toddler break is over. Now to chase them.

Ben: Have fun.

Cory: Always.

CORY SENT YOU AN IMAGE.

Cory: I wish you were here.

Ben: That's a beautiful moon. I also wish I was there.

Cory: Maybe soon?

Ben: Soonish, I don't know when I can take a break, but we can always be on the roof of the bar and watch the moon.

Cory: I'll take the alternative.

Ben: Good. I can ask Finn to fly you back now, and maybe if we're lucky, you'll be here before sunrise.

Cory: Ha, I still have three more days to go, but nice try.

Cory: How's Bernie?

Ben: Excited since today we created our countdown. Ten days before she sees Cory.
:wink: emoji

Cory: Are you sure we're ready?

Ben: I want to think that I am.

Cory: I'm excited and afraid and... I mean, I don't want to impose, but I really love her.

Ben: And she loves you just as much. Sorry for being so selfish.

Cory: You had a tough childhood. I can see why you would want to protect her—and yourself.

Ben: That doesn't excuse me hurting you, but I appreciate that you're forgiving me.

Cory: That's what love is about, isn't it? Communication, forgiving, and loving each other—not in that order.

Cory: It's time to say good night, but I'll talk to you tomorrow.

Cory: We're at the airport, finally heading home.

Ben: Finally!

Cory: You sound a bit frustrated.

Ben: I miss you.

Cory: Miss you as well. I'll see you later, okay?

Cory: Honey, I'm home.

Ben: When you say you're home, does that mean San Francisco or Paradise Bay?

Cory: If you open the door, you might know exactly where I am.

Ben: Fuck, why didn't I fix the hallway's night light.

Cory: Not sure, but don't kill yourself trying to come to the door.

Ben: I'm doing my best with the phone's light.

Cory: Just be quiet. You're going to wake up Bernie.

Chapter Thirty



Benedict

STANDING before me is the epitome of beauty—Cory. Her piercing gray eyes meet mine, radiating warmth and affection. Her dark hair tumbles over her sun-kissed shoulders, which are exposed by her sundress.

With an excited squeal, Cory leaps into my arms, wrapping herself around me. I breathe in her sweet, familiar vanilla scent with a mix of coconut as she nuzzles into my neck.

“You’re here,” I whisper, squeezing her tight.

“There’s no other place I’d rather be,” she murmurs into my skin.

I carry her inside, keeping her wrapped securely in my embrace. “I can think of many... like my bed.”

I close the main door and press her close to my body as I take her to my room. I try to be as quiet as possible. The moment I know we’re alone and no one will hear us, I slant my mouth over hers hungrily.

Cory’s breath hitches as she melts against me. I’ve missed her so fucking much. I want to consume her, beg her to never leave again. Her absence made me acknowledge the aching loneliness inside. I already knew I had been a fool, but after having her and tasting her, I realized it was a miracle that I had survived with only the crumbs of her friendship.

She pulls back, unwinding her legs so I can set her down gently. Our eyes lock, and for a moment, I’m breathless, feeling like the luckiest man alive. This woman wants to be with me. She’s allowing me to love her.

My heart thunders inside my chest.

“What are you thinking about, Ben?” Her voice is low and soft.

“You,” I breathe the word. “I always think of you, but right now, Cory, I’m fucking starving for you.”

She makes a small sound, eyes wide and lips parted. I brush my thumb over her plump bottom lip before capturing it between my own. I plan to feast on every inch of her gorgeous body tonight.

Never before have I witnessed that kind of hunger in her gaze. It’s a primal yearning, so raw and intense that it sends a shiver down my spine. My body responds instinctively, a surge of desire making my heart race and my senses heighten.

Cory links her arms around my neck. “Ben,” she breathes.

I draw her closer, enveloping her in my embrace as the electric current between us crackles with fiery passion. At this moment, it feels as if the universe has shifted and narrowed down to just the two of us.

Every cell in my body thrums with need—an ache that’s been increasing for the past week. I tangle my hand in her hair, angling her lips to mine.

The feel of her mouth on mine is pure elation, a missing piece slotting into place. She melts against me with a soft sigh that I swallow greedily. My hands trail down the delicate arch of her back, tracing each notch of her spine and eliciting delicious tremors.

Breaking our kiss, I say, “I’m going to undress you. Slowly, I’ll peel off that sundress and whatever you’re wearing under it. My lips will trace every curve, worship every inch of your skin. After all, we have all night.” I let my words hang in the charged air between us. My voice is low and rough with desire.

I brush my thumb over her kiss-swollen bottom lip.

“Are you ready for this?” I ask hoarsely. “Because I want to take my time appreciating every part of you.”

“Yes,” she moans. Her eyes smolder, lips part, chest rising and falling rapidly. She gives the faintest nod.

With excruciating patience, I slide the sundress straps down. I press a hot, open-mouthed kiss to each before moving lower. The dress slithers down her body, a whisper of fabric, revealing her to me inch by agonizing inch. She's bare underneath except for a scrap of lace. I groan low in my throat, hands tracing her hips, her waist. "So beautiful. I could spend hours worshipping you."

I trail kisses back up her body until I reach her lips again, swallowing her needy whimpers. Tonight, I will show her how much I've craved and missed her. How empty my existence has been without her light.

I plan to take her apart, then put her back together as mine once more.

"If you plan to eat me, let me tell you, you're a little overdressed, Mr. Farrow," Cory's voice is playful and seductive.

"Is that a challenge?" I quirk an eyebrow.

Cory's lips curl into a knowing smile, her eyes dancing with mischief. "No, just a suggestion. If you want to play, you have to follow the rules. No clothes, no bites—unless you ask nicely—and all the fun."

Letting out a throaty laugh, I say, "I like those rules. This is why you're my favorite person."

Slowly, deliberately, I strip down. I crawl between her legs, my body hovering above hers, and I'm enveloped by the warmth of her gaze. I brush my lips against hers once, then I kiss her forehead. I catch her mouth, parting her lips with my tongue. This time I take it slow.

My lips brush her forehead, then the corner of her mouth. Our next kiss deepens, tongues intertwining in a dance both, familiar yet new. I take my time, unrushed, letting images of our past, present, and future play like a film reel in my mind. My eyes slide shut, lost in the taste of her, the feeling of us.

I gently kiss each of her closed eyelids, whispering against her skin, "I missed you so fucking much." My lips glide over the bridge of her nose as I confess, "So fucking much." I hover

over her mouth, my proximity eliciting a shiver. “Next time, you might have to take me with you.”

Cory’s fingers thread through my hair, anchoring me closer still. Our breaths mingle, hearts beating in sync.

“Or maybe, next time I have to travel, we video call because Bernie will know about us.”

A lump forms in my throat. A blend of anticipation and anxiety swirls within me. Cory’s one-hundred percent ready for us.

