

THE
Calvettes
OF NEW YORK

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS,
DOESN'T ALWAYS STAY THERE

Wild
LOVE

a novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DEBORAH BLADON

WILD LOVE

THE CALVETTIS OF NEW YORK

DEBORAH BLADON

FIRST ORIGINAL EDITION, 2023

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eBook ISBN: 9781926440767

ISBN: 9798866069385

Book & cover design by Wolf & Eagle Media

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CHAPTER ONE

GINA

LAS VEGAS IS SUPPOSED to be the land of the lucky, so why do I feel like the unluckiest woman on earth?

I nudge an elbow into my sister's ribs.

She turns to face me. "What the hell, Gina? That hurt."

The smile on Bella's face tells me that it might have stung a touch, but she's fine.

I tilt my head slightly. "Why is Lawton here?"

Her gaze wanders to where our older brother, Dominick, is standing next to a poker table in this crowded casino. Seated to his left is his lifelong best friend.

Daniel Lawton.

I've known him for as long as I can remember. I can count on one hand the moments when we haven't wanted to strangle each other.

"He's Dominick's best man," she points out. "How could I not invite him?"

I tuck a few strands of my long brown hair behind my ear. "You could have given me a heads-up that he'd be here."

"He said he couldn't make it," she explains, shrugging her shoulders. "I guess he decided to make a surprise appearance."

That's the type of surprise I can do without.

She glances to the left when the joyous sounds of someone hitting the jackpot on a slot machine fill the air.

I trail her gaze to see a woman dressed in a long white lace gown jumping up and down. Next to her is a man in a black tuxedo, complete with a red bow tie.

“Do you think they’re on their way to one of the chapels to get hitched?” Bella’s hands dart to the middle of her chest. “Or maybe they’re already married, and this is their wedding night.”

My sister is three years younger than me. She’s also happily married with a beautiful daughter.

Bella is a firm believer in true love.

She found it with her husband, and now that Dominick is marrying the love of his life, I’m the focus of my sister’s heart eyes, and wishful dreams.

On her wedding day, she predicted that I’d be married before my twenty-ninth birthday. Since that’s less than a month from now, it’s time for her to face reality.

I’m never walking down the aisle. Love hasn’t been kind to me.

I’ve lost count of how many men have broken my heart. There was a time when I thought I’d find my perfect match, but those days are long gone.

“If they got married here, I give it a week,” I say flippantly. “Las Vegas weddings are a bad idea.”

Bella’s head snaps in my direction. “Don’t be so cynical.”

I skim a hand over the skirt of the short royal blue dress I’m wearing. It was a gift from one of my many sponsors.

When I announced on social media that I was heading to Vegas for the weekend, I was inundated with messages from companies looking to cash in on my online popularity.

I’m an influencer.

My follower count across all platforms is in the tens of millions.

Countless strangers scrutinize every image, video, and review I post. It doesn't matter if I'm raving about a new lipstick shade or if I'm in the kitchen of my grandmother's Italian restaurant back in New York City. Everyone has an opinion on my every move.

It's exhausting.

"I like that dress." Bella points to what I'm wearing before her gaze drops to her black pencil skirt and pink blouse. "I'm a mom, so I dialed it back."

I smile. "You look beautiful, Bella."

She does.

My sister and I share the same hair color, but that's where our similarities end.

She's shorter than I am, and her striking blue eyes don't match mine. I was born with the same shade of brown eyes as our mom.

"We should go over and say hi to Daniel," she suggests. "When's the last time we saw him?"

I can't speak for her, but I know the exact date I last saw Daniel Lawton. I can tell her the time and where I was when he walked away from me. It was just past three on a Wednesday afternoon almost a year ago on the sidewalk at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 34th Street in the shadow of the Empire State Building.

I ran into Daniel after I left a photo shoot for a newly launched jewelry line.

He asked if there was anything new going on in my life.

I gushed about the guy I was dating at the time. Brogan McCabe was handsome and successful. I believed he had long-term potential.

When I told Daniel my boyfriend's name, he ordered me to dump him. He listed all of the reasons why Brogan was no good for me.

I balked and told Daniel he had no idea what he was talking about.

He claimed to know someone who knew Brogan.

He sidestepped when I asked for more information about who was feeding him all the bullshit about Brogan that was coming out of his mouth.

In exasperation, Daniel stormed away.

He never looked back.

Six months later, he boarded a plane for California and hasn't been back to New York since.

My relationship with Brogan ended a week after Daniel warned me about him. The breakup had nothing to do with Daniel's accusations and everything to do with the fact that the lease on Brogan's apartment was coming due, and he wanted us to find a place together.

I wasn't ready for that step, so Brogan broke up with me via text message.

I glance in Daniel's direction again, and this time, his gaze is pinned to me.

His blue eyes lock on my face before they trail over my body and back up again.

Is Lawton checking me out?

He moves to stand.

All six feet two inches of him are as muscular and trim as ever. His dark brown hair is shorter than I remember but still styled to perfection. Late day stubble covers his chiseled jaw.

The man is nothing if not hot as hell.

I had a brief crush on him when I was eighteen, and he was twenty-five, but it was over almost as soon as it began.

I went to the apartment he shared with my brother one Saturday afternoon, hoping to get some time alone with Daniel. I had convinced myself that it was the perfect day to tell him that I had feelings for him.

Daniel opened the door without a shirt on. He invited me in, and then a woman wandered out of his bedroom wearing one of his T-shirts.

My infatuation went up in smoke when she begged him to take her back to bed. He told her to wait until I left.

I ran out in a rush, burdened with embarrassment.

“You’re staring at Daniel,” Bella whispers in my ear. “He can’t take his eyes off of you. Is this a movie moment? Are you falling in love across a crowded casino floor?”

I tear my gaze away from the well-tailored dark blue suit Daniel is wearing to glance at my sister. “Put your dreams away, Bella. I’m never falling in love again.”

Her head falls back in laughter. “That’s not how it works, Gina. Love is going to find you. It might even happen here.”

I turn to walk away. “I’m going to my room before dinner.”

Bella rushes to fall in step next to me. “To catch your breath after seeing Daniel?”

Yes, but I won’t admit that to her.

“To change my dress,” I say before I add for good measure, “I want to check on Arietta, too.”

Our future sister-in-law is just fine. Ten minutes ago, she left the casino to go up to the suite she’s sharing with our brother. I suspect she did that to check in with her dog sitter, who just happens to be our grandmother.

“I’ll go find Barrett,” Bella says with a sigh. “When I left our room, he was in the shower. Maybe I can convince him to get dirty before dinner.”

Shaking my head, I laugh. “You’re taking advantage of your child-free weekend, aren’t you?”

She winks. “Absolutely.”

Still chuckling, I wag a finger at her. “Play safe, or Luisa will have a sibling in nine months.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“That would be phenomenal.” I don’t try hiding my excitement at the prospect of becoming an aunt to another little bundle of fun. “Are you pregnant?”

My sister shakes her head. “No, but if it happens, we’d be thrilled.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

As we reach the bank of elevators that lead up to our rooms, Bella wraps an arm around my waist. “You know that all I want is for you to be happy, right?”

I look into her eyes. “I know.”

“Promise me you won’t hide your heart away forever,” she whispers as people gather around us, waiting to board the elevator. “Just because you lost on love a few times doesn’t mean you won’t find it again. We are in the luckiest place on earth, after all.”

I laugh as I hear another person shout when a slot machine’s bells and whistles signal a win in the distance. “I promise you my heart is right where it needs to be. Safe and sound in my chest.”

She fakes an exaggerated frown. “Fine, but you can’t hide from fate forever. One day it will find you. When it does, you’ll know because that will be the day that your heart meets its match.”

CHAPTER TWO

GINA

I HAVE ONLY myself to blame for this.

Dominick has been nothing but generous to me throughout my life. When I was burdened with student debt after attending NYU to earn a degree in behavioral science, my brother secretly cleared that for me.

He was by my side when I bought my apartment, negotiating like the financial genius he is so I'd get the best possible deal.

My brother has always looked out for me, so I wanted to do something extra special for him when he got engaged.

I arranged this Vegas getaway to give him a break from the stresses of managing the investment portfolios of Manhattan's elite. His fiancée, Arietta, is in law school, so this weekend has given her a chance to unwind.

If I had known that Daniel would show up for this trip, I might have made a last minute excuse not to board the plane at La Guardia, but now I'm sitting across the table from him with no escape in sight for at least a couple of hours.

"We should toast to the soon-to-be-married couple," Daniel announces in his toe-curling deep voice.

It's the same voice I fantasized about before I walked in on him and his lover when I was a teenager.

Since then, I've done everything possible to avoid hearing him speak.

Everyone, including me, picks up the flute of Dom Pérignon that was served to us at Daniel's request.

I intended to pay for this dinner, but if Daniel wants to shower us with expensive champagne, he can pull out his credit card.

Showoff.

Daniel pushes to stand. His gaze wanders the table, taking in the sight of my brother holding tightly to his fiancée's hand. He smiles at Bella as she leans against the shoulder of her husband. Finally, Daniel locks eyes with me.

It's intense in a way I'm not expecting, so I drop my gaze to my lap.

The fact that my nipples have furled into tight points under the thin fabric of the black lace dress I'm wearing isn't lost on me.

It isn't lost on Daniel either because when I look up, he's staring at my tits.

What the hell?

I clear my throat. "You were saying, Lawton?"

A languid smile slides over his full lips. "Right. A toast to the happy couple."

"The incredibly happy couple," my brother corrects him.

Tearing his gaze away from me, Daniel nods. He focuses his attention on Dominick and Arietta. "I was thrilled when Dominick told me he'd fallen in love. It all made sense as soon as I found out that it was Arietta. Before I left New York, I had a front row seat to her keeping him in check at work."

Laughter floats through the air from everyone at the table, including me.

His chuckle fades. "She has helped him view the world through a new lens. She's given him a fresh perspective on

life. I've known Dominick forever, and I can say with every confidence that I've never seen him happier."

"Save some of this for your best man speech," my brother says.

Everyone laughs again, but me.

I'm stunned that Daniel understands the depth of Dominick's love for Arietta or that he's noticed the difference in my brother since he fell for the beautiful blonde sitting next to him.

Daniel has been in California while he meets with potential new clients for the wealth management firm he owns with Dominick and another friend of theirs.

He hasn't seen firsthand how the walls my brother always had around him have collapsed under the weight of his love for his fiancée.

"That speech is one for the ages." Daniel laughs. "I've been working on it since you asked me to stand next to you when you marry the love of your life."

Staring at Arietta, Dominick nods. "She is the love of my life."

Raising his glass in the air, Daniel smiles. "Here's to Arietta and Dominick."

Everyone glides to their feet to clink glasses. I follow suit and softly wish my brother and Arietta all the happiness in the world before I turn to Bella and Barrett. When we're done toasting, I glance at Daniel.

He's waiting with his glass in his hand. "To Dominick and Arietta."

I touch the side of my champagne flute to his. "To Dominick and Arietta."

He leans across the table and lowers his voice. "True love rules."

I bite back a smile at the reminder of the phrase I used to recite all the time when I was a teenager.

Dominick holds his flute of champagne in front of him. “Today is also a day to remember a man who had a huge impact on my best friend. Hell, he had an impact on me, too. Today would have been his sixty-seventh birthday, so I want to commemorate that with a toast to him. Here’s to Marlin Lawton. A good man, a great friend, and an incredible father.”

Daniel raises his glass in the air as his gaze wanders to my face. “To my dad. I’ve done my best to make him proud. One day, I hope I can make his every wish a reality.”

“To your dad,” I whisper, suddenly feeling something I never expected to feel tonight.

Gratitude.

As much as Daniel annoys me, I know how important he is to Dominick. They’ve always been like brothers. The smile on Dominick’s face tells me that having Daniel here means the world to him.

I’ll survive spending a weekend in the same city as Daniel. This is Las Vegas. He’ll go his way after dinner, and I’ll go mine.

I doubt I’ll see him again before I head home to Manhattan.

CHAPTER THREE

DANIEL

I LEAN my back against the door to my hotel suite and draw in a deep breath, but it doesn't fill my lungs.

I feel like I've been punched in the middle of my chest.

That sensation happened when I caught sight of Gina Calvetti across the casino floor earlier.

Jesus. She's more beautiful than she was the last time I saw her.

That's not entirely true.

I see Gina on a daily basis in image and video form.

I follow all of her social media accounts under a fake name.

She's the only person I follow.

A loud knock at the door sends me a step forward.

Shit.

I scrub a hand over my face in an effort to regain some of the composure I held onto through dinner.

Sitting across from the most striking woman on the planet while eating a perfectly prepared meal should have been a dream come true, but it was a goddamn nightmare.

I was hard as stone through every course, and when she finally caught my gaze mid-way through dessert, I almost choked on the rum syrup-covered brownie I was eating.

I don't like chocolate, but Gina ordered it for the table, so I indulged.

Another knock sounds at the door, and since I haven't ordered anything from room service, I know it has to be a Calvetti or one of their partners behind that door.

Thank Christ it appears that Gina is single because I'm pretty sure my head would have exploded if I had seen her holding hands or kissing a man.

Even though Gina and I have had our fair share of arguments over the years, not a day passes when I don't think about her.

I've been in this like-hate limbo with her for years.

I spin around and swing open the door, relieved to find Dominick on the other side.

He's grinning from ear to ear. I admit this is going to take some getting used to.

Dominick had the angry bastard look down to a science before he fell in love with his executive assistant.

"Daniel." He pulls me into a bear hug. "How are you?"

Since we already traveled this road twice today, I answer differently this time. "I'm craving a tequila shot."

I've already told him in no uncertain terms that I'm fine, but Dominick knows this day isn't one I get through easily. My dad was my hero. He's the greatest man who ever lived, and his absence has created a void in my life, but I'm doing what I promised him I'd do before he died. I'm creating a life that he'd be proud of.

Dominick steps back to skim a hand over the lapel of my suit jacket. "I told Arietta I'd be back in our room soon, but Gina was headed down to one of the bars. Tequila ranks high on her favorites."

He's wrong.

Gina prefers a glass of wine to anything else. I first learned about her affinity for a full-bodied red twelve years ago when I was invited to one of the infamous Calvetti family lunches at the restaurant that bears their surname.

Gina was too young to legally drink anything alcoholic, but she poured a splash of wine into a coffee mug in the kitchen when she thought no one was watching.

I was, and called her out for it after lunch was over.

She begged me not to tell anyone. I teased her that I would, and she called me an asshole.

I took some twisted pleasure in riling her up back then.

I still do.

"You should join her," he suggests. "Did you see how many guys were checking her out in the restaurant? I'd feel better knowing you were watching over her."

Gina is twenty-eight and more than capable of taking care of herself.

If he followed her socials, he'd know that. She aced a kickboxing class last year.

She has serious self-defense skills.

"You two can catch up," he pitches another reason why I should join his sister for a drink. "A lot has changed in her life since you left town."

"Like what?" I spit out a little too quickly.

Dominick doesn't notice my eagerness because he's preoccupied with getting back to his fiancée. The fact that he's been glancing at his watch every twenty seconds is the dead giveaway.

Curious about what's different in Gina's life since I left New York, I nod. "Do you know what bar she's in?"

He reaches toward the inner pocket of his suit jacket. "I'll send her a text and find out."

Shaking my head, I pat the center of his chest. “No need. I’ll surprise her.”

There’s a good chance she’ll leave the bar if she knows I’m headed in her direction, but maybe Lady Luck is smiling down on me tonight, and I’ll convince Gina to have a shot of tequila with me.

“You’re a good man, Daniel.” Dominick wraps a hand around the back of my neck. “That’s why you’re my best man.”

This touchy feely version of my best friend is new to me, but so far, I like it a lot. “If I ever get married, I expect you to be my best man.”

I toss that out there even though the odds of that happening are slim to none.

“I’m looking forward to it.” He smiles. “I need to get back to Arietta. I wanted to stop in and make sure you’re doing all right considering the day and all.”

“I’m good,” I say honestly. “I’ll catch up with Gina for a drink and then call it a night.”

He laughs. “It’s early. You’re single. Why not take advantage of everything this city has to offer?”

“I’ll see where the night takes me.”

“Wherever that is, make sure you meet up with us in the morning for brunch because Arietta wants all of us there together. Eleven o’clock sharp, Daniel.”

“I’ll be there,” I promise. “Nothing could keep me from it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

GINA

AFTER DINNER, I went to my hotel suite but decided to go to the casino less than twenty minutes later. I'm not the gambling type, but my cousin, Rocco Jones, is a retired professional poker player.

The tips he taught me years ago came in handy tonight during a few rounds of Texas Hold'em.

I took a seat at the table with five hundred dollars in chips and left an hour later with five times that.

After that, I decided to reward myself with a drink.

Since I entered into an agreement with a well-known whiskey brand before I left New York, I was obligated to snap a selfie with a tumbler filled with their offering at a specific bar in the resort.

As soon as I took my first and only sip, my brother texted me, asking what I was up to.

That's Dominick's standard question when he's checking in on me.

I replied honestly when I told him I was in a bar having a drink. A small part of me hoped that he would offer to join me, but that didn't happen. I haven't had much one-on-one time with him recently, and I could use it.

My brother is wise beyond his years, and I've been contemplating making a big change in my life for a few months. I want his take on it, but that can wait until after his wedding and honeymoon.

"My pants are made of boyfriend material. Want to cop a feel, beautiful?"

Eww. That voice alone is enough to send me racing out of here. It belongs to a man who hit on me forty-five minutes ago. He's been making the rounds in here and even ducked out for a time to likely head to another of the many bars in this luxury resort.

"You're embarrassing yourself. Leave her alone."

That voice sends a charge through me. I'd recognize it anywhere because it almost always hits me the same way. Desire pulses through me even if that's not what I want to feel.

I glance over my shoulder to see Daniel standing next to the cheesy pickup line guy.

"I was talking to her, not you." The stranger shakes his head, keeping his gaze pinned to me. "I think I'm in love, and you're messing with my game."

"Your game?" I pipe up before Daniel can get a word in. "You don't have game. You have weak pickup lines. Seriously, they're pathetic."

That draws the guy's thick black brows up toward his hairline. "What?"

"You heard me," I say. "Have you ever met a woman who actually liked any of the lines you use? Be honest."

I catch the smirk on Daniel's face as the guy's head shakes. "No."

"Go back to the drawing board." I point toward the exit of the bar. "Don't subject another woman to your bullshit tonight."

"You don't hold back." He laughs.

“I’m doing you a favor.” I sigh. “You’re wasting your time and the time of any woman who is looking for a decent man.”

“Is that what you’re looking for?” Weak pickup line guy asks. “Are you looking for a decent man?”

“No,” I answer quickly. “I’m not looking for a man.”

“Because there’s someone in the picture?” He casts his gaze in Daniel’s direction for his next question. “Is it you?”

“Nope,” I spit out with a laugh, not waiting to hear Daniel’s response. “It’s not him.”

It’s not anyone, but neither of these men needs to know I’m single and plan to stay that way.

The pickup line guy pats Daniel’s bicep. “Our loss, dude.”

“Apparently.” Daniel shoots him a look meant to tell him to get his hand off of him.

It works.

“I’ll go tweak my approach,” the guy announces. “Thanks for the feedback, sweetheart.”

“Never call a stranger that again.” I point at him. “Promise me you won’t.”

He raises his left hand as if he’s about to take an oath. “You have my word, and that’s as good as gold.”

As he wanders away, Daniel takes the liberty of sitting on the barstool next to me. “Gina Calvetti. You haven’t changed a bit.”

“I have,” I snap. “I’m always changing.”

His gaze rakes me from head to toe for the third time tonight. “Your brother sent me here to watch over you, but…”

“I’m fine on my own,” I interrupt as I look to the left so I don’t stare too long at his gorgeous face.

“I’m well aware,” he says, the husky gruffness of his voice luring the gaze of a woman standing near him. “But since we’re here together, let’s have a shot or two.”

“Of?” I ask expectantly.

“Your brother would suggest tequila. He claims it’s one of your favorites.”

I laugh. “He’s wrong.”

Daniel leans closer to me. “I know. Red wine is your weakness.”

He’s right, but I won’t admit that. I can’t give him that satisfaction. Daniel always remembers the small things about everyone. If he wasn’t annoying as hell, I might find that charming.

“I don’t have any weaknesses,” I lie. “I’m game for a shot.”

“Let’s start with a mind eraser and see where that takes us,” he suggests.

I can handle coffee liqueur, vodka, and soda water in shot form, so I nod. “The next one is my choice.”

Daniel orders our shots from the bartender before he glances at me. “The next one? You’re granting me more than two minutes of your time tonight? Is it a full moon? Do you hate me less than the last time you saw me? What the hell is going on?”

Trying desperately to keep a straight face, I take a deep breath. “It’s a couple of shots, Lawton. Calm down.”

The corners of his lips curve up into a sexy smile. “You do hate me less.”

Shaking my head, I laugh. “I never said that.”

He leans so close to me that I can feel his breath skirt over the skin of my neck. “Your body is telling me that you might actually like me a little bit.”

My gaze drops to my hardened nipples. There’s no masking them through the thin fabric. I didn’t wear a bra because the dress is backless, and I’m barely a B-cup. “You’re so full of yourself. It’s cold in here, Daniel.”

He glances at two women standing near us. Both are dressed in thin silk mini-dresses. From this angle, it’s obvious

neither is wearing a bra, yet there's not a stiff nipple in sight.
"Not according to them."

"I need to use the ladies' room."

As I slide off the stool, he moves to stand, too. "I'll be right here waiting for you."

That's what I'm afraid of.

He's gorgeous, has a smile that could knock any woman's panties off, and he knows me better than almost anyone.

All I need to do is keep my wits about me until I've had two shots. Then I can race to my room and dream dirty dreams about him.

CHAPTER FIVE

DANIEL

GINA DOWNS her second shot as soon as the bartender places it in front of her.

I haven't touched either of mine yet.

"Done," she declares with a swipe of her tongue over her bottom lip. "I'm going to call it a night."

What the fuck is the goddamn rush?

I'd take it personally, but who am I kidding? This is personal. Gina can't stand me. That started somewhere between when she showed up at my door in the middle of a sleepover I hosted a decade ago with a woman whose name I can't recall and the day I ordered her to dump that loser, Brogan McCabe.

Looking back, I realize ordering her to do anything is a cardinal sin. The woman is fiercely independent, has a brilliant business mind, and is worth at least a few million dollars she earned by strategically using social media to her advantage.

"It's still early, Gina. What's the hurry?"

She glances at my wrist and the silver watch that is almost always there. She hums the chorus of a familiar tune as she tilts her head to the side. "I remember that watch."

"I remember that song," I say. "You used to sing that when you were a kid."

She tries to shield the grin on her face by swiping a hand over her mouth. “Everyone sang it when I was a kid.”

I hum a few bars before I launch into her favorite line from the song written by a pop star that topped the charts more than fifteen years ago. “When our hearts are aligned, magic happens.”

Her eyes widen. “You do remember.”

I’d continue singing, but won’t subject the people around us to that, so I chuckle. “It’s catchy.”

Sighing, she drops her gaze to my watch again. “Your dad gave you that on your eighteenth birthday, right?”

I nod.

Before I can say another word, her left hand lands on my wrist. “I’m sorry you lost him, Daniel. He was one of the best men I ever knew.”

He ranks as the best in my books, so I nod again.

“You said at dinner that you wanted to make every one of his wishes come true.” She pauses. “Was one of those wishes that you’d work in finance?”

That’s a broad term to explain how I earn a living, but Gina’s well aware of that. Her brother and I partnered with a mutual friend years ago to launch a firm that now handles the fortunes of many billionaire clients. Becoming a wealth manager was the smartest career move I ever made.

“He wanted me to make a lot of money doing something I love,” I clarify.

She mimes making a check mark in the air with her index finger. “Mission accomplished on that wish.”

I stare into her brown eyes, wishing I knew what to say to keep her in this spot for another minute or sixty.

I fail miserably when she slides off her bar stool. “Enjoy your shots, slow poke.”

Just as I reach for one, she picks it up and drinks it.

I laugh. “You’re welcome, Gina.”

Her tongue darts out to catch a drop of lingering liquor from her bottom lip. “You should be thanking me, Lawton.”

I drag my gaze from her lips to focus on her eyes again. “For what?”

She glances at the bartender. “Charge all of the shots to my room.”

He flashes her a broad smile. “No charge, Gina. Our Instagram follower count has jumped since you posted an hour ago. All of the shots are on the house.”

ALMOST TWELVE HOURS LATER, I walk into one of the hotel’s restaurants at precisely two minutes to eleven, wearing a pair of graphite gray pants and a white button-down shirt. I may be in Vegas for the weekend, but I’ve got a host of wealthy clients in Los Angeles and New York City who expect me to be on call for them twenty-four seven.

Two based in L.A. have already reached out this morning via video chat, even though that city moves at a slower pace than this one.

I glance around, hoping to see the dark-haired beauty who left me in the dust last night after she downed three shots in record time.

I’m disappointed when I spot the party of four waiting for me at a table with a view of a fountain that tourists flock to.

I’ve never understood the appeal of Vegas. I was lured here in my early twenties by the promise of riches and willing women. I enjoyed both, but every time I boarded a plane to head back to Manhattan, I was more than ready to leave this place and all the sins it offers behind.

This weekend is different. I’m here to celebrate my best friend and his bride-to-be, but beyond that, I’m enjoying being in the same city as Gina.

I look over my shoulder to the entrance of the restaurant, but she's not in sight.

When I glance back toward Dominick, he's beckoning me closer with a curl of his fingers.

With even steps, I walk toward him until I'm less than a foot away. "Hey!"

A chorus of greetings from Dominick, Arietta, Bella, and Barrett hit me simultaneously.

I smile in response before glancing down to see five table settings. I'm about to ask the obvious question, but Dominick jumps in to answer it without any prompting from me. "Gina had a work thing pop up that she needed to take care of. She sent mimosas and a massive bouquet of pink and red roses to our room this morning to make up for missing brunch."

"She thinks of everything," Arietta chimes in. "She's a sweetheart, but she works too hard."

Something tells me she's working hard to avoid me, but I brush it off and sit on the vacant chair beside my best friend. "A mimosa sounds great. What does a guy need to do to score one of those?"

CHAPTER SIX

GINA

YOU HAVE GOT *to be kidding me.*

I drag my sunglasses down the bridge of my nose to have an unobstructed view of the shirtless man heading my way.

He's wearing light blue board shorts with a zigzagging pattern of white lines. It's a brand I know well since I'm wearing a one-piece in the same color palette as his shorts.

"What the hell, Lawton?" I whisper under my breath as he nears me.

The slap of his leather sandals against the concrete next to the pool sounds through the air. The only other people here are three bikini-clad women immersed in a conversation about their plans for tonight. They're on their second round of drinks. They invited me to join them, but I declined, telling them I had to make notes on my phone for work.

It wasn't a complete lie. I'm always answering emails or direct messages from followers and potential sponsors. I keep a running list of things I need to do in the notes app on my phone. Regardless of how hard I try, I can't clear that list.

I glance at Daniel again as he nears me. Slightly frustrated to see him, I let out a sigh.

I chose this pool because it appeared to be the least popular. I came to that conclusion when I peered out the

window of my hotel suite an hour ago and spotted this secluded treasure in the distance. It's just past noon so that likely has a lot to do with how few people are here. This city really starts humming by late afternoon.

"Gina Calvetti?" he calls out to me with fake surprise in his tone. "What a shock to find you here."

Daniel is a shitty liar. That's one of the reasons why I often cleaned up when we played poker together. The game typically consisted of Dominick, Bella, Daniel, and me. If I wasn't shoving the night's winnings into my purse, my sister was.

Daniel's poker face is a fail, as is his ability to deceive.

He glances at the white lounge chair next to me. "May I?"

The temptation to toss a towel over my body is there, but this stunning swimsuit cover all the bits Daniel will never see, so I let the sun continue to do its job. I'm slathered in sunscreen, and since a dose of Vitamin D is exactly what I need, I plan on staying put for at least a few more minutes.

I push my sunglasses back up the bridge of my nose. "May you scam? Sure. See you never."

The laugh he lets out is edged with a roughness that makes me feel things I don't want to, so I silence him with a few feminine coughs.

"You sound like you're coming down with something." He sits on the lounge chair so he can face me. "Are you sick?"

"Of you?" I nod without glancing in his direction. "I might be."

"I see you pulled out your pre-teen bag of insults on this bright and sunny Saturday."

I don't need the reminder that it's only mid-day on Saturday. All of us Calvettis are flying back to New York City tomorrow night. Hopefully, Daniel heads back to the Golden State today.

"Why are you here?" I keep my eyes on the soft blue water in the pool.

“Same reason you are.”

Unless he’s hiding from himself, he’s dead wrong.

I opted out of brunch earlier to snap a picture of this gorgeous swimsuit and post it online since I’m contractually obligated to do that. My contract did specify that I had the latitude to post it ‘*at a time I deemed best.*’ To me, the best time was when I knew Daniel was eating waffles and reminiscing about old times with my brother.

Since I did tag my location in the picture because my contract stated I had to, I suspect he checked one of my social media profiles.

I can’t deny that a part of me is flattered by that.

“What’s that?” He removes his sunglasses and stretches his neck to get a better look at my wrist. “Did you get a tattoo?”

My fingers skim the dark ink of the script that runs across my wrist. It’s a small tattoo I got a couple of months ago when my grandma decided she wanted some ink.

I rounded a Manhattan corner to find her in front of a tattoo shop. When I called out, a blush ran over her cheeks before she tried to make a getaway by racing down the sidewalk.

It took me all of two minutes to catch up to her, and when I pushed her to confess what was going on, she admitted that she had been debating getting a tattoo for months, but fear was holding her back.

At that moment, I took her hand in mine, and we walked back to the tattoo shop. I went first, getting the two words my father deemed his motto tattooed onto my wrist. I asked my grandma, Marti, to write the words so the tattoo artist could transfer them to my skin.

When he was done, she asked me to do the same so she could have those same words tattooed on her wrist in my handwriting.

That experience created a bond between us that I’ll treasure forever. Whenever I glance at my wrist, I think about

the woman who has always been an integral part of my life.

“What does it say?” Daniel questions as he leans closer to me. “Show me.”

I hold up my arm so it’s facing him. “It’s my grandma’s handwriting.”

His gaze volleys from my wrist to my face. “Your dad always says those words.”

Signs those words.

I don’t correct him because, in my family, sign language is as much a part of our method of communication as English and Italian are.

My dad has been deaf since birth.

Daniel’s hands jump in the air, and he signs the two words tattooed on my skin: *Be brave.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

GINA

I'M NOT surprised Daniel just signed that to me. He learned American Sign Language years ago to communicate with my dad, and so he could follow our family conversations.

He signs the phrase again, adding my name. *Be brave, Gina.*

I am. I sign the two simple words back to him before dropping my gaze to my only tattoo.

“Getting a tattoo is a brave move.” He places his sunglasses on a small table beside his lounge before gazing at the pool. “It hurts like hell, doesn’t it?”

I laugh. “It’s not that bad.”

Without a glance in my direction, he nods. “My dad had tattoos. He told me to get one.”

“You should,” I say. “Your dad had beautiful ink on his arms.”

I know that because Marlin Lawton owned a bar in Greenwich Village. I worked there for a few months. I was a server, he was the bartender, and whenever I did pull a shift, he made sure to put me in a cab at the end of the night, so I’d get home safe and sound.

Marlin’s goodbye hugs were the best, and when he gave me one, I’d always catch a glimpse of a new addition to the

tattoos on his arms. I'll never forget the night I noticed a purple octopus in the center of a complex design on his right bicep. The entire work of art trailed under the sleeve of his T-shirt, but from what I could see, it was striking and spoke of his love of the ocean.

I raise a finger in the air but stop and smile. "No checkmark for that wish yet, Lawton. You need to get a tattoo if you want to make all of Marlin's dreams a reality."

He laughs. "I'll think about it. He had a lot of other dreams for me, too."

"Like what?"

He pushes to stand, dropping his phone on the lounge chair. "He always wanted me to learn how to swim. If I dive in now, will you jump in and save me?"

"No," I answer without the hint of a smile.

"No?" He drops his hands to his hips.

My gaze follows, and I instantly regret it because his abs are inches away from me now, as is the faint line of dark hair that leads down from his belly button and disappears under the waistband of the shorts.

I don't know how it's possible, but he's even more chiseled than when he was twenty-five.

"You won't let me drown," he says confidently. "You don't hate me that much."

I lift my hands to sign to him. *Be brave.*

He laughs. "That's your advice to someone who can't swim?"

I jerk a thumb to my left. "There's a lifeguard right over there. Judging from the size of him, he would have no trouble dragging you out of the pool. Look at how ripped he is."

Stealing a glance at the shirtless lifeguard, Daniel's eyebrows pinch together. "You think he's ripped?"

"I have eyes, so yeah, I know he is." I swing my long legs over the side of my lounge and push to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Daniel questions.

I look at him before I set my sights on the lifeguard.
“Andre?”

He flashes me a bright smile. “Yes, Gina?”

His French accent should make my heart beat faster, but since Daniel is less than a foot away from me, looking like every dream I had when I was eighteen, I feel nothing for the gorgeous lifeguard who introduced himself to me as soon as I arrived.

“This is Daniel. He’s about to jump in the pool.” I glance at Daniel to find a smirk on his face. “Be prepared to save him because, apparently, he can’t swim.”

Andre flexes both arms. “That’s what they pay me for.”

I shoulder the straps of the canvas tote I brought with me as I turn to leave. Before I can take a step, Daniel is blocking my path.

Even with three-inch heeled sandals on my feet, he towers over me. “You’re leaving?”

“What was your first clue?”

He laughs. “I thought we’d hang out for an hour or two.”

I catch sight of a male server approaching with a tray. Two large martini glasses filled with pink liquid and bright red umbrellas are sitting atop it.

Daniel’s gaze trails mine. “I took the liberty of ordering us a beverage when I saw you across the pool.”

Unable to resist the urge to touch him, I pat him softly on his right bicep. “Word of advice, Daniel. Drinking and drowning go hand in hand. Lay off the hard stuff until you learn how to tread water.”

“Stay and teach me.”

Knowing that we are at the shallow end of the pool, I grant myself the pleasure of touching him one last time when I press both hands to his bare chest. “Lesson number one is to let go of the fear and dive in, or in your case, be pushed in.”

I do just that, and even though Daniel is made of solid muscle, he loses his balance and tumbles into the pool as a chuckle flows out of him.

He's instantly on his feet, brushing his wet hair back from his forehead. A wide grin coasts over his lips. "You'll pay for that, Calvetti."

"Enjoy your drinks," I call back as I walk away.

I make it to a hedge before I finally stop and glance over my shoulder to see Daniel still standing in the pool with a beautiful blonde in a tiny yellow bikini next to him. I immediately recognize her as one of the three women who have been poolside since I arrived. I watch as the server hands Daniel both pink drinks. Almost immediately, Daniel offers one of the martini glasses to the blonde.

Something stirs inside me, but I push it aside with whispered words to myself. "You don't care who he has a drink with. He's not the man for you. He'll never be."

CHAPTER EIGHT

DANIEL

THE LAST THING I wanted to do today was have a drink with a woman who wasn't Gina Calvetti, but that's exactly how my afternoon started.

It ended with a second drink in one of the hotel's restaurants after I changed back into business attire because the woman in the yellow bikini was at the resort with her sisters and very wealthy grandfather.

Two hours spent charming Everest Truscott, and I'm set for a meeting with the man on Monday morning in our office in New York since he calls that city home. I'll work out the finer details of a contract with him while I score a little extra time with Dominick and his family, including Gina.

Life doesn't get much better than this.

I glance around the casino, hoping that inspiration strikes in the form of a promising poker table.

I'm a wizard when it comes to Texas Hold'em.

I learned much of what I know from Dominick's cousin, Rocco Jones, and the rest from my dad.

We'd sit across from each other at his bar, playing cards with whoever wandered in and was willing.

Money was never exchanged, and drinks weren't part of the pot. Instead, we played for peanuts; literal salted peanuts in

the shells.

I not only honed my poker skills, but I spent time with my dad, watching him in his element. He was the best bartender I ever knew. The guy who bought the bar after his death rebranded it as Tin Anchor, but he's kept the spirit of my dad's vision intact. I stop there whenever I need to take a trip down nostalgia lane. Gage Burke, the new owner, almost always offers me free alcohol in exchange for a story or two about my dad.

I would have held onto the bar myself, but the memories were like quicksand for years. I'd get pulled into their depth whenever I stepped foot in the place, so handing it over to someone else was the right move.

I have few regrets, and letting go of Lawtons isn't one.

I look to my left to spot one of those few regrets. She's dressed in a red dress tonight made from some sort of shimmery material. On her feet are heels that match, and when she turns slightly, I catch sight of her bare back.

Gina is striking from every angle.

I catch her eye briefly, and I'm greeted with a shake of her head.

She may think I tracked her movements via social media, but I haven't checked any of her profiles since I sat down with Everest.

Once I wrapped that up, I got a text from Dominick telling me that our group dinner reservation was canceled, and I was on my own to find a meal since he was planning a romantic evening with his fiancée.

I opted for room service. It wasn't bad, and the bonus was that it gave me time to check in with a few clients who had reached out to me today.

I take a tentative step toward Gina, half expecting her to run in the opposite direction, but her feet stay firmly planted where she is.

I might consider that a positive sign if her younger sister wasn't sitting at a slot machine next to her.

My gaze volleys between the two women. Bella is grinning broadly as she glances up at her sister. Her smile is welcoming, and you know instantly that if you give her the chance, she'll become a good friend.

Gina is different. When she smiles, the world stops around her for a second, or maybe it fades into the background. Either way, I've never met anyone with as much effortless grace as she possesses.

She's not as open as Bella or most of the other Calvettis. Gina's been burned by friends and foes alike and by men. I've heard enough stories from her brother to know that.

"Daniel!" Bella darts to her feet with open arms. "I won!"

I go in for the hug because I'll never turn one down.

"How much?" I ask, keeping my gaze pinned to Gina's face.

She's doing everything she possibly can to avoid glancing in my direction. I wouldn't call the mission successful since I catch her eyes darting toward me every five seconds.