“It’s time to let all those fears go, Ben,” she says.

“Letting go of those fears is easier said than done.”

I nod before dipping my head and pressing my lips to her neck. Nibbling her sensitive skin and breathing her soft scent, I take my time kissing my way down her neck. My mouth continues downward in a deliberate exploration. She trembles beneath my ministrations, a breathy moan escaping her parted lips and resonating within me.

Urgency simmers in my veins, but I hold it at bay. This time, I intend to savor every inch, rediscover her form with reverence. Kissing her sternum, I stop at her breasts. I take one nipple into my mouth, sucking it hard while I play with the other one. I pinch it and flick it, alternating sides. My head spins out of control as she pushes her hips against me and whimpers while I devour her tits.

“Please,” she begs with a throaty voice.

“What do you want?”

“Ease the ache,” she breathes, the words a whisper that ignites the fire inside me and makes me want to burn her—blaze each other with desire. “Eat me.”

A thrill courses through me. I love that she knows what she wants, and she tells me. “With pleasure.”

Running my tongue down her torso with slow precision, every swirl makes her tremble. I stroke her pussy over her panties, and her moans sound like music. My fingers slide inside the silky material that covers her pussy. Her exhale

comes out in a shuddering moan, like a long-forgotten song. I continue lazily running my thumb through her slit and circling her clit.

Cory pushes her hips against my hand, and I halt, teasing her with a mischievous smile. "Patience."

A whimper of both protest and anticipation escapes her lips as I gradually peel her panties down her thighs, past her feet, and onto the floor. I kiss the tips of her toes, take them in my hands, and spread her legs wide. I kiss the inside of her legs, inch by inch. Left, then right. I suck the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. My path winds upward, drawn to her intoxicating core.

My fingers glide over her soft folds, and I bend down, pressing my tongue against her clit. My hands go under her ass, raising her pussy and opening her wide. She's perfect. I stroke her with my tongue all the way down to her back entrance.

"Oh," she breathes, trying to close her legs, but I don't let her.

Instead, I continue to pleasure her with my tongue. I nip through her folds and flick her clit. I move my hands from under her and replace them with a pillow. Carefully, I push a finger past her entrance and stop, watching her. Her eyes are glazed and hazy. Her hands twist in the sheets as sensations course through her, but our gazes remain locked, the connection between us unbroken.

"Should I continue?" I ask, my words a tender request.

"Please," she begs.

I slide in a second finger, and my mouth doesn't stop kissing her beautiful pussy. Then I move my tongue to her little hole, licking it, lubricating it. She wiggles and moans, and I take that as a sign to continue. Carefully, I press my middle finger inside her crooking and push it against her G-spot. Her tremors grow, my mouth continues teasing and coaxing, my fingers exploring with abandon.

“Ben,” she screams as if pleading for mercy or maybe for more.

Her climax crashes over her, and her walls spasm around my finger as I continue to draw out her orgasms, savoring the sweet taste of her pleasure. And when her breathing steadies, when the shivers subside, I move away to get ready for more.

“I need you,” Cory grunts, her eyes locking onto mine, and within their depths, I witness a universe of longing and desire. “More than I’ve ever needed anything in my entire life.”

Reaching for my nightstand, I pull out a condom and open the package. I kneel between her legs and roll the condom onto my shaft with practiced ease. I hold my erection, caressing her entrance with it.

I wait as I watch the most gorgeous woman spread in my bed, surrendering to me. Trusting me.

“Don’t make me beg,” she says. “Please, don’t make me wait.”

I stay right by her entrance, lowering my body. I lean down and croon in her ear, “I love you,” as I press myself inside her. Our gazes connect. I smile and whisper again, “I love you so much.”

Cory laces her hands around my neck. I drop my forehead to hers as I thrust in inch by inch. Her walls wrap around me. Our bond strengthens. Every muscle of my body tenses as I control the need to plunge into her. Instead, I enjoy the feeling of being inside the most beautiful woman in the world. I hope she’ll allow me to do this every night, claim her, become hers, and fuse with me.

With one last thrust, I’m all the way home. I stop, resting the weight on my elbows. “I love you so fucking much.”

“Thank you,” she says, running a hand through my hair and caressing my face. “For always knowing what I need.”

I press a gentle kiss to her forehead and move slowly, bringing our bodies closer together. I feel transported to another plane of being, our souls mingling on the deepest level.

Cory's fingers interlace with mine, holding on tightly. Our gazes remain locked. Each motion brings us closer to the precipice, movements perfectly in sync. When release comes, it is a transcendence, a cosmic realignment. I bury my face in the crook of her neck, overcome with emotion.

"Cory," I groan, collapsing on top of her, panting. "I promise to love you for a lifetime. Thank you for trusting me with your heart."

Cory's hand comes up to cup my cheek. "You really did miss me, didn't you?"

I nuzzle against her palm. "You have no fucking idea."

"We'll be okay," she whispers. And I believe it with my entire being. Our bond is unbreakable now.

Though I regret not confessing my love sooner, the timing hadn't been right. I hadn't been ready to wholly give myself the way I can now. I'm endlessly grateful I didn't lose her for good. And I'm so fucking thankful.

Chapter Thirty-One



Cory

MY EYELIDS ARE HEAVY, probably sealed by super glue. Sneaking into Benedict's home at night for the past week has been exciting but exhausting too. And when I hear Bernie's voice, the fear that I fell asleep makes me launch out of bed.

"What time is it?" I whisper frantically, scrambling to locate my discarded clothes from the night before.

"Daddy," comes Bernie's impatient call through the door.

"Maybe it's time for me to make a stealthy escape out the window?" I mutter, scanning the room in vain for my missing shirt. "Why did I fall asleep?"

Ben catches me in his arms, stilling my panic. "You're tired, and maybe it's okay if she sees you?" Ben suggests, drawing me closer and taking me into his arms. "We only have a few days left before you come back. Why not make it today?"

I bite my lip, hesitating. This isn't what I planned for that day. "But I wanted to bring balloons and a present and..."

Cupping my cheek, Ben says gently, "You don't need any of those things," he says. "She only wants you, her Co-ee. No big parties or parades. Just Cory."

My eyes prickle just thinking of the time we've been apart. I adore that little girl. From the moment we met, she has owned my heart entirely. How could she not when she's a part of Ben.

Ben retrieves a sweatshirt from his closet and hands it to me. I slip it on, the soft fabric holding his scent. Drawing a steeling breath, I approach the door on shaky legs.

I can do this. With a final exhale, I turn the knob and swing it open. Bernie's face lights up in astonished joy.

“Co-ee!” She flings herself into my arms, squealing with delight. I clutch her tight, tears slipping free as I rain kisses over her hair. No balloons or gifts could ever compare to this feeling.

“Hey, Bernie. I missed you so much,” I say, hugging her close as she nuzzles into my neck.

“You back,” she declares happily.

“Sorry it took me so long to come to you, Bernie.” I press a kiss into her soft hair. “Do you want me to make you breakfast?”

Bernie’s face lights up. “Pant-kays?”

I glance at Ben and mouth, “Ingredients?” He nods with a smile. “We can add blueberries too.”

“Choc-wit cheese too, pwease,” Bernie adds.

“Umm, I think you want to say chocolate chips,” I correct her, bopping her nose playfully. “Let’s see what we can find, and maybe after school, we can go grocery shopping to ensure the house has everything we need for a fun but nutritious breakfast.”

“No. No kool.” She shakes her head but doesn’t let me go. “Co-ee.”

I glance at Ben, who’s literally looking at me, a little lost.

“Why don’t we have breakfast first, and then we plan our day?” I suggest.

When we arrive in the kitchen, Bernie insists on helping measure ingredients, nearly spilling the flour in her enthusiasm. I hold back laughter, enjoying our time together. Soon the batter is mixed, and Ben starts cooking on the griddle. I slice strawberries while Bernie pulls grapes off the vine, her tongue poking out in concentration.

I’ve missed spending my mornings with them like this, as if we were a family.

Ben presses a sweet kiss to my temple as he flips a pancake, murmuring, “Sorry for the wait, love.”

I lean into him contentedly. “It’s worth the wait. Neither one of us was ready for this.”

He nods, and I sigh with relief because just like it’s going to take us time to build a new hotel, it’s going to take us time to create a family with Bernie, and maybe a few more kids, but it’ll be beautiful and perfect.

BERNIE CLINGS TO MY LEG, her little arms wrapped tightly around me as I arrive at the vineyard.

Lysander’s eyes drift down to Bernie, and he cocks an eyebrow. “Seems you have a little barnacle attached to your leg there.”

Bernie peers up at him briefly before nuzzling into me again. My heart melts. After being apart for so long, she just wants to be near me. Ben and I discussed the alternatives. Obviously, she wants to be with me because she misses me. It’d be cruel to send her to school when I just got back. So, we plan to ease her slowly into her old routine. Maybe since I’m home, I can take her early with me so she can eat lunch and nap at home.

“We’ll transition back to her routine slowly,” I say, hoping he doesn’t start asking questions.

Lysander nods, sympathy flashing across his face. “Of course. Bernie should be your priority right now. Take all the time you need.” He tilts his head toward the winery, his voice softening. “Really, take the day off. That girl has been through enough separations.”

My chest tightens, thinking of all the lost time with her. I stroke her back, a silent promise I’ll never leave her again.

“I thought we—”

“Bernie comes first,” he says. “You guys were apart for a long time because her father had his head shoved up his—”

“Lysander, language,” I cut him off.

“I was going to say bottom.”

“Still, watch your language,” I warn him.

He smirks. “I’m glad you’re happy. Seems like I can finally take a breath.”

Surprised, I ask, “Were you worried about me?”

He scoffs lightheartedly. “You were dating some fudged-up douche who couldn’t cut the umbilical cord between him and his ex.”

I frown. “How do you know?”

He chuckles. “Did you really think we wouldn’t run a background check on him?”

“You three are—” I close my mouth and smile. “The best brothers in the world.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

I open my mouth to respond but stop as I hear footsteps approaching. Bernie’s head pops up, her eyes lighting up.

“Daddy!” she squeals, wriggling free of me and dashing toward Ben.

He sweeps her up into his arms, spinning her in a circle as she giggles. When he stops, he winks at me.

“Hey,” I greet him and then walk over, rising on my toes to give him a quick peck. “I thought you had back-to-back patients today.”

“Heath’s covering so I could spend time with my best girls.” His eyes shine as he looks between Bernie and me, crinkling at the corners with affection.

“I love you,” I mumble, warmth blooming in my chest.

“Love you more,” he says, smiling broadly.

Bernie wraps her little arms around us in a hug. “Mama and Daddy,” she says, snuggling into us.

Happiness washes over me as I soak in this perfect moment. Ben pulls Bernie and me close and plants a kiss on each of our heads. I meet his gaze, seeing my own joy

reflected back in his green eyes. In this perfect moment, with Bernie's arms encircling us, I know we're exactly who we belong to and where we belong.

Epilogue



Benedict

UNDER THE STARRY NIGHT SKY, the ruins of the old inn are aglow with the warm flicker of candles and twinkling lights. I've laid out a blanket on the grass, surrounded by bouquets of Cory's favorite wildflowers. She looks radiant in the soft glow, her eyes sparking with joy and wonder. This place holds such meaning for us. Tomorrow they're demolishing it, so they can start the foundation of our hotel.

Tonight, I want to begin a tradition, a celebration that will mark the first day of our lives.

I take Cory's hands in mine, my heart pounding in my chest. I look into her eyes, those beautiful gray eyes I've adored for so long, and finally say the words I've been longing to tell her.

"Cory, since the moment I first saw you, I knew our souls were intertwined by the red string of fate. An invisible cord, linking us across space and time, heart to heart. When you look at me with those deep, soulful eyes, it takes my breath away. The world falls away, and it's just us two, infinite in our bond. I want to hold you close, feel your heart beat against mine. Trace the contours of your face as if imprinting you onto my soul.

"If I could capture this feeling in a bottle, I would. This overwhelming sense of belonging, of rightness. As if I have found the missing piece of my soul in you. I know getting here wasn't easy, but I believe we can weather any storm. All I ask is you give me your heart in return. Let our souls mingle and dance, destined by the red thread tied around our fingers. Never to be separated nor severed.

"I'm not here to save you but to stand beside you and love you. I just want to love you for a lifetime. I've loved you for years, silently, and I'm grateful that once I convinced myself

that I'm worthy of your love, you're loving me back, accepting me."

I get down on one knee and pull out the ring I've been carrying with me for weeks.

"Cory, you are my best friend, my soulmate, my entire world. Will you make me the luckiest man alive by marrying me?"

I look up at her hopefully, my heart in my throat. Her eyes glisten with tears of joy.

"Yes, of course, yes, I'll marry you."

"Thank you, Cordelia, for giving me a chance to earn your love."

"I love you," she whispers.

I gently cup her delicate face in my hands, bending closer to her. I kiss her deeply, as if this is the first time our mouths have joined or as if this is the last chance I'll have to feel her lips on mine. I pour every ounce of my soul into this one perfect moment. As perfect as every moment I spend with her.

Faking the Game



Aslan

It's past three o'clock in the morning, and I'm standing at my living room window.

Some would say I have insomnia. That's not the case. I operate on very little sleep, just like my father did.