"Ten bucks," Bella states proudly. "I had to spend thirty to do it, but who's counting?"

"The casino," Gina remarks dryly. "They're making a mint every minute."

"They are," I agree, even though I know she was talking to her sister.

Bella steps back to look me over. "You're dressed to the nines. Are you going to the club with Gina?"

Gina lets out a barely audible sigh. "He's not."

"I am." I nod, unsure of what club Gina's heading to, but I'm all for tagging along.

"He's not," Gina repeats, shaking her head.

“You two are adorable,” Bella drawls. “You sound like Barrett and me when we first met. I know you’ve known each other forever, but my instinct tells me something is happening between...”

“No!” Gina yells the word loud enough to draw glances from the people seated at the slot machines near us. “Your instinct is wrong. There is absolutely nothing going on between the two of us.”

“Calm down.” Bella laughs. “What’s that saying about me thinking that the lady is protesting too much?”

“You’re quoting Shakespeare wrong.” Gina taps her sister’s shoulder. “Besides, I’m not protesting. I’m pointing out the truth.”

“Sure.” Bella looks unconvinced. “I thought I didn’t want Barrett until I realized I really wanted him, so don’t protest so much, lady.”

I listen intently, wondering if Bella is sensing something about her sister’s feelings that I’m oblivious to. If I had to rate how much Gina wants me on a scale of one to ten, I’d land at a negative fifteen.

Looking back, I think it was a full-on ten the day she showed up at my apartment when I was twenty-five. At the time, I assumed she was there to talk to Dominick. It wasn’t until the next day I realized he had told her he’d be hiking with his cousin upstate that weekend.

Gina showed up to see me. If I had clued in, I would have asked the woman I was with to leave so I could focus on Gina, but I missed that chance.

Gina glances over her shoulder. “I’m meeting someone, so I have to go.”

“At Veil West?” Bella asks the question that I’m curious about.

Veil West is one of the clubs inside this resort. A client of mine owns it, so it was already on my list of places to be tonight. If Gina plans to spend the evening there, I’ll buy her a shot or two to repay her for last night.

“I need to go.” Gina sidesteps answering it with ease. “Don’t dig too deep of a hole for yourself, Bella. You won, so it’s time to stop.”

I catch Gina’s eye for a second and use that time to flash her a smile.

She glares at me before she turns and walks away, leaving me to stare at her perfect ass as she does.

“You like her, don’t you?”

I glance briefly at Bella’s face to find hope in her eyes. Not sure how to answer that question, I change the subject. “Are you interested in joining me at a poker table?”

“I’m interested in whether you like my sister *that way*.” She stresses the last two words and adds a perk of her eyebrows for good measure, so there’s no mistaking the hidden meaning in that question.

“That way?” I repeat, using the same tone as she did.

She tilts her head. “Gina carries a cloak of indifference around with her because she’s been burned a thousand times, but inside is this sweet, wounded heart. She needs someone like you to show her not all men are rotten to the core.”

I’m struck by her words, but not because her sister needs me to show her a thing. Gina is fearless. In my eyes, that cloak is her strength. If she’s holding her heart tight, it’s because she’s wise enough to know it’s not worthy of the losers who have undervalued her.

“Your sister is a remarkable woman,” I tell Bella.

She reaches up to tug on the lapels of my suit jacket. “You’re a remarkable man, and together you’d made seriously beautiful babies.”

Laughing, I grab her hands to cup them in mine. “Speaking of beautiful babies. Do you have any new pictures of Luisa to show me?”

My request accomplishes exactly what I intended it would. It sends Bella on a new mission, and it’s one that doesn’t involve setting her sister and me up. While she digs in her

purse for her phone, I look back to where Gina was, only to find her disappearing around a corner with a dark-haired guy by her side.

CHAPTER NINE

DANIEL

I DON'T KNOW how the hell I just lost almost two grand to Bella Adler, but while it was happening, she had a sweet smile on her face.

When we sat at a poker table in the casino, she handed me her phone so I could leisurely scroll through the hundreds of pictures of her daughter. I admit I stalled around the twentieth because that photo was taken outside Calvetti's on a sunny day. I know that brick exterior anywhere, and the woman holding little Luisa in her arms took my breath away.

With barely any makeup on, Gina was smiling at her niece.

I was tempted to send myself the picture so I could stare at it for the rest of my life, but I didn't because Bella would have jumped all over that with a discussion about our pending wedding and future children.

Bella's love for Gina is solid and unwavering. She wants only the best for her older sister, so I consider it a huge compliment that she believes I'm the man for her. I admit that I'm attracted to her. It's more than attraction. I've thought about Gina in every compromising position imaginable, but I doubt like hell she's ever thought about me that way.

I know for a fact I'm not on her mind right now because she's sitting in a booth in the VIP area of Veil West with some

goof who is staring at her cleavage like he's never seen a pair of tits before.

At least when I was checking out Gina during this trip, I was somewhat subtle about it.

"Gina!" I call out to her with a slim sliver of hope that she'll ditch the guy in the black silk shirt for me.

The loud music bouncing off the walls drowns me out.

I try again, "Gina! Over here!"

I get nothing from her. There's not even a glance in my direction. Hell, I'd take a middle finger salute at this point, but all I get is ignored.

"I don't think she can hear you, Daniel."

The sound of a woman's voice behind me turns me around.

I come face-to-face with one of Everest's granddaughters. It's not the woman I gave the extra drink to at the pool. This one is younger, blonder, and looks a little glassy-eyed.

I was introduced to her earlier, but since my focus was on Everest, I can't match the face with the name at the moment. I take a stab in the dark since I know all three granddaughters have names that start with *E*.

"Hey, Edith!" I smile, hoping that will soften the blow if I fucked up her name.

Her nose scrunches. "Edith is my grandma."

Shit.

"I'm Ensley." She sighs. "Remember?"

"Of course I do," I lie.

She glances past me toward the VIP area. "Wait a minute. Is that Gina Calvetti? We saw her at the pool earlier. It was before you hit on Elowen."

Elowen hit on me and missed the mark because I couldn't shake the image of Gina's long legs in that fucking bathing suit she was wearing.

I don't bother correcting Ensley.

“That’s Gina Calvetti,” I say proudly, as though I have something to do with the fact that Gina is recognized on a regular basis. That’s all her because she’s created a social media presence that has afforded her a fortune.

Ensley nods. “She’s more beautiful in person. How do you know her?”

I steal a glance at Gina over my shoulder. Now, she’s leaning closer to the guy. From this angle, it looks like she’s engrossed in whatever bullshit is coming out of his mouth.

“We’re old friends,” I say. “I’m actually here with her.”

“Here?” Ensley points to the floor. “As in this club, or here, as in Vegas?”

Before I can answer, Ensley has reached up to put a death grip on my forearm with her hand. “You were with her at the pool. You’re in this club. She’s in the club.”

“True,” I acknowledge with a curt nod.

Her eyes light up as she continues, “Elowen was confused when she said you hit on her, wasn’t she? You’re dating Gina. Has she been keeping you hidden from all of us?”

“All of you?” I question, wishing she’d let up on my arm because this petite blonde has some serious strength.

“Her fans.” She bats her eyelashes. “She hasn’t posted about a guy in a long time, but look at her. How can someone like that not have a boyfriend?”

Because the bastards she’s given her attention to have pissed away their chance to make her happy for the rest of her life.

Ensley finally lets go of my arm. I smooth my palm over the sleeve of my suit jacket to chase away the wrinkles she left behind.

“You should do something about that.” Her hand sails in the air past my head. “That creep is putting the moves on her.”

That spins me around. I’m greeted with the sight of Gina’s head tossed back in laughter as the guy she’s with inches even

closer to her. The way he's eyeing up her mouth looks like he's ready to plant a kiss on her.

There's no fucking way I'm watching that happen.

"Gina!" I yell.

"Save her," Ensley urges with a push on my back. "Save her from him."

I don't know if it's the two whiskeys I had when Bella was stealing my money at the poker table or the fact that I can't stand the thought of anyone touching Gina, but I take a step and another before I'm at a full-on sprint. I dart around people, bump into a few, and hurdle the velvet rope that separates the rest of the club from the VIP area.

Before Gina or the jerk she's with can register what's happening, I'm in the booth, sliding into the spot next to her so she's sandwiched between us.

I have no right to break up whatever the fuck she had going on with the schmuck in the silk shirt, but the look on her face tells me she's not as pissed as I thought she'd be.

"Daniel." My name comes from her parted lips in barely more than a whisper. "What are you doing?"

"Yeah," the bouncer I hurdled past chimes in when he finally catches up to me. "What the hell are you doing, man?"

"He's a crazed fan." The guy in the black shirt puts an arm around Gina's shoulder. His hand lands precariously close to her left breast.

I don't have time to break his wrist because Gina is taking care of that herself. She's got a hold of his hand and is twisting it.

"Gina," he grunts out her name in a wince. "What the fuck?"

"Don't touch me, Carl." She flings his hand back. "Never touch me again."

The bouncer takes a step toward Carl but doesn't make a move beyond that as Gina raises a hand to stop him.

“You can kiss the sponsorship goodbye, sweetheart.” Carl bares his teeth at Gina. “I’m going to make sure everyone knows what an ungrateful...”

“Don’t,” I warn him with a look of my eyes on his. “Don’t say it.”

Gina rests a hand on my forearm. I suspect it’s to keep me in place. She sets her gaze on Carl, who is now sliding out of the booth. “I don’t care what you think of me or who you share that opinion with. I didn’t want to represent your car brand anyway. I don’t know how to drive.”

“No one gives a fuck if you can drive.” He points a finger at her as he stands. “Your sweet ass was all I was interested in. A post of you sitting in the driver’s seat of one of our cars would have sent sales through the roof.”

“I’m more than a sweet ass.” She shakes her head. “I’m an intelligent woman.”

“Sure.” He laughs that off as his hand drifts to the front of his pants. “We both know where this was headed. You would have done anything to get the sponsorship, and I do mean anything.”

“No.” Gina chuckles. “Sex was not on the table. That was never a remote possibility.”

Seemingly unconvinced, he adjusts his belt buckle. “Your loss, sweetheart. I’ll keep my fifty grand, and you can spend your night with him.”

Gina glances at me even though the next words out of her mouth are meant for Carl. “I’m good with that.”

CHAPTER TEN

DANIEL

I DRINK MY SIXTH SHOT, and as it burns a path down my throat, I glance at Gina. “What the fuck is in these shots?”

Her right eyebrow perks. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I nod. “I would. That’s why I asked.”

She laughs that off as if I was trying to intentionally make a joke.

Slightly frustrated, I repeat the question. “What is in these shots, Gina?”

This time, she turns in the booth, so she’s facing me. “A little of this, a little of that, and a lot of joy.”

“I can use some extra joy, so I’m game.” I pick up another and swallow it. It’s just as harsh going down as the last one, but I definitely feel an instant buzz from it.

Gina claps her hands together before she playfully punches my shoulder. “Go, Daniel!”

I laugh. “When did you become my cheerleader?”

She glances toward the exit. “When you helped me chase Carl away.”

“Carl is an idiot,” I state with a minor slur. “Who the fuck did he think he was?”

“Right?” She heaves a sigh. “He owns a car company. Carl thinks he’s the king of cars. He’s dead wrong.”

“Dead wrong,” I agree before I pick up another shot glass.

Gina does the same before clinking hers to mine. The liquid inside disappears between her lips.

I follow her lead and toss mine back, too.

“I’m getting drunk,” I tell her. “I swear to fuck, you’re making me drunk.”

“You’re making you drunk.” She laughs. “I’m not pouring them down your throat.”

“You can.”

Her head pops up until our eyes meet. “Really? From the glass or my mouth?”

Fuck me.

The second option would involve our lips touching, or at least I think it would.

I shake my head. I am dreaming. I have to be dreaming because there is no goddamn way this is happening.

“From the glass it is,” she declares before I can request delivery by her sweet, plump lips.

Her index finger touches my chin, tilting it up a bit. “Open your mouth, Lawton.”

I do just that, and before I can register what’s happening, liquid coats my tongue as some slides over my chin.

“Oopsie, I missed a little.” Gina laughs.

Without thought, I reach up to brush it away with my fingers, but Gina has another plan. Her lips seek out the remnants of the shot just as I swallow.

I almost choke because her lips are on me. It may only be my chin, but my cock doesn’t care. It’s as hard as nails.

She pulls back quickly, laughing as she does. “Marti says never waste food, and alcohol is kind of like food, right?”

Silently, I nod.

She breaks eye contact to glance around the club. “Why did you come here?”

“Work,” I half-lie. “I know the owner. I came to see him.”

“Kade Benton?” she questions. “You know him?”

“He’s a client,” I tell her because I know Kade wouldn’t care if I announced that over a loudspeaker.

He’s always sending wealthy acquaintances my way to pitch to them. I’ve taken on three new clients in the past year because of him.

“He’s over there.” She points toward where Kade is standing next to the bar, wearing a dark suit and a light blue shirt. “You should at least say hi to him to make your lie seem more believable.”

I chuckle. “It’s not a lie, Gina.”

“It’s a lie,” she argues. “You came to find me. You’ve been stalking me since you got to Vegas.”

“No.” I shake my head as I spout another half-truth. “We just happen to keep running into each other.”

“Right.” Her arms cross her chest. “You’ve been trying to annoy me for two days, and you did a great job.”

“I annoy you?” I ask, even though I’m well aware of how pissed she seems whenever she sees me.

With a heavy sigh, she shakes her head. “Not always. Sometimes, like tonight, I like seeing you.”

Now, we’re getting somewhere.

“We need more shots!” she calls out to the server, who acknowledges Gina’s request with a nod and a smile.

Kade picks that moment to wander over.

“He’s coming this way,” Gina whispers. “Don’t act drunk.”

“I’m not that drunk.”

“Says the guy who is *that* drunk.”

I laugh. “You’re not making any sense, Calvetti.”

“Daniel.” Kade reaches out a hand in greeting. “I’ve been keeping an eye out for you. I’m glad to see you made it.”

“I said I would,” I say as I shake his hand. “The club is packed. That’s great for your bottom line.”

The truth is Kade Benton is pulling in millions a year from several different enterprises. This club and another in Manhattan are just a small part of his revenue stream.

“What can I say?” He chuckles. “We’ve been rated the number one club in Vegas for three years running.”

“Congratulations!” Gina pipes up.

“Kade, this is Gina...”

“Calvetti,” Kade cuts me off. “I’d know that face anywhere. Welcome to Veil West, Gina. We’re happy you’ve graced us with your presence tonight.”

“I love your club.” She beams from ear to ear. “The music is fantastic. The staff is awesome, and your shots are superb.”

“I’ll get you another round.” He motions toward another server. “All of your drinks are on the house tonight.”

“Thank you.” Gina smiles. “Daniel and I are celebrating.”

Kade looks at me, but I shrug, so he turns his attention back to Gina. “What’s the occasion?”

Her gaze locks on mine. “Tonight is the night Daniel gets his first tattoo.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GINA

I SCRATCH my eyebrow as I watch Daniel have an animated discussion with the tattoo artist that Kade recommended. I was half-joking back at the club when I said that we were celebrating Daniel getting a tattoo, but he didn't flinch.

He was on board immediately, and when Kade suggested this tattoo shop on the strip, I grabbed my purse and was set to go.

Daniel wanted another celebratory shot, so he enjoyed that before we said goodbye to Kade. He arranged for us to be taken to the tattoo shop by one of the drivers employed by the club to transport the VIP clients wherever they desire in Sin City in the comfort of a luxury car.

The discussion ends with the tattoo artist patting Daniel's shoulder.

I glide to my feet, wishing that I had made a pit stop in my hotel suite to change out my shoes. The red sparkly ones I'm wearing may look like they came straight out of a movie about a wizard who lives in a place called Oz, but they are too tight.

The shoes and the dress are both from a Seattle based clothing boutique I've never worked with before. They reached out via direct message on social media when I posted that I was coming to Las Vegas.

After some negotiation and a good-sized deposit in my bank account, they sent the items via overnight courier to my suite here. I put them on hours ago so I could take a picture in the courtyard of the hotel.

Our transaction is a rousing success in their eyes since both the dress and the shoes have sold out already, according to a text message the boutique's owner sent me less than five minutes ago.

Daniel sprints toward me with a grin on his lips. "I'm all set, Gina."

"You're actually going through with it?" I question for a second time.

The first time was when we got in the car. I suspected that Daniel's excitement about getting inked was all a show for Kade, but he assured me that wasn't the case.

He only waffled briefly when he told me that Kade resides in Manhattan, so he wasn't sure about his recommendation on the tattoo artist, but I chased that worry away when I found the Instagram page of the woman set to take a needle to Daniel's skin. Her name is Angel, and her work is stunning, so it's obvious Kade Benton knows exactly what he's talking about.

"Damn right, I am." Daniel winks. "I'm checking off my dad's wish list on this trip. So far, I learned how to swim, and the tattoo comes next."

"You didn't learn how to swim," I scoff.

"How the hell would you know?" He chuckles. "A beautiful woman jumped in the pool when you bailed. Elowen taught me a thing or two."

I don't want that admission to sting, but it does.

I turn around so Daniel won't see the disappointment that I'm trying to hide.

"You should have brought your swimming teacher to the club," I whisper.

"What was that?" He rounds me. "What did you just say?"

I take a breath before I glance at his face. Stubble is settling over his jaw, and it's a good look for him. I know jealousy is not a good look for me, so I force a smile. "The tattoo that you're getting...what is it?"

He pats the inside of his left bicep. "A special phrase right here."

"What special phrase?"

"You'll see." He perks a brow. "I'm up next."

Slightly disappointed that he won't tell me more about his tattoo, I glance toward a large window to see a group of people walk by. "It's getting late, but Vegas is always buzzing."

"It's early," Daniel says without checking his watch. "It can't be later than ten. Do you need to be somewhere? Did you promise your time to a sponsor tonight?"

Those words cut deeper than they should because sometimes it feels like my sponsorships dictate my life. "I don't need to be anywhere. Do you? Are you meeting up with someone later?"

His brows pinch together. "Like who?"

Not expecting to be put on the spot, I sigh. "I don't know."

"You do know," he accuses with a finger pointing at me. "You think I want to meet up with Elowen."

Hearing her name for a second time spears me, but I stand strong and keep smiling. "You did say she taught you a thing or two. Are the lessons set to continue tonight?"

He takes a step back to eye me up. "You're jealous."

I shake my head a little too vigorously. "What? That's ridiculous."

"It's not," he says. "As your sister said earlier, the lady doth protest too much."

"The lady isn't protesting at all," I argue. "I think all of those shots are catching up to you, Lawton."

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Could be, but I know jealousy when I see it, and I’m seeing it now.”

“You’re talking nonsense.”

“You are,” he bounces back with a smirk.

I run a hand through my hair, pushing a few strands behind my ear. “Don’t be a jerk, Daniel.”

His hand moves to follow the path of mine, but he stops when his fingers feather over my cheek. “Don’t be so beautiful, Gina.”

Our eyes lock, but the sudden ring of a phone drops his gaze almost immediately.

He fishes his phone out of the inner pocket of his suit jacket. “It’s your brother.”

Dammit, Dominick. Worst timing ever.

“Dominick,” he answers the phone in a cheerful tone. “What do you need?”

Although I can’t make out what he’s saying, I can hear my brother’s deep voice on the other end of the call.

“I still have weeks,” he says. “I guarantee it’s epic.”

Again, I stand silent while Dominick says something that makes Daniel shake his head.

“I’ll tell you what,” he says to my brother. “I’ll run it by Gina before the big day. You trust her judgment, right?”

My eyes widen because I have no clue what they’re talking about.

“Good,” he says abruptly. “I need to go. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

As he lowers the phone, I ask the obvious question. “What was that about?”

“Your brother doesn’t trust me to give the greatest best man speech ever, so I need you to weigh in on it.”

Frustrated that we were interrupted, I nod. “I can do that.”

“Daniel!” the tattoo artist calls out his name. “You’re up.”

Daniel glances down at his phone. “I’ll email you the rough draft of my speech. After you give it a read through, give me your honest thoughts.”

“You want me to do that now?”

“How long will this take, Angel?” Daniel asks.

Tucking a wayward curl of her blonde hair into the messy bun on the top of her head, she smiles. “You can’t rush perfection. You’re my last client of the night, though, so the sooner we get started, the sooner we’ll be...”

“Done,” Daniel interrupts as he slides his suit jacket off.

Angel looks at me. “You can wait out here or come with us to the back if you want.”

I weigh the options, but before I can choose, Daniel makes the decision for me. “I don’t want Gina to see the masterpiece before it’s done, so she’ll wait here.”

Glancing at a row of gray chairs lined up against a wall, I nod. “I’ll do that.”

Angel steps around me to lock the shop’s door. “There’s a pot of coffee behind the counter, but be forewarned, it’s hours old, and the restroom is in the back of the shop. If you need to use it, come on back.”

“But cover your eyes if you do.” Daniel demonstrates by placing a hand over his eyes. “No peeking at my tattoo.”

Bowing my head to hide my smile, I nod. “Understood.”

“Read the speech,” he says as he sets off with Angel by his side. “I’ll be back to show you my first tattoo before you know it.”

I raise a hand in the air and mime making a check mark. “First ever tattoo. Mission almost accomplished on that wish.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

GINA

TEARS well in the corners of my eyes as I read the last line of the rough draft of Daniel's best man speech. Overcome with emotion, I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

I witnessed a slice of his sentimentality last night at dinner when he made that speech honoring my brother and his fiancée, but this speech – this best man speech – puts that one to shame.

I've rarely seen Dominick cry, but I know he will on his wedding day when he sees Arietta in her breathtaking gown and also when he hears his best friend read this.

I drop my phone on my lap and stare at the wall opposite where I'm sitting.

When Daniel and Angel disappeared down the corridor toward what I assume is her studio, I lost track of time. I answered a few emails from potential sponsors before I finally opened the email from Daniel and downloaded the speech.

Pushing to stand, I tuck my phone back in my purse.

Since a few of the tears ran down my cheeks, I want to fix my makeup. I doubt that Daniel will care what I look like, but unfortunately, I'm a recognizable face in our social media ready world, so I need to tidy myself up before we leave this place.

I look into my clutch purse but don't spot the small mirror I almost always have with me. I must have left it back in my hotel room on the bathroom counter. I was in a rush when I headed down to the casino to touch base with Bella before my ill-fated meeting with Carl.

Even though Daniel told me he didn't want me to sneak a peek at his tattoo before the grand reveal, I make my way to the corridor, thinking that I can bypass the room he's in, and head straight for the washroom.

I slow as I near an open doorway because the sound that greets me takes my breath away.

"My boy, listen carefully to me," says a voice that I haven't heard in years.

Tears form again, but I can't stop the flow this time.

The deep but frail voice filters out of the doorway toward where I'm leaning against the wall of the corridor. "Make enough money when you're young, so you don't have to work forever. Learn how to swim for once and for all. You kept quitting the lessons when you were a kid, and my son is not a quitter. Sell the bar to someone who will give it the love it needs, get a goddamn tattoo, and for the last time, Daniel, marry Gina Calvetti. I've seen the way you look at her. Grab hold of her before she slips away. Don't waste another day because you never know when it will be your last one."

Shaking, I press my hand against my chest in a failed effort to slow my racing heart.

"I wish all of these things for you, Daniel," Marlin continues. "I wish I were going to be around to witness it all, but most of all, I would have given anything to see you marry Gina. You belong together. A father knows these things. I love you, my son. Never forget."

I hold back a sob as I hear Daniel's voice. "I saved that voicemail because it was the last one he ever left me. He died four days later from pancreatic cancer."

"It's beautiful," Angel whispers with a tremor in her voice. "I get why you wanted the tattoo, Daniel. What a wonderful

way to honor him.”

“I’ve never played that for anyone before,” he confesses.

“Really?” Angel doesn’t try to mask the surprise in her tone. “Not even Gina? I don’t understand. You don’t want her to know that your dad gave his blessing for the two of you?”

A deep chuckle fills the air. “Gina can’t ever know about any of this.”

I take two steps forward until I’m standing in the middle of the doorway of Angel’s studio. Her eyes meet mine before Daniel glances in my direction.

“I heard every word,” I say. “I heard all of your dad’s wishes.”

Since Daniel isn’t saying anything, I walk toward him, never taking my eyes off his face even though he’s shirtless.

“What does your tattoo say?” I whisper as I catch sight of the block letters on his arm.

“Memento Mori,” he says.

“Remember you must die,” I translate the Latin term, even though Daniel knows exactly what it means since Marlin often said it to anyone who would listen. He never let me leave his bar without telling me to make the most of every day since life doesn’t last forever.

“Gina.” He pauses to take a breath. “My dad was on his last days when he left me that voicemail. He did it in the middle of the night when I was fast asleep. I think it was a gift of sorts, so I’d always have his voice to remember him by.”

I nod. “And his wishes to fulfill.”

Angel’s gaze volleys between us. “You two are married, right?”

“No,” we say in unison.

“Do you want to get married?”

Neither of us says a word.

“My wife, Destiny, owns a chapel not that far from here.” She moves to stand, yanking off the gloves that are covering her hands. “If you’re game to make another of Marlin’s wishes come true tonight, I’m available to witness the nuptials.”

“Angel and...” I begin.

“Destiny,” Daniel finishes my thought as he glances at the tattoo on his bicep.

“Is it a sign?” I ask in barely more than a whisper.

“It sure as hell feels like it is.” His voice shakes. “What are we thinking?”

I drop my gaze to the floor. “I don’t know.”

Daniel slides to his feet. “Should we get married? Do you think we should do this, Gina?”

“I do,” I whisper, not sure if the shots I had earlier are pushing the words out of me or if hearing Marlin’s voicemail is contributing to my sudden irrationality. “Let’s get married.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DANIEL

I STARE at the marriage license in my hand.

I'm not a lawyer, but this document I'm holding is legitimate.

We're actually fucking doing this.

I look up at the small white chapel in front of us. It's nestled between a hotel and a restaurant. We're off the main strip, but this part of Las Vegas is still teeming with people.

A few feet away, I spot a woman in a short white dress standing next to a guy who is looking sharp in a formal kilt outfit. Both of their left hands are extended as they stare at what appears to be matching gold bands wrapped around their ring fingers.

"Shit," I mutter. "Rings."

Angel and my bride-to-be glance over their shoulders at me.

"Destiny keeps a selection of wedding bands in the office." Angel smiles before she flashes me her left hand. "Unless you want to head back to my shop after the ceremony. I can tattoo your names on each other's fingers."

"No!" Gina's gaze is trained on the ink on Angel's ring finger. "Not that."

We haven't been alone since we decided to take the plunge and exchange vows. Angel took the liberty of arranging a chauffeur driven limousine to pick us up at her tattoo studio. She told us that it was part of the deluxe package offered by Destiny's chapel.

I agreed to it because Gina didn't disagree.

On the way to the Clark County Marriage License Bureau, Angel poured us a couple of tequila shots. As the driver crawled through the traffic along the strip, the three of us toasted to happy endings and long lives together. As soon as we left that building with our marriage license, we each took another shot.

I'm feeling more buzzed than I was before I got the tattoo, but I know what I'm doing.

At least, I think I do.

I'm making one of my dad's final wishes a reality.

Angel's phone chimes, dropping her gaze to it. "Destiny is officiating another ceremony at the moment, so you have time to pick out a bouquet and those rings."

Gina nods. "All right."

"All right," I repeat.

I follow both women into the chapel, and I'm met with the sound of organ music and the scent of lavender.

Considering the fact that my stomach is already knotted from all the shots and the thought that I'm going to be married within the hour, I reach for the back of an armchair to steady myself.

Fortunately, neither woman notices me.

"Do you have a favorite flower, Gina?" Angel asks with a brush of her fingers over Gina's hand to grab her attention.

"White carnations," I answer before Gina can say a thing.

She turns around to face me. "How do you know that?"

I know that because it matters to her, and I never forget anything about Gina.

Years ago, when I was at Calvetti's, a guy she met for a date handed her a dozen red roses. She smiled and accepted them, but as she walked into the kitchen, I heard her grandmother mention that he already had a strike against him because Gina loves white carnations.

"They are your favorite, right?" I divert by asking my own question.

She nods. "Yes."

Angel lets out a light laugh. "I thought you'd say red roses. Almost everyone says that, and it's all Destiny keeps in the cooler."

Gina's gaze catches mine for a second. "That's fine."

It's not fine. It's a failure.

"This is Vegas," I say. "There has to be a flower shop open that stocks white carnations. I can get some. I'll find some."

"No," Gina protests. "Red roses are fine, Daniel."

"Gina," I say her name with a growl in my tone. "I want this to be perfect."

The corners of her lips edge up toward a grin. "Can I talk to you over there for a second?"

Angel takes the hint. "I'll go check on the ceremony Destiny is performing now. That will give us an idea of when you two are up."

We both nod as she wanders past a woman sitting behind a desk before she disappears down a corridor.

Without a word, I offer Gina my hand. She takes it.

"I loved your dad," she whispers with a tremor in her voice. "He was so good to me, Daniel."

"I know." I try to keep it together by swallowing hard. "He was a good man, Gina."

“I heard him say on that voicemail that he saw you look at me a certain way.” Laughing softly, she shakes her head. “Our parents sometimes see things that aren’t there.”

Not my dad. His instinct was spot-on. He knew before I did that there was something about Gina that made me want to be around her even when she couldn’t seem to stand breathing the same air as me.

“You’ve almost done everything on his wish list.” Her gaze wanders toward the corridor. “I want to help you check off his wish for the two of us, but...”

I can’t listen to her tell me that tomorrow is a new day and most likely will bring massive regret and an annulment.

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her palm. “But we’ll go back to reality tomorrow.”

She nods. “Let’s honor Marlin tonight.”

“We will.”

She tugs her hand away to raise it in the air before miming a check mark. “Marry the fabulous Gina Calvetti. Check.”

I follow her lead and do the same, adding my own twist. “Marry the handsome, wealthy, and charismatic Daniel Lawton. Check.”

She laughs. “You do know your ego is huge, right?”

I lean closer so I can whisper in her ear, “It’s not the only huge part of me, soon-to-be Mrs. Lawton.”

When she pulls back, her eyes are wide, and her mouth is ajar.

I stare at her, wondering how the hell we reached this point tonight.

“I’m going to need another round of shots when we leave this chapel,” she says. “And then another after that.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GINA

I TRY to crack open an eyelid, but the effort is too much.

I know a hangover when one has me in its clutches. This one is more like a death grip, and it may finally be the last straw for me.

“I can’t drink anymore,” I whisper, but I don’t think my lips moved.

A loud bang sounds in the distance, so I press my head into the pillow to block my left ear, but another bang filters into my right ear.

“Stop,” I manage to say. “Just stop.”

“Gina!”

I know that voice and the series of loud raps that follow tell me that my brother is in my vicinity.

This feels like a throwback to when I was in high school, and I had too many beers with my best friend.

My mind wanders to her and the promise we made that we’d never lose touch. We did when I went to college, and she went to Europe. She married some random guy she met in Germany and now owns a bakery there.

“Gina! Open the damn door!” Dominick’s voice ends my trip down memory lane.

I finally open one eye far enough to see sunlight filtering into the bedroom of my hotel suite. “What time is it?”

Not expecting a response from *anyone*, I jump when there’s a murmur next to me.

My gaze darts in that direction.

Stretched out on his stomach, wearing his suit pants, white button-down shirt, and shoes is a man. It’s not just any man. It’s Daniel.

“No,” I say in a panicked tone. “No.”

“Gina Calvetti!” Dominick’s voice is even louder than it was a minute ago. “Open the door now!”

In my rush to get out of bed, I stumble, striking my left hand against the nightstand. “Dammit.”

That quickly turns into an “*oh, fuck, no,*” when I gaze down at my hand and see a plain silver band wrapped around that finger.

“It was a dream,” I say, darting to my feet. “It was a dream, Gina. You’re still asleep.”

“I’m calling you again!” Dominick yells from the corridor outside the door to my suite. “If you don’t answer, I’m going to break this door down. You better be all right, Gina. Please be all right!”

I race toward an armchair near the bed to grab a fluffy white robe that I tossed there after I showered yesterday. I’m still wearing the red dress I had on last night, and since I’m limping, it’s obvious that I have only one shoe on. I spot the other near the entrance to the bedroom.

Quickly wrapping the robe around me, I call out to my brother over the sound of my ringing phone. “I’m coming, Dominick!”

I kick off my shoe and rush out of the bedroom, closing the double doors behind me. I lean against them briefly, look up to the ceiling, and say a short prayer, “Please don’t wake up. Please stay asleep.”

As I approach the door to the suite, I spot Daniel's suit jacket lying in a heap on the floor. I pick it up and toss it behind the couch before shoving my left hand into the robe pocket. Unlocking the door, I swing it open to find my brother on the other side.

"Gina," he whispers my name as he embraces me. "Thank fuck you're okay."

"I'm fine," I lie because I'm pretty sure I'm married to Daniel Lawton.

"We're leaving," he says in a low tone. "It's Arietta's grandfather. He collapsed this morning."

"Oh no." My right hand leaps to my mouth. "Is Vernon okay?"

I only met Vernon Greenwalt once at a Calvetti family luncheon a few weeks after Dominick and Arietta announced their engagement. I know how important he is to my future sister-in-law and how much he cherishes her. He told a couple of adorable stories about Arietta during lunch.

"He's at the hospital," he explains. "He was in Manhattan on business and stayed for the weekend to see a couple of off-Broadway plays."

I nod, even though I'm a little surprised that Vernon would be interested in theater. He strikes me more as the type who likes to count his money as a hobby.

"Bella and Barrett will travel with us," he goes on, "I didn't know what your plans were for today...whether you have commitments you need to fulfill to your sponsors."

"I want to come with you," I say in an effort to escape whatever the hell happened between Lawton and me last night.

I vaguely remember us exchanging vows, but everything after that is fuzzy.

We're both still clothed. We didn't consummate anything. We couldn't have.

Dominick kisses my forehead. "I'll book you a seat on our flight. Be ready to go in an hour, Gina. I need you in the lobby

in an hour.”

“I’ll be there.” I grab his forearm to keep him in place. “Please tell Arietta I love her, and I’m here for her.”

“I will.” He embraces me again, cradling the back of my head in his hand. “She loves you too, Gina. We both do.”

As I step back from the hug, he glances down the corridor. “You weren’t the only one missing in action this morning.”

I know where this is headed, but still, I play dumb. “What?”

His gaze drops to the phone in his hand. “I can’t find Daniel, but that’s not surprising. He probably hooked up with someone. I left him a message telling him we’re heading home. He’ll understand.”

I nod. “I’m sure he will.”

He taps the face of his watch. “Get ready. I don’t want to be late for the flight. We need to get back to New York now.”

I’m all for that. I need to feel familiar ground under my feet so I can figure out what the hell I’ve done and what I need to do to end my marriage as soon as possible.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DANIEL

I GOT MARRIED LESS than twelve hours ago, and my wife already left me.

I can't say that I'm surprised.

She's a Calvetti, and when one of them needs anything, they all step up to help.

Seeing as how Arietta Voss is already considered a cherished member of the family, I'm not surprised that every Calvetti in Vegas is headed back to Manhattan.

I finally rolled over in bed when I heard my phone signaling about a hundred missed messages. It was still in the pocket of my suit jacket, which was folded neatly over the back of a chair next to Gina's bed. I swear I dropped it on the floor as soon as we made it into her suite last night.

That's an exaggeration, but Dominick did call me four times and left just as many voicemails. Add to that the dozen text messages he sent me. By the time I finally looked at my phone, I suspect they were piling into a car to take them all to the airport.

I shot him a quick text message and waited for his reply before I called the airline.

Being abandoned in Vegas by your best friend is one thing, but when your wife bails on you, too, you have a choice.

You can accept the inevitable and set the wheels in motion for the annulment that you know is in your future, or you can chase her down and get your ass on the same flight that she's on.

I know I'm the last to board because the gate agent is tossing me a look that tells me I need to up my pace.

I do just that as I near him, even though my head is pounding because of this hangover that won't let up.

Tequila shots are officially crossed off my list of things to do in the future. I'm never touching one again.

"Mr. Lawton, I presume?" The gate agent manages a half-assed smile as he scans the boarding pass on my phone's screen before he glances at my driver's license. "You almost missed the flight, sir."

"But I didn't." I flash him a smile.

His gaze drops to my hand and the handle of the carry-on I'm holding. "Let me guess. You're in a rush to get home to your wife."

Dammit. The wedding ring.

I tug it off my finger before depositing it in the inner pocket of my suit jacket; my wrinkled suit jacket since I only had time to race to my suite, brush my teeth, put on deodorant, a splash of cologne, and a fresh shirt before I headed to the lobby to grab a cab.

"My wife is on the plane," I tell him.

His brow furrows. "It's Vegas, so I'm not even going to ask."

"Good." I pat his shoulder. "It's complicated."

"It always is." He sighs. "I hope your stay in our fair city was everything you wanted it to be."

"It surpassed that," I tell him honestly. "I made memories here that will last me a lifetime."

Granted, some of last night is a mystery to me since Gina and I indulged in more tequila after our quickie wedding

ceremony.

We exchanged standard vows and rings before I kissed my favorite Calvetti on the forehead after Destiny declared us husband and wife.

“That’s great.” The gate agent motions toward the jet bridge. “Time to board, sir. Have a good flight.”

Here’s hoping I do. It all depends on whether the airline representative I spoke to on the phone came through. I asked him to seat me next to my wife, although he wouldn’t even confirm Gina was on this flight.

I happen to know she is, and with any luck, I’ll be beside her as we leave Las Vegas behind.

“DANIEL?” Gina whisper shouts loud enough that it lures the gazes of the rest of the Calvetti family members on this plane.

I exchange quick hellos with Bella and Barrett before Arietta raises her hand in a greeting to me.

Leave it to Dominick to sit everyone in business class.

The man spares no expense when it comes to family.

“Daniel,” my best friend says as he pulls himself to standing. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Me either,” Gina mutters from less than a foot away from me.

I’m standing in the aisle next to the empty seat that I’m about to settle into. Since the airline representative I spoke to did indeed work his magic, I get to spend the next five hours enjoying some one-on-one time with my wife.

I glance down the aisle into the coach section of the plane.