Nights like this, I enjoy staring at the city lights, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the dark sky. If I were in my childhood home, I'd be gazing at the blanket of diamonds illuminating the blackness above us. That's the beauty of Paradise Bay. The sky is always clear. There's no light pollution dimming the stars.

If it wasn't so late, I'd drive forty-five minutes to my old house and see if that would bring me some answers to all the problems I'm dealing with lately—including my mother.

While growing up, I watched my father doing the same thing almost every night. He'd be staring at the big picture window that looked toward the vineyard. I guess I got my restlessness from him. Some nights, he'd wiggle his fingers, calling me to approach him. We would both stare at the still sky for a long time.

I was an active kid, but those nights when he invited me to be next to him, I didn't fidget or say a word.

"I'll let you in on a secret," he said one time, whispering. "When in doubt, always ask the stars. They'll listen to your problems and will guide you until you find the right way to solve them."

And here I am, as I do almost every night for the past fourteen years since he left us. I stand in front of the window, hoping to find a star that can guide me. Joel Spearman was an extraordinary father, a wise man, and a kind soul. I can't understand why he left us so soon.

It's been too many years without him. Anyone would think that I would be over his death, but I'm not.

He was too young, too full of life and plans.

I rub my chest as if trying to calm the ache of my soul—it's impossible.

The searing pain of losing my father will never disappear, and on days like today, it becomes unbearable. I needed him then and I need him now.

We barely survived his loss and everything that happened during those dark days.

It all started with the vineyard. One night, my family was woken up by the angry flames burning the vines and the guesthouse. According to the fire marshal, it was arson.

Two days later, Dad died of a heart attack. He was found in the field. According to Mom, he had gone out to assess the damage. It wasn't until supper time that she sent my brother, Heathcliff, to look for him. Heath is the one who found him lying lifeless next to the burnt vines.

If that wasn't enough, I found Margie, my fiancée, fucking my cousin Troy during Dad's funeral.

She taught me a valuable lesson. Women only want me for my money—that's exactly what she told Troy as he fucked her. Since then, I haven't dated or taken anyone seriously. My sister Fern says it's just an excuse to be an asshole like the rest of the men in her family.

Is she right?

That's debatable.

It shouldn't matter if I'm dating or not.

But it matters to my mother.

That's why a year ago, I lied and told her that I had a girlfriend. It's the best way to keep her happy. Mom lives in this enchanting world where true love exists, and soulmates are paired before they're even born. According to her, it

happened to all the Spearman families and it's bound to happen to her children too.

Someone should remind her that her soulmate died fourteen years ago. I can't understand how she still believes in that nonsense. She hopes my current girlfriend is *the one*.

My brothers and sisters hate that I've been lying to her for the past year, but it's worked like a charm. Unless I count those days when she wants me to bring my mysterious girlfriend to our family dinners—or for family celebrations. Like the Spearman family reunion happening in less than two weeks.

Yep, I'm fucked.

Hey, I never said the plan was bulletproof.

Should I have had a contingency plan when I learned about this event?

Nine months ago, when we learned about the possibility of a Spearman reunion in Hawaii, I laughed with my brothers, Gatsby and Lysander, my triplets. They've been my partners in crime since the day we were conceived. Our logic laid on the fact that the Spearman family is huge. Dad was one of seven children. Each one of them had five to eight children. Some of them are parents too. It's impossible to get that many people into one place.

We were wrong.

Three months later, I received an invitation to the first annual reunion. They had invitations and we had to RSVP.

The event is well organized. I found out that my cousin June, who used to own a PR company, is one of the masterminds behind the entire operation. Her twin Jeannette and her sister-in-law, Emmeline, are helping her. Those women could take over the world on a weekend and fix it if they had more time.

Since then, Mom has been reminding us that we need to RSVP and our presence at the event is *mandatory*.

With less than two weeks to go, I have to figure out a way to skip this trip. Am I afraid that my mother will drag me against my will? Yes. I think she's capable of that and much more.

Do I want to go?

Maybe.

It's Hawaii. My cousin Jackson and his wife Emmeline will be renewing their vows. Jack is the oldest of our generation. His brothers and sisters are my favorite cousins from the Spearman side, but Mom wants me to bring my girlfriend—after all, we've been together for more than a year. Plus, I'm in the middle of an acquisition, a merger, and... there's a lot of work to do. I can't just pack up and take a vacation.

There's also the fact that a week after this trip is over, we'll be celebrating the fifteen-year anniversary of Dad's departure.

I should borrow a page from Gatsby's life and disappear for a few weeks. Good luck finding me while you're celebrating nonsense or remembering that we lost the most important man in our lives.

"Fuck, I need drink."

As I'm about to head to the kitchen for a glass of scotch, my phone rings. I groan as I realize it's Lysander's tone. So much for having a peaceful night without dealing with family. I take one last look at the Golden Gate Bridge and turn toward the kitchen. If I'm going to deal with him, at least I'll do it with a finger of scotch on the rocks.

I pull out a tumbler, the bottle of alcohol, and answer the phone, setting it up on speaker. "What's up, asshole?"

"Some of us would like to get some sleep," he growls.

If I wasn't pouring my drink, I'd be staring at the phone. Why the fuck is he calling me then? "Good night? Go to sleep? Do you need a nighttime story? Did you try closing your eyes?"

“I can’t sleep because you’re thinking too fucking loud.”

I burst into laughter, almost dropping the glass. “Really? You’re complaining about my loud thoughts?”

“Yep, plus, you make too much fucking noise. I heard you when you left the bed and went to the kitchen. Why are you back there? Do you need another drink? We should soundproof your apartment so I can sleep.”

I look down and give him the finger. Letting him and Gatsby live in my building was one of the worst decisions I’ve made in the past couple of years. They don’t pay rent, they come to my apartment at all hours of the day to take my food, and I don’t have any privacy. “Or, hear me out...you can move out of my building. It’d make more sense to live close to the vineyard.”

He laughs but doesn’t confirm what we know. Lysander doesn’t want to live near Mom. He doesn’t need to live in the guesthouse. Why can’t he just buy a property or rent a place in Paradise Bay?

I guess because he’d be so close to our mother, she’d be barging into his place every five fucking minutes. *Mom needs a hobby* I think as the amber liquid goes down my throat.

“What’s upsetting you?” he asks.

People think he’s the most relaxed of the triplets, but that’s Gatsby. Though, in all honesty, none of us are chill or calm. The moment Dad died, the burden of the family fell onto us. Suddenly, we became parents to our younger siblings. Life came to be complicated as we tried to parent five teenagers and our mother, who had situational depression—losing Dad hit her pretty hard.

That’s the part of her situation I don’t understand. She suffered so much when she lost Dad. Why would she want that for her children? I wouldn’t want anyone to go through what she went through just because they thought they were in love with me.

“Listen, if you’re just calling to harass me—”

“It’s a courtesy call to check up on you,” he interrupts me.

“I’m fine.”

“I call bullshit. Something is either frustrating you or causing you major anxiety. I just want to help you chill the fuck out. Have you tried hooking up? Releasing endorphins is a healthy way to relax.”

“So now you want to dictate how I feel?”

“No, I want you out of my head and heart. It’s so fucking hard to deal with your feelings, Gatsby’s feelings, and my life.”

I snort. “Because you don’t have feelings.”

“Ha, don’t start playing ‘let’s annoy the fuck out of Lysander because’...I hate being a triplet.”

Is it wrong to enjoy his frustration? Probably, but I swear it’s so fucking funny when he’s annoyed.

“Can you just tell me what’s wrong with you?” he growls.

I know when to push, but I also know when I have to back off. Since the game is over, I confess what’s fucking with my head. “Hawaii, our mother, the merger...why can’t things be simple?”

“Tell Mom, ‘Fuck off. I don’t need a wife. The only girlfriend I have is the inflatable doll Caspian gave me for Christmas.’ See, it’s pretty easy.”

Fucking Caspian and his gag gifts. He’s such an idiot.

“I don’t understand why she’s always on my case and not yours. She has seven children *other* than me to nag, and I only hear her say, ‘Aslan, dear, when are you going to get married?’ Why?”

“Margie,” he answers.

I close my eyes, exhaling harshly. “It’s been over for fourteen years. Again, she has seven other children to harass.”

“None of us have ever been close to having a family. You were engaged.”

“You—”

“I don’t count,” he interrupts before I say something else. “Listen, your only options are to confront her or keep going with your fabricated girlfriend.”

He doesn’t understand that I’m at a crossroads. This is it. The fable has to come to an end. Unless he has a solution. “How can I continue with the lie?”

“Take *that* girlfriend to Hawaii, you can break up with her during or after the trip.”

“She’s not real,” I reminded him, annoyed.

“It’s not a matter of having her but finding someone to play the part. Hire someone for the week.”

“Sure, let’s bring a whore to the family event. Classy.”

“I meant—”

“You’re an idiot,” I interrupt him before he says something more stupid.

“Hire an actress.”

I’m about to pull out my hair. Is he serious? I snap my fingers. “Why didn’t I think of that? I could just post it on Craigslist. Actress needed to play the part of my girlfriend. Must be available to travel. No passport needed. Non-smoker, not clingy, nothing serious. I’ll have my assistant run it before noon.”

“The hot VP of Operations could do it.”

“Keep Keaton out of this conversation,” I growl.

“Aww, you don’t want us to mention your favorite, shiny, unwrapped toy?”

I’ve no idea what he means by that, but I’m about to go downstairs and rearrange his face.

“You’ve always had a soft spot for her. On the plus side, she knows how to deal with your...lovely personality.”

He’s not wrong. I consider his idea for one hot second. Can I fake being with Keaton? She’s smart, fun, and beautiful. Not that I’m gawking at her every time we’re in the same room.

Okay, I might glance at her from time to time because, well, she's gorgeous.

"Do you think that's going to keep Mom away?"

"At least for a few months. It's perfect." He snaps his fingers, almost as if he just had a brilliant idea. "She's leaving San Francisco in a couple of months, isn't she? You can claim that *she* didn't want to have a long-distance relationship."

The thought of her leaving makes my stomach drop. Soon, she'll move to Arizona—if the merger with Monti Media goes as planned. Another good reason why I have to skip the reunion. This is her dream, I have to make it happen—for her. I can't go on vacation.

But what if I bring her along? We could work in the hotel room, pretend we're together, and enjoy a week in Hawaii. She needs a vacation. I hate to admit that this plan might work, but am I that desperate?

No. I don't mix business with pleasure or family.

Including Keaton in this insane plan isn't the solution. "There has to be another way?"

"Yes, but you don't like to confront Mom. Hence the big lie, Pinocchio."

"I'll tell her I'm too busy to go to Hawaii."

He chuckles. "The last time you tried to wiggle your way out of a family event using work as an excuse, she threatened to fire you. She might not hold any shares for the company, but she's my mother, and if she asks, I'll vote in her favor. Everyone would agree with me."

The board is a joke. My brothers and sisters only make decisions that are convenient for Mom, and I have to deal with the rest. "I love our mother, but she makes our life too fucking complicated."

"I couldn't agree more. Now can you settle down? I have to be at the vineyard in less than two hours."

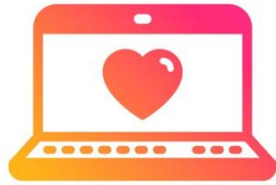
"You need to move back to Paradise Bay."

“I will, as soon as you tell Mom to fuck off.”

That’s probably going to be never.

>>>> Continue Reading [Faking the Game](#)

Can't Help Love



Maia

Fourteen years ago...

“Your plane ticket for May is ready,” Dad says.

I stare at the screen, trying to concentrate on the conversation. It’s impossible.

I’ve always been a rational person.

At least I think I am. My parents raised me to keep my feet firmly planted on the ground. I follow all their social rules. *All* of them.

Well, at least I did up until I started my junior year of college and finally moved out of the house—and the state.

Dad is a very conservative man who believes women shouldn’t leave home until they get married. According to him, I’m not allowed to have a boyfriend before the age of twenty-five.

Ha, good luck with that, *Papi*.

“Maia, are you listening?” Dad growls.

Oh, I’m listening. I just can’t build a coherent sentence.

My secret boyfriend is hiding under the table—as I requested. However, he’s doing very naughty things while waiting for this call to end.

I swallow a whimper as Gatsby licks my left thigh as he skates his hands down the center of my body. He’s so close to my core I can’t breathe. I’m desperate and needy for him.

My story is simple. I’m a naïve good girl who went off to college and discovered she liked sex—a lot. It doesn’t help that my boyfriend can’t keep his hands to himself. He’s always touching me, and I’m always wanting it.

I blame him.

Damn it, Gatsby Spearman and his delicious mouth and wicked fingers.

I told him to hide and stay quiet while I'm speaking to my parents. What is he doing?

He's quiet, but also being his usual wicked-horny self.

"You said your last test is May fifteenth, the ticket is for the twentieth. You're staying in San Diego for the summer, right?"

I bite my lip and nod a couple of times as Gatsby slides his finger between the elastic of my panties and touches my already soaking slit. I jolt but contain my expression. Every evening, this man does something forbidden while I have my daily video call with my parents. By now, I can keep my face stoic and my voice almost steady.

If computer science doesn't work, I might have a career as an actress.

I try to kick Gatz, but he holds my legs in place while pushing two fingers inside me.

Deep.

So, so deep, I can't help but open my legs for him and hold on to the table so I don't fall.

My breath becomes shallow, and then, I sober up when my father speaks. "Maia, are you paying attention to us?"