It looks packed from here, which means Gina has nowhere to go. She can’t escape my company until we land in New York.

“Switch seats with me,” Gina tosses those words and a frown toward her brother.

“No,” he says firmly. “Arietta needs me, Gina. I know you’re worried about her, too, but I want to be beside her.”

Leave it to Dominick to think his sister wants to switch seats out of the goodness of her heart.

“I have a few things to take care of in Manhattan,” I tell Dominick as I shove my carry-on into the overhead.

“I’ll take that, sir.” A flight attendant rushes over to snatch my garment bag from my hand. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water,” I say with a grin. “Lots of cold water for me for the entire flight.”

Since he’s seated directly behind me, Dominick sits back down and grabs Arietta’s hand. “Sounds like you had quite a night, Daniel.”

“You could say that,” I say calmly, even though I married his sister last night.

I turn my attention to Arietta. “I’m sorry to hear about your grandfather. If you need anything, I’m here for you.”

Her blue eyes meet mine. “Thank you, Daniel. Dominick is right. You are a good man.”

“That’s debatable,” Gina whispers.

I hold in a laugh as I take the seat next to her and buckle in. “It’s good to see you, too.”

She lowers her sunglasses far enough that her eyes lock with mine. “We need to talk about undoing what happened last night, but not here. I don’t want any of them to know.”

Since Bella and Barrett are seated in the row behind Dominick and Arietta, I get it.

“Understood, wife,” I whisper.

She shakes her head. “I can’t think about that right now.”

“Then don’t.” I smile at the flight attendant as she approaches with a glass of water in her hand.

I down the entire thing in one quick gulp before I hand it back to her.

“I wanted some,” Gina says in a low tone. “I’m so thirsty.”

“Can you bring some for my seatmate?” I ask the flight attendant. “A glass before take off, and then we’ll take as much as you’ve got.”

Her gaze jumps from my face to Gina. “It looks like Vegas got the better of you two. I hope it was a trip to remember.”

“It was,” we say in unison.

I glance at Gina. “I, for one, will never forget this trip.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GINA

“DANIEL WILL STAY WITH GINA,” Bella suggests.

Wait. What?

I look at her. “Isabella!”

“What?” She shrugs. “You have an empty extra bedroom. Daniel needs a place to crash for a few days. Calvettis don’t allow family to stay at hotels. At least not if we have room.”

I pinch myself to make sure I’m not still asleep.

It hurts so *dammit*, this is not an ongoing nightmare.

I had a bad one on the plane that continued when I woke up to find myself leaning against Daniel’s shoulder. He was quick to tell me that I spent the entire flight like that, nestled up close to him while I snored peacefully.

“I’d offer our extra bedroom, but Arietta wants Vernon to stay with us,” Dominick explains. “She’s on the phone with her mom now. It sounds like her grandfather will be discharged from the hospital tomorrow morning.”

“Not a problem.” Daniel glances at me.

I look away, focusing on where Arietta is standing with Barrett. They are near the luggage carousel, waiting for Bella’s bag. Realizing that I checked a bag, too, I start to head in that direction.

I don't make it more than a foot before Dominick's hand is wrapped around my forearm. "You're fine with him staying with you, right?"

Daniel Lawton has an apartment in the city, so I remind my brother because it seems he forgot. "He has his own place. He can head straight there once we leave the airport."

Dominick cracks a smile for the first time all day. "He sold his place in the city, Gina. You know that."

I don't know that. In fact, this is the first I've heard of it.

"So we're good, right?" Dominick presses. "He'll stay in your guestroom."

I shrug my shoulders since I owe my brother at least a million favors in return for everything he's ever done for me. "Sure. Why not?"

"Thanks, Gina," Daniel says from next to me.

I acknowledge his gratitude with a weak smile even though I don't look to where he is.

My gaze is locked on a woman heading straight for me. I've seen that look on people's faces before. If I try and run, I'll know she'll catch me. I should have packed jeans and sneakers for this trip, but I didn't.

That's why I'm wearing a floral wrap dress and three inch nude heels.

"Gina Calvetti?" The woman's voice rings through the airport terminal. "Are you Gina Calvetti?"

My self-imposed rules dictate that I need to be kind to people who recognize me. It comes with the job.

"I am," I tell her as she nears me.

"I can't believe it." She laughs. "My daughter adores you. I wish she were here. She's going to lose it when I tell her that I saw you at the airport."

I step to the side to put distance between the woman and my family.

None of them signed up for this. My grandmother has had to endure countless people rushing into her restaurant in search of a glimpse of me.

Dominick has fielded dozens of phone calls at work from strangers asking if we're related. Some of my cousins with the same surname as me have been subjected to that, too.

"Let's take a picture for her," I offer. "You can show her that."

"Seriously?" The woman asks, sliding a palm over her dark-brown hair. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all." I manage a smile.

I wait for her to find an angle she's pleased with before she snaps a few pictures with her phone.

She studies each of the images before showing me one. "You're beautiful, Miss Calvetti."

"Gina," I gently correct her. "Thank you. You're stunning, too."

"Me?" She laughs off my compliment. "I look a mess. I had a last minute trip to take care of, so I haven't taken a brush to my hair in over a day. I'm just about to jump in a cab and head home."

"Home is the best, isn't it?"

Her eyes search mine. "You know it. Maybe my daughter and I will see you at Calvetti's sometime?"

"Maybe," I say because I made the mistake of arranging a meeting with a follower once, and that turned into a disaster.

She invited more than thirty people to join her, and as they packed into Calvetti's to meet with me, it quickly became apparent that they wouldn't be ordering anything off the menu.

It cut into Marti's bottom line, and although I tried to make it up to her by offering her money to cover the lost revenue that afternoon, she wouldn't accept it.

"I'm Kelly." She sighs. "My daughter is named Romy. She's a few years younger than you and follows all your

socials. I don't know why I'm telling you this."

I reach for her hand and squeeze it. "It's nice to meet you, Kelly, and please give Romy my best."

With her bottom lip trembling, she looks into my eyes. "I will, Gina."

Sensing she needs it as much as I do, I take her in for a quick embrace. "I need to go, but I hope your homecoming is good."

She doesn't say anything but pulls back with a brisk nod.

"All set, Gina?" Daniel is suddenly beside me, his deep voice luring Kelly's attention away from me.

"I'm Kelly Bires." She offers a hand to Daniel.

"Daniel Lawton." He takes her hand for a brief shake.

"Daniel is my brother's best friend," I say before he can explain our connection.

I trust him not to reveal our marital status to anyone, but I don't want there to be any online speculation about me dating anyone.

Her gaze volleys between the two of us. "It was nice to meet you both. I'll let you be. I can't wait to show Romy the picture of us."

I watch as she takes off, pulling her rolling suitcase behind her.

"Are you always like that with your fans?"

I glance at Daniel as I answer his question, "They're followers, and I try to be kind. It takes courage to approach someone you don't know in the middle of an airport."

"It takes just as much courage to be that gracious with a complete stranger. This is another example of how brave you are."

I run a hand over my forehead and whisper, "And foolish. I married you, and now you're moving in with me."

Not missing a beat, he leans close enough that I can feel his breath rush over my cheek. “I’m going to carry my bride over the threshold when we get home.”

I try to bite back a smile. “There is no chance in hell of that happening.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DANIEL

I FOLLOW Gina into her apartment, marveling at how she's kept her cool since we left the airport.

We shared a car with Dominick and Arietta. Gina asked the driver to drop me off here alone so she could go to the hospital with her brother and his fiancée.

Arietta shut that plan down when she insisted that Gina go home with me. She explained that although she appreciated the support, she knew her grandfather wouldn't be in the mood for visitors beyond her and Dominick.

The expression on Gina's face was priceless, but she begrudgingly agreed to get out of the car in front of her building.

"When I saw you board the airplane, I assumed you'd be heading home as soon as we landed," she says, dropping her keys on her dining room table.

"I live in California, Gina," I say evenly, trying to tame the amusement in my tone. "I suppose if I set out on foot now, I'll make it there in..."

"Daniel," she interrupts me. "I'm talking about your apartment in the West Village. Dominick told me at the airport that you sold it."

When she finally spins around to look at me, I stare into her eyes. “I sold it before I left town.”

Her hands drop to her hips. “I had no idea.”

I can’t say that I’m surprised. Before today, Dominick had no reason to tell his sister that I had unloaded my apartment when I moved out of state.

“Why?” she questions. “That was a great apartment.”

That’s true. I loved that place and all the memories I made there.

“I relocated to California, and the market was hot at that time,” I explain. “I made a nice profit when it sold.”

She shakes her head slightly. “You weren’t planning on ever coming back, were you?”

Surprised that she cares, I nod. “I wanted a fresh start, and you can’t get much fresher than the other side of the continent.”

“So all of your stuff is in L.A.?”

“In my apartment there, yes.” I take a breath. “That reminds me. I need to call my assistant and get him to water my plants.”

“You have plants?”

Chuckling, I nod. “Plants, plates, clothes.”

She glances toward the living room and the navy blue and gray furniture. “I didn’t know. I thought you were planning on coming back.”

“I’m back now,” I say with a grin. “At least for a few days.”

Her eyes close briefly. “Why did you come to Manhattan if you live in Los Angeles?”

“I’m seeing a potential new client here tomorrow. I met him in Vegas.” I pause before I go on, “Elowen’s grandfather.”

“Elowen’s grandfather,” she repeats in a whisper.

“That’s right,” I affirm with a curt nod.

“Will Elowen be at the meeting?”

“Are you asking as my jealous friend or jealous wife?”

Her brows jump. “Neither.”

“So both?”

She stomps a foot on the hardwood. “Speaking of being your wife, we have to fix that, Daniel.”

Since she spent five hours snuggled against me on the plane, I used that time to research the options available for us to annul the marriage in New York.

“Going back to Las Vegas is our best bet.” I smile. “No pun intended.”

“We can annul the marriage here.” She points at the floor. “We’ll do it here in New York tomorrow.”

“It’s not that easy.” I shove a hand into the front pocket of my pants. “We don’t meet the requirements for an annulment in the state of New York.”

“I happen to know that we didn’t consummate this.” Her hand circles in the air between us.

“Unless one of us physically was unable to, that’s not going to fly in New York.”

“Dammit,” she whispers. “This isn’t happening.”

“It is,” I say in a low tone. “We’ll take care of it, Gina. I need to handle this meeting with Everest tomorrow. Then we’ll circle back to the annulment.”

“Fine,” she spits the word out with a huff. “The guestroom is at the end of the hall. It’s the last door on the left.”

“Are we going to Calevtti’s for dinner to celebrate?” I push my luck enough to see a weak grin cross her lips.

“No.” She regains her composure, her expression turning stoic. “We’re not going to see my grandma tonight, and there is nothing to celebrate, Daniel.”

“I can think of a few things.” I rub my chin. “There’s our wedding. If you’re future-focused, we can celebrate our

upcoming annulment. We're bunking together for a few days. I call that a reason to celebrate."

"I call it a disaster," she says. "We need to go back to Vegas soon to get an annulment."

"We will," I promise, even though I don't have a timetable for when I can make that happen.

Signing on a new client often takes some negotiation. Everest and I shook hands on a tentative deal, but there's a chance he'll want to revisit those terms.

"It goes without saying that we're not telling a soul about this, right?" she questions. "No one can find out what we did in Vegas."

I raise my right hand as if I'm taking an oath. "Our secret is safe with me."

Her hand shoots in the air to mimic my movement. "And with me. We'll get an annulment as soon as we can. No one will ever know we got married."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GINA

“WHY DO YOU LOOK LIKE THAT?” My grandma stands back and peers at me. “Something is different. Are you pregnant?”

The first time she asked me that last question, I was twenty-one and took offense to it. When she asked it for the hundredth time when I was around twenty-five, I realized that it was more wishful thinking than an insult.

My grandma loves her great-grandchildren, and in her world, that means the more of them there are, the better.

“I’m not, but Bella might be,” I tease.

“Dolly is pregnant?” Her entire face lights up.

I smile because Marti gave my sister that nickname when she was born, and she’s never stopped using it. I’m sure she’ll do it forever, regardless of how old Bella is.

“Who knows?” I shrug. “I know Bella wants more kids.”

“I want more great grandkids,” she confesses a fact that was never a secret to anyone. “What about your brother? Is he going to be a dad soon?”

“No idea.” I wave away the thought with a flick of my wrist. “You’ll need to take that up with him, but not right now, Grandma. Arietta’s granddad is in the hospital.”

“I know.” She nods. “I took sausage and kale soup there for him.”

I’m not surprised.

Martina Calvetti shows her love through her food, so if anyone in her world is suffering or mildly hungry, she’ll make sure they are fed.

“Sit.” She points at a vacant table near the kitchen. “I’ll bring you a bowl of mushroom risotto.”

“Is there minestrone?” I ask with a hopeful look.

“Of course,” she says before kissing my hand. “But you’ll have the risotto.”

“Because you made it yourself,” I whisper her signature phrase.

“I make it all myself.” She tosses her hands up in exasperation. “I’ll get you the food and a glass of red wine.”

I stop her with a tug on her hand before she can move. “No wine, Grandma.”

Her blue eyes narrow as her gaze drops to my stomach. “I knew you were pregnant. Who is the father?”

I feather my fingers over the front of the jeans I’m wearing. “I’m not pregnant.”

“You never say no to red wine.”

She’s right about that, but I’m still feeling the effects of the hangover that hitched a ride back to New York with me.

“I’m not in the mood for wine,” I say because I can’t tell her I had way too much to drink this weekend. “I’ll have sparkling water.”

Her hand jumps out, landing on my forehead. “Do you have a fever? Are you sick, my Gina?”

My heart tightens with those words.

My grandma has more grandchildren than she has fingers, but she’s always done her best to make each of us feel special.

I reach for her hand and hold it tightly. “I’m not sick. I feel like drinking water tonight.”

“I’ll get the water and the food.” Her gaze drifts over my shoulder. “It can’t be. Gina, look! He’s here in New York! I can’t believe he came to see me!”

I don’t need to glance over my shoulder to know who just walked into Calvetti’s. The expression on Marti’s face says it all.

“Daniel!” she calls out to my husband. “Come. You can sit with Gina and eat risotto.”

“Grandma,” I say her name with exasperation, lacing my tone. “I was going to spend the evening alone.”

“Nonsense.” She rubs her palms on the apron tied around her waist. “Daniel is family, and you have room at your table. You’ll enjoy your dinner with him.”

It’s doubtful, but since the restaurant is packed on this Sunday night, I don’t have a choice.

“If it isn’t my two favorite Calvetti women,” Daniel says as he approaches me from behind. “I must be the luckiest man in New York.”

DANIEL STARES at me from across the table.

He hasn’t said a word since Marti brought us each a glass of sparkling water, a bowl of mushroom risotto, and a large basket of bread to share.

We ate our first meal as a married couple in silence, each checking our phones whenever one of them made a sound.

I finally break the silence. “Is there something you wanted to say, Lawton?”

“Maybe, Lawton.”

I shake my head. “I’m a Calvetti.”

He smiles. “That you are. I thought you weren’t coming here tonight.”

I glance to where my grandma is standing next to a table at least twenty feet away. She’s so engrossed in conversation with the party of six she’s serving that I know she doesn’t have an ear trained to the two of us.

“I believe I said we wouldn’t see my grandma tonight.” I point at Daniel before directing my finger back at myself. “As in we, so I came alone, as in me.”

“We. Me,” he repeats. “Either way, we somehow still ended up breaking bread together.”

He punctuates that point by breaking a crispy breadstick in half. He offers part of it to me, but I refuse with a shake of my head.

“When can we go back to Vegas?” I ask. “I know you have a meeting tomorrow, but it won’t last all day, will it?”

“It might.” He takes a bite of the breadstick.

Just as I’m about to plead with him to postpone the meeting so we can catch the red-eye flight tonight, my grandma appears next to our table.

“Dessert is coming soon,” she says, even though neither of us ordered any sweet treats. “It’s something very special.”

“What is it?” I ask before stealing a small garlic knot from the breadbasket.

Marti’s gaze volleys between Daniel and me. “Guess.”

“Tiramisu,” Daniel says. “You know how much I love that, Marti.”

“I do, but no.” Her head shakes. “Try again.”

Daniel looks at me, but I take a bite of the garlic knot to force him into a second guess.

“The honey ricotta cheesecake that Bella loves.”

Impressed that he remembers my sister’s favorite dessert, I bow my head and smile. Still chewing, I wait for him to guess

again, but Marti taps my shoulder.

She clears her throat. “Your turn, my Gina. What do you think it is? What do you want most right now?”

A ticket for a seat on a flight headed directly to Las Vegas, but that’s not going to appear on a plate in front of me in the next two minutes.

I take another bite of the garlic knot. I know I won’t get the answer to her question right because my grandma has her own plan when it comes to food. I don’t think I’ve ever been served anything I’ve ordered, yet every bite I’ve eaten within the walls of this restaurant or in her home has been exactly what I needed.

I point at my mouth and sign to her. *I can’t talk with my mouth full.*

Daniel raises his hands in reply. *Sign your guess.*

Marti laughs, but her eagerness to reveal the surprise gets the best of her. “Millefoglie for the newlyweds. That’s what it is.”

I start choking immediately, unsure if she really just said she made an Italian wedding cake for Daniel and me.

She made one filled with lemon custard and citrus when Bella and Barrett got married, and the chocolate cream and berry one she created for my cousin Rocco’s wedding was pure bliss.

Daniel is on his feet instantly, rounding the table to help me as I cough through a sip of water. “Gina, are you all right? Gina!”

I nod. “I’m okay.”

Daniel rests a hand on my shoulder. “Are you sure?”

My grandma runs her fingers through my hair. “You have to take smaller bites, sweetheart.”

I glance up and into her face. “I will.”

How the hell does she know that we got married in Las Vegas? Who else knows? Did someone from the chapel post

an image of Daniel and me exchanging vows to social media?

I take another drink before I glance at Daniel. When our gazes meet, I only see calmness in his eyes.

“You want us to test the cake you’re baking for Dominick and Arietta’s wedding?” he asks my grandma. “I’d be honored to do that, Marti. Very honored.”

“Good.” She pats his cheek. “Sit down and take care of my granddaughter while I get you each a slice.”

As soon as she disappears into the kitchen, he kisses the top of my head. “Marti doesn’t know. No one knows. I made sure that no one would ever know.”

“How?” I question.

“I tipped very well at the chapel in exchange for their promise to keep our wedding under wraps,” he explains.

I smile faintly. “Exactly how much did you tip?”

“Enough that Angel and Destiny are planning the honeymoon to Maui that they couldn’t afford before last night.” He drags his chair next to mine before he takes a seat again. “No one will ever find out you married me, Gina.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“No problem, wife.” He flashes me a wicked grin. “You can’t blame me. Being Gina Calvetti’s husband is a pretty big deal, even if it is temporary.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DANIEL

I WALK into the offices of Modica Wealth Management and immediately marvel at how little has changed in my absence.

Years ago, I started this firm with Dominick and our mutual friend, Judd Corning. Back then, we were three guys in their twenties hoping to make a mark in the world of New York City finance. We've far surpassed that now. Collectively, we manage the portfolios of wealthy individuals from countless countries around the globe.

“Daniel?”

I glance to my left and spot a familiar face that has grown up since the last time I saw her. “Lia?”

Lia Calvetti is a cousin of my wife and her brother.

The last time I saw Lia, she was headed to Illinois to study at Northwestern University after graduating with honors from high school. That was six years ago.

She rushes toward me for a hug.

I take her in my arms. “I didn't expect to see you here.”

Laughing, she steps back from our embrace. “What are you doing here? Are you here to see Dominick?”

“No,” I answer immediately. “Are you?”

She tugs on the lanyard around her neck. My gaze drops to the security badge hanging from it with a small picture of her front and center. “I’m his executive assistant.”

“You’re what?” Surprise seeps through my tone.

“It’s a temporary gig,” she explains. “Arietta dashed off to law school, and Dominick hasn’t put in the effort to vet the candidates who applied to be his assistant, so while he slowly does that, I’m filling in.”

I stand back and look her over. Even though she’s related to Bella and Gina, she sports a stylish mane of blonde hair. Her blue eyes are the same shade as Marti’s and many of the family, but her smile matches the one I’ve seen in pictures of Marti’s late husband.

“Are you back for good?” she questions.

“I’m temporary, too,” I joke. “I have a meeting in an hour with a potential new client. Is the main conference room clear?”

Her gaze drops to the tablet in her hands as her fingers skip over the screen. “All clear until late this afternoon. Do you want coffee and something sweet to eat brought in?”

“I can handle that.”

She shakes her head. “Allow me. I have the time, and besides, I could use a cheese croissant. Don’t tell Marti, though. She’ll have a word or two with me if she knows I’m indulging. She wanted me to stop by her brownstone on the way to work to sample a batch of muffins she baked.”

I smile. “You passed on that?”

Her hand falls to the collar of her light blue dress. “It wouldn’t just be a muffin. Grandma lures me in with that, and by the time I left, I would have eaten a five course breakfast.”

I glance down the corridor toward where Dominick’s office is. “Did he come in today? I know Arietta’s grandfather is being released from the hospital this morning.”

“He’ll be discharged at eleven,” she confirms. “Dominick said he’d be in tomorrow, but if you need me to get a message

to him, I can do that.”

I drop my gaze to my watch. “No need.”

“I’ll get that coffee and bakery order in.” She steps to the side. “Bella mentioned that you were in Vegas for the weekend. Do you have any fun stories about my family you want to share?”

I’d call marrying Gina fun, but I know she’d frame it another way, and besides, that’s a secret that I’ll take to my grave.

“They all behaved themselves,” I say, adjusting the lapels of my navy suit jacket.

“Did Gina have fun?”

That lures my gaze back to Lia’s face. “I think so.”

“Good,” she says, tilting her head as she considers her answer before she adds to it. “She deserves to have fun. I get the sense that Gina is always on guard. Or she feels she needs to be. It can’t be easy being that recognizable everywhere you go. Sometimes, my heart breaks a little for her because people are always stopping her and asking for a picture or a few minutes of her time.”

I stand in silence, weighing the gravity of that.

“It’s a hazard of her job.” She smiles. “No one could handle it better than Gina. She’s grace personified.”

I agree with that statement, so I nod.

She glances at her tablet again. “Since Dominick isn’t here today, consider me your executive assistant. Let me know if you need anything.”

I suddenly feel like I need time with my wife, but she was out of her apartment before I woke up this morning. I don’t know if she’s avoiding me or not, but I plan on finding out as soon as my meeting with Everest is over.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GINA

I'VE ALREADY MET with two potential sponsors this morning, so it's time for my third cup of coffee of the day. I need the extra caffeine boost because it was almost impossible to sleep last night, knowing Daniel was across the hall from me.

I walk into the coffee shop my cousin, Arlo, owns with his wife and our cousin, Rocco.

Palla on Fifth is a love letter to the woman he can't live without. He married Palla more than ten years ago, and since then, they've not only launched this endeavor, but they've become parents to six kids.

This café has become a staple on Fifth Avenue. The interior boasts an eclectic mix of leather furniture and distressed wooden tables. The ambience is always welcoming, including the soft music that wafts through the air.

"Gina!" Palla calls to me from behind the counter. "You look beautiful today."

Palla would say that to me if I walked in with a bird's nest tangled in my hair and a burlap sack wrapped around my body. She's always saying that beauty isn't in the eye of anyone. She believes it's everywhere, and she's raising her children to appreciate the value in everything.

I hope one day I can follow her lead.

“You look beautiful too,” I bounce her compliment back. “Can I get a coffee?”

She pushes a ceramic mug toward me. “I made this for me but haven’t taken a sip yet.”

I take a nice long sip of the perfect cup of coffee. It never fails to fuel me when I need a midday pick-me-up. The bonus is that Palla never charges me for coffee.

“How was Vegas?” she quizzes, looking me over. “Did you get that blouse there?”

I glance down at the dark green blouse I’m wearing. It’s backless and tied at the waist. “Sponsor.”

That one word says it all. Today, I’m a walking billboard for Ella Kara. It’s a brand designed by Sophia Wolf. She’s a recognizable name in the fashion world. I’m set to work with her again in a few weeks when she unveils a new collection.

“Ella Kara?” Palla asks. “I love their stuff, but you know.”

I know that funds are tight when balancing a business and many mouths to feed.

“I have a closet full of their pieces. I’ve worn most of them only once or twice.” I smile. “We’re the same size. You should come by my apartment one night and do some shopping.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re at least four inches taller than me, Gina.”

I laugh. “I know the best tailor in the city. She’ll hem the skirts, dresses, or pants, but the tops will fit you to a tee.”

“You’re serious?”

“Very,” I tell her. “My closet is overflowing, Palla. Please come by and save me.”

A light laugh escapes her. “Name the day, and I’m there.”

I yank my phone out of my bag to peek at my schedule.

Before I can pull up my calendar, a text message lights up my screen.

Daniel: Turn around, Mrs. Lawton.

The phone almost tumbles from my hands as I rush to delete the message before Palla can get a glimpse of it.

“Daniel Lawton just walked in,” she says with a lilt in her tone. “I always thought he was cute as a button.”

I smile at that description of him.

He’s more handsome than cute to me, but I know Palla views him through a different lens than I do since she’s madly in love with her husband.

I don’t bother to glance over my shoulder. “Daniel is here?”

“He most certainly is.” She raises a hand to wave toward the entrance. “I thought he moved to California. I wonder why he’s in Manhattan.”

I tap my finger on the rim of the mug. “Can you pour this into a to-go cup? I need to run.”

“Sure.” She reaches for it. “You don’t want to stick around and share a coffee with Daniel? He’s not wearing a wedding ring, Gina. I can’t understand how a man like that can still be single.”

He’s not...unfortunately.

That thought swims in my head as I hear heavy footsteps on the approach behind me.

“Palla and Gina Calvetti,” he says in a tone that hints at the amusement that must be visible in his expression. “Is there a gathering of the most beautiful women in New York here today?”

I roll my eyes, but Palla is too focused on my husband to notice.

“It’s good to see you, Daniel,” she says warmly. “What brings you to New York?”

“Business.” He pauses before continuing, “and a cup of your coffee, Palla.”

Smitten, she giggles. “You’re good for my ego. Arlo will be sorry he missed you.”

“I’ll be back,” he tells her as he stops beside me. “It seems my business will keep me in New York for at least the next few days.”

My gaze snaps in his direction, and I immediately regret that.

He obviously didn’t shave this morning, so the stubble that has settled over his jaw has shot his hot factor into the millions on a scale of one to ten.

The suit he’s wearing doesn’t take anything away from how gorgeous he is.

“That’s a Berdine suit, isn’t it?” I ask before I realize what I’m doing.

Palla glances at me, but Daniel is the first to respond. “Leave it to the fashion expert to notice a great suit. It is a Berdine, and it’s custom-made.”

I shouldn’t be surprised. Berdine is owned by the same corporation as Ella Kara. The men’s clothing line is my brother’s favorite.

Palla nods. “Gina knows best. She’ll let me rummage through her closet for a few designer pieces. To top it off, it’s all free.”

Daniel’s gaze jumps to me. “Gina’s very generous.”

“Would tonight work for you, Gina?” she asks. “I can bring dinner.”

I look at Daniel as I answer her question. “Tonight works for me. I’m not expecting anyone else to stop by, so it’ll just be the two of us.”

He cocks a brow.

“I’ll be there,” Palla says excitedly. “Does eight work? I can come right after Arlo, and I tuck the kids in bed.”

“Eight is great,” I say with a wide grin. “You can take as much time as you need to go through my closet.”

My phone chimes again, so I drop my gaze to it.

Daniel: I guess I'll need to find someone else to hang out with tonight.

I look to where he's typing something else into his phone.

Daniel: I have a few old friends in the city who would love to see me.

"I'll grab you a coffee, Daniel," Palla says. "On the house. Do you want it to stay, or do you need to go?"

"I'll stay," he answers.

I use the opportunity to type out a response to him.

Gina: Don't be so sure of that. You're not as fun as you think you are.

When his phone beeps to signal my incoming message, he glances at it immediately before his fingers dart over the screen.

He flashes me a wicked smile when my phone chimes.

Daniel: I'm more fun than you've ever had. That I can promise.

With shaking hands, I drop my phone in my bag without glancing at him.

Does he mean in bed? Was my husband flirting with me?

Palla snaps the lid on a to-go cup before she slides it toward me. "Here you go, Gina. I'll see you tonight. I can't wait."

"Me either," I mumble before I turn and walk away.

With a glance back, I catch Daniel's gaze pinned to the back of my jeans, checking out my ass.

"He was definitely flirting with you," I whisper, trying to hold in a smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DANIEL

WHEN YOU'RE in Manhattan with no home, you improvise.

For me, that means hanging out in the office I once spent most of my time in. When I first walked into it this morning, I was surprised that everything was exactly as I'd left it. When I moved to California, Dominick and Judd didn't hand it off to anyone else.

I take in the darkened New York skyline before my gaze shifts to a framed picture on the wall. It was taken years ago inside Lawtons. One of the pub's regular patrons back then was Noah Foster. He's a professional photographer with an impressive portfolio, and after a shoot one night, he stopped in for a drink with his brother.

I was there to see my dad. Noah snapped a picture of the two of us. Neither of us realized it was happening, but a week later, Noah came by Lawtons again with two framed prints of that image.

It captures our relationship perfectly. I'm standing behind the bar with my dad by my side. He was trying to teach me how to make the perfect martini. At the exact moment the picture was taken, we were both laughing. My dad's hand is on my shoulder, and I'm looking at him with all the pride I always felt for everything he accomplished.

After his death, I moved all his belongings into my place, along with his copy of the picture. When I moved to California, it took the trip with me and hangs in the living room of my apartment there.

A sound behind me spins me around abruptly.

“Daniel?” Dominick asks as he appears in the open doorway of my office. “What the hell are you doing here this late?”

“Working,” I half-lie.

I did spend some time looking over the proposed contract I had the legal department draw up for my deal with Everest.

It contains some of the amendments he’s requesting after the verbal agreement we came to in Las Vegas. I suspected Everest would want to revise once he returned to Manhattan, and I was right.

I’ll take another swing at him later this week with the modified contract in hand.

Until then I plan on spending time with my wife, and a few of my New York based clients.

Dominick glances past my shoulder to the window. “How does it feel being back in the city?”

My best friend never asked what drove me out of New York. He assumed the sheer weight of the memories of my father made me get on the plane and never look back. That played a part, but once I realized that my feelings for his sister were complicating my life, I created an opportunity to expand our business to the West Coast.

“Like home,” I say honestly. “New York will always be my home.”

That draws him into my office. He’s dressed in jeans and a black sweater. Before he fell in love with Arietta, Dominick was almost always in a suit. Work was his life, with the sporadic random hookup thrown in the mix.

His gaze scans my face. “Are you considering moving back full-time?”

I look toward the window again, weighing the question.

Before I can answer, he makes it clear how he feels on the subject. “I want you back here, Daniel. You’re my best friend. I miss having you around, and we both know that Maeve is killing it in California.”

I hate to admit it, but he’s right. I hired the best of the best to work with me when I launched our office in Los Angeles. Maeve Robbins is a powerhouse when it comes to building a client base. Her monthly revenue is already a third of what I’m bringing in. She attributes that to working in entertainment for years before going back to school to study finance.

“Maeve is a force of nature.” I laugh. “I called her a couple of hours ago. She brushed me off because she was heading to a meeting with a tech billionaire who stays as far out of the public eye as possible.”

“But Maeve got a meeting with him?” Dominick chuckles. “Why am I not surprised?”

“With her,” I correct him. “They went to college together. Connections are everything in California.”

“I think she’s ready to take the reins there.”

I shake my head. “Not yet. She needs guidance.”

“Which we can offer from here.” He taps the corner of my desk with his fingertip. “Or you can do bi-coastal. Spend half the month there and the other half here.”

This Dominick is a far cry from the guy who sent me off to Los Angeles with a pat on the back and all the encouragement I needed to hit the ground running when I arrived there.

“What’s going on?” I shove my hands in the front pockets of my pants. “Why are you pitching to get me back here full-time?”

He rakes a hand through his dark brown hair. “Arietta has changed my outlook on life. It’s short, Daniel. Time doesn’t slow because we want it to. We all think we have plenty of it, but that’s not guaranteed to anyone.”

I glance at the framed photo of my dad and me. “I know.”

“You must miss this city.” He chuckles. “I know you had a lot of memorable moments here.”

I can’t deny that, so I nod. “Too many to count.”

His gaze drops to his watch. “I need to get home. I just ran in to pick up a gift I had delivered here.”

“For me?” I joke. “You shouldn’t have.”

He barks out a laugh. “It’s for Arietta. One of the gifts I got her for our wedding.”

“One of the gifts?”

Still chuckling, he shrugs. “What can I say? The woman deserves the world. I can’t give her that, so whenever I see something I know she’ll love, I pick it up.”

“Or have it delivered,” I say. “Are you going to tell me what you came to pick up, or do I have to start guessing?”

“I’ll show you.” He motions toward my office door. “It’s a necklace. Vintage. The pendant is an oval cameo locket.”

This is the first time I’ve ever heard my best friend describe a piece of jewelry.

He’s not finished, though. “Arietta loves vintage things. She’d much rather own something with history attached to it than something shiny and new off the shelf.”

“She sounds remarkable, Dominick.”

He glances at me. “If you would have asked me years ago if I could see myself this happy, I would have told you no fucking way.”

We laugh in unison.

“I see it on your face,” I say, taking a few steps toward him. “She’s the one for you.”

“The only one.” He holds up his index finger. “I’ll go grab the necklace, and then you can join us for dinner.”

“Vernon hasn’t gone back to Buffalo yet, has he?” I ask. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s good.” He pats the center of his chest. “When he was admitted to the hospital, he was dehydrated, and he’s been under the care of a cardiologist in Buffalo. All looks good on that front, but I booked him in with another doctor here in New York for later this month. Second opinions never hurt.”

“True.” I nod. “I appreciate the dinner invite, but maybe we should give Vern a few days to recover before I join the three of you at the table.”

“You need to meet my future father-in-law.” He smiles. “He can be a cranky bastard, but he’s a good guy. You’re coming for dinner, Daniel. Don’t tell Arietta about the necklace, though. I plan on giving her a gift every morning during the week before our wedding.”

I hold in a grin. “That sounds way too romantic to be coming from you. Who is coaching you on being the perfect fiancé?”

He pats my cheek. “When you meet the right woman, you’ll understand. All you’ll want to do is make every day she has on this earth better than the last.”

If that’s true, I already met that woman years ago. I’d do anything to put a smile on Gina’s face, but unfortunately, I think the only thing that will get that job done is a trip back to Las Vegas so we can annul our marriage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

GINA

I LOOK DOWN at the gift in my hands. The occasion doesn't call for it, but I think you should put a smile on someone's face anytime you can.

The wooden door in front of me flies open.

"Gina!" My brother smiles broadly. "I didn't know you were stopping by tonight."

I didn't know it either, but since Palla left my apartment thirty minutes ago, I decided that a quick trip to grab a gift for Vernon seemed like the right thing to do.

I anticipated hanging out with Palla until at least ten or eleven, but she texted me earlier to ask if we could move up our dinner and my wardrobe cleansing from eight to six thirty. I was on board since I was already home with an empty stomach and too many unwelcome thoughts of how my husband looked without his shirt at the tattoo studio in Vegas.

Palla left shortly after eight with three large reusable shopping bags filled with designer clothing that she plans on having tailored to fit her.

She thanked me with sausage meatballs and polenta.

It was a fair exchange in my eyes.

"I brought something for Arietta's granddad." I hold out my hands. "Can you give it to him for me?"

Dominick's gaze drops to the large box in my hands that is wrapped in a silver bow. "A puzzle? You got Vernon a puzzle of...."

He leans forward to get a better look at the top of the puzzle box, but I do him a favor and tell him, "It's a chalet in Switzerland."

He chuckles. "That's thoughtful, Gina, but he doesn't strike me as the type of man who can sit still long enough to do a puzzle."

I lock eyes with my brother and offer him a sly smile. "He'll like this one. Give it to him for me, okay?"

"Give it to him yourself." He steps to the side. "We're just finishing dessert. It's a chocolate cake that Arietta picked up on her way home tonight."

Since chocolate rates high on my list of things I crave, I accept the invitation. "I can stay for a bit."

"Stay for more than a bit." He ushers me in with a hand motion. "You can go home with your roommate when you're ready to leave."

I stop mid-step just as I clear the threshold of the doorway. "What?"

"He said you can take the subway home with me." Daniel appears behind my brother.

"I don't like the subway," I confess, even though Daniel is well aware of that.

My dislike for New York City's public transportation stems from a scare I had on the A train years ago. I was fourteen and on my way to see a boy I liked who lived in Queens. A fight broke out on the train, and I watched a man crumple to his knees with a broken nose courtesy of a stranger. Since then, Bella has encouraged me to ride the subway to overcome my fear. I've only ever done that with her, and she always squeezes my hand as I board.

"I know." He steps closer. "But I'll be right beside you, Gina."

“It’s the fastest way to get from here to your apartment,” Dominick adds to the conversation. “Daniel will protect you.”

I’d tell him that I can protect myself, but if I’m going to take the subway home tonight, I admit I’m glad Daniel will be by my side.

“YOU REMEMBER?” Vernon Greenwalt looks at me with a tear welling in the corner of his eye. “Gina, you remember?”

“Of course I do.” I pat his hand. “You and your late wife stayed at this chalet on your honeymoon, and she loved puzzles.”

His trembling hand slides from under mine to the puzzle box. He taps the image on the front with his index finger. “That window on the far left, on the top floor, is where our room was.”

“What?” Arietta scoots her chair closer to her grandfather’s. “I didn’t know that.”

“I told Gina when she mentioned that she was thinking of traveling to Geneva,” he explains before his gaze settles back on me. “Did you ever take that trip?”

“No.” I shake my head. “It hinged on a business deal that fell through.”

That sounds more professional than saying that the company paying for the trip to Switzerland pulled out of the sponsorship deal right before I signed because they realized an ad campaign featuring a bunch of cute puppies playing in the snow was much less expensive.

They made the right call. The videos of the puppies frolicking in fresh powder went viral, and their business blew up overnight.