"Of course, I'm paying attention, *Papi*. You have my ticket for M-May."

"Are you okay, *mija*?" Mom asks.

I nod. It's almost impossible to talk when my boyfriend's thumb circles my clit in a torturously slow motion while two of his fingers thrust in and out—fucking me.

"Of course, I'm okay." I swallow hard.

Mom nods, satisfied. "How are your midterms coming along?"

I hold the table tighter, gulping down a breath as Gatsby keeps tormenting me with his fingers, his mouth. He's about to send me to the edge, make me come so hard that my screams will be heard all the way to Europe. I'm trying to hold still, but it's almost impossible.

My traditionalist parents would be very disappointed in me if they realize what's happening under the table. They'll be dragging me back home if they learn that I lost my virginity last September—it was my boyfriend's twentieth birthday. We spent a romantic weekend on Tybee Island.

They'll hate knowing that we have sex several times a day. We sleep in the same bed almost every night. They wouldn't approve of our relationship at all.

Dad will buy a chastity belt, throw me in my room, and ground me until I'm thirty. Since I'm not planning on dealing with the consequences of Gatsby's actions, I look under the table and mouth, *Stop it*.

Gatsby gives me a wicked smile. Not only that, he dares to pull down my panties while giving me a challenging glare.

“Stop,” I whisper.

“End that call.” The commanding low voice sends a wave of heat through my entire body.

I'm getting close.

So close.

“Are you okay?” Mom's voice makes me hit my head on the table.

“I hate you,” I whisper.

Gatsby winks at me. “It's okay. I have enough love for both of us.”

And I melt.

Getting under the table and riding him would be ideal, but I restrain myself and go back to my conversation. The one I plan to end soon so I can go back to my boyfriend.

“Are you okay?” Dad asks, giving me a suspicious glare.

“I thought I saw a cockroach under the table, but it was a wrapper,” I lie.

Mom touches the bridge of her nose. “Where are your glasses?”

“In the nightstand.”

“You should wear them all the time. That’s why you think that your trash is an animal. Clean the studio.”

My studio is clean, Mom. My boyfriend is a neat freak.

I almost roll my eyes, but I don’t. “*Si, Mami.* I’ll do that this weekend.”

“If you have a pest problem, call the management company. They’ll take care of it,” Dad reminds me.

“I can squash bugs, *Papi*, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

And just because he can, Gatsby pushes my legs wide, dipping down. I feel his breath against my wet center. When he swipes his tongue against my clit, I shiver. Pleasure rising like a tide of euphoria. His mouth is so good, my breathing is becoming ragged. If I don’t end this video call now, they’re going to hear me come.

“I don’t want to cut this short, but it’s time for me to go back to studying. Say hi to Tiggy and Cee-Cee for me.”

Dad glares at me. “We barely spoke. Your sisters plan on saying hello after they finish their homework.”

“Maybe you should give me one of those things called... cellphones. I could text even if I’m in class.” My parents are thrifty. They don’t like to spend on superfluous items. Someone should tell them that landlines are becoming obsolete. It’s been almost a decade since the last century ended.

“We’ll see,” Dad answers. That’s his polite way to say, *no*.

“I’m sending you a care package tomorrow. We made *polvorones*.”

“Thank you, Mami.” I wave, ending the call and closing my laptop.

Pushing my chair away from the table, I spring out of the chair. “What is wrong with you, Spearman?”

He’s still on the floor, grinning. “Have I ever told you that you taste delicious?” The dirty boy licks his lips and sucks on the fingers he had inside me a couple of seconds ago.

“You’re a wicked man. If my father knew about this”—I point from me to him a couple of times—“he’d kill you and ground me forever.”

“Your parents love me.”

“No. They liked you when we met you because you helped us carry the boxes and furniture while moving. You were also charming.”

“I’m still charming.”

“They’d stop liking you the moment they learn we’re dating, and once they learn we’re...doing it, well, they’ll hate you.”

He gets out from under the table, and I notice the silhouette of his hard length pushing against his shorts. “I hope you know we’re not having sex tonight.”

“But I just got started, and you’re so wet... I think you’re ready to ride me.” He gives me a sweet, pleading look. “It’s our lucky charm. We have sex, and we pass tests with flying colors.”

I can’t remember when he decided that he’d fail if we didn’t have sex the night before an exam.

Like he needs an excuse. We’re humping each other every chance we get. I’m not complaining, but he should at least own that.

Crossing my arms, I give him an unamused look. “We have a presentation tomorrow, not a test.”

“It’s sixty percent of our grade,” he reminds me, and suddenly his smirk appears. “You know what we should do? Move this party to my apartment. Your studio is cute but small.”

I give him a defeated glance. I'd agree if my parents were different, but they're overbearing, and I can't disobey them. This might be the day they call me or... I don't want to tempt my luck.

Gatz automatically takes me into his arms. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the beat of his heart. It's soothing. Though I want him to finish what he started during our call, I can just stay here, in his protective embrace.

"Can we go to my place?" he insists.

"Nope. If they call and I don't answer, I'm doomed. If they catch me out of my studio after eight, my parents will drag me back to San Diego—immediately."

"I think you're exaggerating."

"You don't know Mom and Dad."

"I've met them. They're lovely. They'd know me better if you didn't hide me every single evening. It's a pain to keep quiet when this place is so small."

"Sorry? There's not much I can do to fix it. You knew what you were getting into from the beginning."

He sets his chin on top of my head and sways me as if we're dancing. "Let me get you a cellphone so they can reach you at any time—in my big-ass, comfortable apartment."

"No, thank you."

"Every time I offer to buy you something, you decline it."

"Why would you buy me stuff? You're lucky I let you pay for my meals. May I remind you I'm an independent woman?"

"I don't know. Margie never says no to Aslan. Actually, she's always demanding something new."

Every time he talks about his brother's girlfriend, I get the feeling that she's a gold digger. Maybe I'm wrong. After all, I don't know her. Aslan, Gatsby, and Lysander might be triplets, but they sound like totally different people. I wish I could

meet them. Maybe one of these days I'll accept his invitation to visit his family.

“Well, I'm not Margie, and you're not Aslan. I'll get a job over the summer and buy myself a phone.”

He releases me and puts his hands on my shoulders, staring at me with worry. “Hey, don't stress out. We'll keep sleeping here and I'll hide. All I want is for you to be happy. I love you, Little Blue.”

Every time he calls me that, my heart flails wildly in my chest.

Is it normal to feel this way about a man?

I don't know. I was homeschooled all my life. I took several classes at the community college, and it wasn't until I turned eighteen that my parents agreed to let me leave the house. I moved to Atlanta, where I now study at Georgia Tech.