“That’s unfortunate.” He heaves a sigh. “You’re young, though. You can go when you get married. It’s the perfect honeymoon destination.”

Despite knowing it's a horrible idea, I glance at Daniel. I'm not surprised to find him sporting a huge grin.

"We're going to steal a week away in Italy for our honeymoon when I have a term break," Arietta says, glancing at my brother. "Maybe we can fit in an extra day or two to visit the chalet in Switzerland?"

Dominick gathers her hands in his and kisses both. "Consider it done."

From his place across the dining room table from them, Vern clears his throat. "You won't regret that decision. Every couple should have a trip to remember after their wedding day."

"I agree," Daniel adds his voice to the conversation. "What do you think, Gina? Should every bride be whisked away to a romantic location after she's said I do?"

I hold in a smile. "I think it depends on the bride. Some women might prefer a ride on a boat through Long Island Sound."

All heads at the table turn in my direction.

"Does that include you?" my brother asks with a chuckle. "I can't picture you on any boat, Gina."

I shrug away his perception of what I would or wouldn't want for my honeymoon. The truth is that when I was a kid, my Uncle Robbie took my cousin Lia and me to Fairfield, Connecticut, on a Saturday afternoon. As he bartered with a friend of his over the sale of a used car in a parking lot facing Long Island Sound, I stood and stared at the water and all of the boats sailing past, including one with a couple who couldn't have been more than twenty or twenty-one at the time.

As her long dark hair blew in the breeze, the man with her tucked a few strands behind her ear before he kissed her.

With storm clouds brewing above them and the water splashing against the side of their boat, the sight mesmerized me.

“I think it sounds perfect,” Daniel says in a low tone.

Our eyes meet briefly before Vernon interrupts, “I’ll build the puzzle in honor of my wife, Gina. Thank you.”

I shift my attention to him. “You’re welcome.”

Arietta springs to her feet. “Does anyone want another slice of cake or a cup of coffee?”

Daniel shakes his head. “I think it’s time for Gina and I to clear out so Vern can rest.”

I get up from the chair I’ve been sitting in. “Daniel’s right. It’s time for us to go.”

“Home,” Daniel adds in barely more than a whisper.

I meet his gaze and nod. “Home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DANIEL

GINA STANDS HER GROUND, and I can't help but stare at her ass as she does and her back.

Jesus, the woman's back is perfection. It's exposed, and even though the wind is now whipping through Manhattan, my wife refuses to take my suit jacket.

She walked away from me when I slid it off and offered it. I suspect that was because I kept glancing at her nipples. I couldn't help myself since they were furled into tight points under her silk blouse.

I'm normally not this fixated with breasts, but I can't stop staring at Gina's.

"I don't need the coat, Daniel," she insists for the third time since we exited the building that Arietta and Dominick call home. "I'm going to order a rideshare."

"Like hell you are." I round her. "We're taking the subway."

"I can afford an Uber," she argues. "It's too windy to walk to the subway. Look at my hair."

"I am," I say as I stare at her. "It's beautiful, Gina."

Her shoulders drop. "I know what I must look like."

"Like a dream?" I smile. "I like you like this."

“Like what?”

“Wind-whipped.” I circle a finger in front of her face. “And with a little chocolate frosting on the corner of your lips.”

Her tongue darts out to retrieve it, and I’m transfixed. I watch her tongue drag over her bottom lip before it lands on the spot with the frosting, scooping the tiny amount into her mouth.

“You’re staring at me,” she accuses. “Is there frosting on my chin, too?”

“Yes,” I lie so I can touch her.

I do just that and run a finger over her chin, stopping to brush her bottom lip.

Her gaze drops to my hand. “Did you get it all?”

I’d lie again and tell her no so I can touch her one more time, but she’s not that messy of an eater. “I got it.”

“Thank you,” she says begrudgingly.

“No problem.”

A shiver runs through her as another blast of wind hits us. “I can feel fall in the air. The seasons are changing.”

I give it one last try and hold my jacket up. “Wear it, Gina, and take the subway with me. Save your money for a slice of chocolate cake tomorrow.”

A smile blooms on her lips. “What makes you think I’ll want chocolate cake tomorrow?”

I take a chance and drape my jacket over her shoulders. “Don’t play that game with me. You’d eat chocolate cake for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if you could.”

She tugs on the lapels of the jacket, pulling it tighter around her. “Maybe for breakfast twice a week, but only for the sugar rush I’d get. Mornings are rough for me.”

“Sure.” I laugh as I motion to my left. “Shall we.”

“Will you hold my hand when we board the train?” she asks softly. “Just when we board.”

“You know I will.”

“All right,” she acquiesces. “The subway it is.”

MY WIFE TURNS heads wherever she goes, and tonight was no exception. As we boarded the train hand in hand, I noticed two young women whispering with pointed fingers at us.

By the time one had her phone in the air primed to take a picture of us, Gina had tugged her hand from mine and slid my jacket from her shoulders.

That didn't deter either of the women. They happily took several pictures before approaching us and asking if I'd mind taking an image of them with Gina. I looked to Gina for guidance, and even though I could see weariness in her expression, she smoothed a hand over her hair before she smiled and agreed to it.

I took the pictures with the strangers' phones that were shoved into my hand before guiding Gina to an open spot on a bench.

As the train starts its journey, Gina looks at me. “I felt something when I put my hand in your pocket.”

I pat my jacket that is now draped over my lap. “Did it bite you?”

She barks out a laugh. “What? No.”

Knowing that I drew that laughter from her fuels me in a way I'm not expecting. Gina Calvetti's laugh is like no one else's I've ever heard. It can turn someone's day around in a split second. I know that for a fact because I've experienced it firsthand.

Her laughter fades. “That's not the same suit you wore that night in Vegas, Daniel.”

I know where this is headed, but I drag the conversation out since we're on a speeding train, and there's no chance of her storming away from me. "Palla was right, Gina. Your eye for fashion is second to none. How did you know this is a Berdine suit?"

She grabs hold of the bait and falls into my trap. "I can tell a Berdine a block away. It's all in the fine details."

I glance down at the jacket. "Your brother was the one who told me to invest in my first Berdine."

"Dominick," she says his name with no surprise in her tone. "He's always dressed well."

"For the office," I add. "You do know that he sometimes leaves his apartment in jeans and torn T-shirts."

She laughs. "You're kidding."

"You do the same," I say without thinking it through.

Her gaze scans my face. "Rarely, and I haven't in months."

That's unfortunate. When Gina rushes around Manhattan in ripped jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, and a ball cap, she's breathtaking.

I spotted her once when she was dressed just like that. The second time I saw her dressed down, she was wearing the same ripped jeans and a white sweater that kept sliding down her shoulder. That day, she wore oversized sunglasses and had her hair in a high ponytail.

I knew it was Gina within seconds of seeing her on the sidewalk. My body felt her presence, and even though I wanted to rush over and talk to her, I didn't because I could sense she wanted to be invisible.

She could never be that to me.

Her left eyebrow perks as the train slows to its first stop. "How do you know I sometimes wear ripped jeans and old T-shirts?"

People around us slide to their feet to exit, but we sit where we are.

“Lucky guess?” I attempt to lure another laugh from her.

She shakes her head. “Did you see me like that, Daniel?”

I nod. “Twice.”

Her gaze follows a woman holding tightly to a toddler’s hand as they exit the train. “When?”

“Before I moved away.” I take a breath. “I saw you once in midtown with a red ball cap on your head. The other time was on a Monday morning in the same neighborhood. You were wearing sunglasses even though it was cloudy that day.”

She runs a fingertip over the bridge of her nose. “You didn’t say hi.”

“You wanted to blend into the crowd.” I lean a touch closer to her. “But you stood out to me. You always do.”

Her eyes lock on mine, but not a word leaves her lips.

I stare at her, wanting to move closer, so close that I can kiss her for the first time, but the announcements blaring through the subway car break the moment.

“Your wedding ring is in your pocket, Daniel,” she says, still holding my gaze with hers. “You had to have moved it from one suit jacket to another.”

“I don’t want to lose it, Gina.”

She takes a moment to absorb that before she sighs. “Why not?”

I shrug. “It feels important to keep it until...”

“The annulment,” she says the two words I’m beginning to hate. “We should talk about that.”

“Tomorrow,” I blurt out to push the issue back a few hours. “We’ll talk about it then.”

“Tomorrow it is.” She grips her hands together in her lap. “The subway isn’t that bad, is it?”

I crack a smile. “As long as I’m in town, I’m available to hold your hand whenever you board the train.”

She glances at my hands. “I’ll remember that, Lawton.”

“You do that, Lawton.”

She tilts her chin down. “I’m a Calvetti. I’ll always be a Calvetti.”

I know, but for this brief moment in time, she’s also my wife. It may be temporary, but I’m enjoying being her husband, and I’ll gladly hold onto that title until we head back to Las Vegas.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GINA

I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time that an alarm woke me up.

I'm usually up before the sun, checking my phone for direct messages from followers and potential sponsors. I also set aside at least an hour twice daily to respond to many of the comments left on my most recent posts.

Hiring a social media manager would take all of that out of my hands, but it took years to build my brand, so I feel my followers deserve a personal response from me.

I scoop my phone up from my nightstand. I only glance at the screen to catch the time before I silence the alarm. Then, I place the phone back down.

An unexpected sigh of relief escapes me because I haven't done that in a very long time. Even when I've spent the night with a man, I've often rushed to the washroom to check my phone while he slept in my bed.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed. A shiver races over me once the cool morning air hits my skin.

I always sleep in silk shorts and a T-shirt. The silk shorts were an extravagance that I invested in when I was in college. Bella gave me a gift card for Liore Lingerie as a holiday gift, so I marched down there the day after Christmas and bought a red pair of shorts. Since then, I've added dozens to my

collection. Today, I'm wearing a white pair and a pink T-shirt emblazoned with the name of a sponsor who produced a best-selling video game three years ago.

My daily routine is to make a coffee before I shower, and since I doubt that my roommate is up yet, I don't see a reason to change that now.

I grab a short, fluffy white robe from the foot of the bed and wrap it around me. I won't give in to the temptation to turn the heat on since the vast amount of sunlight that floods my apartment once it has risen will raise the temperature in no time.

I walk over to my bedroom door and take a deep breath.

It's been a struggle to sleep knowing that my husband is across the hall. I half-expected Daniel to find another place to stay by now. There isn't a shortage of five-star hotels in Manhattan, and I happen to know that he has a handful of cousins in the city, but since his work should wrap up soon, he'll be on his way back to California before I know it.

With a detour to Las Vegas, of course.

I exit my bedroom and pad down the hallway barefoot, headed straight for my coffee maker. I only make it a few steps before the aroma of a freshly brewed pot hits me.

Instead of turning around and racing to hide in my bedroom, I let my craving take the reins, and I keep walking toward the irresistible smell, even though I know that the treasure that awaits me won't be just a cup of coffee, but I'll likely see my husband, too.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach at that prospect.

Does he think I'm still fast asleep? Will I stumble on him wearing only boxer briefs and nothing else? Or does he sleep in the nude? Is there a chance I'm about to see my husband without a stitch of clothing on?

I up the pace of my steps, but the anticipation of seeing Daniel in half or all-naked glory comes crashing down in a puddle of disappointment.

All that's waiting for me is a pot of coffee.

"Dammit," I say under my breath. "He must be showering in his bathroom."

I listen carefully, but the telltale sound of the old pipes creaking as water runs in the second bathroom isn't there. The apartment is shrouded in silence, save for the pounding of my heart.

I walk toward the cupboard to reach for a mug, but an unexpected sight stops me partway.

I smile as I spot a piece of paper next to a small pink box.

Glancing over my shoulder to see if Daniel is in view, I shake off the nervous energy flowing through me and reach for the paper.

My first name is scribbled in masculine handwriting on the single piece of folded paper.

I unfold it and read the note written in black ink:

Mrs. Calvetti-Lawson (Compromise is always the key to a good marriage.),

I had to pull a few strings and hand over a lot of cash, but I got you something extra special for breakfast this morning.

Enjoy every bite.

Mr. Calvetti-Lawson (This compromise thing works both ways.)

P.S. I'm heading to Boston for a couple of days. I needed to be out of

the door by 6 AM. It was a last minute client request, but we'll talk about the return trip to Vegas as soon as I'm back.

A sudden wave of sadness mixes with a strange sense of relief as I read the note again.

A part of me is glad he'll be out of my apartment for at least a day or two, but I wanted to talk about the annulment. I thought that would happen today, but for some reason, I'm happy that we won't have that discussion until he's back in the city.

I slide the box closer and open the lid.

I laugh out loud when I spot the single slice of decadent chocolate cake with cream cheese frosting and a cherry on top.

It's from Dobb's Bakery in Brooklyn, which happens to be one of my favorites.

Unable to contain my excitement, I race back to my bedroom and grab my phone.

I ignore the dozens of notifications for new comments on my social media posts that have popped up since I left my bedroom. Instead, I scroll through my recent text messages until I spot Daniel's name.

I quickly type something before I hit send, hoping that he'll see it before he boards if he's on his way to catch a flight.

Gina: Thank you for the cake.

It's short. It's simple, and it's an honest note of gratitude.

His reply is almost instant.

Daniel: Anything to put a smile on the face of my bride.

I read his text before sitting on the edge of my bed to read it a second and third time.

It's that last time that lures a single tear to my eye, because for a split second, I allow myself to imagine what it might be like to be married to Daniel without an annulment looming on the horizon.

With trembling hands, I type out a message to him and press send.

Gina: I hope the trip goes well. I'll see you when you're back in New York.

Just as I'm about to tuck my phone into the pocket of my robe, it vibrates, indicating an incoming message.

I close my eyes and whisper, "I hope it's one more from Daniel."

A smile slides over my lips when I read his response:

Daniel: Thanks. Don't forget to lick the frosting from the corner of your lips. I'll see you soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DANIEL

TWISTING the truth is never a good idea, especially if you're doing it to avoid a discussion with your spouse.

In my case, I didn't lie to Gina when I left her a note telling her that I was headed to Boston.

What I didn't mention is that I'm the one who sought out the client I'm on my way to see in Massachusetts. She said months ago that when I found myself back in New York, I should carve out time to visit her.

I noticed her name when I was scrolling through my client list last night after Gina and I got home. A quick email later, and she invited me to join her for lunch today at her favorite restaurant overlooking Boston Harbor.

I push my phone into the pocket of my suit jacket as one of the flight attendants helps a man across the aisle from me cram his carry-on bag into the overhead compartment.

My fingers brush against the silver ring I've transferred from one jacket to another over the past few days.

When Gina discovered it last night, I told her the truth. I'm keeping it safe. I have no idea why the hell I'm doing that, but it feels important.

I slip the ring around the tip of my index finger and slide it out of my pocket.

I glance around before I take the ring and put it back where Gina first placed it that night in Vegas.

Once it's wrapped around *that* finger on my left hand, I spread my fingers on my thigh and take in how it looks.

"Hello to you."

A breathy feminine voice lures my gaze up. I'm met with a pretty woman around my age with red hair and green eyes.

Even though the day has barely begun, she's dressed to impress in a navy blue suit.

"Morning," I offer as I half stand because my dad always taught me that chivalry is not dead.

She chats softly with the flight attendant, who takes over placing her small carry-on bag into the overhead bin. Since I'm meeting a client in Boston who essentially funded my first apartment, I'm sparing no expense for this quick trip. It's first class all the way.

"I'm Yara," she offers her hand as she takes her seat. "Who might you be?"

I sit down, too, glancing at my left hand before offering her my right. "Daniel."

She takes it, shaking it for a moment too long as she holds eye contact with me.

I know that move because I've used it time and time again when I've crossed paths with a beautiful woman I wanted to see spread out on the sheets of a bed.

"Do you live in Boston, or is it more of a one-night stand type of visit?"

I hold in a laugh because Yara's pickup game puts mine to shame. She's jumped straight to the point.

My gaze again drops to my left hand and the ring that legally ties me to Gina. I feel bound to the beauty even if the marriage is set to end soon.

I spread my fingers over my thigh again, hoping to lure Yara's gaze down. It works like a charm.

“Oh.” She lets out a faint giggle. “You’re married.”

“I am.”

Still chuckling, she pushes for more. “Happily?”

“Very,” I answer honestly because, I know my wife is at home eating a breakfast I bought for her.

It took half of the night to arrange it and a substantial tip to get Carla Shaw, one of the owners of Dobb’s Bakery in Brooklyn, to open it briefly to allow me to buy Gina that slice of the best chocolate cake in New York City, but I did it.

I did it solely to put a smile on her face, even though I knew I wouldn’t see it.

I couldn’t see it because I need at least a few more days to bask in the feeling of being her husband before this marriage ceases to exist.

“She’s very lucky,” she says politely. “You seem like a great catch.”

“I am.” I nod. “But I’m the fortunate one. My wife is an incredible woman, and I treasure every second I get with her.”

“Awww,” she draws that out with a breathy exhale. “Here’s hoping I find a man just like you one day. How did you two meet?”

“We met when we were kids,” I explain as the pilot announces our impending departure from La Guardia.

She buckles her seatbelt. “A love that spans a lifetime. There can’t be anything better than that.”

There is, and it’s staying married to my wife, but judging by her eagerness to discuss the end of our marriage, I’ll be as single as Yara before the end of the month.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GINA

I CATCH my grandma's eye as she comes rushing out of the kitchen of Calvetti's. I see the veiled panic there. It's the same panic I've seen a few times in the past, so I do the only thing I can.

"I'm going to help," I say as she brushes past me. "I'll put my bag in the back, and help."

Gratitude swims in her expression. "Are you sure, my Gina? You don't need to be somewhere taking pictures?"

Marti has never fully understood what I do for a living. I can't blame her since sometimes it's hard to wrap my head around it.

I fell into the role of being an influencer shortly after I graduated from NYU.

I amassed a huge following online because of a video I was in that went viral. It wasn't anything salacious. I was leaving a New York Yankees game with my brother when a player approached me.

He wanted a date. I wanted a quicker way out of the stadium because there were flashing cameras surrounding me.

By the time I woke up the next morning, someone had tagged me in a video taken by a fan of the team. That resulted

in a flurry of new followers, so I decided to run with the opportunity.

I started posting content about my clothing choices, makeup routine, and life as a single woman in Manhattan.

The first time I received an offer to advertise an eyeliner brand I was already using, I was shocked. It only ballooned from there.

The degree I had worked so hard to earn in behavioral science was pushed aside to pursue a career as an influencer.

“I need to be here.” I grab her hand and squeeze it. “You’re short-staffed, aren’t you, Grandma?”

She nods. Her reddened cheeks hint at how busy she’s already been, and it’s not even noon. The preparation required in the kitchen for the lunch rush is immense. She’s always heavily involved with that while others take care of the front of the house, including waiting on the diners.

“Cere had jury duty,” she explains. “I knew that, and it was okay because I thought Alfie was going to be here, and you know how he handles everything.”

I glance around but don’t spot the man she’s referring to. Alfie has worked in the kitchen for decades, and whenever my grandma needs food taken to a family member, Alfie handles it. He’s also the person who manages the front of the house when Cere isn’t around.

“Is Alfie all right?” I ask with concern in my tone.

Alfie is like an uncle to all of Marti’s grandchildren. I consider him an honorary Calvetti.

“He’s fine,” she reassures me with a faint smile. “He had dental surgery booked and marked it on the calendar two months ago, but I forgot. I forgot.”

The fact that she repeated that twice means she can’t believe her memory slipped.

“Grandma.” I look into her eyes. “You need to call me anytime you need help.”

“You’re busy,” she says. “I know your life is busy. Look at you. You’re going to a fashion show, aren’t you?”

I glance down at the green dress I’m wearing. I paired it with sky-high black heels and a necklace I’m being paid to hang around my neck. It’s not even my style.

“No,” I answer honestly.

I don’t elaborate because how am I supposed to tell a woman who has worked her fingers to the bone seven days a week for decades that I’m dressed like this in case a follower snaps a picture of me?

Since I already took a heavily staged selfie in Central Park with the necklace in full view and posted it to all of my social media channels thirty minutes ago, my work is essentially done for the day.

I stopped in here to see her and grab something to eat. My plan after that was to head home to change into a T-shirt and jeans.

“I’m staying.” I glance at the few patrons who have already wandered in to guarantee they have a table for lunch. “I’m here until closing.”

Marti’s bottom lip trembles. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.” I kiss her forehead. “I’ll handle the wait staff and greeting customers. You worry about the kitchen staff.”

“Okay,” she agrees with a soft nod, even though we both know regardless of how busy she is in the kitchen, she can’t resist sneaking out to speak to the people who took time out of their day to come and eat her food.

“I’m going to put my purse in the office.” I point toward the kitchen since the office is tucked behind it and always locked unless Marti needs something from it. “I need the key, Grandma.”

She fishes in her apron pocket for it before she drops it in my hand. “How’s Daniel?”

Taken off guard, a question pops out before I can think it through. “How’s who?”

She tilts her chin down. “Daniel.”

I shrug. “He’s okay, I guess.”

“Okay, you guess?” She shakes her head. “Your brother told me that Daniel is staying in the extra room in your apartment. You must know how he is.”

I nod. “He’s in Boston. He’s coming back tonight, I think.”

At least, I think he is. I haven’t heard from him since he left yesterday morning, but his note said he’d only be gone a couple of days.

“I like it when he’s in New York.” Her smile lights up her entire face. “I think you like it, too.”

I perk both brows even though she hit the nail on the head. “It doesn’t matter to me where Daniel is.”

“Sure.” She pats my shoulder. “Something tells me you have a small crush on him.”

“No!” I shake my head because the small crush I had on my husband has been steamrolled by the massive crush I have on him now.

“You protest too much.”

“You spend too much time with Dolly.” I smile. “You’re starting to sound just like her.”

Marti leans in to kiss my cheek. “Marrying a man like Daniel would be good for you, Gina. He’d make you happy forever.”

I drop my gaze to the floor so she won’t read my expression because I can’t hide the fact that I’m conflicted about my marriage and the impending annulment I’ll be discussing with Daniel once he’s back.

“Never say never to marrying a good man.” She gives me another kiss. “You need to eat before the lunch rush. I’ll get you something.”

“Minestrone, please.”

“You’ll eat the penne with walnut sauce. I made it myself.”

I try to hold in a smile since I’ve attempted to order a bowl of minestrone for years, but Marti always serves me exactly what she thinks I want to eat. “It sounds delicious, Grandma. I’ll eat and get right to work.”

She glances at one of the servers who are working today. I’m in here so often that I know everyone by name and most of their family members, too.

“I feel better,” she says in barely more than a whisper. “You came to my rescue.”

I pat her hand. “I’m only ever a phone call away, Grandma. I’ll come whenever you need me. I love you.”

With a gentle touch, she tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I love you too, my Gina. I love you, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DANIEL

BOSTON TURNED out to be a hell of a lot more fun than I thought it would be.

Having dinner with my client was superb, as it always is.

Gerti Penland is a spry ninety-seven-year-old with a financial portfolio nearing two billion dollars. Her wealth has been accumulated through inheritances from both sides of her family, and the sale of the business she launched with her husband when they were first married.

After his death, she sold it at the right time and retired in Boston, leaving behind her life in New York City and all the memories she'd made there.

Since then, I've spent my time helping Gerti organize a storage closet in her condo. A good wealth manager has no problem rolling up the sleeves of his expensive button-down shirt to get the job done.

I glance at my phone to see the time.

It's nearing seven, which means I'll be back in Gina's apartment with more than enough time to spare tonight. We haven't communicated other than the few text messages we exchanged the morning I left for Boston.

I suspect she's eager to talk all things annulment when I walk through the door. I was tempted to book a later flight, but

I can't put off the inevitable forever. Our marriage was a spur-of-the-moment decision that needs to be undone.

Logic tells me that even though I wish for more time with my wife.

I adjust my ass on the hard plastic chair that is one of many lined up near my flight's departing gate in Boston's Logan Airport. I arrived with time to spare, thinking I'd head to the airline's executive lounge for a drink, but the memory of how I felt the morning after my wedding stopped me in my tracks.

I've been nursing a bottle of chilled water since I sat down, which is smart given I'm facing an important discussion once I'm back in Manhattan.

I perk an ear when I hear yet another announcement over the airport speaker system. This one grabs my attention as my gaze flits to the gate agent, who is now shaking her head.

The screen behind where she's standing flashes a new message that changes everything.

FLIGHT CANCELED

"It's inclement weather in New York," she addresses everyone racing toward her with a curt announcement on the microphone sitting on the counter in front of her. "Please line up in a single file, and I'll do what I can to get you on a flight first thing tomorrow."

I stay seated. Sliding my thumb over my phone screen, I scroll through my contacts until I land on the name of the most beautiful woman on the planet.

I type out a quick text message and press send.

Daniel: It must be raining buckets there. My flight is canceled. I'll be home tomorrow.

By the time I realize what the message says, she's already typing a reply. The three small dots bounce on the screen as I stare at the one word that reveals a part of me only Dominick knows.

Home.

New York City is my home.

Los Angeles has never felt that way to me.

Gina: It's stormy. I love it. I'll see you tomorrow?

What I wouldn't give to be next to her as the wind and rain rip a path through the city.

I reply so I don't leave her hanging.

Daniel: You bet. Stay safe, okay?

She responds instantly and in true Gina fashion.

Gina: What fun is safe? Have a good night in Boston. Sweet dreams when you make it to bed.

I won't make it there for hours since I now need to find a hotel with a room available for tonight. The one I checked out of hours ago was swarming with people checking in. Some big name celebrity is rumored to be getting married here tomorrow, so the world's media has converged on this place along with thousands of her fans.

I send her one last message.

Daniel: You too.

After pocketing my phone, I stare at the wedding band still on my finger. Gerti didn't notice, and I haven't run into anyone I know, so I planned on taking the ring off before the plane landed in New York.

I skim a fingertip over the back of it and smile.

I know it doesn't hold much weight, and the meaning that should be attached to it isn't there, but the comfort it offers is just what I need.

I glance at the long line of people frantic to get a seat on a flight tomorrow morning.

I'll sort that out with a call to the airline.

For now, I'm off to find a hotel with an available room and a few slices of pizza because I was planning to eat dinner in Manhattan tonight.

My phone rings in my pocket, so I eagerly tug it out, hoping my wife is granting me more of her attention.

I glance at the screen before answering. "Paul. How are you?"

My right hand man laughs. "Barely surviving here, Daniel. When are you coming back to Los Angeles?"

"Soon," I say before I amend it. "I can't say exactly when, but soon."

"Vague is not the correct answer." He sighs. "A call came into the office yesterday from a prospective client. She's based in New York, so I thought, why not send her your way while you're in the vicinity?"

"You've vetted her?" I ask my executive assistant what I always do before I meet with someone reaching out to me.

"You bet." He whistles. "Her portfolio is impressive, as is her story."

"Her story?" I ask since my curiosity is piqued. "What does that mean?"

"It's all in an email I just sent. Take a look."

I lower the phone and scan my emails. Paul's is at the top, so I click it open to glance at the woman's name and her Manhattan based phone number.

"Have I met her before?" I ask Paul. "The name seems familiar."

"She said you met briefly. Listen, Maeve just walked in and needs me. I'll call you back within the hour, all right?"

"Sure," I say. "I'm stuck in Boston for the night and need to find accommodations. I'll read the entire email once I've got that set up, and then we'll talk about what's been going on there. You'll bring me up to speed."

"Will do," he says before he ends the call.

I glance at the woman's name in the lengthy email one last time before I shove my phone back in my pocket and head out of the airport.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

GINA

I UNLOCK the door to my apartment, but it swings open before I get a hand on the doorknob.

My husband, looking like a dream, greets me. “Hey, wife.”

I bite back a smile by digging my top teeth into my bottom lip. “Hey.”

He looks me over, taking in my jeans and red and white striped blouse. His gaze stalls at my breasts.

Although I don’t need a bra, I’m wearing one today because I stopped by Calvetti’s before coming home.

Since I helped Marti out yesterday, I wanted to see if she needed me to pitch a hand in today, but Cere was back at the front counter, and Alfie was due to arrive in a few hours to help handle the dinner rush.

I left with a bag filled with a tray of baked ravioli and half of a cheesecake. My grandma instructed me to share it with Daniel, even though I told her I had no idea when he was coming back from Boston.

I have my answer now.

“Did you bring me lunch?” he asks.

I tear my gaze from the tattoo on Daniel’s bicep and drop it to the bag. “We can share.”

“Good.” He flashes me a wide grin.

To add to that dazzling image, he decides now is the ideal time to rake his hand through his hair. That only accentuates how large his bicep is, so naturally, I check out his tattoo again.

“Did you forget what it looked like, Gina?”

I’ve been busted staring at him. *Dammit.*

“No,” I say and leave it at that. “Move, Daniel.”

His hands jump up to the doorjamb, blocking my entrance to my own apartment. “What’s the password?”

I drop my free hand to my hip. “Move your ass.”

His head falls back in laughter. “Funny, Lawton. You’re fucking hilarious.”

“Calvetti,” I correct him. “Let me in.”

His head shakes. “Still not the correct answer.”

“What are you...twelve?” I narrow my eyes. “I want to come in.”

He makes the sound of a buzzer. “Nope.”

Frustration is seeping in, so I stomp one of my boots on the floor. “You’re a bastard.”

“True, but not the password. You’re not even close.” His gaze slides down my body. “Nice boots.”

“Don’t do that.”

His gaze meets mine. “Do what?”

“Change the subject.” I shake the bag in my hand. “If you don’t let me in, I’ll knock on my neighbor’s door and share this with him.”

He glances down the corridor to the left and then to the right. “Him?”

With the tables of this ridiculous exchange finally turning, I nod. “Yes. Him.”

He scowls. “How old is this guy?”

I study the image before me, wondering if I could slide past him if I tried, but his shoulders are so broad that it's doubtful.

"How old, Gina?" he presses. "Are we talking thirty, forty, older?"

"Around that." I keep it vague and toss out a notable fact about my next-door neighbor. "He won the mayor's award for courage when he lived in Philadelphia a few years ago."

Fifty years ago, but who is counting?

"He what?" Daniel shakes his head. "An award for courage?"

I nod. "Yes, and he's a trained ballroom dancer, so there's that."

I happen to know from experience that Daniel can't dance. I saw him in action years ago at a surprise birthday party for my mom. It might have been painful to watch if it wasn't completely captivating. He was a little drunk, and if there were a Calvetti award for courage, Daniel would have been the sole recipient that night because he left it all on the dance floor, including his tie and left shoe.

"Wow," he says, and I can't tell if sarcasm is lacing it or not.

"Did I mention that he adores my grandma's food?" I shake the bag to remind Daniel that our meal is getting cold. "Unless you let me in, I'll knock on his door and spend the afternoon with him."

He contemplates that while my gaze drifts from the stubble covering his jawline down to his gray T-shirt and beyond to the waistband of his jeans.

"One last try, Gina," he says in a low tone. "You know our password."

My eyes dart up to his face. "I don't."

"I'll give you a hint, and if you don't get it, feel free to share that food with the ballroom dancing hero."

I'd much rather eat lunch with my husband, but since he seems to be calling my bluff, I nod. "Give me the hint."

"Three words...you used to say them when..."

My gaze locks on his. "True love rules."

"It does," he whispers before he steps aside to grant me entry into my home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DANIEL

HOW THE FUCK *have I not noticed the goddamn neighbor?*

Gina lives next door to some guy who got a medal for courage, and he can ballroom dance? My resume doesn't include either of those things.

I thought I was a great dancer until Dominick showed me a video he shot at his mom's birthday nine years ago.

Jesus.

Talk about two left feet. I looked like I had eleven of them when I was busting a move and potentially my kneecap on the dance floor.

That hell finally ended when I tripped. My left shoe literally left me, and my knee hit the concrete floor with a sound that could have woken the dead.

"What are you thinking about?" Gina asks from across the table.

I can't say it's the neighbor because I don't want my wife to accuse me of being jealous, although clearly I am.

I make a mental note to borrow a cup of sugar from everyone on this floor before the day ends.

If I cover my bases and introduce myself to every neighbor, maybe it won't seem that obvious that I'm checking out my competition.

“Boston,” I say because that seems like a safe bet.

Gina tilts her head. “Was it a good trip?”

“Very.”

She scratches her nose in the same adorable way she’s done since she was a kid. “That’s nice.”

I keep rolling with the subject at hand since she seems semi-invested, or at the very least, not completely disinterested. “When’s the last time you went to Boston?”

She places her fork on the almost empty plate in front of her. “Three years ago. I went with Lia on her twenty-first birthday.”

That steers me in another direction, so I go with it. “I saw her the other day.”

She smiles. “At the office?”

Apparently, even though I’m one of the founders of Modica, I’m also the last to know that another Calvetti was on the payroll. “Yes. She seems to be doing great.”

“Lia is always doing great.” She laughs. “She stopped by the restaurant for dinner last night. I took a break so I could sit with her.”

“A break from what?”

Her gaze locks on mine. “Marti was short-handed, so I stepped in.”

“To do what?” I ask because I’m genuinely confused.

Clearly exasperated, she sighs heavily. “To help, Daniel. I worked the front of the house for most of the day yesterday.”

“At Calvetti’s?” I want clarification. “You worked all day at the restaurant your grandmother owns?”

“Why are you such a jerk?”

The fact that she asked me that with a straight face sends my head back in another round of laughter.

She pushes back from the table to stand. “Why are you laughing? I thought you knew...I thought you could see that

I'm not just... I need to pack."

I'm on my feet, too, rounding the table to stop her before she can rush to her bedroom. "You thought I knew what, Gina?"

I want to ask why the hell she needs to pack, but I fear I already know the answer to that question. I wouldn't be surprised if she had an airline ticket to Las Vegas booked and paid for.

She glances at the floor. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," I insist. "You thought I knew what?"

I run the conversation we just had back through my mind. I'm tired because I got no fucking sleep last night due to the fact that I crashed in a room at a cheap motel by the airport, staring at a door that wouldn't lock while I was on a lumpy mattress.

Every goddamn hotel room in Boston and all vacation rentals were booked solid.

I would have fared better if I had rented a car and drove back to Manhattan.

Her brown eyes swim with disappointment as she stares at me. "Let's drop it."

I see it then. I see what I've sensed since I first saw her in Vegas. "You thought I knew that there's more to you than the beautiful woman everyone sees online."

Her bottom lip trembles. "I want to be more than beautiful. I am."

"Damn right, you are." I ache to touch her, but I stop myself by balling both hands into fists at my side. "You're brilliant, compassionate, and one hell of a businesswoman."

She runs a finger over her right eyebrow. "You're right. I am all of those things."

"I do know that, Gina," I say in a low tone. "I've always known that."

Her gaze slowly travels over my face. "I need to pack."

I can barely get the question out, but I do because I can't avoid this forever. "Where are you going?"

"Las Vegas." She takes a breath. "We said we'd handle the annulment when you got back to New York."

I nod because I don't have words.

I did say that, but I want to take all of it back. I want more fucking time. I don't know why or what I think that will gain me, but I just want time with her, like this, with the wedding band in my pocket and her heart within my grasp.

"I can't go to Vegas now," I lie because I could make the time if I wanted to. "I have clients here, Gina. They need my attention."

"That's fine." Her shoulders rise. "I did some research, and we can handle the paperwork remotely with the help of an attorney here, but my family has such far-reaching connections in New York. I understand lawyer client privilege, but we both want to keep this under wraps."

"Sure," I spit out because it seems my wife has put some real effort into this.

"Only one of us needs to be present to file the documents in Las Vegas, so I'll handle it," she states.

That can't be right. We got into this mess...*no, wait*, it's not a mess. It's an opportunity; an opportunity that I'm fucking up more and more with each passing hour.

Even though I know this is a horrible idea, I ask for something I have no right to ask. "Before you do that, I need a favor, Gina."

She eyes me suspiciously, "You need a favor?"

Under any other circumstances, this would be off-limits and a clear violation of professional protocol, but this is an exception. "I do. I'm meeting a new client on Saturday. I want you to be there."

Her arms cross. "You want me to witness the contract signing? Don't you need a notary or something for that?"

I hold in a smile. “You don’t need to witness anything. The client would be thrilled if you showed up with me. They’d love to meet you.”

Her nose scrunches. “Do they follow me on social media?”

It’s a solid assumption since her follower list is growing by the minute. “Yes. They follow you. They’re a big fan.”

“How do you know that?”

“Your name came up in conversation,” I tell her because it’s the truth before I spit out a lie, “They mentioned Dominick, and if I happened to know you, and I...”

“Said you knew me,” she finishes my sentence. “If they follow my work that closely, you’d think they’d seek out my brother for financial advice instead of you.”

“Ouch?” I laugh. “Was that an insult?”

A smile slides over her lips. “An observation.”

“An observation,” I repeat, mesmerized by her smile.

“Daniel,” she says my name before she drops her gaze to the floor. “I think I just need to go get the annulment. It’s what we both want, right?”

It’s not what I fucking want. At least, I don’t think it is. I don’t know anymore.

I pat the front pocket of my jeans so I can feel the outline of my wedding band. “One favor, Gina. Take a drive with me on Saturday for this meeting, and book the flight for Sunday. That’s all I’m asking.”

“A drive where?”

“Connecticut,” I say. “We’ll be back before dinner. Meeting you would make their day. Hell, it would make their entire year. They’ve had a lot going on recently, and I know this would mean a lot to them.”

She weighs my words carefully. “All right. I’ll go with you, and then to Vegas on Sunday. I’ll get the annulment moving forward so we can put this behind us.”

I nod in agreement before she brushes past me and disappears down the hallway.

CHAPTER THIRTY

GINA

“YOU WANT me to get in that?”

Daniel laughs. It’s a low, throaty sound that fills the air around us. “What the hell is that supposed to mean, Lawton?”

I shoot him a look. “Calvetti.”

He nods. “Right.”

“Is it even safe?” I step back from the curb. “Do you have a driver’s license?”

Still chuckling, he shakes his head as he steps closer to me. “My dad bought this car as a project for the two of us when I was a kid. I never got my hands on it because I didn’t make the time. He did. He restored it completely, Gina. It may have been driven off a car lot in the seventies, but it’s like new.”

My gaze slides over the sleek red convertible. “It’s beautiful in a way.”

“It is,” he agrees with a curt nod. “As for whether I have a driver’s license, who do you think drove your brother to get his driver’s license?”

I turn to face him. “You did?”

“You know it.” He tugs on the front of the white button-down shirt he’s wearing. It may be a warm and sunny Saturday morning, but Daniel is wearing charcoal gray pants and shoes I know were imported from Italy. He looks every inch the casual

businessman, right down to the top two buttons that are undone on his shirt.

I dressed for comfort, so I paired jeans with a black and white blouse. They are both pieces I chose and paid for myself years ago. Since I have no commitments to sponsors today, I'm wearing an outfit that I love.

"Where have you been hiding this car?" I step closer to it, marveling at how pristine it is, right down to the white leather seats. "You don't have an apartment in New York, so are you paying for a parking spot?"

"No," he answers succinctly.

He doesn't add any other details, so I press for more. "Were you parking it in someone else's spot?"

"Like who?" he asks the question with a smirk.

"A friend," I say, even though I'm wondering if one of his exes is doing him a favor by storing the car for him.

"As in a woman?" His arms cross his chest. "Is my wife jealous again? Is that what's happening? Because truth be told, Gina, I'd rather park in your spot every day of the week than anyone else's."

I try to hold in a smile, but I fail. "I don't have an available parking spot, Lawton."

He chuckles. "We need to hit the road."

"Where did you keep it?" I ask just as he's about to grab the passenger door handle. "Why didn't you have it transported to California when you moved there? It's the perfect car for Los Angeles, isn't it?"

His hand leaps from the handle to my forearm. He circles it gently with his fingers. "It's been in my uncle's garage in Queens since my dad died. I couldn't bring myself to look at it because of the missed opportunity, but today felt like the right time to be brave and jump in the driver's seat."

I look down to see his hand slide to my tattoo. He edges a fingertip over the script on my wrist.

“I’m glad you asked me to go along for the ride,” I whisper as I stare into his eyes.

“Me too.” He exhales. “Get in and buckle up. Our next adventure awaits.”

I CLOSE my eyes as the wind whips my hair against my cheek. We left New York City twenty minutes ago, and as soon as the traffic started to thin, I took an audible breath.

That drew a glance from the man sitting next to me, who is handling this car like he’s been behind the wheel of it for years.

I saw his hands shake when he first pulled away from the curb in front of my building in Manhattan. Once we were on our way, his posture loosened, and he relaxed.

“What happened with you and McCabe?”

That question opens my eyes, sending my hand up to slide my sunglasses off. “What?”

Daniels glances at me, but his eyes are hidden behind his sunglasses. “You heard me, Gina. What happened between you and Brogan McCabe?”

I gaze at the road ahead and the back of the RV cruising down the highway in front of us. “That’s none of your business.”

“I made it my business when I broke the rules.”

Again, I look at him but turn in my seat, being mindful of my seatbelt. “What does that mean?”

He keeps his eyes on the road. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does,” I say. “You can’t toss that out and not explain it. What rules did you break, and how the hell does it relate to my ex?”

“Drop it, Gina.”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” I point out. “Actually, why did you bring it up? Why now?”

“Because you’re stuck in this car and can’t escape.”

I bow my head and smile. “What rules, Daniel? Tell me what you did.”

When I look, the fingers on his left hand are drumming a beat on the steering wheel. He offers his right hand to me. “I’ll tell you. This is like boarding the subway for me, so hold my hand.”

I want to laugh, but I have no idea if he’s being serious or not, so I take his hand in mine.

He squeezes mine gently. “He was my client at the time.”

“What?” I can’t hide my surprise at that admission, so I don’t even try. “He was your client?”

He nods. “I terminated our contract as soon as I got back to my office the day we argued about him. When you told me you were falling hard and fast for McCabe, I knew I couldn’t sit idly by and watch that happen.”

I try to follow, but I’m lost. “Please explain more.”

His gaze darts from my face back to the road. “He was living on the fortune his parents gave him when he turned twenty-five, but he had blown through that. He spent most of it on luxury vacations and gifts for women.”

During our time together, Brogan gave me nothing, not even a single red rose. More often than not, when we went out for dinner, it was because I had signed a sponsorship deal with the establishment. Our meals and drinks were covered in addition to a healthy deposit in my bank account. In exchange, I had to post a picture or video to social media showing my boyfriend and I sitting at a table having a great time. Although, I often wished we were at my place eating food. Brogan cooked for me once, but there was never a repeat of that.

“When did he give women gifts?” I whisper.

Daniel’s hand tightens on mine. “The last one I’m aware of was a few days before you and I spoke about him. He had just

returned to New York after spending a week in Paris with her.”

I try to tug my hand away, but he holds tightly to it.

“He told me the Paris trip was business,” I say as I glance at the back of the RV again. “I asked to go with him, but he said his dad was accompanying him, so it would be all business all the time.”

“His dad is terrified of flying. He’s never left New York City.”

My hand jumps to my mouth. “What? You’re serious?”

“Brogan McCabe has never worked a day in his life,” he starts before he takes a second to pause. “His parents gave him a monthly allowance. They set him up with me, but he kept spending, and they kept funding him. They were contemplating cutting him off after the Paris trip, so the well was about to run dry for him.”

“You said someone you knew told you he was bad news,” I repeat the words Daniel said to me the last time I saw him before he moved away. “There was no someone. It was you all along?”

He nods. “When I told you that he had a reputation for being an asshole and a lazy bastard, I wasn’t lying, but I didn’t come clean with everything I knew about him. I wanted to. I would have, Gina, but a few weeks later, Dominick mentioned you two had broken up.”

The gravity of that hits me. “You were trying to save me from making a huge mistake. He wanted us to move in together. If I had agreed to look for a place for us, I would have ended up supporting him financially.”

“I believe so, yes.”

“You took a big risk,” I say, even though he’s well aware of it. “You could have gotten into a lot of trouble. Brogan could have sued you for breach of contract, right? His parents, too.”

He glances at me again before dragging both of our hands to his lips to kiss my knuckles softly. “I’d do it all over again,

Gina.”

I stare at his profile. “I had no idea.”

“It’s in the past.” He looks to the road ahead. “I realized that day that I needed to keep moving my life forward. I tried to do that in New York, but leaving for California was the clean break I needed.”

“I thought you left because the memories of your dad were too much.”

“They were.” He nods, keeping his gaze trained in front of him. “Everything felt like too much, so I left and never looked back until I landed in Las Vegas.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

DANIEL

“AT ONE TIME, all I wanted was to go to Yale,” Gina whispers. “I’ve never told anyone that.”

My gaze darts from her face to the building we are passing. It’s part of the campus of the Ivy League school. “You’re serious?”

“It seemed like the brass ring back then.”

“It’s a prestigious school,” I glance at her before I train my eyes back on the road in front of me.

New Haven, Connecticut, is teeming with activity on this early fall day.

“It is,” she agrees. “When the career counselor visited my class during my freshman year of high school, he had us fill out a questionnaire that was supposed to help us find a career path.”

“That’s a bit young to make a decision that monumental.” I chuckle. “During freshman year, I struggled to decide what pair of jeans to wear on any given day.”

Her laugh fills the air. “Same.”

I shoot her a glance. “You’ve figured out the wardrobe thing. You always look incredible, Lawton.”

She doesn’t correct me. Instead, her gaze runs over my shirt before settling on my face. “I guess you have, too.”

My brows rise with surprise. “That’s one of the greatest compliments I’ve ever received. I’m doing something right if *the* Gina Calvetti thinks I’m stylish.”

“Just Gina,” she whispers. “I’m just Gina to you.”

Sensing I hit a sore spot, I steal a second to look at her. “What’s going on?”

She takes one last lingering glance at the Yale campus. “Sometimes I wonder what I’m doing with my life.”

“You’re making bank.”

She laughs again, but this time, there’s no humor there. It’s a hollow sound. “I’ve made enough bank to last me a lifetime.”

I’m not surprised. With her vast number of followers, I imagine each sponsorship deal she scores is worth a great deal.

“Are you considering a career change?” I ask while keeping my eyes on the road.

“I was going to talk to Dominick about it,” she begins before she sighs. “He’s been so busy planning his wedding, and Rocco is a dad now, so I don’t want to steal his time away from his family.”

It’s no secret that Gina has looked to her brother and cousin for advice. Dominick has mentioned it a few times without going into detail about what advice she was seeking.

“I have two ears.” I tug on the lobe of my right ear. “I’ve also been known to give some solid advice to people. I do it for a living.”

“Thanks, but I’m doing great with my finances. I invest most of what I earn. I set up a trust account for Luisa after she was born. I deposited all the rent Bella had paid me when she lived with me.”

My head snaps to the side so I can look at her. “You did that for your niece?”

She glances at me. “I’ll do the same for all of my nieces and nephews. I know my siblings don’t need my help in that

way, but I want to do it. It's important to me."

"Is someone pregnant?" I don't want to overstep, but consider myself part of the Calvetti family. "Is it Arietta? Isabella?"

She shrugs. "Not that I know of, but Bella wants more kids. Dominick and Arietta have talked about having a baby."

I take a second to think about that. Dominick will be a dad one day, maybe soon. It's hard to picture that, yet at the same time, I can see how deeply he loves his fiancée.

"You're imagining my brother as someone's dad, aren't you?" The question is laced with amusement. "I know you are."

Chuckling, I nod. "He'll make a great father, I think."

"He will." Her gaze moves to the cars passing us headed in the opposite direction. "His children will be so lucky."

"Just as you're lucky to have your mom and dad."

"I am lucky," she agrees. "You haven't mentioned your mom. How is she?"

"Loving Florida." I smile as I look ahead. "Moving down there with her friends was the right thing for her after the divorce."

My parents split five years before my dad died. There wasn't a big falling out. No one cheated. They still loved each other but knew it was time to explore their lives separately, so they did that.

"Let's talk about that career change," I circle back to that because it's too important to ignore. "What direction are you thinking of going?"

With the degree she earned in behavioral science, the possibilities are endless. Or maybe she's considering something not related to that at all.

Her gaze drops to her lap. "I want to make a difference in people's lives."

“You have made a difference in people’s lives,” I stress each word because it’s an important point that needs to be made. “You’re really making a difference, Gina.”

She laughs and leans closer to the car door. “I’m helping people decide what eye shadow to wear or what vacation destination is perfect this time of year.”

“It’s more than that.”

“It’s not,” she argues. “I know that people look to me for guidance. I don’t take that lightly. I’ve always tried to present myself as the person I am. I set out to be genuine, but I think that got buried beneath all the sponsorship offers at some point.”

“How so?” I ask.

She looks at me again as we slow for a red light. “That night you found me in the bar in Vegas, I was contractually bound to take an image with a particular brand of whiskey.”

“You hate whiskey,” I point out before she can continue.

“I do,” she admits. “But the money was too good to pass up. I’ve thought about it since, and that’s not the first time I’ve promoted a brand that doesn’t align with what I like.”

I set my gaze on the road again as the light changes to green. “You can change that.”

“I am,” she says. “I’ve been turning down more deals since we got back from Vegas.”

I slow the car to allow someone parked to merge into traffic ahead of me. “When you set out to earn your degree, what was the life plan then?”

Her light laugh carries through the air. “Does anyone know their life plan when they’re eighteen? I went for a degree in behavioral science because the career counselor told me it was the best fit for me, and I loved my courses. I loved college.”

“Me too,” I admit because although a lot of my college days are a blur, I earned a degree in finance that I’m proud of, and it’s afforded me many things.

With a glance over her shoulder, she sighs. “It would have been nice to have the Yale experience, but I’m glad my life turned out the way it has.”

“Are you?” I wave my bare left hand at her. “Even the married to me part?”

Her gaze drops to her left hand. “Are we getting close to our final destination?”

I should be disappointed that she ignored my question, but I’m relieved. I don’t want one of the last memories of us as a married couple to be her desire to end it.

Logically, I know she’ll board a plane headed to Vegas to annul the marriage tomorrow. Today, I want to enjoy being her husband, even if it’s only on paper that will soon be deemed void.

“We’re very close.” I glance at my phone. “I memorized the directions before we left New York so I wouldn’t have to look at my phone. I know you’d try to sneak a peek, and I wanted this to be a surprise.”

She looks at my phone but makes no attempt to touch it. “I haven’t had a lot of surprises in my life. I like this one.”

If I had more time, I’d surprise her as often as I can forever, but today will have to do.

“It’s up ahead.” I point toward the windshield and the corner beyond with my index finger. “Are you ready?”

She nods. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

DANIEL

RECOGNITION WARMS GINA'S expression when she spots my client emerging from a quaint home on a quiet, tree-lined street.

"Kelly!" Gina approaches the woman she met briefly at the airport the day after we got married. "It's you!"

Kelly stops abruptly. Her hands leap to her mouth before she spits out a few words laced with emotion. "Gina? I didn't know...I had no... clue, no idea you were coming."

Gina glances at me before her gaze settles back on Kelly. "It was a surprise for both of us."

Kelly looks down at her faded jeans and red T-shirt. "I wasn't expecting you. We had a rough night, so I don't look my best."

I'm well aware of why she had a rough night, but Gina isn't, and her face shows that. Concern knits her brow.

"Are you all right?" Gina quickens her pace until she's directly in front of Kelly.

Nodding, Kelly smiles. "It's Asa. He has yet to learn what sleeping through the night means."

"It sounds like your grandson is a night owl," I say, stepping into place directly behind Gina on the narrow path that leads to the front door.

The cobblestone beneath our feet has faded with time, and patches of moss cover the corners. It's just one of the signs that the owner of the property has been distracted. The overgrown trees above us are another.

Small tasks take a backseat when you have a baby in the house.

“Romy is inside with Asa.” Kelly brushes a hand over her forehead to push back a strand of her hair. “She’s going to cry when she sees you, Gina. She absolutely loves you.”

I glance at my wife to find her smiling gently. “I’m very excited to meet her, too. Do you think she needs a minute to get ready before I come in?”

Kelly nods. “I’ll tell her we have a visitor, but I won’t tell her who. Give us five minutes. She’s still in her pajamas.”

Gina reaches for her hand to squeeze it briefly. “Daniel and I will wait right here.”

As Kelly nods and turns to rush back into her home, Gina takes a deep breath.

“Kelly owns a real estate development company,” I tell my wife. “She called when I was in Boston. She’s looking for a new financial advisor. She wants to set things up for Asa’s future and Romy’s too.”

“They seem like a lovely family,” she says as she looks up and into my face. “Why did you bring me here, Daniel?”

“To make Romy smile.”

Gina manages a small smile of her own. “What’s the other reason?”

I take a deep breath. “Romy is deaf. Asa’s father was out of the picture before he was born. Kelly and I both thought it would help her to meet you.”

A small smile graces her lips. “Because my dad is deaf?”

“Yes,” I admit. “Kelly told me that Romy first followed you when that video was posted...the one of you and your dad having dinner at Calvetti’s.”

The video was taken by another diner at the restaurant and captured a tender moment between Gina and Louis Calvetti. They were in the middle of a conversation about a tea party Louis had prepared for Gina and her stuffed animals when she was eight-years-old.

The entire conversation was captivating to watch, including the movements of their hands as they communicated and the embrace at the end when Louis lovingly touched his daughter's cheek before he kissed her forehead.

It was a special moment between a father and his daughter that was meant to be private, yet within hours of it being posted, millions of people had viewed it.

Tears form in the corners of Gina's eyes. "That video felt like a violation at the time."

"I know," I whisper. "I'm sorry that happened."

"I'm not," she surprises me. "My dad said it was a lesson in love. He reminded me that love doesn't always look the same in every family. We may express our love differently, but we love each other fiercely, and the world needs to see more of that."

I raise my hands to sign to her. *Your dad is so wise.*

She nods, signing back to me. *Very*

I glance at the house again. "Kelly's family has owned this home for years. She divides her time between here and Manhattan. When I first spoke to her, she explained they would be here for the weekend. I told her I was more than happy to make the drive up. There's something I want to show you before we head back to the city."

Gina taps her chin with her finger. "What do you want to show me?"

"It's another surprise."

Her eyes shine bright. "So far, I really like your surprises. How do I look? I don't have any chocolate on my lips, do I?"

I laughed when she pulled a chocolate bar out of her purse soon after we left Manhattan. I declined when she offered me a

piece because I could tell how much she was enjoying it.

I lock eyes with her. “No chocolate in sight.”

“Good,” she whispers.

Although I have an overwhelming desire to lean forward to kiss her, I stop myself. It’s not the time or the place, but something tells me that before this day ends, my wife and I will share our first kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

GINA

I CAN'T TAKE my eyes off the sight in front of me.

Daniel is holding little Asa Bires as he sleeps. The baby was fussy when we first walked into Kelly's home. It was clear from the look on Romy's face that she was flustered.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and although she blamed those on the happiness she felt at meeting me, I suspect they were grounded in lack of sleep and being a first-time mom.

I saw that look on Bella's face in the first few weeks after Luisa was born. Even though she had Barrett and our entire family to help her, she still felt overwhelmed at times.

I made a point of visiting them a few evenings each week at their apartment in Brooklyn. I'd show up without an invitation with bags of food from Calvetti's in hand and an offer to take care of the baby while they both slept.

I know my sister appreciated the sleep more than the food because I could see the gratitude in her eyes after she napped and showered.

I feel a tap on my shoulder, so I shift my attention away from my husband holding a tiny baby to the young woman at my side.

Romy Bires is a petite blonde-haired, blue-eyed graduate of Yale.

Her mom filled me in on that right after introducing us to Romy and Asa. I could hear the pride in Kelly's voice and see embarrassment redden Romy's cheeks as her mom listed her accomplishments.

I admire you. Romy signs.

I nod in gratitude before I sign my response to her. *I admire you. Yale and a baby. You graduated when you were pregnant?*

Six months pregnant. She responds with a smile.

I look at Daniel to find him staring at the bundle of wonder in his arms. I try to push the thought of what he'll be like as a father out of my mind.

I can't go there.

I'm going to Las Vegas tomorrow to get an annulment because we both want that.

Don't we?

Romy steps closer to me before she signs another question. *Not to pry, but is he your boyfriend?*

This is the first and only chance I may have to tell someone that the gorgeous man standing across the room is my husband, but I shake my head and sign back. *No, a family friend.*

She nods before her hands move to ask a question I sensed was coming. *What was it like growing up with a deaf parent?*

I look at Daniel and Asa again as I hear the baby starting to wake. When I shift my gaze back to Romy, I see she's focused on them, too.

I give her a minute before lightly tapping her hand and signing my response. *It was wonderful. I learned sign language at the same pace as I learned to talk. My dad is my hero. He's the strongest person I know.*

Tears well in her eyes again, as she signs with effortless grace. *I want Asa to be proud of me, too. I want that more than anything.*

He will be. I assure her before I shed a tear, too, thinking about the special moments I had growing up and how my dad was front and center for all of them.

She looks at her baby again before she turns back to me. *Thank you, Gina. I'm shocked that you're standing here. I never thought I'd have the chance to meet you.*

I watch her hands closely, before I raise mine. *I'm honored to have met you. Maybe when you're back in New York, we can have lunch at my grandma's restaurant?*

Her entire face lights up as her hands move swiftly in response. *Are you serious? I love Calvetti's. Your grandma is always so kind to me.*

Marti is kind to everyone, but she takes extra care with her deaf customers. She makes sure they feel welcome and comfortable.

I nod. *My grandma is the best.*

I turn when I hear the front door open. A brown-haired woman around Romy's age walks in carrying a tote bag over one shoulder.

Her eyes widen when she spots Daniel holding the baby, and when her gaze lands on me, she lets out a small shriek. "You're Gina Calvetti!"

I nod, making sure to not only speak but also sign my response. "I am. It's nice to meet you..."

"Bria," she says and signs her name before continuing, ensuring she's standing where Romy can see her. "I'm Asa's nanny and Romy's bestie. I can't believe you're standing here."

Believe it. Romy signs.

I volley my gaze between both women as they grin at each other.

"That video of you and your dad touched Romy," Bria says as she signs each word. "It helped her through her pregnancy, and now it's a dream for her to meet you. I know it is."

Romy nods as she signs her reply. *It is a big dream.*

I've posted tens of thousands of images and videos. Yet, right now, it feels like a stranger's video showcasing a private moment between my dad and I made the biggest impact of anything related to me online.

I hug Romy before I sign something I've never said to any of my followers before. *Let me give you my number. I want you to text me if you need someone to tell you how lucky Asa is to have you as a mom.*

Her hands tremble as she raises them. *Really?*

I sign back. *Really.*

Bria moves closer to us, her hands moving as she speaks, "You seem pretty lucky too, Gina. Your boyfriend is hot with a capital H."

Romy shakes her head, responding for me. *He's just her friend.*

"Too bad," Bria says, signing so Romy can follow. "He looks like a catch, and judging by the way he's handling Asa, I think he's going to be a great husband and baby daddy to someone one day."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

DANIEL

I GLANCE at Gina as I steer the car around a corner, headed to our next destination. “Bria was right. I am a catch.”

She keeps her gaze straight ahead. I suspect she’s trying not to give me the satisfaction of seeing the smile on her face, but I know her. I know how her cheeks lift when happiness lights up her face. “Bria doesn’t know you, Daniel.”

“You do,” I point out. “I didn’t see or hear you disagreeing with her assessment of me.”

She leans her head back on the seat but doesn’t say anything, so I take that as a win.

“What you did back there was amazing,” I go on, wanting to keep the mood light. “Offering to have lunch with Romy at Calvetti’s meant a lot to her.”

“It means a lot to me, too,” she whispers.

Looking in her direction, I catch her smoothing her left hand over her wind-whipped hair. I don’t think I’ll ever forget what it felt like to slide the silver band around her finger that night in Las Vegas.

“Where are we going?” she finally asks, even though I told her I had a stop to make before we leave New Haven.

“I’m buying a condo from Kelly,” I answer honestly. “It’s not far from here. I want to check it out in person.”

“You’re buying a condo here? Why?”

“It’s a good investment.” I steal a glance at her. “I’ll rent it out most of the time. In ten years, it’ll pay for itself.”

“Then you’ll sell it and pocket the profit,” she assumes.

That’s not my plan. I want a property on the East Coast that I can escape to, and this condo fits the bill.

“Did you already put an offer on it?” she asks, sliding her sunglasses down her nose to peer at me. “Is that how you convinced Kelly to sign on with you? She seemed eager to get the documents signed before we left.”

I was grateful that she agreed to the terms I had sent her yesterday. Kelly’s portfolio is impressive, and I look forward to helping her grow it.

“I don’t buy real estate to bribe new clients.” I laugh. “When Paul was vetting her, he pointed out her available properties. I had a look and fell in love with the condo we’re about to see.”

Her head snaps to the right as we round the corner, headed toward the building I’ll call home a few weeks a year when I need a retreat. “Wait! Does this condo overlook Long Island Sound?”

I nod. “From the photos Kelly sent me, the view is spectacular.” I steer the car toward the designated parking spot for my soon-to-be-unit. “Let’s check it out.”

“All right,” she says hesitantly, placing her sunglasses on her lap. “This means you’re planning on coming back to New York to visit sometimes, right? Or will you bypass all of us and hide here when you’re on the East Coast?”

I park the car and turn off the engine before I face her. “I’d never miss an opportunity to see you, Gina.”

“Promise?” she whispers.

I slide off my sunglasses and look into her eyes. “It’s a promise you can bank on.”

“Let’s go see your new place.” She takes her seatbelt off. “Maybe one day, you’ll get a boat.”

I hold in a smile because my beautiful wife has no idea what I have planned for her before we head back to New York City, and she puts our marriage in her rearview mirror.

I PUNCH in the code Kelly provided me on the keypad before I open the door to the unit. I motion for Gina to take the first step inside.

“Me?” Her hand jumps to the middle of her chest. “Are you sure?”

I’m sure I’d like to carry her over this threshold, but I doubt I’d fare better than the last time I asked, so I nod. “Please.”

I follow close behind her as she enters the unit. A sudden sigh escapes her, and I immediately know why.

I’m not a man who thrives on excess other than a good haircut and a great suit. My apartment in Los Angeles isn’t expansive by any means. The apartment I sold in Manhattan wasn’t either. This condo hits the bull’s eye of my target for real estate. It’s small enough to be manageable, but the details won me over.

The flooring is pine, and the fixtures are elegant and tasteful. I’m purchasing it furnished, so I make a mental note to tell Kelly that whoever handles that area of her business is brilliant.

The furniture is all light gray, save for a light blue chair placed in a corner near the showstopper. That’s a wall of windows that provides a view that rivals the one I had in the apartment I used to own in New York.

Water greets the eye along with a few scant boats on Long Island Sound.

Gina is drawn to the windows, her steps quickening as she crosses the condo to get to her destination.

“Daniel,” she breathes my name out, wrapped in a sigh. “This is breathtaking.”

She’s right. The sight before me is, but that’s all about her and not the water.

“You like it?” I ask the question even though she’s already answered it with her reaction.

“I love it.” She glances over her shoulder at me. “This place is a true gem. It’s a treasure.”

Every thought I’ve had about selling it in the future is gone. I’ll hold onto it forever, just as I’ll hold onto the memory of this moment until I die.

I’m falling in love with my wife.

No, that’s not what this is.

I’m falling deeper in love with my wife. I’ve been in love with her for years. I know that now.

She turns to face me. “This was a wonderful surprise. I’m glad I got to see this place.”

“There’s one more surprise.” I walk toward her, keeping my steps measured and even. “I think you’ll like it even more than this one.”

“More than this?” She laughs. “That’s hard to imagine.”

I take a chance and offer her my hand. “Come with me and see.”

Her gaze drops to my hand before she slides hers into it. “Okay. I’m ready for whatever it is.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

GINA

NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED me for this.

I stare at Daniel, unsure of how to fully express what I'm feeling. It's a combination of gratitude, shock, and regret.

I'm beginning to regret booking a seat on the flight headed to Las Vegas tomorrow.

"I promise it won't sink." Leif, the man standing next to Daniel, smiles as he goes on, "Bill hired me to take care of this boat more than ten years ago. I take him and his wife out on the water a few times each summer. When he called and said a friend wanted to borrow it for the afternoon, I was thrilled to lend a hand. There isn't a spot on earth I'd rather be."

I look past him to the sailing boat we are about to board.

"Are you ready, Gina?" Daniel asks gently. "If you'd rather not, I understand."

I look up and into his face. "I want to."

He gestures toward the boat waiting at the dock. "One of my clients who loves to sail offered the use of his boat when I called to ask him if he knew where I could charter one for a few hours. This may not be exactly how you pictured your honeymoon, but I wanted to give you the experience before tomorrow."

"Before I go back to Vegas?" I whisper.

He nods.

Leif slides a hand into the pocket of his navy blue pants. “You two are married?”

Before Daniel can answer, I do because I want to hear the words come from my lips. “We’re married.”

“We’re married,” Daniel repeats. “Recently married.”

“I’ve got some champagne on board.” Leif laughs. “In a plastic bottle, mind you, since glass is a safety concern, but it’s all yours if you want it.”

“It’s not shots, so yes.” Daniel chuckles. “We’d appreciate that. Thank you.”

I smile. “Shots are what got us to this place.”

Daniel gazes into my eyes. “I should thank the shots because this is the best place I’ve been in a long time.”

I gaze out at the water and the endless blue sky beyond before I look back at my husband. “Me too.”

“ARE YOU COLD?” Daniel asks.

I turn to my left to find him right next to me. He has spent the past fifteen minutes with Leif as he listened to several tales about various fishing trips.

It makes sense since it sounds like Leif grew up spending his weekends on a boat much like this with his family.

“I’m good,” I assure him, even though my hair is whipping in the wind. “It’s beautiful out here.”

Daniel gazes at the water ahead as the boat cuts a path through it. “Don’t laugh, but this is my first time on a boat, Gina.”

I hold in a smile. “I would have thought you’d be out on a different yacht every weekend with your clients in California.”

“I’ve been invited,” he admits. “But it wasn’t what I wanted to do. You’d be surprised how many people are willing to trade a day trip on their yacht for a meal at one of the best restaurants in Los Angeles.”

“As long as you foot the bill for that?” I laugh.

“You know it.”

I look out at the water again. “It’s so calming, isn’t it? It feels like a different world out here. It’s serene and quiet.”

We passed other boats on our journey, but that was only twice, and after we waved to the people on board and they responded in kind, we continued on.

“Should we toast to our good fortune?” Daniel asks. “To the future?”

This moment. This man. All of this feels like what I imagined in my mind’s eye when I saw that boat on the water and the couple kissing all those years ago.

His hand reaches for mine. I give it willingly because I want to touch him.

“Sometimes, I look at you, and I can’t understand how someone can be this beautiful inside and out,” he says.

I want to thank him for the compliment, but all I can do at this moment is stare into his blue eyes.

“I know tomorrow has to come,” he whispers. “I’d trade everything I own to stop time. Even if it’s just for a little while.”

I want that, too, but the words get caught behind a sudden lump in my throat.

His hand drops mine so it can circle my waist. He tugs me closer. As the wind kisses the side of my face, his eyes lock on mine. “I’m the luckiest man in the world. I got to be married to you.”

“You’re happy you married me?” I ask, even though I already see the answer in his eyes.

“So fucking happy.” He smiles. “It’s been a wild ride, Gina Calvetti.”

“Calvetti-Lawton,” I whisper.

“Calvetti-Lawton,” he repeats. “Mrs. Calvetti-Lawton.”

“Mrs. Lawton,” I say out loud for the first time as I stare into his eyes. “I’m happy, too.”

He tugs me closer, his chin tilting slightly. “May I kiss the bride?”

As my heart skips a beat in my chest, I nod and push up on my toes. “You may kiss the bride.”

One of his hands cups my neck as his lips find mine. With the wind swirling a path around us, the sound of the water hitting the boat, and the warmth of the sun bathing our faces, I kiss my husband for the very first time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

GINA

“DANIEL.” His name escapes me in a breathless rush. “I want...”

“Me,” he finishes my sentence before taking my mouth in a deep, lush kiss.

This kiss is different than the one we first shared on the boat two hours ago. After that kiss, Daniel poured champagne into two plastic glasses, and we toasted to tomorrow.

Neither of us knows what that holds for us, but today, right now, we both want the same thing.

As soon as our kiss breaks, he fumbles with the keypad outside the door to the condo he'll soon own. It's the condo that overlooks the spot where we shared our first kiss.

“Why can't I remember the fucking code?” He chuckles. “You do things to me, Gina.”

I circle a hand around his bicep. “Good things?”

He stops to kiss me again. The tip of his tongue traces a path over my bottom lip before it slides into my mouth. It's so intimate and gentle that I can't hold in a small moan.

“Jesus,” he whispers as soon as I step back. “You're driving me mad.”

“Look at me,” I say as he again punches random numbers into the keypad. “It's going to lock you out. If that happens,

whatever you were going to do to me will have to wait.”

His gaze trails over me so slowly that it feels like he’s already undressing me. “I’ve waited forever for this. I’m not waiting another goddamn minute.”

A light laugh flows out of me. “Focus, Daniel. Look at me.”

He does just that, locking his eyes on mine. “I’m looking. I’ll never stop looking at you.”

My heart aches in my chest, not only from the words he just spoke but his tone. It was soft and tender.

“You know the code.” I cup his face in my hands. “Think, or we’ll have to call Kelly.”

His gaze trails over my face. “I’ve thought about kissing you for years.”

As much as I want in his condo so I can fall into bed with him, I savor the moment. “For years?”

“Forever,” he clarifies. “I almost ran after you when you knocked on my apartment door that morning.”

I won’t let the memory of one of his past lovers taint this moment, so I push past her presence and don’t mention her at all. “When I was eighteen and you were twenty-five?”

He nods, his eyes lighting up as he does. “That’s it. One. Eight. Seven and Two.”

I watch in silence as he keys it in. The light on the pad flashes green.

With a push of the handle down, the door opens.

“I’m going to carry you over the threshold,” he tells me as his right arm circles my waist. “No arguments from you.”

I laugh, reaching for his shoulder as he dips down to slide his other arm under my legs.

He takes a single step forward before looking into my eyes. “I’ll be good to you, Gina. I promise this will be a night you’ll never forget.”

That promise only cements what my heart is already telling me. This night will live in my memory forever.

I STARE into his stormy blue eyes. The color seems different in the light in this bedroom as he steps toward me.

We're standing face to face with nothing separating us but a few inches of distance.

I undressed as he did, never tearing my gaze from his body.

With each inch of skin that was uncovered, I felt closer to him. I sensed his eyes on me as my blouse slid off my shoulders, and when I dropped my panties once my jeans were on the floor, a deep, audible groan escaped from between his lips.

"You're so fucking incredible," he whispers.

I drop my gaze to his stomach and then lower, my eyes following the trail of dark hair that leads straight to his cock.

"You are, too."

He laughs. "I'm so hard already."

He is, and large. Impressive, but I've imagined that for years. I've thought about what he'd look like naked. What his body would feel like pressed against mine.

"I brought condoms."

I slide my gaze from his body to look at his face. "You did?"

"Hope is a powerful thing." He smiles, and it's slightly crooked. It's endearing and punctuates the moment in a way I didn't know I needed.

"Reality is even better."

"You're not kidding." He chuckles. "I need you now, Gina, or I'm going to blow my load all over this floor."

I step forward once and then again before I drop to my knees and circle his thick shaft with my hand. “This first.”

His head shakes as his hands rake his hair. “I want to taste you.”

“You will,” I assure him before I lick over the length of his cock. “We have time.”

“Do we have all night?” he asks.

I know what that means, and I know what he’s asking beyond the obvious question. He wants to know if I’m still planning on flying to Vegas tomorrow, but I can’t think of that now. All I can think about is him. “Tonight is ours. I don’t want to leave.”

Before he can respond, I suck the crown of his cock between my lips. I’m rewarded with a groan so deep that it sends a pulse straight through me.

“Ah, fuck,” he growls. “Like that, Gina. Just like that.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

GINA

HE CIRCLES my left nipple with his lips. The touch is gentle at first, but it changes quickly to something more. It's not quite a bite, but it's more than a lick. It hits me just the right way, sending my hips up in a circle.

"You like that," he whispers.

"I like it all," I answer honestly.

I liked sucking him off. I loved when he shot down my throat, and I could barely stand how incredible it felt when he buried his face between my legs.

He ate me with such tenderness and expertise that I came within minutes.

Now, he's above me while he tortures my nipples with his teeth, tongue, and lips.

"You'll like this more," he says as he slides down my body.

I whimper in protest. "I don't want that again right now, Daniel. I'm aching for you. I want..."

A deep, soulful laugh fills the room. "I'm going to give you exactly what you need."

He settles between my legs, his hands moving slowly up my thighs. "You're more breathtaking than I could ever have imagined."

I listen intently to his every word and each sound that escapes him, wanting to save all of this to a spot in my memory that will never be erased or written over by another lover.

I don't want there to ever be another lover.

He parts my legs farther, pushing gently on my thighs to expose my core.

His tongue traces a path over his bottom lip. "I do want to eat you again, but I want to fuck you more."

"Do it," I challenge because the ache to have him inside me is almost too much to bear.

His hand drops to my pussy. His fingers part my folds before he slides one up to circle my clit gently.

"That's not fucking," I whisper.

He laughs again. "It's part of it, baby."

The endearment warms me from the inside out. I close my eyes and let myself feel his hands, his words, all of it.

I moan when one finger slides into my channel, and a quick gasp follows at the sensation that another has joined it.

"You're tight, Gina."

My eyes pop open to catch my husband's face as he stares at his fingers inside of me. I see desire there, raw need, and something more.

Maybe that's my imagination wanting things, but it feels like I can see love in the way he's devouring me with his gaze.

"Be gentle," I whisper, referring not only to my body but my heart.

He pumps his fingers into me slowly. "I will, for now. I can't promise that when I feel this beautiful pussy wrapped around my cock."

I moan loudly because the need is a weight I can't bear for a second more. "Please, Daniel."

I don't have to ask again. He moves quickly, shifting his body, lining up his sheathed cock, and with a solid push and a grunt, I feel him in a way I have always wanted, even when I couldn't admit it to myself.

"Fuck, yes." His head drops so his lips can meet mine. "This is my heaven."

He takes me slowly at first but then moves us both without losing contact. My legs are pressed against his chest. His cock is buried so deeply within me that there's a bite of pain each time I feel the stretch as he plunges into me.

He fucks me hard, each pulse of his body into mine, luring a sound from my lips that I've never heard before.

As I near my release, I cry out his name.

He ups the pace, grunting out my name in a chant that sends me over the edge.

He follows with a heady sound from deep within before he collapses on top of me, whispering words of gratitude that reflect everything I feel inside.

HOURS LATER, light kisses pepper their way down my back.

Every muscle in my body is sore in the most delicious way.

"What are you doing?" I whisper the question with a lilt in my tone.

"Heading to my heaven," he answers in a growl before he pushes me onto my stomach. "I want to taste you like this."

I don't argue because Daniel's tongue is officially one of my favorite parts of him. That and his cock, and his eyes, and...

"Ohhh," I draw out that one word as he bites the left cheek of my ass. "That hurt."

“In the best way,” he says with confidence. “Ass in the air, Gina.”

I do it immediately, parting my legs in the process. I sense movement behind me as he gets on his back, sliding his way underneath me.

“Lower, baby.” He grips my hips with both hands, tugging me down. “Sit on my face.”

I inch down but then pull back up immediately, teasing him.

His hand rises before it lands with a sharp slap on my ass.

I can't help but squirm as a low moan escapes me.

“I need to taste you.” His voice doesn't disguise the need he feels. “As soon as you come on my face, I'm going to fuck you so hard.”

“Promises, promises.” I laugh.

He pulls me back so hard that my hands leave the bed. I'm almost upright, looking down at his eyes as I watch his lips move to take my clit between them.

My hand drops to his hair. “Oh my god.”

He moves slightly and growls out two words. “Watch me.”

I do, but before a single minute passes, my eyes are closed again, my neck is arched back, and I'm riding my husband's face to another release.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DANIEL

“I DON’T THINK your blouse will fit me, Gina.”

She turns abruptly, sending her messy hair flying over her shoulder.

My wife looks well-fucked and satisfied. I take pride in that, and I want more of it. Much more.