If my parents had a choice, I would've gone to Stanford or Caltech. Unfortunately for them, they didn't offer me any scholarships. I look at Gatsby and smile because he is one of the best things about my college experience—if not *the* best.

He's not only the best boyfriend in the world. He's my rock. From the moment I arrived on campus, he held on to my hand and helped me adjust.

And best of all, he loves me as much as I love him.

He kisses my nose, brushes my lips with his. “What are you thinking?”

“That I'm lucky to have you, and maybe we should practice tomorrow's presentation.”

“We already did that thrice. It's time to take a break.”

“I just want it to be perfect. As you mentioned, the majority of our grade is riding on it. What if we fail?”

“Last semester you said the same about the app we created, *Rencontrer*, and we aced it.”

I smile. “You know we could start our own matching company. I mean, not right now, but if we set up the website, tighten the algorithm, and come up with a good marketing campaign... My graphics for the branding are pretty awesome.”

“You’re brilliant and a kick-ass artist, but there are more colors than purple, pink, and blue...” He pauses, kissing my nose again. “We’ll talk about that when we’re ready to set up our company. I’m sure Dad will back us up, and if not, I’ll use my trust.”

“First of all, we’re not taking money from anyone, I want it to succeed on its own merit. Also, we need romantic colors for the application.” We might be years from starting it, but I want to get things started.

“That’s because you’re a romantic and believe in all that stuff.”

“You don’t?”

“I believe in you and that I’ll never stop loving you.”

The insecure girl inside me asks, “Is that a bad thing?”

He hugs me again, tightening his grip. Then, he pulls us forward. We fall on the fluffy queen-size bed.

The one he bought—against my wishes—last September, after the first night he stayed with me. He claimed the single bed my parents got me was too small. Okay, he was right about that. The guy is six-three and has the body of a swimmer. He’s a combination between Johnathan Rhys Meyers’s face and Michael Phelps’s body—including the washboard abs.

“No, loving you is never a bad thing. I’m hoping that after we graduate, we’ll set up *Rencontrer* and everything else we come up with together. They’ll be the best applications in the world.”

“Sounds like you plan on keeping me around a long time.”

He brushes some strands of hair away from my face. “Forever if you allow it, but let’s not get sidetracked. I think

you owe me something.”

He lowers his head and kisses me. As always, his mouth burns my lips, and the heat combusts my entire body. I sway on the edge between fantasy and love.

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<https://claudiayburgoa.com/wp/cant-help-love/>

Along Came You

Elliot



We all think there's a defining moment that shapes a person's future.

There's not *one moment*.

It's a series of events that occur throughout our lives.

The person I was yesterday isn't the same as I will be twenty years from now.

Not many guys think about the happily ever after when they're young, but I'm pretty sure that I happened to meet the love of my life at the tender age of two. I don't think I can say that I fell madly in love with her. We just loved each other. I believed she was my future and my everything until not one, but several events changed our lives.

At eighteen, I thought my life would be different. I planned on marrying the girl next door, living by the ocean, and having a few children.

I did marry the girl, but then destiny screwed with my life, and I lost her.

It's been twenty-three years since I said I do. Less than twenty since the divorce and it feels like a lifetime since I let her go. She found happiness with another man. I'm no longer that teenager with dreams and an open heart.

All those moments I lived were so impactful they became a wound.

A wound so deep that I avoid certain things.

If I ever write a biography, I'd call it *The Art of Avoidance*.

I avoid relationships of any kind, settling down, and commitments.

I'm a drifter.

A ship that lost its anchor so long ago it keeps floating along the ocean. Well, more like flying around the world, but the result is the same. I visit my family, so they know I care about them, but I mostly keep my distance, so they don't suffocate me.

I just arrived from Zambia. It was an almost eighteen-month trip where I helped build a hospital. The moment I arrived in San Francisco, I texted the family group chat to let them know I'm back on US soil.

For how long? I don't know. It could be just a few days or maybe a few weeks.

No one bothers to respond immediately, but I'm not surprised that my phone rings while eating lunch. It's Kyle, my best friend and brother-in-law.

"Hi," I answer, setting my spoon on the napkin.

"Where are you? There's a lot of noise in the background." There's no hello, how are you, or... he's never been one to have a normal conversation.

"A coffee shop."

"City? What city? I couldn't find you with the fucking app. Did you change phones again?"

I sigh. If he could, he'd put a tracker on my ankle. My little sister gets anxious when she doesn't know where I am. She should focus on raising her five children and dealing with her husband. Kyle is too fucking needy.

"I'm in San Francisco."

"Huh, interesting."

"Is it? You know the place well, I'm sure there's nothing *interesting* here for you."

Kyle and I met in Santa Cruz, a town just an hour south of the Bay area. That's where I was born and raised. His family owned a vacation home, but he's part of the Maxwell family. The Maxwells are one of the wealthiest families in the state, maybe the country. I think his worst memories are buried somewhere downtown. He's better living in Evergreen, Colorado, far away from here.

"Don't play dumb," he snaps. "Why are you there and not here?"

"I'll visit you soon, honey. You know you're my one and only," I joke.

"Fuck you. My wife wants to know how long you're staying. She misses you—" He pauses long enough to make me want to hang up, but I don't. "We all miss you, Elliot."

Kyle used to be the clown of our friend group. He didn't care what happened around him, but now, he sounds more mature than I do. It's not like I haven't matured.

My sister, Cassandra, swears I have Peter Pan Syndrome, but I don't. There's a huge difference between not wanting to grow up and avoiding my past.

"How's Cassy? How are the kids?"

"You should come and visit us."

"I'll do it soon," I promise, though soon can mean six months or a year, or maybe even two.

I adore my brother and sisters, and sometimes I miss my best friends. However, they'll expect me to stay longer, and I don't like to stay in one place for too long.

"What are you up to?"

If I knew, I wouldn't be here, but I just say, "I'm still deciding."

It's not like a project is going to fall into my lap. Next week, I might make a few calls. "For now, I'm planning on taking it easy." I don't lie. I'm gently letting him know to fuck off.

“You can come and work for me.”

I laugh. “No, but thank you for the offer.” I’m tempted to tell him that we co-own his company, and we agreed I’d be a silent partner. Meaning, he runs it and makes monthly deposits into my account.

That’s how I’ve been running my business affairs for the past six years—since Mom, my sister, Dahlia, and two of her daughters died in a car accident. I close my eyes, sending a silent prayer for their souls.

“Your sister would appreciate having you around for more than a weekend.”

“Why don’t I call you when I decide where I’m going next. Say hi to everyone for me.”

“Elliot you—”

I cut off the conversation before it gets too heavy. I love my friend, but I’m not in the mood to discuss my future, my choices, or his nonsense. I go back to eating when I notice a woman holding a tray walking around the dining room as she looks for a place to sit and eat her food.