As she sits on the window seat in the bedroom, she tugs on one of the sleeves of my button-down shirt. “I think this fits me perfectly.”

She’s right. It does.

If I have to drive back to Manhattan half-naked, I will.

I want her in my shirt and my bed. Fuck, I want her in my life every single day going forward.

“Do you want me to take it off?” she smiles, tilting her head.

“If you do, we’ll end up back in bed.”

“I like the sounds of that, but...”

Her words trail, and it feels as though reality sucker punches me.

My gaze drops to my watch. It’s just past five in the morning. *Sunday morning*. If we leave New Haven now, she’ll still make her flight out of New York to Las Vegas.

I assumed that when she agreed to stay last night, that meant the annulment was off of the table, for now.

“But, what?” I face it head-on. “But, what, Gina?”

“We need to talk, Daniel.”

I slide both palms over my thighs before I take a seat on the edge of the bed facing her. I should put on pants for this, but at least I’m wearing my boxer briefs, so I don’t feel completely vulnerable.

It’s not dawn yet, but the darkness is fading behind her, giving way to what will soon be daybreak. Long Island Sound is just beyond my reach up here, but I know that every time I come to this condo in the future, I’ll take a walk to the dock and stare out at the water.

“Talk,” I say because I’m impatient, and dread has crept over my body, tensing my shoulders and jaw.

She nods. “I’m confused.”

I’ll take confusion over *I still want the annulment* any day of the week.

“Tell me why,” I say evenly.

She glances at the bed and the rumpled sheets. “That, and this.”

“This?” I ask because I think I know what she means, but I want to hear it. I need to hear the words.

“Us.” Her hand circles the air in front of her. “What are we doing, Daniel?”

I want to drop to one knee in front of my wife and propose for the first time, but she doesn’t need that right now. She needs me to be the levelheaded one in the room. I’m far from that right now, though. I feel like my heart has my mind and body on a leash, leading me straight to forever with her by my side.

“What we should have done years ago,” I say, staring at her.

Her brows perk for a second before her lips part. Before a word comes out, she slaps her hand over her mouth.

I smile. “Are you speechless, Calvetti?”

Laughter flows from between her fingers.

“You are.” I chuckle. “This is a day for the record books.”

“It is,” she whispers. “And not for that reason. I’m not speechless.”

I inch my ass closer to the edge of the bed. “Why is this a day for the record books, Gina?”

She glances over her shoulder toward the water. The day is breaking more with each passing second. “It’s the morning after your first ride on a sailboat.”

“True.” I tap a finger on my bare knee. “What else is it?”

That snaps her head back in my direction. “The day after we made love for the first time.”

My cock hardens because the promise of more days like this is there in her words.

“You said you’re feeling confused, Gina.” I lean forward, resting both forearms on my thighs. “Let me help with that.”

She gazes down at her left hand. “I’m not going to Las Vegas.”

I swear to fuck, my heart just swelled inside of my chest.

“Unless you think I should.” Her gaze finds mine. “Do you?”

I shake my head. “Hell no.”

“I didn’t know that we’d do that last night.” She skims her hand over her leg. “I’m glad we did, but it was unexpected.”

I extend a hand to her. “I’m glad we did, too.”

Without hesitation, she’s on her feet, reaching for my hand before sitting beside me on the bed.

I know this woman and everything she’s been through. I know that there hasn’t been a man who has seen her for the

gift that she is.

Dominick has told me too many stories about men who broke her heart, but I'd rather slice mine out of my chest than cause her pain.

"Maybe we need to...should we rethink," she stumbles through her thoughts, trying to express them.

"You want to put the annulment on hold?" I offer.

"On hold," she agrees with a nod. "I think I do."

"I know I do."

"You do?" Her shoulders sag, a sign that the tension she's been holding is slipping away. "For a week or two?"

Forever, but I'm all for baby steps. "For a week or two."

"Maybe when we get back to Manhattan, you can stay in my bedroom with me."

I know how much courage it takes for her to put herself out there in this way for me. "I'm there, Gina."

"I'm kind of scared," she whispers as her bottom lip trembles. "I don't know if this is the right path for us or not."

I tug her closer to kiss the side of her forehead gently. "It's our path, Calvetti. We pave it. We travel it."

She lifts her chin until our eyes meet. "We won't tell anyone yet, okay? I don't want to put it out there in case it doesn't work out."

That's fear talking, but I get it, so I nod. "Our secret is still safe with me."

Her gaze trails over my face. "When you were asleep, I picked up your pants and this shirt."

I figured as much since my pants were neatly folded on a chair in the corner of the bedroom.

"Then you stole the shirt." I trail a finger over the collar. "You can keep it."

"I'll let you wear it for the drive back."

I kiss her again, on the lips this time. “Deal.”

“The ring fell out of your pocket.” She steals a glance at my pants. “Your wedding ring.”

I nod, not ashamed that she found it. “I told you I’m keeping it safe.”

“I keep mine safe, too.”

Surprised that she didn’t trash it the morning after our Vegas nuptials, I perk an eyebrow. “You do?”

She starts to slide away from me, and as much as I don’t want her to go, I let her. She moves across the room swiftly, headed straight for the purse she brought with her. Her right hand dives inside it before the sound of a zipper being pulled breaks the silence.

When her hand reappears again, she’s holding the ring I slipped on her finger in the air. “I do.”

I smile at those two words before I go to my pants to get my ring. Once it’s in my hand, I face her. “I do, too.”

Her eyes never leave mine as she slips the ring back on her finger. “Maybe we can wear them today?”

I slide my ring back on. “I’m in.”

“We’re married, Daniel.” Her voice breaks. “I married you.”

I go to her because I know she needs that. I circle my arms around her and tug her against my chest. “I married you too, Gina.”

She leans back just far enough that she can look into my face. “Will you take me back to bed for a few hours before we go home?”

I answer with a kiss to her mouth. It’s slow and tender. I hope it chases away any doubt she has about what my next move will be.

“You’re going to fuck me hard, aren’t you?”

I chuckle into the skin of her neck. “So hard, Mrs. Lawton.”

Her hand trails down my stomach toward my boxer briefs. “This may be the best Sunday of my life.”

It sure as hell is the best Sunday of mine. Hell, it’s nearing the top of my list for the best day of my life; right behind the day she married me.

“The rings come off when we leave here,” she whispers.

“Rings off when we leave,” I agree. “For now, it’s clothes off. Get naked.”

With deft hands, she undoes the buttons of my shirt and drops it on the floor, revealing her nude body.

I take her in. Every inch of her creamy skin is exquisite, but when my gaze reaches her left hand, I have to swallow hard because of the sudden lump in my throat.

Emotions clash inside of me.

This is my wife. I don’t know how long she’ll want to stay married to me, but I’m going to savor every second of it, beginning right now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

GINA

“DAMMIT,” I say under my breath as my phone screen lights up with what has to be hundreds, if not thousands, of notifications.

Daniel steals a glance at me before he levels his gaze on the road ahead. “What’s wrong?”

I sigh deeply. “I turned off my notifications yesterday.”

“You did?” He looks at me again. “For real?”

I laugh at the phrase that I always used to say when I was a teenager. Whenever Dominick had good news to share, that was my first response. *For real* became the catchphrase that my brother would toss out at me at the most inopportune times. For a few months, it was endearing, and then when my sixteenth birthday was approaching, it faded away.

“For real,” I repeat, with a smile even though he can’t see it.

The highway is busy today. It seems we’re not the only ones heading back into the city to get ready for the week ahead.

It’s mid-afternoon now. After we spent a few more hours in bed exchanging mind-blowing orgasms, Daniel ordered brunch. After one last walk hand-in-hand to the dock to watch the sailboats go by, we got in the car to head back home.

Daniel made sure to call Kelly before we left the condo's parking lot to tell her that he was prepared to put in a full bid offer with a quick closing. She agreed without question and even suggested he hold onto the keycard since she promised no one would step foot in the condo again besides the cleaning crew, who will do their weekly run through the place tomorrow.

“How often do you turn off notifications?”

I glance at him again, but this time, he's looking at me. “Including this time?”

He nods. “Yes. Including this time.”

The index finger on my left hand darts in the air. “Once.”

Daniel huffs out a laugh. “I am special, aren't I?”

I heard him, but I'm so focused on my hand that I don't respond.

“Are you speechless again?” He pokes my thigh with his finger. “I love that I can do that to you.”

“My wedding ring,” I whisper. “I'm still wearing it.”

His gaze darts to where my hand is now resting in my lap before it shifts to his hand. “I am, too.”

“We should take them off now.” I touch the back of mine with my right thumb. “We can't wear them at home.”

I feel Daniel's gaze on me as I slide my ring off and tuck it back into the inner compartment of my purse. I carefully zip it shut.

He tugs his off and leans back on the seat as he steers the car. He struggles to get it into the front pocket of his pants, but he does.

When he looks through the windshield again, I do the same.

As the miles pass, the sound of the traffic around us is the only thing punctuating the silence until the unmistakable skyline of Manhattan begins to come into view, and I exchange a look with my husband that says it all.

We're back to the reality where no one knows we've exchanged wedding vows or ourselves with one another.

I WAS HOPING to share a shower with my husband when we got back to my apartment, but one of his potential clients demanded his attention.

I had to hold in a laugh when I heard Daniel talking to Everest Truscott on the phone as we boarded the elevator on our way up to my floor.

Daniel was patient as he explained that he would meet up with Everest for a drink after dinner tonight.

Apparently, Everest is not a patient man because he wanted the drink to happen during dinner.

Instead of feasting on the baked cod and rice pilaf that Daniel promised to make us, I'm at Calvetti's in search of a bowl of the ever-elusive minestrone my grandma refuses to serve me.

"Gina!" Marti calls out as soon as she spots me. "Come and give me a hug."

I'm all in for that, so I cross the crowded restaurant and land in her arms in record time.

I almost always wear heels, but I make a point of never stepping into this restaurant or Marti's home without them.

The reason is simple and private.

When I hug my grandma like this, with me towering above her, she fits perfectly against me. Her head rests on my chest, and her arms circle my waist.

I always close my eyes and savor the feeling because one day, this will be a memory, and I want it etched in my mind now.

"I knocked on your door last night." She taps my back with a closed fist three times. "You weren't there, so tell me

about him.”

Since I absolutely cannot do that, I step back from the embrace and sidestep by asking for the one thing I know she wants more than information about any man in my life.

My grandma lives to feed the people she loves, those she likes, and even those she dislikes.

“I’m hungry,” I say because it’s not a lie.

She taps her forehead twice. “What am I doing? Of course, you’re hungry. It’s dinnertime, and you can’t cook an egg.”

Um, yeah, I can. It’s the only thing I can cook, but I do it well.

I ignore that and smile. “Can I have the minestrone?”

She laughs like it’s a joke. “I’ll get you a big bowl of spaghetti with meatballs. You love that.”

“I do,” I debate asking for the minestrone again, but I decide to settle for what she’s offering because I know it’ll be delicious.

She looks past me toward the entrance of the restaurant. “Is Daniel coming?”

I wish, but I keep that thought to myself. “He had to meet a client.”

“Just like your brother.” She shakes her head. “Work, work, and more work.”

“Like you,” I point out. “Do you need help?”

She glances around the restaurant. “Tonight, we’re good. You’ll eat. I made it myself.”

I’ll never tire of hearing those words.

“I’ll pack up some for Daniel.” She tilts her chin down. “Is he nice to live with? Are you two having fun?”

The way her eyebrows are bouncing up and down is distracting and a little embarrassing.

“Grandma.”

“What?” She holds both her hands out in front of her. “A grandma can’t hope that her granddaughter is having fun with a handsome man?”

“I’m hungry,” I remind her.

She moves a step forward to pat my shoulder. “I promise you can’t do better than him, Gina. If he likes you like that, give him a chance.”

“If he likes me like that?” I laugh. “I’m not a teenager anymore. I’m an adult now.”

“A very beautiful one.” She slides my hair back over my shoulder. “That’s a nice dress.”

I glance down at the denim dress I’m wearing. “I bought it a long time ago.”

“You were nineteen,” she says. “You bought it the day before your mama’s birthday that year. You wore it to the party, and guess what?”

Stunned that she remembers that, I stare at her. “What?”

“Daniel was at the party, and he liked that dress, too. I saw him looking at you again and again.” She lets out a giggle. “He danced that night. He lost his shoe. I’ll never forget that.”

I won’t either.

“I’ll get the spaghetti and meatballs.” She takes one last look at me. “Four meatballs. I don’t want you to leave here hungry.”

I bow my head to hide my smile. “Thanks, Grandma.”

She kisses my cheek. “I love you, my Gina.”

“I love you, too.”

CHAPTER FORTY

DANIEL

“YOU’VE BEEN SMILING since you got here,” Everest points out from across the table. “I haven’t agreed to your terms yet, Daniel, so don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Circling my index finger in front of my face, my smile broadens. “This is a personal smile. It’s not related to business at all.”

He leans back in his chair, eyeing the second glass of expensive scotch just delivered to our table. We’re at Nova, one of the best restaurants in Manhattan.

Some people would think I’m lucky for landing a dinner reservation at the last minute, but the owner and executive chef is a client of mine. It’s a perk that I’ve taken advantage of a few times.

“It’s a woman,” he deduces. “That’s what I’m looking at. A man who is crazy about a woman.”

I can’t argue with him because he’s right, so I nod.

“One of my granddaughters thought she might have a chance with you.” He shakes his head. “Something about a drink in a pool in Las Vegas?”

Chuckling, I nod. “Elowen came over to say hello when I happened to have an extra drink in my hand.”

He doesn't ask why the hell I was holding two drinks in a hotel pool. Instead, he glances at the watch on his wrist. "Since their parents died, I've taken on the task of raising them. Ensley and Evangeline are in college now, too. Elowen graduates next spring with a business degree."

"You must be proud," I say.

I know his backstory. Paul dove deep into it when I was in Vegas. The death of Everest's son and daughter-in-law left him devastated. He stepped down from the helm of his business to devote himself to being a full-time grandfather.

Now, his focus is on rearranging his impressive portfolio to work its magic so he can stay retired and his granddaughters can pursue their dreams without any financial worries.

"I told the girls that your father died, too," he admits, to my surprise.

"He did."

"You turned out to be a fine young man." He smiles. "I'm leaning toward trusting you with my fortune, Daniel, but I have one issue."

"Name it, and I'll fix it." I smile. "Whatever it is, we can figure out a compromise."

"I'm based here." He taps the tabletop. "New York is my home. You're based in Los Angeles. I'm an impatient man, so if need to discuss something with you at seven a.m. my time, and you're fast asleep..."

"I'm considering moving back to New York," I interrupt.

I've been thinking about it, contemplating how that would work, but it's been at the forefront of my mind for days.

I want to come home. I want to stay in the home I'm currently sharing with my wife. I want us to have a family here surrounded by the family we already have.

"Seriously?" he asks with a chuckle. "You'd do that for me?"

I take a sip of the water I've been drinking all night before I shake my head. "As much as I want to handle your finances, Everest, that's not the reason."

He perks both brows. "I take it the lady that put that smile on your face lives here?"

"She does," I tell him. "That makes New York City the place I belong."

"A man who follows his heart is a man I can trust." He shoves his right hand toward me. "Based on the last terms we discussed, you have yourself a deal, Daniel."

I go in for a solid handshake. "I look forward to working with you, Everest. This is a decision you won't regret."

I WOULDN'T CONSIDER myself a good husband if I didn't go home without a bouquet of white carnations for my wife.

I stopped at a flower shop on my way and asked the owner to wrap up every white carnation there. She had fifteen of them, so with a bit of greenery added and some white paper around the stems, she tied it all up in a pink bow.

I fish in my pocket for my keys, but before I can get them out, the door to Gina's apartment flies open.

It's not my wife standing on the other side. It's her sister.

Behind her is Lia, and beyond that, I don't spot a soul.

"What the...?" Bella's gaze drops to the bouquet in my hand. "Are those flowers for Gina? What is going on?"

Lia takes a few steps forward. "Is it a special occasion?"

Feeling as though I've been pinned against the wall by two of the most important women in Gina's life, I draw deep and come up with the perfect explanation. "These are a little thank you gift for Gina for letting me stay with her."

"They're beautiful, Daniel."

My gaze wanders past both women to seek out my wife because hearing her voice is music to my ears.

Bella steps aside to allow me entry. “Go give them to her.”

I don’t need the encouragement. I need privacy because my bride is wearing an all too familiar denim dress, and her long brown hair is in a high ponytail.

A woman has yet to be born who can compare to her. Maybe if we have a daughter one day, and she’s blessed with her mom’s beauty, she’ll rank a solid second.

I cross the room and offer the flowers to Gina.

She stares at them while she bites the corner of her bottom lip. “White carnations.”

“They’re Gina’s favorites,” Bella says from behind me.

Lia laughs. “Something tells me he already knew that.”

Gina gathers the flowers in her arms. “I love them, Daniel.”

I stare into her face and the depths of her brown eyes. “Good.”

“I’ll put them in water.” She sighs. “I was just about to take a walk with Bella and Lia.”

“We don’t want you to tagalong anymore.” Bella giggles. “We need to gossip, so stay here.”

I glance over my shoulder at the two of them huddled together. Bella’s hand is wrapped around her cousin’s forearm.

“The flowers really are beautiful.” Bella smiles at me. “We went to Calvetti’s for dessert and saw Gina there. Marti gave us a honey ricotta cheesecake to share. What’s left is on the box on the counter. You two should enjoy it.”

“We will,” I say. “Be safe out there.”

“Be safe in here.” Bella winks at me. “I love you, Gina.”

“Love you,” Gina calls back. “You too, Lia.”

“I love everyone in this room.” Lia laughs. “We’re leaving now.”

They do, and as the door shuts behind them, my wife closes the distance between us before giving me a kiss that leaves me wanting more.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

GINA

“DANCE WITH ME.” Daniel holds out a hand as I walk back into the living room carrying the vase I placed the carnations in.

Soft music is filling the air. I suspect it’s streaming from his phone as it sits atop the coffee table in the middle of the room.

Before I can answer, Daniel takes the vase from me. He walks across the room to place it on a table next to one of the windows.

As much as I love fresh flowers, I rarely stop to pick up any. Carnations may not cost a fortune, but it’s an extravagance I’ve never indulged in.

“You want to dance?” I question him. “I’ve seen you dance. Maybe I should grab my phone in case I need to call 911.”

His head falls back in laughter. “You’re funny, Calvetti.”

I reach into the pocket of my dress to grab my wedding ring. Before I think it through, I slide it on my finger. “It’s Lawton, for now.”

I added ‘*for now*’ because I have no idea what Daniel is feeling. Yesterday, we talked about putting the annulment

aside, but that felt like more of a spur-of-the-moment ‘*for now*’ agreement than a forever commitment.

His hand dives into the front pocket of his pants to yank his ring out. It’s on his finger almost instantly. “Let’s share our first dance, Mrs. Lawton.”

My breath hitches because that’s precisely what this will be. It will be our first official dance as husband and wife.

Before he takes me in his arms, he heads for the lamp I turned on when I got home. He slides the switch to dim the light.

“Perfect,” he whispers before he turns to face me. “Are you ready?”

To fall deeper in love with him? *Yes.*

His right arm wraps around my waist as he takes my hand in his. I rest my free hand on his shoulder before I gaze up and into his handsome face.

“I chose a slow song for obvious reasons.” He smiles down at me with that same crooked smile that was on his lips before we made love for the first time.

“So you wouldn’t break a leg?” I tease.

“You’re a riot.” He kisses me softly on the forehead. “I chose this song because it’s your favorite.”

I perk an ear to listen more carefully to the lyrics.

“When our hearts are aligned, magic happens,” a soft feminine voice croons.

I can’t hold in a smile. “This version is different.”

“This version is our version,” he whispers. “One of my clients has a daughter who loves to sing. I texted her asking if she’d be willing to record a slower version for us.”

Emotion bubbles in my throat. “When?”

The song continues, and it’s clear that a guitar is the only accompaniment to the woman signing.

Her voice is soulful, and the slow twist she's put on the song has changed the entire feel of it.

"This morning before we left New Haven." He laughs. "When she sent me the audio file an hour ago, she said it's a practice run. I was going to surprise you on your birthday with it, but I couldn't wait."

"This is our song," I whisper through a haze of tears.

"Always, Gina." He holds me closer as we dance slowly. "It will forever and always be our song."

"HAVE you ever thought about me when you're doing that?" Daniel's lips glide over my neck.

I can't focus on that. The only thing I can remember to do is take my next breath.

My finger is circling my swollen clit. Daniel is watching my every movement. He has been since he took a shower and found me stretched out naked on my back on our bed.

My bed.

No... it's our bed.

Our apartment. Our life.

"Yes," I confess.

"A lot?"

I manage to let out a soft laugh. "Your ego is huge."

"My cock is bigger," he reminds me. "Let me take over where you left off, and I'll prove it."

I turn slightly so I can meet his gaze. "You'll fuck me now?"

"You're already so wet," he growls. "I can't help myself, Gina."

I watch in wonder as he reaches for my hand before he brings it to his lips. He licks each of my fingertips slowly, his

eyes closing as a groan flows from him.

“You taste so good,” he whispers. “I’ll get a condom.”

I know it’s the right thing. It’s the safe thing, but is it what I want?

“Daniel.” I stop him from leaving the bed by reaching for his wrist.

“Yes?” His gaze drops to mine.

“I’m clean,” I say in a barely audible tone. “I’m on birth control. If you’re clean, and you want to, we can...”

Before he can answer, he’s between my legs, his cock edging a path over my core.

I moan, knowing that this will be the first time I’ve ever felt a man like this.

“I’ve never done this before.” His voice is laced with so much desire that it’s palpable. “I’ve never gone bare.”

His breath hisses out from between his lips as he slides into me in one solid thrust. “It’s too good. Jesus. It’s so goddamn perfect.”

It’s everything.

“Look at me, Gina,” he demands in a voice that sends me closer to the edge of my release. “Look in my eyes while I fuck you.”

It’s so primal and filled with need that I moan aloud.

“More of that.” He ups his pace; each pump of his hips is harder than the last. “I fucking love those sounds you make. Just for me.”

“Just for you,” I whisper. “Only for you.”

My back arches off our bed as I feel my climax building. I can’t say a thing because the moans I want to contain can’t be held back.

“Fuck, I love those sounds.” He pins my hip to the bed with one hand as he drives his cock into me.

I come with an intensity I've never felt before. I let out a heady cry, but there's so much else building inside of me. I want to tell him I love him, and I never want this night to end.

He pumps again and again, slowing his pace even though he hasn't come yet.

"Give me another, Gina."

I lock eyes with him as I catch my breath. "I've never had a second so close after the first."

"You will with me," he says with such conviction that I know I'm going to have another orgasm before he comes inside of me.

"I will." I nod.

"I'll give you a minute more, and then I'll show you exactly how much I love your body." He circles my right nipple with his lips for a tender kiss.

Knowing he can't see me, I silently mouth the words I long for him to hear. "*I love you.*"

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

GINA

I TOSS my phone onto the couch as I let out an exasperated breath. “Leave me alone.”

My husband rounds the corner from the hallway. “I got the hint when you crawled out of bed when I was in the shower, Lawton. I’ll ravish you again tonight.”

I can’t hold in a laugh. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

He adjusts the tie around his neck. “So I can ravish you now?”

I want that.

Men I’ve been with in the past knew what they were doing in bed, but with Daniel, it’s different.

He woke me with his mouth on my thigh this morning. Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, I was in the throes of an intense orgasm courtesy of his skilled tongue.

As I was trying to recover from that, he fucked me slowly from behind. It was the most delicious wake-up call I’ve ever had.

“I have to do some work,” I confess with an exaggerated frown. “Then I’m going to see Arietta.”

His gaze falls to my left hand. “Are you planning on taking that off before you leave?”

I stare at the ring on my finger before I glance at his left hand. “You took off your ring.”

He pats the front of his suit jacket. “It’s safe and sound in my inner pocket.”

I tug off my ring and drop it in the pocket of my robe as I close the distance between us with hurried steps. “I’ll put it in my purse before I leave.”

Daniel smiles at me. “Who do you want to leave you alone? Give me their name. I’ll make sure they never bother you again.”

“It’s fine,” I reassure him as I rest my hands on his shoulders.

“Is it the dancing neighbor?”

Smiling broadly, I shake my head. “He can bother me anytime he wants.”

His left eyebrow perks. “I meant to go borrow a cup of sugar from him. I have to do that today.”

A bark of laughter escapes me. “We have sugar.”

“I know,” he replies with a wink. “I need to get a look at this guy. It’s all about sizing up the competition, Gina.”

Even though his hands have dropped to my waist, and I love the feeling of that, I tug away to head towards my phone.

Once it’s in my palm, I scroll through my photo app, cringing at how many selfies I’ve taken in the past week to sell products for my sponsors.

“You’re not about to show me a cute picture of the two of you, are you?” Daniel chuckles. “Is that what you’re looking for?”

I nod. “That’s exactly what I’m looking for.”

“I don’t need to see that.” He walks toward me. “In my mind, he’s a cheery, gray-haired grandpa who views you as the granddaughter he never had.”

My head snaps up. “What?”

His gaze searches my face. “Did I hit the nail on the head? Is your neighbor that sweet man with the purple silk scarf who sits in the lobby reading every afternoon?”

I smile. “Let me find the picture.”

I sense his gaze on me as I finally spot the picture I’ve been searching for. Before I can turn it to show him, he’s laughing. “His name is Byron, right? It is him.”

I hold up the image I took months ago of my neighbor and me in the lobby. We’re both wearing purple scarves, and our smiles say it all.

“You had me going, Gina.” Daniel trails light kisses over my neck before he playfully bites the bottom of my earlobe. “I was fucking jealous over this guy.”

I tug away to look at his face. “You should be. He can dance, and he won that award for courage.”

He reaches to cup my face in his palms. “I can’t compete with Byron on the dance floor or the courage department, but you have to admit, I could win an award for what I just did in our bedroom.”

My knees weaken at the last two words.

Our bedroom.

It feels right in a way I always want it to.

My phone starts ringing, breaking the moment.

Both of our gazes drop to it.

Daniel leans forward to see the name flashing across the screen. “That’s a bakery chain, right? Is that their head office calling?”

I silence the phone and nod. “It is. They’ve been chasing me for weeks. They want me to promote their new donut flavor in exchange for... it’s a lot of money.”

“Donuts and money?” He laughs. “You should have answered it.”

I glance at the phone's screen again as the call goes to voicemail.

"It's a nationwide chain, Gina," he points out. "Their offer must be very generous, and I know you love donuts."

I toss my phone on the couch again before my gaze meets his. "I love the chocolate donuts Marti makes for me. They're my favorite. They'll always be."

He leans down to kiss me softly on the lips. "You're incredible."

"Daniel?" I whisper his name as the kiss breaks.

"Yes, wife?" he answers with a smirk.

"You won the award for best wake-up call ever today. Your mouth...your cock...let's just say that it was a phenomenal start to the day."

He lets out a low laugh. "I fucking knew it. There has to be a prize that comes with it, right? What is it? I want it now."

I tug on the sash at my waist, opening my robe. Before my next breath, I slide it off. As it pools at my feet, my husband's gaze rakes my nude body from head to toe.

Even though he's fully dressed in a three-piece suit and tie, he picks me up and hauls me over his shoulder. "I'm going to be late for work today. Very, very late."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

DANIEL

“HOW’S VERN?” I ask Dominick when I glance up to see him entering my office.

“Stubborn.” He chuckles. “He’s seeing another cardiologist today since he didn’t like the first one we set him up with. Arietta is taking him to that appointment. I think your roommate is tagging along.”

Wife. Gina is my wife.

“This doctor is the cousin of Arietta’s best friend,” he goes on, “he was booked solid for months, but Sinclair pulled the necessary strings. She’s always there for my fiancée.”

“Everyone needs a friend like that.”

“She’s Arietta’s maid of honor.” He takes a step closer to my desk. “You’ll meet her soon.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I say honestly. “Your big day is on the horizon.”

He nods. “Gina’s birthday arrives first. It sounds like Bella and Lia are planning a party. They want it to be a surprise, but Gina’s not keen on that.”

I’d much rather have her all to myself on the day she turns twenty-nine, but I know how important family is to her.

“I’m here to help.” I push to stand. “Tell Bella and Lia they can count on me.”

He looks me over. “I will. I noticed you pushed back your morning meetings until this afternoon. Everything all right, Daniel?”

Everything is exactly as it should be.

When my wife wasn't sitting on my face, she was riding my cock. That's a hell of a lot better than catching up with my New York clientele.

“Couldn't be better,” I say, bypassing the intimate details of how I spent my morning.

“You're enjoying your time back here,” he assumes, based, I think, on the broad smile that rarely leaves my face.

“I love New York.”

And your sister. I don't share that because I have no fucking idea how he'd react if he knew I was married to Gina and that we are sharing a bed.

On the day I realized McCabe was the guy Gina was involved with, I drowned my sorrows in a few glasses of whiskey at Tin Anchor. Gage poured me drink after drink as I told him, a virtual stranger at the time, that I was falling for Gina.

The following morning, I pushed all the feelings aside as a byproduct of too much alcohol and lingering grief over my dad's death.

Gina has been part of the foundation of my life in this city for years. Her family has always been a soft place for me to fall.

I convinced myself that whatever I felt for her at the time was based on that connection, but I was wrong. I was dead wrong. I've been slowly falling in love with her for years.

“Stay, Daniel.”

I know he's not referring to my office. He wants me back in Manhattan for good.

“I'm considering it,” I lie, since I've already mapped out in mind how I'll make the transition back to living in New York

full-time.

“Good.” He glances at the window behind me. “We’ve all missed you. Your clients have, too.”

I drop my gaze to the top of my desk. “When I make a final decision, I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll be the first to know,” he says, believing his words.

He’ll be the second. My wife will be the first person I tell that I’m staying in this city and fighting to make my marriage work.

It may not have started out as an *until-death-do-us-part* gig, but I’m all in for that, and I hope to hell she is, too.

THE LEAVES ARE STARTING to turn color. The late afternoon sun is hitting the sidewalk in just the right way to turn shadows into temporary works of art, and I’m headed into Calvetti’s to pick up dinner for Gina and me.

I don’t make it more than a foot inside before I spot Arietta and a woman with long dark hair.

It’s not the woman I’ve been thinking about all day, though.

This one has bright blue eyes, and the smallest baby bump is noticeable under the snug red sweater she’s wearing.

I catch Arietta’s eye before I take another step. She waves me over to where they’re standing near the kitchen, so I head straight there.

“Daniel!” Arietta calls out as I get closer. “How are you?”

She’s family, so I take her in for a hug. She’s all in, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

“I’m good,” I say, stepping back from the embrace, before I turn my focus to the woman standing next to us. “I’m Daniel Lawton.”

“Sinclair Morgan.” She smiles. “Arietta’s best friend and maid-of-honor.”

“Any relation to Keats Morgan?” I ask because Keats represents a few of my clients who have made a fortune in professional sports.

“Keats is my brother.” She smiles. “You’ve heard of him?”

He’s a sports agent with a reputation for hammering out incredible deals. I can attest to the fact that in my clients’ cases, he’s worked magic on their behalf.

“I have.” I glance around the restaurant. “This place is packed tonight.”

“I think Marti may be short-staffed.” Arietta sighs. “I offered to help, but she wouldn’t hear of it. She insists I take Sinclair home and feed her since she’s having a baby in a few months.”

“Congratulations.” I smile at both of them.

“Thank you.” Sinclair rubs her stomach through her sweater. “I’m been so hungry lately. I can’t stop craving spaghetti and meatballs, so I’m here almost every day.”

I drop my hand to the front of my vest. “I’m here all the time, too, but I don’t have an excuse. I just love Marti’s food.”

“Me too,” Arietta chimes in.

“How’s Vern?” I ask.

“Great.” Arietta grins. “His heart is perfectly perfect, so he’ll go back to Buffalo tomorrow. He’s having dinner with Dominick tonight.”

“It’s a *you-better-treat-my-granddaughter-right* dinner.” Sinclair laughs.

Arietta and I join in the laughter before she points out the obvious. “Dominick is the best fiancé in the world. I couldn’t have asked for a better partner than him.”

The joy in her voice radiates onto her face.

Her gaze shifts to my left, and the smile on her lips broadens. “Here comes Marti.”

I turn to see Gina’s grandma on the approach with a large bag in her arms. I dart toward her to take it from her.

“Thank you.” She pats my shoulder. “All of Sinclair’s favorites are in there. I made it all myself.”

“Thank you, Marti.” Sinclair goes in to embrace her. “What do I owe you?”

“A smile.” Marti demonstrates by smiling as she hugs Sinclair. “That’s all I want.”

“Done.” Sinclair reaches for the bag, but Arietta takes it before she can get a hand on it. “I’ve got this.”

Marti turns in a complete circle. “Where’s my Gina?”

Since I’m not the last one in the room to see her, I look at Arietta to answer the question, expecting her to say that Gina went home after Vern’s appointment.

“My cousin asked her to hang around.” Sinclair smiles. “He’s single. She’s single, so.”

Marti takes a step back. “Your cousin? The heart doctor?”

“Gaines.” Sinclair nods. “He was working out of the hospital today, so we went there to see him. The five of us had coffee in the cafeteria after Arietta’s granddad’s appointment. When it was time for us to go, Gaines asked Gina to hang back.”

What the hell?

“A doctor.” Marti nods. “I like doctors.”

That makes one of us.

“It takes a brilliant man to know the treasure my Gina is.” Marti suddenly turns to stare right at me. “Doctors are very smart.”

“So are wealth managers,” I mutter under my breath.

Marti taps her ear. “What was that, Daniel?”

“Can I get an order of lasagna to go?” I ask with the best charming grin I can muster.

“Carbonara for you tonight,” she says. “I made it myself.”

As much as I want to race home to ask Gina why she made extra time in her schedule for a single heart doctor, I can’t do that right now.

I see too many hands in the air, trying to grab the attention of a clearly exasperated waitress.

“Put my order on hold, Marti.”

Her hands drop to her hips. “Why?”

“I’m helping out.” I slide my suit jacket off. “I need the key for the office so I can drop this off in there.”

She fishes in the pocket of her apron. “Are you sure, Daniel?”

I hold out my hand for the key. “I’m sure. I have something valuable in here, and can’t risk losing it, so I’ll put it in the office and get to work.”

“Is it your phone?” she assumes. “Or your wallet?”

Both of those are replaceable, but the inexpensive silver band tucked in the pocket of my jacket is priceless to me.

“I’d stay and help too...” Arietta begins.

“No,” Marti interrupts her as she drops the key in my palm. “You’ll go home and make sure Sinclair is fed. Daniel will help. We will see how many plates he can break before we close.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I broke two plates years ago, Marti. It was years ago.”

Tapping the center of her forehead, she smiles. “I never forget. I’ll tell Gina you did good today, Daniel. She’ll like that.”

I grin because if her grandma approves of me, I’m already halfway to winning my wife’s heart.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

GINA

WITH A BOUNCE in my step and a future filled with hope, I make my way toward my grandma's restaurant.

I skipped lunch today because my plan was to stop in here and pick up dinner for Daniel and me. I'll order the minestrone because it's worth a shot, but I suspect I'll be leaving with something delicious that includes pasta and cheese.

Just as I'm about to yank open the door to the restaurant, something inside catches my eye.

My husband is in Calvetti's, minus the suit jacket he had on this morning. He does have a new accessory, though, and it's not complementing anything.

A petite blonde woman has her arms wrapped around him, and he's returning that favor.

Jealousy pierces my heart as I swing open the door and march inside.

I don't make it three steps before my grandma is at my side. "Gina! You're here!"

She screams that loud enough that it draws the gazes of the people waiting to be seated and a few that are already at tables. It doesn't, however, interrupt Daniel and the woman he's hugging.

As I greet my grandma with a weak “*Hey, Marti,*” Daniel steps back from the embrace, and I get my first good look at the woman he was hugging.

She looks familiar.

“That’s Elowen Truscott,” Marti fills in the blank for me. “I think she likes Daniel.”

“You think?” I mutter sarcastically.

“Where’s the doctor?”

I tear my gaze away from my husband and the woman he met in a pool in Las Vegas and focus on my grandma for a split second. “What doctor?”

“Dr. Morgan.” She pushes her shoulders back. “He’s a heart doctor, Gina. You know what that means.”

I shake my head, stealing yet another glance at Daniel and Elowen. “He fixes broken hearts?”

Marti laughs. “It means he’s good husband material.”

“What?” I let out an awkward chuckle. “What are you talking about? Did Daniel come here with her?”

“Why?”

Frustrated, I turn to face my grandma. “Why what?”

“I asked a simple question.” She smiles. “Do you know the answer to it?”

Completely lost, I shake my head. “I’m confused.”

Her hands circle my left hand. “You’re not, my Gina. You like the doctor or Daniel. You can’t like both.”

I take a breath. “Grandma.”

“Yes?” Her eyebrows perk. “Answer my question. Do you like Dr. Morgan or Daniel?”

“I’d love to know the answer to that,” Daniel’s deep voice hits me before I realize he’s less than a foot from me.

Marti giggles. “If you ask me, you’re the one she likes.”

“Grandma!” My hand jumps to my lips to hide my smile. “I came here for dinner, not for any of this.”

She edges closer to me before darting up to her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. “Liking him is okay.”

I kiss her cheek. “I’m hungry.”

“I know.” She tosses both hands up in the air. “I’ll get some food.”

“Minestrone?” I ask hopefully.

“Carbonara for you tonight,” Daniel says before Marti can answer. “She made it herself.”

Laughing, Marti nods as she wanders off toward the kitchen.

“I know you saw me when you walked in,” Daniel whispers as soon as my grandma is out of view. “Who knew that jealousy would look this good on you, Lawton?”

“I’m not jealous,” I say, scoping out the restaurant for Elowen.

“She’s at table nine with her grandfather,” Daniel tells me, never tearing his gaze from my face. “I was serving them.”

“You what?”

“I’m helping Marti out tonight.” He pushes on one of his rolled up shirtsleeves. “When a Calvetti needs a hand, we all pitch in, right?”

“Right,” I repeat, touched that he stepped up to help my grandma.

“Elowen hugged me because we both lost our dads, Gina.” His hand lightly brushes mine before he pulls away. “She lost her mom too. That’s all you saw.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I whisper.

He nods. “It’s been rough for her, but she’s focused on the future.”

“Good.” I take a breath. “Back to that being jealous comment you made. I’m not.”

“Sure,” he quips with a smirk. “Just like I wasn’t jealous when Arietta told me you were hanging out with a single cardiologist who looks like a fucking model.”

“Who told you he’s good-looking?”

Chuckling, he shakes his head. “I looked him up online before I started my shift here.”

I take a step closer to him. “When is your shift over?”

“When I work long enough to cover the cost of the three plates I broke tonight.”

My body shakes with a laugh. “Bring Marti a bouquet of pink peonies tomorrow, and all will be forgiven.”

Tapping his forehead, he grins. “I’ll make a mental note of that.”

I glance toward the kitchen before I level my gaze back on his face. “Thank you for helping her out.”

“Like I said, she’s family, Gina.” His expression turns serious. “Your family is my family. I’m here to help however I can.”

“Daniel!” My grandma’s voice carries over the noise in the dining room. “Your orders are backing up!”

“I’m going to get fucking fired.” He flashes me a brilliant smile. “I don’t even work here, and I’m about to get my ass tossed out the door.”

“I’ll put in a good word with Marti.” I glance at the only vacant table in the restaurant. “I’ll wait for you so we can go home together.”

There’s more meaning behind those words than he might realize, but it’s exactly what I want. I want to go home with my husband tonight. I think I might want to go home with him every night for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

DANIEL

AS SOON AS we exit Calvetti's, I'm tempted to reach for my wife's hand, but I don't.

We have yet to show any affection in public. I'm on board for it, but I don't know what Gina is feeling. She didn't go into detail about the doctor she devoted her time to this afternoon, so I want more information on that.

We start walking down the sidewalk. We haven't made a decision on how we'll get home, so I'm going to guide my bride toward the subway. That way, I know I'm guaranteed a chance to hold her hand, albeit briefly, when we board the train.

"What's going on with you and the doctor?" I ask, trying to keep my tone even.

Gina flashes me a look with both of her eyebrows perked. "Really, Daniel?"

"Really, what?" I ask.

"You accused me of being jealous about Elowen." She chuckles as she tugs on the sleeve of the blue dress she's wearing. "I have to start remembering to bring a sweater when I go out. It's definitely autumn in New York."

I don't bother asking if she wants my suit jacket. I slide it off and wrap it around her shoulders as she slows beside me.

“Put your arms in the sleeves.”

Nodding, she does it without a single complaint. In fact, she smiles softly. “Thank you.”

“I’d do anything for you.” I glance to my right and then down the sidewalk to the left. “You’re my wife, remember?”

“I remember,” she whispers as we start walking again, navigating around the pedestrians headed in our direction.

“So, Dr. Handsome as Fuck?” I laugh. “Details, now.”

Glancing at me, she grins. “You’re Mr. Jealous as Fuck right now.”

“Damn right, I am.”

“Are we taking the subway?” she asks as we slow on the approach to a corner.

I edge my elbow into her side. “I get to hold your hand if we do, so what do you think?”

“I think we are.” Her gaze flits over my face. “Typically, when I have good news to share, I tell Dominick first or Rocco. Bella is my backup.”

“Does the good news involve the doctor?” I glance at the crossing light before signaling my wife to cross the street.

Stepping off the sidewalk, she nods. “It does.”

Jealousy bites a path through me, but it’s not as intense as earlier. The way she’s been looking at me since she spotted Elowen in my arms is a sign that I haven’t been pushed aside for some guy with a degree from a prestigious medical school and a dozen accolades attached to his name.

“Are you going to tell Dominick soon so I can pry it out of him?” I laugh. “Or Rocco? I could take him out for a beer and get him to share it with me.”

She slows as we step onto the sidewalk again after crossing the street. “I’m going to tell you before I tell anyone else.”

Unable to resist the urge, I motion to a narrow alleyway where Dominick and I once shared a cigarette when we were teenagers before we swore off of them forever. “Tell me now.”

Her eyebrows perk. “Down there? Is it safe?”

Darkness shrouds the city, and this area is not teeming with people. It’s quieted as dusk has fallen. “It’s secluded.”

“I can tell you at home,” she suggests.

My gaze trails over her face, settling on her lips. “You can kiss me in the alley.”

“You want to kiss me now?”

“I want to kiss you every fucking minute of the day and night, Gina.” I point behind her. “Two minutes in that alley for a kiss you’ll never forget, and then we’ll head home.”

Her eyes widen. “That feels a little dangerous.”

“One kiss,” I say, leaning closer to her. “Calm my craving.”

“You’re craving me?” she asks as if it’s not obvious.

I nod. “More than you know.”

Her gaze drops to the front of my suit pants. “Are you hard, Daniel?”

Not wanting anyone passing by us to hear the next words I’m about to say, I lean so close to my wife that I can drop my voice to a whisper. “I’d fuck you against the side of that building if given the chance.”

Her hand is on my tie before I realize what the hell is happening, and my beautiful wife is tugging me into the darkness of the alley with the unspoken promise of a kiss I’m never going to forget.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

GINA

HE KISSES me as though his life depends on it.

It's a hungry kiss laced with a hint of peppermint, courtesy of the gum he was chewing at the restaurant. I can smell the intoxicating scent of his cologne. Combined with the sounds seeping out of him, I fear I may pass out.

"I'm going to make you come, baby," he growls.

"On your cock."

A burst of laughter falls from his lips against mine. "My demanding little wife loves my cock."

"I do," I admit. "I love it."

I love you. The three words are on my tongue waiting to be said, but not here. Not when my back is pressed against the uneven red, chipped bricks of a building that has been here for more than a century.

We're behind a bar.

I can hear music streaming from the cracked open back door. The faint sounds of people's voices only add to the moment.

I've never done anything like this before, but I want him so desperately I'd strip naked and jump on him without another thought.

His hand runs over my thigh. “Spread.”

I do it with no hesitation.

His fingers glide over my panties. “So fucking wet, Lawton.”

“For you,” I whisper in the darkness, searching for his lips again.

He finds mine, and I’m gifted with another kiss. This one is slow and meant to torture me. I’m sure of it.

“Your cock,” I manage to purr out those two words.

“My fingers,” he counters as he fists my lace panties and tears them off, shoving them into the pocket of his pants.

I jolt forward with the motion, but I stop myself with two hands on his chest. “Daniel.”

“I need you to come now,” he says through a heavy exhale. “I need to hear it. Jesus, you make the sweetest sounds when you come. The way you say my name...I could blow my load thinking about that.”

I close my eyes because the weight of my need for him is almost unbearable.

I cry out when his fingers glide over my core.

“How can anyone feel this fucking good?” he whispers.

I glance down to see his hand hidden under the skirt of my dress. His arm moves with each thrust of his fingers inside of me. It’s raw and utterly primal.

Anyone who walked out of the back door of the bar would know what he’s doing to me.

“This won’t take long,” he says with assurance, amusement tainting his tone. “I’m going to fuck you with my fingers and make you wait for my cock.”

“No,” I protest in a voice dripping with frustration. “I need to be fucked.”

He slips a finger in my channel and then another.

I slide my hips forward, seeking more contact.

He understands, knows, can sense exactly what I need because even in this darkened spot with his eyes glued to my face, his thumb finds my clit with ease.

He circles it again and again as he fucks me with his fingers.

The sound is unmistakable, and the low moans coming from my throat are a perfect accompaniment to it.

I reach down and cover his hand with mine, riding it. “Daniel.”

“Just like that, baby.” His voice is deep and dripping with unmet need. “Ride me. Take from me. Use me.”

My knees buckle, but he holds me up when he slides his other hand around my waist.

“This is wild,” I say with a moan wrapped around it.

“This is us.” His lips trail a path over my neck. “Our wild love.”

I come, seeking his mouth as I do so our kiss can drown the sounds I can’t contain.

My husband kisses me softly before he pulls back. “Let me hear it. Let me hear it all.”

I let go, still holding tight to his hand as he fucks me through the orgasm with his skilled fingers.

As I come down from the high, I bury my face in his chest. “Did anyone see us?”

“No one,” he whispers. “This was just for us.”

“For us.” I suck in a deep breath but still feel as though I can’t breathe.

“That was one hell of a kiss, Mrs. Lawton.” He tenderly runs his fingers over my core before his touch leaves me. “I, for one, will never forget it.”

“Me either.” I look into his eyes.

He slides down to crouch in front of me, planting a soft kiss on my pussy before he adjusts the skirt of my dress.

“You ruined my panties,” I remind him. “Now, I have to ride the subway home like this.”

He straightens to stand. “It was worth it, Gina. It was all worth it.”

I can’t argue with him, so I don’t.

Tenderly, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Let’s go home.”

I nod, desperately wanting to tell him this is a wild love. It’s the love I’ve been waiting my entire life for. It fills me in a way nothing ever has before.

“You’re perfect.” He adjusts his jacket on me, straightening the lapels.

“So are you,” I whisper.

He smiles, and it’s so brilliant that it feels as though it lights up the night. “I’m also very, very hard.”

“I’ll take care of that as soon as we’re home,” I promise with a wicked smile.

He rakes me over. “Can you run in those heels?”

Slapping the center of his chest, I laugh. “I can’t even promise I can walk after what we just did.”

“If you can’t, I’ll carry you.” He kisses me again softly. “I love taking care of you.”

I stroke a hand over the late-day stubble on his jaw. “You’re going to really love how I take care of you as soon as we get home.”

His eyebrows perk. “What are we waiting for?”

I take a tentative step and then a second. “I’m ready if you are.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

DANIEL

A BLOW JOB and then a good hard fuck.

If that's not what every man dreams of, I don't know what is.

Actually, I do know.

It's being married to the most incredible woman in the world who is now eating something out of a container in the kitchen while only wearing a pair of black panties.

She thinks I'm fast asleep in bed, but I woke to find her gone, so I needed to seek her out. Being close to Gina calms me. It centers me; it fulfills me in a way I've never felt before.

"Save some for me," I say.

It's enough to startle her because the container in her hands drops to the floor.

What looks like cheesecake splatters everywhere.

"Fuck." I laugh.

"You scared me," she accuses as she spins to face me.

Jesus.

My heart stalls in my chest. I swear it ceases to beat for a second or two because I can't feel anything but this overwhelming need to thank whoever is responsible for bringing me to this exact moment in time.

Gina's hair is messy. Her makeup is smudged from everything we did in our bed, and there's a smile on her face that could crack open even the hardest heart.

"You're so goddamn beautiful." My voice wavers, but I hold onto the composure that remains within me. "Have I told you that? You know that, right?"

"Do I have food on my face?" she questions, believing I'm teasing her.

I close the distance between us; not caring that I'm nude or that I'm sliding slightly because my right foot just landed in a puddle of honey ricotta cheesecake.

I take her face in my hands and just stare.

"You can lick it off?" She laughs. "Just lick it off."

I kiss her with so much tenderness that I think I might cry.

When I pull back, her eyes lock on mine. "What is it, Daniel?"

I love you.

My heart screams it. It's there in every single fucking beat it makes, but I can't get the words off my tongue.

I can't do that to her before I know how she feels.

Gina is the strongest woman I know, but men have broken her. The assholes who haven't known her true worth have hurt her.

Love scares her.

It fucking scares me, too, but I'm all in now. I love this woman with everything I am and will ever be.

"You aren't still thinking about Dr. Handsome as Fuck, are you?"

I laugh because it's the last thing on my mind. "Why would you think that?"

"Because I want to tell you about him," she confesses. "I'll clean this up, and we can talk, okay?"

I jerk a thumb over my shoulder. "I'll put on some boxers and handle cleanup duty."

Her gaze drops to my semi-hard cock. "I won't complain if you want to clean just as you are."

My hand slides down to circle my dick. "Whatever makes my wife happy."

"You do," she whispers.

I don't think I've ever received a greater gift than those words.

"I'm honored that you're going to tell me the news before you share it with anyone else." I smile. "I feel like a pretty big deal."

Her hand drops to glide over mine as I slowly stroke my cock. "You are a big deal. I'm a little sore."

"There's only one cure for a sore pussy." I smirk. "Your husband's mouth."

"You can't clean the kitchen and eat me out at the same time."

I grab a towel from the counter to wipe the bottom of my foot. "The rest can wait. I get to play doctor with my wife."

"And then I'll tell you about the real doctor."

Shaking my head, I chuckle. "That works for me. Should I carry you to bed, or..."

Before I can finish the question, Gina is rushing past me, heading out of the kitchen with her perfect ass guiding my way.

"First one there has to clean the kitchen in the morning," she calls over her shoulder.

I slow my pace because I'll handle that and anything else she'll ever need me to do.

If I'm lucky, I'll get to do that until the day I draw my last breath.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

GINA

I SWING OPEN my apartment door shortly after eight a.m. to find one of my favorite people in the world.

“Grandma!” I greet her with open arms even though she’s holding two bags.

She comes in for a hug, resting her head against my shoulder.

“You look so beautiful, my Gina,” she says, tears welling her eyes. “This is the Gina I remember before all the...”

“Social media stuff,” I fill in the blank for her.

She nods. “You bought those in college, didn’t you?”

I glance down at the faded denim overalls that I plucked out of the back corner of the closet in the guest bedroom. I paired them with a short-sleeved white sweater and, so far, no shoes.

I’m going to slide my feet into the worn black leather low-heeled boots that I’ve had since high school.

Since I don’t have any work obligations today, I want to be comfortable. That’s why I opted to braid my hair to one side.

“No makeup today.” Marti stares at me. “Or maybe a little mascara for good measure?”

She bats her eyelashes. She obviously applied mascara this morning, as she does every day.

When she asked me to give her a tutorial on makeup months ago, I told her that she needed to let her natural beauty shine through but that I, personally, never leave home without at least one coat of a good mascara.

Since then, I've been dropping off a tube of Matiz Cosmetics' *'Navy Blue Bold'* mascara for her once a month since free makeup is one of the perks of the contract I've had with them for the past two years.

I reach for the bags she's carrying. "What did you bring me?"

"I brought you and Daniel breakfast." She tries to peer past me toward the hallway, but even in bare feet, I tower over her by a few inches. "Where is my boy?"

My heart swells at the endearment.

Daniel has always been a part of my family, but that feels different now. At least, to me, it does.

"He's in the shower, I think," I say, knowing he is.

I woke before him, showered, and dressed for the day. When I heard the knock at the door, signaling my grandma's unexpected arrival, I rushed back into our bedroom, poked my husband in the shoulder, and told him to race to the guest bathroom.

He was out of bed and on his way in record time, gifting me with a clear view of his bare ass as he sprinted across the hall before he shut the door behind him. That didn't happen until he blew me a kiss.

"You think?" She pushes past me. "Do you two not talk? Who doesn't say good morning to their house guest?"

"Are there chocolate donuts in here?" I peer into one of the paper bags, hopeful that my favorite treat awaits me, but also confident that I've created enough of a diversion that she'll stop talking about what Daniel and I do every morning.

Sex is the answer to that question.

Today, we skipped that because we fucked until after two a.m., and even though I felt boneless, I offered to get up then to help him clean the kitchen. He insisted I stay in bed as he set off to handle it himself.

Marti raises her chin. “It’s lemony fresh in here. Do you pay someone to clean for you?”

If I admit I do, my grandma will order me to call them and cancel their services. I learned that lesson two years ago when she dropped by unexpectedly to find two shirtless men cleaning my apartment.

One was in the middle of vacuuming the floors. The other was busy living up to the company’s promise of streak-free window cleaning. They were both a gift from Bella for my birthday that year.

She paid for a three-month subscription to their service. They only showed up once because Marti told them to leave, insisting she’d clean for me for free once a week.

Since she had more than enough on her plate already, I told her I would handle it, and I have.

“Daniel cleaned up last night,” I answer honestly.

Her eyes light up. “Really? That’s nice of him.”

“It is.” I nod. “Should I put these bags in the kitchen, Grandma?”

She glances around. “He does a good job.”

My gaze follows the same path as hers. I have to admit that she’s right. Daniel must have taken some time to tidy up after he cleaned the kitchen. There’s not a speck of dust in sight, not even on any of the picture frames on the windowsill.

I stare at them, instantly realizing there’s an extra one.

Holding the two bags Marti brought, I step toward the window but stop as soon as I can make out the photograph in the vintage silver frame.

It’s new to me. I’ve never seen it before.

The last person who lived with me was Marti. That was when her apartment flooded, and her new home wasn't ready yet. Before that, Bella occupied the extra bedroom.

This frame doesn't belong to either of them. I know it's meant for me because the photograph within it speaks only to my heart.

"I did bring donuts," Marti says from behind me. "I made that egg dish you love and there's a tray of manicotti. You can have that for dinner tonight. Or lunch. Your choice, my girl, but there's enough for two, so you can share..."

Her words fade into the background, drowned out by each beat of my thundering heart as I study the picture of Long Island Sound and the blue sky that looks like it stretches on forever. In the top right hand corner of the photograph is a visible slice of the sail from the boat where I shared my first kiss with my husband.

"The kitchen is this way." Marti laughs.

I turn to follow her, but she's approaching me instead. "I'll take this and get it all plated for us. Should I make a plate for Daniel, too?"

I nod. "I think he'd like that."

"You think?" She pinches my chin. "You know. You know what he likes."

I know what I like, and that's my husband. I like him a lot and love him more.

"You were daydreaming," she says as she takes the bags back from me. "Keep doing that, and I'll get everything ready."

Normally, I'd argue, but I want — *no, I need* — a moment alone with that photograph.

I wait until Marti disappears from view before I turn and pick up the frame.

I study the picture again, flipping it over in my hands.

Taped on the back is a small white envelope with my first name scribbled across it in black ink.

I tug it loose before I place the frame down.

Sliding a fingernail under the seal, the envelope pops open, and within seconds, I have the card that was inside in my hands.

My bottom lip trembles as I read what's written on it in Daniel's handwriting.

Mrs. Lawton,

*The frame is old to someone but new
to us.*

*The sky is as blue as the water was
that day.*

*The sailboat was borrowed for our
honeymoon adventure.*

*This is your something old, new,
borrowed, and blue.*

Mr. Lawton

A single tear falls from my eye as I cradle the card against my chest.

"I love you," I whisper under my breath. "I love you, Mr. Lawton."

"Gina!" my grandma calls from the kitchen. "I don't know about your coffee maker. Come show me how to use it."

I slide the card back into the envelope and tuck it in the front pocket of my overalls before I take one last look at the

photograph and close my eyes, wishing this beautiful life I'm suddenly living will never end.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

GINA

“WHAT SMELLS SO GOOD?” Daniel’s deep voice turns my grandma around to face him.

I take an extra second to steel my nerves before I do the same.

I’m still reeling from the photograph and card I stumbled on less than thirty minutes ago. I have no idea when Daniel put it there, but I’m forever grateful that he did.

“You?” Marti races toward him with open arms.

Without hesitation, he hugs her, all while keeping his eyes on me. “Good morning, Gina.”

“Morning,” I say with a smile. “Is that a new suit?”

Marti runs both of her palms down the front of the gray jacket. “It’s a nice one.”

“It is new.” Daniel perks a brow. “I had my guy at Berdine put in an order for two new suits. He got them to me in record time.”

I’m sure the closet in his place in California is filled with business attire, so I take his recent investment in two suits here to mean he’s planning on staying in New York for a while.

I hope that transforms into forever.

“Look at our Gina.” Marti points to where I’m standing next to the kitchen counter. “Doesn’t she look like our Gina again?”

I can’t take offense, because I saw it myself when I looked in the mirror this morning.

It’s not just the fact that I’m wearing my own clothing, and it has little to do with my hairstyle or lack of makeup. It’s my smile. It’s how I feel inside. I haven’t felt like myself in a very long time.

“She looks beautiful,” Daniel says.

Marti’s gaze volleys between my husband and me. “You both do. You’re both beautiful.”

“Thanks, Grandma.” I point at the pot of freshly brewed coffee. “Do you want a cup, Daniel?”

He nods. “Absolutely, and a plate of whatever’s cooking.”

“It’s Gina’s favorite.” Marti pats his bicep. “She says she cooks eggs, but I don’t know.”

“I do,” I say a little too forcefully. “I’m learning to cook more things. I want to learn to cook everything.”

Her brows shoot up. “You do?”

“Yes,” I admit in a whisper. “I want you to teach me, Grandma.”

“I want that.” She closes the distance between us with hurried steps. “I want to teach you.”

I’ve been afraid to admit that because it’s become a running joke in my family that I’m the only one who can’t cook anything remotely Italian related. I want to change that. I need to. It’s important to me.

I hug her briefly. “We’ll start soon, okay?”

“Okay.” She nods. “I’ll plate the food. Then you can tell me about the doctor. Dr. Morgan. Lia showed me a picture. He’s handsome.”

Her gaze darts to Daniel. I assume to gauge his reaction.

With his hip resting against the counter and a smirk on his lips, he tilts his chin up. “I’d love to hear about the doctor too, Gina.”

“Would you?” Marti questions him. “Doctors make a lot of money.”

“So do wealth managers,” he counters.

I step toward the cupboard to grab a mug for my husband’s coffee. “So do social media influencers.”

Marti laughs. “Touché.”

I pour the coffee and hand it off to Daniel since he’s now standing next to me.

“Will you see the doctor again?” Marti asks as she grabs the oven mitts from the counter.

I look to Daniel. I intended to share my good news with him first. I still want to do that.

Without a word from me, I know he understands what I’m thinking because he moves to help my grandma, taking the oven mitts from her so he can grab the egg casserole she brought with her that’s been baking. “I was thinking of bringing a client by the restaurant for lunch today, Marti. What’s on the menu?”

It’s the distraction I needed to avoid telling her about Gaines.

Her entire face lights up. “Everything! I can prepare something special. You tell me what they like, and I’ll make it.”

With my grandma’s back to me, I reach into my pocket and tug on the envelope to reveal a small corner of it.

As he places the casserole on the counter, Daniel’s eye catches on the envelope. A slow smile slides over his lips.

I raise my hands and sign to him. *Thank you.*

He takes two steps forward, dropping the oven mitts on the counter. When his hands are out of Marti’s view, he silently signs back to me. *You’re welcome.*

I'll tell you about Dr. Morgan tonight. I sign quickly.

His response is immediate as he moves his hands too. *I'm looking forward to it.*

“I’ll get the plates and silverware,” Marti tells us. “We’ll sit down and talk about Dominick and Arietta’s wedding. I love weddings. I can’t wait for it.”

I share a knowing smile with my husband before he takes over getting the plates while he instructs my grandma to sit at the kitchen island so he can serve breakfast to her.

CHAPTER FIFTY

DANIEL

I WALK into the offices of Modica Wealth Management, and before I can round the corner and head down the corridor toward my office, I hear my next appointment crying out.

I hold in a laugh as I divert my path and make a straight line for the waiting room near reception.

Lia is sitting next to the person I rushed here to see.

I watch as her hands move fluidly in the air. *Your son is adorable. I think he looks just like you.*

I need to thank Lia for taking the time to sit with Romy since I'm running a few minutes late.

Romy glances my way, and a huge smile lights up her face. She gestures to Lia to take Asa from her.

Lia is all in, cradling the infant in her arms.

Romy, dressed in a navy blue suit and a white blouse, stands. She signs a greeting to me. *It's good to see you, Daniel.*

You too. I sign back.

Bria was busy, so I brought Asa with me. I hope that's okay. The expression on her face is filled with anticipation as her hands move.

I'm glad you brought him. I sign as I approach her. *Do you want anything to drink? Coffee, tea, or water?*

She answers as she shakes her head. *I'm good. Thank you.*

I motion down the corridor, but she's busy gathering her son back in her arms.

Lia picks up the large tote bag resting on the floor near Romy's feet. She passes it to me. I slip the strap over my shoulder so I can keep the conversation going.

Do you want to join us, Lia? I sign before I continue, saying the words in unison with the movement of my hands. "You're more than welcome to."

I can't. Her head shakes. *I have an interview of my own to get to.*

I laugh, signing so that Romy feels a part of our conversation. *You're leaving us so soon?*

She nods, speaking as she signs her response to me. "Dominick found someone to replace Arietta. He seems great, so I'm off to see where I'll land next. I want to put my degree to work."

Good for you. I smile at her. *I'll see you around, though.*

"You will," she says as she signs. "You're practically a member of my family."

I am a member of her family in every imaginable way, and I hope to openly claim my spot very soon.

"Good luck," I direct that to Lia before I plant all of my attention on Romy and Asa. *Are you ready?*

With a grin on her face, she nods. I can tell she's as ready for this as I am.



AN HOUR LATER, I have a new intern lined up and a stain on my shoulder from where little Asa burped up on me.

Romy was horrified, believing her son had ruined an expensive suit jacket.

I brushed it off, literally and figuratively, because the reward for that burp was a big smile on the little boy's face.

The suit jacket can be cleaned.

I glance up when I hear footsteps on the approach outside of my office. I'd recognize that step pattern anywhere.

"Dominick," I say his name before he comes into view.

He pops his head around the corner, peering into my office. "How the hell did you know it was me?"

"Intuition," I lie. "What can I do for you?"

"Congratulate me." He stands tall, raking a hand through his hair. "I hired a new permanent executive assistant, and he puts Paul to shame."

I doubt like hell that's true, but I won't get into a best assistant war with him. "Good for you."

"Good for me?" He laughs. "Aren't you going to defend Paul's honor?"

"Paul can do that for himself."

"Or Maeve can do it for him." He laughs. "Those two have something going on."

"Something going on?" I look up from the screen of my laptop to focus on him. "What does that mean?"

"That means they are crisscrossing the line between business and pleasure whenever possible."

I can't help but chuckle. "Who the fuck told you that?"

"Paul," he says with a straight face. "Did your assistant confide in me before he confided in you?"

He sure as hell did.

I shrug. "Paul's personal life is none of my business, Dominick."

He shakes his head. "It's your business if it means he's not going to relocate back here when you do."

Shit. That's likely true.

I just hired a paid intern to learn the ropes from me, and now I may need to put out feelers for a new assistant.

“My new executive assistant’s husband happens to need a job.” Dominick perks a brow. “His resume is almost as impressive as Christopher’s is.”

“Chris is the name of your new executive assistant?”

“Christopher,” he corrects me. “His husband, Clay, is looking right now too. They recently relocated to New York from Pittsburgh.”

“Get his number to me, “ I say, standing to button my suit jacket since I need to leave within the next ten minutes for a meeting. “I’ll give him a call.”

“Hiring a new assistant is a sure sign that you’re coming home.”

Since I haven’t discussed any of this with my wife yet, I brush off the comment. “I could use someone here full-time to handle the day-to-day with my East Coast clientele.”

“That’s a load of bullshit. A simple confirmation that you’re packing up your place in L.A. is all that I need.”

“No confirmation yet,” I say, even though I’m lining everything up so I can have a future with Gina based here in Manhattan.

He nods. “Have you got a plan worked out for Friday night?”

It’s the same plan I have on the go for tonight. I’ll cook for my wife, and then eat her for dessert. After I’ve thoroughly satisfied her in every way possible, we’ll talk about Dr. Morgan.

There’s no way in hell I can share that plan with my best friend, so I ask a question to answer his. “What’s happening on Friday night?”

“Gina’s surprise birthday party,” he says like I know what the fuck is going on. “You’re the one bringing her to Calvetti’s at eight, right? Marti is planning on closing early for it.”

“What?” I push back from my desk to stand. “Gina’s birthday is Saturday, Dominick. That’s why Isabella has been sending out non-stop emails about the surprise party happening that night.”

He shakes his head. “You neglected to read the last two or three. She switched it to Friday to throw Gina off. She’s worried Gina is on to her.”

I’ve been keeping my wife so busy that I doubt like hell she’s aware that her family is planning a party at all.

“I’ll have her there at eight on Friday night,” I tell him assuredly.

“Don’t tip her off,” he warns with a smile. “Although, Gina’s always dressed as if she’s heading to a party, so no worries there.”

This morning, she was dressed in ripped denim overalls and distressed boots that I recall seeing her in years ago. To top it all off, the smile on her face was the crowning glory of the outfit.

“I can keep a secret, Dominick,” I say with a smirk, because, *fuck*, can I ever.

“Good.” He rounds my desk to pull me in for a hug.

I’m still not used to his transformation from stoic businessman to loving, smiling-faced groom-to-be, but I’m getting there.

As he steps back from the embrace, he pats my cheek. “You’re my family, Daniel. You know that, right? You’re like a brother to me.”

“I feel the same,” I say to my brother-in-law.

“I’ll get Clay’s contact information to you.” He turns to leave my office. “We need you here, Daniel. We all do. Me, Arietta, Marti, and even Gina. We all love you.”

If the last person on his list does love me, I’m good as gold. I can die a happy man.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

GINA

I WALK INTO MY APARTMENT, and I'm instantly greeted with the aroma of something decadent. This time, it's not my husband's cologne. It's food. Someone is cooking something that I can't wait to indulge in.

"Daniel?" I call out tentatively because Daniel, my sister, and my grandma all have a key to my apartment, and they're all good cooks.

At least, I think Daniel is a good cook, based on what Dominick used to tell me about the meals he prepared when the two of them shared an apartment.

"In the kitchen!" he calls back. "I'm cooking dinner for you."

My stomach growls as my heart beats faster.

A man who can cook is a dream come true because until now, I've had no interest in learning how to do anything in the kitchen other than make a great cup of coffee. I can't even really take credit for that since the beans are from Palla on Fifth, and Palla grinds them for me.

I drop my purse on a chair in the living room and head straight to the kitchen.

As soon as I'm standing in the entryway, Daniel glances at me.

The broad smile on his face mirrors the one on mine.

He's still wearing his suit pants and the light blue button-down shirt he had on this morning, but his tie, vest, and jacket are nowhere to be seen.

I do spot something that catches my breath.

His gaze trails mine to his left hand. He taps the ring on his finger. "I thought I should be wearing this when I cook for my wife for the first time."

My hand darts in the air. "Hold that thought."

I race back to my purse and fumble with the zipper on the inner compartment before I fish inside for my ring. I tug it out and slip it on while I sprint back to the kitchen.

Daniel is waiting for me in the entryway this time. "Kiss me, Gina."

I do.

As the kiss lingers, I bite his bottom lip softly, luring a deep groan from him.

"Focus, Daniel," he whispers. "Food first, then you can fuck your wife."

I laugh. "Are you giving yourself a pep talk?"

"Damn right, I am." He kisses me again as if I'm the only thing he's craving at the moment.

I have to fan my face with my hand once it ends. "Damn, Lawton, you know how to kiss."

"As do you, Lawton." He traces a path over my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. "Don't distract me anymore. I need another fifteen minutes to finish up our meal."

I peer around him to get a look at the stove. "What's on the menu?"

"Seared salmon with quinoa salad."

I tilt my chin down. "It sounds divine."

"It is," he assures me. "We're drinking sparkling lemon water, and for dessert, I picked up another piece of chocolate

cake from Dobb's Bakery."

"You're the best," I whisper, wanting to say more, so much more, but I don't know if his heart is on the same path as mine.

Mine is headed straight to forever without a detour in sight.

"We'll talk about Dr. Handsome as Fuck after dinner." He laughs.

"Good." I steal another kiss from him. "I have a lot to tell you."

"I have all night to listen." He glances over his shoulder. "I need to get back to the stove. I'll meet you at the dining room table in fifteen."

"We're not eating in here?" I point at the stools next to the kitchen island.

"I set the dining room table up." He perks a brow. "Go check it out."

I head straight out of the kitchen and turn the corner to step into the dining room. The beautiful blue and white patterned plates my mom gave me a few years ago are set out next to utensils on blue placemats. Two tall white candles are waiting to be lit next to a vase filled with fresh white carnations.

"This is perfect," I say. "Everything is perfect."

I glance down at my hand and the silver ring that symbolizes much more today than when Daniel slid it on my finger in Las Vegas. My birthday is just a few days from now, and I plan on giving myself the gift of a lifetime that day.

Marti always brings over a cake for me on my birthday, so as I blow out the candles, I'll wish for forever with Daniel before I tell my husband that I love him for the first time.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

DANIEL

GINA'S GAZE drops to the plate in front of her. "I had no idea you were so skilled in the kitchen."

That's a compliment I'll gladly accept with a smile. "I'm self-taught."

"I tried that." She lets out a squeak of laughter. "When Bella was living with me. I wanted to surprise her, but instead, the smoke detector did that for me when she got home from work one day."

I try to mask my amusement by taking another bite of food.

"Are you speechless, Daniel?" she teases. "Don't be. I am *that* bad of a cook."

I swallow down a piece of salmon with a sip of water. "This morning, you told Marti that you want to learn to cook. I'm all in for offering lessons, too."

She gestures to the food I prepared. "Will you teach me to cook this?"

"Absolutely," I affirm with a nod.

"I'd like that." She sighs. "What did my grandma make you and your client for lunch today?"

"What didn't she make us?" I huff out a laugh. "It was a four or five course spread. My client raved about the food. She

loved every bite.”

Her left eyebrow perks. “She?”

I can’t tell if there’s jealousy behind the question, so I answer in a way that I hope brings a smile to her face. “I didn’t have lunch with Elowen.”

A grin slides over her perfect lips. “That’s good to know.”

“I’d like to know about the doctor,” I broach the subject that’s been haunting me all day. “I’m curious, Gina. Start by assuring me that you’re not sick.”

That thought started nagging at me last night as I watched her sleep. The idea of a world without Gina is unbearable. I need her to be healthy for a hell of a long time.

“I’m fine.” She sets her fork on the edge of her plate. “He asked to speak to me yesterday after Vern’s appointment because he saw that viral video of my dad and me in Calvetti’s.”

I nod. “Is he a fan?”

She’s got millions of them, and at least a dozen ask her to marry them on a daily basis. I know this because I devote a little too much time to reading the comment sections of her posts on social media.

“No.” She laughs that off with a brisk shake of her head. “He’s looking for help.”

“Help?” I laugh. “Is that code for sex?”

Her shoulders slump forward. “You’re so jealous.”

“I am,” I admit it because why try to lie about something that obvious? “What does he want help with, Gina?”

“Gaines has a patient who is deaf,” she tells me. “A few patients actually who need an ASL interpreter. His employee who is proficient in that left unexpectedly last week on an early maternity leave, so he asked if I knew a certified interpreter who was looking for some extra contract work.”

“Do you?”

She jerks a thumb toward herself. “Me.”

My brow furrows because I’m surprised, not only about why he wanted to speak to her but that she’s interested in an opportunity like that. “You?”

She nods softly. “I think I might want to do it, Daniel.”

Before I can respond, she’s reaching across the table for my hand.

I can tell she’s apprehensive about the conversation, so if she needs me to offer her comfort, I’ll do it.

“Are you a certified ASL interpreter?” I ask, wondering what that entails or what’s required of someone who wants to earn that designation.

She nods as she takes a bite of food.

I wait until she’s swallowed before I ask another question. “When did you get certified?”

“Months ago.” She smiles softly. “I was volunteering at a community center in midtown. I’m pretty sure both times you saw me dressed down, I was headed there.”

“Seriously?”

She laughs. “They have some members who are deaf, and although they have a kick-ass interpreter there, I asked if I could lend a hand. My dad goes there to play cards once a month.”

That makes perfect sense. Of course, she’d offer to pitch in to help.

“One of the board members mentioned the idea of certification. I had the required hours of interpreting experience there at the center, so she signed off on that,” she goes on, “I went ahead and took the exam and passed with flying colors.”

“I’m not surprised,” I say.

She glances at my phone again as it vibrates. “There are so many things I want to do with my life, Daniel.”

“Like what?”

This conversation has nothing to do with our Las Vegas wedding, but I want the first thing on her life to-do list to be staying married to me.

“I want to work with Dr. Morgan and any other doctors who need a temporary interpreter. I want to explore the idea of being a patient advocate. I feel my degree sets me up for that. Still, I’ve started looking into the possibility of taking a few courses to learn about medical terminology and insurance procedures. Many people need someone by their side when dealing with a health challenge. Dr. Morgan mentioned it in passing, and I think it might be a good fit for me.”

“Gina.” I squeeze her hand. “I’m in awe of you.”

“I’ll do all that part-time because I want to help my grandma more. I want to make her life easier by taking on more tasks at the restaurant.”

I can’t contain my smile. “You’re fucking amazing.”

“I’ll still do the social media thing.” Her chin tilts up. “I’ll only work with the brands I truly love and believe in. But I also want to showcase more important things than the next big fall coffee flavor.”

“Things that make a difference in more people’s lives?”

“Right.” She nods. “More content about helping others. Maybe a few videos featuring my dad because he won’t admit it, but I could tell he loved going viral.”

I laugh. “Louis is a star waiting to be discovered.”

“I can do this.” She takes a breath. “I can do it all, can’t I?”

“Damn right you can,” I tell her with pride etched in every word. “You’ll conquer it all and more.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

GINA

“GINA?” Daniel’s voice is rough. It’s edged with sleep and unfettered desire.

I smile softly because we spent most of the night wrapped around each other. Long limbs entwined, mouths seeking one another, gasps, moans, and primal grunts filling the silence of our bedroom.

It’s been that way all week.

Each day spent apart before we meet up here, in our home after Daniel’s work is done, and I’ve planned my next steps while still fulfilling the commitments I’ve made.

His gaze wanders the guestroom, stopping to take in the vase of fresh, white carnations that I brought in here with me an hour ago.

The bouquet he gifted me with the night he first cooked for me, started to wither and brown so last night, Daniel arrived home with a fresh batch in hand and another piece of cake.

I thanked him for the flowers before reminding him I’ll have my fill of cake soon enough.

Tomorrow is my birthday.

It’s the day I tell my husband that I love him.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his eyes searching for an answer as to why I’m sitting on the floor wearing only a red

bra and matching panties.

My hair is wet and wavy. For most of my life, I've viewed that as a curse. I'd rush to blow dry and straighten it as soon as I stepped out of the shower, but lately, I've come to love my reflection in the mirror when I see the soft waves surrounding my face.

"Hunting," I answer with a light laugh.