There’s something about her that calls to me. Maybe it’s her posture, those eyes, or the frustration etched on her forehead. She’s beautiful but young. Too young. She could be my niece. Not many believe I have nephews and nieces who are in their early thirties.

If my niece Teagan were distraught, I’d love for someone to aid her. I rise from my seat and approach the frazzled-looking woman. “Would you like to share the table with me?”

She smiles, almost knocking me down to my knees. She’s even more gorgeous than I thought a second ago. Her gray-blue eyes are big and bright. It’s like staring at the ocean. I bet they’re bluer when she’s happy and look like a storm when she’s angry.

This kid is too young, just walk away.

“I don’t want to interrupt your meal,” she says with a sweet, gravelly voice that hits me in the groin.

Okay, maybe I need to look for a woman who can take the edge off. It's been a long time since the last time I fucked someone. She's not the one though.

"Don't worry about me," I assure her, planning on just picking up my tray and leaving the place immediately.

"Okay, but it'll only take a few minutes. I'm a fast eater." She sets up the tray on my table, and I pull out the chair so she can sit. She glances at me, gifting me another smile. "Thank you. You're making me believe in humanity."

"Because you lost hope?" I ask, taking a seat. "Please, don't eat fast on my behalf. Take your time."

"I always eat fast."

"Why?"

"I grew up with six brothers. They'd scarf everything down. If I didn't match their pace, they'd leave me without dessert."

I can't help but laugh. "Six brothers, huh?"

"Yes, and a baby sister. We're a big family." She fixes the paper napkin on her lap, squeezes some hand sanitizer, and then grabs a spoon.

While she's eating, I study her. Brown hair with some auburn highlights, fine facial features, and her heart-shaped lips are tempting. She's pretty and probably too young. She might be just fresh out of college.

"You don't have to stop eating on my account," she says.

I shake my head, wondering what it is about her that hypnotizes me. Since we're sharing a meal, I extend my hand. "Elliot McPhee."

She smiles, meeting it. "Sorry, where are my manners? I'm Fern. My mind is all over the place today. People are just... not very nice."

I can't help but chuckle at her politeness. "Anything I can do to help?"

After a long yet soft exhale, she says, “If you can find a construction company that can take on my project, maybe?”

“There are plenty in this area. I doubt any of them will turn down a job.”

“You’d think. I just finished a meeting with North Bay Construction company, and they shut me down when I said this is for a foundation, and I was hoping they’d donate—”

“Wait, you went to one of the biggest construction companies in the Bay area asking for a donation, and they rejected you?”

“Try biggest in the state,” she corrects me with a smirk on her plumped lips. “And yes, I dared to ask them to work for me. Not that they let me say much.”

“Biggest company on the West Coast, but that’s not the point,” I argue with humor in my voice. “What in the world did you ask for that they shut you down?”

She sighs. “I made the mistake of mentioning the words charity and donation. Even before I could pitch my project to them, they ushered me toward the exit. Which is weird because aren’t construction companies supposed to woo their future clients?”

“Usually. Why did you flip the roles?”

“Who said it was my doing?”

“You.” I grab a chip from the bag and munch on it as I consider offering my services. I know a lot about construction and spend most of my time doing volunteer work. We could help each other. “Why don’t you tell me more about this project they rejected?”

She takes a bite of her sandwich. After chewing and swallowing, she explains, “I want a community with affordable housing close to the city. We have the lots, but before I can even tell the board what we’re doing, I need to have an architect willing to design them, and a crew—”

Fern sighs in frustration.

“Take a deep breath. It seems like you have a big project on your hands, but you just haven’t found the right person to manage it.”

She grabs a napkin and wipes the corner of her lips and nods. “That’s why I went to North Bay Construction. However, Jonathan Smith shut me down and invited me to get the eff out of the company.”

Fern straightens her shoulders and tilts her head toward the door. “The CEO is an asshole. I swear he just agreed to see me because...”

She clamps her lips without finishing the sentence.

My jaw tenses. “Did he insult you?”

“He kicked me out of the building. He has quite a colloquial vocabulary. I bet if I had been there representing one of my brothers, he would’ve been trying to kiss my ass.”

Some people are just entitled assholes. But maybe I should be thankful, because I could take on that project and give myself some time to think about where I’ll be going next. It shouldn’t take me long to draw up some blueprints and plan a community. I’ve done it a few times before.

“Why don’t we finish our lunch, and I can follow you to your office. Then, you can tell me more, and I might be able to find the right person.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “Just like that.”

I shrug. “Why not?”

She laughs. “Sorry, who are you?”

“I thought I already introduced myself. The name is Elliot.”

Fern can’t stop the laughter. “Well, that should be plenty to trust you with this project. What are your qualifications?”

“Well, for starters, I know the right people for that kind of job.” I wink at her.

She gives me a suspicious glance. “What do you know about construction?”

I show her my calloused hands. “Dad taught me from a young age so I could help him.”

“Though that’s helpful, I need more than a handyman.”

This woman might want my résumé before I can even learn more about the community. I sigh. “I’ve worked in construction for more than twenty years. I also have a degree in architecture and have a few engineer friends who might be able to give you a hand—for free. As long as your foundation is legit.”

She’s still not buying what I’m saying. I can see it in that doubtful gaze. “Are you pricey?”

“No, and if your cause is worthy, I might even donate my time.”

“You don’t have to. We can pay you, but—”

I point at her food, interrupting what might be her pitch. “Why don’t we enjoy our lunch, and then you can proposition me. Maybe I’ll even do a lap dance for free.”

I wink at her, and her cheeks heat up.

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Thank you so much for reading WHERE WE BELONG.

I hope you loved it as much as I loved to write it. Even when I ended it just as I was falling into a comatose state because of COVID ... it wasn't pretty. But I really loved how this book and the entire series ended. It was slightly angsty and yet sweet.

And can you believe that the series? I swear when I wrote the last chapters I was in tears because these characters have been with me for a few years and I'm going to miss them.

Of course we'll see them here and there ... and hopefully, another Spearman branch of this amazing family will appear soon. So definitely stay tuned.

If you loved this book, I would really appreciate if you leave a review in Bookbub and your favorite retailer.

Sending all my love,

Claudia xoxo



Claudia is an award-winning, *USA Today* bestselling author.

She writes alluring, thrilling stories about complicated women and the men who take their breaths away. Her books are the perfect blend of steamy and heartfelt, filled with emotional characters and explosive chemistry. Her writing takes readers to new heights, providing a variety of tears, laughs, and shocking moments that leave fans on the edge of their seats.

She lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband, her youngest two children, and three fluffy dogs.

When Claudia is not writing, you can find her reading, knitting, or just hanging out with her family. At nights, she likes to binge watches shows or movies with her equally geeky husband.

To find more about Claudia:

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Also By Claudia Burgoa

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