He adjusts the waistband of his boxer briefs as he sits down next to me, tugging my hand into his. He feathers kisses over my knuckles before he closes his eyes briefly. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," I lie.

It's been at least two hours.

It's hard to sleep when you feel as though you're standing on the edge of tomorrow; on the precipice of the rest of your life.

That's where I am.

Today, I'm Gina Calvetti.

Tomorrow, my wish for my twenty-ninth birthday is that I become Gina Lawton to the world. I want everyone to know that I married the most remarkable man.

He glances at the cardboard box in front of me. "What's this?"

"Memories," I whisper.

He leans forward to peer inside, and almost instantly, a bark of laughter fills the quiet space. "What the fuck, Gina?"

I laugh too when his hand dives in, and he yanks out a blue T-shirt with the name of a band stamped on the front along with their recognizable logo. I know it well. So does he.

I snag it from his hand before he can reclaim it as his. "That's mine."

He fists the bottom hem, giving it a firm tug. "Like hell it is. The last time I saw this was years ago. Jesus, how long has

it been? At least eight or nine years.”

I pull hard enough that he releases the fabric. Before he can get ahold of it again, I have it bunched up and cradled near my face. I inhale deeply. “It was ten years ago that it went missing.”

“Went missing?” His left brow perks. “I thought your brother stole it from me. He was always borrowing my clothes, and he happened to love that band.”

“I took it,” I admit.

His gaze searches mine. “Why?”

I never imagined a scenario in which I’d have to admit this to anyone, especially not Daniel, but here I am. “Because it smelled like you.”

“You took it?” Confusion etches his tone. “You took my shirt, Gina?”

I nod softly. “I was visiting Dominick one day. You weren’t home, and it was there on the couch. I shoved it in my purse and ran out of your apartment.”

I expect him to laugh, but there’s no amusement in his expression. It’s all intensity as he stares into my eyes. “I had no idea you liked me that much.”

“It was a crush,” I explain. “I had a silly crush on you back then.”

“Is it still a silly crush?” he asks, his gaze dropping to my lips.

“It’s something,” I manage to say.

“It’s something for me, too.” He glances at the shirt again. “Did you steal anything else that belongs to me?”

His heart. I hope I’ve stolen that.

“No,” I answer because I need today to figure out exactly what I’ll say to him tomorrow.

“So you came in here at the crack of dawn to smell my shirt?” He smirks. “You could have stayed in bed and smelled

the real thing.”

I laugh. “You do smell divine today. You always do, but I was looking for something to wear today.”

His gaze wanders up to the rack of clothing in the walk-in closet. “The closet in our room is filled with clothes, Gina.”

Our room.

Those words make my heart sing.

He views this as our home. It is. Our home. Our life. Our future awaits us.

“Those are mostly items I got from sponsors.” I tilt my chin up. “This closet is filled with clothes I bought.”

He nods because he understands completely. “Why don’t I take you out to dinner tonight in one of the outfits from this closet?”

“To Calvetti’s?”

He nods. “Let’s aim for eight. I’ll meet you back here first, though, okay? I want to work up an appetite before we have dinner.”

I smile. “I love that plan.”

He presses his lips to mine in a sweet kiss. “I love that you stole my shirt.”

“I couldn’t help myself.”

He runs the pad of his thumb over my chin. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“I need to answer a few emails and plan my online content for the rest of the month. I also have a photo shoot this afternoon with one of my favorite brands.”

“Which brand?” he questions with a grin.

“Ella Kara,” I tell him. “It’s for the launch of a new line they’ll be offering in the spring. I’m excited to be working with them on it.”

“You’ll kill it.” He gazes into my eyes. “I’ve got a full day too, so I need to get my ass into the shower. You wouldn’t

want to...”

“Join you?” I interrupt, tossing the T-shirt back into the box as I stand. “I think I missed washing a spot on my back during my first shower, so I’m all in if you agree to take care of that for me.”

He glides to his feet, his hands moving quickly to encircle me. Before I realize what’s happening, he’s unhooked the clasp on my bra with one hand.

“Daniel!” I laugh as he slides it from my body.

“I’ll wash every part of you.” He pushes my panties down my legs. “I’m stealing these to even the score.”

He bunches them in his hand before he hauls me over his shoulder and carries me out of the room.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

DANIEL

I IGNORE the ring of my phone as I stare out at the skyline of Manhattan.

This is my home.

The moment I stepped off the plane at LaGuardia the day after I married Gina, I finally felt as though I could fully breathe again.

I belong here. I always have, and tomorrow, I'll set that in stone by asking my wife to marry me again.

My hand dives into the pocket of my pants so I can cradle the small square box that holds my future. I plan to give it to my wife tomorrow for her birthday.

Tonight, her family can celebrate her.

Tomorrow belongs to me. I'm the guy who is lucky enough to shower Gina with gifts for an entire day.

I can't fucking wait.

"Are you ready for tonight, Daniel? It's only a few hours now."

I smile when I hear that voice. It may have changed slightly over the years, but I'd recognize it anywhere.

"I'm ready, Bella," I say before I turn to face her.

She's standing in the open doorway of my office. I expect to see a smile on her face, and I'm not disappointed. She's grinning from ear to ear.

"Gina is going to be so surprised." She claps her hands together. "I just stopped by the restaurant. Grandma insisted on watching Luisa while I ran a few last minute errands. You should see the cake she baked for my sister. It's magnificent."

The emotion in each of her words is apparent. Calvettis love each other fiercely. I can attest to that because I've been an honorary member of the family for years. Now, I'm a full-fledged member.

"She'll love it," I say assuredly.

"She'll love my gift more." Bella bounces in place.

She's dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt. That's covered with what looks like one of her husband's suit jackets. It's a look that I know was inspired by her sister since Gina has been photographed in something similar many times.

Bella tugs the jacket closer to her frame. "Did you get her anything for her birthday?"

I wrap my hand around the box in my pocket again. "I did."

"Tell me what it is, and I'll tell you what I got her."

The playfulness in her tone is almost irresistible, but the gift I'm going to give her sister is a secret. I won't even offer a hint.

"You'll have to wait and see." I smile. "I'm giving it to her tomorrow."

"I'm pregnant," she blurts out. "I'm going to tell Gina I'm expecting another baby next spring, Daniel. She'll be an aunt again."

That means I'll be an uncle of two.

"Bella." I rush toward her with my arms outstretched. "Congratulations!"

“It’s a surprise,” she whispers as her arms circle me. “Don’t tell her. Promise you won’t. I haven’t even told Marti or my parents yet.”

“I won’t say a word.” I step back to look at her. “Gina will be fucking thrilled.”

“I know.” Her hands leap to cover her mouth. “I want this to be her best birthday ever. I hope it will be.”

My phone starts ringing again. I don’t glance at it, but Bella does.

“Answer that,” she directs me. “I was close by, so I thought I’d stop in to make sure you’ll get her to the restaurant at eight. I think we’re actually going to pull this off.”

“We are going to pull this off,” I assure her.

She nods. “I need to run. I have to grab Luisa and get home to change before the party.”

“Go.” I motion toward the door. “I’ll see you at eight.”

She kisses my cheek softly before she turns on her heel and leaves.

With my phone still ringing, I walk over to my desk and glance at the screen.

It’s an unknown caller, but the area code is one I recognize.

Nevada.

“Kade,” I whisper. “You must have sent a new client my way.”

I scoop the phone into my palm and swipe a finger across the screen. “This is Daniel Lawton.”

I’M NOT a man who bends to threats.

Dominick can attest to that.

I took a fist to the nose in middle school because I wouldn't give in to some kid named Timmy or Tommy who gave me two choices one morning. Hand over my lunch or deal with his wrath.

I was a big fan of the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches my mom made, so I told Timmy Tommy to shove it. He did. He shoved his clumsy fist straight into my nose at warp speed.

My nose broke in two places, but while I waited for x-rays at the hospital with my dad at my side, I ate that goddamn sandwich, and it tasted as sweet as I knew it would.

I approach Lia's desk. Today is her last day. The occasion was marked with cupcakes in the break room this morning and a sentimental speech from Dominick, even though Lia has only worked here for a few months.

"What can I do for you, Daniel?" she asks as she pushes back from her desk. "Are you ready for Operation Surprise GC?"

I'd smile at the fact that she's given Gina's surprise party a code name, but I'm too damn pissed at the moment. That phone call from Nevada ruined my entire fucking day.

"Do you know where Gina is?" I ask, trying to keep an even tone.

Her shoulders stiffen. "Oh no. Is the plan falling apart?"

I shake that off because the birthday party is my last concern. Gina is all I'm thinking about at the moment. I need to find her now.

"No." I take a breath. "I want to up the surprise quotient and show up at her photo shoot."

I'm firing from the hip, but it's plausible enough that Lia buys into it. "That's an incredible idea. I know she's working with Ella Kara today."

"Do you know where?" I push. "Where the photo shoot is?"

She shrugs both shoulders, sending her blonde hair drifting onto her back. "I don't. I can text her and ask, but that would

seem suspicious.”

Since I’ve already sent Gina a dozen text messages and tried calling her at least half as many times, she’d reach out to me before responding to anyone else.

That’s not my ego talking. That’s intuition. I know Gina will panic when she sees my repeated attempts to contact her.

“That’s all right.” I nod. “Thanks anyway.”

“You’ll have her at Grandma’s restaurant at eight, right?”

“On the dot,” I promise, even though I have no idea what Gina’s life will look like three hours from now, let alone an hour from now.

“Perfect.” Her smile shines bright. “That’s it for me, Daniel. It’s officially quitting time. I am no longer an employee of Modica.”

“We’ll miss you,” I say to lead this conversation to its end. “But I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Two and a half,” she corrects me.

“Right.”

It’s not as though I’m unaware of the time since I feel as though there’s a ticking time bomb strapped to my back at the moment.

With her attention on her phone, she waves a hand in my direction. “See you later.”

I don’t offer a response because I’m already sprinting toward the elevator.

I can fix everything with a press of a button, sending a nice tidy sum to someone who snapped a picture of Gina and me exchanging vows in Vegas, but I owe it to my wife to tell her what’s going on before I bury that picture forever.

For better or worse just got a hell of a lot more real.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

GINA

I STARE at myself in the full-length mirror in front of me.

“If you ever get married, that’s the dress for you,” Sophia Wolf says. “Gina, you look beautiful.”

I do.

I see it.

When I arrived just over three hours ago, Sophia screamed in delight when she saw the state of my hair.

It was still naturally wavy, partially contained by the loose ponytail I had it in.

She immediately insisted that the hair stylist she hired for the shoot not touch a strand of my hair. The woman almost complied. She ran her fingers through it and added a little spritz of some papaya-scented product that she promised would chase any frizz away.

I love the way it looks almost as much as I love my makeup.

The man tasked with that promised me a natural look that would wow. He wasn’t lying. I look incredible.

The sound of horns honking lures my gaze toward the city skyline. We’re on the terrace of Howerton House. It’s a venue in midtown that has become *the* place to have a wedding.

I toured it less than two months ago with Arietta. A date opened up, and Dominick pulled a few magic strings to secure the space if they wanted it. They did, so their wedding will take place right in this spot just a few weeks from now.

“I love the dress,” I tell Sophia while holding tightly to the bouquet of red roses in my hand. “I’ve loved all of them, but this is my favorite.”

It’s the fifth I’ve had on today, but it’s the most *me* of all of them. It’s satin with a ruched bodice and spaghetti straps. It’s simple, elegant and drapes my body perfectly.

“Have you thought about getting married?” she quizzes as her dark eyebrows rise. “You must get multiple marriage proposals every day.”

I laugh. “I do get a few.”

Her fingers drop to her wedding rings. “I didn’t give a lot of thought to getting married until I met Nicholas, but look at me now.”

I see happiness when I look at her. She radiates joy, and I know that has a lot to do with her husband, her kids, and her blossoming career.

“I’m honored that you asked me to be the face of your bridal collection,” I say for the third time today. “You’ve always been so generous to me.”

Sophia and everyone at Ella Kara’s parent company, Foster Enterprises, have treated me with respect and kindness. Not only have they paid me remarkably well for promoting their clothing, but they’ve made a point of honoring my preferences. If I’ve felt uncomfortable with an outfit, they’ve never pushed me to wear it.

“I meant what I said,” she reiterates her point by tapping my hand. “If you get married, say the word, and this dress is yours. It’ll be in our sample closet forever, so I’ll pin your name on the garment bag.”

I take another look at myself and imagine what it would feel like to wear this when renewing my vows with my husband. “Thank you.”

The photographer she hired for the day clears her throat. “Are we ready to go?”

“Ready!” Sophie nods. “Why don’t you get started? I need to check my phone to see if Nicholas or anyone from the office has reached out.”

Even though half of Ella Kara’s marketing department is here, along with Gabriel Foster himself, the CEO of Foster Enterprises, I nod. “I’ll do my best.”

MY GRANDMA once told me that if I wish hard enough for something, it’s sure to come true.

I was planning on wishing for my happy ever after tomorrow when I blow out the candles on my birthday cake, but that wish is already coming true.

My husband, with a smile on his face, is sprinting toward me.

The skyline of my city lights up the dusky sky behind him, and the soft white lights that border this terrace add to the ambience of the moment. Since the photo shoot is winding down, the photographer shut off the massive spotlights she had been using just moments ago.

“Gina!” Daniel calls to me with his hand in the air. “My beautiful, Gina.”

Sophia rushes toward me with her phone in her hand. “Apparently, he called the office looking for you. My assistant said it sounded important, so she sent him here. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay,” I reassure her as my gaze darts back to Daniel. “It’s perfect.”

Dressed in a sharp three-piece gray suit, Daniel looks every inch the groom to my bride. I’m still wearing the satin dress that Sophia has deemed mine.

“What are you doing here?” I question my husband as he nears me.

“I came to...” His voice trails as he looks me over. “Goddammit, Gina. Look at you.”

I glance down. “Do you like it? It’s part of Ella Kara’s bridal line. The designer, Sophia, said I can wear it if I ever...”

“Marry me.” He suddenly drops to one knee in front of me. “Gina Marie Calvetti, I love you. I fucking love you. Please marry me again. Let me be your partner forever. I promise you’ll never find another man who will love you like this.”

I stare at him, stunned that he’s here and this is truly happening.

“I know we already did it our way.” He laughs. “We had our first dance after our honeymoon and our first bite of wedding cake when we thought we were getting an annulment. You got your something old, new, borrowed and blue later than you should have, but this is us, baby. This is our wild love.”

Through a veil of tears, I watch as he yanks a box from his pocket. He pops it open to reveal a stunning diamond engagement ring. “Will you marry me again, Gina?”

All I can do is squeal a response because this is everything I’ve ever wished for and more. “Yes!”

“I’m so lost.” Sophia laughs as she watches Daniel slide the ring on my finger. “Are you two married?”

“We are,” I answer her before I leap into my husband’s arms and focus solely on him. “I can’t believe you’re here. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Believe it,” he whispers into my ear. “I love you, Gina.”

I step back to look into his eyes as I say the words I’ve wanted to say for so long. “I love you, Daniel. I love you, too.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

DANIEL

THE ISSUE that brought me racing here doesn't seem important anymore, but it is.

I have to tell my wife what's going on so we can handle it together in the way that works best for her. She's all that matters now and forever.

"Gina." I turn to face her as the photographer loads up her gear, and Sophia Wolf talks to her staff in the corner. "I need to tell you something."

"That you love me again?" She smiles. "I'll never get tired of hearing that."

"I love you," I say as I stare into her eyes. "I'll always love you."

"I'll always love you," she repeats with tenderness in her voice. "That's not what you wanted to tell me, though, is it? Is there a surprise party tomorrow night? Is that what's happening? I've been wondering if Bella is up to something."

"It's tonight," I correct her. "At eight."

"Bella is sneaky." She laughs. "Let me guess. You're the one who is supposed to get me there, right? I can change and be ready to go in no time flat."

"We have time," I say evenly, not wanting to alarm her. "But there's something else, Gina."

“Can we tell everyone tonight?” Her gaze falls to her hand. “I want my family to know we’re married. I want all of them to know how much I love you, Daniel.”

“We’ll tell them.” I bring her hands to my lips to kiss her engagement ring. “I want to ask your dad for permission to marry you again.”

That lures soft laughter from her. “He’ll say yes.”

“I know he will.”

Her gaze searches my face. “There’s something else. What is it?”

I tug on her hand to lead her to the edge of the terrace. “I got a call earlier.”

“From who?”

I glance to where the Ella Kara crew is gathered. “A woman who works for the chapel in Vegas. Destiny’s chapel. She said she got my name and number from the paperwork we filled out before the ceremony.”

“Rochelle?” she asks in a calm tone. “Was it Rochelle?”

Shocked that she knows the name of a woman we were never introduced to, I nod. “Yes. How do you know her name, Gina?”

Her fingers trace a soft path over my chin. “She’s popped up in my direct messages on Instagram a few times since our wedding.”

I take a step back. “She has?”

Glancing over her shoulder to where Sophia is now talking to the photographer, she nods. “At first, it was to tell me that she didn’t realize who I was until we’d left the chapel.”

I nod.

“Earlier this week, she reached out again to say that she was surprised to find out it was your generosity that funded the trip that Destiny and Angel took to Maui. One of them must have spilled the beans on that.”

I chuckle. “So much for buying their silence.”

Gina smiles. “When I read that message, I knew she was testing the waters of what I might be willing to give her in exchange for her silence, but I just wanted to bide time.”

“Bide time?” I question. “In what sense?”

“I knew the day of our honeymoon that I was yours,” she confesses. “I felt it in my heart. In my soul. I just knew, Daniel.”

“I knew, too.”

“I planned on telling you tomorrow.” She laughs. “That was my birthday gift to myself. I was going to tell you how much I loved you and ask you to stay married to me.”

“Seriously, Gina?”

“I’m dead serious.” She cradles my face in her hands. “I was bursting at the seams wanting to tell you, but tomorrow felt like the perfect day. I had no idea that you had a ring and...”

“I bought the ring the day after our honeymoon trip,” I tell her. “I wanted to ask you to be mine forever every day since then.”

“I would have said yes.” She smiles. “Yes, forever and always.”

I kiss her softly. “I was planning on doing it at midnight. I wanted to start your birthday off with a bang, but then I saw you in this dress, and I couldn’t wait another second.”

“Do you mean a proper marriage proposal and then a literal bang?” She grins. “As in...you know.”

“I know.” I perk a brow. “A fuck to celebrate that proper proposal.”

She lowers her voice. “I’ll still want that first part when we get home tonight.”

I nod. “Oh, that’s happening.”

“Good.” Her hand skims the front of her neck. “You should know that I got a message from Rochelle late last night telling me she knew she could get a lot of money if she sold a picture she took of us in the chapel to RumorMel.”

“Fucking RumorMel.” I laugh at her mention of one of the most popular gossip websites in the world.

I hadn’t heard of it before today when Rochelle brought it up during our conversation.

“You could have come to me with this, Gina.”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Our wedding wasn’t perfect, Daniel, but it belonged to us. Knowing someone was trying to profit off of it felt wrong. Besides, if she did snap a picture of us in the chapel, she’s had it for weeks and hasn’t sold it yet. I think she was hoping we’d offer her whatever you gave Destiny and Angel.”

“I will if it’s what you want.”

Gina steps closer to me. “I don’t want that. I don’t care if the entire world knows we’re married, Daniel. I do care about my family. I want to tell them before they see or read about it from anyone else.”

I glance at my watch. “Rochelle said she’ll sell that picture to RumorMel if I don’t send her something tonight.”

“I don’t even know if RumorMel would be interested in a picture of me getting married.” She laughs softly. “They’ve only posted about me once, and that was to compare my look to an Oscar winning actress. I wore the same outfit she did to a gala.”

I smile. “You looked better that night, Gina.”

She smacks the center of my chest lightly. “You don’t even know what I was wearing or who the actress was.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “You always look better than anyone.”

“You think that because you love me.”

“Damn right, I do.” I kiss her forehead. “I will love you for eternity.”

“Regardless of what Rochelle does with that picture, we need to tell my family.” Her bottom lip trembles. “It would break my heart if they heard about it from anyone but me. We should tell them tonight.”

I can’t contain a smile. “Let’s do one better than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Marry me again tonight, Lawton.” I stare at her. “At Calvetti’s. You’re dressed for it. I look pretty sharp tonight. We’ll pick up some carnations on the way...”

“And a bouquet for my maid of honor?” she asks with hope in her eyes.

“Anything you want, baby.” I take her in my arms. “Are you in?”

“I’m all in,” she answers in a breathy tone. “I’ll post to my socials about us after we renew our vows in front of my family. I want the entire world to know I’m Gina Lawton now.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

GINA

AS THE CAR we are in heads toward Calvetti's, I glance at my husband. "I love that you came to Howerton House tonight. It was my birthday wish come true."

He scoops my left hand in his right.

After Sophia hugged us both and insisted I wear the wedding dress to our renewal ceremony, we went back to our apartment.

I needed my wedding ring, and Daniel wanted to change out his cufflinks for a pair that Marlin had left him. He has kept them close since his father's death and was wearing them the night we first exchanged vows. It was only fitting that I helped him put them on tonight.

Then, we made a quick stop at a flower boutique owned by Sophia's sister-in-law, Athena. Sophia had called ahead to tell Athena what we needed for our last minute ceremony. By the time we arrived, two bouquets were waiting for us.

I'm holding tightly to mine. It's a simple bunch of white carnations tied with a white ribbon. Daniel is cradling the other in his lap.

"I want to make every wish you've ever had come true." He smiles. "Make a list of them, and I'll make them reality."

I laugh. "I think you've already done that."

He kisses me softly. “You’ll come up with more.”

As the driver turns the corner, Daniel leans forward to pat his shoulder. “Thanks again for taking time out of your night to do this for us.”

The driver has been an employee of Modica for years. I’ve been with Dominick when he’s driven us around the city. He’s a kind man who agreed without question when Daniel asked him to pick us up at Howerton House.

“Of course, sir,” he offers with a smile in the rearview mirror. “Congratulations seem to be in order.”

“They are,” Daniel affirms. “This beautiful woman has agreed to be my wife for a second time.”

I squeeze my husband’s hand. “I can’t believe we’re getting married again.”

“Believe it, Lawton.” He kisses my hand. “What I can’t believe is all the Calvettis in the five boroughs think they’ve gathered to surprise you for your birthday.”

I laugh. “They’ll be the ones who are surprised when we turn the birthday party into a second wedding.”

“I’ll need a minute with your dad before we start,” he says. “I want Louis to know how much I love you, Gina. How I’ll honor you every single fucking day until I die.”

“My dad will be so happy,” I whisper. “I need a minute, too.”

His gaze drops to the bouquet in his lap. “She’ll be over the moon when you ask her to be your maid of honor.”

A single tear wells in the corner of my eye. “She’s the right choice. She’s the only choice. I can’t wait to have her standing next to me when I marry you again.”

SURPRISING ONE CALVETTI is a monumental task. Surprising almost all of them is a feat unknown to anyone until

this very moment.

Daniel took the lead as we entered the restaurant my grandmother has owned for decades. I was a step behind with my beautiful bouquet of carnations nestled in the cradle of my right arm.

A united scream of “surprise!” was instantly followed by a collective gasp when I came into view.

“Gina?” My mom comes at me with tears streaming down her face. “What’s going on?”

I hug her tightly before I wipe the tears from my cheeks. Wanting to be sure that my dad can see me, I take a step to the left and sign the most important words I ever have to my parents and my entire family, as I say them loud enough that I know everyone can hear me. “Daniel and I got married in Las Vegas. We want to renew our vows tonight in front of all of you.”

So many voices chime in that I can’t differentiate one from another. Overwhelmed, I reach for my husband’s hand as Dominick pushes through the crowd to get to us.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He glances over his shoulder to where Marti is standing with her hands covering her mouth. “You two got married in Vegas? When we were all there together?”

I take the lead and nod. “Before he died, Marlin made a wish that we would.”

“And the shots we had convinced us it was the right move,” Daniel adds. “It was reckless and spontaneous, Dominick, but dammit if it wasn’t the best decision I’ve ever made.”

I glance at my husband to see a broad smile on his face. “Me too.”

Dominick takes us both in his arms for a hug. “I’m so fucking happy right now. Why couldn’t I see before now that you belong together?”

Daniel steps back from the embrace first. “You’ll be my best man tonight. I need that, Dominick. I want you there beside me.”

“I’m there.” Dominick grins. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

“So, you’ve been married all this time?” Isabella asks as she approaches us. “You’ve been living together and married? You fell in love, didn’t you?”

Daniel and I nod in unison before he answers for both of us, “Madly, deeply, forever. It’s that kind of love.”

“I’m so happy!” Bella shrieks loud enough that everyone can hear.

As our dad steps next to us, Bella raises her hands to sign the next words out of her mouth. “A birthday, a wedding, and a new baby all in one night.”

What? My dad signs as he looks at me. A baby, too, Gina Marie? You’re having a baby?

“Not me,” I say and sign at the same time. “Bella, are you pregnant?”

“Yes!” She bounces in place, sending the skirt of the pink dress she’s wearing swaying back and forth, being mindful to keep her hands in our dad’s view as she signs. *Barrett and I are expecting another baby in the spring.*

“Bella just outdid our surprise of the birthday surprise,” Daniel says as he faces my dad to sign the words to him.

This is one of the best days of my life. My dad signs as tears fall down his cheeks.

Can I talk to you for a minute, Louis? Daniel signs to my dad. *In private?*

My dad pats Daniel’s cheek before he responds. *Of course, my boy. Let’s go to the kitchen.*

Daniel passes the bouquet in his hand to me before he kisses me softly on the forehead.

As they leave the dining room so my husband can ask my dad for my hand in marriage, I step forward, and my family parts to make a path. My cousins, Luke and Rocco, hug me briefly. Lia tucks a few strands of my hair behind my ear, and Dante, Lia's brother, kisses my cheek.

Rocco and Luke's brother, Nash, smiles as I near him. I stop for a moment to ask him an important question. "Will you officiate?"

He handled those duties for Bella and his brothers on their wedding days. "I would be honored, Gina."

I take a few more steps until I'm standing in front of the most remarkable woman I've ever known.

"Grandma," I say, holding out the beautiful bouquet of pink peonies. "Will you be my maid of honor?"

Her eyes well with tears as she nods. "My Gina. My girl. I would be so honored."

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

DANIEL

IT WOULDN'T BE a Calvetti family gathering without food.

Marti had the birthday party menu planned for weeks, but as Gina walked down the makeshift aisle in the middle of the restaurant with her parents on either side of her, I could see the wheels turning in her grandmother's head.

She listened with bated breath to every word Nash spoke and signed as he officiated our second ceremony.

He changed up the traditional vows to reflect the fact that we're already legally wed, but it was perfect.

Each word we repeated to each other spoke of the undying commitment that my wife and I share.

"Where's Marti?" Gina asks me as she gazes around the dining room.

Her family all pitched in and pushed the tables into a corner before the ceremony so they could line the chairs up. When it was over, they got back to work placing everything where it usually is so we can have dinner before we indulge in the triple layer chocolate birthday cake that Marti baked and decorated for my wife.

"In the kitchen." I push a lock of her hair off her forehead. "Did I mention yet today how fucking beautiful you are?"

"You did, but I'm not opposed to hearing it again."

“You’re a vision, Lawton,” I whisper in her ear. “I can’t wait to get you home to...”

“Gina?” Bella’s voice interrupts the moment.

Gina spins to face her sister. “Yes?”

Bella reaches out a hand. “I’ve never seen you this happy before.”

Gina gathers her sister’s hand in both of hers. “Thank you, Bella. You’re glowing. I’m so excited to be an aunt again.”

“I’m going to be an uncle,” I interject.

“You are.” Bella smiles softly before turning her attention back to Gina. “I knew you’d be married before your birthday. I could feel it.”

“You were right,” Gina admits. “I’m so glad you were right.”

“What are your plans for a honeymoon?” Her gaze volleys between her sister and me.

“We already did that.” Gina laughs.

“You went on a honeymoon?” Bella shakes her head. “Was I asleep because I don’t remember you jetting off anywhere after you got back from Vegas?”

“It was a day trip,” I clarify. “To a very special place. We’re heading back there soon for a longer stay.”

Gina’s gaze snaps in my direction. “Are we?”

Tugging her closer, I nod. “We are, and I promise that we’ll go as often as we can.”

Bella’s gaze drops to her phone. “Your post is blowing up, Gina. Your followers are so happy for the two of you. I love that you changed the name on your profile to Gina Lawton.”

Bella is the one who took a photo of Gina and I after the ceremony. With her left hand resting on my chest and our gazes locked on one another, we had no idea that Bella was in front of us with her phone pointed in our direction.

She forwarded the image to Gina. She posted it immediately with a short, but touching tribute to our undying love.

“It’s who I am,” Gina says. “I’m going to legally change my name to Gina Lawton. It feels right. I’ve felt it for a long time.”

“I’m honored,” I tell her honestly because her last name bears no weight when it comes to how much I love this woman.

She’s a Lawton now, but she’ll always be a Calvetti, too. I love her for who she is, who she was, and who she will be in the future.

“Everyone sit!” Marti calls out from the kitchen. “Dolly, come help me.”

Bella rushes off toward her grandmother, who now has a white apron tied around her waist. The blue dress she has on underneath matches the few streaks of blue in her hair. With the tattoo on her wrist, she’s every inch the grandmother-in-law that I’ve always known and loved.

“Gina, you sit here with Daniel.” Marti pats the back of a chair next to a table in the center of the room. “I made something special for you. I made it myself.”

I lead my wife to the table before pulling out the chair so she can sit. She does that carefully, being mindful of the long skirt of her wedding gown. I take a seat right next to her.

Marti darts out of view again before she appears with a large white bowl in her hands. Bella is close behind with a matching one in hers.

Gina gasps aloud as her grandmother sits the bowl in front of her before she circles her granddaughter’s neck with both arms. “I made this minestrone just for you, my Gina.”

“Grandma,” Gina’s voice quivers.

“My grandma served me minestrone the day I married your grandfather,” she says softly. “I was saving it for the day you married your love.”

“I love it.” Gina squeezes Marti’s arms. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Marti whispers before she glances at me. “And you, too, my boy.”

I nod because the sudden lump in my throat has rendered me speechless.

“Eat!” she instructs us before pulling away to address her large family. Her hands jump in the air as she signs the words she says, “Everyone else gets lasagna.”

Before she can say another word, a collective chorus of Calvetti voices fills the restaurant, all saying the same thing, “You made it yourself.”

EPILOGUE

DANIEL

Six Weeks Later

“California, New York, and this place all in one week.” Gina stirs next to me in our bed. “Aren’t you tired, Daniel?”

My hand stalls halfway up her thigh. I wanted to wake up my wife in her favorite way, but it seems she’s already greeting the morning by dragging her fingers over my bare chest.

“I’m never too tired to fuck my wife.” I circle the soft skin of her thigh with my index finger. “It’s been hours since you came, Gina.”

A bubble of soft laughter escapes her. “It can’t be more than two or three hours.”

She’s right about that.

I’m insatiable.

I can’t imagine a moment between now and when I die that I won’t crave her. I ate her as soon as we fell into bed last night. After that, I fucked her slowly against the wall with her moans fueling me.

I came hard, almost violently, but before I was done, she was on her knees licking a thick rope of cum from my leg.

The reminder is enough to harden me again, quickly and painfully.

“I’m so fucking hard,” I half-complain but mostly laugh. “You do things to me, Gina.”

She pushes me on my back onto the soft linens that she chose for our bed in this condo. It’s our place to escape from the world, and we’ve taken full advantage of that recently.

Without a word, she kisses a path over my chest before small bites of her teeth trail down my stomach. A swipe of her tongue over the crown of my cock to collect the bead of precum lures a deep groan from me.

I watch in wonder as she flings her hair over her shoulder before she crawls on me, straddling my thighs.

“I want it like this,” she purrs, her hands cupping her small tits. “I want to ride you, Lawton.”

“Get on it,” I grind out the words as I slap her hands away so I can work on her nipples.

The soft sound that escapes her parted lips tells me I’m hitting just the right spot, so I up the ante and take her left nipple in my mouth. I suck it, bite it, and lick it until she slides back.

I know what’s next, so I settle back and let my wife take control.

Her hand circles my cock as she lines up the crown with her entrance before she lowers herself onto me.

“Jesus,” I bite out through clenched teeth. “It’s too fucking much.”

“I’m just getting started.” She lets out an audible breath. “I promise it’ll get so much better than this.”



AN HOUR LATER, I hold tightly to Gina’s hand as we approach the dock.

“Was it hard to clear out the apartment in Los Angeles?” she asks, peering at me from over the frames of her sunglasses.

She's a vision, dressed in a black sweater and jeans, both from the closet in the guestroom in our apartment. All she packed for this weekend's getaway were clothing pieces she's had for years.

She's been mindful of the brand representations she takes on. Since most of her time the past few weeks has been devoted to working as a contract ASL interpreter with Dr. Morgan and a colleague of his and spending time learning the inner workings of the restaurant with Marti, she's cut back on her posting schedule.

"No," I answer her honestly, even though she took the trip to California with me and caught me tearing up a time or two.

That was because I'd stumbled on a few belongings of my dad's that are now proudly displayed in our apartment in New York. I brought a stone carving that he loved with us on this trip to start making our condo that overlooks Long Island Sound feel more like our home away from home.

"Romy is coming to Dominick's wedding," I tell her. "Dominick's glad to have her working for Modica, so he wants her there."

"It's less than a week now until they get married." She smiles. "I can't wait to go back to Howerton House to the spot where you proposed."

"We'll dance the night away." I smirk. "I'll try and stay upright and keep my shoes on."

"You do you, Daniel." She wiggles her hips. "I'll join right in because that's what Lawtons do."

I stop to tilt her chin up to kiss her lips.

"I'll take another," she whispers when we part. "Just like the first one."

I deliver as requested with an extra tug on her bottom lip with my teeth.

"I love kissing you," she confesses. "You have to be the best kisser on the planet."

I take the compliment with a smile before I wrap an arm around her waist. With my free hand, I point toward the dock. “Something is waiting for us by the water.”

Her gaze follows the path of my finger. “What is it?”

“That officially belongs to you, baby.”

She looks at me before she glances at the sailboat with Leif aboard. It’s the same boat we were on when we shared our first kiss. “What belongs to me?”

I take her hand and lead her down the path toward the dock, all while she shifts her gaze from me to the boat that awaits us.

As we near, Leif raises a hand in greeting. “Mr. and Mrs. Lawton! It’s good to see you both.”

We’ve seen Leif twice since our second wedding. A ride on the boat has been a staple of our trips here, but today is different.

It’s taken some time and a fair bit of negotiation with my client, who owned the sailboat, but today, I can finally give my wife the gift I’ve longed to since our first honeymoon.

“Are you ready to board?” Leif asks.

I grin at him. “One minute, and we’ll be set.”

He nods before he wanders off to grant us an extra moment of privacy on the dock.

“What’s going on?” Gina tugs on the front of the gray sweater I’m wearing. “Daniel, tell me.”

“You have given me the greatest gift a man could ever wish for, Gina,” I say with emotion lacing my tone. “This is a small way of showing you how much you mean to me.”

I skirt around her to grab the bottle of champagne encased in gold mesh netting sitting on the dock. I extend a hand, offering it to her.

She glances at it before her brows pinch together in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

I take a step to the left, hoping she'll follow. She does.

I grab her hand to wrap it around the neck of the bottle before I cover it with mine. "It's time to christen your new boat, Mrs. Lawton."

"This is our boat?" Her hand jumps to cover her mouth. "We can't smash that against the boat, Daniel. That has to be a bad idea."

I laugh. "The bottle is scored, Gina. It'll break easily, and the mesh netting collects all the glass. There's no way in hell I'd risk you getting hurt."

"You think of everything." She sighs. "I'm so glad I married you."

"Me too," I say before I gesture to the boat. "Gina, this is Wild Love, and whenever we board it, it's another chapter in the story of our never-ending honeymoon and eternal love."

She gasps when she sees Wild Love painted on the bow, and as we swing the bottle and crash it against the side of the vessel, we both tear up.

"I love it, Daniel," she whispers as her gaze catches mine. "I love it so much. Thank you."

Leif appears and crouches to take the netting filled with glass from me. "Congratulations, you two. It's my honor to skipper this boat for you."

I acknowledge his kind words with a nod before he walks away, leaving me alone with my wife again. I immediately take her in my arms. "I love you, Gina. Thank you for saying yes twice."

Laughter accompanies the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'd say it a million times if it meant forever with you."

I kiss her softly before I help her board our boat as I think about the past, the present, and the future that holds the promise of a life better than I could have ever imagined.

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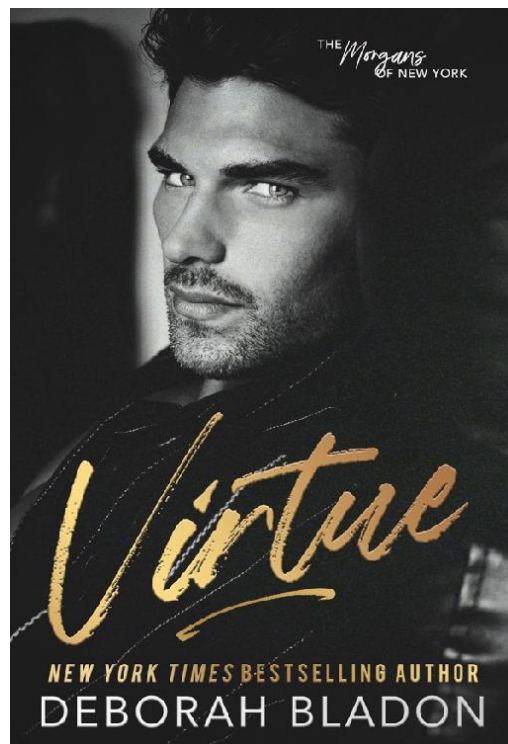
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Bladon has never read a romance hero she didn't like. Her love for romance novels began when she was old enough to board the bus, library card in hand to check out the newest Harlequin paperbacks. She's a Canadian by heart, and by passport, but you can often spot her in New York City sipping a latte and looking for inspiration for her next story. Manhattan is definitely her second home.

She cherishes her family and believes that each day is a gift for writing, for reading, and for loving.

